While traditional gender norms can be strengthened during armed conflict – men embracing combat roles and women caretaking roles – such times can also create a shift in gender dynamics as women are forced to take on roles not (stereo)typically assigned to them. For women, conflict can thus be a site of subjugation *and* of new possibilities, it can present obstacles *and* opportunities.

Often, women in conflict are portrayed as powerless mothers, widows, caretakers, peacemakers and refugees. Those women who are actively involved in combat are either deemed to be defying cultural norms or they are often sensationalised as brave – but abnormal – warriors. These portrayals disregard the structural contributions that women make during conflict and in peace and reconstruction efforts. This research project contributes an ever-growing body of literature and policymaking that focuses on women’s leverage during conflict.

The region under study is Rojava. Rojava means `West` in Kurdish, and refers to the self-administered areas in the north of Syria. Since 2014 there has been a huge influx of journalistic attention on the region, largely due to the Kurdish female fighters of the YPJ (Women’s Protection Units) that are fighting against Daesh. This research arose from the want to understand more about women in Rojava than that portrayed in the media. Much of the literature on Rojava was either incredibly critical, or overly praising, and it appeared that there is little empirical evidence about the reality for women living there.

Policy wise, there is a common narrative by Western states to support women in conflict zones, yet in Rojava there is limited knowledge on what women’s role entails and thus how policies may be better tailored to their needs. Moreover, there is a tension between, on the one hand, the demand of various political actors, NGOs, and activist groups to support women in Rojava and, on the other hand, the hesitance among Dutch and international policymakers to engage with women-led initiatives due to concerns over political interests, and the reliability and inclusivity of these initiatives. This tension is linked to a more fundamental problem that policy makers face nowadays, namely if and how to engage with non-state actors that de facto govern certain areas. As will be explained, Rojava challenges dominant state-centric notions; the self-administration system in place goes as far as to actively critique the state model for fuelling oppression and patriarchal mentalities. Development assistance usually goes through states, and it is often disregarded that in many Fragile and Conflict Affected Settings (FCAS) non-state actors play a crucial role in local governance, social services, and security. These are the foundations on which we built upon for this policy-based research.

It is first necessary to briefly explain what and where Rojava is. Rojava is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious region in the north of Syria, de facto governed by the Self-Administration – a system implemented by the largest Kurdish political party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD). At the onset of the Syrian revolution, many of al-Assad’s forces withdrew from the north in order to focus their military attention in more needed parts of the country. This allowed the PYD, who were already organised, to take control of much of the region. They implemented a bottom-up system of governance based on the writings of Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdish PKK. The PKK is a leftist Kurdish organisation, that seeks Kurdish rights in Turkey. The PKK is listed as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, NATO, and many Western states. Focal to the Self-Administration system, is the central role women must play in local governance, security provision, and social services.

Historically in Syria (like with surrounding countries), the Kurds were discriminated against in favour of their Arab neighbours. So when they had the opportunity to re-gain their culture, language, and heritage, many Kurds in Rojava embraced this newfound freedom. As a result, since 2013, schools have introduced teaching in the Kurdish language, Kurdish festivities are now publically celebrated, and laws based on Sharia have been abolished. While this is a positive development for the Kurdish population, the Self-Administration has been accused of discriminating against other ethnicities, and those with differing political affiliations.

Through a qualitative research approach, over one hundred interviews were conducted, by Utrecht University researchers and a team of local researchers, in the Cizîrê canton of Rojava, in Iraqi Kurdistan, and in the Netherlands with Arabic, Kurdish and Christian civilians, officials from different Kurdish parties, humanitarian aid workers, and policymakers. This research sought to explore three things: firstly, what threats women in Rojava face ; secondly, what multifaceted roles women are playing in the realms of governance, social services, and security; and thirdly, how current Dutch and international policy can be better tailored to meet women’s needs. The findings, in brief, will be presented.

Firstly, this report demonstrates that women in the Cizîrê canton of Rojava face various threats. The most important threats identified by the respondents are physical violence due to the ongoing war, and a lack of resources due to the weak economy. SGBV and a lack of healthcare are also seen as important threats, and to a lesser extent concerns are raised with regard to education, ethnicity, political affiliations, and societal norms and traditions. It is vital that policymakers have an accurate understanding of the threats faced in conflict environments so that they can effectively address them.

Secondly, while the ongoing war in Syria is reported as one of the most important threats to the physical security of our respondents, as mentioned above it also enables new opportunities. This research has therefore investigated the perceptions on these new modes of governance and female-led initiatives. It was found that women are visible and active in local governance, social services and security. Overall, this is received positively across society, including across ethnicities. Organisations addressing SGBV are well known by the people that were interviewed, but at the same time these organisations are reported to suffer from a lack of resources. In terms of local governance, formal gender quotas have been implemented which ensure at least 40% participation of both genders. Further there is a co-leadership requirement meaning at all levels of governance there must be a man *and* a woman in leadership positions. And new women’s rights laws have been introduced that ban polygamy, see men and women as equal in court, and allow women to seek divorce. These are all positively received in society, but there is a concern that often women are placed in governance positions in order to fulfil these quotas but often they are not qualified to do so. With regard to security, the respondents generally praise women’s involvement in providing security services through the Asayiş (local police) and YPJ. Some respondents explicitly mention that women are better equipped to secure women, other respondents state men and women are both able to do this. Most members of the women’s only Asayiş that were interviewed claim that societal norms were hindering women’s involvement in the Asayiş. With regard to the YPJ some respondents object the idea of women fighting in the frontline, while others stress the braveness of the women in the YPJ and emphasized they could also fight. In general, women in the Cizîrê canton of Rojava are actively participating in the realms of local governance, social services, and security, and this is generally accepted, but there are cultural restrictions and traditional gender roles prevalent.

Third, for international NGOs it is difficult to engage with Rojava for a number of reasons. In particular, difficulties with border crossing, security, transferring funds and international politics, were identified as the main issues. One of the overarching problems is the alleged ties of the Self-Administration with the PKK and the Al-Assad regime, which further complicates the possibilities of supporting female-led initiatives in Rojava.

While there is ample attention for ‘local approaches’ and addressing ‘the local level’, it often remains unclear which locals should be included, and which locals should be excluded from such efforts. Furthermore, policy frameworks do stress how non-state armed actors can cause security threats for local populations, but they neglect that in some cases non-state armed actors have the capacity to govern, organise social life and address some – though not all – the needs of local populations. An important implication for policy makers who seek to address the security threats of civilians – including women – in FCAS, is the need to better adapt policy frameworks, approaches, and specific interventions to both state and non-state forms of governance.

Apart from widening the lens to governance beyond the state, this report has also shown how strategic and geopolitical considerations of external actors can trump the security needs of local populations. Development, as well as security interventions in FCAS, are generally mediated through a complex set of relationships between donors and national governments, regional governments, non-state armed actors, local elites and others. The case of Rojava shows how the seemingly shifting limits of external engagement with FCAS can have perverse consequences for women, children, and other vulnerable groups in armed conflict.