

# Gender, Citizenship and Resistance in Minoritized Communities

Conference organized by Centre for Gender Research (UiO) and Fafo Research Foundation

Date: 11-12 March 2024

Location: Tøyen Hovedgård, located in the Botanic Garden. Trondheimsveien 23B, Oslo.

## Abstracts

### Day 1

#### **1. Palestine Embodied: Naqab Bedouin women's everyday resistance in Israel**

*Sophie Richter-Devroe, Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Qatar*

This presentation focuses on Palestinian Bedouin women's everyday resistance through oral poetry and song in the Naqab/Bi'r as-Saba' region. Today this often-forgotten Palestinian community consists of more than 280.000 Arab Palestinians. They hold Israeli citizenship and, after waves of forced displacement at the hands of the Israeli regime, reside today predominantly in the Northern Naqab region.

Oral traditions, such as poetry and song, form a central part of Bedouin – and more generally Arab and Middle Eastern - social worlds and interactions. They are performed in everyday as well as in more ritualized settings. My ethnographic research in the Naqab (2014-2016), including interviews with female and few male singers, as well as participant observations and audio/video-recorded fieldwork material of their oral repertoires, brings to light the important counter-Zionist local knowledges on land, history, politics and people of Historic Southern Palestine contained in these songs.

While presenting and analyzing some of the lyrics, my aim in this presentation is to go beyond the word, and trace, in line with performance and ethnomusicological studies, the social and political role that oral traditions play in Palestinian Bedouin women's everyday native resistance and survival. Relying on performance studies scholar Diana Taylor's (2003) notion of the oral and performed "repertoire", which she contrasts to the "the archive" of literacy and textuality, I understand oral traditions as embodied systems of learning, teaching and storing native memories, knowledges and life worlds. Naqab Bedouin women continue to recite, perform and adapt their songs and oral poetry within and against a context of continuous violent Israeli settler-colonial policies aimed at "eliminating the native" (Wolfe, 2006). Through their oral and embodied repertoire and performances, they not only resist the colonization of their bodies and minds, but also involve, teach and transmit their own corporeal language to members of their indigenous community – an embodied language which remains largely indecipherable to the colonizer.

## **2. Performing heritage and citizenship in minoritized communities: combined capabilities, moral imagination and empowerment of Kurdish women**

*Joanna Bocheńska, Jagiellonian University, Cracow*

In this presentation I focus on several practices of Kurdish women in Turkey and Iran which aim at protecting and revitalising their cultural heritage but at the same time offer new spaces for women visibility and participation. Language revitalisation, collecting folklore, writing literature in Kurdish or practicing art can be viewed as combined capabilities (Nussbaum 2000) which enable women to do important work for their minoritized communities and, simultaneously, to enter worlds which were until now preserved only for Kurdish men. They do it in a spatial sense – for example as photographers entering places preserved for men to take pictures there, and metaphorically - by searching for their personal and artistic development in order to challenge the men's dominated fields such as literature or art.

Heritage studies focus largely on memory-work and often ignore imagination. Yet recent neurological science research shows that memory and imagination are closely intertwined and dependent on each other (Miller 2007). In this study heritage performance is perceived as an act of communication and empowering experience, because “the real moment of heritage when our emotions and sense of self are truly engaged is in the act of passing on and receiving memories and knowledge” (Smith 2006, 2). Such acts evoke *moral imagination*, which fills the gaps between abstract ideas, memories and observations (Steiner, 2000), invites awareness of the various dimensions embedded in a situation and impacts our actions (Nussbaum 1990; Werhane and Moriarty 2009). Hence imagination hosts, refurbishes and recreates our memory and constitutes an invisible operational space for heritage performances, artistic engagement and women empowerment.

Furthermore, by following Engin Isin (2008, 2009, 2019), Paula Hildebrandt and Sibylle Peters (2016, 2019), I connect heritage performance with *acts of citizenship* and *performative citizenship* because the practices of Kurdish women encompass actions by which they constitute themselves as a new performing body. They inhabit a space of a legal and political fiction and, only by enacting this fiction, they gradually force the existing order to perceive them as real and their claims as justified. They perform and fake an alternative reality in order to impose the desired change on the political world surrounding them. Being engaged in artistic activity stirs their moral imagination and thus invites them to imagine themselves acting in different contexts which were until now unfamiliar or even scary to them. Even though such process of imagining is often designed to create fiction, it empowers women to act in their everyday lives too. Hence, performing heritage and practicing art invites women to continually cross the border between fiction and real, private and public and to create a new scene of negotiations with the patriarchal society and the legal system that oppresses them.

### **3. Queer Postcolonial Sovereignty and Sexual Citizenship in the Dutch Caribbean**

*Dr. Wigbertson Julian Isenia, University of Amsterdam*

This paper delves into the concept of sexual citizenship within the fragmented, postcolonial context of the Dutch Caribbean, a region often characterized as 'queer' due to its complex sovereignty and the backdrop of historical and neo-colonial complexities. Through an analytical lens, this research scrutinizes the evolving legal frameworks and cultural practices that shape the identities and rights of LGBTQIA+ communities within this distinct postcolonial setting. It traces the historical trajectory of constitutional reforms and citizenship paradigms since 1954, emphasizing the asymmetrical interdependencies between the Netherlands and its Caribbean territories. Moreover, this investigation reveals how cultural practices and legal structures collaborate and conflict, thereby shaping the lived experiences of same-sex desiring and trans\* individuals. An in-depth analysis of cultural practices—including public performances, civic engagement, and the negotiation of social spaces—illuminates how these practices reflect, contest, and ultimately reshape the understanding of sexual citizenship and belonging. By focusing on the unique socio-political landscape of the Dutch Caribbean, this paper offers a nuanced perspective on sexual citizenship, advocating for a reimagined and inclusive approach that acknowledges the complex, 'queer' nature of sovereignty and community dynamics in the region.

### **4. Affective citizenship and activist placemaking: small-scale activism in Kurdistan**

*Wendelmoet Hamelink, University of Oslo*

In this presentation, I explore how small-scale projects in Kurdistan create alternative affective spaces for exercising and performing citizenship. During our research, we investigated projects set up by women and queer people that are meant to support and empower women and LGBTQ+ persons in their own environment and networks. Women and queer people involved in such activities often try to operate outside of the existing political and civil society organizations, as they are dissatisfied with the achieved results, do not want to be part of such organizations, or define their activities as different from what such organizations do. They do not necessarily define themselves as activists but have a strong intrinsic motivation to change people's lives.

I argue that the motivation with which many undertake these activities emerges from the everyday reproduction of inequality for women, the LGBTQ+ community and for Kurds. Due to the continuous reproduction of such inequalities in daily interactions, the research participants were aware of the long-term emotional connection and investment it takes to make changes on a micro-level. With small-scale actions, they intervened in everyday affective practices and interactions between people. Moreover, borrowing from queer theory, I argue that these personal encounters entail *activist placemaking* (Drysdale et al.

2022). Women and LGBTQ+ persons (re)claim, (re)invent and (re)create certain spaces as areas of new involvement and activism.

These affective practices and activist placemaking made the research participants engage and transform community practices from below (Sheller 2012), both through inward and outward facing engagements (Zielke 2021). First, they open up spaces for others to be active and therewith create new spaces from within. Secondly, they use affective strategies through which women and LGBTQ+ persons connect to each other and spread ideas, skills, patterns of behavior, not through institutional or state structures, but through creating new meaningful connections in their local environment. Thirdly, they expose others in society to unexpected, unknown or unusual gendered acts, which changes gender dynamics from a grassroots level. And lastly, Kurds increasingly have cross-border encounters with people from different regions, making new transregional connections that change both local and international positions and imaginations about women's and queer lives.

As a conclusion, despite their invisible character, small-scale grassroots initiatives have a great potential to change gender dynamics and encourage citizenship practices that actively transform Kurdish communities from within, and also have an outward effect that can change Kurdish lives within a mostly hostile nation-state environment.

### **5. Agency in queer spaces in Berlin. A sociological study on practices of precarious subjects.**

*Esto Mader, Freie Universität Berlin*

This qualitative study in activist queer spaces in Berlin asks how agency and collectivity of precarious subjects is produced. In queer spaces, marginalized subjects can feel strong. By means of an imagined basic consensus and a specific affective-aesthetic logic, a feeling of home is created. The ascribed "being different" can be lived out, networks can be established and each other can be celebrated. However, such spaces are also structured by hierarchies, internal scene norms and exclusions, which leads to constant negotiations. In particular, negotiations about security, participation and visibility are characteristic of such spaces. For this study, Esto Mader works with a diffractive methodology to show the dynamics of queer spaces.

### **Day 2.**

### **6. The invisibility of Kurdish women's activism in Rojhelat: Roots and consequences**

*Azad Hajiagha, Jagiellonian University, Cracow*

In recent years, despite the dedicated attention researchers have afforded to the study of Kurds and the agency of Kurdish women in the Middle East, a discernible disparity emerges when addressing the Kurdish issue in Iran, particularly concerning Kurdish women's activism.

Furthermore, research texts authored by Iranian academics in the field of women's activism exhibit such a shortcoming. Conversely, within literature produced by Kurds themselves, primarily by political leaders in the form of memoirs or biographies, a conspicuous scarcity persists in the representation of Kurdish women. When such representation occurs, it is often confined to their involvement in armed movements during the specific historical period of 1979-1988. How can we elucidate the reasons for the invisibility of Kurdish women's activism in Rojhelat?

With the inception of the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the establishment of religious governance, the political and social landscape for women underwent profound transformations. In contrast to the Pahlavi regime, the perspective of the nascent political system actively directed women towards the private sphere, metaphorically depicting them as a "gem in the shell." Throughout the 8-year Iran-Iraq war, women predominantly occupied the public spheres through roles such as "mothers of Islamic soldiers" or when there arose a necessity to embody the ideals of the revolution. This trajectory underwent a significant shift with the commencement of the period of political reforms in Iran (1997-2005). During this phase, marked by escalating struggles, women bolstered their presence in the public sphere.

Despite these circumstances, the activism of Kurdish women in Iran, except for a brief period coinciding with their limited involvement in armed organizations (1979-1988), remained predominantly invisible. A retrospective analysis underscores that the religious stands of the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly in safeguarding women within the private sphere, have further entrenched the more or less patriarchal structure of Kurdish society. The government's security-oriented perspective towards Kurdistan, persisting even during periods of reformism, manifested as hindrances to women's social and political involvement. Moreover, in this timeframe the struggles and demands of Kurdish women were dismissed by female activists at Iran's centre, as these demands were perceived to encompass Kurdish identity and separatism. Consequently, when certain elite women, primarily situated in major urban centres, initiated socio-political endeavours, Kurdish women's efforts were deliberately overlooked.

This article aims to elucidate the factors contributing to the invisibility of Kurdish women's activities. Derived from interviews with women civil activists from Rojhelat and the Diaspora, these conversations underscore three central factors: the political-religious atmosphere of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the more or less patriarchal structure of Kurdish society, and the marginalization of Kurdish women activists, as articulated by central Iranian activists and feminists. These elements collectively exert a substantial influence on the invisibility of Kurdish women's activities in Rojhelat. Nevertheless, the lived experiences of Kurdish women spanning four decades, reveal that, despite the invisibility of their struggles, they effectively represented the demands of Kurdish women. This representation was accomplished through the creation of an intersectionalist discourse, concurrently challenging the religious sovereignty of the central government and the entrenched patriarchal attitudes within Kurdish society. Kurdish women managed to articulate the demands of their community, thereby enhancing their visibility in the public sphere.

## **7. Rethinking violence, emerging subjects: Indigenous perspectives in Central America**

*Dr Silvia Posocco, School of Social Sciences, Birkbeck, University of London*

The paper focuses on contemporary analyses of violence in Central America – and Guatemala more specifically – to foreground the contribution made by Indigenous perspectives in reframing debates on struggles over rights and citizenship locally and transnationally. The paper outlines how emerging frameworks that draw directly on Indigenous epistemologies and Indigenous forms of resistance and social critique profoundly problematise assumptions regarding the subject of rights – most notably anthropocentrism – and related horizons of citizenship, as well as distinctions between domains of knowledge and action in subaltern contexts marked by multiple cycles of extractivism and dispossession. The paper considers how this reframing of violence connects to analytics that re-centre difference in multiple intersecting processes across scales to implicate – and redefine – gender, sexuality and sexual politics in particular ways. The paper closes with a reflection on the challenges and possibilities inherent in comparative and transnational analytics that seek to reenergise debate and exchange on locally situated – and far-reaching – shifting domains of struggle.

## **8. Life as resistance: resilience of Kurdish women activists in Rojava**

*Marcin Skupiński, University of Warsaw and Carcow University of Economics*

In the global leftist and feminist imaginary, the region of Rojava (albeit the current official name of the non-state entity Rojava is DAANES: Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, reflecting the multi-ethnic nature of the autonomous areas) became associated with iconic images of women fighters in war against the so-called Islamic State. This is a simplification that has been criticized by feminists and Kurdish women challenging romanticization or even sexualization of women with guns. Despite those valuable critiques, less militant faces of the revolution received less attention from both journalists and scholars – a trend which only recently seems to change with new works based on fieldwork in the region.

Although the female army (YPJ) and police force form the backbone of the proclaimed women's revolution in North-East Syria (NES) I will argue that much slower and perhaps more important change is happening in wider society where patriarchal norms are still strong but women tend to take more prominent roles and appear more frequently in the public space. In my paper I focus on everyday life and civil activism, using the interviews and conversations I had with members of the administration, local NGO workers, University students and staff based mostly in or around the city Qamishlo.

While I'm not focusing on soldiers, I will explore the impact of civil war on my interlocutors focusing particularly on actions of the Turkish state, that are dubbed "special warfare" in the discourse of the Kurdish Freedom Movement and could be variously viewed as forms of necropolitics or ecocide. A specific set of measures aimed not for the physical extermination of the, particularly Kurdish, local population but rather aimed at rendering all areas unliveable

in order to break the support for the political project of DAANES and possibly change demographics of the region.

This dire situation, I will argue, makes the decision to stay or return to the region an act of resistance of its own, which in turn influences emotional or even affective engagement for the social change in NES.

### **9. Sámi feminism, ethnographic refusal, and Indigenous resurgence: Why looking at epistemic privileging, power asymmetries, and failures of implementation of Indigenous knowledges in governance systems and decision-making processes is good feminist practice**

*Lena Gross, Centre for Sami Studies, The Arctic University of Norway and NIKU*

In a conversation about Sámi feminism, Sámi scholars Ina Knobbloch and Rauna Kuokkanen discuss how the focus of white liberal feminism in the Nordics on gender discrimination/equality leads to an oversight of urgent matters concerning colonial structures of dominations. This means that “when Sámi women talk about reindeer herding laws, global capital encroaching on their traditional territories, or the ability to teach the Sámi language to their children, these are not seen or understood as feminist concerns” (Knobbloch and Kuokkanen 2015, 278). Non-Indigenous scholars have contributed to othering Sámi women and Sámi members of the LGBTQ+ community by either romanticizing, essentializing, or by victimizing them through pain narratives. Therefore, as a white non-Indigenous scholar, I argue that it is good feminist practice to exercise ethnographic refusal where the playing fields are not even (Simpson 2007, 2014, 2017). This means amongst other things to investigate intersecting structures and practices of power and to identify where gendered settler colonial assumptions are at play both in society and in one’s own understandings when writing about gendered aspects of Sámi activism and resistance. In this paper, I will therefore look at epistemic privileging, power asymmetries, and failures of implementation of Indigenous knowledges in (environmental) governance systems and decision-making processes and their consequences when talking about the role of gender in Sámi resistance to land fragmentation and resource exploitation on reindeer herding territories.

### **10. Territories of Resistance and Hope: Kurdish Environmental and Climate Justice Activism in the Context of Indigenous Movements**

*Dobrosława Wiktor-Mach, Cracow University of Economics*

Indigenous environmental justice has become an important approach to understanding the social mobilisation of indigenous peoples in defence of their natural ecosystems, practices, and epistemologies. So far, academic interest in indigenous “territories of resistance” (Zibechi 2012) has mostly focused on Latin America or South Asia (Guha and Juan Martínez-Alier 1997, Peet and Watts 2004) while the Middle East has long remained “terra incognita” in this field (Sowers 2018). Recent debates, however, have opened up new avenues of research and

understanding. One of these is the interest in the trend to decolonise the study of environmental justice, exploring the connections between local communities and their natural environment, including issues of identity, justice and gender (Álvarez and Coolsaet, 2018). Another is the relevance of the indigeneity perspective to the Kurdish case. While some scholars and lawyers point to the ambiguity of the legal definition of indigenous people in the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (Crawford 2021), others point to the Kurdish self-identification with the concept of indigeneity (Demir 2021; Unal 2022). In this presentation, I will draw on these arguments and analyse Kurdish environmental and climate practices in relation to indigenous mobilisation in other parts of the world, posing questions whether and how we can integrate these discussions and why it matters.