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Small Circles of Empowerment

Kurdish Women Claiming Citizen Rights and Agency through Language Revitalisation

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Abstract

This article investigates the activities of Kurdish women aimed at protecting and revitalising Kurdish language, which include collecting and publishing folklore, translating into Kurdish, and writing literature in Kurdish. Throughout the 20th century, countries like Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq, in varying degrees, imposed restrictions on the use of Kurdish. Our primary focus is on Turkey because this country has been most repressive toward Kurdish language since the establishment of the Republic in 1923, but also due to a recent increased visibility of women language activists and folklore collectors. According to Fishman, language revitalisation does not only pertain to caring for a language but brings about a complete, self-defining way of life. Through language revitalisation, Kurdish women not only build an alternative to the state policy of denial, they also win respect and freedom within their communities. Drawing

from Martha Nussbaum's capability approach and from Sara Ahmed's understanding of how emotions function through language and its circulation, we demonstrate how collecting and publishing Kurdish language and culture in 'small circles' enables Kurdish women to assert their citizenship rights.

Keywords

Kurdish language – citizenship – women's rights – minority rights – indigeneity

1 Introduction

Çirok çiroka jinê ye (*Stories are the stories of women*) – said Heciyê. She is one of the folklore collectors in Bakur¹ (Kurdistan of Turkey), suggesting that women are primarily responsible for telling and collecting stories. This commonly used narrative among Kurdish folklore collectors is based on the assumption that stories, fairy tales, and songs were often told to children, whose upbringing was on women's shoulders. But the phrase also points to recent developments in which women rediscover and revalidate Kurdish language, folklore, and heritage. From the collected interviews with women folklore collectors, writers, and language activists we found that their approach combines a rediscovery of women's activities in the field of Kurdish language with a discourse of women emancipation and citizen rights. As we demonstrate in this article, presenting different types of engagement in the Kurdish language and oral tradition as a task for women allows them to reinterpret and challenge many derogatory attitudes about women while also claiming women's agency. Their narratives draw from hegemonic ideas about women liberation spread by the Kurdish movement, but, as we argue, move beyond the movement's visions by creating alternative spaces for liberation. These are small-scale activities that are not (yet) highly visible in a cultural domain that is often dominated by political activists but arguably these activities do have considerable impact in "small circles" (see later in this article). They can therefore be understood as bottom-up and alternative practices of citizenship that change local attitudes and lead to empowerment of marginalised groups within Kurdish society, most notably women and uneducated people. We understand the activities as

1 Kurd. North – refers to the Turkish part of Kurdistan. In recent years it has become increasingly common to refer to the Kurdish regions according to the cardinal points in Kurdish (apart from Bakur also Rojava (west: Syria), Başûr (south: Iraq) and Rojhilat (east: Iran). We apply these names in our paper.

acts of citizenship (Isin & Nielsen 2008)² that challenge existing narratives and the role of women in private and public spaces and offer sources of inspiration for people in their daily lives.

Theoretically we lean on Martha Nussbaum's³ combined capabilities approach and Sara Ahmed's⁴ ideas about the circulation of emotions. Although Nussbaum's approach was primarily designed to enhance the effectiveness of various governmental and non-governmental institutions, we propose applying it to the activities of precarious actors in the sense of Judith Butler⁵ who, like Kurds, are denied numerous cultural and political rights in the countries in which they live, and, who, as Kurdish women, cannot be abstracted simply as 'women' apart from their community and Kurdish identity.⁶ According to Nussbaum,⁷ securing rights to citizens in a certain area is "to put them in position of combined capability to function in that area" because political participation does come into being "only if there are effective measures to make people truly capable of political exercise".⁸ Hence, the analysis of capabilities "looks at how people are actually enabled to live".⁹ Furthermore, the capabilities approach relies methodologically on imagination and emotions. Nussbaum¹⁰ asserts: "[i]magination about the necessary components of a truly human life, and emotions of loss and longing associated with the imagining of these central goods, play a (suitably constrained) role in the creation of basic political principles. And the approach continually directs its user[s] to imagine how resources go to work differently in different lives and circumstances."

Following her suggestion, in our study we focus on how the experience of emotions about language loss and marginalisation as well as the desire to prevent it, stimulate Kurdish women to imagine and enact Kurdish language use in both private and public spaces. In addition, instead of seeing some cultural or political factors in terms of a simple binary (restrictions or empowerment),

2 Engin Isin and Greg Nielsen, *Acts of citizenship* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008.)

3 Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

4 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014 (2004)).

5 Judith Butler, *Notes Toward the Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2015).

6 Metin Yüksel, "The Encounter of Kurdish Women with Nationalism in Turkey," *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 5 (2006): 777–802.

7 Nussbaum, *supra* note 4 p. 98.

8 *Ibid.*, 98.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

10 *Ibid.*, 250.

we propose to view them as a combination of capabilities. We ask: how can women enable themselves and each other to live and improve their subjectivities as Kurds and as women despite the precarious circumstances of these identities that make them seemingly unable to do that? This allows us to observe how the numerous restrictions and disadvantages may, in certain contexts, be converted into positive resources. Accordingly, we can also realise the limits of allegedly empowering policies.

As stressed by language revitalisation specialists, both language loss and its implied remedy – revitalisation – must today be perceived in the wider context of building new decolonised relations, which entail the right to self-determination as well as people’s cultural, social and political empowering by restoring or constructing a group’s agency.¹¹ Furthermore, “when individuals decide to learn a language or choose to speak one language instead of another in a multilingual context or to their children, they are making policy decisions, even though their decisions may not be conscious or overt.”¹² Finally, as stressed by Roche, any revitalisation should be “responsive and respectful of Indigenous and minority worldviews”.¹³ Therefore, we view the ensuing female agency not only with regard to the public visibility and popularity of an action – so often associated with successful women’s empowerment – but also with regard to the intimate, affective, and reflective side of women’s engagement that enables them to reconsider or recreate their lives in a way they find doable and satisfactory in their particular contexts. These intimate activities in small circles have an additional function in that they enable the sharing and repetition of Kurdish texts (including stories, songs and the acts of storytelling, singing and listening) within small circles and therewith create a circulation of emotions through the voices, bodies, objects and texts that the collectors, performers and (often family) audiences create together.¹⁴ As will be shown in our paper, gaining self-confidence as a woman is not exclusively connected to just being a woman. It can be as well inspired by being a ‘Kurdish’ woman who is able to speak Kurdish and thus attracts attention and respect to herself speaking

11 Olko Justyna and Tomasz Wicherkiewicz, “Endangered Languages: in Search of a Comprehensive Model for Research and Revitalization,” in J. Olko, T. Wicherkiewicz and R. Borges, eds., *Integral Strategies for Language Revitalisation*, (Warszawa: University of Warsaw, 2016): 649–676.

12 Julia Sallabank, “Effective Language Policy-making for Language Revitalisation: What Might It Look Like?” in J. Olko, T. Wicherkiewicz and R. Borges, eds., *Integral Strategies for Language Revitalisation*, Warszawa: University of Warsaw, 2016): 544.

13 Gerald Roche, “Decolonizing and Globalizing Language Revitalisation,” in L. Hinton, L. Huss and G. Roche, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Language Revitalisation*, (New York: Routledge, 2018): 275.

14 Sara Ahmed, *supra* note 5.

Kurdish and having something important to say as a woman. Considering the long-standing restrictions on *speaking Kurdish* and limits regarding 'being a woman able to speak and to be heard', which resulted in a lack of confidence in both domains, the actions directed at promoting language revitalisation may in fact quite effectively enable women's participation too.

This study is based on semi-structured interviews and conversations with a total of 37 women language activists, writers, folklore collectors, and translators, conducted between 2020–2023. They are from Turkey (20), from Iraq (4), from Iran (9), from Syria (4). Five of these women currently reside in the diaspora¹⁵ but grew up in Kurdistan. The interviews were conducted in the Kurdish Kurmancî, Soranî and Zazakî dialects, Turkish and English. Our primary focus is on Turkey for two reasons: first, the country has the Middle East's most repressive assimilation policy, which it has maintained since the establishment of the Republic in 1923. Second, due to a recent increased visibility of women language activists and folklore collectors as well as initiatives to support them. For example through courses in folklore collecting organised by the Mezopotamya Foundation; publishing opportunities provided by publishers such as Wardoz, Mezopotamya Foundation, Nûbihar or Avesta; as well as the political rhetoric of the Pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP) promoting women's participation in public life. Nevertheless, in varying degrees, Kurdish language oppression and marginalisation marks the experience of women in the three other countries too. This is because historically Kurdish women often suffered from lack of access to formal education; to state sponsored cultural and social institutions. This also impedes the acquisition of the country's official language, which marginalised them as citizens. For many women, the Kurdish language became a crucial means to resist oppression and to struggle for being able to speak, write, read, and enjoy life in Kurdish. They often highlighted this by saying: "Kurdish is a mother tongue" (*zimanê dayikê*), with which they did not only refer to its indigeneity, but also to the importance of the intimate contact between mother and daughters *through* the Kurdish language and to the specifically female efforts to make this language survive and flourish. Often, Kurdish activism is studied regarding a single state, whereas we think that collating the language centred initiatives of Kurdish women proves significant to see the wider dynamics of their activism in the Middle East and the diaspora.

In the following sections we present the situation of Kurdish language in different countries, then focus on its revitalisation and discuss some of the common visions of women liberation in Kurdish movements. In the fourth section,

15 In Norway (2), Great Britain (2), Germany (1), Canada (1).

we examine how language revitalisation and women's agency become combined capabilities of precarious actors. In the fifth one, we focus on empowerment created by 'small circles' in which texts are created and exchanged between writers and audiences, collectors, and performers. We then build on this idea in the subsequent section which explores the family as a contradictory source of empowerment as well as impediment. In the conclusion we return to our main research question, namely how Kurdish women claim citizenship rights through language activities.

2 From Ban to Revitalisation: the Situation of the Kurdish Language in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria

In Turkey as well as in neighbouring countries, Kurds were often forced into the margins of the political establishment since the early 20th century disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. They were first defined as 'backward' and 'tribal' and then expected to integrate in the dominant state culture, learn the state language, and become educated citizens after the model created by the state bureaucracy. In this process, the Kurdish language was often marginalised, although the level of marginalisation varied in different countries and time periods. The conditions ranged from a total eradication of everything *Kurdish* in Turkey starting from 1924 up until 1991, to a milder policy of a seeming recognition in Iraq in the early 70s.¹⁶

In Turkey, the idea "that the state belongs to ethnic Turks only and that Turkish identity, culture, and language must erase others (..) has been the trademark of the contemporary Turkish constitution in particular, and Turkish politics in general".¹⁷ This policy was described as *linguicide*¹⁸ or *ethnocide*¹⁹ because it entailed different, often forceful measures such as admission of

16 Kaziwa Salih, "Kurdish Linguicide in the "Saddamist" State," *Genocide Studies International* 13, no. 1 (2019): 34–51. Also see: Amir Hassanpour, *Essays on Kurds. Historiography, Orality, And Nationalism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2020).

17 Hanifi Baris, *The Kurdish Model of Political Community. A Vision of National Liberation Defiant of the Nation-state* (London, New York: Lexington Books, 2016), 99.

18 Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Sertaç Bucak, "Killing a Mother Tongue – How the Kurds are Deprived of Linguistic Human Rights," in T. Skutnabb-Kangas and R. Philipson, eds., *Linguistic Human Rights: Overcoming Linguistic Discrimination*, (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994), 347–370.

19 Kristine Koivunen, "The Invisible War in North Kurdistan," (PhD dissertation, University of Helsinki, 2000).

children into boarding schools,²⁰ resettlement,²¹ physical punishment and even imprisonment for speaking Kurdish in public spaces, which was often recalled by our interlocutors. The Turkish constitution of 1982 elaborated on the Turkishness of Turkey's citizens and named Turkish as the only mother tongue.²² Even though since 1982 there were many amendments introduced to this document, it continues to deny the existence of any mother tongue other than Turkish. In recent years, after a few short-lived attempts by the ruling Justice and Development Party²³ to solve the 'Kurdish issue', the exclusive nationalist Turkish narrative was reinstalled and the previous scarce initiatives to introduce Kurdish as an additional subject to public schools and universities were hampered or totally cancelled. According to Jaffer Sheyholislami, even if from 1991 onward the Turkish state policy toward Kurdish is presented as one of *toleration*, "it is safe to suggest that Kurdish in Turkey remains endangered."²⁴

The term linguicide was also applied to describe the erasure of Kurdish language in Iran.²⁵ Although Kurdish was never banned in that country, in the late 1960s a group of experts advised the government "that Persianisation was 'an important step toward national unity'".²⁶ The Islamic Revolution of 1979 brought little changes. The new constitution acknowledged the existence of non-Persian languages in the country, but defined Persian as the only official medium of communication. As Sheyholislami demonstrates, the various decrees issued by both private and public bodies discourage or directly ban the use of Kurdish in many domains, especially education.²⁷ Moreover, it is essential to recall that in Iran, Kurdish is spoken not only in the Kurdistan area (Rojhilat) adjacent to Kurdistan of Turkey and Iraq, but also in the Khorasan province located close to the Turkmenistan border where their language

20 Uğur Ümit Üngör, "Untying the tongue-tied: Ethnocide and language politics", *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* no. 217, (2012): 127–150.

21 Nesrin Uçarlar, European Declarations on Minorities: The Kurdish Quest for Turkey's Membership of the European Union. In Bo Petersson and Katharine Tyler eds. *Majority Cultures and the Everyday Politics of Ethnic Difference*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2009): 169–187.

22 Welat Zeydanlıoğlu, "Turkey's Kurdish Language Policy", *International Journal of The Sociology of Language* 217, (2012): 99–125.

23 Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP.

24 Jaffer Sheyholislami, "Linguistic Human Rights in Kurdistan", in T. Skutnabb-Kangas and R. Philipson, eds. *The Handbook of Linguistic Human Rights*, (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2022), 357–371, 367.

25 Amir Hassanpour, *supra* note.

26 Jaffer Sheyholislami, "Linguistic Human Rights in Kurdistan", 362.

27 Jaffer Sheyholislami, "Language as a problem: language policy and language rights in Kurdistan-Iran", *Etudes Kurdes*, (2019: 99–134).

(mainly Kurmancî) is much more endangered due to the limited contacts with other speakers.²⁸ Also, there are smaller dialects of Kurdish such as Hawramî/Goranî (or Zazakî in Turkey)²⁹ which have already been classified as endangered in the 2009 UNESCO report on languages in danger.³⁰

Prior to the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government in 1991, the Kurdish language status in Iraq was unstable. Even though some Kurdish schools could start and operate during the British mandate (1926–1932), the policy of the central authorities was determined by the pan-Arabist ideology of Sati' Al Husri (1879–1968) and openly denied the Kurds the right to mother tongue education.³¹ After the coup d'état of 1958 which abolished the monarchy and established the Iraqi Republic, the Kurds advanced their claims for mother tongue education which culminated in the March Manifesto of 1970 and the subsequent Autonomy Law of 1974. On paper, the documents granted the Kurds wide cultural autonomy including the official status of their mother tongue. However, this plan was never fully implemented³² and Arabic language dominated even the newly established University of Sulaimani (1968).³³ Subsequently, the era of Saddam Hussein led to both linguistic and genocide of Kurdish people.³⁴ Only after 1991 when the UN resolution provided the Iraqi Kurds with a fragile and limited safety, and especially after the new Iraqi constitution was adopted in 2005, Kurdish became recognised as the second official language, and is currently used as a language of education and bureaucracy in the KRI (Başûr).

In Syria, the Kurdish language enjoyed a certain freedom only during the French Mandate (1920–1946) but even then, Kurdish schools did not open out

28 Conversation in Kurmancî with Gulê Şadkam and Javad Rezaei (Kraków, October 2022).

29 As stressed by Haig and Öpengin, “there is no consensus in the literature when it comes to defining and classifying ‘Kurdish.’” In their paper, Haig and Öpengin divide Kurdish dialects into five groups: Northern Kurdish (Kurmancî), Central Kurdish (Sorani), Southern Kurdish (which includes varieties such as Kelhuri, Feyli, Kirmashani), Gorani, and Zazaki. In our paper we follow this classification, Haig and Öpengin, “Kurdish: Critical Research Overview”, *Kurdish Studies*, 2, no. 2 (2014): 99–122, 110.

30 Christopher Moseley, *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*. (UNESCO Publishing 2010).

31 Kaziwa Salih, *supra* note.

32 David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, (London and New York: I. B. Tauris: 2004), 336.

33 Abdullah Jalal Fatah, *Problemy rozwoju i rozpowszechniania kultury kurdyjskiej w Iraku* (Development and Dissemination of the Kurdish Culture in Iraq). Institute of Sociology, Warsaw University, unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1978, see also: Joanna Bocheńska and Karwan Fatah-Black “An Intellectual on a Mission: Abdullah Jalal Fatah, his dissertation on Kurdish culture (1978) and heritage making inspired by Józef Chałasiński and Polish academia”, *Kurdish Studies*, 9, no. 2 (2021): 155–173, 166, 170.

34 Kaziwa Salih, *Ibid*.

of fear to affect French-Turkish relations and due to the absence of suitable socioeconomic conditions.³⁵ In the 1960s, upon the Baath Party's ascension to power, Kurdish language was banned from public space to be gradually reinstalled only after 2011 when the revolution began.³⁶ As stressed by Nariman Evdîke, writer and spokesperson of the Literary Association of North and East Syria (Serê Kaniyê) providing education in the mother tongue is one of the priorities of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Rojava). Teaching Kurdish language started in November 2012, after the Kurdish centres managed to train teachers in 2011.³⁷ Initially, these were classes in both Kurdish and Arabic. Only in 2015 the Kurdish books and curriculum were introduced.³⁸ It is thanks to this new form of education, that is offered from primary school to university, that young people became more interested in reading and writing in Kurdish which contrasts with the generation of their parents who are still very much attached to literacy in the Arabic language. Evdîke stressed the noticeable engagement and close collaboration of women who constitute most Kurdish language teachers and students at the university departments of Kurdish language and literature, which points to the important role women play in language revitalisation.³⁹

The changed status of Kurdish in both Iraq and Syria is a source of inspiration for Kurdish language activists in Turkey and Iran who followed these developments and established close contacts with those two regions.

3 Language Revitalisation and Practices of Citizenship in Public and Private Spheres

Through various mechanisms (the marginalisation and criminalisation of organising based on being Kurdish; speaking Kurdish; and being involved in Kurdish cultural activities), Kurds were excluded from public spheres and forced into "counter publics",⁴⁰ "existing beneath, within, or hidden from the

35 Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds. History, Politics and Society*, (London and New York: Routledge: 2009), 26–27.

36 Jaffer Sheyholislami, "Linguistic Human Rights in Kurdistan", 365.

37 Phone conversation with Nariman Evdîke, February 2023.

38 Information provided by the writer Helîm Yûsiv, after his conversation with Bahcet Lewend, a Kurdish teacher and Chair of the Centre of Studies in North and East Syria, personal communication with Helîm Yûsiv, March 2023. See also: Thomas Schmidinger, *Rojava. Revolution, War and the Future of Syria's Kurds*, (London: Pluto Press 2018), translated by Michael Schifflmann, 120.

39 Phone conversation with Nariman Evdîke, February 2023.

40 Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

more formal spaces of organised politics”.⁴¹ In Turkey, Syria (until 2011), and Iran, Kurdish became the language of the ‘home’. Whereas citizenship is ideally a neutral term that connects the private sphere of individual citizens to the public sphere of the state,⁴² this ideal model does not account for how unequal power relations affect access to, and exclusion from, the public sphere.⁴³ The ways in which the private sphere or everyday activities can become an arena of diverse expressions of resistance and micropolitics⁴⁴ has been brought up in relation to marginalised communities such as LGBTQ communities,⁴⁵ African Americans,⁴⁶ indigenous people,⁴⁷ women,⁴⁸ as well as Kurds.⁴⁹ This has a strong spatial dimension as marginalised groups are often excluded from majority citizens’ spaces and forced to operate in certain geographic regions, city neighbourhoods, and hidden places. For Bakur, Jongerden argues that the ban on meetings, associations and official organising “resulted in the emergence of the political as a private affair”⁵⁰ where PKK⁵¹ activists met in private homes and established a strong ideology and organisation. For Rojava, Kurdish women narrated that they often experienced the home and the family

41 Mimi Sheller, *Citizenship from Below. Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012), 35.

42 Thomas Marshall, *Class, Citizenship and Social Development* (New York: Anchor Books, 1964); Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Bürger, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989 (1962)).

43 Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in C. Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992): 109–142.

44 James Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

45 Mimi Sheller, *Citizenship from Below. Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012); Michael Warner, *supra* note 22.

46 Michael C. Dawson, “A Black Counterpublic?: Economic Earthquakes, Racial Agendas, and Black Politics,” *Public Culture* 7 (1994): 195–223; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

47 Monica DeHart, “A Contemporary Micropolitics of Indigeneity,” *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2008): 171–192.

48 Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in C. Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992): 109–142; Zakia Salime, “Embedded Counterpublics: Women and Islamic revival in Morocco,” *Frontiers: A journal of Women’s Studies*, 37, no. 3 (2016): 47–73.

49 Karol Kaczorowski, “Countering Othering: Social Negotiations of Identity Among New Kurdish Migrants in Istanbul,” in J. Bochenka, ed., *Rediscovering Kurdistan’s Cultures and Identities: The Call of the Cricket*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): 151–185.

50 Joost Jongerden, “A Spatial Perspective on Political Group Formation in Turkey After the 1971 Coup: The Kurdistan Workers’ Party of Turkey,” *Kurdish Studies* 5, no. 2 (2017): 140.

51 Partiya Kerkerên Kurdistanê, PKK, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party.

as places where one could escape state surveillance, be safe from strangers' eyes, organise politically, and create supportive and lasting political bonds.⁵² A similar approach to the home characterises the activities of women in Rojhilat. Even the most suppressive regimes were not able to invade the private entirely.

However, feminists have opposed the definition of the home and the family as a private and safe space outside of public/state influence,⁵³ amongst others because women have often been *forced* into the private by defining them as vulnerable, weak, and incapable, which “works to secure femininity as a delimitation of movement in the public, and over-inhabitation of the private”.⁵⁴ Moreover, the private space can be a dangerous place where perpetrators of psychological, physical, and economic violence and abuse are able to control their victims (predominantly women and children) unseen from public eyes. Therefore, “the liberal protection of the private from public interference simply blocked from view those kinds of domination that structure private life through the institutions of the family, the household, gender, and sexuality”.⁵⁵ Indeed, Kurdish women have brought up these issues for their own situations; many feel obstructed by family control, feel excluded from public roles and leadership positions, and have fought for empowerment within their families, in wider society, and in the political movements.⁵⁶

The private and the family can thus entail positive meanings to Kurdish women despite of parallel histories of family structures that are oppressive and limit women's freedom. Such opposing meanings of the family have been shown before by Black feminists for whom the family could be a site of oppression but also of reconstruction of family structures destroyed by a history of slavery.⁵⁷

52 Wendelmoet Hamelink and Rusan Güngör, “A Narrative Approach to Displacement, Gender and Conflict: Motivations of Kurdish Women to Leave Syria in Times of Lawlessness,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/13669183X.2022.2131511, (2022).

53 Michael Warner, *supra* note 22; Margaret Abraham, Esther Ngan-ling Chow, Laura Maratou-Alipranti and Evangelia Tastsoglou, *Contours of Citizenship. Women, Diversity, and Practices of Citizenship* (New York: Routledge, 2016) (2010); Sara Ahmed, *supra* note 5; Judith Butler, *supra* note 6.

54 Sara Ahmed, *supra* note 5, p. 70.

55 Michael Warner, *supra* note 22, p. 47.

56 Isabel Käser, *The Kurdish Women Freedom Movements. Gender, Body Politics and Militant Femininities*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Nerina Weiss, “Falling from Grace: Gender Norms and Gender Strategies in Eastern Turkey,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 42 (2010): 55–76.

57 Renee Heberle, “The Personal Is Political,” in L. Disch and M. Hawesworth, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): 591–609.

The portrayal of Kurds as backward, tribal and savage, while excluding them from public spheres, caused Kurdish counter narratives and practices of the family as a haven of support, protection, and resources. Because of the double exclusion from the public sphere as women and as Kurds, our data shows that their struggle to access the public is likewise a double movement towards inclusion, namely of Kurdishness as well as womanhood. Kurdish women do not only fight stigmatisation by state institutions and the majority society, but also by patriarchal structures within Kurdish society, as well as by majority feminism for example in case of the Turkish feminism disregarding Kurdish women in Turkey.⁵⁸ Resistance against exclusion creates its own bonds, dynamics, narratives, and imaginations. In this article, we connect this double exclusion to Nussbaum's combined capabilities approach, as we found that women reinstate agency by mobilising both identities.

4 Visions of Kurdish Women Liberation

Like many other nationalist movements, the Kurdish one too focused on the liberation of Kurdish women.⁵⁹ Yet the postulated female emancipation was often imagined mainly by men and the figure of the Kurdish woman became a conventionalised symbol of the homeland in need of protection.⁶⁰ However, the figure of the woman fighter, which was associated with the Kurdish national and emancipatory struggle in the late twentieth century, cannot be considered entirely modern. It has its roots in Kurdish tradition, as emphasised in stories or proverbs that elevated the role of a brave and fearless woman able to fight

⁵⁸ Metin Yüksel, *supra* note 7, p. 777–802.

⁵⁹ Janet Klein, "En-Gendering Nationalism: The 'Woman Question' in Kurdish Nationalist Discourse of the Late Ottoman Period," in S. Mojab, ed., *Women of a Non-state Nation: the Kurds*, (Costa Meza: Mazda Publishers, 2001): 25–51; Shahrzad Mojab, "Women and Nationalism in the Kurdish Republic of 1946," in S. Mojab, ed., *Women of a Non-state Nation: the Kurds*, (Costa Meza: Mazda Publishers, 2001): 71–92; Azad Haji Aghaie, "Early Kurdish Nationalism and Women's Imagination," *Journal of Middle Eastern Research*, 1 (2017): 28–45; Isabel Käser, *supra* note 38.

⁶⁰ Mino Alinia, *Honor Violence Against Women in Iraqi Kurdistan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Özlem Galip, *Imagining Kurdistan. Identity, Culture and Society* (London/New York: I. B. Tauris, 2015); Handan Caglayan, "From Kawa the Blacksmith to Ishtar the Goddess: Gender Constructions in Ideological-Political Discourses of the Kurdish Movement in post-1980 Turkey (Translated by Can Evren)," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 14 (2012): 1–28.

and die to protect her chastity and honour.⁶¹ Gradually, the notion of honour has been reconsidered and associated with the homeland as well as with the national and reformist struggle.⁶²

Starting from the 1960s, Kurdish women took up arms as a part of Kurdish partisan forces. They appeared first in the Komala party established in Iran in the early 1970s. Then women's units emerged within the Iraqi peshmerga. However, women's contributions to the military struggle became only much later globally visible, particularly with the PKK and recently the Democratic Union Party's⁶³ guerrilla forces. This has been attributed by the Kurdish movement to the significant place of the emancipatory discourse in the writings of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan who developed the concept of *jineolojî* – knowledge of women, which should be produced by and for women. Recent research shows that women within the movement were crucial in developing the ideas and practice of *jineolojî*, which became its globally recognisable hallmark.⁶⁴ The women guerrillas and the increasing visibility of women in military combat became an important incentive for many civilian Kurdish women to take up emancipation struggle not only in Turkey, but also in Iraq, Iran, and Syria. As stressed by Aynur (not her real name) from Bazîd (Doğubeyazıt, Bakur), the women guerrillas' visits to her village had a profound impact on the women living there, because "they were women who lived differently, they were independent".⁶⁵

However, the military struggle did not always favour women's emancipation and activism as described in the book *PKK'de Kadın Olmak* (Being A Woman in the PKK).⁶⁶ Simultaneously, Öcalan's writings were not free from contradictions and instrumentalisation of women; for example, in the image of the Ishtar-like goddess able to blow herself up to protect her homeland.⁶⁷ In many places, especially in Turkey, the image of the self-sacrificing woman able to abandon her – feudal and patriarchal – family and die for her country overshadowed the many other civic engagements of women activists, which were often perceived as less honourable, or even non-existing. Also, it resulted in a

61 Joanna Bocheńska, "Between Honour and Dignity. Kurdish Literary and Cinema Narratives and their Attempt to Rethink Identity and Resistance," in J. Bocheńska, ed., *Rediscovering Identity and Resistance. The Call of the Cricket*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): 55–62.

62 Handan Caglayan, *supra* note 42. Bocheńska *ibid.*; Isabel Käser, *supra* note 38.

63 Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat, PYD.

64 Isabel Käser, *supra* note 38, p. 62.

65 Conversation with Aynur, in Kurmancı (Doğubeyazıt, 2012).

66 Nejdet Buldan, *PKK'de Kadın Olmak*, (Istanbul: Doz, 2004).

67 Melike Gül Demir, *1980'lerden 2000'lere Siyasal Kürt Kadının İşası* (Istanbul: Belge Yayinlari, 2015).

negative image of the Kurdish family – often viewed as a source of ‘backward’ relations.

Moreover, when drawing the landscape of the Kurdish women’s predicament, one should take two important factors into account, first the many traditional restrictions limiting the public visibility of women, such as the alleged shameful aspect of women *dengbêjs*’ (performer of Kurdish oral tradition) voices,⁶⁸ and secondly the new sense of discipline imposed on the modern visibility of women, who should be properly educated and aware of the many standards of public communication in order to be heard and respected.⁶⁹ In all parts of Kurdistan, the model of an educated modern woman was shaped by the official education system, the official language and the state knowledge production, which impacted Kurdish activists. As stressed by Schäfers, when indicating the historical significance of *dengbêjs* and their *kilams* (recital song), or when applying for funds to continue with the archiving and publishing of oral tradition, the women she encountered “used language that reverberated with the vocabulary of official historiography”.⁷⁰

In the second part of this article, we investigate how Kurdish writers, language activists and folklore collectors have developed a distinct vision of women, which complicates the many hegemonic narratives prescribing the best ways for women to behave. Indeed, some topics around which female action is established such as care for Kurdish history, folklore, or language are currently seen as ‘honourable deeds’ in the light of Kurdishness (*Kurdayetî*), and thus become instrumental in enabling women’s agency. Are they, however, only a marker of a simplified transformation of “a living oral tradition” into a “dead” cultural heritage, which incidentally provide some benefits for women?⁷¹ According to Fishman, language revival does not only pertain to care for a language. Rather, it brings about “a notion of a complete, not necessarily unchanging, self-defining way of life”.⁷² Accordingly, language revitalisation

68 Wendelmoet Hamelink, *The Sung Home. Narrative, Morality, and the Kurdish Nation* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2016); Marlene Schäfers, “Archived Voices, Acoustic Traces, and the Reverberations of Kurdish History in Modern Turkey,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 61, no. 2 (2019): 447–473.

69 Lila Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 1998); Schäfers *ibid.*

70 Schäfers *Ibid.*, 456.

71 Marlene Schäfers, “Being Sick of Politics: The Production of Dengbêjî as Kurdish Cultural Heritage in Contemporary Turkey,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 60 (2015): 13.

72 Joshua Fishman, “Reversing Language Shift: RLS Theory and Practice Revisited,” in G.E. Kindell & M.P. Lewis, eds., *Assessing Ethnolinguistic Vitality: Theory and Practice, Selected Papers From the Third International Language Assessment Conference*, (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2000): 1–25.

through folklore collecting, translation or literature may not only enable women's agency but at the same time inspire different perspectives on what this agency means and create transformative and empowering forms of Kurdish citizenship. It may also result in a new or revived circulation of affect.⁷³

5 Kurdish Women's Emancipation and Language Activism as Combined Capabilities

In this section we present data demonstrating how women often combine their emancipation as women and as Kurds through language revitalisation projects. The examples come from different countries and are explained within their respective contexts. Our interlocutors indicated that oppression and restrictions imposed on Kurdish frequently prompted people to seek methods of interaction and revitalise the language. Due to lack of education, mothers who often spoke Kurdish with their children became crucially important for language activists. At the same time, through their activities, women resist against the relegating of Kurdish to the private sphere of the home and work towards using Kurdish increasingly in public spaces. Also, they often highlighted the importance of giving space to other Kurdish dialects which are even more minoritized than Kurmancî and Soranî.

In Bakur, the mother tongue has retreated to a few narrow spaces because it is hardly seen as a suitable tool of communication for a citizen of a modern state with its complex system of education, public institutions, and media, where Turkish is used as the only language of communication. Increasing numbers of Kurdish women have received public education and Turkish as the official language reached Kurdish homes also through the ubiquitous television and Internet, including the lifestyle it advertises.

Surya Human is one of the Zaza employees of the Mesopotamya Foundation that aims to revitalise and standardise the Kurdish language. Zazakî (also Kirmanckî) is one of the two Kurdish languages spoken in Turkey and most under threat of extinction. She said:

When I first spoke Zazakî while studying it at university, I felt very moved. I had a feeling as if until now I had been a foreigner here, I wasn't a citizen. Because this language is not spoken when you go outside to the shops or to your neighbours. Wherever I go, I speak Turkish. And when I speak Turkish, I don't feel like a citizen. When I could speak my language

⁷³ Sara Ahmed, *supra* note 5.

at the university, I felt that this is our place, this is Kurdistan. If you speak Kirmanckî at the state university, it impacts a lot on the way you feel. How? It makes you feel responsible. Also, you can say to yourself that you have a role to play, you want to find your place, you want to work so that the language can be spoken everywhere. I am struggling for that purpose. If I do not speak my language, I will never feel a citizen here.⁷⁴

Surya refers to the establishment of departments of Kurdish language in Turkish state universities, which was later followed by Iran as well. However, her words speak volumes not only about the lengthy history of the Kurdish language restriction in the Republic of Turkey; they make us realise the intimate, affective, and imaginary connection between language, citizenship, as well as the sense of belonging it entails. In another place of the interview quoted later in this paper she highlighted her pride of being a woman able to use her native language when collecting folklore. By being able to speak her mother tongue, she feels that, rather than being an outsider without any agency to influence her environment, she belongs to the community, that she has a role to play and is co-responsible for the system.

The Zazakî writer Bedriye Topaç also connects the struggle for women's rights to the Kurdish language. She states that writing in her mother tongue enables her to better express herself as a woman, and 'to shout' about the things she had to endure:

In my opinion, there is a strong connection between language and womanhood or women's emancipation. I've seen this in my writing. If I had been asked about it before I started writing, maybe I would have said that there was no connection. But now I can say that there is a relationship. Language opened a way for me to exist. In my literature I shout about the things I endure in my daily life or about how I see people. Every day I am becoming better at it, and I can see it in my books and poems. The more I read and write in my native language, the more I improve myself. The language is the teacher, and it paves my way to exist. It happens that I forget that I am a woman, but every time I undertake writing, I recall my womanhood and I feel that I am a woman again.⁷⁵

For her, the mother tongue is not only a spoken language, but a medium to communicate with others, to express frustration in writing, and *to exist*. Writing

74 Interview in Kurmançî (Diyarbakir, 2021).

75 Interview in Zazakî (Dersim, 2021).

in her mother tongue gives her an existential feeling of taking control of who she is as a woman. It offers an aesthetical and ethical potential, a safe haven, that enables Bedriye to enjoy her being in the world as a woman. She feels that while writing she increasingly develops her own identity as a Zaza person, as well as her identity as a woman.

Nariman Evdîke from Rojava described her involvement in literature as a means of overcoming obstacles during her youth. She was physically disabled, extremely shy, and incapable of initiating discussions. Writing in her mother tongue helped her to express her deepest emotion and sorrows and, boosted her self-confidence, and enabled her to communicate with the outside world.

For these women, gaining a certain degree of self-confidence and a conviction of 'having a role to play' as a woman in public goes hand in hand with language use. Due to the many attempts to erase the Kurdish languages, speaking, hearing, reading, writing, and seeing the mother tongue on banners, books or in music, became a symbolic act of resistance. The abovementioned examples demonstrate that these women regard their activities as combined increased capabilities, which can explain the increasing interest in language revitalisation among Kurdish women.

Although the PKK was one of the actors that encouraged women's emancipation, according to some activists they did not pay enough attention to the importance of *Kurdishness*. Fexriya Adsay for instance, a well-known Kurdish translator and intellectual who is an adamant critic of both the Turkish government and the PKK, does not want to identify herself solely with the women's struggle, even though she believes she is a feminist. She insists that talking only about women's issues and emancipation while doing it almost exclusively in Turkish, the language that dominated the discourse of the Pro-Kurdish political party HDP, overshadowed many other questions such as 'being Kurdish' and 'speaking Kurdish'. Therefore, Adsay describes herself first and foremost as a Kurdish nationalist and criticises the HDP policies, which, – according to her, – invent binaries and simplify reality: “[in] Kurdistan of Turkey, the world of men and women has been invented, [as if] there are only men and women. As if the whole world only revolves around women's issues. There is no such thing. The question of women is intertwined with other human problems.”⁷⁶

Faxriya targets the way in which over the last decade, the women's movement and ideology within the PKK has focused on *jineoloji* and women's issues. Faxriya was raised by migrant parents in the west of Turkey, but as an adult she decided to return to Bakur. She learned Kurdish from her parents, but read her first book in Kurdish relatively late, when she was a teacher working at a

⁷⁶ Interview in Kurmancî (Diyarbakir, 2021).

Turkish public school. She then gradually became involved in translating from English into Kurdish. She gave priority to translating theoretical works, which she regards as helpful in developing a necessary modern vocabulary in Kurdish and stimulate new ideas among Kurds. She combines her struggle for women emancipation with the struggle for Kurdish language and independence.

In other regions of Kurdistan, we find similar examples where women emancipation and language activism go hand in hand. The case of Zara Mohammadi, a Kurdish language teacher and activist from Rojhilat sentenced to five years in prison for teaching Kurdish in her hometown, Sine (Sanandaj) also reveals the link between the language and the process of restoring women and community agency.⁷⁷ Interestingly, Mohammadi was not punished just for 'teaching Kurdish'; there are some private Kurdish schools in Sine that are tolerated by the regime.⁷⁸ Rather, she was persecuted because of her bold form of activism directed to revitalise the language, i.e., making it a tool of communication for Kurdish citizens, so that they could feel empowered to exert their rights. She was teaching her mother tongue, promoting its daily use by distributing chocolates on the streets of Sine on International Mother Language Day, and assisting the victims of flooding. In court, she declared that she had worked solely "for empowering marginalised members of Iran's Kurdish minority and for teaching her mother tongue".⁷⁹ In her public speech to the media, just before handling herself to the Iranian authorities to serve the sentence, Zara's headscarf had slipped off her head. Instead of immediately placing it back, she audaciously remained with her hair uncovered when speaking, and thus openly alluded to the widely known Iranian women's protests against wearing the headscarf.⁸⁰ This can be analysed as a symbolic action linking the Kurdish struggle for mother tongue education with the battle for women's rights in Iran. Importantly, her action – even if probably not deliberately planned – did not only appeal to Kurdish women 'minority rights' but also, – following the logic of *one for all, all for one*, – suggested that struggling for minority rights is closely intertwined with other democratic postulates of Iranian citizens, and should be taken on board by all people, not just by minorities.

Çinûr Saîdî, a Kurdish writer who is also from Sine, believes that exploring different dialects and subdialects of Kurdish and bringing their richness into

77 Zara Mohammadi was unexpectedly released from prison in February 2023.

78 For example the famous *Raja* school offering Kurdish lessons for young and old, interview in Sorani with the teachers Azadeh and Ednan, July 2022. See also Sara, the Kurdish language teacher on Picture 1.

79 Karwan F. Dri, "Kurdish Language Teacher Turns Herself in to Iranian Authorities," *Rudaw* 2022, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iran/08012022>.

80 <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=665009154859105>.



PICTURE 1 Rojhilat. After graduating at the age of 16, Susan has started teaching Kurdish in cities and remote villages on her own initiative. She has held free classes in 42 villages. They are 3-level classes organised in mosques and houses of village leaders. The age of students ranges from 8 to 70.

INFORMATION AND PHOTO BY EBRAHIM ALIPOOR

her short stories about women assists her in drawing more attention to class divisions and helps in democratising Kurdish literature and society:

On one hand there is the Sine establishment on the other, people from surrounding villages who are often mocked by this establishment. They speak a subdialect (*binzarawe*) which is called *Leylaxî* and is very rich. But when they speak, the people from the centre laugh at them. (...). As a writer I bring it to my short stories. For example, one short story I am currently working on is narrated by a woman who comes from such a village but dreams about becoming part of the Sine society. She visits some families and wishes to be bride in one of them. (...) Her voice becomes expressed in the story. Writing in *Sineyî* dialect is relatively new in the field of Soranî writing, but applying the subdialect from the villages surrounding Sine has not been expressed in this literature at all. We still ridicule and neglect them.⁸¹

81 Interview in Soranî, Sine, July 2022.

Saîdî's intention to give space to the language of the village corresponds with her wider strategy to make Kurdish literature a site for women voices, emotions, experiences and even places (home or beauty salon), which to her have been neglected or misrepresented by the dominating literary production of men.

Houzan Mahmoud, a writer and activist from Başûr who has been living in Europe for many years, recently published the book *Kurdish Women's Stories*, which includes 25 self-written or self-told stories about women's life experiences from Iraqi Kurdistan and other regions. Most of the stories speak of suffering from government persecution, imprisonment, executions, despair, and loss, but also of the bravery with which the women and their families withstood collaborating with the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein or oppressive regimes in other areas of Kurdistan. In the interview about this book, Houzan made the connection between language, writing, and women's emancipation: "[e]specially writing was very important to me because traditionally speaking, Kurdish women and writing were two separate things where writing is a luxury and education is a luxury as well. Not so many women could afford getting educated, even in my generation your family would prevent you from getting educated. And for me it was important to have that text, for Kurdish women to have their own text."⁸²

The book was published in English in the UK for the international market,⁸³ and in Soranî Kurdish in Başûr. She said that many women whose stories were included in the book came to the book launch and were ecstatic with the result: seeing a real and serious book about themselves. "They loved it, they said: if we die now, we are happy. You gave us the opportunity for our story to be in the book, and even when we die, we have this story living on." They saw the book not only as documenting their own life stories, but also as a way to immortalise deceased relatives whose plight they chronicled. In this case, it was not only the Kurdish language itself, but also having their story out in the world for everyone to read, as a published text in Kurdish and English, which made the contributors feel they had reached an incomparable goal that countered the erasure of their personal and collective histories, as women and as Kurds.

6 Collecting Folklore as *Small Circles* of Empowerment

Over the last decades, women collectors have become a phenomenon among Kurds in Bakur, forging new connections between an educated younger

⁸² Interview in English (Bonn, 2022).

⁸³ Houzan Mahmoud, *Kurdish Women's Stories* (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

generation of women with an uneducated and often illiterate older generation. Whereas previously, Kurdish heritage was often depicted in Turkey as backward, unmodern, and as reflecting tribal and primordial sentiments, since the early 2000s Kurdish folklore and oral tradition was rediscovered and revalued.⁸⁴ Initially, the majority of publications were authored by men and the majority of performers from whom this folklore was recorded were also men. However, women performers increasingly became the focus of attention and many women have entered the stage of folklore collecting (*berhevkarî*) which became associated with Kurdish authenticity and indigenous knowledge production⁸⁵ as well as with a history erased by the Turkish state and rediscovered as part of a wave of interest in oral history and its decolonising potential. In this section we explore aspects of the passion for oral tradition that transcend the tasks of narrating a marginalised history or building the Kurdish nation.

According to some women, it is the personal undertaking of folklore collecting where the real empowerment is taking place. To Surya Human,⁸⁶ it contrasts with the empty rhetoric of the many institutionalised and overtly public governmental and non-governmental initiatives. She described this vividly as an opposition between *big* and *small circles*: “[t]hose who are today mostly engaged in protecting the language are men. When I enter this job, when I go from one house to another and talk to men, I feel that a strength appears in me: I can also do this and I am a woman, we have reached a modern stage.... when I look at myself, I see democracy. I see it in a small circle, but I don’t see it in a big circle.”

When we asked her to explain what she meant by small and large circles, Surya further explained: “[organisations] pay lip service by repeating ‘why are there no women in this job?’ but do not create any space for women. Small circle is when I collect folklore, when I go from house to house and people are happy, they become full of hope. The illiterate people support me, and I see them becoming proud. I see democracy here, at this level, but those who work for their language in the big circles, they don’t allow this.”

84 Mehmet Uzun, *Zincirlenmiş Zamanlar Zincirlenmiş Sözcükler* (Istanbul: Gendaş Kültür, 2002); Clémence Scalbert-Yücel, “The Invention of a Tradition: Diyarbakir’s Dengbêj’s Project,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 10 (2009): 1–25; Metin Yüksel, Dengbêj, “Mullah, Intelligentsia: The Survival and Revival of the Kurdish Kurmançî Language in the Middle East 1925–1960,” (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 2011); Wendelmoet Hamelink and Hanifi Baris, “Dengbêjs on Borderlands: Borders and the State as Seen Through the Eyes of Kurdish Singer-poets,” *Kurdish Studies* 2, no. 1 (2014): 34–60.

85 See more: Joanna Bocheńska and Farangis Ghaderi, “*Gan qey bedenî yeno çi mana*. Collecting and Archiving Kurdish Folklore as a Strategy for Language Revitalisation and Indigenous Knowledge Production”, *Folklore*, upcoming.

86 Interview in Kurmançî (Diyarbakir, 2021).

The image of a Kurdish woman protecting her language, which was previously often visualised as a Kurdish mother in traditional costume, an illiterate woman who speaks Kurdish at home with her children, is being redefined and reimagined by young women who wish to protect their language in a 'professional and scientific' way. They feel that they and the performers and audiences they work with get empowered, not through an institution or an ideological narrative, but rather because of direct contact with the performers and their families who 'become full of hope' and 'proud' because of women collectors' engagement. Hence, what takes place here is not only the empowerment of female actors, but rather an exchange of moral empowerment between different groups of people who, due to various factors, feel marginalised. These small circles often consist of family networks. Many women describe how the family was a source of inspiration which often started during their childhood and became a reason for them to start collecting.

Collecting activities were sometimes a direct response to experiences of marginalisation. Nêrgîz (not her real name), a Kurdish women activist from Rojava (born in 1950) who currently lives in Norway related how she and her siblings were, in their childhood, the only children with Kurdish names. As an adult, she started collecting Kurdish names in a notebook and finally turned this into a small dictionary, which helped in selecting Kurdish names for children in the small circle of her family and friends.⁸⁷ Giving a Kurdish name to children was in many regions in Kurdistan an act of resistance, and some women from Rojava shared memories of being mocked at school for not having an Arabic names.

Gulê Şadkam, a collector of folklore from Khorasan, Iran, defined longing for the past relationship with her grandmother as the starting point of her collecting activities: "I believe that this work has its roots in my childhood when I used to go to the village to see my grandmother, who was telling me fairy tales. When I grew up, I always wanted to recall and collect these stories."⁸⁸

Zeynep Yaş, a cultural manager at the Diyarbakir Municipal Museum who is responsible for the multimedia exposition about the Diyarbakir *dengbêjs* in the Cemil Paşa Mannor, referred to her father as the main source of inspiration for her interest in folklore:

My father loved his culture very much. He was proud of it, and it accompanied him everywhere. For example, when we were going to the vineyard, to the garden, or to do some work, or when we felt ill, he sang for us.

87 Interview in Kurmancî, (Oslo, 2019).

88 Online interview in Kurmancî (2021).

It was the first medicine he had for us. At the beginning, he was reciting the Quran, but later he sang songs so that we felt better and to support us morally. He was like this: A very nice person. He led us to love him and to love our culture.⁸⁹

Living everyday life with the help of Kurdish songs established an intimate and warm relationship between Zeynep and her father and inspired her to love Kurdish music, which she later transformed into a professional interest in collecting folklore.

Vildan Sevim, a collector from Diyarbakir, pointed not only to the presence of fairy tales in her childhood, but also to the fact that, to her, the world of songs and tales could constitute an imaginative roof under which one could hide. This used to be a social phenomenon experienced with the entire family:⁹⁰

Folklore was always present in our home because my mother used to tell us a lot of fairy tales when we were children. (...). My mother liked them very much. She told us that until she got married, she hadn't known that fairy tales weren't real. She told us she believed in all these things... that snakes can speak, and gazelles can turn into girls and then back into gazelles. She said: *'When I married, my father-in-law told me that all of these fairy tales are a lie, that they are not true stories.'* She told us that she became very upset.

It seems that learning the 'truth' about the fairy tales narrated by Vildan's mother to her children is here associated with getting married and obtaining (sexual) maturity. In this way, quite symbolically, it marked and celebrated the very rapid and plausibly also painful passage from childhood into maturity. Elsewhere in the interview, Vildan said that she realised the value of her childhood filled with fairy tales only after arriving in Germany as a child of migrants and after being registered to a German school, where 'there was no place for folklore, religion, and the intimate connection between younger and elder generations'. This brought a painful, though simultaneously, illuminating experience of loss, which made her realise the value of fairy tales. In her adult life, this memory inspired Vildan to return to her country and collect and publish fairy tales for future generations.

The collectors Bêrivan Matyar (Picture 2) and Heciyê (not her real name) pointed to the roles of their mothers in introducing them to the collectives

89 Interview in Kurmancî (Diyarbakir, 2021).

90 Interview in Kurmancî (Diyarbakir, 2021).



PICTURE 2 Bakur. Bêrivan Matyar surrounded by women performers in the village of Çiçika. FROM MATYAR'S ARCHIVE

of performers from whom the songs and stories could be recorded. For both, the process of collecting started at home and proceeded with a snowball method that engaged more and more women from the family. Moreover, it brought a small-scale recognition, entertainment, and joy to the performers. As stressed by Bêrivan, the process of collecting folklore has gradually raised her awareness that 'everyone' in the Kurdish society is a potential performer.⁹¹ This brought a democratisation of the recently elevated image of a *dengbêj* by directing attention toward those who never performed on the stage or for the media, among them many women. This animated a group of often elderly people who became sources of knowledge production about folklore. Meeting with them and recording their voices did not require great financial resources and political backing.

Jana Seyda, born in Kobanê and now living in Germany, explained how her grandmother told her fairy tales during her childhood, and her mother recited poems of the classical poet Melayê Cizirî (1570–1640), in an emotional manner that was different from the recitation style of male relatives. These experiences and memories formed an important source of inspiration for her to pursue her literary career as a modern poet and writer, who is devoted to writing literature in her mother tongue.⁹²

91 Interview in Kurmancî (Diyarbakir, July 2021).

92 Online meeting in Kurmancî with Jana Seyda organised in the scope of Kurdish Gender Studies Network by Joanna Bocheńska and Farangis Ghaderi, 31.03.2022.

By collecting different folkloric objects such as pillows, rugs, kitchen tools, bags, horse saddle and cloths and by offering them a new space in their modern environment, women from Başûr wished to commemorate their mothers or grandmothers, who – as they felt – played an important role in their lives. According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett⁹³ cultural objects displayed at home can elicit memories and reflection. Etya Heme Saîd Lîpzêrîn who works as a gynecologist in Hawlêr (Erbil) collects folkloric items in her hospital office and she also turned her parents' house in Koye into a small museum. Lipzêrîn⁹⁴ described her reasons as a remembrance of her mother: “to preserve my mother’s identity and cultural norms, because my mother did a lot of work for Kurds and Kurdistan, as well as serving Kurdish folklore by collecting and using Kurdish folklore in her home. My mother’s home was usually bustling with visitors. I wanted to turn her house into a museum so that it would always be full of visitors and people would come to see her little world.”

In this case the folkloric items elicited memories but also inspired Lipzêrîn to tell about her mother’s life. Attracting visitors to see these objects served to commemorate Lipzêrîn’s mother by recalling some of her personality traits. Similarly, Sirwe Sîweylî, the owner of a restaurant in Silêmanî believed exposing folkloric items in her restaurant served “to remember her grandmother, who was like a second mother to her”, and who liked collecting folklore too. In both cases, the folkloric objects brought up memories but also stirred the circulation of stories and emotions about some women figures recognised as important in the small circle of family, friends, visitors, patients, and customers. Whereas Zuhre Caf from Basûr has transformed a bedroom in her flat into a “folklore chamber” (Picture 3), the decoration from ceiling to the floor gives it the appearance of a little museum. Zuhre believes that a connection to the “beautiful past,” as she calls it, not only contributes to the restoration of culture but also provides mental tranquility and psychological benefits to the individual. “When I am upset, I go to my folklore room and calm down,” she said.

Generating interest into folklore and its performers through intimate sessions between collector and community, often in a family setting, can be viewed as a continuation of traditional methods to encourage performances. The often-younger collectors belonging to the community and to the family as well, revive an intimate session with the potential performers. Quite often they must prove that they also know some songs and sayings and can share them with the performers to establish a trustworthy relationship. In fact, this

93 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Authoring Lives,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 26, no. 2 (1989): 330.

94 Interview in Soranî (Hawlêr/Erbil, 2021).



PICTURE 3 Başır. Folklore room of Zuhre Caf, photo by H. O.

is not much different from the traditional circumstances of family gatherings during which people used to sing or tell stories to each other. Hence, it does not require the performers to step into the often-contested space of the public and can provide them with a small-scale recognition with the help of these traditional methods.

The moment of publishing a book with folklore, the result of the collectors' works, was imagined by Vildan Sevim and other women not with reference to the publicity of the book and its editor among a wider reading public, but as a gift returned to the community. The collectors believe that having the songs or stories published in the form of a book will allow future generations to properly learn their mother tongue as well as enjoy and protect the content. However, rather than interpreting this as a fossilisation of Kurdish oral heritage,⁹⁵ we argue that the book is at the same time an affective object⁹⁶ that evokes emotions like the example of Houzan's book launch. The book became a testimony of the value of the Kurdish language and community knowledge; its existence countered the erasure of (knowledge of) language, culture, and

95 Marlene Schäfers, *supra* note 50.

96 Sara Ahmed, *supra* note 4.

history; and it commemorated the sessions that the collectors, performers and audiences had shared.

7 The Contradictory Meanings of Family Bonds: Transforming Disadvantages Into an Asset

Next to showing the morally empowering side of family bonds, the interviews also show that family relationships can be an impediment for language activism. Heciye admitted that, initially, her efforts as a folklore collector were not welcomed by her husband and his family, who could not easily understand her need to do some work outside of the house and believed she would neglect her duties as wife and mother. However, with time, facing her resilience and understanding her work better, their attitude evolved, and they started respecting her more. Importantly, Heciye's efforts as a folklore collector elevated her status. She became a respectable person among her kin, which allowed her to successfully intervene in cases of family issues where, she felt, women were mistreated. This illustrates how the family is a site of constant development where people's attitudes and positions can change over time.

Faxriya Adsay pointed to the housework she had to do during her childhood as a motivating force to educate herself. Her parents were farmers, and she was one of many siblings, which made it a struggle for her to get educated. She emphasised that it was due to her being constantly burdened with chores as the oldest girl in the household that she loved reading and studying. These activities were her best shelter from the work she so much disliked. When thinking about her past, she managed to transform the obstacles she faced into trump cards, which could offer her a sense of self-confidence and satisfaction.

The folklore collectors, aware of both the positive and negative sides of the family for their activities, expressed this during the interviews often as a discourse about how women obtained their storytelling and language skills *due to* being forced to stay in private spaces. This discourse suggests that women's stories became so exquisite *because* of the necessity to take care of children, to draw their attention and to entertain this very demanding public and that; women narrate with much more passion than men *because* women's voices are so often neglected. Our interlocutors thus transformed negative associations and unfavourable images of women (who are understood as not having a voice, as talking without meaning (a talkative woman or as having little understanding of things) into a source of success. When talking about Kurdish women singers, Zeynep Yaş, voiced her dissatisfaction with the emphasis placed on the agony they had to endure, rather than on their professional

skills, achievements, and the aesthetical features of their performance. Other collectors as well highlighted women's storytelling potential and their mental and creative skills, therewith challenging dehumanisation. This once more demonstrates in what way the two types of activism (language revitalisation and women's emancipation) are intertwined and can be treated as combined increased capabilities.

8 Conclusion

In this article, we investigated the many activities of Kurdish women directed not only at reviving Kurdish language, but also at enabling women's emancipation, therewith functioning as combined increased capabilities in the sense of Nussbaum. We discovered in our data that writing in the mother tongue as women can give them a feeling of belonging, participation, and responsibility for community development, and that small circles of community gatherings, in which people share local knowledge of songs and language, can have empowering meanings. Even if these activities take place in private spaces and are not necessarily very visible for a wider public, they create affective and imaginative bonds that strengthen feelings of belonging. The activities directed at revitalising Kurdish language enhanced both a sense of pride and satisfaction about being Kurd as well as about women's capabilities. Moreover, some of the examples (like Houzan Mahmoud's book) show that our interlocutors' activities form new (imaginative and physical) connections between women from different areas of Kurdistan and in the diaspora.

This demonstrates that not only highly visible social, political and military movements (such as the PKK, HDP, or Kurdish cultural centres or movements in other areas of Kurdistan) are able to forge a sense of alternative belonging and citizenship, but that also small-scale, more individual activities without a strong organisational foundation can contribute to the development of a sense of community life and agency. Like their more powerful counterparts, such small-scale activities offer disruptive acts of citizenship that contest the hegemonic discourses, symbols, and practices of the state, and simultaneously offer alternatives to the hegemony of Kurdish movements and ideologies. Their activities may be partly inspired and founded on the Kurdish political movements' accomplishments to turn the Kurdish struggle for independence as well as women's liberation into a known and important cause, domestically as well as internationally, but contribute in a unique and distinct manner.

Our research shows that there are three important ways in which women claim citizenship rights through language revitalisation. First, they create

spaces for marginalised groups of Kurds such as women, illiterate people, and people living in rural areas, to practise citizenship according to their own needs and wishes. The focal point of this research was the so-called 'small circles' of empowerment, which rely on indirect contacts and exchanges of support between seemingly disempowered actors: the family and the intergenerational relations with traditional performers on the one hand and language activists and folklore collectors on the other. Following Ahmed who sees emotions not "as psychological states, but as social and cultural practices"⁹⁷ that circulate and move through objects, bodies, and texts, these shared sessions relate to past contacts and experiences while at the same time creating new affective bonds and objects such as the resulting books. The attendants do not necessarily need to adhere to the movement's ideology or be active as political agents in order to be seen; speaking the Kurdish language fluently, possessing unique local knowledge about history and culture, and telling one's life story are turned into assets that contain value in their own right. Recording and publishing the stories and songs as well as exposing folkloric objects is imagined as fulfilling many new social needs of the community: the book can serve as language documentation for language activists and writers and can simultaneously provide moral support to the performers. It therefore connects research with ethical responsibilities and fosters new relationships.

Secondly, the activists' activities offer visions of women's liberation that contrast with hegemonic ideologies. Language revitalisation offers a ground for change that does not need to relate to political ideology; it can have a transformative power by itself. By using the mother tongue to write literature, women felt that they developed and enhanced their sense of self, identity, as well as citizenship. By creating books published by and about Kurdish women, women acted as transformative agents that countered erasure of women's and Kurdish voices and histories. By giving more attention to the smaller dialects, women attempt to democratise the Kurdish culture and society. By collecting and recording Kurdish songs and stories known by the community, women encourage a revaluation of Kurdish knowledge and an increase of its status, as well as a revaluation of the family and intergenerational connections.

And thirdly, the revitalisation activities transform the private space of the home into a space where new publics are actively created. These are transformative acts that are at the same time founded on a strong desire for continuity engendered by intimate, familial, and intergenerational relations. Community changes are thus not only forged in public spheres by more visible political activists and movements; they can as well take place within families through

97 Sara Ahmed, *supra* note 5, p. 9.

the intimate and affectionate contacts between generations. Moreover, gaining respect as a Kurdish language activist, writer or folklore collector is not reducible to the cultural field; the new status women gained through their activities also empowered them as women. They mobilised the exclusion of women from public spaces and their struggle for being heard as a narrative of empowerment; inhabiting the private space gave them unique skills as well as inspiration and motivation to actively transform women's and community life. Furthermore, their new status as actors in the field of language revitalisation at times also enabled women to intervene in family issues when they felt other women were being mistreated.

Concluding, being active as a Kurdish woman in the field of language revitalisation and therewith building the own community is a capability combined with the women's rights struggle. Whereas women who are part of majority communities can focus exclusively on women's liberation, women from minoritized communities are more likely to combine this with a struggle for other rights. The fight for inclusive citizenship counters their double exclusion as women and as Kurds, and outside of the public eye, creates and transforms new community connections, dynamics and productions.

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