Recognition of power: The agency of Kurdish women in their everyday practices

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Abstract
Anthropological work on Kurdish women has hitherto adopted western stereotypes of power, representing it as non-existent, as women being deprived of agency in everyday practices, or totally politicized. In order to challenge prescriptive gender stereotypes, moving beyond objectification to subjectivity and offering a more complex analysis of gender relations, this study examines the position of women within their family and wider social structures in Şırnak in Turkish Kurdistan based on a sample of local women who are not employed in paid work, and their children. The implications of the results are discussed in order to enable understanding of the social structures that make it possible for women in Şırnak to exercise informal decision-making authority or to be part of the social power structures as subjects, highlighting their importance in household management and showing that ‘power’ does not necessarily equate straightforwardly with western understandings.

Keywords
Kurdish women, western feminism, ethnographic refusal, agency, power

Introduction
Religion, customs, and traditional values imposing hierarchical inequality are generally regarded as obstacles to gender equality and women’s rights by Western feminist anthropologists. This has been challenged, mainly by Third World feminists (e.g. Alcoff, 1991; Mohanty, 1991; Razack, 1998; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2009). However, many western feminist anthropologists have still not completely broken rank with conventional
anthropology, falling into the trap of an ethnocentric and colonial perspective, thereby
essentialising women’s standpoint along with western liberal notions of ‘agency’ and
‘power. To start with, in the context of Middle Eastern societies, women are homogenised
as ‘Middle Eastern women’ and their social positions is negatively contrasted to women
living under/within Western feminism and Western gender ideals (Hamid, 2006; Lazreg,
2009). To some, women in Middle Eastern countries are considered “as victims of male
brutality who must be rescued from traditional, oppressive male morality, which is im-
gained as a total control over female bodies and actions” (Ewing, 2008: 1-2). Especially
since 9/11 and the war on terror, some western feminists (Palmer and Palmer, 2004;
Lewis, 2004) have suggested that Islam is the basis of violence, which is the cultural
opposite of Western cultures and values, positing Muslims as the embodiment of gen-
dered alterity. In fact, in some cases, western feminist theorists construct a feminism
that uses the lives of Black and Brown people as arenas in which they can prove their
credentials to white men (Zakaria, 2021) and narrowly equate feminism with sexual
equality (Kohrs Amissah, 2003). Fortunately, other feminist scholars such as
Mahmood (- on women’s piety movement in Egypt), Utas (2005 - on young women’s
agency in conflict zone of Liberia), Osanloo (2009 - on the question of women’s right
in Iran to challenge Islam’s allegedly undeveloped political culture) and Lentin (2011 -
on Palestinian women’s day to day efforts to accommodate their own needs under
Israeli oppression) resist the blanket application in their analysis of dominating and sub-
jectivising modes of western or hegemonic power over Middle East and North Africa
(MENA) countries and propose instead, analyses of some creative aspects of women’s
agency and subjectivity in such countries. However, even these studies address only a
certain class or social status of women (e.g. political, pious) in the public sphere or
their resistance against religious or political oppression, to represent a counterpoint to
western conceptualizations of passive Muslim women, overlooking ordinary women in
the private realm along with their everyday social practices. Research does exist,
which demonstrates that women in non-Western countries may have considerable infor-
mal ‘power’ or influence, and that this has been underestimated in the ethnographic lit-
erature, but such research is limited to indigenous and primitive societies and
attributed to the past (Clignet 1970; Evans-Pritchard 1974). Silence about the informal
agency of women in their everyday practices in feminist scholarship is as deliberate as
those produced in the context of “the power of coloniality” (Quijano, 2000) and the
Eurocentric thinking leading to the objectification and radicalized Othering of the
studied subjects.

This article argues that that women who are not in paid work and who are illiterate,
even in the contemporary period, can hold some sort of ‘power’ and ‘agency’ over the
conditions of their life, within their family and within patriarchal, traditional, and cultural
structures, through their everyday engagements in the private sphere. With Şirnak, in the
Kurdish region of Turkey - considered one of the most authentic Kurdish cities - as the
research site, this article attempts to draw attention to the shortcomings of a polarized
view of the relative power of men and women in Kurdish society. Drawing on feminist
critiques of gender-power relations in Middle East anthropology and ethnography, the
article questions assumptions about the nature and meaning of women’s agency in differ-
ent non-Western societies when Western, capitalist, and liberal values (economic
networks, development, and global relations) are taken as the norm to frame non-Western women’s empowerment, ignoring local conceptions of ‘agency’ and ‘power’. The central aim of the article is to show more nuanced ways of addressing the agency of non-Western women who are not in paid work, through the case of Kurdish women in Şırnak, and show the complexity of the agency of women in different “social and cultural contexts in which women speak themselves into existence, a complexity often missed in delineating modern forms of agency” (Hilson, 2007: 132).

This article does not argue for a simple dichotomy between ‘agency’ or ‘lack of agency’. It neither underestimates the oppression of women under a hegemonic patriarchal structure nor do the ‘power’, ‘agency’ and autonomy identified throughout necessarily denote ‘rule by women’. The article does not seek to idealize the conditions of the research participants in their context, nor to ignore the presence of a patriarchal culture in which Kurdish women are subordinated, and women’s agency impeded in general. Nevertheless, it aims to argue that there is a need for a broader framework within which to imagine, consider and analyse the different realities of women’s lives, and within which the experiences and voices of marginalized women should be enriched and empowered. It is my contention that if the ‘lived-in-world’ of these women in Şırnak is better known and understood, a different image of their society and definitions of ‘power’ and ‘autonomy’ can be identified.

Recasting feminist methodology: From ethnographic refusal to critical ethnography

As a Kurdish woman writing on Kurdish women, my ethnographic stance is certainly not “objectivist”. But nor is that of a white man writing on Kurdish women. Harding (1987: 9) rightly points out that we cannot make the researcher’s cultural beliefs and practices invisible, while simultaneously displaying and skewering the research objects’ beliefs and practices, since the beliefs and behaviours of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of research. Through a lens of intersectionality and Sandra Harding’s interpretive approach to challenging androcentric feminist methodology and analysis, this article underlines the significance of a “context of justification” wherein hypotheses are tested, and that we should seek the “logic of scientific inquiry” (Harding, 1987: 7). In this case, women’s experiences (including my own experiences) are used “as a significant indicator of the ‘reality’ against which hypotheses are tested” (Harding, 1987: 7). As a Kurdish woman, my first impressions of womanhood, obtained largely from my mother and grandmothers, were that none of them appeared weak or helpless, none of them presented themselves tentatively. Nowhere in my mind is there a submissive, helpless, and powerless victim of male domination. Even where something akin to male domination was evident, women were perceived as powerful socially, physically, and metaphysically. I have struggled to reconcile this with the contradictory interpretations of Kurdish customs, traditions, and beliefs in academic writings. Tradition is still frequently referred to as an unchanging set of Eastern rules, and modernity still implies emancipation, advancement, and westernization (Kannaneh, 1997), which can undermine the ‘power’ originating in traditional and
cultural characteristics. In order to avoid flawed analyses and generalizations, I believe one should make judgements based on ethnographic results peculiar to a region and its set of traditions through direct engagement and interaction with local subjects.

Ethnography is in fact to understand another world using the self as the instrument of knowing (Ortner, 2005: 173). So, I conducted this research in my hometown, Şırnak, where Kurdish cultural identity and language is maintained. Undoubtedly, similar patterns of kinship, family structures or women’s agency exist elsewhere, but I limit myself to speaking about Şırnak, a province in Southeast Turkey, bordering Iraq and Syria. The majority of the population is Kurdish and has endured many clashes and evacuations, and much destruction due to conflicts between PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, Kurdistan Workers Party) and Turkish security forces over the last three decades. My evidence for the ‘power’ and ‘agency’ of the women with whom I conducted my research is based on ethnographic observation, indirect participation, and semi-structured interviews with 23 women participants (aged between 45 and 69) and 11 of their grown-up children (aged between 29 and 45, who, except for one, also had their own children) met through snowball sampling. In terms of positionality, I am both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’. After leaving the province, I returned several times for short family visits, but due to the heightened war, for a long time it was not safe to do so. I returned in autumn 2019 for this research and met different generations of women during my stay. Considering myself as an ethnographer is clearly not shaped by an essentialist notion of being native or subaltern (Narayan, 1993) as I am not just a Kurdish native, but also someone who grew up in the Turkish region of Turkey and studied in the UK, all of which I believe puts me in an advantageous position. As Comaroff (1985) points out, subalterns may effectively draw on, and take advantage of, some of the latent oppositional categories and ideologies of Western culture. Hence being both a Kurdish native and being immersed in the ideologies of Western culture has allowed me to have alternative authentic insights into the representations of Kurdish women outside Kurdistan. By locating knowledge or inquiry in my standpoint or my experience as a Kurdish woman to illuminate lived and embodied experiences of other Kurdish women, I see this study as a contribution to “resistance studies”; as Nandy (1983) says, subordinated selves may retain oppositional authenticity by drawing on aspects of the dominant culture to criticise their own world as well as the situation of domination.

“Ethnographic refusal” is to Ortner (2005: 188) “the refusal to know and speak and write of the lived worlds inhabited by those who resist” or simply those not holding Western liberal notions of agency. Through this study I argue that not recognizing the agency of women who are not in paid work within the household constitutes “ethnographic refusal” on the part of the researcher complying with his/her specific desires, cultural beliefs, and interests. Accordingly, limited by the lack of an ethnographic perspective, for Ong (2001: 114) the dangers of not “speaking for others” are greater than those of continuing to do so. Researchers must be engaged with “untold stories” (Shuman, 2005: 162) to enrich our understanding of women’s lives in specific cultural contexts. The researcher must ask him/herself “whose story is it, what is it being used for, what does it promise, and at whose expense?” (Shuman, 2005: 162). The questions asked by the researcher, and even more significantly those questions that are not asked, are at least as determinative of the adequacy of our total pictures as are any answers that we can discover. In order to avoid the androcentric methodological trap that many western feminist ethnographers fall into.
with “third world victimization” (Mohanty, 1984; Ong, 2001), rather than using western notions of gender (in)equality favouring western feminist notions of development, I attempt to see, through a woman’s individual identity in her specific context to reveal the complexity of multiple subjectivities. I designed the key aspects of the questions addressed to participants in a way that was intended to enable understanding of power dynamics, management of finances and gendered expectations in the household and their social networks in larger family dynamics and relationships. I selected women informants who are not in paid work and have lived in Şırmak all their lives. This is important, as I also argue later that change of context and conditions can lead to changes in women’s ‘agency’ (playing an active role in their social endeavours) and ‘power’ in their daily lives. All of the mothers who participated were housewives (not in paid employment) and dependent on the income from either their husbands or sons. I benefited from observing these women’s relations with their husbands and children as an indirect participant.

The interviews with mothers focused around two questions: How do they view themselves in their household? How active are they in the decision-making process on issues concerning the family? Through these questions, I aimed to address the following research questions: What is the degree of female autonomy in household and family structures in Şırmak? What are the gender dynamics in Şırmak, with regard to power and autonomy in decision-making?

I particularly wanted to talk to sons as well as daughters, since sons are considered to have a special bond with their mothers in Kurdish society, as borne out in the research: almost all of the sons I spoke with highlighted the influence their mothers had on them in their own family and work life, particularly when it came to important life-changing decisions (such as buying, selling, or renovating a house). The questions the grown-up children were asked were aimed at understanding their mothers’ role in the household from their own perspective, and their own relationship with their mothers in their specific sociocultural contexts. All but two women participants were illiterate; three sons had high school diplomas; and the other children, including daughters, had elementary school diplomas.

Power through motherhood and aging

Studies on gender and inequality in families commonly conclude that gender ideologies and men’s greater earnings are the primary mechanisms through which families define power dynamics and maintain gender stratification in power (Sorenson and McLanahan, 1987; South and Spitze, 1994). This is uncritically assumed, particularly in ethnographic descriptions of pastoral and sedentary societies in the Middle East, the assertion being that men and women inhabit dual and separate social worlds, the former being ‘public’ while the latter is ‘private’. This distinction is assumed as a matter of definition (male equals public, female equals private). The latter world is invariably described as domestic, narrow, and restricted, whereas the former is described as political, broad, and expansive (Nelson, 1974). The traditional role and expectations of motherhood linked with the ‘private’ sphere are considered to be marginalized by the ‘power’ structure. In other words, childrearing, not ‘working’, socializing with female neighbours, friends, and relatives, have been taken as evidence of the inferior status and subordination of women.
In fact, ‘power’ can take many forms including “relationships of influence and domination” (O’Hara and Clement, 2018) and “knowledge and ideas” (Lukes, 2005) and it may differ in specific cultural contexts. As in many other cultures, motherhood is an affirmation of a woman’s ‘power’ and her central role in Kurdish society in Şırnak. The findings of this study show that to address a person as ‘mother’ is to pay the highest ritual respect, and the mother’s position in the family is as high as that of the husband in terms of being head of the family. The mother performs vitally important organizational, household, and childrearing functions for the whole family and kinship collective. Motherhood’s centrality to Kurdish women’s authority and status within Kurdish culture in Şırnak seems to be very distinctive. I met Başkan, a 44-year-old native whose family has lived in Şırnak for generations; he is married and has five children. He took his mother to live in his family home after his father died. I talked to Başkan in their home and my visit took several hours. Throughout my stay his mother sat in a corner on a cushion with a serious look and only once left the room for half an hour. Başkan, his wife and the grown-up children at home were making sure that she did not need anything although she was not a guest but a family member living with them. As we spoke in Turkish, and his mother only speaks Kurdish, Başkan talked about his mother while she was also in the room:

“I think men just has a name in our culture. They are not very functional […] I always see our women as Home Affairs Minister […] When I wanted to marry my current wife, if my mum had not given permission, it would not have been possible regardless of what my father thought […] Although my mother has considerably lost her sense of memory due to her age, this has not changed anything […] I cannot take a step without consulting her. This is not out of fear but respect […]”

By the time I was ready to leave Başkan’s house and he was also leaving, he said goodbye to his mother, kissed her hand and she also kissed his hand back while holding it and prayed for the health and success of his life. I observed many similar scenes of sons greeting their mothers warmly, asking about their health and mood, when entering the house and leaving. As the case of other Middle Eastern societies, most such scenes and narratives indicate that the mother-child bond is likely to be stronger, and to entail more (or more important) rights and duties than, for instance, the husband-and-wife bond (Joseph 1999; Zaatari 2006).

Mothers are the centre of the communal home; the sons bring their wives to live in the circle. Contrary to simplistic assumptions about the control of men over women in patriarchal societies, ethnographic studies of Middle Eastern families have highlighted the considerable power that many matriarchs wield over their grown-up children, and over younger females, especially daughters-in-law (Rabho, 2015). Accordingly, nearly all women who participated in this research had experienced living with their parents-in-law, and mothers-in-law particularly have a dominant position in the house. They exercise considerable domestic control over other women and children (Safilios-Rothschild, 1982). The findings show that within the household in Şırnak, there is a clear hierarchy whereby the newest bride (bûk in Kurdish) is subordinated to her mother-in-law as well as to all the more senior sisters-in-law. A young woman is also more readily socialized to her
unequal role and inequitable entitlement to the family resources, even compared to her own children (Kandiyoti, 1988; Moghadam, 2004). Childrearing gives her greater status in her husband’s family. However, the apex of her influence and power comes when she in turn has grown-up sons who bring their own brides to her circle. Without doubt, the senior mother-in-law’s superiority over brides is a matter of authority. To Kandiyoti (1987: 331), the cyclical nature of women’s relative power position in the household, as well as the fact that their socialization is at every stage overseen by other women with greater authority, leads to internalization and reproduction of this particular variation of patriarchy. Mothers also decide if their daughters should not study any further but stay at home to help them with household management instead. So, the relationships among and between women can also be exploitative.

A traditional marital arrangement whereby men can have more than one wife also involves a hierarchy and exploitation among and between women. Although this type of marriage is not common nowadays, there are still a number of polygamous marriages, which still took place at least two decades ago. The second wife (fellow wife), termed Hêwi in Kurdish, is usually younger and much less experienced than the first wife, and the latter can hold authority over her for years. Based on the interviews and observations of daily life in Şîrnak, it can be said that both wives live in the same house as the rest of the family; the second wife usually does most of the housework and has little say in big decisions concerning the household. However, over time, as the second wife gets older and has children and grandchildren of her own, the two wives can arrive at the same level of authority over household matters. In the four houses with two wives, I was welcomed by both wives, and in each house, they were 60 years old and had lived together for more than 30 years. They sat next to each other throughout my visits, and I did not observe any indication of hierarchy. In my interviews, the women mentioned that they get along well and do not have any issues. However, some of their grown-up children said that while the two wives had started to get along well after all these years, there are ongoing internal conflicts, but it is disrespectful to reveal these conflicts outside the house, and especially to guests.¹

The concept that ‘agency’ is found in various forms of action also reveals the fact that it is highly dependent on specific social situations (Thomson, 2013; Utas, 2005), which in the case of Şîrnak, concerns age. I observed that that age is crucial in intra-household power relationships in Şîrnak. For instance, Neşet, a 42-year-old male born and living in Şîrnak, underlines that Kurdish women in Şîrnak gain special status with power in the household after getting married, which increases with motherhood and gradually increases further with age, reaching a peak on becoming a grandmother, indicating a clear hierarchy within the household, which is dependant on the age of the women.

It is also observed that those who live separated from their in-laws have more bargaining power than others, and they do not have to be in the control of older women in the house while making their decisions or managing the home. Siyahan, a 38-year-old mother of a two-year-old boy, whom I met in her aunt’s house for the interview, does not live with her in-laws from her second marriage as her personal preference is to be, as she puts it, more independent. Siyahan returned to her family home after her first marriage ended in divorce and is living with her family until she gets married again. She agrees that older women within the household have authority, saying:
“In my family circle, those women who are over 60 years old are the strongest family members. They have full power over their children, daughters-in-law, even the surroundings outside their homes […] One of these women was my grandmother who was around 70 when I was a child, she would not let anyone take a step without her involvement, who would marry who, what business her sons would pursue would be up to her. However, it is not a given agency to these women automatically […] Women usually create their own authority and spread it around. They need to create this aura of leadership.”

Siyahan shares her personal experience of the forced marriage imposed on her by her father although she did not want to talk about what went wrong in the marriage. The marriage lasted seven years and produced no children. However, she emphasises the positive impact of her mother, whose power has increased over time, on her personal life and adds:

“My mother did not have any say when I was a child. My father forced me to get married when I was 16, she could not stop him doing this because she thought he would know better. I got divorced after years of suffering. But I think in time, she got stronger and had more confidence, maybe because she aged […] Especially after my divorce, she started to stand against my father and now she is the leader of our household […] I think Kurdish women get stronger in their household over time.”

The oldest daughter, married or unmarried, is also considered to be the leading family member among children. Those women who are not married and stay at home to look after their parents are seen as having sacrificed their happiness for the good of the family, so they receive special respect from, and superiority over, others. For instance, I met Gulcan, 39 years old, who happened to be a guest when I visited the home of one of my participants. She chose to never get married but to stay beside her parents after her siblings got married and left home. Although talking to unmarried women was not part of my research plan, observing her and the way other guests talked about and treated her introduced a new dimension to my argument. While she was not present in the room, I was told by the other guests that she was treated with special respect and hospitality in her neighbourhood and during her visits to relatives. Accordingly, she was received and welcomed by the host as if a holy person was visiting them. When I asked if this was personal or would apply generally to women who chose not to marry, the oldest woman in the room, around 70, called Heçîye (meaning female Haji in Kurdish)² explained in a firm and concise way:

“She could have married and had her own family, but she didn’t. […] She sacrificed herself, […] her life, to her parents and her younger siblings. This shows her good heart and conscience. Everybody needs to respect her for what she has done […] Let her go to heaven.”

**Structural links between kin: Solidarity and hierarchy among women**

Another dominant theme repeated throughout the talks with the participants, especially in the light of observations, is the crucial role women play as structural links between kinship groups in societies where family and kinship are the fundamental institutions of everyday life. In the context of locals’ hospitality, I was not allowed to stay at a
hotel throughout my weeks of stay, staying at different houses, sometimes with distant relatives, sometimes locals that I met during the visits. They are usually very insistent on this and staying with them enriched my data through observations day and night. Throughout my stay, in every different household, I observed that the woman as simultaneously daughter, sister, wife and mother acts as an ‘information-broker’, mediating social relations within the family and larger society. Based on the informants’ responses, it is apparent that women often have a wide network of interpersonal relationships leading to more power in relation to their husbands. For example, 49-year-old Šikirye, who seemed very confident and outspoken, said:

“While my husband is busy with earning money, I have close contact with many people […] I am in touch with the relatives or surroundings; I know them better than him […] I always hear news about anyone in any families in our town much quicker than him. He learns it from me.”

It was evident that she had a large network in the whole province, even in more distant neighbourhoods. During our talk, her telephone rang several times, and she even tried to arrange new participants for this study. Šikirye underlines the fact that she is the source of information for the whole family, including the extended family, and her husband needs this information to take action if required, even if it is something to do his own family. But she is usually in charge of taking action. When I asked what type of actions, she said even what to buy as a present (always golden jewellery) for newly married couples from his own family. She shrugged and said, “how on earth would he know what to buy or how much to spend? I know his family, the traditions […] the customs better than him”.

In this sense, my observations, and interactions with the participants throughout the research reveal that men do not seem to conceive of ties other than those of kinship linked with common residence, whereas among women, the mere fact of belonging to the same sex seems to be enough to establish active solidarity. Almost all of the women interviewed confirmed that they financially supported women in need and provided moral support, including providing voluntary childcare to the women in their circles, irrespective of blood relationships. In this sense, women form their own exclusive solidarity groups, and these groups exercise considerable social control (Cornwall, 2007). Also, by seeking alliance and support from other women in the community, women achieve high social status in that community and, consequently, exercise ‘influence’ over decisions. In this position, the women influence decision-making about alliances, set up marriage relations, and inform male members of the household what is going on in other homes. The ‘home’ in question here is not that of the nuclear family, but of the wider family group. For instance, 55-year-old Fatim, who seemed to be the main authority in the entire household during my stay in their house, says:

“I have always watched over the poor or widowed women all the time. Apart from supporting them financially if I can through zakat,3 I have done a quantity of matchmaking to make sure these women are taken care of by their husbands. I even arranged several men in my own family for widowed or deprived women that I knew.”
Throughout my two-day stay at Fatim’s house, I only saw her cooking with the help of daughters and daughter-in-law, not doing any other household chores apart from taking care of the grandchildren. When I asked Rojda, the daughter in law, about Fatim’s interest in taking care of her two small children, Rojda said this was normal. “All grandmothers parent their grandchildren, this is normal here, not because they see it as a job but because they love them. Also, they are more experienced mothers […] My aunts or even my husband’s aunts take care of my children when I need it or sometimes, I don’t even ask, and they just feed them”. Apart from childcare support, especially by those in their 50 s and above, the ties I observed between women, regardless of age or generation, constituted the core of the extended familial network, through which they borrow money and lend important non-monetary resources, if necessary.

Hidden power and autonomy: Women, decision-making and access to resources

Early anthropological literature broadly described autonomy as the degree of access to and control over material and social resources within the family, in the community and in the society at large (Dixon-Mueller, 1978). Later it was defined as “the capacity to obtain information and make decisions about one’s private concerns and those of one’s intimates” (Dyson and Moore, 1983). However, its definition has been broadened over time, and additional characteristics have been included. While to Mason (1986) women’s autonomy is the control over household and societal resources, Doan and Bisharat (1990) argue that it is their bargaining power within household power relations. Jejeebhoy and Sathar (2001) define it in its broadest sense and argue that ‘autonomy’ consists of access to knowledge and information, decision-making authority, freedom of movement, and access to and control over resources. In this context of multiple definitions, there are dimensions of ‘autonomy’ which cannot be measured, as it often was, using a single observable characteristic, such as women’s education or labour force participation rates, as an approximate indicator (Agarwala and Lynch, 2006). It can be applied to women’s ‘power’ over decisions and access to and control over resources within the household and wider social network, incorporating participation in economic decisions (e.g., to buy or sell a property or launch a business) and child-related decisions (e.g., choice of school or whether to take a sick child to a medical facility). It is believed that under patriarchal family and social systems, men generally control the resources and, therefore, maintain control over the family and social opportunities (Mason, 1986). However, by re-evaluating the notion of ‘power’ in relation to ‘autonomy’, we can specify ethnographically those situations in which women can, and do, exercise influence over men and their society. Women who have little say in the public sphere or formally withing communities or organizations can have more say in the neighbourhood and kinship networks or within the household, which is particularly important for women’s empowerment and autonomy in developing societies as they “occupy that decision-making space” (Rowlands, 1995: 87).

In addition, ‘resources’ in the family context can broadly include not only economic resources (land, labour, food, money), but also other types of resources, such as ritual
knowledge, specialist skills, informal rights, and information within the family, in the community and in the society at large, and control of such resources must be taken into account (Dixon, 1992). The principles of control and protection were granted to the women, whether as daughters, wives, or mothers. All of this is hidden behind the facade of public male dominance. Several interviewees made observations such as “they say men are the leader of the house but this is not true” (Ayşê, 59, female), “in our culture, women know the best of all” (Mehet, 49, female), “in fact, our women have a powerful role in our culture” (Mihemed, 42, male), “Kurdish women are, in fact, strong” (Yaşar, 48, male), which suggest that they feel the need to correct false perceptions of Kurdish women’s lack of power, or they think Kurdish women’s agency in daily life is not visible or misrepresented. When asked why a woman is perceived as powerful by others, the responses were either related to Kurdish culture valuing women or trust for their character or judgments. Almost all female interviewees talked about the fact that they could tell their husbands, brothers, and sons whether to buy or sell property because they are trusted. Most of the time they are not only decision makers in arranging their children’s marriages and distributing family property, their advice or recommendations were taken into account regarding new business ideas or development of existing businesses. When asked about the reason for women’s influence on decisions, the participants’ responses bring us to certain skills attributed to women. In the participants’ own terms, these include being ‘smart’ (biagil), ‘decisive’ (biyardar), ‘hard-working’ (jehati), ‘knowledgeable’ (zana), ‘instinctive’ (pêhisên xurt) and ‘fair’ (dadmend). Certainly, women have to prove themselves with regard to these traits in order to gain trust over time. For instance, 68-year-old Hayat, with 5 children and 13 grandchildren, says:

“On our side (referring to the Kurdish region in general), being smart and hardworking matters not if you are man or woman. When I came as bride to my husband’s family, I was young and inexperienced. I could not have my voice heard. But in time, it has changed. My husband’s household realized that I am a clever and capable woman with the way I was conducting the house and family management. They respected my opinions on family decisions although I was not even related to them […] My father used to take my recommendation before I got married. Then, I started to have more say than my brothers-in-law when my in-laws saw that I was smart and hard-working. My father-in-law trusted my instincts and ideas”.

My observations during my interaction with Hayat, her family and even the visitors confirmed the statement she made above. She was well-respected and the centre of the attention in the room full of guests and family members. Through her questions addressed to others, it seemed that she knew life details of the people talking to her and confidently gave specific advice to each of them. Childcare seemed to be one of the biggest chores, especially for grandmothers. When asked if she is limited by childcare, 65-year-old Azya, living with her six grandchildren in a big house with a yard, seemed to be offended by the question. In a heated tone she declared that she was not secluded and could be present with guests, including men, sit at the same table with them and receive guests when the husband was not home. She added:
“For me, husbands only bring money into the house, he is doing trade with Iraq. Sometimes he goes to Iraq with the driver of our lorry, and he is not home for days. He would not know anything about the needs of the family […] He gives a sum of money on a regular basis, and I distribute the money according to the needs […] He would not know what is best for our children or anyone else in the family. Men do not know. We know.”

As the husbands do not check on their wives’ expenditure, women usually save up money with the sum allocated for the management of the house and also gain power and independence with these savings. Several women interviewees confirmed that they put some money or gold aside for bad days and underlined the fact that they are free to do anything they want with the money they save. Their husbands or fathers would not ask how much money they had or ask them to give it to them. Accordingly, it is important to take into consideration women’s acquisition of material resources through their husbands. Salem (2018), in her ethnographic work on the domestic resources of married Egyptian women, underlines how matrimonial transactions enhance married women’s power. It is possible to interpret these facts from a fixed point of view, focusing on husbands’ authority as the ones who support the family financially, and to argue that despite the wives’ control over their children and over the household in general, they remain the inferior partner. However, I do not subscribe to this view. The informal decision-making authority of women who are not employed in paid work (not just over routine household decisions or day-to-day activities but big decisions of interest to all family members) and their influence over the future of their sons and daughters should be considered as agency and a source of empowerment. The findings of this study with regard to decision-making/agency at individual and household level have important implications in that the family is a significant unit in the socio-economic structure of a Kurdish rural community, and, therefore’ who holds ‘power’ within that unit must have important consequences for the distribution of power within Kurdish society as a whole. While cautioning against the pitfalls of both under and overvaluing agency, the actions resulting in the agency of Kurdish women in Şırnak I met can be considered as “constrained choices” (Connell, 1997); however, with this sample study, I want to raise awareness for the fact that if the ethnographic perspective is not limited for various reasons, one can see that these women’s agency can be found in hybrid forms, even if their agency is spatially confined to the invisible (private) realm.

**Conclusion**

This study shows that Kurdish women in Şırnak complement and confirm the essentialist notions of ‘non-working’ housewives and mothers put forward by urban-oriented, middle-class feminists and social scientists who too often rely on a patriarchal capitalist political economy and education system, subjected to western ideologies of gender identities and relations. All of these factors suggest that theories on women’s social position in their domestic environment, their exclusion from activities in the larger world, their lack of economic autonomy, and their paucity of public, formalized roles, have only limited applicability in contexts such as Şırnak. Kurdish women and their power within their society and kinship groups should be viewed differently than women in western culture.
or other cultures, because they are not necessarily ordered around the same principles; ones mainly imposed by ‘modernity’. To do otherwise ignores the possibility that differences between women and the type of power that women can and do hold and apply, can and do in fact exist. Based on this study, I argue that women can be involved in making decisions through informal channels, especially through their influence on brothers, sons, and other male members of their matrilineage (Fogelson, 1990). Control over social resources (including knowledge, power, and prestige) within the family, in the community and in the society at large (Dixon, 1987) should be considered as significant as control over material resources such as food, income, land and other forms of wealth.

It is important to note that the analysis is valid for the locals of Şırnak who have not left their lands irrespective of the decades of conflict between Kurdish guerrillas and the Turkish state. However, the relevant literature suggests that in cases of forced migration, most or all material and social ties at the place of origin are typically severed, and forced migrants are left with little or no personal connections with their place of origin (Hampton, 1998). Similarly, forced migrations, evacuations of villages, the pressure and assimilative politics of the Turkish state, have affected the structural position of Kurdish women and led to their exclusion from the power hierarchy within their communities (Çelik 2005; Bahar 2017). The environment of violence and insecurity has increased the vulnerability of Kurdish women in their own region (Diner and Toktaş, 2010). Furthermore, the new environment in cities to which they have moved, usually small, very crowded city apartments, limits these women’s roles, especially those of older migrant women in the household. Comprehensive research and analysis are needed to delve deeper into the impact on Kurdish women’s autonomy in the household and its community circles when they are separated from their native environment. It is important to analyse the impacts of urbanization, where women are taken out of their familiar familial and social context.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 788651.

Notes

1. Throughout my recent visits to Şırnak, I have not encountered any recent polygamous marriages. The most recent one, as I mentioned, occurred two decades ago. I was told by several participants that the decrease is related to the dominance of pro-Kurdish political parties in the region, and such marriages are not welcomed by local people any longer.
2. “Haji” refers to Muslim people who have been to Mecca as a pilgrim. In some cases, these people are only addressed with this title not their names.
3. A type of payment made annually under Islamic law on certain kinds of property and used for charitable and religious purposes, one of the Five Pillars of Islam.
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