A growing number of women began to join the PKK in the late 1980s and early 1990s; according to one estimate they made up one-third of new recruits by 1993 (Marcus 2007, 173). This significant increase in women’s membership resulted in noteworthy changes to women’s roles and positions within the Kurdish movement. Today, women are a substantial part of the insurgency, making up some 40 percent of PKK guerrilla units and functioning in all levels of decision making.¹ Women have become an integral part of the organizations and parties formed or inspired by the PKK movement. They have been elected as mayors, parliamentarians, and cochairs. Below, I delineate the primary mechanisms through which these changes have occurred. The analysis shows that gains in women’s rights have mostly been a result of a combination of a progressive ideology and war dynamics.

Since its inception in 1978, the PKK has described itself as a modern and revolutionary force for change committed to eliminating traditional structures of sociopolitical organization (Jongerden and Akkaya 2011). Over the past four decades the PKK has parted ways with the Turkish left and acquired a more “Kurdish” identity that transcends regional, tribal, religious, and class divisions within Kurdish society. It has also strived for going beyond what the PKK leader Ocalan calls “primitive nationalism,” a narrow form of nationalism often associated with traditional Kurdish groups and movements.²

Kurdish movements’ search for universalism through mainly leftist ideologies precedes the rise of the PKK (H. Bozarslan 2017). In the
1960s a number of Kurdish groups in Turkey resorted to a socialist discourse by portraying Kurdistan as a “colony” and Kurds as a “colonized people.” Viewing national oppression and economic exploitation of the Kurds through these prisms gained widespread acceptance among Kurdish activists from the 1970s onwards (Gunes 2013, 250). It was the rise of the PKK in the 1980s, however, that led to a convergence of leftist ideals and Kurdish nationalism to an unprecedented degree. In the words of Hamit Bozarslan (2017), a renowned Kurdish studies scholar, the PKK redefined Marxism-Leninism with a high dose of Fanonism, emphasizing the creation of decolonized human beings through resistance. The PKK leader Ocalan, describing Kurdish history as one of enslavement, called for violent resistance to liberate Kurdistan and, more importantly, to free Kurds from their interiorized enslavement.

The search for universalism, through a hybrid of Marxist-Leninist discourse and a newly adopted framework inspired in part by the writings of American political theorist Murray Bookchin, has given rise to such concepts as “democratic autonomy” and “ecological democracy,” with an emphasis on pluralist, grassroots-driven local administrative units and radical gender equality.3 Described by its leader as a social revolution and uprising against the old social order, the PKK has aimed at transforming Kurdish identity and creating the New Man (Grojean 2008, 4). The emphasis on gender equality that constitutes a chief tenet of the PKK’s vision of social change should be considered within this context.4

Women’s participation in Kurdish rebellions did not start with the PKK. As Bengio (2016, 31) notes, “Kurdish history is replete with cases of charismatic women assuming leadership roles in the religious, political and military spheres.” But these women were small in number and consisted mainly of wives, daughters, and relatives of leading figures. With the rise of the PKK in the late 1970s and the ensuing armed conflict in the 1980s, gender issues became a key aspect of Kurdish rebellion. One key feature that separates the PKK from earlier rebellions is its successful mass mobilization of women and the subsequent break with traditional gender roles (Caglayan 2012).

As noted earlier, despite an unfavorable environment characterized by a conservative Islamic culture, low levels of socioeconomic development, and limited prior domestic women’s mobilization, women have become an integral element in the Kurdish movement. They have moved from eligible to aspirants to candidates and from candidates to elected officials (Sahin-Mencutek 2016). The push for women’s representation and women’s social and political empowerment has been transformative for both the
movement and for women. It has produced significant positive changes in a region sometimes referred to as “the patriarchal belt” characterized by strict control over women’s behavior (Caglayan 2012).

The struggle for gender equality within the Kurdish movement can be observed on multiple fronts. In the legal arena (legal alan), Kurdish political parties inspired by (or accused by the state of being extensions of) the PKK became the first political institutions in Turkish history to introduce a voluntary quota for women to overcome the barrier to entry. In 1999 the Kurdish People’s Democracy Party (Halkın Demokrasi Partisi, HADEP) set a 25 percent quota for women to redress gender imbalances in the composition of all intraparty structures, including both elected and nonelected assemblies. The PKK leader Ocalan’s push to increase the gender quota coupled with war dynamics that empowered Kurdish women resulted in increasing the quota for women from 25 percent to 40 percent in 2005 (Kisanak, Al-Ali, and Tas 2016; Sahin-Mencutek 2016).

These policies have yielded serious results. Of the thirty-seven mayoral races won by the HADEP in the Kurdish-dominated region in the 1999 local elections, three were won by women candidates. The number of female mayors from the Kurdish political party increased to fourteen in the 2004 local elections. A decade later, in the 2014 mayoral elections, the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (Baris ve Demokrasi Partisi, BDP) had more female mayors (twenty-three) than the governing AKP (six), the main opposition Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP) (six), and the far-right Turkish Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetci Hareket Partisi, MHP) (one), combined.5

Similarly, in the 2007 national legislative elections, eight female candidates, making up 36 percent of the total seats gained by the Kurdish Democratic Society Party6 (Demokratik Toplum Partisi, DTP), were elected to the national parliament. This trend continued in the 2011 national elections; 34 percent of the total parliamentarians elected to the Grand National Assembly of Turkey on the Kurdish BDP’s7 ticket were women. In the June 7, 2015, general elections, the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP) won eighty seats in the Turkish National Assembly, 39 percent of which were women (Kisanak, Al-Ali, and Tas 2016; Sahin-Mencutek 2016).

In the illegal front (illegal alan), the PKK’s Fifth Congress of 1995 is often cited as a watershed meeting since it addressed several long-standing important issues. The PKK leadership made a strong critique of the Soviet approach to socialism, pointing out its pan-Russian chauvinism, extreme centralism, and decline in individual freedom as the main causes of Soviet-
era stagnation. The leadership emphasized the need to create a new militant identity that with great care, understanding, and resolve seeks to overcome all difficulties, a militant that turns the negative into something positive and, stressing the diversity and richness of Kurdistan and the Middle East, calls for cooperation between all disadvantaged groups. This idea would later give birth to the concepts of “democratic autonomy” and “democratic confederalism,” with an emphasis on community-based, pluralist democratic coexistence within the existing framework of nation-states.

Significantly, the Fifth Congress formalized the growing number and power of Kurdish women within the insurgent movement by establishing a separate, independent women’s army, the Kurdistan Free Women’s Union (Yekitiya Azadiya Jinen Kurdistan, YAJK) (Tax 2016a, 119–30). This is not unique to the PKK. Nations as diverse as El Salvador, Sri Lanka, and Nepal have witnessed a similar phenomenon: “unprecedented numbers of women have left their homes, picked up guns, and defied cultural norms to quite literally fight for revolutionary change” (Viterna 2014, 4). The establishment of a separate women’s unit was not, however, merely a result of the need to increase the number of fighters. Instead, the YAJK (which later became YJA-Star) was a reflection of the changes the war dynamics had brought about as well as the result of an ideological commitment to empowering women and changing both men and women with regard to gender and gender equality. In other words, the transformation of gender relations was not a sidebar to the PKK but rather was considered to be a central task that would ultimately determine the success or failure of the entire endeavor (Tax 2016a, 128).

This commitment to gender equality as part of creating a new society grew stronger over time. The PKK leader Ocalan (2013, 9) would later describe “the 5000-year-old history of civilization” as “essentially the history of the enslavement of woman.” He (2013, 11) portrays women as the first “slaves,” the first subjugated group: “the enslavement of men comes after the enslavement of women. Gender enslavement . . . is attained through refined and intense repression combined with lies that play on emotions. Woman’s biological difference is used as justification for her enslavement. . . . Her presence in public sphere is claimed to be prohibited by religion, morally shameful; progressively, she is secluded from all important social activities.” Ocalan is unwavering about women’s role and place in the PKK and the struggle for freedom by which new identities are created. Calling for a “total divorce” from the five thousand years of male domination, he has spoken of the need to “kill the male” and described the PKK as a “party of women.”
This discourse and underlying ideology equates women with nature, as portrayed in the ideal matriarchal society of ancient Mesopotamia. It successfully integrates gender issues into the Kurdish national struggle for a radically redefined relationship with the dominant, oppressive groups. Despite the risks involved in blending gender issues with nationalist agendas (Cockburn 2007), Kurdish women’s participation on both nationalist and feminist fronts has been described as complementary, promoting and feeding one another (Bengio 2016).11

Even though the changes fall short of the ideal picture portrayed by the PKK leader, they call attention to the significance of ideology in producing these positive outcomes. Sebahat Tuncel, a female member of parliament for the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), a predecessor of the HDP, describes the issue as a double-edged sword. While referring to Sakine Cansiz’s (a female founding member of the PKK) contribution to the movement, Tuncel argued that “while we fight to end the unequal treatment of the Kurds in Turkey, as women we also fight another battle, the male dominance within the Kurdish society” (Butler 2013).

The conflict environment enabled Kurdish women to criticize the way their own sex was used as a basis for discrimination by men in the movement. Kisanak, the first female comayor of Diyarbakir, highlights challenges in overcoming entrenched patriarchal tradition within Kurdish society. She argues that, akin to justifications used in other cases, women’s issues were sidelined based on the pretext that the time was not ripe for such changes. In her own words, “this is not something we were given. We had to fight for every single advance” (Kisanak, Al-Ali, and Tas 2016). Accounting for the gains in women’s rights, Kisanak draws attention to wartime experiences, changes in international norms, and women’s struggles against the patriarchal culture and practices within the Kurdish society and movement. Notably, she underlines the significance of the leadership and ideology in improvements in women’s rights.

A thirty-six-year old female interviewee, a former high school teacher who had recently immigrated to Canada, pointed out that “war dynamics created conditions for Kurdish women to discover their true potential, helped them question the unequal gender roles, and demand change in their status in the society.” She also highlighted a key difference between earlier Kurdish rebellions and the PKK insurgency: the latter shows important differences in its approach to gender equality. She concluded that war dynamics are only one factor in changes in gender relations that the Kurdish society has experienced. Without “a strong commitment to
gender related issues,” she asserted, these “positive outcomes” may not have been achieved.

Another interviewee drew attention to a certain segment of the Kurdish community in Toronto, which he described as “traditional,” “patriarchal,” even “backward” despite their support for the Kurdish political movement. In explaining this outcome, he pointed out that the part of the Kurdish region they emigrated from did not become a site for the armed conflict; it remained on the sidelines of the insurgent activity. But more importantly, he stressed that “they were not touched by the PKK philosophy.”

Ayla Akat, a former Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) parliamentarian and spokesperson for the Kurdish Free Women’s Congress (Kongreya Jinen Azad, KJA), also highlights the PKK leader Ocalan’s approach to gender in addressing and overcoming gender-based inequalities in Kurdish society. The PKK in general and Ocalan in particular, she argues, put women’s freedom before national liberation (Akat, Al-Ali, and Tas 2016). This is instructive of wartime experiences interacting with underlying discourses, ideology, and leadership. Absent the ideology and leadership’s firm stance toward gender equality, such changes would have been unlikely outcomes of the conflict.

Social-Psychological Linkages

In addition to a progressive ideology and a leadership committed to gender equality, war experiences have also contributed to overcoming social standards of becoming “a good wife and mother.” As Caglayan (2010) notes, despite the traumatic impact of conflict, it has also provided opportunities for Kurdish women’s activism. In line with those studies that have argued for war dynamics blurring the line between women’s private and public roles, the conflict has resulted in an expansion of women’s public roles and responsibilities mainly through two mechanisms.

First, while the conflict has generated a surge of internally displaced Kurds, it has also resulted in an increased exposure to forces of modernity. As the Kurdish rural population poured into major cities, female members of displaced families started to get involved more heavily in the Kurdish movement; they became participants in protests, visitors at prisons, and heads of households as caretakers and breadwinners (Celik 2005). Similar to what Menon and Rodgers (2015) found in the case of Nepal, Kurdish women’s employment increased as a consequence of the conflict. Some became workers in the garment industry, others seasonal agricultural
laborers, while some became self-employed and opened up small shops or became involved with sewing cooperatives.

Local women’s councils, organized by the Kurdish movement for recently urbanized Kurdish peasant women, set up sewing cooperatives modeled on those of the Zapatistas in Mexico. One coordinator at these local women’s councils underlines the importance of “being involved” with the Kurdish movement in overcoming the challenge of organizing women who were not accustomed to being seen in public, working outside the home, or participating in politics. Being involved with the movement or having ties with it helped the male members of these newly urbanized families to overcome their negative views of women (Tax 2016a, 160).

Intense work at the local level, combined with the conflict and a progressive ideology, has engendered significant changes in Kurdish women’s participation in the workforce. Women’s increased employment, an element Button (1989, 23) considers to be a sign of social change, has forced many to re-evaluate their beliefs and social norms and has led to the questioning of traditional gender roles.

An analysis of the data on female participation in the labor force in Turkey highlights several important findings. First, overall female participation in the workforce in Turkey is much lower than that of non-Muslim-majority countries with similar levels of economic and political developments. Female employment as a percentage of total labor force in Turkey as of 2015 (31.1 percent) was lower than that of Mexico (32.5 percent), Thailand (45.6 percent), and Romania (46.1 percent) for the year 1996. This shows that even twenty years later, women have a lower participation in the workforce. Second, there is an important gap between the Kurdish east and the rest of Turkey. While the coastal areas and the most industrialized western parts of the country bear a resemblance to Belgium and Italy with women making up more than one-third of the labor force, the eastern regions resemble Algeria and Iran of the late 1990s with ratios around 10 percent.12

Nonetheless, Kurdish-majority provinces that became sites of heavy fighting in the 1990s have experienced a significant increase in female participation in the labor force following the forced evacuation of thousands of Kurdish villages. As presented in table 4, data from the Turkish Statistical Institute on female participation in the labor force for the years 2000 and 2004 reinforces this statement.

Of the seven provinces in the eastern and southeastern regions for which the data are available, three are Kurdish majority and are known for their support of the PKK insurgency. The mean percent change for the
provinces of Van, Diyarbakir, and Siirt (15.2 percent), which are known for their pro-PKK positions and have been battlefields of the conflict, is nearly twice that of the neighboring provinces of Erzurum, Gaziantep, Malatya, and Kars (8.6 percent), which have yet to show significant support for the PKK and have not become a site of the conflict. While the Kurdish province of Van had a 20 percent increase in its numbers of economically active women between 2000 and 2004, the Turkish-majority province of Erzurum in the same region had a change of 13.6 percent.13

In further confirmation of this trend, figure 5 illustrates that Kurdish provinces experienced the highest increase in female participation in the labor force between 2004 and 2011. A report by the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey shows that Kurdish-majority Sanliurfa and Diyarbakir provinces combined experienced a 277.8 percent increase in female participation in the nonagricultural workforce. Another subregion that includes four Kurdish-majority provinces, Mardin, Batman, Sirnak, and Siirt, saw an increase of 275 percent. Female participation in the workforce went up by 225 percent in the subregion including Van, Mus, Bitlis, and Hakkari provinces in the east between 2004 and 2011. Provinces on the margins of the Kurdish region, some of which have Kurdish-majority populations but did not experience the conflict, saw a much lower increase in their female participation rate between 2004 and 2011. Gaziantep, Adiyaman, and Kilis provinces combined saw an increase of 54.3 percent, whereas Agri, Kars, Igdir, and Ardahan collectively saw an increase of 36.4 percent (Asik 2012).

These changes are on a par with the changes in the United States brought about by World War II, described as the most significant event since the Industrial Revolution and one that helped change the social landscape of America (Chafe 1999, x). As Chafe (1999, 11–13) argues, despite the paradoxes and challenges involved (ranging from the lack of a gov-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province Name</th>
<th>Conflict Zone</th>
<th># of Economically Active Women (2000/2004)</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Van</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>4,373/5,262</td>
<td>20.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diyarbakir</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10,981/12,395</td>
<td>12.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siirt</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1,064/1,196</td>
<td>12.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erzurum</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>7,645/8,687</td>
<td>13.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaziantep</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>17,200/19,259</td>
<td>11.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malatya</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>11,060/12,341</td>
<td>11.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kars</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2,064/2,009</td>
<td>−2.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ernmental commitment to gender equality to societal norms and values that confined women to the private sphere), wartime dynamics engendered key changes in the lives of American women. As a result, the female labor force increased by 57 percent. By the time the war came to an end in 1945, women made up 38 percent of all federal workers, more than twice the percentage of the last prewar year.

The second mechanism, in line with the social-psychological linkages outlined in chapter 2, emphasizes the effect of women’s participation in war on changing views and attitudes of women. Similar to how the sight of women fighters altered men’s perception of women in Uganda (Tripp 2000, 110), a twenty-nine-year-old Yazidi Kurdish man who was trapped on Iraq’s Sinjar Mountain by Islamic State fighters before he was saved by a battalion of Kurdish women described the moment as transformative and powerful. He concluded that “the battle made me think of women differently. I’d never thought of women as leaders, as heroes, before” (Wes 2015).

The PKK female units’ perseverance has provided a powerful counterimage to that of weak women in need of protection and has played a significant role in redefining gender roles. The very sight of women as fighters serves as a serious challenge to deeply ingrained attitudes regarding traditional gender roles and responsibilities. Many interviewees con-
sistently pointed out female fighters’ prowess in explaining their changed views of the opposite gender. One interviewee in his mid-sixties, explaining the shift in his perception of women, stated that “seeing young women fighting for my freedom made me reassess gender issues.” Another male interviewee, a thirty-nine-year-old waiter who was detained and tortured for his involvement in the insurgency, noted that war experiences resulted in questioning traditional gender roles and engendered respect for women’s strength.

Answers to questions pertaining to gender equality from two subjects confirm the effect of conflict on changing views of women. These two male interviewees were alike in all other characteristics except for that one had little or no exposure to violence. They were born and raised in the same village, lacked formal education, engaged in farming, and were about the same age. When asked about whether men make better political leaders than women, the interviewee with little or no exposure to violence stated that “of course, because women are half-wit.” The other interviewee, who was detained for his involvement in the conflict, vehemently opposed that view. Citing women’s role in the war against the “state oppression of the Kurds,” he stated, “I have known many women who could easily exceed men in several aspects, including leadership skills.”

A former female combatant who joined the PKK at an early age and spent more than twenty years with the insurgency maintained that she is a living testament to the transformative aspect of the conflict. This ex-combatant, whom I interviewed for two days in Montreal, Canada, in August 2015, argued that her experiences with the insurgency were life-changing. She asserted that her experiences taught her that a woman can do anything that a man does and that equality between men and women is indeed possible.

A thirty-two-year old male interviewee, whose village was forcibly evacuated by the government in the 1990s, argued that he has grown to be supportive of gender equality and has developed empathy for women as the most marginalized segment of society. In line with the argument made earlier that war dismantles traditional social structures and engenders positive views and attitudes toward women, he concluded that “we [men and women] both suffer equally. Just as the pain does not know gender differences, neither should we.” The same interviewee also attributed his changing views and attitudes toward women in part to the urban environment he was thrown into after his family fled. He stated that some progress would have happened absent the conflict but that war dynamics accelerated the change.
Another female interviewee, who was in her fifties and had lost one son in the ranks of the insurgency and saw another imprisoned for his political activism, was transformed into a community organizer. This interviewee, born into a socially conservative society, defied the social norms that confined women to the private sphere and overcame them primarily because of her experiences with the armed conflict. A female medical doctor from Diyarbakir argued that “the conflict has fundamentally changed the patriarchal social culture prevalent in Kurdish society,” and a twenty-eight-year-old female accountant stated that the conflict environment has “definitely played a key role in weakening entrenched patriarchal culture among the Kurds.”

A closer look at the data collected from these interviews confirms these results. This nonrandom sample of fifty-one interviewees includes a broad range of Kurds such as doctors, lawyers, certified public accountants, school teachers, college students, construction workers, farmers, housewives, and former PKK combatants ranging from twenty-three to sixty-five years of age. The sample included fourteen female and thirty-seven male subjects. A majority of the interviewees had a high school (25 percent) or college degree (45 percent).

The exposure to violence index for this sample ranges from 0.3 to 1 with a mean of 0.69 and a standard deviation of 0.25. Since all subjects were exposed to violence to one degree or another, I compared those individuals with a value of 0.5 or smaller to those with a value greater than 0.5 ($n = 23$ and 28, respectively). In line with the results obtained from analyzing the probability sample of 2,100 individuals shown below, those with a high level of exposure to violence (>0.5) had significantly more positive attitudes toward women than those with a low level of exposure ($\leq 0.5$). Subjects who experienced a high level of exposure were more likely to disagree with the statements that “Men make better political leaders than women do” and “If a woman earns more money than her husband, it is almost certain to cause problems.” Controlling for confounding factors such as age, gender, and education did not substantially change the effect of exposure to violence on disagreeing with the statements regarding women.

**War as an Education**

Evidence from the Kurdish case also sheds light on the educational aspect of war. Gultan Kisanak describes wartime experiences as “important” in Kurdish women’s enlightenment. She explains that as female friends faced
state oppression in the form of death, arrests, and torture, they simultane-
ously began to educate themselves about their rights and defend them-
selves during trials (Kisanak, Al-Ali, and Tas 2016). In the words of an inter-
viewee, a former mayor who was imprisoned for five years for his alleged
support of the PKK, “the Kurds have collectively served a million years in
prison.” Prison life has hardened many PKK members, sympathizers, or
Kurdish civilians caught in conflict dynamics; it has served as a school, if
not a university, with many “graduating” as revolutionaries.

Leyla Zana is the Kurdish woman elected to the Turkish National
Assembly in 1991. Her parliamentary immunity was lifted so she could be
prosecuted for calling for Turkish and Kurdish brotherhood at the oath
ceremony, and she was later imprisoned for ten years. Zana was born and
raised in a small village in the Kurdish province of Diyarbakir, received
no formal education, and was married off in 1975 at age fifteen to a much
older cousin, Mehdi Zana, who would later become mayor of Diyarbakir.
Her husband’s arrest after the military coup of 1980 and her involvement
in prison protests led to an arrest in 1988 during which she was tortured
and sexually harassed. In her own words, “it was about that time that I
began to be a political activist, and when I learned there were Kurdish
women fighting with guns I moved to action. . . . This changes everything,
I told myself, a woman is also a human being” (Marcus 2007, 173). She
became a political activist as a result of her experiences with the conflict.

When asked about the effects of the conflict on women, a thirty-nine-
year-old female interviewee (a visual artist who lives in Diyarbakir) stated
that “conflict affects the entire society in one form or another, but women
often face additional issues and suffer disproportionally. It is much more
difficult for women who have lost their husbands, brothers, or sons to cope
with the war environment.” At the same time, she continued, “as women
lived through the conflict they also became politically active and gained
confidence, contributing to a more gender-equal society.”

It is worthwhile to restate that women’s struggle against patriarchal
norms and practices in the Kurdish case should not be confused with the
prior strength of the women’s movement. The Ugandan women’s move-
ment consolidated gains in a country with a relatively strong women’s
movement with roots in pre- and postcolonial mobilization (Tripp 2015),
while there was no such women’s movement in Kurdish society before
the PKK insurgency. In Uganda, girls were already attending secondary
schools in the 1920s, which resulted in women working in a variety of pro-
fessions (Tripp 2015, 55–56). In Turkey, particularly in the Kurdish south-
east, female literacy was generally considered at best an unnecessary vice
until the early 1980s. Thus women’s groups within the Kurdish movement owe their existence largely to war dynamics.

To review, the mechanisms through which conflict dynamics alter gender relations are not independent of one another. They work in conjunction, feeding and influencing each other. To explain the changes the PKK insurrection has engendered, the aforementioned mayor who was removed and later imprisoned for five years on charges of aiding the PKK pointed out two fundamental gains: Kurdishness and gains in women’s rights. He argued that Kurdish women have been “reborn” as they are no longer simply “mothers” or “wives.” Instead, they are part of public life as fighters, organizers, mayors, and deputies. The PKK leader’s views of women and his stance toward gender equality, this interviewee argued, has clearly played a key role in this shift. But, echoing the observation of Gultan Kisanak, the aforementioned comayor of Diyarbakir, that women had to fight for every single advance even within the Kurdish movement, this male interviewee pointed out two additional factors: war dynamics that created opportunities for women, and Kurdish women’s own sacrifices for equal treatment within the Kurdish society and movement. Gains in women’s rights in the Kurdish case therefore appear to be a result of a combination of war dynamics, a progressive ideology, and a committed leadership.

The rest of this chapter proceeds as follows. First I describe the survey data and lay out the research design to empirically assess the hypothesized effects of exposure to violent conflict on changing views and attitudes toward women. I then proceed to present results from a probability sample of 2,100 individuals from Diyarbakir, Van, and Sanliurfa. The findings show that changes in women’s rights are not limited to an increase in women’s employment nor are they confined to Kurdish women being elected as mayors or parliamentarians. Instead, war dynamics have engendered positive attitudes toward women in a society that was an unlikely candidate for experiencing such changes.

A Micro-Level Analysis of the War-Women Relationship

As noted above, the pro-Kurdish political parties proportionally have a much higher rate of female representation than any other group of political parties in Turkey. This is due in part to pressure from Kurdish women within the movement and the PKK leader Ocalan’s positive approach to gender equality. Is this change a result of the imposition of gender quotas from the top down? To what extent have ordinary Kurds embraced
women as mayors, co-chairs, and deputies who run committees and oversee municipalities in the Kurdish region? In this section, I present results from an econometric analysis of the key drivers of developing positive attitudes toward women.

To gauge changes in the attitudes toward women, randomly selected participants from three Kurdish-majority provinces in the eastern and southeastern regions of Turkey were asked to express agreement or disagreement with two statements. The first statement aims at measuring the effect of armed conflict on altering perceptions of women as leaders. Participants from Diyarbakır, Van, and Sanliurfa provinces were asked to answer to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement that “Men make better political leaders than women do.” The responses are based on values ranging from 1 to 4, where 1 indicates “strongly disagree” and 4 means “strongly agree,” with a mean of 2.45 and a standard deviation of 0.69.

Next, respondents were asked to express their opinion of “If a woman earns more money than her husband, it is almost certain to cause problems.” Values ranged from “agree” (1), “neither” (2), to “disagree” (3). This variable, which had a mean of 2.33 and a standard deviation of 0.90, is used as a proxy for a different aspect of social change in a society where women are traditionally confined to the private sphere and assigned the roles of good “mothers” or “wives.”

I also control for the sociodemographic characteristics of participants. Respondents’ ages were measured on a scale of 1–5, where “1” is equal to 18–24, “2” to 25–34, “3” to 35–44, “4” to 45–54, and “5” indicates “55–65.” Sex is dichotomized (1 = Female; 0 = Male). More than a third of participants (35 percent) were female. Participants’ education level was coded on a scale ranging from 1 to 5, where “1” means “no schooling,” “2” indicates “completed primary school,” “3” refers to “high school,” “4” is “college degree,” and “5” indicates a “postgraduate” degree. Nearly 40 percent of respondents had either never attended school or completed only primary education.

Participants’ income was measured using the data on whether they owned a car and the number of children they had. Although 53 percent of participants owned a car, more than a third of the sample (37 percent) had four children or more. The Sanliurfa sample had a significantly higher number of children than the other two samples drawn from Diyarbakır and Van.

Religion is often an important aspect of conservative and patriarchal social structures prevalent in many war-torn countries. I utilized the data on “How important is religion in your life?” with responses ranging from 1
to 4, with higher numbers indicating a higher level of religiosity to control for the effect of religiosity on attitudes toward women.

Findings

As demonstrated in table 5, the cumulative measure of exposure to violent conflict is significantly correlated with the two statements used to evaluate attitudes toward women. Model 1 of table 5 presents the findings from an ordered logistic regression on the respondents’ agreement with the statement that “men make better political leaders than women,” ranging from 1 to 4 with higher numbers indicating agreement with the statement. Thus, the negative coefficient on the exposure to violence index variable indicates less agreement with the statement that male political leaders are superior to female leaders.

Similarly, the coefficient for the exposure to violence variable in model 2 of table 5 corroborates the finding that exposure to violence during the armed conflict results in positive attitudes toward women. The positive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>% Change</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exposure to Violence Index</td>
<td>−1.08***</td>
<td>−23.3</td>
<td>.35*</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[.19]</td>
<td></td>
<td>[.19]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>−.81***</td>
<td>−32.1</td>
<td>.46***</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[.09]</td>
<td></td>
<td>[.11]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−.18***</td>
<td>−16.8</td>
<td>.11**</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[.05]</td>
<td></td>
<td>[.05]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>−.22</td>
<td>−19</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[.06]</td>
<td></td>
<td>[.05]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automobile</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>−.06</td>
<td>−3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[.09]</td>
<td></td>
<td>[.09]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Children</td>
<td>.12***</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>−.05**</td>
<td>−5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[.02]</td>
<td></td>
<td>[.02]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>.38***</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>−.56***</td>
<td>−31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[.07]</td>
<td></td>
<td>[.08]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut 1</td>
<td>−2.78</td>
<td></td>
<td>−2.26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut 2</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td></td>
<td>−1.97</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut 3</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2100</td>
<td>2100</td>
<td>2100</td>
<td>2100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * significant at 10 percent; ** significant at 5 percent; *** significant at 1 percent level (two-tailed). Robust standard errors in brackets.
coefficient of 0.35 indicates “disagreement” with the statement that “If a woman earns more money than her husband, it is almost certain to cause problems.” This provides further evidence for the hypothesized relationship between violence and positive attitudes toward women.\(^\text{15}\)

Due to the nonlinear nature of the model, I provide odds ratios to interpret the results obtained using ordered logistic regression. As shown in columns 3 of table 5, one standard deviation increase in the value of exposure to violence index decreases the odds of agreeing with the statement that men make better political leaders than women by 23.3 percent. Furthermore, as illustrated in figure 6, the cumulative probability of “strongly disagree” (SD) and “disagree” (D) with this statement shows a noticeable rise as the exposure to violence index increases. The associated change in the odds for the second statement, “If a woman earns more money than her husband, it is almost certain to cause problems,” is 9 percent (column 5 of table 5).

Of the control variables, having more children and being more religious (often deemed characteristics of traditional societies) negatively affect attitudes toward women. The findings on the “sex” variable are not surprising
as women are more likely to be supportive of gender equality. The effect of exposure to violence, however, is as robust as that of “sex” and “children.”

Contextualizing Violence

The results presented above are consistent with the overall positive relationship between armed conflict and gains in women’s rights outlined in current studies. This analysis, however, does not distinguish between different types of exposure to violence, and it fails to account for the effects of ideology on the outcome. As explained in chapter 2, violence during civil war needs to be qualified. In other words, the hypothesized positive effects are likely to be conditioned by three main factors: whether participants experienced violence directly; how they perceive violence and whom they blame for their suffering; and the underlying ideology to which they subscribe.

Different types of exposure to violence might affect the outcome quite differently. Direct exposure in the forms of arrest, torture, or evacuation might condition sufferers differently from indirect forms such as loss of a family member or familiarity with victims of torture or forced eviction. The “direct exposure” variable is set equal to “1” for those individuals who stated that they were arrested, tortured, or fled because of the conflict and “0” otherwise. The mean for this variable was 0.218 with a standard deviation of 0.41. Of the 2,100 respondents, nearly 22 percent were directly exposed, while 78 percent either were not exposed to violence or experienced violence vicariously.16

As a part of the framing and blaming processes, participants who blame the rebels for the violence and its negative effects are those who are either complacent about their situations or do not approve of the methods used by the insurgency to seek change. Conversely, individuals who are exposed to violent conflict and blame the state for their victimization are likely to interpret their suffering in such a context that could lead to a positive change in their outlook.

Of the 2,100 individuals 31 percent responded to the question “Who is responsible for these incidents” with “state forces,” and 12 percent stated that the rebels/PKK were to be blamed. The rest opted to answer with “others” or “I don’t know.” While there might be a variety of individual reasons behind the category of “others/I don’t know,” it is important to stress that the vast majority of violence in the Kurdish case has been a
result of confrontations between the PKK and Turkish security forces. In the absence of splinter or rival insurgent groups, violence has been primarily an outcome of the state forces fighting a highly disciplined insurrection. Thus, “others” in this case is likely to be a result of the sensitivity of the question and the conflict environment in which the survey was conducted. As noted above, whether respondents blame the state or rebels is significant because such a response is a stronger indication of how violence is interpreted and framed. Thus the models presented below include “state as perpetrator” and “rebel as perpetrator,” using “others” as the reference category.

Finally, while it is difficult to come up with a valid and reliable measure of PKK ideology, respondents’ vote choices can serve as a proxy for “support” for the PKK and what it stands for. In line with high levels of political support for the pro-Kurdish political parties and the ruling AKP in the Kurdish region, an overwhelming majority of the respondents stated that they cast their votes for the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) (40 percent) or the AKP (45 percent). The remaining 15 percent stated that they voted for such political parties as the CHP (2.5 percent), the conservative Islamist Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi, 2 percent), the Turkish ultranationalist MHP (2 percent), and the Kurdish Islamist Free Cause Party (HudaPar, 0.5 percent). Five percent of the sample stated that they did not vote.

The main opposition party, the CHP, is known for its prowomen and secular positions. As noted above, though, its vote share in the Kurdish region is negligible. Other parties, such as Saadet, HudaPar, and MHP show similar characteristics with the governing AKP. The Kurdish Islamist HudaPar made an informal coalition with the AKP against the pro-Kurdish HDP in the general elections of November 1, 2015. As Arat (2010, 873) explains at length, the AKP government discourages rather than encourages women’s participation in the labor force and propagates patriarchal religious values that endorse traditional gender roles. As a result of this underlying discourse, “religious movements that were once banned establish schools, dormitories and off-campus Quranic courses, socialising the young into religiously sanctioned secondary roles for women” (870).

The practical division of the Kurdish votes between the AKP and the Kurdish BDP offers an opportunity to test for the effects of two different approaches to gender equality. Toward this end, I defined a variable to distinguish the BDP supporters, the Kurdish party at the time the survey was conducted, from others. To be sure, not all BDP voters are hard-core PKK supporters or share its ideology. Nonetheless, they subscribe to what the
pro-Kurdish parties advocate, seeking a change in Kurdish-Turkish relations. The underlying ideology often helps set the tone even for those who may not agree with it. Thus voting for the Kurdish party of the time could serve as a reasonable proxy for accounting for the effect of ideology on the outcome.

Table 6 demonstrates results from the models that control for the type of exposure, perpetrator, and ideology as measured above. The negative and significant coefficient on the direct exposure variable indicates that those who were directly exposed to violence in the forms of arrest, torture, or fleeing have more positive attitudes toward women. When compared to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 6. The Contextual Effect of Violence on Attitudes toward Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure to Violence Index</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Exposure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State as Perpetrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebels as Perpetrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted for the BDP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure* BDP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automobile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo $R^2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prob.&gt;Chi$^2$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * significant at 10 percent level; ** significant at 5 percent level; significant at 1 percent level (two-tailed). Robust standard errors in brackets.
others, they are less likely to agree with the statement that “men make bet-
ter political leaders than women.” While 60 percent of self-reported direct
victims voiced “disagreement” (7 percent “strongly disagree” and 53 per-
cent “disagree”) with this statement, only about half (51.6 percent) of oth-
ers “disagreed” (6 percent “strongly disagree” and 45 percent “disagree”).
Overall, the difference between the subjects who experienced violence
directly and others in their attitudes toward gender equality as measured
by this statement was statistically discernible [Chi²(3) = 10.42; Pr. = .015].

Similarly, the coefficients on “State as Perpetrator” and “Voted for the
BDP” support the argument that the effect of violence is likely to be con-
ditioned by how victims interpret it. Compared to “others,” those who hold
the state responsible for their suffering have more positive attitudes toward
women. The direction of the coefficients on “Rebels as Perpetrators” in
both models indicates that blaming the rebels is related to lower support
for gender equality, but not significantly so. The positive and insignificant
coefficient on the variable “Rebels as Perpetrator” in model 1 indicates that
those who blame the rebels for the violence are no more or less likely to
agree with the statement used to measure support for women as leaders. In
addition, in line with the argument made above, the BDP supporters are
more likely to see women in a more positive light; they are less likely to
agree with the statement that men are better political leaders than women.

The effect of violence on attitudes toward women, measured by
responses to the statement “If a woman earns more money than her hus-
band, it is almost certain to cause problems,” however, is no longer notice-
able. As shown in model 2 of table 6, the direct exposure and perpetrator
variables do not significantly predict participants’ attitudes toward women.

Nonetheless, those who voted for the BDP are significantly more likely
to disagree with the statement “If a woman earns more money than her hus-
band, it is almost certain to cause problems.” It is important to stress
that responses to this statement take values ranging from “agree” to “dis-
agree.” The average adjusted predictions for BDP voters show that the
BDP supporters are less likely than nonsupporters to “agree” with this
statement (24 percent as opposed to 33 percent), about as likely to report
“neither” (5.7 percent to 6.7 percent), and more likely to “disagree” with
this view (70 percent versus 60 percent). The effect of ideology on attitudes
toward women as measured by this statement is visualized in figure 7.

To find out if violent conflict impacts the BDP supporters differently
than others, I added an interaction term between the “Exposure to Violence
Index” and “Voted for the BDP” variables. In model 3 of table 6, I account
for the ideology of the PKK while keeping all other variables the same as in
model 1 of table 5. Model 4 of table 6 includes an interactive term between “Exposure to Violence Index” and “Voted for the BDP” variables.

In model 3, measures of exposure to violence and ideology are both highly significant in the expected direction; they are negatively and significantly related to the statement that men make better political leaders than women. In model 4, where these two variables interact, the effect of the exposure index is reduced both substantively and statistically. The interaction term is negative, albeit the coefficient on this variable (as with the exposure index) is marginally significant.

Alternative model specifications also showed that while the effect of exposure to violence on having positive attitudes toward women is apparent, this effect is not as robust as argued in current studies. The results also suggest that the hypothesized effect of violence is likely to be more complicated than is portrayed in the existing literature. Significantly, such an effect is in part a result of violence interacting with other variables. In line with the argument made in chapter 2 and consistent with insights from the qualitative data, results from these models strengthen the overall conclusion that the effect of violent conflict on gains in women’s rights is con-

Figure 7. If a woman earns more money than her husband, it is almost certain to cause problems
ditioned by the framing of violence. Moreover, the underlying discourse constitutes an important part. In addition, changes in women’s rights are multifaceted. Violence might assist overcoming one aspect of gender-based discrimination but fail to address another.

A closer look at the data collected from the in-depth interviews confirms these findings. While exposure to violence has facilitated paving the way for more gender-equal positions toward women, its effect is not straightforward. Those interviewees who were well-versed in the PKK’s underlying ideology were more articulate about their changing attitudes toward women. They could make sense of the changes that Kurdish society has been undergoing and relate to these changes at a level that is likely to leave a lasting legacy. Those who were “involved” with the Kurdish movement displayed similar yet less elaborate views. While they were less successful in articulating the changes they or society were experiencing, the effect of the PKK’s positive stance toward women was visible. The PKK’s discourse on women has provided a vernacular with which many Kurds make sense of an otherwise chaotic and devastating armed conflict.18

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that although the effect of armed conflict on changing attitudes toward women is not as straightforward as depicted in the existing studies, it is noticeable. Evidence from the Kurdish case shows that war dynamics impact gender relations and help break traditional roles assigned to women. Gains in women’s rights are observable in economic, social, military, and political spheres. Women are progressively becoming visible in public life. They are increasingly participating in the workforce, serving as mayors and cochairs, running committees, supervising local councils, and engaging in the armed struggle as fighters.

The roles war dynamics play in producing these positive changes is conditioned mainly by the insurgent ideology and a committed leadership. Without the leadership, direction, and vision provided by the PKK leader Ocalan, the positive changes in gender relations described in this chapter might not have been realized. In light of evidence from in-depth interviews and a large probability survey, this chapter shows that the mechanisms through which improvements in women’s rights occur are not necessarily isolated from one another. Violent conflict transforms mainly through interacting with the underlying insurgent ideology.

Clearly, the survey data measures one aspect of gender equality, and it is
hard to infer a change in behavior from the data at hand. Hours-long inter-
views, however, with dozens of individuals (some of which were conducted
at interviewees’ homes) revealed that the change described here is more
than just a simple “disagree” answer to a survey question. Many male inter-
viewees, especially those who lost a family member or witnessed violence
personally, demonstrated significantly more positive behavior toward their
wives, daughters, or sisters. Female members of families who had “sacri-
ficed,” a term that denotes families with a son or daughter in the PKK,
showed important differences than female members of families with oth-
erwise similar characteristics. Women in the first group were more vocal
in expressing their hopes, ambitions, and frustrations. They also enjoyed
freedom of mobility and greater freedom in their choice of dress.

While these issues might be taken for granted in the Western con-
text, traditional societies are often characterized by their restrictions on
women’s mobility and dress. This is particularly so for Muslim-majority
societies. Norris and Inglehart (2004; also see Inglehart and Norris 2003),
in their extensive analysis of cultural values from the World Values Survey,
conclude that while there are no significant differences between the popu-
lations in the West and the Muslim world in their approval of democracy,
they differ significantly in their support for equal rights and opportuni-
ties for women.

Women’s mobility and dress became one of the first issues in the after-
math of the revolutionary waves collectively referred to as the Arab Spring,
which swept through the Arab world in late 2010 and early 2011. Women,
especially those unaccompanied by a male relative, were accused of immo-
rality and assaulted for wearing short skirts (Gurses 2015c). Turkey’s dep-
uty prime minister Bulent Arinc, a founding member of the AKP, called for
chastity in both men and women in 2014 and urged women not to laugh
in public (Dearden 2014). Thus, the freedom to appear in public without a
headscarf, wearing pants, or without a male relative signifies an important
change in gender relations.

To be sure, gender equality or women’s empowerment is not confined to
the changes described in this study. Furthermore, as in the case of Rwanda,
Kurdish women still suffer from patriarchal control. Similar to what Uvuza
(2014, 199) argues with regard to the limitations of conflict–gender equal-
ity relationships in Rwanda (i.e., biases, stereotypes, and discrimination still
exist both in the home and workplace), Kurdish women continue to suffer
from the entrenched patriarchal norms and values.

While conflict might fail to eradicate traditional patriarchal values that
often determine the role and status of women in social hierarchy, it clearly
weakens the prewar patriarchy, leads to wartime partnership, and results in at least “partial post-war empowerment” (Blumberg 2001, 163). Furthermore, as Thames and Williams (2015, 3) have demonstrated, “women’s representation in one area or institution does, in fact, affect women’s representation in other areas.” This process of “contagion,” the authors conclude, manifests itself in different ways and especially in the area of political representation, where “even small gains . . . can have significant effects down the road” (127–28).

In the span of three decades, Kurdish society has certainly shaken off its socially conservative culture and embraced a remarkable shift toward gender equality. This transformation in gender roles and relations is substantial and, as Bengio (2016, 45–46) notes, is “deep and authentic” enough “to not allow for the return to earlier repressive norms and traditional roles.” The conflict has been a primary engine of social change. It has created new contexts and possibilities for the most marginalized segment of society, and the insurgent ideology together with a committed leadership has both facilitated and solidified these new possibilities.