

Movement within the Movement:

Kurdish and Zapatista Women's Struggle for Gender Equality

Cynthia Enloe posits that “[w]omen have had distinctly uneasy relationships with nationalism” (2014, 87). Indeed, there has been a consistent pattern, as she and other scholars have documented, in which women are given space within ethno-nationalist, anti-colonial, or race-based movements--and social movements more generally--but asked to wait for their liberation *as women* until after the liberation of the larger community is achieved (Enloe 2014; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989; Roth 2004; Omar 2004; Cockburn 2007). Against this background, the experiences of the women in the Zapatista movement in Mexico and the Kurdish movement in Turkey may be considered exceptions. Within both movements, women have been encouraged from the very beginning by the movements' leadership to defy traditional gender roles which have excluded them from political and social participation and to engage in the efforts to *not only* liberate their communities but to also challenge gender inequality within them. In both cases, the movements' ideological commitment to women's liberation has been accompanied by internal contestation as male members have resisted the full implementation of the principle of gender equality in practice. Yet, having taken advantage of the initial space provided by the leadership, women in both cases have pressured their movements to live up to their gender egalitarian discourses, giving rise to what I conceptualize as *movement within the movement*. Thus, the trajectories of Kurdish and Zapatista women differ from the general picture painted by Enloe (2014): they have been able to pursue their gender-based demands within their respective movements due to the latter's willingness to discursively embrace the necessity of internal transformation in regards to gender inequality and their relative flexibility as to allowing such transformation in practice.

While there has been abundant research on the development and limitations of Kurdish and Zapatista women's organizing within their respective movements, comparative studies of two cases are very few (see for example, Mañós, 2018). This paper makes a unique contribution

by attempting to identify the features that have made the two movements diverge from the common pattern and by looking at the challenges that Zapatista and Kurdish women have faced in organizing for gender equality as well as the mechanisms they have developed to overcome those challenges. I will attempt to evaluate the extent to which these mechanisms have enabled women to expand the organizing space initially provided by the movements' leadership and to institutionalize women's rights despite the internal contestation. I believe the research on each movement can greatly benefit from a comparative investigation as it brings to the fore the issues that may be addressed in the research on one of the contexts but not in the other. It also suggests alternative potentialities that may hint at effective solutions to the persisting practices of gender inequality in both cases.

I will start with an overview of the research on women in social movements, followed by a discussion on the application of a feminist intersectional lens in studying social movements (Crenshaw 1995). I will then look at the ways in which a prefigurative perspective (Sitrin 2006) overlaps and may complement intersectional analysis in examining internal transformation of social movements in regards to gender equality and beyond.

In the second section, I will provide a historical background of the Kurdish and Zapatista women's movements highlighting similarities and differences in their trajectories. I will analyse the two movements from the intersectional and prefigurative perspectives in an attempt to identify their characteristics that have enabled greater mobilization on part of women. Following Benita Roth, I use a feminist intersectional lens to theorize women's organizing against gender inequality within movements for a broader cause (2017). Kimberlé Crenshaw originally offered the concept and approach of intersectionality not only to reveal the exclusion of multiply marginalized identities, but also to highlight "the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics" (1995, 1296). A feminist intersectional perspective brings to the fore the coalitional nature of oppositional communities by highlighting the fact that inequalities which characterize the society at large become also perpetuated within such

communities and can lead to internal conflicts (Crenshaw 1995, 1299; Roth 2017, 21). Such a lens treats a movement not as a homogenous group but rather as a coalition of individuals or groups with intersecting identities, who are subject to different kinds of inequalities. While a movement may be based on a common identity, an intersectional sensibility alerts one to the existence of other identities that create unique experiences of oppression and a basis for particular interests that may diverge from the primary common identity adopted by the movement. The power differences shape activists' interaction with each other and challenge the movement's ability to construct solidarity (Roth 196). Prefigurative movements, despite their commitment to elimination of injustices not only external but also internal to them, are not immune to such reproduction of larger structural inequalities (Sitrin 2006). Not only do they undermine an egalitarian commitment but also interfere with the movement's ability to deal with intra-movement conflicts. Thus, recognition of intersectionality and that identity groups are coalitions, can help reconcile differences and make sure they are represented and expressed in group politics. Similarly, a prefigurative perspective shifts our focus from a contentious involvement of a social movement with external actors to attempts to overcome internal differences within the movement.

In the Zapatista and Kurdish cases, women's struggle against internal inequalities has been as important as--if not more than--the one against the external ones, and it has radically impacted the structure and content of the two movements. Looking at these movements as coalitions allows a conceptualization of what I call *movement within the movement* which accounts for women's organizing based on their interests *as women* and their push for internal transformation of their movements and communities at large. Such conceptualization foregrounds the fact that the Zapatista and Kurdish women make their claims for gender equality primarily against their male counterparts within the movement, while also opposing gendered violence they uniquely experience as women members of their ethnic and political groups as well as organizing against oppressions common to both genders. This formulation

allows one to combine the lens of prefigurative and contentious politics as women both engage in a prefigurative endeavor of internal transformation of their movements and a contentious one through engagement in a constant process of contestation and negotiation vis-a-vis both their male counterparts and external oppressors.

The last section of the paper will attempt to address the following questions: Why has not the discursive commitment to prefigurative transformation and gender equality been implemented fully in practice? Which mechanisms have enabled women to counter internal contestation within their movements? What has been the role of women's autonomous spaces in this process? The examination of the two cases suggests that the movement's failure to fully live up to the gender equality discourse has been due to a combination of structural, interactional and personal factors: lack of sufficient mechanisms to enforce the principle of gender equality, failure to fully interrogate the traditional norms of femininity, internalization of inferiority by women and, arguably most importantly, the resistance on the part of men to adjust to the new gendered order. I argue that the formalization of various mechanisms to ensure women's equal representation by the Kurdish women's movement, such as women's autonomous bodies, women's quota and co-chair system, has partially minimized contestation by men, especially on the interactional level. This, however, has not occurred within the Zapatista movement to the same extent. I also argue that in both cases, women-only spaces have served as tools of empowerment by eliminating the male's "gaze" from women's activities and enabling women to build up confidence and construct collective interests, demands, and agendas *as women*.

The paper is based primarily on secondary research and original documents produced by the movements, and to a lesser extent on the author's own interviews with the participants of both movements.

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