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Female Militarization and Women's Rights: A Case Study of the Peshmerga and YPJ

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FEMALE MILITARIZATION AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS: A CASE STUDY OF
THE PESHMERGA AND YPJ

by

MARGARET MORGAN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Political Science
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ABSTRACT

Since 2012, there has been an increase of media attention on the Kurds, particularly women who are active in the YPJ and Peshmerga. Various publications have equated women's militarization with women's liberation. In an effort to more accurately measure this, the following question must be asked; what is the effect of women's military involvement on women's rights? Women that are active in both nationalist movements and traditional state armies are presented with changing gender roles. Post conflict, there is a struggle for women to transfer their newfound autonomy into political activism. The theory outlines a chain in which women participate in the armed forces, feel empowered, are able to obtain positions of influence, and create policy and social change. A break in any point of this chain will block female ex-combatants from influencing women's rights. The theory is tested on Kurdish women active in the Iraqi Peshmerga and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) in Syria. Data on women's military participation and their impact on women's rights was gathered from NGO reports, news articles, scholarly journals, and laws that were passed in Iraqi Kurdistan and Northern Syria. The evidence gathered indicates that women's military participation is not the only mechanism for improving women's rights. While the development of gender equality in Northern Syria can be linked to women's militarization, gender equality efforts in Iraqi Kurdistan do not have a direct link to women's involvement in the Peshmerga. This work adds to the ongoing discussion on Kurdish political rights, particularly women's autonomy.

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning in 2013, Western media outlets like BBC and Reuters started to cover stories of Kurdish women soldiers in the Peshmerga and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ). Similarly, Vogue Italia featured a photo series of female Kurdish fighters in January of 2018, titled "Jin Jian Azadi", which in Kurdish translates to "Women, Life, Freedom" (Hamad, 2018). The women that were featured were commonly described as being "badass", "beautiful", and in one case drew comparison to Angelina Jolie (Dehghanpishesh & Georgy 2016; Dirik, 2014; Gol, 2016). The women included in these narratives provided inflammatory rhetoric against ISIS, threatening to "tear them apart" (Dehghanpishesh & Georgy, 2016).

These firsthand accounts provide information on how Kurdish women are rising up and joining ranks, as well as offers insight into the motivations for women entering armed struggle. Although the articles provide insight into women's positions in the military, they do little to describe the complete narrative on how Kurdish women are treated outside of battle. Therefore, these accounts do not question broader societal gender roles, and seemingly equate women's military involvement with women's liberation. This study poses the following questions: what are the effects of female militarization on women's rights? Outside of the military, what do the rights of Kurdish women look like? If they are able to attain high-ranking military positions, can these roles transfer to the political and civilian sectors? To understand how women's rights change through militarization, women's roles must be studied beyond the battlefield. This research aims to bridge the gaps between the media coverage of Kurdish women as liberators and whether or not gender equality is being pursued in Iraqi Kurdistan and Rojava.

Historically, war and conflict have been studied and understood through male experiences of militarization (Henshaw, 2015; Thomas & Bond, 2015). In addition to this, studies on the impact of war and conflict have traditionally excluded women (Blattman, 2009). However, the number of studies on women and militarization has grown since the mid 20th century (Di Leonardo, 1985; Segal, 1995). This research aims to reach beyond male ex-combatants, and rather focuses on the challenges, experiences and changes that are unique to Kurdish women once they return from battle. Feminist scholars present two different approaches to female militarization. Antimilitarist feminists argue that militarization is rooted in patriarchy and therefore marginalizes women (Enloe 2000, Kirk 2018). Feminists that support women's military participation argue that including women promotes them to the same level of citizenship as men and provides career opportunities (Feinman, 2000). Beyond this, there are theories that believe that women's military involvement can serve as an avenue for policy change, activism, and eventually observable improvements in women's rights.

The theory discussed in this study examines female militarization does not always translate into an improvement in women's rights. This approach outlines a mechanism in which female ex-combatants pursue different initiatives to create change. By applying the theoretical framework to women in the Peshmerga and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), pursuits of gender equality among the Kurds are better understood. This research therefore attempts to clearly analyze women's political and societal efforts, and whether or not they are creating choices and opportunities for women is actualized.

Studying Kurdish women in particular offers several distinct advantages. This is a population that is not constricted by formal state structures, so there are less variables regarding

the creation of women's organizations and changing gender roles. The findings of the study suggest that the process of women's liberation is drastically different between the Kurds of Iraq and the Kurds of Syria. The process of inclusion of women in the Peshmerga as well as in public life in Iraqi Kurdistan has been far more gradual than the changing roles of women in northern Syria; otherwise known as Rojava. There is greater support for the claim that there is a women's revolution in Rojava as compared to Iraqi Kurdistan. Despite the ongoing changes for women's rights in each of these regions, there is room for improvement for pursuits of gender equality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of women in different militaries can be examined across cultures throughout history. Despite female militarization being an ancient practice, scholarship on the societal effect of women in combat roles is relatively new. The scholarship that currently exists and continues to develop can be seen across studies in political science, sociology, anthropology and women's and gender studies. In both established militaries and rebel groups, women are useful in a symbolic way. Even if women are used for symbolism in a military, they are still able to use new skills and autonomy to influence change post conflict. Women that are active in rebel groups, however, may not be able to as easily translate their new skills into post conflict society. In both recognized and unrecognized states, the ability to influence policy and therefore make changes are largely dependent on what policy and state-building frameworks are accessible to women.

The literature review will examine several different groups and sub-groups. First, women's military participation in established states will be discussed. This serves as a baseline for comparing and understanding women in rebel movements. Literature on methods of policy change, specifically among women and ex-combatants, are also part of this review. The actors in this study are female ex-combatants, so these two categories serve to show how other women and other ex-combatants work to influence policy.

The impact of women's military participation on gender equality in established states varies. The literature indicates that although some states may use women for their own recruitment purposes, there are cases in which female ex-combatants can use their new skills to their advantage. There is less variation, however, in non-state armies. Many of these movements fail to include women in the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process post

conflict. Regarding women in policy activism, whether male legislators support women in politics can impact women's political mobility. In ex-combatant policy activism, the literature implies that ex-combatants are an underutilized resource in the DDR process.

Women's Military Participation in Established States

Established state militaries offer opportunities for women to enter conflict. The motives for state militaries that use women are sometimes questioned, and are criticized for only using women to garner "patriotic zeal", yet will demobilize them once there is an actual outbreak of conflict (Enloe, 1980). The white women that were used in the South African Defense were used to symbolize white unity, and served in a subordinate nature that failed to destroy "patriarchal authority relations" (Unterhalter, 1987; Cock, 1994). The United States Army in the 1970s enlisted women to meet recruitment goals. Women were not a necessity ten years later, and so the military closed off specialties for women that had been already completed training for (Stiehm, 1989). In other cases, women that serve in the military are able to make a broader societal influence afterward. Women that serve in the Israeli Defense Forces have voiced criticism of the IDF and engaged in political protests. (Sasson-Levy et al., 2011). Women's protests as soldiers offers a new perspective to women's antiwar movements that states cannot ignore (Sasson-Levy et al. 2011). During conflict, women can begin to develop skills that are then utilized following war. Women in the Chinese military have served in noncombatant roles and have experienced personal benefits from exposure to education and training opportunities (Li, 1993).

Despite some of the advantages that women are able to gain, there are still roadblocks that women face in state military integration. Women in armed forces still have limited representation in higher-ranking posts as well as traditional combatant roles (Carreiras, 2006). In Canada, the military and the use of women is not reflected in civilian life. The Canadian military is still largely based off of a patriarchal frame, and is therefore resistant to women being treated as equals within the military (Winslow and Dunn, 2002). Even in societies that provide the structures and support necessary for women, particularly ex-combatants, these resources are not always taken advantage of. It was found that within the United States, female ex-combatants were less likely than men to take advantage of Veterans Affairs centers (Segal and Lane, 2002).

These established state militaries offer different opportunities, levels of involvement for women and therefore different outcomes. Militaries are still largely based off of patriarchal frames, yet women are still included and somewhat integrated. Women that are active in state militaries are overall able to develop new skillsets, regardless of the intentions of state militaries including them. Although women are able to be active in state militaries, they do not always have broader impact on the rest of society. Further examining why women's military participation does not always translate to broader participation is important to study because it answers several questions. Research on women's military participation illustrates both how war impacts women and how women impact war. By understanding this, researchers and policymakers can implement policies and initiatives that secure women's rights post conflict.

Women in Rebel Movements

The examples previously mentioned discuss established state militaries, and therefore greatly differ from non-state militant groups. Non-state militant groups, especially nationalist movements, have used women in their operations. Out of seventy different rebel movements that have been active since 1990, women were active in 60 percent of them (Henshaw, 2015). They are therefore worth studying separately from established state actors. National liberation movements like the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Irish Republican Army offered more opportunities for women's military involvement than the nation states that these groups fought in. Despite these movements providing positions for women, individual men within these groups are less likely to want women to gain equal status (Alison, 2004). Women have also been used in Bolshevik Combat units, the Chinese Revolution, Vietnamese Revolutions, and the Lebanese Civil War (Enloe, 1980). Aside from nationalist movements, women have been involved in non-nationalist rebel groups. During the Nepalese Civil War, about 40 percent of the Maoist cadres were women (Fontanella-Khan, 2009). The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) also used female combatants. The FARC was attractive to female recruits because it presented not only an escape from discrimination, but also a way of securing equality (Stanski, 2006). Post conflict Namibia had weak policies for reintegrating ex-combatants, particularly those that were either disabled or female (Dzinesa, 2007).

It can be argued that women were seen as an invaluable resource for a strive toward independence, yet broader women's issues were not a true concern of these movements. Instead, nationalist groups have used women's support during times of struggle, yet have faced criticism for failing to meet women's demands (Scarnecchia, 1996). Enloe (1989, 44) asserts that

nationalism has “sprung up from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope.” This means that when a conflict reaches its end, the image and rhetoric that were once used to recruit women return to fit a “patriarchal, heterosexual familial model” (Sunindyo, 1998 p. 3). After demobilization in Sierra Leone, male rebels were encouraged to enlist in the Sierra Leone Army, but female ex combatants did not receive this form of legitimacy (Coulter, 2009). Women that were active soldiers in Sierra Leone were largely left out of the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process post conflict because their roles as soldiers were largely ignored (MacKenzie, 2009).

In other cases, women are able to make an impact in liberation movements, yet their social status post conflict regresses to the way it was before the conflict began. After the civil war in El Salvador, some FMLN female ex-combatants became activists within the FMLN political party, or as elected officials in town councils (Viterna, 2013). Female ex-combatants who did not take these roles either returned to their traditional pre-conflict wars or lacked opportunities despite feeling empowered (Viterna, 2013). Women who attempted to challenge gender roles during and post conflict were met with public backlash, serving as an incentive to avoid the public eye and not to pursue political activity (Pankhurst, 2012). Similarly, women that were in the EPLF in Eritrea experienced a never before seen level of equality, yet were faced with challenges when they returned from conflict (Rolston, 2010). Girls as young as age twelve that have been recruited as soldiers will return to their families “newly assertive and independent”, yet will have little economic opportunities (McKay, 1998). Female ex combatants in Eritrea were not able to wed after combat, as they were criticized for being “too emancipated” (Rolston, 2007).

When legal processes do allow for the inclusion of women, the desired effects are not always carried out into practice. Despite women parliamentary candidates making electoral gains in post conflict Rwanda and Uganda, ordinary women were still subject to rape and violence (Moran, 2010). Female ex-combatants are typically overlooked in disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and transitional justice processes. These programs limit women to traditional gender roles and deter female ex combatants from participating in them (Ortega, 2010). Ortega (2010) argues that further research on female ex combatants and a stronger government focus on reintegrating women in post conflict is needed in these cases. However, there are cases within Africa in which post conflict, quota systems were established for women's involvement. Tripp (2015) found that 76 percent of post conflict countries implemented a quota system for women, in comparison of 58 percent of non-conflict countries doing the same. This serves as another example of conflict impacting and restructuring gender roles.

The Zapatista movement during 1990's Mexico did provide outlets and resources for women (Castillo, 2002). Women's involvement in the Chiapas Rebellion changed the face of Mexican feminism that was emerging at the time to include indigenous women (La Botz, 1999). The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) was able to gain political influence and use it to the advantage of women. The EZLN promulgated the Women's Revolutionary Law, which granted women the right to choose their husbands and how many children they wanted to have. The National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) was a rebel movement that used female soldiers who later were able to build businesses and gain influence within civil society (Utas, 2005). Women take on untraditional roles by fighting in conflict, but even civilian women are impacted by ongoing war. Wood (2008, p. 539) outlines "political mobilization, military socialization,

polarization of social identities, militarization of local authority, transformation of gender roles and fragmentation of the local political economy” as social processes occurring during war.

As earlier stated in the literature reviewed, women in armed non-state militaries have different experiences than women who are involved in established state militaries. This research contributes the assessment that the lack of political structure facing nationalist rebel movements creates a unique space for women. When conflict rises, rhetoric is used to recruit them, yet post conflict female ex combatants are not likely to be able to make societal gains. One of the ways in which female ex-combatants will try to create societal gains is through pursuing policy change. Studying policy change strategies used by female ex-combatants bridges the gap between women participating in conflict, gaining skills, and then applying them to the political sphere.

Methods of Policy Change

After military service, women who feel empowered and able will likely try to pursue social change. One of the mechanisms that can make this possible is engaging in policy change. It is therefore crucial to understand how methods of policy change compare between different groups. For the purpose of this study, female ex-combatants are examined. Thus, the following sections will discuss a broad overview of policy change followed by discussions on women in policy change and ex-combatants in policy change.

According to Hugh Hecló, policy change results from not only large scale social and economic change, but from interactions between people within a policy community (Sabatier, 1988). Therefore, it is crucial to study the actions of individuals in these groups. By examining

the methods in which actors influence these changes, women's activism and pursuits for social change during peacetime can be understood. This serves as a frame of reference for how war and women's military participation can influence these mechanisms.

The methods of policy change that are pursued by activists vary between governments. Several examples of policy change include street level bureaucrats, policy entrepreneurs, and policy brokers. Street level bureaucrats are defined as individuals who represent the government in their interactions with people (Lipsky, 1969). Policy entrepreneurs are individuals who are within the policy process, and who use their own resources in hopes of influencing a specific policy proposal (Shearer, 2015). Christopoulos (2006) emphasizes that policy entrepreneurs are limited by policy networks. He also asserts that actors with low political capital will engage in high risk actions, yet actors with high political capital can pursue long term, low risk policies. Policy brokers are members of coalitions that attempt to find mediation between two groups pursuing different policies (Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier, 1994). Sørensen (2002) introduces the concept that the relationship between politics and administration is dynamic and subject to continuous renegotiation. These theories of policy change can be broadly applied to different states and different actors. The following sections will narrow this focus onto women and ex-combatants.

Women in Policy Change

Studying how women in general may influence policy change serves as a baseline to compare how female ex-combatants policy change pursuits compare. Additionally, examining

women's efforts toward policy change offers general insights into women's successes and failures in this area. Goetz (2005) discusses five different forms that women's policy agencies adopt. These agencies may be advocacy or advisory units, policy monitoring units, units with implementation responsibilities, or commissions with investigation powers. Important to note is that the inclusion of women in government is not the only determining factor in an increase in pro-women legislation. Other important factors include the support of male legislators and the relationship between female legislators that actors in civil society and aid efforts (Wang, 2013). International norms, pressure from civic movements, and actions taken by individuals all have the potential to influence policy (Htun, 2016). Despite the impact of these factors, international organizations have used inclusion of women in parliament as a measure for a country's progress toward gender equality. What results, argues Htun (2016) is the inclusion of women without true representation.

The methods of influencing policy previously outlined imply a socially structured relationship between individuals and their government. The creation of post-conflict policy, however, presents new challenges. Policy makers must decide whether or not ex-combatants should be treated as a separate interest group (Kingma, 1997). Beyond this, reintegration of women, and therefore including them in these policies, can lead to tensions within communities (Kingma, 1997). The scope of these assertions is limited, as socially structured relationships can only be applicable to established, internationally recognized states. Therefore, there are important questions to be asked regarding the relationship between individuals and states that are not internationally recognized. Literature on rebel groups and non-state armies offer insights into

some of these questions. One group worthy of studying in this framework are ex-combatants and their efforts for policy change.

Ex-Combatants in Policy Change

There is recent literature that suggests that ex-combatants are a resource for policy building and social change (Friðriksdóttir, 2018). Sonpar (2008) discusses an “activist orientation” exhibited by ex-militants in Jammu and Kashmir. She argues that the subjects in her study show the potential that ex-militants have for activism and peace building. The United Nations is known for its disarmament, demobilization and reintegration initiatives, commonly referred to as DDR (United Nations Peacekeeping). Ex-combatants influencing policy change falls under reintegration. According to Özerdem (2002, p. 962), “reintegration is the process whereby former combatants and their families and other displaced persons are assimilated into the social and economic life of (civilian) communities.” Reintegrating ex-combatants into politics is an important part of the DDR process to ensure that they do not feel a need to return to arms (Bowd & Özerdem, 2013).

The DDR process has resulted in various successes and failures. A study in Uganda found that forced recruitments into the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) were more likely to vote and be community leaders (Blattman, 2009). The abductees interviewed “described, after return, a sense of power over their lives and events” (Blattman, 2009, p. 243). This implies that ex-combatants experience life altering events that make them more politically active. With this being said, female ex-combatants do not always experience the same agency. Ortega and Maria

(2010) question the inclusion of female ex-combatants in the DDR process. They state that DDR programs often encourage the “return of women to the domestic and private sphere” (Ortega & Maria, 2010, p. 2).

Examining theories of policy change offers insights into how individual actors pursue policy change within formal recognized states. Unrecognized states and national liberation movements are subject to rapidly changing social structures. The motives of the different armed forces as well as the political avenues and structures that are present for women greatly impact what roles women will serve in larger society once they return from combat. The goal of this study is to establish linkages between women’s military service and changes in women’s rights and roles. Therefore, the following section outlines a theoretical framework explaining why women’s militarization does not always lead to an increase in women’s rights.

THEORY

As previously discussed, there are both rebel movements and state militaries that employ women as soldiers. However, using women in militaries is not enough in itself to lead to improvements in women's rights. Instead, there are a series of steps that must be taken for policy change regarding women to take place. The theory tests the assertions made by scholars that Feinman (2000, p. 12) refers to as "feminist egalitarian militarists". These scholars treat participation as a mechanism for an increase in women's rights within that society. This can be observed in a few recognized states, but there are fewer examples in unrecognized states. This research aims to establish that women's military participation does not always lead to increased rights within unrecognized states. Unrecognized states are subject to new and developing systems of government, and are not limited by a political class system like established states.

In order to appreciate the different roles that women have in these two structures, it is important to note the differences between recognized and unrecognized states. Unrecognized states are defined as lacking international recognition, having an aspiration for independent status as a state, and have control of some territory (Caspersen and Stansfield, 2011). Because of this, unrecognized states have different motives and norms within the international system. They are subject to new and developing systems of government, and are not limited by a formalized political system like established states. These differences between recognized and unrecognized states apply to the use of women in their militaries as well. Unrecognized states are not bound by pre-existing state structures. Therefore, they provide an environment in which there are seemingly less formal restraints on women than in recognized states. One would then expect a greater impact of women's military participation in this environment. Women have been active

in armed forces of unrecognized states. Specifically examining states that are not internationally recognized offers a framework in which the impact of female military participation can be observed.

As discussed by King (2001), unrecognized states in Eurasia have been able to defeat recognized powers and create their own state structures. These structures that are created differ greatly from established states. In Somaliland, the clan-based system of government ensures survival and stability. This comes at the expense of the women of Somaliland, who would benefit more from a liberal democracy rather than a clan based government. In the Puntland region of Somalia, clan leaders indirectly elect government officials, leading to women being disenfranchised (Johnson and Smaker 2014). Looking at these examples, it can be seen that whether women make societal gains after conflict varies between recognized and unrecognized states.

To understand why women's military participation in unrecognized states usually does not lead to increased rights in unrecognized sets, the path from participation in the armed forces to changes in policy must be examined. Participation in the armed forces will enact political change through the following series of steps. First, women participate in the armed forces. Then, upon surviving war, ex combatants must feel empowered. Following this, there should be societal opportunities for civic engagement. Women then use these positions to affect change or influence policy. Finally, these societal outcomes that have been promoted by female leaders should actually occur. There are cases in which the steps outlined below were followed, and therefore policy change took place. This chain captures the efforts that women make in order to be politically and socially represented within their society. Although there might be latent ways

in which women enact change, this framework accounts for intentional actions in which women seek to enact change. Therefore, a break in any of these links will prevent female ex-combatants from enacting intentional societal or political change.

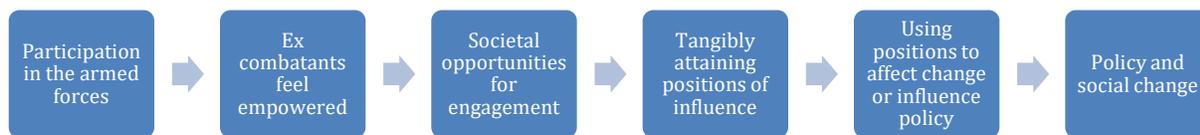


Figure 1: Linkages for female ex-combatants creating social change

As demonstrated by the flowchart, the first step in the relationship is women's participation in the armed forces. For the purpose of this paper, participation in the armed forces refers to women in combat roles. Although women have been used historically in auxiliary and supporting roles, it is important to separately study the impact of women as soldiers (Gjelsvik, 2010). The integration of women into the military has disrupted the structure of the organization that they are fighting for, so their ultimate return to their communities will also result in change.

The next step in the pathway to enacting policy change is that ex combatants feel empowered. It is assumed that after surviving conflict, women return to either their previous societies or are transplanted into a new one. After serving in conflict, the military roles that they were in have led them to feel capable and motivated to be a part of societal change. A feeling of empowerment may be difficult to measure, but it can be examined by the attitudes and actions of female ex combatants. It can be assumed that women who return from conflict as recluses are not

empowered. Returning combatants who are able to readjust to their new lives and take an active interest in their surroundings and political processes are empowered.

After women survive conflict and feel empowered, there should be societal opportunities for civic engagement. These opportunities for civic engagement act as a mechanism for newly empowered women to feel comfortable with using their new identity to pursue a greater cause. These opportunities can be in the civil sector, activist focused, or in government. Opportunities for women's civic engagement may have existed before conflict, but militarization of women should lead to an increase in awareness of women's issues, and therefore an increase in positions for women. This includes the government having quotas to include women.

Once opportunities for civic engagement are determined to be present, women must act on these opportunities and attain a position of influence. Even if opportunities are present within a government, women may face obstacles in attaining positions. For positions of political influence, like parliament or public office, candidates must be elected. Women may not be elected for a number of reasons, given that a majority of the electorate may not agree with their platform. Another underlying possibility for women not being able to enter public office are sexist attitudes of the general population. Outside of government, opportunities for civic engagement will exist in civil movements and non-governmental organizations. Women hoping to join these movements must either be hired, appointed, or be recruited as a volunteer. The ability and frequency of women to be chosen for civilian based movements indicate civilian attitudes toward female ex combatants.

In the event that women are able to attain a position of influence, they must use their positions to affect change or influence policy. Whether they are active in a nongovernmental

organization or in public office, female ex combatants have the potential to use their role to affect change. Women who hold public office may not fully utilize their influence to enact change in an effort to appease their voter base. Similarly, women who are activists may feel either pessimistic or that their society is not yet ready to embrace changes in gender relations.

The final result of the flow of women's military participation is political and social change. Once women return from war, feel empowered and are able to take advantage of the opportunities presented, new legislation must be passed. It is assumed that female ex combatants that are integrated into civil and political processes will vote in favor of policies that will benefit women. For this outcome, it is not enough for laws to merely be passed. Regarding political change specifically, the laws that are passed must be applied to the population. Although legal frameworks may serve as a basis for increased rights for women, they must be enforced for observable societal change to occur.

These linkages are required for policy change. If there is a break at any point in the flowchart, policy change will be less likely to occur. The second linkage, "feeling empowered" is a precondition for the study. This can be applied to women who leave combat positions, or women who are ushered in to new leadership roles. This link can be easily broken as it is applied individually to women. Therefore, individual factors such as personality and marital status may impact whether or not a women feels empowered. Women not feeling empowered would be observable in women voluntarily returning to the positions and status that they held before they entered conflict. Female ex-combatants who are not empowered will not join communities or participate in activist efforts. Alternatively, women who are placed in new leadership roles may feel disillusioned with the cause that they initially aligned themselves with.

The previously established precondition, feelings of empowerment, alone is not enough for female ex-combatants to be able to influence or change policy. Rather, for engagement should be available for these feelings to be translated into efforts for change. If women cannot hold political office or hold jobs, then they are ultimately left without a medium to pursue social change.

H1: If female ex-combatants do not attain positions of influence, then they are less likely to influence or change policy

Gaining a position of influence is also a step that may not be actualized. These positions can be in the government sector, private sector, politics, or non-profit work. These roles all serve as mechanisms for women to be in leadership roles. Conservative attitudes about gender roles may block women from filling these roles. Another reason for a lack of women in these positions is that in many nationalist movements, the building of the state is seen as a main priority, leaving women's issues to be ignored (Mojab and Gorman, 2007). Even if women are able to make gains during revolution, these new roles and positions may fade once conflict is resolved (Tank, 2017). This allows for the public to ignore or overlook women as prospective job candidates or political candidates.

H2: If female ex-combatants in positions of influence lack societal opportunities for engagement or are not included in policy change discussions, then they are less likely to influence or change policy

Even in the instance that women are able to gain influential positions, they may hesitate to translate their power into policy change. Elected officials may not favor radical changes in hopes of being reelected or in fear of receiving backlash. Similarly, it is possible that women who are

newly employed may be excluded from important decisions. This hypothesis aims to measure not the number of women in the job sector and in political office, but rather the women who are able to translate their positions into change. Whether or not women are included in political discussions and processes reflects the attitudes of the male politicians that they work with.

Women who serve in noncombat support roles in militaries will have different experiences within the military. These support roles offer a more traditional route for women to be involved militarily. Women were typically limited to nursing or secretarial positions, which reflect gender stereotypes from the civilian sector (Quester, 1977). While the roles of combatants and non-combatants may differ, societal attitudes toward these women post conflict are sometimes very similar. In the case of the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, women that served in either of these roles were not seen as suitable wives post-conflict (Alison, 2004). Despite these similar societal expectations, this research questions whether female combatants and non-combatants actually have different experiences post conflict. Ex-combatants obtain untraditional roles in a military, so it is worth questioning whether their training and military service sets them apart from noncombatant women. What this study aims to look at is the impact of women adopting new, untraditional combat roles and how this impacts women's rights.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In testing the theory, two cases will be discussed. These cases will examine the use of women in two different militaries; the Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdistan and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) in Northern Syria. The formation of the Peshmerga dates back to 1943, but they did not receive international attention until they helped overthrow Saddam Hussein in 2003 (Lortz 2012). Although the PKK has been active in Syria, The YPJ as well as the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria were not formed until 2012. The creation of these units was brought on by the Rojava revolution. Figures vary across reports, but there are estimates that out of the 150,000 Peshmerga fighters, about 1,700 of them are women (Rudaw, 2017; Szoldra, 2017). Between the YPG and the YPJ however, these numbers are more even, as women are estimated to make up 24,000 of the total combined 60,000 fighters (Perry, 2017)

Studying the use of women in Kurdish militaries and the effect of women's rights in Iraqi Kurdistan and Northern Syria are worth looking into for multiple reasons. More broadly, these two cases offer insights into the roles of women in rebel groups and unrecognized states as opposed to traditional state actors. Also, Kurdish militaries are especially relevant to study given the attention of the international community and western media on their use of women. Therefore, this research adds to two ongoing scholarly debates; the first being women's militarization in non-state groups, and the second being gender roles in Iraqi Kurdistan and Northern Syria. To fully understand the present day relationship between female militarization and women's rights among the Kurds, it is crucial to discuss the history of Kurdish nationalism, Kurdish female leaders, and women within the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK).

The Kurds

The debate over the prospect of Kurdish statehood, commonly referred to as the “Kurdish Question” has been present since the early 20th century. Following World War I, the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres was drafted. The treaty included plans for a Kurdish state, but it was not ratified. Instead, the Treaty of Lausanne was ratified in 1923, which blocked the creation of a Kurdistan. This left the Kurds without a state, and are now spread across Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. As a result, the Kurdish language, customs and traditions were repressed. In Turkey, Kurds were referred to as “mountain Turks” and the names of Kurdish villages were changed to Turkish (Gunter, 1988).

Studying Kurdish women’s military service in relation to women’s rights and gender roles is incredibly salient. Although the Kurds as a group have been the subject of a growing collection of literature since the early 2000s, much remains to be learned about Kurdish women, particularly militant ones. Insights gained from studying women in the Peshmerga and the YPJ extend beyond just Kurdish issues. Rather, this research can easily be applied to feminist studies along with scholarship regarding nationalism and militarization.

Kurdish Women and the PKK

When examining Kurdish women and their current roles in Rojava and Iraqi Kurdistan, the formation of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) is crucial to understand. The PKK was founded by Abdullah Öcalan in Turkey in 1978. The PKK’s mission was to “make a communist

revolution by guerilla warfare, and establish a separate Kurdish state” (Criss, 1995, p 18).

Women were active in the PKK from its very beginning. Kesire Yildirim, Öcalan’s ex-wife, was one of the first women to support the PKK. Their failed marriage heavily influenced Öcalan’s ban on marriage and sexual relationships for PKK militants (Marcus, 2007). A few years after its establishment, the PKK targeted Mehmet Celal Bucak, a parliamentarian with right wing ties, for political assassination. The attempt failed, but it nonetheless served its goal in declaring the establishment of the PKK (Marcus, 2007).

In 1984, the PKK declared war against the Turkish state. Sakine Cansiz, another woman in the PKK, was active during this time. She was eventually imprisoned for eleven years, but led a Kurdish protest movement in prison. After her release in the early 1990s, Cansiz began organizing the women’s movement within the PKK in Iraq (Letsch, 2013). This is when women started joining the PKK in significant numbers (Tezcür, 2019). At first, the PKK was not logistically able to accept so many women, but they needed more combatants for warfare (Tezcür, 2019). Not long after joining in mass numbers, women started to take leadership positions. In 1996, Zeynep Kinaci, a female PKK member, carried out the group’s first suicide attack. She blew herself up in a Turkish military parade, injuring 30 people and killing ten soldiers (Bayar, 2019).

Three years after the PKK’s first suicide bombing, Öcalan was captured and imprisoned by Turkish special forces in Kenya. Despite his imprisonment, Öcalan is still an influential figure in the PKK, as he continues to release public statements. Ideologically, Öcalan has moved away from advocating for a Kurdish state. Instead, he has proposed “a new ‘truly’ democratic Turkish republic, and a project of democratic confederalism” (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2011, p 151).

Regarding Öcalan's changing ideology, the writings of Murray Bookchin were incredibly influential. In the 1980s, Bookchin, a former Stalinist, started developing ideas for "an ecological, democratic society" (Biehl, 2012). He was anti-statist and advocated for small-scale democratic assemblies to make decisions for a community. Öcalan began seeing nation-states as oppressors, therefore adopting Bookchin's approach of democratic confederalism rather than calling for the creation of a Kurdish state (Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016). Öcalan (2013, p. 26) went so far as to claim that "housewifization is the oldest form of slavery." What is commonly referred to as the "Rojava Experiment" is a continuation of what Abdullah Öcalan began within the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in Turkey. The PKK has been connected to Syrian Kurds since the late 1980's (Marcus, 2007).

Öcalan's public statements and his writings both reflect a commitment to women's liberation. He even declared the PKK as a "women's party" in 1998 (Damon, 2008). Öcalan argues that along with its nationalist goals, the PKK "struggled against internal feudalism in order to change the status of women and end the enslavement of society in general." (Öcalan, 2013 p. 40)

Kurdish Women in Power

Outside of the PKK, there is a deep history of Kurdish women as leaders. As early as the 1600s, there were female tribe chieftains. In the 1850s, Kara Fatima Khanum acted as the chieftan of her tribe following her husband's imprisonment. She became famous in Europe for commanding a Kurdish contingent during the Crimean War. Similarly, Adela Khanun was the

wife of a chieftain and governor within the Ottoman government during the 20th century. She had gardens and bazaars built, transforming her village of Halabja into a major trade center. Possibly one of the most famous cases of a Kurdish woman gaining political influence can be seen in Layla Zana. Like many powerful women before her, she was the wife of a Kurdish political leader. When her husband was imprisoned, she turned to political activism. She eventually was elected into Turkish parliament. In 1994, she was sentenced to prison for contacts with the PKK. Through her political activism, Zana has solidified herself as an international symbol for Kurdish nationalism (van Bruinessen, 2001).

With all of these examples in mind, it is important to note that these were all women in aristocratic circles. There are comparatively far fewer examples of Kurdish women in power who weren't born into or married into influential families. It is undeniable, however, that these women yielded tremendous power and influence, particularly Leyla Zana. It would therefore be a mistake to give Öcalan all of the credit for spearheading women's liberation. In fact, van Bruinessen (2001, p 15) makes the argument that Leyla Zana rather than Abdullah Öcalan is "the closest to Nelson Mandela that the Kurds have."

Outcome of Interest

The creation of pro-woman policy, as well as women's rights in both Kurdistan and Northern Syria are the outcomes of interest for this study. Pro-woman policy will be defined as statutes and laws that are concerned with women's political and social equality. For this study, women's rights will refer to the practice of female genital mutilation child marriages, and

women's political participation. Female genital mutilation, child marriage and women's political participation are all appropriate measures for women's rights. Legislation that has been passed by the Kurdistan Regional Government as well as the New Charter of Rojava are against these acts, making them logical choices to use to study whether rights have been improved or not. Beyond whether or not laws are passed, the implementation of these policies will also be studied. To determine this, data on programs that work to educate and enforce policies are part of this research. To examine women's rights, data on female genital mutilation and child marriages will be obtained by reading human rights reports from nongovernmental organizations. Additionally, women's involvement in the development of policies will also be examined.

Possible Drivers of Outcome

In this study, the possible drivers of outcomes will be lack of women's empowerment, women's inability access to positions of influence, as well as the inability of women to use these positions to implement change. Women's military participation will be measured by examining how many women are in military combat roles. This study will exclude women that are involved in noncombat related support roles. Each intervening linkage between women's armed military participation and the outcome of women's policy change will also be treated as an independent variable.

Many female representatives of Kurdish Parliament rely on nominations by male party leaders, leading them to reflect the party's wishes rather than initiating change (Kaya, 2017). Reading news reports and legal documents on what legislation has passed through parliament

will provide information on which parliamentarians supported or opposed different acts. If female parliamentarians do not vote in favor of legislation that is in favor of increasing women's rights, then it can be stated that they do not use their position to gain policy outcomes.

Alternative Explanations for Outcome of Interest

There are lingering questions about the motivations for policies being passed in Rojava and Iraqi Kurdistan regarding women. One possibility for why Rojava and Iraqi Kurdistan focus on women's rights is an effort for approval from foreign countries. Because Rojava is only de facto independent and Iraqi Kurdistan is semi-autonomous, the backing of the international community does carry some weight. Important to note is the United States' role in supporting the YPG/YPJ units. The United States began supplying arms to the Syrian Kurds in May of 2017 (Arafat, 2017). U.S. Support enabled the YPG to rise as a prominent military force (Barnard and Hubbard, 2018). Because of Turkey's designation of the YPG as a terrorist group, there were questions of whether President Trump would continue to back the Kurds or pull out due to its NATO ties with Turkey. In December of 2018, it was announced that the United States would be withdrawing from Syria. While this effort may preserve U.S.-Turkey relations, the Kurds, along with other potential partners of the United States, will likely feel skeptical about the Trump administration (Macaron, 2018).

Political Statements vs. Actions

The politicians of Iraqi Kurdistan have made statements and declarations regarding women's rights. Prime Minister Barzani criticized religious leaders for practicing FGM, calling the measures "anti-women and anti-government. (Joly and Bakawan, 2016). Additionally, he has publicly supported stronger policies for gender related violence in November of 2013 (Joly and Bakawan, 2016). While the Prime Minister has made public statements, it is crucial to analyze what measures are being taken. The Kurdistan Regional Government conducts educational activities regarding FGM, including certifying midwives, conducting police trainings, and creating presentations for schools and the general public (Schwartz, 2015). Despite these measures, the question remains whether female activists or international actors motivated these decisions.

A separate alternative explanation for the passing of pro-women legislation is a dedication to Kurdish nationalist Abdullah Öcalan rather than the women within the societies. At the beginning of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), Öcalan stated that it was the Kurdish movement's responsibility to liberate women (Marcus, 2007). The influence of Öcalan therefore ignited commitments to gender equality among the Kurds, specifically the PKK and the PYD. This research aims to examine whether or not these commitments were made in an effort to simply comply with Öcalan rather than to protect women themselves.

When looking at the Kurdish situation, it is undeniable that Abdullah Öcalan has had a strong impact on Kurdish nationalism and the political pursuits of the Kurds. However, placing him as the sole instigator of the women's rights movement is an exaggeration. Additionally, foreign support is not likely to adequately explain the roles of Kurdish women. After the

Peshmerga was formed in 1943, women began joining in the 1960s. This was long before the Iraqi Kurdistan referendum, or the de facto liberation of Rojava. Even though Rojava is newly de facto, the political structures that are in place have been in place since the early 1990s.

Therefore, Kurdish women's military involvement precedes United States' interest in the Kurds.

Measuring Women's Rights

Women's rights are examined using several measures. To distinguish between what is women's empowerment and what is not women's empowerment, the status of women before and after women's militarization is examined. Looking at women's rights before they were heavily involved in the Peshmerga and the YPJ provides a baseline for comparison on how women's rights have or have not evolved. Empowerment will be measured by looking at familial and political structures that encourage women's autonomy.

The theoretical framework and hypotheses discuss "positions of influence." For the purpose of this research, these positions are women that are in public roles that involve broad levels of decision-making. This includes women that are in the job sector, are activists, or are politicians. Data on women in positions of influence who were not in the Peshmerga or YPJ are also included. This serves as a comparison for female ex-combatants' societal engagement. Women attaining positions of influence is measured through Internet research of news sites.

Societal opportunities for civic engagement will focus on women that are in nongovernmental roles and are active in the workforce. Looking at women in the job sector offers insight into civic engagement, because women who work outside of the home are more

likely to mobilize politically (Ross, 2008). Women's societal opportunities will look at what job opportunities and positions are newly available to women. This measure will exclude positions that were traditionally held by women before there were large numbers of women in the Peshmerga and the YPJ.

All of these forms of participation are measured through systematic Internet research. Data from Kurdish news sources including ANF English, Rudaw and Kurdistan 24 provide information on women who are attaining positions of influence. Additionally, the Kurdistan Regional Government website has information on government structures and women who are members of the Kurdistan Parliament.

Future Interviews with Peshmerga Women

Moving forward, future interviews with female ex-Peshmerga soldiers will be conducted. These surveys serve as a method to measure the experiences of women before, during and after their service. These primary accounts are crucial to understanding the full implications of women's militarization on women's public participation and legislation. The survey is 40 questions long and is divided into three subsections. The first section asks questions background and familial attitudes. The purpose of these questions is to measure attitudes regarding gender equality and women's empowerment before going into the Peshmerga. This sets a point for comparison regarding whether female ex-combatants' opinions on gender equality changed during service.

The second section includes questions regarding time in the Peshmerga. These questions focus on instances of gender discrimination and training on Öcalan's political ideologies. This section measures the training and exposure that ex-combatants, rather than female non-combatants would receive. This information distinguishing them from other women is important to acknowledge, especially considering that the theoretical framework of this research focuses on the distinct experiences of female ex-combatants. The final question in this section asks to compare the number of women in commanding positions to the number of men. This measures the feasibility of women gaining positions of influence within the military.

The third section of the interview questions looks at attitudes and feelings of empowerment after Peshmerga service. Specifically, these questions focus on women's beliefs that they are equipped for politics or the public sector. This section includes questions about employment and political activism of Peshmerga women. These questions correspond with the third and fourth linkages of the theoretical framework, which refer to societal opportunities for engagement and female ex-combatants tangibly attaining them. Additionally, questions about knowing Peshmerga women that try to be politically active or try to gain positions in activism will be used to measure whether Peshmerga are trying to gain positions of influence.

WOMEN'S ROLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

To understand the extent to which women's rights are being pursued, examining women's roles and opportunities provides insight into women's societal integration. There are a few sectors worthy of studying to determine whether women's roles and rights are transforming. Whether or not women are taking on new employment or societal roles is indicative of changing attitudes towards women's roles. In the 1990s, the PKK made efforts to include women by holding women's assemblies (Knapp, Flack, & Ayboga, 2016). The following section looks at women's roles within Kurdish systems of governance along with the private sector.

Kurdish Women in Northern Syria before 2011

After the Sheikh Said Rebellion in 1925, there was an influx of Kurds into Syria. The Kurds were given some freedom when it came to publishing and broadcasting in Syria during the French mandate. In the mid 1950s, the newly independent Syrian government seized and destroyed Kurdish publications (Hassanpour, Kangas and Chyet, 1996). Compared to the Kurds in Iran, Iraq and Turkey, Kurds in Syria had little role in early Kurdish Independence movements. This changed when the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria was founded in 1957. Nine years later, the party would split into the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria and The Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria. Throughout the seventies and eighties, each of the groups was split off into multiple parties. When Hafez al-Assad first took power in 1971, the Kurds began to experience newfound freedom. This eventually led to the creation of the Kurdish National Council in 2011. (al-Kati, 2019)

Prior to the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, a few resources for women in Syria existed. Women were granted the right to vote in 1949 and could stand in elections in 1953 (Kelly & Breslin, 2010). The General Women's Union (GWU) was formed in 1967 for the purpose of developing women's welfare and political participation (Bellafronto, 2004). In 2003, Syria passed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) with reservations for articles on issues including women passing her nationality onto her children, freedom of movement, equal rights in marriage, and the legal effect of child marriages (Kelly & Breslin, 2010).

The Kurdish population in Syria was consistently discriminated against. In the 1960s roughly 120,000 Syrian Kurds were stripped of their citizenship. Kurdish political parties were also banned, and Kurdish language publications were limited. Although the Syrian government suppressed its Kurdish population, they were supportive of Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria. Iraqi Kurds were willing to support Syria in its regional conflict with Iraq. This allowed for PKK influence to take hold in Syria in the 1980s (Marcus, 2007). From this information, it can be gathered that Kurdish women in Syria were not guaranteed the same limited rights as Arab women.

Women in Rojava

With the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, Bashar al Assad withdrew the Syrian Army and government administration from parts of Northern Syria in July of 2012. This allowed for the Democratic Union Party (PYD) to step in and take control (Federici, 2015). A year later, the

PYD announced a Kurdish Constitution. The constitution established three cantons within a Kurdish Autonomous region (Radpey, 2015). The canton structure is known as the People's Council of West Kurdistan (MGRK). The MGRK is divided into four levels; communes, neighborhoods, districts, and the MGRK itself. The region is divided into three cantons: Afrîn, Kobanî, and Cizîrê. The canton system was largely based off of Öcalan's teachings of democratic confederalism. Additionally, the canton system utilizes Öcalan's concepts of gender equality, as each canton has a male and female co-chair.

Other than the canton system, there are several organizations within Rojava that specialize in women's rights and education. Kongreya Star, originally Yekitiya Star, was founded in 2005. It is an organization largely dedicated to the political education of women. Kongreya Star gives women a ten-day training program on the councils and communes. Kurdish women are not the only ethnic group active in women's mobilization. The Syrian Women's Association is an organization that includes women who are Kurds, Arabs, Yezidis, and Syrians. The association is not part of the larger MGRK council system, but it is focused on creating laws and forums for women's liberation movements (Knapp, et al 2016).

The women in Rojava that are spearheading women's revolution have a strong focus on youth. The Youth Confederation specifically focuses on educating women. Doz Kobaî, a member of the Youth Confederation, states that the organization educates women on "the position of women in society before patriarchy and what man has done to her in all the eras since" (Knapp et al., 2016). Other youth efforts include hosting a Conference on Young Revolutionary Women. Another organization focused on women's rights is the Foundation of

Free Women in Rojava. This foundation has developed women's health centers and preschools (Knapp et al., 2016).

Non-Governmental Employment in Rojava

Outside of the co-leadership positions, women in Rojava take on roles in different sectors. The Women's Economy directorate is one office that supports women's employment. Their office supports 4,500 women in agricultural projects through training and assistance (Lynch, 2019). Women in Rojava are also able to obtain jobs. This includes serving as traffic cops and defense ministers (Lemmon, 2018). Last year, an all-women market was opened in Derik City in Rojava (Shekhani, 2018). The market director states that the market was developed for women who faced "social restrictions", referring to women who did not hold certificates or who were housewives (Shekhani 2018). The Star Union of Women financially supports the market. Other than business, women are heavily involved in agriculture and education. In Afrîn, 56 percent of workers in agriculture are women, and 70 percent of the members of teachers unions are women (Knapp, et al., 2016).

Women's representation in the media is another cornerstone of society in Rojava. The Kurdish Women's Press Association was founded in 2013. The association was formed in order to unionize female journalists. The founding conference for the association stated that a women's radio station in Rojava would be established and a women's media academy would be opened (Knapp et. al, 2016).

Opportunities and Structures for YPJ Women

There is a perceived connection between including women in the YPJ and the broader rights that are being granted to them in Syria. One YPJ commander claims that because of YPJ participation, women “play their role in media, health, economy, art and culture, language training, in every field (Darden, 2015 p. 51). The revolution in Rojava has often been described as not only a cultural revolution, but also a women’s revolution. One YPJ fighter states that “before the revolution, most Kurdish women were staying in their homes. Since I began fighting for my country, these attitudes have been changing” (Johnson, 2013). Because of the distinct inclusion of women in leadership in Rojava, it is unlikely that former YPJ women will return to their traditional roles. Now that Rojava has spaces for women in politics, education and health, women in the YPJ will now have more options for activism than they did prior to military service.

New YPJ recruits are given a military education that includes political thought, democratic autonomy and self-defense (Serhat & Servan 2015). The women in the YPJ are exposed to the concept of jineolojî, or “women’s science” in their training camps (Knapp et al., 2014). Jineolojî has also spread to women’s academies built by Yekîtiya Star. This implies that ideas of women’s liberation and determination are not confined to the YPJ. Instead, these are concepts that permeate all aspects of life in Rojava.

Kurdish Women in Iraq before ISIS

Although the Peshmerga is older than the YPJ, the number of women involved has never been as high. Some of the legendary Peshmerga women from the 20th century include Margaret George and Hero Ibrahim Ahmad (Lortz, 2012; Goudsouzain, 2016). Women like George and Ahmad were in the minority at the time, and thus had limited influence on social change and political processes. It was not until 1995 that Colonel Nahida Rashid created the first women's Peshmerga unit (Nilsson, 2018). Even with the creation of the women's unit, women were not fully integrated and utilized until the emergence of the Islamic state in 2014 (Marouf, 2018). The few women that were active in the Peshmerga during the 1990s had limited success in gaining positions of influence. The exceptions to this were women who were married to men in power. Kafiya Suleiman, for example, is the wife of former leading commander Omer Fetah. She became the secretary general of the PUK Women's Union in the early 1990s (Fischer-Tahir, 2014). Therefore, the roles of Kurdish women in Iraq from the 1990s up until the early 2000s serve as a baseline for examining whether women's inclusion in the Peshmerga has impacted women's roles and rights.

In the first Kurdistan parliament in 1992, six out of 105 members were women (McDonald, 2001). However, in its early history, the KRG still had more progressive stance than did Iraq. For instance, Iraq's 1990 Penal Code, which legalized honor killings, was renounced in the KRG in 2000 (Brown & Romano, 2006). Additionally, although none of them were Peshmerga militants at the time, Kurdish women still engaged in peace activism during the 1994 war between the PUK and KDP (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2011). Kurdish women were also involved in activism with the formation of the Independent Women's Organization (IWO) in 1993. Its main

objectives were raising awareness of honor killings and establishing shelters for abused women (Mojab & Gorman, 2007). In 1992, 15,000 women signed a petition asking parliament to abolish polygamy and grant equal rights to inheritance and divorce, but the parliament rejected the proposals (Mojab, 2001). These examples show that even before women were involved in the Peshmerga, there were still some mechanisms, albeit limited ones, available for political representation and activism.

Women in Iraqi Kurdistan Present Day

Since its first parliamentary elections in 1992, women have been granted an increasing amount of access to politics and activism. Iraqi Kurdistan, similar to Rojava, has also created government structures for women. The political structure of Iraq is somewhat different from Rojava, as it is a semi-autonomous region in Iraq. Iraqi Kurdistan therefore has its own Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Kurdistan Parliament. Although not a fully autonomous state, Kurdistan does have representatives in several countries, including the United States, Iran, and Russia. Because of Kurdistan's government structure and government, they have been able to build structures and institutions for women. In 2007, the Kurdistan Regional Government set up the General Directorate for Tracing Violence against Women (GDTVW). The goals of the GDTVW are collecting data, following up on legal cases, and raising awareness of violence against women (Joly & Bakawan, 2016).

Within the KRG, there is a Women's Rights Monitoring Board and a High Council of Women's Affairs. The Ministry of the Interior has a general directorate to combat violence

against women, as well as their regional directorates in Erbil, Slemani and Duhok. In addition to these institutions, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs is responsible for running women's shelters, while the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs aims to mobilize religious efforts against gender based violence. The Independent Human Rights Commission is a commission funded by the KRG. It has produced human rights reports and has worked with Doctors Without Borders to provide support for women in IDP camps (IHRCKR, 2017).

Women have served as ministers in the KRG cabinet, although not to the same extent as men. In the sixth and seventh cabinets, only one of the nineteen ministers was a woman (Hardi, 2013). In the current eighth cabinet, there are three female ministers out of a total of twenty-four (Kurdistan Regional Government). A woman, Dr. Rewas Faiq Hussein, is currently serving as the Speaker of Parliament. Before Dr. Hussein became the speaker, another woman, Val Fareed, served as the interim speaker in February 2019. This made her the first female speaker of the Kurdistan Parliament (Aldroubi, 2019). Muna Kahveci, a female representative from the Turkmen Reform Party, was elected as the second female deputy speaker (van Wilgenburg, 2019). In the current Kurdistan parliament, there are 36 female parliamentarians out of a total 111 (The Baghdad Post, 2018). One of these 36 women, Hazhan Kwestani, is a former Peshmerga soldier (Kurdistan Parliament).

Despite the political support structures for women, Kurdish women that are not part of political institutions face challenges. Kurdish women activists that are not sponsored by the main political parties of the KRG face their own challenges (al-Ali & Pratt, 2011). Both the KDP and the PUK have their own offshoots that are concerned with women's rights. The Kurdistan Women's Union (KWU) is the KDP's women's organization. The KWU was founded in 1952

and offers numerous resources for women, including job training, health care centers and education services (The Kurdish Project). The KRG recognizes that despite the inclusion of women in different sectors, “social and cultural considerations continue to restrict the equal access of women to resources and leadership positions in society.” (Kurdistan Region of Iraq 2020, p. 11)

Non-Governmental Employment in Iraqi Kurdistan

Outside of politics, Kurdish women are less active in the private sector. A 2014 World Bank Survey found that only 11 percent of women were active in the labor force (Dexter, 2016). In comparison, eighty percent of women in the workforce in Iraqi Kurdistan work in government (Kurdistan Region of Iraq 2020). More than half of non-working women want to work. A World Bank study found that most individuals in Iraqi Kurdistan had positive attitudes toward women working. In fact, over 70% of men and women surveyed found it acceptable for women to work in the private sector. The same study found that the constraints that women faced were lack of access to child care and a lack of job security after maternity leave (World Bank, 2019).

The Ministry of Planning in the KRG released a document titled *Kurdistan Region of Iraq 2020: A Vision for the Future* which includes concerns for women. One of the policy priorities outlined is “Helping women enter the labor market and succeed”. Under this heading, the policy details measures that must be taken to include women. The document emphasizes that government statements and actions will “show that women deserve equal opportunities in the labor market” (p. 17). Including this policy objective demonstrates that the KRG is both aware of

and committed to including women in the private sector. By outlining and implementing policy objectives, the KRG aims to diversify and include women more broadly in the workforce.

Another structure that exists for women in Iraqi Kurdistan are non-governmental organizations. Women began organizing and building NGOs in the late 1990s. Although they were dedicated to their causes, the women that started these efforts were underpaid and inexperienced. Within the past ten years however, there have been more substantial efforts to train and educate NGO leaders (Hardi, 2013).

Opportunities and Structures for Peshmerga Women

Female Peshmerga soldiers have expressed concerns about whether or not they will maintain their positions after the fight against ISIS concludes (Marouf, 2018). Prior to the emergence of ISIS, the women that were active in the Peshmerga typically served in support roles. This included running women's shelters and maintaining border security. With the onslaught of the Islamic State, women began to take on more combat roles. Because of the shifts in women's roles, female Peshmerga soldiers are now questioning what their roles will be like in the forces post ISIS.

Some of the women of the Peshmerga are motivated to pursue political and social activism. These advocacy positions include acting as a lawyer to stop domestic violence and volunteer work (Nilsson, 2018). Because of these newfound roles, many Peshmerga women believe that women's militarization has promoted changes for gender equality (Nilsson, 2018).

Women that are currently in the Peshmerga have a few examples to look at when determining what post Peshmerga life will hold. Amineh Kakabaveh is an Iranian Kurdish ex-Peshmerga fighter who sought asylum in Sweden in the 1990s. Kakabaveh then became a Swedish Member of Parliament in 2008 and maintains her position (Branchereau 2018). Hero Ibrahim Ahmad was also a Peshmerga fighter, but her service was in the 1980s against the Baathist regime. As the former first lady of Iraq, Ahmad is still influential in the PUK. However, she has been subject to personal attacks from patriarchal sects of Kurdish society over the past three decades (Goudsouzian 2016). Pakhshan Zangana is another former Peshmerga soldier who currently serves as the head of the High Council for Women's Affairs (Rahman, 2019).

Looking at Kakabaveh and Ahmad, it seems as if Peshmerga women are positioned to enter politics after service. With this being said, Kakabaveh and Ahmad were Peshmerga soldiers long before the rise of ISIS and the dramatic increase of the recruitment of women. Additionally, there are women within Iraqi Kurdistan who became politically active without direct Peshmerga involvement. However, many of these women have fathers or husbands who are active in politics. Comparatively, there is a greater percentage of women that are in KRG legislature than there are women in the Peshmerga. This shows that armed group participation is not the only way for women to pursue political involvement (Darden et al. 2019, p. 52).

WOMEN AND ELECTIONS

Although Rojava and Iraqi Kurdistan differ in government structure, they each present opportunities for women to participate in government processes. The canton structure of Rojava is built up of local municipalities, in which every position at every government level in Rojava has a female equivalent in authority. Rojava is commonly referred to as a “woman’s revolution,” as seen by the political activism of women like Hevi Ibrahim, the prime minister of the Afrin Canton (Civiroglu, 2014). As previously mentioned, Iraqi Kurdistan has a parliamentary system that women can serve in. The following section will examine the structures that are present for women and whether they carry out their intended purposes.

Effectiveness of Women and Elections

Within governments that have gender quotas, there are questions of the effectiveness of mandatory involvement of women. The central question for women’s involvement is whether women’s participation translates to women’s representation. In Iraqi Kurdistan, there is a mandatory thirty percent quota for women in parliament. Regarding parliamentary elections in Iraqi Kurdish parliament, there were 241 female candidates competing for representation in the 2018 election. Thirty-four women had served in the previous term. The KDP had 12 female members of parliament, followed by eight in the Gorran party, six in the PUK, three in the KIU and two in Komal. The Turkmen parties each had one female member of parliament, while the Christian parties had two (Ahmad, 2018). In July of 2018, Kurdish parliament amended a law

that requires one of the three leading members of parliament—the speaker and the two deputies, to be a woman (Ali, 2019).

Women who run for office in Iraqi Kurdistan are subject to their own set of challenges. In the Iraqi parliament, Kurdish female candidates have been the targets of fake sex tapes and revealing photos in efforts to undermine their aspirations (Edwards, 2018). Although the quota requires that there are women in parliament, critics claim that the result is hardly representational. Hezha Khan, a women’s activist in Iraqi Kurdistan, doubts that the seats in parliament are spread evenly among the social classes. Instead, she believes that most of the seats go to women who are related to men that are in power (Edwards, 2018). This implies that familial ties, rather than Peshmerga service, is a greater determinant for a woman’s likelihood to be in politics. Dr. Choman Hardi, the founder of the Center for Gender and Development Studies at the American University of Iraq in Sulaimani, is critical of the thirty percent quota in the Kurdistan parliament. Regarding women in parliament, Hardi states “some people believe that they were chosen intentionally to be ineffective so that they don’t threaten the system” (van Wilgenburg, 2019). Because of these negative experiences, political parties may have trouble encouraging women to run for office.

Laws for Women’s Equality

Along with passing gender quotas, both the MGRK in Northern Syria and the KRG have passed legislation that is inclusive of women and women’s rights. Rojava’s Constitution makes numerous references to the status of women. Iraqi Kurdistan has passed two major legislative

acts that outlaw female genital mutilation and has banned child marriage. The passing of these laws demonstrates societal attitudes toward women's rights, and whether or not governments are supportive in outlawing regressive practices. In addition to the creation of laws, it is important to note what language and definitions are included. Both Rojava and Iraqi Kurdistan have laws that received general support and clearly outline definitions for terminology such as gender equality and domestic violence.

Legal Frameworks in Rojava

In Rojava, the concept of gender equality can be seen throughout its legal system. The Constitution of the Rojava Cantons was passed in 2014. Women and gender are discussed in several different articles. Article 23 states that “everyone has the right to express their ethnic, cultural, linguistic and gender rights.” Article 28 explicitly states that the “Charter guarantees the effective realization of equality of women and mandates public institutions to work towards the elimination of gender discrimination.” It is in Article 47 that the constitution lays out that the Legislative Assembly must be composed of at least forty percent of either sex. In addition to this, men with histories of domestic violence or polygamy are excluded from organizations (Dirik, 2014).

Legal Frameworks in Iraqi Kurdistan

Similar to the Rojava canton system, the Kurdistan Parliament has also passed legislation regarding women's rights. The Kurdistan Parliament passed Act No. 15 on November 3rd, 2008. This legislation was an amendment to the Personal Status Law that was initially passed in 1959. The first article defines marriage as a "voluntary contract" and states that husbands must have the permission of his first wife in order to marry a second wife. The law outlaws forced marriage, and states that any relative who breaks this can be sentenced to two to five years in prison. The Law against Domestic Violence was adopted in 2011. The bill received support from 68 of the 111 parliamentarians, securing a majority (Khalife, 2010). The law provides a definition for domestic violence that extends to physical and psychological harm, as well as deprivation of liberties. Thirteen different examples of domestic violence are outlined, including female genital mutilation, forced marriage, and marriage of minors.

The Law against Domestic Violence was subject to media attention when Mullah Ismael Sosaa, a religious leader, demanding that Prime Minister Barzani refuse to sign the bill into law. Barzani complied with not signing the bill, but he did allow for it to go into effect when it was published in the Government's Official Gazette in August of 2011 (Iraqi Kurdistan: Law banning FGM not being enforced, 2012). One year later, the Supreme Council for Women Affairs in the KRG passed the National Strategy to Confront Violence against Women in Kurdistan. This is a five-year plan that outlined goals of passing more legislation for women and increasing women's political participation (National Strategy to Combat Violence Against Women, 2012).

Applying Women's Rights Legislation

As previously mentioned in the theory, only looking at legal frameworks does not provide enough insight into women's rights. Rather, this must be combined with studying the application of laws. One of the main challenges of applying the laws in Iraqi Kurdistan is an overall lack of awareness of the people. The Warvin Organization surveyed 1000 women in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2013. When asked about awareness of the Combatting Violence against women act, 43 percent of women were not aware of the law at all. Twenty eight percent of women knew that there was such a law, while 18 percent were aware of some of the articles and only 11 percent were fairly aware of the law. The same report stated that 42 percent of women had "never seen any woman" benefit from the law, 25 percent of women had "rarely seen" women benefit, 24 percent had "seen some women benefit," and only nine percent saw "many women benefit" (Al-Massala Organization for Human Development, 2013).

Similarly, a UN survey was conducted in Erbil on opinions on female genital mutilation. Sixty-eight percent of people surveyed stated that they were against the practice of FGM. Of these people surveyed, 60 percent of them said that they were unaware that FGM had even been outlawed (Ford, 2014). The 2011 "Law of Combatting Violence Within the Family," stated that a special court would be established for familial violence. However, this court has yet to be established, allowing practices like female genital mutilation to be continued without punishment (Hardi, 2013). One reason why the KRG has struggled to implement the law is the number of mothers who perform FGM on their daughters. These women are less likely to file complaints against their parents (Agence-France Presse, 2019).

Along with all of this, some religious leaders are still in favor of FGM. A 2018 study interviewing 29 religious leaders in the Erbil governate found that most of the interviewees did not support outlawing FGM. The participants were not directly asked if they were aware of the existing law, but only one participant referenced the existence of the law (Ahmed, Kareem, Shabila & Mzori, 2018). In 2019, the KRG announced a new plan to eradicate FGM by 2028. The plan includes the cooperation of the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Religious Affairs (Sulaivany, 2019).

Violence against Women, Child Marriages and Honor Killings

Despite the laws that are in place to protect women in Kurdistan and Rojava, they are still subject to illegal practices. Breaking down and looking at instances of violence, child marriages, female genital mutilation, and honor killings provide insights into women's status and whether laws are being enforced. These three measures were chosen because they have roots in Kurdish culture.

A 2013 study in Erbil found that over half of women surveyed were subject to emotion, physical or sexual violence from their husbands (Al-Atrushi, Tawil, Shabila and Hadithi, 2013). In 2015, there were 7,436 registered complaints of violence against women in Iraqi Kurdistan, compared to 6,673 complaints in the previous year (Parvaz, 2016). A CEDAW Shadow Report was conducted in 2014. The report found that child marriages had increased from 2003 through 2014 in Iraqi Kurdistan. The report speculates that economic development and tradition were two driving factors for the increase of child marriages. In the year 2017, there were fourteen reported

cases of honor killings in Iraqi Kurdistan (Dolemari, 2018). Although women are protected from honor killings by law, cultural undertones of the practice enable its prevalence.

Female Genital Mutilation in Iraqi Kurdistan

Compared to other countries where FGM is practiced, Iraq has relatively low rates (Ahmed, Shabu, and Shabila 2019). Female genital mutilation is still practiced in Iraqi Kurdistan, but studies indicate that the practice is actually decreasing. In 2018, a UNICEF survey found that 37.5% of women had been mutilated, compared to 58.5% in 2014 (Agence France-Press, 2019). A 2011 study using 1,508 females aged 6 months to 20 years of age was conducted among the provinces of Erbil, Sulaimaniyah and Duhok. The practice of FGM was reported in about 37% of participants from Erbil, 29% in Sulaimaniyah, and 4% in Duhok (Saleem, Othman, Fattah, Hazim and Adnan, 2013). Saleem et al. (2013) also examined attitudes about FGM from women who had already undergone the practice. Their findings state that 51% of participants with no education favored FGM, but only 27% of those with basic education and 18% with a high school education favored it (Saleem, et al. 2013). Similarly, a 2013 study using 1987 women from ages 15-49 was conducted in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan. Yasin, Al-Tawil, Shabila and Hadithi, (2013) found that the practice was significantly associated with women's employment status. The findings from these studies suggest that women's level of education and employment status affect the likelihood of women undergoing FGM.

Supporters and Dissidents of Women's Rights

To trace reasons why violations against women are still carried out, it is important to determine which figures in power either support or speak out against violence. Similar to the traditional nature of honor killings, FGM may be encouraged by clerics and scholars to preserve customs. In 2015 an Iraqi Kurdish media network interviewed Sunni preacher Mullah Ali Kalak. Kalak at the time encouraged Kurdish Muslims to continue the practice of FGM despite the laws prohibiting it. After speaking with a representative from Gender, an NGO in Erbil, Kalak agreed to stop practicing FGM and cease from encouraging others to defy the KRG (Schwartz, 2015).

While some men in public positions like Kalak may encourage FGM, it is usually women that support and even carry out the practice. A 2014 UNICEF survey found that 75% of women saw their mothers as being supportive of cutting (Agence France-Press, 2015). This can prevent FGM from being reported, as women may feel hesitant to report parents for breaking the law.

Unlike Kalak, there are cases of men in power who support movements for women's rights. Even prior to FGM being outlawed in Iraqi Kurdistan, the High Committee for Issuing Fatwas at the Kurdistan Islamic Scholars Union issued a fatwa stating that Islam does not require FGM (Iraqi Kurdistan: Law Banning FGM Not Being Enforced, 2012). Outside of religion, politicians have also voiced their support for women's rights. Male politicians are overall less likely to be against changing gender roles for women. Rather, men that are in lower positions typically felt threatened by women's new roles (al-Ali and Pratt, 2010).

LIMITATIONS

With the methodology used for this study, there are several limitations. The Internet research that was gathered is based off of secondhand accounts. Therefore, there are possibilities for bias from journalists and reporters. Additionally, the government websites for the KRG and Rojava will also support a very specific narrative that is inclusive of women. However, an advantage of using news sources is that they will offer up to date information on political and social developments. The legal documents and laws that are passed will be useful in determining when, why and how legislation was passed, and will offer little to no bias.

The future interviews conducted with primary sources offers an in depth analysis of women's lives before, during, and after their Peshmerga service. With this being said, the answers given in the interview are subject to the interviewees' personal biases. The subjects of the study may feel protective of the Peshmerga, and their service. This might lead to a skewed perspective of the rights of women and whether or not they are achieving true equality through military service.

DISCUSSION

Women in Rojava and women in Iraqi Kurdistan have faced different histories and therefore have different experiences regarding gender equality. In Rojava, it is easier to make a connection between an increase in women's rights and the creation of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ). This is because many gender equality initiatives took place concurrently with the establishment of the YPJ. In Iraqi Kurdistan however, the situation is somewhat different. Although women are able to serve in the Peshmerga and hold political office, it is difficult to establish a link between the two. There are a few standout cases of former Peshmerga women entering politics, but for the most part, the roles of ex-Peshmerga remain to be seen. It can be argued that through the laws passed by the KRG and the initiatives taken by Kurdish NGOs, Iraqi Kurds support efforts toward ensuring women's equality. With this being said, Iraqi Kurdistan has not seen as dramatic of a surge in women's activism and political participation as has Rojava.

It is important to also note the vast differences between the Kurds in Iraq and the Kurds in Syria. Rojava and Iraqi Kurdistan emerged in very different socio-political conditions (Cemgil & Hoffman, 2016). For instance, the Kurdistan Regional Government does not prescribe to the same notions of democratic confederalism that Rojava does. The Kurdish region in Iraq is governed on "socially conservative, tribal lines within a capitalist economic framework" (Gupta, 2017). Therefore, it is possible that Rojava simply had the right mechanisms and opportunities that allowed gender equality to develop.

Along with differing political structures in both Iraqi Kurdistan and Northern Syria, the role of class greatly differs between in region. Historically, women in Iraqi Kurdistan have been

able to gain influence through their husbands and families. This can be seen in present day Iraqi Kurdistan, with both female ex-Peshmerga soldiers and non-combatants. In Rojava however, there is a greater number of women who do not have family connections that are active in leadership. Therefore, it can be seen that the “women’s revolution” in Northern Syria is an intersectional one, as positions of influence are not reserved for only upper class women.

It is clear that both the Kurds in Iraq and the Kurds in Syria are heavily influenced by Öcalan’s ideals of women’s autonomy. It is unlikely that the Peshmerga and the YPJ have only used women to support a Kurdish nationalist agenda. This can be seen in the efforts that are being put forth by the canton structure and the KRG. If the Kurds were simply using women for a nationalist struggle, they would not be able to serve in the Kurdistan Parliament or have positions of influence in Rojava.

Referring back to the hypotheses, H1 is correct in the case of Iraqi Kurdistan. Many women formerly active in the Peshmerga that have been successful in pursuing political careers have been married to influential figures. Women that do not have these connections have struggled to become politically involved. In this case, military service does not seem to have a strong impact on women’s political involvement, since there are non-Peshmerga women in the KRG. The gender politics of Northern Syria, however, differ. Women in Northern Syria are included in more levels of decision making than women in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Looking at H2, it can be argued that this is not necessarily the case for Iraqi Kurdistan. As previously stated, not all women that are active in the Kurdistan Regional Government have a history of Peshmerga service. Therefore, in Iraqi Kurdistan, women’s militarization is not the only mechanism for women to pursue social and political change. The same cannot be said

for Kurdish women in Rojava. In Rojava, the reason why there is so much change is because women are included in all levels of decision-making. The women that are active in the YPJ have a strong link to the politics, governance and overall activism in Rojava.

Liberation for Kurdish Women: What Next?

Through the efforts of Rojava and Iraqi Kurdistan, it can be seen that each government and the organizations within them have gender equality agenda. With this in mind, there is still room for improvement in both Rojava and Iraqi Kurdistan. Some of the strongest criticism against the Kurdistan Regional Government is that they are not doing enough to enforce laws regarding gender equality. Women that are active in KRG politics are also subject to their own sets of challenges. Critics assert that many women in parliament only gained these positions due to their political affiliations rather than their actual abilities (van Wilgenburg, 2019).

Comparatively, there is less global criticism of the women in Northern Syria. Part of this might be because it is simply more difficult to obtain exact numbers regarding female genital mutilation and honor killings in the region. There are still women in Rojava that are not active in organizations and that are economically dependent on their husbands (Knapp et al., 2016). The demographic that faces the most challenges are married women. The revolution and new positions that women are able to gain go against traditional gender roles that their husbands are accustomed to.

Iraqi Kurdistan and Northern Syria are both in stages of political change, so there remains much more to be seen in the upcoming future. This is especially true for the drastic changes in

Rojava. Idris Nassan, a politician in Rojava, questions whether or not returning male refugees “will be able to change their mentality since they have not been part of the cultural revolution” (Argentieri, 2016). It remains to be seen what societal attitudes toward women in positions of influence will be like after the Syrian Civil War. In Iraqi Kurdistan, initiatives for women’s equality have developed more gradually, and also independently from women’s involvement in the Peshmerga. It can then be argued that legislation and reforms for women’s equality are more stable in Iraqi Kurdistan than in Rojava.

CONCLUSION

Studying women in Iraqi Kurdistan and Northern Syria offers distinct insights into how female militarization impacts gender roles in a society. The case of the Kurds varies greatly from most revolutionary groups. Whereas many nationalist movements utilize women for their cause and afterward abandon women's rights, the Kurds have consistently supported their public claims of gender equality. This is evident in governmental and organizational efforts in both Iraqi Kurdistan and Northern Syria.

While it can be said that the Kurds practice what they espouse, there are still further steps to be taken to ensure women's equality. In Iraqi Kurdistan, there is a low percentage of women that are employed in nongovernmental positions. A similar problem exists in Rojava, but instead of just a lack of employed women, the region suffers from a low amount of workers due to the Syrian Civil War and the rise of the Islamic State (Assad, 2019). Other than issues of employment, female genital mutilation, honor killings and violence against women are still carried out in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Avenues for future research include more in depth analysis for women in the YPJ. Depending on the direction of the Syrian Civil War, it would be worthwhile to study what Kurdish women's rights will look like in Northern Syria post-conflict. This research adds insights to both the discussion of gender equality among the Kurds in Syria and Iraq, as well as to theories on women's militarization and women's rights.

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