

International Theoretical Seminar : Introductory speech by the Kurdish Women's Movement

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International Theoretical Seminar on Women's Liberation

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Dear women, dear comrades, dear sisters,

We are honoured to be in the presence of such revolutionary, struggling women. We are especially grateful to our Indian comrades for hosting us and making this historic gathering possible. On behalf of the Kurdish women's movement, we salute you and your resistance.

We thank the organizers for dedicating the venue hall to our precious comrade Sakine Cansiz. Sakine Cansiz, nom de guerre Sara, born 1958 in Dersim, was one of the co-founders of the Kurdistan Worker's Party. She was detained in 1980 in the infamous military prison of Diyarbakir, where she was tortured brutally. As a leading figure of the prisoner's resistance she became a living legend. After her release in 1991, she joined the Kurdish guerrilla. She played a special role in the founding of the Kurdish women's guerrilla and the autonomous organisation of women within the Kurdish liberation movement. On January 9, 2013 together with two of her comrades, Fidan Dogan and Leyla Saylemez, she was assassinated by the Turkish intelligence in Paris/France. , Comrade Sara has been a symbol

for women's resistance during her lifetime and continues to drive our struggle beyond her death.

Throughout history, women have played historic roles in the struggles for socialism, democracy and national liberation. Despite their sacrifices, labor, and commitment, they have often been pushed to the background, even by their own male comrades. Our own historical experience as the Kurdish women's movement shows us that the patriarchal backlash that struggling women often experience is not due to their weakness or lack of will. Rather, we believe that this phenomenon is due to a lack of sufficient theoretical analysis of the depth of patriarchy and its relationship to capitalism and state. Likewise, practically, women's demands are often compromised and turned into side attachments to the revolutionary work for the so-called „general cause“ due to a lack of autonomous organization and ideological women's structures. Over a difficult, struggle-ridden period of four decades, we came to a determined conclusion: that all revolutions must be women's revolutions.

Today, we want to share with you the ways in which our theory and practice went hand in hand. Over decades, we managed to achieve important steps, but our history was determined by immense struggles over gender and class, as well as a profound challenging of our own perspectives on revolution before we could reach this day.

Kurdistan is the homeland of one of the largest nations without a state. One century ago, European imperialist interests arbitrarily re-drew the map of West Asia along colonial interests. As a result, our homeland was divided between four nation-states: Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. In response to the brutality of severe state terror and colonialist violence, inspired by the many powerful Marxist-Leninist and anti-colonial revolutionary national liberation movements of the world, the Kurdish freedom movement around

the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was formed in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan and his comrades. One of the women that attended the foundation of the PKK was Sakine Cansiz. In the mid-1980s, the PKK started guerrilla warfare against the genocidal policies of the Turkish state.

At the time, in the Cold War world, many of the party's initial assumptions and attitudes, including its perspectives on women's liberation resembled that of most revolutionary groups of the time. The ideal of socialism provided a framework for a promise of freedom; women in socialist countries had made immense gains. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the movement's leadership engaged in a deep critical and self-critical analysis to understand the conditions that led to the end of this historic era. As early as the 1990s, Abdullah Öcalan began to question the belief that the attainment of an independent Kurdish state would necessarily lead to the liberation of society. To what extent did national liberation induce social change? Did it necessarily overcome class? How about all the anti-colonial movements and their new nationalist elites that exploit the people? How could we expect patriarchy, a system that is not 500 but 5,000 years old, to be overcome, if it manifests itself in the most private areas of life?

Women were part of the Kurdish freedom struggle from the very beginning. The first women joined the struggle to be part of the fight for socialism and national liberation; the movement's perspective was internationalist from the very start. In the 1980s, but especially with the 1990s, when the Turkish state began systematically destroying Kurdish villages, thousands of women joined the guerrilla ranks and participated in social and political work. With the perspectives and suggestions of Abdullah Öcalan, who was a comrade of women from the very start, the 1990s marked the beginning of Kurdish women's autonomous organization in the armed sphere. The increased participation of women in the

armed struggle and their leading role in people's uprisings at the beginning of the 1990s lead to the formation of a women's army with own headquarters, academies and commandship within the guerrilla ranks. After a process of theoretical, ideological and practical preparation on March 8, 1995 300 female guerrilla fighters came together in a cave in the mountains of Kurdistan to uphold their first women's congress and to announce the Kurdistan Women's Freedom Union (YAJK). But this development was not only a result of the growing number of women but also an answer to a challenge within the movement: gender and class conflict.

This was because both, classical class and gender relations were reproduced within the militants. Male militants made use of the class conflicts between the women according to the old imperialist rule "divide and rule". Therefore it was not just crucial to organize women separately but to strengthen the ideological struggle inside the revolutionary movement, to fight not just the external enemy but also the internal enemy, which reproduces the system we are opposing.

This is what the Women's Liberation Ideology of the Kurdish Women's Liberation Movement is about. Women's liberation ideology plays a strategic role for the ideological struggle between women and men on one side and women and women on the other side. Being a freedom fighter is not only about taking arms and fighting against the occupiers. Being a militant is not only about organizing people for the case. Being a revolutionary is about realizing the revolution in your own personality first. It's about living the ideals and values of the society you are fighting for. Because otherwise you never can be sure that you don't reproduce the system you are opposing. Therefore political and ideological struggle cannot be disconnected from each other. And we have to start with ourselves.

But do we, as women need an ideology? In our own struggle we saw: Yes, we as women need an ideology. Because enslavement,

exploitation and discrimination of women have an ideological background. By analyzing social history we came to the conclusion that patriarchy marks a counter-revolution against a social order that was developed by women without any forms of exploitation, power and hierarchies. Patriarchy, which has a history of 5 thousand years, is reproducing itself through very ideological arguments and systematic mechanisms that are based on sexism, which is the basic ideology of power. It is crucial to see that ever since the hierarchical order's enormous leap forward, sexism has been the basic ideology of power. It is closely linked to class division and the wielding of power. Power and sexism in society share the same essence.

What about the relationship between power and masculinity? Power is synonymous to masculinity. If we want to understand the fundamental characteristics of the consequent male-dominant social culture, we need to analyse the process through which woman was socially overcome. Class and sexual oppression develop together; masculinity has generated ruling gender, ruling class, and ruling state.

The woman's question has mostly been seen as a sub-conflict that will be solved automatically with the revolution or the national liberation. But if we look at the revolutionary experiences of socialist and national liberationist movements in the 20th century unfortunately we see that the situation of women did not really change or that as result of women's liberation struggles mechanisms for women have been established but sexism itself or the patriarchal mind have not been shaken in their roots. What is the reason for this phenomenon? Shouldn't overcoming masculinity as a system be the fundamental principle of socialism?

As movement we came to the conclusion that it is crucial for women's liberation to analyse masculinity as a system that is not just outside, but effecting and determining both, men and women, in every sphere of life. Masculinity is a system that

is well-organised, that is based on an ideology (sexism) and a state of mind (patriarchy). If we really want to overcome it, if we really want to found the basis for a free life of society, we need to struggle in an organised, systematic and ideological way against masculinity. By saying masculinity we do not reject men. But we believe in the need for a transformation of the men, because the question of freedom does not only concern women but also men. That means a male revolutionary or socialist has also the responsibility to liberate itself from patriarchy.

In our movement this issue has been taken on the agenda of the movement by its leader Abdullah Öcalan and the militant Kurdish women's liberation movement. The project through which the women's movement developed this issue further practically and ideologically was called "transformation of the men". At the beginning of the century male guerrilla fighters wrote reports to the women's leadership, expressing the reasons why they want to join this project, how they think about male power and women's liberation and how they aim to overcome masculinity. Those chosen by the women's movement spent nearly one year at the women's freedom academy, studying and analysing how patriarchy is reproduced in their personality and trying to overcome it.

But before these steps for the transformation of men, the militant women made a radical cut, starting to organise themselves separately. It was needed to create the room for women to educate, organise, train, live separately, in a place of women. This experience to organise the whole life without any help from men, to build own camps, to plan own military actions, to decide as women on women was very crucial as it showed them that women are able to do everything men can. This experience was very important for strengthening women's will and also to create a new understanding of women's collectivism. Liberation is a collective process and needs organisation.

This radical step of the women was later theorized as break-off theory. The meaning was not just a physical break-off from men – they were not totally isolated or disconnected, but came together in mixed meetings, educations, military actions etc. – but it was symbolizing ideational and physical breaking off by women from the patriarchal mentality. This theory was later further developed and named “total divorce”, which means the ability of women to divorce from the five thousand years old culture of male domination.

These and other concepts and theories build together the Women’s Liberation Ideology. The women’s liberation ideology is an expression of the need for an ideological ground of women’s liberation struggle. The Women’s Liberation Ideology is based on the several principles. First of all, women’s patriotism. Against male-dominated notions of borders, nations, and states, we express our patriotism as a universal love for humanity and the earth. We are attached to our native lands, forests, waters, languages and cultures. Our identity is indivisible from our concept of life. Women’s patriotism means a fight against colonialism, state terror and other forms of exploitation and oppression. Women’s patriotism is inherently internationalist. This is connected to the second principle, organized-ness. We see organization as the guarantor for women’s struggles to succeed. Without our active participation in all spheres of life, from society to culture, economy to self-defence, we cannot assert ourselves and our demands for freedom. Women’s autonomous organization constitutes the collective expression of women’s willpower, independent from patriarchal concepts and cultures of life. The third principle, free thought and free will, is a commitment for women to develop their independent and autonomous struggle concepts to make sure that they do not reproduce male-dominated structures. We believe that we need to turn upside down the patriarchal meanings of concepts like democracy, revolution, nation, and class. We need to induce a mental social revolution in the realm of thought and theory.

The fourth principle is struggle. We cannot expect automatic formulas to magically give us our rights, we cannot pursue standard procedures and expect deeply internalized social mentalities of exploitation and domination to be overcome. We must be in a permanent struggle, against the male-dominated system's expression among our comrades and even within ourselves. If individual women do not struggle to liberate themselves, they will not be able to act upon society against oppressive conditions. But above all, we must create mechanisms for collective struggle. The fifth principle claims that for women to develop an autonomous and independent understanding of themselves, society and life, an alternative understanding of ethics and aesthetics is necessary. Women's conduct and appearance, their mentality and bodies, their means of internal and external self-determination have been taken away by patriarchal systems. Women's bodies are commodified for the further generation of profit and exploitation. But we believe that beauty transcends the physical realm. Beauty concerns primarily the dynamics within women's mental self-determination. In other words, it is of vital importance for women's thought and perspectives to be beautiful. Her ethics, informed by a commitment to justice, autonomy, truth and liberation, generate principles by which she can live. With this understanding of beauty and its effects on physical aesthetics, our confidence and inner power will have an aestheticizing effect on our environment to transform ourselves, other women, men, and society as a whole.

Without a women's liberationist ideology, even the most revolutionary women will be dragged into the male-dominated system or be instrumentalized, even by their male comrades. Our own experience has illustrated this. At the same time, we see the ways in which women's movements can become detached from societal realities, because they create no alternative to the system or lack the militancy to struggle. The women's liberation ideology can be applied by women in all countries and adapted to their own contexts. It guaranteed our women

that our struggle will not defer women's liberation to a later point. Instead, we believe that to the extent to which women are liberated, revolution will be possible. Women will not merely serve revolutions, which marginalize their freedom. On the contrary, we are the revolution's pioneers and creative force. Not only is the women's liberation struggle the guarantee of revolution, it is also the most radical intervention to the 5,000-year-old male dominated system.

In the realm of theory, our women's liberation ideology provides a radical, ideological perspective, a revolutionary mentality with which we tackle all of our tasks, from the democratization of the family, to the creation of our communes, cooperatives, academies and assemblies, to our strategic relationship building with revolutionary women around the world such as yourselves. Practically, we understand that our women's revolution is an on-going effort that must be started in the here and now in the most concrete forms. Thus, rather than delaying our liberation to a date in the calendar, or to a distant, uncertain future „after the general revolution“, we are working towards building up a women's confederal system from our neighbourhoods to our global democratic alliances.

As Kurdistan Women's Liberation Movement we came to the conclusion that the woman's question marks the most profound, deep-rooted question in society and history. Women are the first class in history. They are the most oppressed race or nation. All other forms of enslavement have been implemented on the basis of housewifisation. Without an analysis of woman's status in the hierarchical system and the conditions under which she was enslaved, neither the state nor the classed system that it rests upon can be understood. Without a thorough analysis of women's enslavement and establishing the conditions for overcoming it, no other slavery can be analysed or overcome. In this sense, we must acknowledge that not only is patriarchy the precondition for all other forms of

exploitation and domination such as class to develop, but also that the liberation from all other forms of oppression necessary must go through the liberation of women.

Therefore we believe that each quest for liberation must take women's liberation in its centre. Because the women's question is neither a secondary issue nor a side contradiction but the "mother of all issues". This is the paradigm with which our movement, which started as classical Marxist-Leninist cadre party, entered the 21st century. In this sense, the new century was entered with a commitment to democratic socialism. This, in turn, would only be possible with nothing less but a women's revolution.

At this point we have to return to the dialectics of women's liberation and social transformation. The Kurdish Freedom Movement maintained a dialectical understanding, saying that national liberation and women's liberation must be simultaneous processes. Women's freedom in turn stands in dialectical relation to the liberation of society. In this sense women must be the main subjects in the struggle for a free, democratic and equal society. In his message to YAJK in 1998, Öcalan described this point with these sentences:

"Woman's freedom will play a stabilising and equalising role in forming the new civilisation and she will take her place under respectable, free and equal conditions. To achieve this, the necessary theoretical, programmatic, organisational and implementation work must be done. The reality of woman is a more concrete and analysable phenomenon than concepts such as 'proletariat' and 'oppressed nation'. The extent to which society can be thoroughly transformed is determined by the extent of the transformation attained by women. Similarly, the level of woman's freedom and equality determines the freedom and equality of all sections of society."

With Abdullah Öcalan's suggestion to shift in favour of a "Democratic, Ecological, Women's Liberationist Paradigm"

through his proposal of Democratic Confederation not only the quest to find freedom within a state changed in favour of radical democratic, direct action-based, concrete social, political and economic structures, such as communes, people's academies, people's assemblies and cooperatives – this new perspective also further radicalized the women's movement. Since 2005, in all spheres of life, women organize their everyday needs, theorize their freedom principles and build the concrete conditions for a free, just and beautiful life through the democratic confederal system.

Since 2013, on each level of our political and organizational positions, we implement the principles of equal participation and equal representation. Inside the movement half of the members of each body and executive body are women. They are not only numbers but representatives of the organized collective will of the women's movement. Therefore, the female candidates are chosen by the women's movement itself. Men are not able to intervene in the collective will of the women but women can veto men that reject women's liberation values and principles.

It was with this perspective that in Rojava/North-Eastern-Syria, over the last 7 years, the world has observed a radical women's revolution unfold, which not only managed to defend entire communities against the fascist patriarchal barbarism of ISIS and similar groups, but also to create the foundations for a new autonomous life. From the smallest commune to federal units in all of our liberated areas, the principle of co-leadership between one woman and one man is formally and practically implemented. Women's communes solve society's issues, while women's autonomous economic efforts, justice systems and educational perspectives attempt to mobilize, organize and educate women in all spheres of life.

To be able to play this leading role and to give revolutionary processes a female character, it is crucial for women to organise autonomously and separately. Only as an autonomous

force with an organised collective will that takes its own decisions and can intervene in general decision-making processes we can play a historical role in our own movements and at the first quarter of the 21st century, which we can transform into an era of women's liberation. An end of patriarchy is possible. Because it constitutes the shortest period in history. Even pre-civilizational matriarchal, primitive communal societies have a longer history than patriarchy. We can overcome it by realising the 2nd women's revolution everywhere. Without such a radical women's revolution liberating life from all forms of exploitation, enslavement, violence, oppression will not be possible. But it's also not possible to make a revolution with enslaved women. The extent to which society can be deeply transformed is determined by the extent of the transformation attained by women. The level of woman's freedom and equality determines the freedom and equality of all sections of society. Women need to be an organized autonomous force within liberation movements to be able to create real change – starting with themselves. Therefore, let's realise total divorce from the patriarchal system, with all the attitudes it imposes on women and men, for strengthening women's leadership in revolutionary processes and by doing so let's turn the 21st century in an era of women's liberation.

Jin – Jiyan – Azadi!

Women – Life – Freedom!