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Nation in Conflict, Gender in Conflict

How do Syrian activists reflect on gender concepts challenged by the civil war?

While the Syrian nation is stuck in a state of crisis, so are the country's concepts of gender. They are destroyed and renegotiated by different political and social players. Women in Syria are actively participating in this process. The activists Suhair Atassi, Razan Zaitounh, Samar Yazbek and Mouna Ghanem are quoted on the topic of changing gender concepts in the civil war. This article seeks to contribute to a post-colonial discussion on gender in the Arab World, using the voices of four Syrian women as primary sources in this article. They can be found online and in English language. Continuing the work of my Bachelor Thesis, their stories are supported by different sources providing additional information about the person speaking and their work as activists. All of the four have been publicly known figures in Syria before 2011. Their stories are being aligned by different secondary sources, such as a variety of scientific literature on gender in the Arab World, as well as a gathering of historical background information on the shaping of Syria before 2011 and different discourse analyses of German and English speaking media, as well as scientific publications on the Syrian civil war. The argumentation of this article follows three steps. Each is being composed by a theoretical statement on the interdependencies of nation and gender – based on post-colonial and feminist theories of scientists like Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeha and Joyce P. Kaufman – a comparison to the situation in Syria and the quotes and perspectives of the four activists.

The narrative of a nation is always a gendered narrative. To introduce this first point, it is argued that gender categories have been key factors in the shaping of different Syrian national identities. Formal spaces, like politics, academics or religion, have been dominated by men and informal spaces, like the family, households and social community work, by women. Women movements in Syria have struggled for decades with the absence of national civil rights, as different patriarchal family laws had been installed in each religious community in Syria. The Assad regime had officially proclaimed gender equality, while silencing all non-party organizations after the Damascus Spring in 2001 with the foundation of the Ba'ath Party's Women Union. Suhair Atassi, a Syrian activist and lawyer, refers to these times leading on to the protests in 2011, as to a life in a “kingdom of silence”.

The second theoretical statement explored in the cause of this argumentation is that whenever the nation is in conflict, gender concepts are in conflict. Through destruction something new can emerge – through anarchy-like moments in time, long-lasting power structures can be

broken. In Syria, the first protests in March 2011 were marked by women and men demanding the release of their imprisoned children. Different sources agree upon the fact that women have been part of the revolutionary movements from day one, with gender usually being an important point in the narratives of the uprising. Female political players have been encouraging peaceful solutions to the conflict, not only as an opposition to the regime, but to any kind of typically male connoted violence. At the same time, women have emerged as leaders within families as well as in society. The activist Razan Zaitouneh was kidnapped in December 2013, right after she uploaded a video on YouTube in which she talks about the war in Syria and asks an international audience for support. Other activists appeared with their hair cut “short like a boy,” protesting to break the siege on the suburb of Homs in 2012, or publicly claimed in 2013 that “Syrian women are now fighting for their rights shoulder-to-shoulder with the men [...] There remains no room for feeling paralysed in these Arab revolutions”.

An unstable society trying to defend or rebuild itself often seeks to find stability in the supposedly never changing gender roles. But repeatedly, history has shown that once gender roles are transformed through conflict and war, lasting change becomes apparent in the way people perceive these roles and their stability. This final part of the argumentation leads to further conclusions: Experiencing the Syrian nation in an ongoing state of conflict has turned women into political activists, fugitives living in exile, witnesses, partners, opponents, leaders, and lost ones. Some have been creating a whole discursive body of media material, presenting new concepts of gender identity, which could be used when organising a post-war society. The writer Samar Yazbek claims that “the real revolution will be the feminist revolution that will start when the war is finally over”. At the same time, others, like the politician Mouna Ghanem, fear that the ongoing escalation of violence is lastingly “destroying identity, dignity and the social fabric of families and communities”. Whatever the outcomes of the conflict will be, these stories are expressions and products of the gender re-negotiations taking place; when Syria's national narrative will be written anew, these stories could make history.