

Dear comrades,

after my 3 weeks' stay in Kurdish Iran you asked me about my idea of "Kurdish women". I am very happy this is an important topic to you and that you think, my impressions can bring you forward in your political work. Yet, I have some remarks before getting to the core of the question.

1. I will not tell you anything about "the Kurdish women" just as I would never say anything about "the German women" or "the European women". This is, because human beings are never simply their nature, but cultural and social beings embedded in society and the historical context. What I want to say is that the question we have to ask is about "the *situation* of Kurdish women", not about "Kurdish women" as such. On the one hand this focusses on the fact, that millions of women are forced to a way of life, which is not their natural determination. It is a fundamental injustice that society burdens on them. On the other hand, the fact that this injustice is socially made also gives us the perspective to change the situation. If we are responsible for a culture, that is taking away women's humanity, we can also bring back our humanity.

I know you probably are very aware of this and this inaccuracy was mainly a difficulty of language. Still it is important to me to emphasize the difference between the question of "the Kurdish women" and "the *situation* of Kurdish women". It may seem pedantic and hairsplitting, but in fact it is the difference between the idea of natural and the idea of social human life and therefore the question whether we can change the existing injustice or not.

Although, when I got the chance to compare the goatly and the human patriarchal fights, I was very tempted to throw away all I've learned from social theories so far and believe that humans are animals just like any other animal. This experience makes it even more important to think about how patriarchal culture works to oppress women and picture it as a natural order.

2. I find it quite interesting that you asked me about Kurdish women. There are so many fields of social and political life. But obviously you considered me as an 'expert' on the women's question without knowing very much about my political conviction or expertise. I wonder what you would have asked me about if I was a man. Probably you would have been very interested in my view on other social relations such as economy, political and workers' movement and the like – fields that are generally understood as more general than the women's question, as if patriarchy was not determining all our lives in the production and reproduction of society.

You also could have asked me about my impressions of education and raising children in Kurdistan, which is the major topic of my studies. I made some very interesting observations on that and it is, without doubt, an essential question in culture and reproduction of human life. But apparently you saw me as an expert on the women's question, as far as I can judge only for the reason that I'm a woman. But I am also a worker, a mother, a pedagogue, etc.

Please don't get me wrong: As I already said I am very happy, that you care about the topic and that you want to understand my perspective. Nevertheless, isn't it also part of the degradation of women, that we are asked for our perspective on our own oppression only – as experts on what we experience directly and on the opposite side from men? And not on our perspective on fields of social life, in which men and women have more in common? Apparently, female expertise cannot get a perspective that is general enough for general social theory, so we are pushed to the field of women's oppression and women's emancipation only. But we as women are just as human as men. So, our perspective on social relations is just as general as a male perspective and therefore an essential counterpart to androcentric (male-centred) 'general' social theory.

3. I have some difficulties in finding my role in writing this letter. I don't want to write another ethnological report that in the end just functions to show white and western supremacy over other cultures in a colonial tradition. I did not come from outside to visit Kurdistan like a zoo and later on tell my observations of Kurdish behavior. This may sound ridiculous, but I actually see this as a danger in writing from my perspective as a visitor to Kurdistan, especially as I came with very little knowledge of the Kurdish language. Therefore, I could only observe social relations and interactions on a mostly non-verbal level and must have missed many details of oppression but also of resistance.

So why am I writing this letter despite these problems? This is, because I am not only an observer from outside. I was in Kurdistan as a woman and therefore was integrated in the male-female-relations. Though, I was put into an interesting position in between. Apparently, as a visitor from the west, I was not supposed to fulfill all the domestic work other women did, including other visiting, but local women. Social rules of behavior applied to me in an alleviated way. There seemed to be a conflict between my position in the patriarchal system and my position in the system of global inequality. In the one system I am the oppressed, in the other system I am the glorified privileged. While I was supposed, as a woman, to integrate into doing the domestic work, I was also, as a white westerner, supposed not to do too much work, respectively to be served by the local women (and partly men).

This conflict also affected my reaction to the oppression of Kurdish women: On the one hand I wanted to give my solidarity to the women who have to serve the men, on the other hand I did not want to integrate into serving those who were sitting on the carpet giving orders to the subordinated beings in the house – or not even giving the orders because everybody already knows the female house duties: make the table, prepare and bring the food, wait for all men and visitors to finish to eat their leftovers, clean the table, bring the tea, ...

In this regard, we also have to consider that I spent a lot of time in a small village close to Marivan. This is where I saw the most extreme forms of women's oppression that struck me so much. So, what I am writing here might in parts seem unjust or exaggerated for wider parts of Kurdish society. On the other hand, the oppression in other places and settings was only slightly more subtle. I can't find an essential difference between an order addressed to a woman or a woman fulfilling an order, that was not explicitly expressed, because everybody knows her role and duties. Of course, it is true that in very few exceptions – in some communist urban households – I actually saw men taking part in domestic work. This can at least give us some hope. But it is just a very small group of people in Kurdistan who live in such rudimentary emancipated relationships. And as long as there is even one woman being oppressed because of her gender, we have to fight patriarchy! So, we have a very long way to go.

Patriarchal slavery as the unquestioned order?!

I know I am not telling you anything new. This is just everyday life. But this is what I observed, and what deeply struck me – because it is not everyday life in my world. Of course, women's oppression in the house and outside the house is part of everyday life in Germany as well, but in the broadest part of society not to this extreme and not this obviously. It used to be, though, some decades ago. This is very important to see because it means that we can change it and that it is not at all natural.

There are parts of women's oppression, which I found many people were quite aware of and complaining about. But the same men who complained about "jemhuri islami" when it came to the head scarf or the prohibition of alcohol apparently had no problem with "jemhuri islami" when calling "Khaje, chai!" or asking the youngest sister for chai in the tone of heavy reproach, as if a man – for instance the older brother – could not prepare his and the family's tea on his own. In those situations, also the correlation of patriarchy and generational relations becomes apparent: it affects not only the rule of men over women, but also of the older people over the younger ones. Although elder women are working in the household just as younger women, orders like this are only addressed to younger

women. Is there not the danger that this subordination of younger persons under the older ones goes hand in hand with the subordination of new ideas under older, traditional ways of life? This would mean, that even the slight advantages and little power older women have over younger ones is part of stabilizing patriarchy.

I was seriously shocked when I saw how obviously and generally women are oppressed in families in Kurdish Iran. The oppression starts as soon as the first family member gets up in the morning and ends at night when the last family member goes to bed. And if there is a baby or a sick person in the house it may even continue throughout the night. What do I mean by this? The woman is serving the man all day long, whenever he requests it. I will give you a list of examples of those oppressive practices, which by far is not complete: The woman's day starts preparing breakfast and making the bed, when breakfast is finished she cleans the dishes and the kitchen, then she does all the preparation for the food during the day or at the absolute minimum the part that has to be done in the house. She washes the men's, women's and kids' clothes and puts them to dry. While doing so she takes care that everybody in the house is getting their chai. Along the way, she takes care of the kids and the elderly. Meanwhile the kids are playing outside: girls have their beautiful little kitchen equipment and boys a bike and the like. Those tasks are filling the whole day and, in the evening, again men are served at the table, table, dishes and floor are cleaned after them, chai brought, and dishes taken again. In the meantime, men are sitting around or simply leaving after having satisfied their needs. The woman's day ends making the beds or at least bringing the sheets etc.

Also, I never saw a man changing a baby's diapers. When I asked a man to do so, he would repel it as if it was a very awkward idea. Yet, wouldn't it be the most logical work for a man? The woman invests so much time into breast feeding, that it should be so obviously clear that it's the man's task to do all the rest for the baby. Instead, breast feeding is used to bind the woman to the house and the kids. Breast feeding seems to me as an indicator on how independently women can live in a place. For instance, in France and the Netherlands, babies are fed with milk from the bottle (made from powder or expressed from the breast) from the age of three months on. Institutional childcare in those countries usually starts at the age of three months, which is also when most mothers start wage labor again, and therefore are financially and socially more independent again. In Germany, mothers are told by midwives and other agents to breast feed their babies for one year. Paid parental leave lasts exactly one year here and most day-care facilities start from the age of one year. In Kurdish Iran women are breast feeding their kids for two years or more. Parental leave for 9 months, paid or unpaid, does not help here, as there are nearly no day-care facilities and only few and expensive kindergartens from three years on.

As long as I have to take care of a child during the whole day, I cannot do wage work. I don't earn money and therefore I am depending on the child's father or other family members. But also, I don't have time for myself or for social activities without the child. This also affects possibilities of political engagement. On the other hand, it causes a problem when mothers are forced to get back to wage labor out of financial reasons very soon after giving birth, which is the case in France or the Netherlands with very short or low parental leave payments. However, coming back to the situation of mothers in Kurdistan, the material, social and legal conditions force them to depend on others – mainly their husband – in financial matters and in questions of political engagement, which pushes them into a weak social position with little power.

The question of breast feeding is also a question of physical dependency. In breast feeding I am feeding another human being in the very original sense of the term. But with my body I can also feed other human needs and desires. So, it can only be in the interest of the child's father if the mother gets used to organize her life around giving her body to someone else. In a patriarchal relationship in a capitalist society, the woman will never be the full owner of her own body. This is not a beautiful experience,

but it might be easier to bear if part of this is giving your body to your needy baby – or child (because a two year old kid is not a baby anymore). Don't get me wrong: breast feeding can be a very beautiful experience for the mother and the child. But it can also be instrumentalized to keep the mother in the house and her body to the man respectively family.

Outside the house, in the streets, especially in Marivan, you can almost only meet men, whose life is based on the fundamentum women are building and holding up in the house. While women are staying at home, making sure that the social reproduction works in the family unit, men are outside, shaping society in its larger scale. And of course, this is affecting the life of all people in this society, also in the homes. So, it is a manly shaped society on female pillars. Without these pillars, society would fall apart.

It is a common pattern to explain this difference between men and women with the supposed weakness of women. The woman must be protected and therefore must stay at home. But if it is too dangerous for her to stay in the streets, go to the building lot or take a motor bike, why is it women who are doing so much of the hardest work in Kurdistan: the farming without any machine aid under the dry and hot sun? Milking the cows and cleaning their stable? Organizing and having an overview over the whole family's life and every member's wellbeing?

As we can see from this, the difference is not the physical or mental strength. On the contrary, women are carrying a double burden having a fulltime farmer's work or wage labor plus fulltime family work, which takes more than the 8 hours for regular fulltime wage labor. The difference is the place and the purpose of the work. The man is doing all that is determining life in broader society, while the woman is keeping his back and his mind free. She is the house slave, who is paid only in kind, always ready to serve the man to satisfy all his needs.

Cultural rules – oppressing dressing rules

The oppression of woman reaches from the very obvious material facts and openly expressed female duties to very subtle ways of oppression. One of those ways are the dressing *rules*. Deliberately, I am not talking about dressing *codes* because in Iran it is the law and state repression that underly the codes taken up in culture. Nevertheless, the (partly) acceptance of dressing rules in cultural dressing codes as I saw them especially in the village also allows the state to keep up their oppressive politics.

I will go into the concrete ways of oppression through dressing rules in the following. But first I want to highlight one word and its explicit and implicit message connected to dressing codes. First, I only heard it being addressed to children but later on realized that also women can be "eibe", "impudent". Already for the kids I was surprised by how often they are scolded "eibe" when interacting with others in a lively way or not comporting like little adults. I find it rather important for kids to find their own ways, have their own games and do not accept every rule imposed on them. This behavior should rather make us question our rules and world views instead of wiping it away as "eibe". If I felt uncomfortable with this kind of relationship between kids and adults, it left me speechless when I understood that not only kids are "eibe" all the time but women as well, when not covering their body adequately or not serving men to their own self-abandonment. Here again we see the interconnection between patriarchal and generational rule. Is a woman, who is not subordinating herself under her own oppression, really "eibe" like a small kid? These little acts of individual resistance are scolded, not only by men but also by women and even kids are taking this up. But I am not a little defiant brat! I am a human being! And if I was a little defiant brat I would be a thousand times stronger and freer than if I was doing whatever society and its members are expecting me to do.

So, the word "eibe" serves to have women comply with the rules imposed on them and to degrade them as subordinate beings who cannot decide on their own how to dress and how to live. But the oppressing effect of dressing rules is not only the fact that people *are told* what they must wear. The

dressing rules also have an effect through the *form* of clothes they impose on men and women. And this second effect is even increased by traditional costumes and the social coercion to wear those dresses. With a long skirt, many works get so much harder to do. The head scarf has to be wrapped around the head quite tight to be able to do field and farm work without the scarf coming down all the time. Here the law has an effect on habits and the culture: Especially women in the villages, who are doing a lot of farming, are getting used to wear their head scarf in a way that covers all their hair, because only like this they can work without having to take care of their head scarf all the time. As a result, they are complying with the law to its prototypical ideas out of material necessity, not out of abject obedience. Out of their material necessities, they will not be able to carry out the acts on the very tiny line between obedience and disobedience as other women do it in wearing the head scarf as loosely as possible.

And then, wearing the head scarf as loosely as possible brings the same problem, which makes farming women wear it tightly. All the time women have to take care that their hair is partly covered. I was sometimes so much occupied with my head scarf that I couldn't do the things I wished to do: play with the kids, shortly jump out of the taxi to get something (and to disturb the solely male appearance on the streets), quickly get out my purse to be the one paying (and not allowing men to pay for me all the time), ... Women who grew up with a head scarf are of course more skilled with it and more capable of acting - a skill I probably could have acquired, but I am not planning to do so. But still, the head scarf is a burden in everyday life in a very practical sense, let alone its function in the oppression of women. And as we can see in the examples I gave with the annoying but necessary parenthesis, the practical constraint is very much connected to and interwoven with the oppression of women.

Another aspect of women's oppression through dresses is the impossibility to carry more than a phone and a little amount of money. Also in western fashion, women's trousers and skirts are having very small pockets. So, whenever women want to carry enough things with them to move independently, they have to take a bag – which for women is made in a way to always occupy one hand. So again, it makes us less mobile. Additionally, we also need enough space to carry things others need such as kids' (and men's) snacks and drinks, diapers and changing clothes, and so on. Also women's shoes are designed to complicate practical life and work and I am sure we could find many more examples.

Comparing western dressing codes and Iranian or Muslim dressing rules, we find two ways of oppression on the opposed sides of a spectrum that is based on the idea of women as (dangerous) sex objects. In Kurdistan, women have to hide every part of their body that can in any sense be considered sexual. In the west and especially in western media and advertisement, the danger of the woman makes her hot and interesting – or rather the different objects she decorates, which makes her even less than an object: the decoration of an object. So, in the one place women have to hide their sexual attractiveness to make sure that no man takes away the property of the other man, in another place women have to display their sexual attractiveness to make sure that a consumer buys a capitalist producer's product.

There are so many faces to the oppression of women as sexual objects between the two extremes I mentioned here, that I will not try to list them all. What I find essential when we think about the sexualization of the female body is that exactly for the fact of its numerous and enormously diverse faces, we have to be very careful about how to resist it. In Islamic places just as in strictly Christian places women have to cover as much of their body as the ruling class can force them to. But the answer cannot be to strive for a society where women are forced to walk around (half) naked. And just because women are reduced to their sexuality and expected to show it, we cannot make them hide their sexuality and their bodies in those places. Women and all humans must have the chance to decide themselves, how much they want to show of their body in which place and to whom and what sexuality means to them. This leads us to the question how to fight women's oppression.

Overthrowing patriarchy structurally and culturally

The question of women's emancipation is too big to adequately deal with it in such a short text. Books have been written on it and it is so much connected to the specific conditions, that I cannot really give you a satisfying appraisal. So, I am just trying to formulate some general thoughts here that have to be enhanced much further and adapted to the specific situation in Iranian Kurdistan.

As I tried to show, women's exploitation and oppression are inseparably interwoven with each other. Women's (domestic) labor is being exploited without any or with low financial compensation which makes them depend on men economically while building the pillars of their life in society. At the same time, cultural oppression is fastening them on this social position. This means that we need to change the whole way society works. We cannot wait for the culture to change slowly and solely through education and explaining the idea of equality between men and women. Also, we cannot simply change the material conditions of life and wait for culture to change automatically. We have to think and fight together in the areas of economy, law and culture.

On the economic level we have to perform what might seem to be the most radical change towards women's emancipation: We have to abolish private ownership of the means of production, and with it profit and class relations as the base of human life and relationships. This means to abolish capitalism. As long as the ruling class can profit from the exploitation and oppression of women and other groups, we will not get to real emancipation. This is also one of the reasons why it is so important for men to fight patriarchy. In the little microcosmos of the family, women's oppression might seem to be men's power but in its larger scale women's oppression is closely connected to capitalism and domination of the few over the many.

In the juridical system we have to address two fields: economic rights and reproductive rights. Women need the right to be financially completely independent from men: fathers, brothers, husbands. And we need the full power over our body which includes the power over reproduction. We are the ones to decide if we want to have children or not. The right to abortion is very much emphasized in feminist movements and it certainly plays a key role in women's emancipation. But over this we sometimes forget that we do not only need the right *not to have children* but also the right and the conditions *to have children* without sacrificing our whole life. This is connected to material circumstances as much as to cultural ones. I have to be able to feed and dress my children and myself healthily. But I also need to offer them good education, sports and other leisure time activities, which take place in the intersection of culture and economy.

It has often been assumed that culture will automatically adapt to economic and political changes in society. But the reverse is true: The hardest fight for emancipation is the one for its cultural aspects through resistance and education. Real emancipation from women's cultural oppression will last several generations, until no one is pushed into a specific role and duties because of his or her gender anymore but also the physical specifics for instance during menstruation, pregnancy and menopause are considered and respected in production and reproduction of life in society.

In a culturally emancipated society, I have to be sure that I am not the only responsible person for the household just because I am the (youngest) daughter or the wife, and for the children's wellbeing just because I am the mother. We need to build a society where care work is shared equally between genders and classes and where it is the whole society's duty to care for its members. This does not mean that kids should be taken care of in institutions from morning till evening and their parents see them only to bring them to bed at night. This would not only violate the children's needs for stable and close attachment persons, it would also deprive us from this wonderfully beautiful experience of spending time with the little human beings we put into the world or took as our protégés. On the contrary, we have to make the family a place of love and community again, which it risks losing in its

economic determination in capitalism. But we also need the possibility to have a life apart of our family life. This is where society's responsibility comes in.

In this regard, I was highly inspired and impressed by Kurdish culture. It is not only the small family unit taking care of the kids and other "family" concerns, but everyone around in the neighborhood, work place, school, etc. This is a great chance and seems to me like a small glance to how community can look in an emancipated society on the interpersonal level. I saw neighbors taking care of the kids playing in the streets, building houses together, preparing the food and doing the dishes. In Germany, some lefties are trying to organize and establish a similar way of community life in "house projects" but by far do not get to this matter of course solidarity, community and responsibility for each other.

Also, this "culture of neighborhood" seems like a small-scale picture of communist ideas to organize care in institutions such as day care facilities or cafeterias. Of course, we have to be very careful not to over glorify this culture or picture is as the end of emancipation. One point is: It is not true that everyone is doing the work together. In this community in Kurdish villages and neighborhoods, the real care work is solely female responsibility while work outside the house such as constructing are male dominated. And this is not only oppressive against women. It also deprives men of the experience of the beauty of care work and the emotional satisfaction in caring for others. The other point is: This kind of community life takes place in an environment of exploitation, oppression and coercion. It seems to be a cultural and economic need to organize in this specific way of neighborhood culture, with family units organized around heterosexual matrimony and without the real power of the people to determine and shape how they want to live on the level of interpersonal relations and on the level of the whole society.

Some emancipating changes in the juridical system and in culture can be achieved in the existing order already and it is very important that we fight for those changes as reforms are easier to achieve than building up a fundamentally different society. Therefore, those reforms can give us concrete aims and successes during the long and tedious way to revolution and socialism, let alone communism. On this way we have to alleviate the burden on women's lives as much as we can through reforms – for the sake of women's wellbeing as much as for the necessity to create conditions for women to take part in the broader fight. But in this fight for reforms we must never forget the general fight for a global emancipatory change, for a socialist revolution, accompanied and followed by tedious and long-term work to overcome the cultural aspects of patriarchy as well.

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