

The Rojava Revolution: Kurdish women's reclaim of citizenship in a
stateless context

- A qualitative study of the autonomous women's movement



University of Gothenburg
Institution of Global Studies
Bachelor thesis in Global studies
Spring Semester 2016
Author: Sanna Ghotbi
Supervisor: Maria Stern

Abstract

The Kurds have historically been subjected to structural forms of oppression such as being denied the right to land, their language, culture, political participation or even a passport and social security number. Within this process the Kurdish women's marginalisation has been doubled as they have been subjected to patriarchal laws, restricting their rights. In the aftermath of the Arabic spring the Syrian government decided to withdraw their forces from the Kurdish region Rojava and instead of turning it into an independent state, the Kurds decided to create a stateless democracy through autonomous cantons. Inspired by the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's idea of Democratic Confederalism, Rojava now uses a system of stateless democracy with the help of hundreds of councils that exist in the different communes and villages. The Kurdish women's movement has created autonomous structures with women's academies, houses, tribunals, cooperatives, security forces and military units. In this study I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven female activists from the autonomous women's movement in Rojava. My research question was: How does the Kurdish women's movement make sense of their reclaim of citizenship? I firstly analysed my informants' statements as chronological narratives of their changing citizen-status, beginning when they still were colonised by Syria and ending with their practice of stateless democracy. I discovered that the informants had constructed two identities that represented the Kurdish women's transformation from disempowered non-citizens to empowered citizens: 'The housewife' and 'The female combatant' who are each other's contrasts. Secondly, I analysed the women's practices of citizenship through their use of autonomous women's structures as action spaces. These action spaces made it possible for the women to mobilise their reclaim of citizenship. By using Kabeer's theory of citizenship as a bridge that enables empowerment to turn into gender justice, I found that the women's movement in Rojava were attempting to change gender roles and structures, making their reclaim of citizenship feminist. The thesis contributes to understanding how marginalised people experience citizenship and shows that citizenship is a social construction and thereby something that can be both taken from you as well as reclaimed.

Keywords: Rojava, the Kurdish women's movement, reclaiming citizenship, gender justice

Acknowledgements

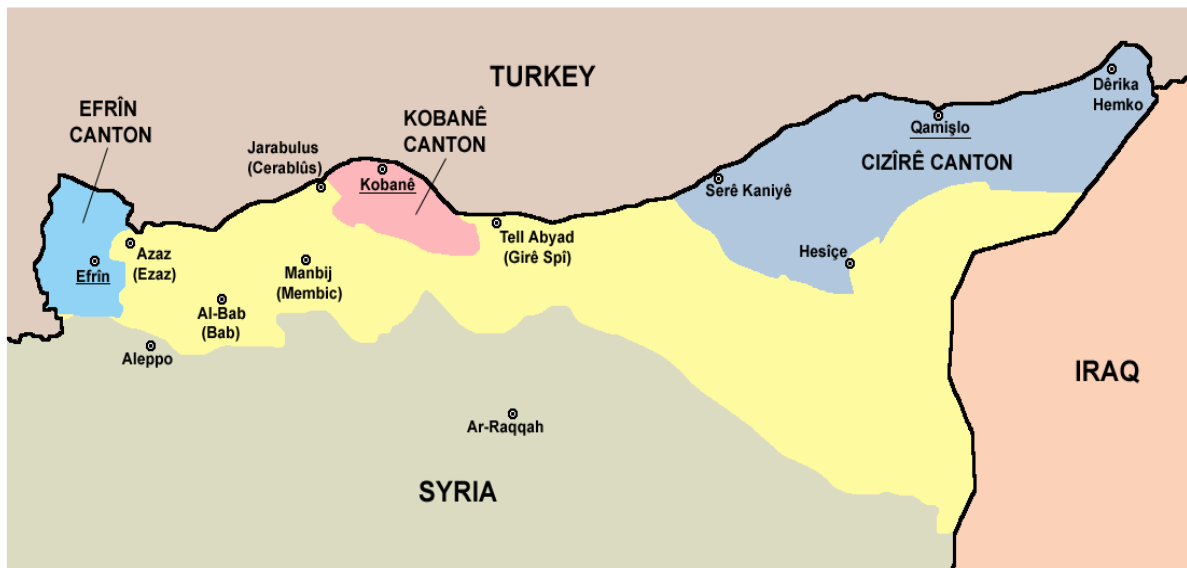
Firstly I would like to thank my informants ‘Delvin’, ‘Zeriyan’, ‘Meike’, ‘Nojin’, ‘Zeineb’, ‘Novbahar’ and ‘Iman’ for sharing your experiences and knowledge with me. I am also thankful for all the people who assisted me in the process of finding informants such as Ali and Rezgar and for PKK Gothenburg and Newroz TV who took the time to show me around. Thank you to my supervisor Maria Stern for helping me with my thesis. I specially would like to thank my parents Fahime and Javad *aziz gian* for tirelessly helping and supporting me in all my endeavours and for being such kind and brave people, without you this thesis would never have been possible as you are its inspiration.

Lastly I would like to thank all the brave Kurdish women in Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran for your fight for equality and human rights. Many of these women have had to risk their own lives in order to save others, such as Fidan Doğan, Leyla Şaylemez, and Sakine Cansız who were in many ways the core of the Kurdish women’s movement but were brutally assassinated by the Turkish state. *Biji Azadi, Biji Berxwedana Kobane!*

List of acronyms

BDP	Partiya Aştî û Demokrasiyê, The Peace and Democracy Party
Daesh	ISIS, The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
EZLN	Zapatista Army of National Liberation
KRG	Hikûmetî Herêmî Kurdistan, Kurdish Regional Government
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, Kurdistan Worker's Party
PYD	Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, Democratic Union Party
TEV-DEM	Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk, The movement for a Democratic Society
YPG	Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, People's defence units
YPJ	Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, Women's defence units

Map of Rojava



●●● - De facto cantons of Western Kurdistan (Rojava), as of February 2014

● - Territories claimed by Western Kurdistan (Rojava), but not controlled by the Kurds in February 2014

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Atlas_of_Western_Kurdistan

Table of contents

- 1. Introduction – The Rojava Revolution.....7**
 - 1.1 Objective and research questions
 - 1.2 Delimitations

- 2. Background.....10**
 - 2.1 The Kurds and the Kurdish liberation movement
 - 2.2 Rojava

- 3. Method.....14**
 - 3.1 Sampling method
 - 3.1.1 Material
 - 3.2 Method of analysis
 - 3.3.1 Discourse analysis
 - 3.3 Ethical considerations
 - 3.4 Limitations

- 4. Theoretical framework.....21**
 - 4.1 Analysing women as a collective
 - 4.2 Citizenship
 - 4.3 Women’s autonomous organising/separatism
 - 4.4 Empowerment and gender justice

- 5. Results.....27**
 - 5.1 Kurdish women as non-citizens
 - 5.2 “The revolution caused housewives to become leaders”: The housewife and the female combatant
 - 5.2.1 ‘The Housewife’
 - 5.2.2 ‘The female combatant’
 - 5.3 Women’s autonomous organising: reconstructing a male defined citizenship
 - 5.4 Feminist citizenship practices: *to kill, not men, but their masculinity*

- 6. Conclusion.....45**
 - 6.1 Future research

- 7. Bibliography.....47**

- 8. Appendix.....50**
 - 1. List of participants

1.Introduction – The Rojava Revolution

From its start, the conflict in Syria has been a highly topical issue, bringing news of the terror and violence caused by Daesh (ISIS) and the highest refugee count since the Second World War. However, it seems like the media coverage has failed to make certain aspects visible, for instance the practice of a whole new political system in the Kurdish region Rojava. At the start of the civil war the Kurds managed to declare independence of Rojava – an area that they had been denied for hundreds of years. But instead of building their own state, the people chose to build an alternative system based on stateless democracy. The Kurds have systematically been deprived of rights such as the right to their land, culture, language and political participation, and been victims of imprisonment and genocide. They have even been denied passports and social security numbers, making their status as non-citizens complete (Strangers, 2015: 7-9; Abdullah, 2015, April). The Kurdish women have been victims of further abuse, as the colonial states have tried to use them for their own nationalist agenda (Dirik, 2015, April) and they have been subjected to patriarchal laws (Interview 4 & 6). Today the women's movement in Rojava is growing strong and has managed to improve the situation for women in the region by autonomously organising. They have created an all-female military unit YPJ (Women's defence unit) and with it separate women's houses, academies, tribunals, cooperatives, communes and policeunits (In der Maur & Staal, 2015; Strangers, 2015).

Global governance, development and human rights institutions are starting to recognise the importance of citizenship and the possibility of developing new spaces for participation. For example the World Bank has “embraced citizen 'participation' and 'empowerment' as a panacea for addressing inequalities” (McEwan, 2005: 970). However, critics (See, for example, Brown, 1997; Miller, 1998; Shapiro, 2000) claim that when it comes to constructing citizenship, these institutions are coloured by “Western” politics and culture, which gives them a limited perspective of who a citizen is and which groups have the right to use the citizen-status, to define and own citizenship. Various feminist theorists (See, De Beauvoir, 1952; Pateman, 1989; Young, 1990; Yuval-Davis, 1997; Lister, 1997) are critical of how the narrow “Western” conception of citizenship reduces it to just a question of political participation as well as completely obscures the gendered process of citizenship. These theorists further claim that citizenship is constructed around social, political and economic

power structures that exclude marginalised groups such as women and minorities, and demonstrate how these groups in response create their own spaces (McEwan, 2005: 970-972). By reviewing how the Kurdish women see themselves reclaiming citizenship, this thesis will show how citizenship is a fluid construction that has been systematically denied marginalised groups such as the Kurds, but can also be reclaimed by them.

1.1 Objective and research questions

Based on interviews with female activists in Rojava I aim to get an understanding of how stateless democracy has affected women's position in society, from the eyes of the Kurdish women's movement. I have narrowed my study to focus on how the informants' discourses of reclaiming citizenship are manifested in their narratives. Since Kurds, especially Kurdish women, long have occupied a status as non-citizens (Abdullah, 2015, April; Dirik & Staal, 2015) and now have managed to create a new political system of stateless democracy, their discourses of reclaiming citizenship becomes interesting to analyse. Pamela Radcliff explains why citizenship is especially important to study in times of political transition; something I believe applies to Rojava.

“Periods of political and social transition offer a fertile space for the (re)construction of citizenship practices and ideals. At these moments, individuals’ relationships to the state and to each other can be questioned and sometimes re-negotiated. As a result, such transitions provide an ideal context for the historical analysis of how citizenship practices and ideals are created, contested and imagined” (Radcliff, 2002: 76).

Also, by studying how the Kurdish women's movement is using autonomous women's structures such as women's academies, houses, cooperatives and all-female military units in order to organise and empower women, I will be able to understand how the Kurdish women see themselves reclaiming citizenship through action spaces. By doing this, I am broadening the definition of citizenship from formal participation to actions practiced by people of “specific identities in particular locales” (McEwan, 2005: 970). Broadening the conception of citizenship is particularly relevant to the field of global studies, as a critical understanding of citizenship is central to ideas about development, human rights and social justice (McEwan, 2005). Further, I believe that this thesis can contribute to shedding light on the Rojava Revolution, as it is a so far unexplored territory within academics and literature.

My research question for this thesis is:

How does the Kurdish women's movement make sense of their reclaim of citizenship?

I interviewed seven activists from the Kurdish women's movement in Rojava and analysed their narratives through discourses of reclaiming citizenship. The informants all came from autonomous women's organisations and groups, as I wanted to study how their use of autonomous, or separatist, organising was used to create action spaces where new forms of citizenship were constructed. This thesis separates citizenship as *status* and as *practice*, in order to first look at the informants' chronological narrative of going from the status non-citizen to citizen after the revolution, and then study how they view their practices of citizenship as a reclaim of a feminist citizenship, using theories of empowerment, citizenship and gender justice.

1.2 Delimitations

In this paper I have limited the scope to the relation between the women's movement in Rojava and their reclaim of citizenship, thereby choosing to set aside other aspects of the Rojava revolution and its context. For example, I did not go deeper into the discussion of the civil war in Syria, other than brief background information and possible accounts from my informants. Even though the conflict is an important aspect of how Rojava was created and is maintained today, which will become evident later in this paper, there are a lot of complex factors and many actors involved that are not central for this subject and are not possible for me to analyse, seeing as a bachelor thesis gives limited time for research. Moreover, I have narrowed the research scope when it comes to Rojava itself by choosing not to immerse myself into their economic system, production, legal system, employment etc. even though this is briefly described in the background.

2. Background

2.1 The Kurds and the Kurdish liberation movement

There are a total of twenty-eight million Kurds living in Kurdistan, an area covering Northern Iraq, North-western Iran, South-eastern Turkey and North-eastern Syria. The Kurds are a non-Arab minority living in the Middle East that have been subdued by bloody battles and ethnic cleanings, the most recent still ongoing by the Turkish state and Daesh (Strangers, 2015: 6 & 14-15). Daesh was formerly an extremist part of Al-Qaeda in Iraq that was able to grow after the American invasion in the area 2003. When the tension and conflicts started to grow in Syria, the group saw their chance to gain power and obtain their goal of killing all the deifiers of their proclaimed Islamic Caliphate. Today, Daesh is the most well-founded and well-armed jihadist group in the world with a territory that stretches from Eastern Syria to Western Iraq (ibid).

Kurdish cities were in ancient times conquered by Persians, Romans and Arab invaders who since then have tried to assimilate them. The Kurds were assigned their own independent land after World War I but were stopped by a treaty, proposed by Turkey 1923, giving Kurdistan back to Turkey (Strangers, 2015: 7-9). Around the same time the Syrian-Arabs were struggling for independence from the French who in turn used Kurds and other ethnic minorities in their colonial armies, promising them land and important positions. When Syria gained its independence 1946 it turned against their enemies by seizing the land, properties and identity papers of 200 000 Kurds and subjecting them to force labour (ibid). They also forbid Kurdish customs, language, arrested many leaders and increased police surveillance in Kurd-populated areas to prevent them from politically organising. The same pattern can be found in Iraq, Iran and Turkey who have been, and still are, discriminating, falsely imprisoning and murdering Kurds who try to organise or resist their situation. In Iraq Kurds have in later years, after the fall of Saddam Hussein, managed to find some form of independence and in Iran the oppression is deepened by the Islamic regime. However, the situation for Kurds is by far worst in Turkey (Strangers, 2015: 7-9).

1978 was the start of leftist uprisings in Turkey, with the mobilisation of workers and students wanting a political change. The same uprising gave birth to the first militant Kurdish resistance movement with an open Marxist ideology: PKK. Their goal was to obtain

independence from Turkey and replace it with a communist Kurdistan. PKK has been an important political actor when it comes to fighting for Kurds right to their own land, language, political administration and culture (Strangers, 2015: 12-14). Since their start the organisation has been met with a deadly resistance from the Turkish state, who chose to put PKK, and its entire sister organisations, on a terror-watch-list in the US and EU, using their mandate as the second largest army holder in NATO. Today the list contains over hundred Kurdish organisations while Daesh is still not labelled as terrorists (Strangers, 2015: 19-20 & 112-113). Turkey still uses its NATO-position as well as threatens the EU with their power to control the borders by choosing to let refugees pass or not (BBC, 2015, November 29) and in response the “West” is excluding the Kurds from peace-negotiations and denying key members of the Kurdish movement Visa to Europe and the US. In 1999 the PKK-leader Abdullah Öcalan, “Apo”, was arrested and overturned to the Turkish state and has since then been imprisoned on the high-security prison island Imrali (Strangers, 2015: 127-134).

During his first years in prison, Öcalan started to doubt the effectiveness of Marxist ideology in liberating the Kurds. Instead he researched anarchist theories, becoming particularly interested in Murray Bookchin’s writings about ecological municipalism (Strangers, 2015: 22-26). After Bookchin’s death in 2004 PKK adopted the ideas of Democratic Confederalism, a political ideology based on feminism, ecology and stateless democracy, in their official platform and made a vow of being the first society to practise the system (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2015: 163-164). The Kurds began to form free citizen councils in North Kurdistan, with the support of BDP (the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party), but it was not until one year later, during the Rojava revolution that the world got to see its first society built completely upon the ideology (TATORT, 2013: 11-12).

2.2 Rojava

The republic of Rojava was declared in 2012 as a way for the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad to prevent a Kurdish uprising. All military and government officials were pulled out of the region, leaving the area in the hands of the Kurds and Yezedis. This gave rise to a tension between the possible parties that wanted to take over the region: PYD (Democratic Union Party) in Syria and the parties aligned with KRG (Kurdish Regional Government) in Iraq. They managed to resolve the tensions by creating a coalition of fifteen parties, non-Kurdish groups, assemblies and different citizen groups called TEV-DEM (the Democratic Society Movement). The coalition created the governing body of Rojava with the use of Democratic

Confederalism, and its only responsibility now, according to Rojava's constitution, is to make sure that all decisions made by the administrations are anchored within the grassroots (Strangers, 2015: 22). Politically the area is divided into three autonomous cantons: Efrîn, Kobanê, the area most attacked by Daesh, and Cizîrê, the most populated canton. The three cantons, while allied, organise themselves autonomously based on each cantons specific needs. The cantons each have two chairs, one man and one woman, and 22 ministries that in turn consist of one minister and two deputies. The three posts have to be divided between one Kurd, Assyrian and Arab and at least one has to be a woman (Strangers, 2015: 24-25).

Each city district is made up of 5-17 neighbourhood councils, which in turn consists of 30-150 families depending on the size of the city/village. There are also councils based on charitable and civic organisations, political parties, workplaces, religious organisations and others depending on what people involve themselves with in everyday life. All the councils operate by direct democracy, meaning that everyone is allowed to speak freely and vote (Strangers, 2015: 3-4). Every city district elects one man and one woman to serve them in the larger body of the Rojava cantons: the Supreme Council. The representatives' only task is coordinating all the councils, and their decisions must be approved by the local assemblies in order for them to be binding in the local districts (ibid: 4 & 25). Furthermore, all representatives in the upper councils rotate frequently in order to hold the power locally and decentralise the system. Aside from the local councils, all governing bodies must have proportional representation ethnically and in terms of gender. In fact, the only minister post that is not co-held by a man and a woman is the Women's minister (Strangers, 2015: 3-4 & 26-29).

In a society practising Democratic Confederalism, the military must always rest on voluntary participation, be controlled by the democratic institutions and only be used as self-defence against attacks (Öcalan, 2015: 107-109). YPJ and YPG are the main defence forces of Rojava, consisting of volunteer militias selected by the city districts. YPJ was founded in April 2013 and consists of only women, while YPG is a mixed force, with 45% of the combatants being women (Interview 7). Rojava also has separate security forces (Asayish) functioning like police that are responsible for overseeing the security in the districts. They too have an all-female unit called Asayish-J whose purpose, besides the usual responsibility of overseeing security, is to combat crimes and violence against women and children plus hate crimes. They also run safe houses for women over the age of 15 where they provide free

education and run a hotline for women objected to forced marriage (Strangers, 2015: 33-34). To become an Asayish you must attend a police academy where courses in feminist theory and non-violent conflict resolution are mandatory. However, Rojava's goal in the long run is to eliminate the police by providing six weeks of police training to everyone. Further, capital punishment is now abolished, the secret police have been dissolved, and the military units elect all their officers (Graeber, 2015: 201).

The economic model of Rojava rests on the idea of cooperatives and small production units. The region is quite rich in petroleum but has chosen to produce no more than what is needed locally. Still, economically, the region has suffered after a trade embargo by Turkey and the war that has taken up 70% of their resources (Strangers, 2015: 98-100, 122). The UN only recognises states and since Rojava is not a state, they do not send humanitarian aid to the area. Therefore, instead of support, Rojava received economic and political embargos, which they had to overcome by learning to grow their own food and create other necessities from scratch. The defence forces even had to build their own tanks (Dirik & Staal, 2015: 43-46).

3. Methodology and method

This study derives from a qualitative approach, using verbal narratives from deep interviews as a basis for a discourse analysis. Laurel Weldon (2006) argues that by grounding ones study in the marginalised voices of women, researchers are creating a methodology of inclusion and contributing to a better view of international relations (Weldon, 2006: 62). This is why I chose to conduct interviews with women who were active in Rojava, in order to understand how they make sense of their reclaim of citizenship. Patricia Collins (2000) argues that the use of black women's standpoint within research is an epistemic advantage as they naturally have a critical attitude, offering an alternative to hegemonic discourse and by often organising separately to construct their own analysis of their experiences. Despite the fact that black women can offer concrete experiences, their knowledge has been devalued by the elite in a process that Collins calls "epistemological gatekeeping" (Sprague, 2005: 41-47), similar to the Kurdish women. Without understanding marginalised group's perspective on citizenship, governments, development and human rights organisations will have a hard time achieving democracy. Conducting interviews with the Kurdish women's movement in Rojava and analysing their construction of action spaces to reclaim citizenship, is a step towards improving our understanding of a democratic citizenship.

3.1 Sampling method

For this study I interviewed seven female activists who were active in Rojava in different ways. I chose to focus on informants that were active in key all-female organisations and units, as I aimed to study the women's movement, not the whole political movement in Rojava. As all my informants are currently active in the region and have a lot of enemies working against them, I had to put a lot of effort in establishing contact and trust with them. Even though I will only present and analyse these seven interviews, the amount of people I talked to and visited is actually much higher. My main resource in establishing contact with the movement was the use of my father as a "middle man". My parents were *peshmerga* (Kurdish guerrillas) during the revolution in Iran and therefore have a lot of contacts within the Kurdish liberation movement, which they used to help me find informants. I let my father take initial contact with many of my informants and used his background to gain people's trust, as they would never have trusted a stranger and outsider. This is also why I chose to use snowballing as a method to find more informants (Beauchemin & González-Ferrer, 2011),

meaning that once I had established contact with one informant, she was able to put me in contact with more people within the women's movement. I spoke with several important female leaders who had a lot of knowledge but were too busy to be interviewed, as well as those who lacked enough information about the area I was interested in. However, these brief contacts were important steps towards finding informants who had both the necessary knowledge and time. Besides these conversations, I also did two fieldtrips: one to PKK in Gothenburg to find informants and discuss my thesis, and one to Newroz TV in Stockholm, which is one of the main stations reporting on Rojava. During these field trips, I was able to get contact details to more informants as well an overall picture of the movement.

I transcribed all my interviews and translated most of them from Kurdish. As I don't speak Kermanji (the Kurdish dialect used in Turkey and Syria) I used an interpreter for five of the interviews. The other two were in English so I was able to conduct them myself. With the English interviews, I also used e-mail to complete questions that came up in hindsight. For two of the interviews that were conducted face-to-face in Kermanji I used on separate occasions two different interpreters who knew Swedish and Sorani (the Kurdish dialect used in Iran and Iraq that I speak). I used my father as a translator in three interviews, all of them conducted by Skype or phone. However, since two of the interviews were mostly in Sorani, it was only during one of the interviews that my father had to translate everything. Thus, for most interviews I was able to ask the questions myself but I still let my father look over my transcriptions to ensure that I did not misread or mistranslate anything. I believe that the informants opened up much more when my father acted as a bridge between us, as he explained his own background in the Kurdish liberation movement, thereby giving me legitimacy. This was especially important since I could not communicate well with them in their dialect and therefore might have been viewed as an outsider. Other researchers have used this strategy as well, for example Lila Abu-Lughod brought her father with her during the initial face of her anthropological study of the Beduin in Egypt (Abu-Lughod, 2006). By using her father, she was able to legitimise her identity as a fellow Arab and gain access to her informants' lives (ibid: 11-15, 24 & 28).

Being a woman with Kurdish background and having parents that were part of a similar resistance movement was an advantage for gaining the informants' trust and having a greater cultural understanding that could lower the barrier between us. On the other hand, I may have been held to a higher standard of loyalty and therefore expected to only write positive things

about the movement in Rojava, though this was not something I noticed. The fact that I represent the academic field, I am born and raised in a Nordic country and never experienced a war still creates a barrier between us. Iver Neumann (2008) emphasises the importance of cultural competence, when conducting a discourse analysis, as it gives the researcher an advantage to know more about social codes, shared meanings within a community, the political setting or have overall knowledge. At the same time, being too “native” might make a person blind to the peculiarities of the society that they are studying (Neumann, 2008: 64). Owing to this, my position as an insider yet outsider might have been an advantage.

I chose to use a semi-structured interview technique where I asked open questions about several themes, using a loose interview guide, and let the informants steer some of the conversation. The interviews lasted 1-2 hours, the first ones were less structured, as I wanted to gain perspective on what the informants found central to women’s role in Rojava and with time I started to ask more directed questions concerning topics that came up with earlier informants. The questions varied somewhat, depending on the informants’ background, but were all divided into the themes: “Background information: personal experiences and position within the movement”, “Women’s position in Rojava: then and now”, “The women’s movement and autonomous organising”, and “Stateless democracy: today and the future”.

3.1.1 Material

As far as I can see, the Rojava revolution is an unexplored topic within academics, and even within common literature. Due to this, I was forced to rely on mainly two publications for facts and background information. The first book *A small key can open a large door* (2015) is edited and published by an anonymous group, calling themselves “Strangers In a Tangled Wilderness”. The first chapters, which only contain facts about the history of the Kurds and Rojava, are written by the editors. The remaining chapters are written by a variation of people, ranging from researchers who have visited Rojava, human rights organisations based in different countries around the world, to journalist groups. There are also interviews with politicians from the Rojava administration and letter correspondence from YPJ-combatants to their families. The second publication used, *Stateless democracy* (2015), was published by New World Academy, an alternative educational platform that gives stateless organisations the opportunity to discuss their political projects with artists, students, and movements. This volume, which is in collaboration with the Kurdish women’s movement, is their fifth. The publication is written by a variation of people that have visited or lived in Rojava during their

new political administration. The third source used for facts was the informants I interviewed, as most of them were important actors within the revolution. For example one informant is the co-founder and leader of the most important women's organisation in Rojava and helped me learn more about the women's movement and its autonomous groups. Another informant worked for the YPJ foreign relations office and could therefore tell me about YPJ's structure. Thus, I used my informants' testimonies in two ways: to check facts and collect background information and to do a discourse analysis of their narratives.

3.2 Method of analysis

Tami Jacoby (2006) uses her fieldwork encounters in Israel/Palestine to discuss the difficulty of using experiences as a unit of analysis and transforming them into something theoretical, tangible and true. The interpretation of informants' experiences is based on the researcher's interest and definition of knowledge, something that creates an unbalanced power dynamic, which goes against the ethics of feminist ethnography (Jacoby, 2006: 162-163). At the same time, a researcher needs to break down oral accounts in order to analyse them through a theoretical framework. Further, oral accounts cannot be seen as uncontended truths, as with most data, but should be viewed in the light of its context, discourse and the concept of self-presentation. Jacoby points out that all informants and researchers present themselves in a certain way in order to be viewed as more presentable and legitimise their actions (ibid). These are all dilemmas that I battled when collecting and analysing my data. How should I interpret my informants' accounts? Can they be presented as facts and truths or as experiences and individual narratives? As my aim was to analyse the informants' conceptions of reclaiming citizenship I concluded that the veracity of their statements was not the most important. Even if their accounts are not seen as an objective truth I am still able to "discern how subjects assert their agency, imbue their actions with meaning, frame their own representations, and determine how these data are accumulated, classified, stored, and interpreted accordingly" (Jacoby, 2006: 162-163).

3.2.1 Discourse analysis

The choice of analytic method for this study was to conduct a discourse analysis of the informants' testimonies. According to Mats Börjesson (2003), a discourse is a regulated order of conversation with institutionalised practices and discourse analysis means to problematize the essence of these orders and practices, by asking how and why social categories were created (Börjesson, 2003: 19). Iver Neumann (2008) explains discourses as people's use of

language to construct categories in order to understand the world and sort all sensory data that surround them. Discourse analysts call these categories representations, which they claim institutionalise, or normalise, ideas into practices (Neumann, 2008: 61). According to Neumann, it is rare, or even impossible, to analyse all discourses in a study, instead the choice of what discourses to focus on are often theory-driven. He further asserts that “Demonstrating institutionalized discourse can often simply be done by proving that metaphors regularly appear in the same texts” (ibid: 62). I have chosen to focus on the representations that were most prominent in my informants’ statement, relating to discourses of reclaiming citizenship. For example, when asking questions around the theme “Women’s position in Rojava: then and now”, I noticed how the informants categorised being a citizen respectively a non-citizen by constructing the identity of ‘the housewife’ versus ‘the female combatant’. Börjesson uses the category housewife to exemplify how to conduct a discourse analysis. He says that instead of asking how many housewives there are, one should ask what constitutes the housewife as a category by looking at the cultural and socio-political context (Börjesson, 2003: 18), which was what I did. Further, I looked at how discourses of reclaiming citizenship were manifested in the informants’ accounts, in connection to empowerment and gender justice, by analysing the words they used to provide meaning to the themes “The women’s movement and autonomous organising”, and “Stateless democracy: today and the future”. Like Neumann mentions, I looked at the most common metaphors used by the informants and, like Börjesson suggests, studied the social and political context in which they were created.

Consequently, I did not ask any of my informants direct questions about citizenship and empowerment. Instead I asked broader questions about their political involvement, their views on democracy and their new political system, the situation for women before and after the revolution, the different autonomous women’s spaces and the challenges they had faced. I later used the transcriptions of the interviews to do a discourse analysis, paying special attention to their conceptions of citizenship, empowerment and gender justice, and how that connects to their reclaim of citizenship. The following method of analysis has been used by many researchers before me, for example Maria Stern (2006) presents how she used her Mayan informants’ narratives as a basis for a discourse analysis of security. Instead of asking them direct questions about security, she interviewed them “about their processes of politicization, their coming-into-being as political subjects” and found their conception of security “embedded in their representation of themselves as political subjects”(Stern, 2006: 183). However, my aim with the interviews was not to focus on individual experiences but the

collective experiences of the Kurdish women's movement as a whole, using their key members and leaders in order to understand how they, as a movement, are reclaiming their citizenship and using autonomous women's groups as action spaces.

Bina D'costa discusses "the methodological dilemmas of conducting fieldwork in unconventional sites, like among activist groups in conflict zones, and with subjects of study that have been traditionally absent from IR, such as women and marginalized communities" (Ackerly, Stern & True, 2006: 12). Her definition of marginalisation is the same as mine: a status linked to social groups that experience discrimination and exclusion based on identities such as gender, class, ethnicity or nationality (D'costa, 2007: 130). She explains how she was able to use the stories of marginalised groups to get theoretical insight into nation-building processes that would otherwise have been lost to her (ibid: 129-131). D'costa critiques traditional IR-theory for excluding these groups when studying governance, policy and other aspects of global and local politics. My choice to use the accounts from activists in the Kurdish women's movement in order to understand their discourses of reclaiming citizenship rests on the same reasoning. By using voices of the marginalised, "the outsiders", in this case people whose citizenship status is ambiguous or even absent, we are able to form an understanding of the "insiders", and the systems used to separate them. By studying these same outsiders in a context where they have created their own action spaces, we are able to analyse their discourses of reclaiming citizenship and what they define as democratic citizenship. I also agree with D'costa in that feminist oral history as a method is a form of research activism that both contributes academically as well as makes a difference for the informants, since their narratives are given space within academics (D'costa, 2007: 129-133 & 150).

3.3 Ethical considerations

I used the ethical guidelines from the Swedish Research Council as a basis for this study. Interviewing people that have been or are in the middle of a war can be highly sensitive, as it can give rise to trauma and due to the risk of people disclosing sensitive information (Ford, Mills & Upshur, 2009). This was made apparent during the initial face of establishing contact with new informants, as it was important for them to know whom I had talked to before them and who had given me their contact details. I therefore took particular care in informing them that they could be anonymous, could stop the interview at any time, choose not to answer any question and decide whether they were okay with being recorded or not. All of my informants

were fine with my using their first names, although some of them were probably not their real ones, as most of the activists and combatants within the movement usually change their names regularly. Since my thesis is not focused on the war or details about the military units, my informants seemed to be comfortable with my questions and never refrained from answering them. Further, they expressed the need for more people to spread information about the revolution in Rojava and therefore were in favour of my spreading the content of my thesis. During the interviews conducted via Skype and telephone, I was worried about the risk that the calls might be tapped, but my informants did not perceive this as a risk, and seemed to be used to communicating through those mediums. Further, as other researchers have concluded before me: the informants were not going to tell me anything they do not want me to know (Stern, 2006: 186). Lastly, and most importantly, I did not feel any pressure from my informants when it came to what I should write. I always explained the topic of my thesis at the start of the interviews and none of them made any attempts to steer the focus or asked me about its content. Still, seeing as they knew about my Kurdish background and that my parents have been *peshmerga*, they probably expected me to write about Rojava in a favourable manner. This is something that has troubled me when writing my thesis but at the same time, it is also what gave me unique access to the informants.

3.4 Limitations

One of the limitations with this study is that I never was able to visit Rojava myself and that I conducted most of my interviews through Skype or the telephone. A study's credibility is usually strengthened with the use of observations and meeting informants face-to-face. Because of lack of time and resources, as well as the risks when travelling to a region of conflict, I did not have the possibility to go to Rojava. As I wanted to speak to people who are active in Rojava today, the use of Skype and telephone became a natural choice. However, as I found reliable literature on the Rojava revolution I was able to confirm the facts that my informants presented. Another aspect of my method that some might criticise is the choice to use my father as a translator in some of the interviews. As I argued before, it was only during one interview that my father needed to translate everything; in the others I could communicate by myself in Kurdish, English or use another interpreter. Mostly my father helped with my transcriptions as well as helped me to initiate contact and trust with the informants, making his participation vital. By letting one person translate and another double check the transcriptions, I made sure that the interpretation was correct, even in cases where I understood the content by myself.

4. Theoretical framework

In this chapter the theories used to conduct a discourse analysis of the informants' accounts will be presented. Since this thesis derives from a gendered analysis and the Kurdish *women's* movement's standpoint, I will firstly present a discussion of why I have chosen to analyse the informants' narratives through their collective identity as "women". As the main analytic theme for this essay is discourses of reclaiming citizenship, the theories used to define and analyse citizenship will be presented. Further, I will introduce earlier research about women's autonomous organising and how they can be seen as action spaces for reclaiming citizenship. Kaber's definition of empowerment and gender justice will also be used in order to understand how the informants' citizenship practices went from attempting to empower individuals to collectively changing gender norms.

4.1 Analysing women as a collective

I will use an overall gendered analysis in this thesis, meaning that I will use a gender lens to understand the Kurdish women's movement generally and the informants specifically. A basic premise for my analysis is how men's historical, political, economic, and sociocultural advantage within the gender power order (see Hirdman, 1990) have left little space for women, and therefore created a need for them to construct their own autonomous spaces (Freedman, 2003: 1-3). Seeing as this thesis draws from the collective experiences of the Kurdish *women's* movement, another premise for this study is that there exists a shared experience amongst women, at least amongst women in a specific location, which relies on my use of the category "woman".

Lena Gunnarsson claims that even if the "the category 'woman' does not reflect the whole reality of concrete and particular women, it nevertheless refers to something real, namely the structural position as woman" (Gunnarsson, 2011:23). She presents how the use of the category "woman" within feminist academic circles has become stigmatised and called out as essentialist, which she believes is problematic as it obscures the central power analysis of feminist theory (ibid: 24). Feminism is an extensive ideological field making its meaning highly subjective and dependent on a person's own background socioeconomically and culturally. However, a common ground for its supporters is that it questions men's structural oppression of *women* and wishes to stop gender discrimination (Freedman, 2003: 1-3).

Gunnarsson presents how feminists such as Chandra Mohanty (2003) have rejected the category “woman” for being Eurocentric and homogenising “the third world woman”. As a critique of post-colonial, heterosexual and white feminism, feminists (See Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005; Davis, 2008) have introduced intersectional feminism that looks at how different power relations such as race, sexuality and gender meet, or intersect. This makes it possible to still use “woman” as a category without obscuring other power relations that separates different women’s experiences (Gunnarsson, 2011: 25). Feminist queer theorists, like Judith Butler (1999) have criticised the use of the category “woman” for upholding the dichotomy of gender and forcing people into a category, as there are people with a non-binary gender identity. Gunnarsson argues that:

“The radicality of the insight that gender is socially constructed lies exactly in the element that our experiences as women, men, transsexuals and queers, although real, are not pre-given, static entities but products of historically determined human activity and thus subject to change. The radicality does not lie in refuting the reality of that which is socially constructed; that only retains the positivist assumptions of what reality is, assumptions that feminists have found crucial to dismiss since gendered power structures could not possibly be proved to exist according to such standards” (Gunnarsson, 2011: 29).

Thus, without using the category “woman” one cannot point to the structural oppression that people who identify as women are subjected to, making it hard to change gendered power structures. Gayatri Spivak (2006) uses the term strategic essentialism to explain the necessity for groups that share a common background and interest to organise and make political claims (ibid: 30), something that is exemplified with my informants. In sum, even though I agree that gender is a social construction and that women as a group have different positions of power depending on other intersecting factors, I still view the category “woman” necessary in order to understand the gender power order. Further, as my thesis is based on the Kurdish women’s movement, which uses the term “women” to describe their collective experiences, I have chosen to view their statements as collective discourses of reclaiming citizenship.

4.2 Citizenship

In this thesis I mainly use Ruth Lister (1997) and Pamela Radcliff’s (2002) theories to define

citizenship and interpret the discourses of reclaiming citizenship within my informants' statements.

The notion that citizenship is something that can be reclaimed is linked with the notion that citizenship is a social construction and not a fixed object. Radcliff criticises how mainstream literature confines democratic transitions and construction of citizenship to the arena of state institutions. Instead, she understands citizenship as something fluid, as an "outcome of legal, political and symbolic practices" and as something more than a "status guaranteed by the state, a set of rights and responsibilities bestowed upon the population". (Radcliff, 2002: 78). She claims that the recreation of democratic citizenship takes place within civil society, its relation to the state and its political, social and cultural context, and that it is constructed through collective action and everyday practice (ibid). Using this idea, I am able to analyse the Kurdish women's movement's collective organising and practice as a renegotiation of their citizenship. In this thesis I am using two definitions of citizenship: firstly citizenship as *status* and secondly as *practice*. Lister defines two separate traditions of citizenship: Liberalism that focuses on the individual and conceptualizes citizenship as a status, and civic republicanism that focuses on the collective and conceptualises citizenship as a practice. She argues that we need to distinguish between being a citizen, which means legally enjoying the rights of citizenship that enable political participation, and acting as a citizen, which means to fulfil the potential of one's citizen-status (Lister, 1997: 6-10). Naila Kabeer (2012) similarly differentiates between the status and practice of citizenship:

"While the status of citizenship spells out the possibilities and constraints that individuals and groups experience as members of a particular society, the practice of citizenship places the question of human agency, including the capacity to accept, to conform, to question or to dissent, at the heart of contesting views about citizenship"(Kabeer, 2012: 220).

In the first section of this thesis I will study the informants' conception of their citizen-status, meaning their "being a citizen". After having analysed the informants' chronological narrative of their changing citizen-status, the second part of this thesis will analyse the Kurdish women's movement's *practice* of citizenship, i.e. their "acting as a citizen", in order to understand how they are reclaiming it. Radcliff claims that the notion of citizenship practices as something only taking place in the public political sphere has led to an exclusion of women's everyday activities and social movements that often have been practiced within the private, such as the Spanish house-wife associations that she has studied. She shows how

these associations enabled women to access a space where they could form new practices of female citizenship (Radcliff, 2002: 80). The next section will elaborate on how autonomous organising can be seen as action spaces for reclaiming citizenship.

4.3 Women's autonomous organising/separatism

All of my informants were active within different autonomous women's organisations and units, as my objective was to study how they conceived their practices within these autonomous spaces as a reclaim of citizenship. For this study I have therefore looked at similar autonomous women's movements such as the Zapatistas and Mujeres Libres (which will be presented in the analysis) and mainly Marilyn Frye's (1997) theory of separatism and Cheryl McEwan's (2005) definition of action spaces.

According to Frye, men are sceptical towards the idea of separatism because it denies men access to women thereby restricting male privilege, while women are uneasy because they fear being punished for opposing society's male-defined needs and expectations. Still, Frye argues that feminist separatism is necessary in order to equalise the power balance, because it gives women a space to escape the domination of men and a context outside of patriarchal constructs. Separatism can be found in places such as women's shelters, women's clinics and lesbian communities as well as in activities like divorce or abortion. Frye calls men's need to access, and thereby power over, women "male parasitism" as they, like parasites, suck the power, independence and resources out of women (Frye, 1997: 410). By using separatism, such as all-female groups and organisations, women can take control over their own lives and break this structure of parasitism (ibid: 406-414).

For example, during the 80's when PKK and the Turkish state were at war, a lot of people with rural backgrounds joined the struggle and they, coming from a difficult socio-economic situation and lacking education, had a hard time accepting women as equals to men. During wartime, ideology and political theory came in second place, instead it was all about survival (Dirik & Staal, 2015: 39). This made it even harder for female guerrillas who had to assume a more "masculine" image and many even cut their hair short to resemble men. Because of this inequality, female guerrillas decided to organise themselves autonomously with the first all-female guerrilla units in 1993 and the first women's political party 1999 (ibid). Yuval Davis (1997) points out that all-female military units might provide a safer space for women, especially when it comes to protecting them from sexual harassment, and gives them the

chance to perform equal tasks as that of men, in comparison to the mixed forces where women always have to prove themselves (Davis, 1997: 104).

Weldon lifts the importance of giving marginalised groups the opportunity of autonomous self-organisation. She claims that feminist scholars have long stressed the significance of autonomous women's organisations and groups where they can construct their own agenda and strategies for coping or resisting their subordination (Weldon, 2006: 75). Through interviews with black women in post-apartheid South Africa, McEwan (2005) shows how marginalised groups are forming their own spaces for radical citizenship when being excluded from the formal places of participation. The women's activist groups are providing a place where women from different spectrums can meet and discuss issues such as domestic violence or rights to employment. McEwan also calls them "action spaces" as they provide people opportunities to organise a resistance, challenge current conditions and reform alternatives, which she means are important for realising and exercising citizenship (McEwan, 2005). Similarly, I found that the autonomous women's structures constructed by the Kurdish women's movement provided spaces for them to organise and reclaim their status as citizens, once again showing that citizenship is a plastic construction able to be remoulded by resistance practices.

4.4 Empowerment and gender justice

In order to understand the discourse of reclaiming citizenship, found in the informants' narratives, I used Naila Kabeer's (2005, 2012) theory of empowerment and gender justice in connection to citizenship. Her theory of empowerment was used to understand the informants' descriptions of the changing citizen-status within women as individuals, while her theory of gender justice was used to understand how the Kurdish women's movement's reclaim of citizenship can be viewed as feminist.

Kabeer describes empowerment as a form of change where you go from being disempowered, which "means to be denied choice", to being empowered, a process "by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability" (Kabeer, 2005: 13). Here she differentiates between having power and being empowered, as those who are powerful and get to make choices all the time never have been in a state of disempowerment and have therefore not undergone this central process of change. Kabeer emphasises that a choice has to be real in order for someone to be empowered. Firstly there must be alternatives

to choose from and secondly they have to be seen by the chooser and not obscured by power relations, as the disempowered often internalise and legitimise their subordination (ibid). The choices also have to be important to one's everyday life, such as the right to choose whom to marry, whether to have children or to get divorced, and not undermine the choices of others. According to Kabeer there are three dimensions of empowerment: agency, resources and achievement. Agency in relation to empowerment "implies not only actively exercising choice, but also doing this in ways that challenge power relations" (Kabeer, 2005: 14). To become empowered one must look within oneself and turn the internalised inferiority into a higher sense of self-worth. However, the agency of individual women and a focus on immediate inequalities are not enough, "institutional transformation requires movement along a number of fronts: from individual to collective agency, from private negotiations to public action, and from the informal sphere to the formal arenas of struggle where power is legitimately exercised" (Kabeer, 2005: 16). The thesis has divided the informants' narratives into two "stages" of empowerment: firstly, the individual form that is connected to self-confidence and secondly, the collective form that can transcend into institutional change.

Lister discusses whether it is possible to rebuild a women-friendly citizenship, as according to her citizenship is inherently women-unfriendly. She claims that conceptualisation of citizenship is especially important when it comes to challenging "the oppressive male-dominated political, economic, social and cultural institutions that still deny women full citizenship" (Lister, 1997: 10) as the exclusion of women within nation-states "has been pivotal to the historical, theoretical, and political construction of citizenship (ibid: 12)". Using the informants' testimonies I found that their reclaim of citizenship could be perceived as woman-friendly, or even feminist, as they were talking about changing gender structures. Kabeer views empowerment as interrelated with citizenship and gender justice when it comes to enabling social change in women's lives. Her definition of gender justice is the strive for gender equality and women's rights on an institutional, local and global level. She argues that, "Ideas about citizenship offer an important bridge between these two processes of change (i.e. empowerment and gender justice) because they help to mediate the translation of individual notions of selfhood into socially recognised identities" (Kabeer, 2012: 217).

The last section of this thesis will present how the Kurdish women's movement went from empowering individual women to attempting to change the gender power order, making their reclaim of citizenship feminist, or gender just, in line with Kabeer's theory.

5. Results

In this following chapter, the results from the interviews I conducted will be intertwined with my analysis. I have chosen to use a lot of quotes from the informants in order for their accounts to truly come across. The purpose of this chapter is, in line with my research question, to analyse how the Kurdish women's movement make sense of their reclaim of citizenship. The disposition of this chapter is laid out chronologically, starting with the Kurdish women as non-citizens before the revolution, their transformation from "housewives to leaders", their reconstruction of citizenship through autonomous organising, and finally their attempt to change norms of masculinity to complete their creation of a feminist citizenship. This chapter is in majority based on the statements made by my informants during our interviews.

5.1 Kurdish women as non-citizens

"The Kurds were especially oppressed by the state as they were not allowed to have identity papers, to speak their own language and most of them were not even recognised as citizens by the Syrian state" (Interview 4).

To understand why the informants viewed themselves as non-citizens before the revolution, one must understand the socio-political context of Kurdish women's rights. Asya Abdullah, a co-founder and chair-member of PYD from Cizîrê canton, describes how the colonising states have created laws to imprison every Kurd that tries to resist politically. During the many years of the Assad regime, the Kurds were not allowed to have a passport, a social-security number, were denied the right to education, and the state took all the profits made by production and economy from Rojava, which left the Kurds with nothing (Abdullah, 2015, April). Thus, having been forced into a rootless identity and denied central rights, the Kurds have been systematically deprived of their citizenship. According to Dilar Dirik the Turkish state has long used Kurdish women for their own nationalist agenda, forcing them away from their "backwards" culture and into the state's "modernization project". She argues that Kurdish women have been subjects to colonialism, socio-economic exclusion and patriarchal violence by the state as well as their own community while living in a stateless nation in a world ruled by states (Dirik, 2015, April).

There are several organisations that are important for strengthening the role of women in Rojava, but none as important as the umbrella organisation *Yekitiya Star* (English: Star union). *Yekitiya Star* was founded 2005 and is an all-female organisation with an ideological purpose of creating Democratic Confederalism, ecologism and equality between the sexes (Interview 6). Their first order of business was to initiate the forming of YPJ. The leaders felt that the increasing role of women caused men's resistance to grow and therefore decided to establish women's houses to protect and support the women. The houses offer everything from a safe place where women can stay as long as needed, free courses and activities and a meeting space. Further, they created women's academies as they saw education as a necessary means for empowering women. As *Yekitiya Star* was responsible for creating YPJ, the women's houses and academies, they became an important political actor for women's rights (Interview 4 & 6; Strangers, 2015). One respondent, 'Nojin', who used to work as a politician in Cizîrê and is now stationed as an ambassador for *Yekitiya Star* in Bashur, Kurdistan Iraq, to do diplomatic work, describes how much the role of women has changed in Rojava since the cantons were created.

She explains that there are autonomous women's councils who have veto right to all decisions made by the other councils and separate tribunals for women. When a woman goes to court, half of the representatives and the judge have to be women. Further, a representative from the women's house has to be present and if this rule is not followed, the court is not allowed to proceed with any decision. This reform is coupled with the criminalisation of violence against women, where honour (*Kurdish: Namos*) violence is punished with high penalty. According to Nojin, as well as my other informants (Interview 1, 5, 6 & 7) there were no laws for women before. For example if women wanted to go abroad, they had to have their father or husband's permission and when they became pregnant they lost their jobs. Nojin explains as follows:

*"In general Syrian laws were terrible for women. Before men had the deciding power over marriage and children but now that has changed and both parties have equal right to custody over their children and right to decide whether to get married or divorced. Further, in accordance with Syrian law, when you testified you had to have two women to count as one male witness, now one woman is equal to one man in the eyes of the law. Also, an important legal change was when they removed dowry (*Kurdish: mehrije*) as this used to create big problems for women and their families. Moreover, you no longer have to have a mullah to get married; instead you get registered in the commune you live in. In fact, Rojava is now a secular society, meaning that legally religion has to be separated from politics and become private" (Interview 4).*

In this statement, Nojin identifies different factors that she associates with disempowerment, being denied deciding rights within marriage, parenthood and economy, and how these when turned around can lead to empowerment. Kabeer's theory about gender justice helps us understand Nojin's descriptions of the laws for women in Rojava. According to Kabeer empowerment starts with the capabilities of individual women but when turned collective it can lead to a form of gender justice, creating institutional change (Kabeer, 2012: 220). She therefore argues that individual empowerment is an important step in order to achieve a structural change (ibid, 227). Similarly, Nojin stresses that the improvement of women's situation in society was and is not achieved by just changing the laws but also by changing the norms of masculinity. The women's movement worked hard on increasing knowledge about destructive gender roles by reaching everyone in society, including the mullah's (Interview 4), which is something I will discuss further in the last section of this chapter. However, their narratives explain that there are still many difficulties when it comes to domestic roles in Rojava, as women are still expected to take responsibility for the children, which is particularly hard when there are so few child care centres, and domestic work in addition to finding time for education and formal work. None of my informants tried to claim that Rojava now was perfect and that they had reached complete equality, instead they present how much the situation had changed during this short period of time and that it would probably improve even more if they were given more time (Interview 1, 4, 6 & 7). This shows that the important thing for the informants was to gain the power to make choices over their own lives, even if it would not guarantee them equality right away.

During the interviews, it became clear that all my informants wanted to convey how much women's position in Rojava had changed since the revolution. They used the laws as an example to highlight what society used to be like for women, because for people who come from the outside, it is hard to understand the context in which this movement was formed. I chose to interpret these accounts in a similar manner as Kabeer did when she divided citizen *status* from citizen *practice* in her study of citizenship, empowerment and gender justice. Kabeer, drawing on Lister's theories (1997), used "the concept of status to refer to how the existing constitutional/legal arrangements in a society define the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, including its gender dimensions" while using "practice to refer to the different ways in which members of a society seek to act on - and challenge - these collective definitions" (Kabeer, 2012: 220). In this first section I have therefore chosen to highlight how

the informants compared their status as citizens before and after the Rojava revolution, while in the next section I will look at how they conveyed their practice of citizenship: going from being ‘the housewife’ to ‘the female combatant’.

5.2 “The revolution caused housewives to become leaders”: The housewife and the female combatant

“During the Assad regime, women had no power and no say in politics in Rojava. Instead, they were under the power of the man and the state. During the Rojava revolution we helped all women, including housewife’s with no previous experience in politics and many of them illiterate, to become involved in society. When YPJ was formed many women who did not have a place in politics before, became inspired and joined. Women with children left them at home and joined the fight saying that if I fight for a free Kurdistan, I will also ensure my child’s future” (Interview 1).

“Before the revolution women have mainly lived as housewives and mothers. Now you can see women being part of all the decision-making procedures in society. This is a big change of course” (Interview 3)

“Look at how the role of women has changed: before they were nothing, they were just slaves and housewives and now they are at the frontlines of the war. That woman, who was not even allowed to speak against her own husband, is now sitting in the board of the governing body as an equal to the men. That woman, who beforehand had no role, is now head of economy, diplomacy and all of society. That woman who could not even speak two words is now a politician. Democratic Confederalism has changed everything, it has given equal power to women and everyone can see this. The revolution caused housewives to become leaders” (Interview 4).

5.2.1 ‘The Housewife’

Chantal Mouffe (1996) argues that citizenship shapes the individual’s sense of identity and formation of different personalities (McEwan, 2005: 982). When analysing my informants’ positioning and construction of citizenship, I found that the identities ‘the housewife’ and ‘the female combatant’ became the two main characters in their statements in order to manifest their transformation from non-citizens to citizens. As seen above ‘Delvin’, a PKK-member who helped organise the women’s movement in Rojava, ‘Meike’, representative of the *Foundation of Free Women* in Rojava, and Nojin used ‘the housewife’ to present how little role women had in society beforehand. For example, when Nojin says, *“before they were nothing, they were just slaves and housewives”* she is clearly linking the ultimate form of

powerlessness, being a slave, to the role of the housewife. She uses the roles “combatant” (*now they are at the frontlines of the war*), “politician” and “leader” to compare what the women in Rojava, according to her, have transitioned to after rejecting ‘the housewife’ (Interview 4). Here it is clear that citizenship is defined as something produced in the public sphere and not within the private domain, which ‘the housewife’ often is connected to.

Interestingly, all of my informants used Öcalan’s theories during parts of the interviews in order to provide a theoretical framework for their accounts; they especially used his analysis of ‘the housewife’. When this came up during the first interviews I conducted, I dismissed it but when I started to notice a pattern, I decided to peruse the subject by asking my informants to elaborate on women’s role by using Öcalan’s theories. For example, when one informant, the YPJ-combatant ‘Zeineb, said, “*Now, men can no longer think that women only belong in the kitchen*”, I asked her why she thought men used to think like this. She, in turn referenced to Öcalan’s writings about the historical oppression of women, forcing her into to the role of the housewife (Interview 5). Before conducting my interviews, I had read Öcalan’s book *Woman’s revolution* (2013), which enabled me to understand how my informants conceptualised ‘the housewife’. For instance Öcalan writes, “The 5000-year-old history of civilisation is essentially the history of the enslavement of woman” (Öcalan, 2013: 9), which was similar to my informants’ accounts. ‘Novbahar’, who is the co-founder and leader of Yekitiya Star, said “*Moreover, for five thousand years women have had to look to men and follow them and not their own minds*”, likewise did Nojin “*Men have had power over women for 5000 years and this is not something that is easily changed*” (Interview 4 & 6). According to Öcalan “No race, class or nation is subjected to such systematic slavery as housewifisation” (ibid: 11), similar to when Nojin said, “*Before they were nothing, they were just slaves and housewives*”, or Novbahar’s claim that “*women were the first slaves of the state*” (Interview 4 & 6).

By being aware of Öcalan’s theories about ‘the housewife’ as a political discourse I was able to further understand why my informants so often linked slave hood to being a housewife, and thereby their view of whom the ultimate non-citizen is. Öcalan defines housewifisation as sexism in an institutionalised form and as the bases for all hierarchal power relations in society, which is at its worst when the nation-state is at its strongest (Öcalan, 2013: 26). He further claims that Kurdish families suffer from the consequences of colonisation, which means “Families facilitate assimilation and the internalization of colonized personalities” and

sexuality and love consist of dominant structures, which will never change until women become liberated and the family as an institution transforms itself (Üstündağ, 2015, April). Öcalan also calls the family a microstate where women are subjected to violence, sexual and labour exploitation and their slavery, as housewives and mothers, becomes normalised in society (Öcalan, 2013: 34-38). According to the informants, making female family members dependant on males and giving husbands control over their wives citizenship, was a common strategy used against the Kurdish women before the revolution. As presented before, my informants explained how women beforehand had no say in marriage, childbirth, politics or work and “*If women wanted to go abroad, she had to have her father or husband’s permission*” (Interview 6).

Thus, ‘the housewife’ can be seen as a production of a citizenship based on male needs, and to my informants that identity represents their former status as non-citizens. As presented earlier, researchers have shown how citizenship is traditionally viewed as something produced in the public sphere and through formal participation (Lister, 1997; Radcliff, 2002), or as Nojin expressed within politics, economy and diplomacy (Interview 4). When adding Öcalan’s discourses about housewifisation, the informants’ discourse of citizenship becomes even more tied to the public, while the domestic/private becomes downgraded and clearly tied to a non-citizen status. As a opposite to this traditionally “feminine” role, the informants painted a picture of the YPJ-soldier or ‘the female combatant’ as the essence of women’s empowerment and complete citizen.

5.2.2 “The female combatant”

As presented, my informants created a similar narrative when talking about how the role of women in Rojava had changed. They used ‘the housewife’ as a “before picture” to represent the low position of women pre-revolution, and ‘the combatant’ as an “after picture” to present the new and strong type of women that had been created. “*The women of Rojava stepped out of their houses and got involved in the peoples’ defence forces*” (Interview 3) is a sentence that represents this narrative and embodies the very idea of empowerment as a process of change going “from the informal sphere to the formal arenas of struggle where power is legitimately exercised” (Kabeer, 2005: 16). The same notion is manifested in Delvin’s answer “*When YPJ was formed many women who did not have a place in politics before, became inspired and joined. Women with children left them at home and joined the fight*” (Interview 1). According to Nazan Üstündağ, ethnographic studies in Kurdistan show how much the

family structures are changing when women are participating in the movement. Many women who have become politically active, either from the start or after their relatives were killed in combat, have left their husbands and children at home to take place in the public sphere, thereby changing the sexual division of labour (Üstündağ, 2015, April). The following was also manifested in the way the informants associated YPJ with social change and equality, not military power. As ‘Iman’, member of the YPJ foreign relations office, says

“Women developed their knowledge to be able to represent themselves so they struggled and fought in order to create self-confidence. YPJ started as an ideological force, and not only as an armed group, which based its philosophical features on the principle of legitimate defence to achieve peace and equality. It is not only a military organization, but also a social, political, cultural and economic organization” (Interview 7).

Consequently, in the respondents’ narratives, self-defence is not only about using military methods, but also about education to enable people to become politically aware of their own identity and rights. I used Kabeer’s theory of how empowerment and self-confidence correlates and helps “to mediate the translation of individual notions of selfhood into socially recognised identities” (Kabeer, 2012: 217) to make sense of the informants’ statements. Iris Marion Young (2001) claims that civic and political associations are important because they “develop communicative interaction that supports identities, expand participatory possibilities and create networks of solidarity”. She divides these interactions into two forms of citizenship: the horizontal form that consists of communication between citizens, and the vertical form, which comprises communication between citizens and the “government”, contributing to democracy (Radcliff, 2002: 80). By defining themselves as an *ideological force and social, political, cultural and economic organization* (Interview 7), YPJ believe themselves to not only focus on the individual woman’s reclaim of citizenship, but also use their socially recognised identities as empowered combatants to influence different levels of society, nurturing both a horizontal and vertical axis of citizenship and enabling a collective reclaim of citizenship.

Zeineb further claims:

“The difference between our organisation and other leftist organisations is that they want to create a revolution first and then women’s rights is added as an afterthought but we created a revolution within the revolution so that the role of women became first priority and recognised that the women’s cause cannot wait one day longer (...) When you look at YPJ from the outside you assume that they

are only warriors and that is the only change that has happened for women – that they are now allowed to join the military. This is not true, it has changed gender roles in society as a whole, changed the mind-set of women and men. The family structure has really changed, it is not same as before when men decided everything, and men cannot dominate women anymore. Men have changed their behaviour completely, which we are very glad about” (Interview 5).

This account is similar to the one from Iman, as it questions the idea of YPJ as only a military organisation and instead links it to a way of empowerment and resistance against gendered structures. Thus, according to Zeineb and my other informants, the creation of YPJ and the involvement of female combatants are not just strengthening these women as individuals but affecting the position for all women in society by changing the divisions of labour and the view of women as “*only being able to cook and take care of children*” (Interview 4).

The YPJ-forces can be compared with the Zapatista (EZLN) movement, in 90’s Chiapas Mexico, and its female combatants. In the same way that the movement aimed to redistribute power, giving those made invisible by the state a voice, their objective was to raise indigenous women’s status in society (Mora, 1998: 164). This was done partly by changing traditional structures that objectify women and make them powerless. One step was to give women high ranks within their military and the next was the proposal for the law of women in which they demanded equal rights to work, participation in politics, health-care, education and their own body i.e. reproduction and freedom from violence. According to a female EZLN-major the women chose to become combatants because they were exploited and marginalised in their community and wanted to reclaim their rights (ibid: 169). Thus, by participating in the EZLN military the women were, for the first time, given a space to express their rights. The women saw the importance of having their own place to meet without men hindering them. One impact of these new spaces for women was the change of attitudes, which decreased men’s violence against women, at least during the time that the Zapatistas were active (Mora, 1998: 169-175). When Zeineb says that YPJ has “*changed gender roles in society as a whole, changed the mind-set of women and men*” and “*The family structure has really changed*”, she is emphasising the type of empowerment that, when linked to collective citizenship practices, can transform into gender justice (Kabeer, 2012: 220).

Michel Foucault uses the term subjectification to describe the process in which someone submits to the role assigned to them and becomes a subject to disciplinary power. However, he asserts that there also exists reversibility against these structures with openings for

resistance such as subversion, disidentification and reconstitution (Foucault, 2002). By becoming a ‘female combatant’ women are rejecting the symbols and identities that the nation-state places on them, they are no longer “peaceful” and “earthly” or a symbol for the “motherland”. Within gender norms the ‘fighter’, ‘soldier’ or ‘combatant’ can be seen as the ultimate male while ‘the housewife’ is understood as the ultimate female (Osborne, 2006). Thus, by going from this hyper feminine position to its complete opposite, the YPJ women are not just resisting the role forced upon them, but resisting and even attempting to dissolve the gender division and norms completely. At the same time, when the informants’ use the identity ‘the housewife’ to represent their former status as non-citizens while using ‘the combatant’ to represent their newfound empowerment, they are also reproducing the view of citizenship as something confined to the public sphere and linked to traditionally “masculine” qualities.

The informants seem to have formulated an idea of housewives as passive citizens, lacking any agency, and female combatants as active citizens, being in charge over their lives. By stepping out of their houses and into the defence forces (Interview 3), the women are going from a passive to an active role. This process can be seen as a first step towards active participation and human agency, as described by Lister: “Citizenship as participation represents an expression of human agency in the political arena, broadly defined” (Lister, 1997:9) Once this step is taken, the women become actors with the ability to reclaim their citizen rights, as Lister says “citizenship as rights enables people to act as agents, individually or in collaboration with others” (*ibid*). In the following section, I will examine this second process by looking at the informants’ *practices* of citizenship and their use of autonomous organising as a way of reclaiming a status previously denied to them.

5.3 Women’s autonomous organising: reconstructing a male defined citizenship

“You cannot clap with just one hand and expect it to make a sound and in the same way women cannot fight for their rights alone, they have to stand together and organise” (Interview 6).

One of my informants, Meike, works for *the Foundation of Free Women* in Rojava, which is a non-profit organisation that aims to secure the rights of women by focusing on what they wish to improve in their own society. They have established projects in refugee camps in Rojava such as women’s health centres, with the goal of opening a centre in every town, and workshops in reading and reproductive health. They have started preschools to free “*the*

women's burden of childcare so that they can activate themselves and work instead"

(Interview 3). The foundation is also establishing women's cooperatives for everything ranging from agriculture, sewing, hairdressing, cafés and cheese making. Further, they aim to start women's parks and a women's village "*where women can meet, take part in activities and organise without men*" (ibid). Meike highlights the importance of the autonomous women's structures in Rojava in order to change the patriarchal structures:

"The revolution of Rojava is a revolution of women. In the struggle against ISIS and in the struggle for a new society women are clearly the leaders. The model of Democratic Autonomy, which is the basis for the self-determination of the people living in Rojava, has autonomous women's structures in all fields of the organisation of the society. The women of Rojava stepped out of their houses and got involved in the peoples' defence forces, the councils, the new health system, the council for a democratic Syria and so on. Women are present in all fields of society. Without the involvement of the women's movement it is not possible to do something in Rojava (...) So in Rojava we can see a transformation process from a feudal patriarchal organized society into a society, which is organised in equality of gender, ethnicities and religions. This is a great and new change in the Middle East. And this transformation process is proceeding very quickly and successfully. This is the first time in the Middle East that an emancipation movement in this dimension is taking place. It is a very important step for the society in its self-determination and in its liberation from exploitation" (Interview 3).

Meike was actually the first informant to use the definition "*autonomous women's structures*", a description that I found interesting as it emphasises the structural quality of the different all-female groups and communities. Here, she is using words such as "*transformation process*", "*an emancipation movement*", "*self-determination*", and "*liberation from exploitation*", in line with Kabeer's definition of empowerment (Kabeer, 2012). She is also highlighting the collective nature of these empowerment practices and connects it to citizenship by lifting how the movement affects the overall democratic structures (Interview 3). Even though women have been a natural part of PKK since its start, an important change took place when they replaced the nation-state with local stateless-democracy, as it created an opportunity for women to organise themselves autonomously in groups, councils and communities. Before the political change, PKK had women's units within the organisation but they were never independent from the organisation and its structure as in reality they were still lead by men, but now that has started to change (Strangers, 2015: 7-11; Interview 6). According to my informants, this was not something easily done; men put up a lot of resistance and claimed that there should not be two parallel

movements, that they did not understand why there should be separate women's organisations. When the ideology of the movement started to change in a feminist direction, they introduced the concept of *howseruc*, meaning co-led leadership between one man and one woman in all instances. Now my informants tell me that there is a norm of equal representation in all decisions, so that no resolution can be passed if more than half of the voters are male (Interview 1, 4, 5 & 6). However, according to Novbahar there still exists a need for women to organise separately (Interview 6).

“In all operations that exist in our community such as the military, the governing bodies, the economy and so on we co-exist and work with men as equals but we still have our autonomous women's units, because if women cannot be independent from men and participate separately from men, they will never have complete power. The situation for women is the same as the situation for the Kurdish diaspora who has been a slave to other nations for a long time, the only way for them to speak their own minds and become free is to organise independently and it is the same for women, they can never be free if they have to follow men. Moreover, for five thousand years women have had to look to men and follow them and not their own minds, men have always decided what is right and wrong. This has especially been the reality in the Middle East for very long and in the minds of men it has always been obvious that they should rule. This is the case even within organisations that are politically aware such as the revolutionary freedom movements, because the norm that men are the ones with power is so strong that women who try to override their decisions are subjected to resistance, thus we have to organise for ourselves” (Interview 6).

In her testimony, Novbahar compares the marginalisation of women with the colonial nations' oppression of the Kurdish diaspora, both of them being denied their status as citizens. The Kurdish movement she explains are using autonomous women's structures in order to reclaim their rights that have been denied to them because of a double oppression, the colonial where the state have denied them citizen rights and the patriarchal where they as women have been depoliticized. She identifies independent organising as their only way to freedom, connecting autonomous organising with empowerment and thereby the reclaim of citizenship. According to Kabeer:

“If it is through the ‘given’ relationships of family and kinship that women gain their sense of identity and personhood, then it is through participation in other ‘chosen’ forms of associational life that they may be able to acquire a reflexive vantage point from which to observe and evaluate these relationships” (Kabeer, 2012: 223).

Kabeer helps us understand Novbahar's claim that women need autonomous women's groups to escape men's oppression, even within their own organisation and community (Interview 6). It is not the first time that a women's movement has used autonomous organising as a method. Mujeres Libres was formed 1937 during the Spanish civil war as a protest against how their male comrades in the anarchist parties undermined them by not giving them any leadership positions, still seeing them as housewives (Ackelsberg, 2004: 115-122). The members claimed that even though the men were militant anarchist who stood against hierarchy and authority in the form of the state and its institutions, they still upheld the same hierarchy and authority in their homes against "their" women (ibid: 115-122). Novbahar discusses the same problem within their movement when she says "*This is the case even within organisations that are politically aware such as the revolutionary freedom movements*" (Interview 6). Even though the men in the Spanish union groups and anarchist organisations were against the formation of separate women's groups, a group of women still went forward with the idea when they saw the need for women to have a space of their own and used self-directed action as a way of empowerment (Ackelsberg, 2004: 115-122). Like the Spanish men, the Kurdish men also resisted the formation of women's autonomous groups, according to Novbahar "*This was not something easily done, men put up a lot resistance and claimed that we should not have two parallel movements, they did not understand why we should be separate*" (Interview 6). The resistance that the men put up can be explained through Frye's theory where she argues that men's scepticism towards the idea of separatism derives from their need to access and exert power over women (Frye, 1997: 410). This argument is also made by Novbahar when she says, "*the norm that men are the ones with power is so strong that women who try to override their decisions are subjected to resistance, thus we have to organise for ourselves*" or "*When women were able to work, lead and participate in all areas in society they find and release a hidden power within themselves, a power that men had suppressed for so long. In that way men were like a cloud, blocking the sun*" (Interview 6).

There are many similarities between Mujeres Libres and the Kurdish women's movement with both of them having used autonomous organising as action spaces. By constructing a context previously closed to them they created a community that gave women a strong sense of self and transformed them both personally and politically. By participating in consciousness-raising programs individual women became empowered as their experiences were "validated by the experience of other" (Ackelsberg, 2004: 125). The importance of

female-bonding have been highly emphasised within contemporary feminist theories where they have lifted the significance of having women's networks in order to support women in their communities, workplaces, their family role as well as strengthen them politically to take action (ibid: 201). According to Martha Ackelsberg, some feminist theorists have found a correlation between women who participate in all-female networks with family, friends and associates and how they form experiences and actions outside of "prevailing (male-defined) norms" (Ackelsberg, 2004: 201).

The importance of women's networks as a way of strength is discussed in Zeineb's statement:

When you think about it, it is our experiences that give rise to the result, if you go back in history you can see how women learnt that separatism could be useful. However, this does not mean that we just stick to women's organisations, we should be everywhere but on the other hand when we women are by ourselves, meaning separate from men, we get more strength, more power, more energy, we can decide everything for ourselves and foremost, we can have self-confidence, which is very important. When people have self-confidence they can achieve great results. Of course it is important that we all work together, no matter the gender, but when women organise alone they can take care of each other much better and open up to each other, which is harder to do in mixed company (Interview 5).

Firstly, she talks about *experiences*, which I analysed through Ackelsberg's description of the way female bonding defines how women experience the world and helps them take action outside of male-defined norms. Secondly, she uses words like *strength*, *power*, *energy*, and *self-confidence* to describe the benefits of autonomous organising, in line with Kabeer's definition of empowerment (Kabeer, 2005: 16). Further, Zeineb's account is similar to the concept of "actions spaces" (See, Berberton, Blake, & Kotze, 1998), spaces that give the marginalised an opportunity to share their experiences and strengthen themselves, which McEwan means are important for realising and exercising citizenship (McEwan, 2005: 980-981).

One example of such an action space is the women's cooperatives in Rojava that use small-scale production as a means for giving economic power to women. Nojin describes the different cooperatives in Cizîrê that do everything from making toorchi (a Kurdish dish), baklava, bread, and maths, to cultivating commodities and sewing clothes. The number of participants varies from four to thirty and many of them receive start-up loans or funding from women's organisations. Further, they have created an academy for economy where they

teach women how to become economically independent. According to Nojin *“This is very important, as women cannot become independent without economic independence”* (Interview 4). This can be understood through Kabeer’s (2005) presentation of how women engaged in different cooperatives, for example vegetable farming in Kenya and Guatemala, have been able to create social networks with other women, which has empowered them to leave abusive relationships, participate in politics and find economic independence (Kabeer, 2005: 18-19). As the Kurds are victims of prosecution, forced resettlements and Kurdish is banned from the education system many are illiterate, long-time unemployed or are undocumented and therefore can’t partake in public services (TATORT, 2013: 137). Therefore, the informants explain that these women’s centres and cooperatives give them the opportunity to reclaim their lives and create meaningful activity, making it an important method of empowerment.

The informants’ reclaim of citizenship can be understood through McEwan’s term “radical citizenship spaces”, which describes the spaces that marginalised groups are constructing in response to their exclusion from formal spaces of participation (McEwan, 2006: 971). The idea of creating spaces was not only indirectly found in the informants’ testimonies, but also mentioned specifically by Novbahar: *“we have to give women back their space and resources, like back in the days of the agricultural communities when women had the power through owning their land, we have to create the same safe space for them today so that they can feel that the streets are not just for men but for women too”* (Interview 6). Here she directly uses the term “space” and connects it to empowerment over one’s life and feeling of safety, which are important factors for citizenship participation. McEwan claims that “Collective struggles can allow women to influence institutions such as the household, market and state and these struggles take place through women’s organising in both formal and informal spaces” (ibid: 985). In this section I have presented why the informants saw the need for women to organise autonomously and how they viewed these spaces important for empowering the women in Rojava, giving them tools to reclaim citizenship. For the next and final section, I will look at how these citizenship practices connect to gender justice, as defined by Kabeer (2012), and how their collective struggles can be seen as a construction of feminist citizenship

5.4 Feminist citizenship practices: *to kill, not men, but their masculinity*

Delvin is a member of PKK and helped to organise the women’s movement in Rojava before the revolution. I interviewed her at the home of one of her PKK co-workers in Gothenburg.

The first story she told me in order to explain how women's situation had changed in Rojava was a personal anecdote from her own home life. She told me a long story of how her own father, who had been a violent drunk with many rules for his wife and daughters, had transformed into someone fighting for women's equality. He encouraged Delvin and her sister to study at university even when they complained that it was too far to walk, and told them stories about the powerful female Kurdish guerrillas in order to show them how strong women were. At first, I was unsure of why she had told me this story and why she put so much time into explaining the details of her father's behaviour but when it was followed by an account about the importance of changing men's destructive masculinity, I made the connection (Interview 1). This was also conveyed in the account from one of my key informants, the Yekitiya Star leader and co-founder Novbahar.

An important moment for gender equality was when Öcalan decided to kill, not men, but their masculinity. Men thought that women belonged to them and represented their honour, their homes were like castles and the women their slaves but now that illusion had shattered. Apo had a project to eliminate masculinity with several courses to teach men how to change the man's role and to introduce feminist theory. These courses lasted for several months and most of the teachers were women. From the beginning, many were critical of the idea of being taught by women but slowly it was accepted, especially since Öcalan was behind it. Now we have several women's academies, which have played a great part in strengthening the role of women and the lessons, that received resistance before, are now a natural part of our society. This mentality was the same in society overall, where people did not accept women as equals, as guerrillas fighting next to men, they judged families who let their daughter join the militias but now it is the opposite, people are proud to have female family members fighting in the units, now they raise their heads high when saying that their daughters are YPJ-soldiers (Interview 6).

This testimony in many ways centralises the gendered transformation process that the informants constantly discussed in the interviews. Novbahar is painting a picture of a woman first enslaved in a man's castle, but later freed by killing him, not his physical being but his patriarchal mind-set. She uses the same dichotomy as presented before, the housewife to represent the status as a passive non-citizen, and the female combatant as the empowered and fully recognised citizen (Interview 6). The same content can be found in the other informants' accounts. For example 'Zeriyar', a Kurdish journalist covering Rojava:

"The Kurds have always been treated as slaves, learnt to keep their heads low, being bribed to inform on their own and being used as pawns by the states. To change this character we have to teach this people how to create democracy, how a democratic society works and this is why we have started academies; political

academies, women's academies, military academies. This is a central part of Democratic Confederalism because the people that participate in this system must be able to learn to believe in themselves. It's important that we raise the confidence of men and women, of every member in this society so that they believe that they can have power" (Interview 2).

Zeriyān, like Novbahār, uses the word *slave* as the antipode to being in power and to describe the situation they were in before they constructed their own political system. She is also talking about education as a tool to make people “*believe in themselves*”, which is similar to Novbahār’s description of how the women’s academies “*have played a great part in strengthening the role of women and the lesson*” (Interview 6). The belief in oneself is something Kabeer explains as essential to empowerment when she says that individual’s change within is necessary in order to change the collective (Kabeer, 2005: 16). She presents how education has enabled women to change “power relations within and outside the household” and take collective action against male prerogatives (ibid). Examples from around the world show that engaging women in education and work leads to “renegotiations of the boundaries between public and private life, to collective forms of struggle, and to women’s greater representation in structures of decision making” as well as give potential for women to organise against other aspects of patriarchal injustice (Kabeer, 2005: 22).

There are several women’s academies in Rojava with the role of providing knowledge to women in economy, diplomacy, and ideology to raise women’s positions in society. (Biehl, 2015: 211-222). I interviewed Nojin about how these academies work, and understood them to be important in creating a space for communal sharing in women’s experiences and increasing knowledge about gender relations, which is essential for the Kurdish women’s movement in their reclaim of a feminist citizenship. At the academies, they study the construction of the nation-state, how they can shift the power imbalance by replacing it with grassroots democracy and “*aim to dissolve the hegemonic man by constructing a new form of masculinity*” (Interview 4). The students, who range from young teenagers to great-grandmothers, from people with previous academic knowledge to those who are illiterate, learn about the political system in Rojava and how they can participate in it. For example, Nojin studied at a women’s academy in Cizîrê, which enabled her to become a diplomat (ibid). Further, the academic institutions are now teaching and practicing “jineology” as a base for creating an educational system for women. Jineology (Kurdish: *jin*; *woman*) means women’s science and entails the creation of a woman’s paradigm by working ideologically,

philosophically and intellectually to understand the historic, contemporary and future role of women in society. Jineology comes directly from the experiences of women in Rojava and no matter their class or academic background they take part to formulate ideas of how to dissolve patriarchy and create a society with new ways of producing knowledge (Kaya, 2015: 83-96).

Within the informants' testimonies, the concept of freeing one's mind became a clear pattern. It is noticeable in Novbahar's above statement about changing the mentality of men and when she says "*We are not just working to change the situation legally but also by norms*", when Zeriyan says "*It is not enough to just have equal representation; all men and women must also in their minds believe that men and women are equal*", or Delvin's answer about why the women's academies are important to them: "*First of all the mind has to become free*" (Interview 6, 2 & 1). Nojin argues, "*We fought an ideological war against the people, the men, who resisted us. At the same time we have tried to change the minds of men*", similar to Zeineb's claim that the revolution "*changed the mind-set of women and men*" (Interview 4 & 5). Kabeer's theory of gender justice helps us understand the informants' idea of *changing minds, mind-sets, or norms*. According to Kabeer practices of citizenship is the bridge that can transform empowerment, or "individual notions of selfhood", into gender justice, or "socially recognised identities" (Kabeer, 2012: 217). The explicit feminist nature of these practices, become evident when Novbahar, co-founder and leader of Yekitiya Star, says "*We are an openly feminist organisation, one small part of the international feminist movements*" and Zeineb says about YPJ "*On one hand you have to attend military training and on the other you have to educate yourself politically to learn about the ideology of Rojava including feminist theory*" (Interview 6 & 5).

In summary, I see the women's movement in Rojava as an embodiment of Kabeer's chain theory about empowerment, citizenship and gender justice. By creating *action spaces*, or *autonomous women's structures*, the movement enabled women to first become empowered as individuals, as it raised their *self-confidence* and started to change their perceived citizen-status from 'the housewife', or the *slave*, which was viewed as the ultimate non-citizen, to 'the female combatant', the empowered and strong woman. The movement then used collective action against patriarchal norms, in order to free peoples' *minds* and *kill masculinity*. By causing structural change in their society, the Kurdish women's movement went from empowering women as individuals, to working for gender justice, making their actions a reclaim of a feminist citizenship. This shows that citizenship can indeed be practiced

and is not just a status placed on people by the state. By broadening the definition of citizenship to focus on *practices* of citizenship, we are able to make visible the “autonomous forms of action through which citizens create their own opportunities and terms of engagement”, bridge “the gap between social and political participation”, and reshape what it means to be a citizen (McEwan, 2006: 987).

6. Conclusion

By conducting interviews with activists within the Kurdish women's movement in Rojava, I was able to understand their process of going from non-citizens to reclaiming a new form of citizenship. When analysing the informants' accounts, I discovered a common narrative where they created a mental timeline starting with the pre-revolution period that was associated with disempowerment and 'the housewife' identity. The character of 'The female combatant' was used frequently to explain women's empowerment and the dissolvent of gender structures, since she can be seen as the antipode to the housewife, the ultimate woman. Using these dichotomies, the women were in part reproducing the view of citizenship as something tied to the public sphere, while at the same time attempting to resist the gender roles forced on them as women, when becoming 'the female combatant'.

Autonomous organising is a method that has and is being used by marginalised groups and resistance movements in order to create a space where they can share experiences, strengthen themselves, and reclaim their rights. According to the women's testimonies in Rojava, the women's movement has managed to empower women by creating separate houses, academies, cooperatives, tribunals, defence units and communes for women. They explained that even though women now have an equal place within politics, economy and other aspects of society they still see a need for separatism as it gives them a space outside of men's control. These autonomous structures were used as action spaces, where the women could organise against the patriarchal structures that had made them into "*slaves*" and "*housewives*". By attempting to change gender norms, the movement's collective actions turned individual empowerment into gender justice, making their struggle a reclaim of a feminist citizenship.

By shedding light on the Kurdish women's movement in Rojava I hope that it will inspire more researchers to study the area and its political struggle, as the Rojava revolution is an underreported subject. Through studying discourses among members of the Kurdish women's movement, a group that have historically been deprived of a citizen-status and are now practicing a new form of stateless democracy, I was able to show that people are not just passive recipients of a firm structure, instead individuals have the capacity to form and reconstruct citizenship as it is socially constructed. These realisations are particularly relevant to the field of global studies as citizenship is an important factor for human rights and

development. Hopefully, this study will contribute to broadening the definition of citizenship with "the potential to bring the voices of people marginalized by relations of power to often abstract debates about citizenship, both in terms of understanding meanings of citizenship and its spatiality"(McEwan, 2005: 986).

6.1 Future research

I believe that there are many aspect of Rojava that can provide an interesting subject for research. In this thesis I have focused on female activists' perception of their situation within the context of stateless democracy, leaving out other groups and movements in the area. Further, I have only analysed the separatist units, such as YPJ, the women's academies and cooperatives, and not looked into the mixed forces or organisations. In an age where transnational companies have a strong hold on global economy, it would be interesting to see how Rojava is rejecting industrialism and capitalism and instead focusing on small-scale productions and cooperatives. In this study I chose to analyse discourses and not investigate the material conditions of Rojava. Therefore, for future studies it would be interesting to look closer into the practice of stateless direct democracy by doing field studies to the local assemblies and different political bodies of the administration. Another important aspect of Rojava, that I only briefly discussed, is international relations concerning the Kurds where one could look at the relationship between Turkey, the EU and US in connection to the civil war in Syria.

7. Bibliography

Abdullah, A [Network for an Alternative Quest]. (2015, May 12). Democratic Nation - A Cure for Nationalism? [Video] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFEsLZ8oRPA>

Abu-Lughod, L. (1986). *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. New York: Oxford University Press

Ackelsberg, A, M. (2005). *Free women of Spain - anarchism and the struggle for the emancipation of women*. Oakland, West Virginia & Edinburgh: AK Press

Ackerly, A. B., Stern, M., & True, J. (2007). *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*. Cambridge University Press

Akkaya, H, A. & Jongerden, J. (2015). Reassembling the political: The PKK and the project of radical democracy. In In der Maur, R. & Staal, J(ed.). Stateless democracy. *The New World Academy Reader*; 5 (p.159-190). ISBN: 978-90-77288-22-1

BBC. (2015, November 29). Migrant crisis: Turkey and EU strike deal to limit refugee flow. *BBC*. Obtained 2016-03-06 from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34957830>

Beauchemin, C & González-Ferrer, A. (2011). Sampling international migrants with origin-based snowballing method: New evidence on biases and limitations. *Demographic Research*, Vol 5, 3 (p.103-134)

Biehl, J. (2015). Revolutionary education: Two academies in Rojava. In In der Maur, R. & Staal, J(ed.). Stateless democracy. *The New World Academy Reader*; 5 (p.211-223). ISBN: 978-90-77288-22-1

Börjesson, M. (2003). Diskursanalys, konstruktionism och vetenskap. I *Diskurser och konstruktioner: En sorts metodbok*. Lund: Studentlitteratur

Cover image by: sven resist, disorder rebel store Berlin

Davis, Y. (1997). *Gender and nation*. London: SAGE publications

D'costa, B. (2006). Marginalized identity: new frontiers of research for IR. In Ackerly, A. B., Stern, M., & True, J. (ed.). *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations* (p.129-152). Cambridge University Press

Dirik, D. (2015, April). *Feminism and the Kurdish freedom movement* [Transcription from presentation]
https://www.academia.edu/12025363/Feminism_and_the_Kurdish_Freedom_Movement

Dirik, D. & Staal, J (2015). Living without approval. In In der Maur, R. & Staal, J(ed.). Stateless democracy. *The New World Academy Reader*; 5 (p.27-57). ISBN: 978-90-77288-22-1

Foucault, M. (2002). Discipline and Punish. i M. Haugaard, Power a reader (ss. 181-204). Manchester: Manchester university press

- Ford, N., Mills, E. J., Zachariah, R., & Upshur, R. (2009). Ethics of conducting research in conflict settings. *Conflict and Health*, 3, 7. <http://doi.org/10.1186/1752-1505-3-7>
- Freedman, J. (2003). *Feminism – en introduktion*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Frye, M. (1997). Chapter 22: Some reflections on separatism and power. In Meyers, T, D(Ed). *Feminist Social Thought – A reader* (p.406-414). London: Routledge
- Gunnarsson, L. (2011). A defence of the category ‘women’ Cultural practice as gendered exclusion. *Feminist Theory* , 1 (12), 23-37
- Güneşer, H. (2015). Femicide. In In der Maur, R. & Staal, J(ed.). Stateless democracy. *The New World Academy Reader*, 5 (p.57-73). ISBN: 978-90-77288-22-1
- Graeber, D. (2015). No. This is a genuine revolution. . In In der Maur, R. & Staal, J(ed.). Stateless democracy. *The New World Academy Reader*, 5 (p.195-211). ISBN: 978-90-77288-22-1
- In der Maur, R. & Staal, J(ed.). (2015). Stateless democracy. *The New World Academy Reader*, 5. ISBN: 978-90-77288-22-1
- Jacoby, T.(2007). From the trenches: dilemmas of feminist IR-fieldwork. In Ackerly, A. B., Stern, M., & True, J. (ed.). *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations* (p.153-174). Cambridge University Press
- Kabeer, N. (2012). Empowerment, Citizenship and Gender Justice: A Contribution to Locally Grounded Theories of Change in Women's Lives. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 6:3, (P. 216-232). DOI: 10.1080/17496535.2012.704055
- Kabeer, N. (2005). Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment: A Critical Analysis of the Third Millenium Development Goal. *Gender and development*, Vol 13, 1 (p.13-24)
- Kaya, G. (2015). Why Jineology? Re-constructing the sciences towards a communal and free life. In In der Maur, R. & Staal, J(ed.). Stateless democracy. *The New World Academy Reader*, 5 (p.83-97). ISBN: 978-90-77288-22-1
- Lister, R. (1997). The Dialectics of citizenship. *Hypatia*, Vol 12, 4 (p.6-26)
- McEwan, C. (2005). New spaces of citizenship? Rethinking gendered participation and empowerment in South Africa. *Political Geography*, Vol 24, 8 (p.969-991)
- Mora, M. (1998). *Zapatismo – Gender, Power and Social Transformation*. In Lorentzen, L.A & Turpin, J (ed.). *The Women and War Reader*(p. 164-176). New York: New York University Press
- Neumann, B. I. (2008). Discourse Analysis. In Klotz, A & Prakash, D (Ed.). *Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide* (p. 61-77). New York: Palgrave Macmillan

Osborne, D. (2006). 'I do not know about politics or governments ... I am a housewife': The Female Secret Agent and the Male War Machine in Occupied France (1942–5), *Women: A Cultural Review*, 17:1, (p.42-64), DOI: 10.1080/09574040600628542

Radcliff, P. (2002). Citizens and Housewives: The Problem of Female Citizenship in Spain's Transition to Democracy. *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 36, 1 (P.77-100). Oxford University Press

Sprague, J. (2005). *Feminist Methodologies for Critical Researchers: Bridging Differences*. Oxford: Altamira Press

Stern, M.(207). Racism, sexism, classism, and much more: reading security-identity in marginalised sites. In Ackerly, A. B., Stern, M., & True, J. (ed.). *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*. Cambridge University Press

Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness. (2015). *A Small Key Can Open A Large Door: The Rojava Revolution*. US: Combustion Books

TATORT Kurdistan. (2013). *Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan – The Council Movement, Gender Liberation and Ecology in Practice*. Norway: New Compass Press

Üstündağ, N. (2015, April). Power relations: State and family [Transcription from presentation]. <http://networkaq.net/2015/speeches/pdf/4.4%20ENGLISH%20-%20Nazan%20%DCst%FCndag%20-%20Power%20Relations%20State%20Family.pdf>

Weldon, S. L. (2007). Inclusion and understanding: a collective methodology for feminist international relations. In Ackerly, A. B., Stern, M., & True, J. (ed.). *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*. Cambridge University Press

Öcalan, A. (2013). *Liberating Life: Women's Revolution*. Germany: International Initiative Edition & Neuss. ISBN: 978-3-941012-82-0

Öcalan, A. (2015). Democratic Confederalism (excerpts). In In der Maur, R. & Staal, J(ed.). *Stateless democracy. The New World Academy Reader*, 5 (p.97-111). ISBN: 978-90-77288-22-1

Appendix 1

List of participants

Interview 1. Delvin, PKK-member, helped to organise the women's movement in Rojava

Interview 2. Zeriyan, journalist covering the Rojava revolution

Interview 3. Meike, works for the Foundation of Free Women in Rojava

Interview 4. Nojin, Ambassador for Yekitiya Star, former politician in Cizîrê canton

Interview 5. Zeineb, YPJ-fighter

Interview 6. Novbahar, co-founder and leader of Yekitiya Star

Interview 7. Iman, a member of the YPJ foreign relations office