GENDERED ALTERNATIVES

Exploring women’s role in peace and security in the self-administered areas of Northern Syria

Policy Report

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**Abbreviations**

**BRHA** Board of Relief and Humanitarian Affairs

**CU** Christen Unie (Christen Union)

**Daesh** al-Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant)

**EU** European Union

**IAC** International Advisory Committee

**KDP** Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Democratic Party)

**KDPS** Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê li Sûriyê (Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria)

**KNC** Encûmena Niştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê (Kurdish National Council)

**NAP** Dutch National Action Plan

**NATO** North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

**NGO** Non-governmental organisation

**OECD** Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

**PKK** Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers’ Party)

**PvdA** Partij van de Arbeid (Labour Party)

**PYD** Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party)

**SDF** Hêzên Sûriyê Demokratîk (Syrian Democratic Forces)

**SGBV** Sexual and gender-based violence

**TEV-DEM** Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk (Rojava Movement for a Democratic Society)

**UN** United Nations

**UNDP** United Nations Development Programme

**UNICEF** United Nations Children’s Fund

**UNSCR** United Nationals Security Council Resolution

**YPG** Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People’s Protection Units)

**YPJ** Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (Women’s Protection Units)
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Executive Summary

This policy report is the end product of a six-month research project that focuses on bottom-up female-led initiatives in the realms of local governance, social services, and security in Northern Syria, referred to as Rojava. In particular, the role that women and women’s organisations are playing in the provision of security, social services, and local governance in this region are analysed in order to identify possible entry points for development organisations to support such local efforts. The main findings of this research are summarised in the following paragraphs.

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. Sexual and gender-based violence (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. From a human security perspective, these threats pertain to economic security, food security, health security, political security, personal security, and community security. For policy-makers and practitioners, this mapping illustrates the importance a contextualised understanding of the multi-faceted threats women face in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Settings (FCAS). This is vital knowledge in order to develop conflict and gender-sensitive programming aimed at addressing these threats.

Secondly, while the ongoing war in Syria is reported as one of the most important threats to the physical security of our respondents, it also enables new opportunities to govern and new female-led mechanisms that seek to address the various threats women face. This research has therefore investigated the perceptions on these new modes of governance and female-led initiatives. That exploration shows that women in Rojava are visible and active in local governance, social services, and security. Overall, this is received positively across ethnic backgrounds. However, political affiliations seems to be a restricting factor for participation in local governance and access to social services, thereby affecting perceptions on (the effectiveness of) female-led initiatives negatively. 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. With regard to security, the respondents generally praise women’s involvement in providing security services through the Asayiş (the local police) and Women’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, YPJ), but the involvement of women in the Asayiş and YPJ does not make women necessarily feel more secure. While 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 emphasised 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. This is generally accepted, but there are cultural restrictions and traditional gender roles prevalent.

Thirdly, 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 main issues. One of the overarching problems is the alleged ties of the Self-Administration with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK) and the al-Assad regime which further complicates the possibilities of supporting female-led initiatives in Rojava.

The report furthermore shows that most policy frameworks and approaches emphasise how civilians in FCAS face a wide range of security threats. In order to address these threats, a combination of strengthening fragile states and supporting local civil society organisations is commonly propagated. 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, these 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 – 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.

The relatively limited engagement of the Dutch Government with Rojava can be explained against this background. While it is formally justified as the result of the complicated situation in the region, concerns over ties between the PYD and the PKK, the difficulties of providing ‘neutral’ aid due to the PYD’s presence, and limited access to the region, among other things, the Dutch Government omits to mention how the
relationship with NATO member Turkey and the recent EU-Turkey refugee deal has affected the Dutch position towards the region. This prompts questions of how geopolitical concerns are balanced against the overriding objectives of humanitarian aid in conflict zones, namely to preserve life, prevent and alleviate suffering, and help to maintain human dignity in the face of natural or man-made disasters with adherence to the fundamental principles guiding humanitarian aid. This fundamental tension between strategic geopolitical concerns and the aim to provide humanitarian assistance to women in conflict zones illustrates how policy-makers manoeuvre in a complex field of stakeholders that are driven by different logics, justifications, and approaches that compete, or sometimes even directly contradict, each other.
1. Introduction

This research addresses the bottom-up, female-led initiatives in the realms of local governance, social services, and security in Northern Syria, referred to as Rojava hereon. The focal analysis is on the role that women and women’s organisations are playing in the provision of security, social services, and local governance in this region in order to identify possible entry points for development organisations to support such local efforts. Although a vast majority of victims in contemporary conflicts are women and children, it is critical that the agency of women and the multi-faceted roles that women play in conflict settings are not overlooked. 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 (Dutch National Action Plan 2016: 10). For women, conflict can thus be a site of subjugation and/or of new possibilities; it can present obstacles as well as opportunities.

Women in conflict are often 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 and they are often sensationalised as brave – but abnormal – warriors (DeGroot 2001: 26). These portrayals disregard the structural contributions that women make during conflict and in peace and reconstruction efforts. This research aims to contribute to the ever-growing body of research that focuses on women’s leverage during conflict, rather than on the victimisation that is so often portrayed. In this research, we adopt a contextualised and constructivist perspective, meaning that we are interested in the different experiences and perceptions of women-led initiatives in the realms of local governance, social services, and security. We aim to better understand how women with various backgrounds assess the threats they face in their daily lives and if and how they are addressed by these women-led initiatives. Our approach is first and foremost analytical, although we recognise our normative interest in gender equality and in giving a voice to civilians in the midst of ongoing conflict.

This research about the role of women in the Cizîrê Canton of Rojava arose from the increased media attention to the region and especially the female fighters. While there have been many journalistic and activist articles produced about women in Rojava, there is little academic research about their work. Moreover, although many Western states focus on supporting women in conflict zones, there is limited knowledge on what their role entails – in Rojava specifically – and how policies may be better tailored to their

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1 Rojava translates to “the West” in Kurdish and is commonly referred to by the Self-Administration, journalistic accounts, and a large part of the local population. The United Nations (UN) does not recognise Rojava’s autonomous existence and refers to the region as Northern Syria. The Dutch Government refers to Rojava as a de facto autonomous Kurdish Region (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken 2015). For a map with the areas of military control in Syria of August 2016, please see Annex 1.
needs. Moreover, and as will be demonstrated in this report, 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 policy-makers to engage with women-led initiatives due to concerns over geopolitical 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 territories. Indeed, from a policy perspective, the case of Rojava challenges dominant state-centric notions of development that many OECD countries adhere to. However, in many so called Fragile and Conflict Affected Settings, non-state actors may play a crucial role in local governance, social services, and security (Boege et al. 2009; Luckham and Kirk 2012; Stel and Frerks 2013; Arjona et al. 2015; Duyvesteyn et al. 2015). This tension between current policy frameworks and local realities will be interrogated throughout the report. Moreover, specific policy recommendations will be provided on the basis of our findings.

The report is structured as follows: firstly, the ongoing debate about what security and governance in conflict settings entails is outlined. This paper argues that security should be studied from a bottom-up perspective in which the role of non-state actors is acknowledged, moving away from a state-centric approach that so often dominates policies in FCAS. Following this, in chapter three the overall methodology of this research project is explained. Researching Rojava brings with it many challenges: the sensitive political background, the lack of academic research in the region, and the ever-changing conflict dynamics are just the most evident among these. Thus, conducting research on Rojava requires a high level of methodological flexibility. The methodology section details our approach, the composition of the research team, how we planned, conducted and analysed our data, and how we overcame fieldwork challenges and attempted to mitigate bias. The fourth chapter offers a contextual introduction to the emergence of the Self-Administration in Rojava. This entails a short history of the region and outline of the complicated political landscape, along with an analysis of the governance system that has been implemented and women’s position within this. In addition, at the end of this chapter, there is a review of the current Dutch and international policies that are in place to support local female-led mechanisms in conflict-affected settings. This review will focus on Security Council Resolution 1325, the subsequent Dutch National Action Plan (NAP) that aims to implement this Resolution, and regional specific Dutch policy tools to address gender and conflict. It will be demonstrated that women in the Cizîrê Canton of Rojava receive little to no external support and we reflect on why this may be the case. In the remaining chapters, we present our main findings.

Chapter five will begin by explaining what the main threats are that our respondents reported. These include: physical insecurity, economic hardship, gender-
based violence, and a shortage of healthcare. The following chapter proceeds to explore which female-led initiatives are currently trying to address these threats. There are three broad categories that partly overlap: local governance, social services, and security. Local governance encompasses the mechanisms in place that supposedly ensure women's rights, for example the co-chair system and gender quotas. The category of social services regards women's organisations that try to economically empower women and teach women's rights. Security extends from military forces on the frontlines to local police and traffic wardens. The inclusivity of and perceptions about the effectiveness of these initiatives are analysed. Chapter seven explains the work of NGO workers in Rojava with a focus on the numerous challenges that they face in such a complex and unstable environment. Their suggestions for policy recommendations are integrated in this report. A more fundamental issue in humanitarian aid will be put forward in this chapter as well: when international actors are unwilling to work together with non-state actors who are de facto in control of a certain territory, this has implications for civilians living in these areas. Lastly, chapter eight concludes on the main findings of the research and presents the final policy recommendations to different audiences, notably the Dutch Government, the Self-Administration, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), and policy-makers and practitioners in general.
2. The Policy Debate

Introduction
This chapter briefly outlines ongoing debates about support for civilians in FCAS, of which Syria is a pressing current example. It shows how in the post-Cold War era new thinking on security led to the emergence of the human security concept which sparked debates between and among academics and policy-makers and practitioners.\(^2\) The actual implementation of the propagated values of the human security paradigm has proven to be much more problematic. While the thinking on security has broadened in academia and policy circles, with regard to governance, Western policy-makers are much more hesitant to accept and act upon the assertion of academics that governance in FCAS is often provided beyond the state. The contention is thus not centred on if and what kind of threats civilians face in armed conflicts but rather on what are seen as legitimate mechanisms and actors to address these threats. The modes of governance in Rojava that were established since the start of the Syrian civil war question the notion of conventional statehood, but with regard to other aspects, such as gender equality and combating sexual and gender-based violence, the current international policy frameworks and local initiatives seem to have more common ground. Subsequently, this chapter discusses the emergence of the human security thinking, UNSCR 1325, the comprehensive approach to human security, and the tension between Western policy frameworks and local realities.

2.1 Human security
In the post-Cold War period, new thinking on security emerged in response to changing security threats (Weller 2014: 6). The Human Development Report of 1994 coined the term ‘human security’ to move from the narrow concept of national or state security, to a more people-centred and all-encompassing concept of security (UNDP 1994). It was argued that ideas about security had to change “from an exclusive stress on territorial security to a much greater stress on people’s security” (24). Human security does not ignore state security but treats it as equally important to individual security (Bajpai 2000). The state may thus be effectively securing the boundaries of its territory while at the same time causing insecurity to (segments of) the population (Terpstra and Dirkx 2015: 7).

In contrast to those emphasising traditional forms of state security, proponents of human security agree that the primary aim of policy and interventions should be the protection of individuals. There has, however, been a lengthy and ongoing discussion among the proponents of human security on the scope and purpose of the human

\(^2\) Notably, the call for proposals which this research addresses builds on the notion of human security.
The main question regarding its scope is which values and which threats should be of concern. Both broad and narrow conceptions have been used in policy and analysis. The seminal UNDP report defined human security in the broader way as “first, safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease and repression. And second, it means protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life – whether in homes, in jobs or in communities” (UNDP 1994: 23). The report continues with a comprehensive list of seven main values/threats:

- economic security;
- food security;
- health security;
- environmental security;
- political security;
- personal security;\(^3\)
- community security.

Apart from this broad definition of human security, there are also narrow definitions of human security that, for example, merely describe the concept as a “life of dignity” (3P Human Security 2011: 1). The UN General Assembly adopted a broader conception, however, specifying the common understanding of human security as an “approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people.”\(^4\) This common understanding is constituted by the broad definition of human security as freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom from indignity. The Dutch Government has also included human security as an important component of its international development and security agenda for many years (Weller 2014: 7).

Apart from listing human security threats, Bajpai (2000) argued that the academic focus should be expanded to the capabilities of protection. This should enable researchers to not only investigate security threats but also to identify the (lack of) capabilities in certain communities or regions to effectively counter their experienced threats to their human security. Questions that arise from this are: By what means can security be achieved? By who? And for whom? These questions will be addressed in the final section of this chapter.

### 2.2 UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security

Parallel to the rise of the human security concept, attention for women in armed conflicts increased. Resolution 1325 on *Women, Peace and Security*, adopted by the United

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\(^3\) Note that the operationalisation of personal security includes threats directed against women, such as rape and domestic violence.

Nations Security Council in 2000, urges Member States and other relevant actors involved in conflict to include women in peacebuilding efforts, promote women's rights, and prevent gender-based violence worldwide. It is crucial for women to be represented at all levels of decision-making processes (UNSCR 1325, 2000). UN Women was created by the UN General Assembly in 2010, building on the United Nations’ hypothesis that women’s increased participation in the political sphere will significantly improve social relations and trust in communities, and lead to stronger social institutions. The work done by UN Women increases the attention paid by policy-makers to women’s role in social services, such as healthcare and education, which is portrayed as advancing the reconstruction of society in post-conflict environments (UN Women 2012: 6). Moreover, UN Women addresses and challenges socio-economic constraints for women, which might prevent them from participating in political processes. Also, UN Women argues that as long as local governance remains the exclusive domain of men, gender equality will not progress.

In The Netherlands, the National Action Plan aims to implement the core values of UNSCR 1325 into Dutch foreign policy and prioritise women's participation and empowerment in conflict and post-conflict environments, including Syria. In particular, it promotes the distinct need of women's involvement in conflict prevention, resolution, peacebuilding, protection, relief, and recovery through civil society organisations, including grassroots women's rights movements (NAP 2016-2019). “Including women in peace and security efforts is not only the right thing to do; it also makes these efforts more effective and leads to sustainable solutions” (4). This assumption of the NAP 2016-2019 seems to imply that women have certain merits that men do not. Although we share the ideal of emancipation of women in all spheres of life, the assumption that involving women in conflict resolution would naturally lead to “more effective and sustainable peace and security efforts” has to be empirically scrutinised. Given the seemingly important role that women in Rojava play, this research creates the opportunity to evaluate this rather essentialised description of the potential roles of women and men in conflict.

2.3 Comprehensive approach
In policy circles it is commonly advocated that a holistic approach is needed in order to address the wide range of human security threats that women – and civilians at large – face in FCAS. From this perspective, peace, security, justice, and sustainable development are generally seen as interlinked processes, reflecting the assumption that “all good things come together”. This thinking gave rise to the notion of a “comprehensive approach” which propagates to address various security, governance, and socio-economic challenges by different stakeholders in a coherent manner (Weller 2014: 4). The Dutch Government, for example, has developed a policy framework called
the “Leidraad Geïntegreerde Benadering” (2014) which stresses the need for inter-departmental cooperation between the Ministries of Defence, Foreign Affairs, Economic Affairs, and Security and Justice (Weller 2014: 11). The document also repeatedly stresses that there can be “no security without development, and no development without security.”

This comprehensive approach to human security thus requires the involvement of a broad set of local and external actors to address the multi-faceted threats women and civilians at large face in FCAS. It raises questions, however, on who should be included and who should be excluded from these undertakings (Weller 2014: 12-13). Furthermore, it prompts questions on how local and external actors should engage and what role they can play. What is, for example, the role of local communities, governmental, non-governmental, and multi-lateral organisations? It especially raises questions at the local level, since the human security concept propagates a people-centred, bottom-up, and conflict-sensitive approach. Weller (2014: 12-13) emphasises that “host governments, communities, civil society, the private sector, traditional leaders and women’s, youth and victim groups – intrinsically have more information about their specific context than outside actors.” From a human security point of view, they are thus vital partners in working on human security. Yet, there are often fundamental differences in how Western policy-makers seek to address these threats and the local realities of civilians in FCAS. This tension will be explained in more detail in the following section.

2.4 Between policy frameworks and local realities

Policy-makers and practitioners with the ambition to address human security needs, and advance the position of women in FCAS, are often confronted with various dilemmas and sub-optimal options for engagement. Actors and networks that have strong local legitimacy – or at least a degree of control over a specific territory – may self-organise local governance, social services, and security in ways that are not always in line with a donor’s political views and values (Weller 2014: 16). Yet, there are ample examples where civilians heavily rely on such non-state actors to address the threats they face in their day-to-day lives. Debiel and Lambach (2009: 25) therefore emphasise that the political realities in such contexts can be understood neither through the lens of the modern state nor by essentialised portrayals of medieval times. Political and governance structures in such environments are rather defined by institutional hybridity and a mix of traditional and modern norms and practices (see also Boege et al. 2009). In this research, we consider the Self-Administration as a non-state governance actor. We analyse their role in relation to female-led initiatives in the realms of local governance, social service provision, and security.

A growing body of academic literature critiques the underlying assumptions and efforts of Western governments to implement a so-called ‘liberal peace’ in FCAS (van der
Borgh 2009). According to Richmond (2005: 193), the liberal peace thesis assumes that co-existence is enabled if certain ways of governance are adopted that roughly consist of a combination of political liberalisation (free elections and democratisation) and economic liberalisation (free market economies, privatisation, and trade liberalisation). In Rojava, however, the Self-Administration bluntly rejects the idea of an OECD-type state and a free market economy. Instead, it advocates “democratic confederalism” and an anti-capitalist economy as the way forward. On top of that, the PYD are seen by many as linked to the PKK – which is labelled as a terrorist organisation by the Turkish Government and the EU. On the other hand, the Self-Administration in Rojava has been praised by many journalists, activists, NGOs, and political actors for its efforts to advance the position of women across society. As such, a tension emerged between the demand by various political actors, NGOs, and activist groups to support women in Rojava and the hesitance among Dutch and international policy-makers to support female-led initiatives due to concerns over the Self-Administration, geopolitical interests, and the reliability and inclusivity of these initiatives (Bateson et al. 2016: 30). The case of Rojava thus prompts questions about if and how policy-makers can respond to alternative forms of governance, social services delivery, and security provision. Furthermore, as Weller (2014: 26) puts it, “To what extent and how can international actors work effectively with ... unconventional local partners?” The research findings presented in this report seek to contribute to this debate.
3. Methodology

Introduction
The central premise guiding this project has been to provide evidence-based knowledge on the role that women and women’s organisations are playing in peace and security in Rojava, with special attention for the domains of local governance, social services, and security. Given the volatile nature of the region, our methodological approach has required flexibility and a high level of gender- and conflict-sensitivity. This chapter outlines the followed methodology in detail. This chapter starts with an explanation of the adopted case study approach of this research. Thereafter, the central research question is explained, definitions of key terms and concepts are provided, and the composition of the research team is discussed. The chapter will then delve into the data collection process, opportunities and limitations during the fieldwork, sampling, and data analysis. Finally, the knowledge sharing activities of the project are listed and explained.

3.1 Case study approach
This policy-oriented research project has adopted a case-study approach. A case study is a “multiplicity of perspectives which are rooted in a specific context ... In these circumstances, the sample design is structured around context(s) rather than around a series of individual participants” (Lewis and Ritchie 2003: 52). Given the complex circumstances with regard to collecting data in Rojava that included challenges with regard to access and security, this approach was most suited to our research. It allowed us to follow a triangulated data collection process in which we used multiple sources of evidence such as structured and in-depth interviews, open-source documentation, and policy reports. In the complex context of Rojava, this helped us to produce a more balanced analysis. Since we are more interested in different perceptions and experiences than statistical analysis, we conducted qualitative rather than quantitative research. Through an empirical inquiry, we thus have collected qualitative data that gives specific insights into the perceptions and experiences of local women from various backgrounds, as well as other relevant stakeholders.

3.2 Research question
Following the objectives of the project and the case-study approach of this research, this report is centrally investigating:

How are bottom-up initiatives by women and women’s organisations in the realms of local governance, social services, and security, facilitating or hindering peace and reconstruction processes in Rojava from 2012 onwards?
This central research question has been broken down into six sub-questions. The sub-questions we explored prior and during the data collection in Rojava were:

1. What female-led local mechanisms have been established to address threats to women’s economic, personal, community and political security in Rojava?
2. How do these mechanisms contribute to, or hinder, peace and reconstruction in the region?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of these local mechanisms, and how are they perceived by civilians (especially women)?

Following the answers to first three sub-questions we have investigated the following sub-questions after the fieldwork:

4. How do current international policies address, engage, and respond to female-led mechanisms in the region?
5. What are the entry-points for development organisations to engage with these mechanisms?
6. How can these entry-points be utilised to tailor international responses to local needs in a conflict and gender-sensitive way?

3.3 A note on terminology

It is important to note that terminology and concepts in policy documents and academic literature with regard to peace, conflict, security, reconstruction, and gender are not used in a coherent way. Such notions are often used imprecisely and defined differently by various actors. These differences can be attributed to cultural, political, disciplinary, and epistemological backgrounds, as well as specificities in the situation on the ground (Frerks 2016).

Rather than presenting concepts such as war and peace as static and monolithic, this report aims to reveal the different “languages of description” and the multiple meanings attached to them by various actors. In defining the key terms and concepts of this report, the point of departure has hence been the recognition of this multiplicity of meanings. The most important terms and concepts of this research comprise gender, peace, conflict, local governance, social services, security, and reconstruction. Brief definitions are provided in a glossary in Annex 2, but we recognise that these may be used and interpreted differently in practice.
3.4 Research team

The research that is the basis of this report has been carried out through a collaboration between the Centre for Conflict Studies of Utrecht University and the Women’s Commission in Rojava. As will be explained in more detail in chapter four, the Women’s Commission is part of the Self-Administration that is currently in place in Rojava. The International Advisory Committee (IAC) that judged the quality and relevance of the proposal for this project rightfully pointed to “the potential conflict between the political role of the Women’s Commission and the objective to produce unbiased knowledge.” Since the start of the project, we have been well aware of this risk which was mitigated in large part by hiring four researchers independent from the Women’s Commission. One of these researchers works for SARA organisation, a second works for Weqfa Jin, two are not affiliated to any organisation, while a fifth researcher was part of the Women’s Commission. Through this composition of the research team in Rojava, the project benefited on the one hand from what the IAC praised as “a strong partner in a conflict context”, while at the same time the research was conducted as unbiased as practically possible.

In any case, the researchers in Rojava were essential in getting access to areas that remain blind spots for the majority of (foreign) researchers and policy-makers and crucial to actuate parts of the project that involved dealing directly with local women and women in leadership positions. Moreover, much of the research necessitated intimate knowledge of the human terrain and a high level of contextual sensitivity; working with local researchers that already had trustworthy contacts with community members helped to partly mitigate this difficulty. Through working with researchers from Rojava, we thus obtained access to highly relevant respondent groups, even if there was an inevitable trade-off in that we assume respondents sometimes gave socially desirable answers.

Since the research findings in this report are the result of a collective effort, it is important to point out that the gathered data has been subjected to various layers of interpretation. Therefore, it was essential to inform everybody in the entire research chain not only about the interview guides but also about the ideas behind the questions. Still some nuances undoubtedly were lost in the data collection phase. Yet, during the entire process steps have been taken to minimise the chance that this would happen, including a workshop on data collection, which will be discussed later on. The knowledge that has been produced through this collective process of data collection is thus

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5 The Women’s Commission is one of the twenty-two Commissions established in Cizîrê Canton.
6 Decision SRoL ARF2 – policy advice and tools (Assessment International Advisory Committee).
7 SARA organisation is a civil society organisation that addresses domestic and sexual violence.
8 Weqfa Jin is a women’s organisation that empowers women through educational and economic projects, as well as teaching them about their rights.
9 Ibid.
negotiated between respondents, field researchers, translators, and data analysts. This is vital to keep in mind when reading the report.

3.5 Policy and literature review
Prior to collecting data in Rojava, Iraqi Kurdistan, and elsewhere, we conducted an open-source policy and literature review to better understand the socio-political setting of the conflict in Syria, the specific threats women face in Syrian Kurdistan, and the local efforts made by women and women’s organisations to deliver social services, security, and governance (Bateson et al. 2016). Finally, we investigated the current international policy tools to support local bottom-up initiatives by women and women’s organisations in the realms of local governance, social services, and security. This phase of the project was concluded with an expert meeting on 25 July 2016 at The Hague Institute for Global Justice. Policy-makers, practitioners, and researchers provided valuable feedback on our preliminary findings. Their insights and our own policy and literature review helped to prepare the data collection in Rojava and Iraqi Kurdistan. This part of the research will be explained in detail in the following section.

3.6 Data collection
The data collection techniques that were used in Rojava and Iraqi Kurdistan consisted mainly of interviews and, to a lesser extent, focus group discussions and informal conversations. Through these data collection techniques, this research has investigated the implications of the context-specific threats women face; the perceptions of the strengths and limitations of local female-led efforts in delivering local governance, social services, and security; and the economic and political role of women in the region. In Rojava especially, the data collection has required a high level of methodological flexibility. Rojava is an incredibly volatile region where safety and access can at no time be guaranteed. The researchers from Utrecht University were therefore based in Iraqi Kurdistan during the fieldwork, a region which has remained relatively stable compared to Northern Syria.

Initially, an intensive four-day research capacity building workshop was planned for in Iraqi Kurdistan with the Syrian researchers and the researchers of Utrecht University in order to further discuss the aims of the research and the proposed methodology. After the fieldwork, it was envisioned the research team would gather again for a debriefing in Iraqi Kurdistan. However, due to increased political tensions between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê, KDP) and the PYD during the time of the fieldwork, the border between Iraqi Kurdistan and Rojava was closed, and consequently the Syrian researchers could not attend the workshop in Iraqi Kurdistan. The context chapter will explain the reasons behind and consequences of these increased tensions and thus the border closure.
Despite these tensions, during the first five days of the fieldwork, Utrecht University researchers did attempt to arrange permission for the border crossing by contacting several KRG representatives and the Dutch Consulate in Erbil. When, after the fifth day of attempting to arrange the border crossing of the Syrian researchers there was still no green light from the authorities in Iraqi Kurdistan, it was decided to conduct the research capacity building workshop through a video-conference. This situation was not optimal, but because we prepared several fieldwork scenarios at the start of the project we could quickly adapt to the new situation and still managed to achieve the objectives that were set for the research capacity building workshop. During two full days, the researchers from Syria and Utrecht University exchanged views on the aims of the project, how to conduct the interviews, possible challenges during the data collection, and ways to mitigate these challenges. Based on these mutual exchanges, some questions in the interview guides were adapted to better fit the local context, and a data collection strategy for the fieldwork in Rojava was agreed upon.\(^{10}\)

3.6.1 Rojava
The fieldwork in Rojava started the day after the research capacity building workshop. In order to obtain the necessary permissions to conduct the interviews in Rojava, the Syrian researchers went to the so called Humanitarian Office of the Self-Administration to provide them with a brief explanation of the project. Once the permission to conduct interviews was arranged, the Syrian researchers started to conduct the interviews. Subsequently, interviews were conducted in Serê Kaniyê, Derbesia, Qamişlo, Terbaspia, and Derik. A map of the sites where interviews were conducted is provided in Annex 3. There were two teams of two female researchers who conducted interviews with female respondents, while a male researcher conducted interviews with male respondents.

3.6.2 Iraqi Kurdistan
After the research capacity building workshop was concluded, the researchers of Utrecht University started their own fieldwork. In Iraqi Kurdistan, firstly, interviews were held with various NGO workers, and permissions to do interviews in refugee camps were obtained. The first permission was granted by the governorate of Duhok, after which the B.R.H.A. Office\(^ {11}\) in Duhok provided them with the necessary documents and contacts to enter the Domiz camp. This camp for Syrian refugees – mainly from Rojava – is the largest refugee camp in the region of Duhok. The camp, which opened in 2012, currently houses approximately 50,000 people in varying types of accommodation.

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\(^{10}\) The interview guides and the research guide are available upon request.

\(^{11}\) B.R.H.A. Office is the Board of Relief and Humanitarian Affairs. It is a governmental body within Duhok’s governance structure and, while working with NGOs, provides assistance to people of concern within the refugee camps. For more information: http://www.brha-duhok.org/
Challenges that were encountered during the interviews in Domiz were that the majority of interviews were conducted in the presence of (male) relatives of the respondents. Partly because of the small accommodation, and partly because of cultural norms, it was difficult to interview women separate from their children, sisters, brothers, parents, or husband. Most interviews in Domiz were thus conducted in front of family members, who overheard the conversation, or sometimes also actively took part in answering questions. On the one hand, this helped to get different perspectives on the subject matter, but, on the other, it sometimes hindered women’s ability to speak freely. This was especially the case for questions related to SGBV. Unsurprisingly, these questions were most controversial. Perhaps, with more time to build up rapport, these questions could have been explored in more detail.

An advantage of conducting interviews in Domiz was that the respondents arguably had more freedom to criticise the PYD and the Self-Administration in Rojava than the respondents interviewed in Rojava. Nevertheless, it has to be noted that the views on the PYD varied largely. While some – especially KDP supporters – were critical of the Self-Administration model, others praised it.

In addition to the interviews in Domiz, interviews were conducted with NGO workers, as well as mid- to high-ranking KRG officials. The former helped to better understand potential entry points for development organisations in Rojava, while interviews with the latter were useful in interpreting the complex relationship between the Self-Administration in Rojava and the KRG in Iraqi Kurdistan. This further helped to contextualise issues related to the border between the Iraqi Kurdistan and Rojava.

3.6.3 The Netherlands

After the fieldwork in Iraqi Kurdistan, the researchers of Utrecht University conducted interviews in The Netherlands with a representative of the Self-Administration in The Hague and various NGO and humanitarian aid workers with experience in Rojava. Some of these interviews were conducted in The Netherlands while others were conducted remotely with people in Rojava. A considerable number of NGO and humanitarian aid workers explained they could only talk to us off the record and under the condition we would neither publish their names nor the organisations they work for.

3.7 Sampling

The data that was collected in Rojava, Iraqi Kurdistan, and The Netherlands consists of a total of 96 interviews and three focus group discussions. At the data collection sites, respondents were selected on the basis of a defined research population (Boeije 2010: 35). The following section outlines who this research populations consists of and what sampling techniques were used to select them.
3.7.1 Rojava

In Rojava, the respondent groups consisted of:

1) providers of local governance, social services, and security;
2) users of these services; and
3) foreign actors

The first group of respondents encompasses officials from the Self-Administration, particularly those that are in co-leadership positions, police officers, and representatives from women’s organisations. Interviewing the providers of these services informed us about the organisations that are active in the realms of local governance, social services, and security, but it also gave insights into the views of these providers about their capabilities, and the degree to which they deem their interventions effective.

The second group of respondents in Rojava were those members of society that use, or are aware of, the services provided by the first group of respondents. This included mainly women, but also men, of different ages and ethnicities in different geographical locations. Women and men from cities and from more remote villages were interviewed. Qamışlo is one of the cities where interviews were conducted because it is the self-declared capital of the region and is one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse areas. The respondents were not limited to the Kurdish population and included Arabs and Christians. When interviewing the users, of most interest was how the female-led services in Rojava are perceived and experienced.

The third group of respondents in Rojava are foreign actors. These foreign actors consist of NGO workers, humanitarian aid workers, and journalists with experience in the region. The foreign NGO workers and humanitarian aid workers also gave their views on female-led services in the realms of local governance, social services, and security. They furthermore provided valuable insights about possible entry points for development organisations. During these interviews the respondents were explicitly asked about their policy recommendations with regard to women in Rojava.

Purposive sampling was used for all of the data collection in Rojava. The sampling was limited to the Cizîrê Canton of Eastern Rojava, as it remains the most accessible and stable canton of Rojava. Table 1 provides an overview of how many interviews were conducted for each of the above-mentioned respondent groups.

Table 1. Structured Interviews per Researched Area in Cizîrê Canton

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cizîrê Canton</th>
<th>Qamışlo (ethnically diverse)</th>
<th>Derik (Al-Malikiyah) (ethnically diverse)</th>
<th>Villages of Serê Kaniyê (Ras al-Ayn) (predominantly Kurdish)</th>
<th>Villages of Derbesia (predominantly Kurdish)</th>
<th>Villages of Terbaspia (Al-Qahtaniyah) (predominantly Kurdish)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
3.7.2 Iraqi Kurdistan

In Iraqi Kurdistan the respondent groups consisted of:

1) refugees from Rojava;
2) officials in the KRG; and
3) NGO workers

The first group of respondents consists of people who fled from Rojava to Iraqi Kurdistan. This group was very similar to the “users” that were interviewed by the Syrian researchers in Rojava. The respondents thus consisted mainly of women, from both cities and villages. All respondents in Iraqi Kurdistan identified themselves as Kurdish Muslims. Although it was tried to interview Arabs and Christians from Rojava, unfortunately our local network lacked contacts with these communities. This means that there is a certain bias that we take in consideration in the respondent group from Iraqi Kurdistan, namely that it lacks ethnic and religious diversity.

The second respondent group consists of officials in the KRG in both Duhok and Erbil. Interviews with this group were conducted to get a better understanding of how these officials perceived the position of women in Rojava, the relationship with the PYD, and issues related to the border crossing between Iraqi Kurdistan and Rojava. Dr. Fuad Hussein, Chief of Staff to the President of the Kurdish Regional Government, was interviewed in Erbil for this matter. Ibrahim Biro, the head of the Kurdish National Council (KNC), was also interviewed.

The third group of respondents consists of NGO workers that were interviewed in Duhok. Some of these NGO workers focused on working with Syrian refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan, while others were directly working on projects in Rojava. During these interviews, respondents were asked about the work they are doing with refugees from Rojava, what they see as the most pressing issues in Rojava, and how current policies can be improved.

Purposive sampling was used in the refugee camp in Domiz since only some of the people living there met the specific conditions of being from the Cizîrê Canton and coming to Iraqi Kurdistan in the past year. For the other interviews, snowball sampling was used. This seemed most appropriate due to the difficulties in getting access to these
very specific groups. Table 2 provides an overview of the number of interviews that were conducted for each of the four respondent groups in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Table 2. Semi-structured and in-depth interviews in Iraqi Kurdistan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Iraqi Kurdistan</th>
<th>Erbil</th>
<th>Duhok</th>
<th>Domiz camp</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 KRG official</td>
<td>1 NGO worker</td>
<td>11 interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 KDP-S official</td>
<td>1 KRG official</td>
<td>11 users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 journalist</td>
<td>2 RojPesh staff</td>
<td>3 focus group discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- 4 females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- 3 males and 2 females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- 3 males</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.7.3 The Netherlands

After the fieldwork, interviews were conducted in The Netherlands with a representative of the Self-Administration, a Dutch political party member, and several NGO workers. For these interviews snowball sampling was used.

3.8 Data analysis

The analysis of the interview data has been done through NVivo 11. In this programme, the interviews were uploaded and coded according to the topics we were interested in and which were integrated in the questionnaires. The analysis of the data started with “open coding” in which the data was categorised into groups such as age, gender, and ethnicity. This was followed by a phase of “axial coding” which grouped the interview data into different themes. Finally, a phase of “selective coding” enabled the categorisation of interviews into specific segments of data, highlighting recurring patterns.
4. Brief historical context to the Self-Administration in Rojava

Introduction
This chapter provides a brief historical context to the Kurdish Self-Administration. While there is an abundance of literature on Syria, there is relatively little academic and policy research on Northern Syria. Due to the ongoing conflict in Syria and the rise of Daesh, there has been increased journalistic attention on the region, but little is known about the local realities and experiences of civilians in Northern Syria. Although it is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious area, the system that has been recently introduced was implemented by the PYD, the largest Kurdish political party in Syria. In order to make sense of the region referred to as Rojava, it is important to explain the historical context of the Kurds in Syria. Focussing on the Kurds in this section is not to disregard the other ethnicities living in the region.

4.1 The Kurds in Syria
In order to understand the Rojava region, comprehending the geopolitical landscape is essential. The Kurds are the largest ethnic group without a state in the Middle East, mostly inhabiting areas of Southeast Turkey, Northeast Syria, Northern Iraq, and Northwest Iran (Minority Rights Group 1996). Fragmented by state borders, Kurds have faced different levels of repression from the Turkish, Syrian, Iraqi, and Iranian Governments (Federici 2015: 81). Although comprising the smallest Kurdish population of these four states, the Kurds are the largest non-Arab ethnic minority in Syria with estimates of the size of their community ranging from 2 to 4 million – around 10% of the Syrian population (Savelsberg 2014).

4.1.1 Discrimination and Arabisation
Historically, Syrian Kurds have been marginalised because they were perceived as a threat to the country’s Arab nationalist identity (Human Rights Watch 2009: 10). A national population consensus in 1962 stripped 120,000 Kurds of their citizenship, rendering them stateless (Human Rights Watch 1996; International Crisis Group 2013: ii). Kurds labelled stateless were then deprived of their civil and political rights, leaving them unable to travel outside of Syria, excluding them from public sector employment and education, and depriving them of legal access to property (Montgomery 2005: 79).

In addition, despite Armenians, Assyrians, and Jews all being permitted to speak and teach their respective languages in schools, the Kurds were prevented from doing so.

12 Daesh is the term this report uses when referring to the extremist group that is also often called “Islamic State (IS),” “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria” (ISIS), or “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” (ISIL). Daesh is the Arabic acronym for “Dawla al-Islamiya fi Iraq al-Sham”, which literally translates to “The Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham”.
13 Estimates vary considerably as it is difficult to accurately assess the number of Kurds in Syria due to the ever-changing conflict dynamics.
This prohibition of the Kurdish language also extended to workplaces, public offices, cinemas, and cafes (97). Kurdish place names were all changed to Arabic and important cultural festivities were banned (Human Rights Watch 2009: 11). Many respondents that were interviewed for this research told stories about discrimination they experienced from the Syrian regime due to their Kurdish ethnicity. For example, one respondent who was studying in Latakia, where she was not allowed to talk in Kurdish, asked us to “imagine being forbidden to speak your mother tongue?”

4.1.2 Gender relations

Women in Rojava have been exposed to discriminatory government policies and patriarchal mentalities prevalent in society (Gunter 2014: 33). The abovementioned denial of rights that the Syrian regime imposed on its Kurdish population – particularly property, healthcare, and citizenship rights – negatively affected the economic situation of many Kurds. Such exclusionary state policies resulted in limited practical or social infrastructure, making mobility and health care facilities poor (Adlim 2005).

The region is based on an agricultural economy, an area of work in which many women were active. However, as women were prohibited from selling the agricultural products they accumulated, they relied on men to do so for them. This created economic dependency on male counterparts. A more indirect result of state exclusion is related to female education. As Kurdish families could only send one child to school, which often was the son, many girls went uneducated and were forced into young marriages (Gunter 2014: 33).

4.1.3 Political mobilisation

In 2003, after suffering years of repression from the Syrian regime, the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD) was formed. It was, and remains, the largest Syrian Kurdish political party. According to the International Crisis Group, the PYD is ideologically connected to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party. The degree of autonomy that the PYD has from the PKK is controversial (International Crisis Group 2013: 1). Moreover, the International Crisis Group argues that: “Syrian Kurdish PKK cadres with years of service in Qandil (the organisation’s northern Iraq mountain base) dominate the YPG [Yekineyen Parastina Gel, People’s Defense Units] leadership and are the decision-makers within the self-proclaimed ‘autonomous administration’” (2016: 2). However, the PYD states they are only ideologically and not operationally linked to the PKK (Tanis 2016). The PKK, which has carried out an armed struggle against the Turkish state since the 1980s, is listed as a terrorist organisation by many states and organisations in the international community, including the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic

14 Author’s interview with a 23-year-old female member of Rojava Peshmerga in Duhok on 1 September 2016.
15 http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/48526
Treaty Organisation (NATO) (Phillips 2013). It is important to acknowledge the effect that the ideology of PKK’s leader, Abdullah Öcalan, has had on the Self-Administration in Rojava, especially in regards to women’s position, which will be explained later on in this chapter. Although it can be argued that Öcalan’s ideology on women’s emancipation differs with how most Western governments envision the advancement of women, both Öcalan and Western governments seem to agree on the need of women’s emancipation regardless of the form it takes. However, that the PKK is listed as a terrorist organisation makes engagement with women’s organisations in Rojava difficult. Indeed, this research will analyse the effect that the terrorist designation of the PKK has on international dialogue with the PYD and on the civilians living in the Northern Syria.

4.2 Emergence of the Self-Administration

In order to understand in what context the Self-Administration emerged, this section outlines how the Syrian civil war and the emergence of Daesh opened up a power vacuum in which the PYD gained territorial control over large shares of Northern Syria. The current politics of Rojava and the Self-Administration are not only shaped by these developments but also by regional and international relations.

4.2.1 Syrian civil war

In March 2011, pro-democracy demonstrations began in Deraa by a group of teenagers writing revolutionary slogans on the wall of their school. The teenagers soon gained widespread popular support after al-Assad’s government force’s violent response towards them. By August, the uprisings turned into a full-scale civil war (BBC 2016). As of September 2016, the death toll is estimated between 300,000–400,000, there are over 4.8 million refugees that have fled from Syria, and over 6 million of the remaining population are internally displaced (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights 2016). Amid this crisis, there has been a rise of jihadist groups in the region, including Daesh and al-Nusra.

Anti-government protests were on-going in Northern Syria since the onset of the civil war in March 2011. Kurdish forces, namely the People’s Protection Units, easily began to take control of cities in the north with little resistance from Syrian security forces (Rudaw 2012). Allegedly, after negotiations with al-Assad, government forces retreated from the north of Syria in order to focus their military efforts against opposition forces in other parts of the country (Cemgil and Hoffman 2016: 60). This decision allowed local militias and the PYD to take control of parts of Northern Syria (International Crisis Group 2014: 15). Due to their organisational coherence, having formed almost ten years prior, the PYD effectively started to fill this power vacuum created by the negotiated withdrawal of the regime and left little political space for other parties to step in (1). When the PYD was formed in 2004, their military wing (YPG) was also established,
although it was not until the beginning of the Syrian civil war that it became an active force. In 2012, after a growing number of women joined the YPG, a separate all-female armed force was created, the Women’s Protection Units (Yêkîneyên Parastina Jin, YPJ) (Bateson 2015). Since 2014, the YPG has been fighting Daesh but since 2013, has also experienced clashes with al-Assad’s forces, namely in the district of Qamişlo as there are tensions in the neighbourhood where al-Assad’s forces are still visible (VICE News 2016). Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, the YPG also has been at conflict with the Free Syrian Army (which is backed by the West). Furthermore, the YPG has been fighting with Turkish supported rebel groups, most recently during Turkey’s “Operation Euphrates Shield” – a military operation in Northern Syria (Global Research 2016).

4.2.2 The Self-Administration

In November 2013, the PYD announced their autonomy from Syria, and the Cantons of Rojava were declared. In that same month, a regional Self-Administration was established and a constitution published. Rojava is made up of three cantons – Efrînê, Cizîrê, and Kobanê – whose capital cities are Afrin, Qamişlo, and Kobanê, respectively (Radpey 2015: 836). The liberation of the Kobanê Canton from Daesh generated much media attention for the region. Kobanê was under attack from Daesh for over a year. In September 2014, the offensive intensified until January 2015, when the YPJ and the YPG liberated the city from Daesh control (Kobanê in Gündem 2015). In addition to gaining media attention for their military success, the battle for Kobanê also consolidated support from the US-led anti-Daesh coalition (Cemgil and Hoffman 2016: 60). In March 2016, the PYD declared a “federal democratic system” in Rojava (Al Jazeera 2016a). The Movement for a Democratic Society (Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk, TEV-DEM), a coalition of parties that is led by the PYD and advocates for Rojava’s autonomy, governs the Self-Administration (Dirik 2015), but it is unclear what the political balance of power is between these parties. However, according to Sary (2016) TEV-DEM is a Kurdish dominated project, as local Arab populations seem less sympathetic towards TEV-DEM.

16 According to Sary (2016), the PYD’s relationship with the al-Assad regime is ambiguous and should be seen as a “survival strategy adopted in the circumstances of war”. The regime’s strategy is focussed predominantly on defending Damascus and Western Syria, which has given some room for the Self-Administration to develop. Assad however has not officially recognised the Self-Administration. On the one hand the local administration is at times heavily dependent on the central government in Damascus, because they share oil and agricultural revenues and have coordinated military operations in the past. On the other hand, Sary (2016) stresses that given the recent clashes in the summer 2016, the relationship between al-Assad and the PYD may alter.

17 On June 12, the FSA fired a missile at a YPG position, the first attack of its kind according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (Perry 2016). According to Perry (2016), The FSA aims to oust al-Assad, while the YPG is trying to “carve out its own areas of control in Northern Syria” and both sides accuse each other of conspiring with their enemies.

18 Turkish President Erdogan said that Turkey was determined to clear the YPG from the Northern Syrian town of Manbij, after clearing the Islamic State from Northern Syria. This would allow the creation of a “terror-free zone” (Alami 2016).
The federal system supposed to function according to PYD’s ideology, but little is known about how it works in practice. According to Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned founding member of the PKK, the federal system is based on five leading principles: 1) The right to self-determination of the people; 2) a non-state social paradigm; 3) grassroots participative democracy; 4) ethnic, religious, and class diversity; and 5) anti-nationalism (Öcalan 2011: 33-34). In theory, the three cantons of Efrînê, Cizîrê, and Kobanê govern themselves autonomously with coordination limited to regional issues (Dirik 2015). In principle, across the region, all decision-making processes are supposed to occur at the community level within the local councils and communes. Each commune and council has a women’s committee and a youth committee. Like all bodies, institutions, and councils of the Self-Administration, the communes are managed by a co-leadership of one man and one woman. The system further prescribes that if decisions cannot be made at the commune level, they are relegated to the People’s House (similar to a neighbourhood council), and then to the city councils (ibid). This form of local governance can be seen as an attempt at direct democracy, whereby all members of society are supposed to be involved with decision-making processes. However, as explained in chapter six, there are various reasons why women are often not involved in these processes.

Each canton is made up of twenty-two Commissions – ranging from internal affairs, healthcare, defence, youth and women to economy – in addition to an Executive and Judicial Council. The Women’s Commission, our local partner, is one of these twenty-two. Each canton also has its own courts, Asayîş (police), and Defence Forces (Kurdistan National Congress 2014: 13). According to the Self-Administration, there are quotas in place across all levels of society that is meant to ensure multi-ethnic representation and at least 40% participation rate of women (Kurdistan National Congress 2014: 12; Charter of the Social Contract 2014: Article 65). Currently, across the Self-Administration different ethnicities are represented. For example, the co-Chair of the Cizîrê Canton is Hussein Taza Al Azam, an Arabic man from Qamişlo (Inter Press Service 2014). Furthermore, within the Self-Administration there are specific groups for different ethnicities, such as the Syriac Union Party (SUC) which represents the interests of Assyrian Christians and their communities. Linked to the SUC is Sutoro, the Assyrian Christian defence force.

**4.2.3 The role of women**

In the past four years, the status of women in Rojava has changed considerably. This is partly due to external influences from the Turkish region of Kurdistan and the PKK (ICG

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19 It must be acknowledged that cooperation with the Self-Administration is a necessity in order to conduct research in the region. The bias that this may bring is taken into consideration, as discussed in the methodology chapter.
2013) and to internal shifts in local governance and social transformation. As previously mentioned, the PYD and the PKK have important ideological connections which are especially significant when analysing the role of women in the region. According to pro-PKK activist and journalist Havin Güneşer, women have played a central role in both the military and the political spheres since the PKK’s formation (Güneşer 2015: 59). Öcalan prioritises the rights of women in all of his recent writings, and he highlights the importance of overcoming male-dominated mentalities in order for women to progress (Öcalan 2011: 16). The self-proclaimed egalitarian and democratic philosophy of the PKK has led to formal gender quotas within the organisation and has allegedly ensured women’s continued involvement in the military as guerrillas and commanders. In other Kurdish movements, there is now a similar pattern visible. Today for example, the People’s Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkey employs a 50% quota for women's participation, and it is co-chaired by a man and a woman. A similar system is in place in Rojava. An essential part of this research is assessing women’s perception on their participation in different spheres of social life and the implementation of the policies by the Self-Administration and thus interrogates formal guidelines and informal realities.

4.3 Rojava today

Today, Rojava is under embargos by Turkey and the KDP and civilians face different threats in their daily lives. To the north, the Turkish Government views the Kurds’ expansion in Syria as a threat to the “Kurdish question” within its own borders and has an openly aggressive policy towards the PYD and YPG, groups whom they officially declared as terrorist organisations in 2015. To the east, in the north of Iraq, the KDP politically opposes the Kurdish quest for autonomy in Syria and has thus imposed a de facto embargo that restricts the access of humanitarian aid, trade, or food across the border (Cemgil and Hoffman 2016: 63). According to Sary, economic growth is also hindered because, “Asayiş and other security forces continue to lead and bypass organisational structures [of TEV-DEM, because of] security reasons. This continues to be an obstacle for a decentralised decision-making process, which is also leading to delays in project implementation as well as affecting economic growth” (2016: 14). To the south and west, the region faces threats from Daesh and oppositional groups engaged in the civil war. The current conflict with Daesh is particularly relevant when analysing the role of women in the region. Daesh in Syria has repeatedly targeted and exploited women. Their harsher interpretation of Islamic law, which prescribes women as inherently inferior to men, seems to have been a motivating factor for many women in Rojava to join the YPJ and organise for their rights according to Gündem (2015).

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20 The HDP is a predominantly-Kurdish, pro-minority political party established in 2012. In the June 2015 Turkish general elections, the HDP won 13.1% of the vote (Letsch, 2015).
4.3.1 Internal relations

Although the PYD is the largest political party in Rojava, the Kurdish National Council (Encûmena Nişîtmanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê, KNC) is a significant rival political organisation. The KNC was established under the sponsorship of Massoud Barzani, the leader of the KDP, one of the ruling Kurdish parties within the KRG. Despite cultural similarities between Iraqi Kurdistan and Rojava, the KDP and the PYD share little political or ideological objectives. The same is true for the PYD and the KNC. The KNC have strongly opposed the PYD and its political system in Rojava and often criticise the monopoly of power that the PYD enjoys. According to Savelsberg (2014) and some of the respondents of this research, the dominance of the PYD in Rojava is said to be partly due to its repressive policies towards activists and members of the parties of the KNC. Moreover, Human Rights Watch has reported arbitrary arrests, abuse in detention, due process violations, unresolved disappearances and killings, and the use of children in the YPG (Human Rights Watch 2014). Since this report, the YPG has signed a ‘Deed of Commitment’ to halt underage recruitment and to demobilise existing child soldiers (Geneva Call 2014).

4.3.2 Regional relations

There are thus deep divisions between the Kurdish political parties in the region, with the most significant being those between the KDP and the PKK and their respective affiliates. The two largest governing parties in Iraqi Kurdistan, the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), dominate the KRG. Their support is split; the PUK has more influence in the south in Suleymaniyyah and the KDP enjoys more influence in the north in the Erbil and Duhok regions (where the border crossing is situated). The KDP has increasing power within the KRG; they control the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Interior, and the KDP-leader Massoud Barzani is the President of the KRG (van Wilgenburg 2014). Generally, the PUK has a more sympathetic stance towards Rojava, and are reportedly supportive of the PKK (Salih 2016). Relations between the PYD and the KDP are particularly fragile with the causes rooted in the stark differences in their political views. While the PYD say they seek an autonomous federal system and reject the state system, the KDP (and their Syrian counterpart the KDP-S) wants a Kurdistan region in Syria similar to that in Iraq – an autonomous state-like structure within the confines of a federal state (van Wilgenburg cited in Zaman 2016).

The KDP has close economic and political ties with Turkey, which strains relations between the PYD and KDP. Economically, the KRG exports much of its oil to Turkey, and politically the KDP and Turkey share their distaste towards the PKK (Wood 2015). In early 2016, Erdogan reportedly sent $200 million in emergency aid to President Barzani, confirming their close relationship (Reuters 2016b). A unilateral economic blockade of
Rojava has been implemented by Turkey and the KDP which has had a negative impact on the economic and humanitarian situation in Rojava (Van Wilgenburg 2016), as will be demonstrated in later chapters. The KDP is also training a military force that consists of Syrian Kurds linked to the KNC called “RojPesh” (Ignatius 2016). However, according to the Colonel in charge of RojPesh, they are not allowed by the YPG to enter Rojava. Nonetheless, they seem to still have the desire to do so, as the Colonel in charge of RojPesh said: “God willing, RojPesh will help the People in Rojava.”

In March 2016, the Semalka border, the main crossing between Iraqi Kurdistan and Rojava, was closed by the KRG. This occurred on the same day the PYD declared Rojava as a ‘Democratic Federal System’ (Reuters 2016a). For months, the border was completely blocked, with not even medicine or basic humanitarian aid being permitted to cross. Through mounting pressure, the border restrictions began to ease but, again, in August 2016, tensions arose. Wedat Hussein Ali – reporter of a pro-PKK news agency – was murdered in Duhok, Iraqi Kurdistan. PKK supporters speculated that the KDP were to blame as he had been repeatedly called for questioning by security forces in the days before his murder (Pen International 2016). In alleged retaliation, the Asayiş in Rojava arrested and deported the leader of the KNC, Ibrahim Biro, from Rojava. This led to a renewed strict prohibition of aid or trade being allowed to enter Rojava.

4.3.3 International relations

Turkey strongly and publicly opposes the PYD in Rojava. As mentioned before, Erdogan persistently groups together the PKK and PYD with Daesh. He claims that Turkey “will never allow the establishment of a state on our southern border in the north of Syria … We will continue our fight in that respect whatever the cost may be” (quoted in Totten 2015). Whilst bombing Daesh in Rojava, Turkey is also conducting airstrikes on the YPG (EKurd 2016).

Regardless of the global ties that Turkey has, the international community’s response to Rojava differs. Since the siege of Kobanê in 2014, the US has publically provided military support, largely in the form of airstrikes, to the YPG (BBC 2014). Since then, such support has persisted and it has been reported that over 300 US Special Forces are now on the ground with the YPG (Hawramy 2016). Although the YPG deny it, the British Government suspects military coordination between them and Russia (Reuters 2016c).

Although military support of the US is relatively strong, humanitarian or political support remains almost non-existent. The US military has been providing humanitarian aid to Manbij, a city in the north of Syria recently liberated and controlled by SDF

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21 Authors’ interview with RojPesh on 1st of September 2016, in Duhok, Iraqi Kurdistan.
22 Ibid.
forces, but this is all that is publically known (ARA News 2016a). Due to international support largely being limited to military assistance, the PYD are trying to increase their political legitimacy through the opening of representation offices of the Self-Administration in Berlin, Paris, Moscow, The Hague, Stockholm, and Suleymaniyah (ARA News 2016b).

4.3.4 Current policy

Currently, the Dutch Government supports programmes such as Women on the Frontline and Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women (FLOW). Women on the Frontline is an organisation that was formed to strengthen the capacity of women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region following the Arab spring uprisings. It focuses on women’s full inclusion in economic and political processes. FLOW is a program set up by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and aims to improve the position of women and girls in developing countries. The Dutch Government also supports the UN-led Syrian Women’s Initiative for Peace and Democracy (SWIPD) – an all-female board that gives advice to the UN Special Envoy for Syria (Syria Justice and Accountability Centre 2016).

Current Dutch and international policy specifically tailored to Rojava is limited. The Dutch government finances the UN pooled fund for humanitarian aid for Syria that operates from Southern Turkey (Rijksoverheid 2016). Although a program evaluation study commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs highlights that in 2014 268.000 people were reached in north-eastern Syria, “overall humanitarian access remained blocked or heavily restricted, across borders and across front lines” (Giesen & Leenders 2015: 27). Moreover, the study found that the response of UN-OCHA led agencies to humanitarian needs in Syria has been slow or in some cases absent because of insufficient funding and problems with access due to the Syrian regime (ibid). The embargoes of Turkey and the KRG also have a negative impact on humanitarian needs. As this research will show, basic human needs such as water, food, and healthcare are not available, and these politically motivated embargoes are contributing to the suffering of civilians.

International NGOs, including Save the Children, Medicins sans Frontiers, and the ICRC work in Rojava. The Dutch Government does engage with civil society organisations in Syria but policy specific to Rojava is scarce and gender-specific policy seemingly non-existent. In 2014, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign affairs decided to not spend the budgeted €1 million to strengthen local governance in Northern Syria because

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23 The SDF is a coalition of Kurdish, Sunni Arab, and Syriac Christian fighters, largely controlled by the YPG.
24 For more information see http://www.womenonthefrontline.eu/about/
25 For more information see http://www.flowprogramme.nl/Public/HomePage.aspx
of “the worsening situation on the ground” (Rijksoverheid 2014). In a recent letter to Parliament, the Dutch Minister of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, explains that “giving aid to Northern Syria is very complicated” (Rijksoverheid 2016). One of the objections to provide aid is that the Dutch Government accuses the PYD of having banned Arab inhabitants, and of a lacking democratic governance system. The Minister does not specify however, whether this aid includes humanitarian and/or development aid. Another concern regards the ties that the PYD has with the al-Assad regime and the PKK. The support that is given to Northern Syria is said to include the support of political dialogue between Kurdish parties to stimulate inclusive governance. Moreover, the Dutch Government finances the organisation Mines Advisory Group (MAG) that operates in Northern Syria. The Minister also claims to support projects in the realms of human rights, education, and women’s rights, but clear examples are not given (ibid). Recently, the Dutch Government announced to support women in Northern Syria through the African Women’s Development Fund. Furthermore, the Dutch Government has dedicated €2 million to Kurdish women in Northern Syria through the NAP (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken 2016).

Limited Dutch policy in the Rojava region can further be explained by the obstacles that come with working in the region, such as access and political hesitation. In an interview with Dr. Fuad Hussein, Chief of Staff to President Barzani of the KDP, we were told that NGOs and humanitarian organisations are permitted to cross the border, but all the NGO workers we interviewed said they experienced problems with border access. During a meeting at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague, policymakers explained another major challenge: “The lack of reliable and trustworthy partners in Syria, specifically in northern Syria”. As described by the Dutch Consulate General for the Iraqi Kurdistan, the PYD is an “uneasy” partner for The Netherlands, due to their suspected links with the PKK and their reported human rights violations. However, the Development Aid spokesman for the PvdA (the Dutch Labour Party) raised the argument that civilians in Rojava are not receiving much-needed access to aid which opposes humanitarian principles and the supposedly apolitical ethics of international aid distribution.

The current ‘refugee crisis’, or more specifically, Turkey’s role in the crisis, is also playing an important role on the international isolation Rojava is experiencing. While the Dutch Government does not state this is a reason for the current policy on Northern

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27 Authors’ interview with Dr. Fuad Hussein, Chief of Staff to President Barzani of the KDP, Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan on 5 September 2016.
28 Authors’ interview with Janet Alberda, the Dutch Consulate General, in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan on 6 September 2016.
29 Authors’ interview with Roelof van Laar, Development Aid spokesman for PvdA, in Den Haag, The Netherlands on 12 October 2016.
Syria, the political hesitance must be placed in the context of the “Turkey deal”. Many Western states are concerned about increased migration flows onto European soil, giving Turkey considerable political leverage when it comes to regional policies.

In March 2016, the EU and Turkey agreed on a set of arrangements that includes, among other things, decreasing irregular migration to Greece, while setting up a resettlement program for Syrian refugees from Turkey to the EU and liberalising EU-visas for Turkish citizens. For every irregular Syrian refugee that Turkey takes back from Europe, one Syrian refugee is resettled into Europe, up to a maximum of 72,000 refugees (Alanso 2016).
5. Threats Women Face

Introduction
This chapter discusses the threats women face in Rojava in their day-to-day lives. Respondents were asked what the biggest obstacles they encounter are and how their ethnicity, gender, and environment impact this. Common themes that arose from people’s answers were broadly related to physical security, a lack of social services (namely healthcare and education), economic hardships, and cultural norms (especially for women). Unsurprisingly, considering the complex conflict dynamics, the most pressing threats that respondents described were related to physical security and the economy. Respondents prioritised different threats depending on whether they were living in rural or urban areas and whether they were still in Rojava or had fled to Iraqi Kurdistan.

5.1 Safety and Security
In all respondent groups, aside from the Terbaspia cluster, safety and security related threats were listed as most important. The threats varied widely with many people reporting rumours of regular kidnappings of young girls, fear of Turkey bombing across the border, forced conscription by the Syrian regime and the PYD, and sexual and gender based violence. The geographical location of respondents was the most significant variable to describe these variations, in addition to gender. Although initially female respondents did not list SGBV as a pressing threat – perhaps due to it being a culturally sensitive topic – when asked directly if they feared such violence, many reported incidences of either themselves or women they knew. This section will further describe the multifaceted threats that women reported in terms of their safety and security.

5.1.1 Physical violence
Regarding physical violence, respondents across all three ethnicities – Kurdish, Arab, and Assyrian – were afraid of attacks from Daesh and Turkey. Predictably, Daesh was listed as a direct threat, with some female respondents specifically mentioning the fear of rape and kidnapping from the group. In Derbesia, the village closest to the Turkish border, respondents listed Turkey as the biggest military threat. One woman told a story of her neighbour being shot at by Turkey and how now neighbours in her village are afraid to go close to the border.31

In the cities of Qamişlo and Derik, and the predominantly-Kurdish village of Derbesia, respondents listed the regime as a threat to their safety and security. In the villages of Serê Kaniyê (where the majority of respondents were Arab) and Terbaspia

31 Local researcher’s interview with 55-year-old Kurdish woman in Derbesia, Rojava on 29 August 2016.
(where the majority of respondents were Christian), the regime was not once reported as a threat. For the Kurdish respondents interviewed in Iraqi Kurdistan, regime violence was ranked the highest against all other military forces. Some of the respondents in Iraqi Kurdistan fled up to four years previously which could partly explain why they were most afraid of the regime, as the influence of Daesh was not so widespread at this point, and the Self-Administration had not yet been established.

5.1.2 SGBV

Sexual and gender-based violence is a general term used to define violence that “occurs as a result of normative role expectations associated with each gender, along with the unequal power relationships between the two genders, within the context of a specific society” (Bloom 2008: 14). SGBV can affect all people, but it is widely acknowledged that women and girls are the primary targets (UNFPA). Many of the threats listed can be seen as forms of SGBV, as the term can be used to encompass many types of violence - sexual, physical, emotional and psychological, harmful traditional practices, and socio-economic. However, when used in this report, it is referring to physical, sexual, and psychological violence, namely rape, sexual harassment, and domestic violence. Researching this form of SGBV was highly sensitive, and in some of the interviews the respondents male counterparts were present. When NGO workers were interviewed, they generally reported higher rates of SGBV than what the respondents’ reported. It can be assumed that respondents’ were hesitant to disclose details about SGBV in society.

Although no respondents prioritised SGBV as an obstacle to their daily lives, when asked if they had experienced rape, sexual harassment, or domestic violence, or whether such incidences were common in their community, many said that they were. For example one woman said: “Two years ago I was beaten by my husband and he left me with two broken ribs and a ruptured shoulder.”

Answers, however, differed greatly, especially when explaining the reasons behind SGBV.

In all respondent groups, domestic violence was listed as the most prevalent form of SGBV, though there was little consensus on whether women’s increased role in local governance, social services, and security is having a positive or negative effect on the rates of domestic violence. Some people said that since the establishment of the Self-Administration, “[domestic violence] is becoming less wide-spread as women are developing and becoming more aware”, and that, “after the opening of the Women’s House and other Kurdish women’s organisations, we do not see such phenomena anymore.” Others contradictorily said that domestic violence has risen as “fighting for women’s freedom and rights makes men afraid that they will lose their authority and

32 Local researcher’s interview with a 37-year-old Kurdish woman in Derik, Rojava on 31 August 2016.
33 Local researcher’s interview with a 40-year-old Kurdish woman in Derbesia, Rojava on 29 August 2016.
34 Local researcher’s interview with a 42-year-old Kurdish woman in Derik, Rojava on 30 August 2016.
power over women and [therefore they] resort to violence.”

It was repeated that men often do not accept that women are working in the public sphere, and this was seen to have caused a rise in harassment. Norms and traditions, including “social backwardness” and “men’s authoritarian mentality”, were said to be a motive for SGBV, illustrating a tension between more traditional patriarchal mentalities and the gender egalitarian ideology that is being advocated by the Self-Administration.

Other significant reasons that were listed as a reason for SGBV were linked to the economy and the general security situation. One of the workers at a Family Development Centre said that when men are under financial pressure they tend to mistreat their wives. Another medical worker mirrored this when she said that, “When a man faces difficulties providing basic needs of his family, he treats his wife in a bad or inappropriate manner.”

Kidnapping of young girls was a recurring fear for female respondents; this too is linked to the economy as it was reported that girls are abducted and then sold for ransom.

Although many women reported that sexual harassment and domestic violence were high, often they said that rape did not exist in their society. It is unclear whether this is indeed the case or whether rape is so stigmatised in society that respondents were not willing to talk about it. When rape was mentioned, it was usually in relation to Daesh. This is unsurprising as there are many accounts of enslavement, kidnapping, rape, and sexual torture by Daesh (Human Rights Watch 2015). One international NGO worker that was interviewed assumed that, like other conflict zones, sexual violence and rape did exist in Rojava but he did not know the extent. He said that rape often went unreported and that there were few actors who dealt with this problem.

5.1.3 Forced conscription

Prior to the civil war, there were conscription laws that obliged men to join the Syrian army at the age of 18 for a period of one and a half years (Xinhua 2015). Since the war intensified, even those who have completed their obligatory service have been forced to join reserve forces (SCMP 2014). In Rojava, there is mandatory “self-defence duty” for 18- to 30-year-olds with the YPG in the PYD controlled areas. It is for six months, after which they can decide whether to join the YPG or to go back to their home (Danish Immigration Service 2015: 14). Although de-mobilising 149 child soldiers in 2014, the PYD continues to be criticised for recruiting underage members to their military (Human Rights Watch 2015).

Respondents in Iraqi Kurdistan – especially men – expressed fear of being conscripted by the PYD which for some explained why they fled Rojava. They reported

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35 Local researcher’s interview with a 36-year-old Kurdish woman in Derbesia, Rojava on 29 August 2016.
36 Local researcher’s interview with a 39-year-old Assyrian woman in Terbaspia, Rojava on 28 August 2016.
37 Off the record interview with humanitarian aid worker that lived in the region for several years.
the YPG threatening them and conscripting underage boys and girls. Some of the KRG respondents who had been living in Damascus, not Rojava, also reported regime conscription. No respondents in Rojava reported forced conscription of the PYD, and generally conscription by any military force was only expressed as a threat by a small number of respondents.

5.2 Economy

Second only to safety and security were economic threats; mostly a severe lack of resources – particularly water, food, and electricity – and a lack of work. In Terbaspia, economy-related threats were listed the highest. During conflict, economic constraints affect men and women differently. Women are often more susceptible to economic vulnerability as many are left widowed or alone as their male counterparts are killed or become combatants, leading to a sharp increase in female- (or child-) headed households (Rehn and Johnson 2002: 19). For men, being unable to provide for their families can have a damaging effect on their notions of masculinity (Sudhakar and Kuehnast 2011: 3).

Across the different groups, respondents from the city of Qamişlo and the village of Terbaspia appear to suffer the most economically. In Qamişlo, people reported the unaffordable price of living, high rent costs, and a shortage of water and electricity, all of which make people unable to secure their basic needs. In Terbaspia, there were all of the previously mentioned economic constrains but with the added difficulty of a lack of infrastructure. One respondent in the village said that when her daughter reached high school, she had to stop education because there was no transportation there. In all areas, lack of water and electricity were the most emphasised economic obstacles.

In addition to these threats, women in the Cizirê Canton of Rojava also face gender-specific obstacles. As stated above, women can become more economically vulnerable in conflict as they often have to assume newfound responsibility in providing for their families. This can also indirectly lead to threats to their physical security as they can be forced to go out in public alone in dangerous areas. Some respondents who lived alone – either because they were widowed, divorced, or their husbands were abroad – said they could not safely leave the house without a male counterpart and that it was not safe for women to live together alone.³⁸ We were told that the lack of food means that when women go to the shop for bread, they have to wait three or four hours because the queues are so long, exposing them to the risk of bombs. Another respondent told a story of when she needed to go to hospital because her daughter was sick but she was unable to go because she is a woman.

³⁸ Authors’ interview with a Kurdish woman in Domiz refugee camp, KRG on 31 August 2016.
5.3 Healthcare

Among the respondents interviewed who had fled from Rojava, health problems were more evident than those still living in Rojava. One family had been in Iraqi Kurdistan for less than three weeks after being seriously injured in the suicide bombings by Daesh in Qamişlo on 27 July 2016 (Al Jazeera 2016b). They were forced to flee Rojava because it was impossible to get the medicine they needed due to the high prices and unavailability. The son of a woman we interviewed in Iraqi Kurdistan had a visible tumour on his head; there was no treatment available so they had to flee. Some respondents reported having surgery with no drugs to ease the pain; others reported paralysis due to sickness. In Rojava, many respondents expressed the fear of themselves or their family members becoming ill because there was simply no medicine available to treat them. Psychological problems were also prevalent among the respondents’ answers and predominantly due to conflict-related trauma.

We interviewed NGOs working in Rojava and the lack of medical supplies was often listed as a desperate problem. The European representative of Weqfa Jin said that, “the whole health system has been destroyed and there is not even basic healthcare.”39 A representative from Heyva Sor, the Kurdish Red Crescent, stated that it was impossible to get medicine into Rojava. She highlighted a further problem: many doctors are lost in the conflict as many go to join the YPG to fight.40 An international organisation that works in Rojava told us that there was a severe lack of medicine, as well as trained doctors and nurses, of which most of them either fled the country or joined the YPG.

5.4 Education

Although education-related threats were not the most pressing threats listed, there were some important criticisms and concerns raised by respondents. Fears related to education varied. Transportation to and from school was a recurring concern. This was due to either security threats, especially the kidnapping of girls, or of being unable to afford the transport. Some reported a complete lack of schools in the areas they lived, some said that teachers often did not show up in the mornings, while others said that teachers were untrained. One of the main concerns for parent respondents was the future of their children, and education played a role in this.

5.5 Ethnicity

Many Kurdish respondents who had lived or studied in Damascus or Latakia told stories of assimilation policies against them due to their ethnicity. These ranged from being forbidden to speak Kurdish, being unable to get University certificates despite completing

39 Author’s interview with Meike Nack, European representative of Weqfa Jin, conducted via Skype from Utrecht on 7 October 2016.
40 Author’s interview with the European Representative of Heyva Sor, in ’s-Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands on 28 September 2016.
degrees, being prohibited from travelling due to not having a passport or ID card, deprived of employment, and stripped of basic rights. These policies were mainly described as being implemented by officials of the regime, but, there were also reports of everyday discrimination by Arabs.

During interviews from both Rojava and Iraqi Kurdistan, a number of Kurdish respondents blamed acts of violence on Arabs, despite not knowing who the perpetrators were. One respondent directly linked this to the past, positing, “As Kurds, it’s very difficult for us to accept Arabs in such a short time because they have always assaulted us in the past and we cannot trust them easily.” Some people highlighted Kurdish animosity towards their Arab neighbours, but there were many more respondents that said they live peacefully next to one another.

5.6 Political affiliations
The respondents who reported that their political affiliations posed a threat in their lives were limited to three respondents in Iraqi Kurdistan. All three were members or supporters of either the KDP or their Syrian counterpart, the KDP-S. These respondents said that it was difficult to hold meetings, and they could not publically denounce their affiliations due to the consequent obstacles that would result. Some respondents in Rojava were critical of some aspects of the PYD-implemented system, as will be discussed in chapter six.

5.7 Societal norms and traditions
Societal norms and traditions intersected with many of the abovementioned threats, namely with SGBV and the restrictions that women face. As one woman put it: “Women are shackled by norms and traditions.” There was no significant disparity concerning the geography of the respondents or their ethnicity; such constraints were listed among all groups. Many references to societal norms were general, and respondents often did not elaborate on what norms and traditions they were specifically referring to. There were many statements such as, “she fears the norms and traditions of our society,” or there is “mistreatment due to the prevailing norms and traditions.”

Nonetheless, several respondents did list specific problems that came with societal views and traditions. Women expressed, for example, fear of losing their honour and reputation and some complained of the harassment they received when they went outside. This latter threat, that society does not accept that women go outside of their houses to work, was recurring. This is interconnected with the “pro-male mentality” of

41 Local researcher’s interview with 24-year-old Kurdish woman working in the Asayiş in Derik, Syria on the 30 August 2016.
42 Local researcher’s interview with a 28-year-old Kurdish woman in Derbesia, Rojava on 29 August 2016.
43 Local researcher’s interview with a 25-year-old Kurdish woman in Derik, Rojava on 30 August 2016.
44 Local researcher’s interview with a 32-year-old female member of the Women’s Commission in Qamışlo, Rojava on 27 August 2016.
the society that one female respondent reported. This mentality was also described as “authoritarian” and as treating “women as slaves and subordinate to men and teaches them since childhood that the man is the boss.” Furthermore, one woman said that “society looks at women as if she were an underage child despite the sacrifices she makes for her family.” Throughout the data collection, respondents said that divorce rates have risen in society since the implementation of the women’s rights laws which allow for women to seek divorce; previously it was something only men were permitted to file for (Gupta 2016). Yet, many women are still forced into underage marriage and experience domestic violence, and societal views towards divorced women are still an apparent challenge. One respondent said that after divorce, women often stay at home because society looks negatively at them and watches every step they make. A political figure from Rojava described divorce as “an extreme social taboo”; he said that, “Even if women are not happy with their marriage she cannot take a divorce because of social pressure against her doing that, so she is doomed to spend her life with her husband, unhappy.” Cultural values and societal norms thus do not always match the ideology of the new system.

5.8 Policy implications

This chapter has shown how women in Rojava perceive the various threats they face in their day-to-day lives. The most important threats that were identified by the respondents were physical violence due to the ongoing war and a lack of resources due to the weak economy. SGBV and a lack of healthcare were also seen as important threats, and to a lesser extent concerns were raised with regard to education, ethnicity, political affiliations, and societal norms and traditions. From a human security perspective, these threats fit nearly all categories of the broad definition of human security, including economic security, food security, health security, political security, personal security, and community security. Threats related to environmental security were not mentioned explicitly.

For policy-makers and practitioners, this mapping draws attention to the importance of a contextualised understanding of the multi-faceted threats women face in the midst of an ongoing conflict. This is vital knowledge in order to develop conflict and gender-sensitive programming aimed at addressing these threats. What also becomes clear from this mapping is how various state and non-state actors such as the al-Assad regime, Turkey, Daesh, and the Self-Administration shape and affect the perceptions on threats of women living in Rojava. Respondents often referred to these actors as sources

45 Local researcher’s interview with a 27-year-old Kurdish woman in Qamishlo, Rojava on 27 August 2016.
46 Local researcher’s interview with a 19-year-old Kurdish woman in Qamishlo, Rojava on 27 August 2016.
47 Authors’ interview with two Kurdish men in Domiz refugee camp, KRG on 31 August 2016; Local researcher’s interview with 34-year-old Kurdish woman in Qamishlo, Rojava on 27 August 2016; Local author’s interview with 30-year-old Kurdish woman in Serê Kaniyê on 25 August 2016.
48 Authors’ interview with Ibrahim Biro, head of the KNC, in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan, on 5 September 2016.
of threats to their security. Following the complex configuration of regional and international actors who try to exert their political and military power in this region of Syria, policy-makers and practitioners are confronted with several challenges and dilemmas. Especially, with regard to who to engage with, who to support, and what avenues can most effectively address the above-mentioned threats women face. In the following chapter, more attention will be paid to these questions by discussing different local female-led mechanisms in the realms of local governance, social services, and security.
6. Addressing Threats

This chapter discusses female-led local mechanisms in the realms of local governance, social services, and security in Rojava. As will become clear, these mechanisms partly overlap. Together, they seek to mitigate the wide range of threats that were discussed in chapter five. The perceptions on the strengths and weaknesses are assessed, and perceptions on whether and how these initiatives address the threats women face in Rojava are presented. Generally, respondents were positive about the new roles that women assumed in Rojava, and many respondents working in local governance, social services, and security said their work had empowered them. The perceptions on the effectiveness of women in working in these sectors highly differed, however. The chapter concludes with a brief summary of the findings, and implications for future policy will be given.

6.1 Local governance

As explained in chapter three, Rojava has a governance system that supposedly stimulates and ensures the active participation and protection of women. In this regard, there are laws put in place that protect women. Furthermore, in the “Social Contract” of Rojava there is special attention paid to the importance of female participation in all aspects of society. In January 2014, the cantons of Efrînê, Cizîrê, and Kobanê designed this “Social Contract” which is similar to what most states call their Constitution. It ensures the protection of different local ethnicities, women, and youth. There are several articles that protect women’s rights that are of particular interest to this study. For example, Article 27 states that “Women have the inviolable right to participate in political, social, economic and cultural life”; Article 28 reads: “Men and women are equal in the eyes of the law. The Charter supposedly guarantees the effective realisation of equality of women and mandates public institutions to work towards the elimination of gender discrimination”; and Article 29 focusses on child marriage: “Children shall not be married before attaining the age of majority”.

The commitment to gender equality is not simply rhetoric. There are several mechanisms in place to ensure the implementation of the above principles. For example, all governing bodies, institutions, and committees must be comprised of at least 40% of either sex (Article 87). There is also a co-chair system whereby in all leadership positions – from communes to councils or cantons – there must be both a man and a woman. Gender quotas are a practical first step towards gender balance and can encourage women’s participation in leadership positions (Rehn and Johnson 2002: 81). This paves the way for women to become more formally involved in political processes.

In March 2016, while declaring the federal system in Rojava, the pledge to gender equality was reiterated by the Constituent Council: “Women’s freedom is an essence of
the federal democratic system. Women have the right to equal participation and in
decision-related responsibilities in relation to female issues. Women will be represented
as equals in all spheres of live, including all social and political aspects” (Peace in
Kurdistan 2016). This is in stark contrast with the rest of Syria where only 12% of
parliament is represented by women (World Bank 2015). Notably, though to a lesser
extent, it is also in significant contrast with Western states as only five Western countries
have 40% women seated in parliament.49 In The Netherlands this percentage is 37.

There are several organisations in Rojava that are trying to work on gender
equality at the local level. The governance structure in the region is therefore hailed by
some as a form of direct democracy (Ross 2015). Yet, others critique it for being
authoritarian (Savelsberg 2014; Sary 2016: 11). According to Dirik (2015), the
organisation TEV-DEM (Movement for a Democratic Society)50 links the Self-
Administration with the people and is supposed to guarantee the dominant input of
grassroots issues. In theory, most decisions are made in the local councils of
neighbourhoods, villages, and cities. Each council is supposed to have a separate
women’s group that deals specifically with issues related to women. TEV-DEM facilitates
these councils. Another coordinating body is Kongira Star (formerly Yekîtiya Star).51
Kongira Star is independent from TEV-DEM and operates solely for women. Dirik (2015)
states it has significant decision-making power on women’s affairs and is responsible for
appointing the female co-president for the cantons.

Next to these two organisations, our local partner, the Women’s Commission
seeks to defend the rights of women in the Cizîrê Canton of Rojava. It is one of the
twenty-two Commissions that form the Self-Administration. In 2014, the Women’s
Commission formulated a set of women’s rights laws around the central tenet that the
freedom of women is the basis of a democratic society (Desteya Jin 2014). Twenty-one
basic principles and eight general provisions cover a wide range of topics to ensure
gender equality. These include women’s rights in marriage and divorce, family life,
political participation, law-making, and economic participation. Moreover, it combats
violence against women, honour killings, and Shighar marriages.52 The recently revised
charter also adds punishments in cases of unlawful behaviour. The introduction of these
laws were not without resistance. As Amina Omar recalls in an interview:

We have a lot of difficulties in the legislative authority. After we declared the
decrees a lot of people were shocked – we are amidst of Islamic traditions and

49 These countries are Finland, Sweden, Iceland, Spain, and Norway (World Bank 2015).
50 TEV-DEM is comprised of different parties including the PYD and the Syriac Union party. It is said that the
TEV-DEM is dominated by the PYD. According to Asia Abdulla, co-chair of the PYD, the PYD is "politically leading
the democratic revolution in Syria's Kurdistan while Tev-Dem is socially doing so" (MacDonald, 2014).
51 The name was changed from Yekîtiya Star to Kongira Star to make it more inclusive to other ethnic groups
living in Rojava.
52 Shighar marriages are when a daughter or sister is wedded to a man in exchange for marrying his daughter
or sister.
many people did not accept these things saying: “Why we cannot marry two women at the same time?”

A major change is that now women and men are equal before the law, as Omar explains: “In the past, two women were like one man in court.” Thus, these women’s laws can be seen as revolutionary. During the time of al-Assad’s regime, the legal system was comprised of old French, Ottoman, and Sharia law (UNICEF 2011). In the rest of Syria, there are both secular and religious courts. In the latter, a woman’s testimony is indeed worth only half of a man’s (UNICEF 2011). UNICEF also reports that polygamy is legal under Islamic law and gender-based violence is only punished with lenient sentences (2011).

In the first part of this section, the general governance framework and its characteristics with regards to women were described. In order to assess how this governance structure is experienced by the local community and notably by women from different ethnic backgrounds, interviews were done with more than 100 respondents, as is explained in the methodology chapter. The remainder of this section on local governance analyses how governance structures are perceived by women and in what way they address the identified threats that we discussed in chapter five.

In all villages and cities, the Self-Administration and local communes were virtually always referred to when respondents were asked who was in charge in their area. In a few exceptions, respondents said that there was no one in charge in their city or village, presumably referring to a sense of insecurity. In Qamişlo, the presence of al-Assad’s government was also reported. The Self-Administration and al-Assad’s regime were sometimes also referred to as the PKK and the Baath regime, respectively. Opinions on the effectiveness of local governance varied greatly, as some people were strong supporters of the Self-Administration, others showed a mixed attitude and some were strong opponents of the PYD. The latter were often aligned with Kurdish oppositional parties. There were no significant differences between urban and rural settings or between ethnicities in terms of support for the Self-Administration.

Most respondents said that, in one way or another, women were involved and active in local leadership and decision-making. However, there were some criticisms that women are put in leadership positions despite a lack of education or experience, hereby referring critically to the quotas that are set in place by the Self-Administration. A Kurdish male refugee interviewed in Iraqi Kurdistan said for example:

There are lots of uneducated women that do not know and understand their rights and this has affected men in a bad way. For example, women take their men to the women’s centres and report them. It is the freedom for the educated (on co-

53 Authors’ interview with Amina Omar, Head of the Women’s Commission, in Qamişlo on 26 April 2015.
leadership). There are a lot of uneducated women in co-leadership positions. Lots of women just completed high school and then are members of court and judge people. This is not good.54

According to a representative of PAX, due to the fact that many men are either hiding or fleeing from conscription to the regime and/or the YPG, women have become more active in society. In terms of power distribution between men and women, perceptions differed. Some of our informants stated that it is still men at the top that are making the important decisions in the Self-Administration. However, one informant reported that in Derik and Qamişlo, there are women in leadership positions. The 11 women working in local governance that were interviewed all appeared to work exclusively on women’s issues, which may be a coincidence, but it could also suggest to some extent a gendered division of labour within local governance structures in which only women are occupied with women related issues. The latter line of thinking is further illustrated by the fact that according to a Kurdish female provider in local governance in Serê Kaniyê, the Self-Administration requires the help of men when executing certain tasks. For example, men are needed when collecting taxes from the local population. Women thus depend on men for certain tasks, but all providers did state that there is full equality between men and women in the workplace. Drawing conclusions on the extent of gender equality in local governance is therefore difficult.

The majority of users viewed the involvement of women in governance as positive. The reason was often given that women would be able to understand the needs of women better. However, there were some critical remarks. For example, and as mentioned before, because of the implemented gender quotas, some women in governance positions supposedly lack expertise. Most of our female respondents said that they did not participate in the local communes and thus were not actively involved in decision-making processes as envisaged by the model of democratic confederalism. Although the reasons behind low participation were not thoroughly researched, many female respondents said it was due to being unable to leave the house because of their childcare duties or their husbands forbade them. Moreover, women’s organisations were not present in all areas that were studied. For example, in Serê Kaniyê, an Arabic female involved in governance said that although there were women’s only meetings, there were no women’s only organisations.

The fact that the involvement of women in local governance is generally viewed as positive does not necessarily mean that women in local governance are accepted throughout society. A 22-year-old woman involved in governance in Derik explained that her role in the Self-Administration as a woman is not accepted by some:

54 Authors’ interview with 30-year-old male from Derik in Domiz refugee camp, KRG on 31 of august 2016.
My family did not accept my work at first. ... The nature of my work requires me to go out a lot and do fieldwork. The society was not accepting this and everybody was talking about us, saying that we had a bad reputation.55

Moreover, almost all female governance providers expressed difficulties combining work and household duties, referring to the double burden for women that often develops together with the evolvement of emancipation. Although all respondents recognised that the Self-Administration’s system was de facto in control of their village, some interviewees explained that traditional power structures are still upheld in some settings, most notably in villages:

When a problem arises, it is quickly tackled because some people already gathered money. If the problem happens they will solve it by using these funds. The high people, the respected people will do this. They are called the Mukhtar.56

Here, in cases of disputes between families or a lack of resources, a group of elder men would address these problems, even in places where the Self-Administration is in power. In Terbaspia for example, one respondent said that the elderly are now integrated in the local communes as members of the “reconciliation commission”. Given the traditional nature of these elders, it is assumed, and in some instances it was verified, that these groups of “high people” are only men.

With regard to the women’s rights laws, only respondents in Iraqi Kurdistan were asked about their opinions on them. We thus cannot generalise about all respondents. Nevertheless, even the respondents in Iraqi Kurdistan, who were also generally more critical towards the Self-Administration and its governance system, perceived these women’s rights laws positively. The laws that they mentioned were mostly regarding divorce and domestic violence. Many respondents said that now women are able to stand up to their husbands, especially in cases of domestic violence. For example, one respondent said:

The laws are good. Ten years ago men hit their wives a lot but now they don’t. People used to hit their wives because they were uneducated and don’t know how to deal with their family, but now people go to school and learn about their rights.57

However, some respondents said that the laws have led to a high rate of divorce in society. Moreover, the extent of the current perceptions on effectiveness of these laws at

55 Interview with a 22-year-old female in Derik on 30 of august 2016.
56 Authors’ interview with 28-year-old female from Alkqoosh, Rojava in Domiz refugee camp, KRG on august 29th 2016.
57 Authors’ interview with 27-year-old female in Domiz refugee camp, KRG on August 25th 2016.
the moment is somewhat questionable. For example, a 19-year-old women involved in local governance said that the biggest obstacle in doing her work is that the society does not adhere to the women’s laws.

Across all villages and cities in Rojava, there were some negative perceptions of local governance in general and in Iraqi Kurdistan there were also negative reactions, largely from respondents with opposing political affiliations. The few women that were interviewed in Iraqi Kurdistan that supported oppositional parties, perceived local governance significantly different from most respondents that were interviewed in Rojava. For example, two women that were members of the Kurdish KDP-S party stated that they were excluded from local decision-making processes in communes because of their political affiliation. This criticism is endorsed by foreigners working in humanitarian aid. For example, one of them said: “The fact remains that there is only one political party, the PYD, and for the opposition there is only limited room to move.”

Generally, criticisms on local governance were of the Self-Administration, rather than on women’s involvement.

Despite the criticism and limits on local governance, it must be stressed that in the Middle East, this system of governance is unique. According to a humanitarian worker:

There is a genuine effort to enhance the position of women in Rojava. The Self-Administration is consciously trying to improve the position of women. Men are still dominant, but at least it is an enormous step in the right direction. Women participate actively and get the chance and the space to do so.

This section has outlined women’s involvement in local governance which affected how other female led initiatives have developed. Although local governance may address threats women face indirectly, it shapes mechanisms that do so more directly. In the next section, these mechanisms are discussed, namely social services and security.

6.2 Social services

Next to local governance, social services that are provided in Rojava seem to mitigate some of the threats women face. In this section, it is therefore investigated how the provision of social services addresses these threats. Social services may be provided by different actors, including governance institutions, INGOs, civil society organisations, or informal networks.

As stipulated throughout this report, conflict has the potential to empower women. Evidence shows that women’s participation in income-generating and decision-making activities increases during violent conflict because of the injury, death, and

58 The KDP-S is the Syrian branch of Barzani’s Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraqi Kurdistan. Like the KDP, the KDP-S strongly opposes Rojava, especially the Self-Administration model and the PYD.
59 Off the record interview with humanitarian aid worker that lived in the region for several years.
60 Ibid.
displacement of individuals, the destruction of social fabric and political structures, and the re-composition of households (UN Women 2012: 3). During conflict, it becomes common for women to begin organising themselves and improving their position in society. While dependency on male counterparts decreases, women are forced to organise for social services such as health care, provision of food and water, and education (Freerks 2014: 97). Although women tend to bear these responsibilities anyway, they are generally restricted to informal, private work as opposed to collective organising in the public sphere (Rehn and Johnson 2002: 76).

Prior to the conflict in Syria, there was just one women’s organisation in Rojava.61 In 2014, however, it was reported there were over 27. These organisations provide a range of services, including gender-based violence assessment and support, family mediation, legal help, safe houses for survivors of violence, and support for the wives and mothers of those that have been killed in the conflict. They also provide personal, economic, and social empowerment programs (Roj Women’s Association 2014).

The SARA organisation is the leading organisation combatting gender based violence in Rojava (ibid). The Asayiş seek out the assistance of SARA when dealing with cases of GBV. Some of their work includes encouraging women to talk about GBV and helping survivors of violence to safe houses. One of the respondents of earlier fieldwork explained the importance of the safe houses:

*We had two people who came to the safe house because they were pregnant and single. So they were in our safe house to get their children. We have our own doctors, specialized in psychology to help them back to our society ... We have jobs for them; they work as tailors now and they have their own money and their own life.*62

SARA also works together with many other women’s organisations and campaigns against GBV through social media and community networking. There are women-only media outlets, such as the Jihna news agency. They try to encourage and strengthen the advocacy for women through their journalistic articles (Gupta 2016a). Furthermore, Kongira Star publishes and distributes its own women’s magazine (Roj Women 2014).

Another sphere in which women in the Cizîrê Canton of Rojava are active is the economy. Kongira Star pursues many economic activities that aim to empower women. They have set up women-only cooperatives whereby only women are permitted to be owners and members (Gupta 2016b). Weqfa Jin Azad Rojava (Foundation of Free Women) is another local NGO that is involved in several economic activities. For example, it gives humanitarian aid to refugees from Iraq and Syria. Moreover, they

61 Authors’ interview with Amina Omar, Head of the Women’s Commission, in Qamislo, Rojava on 26 April 2015.
62 Ibid.
established pre-schools in order to educate young children, but also to give their mothers the opportunity to develop themselves (Weqfa Jina Azad 2016). In addition to this, they have opened multiple health centres, cooperatives, and cafes solely for women (ibid).

During interviews, respondents were asked who provides particular services in their area, such as health care, education, basic services, and protection against SGBV. In the previous chapter, it was described how the economic hardship and war in general were one of the biggest threats to women in the Cizîrê Canton. Naturally, these factors affected perceptions on the effectiveness of local initiatives. According to most providers of social services, this was the biggest obstacle in their daily work. In general, there are little resources that can address the economic threats women face in the Cizîrê Canton.

Nearly all respondents said that women are involved in the provision of healthcare. These services were reported as equally accessible for both men and women. Most of the weaknesses related to healthcare were attributed to a shortage of medicine and trained doctors. The situation in Rojava concerning health care is hence described by several humanitarian aid workers as dire. One of the respondents, for example, said she had undergone surgery to her leg after having been injured during airstrikes without any sedatives. According to an aid worker in Kobanê, the Self-Administration lacks the proper expertise to set up a public health care system in order to, for example, vaccinate children.63 Moreover, according to aid workers that were interviewed, many highly educated people fled the country resulting in an acute shortage of doctors and nurses. Health care was by some reported to be politicised, although most of the respondents said that health care was accessible for everyone.

Since the establishment of the Self-Administration, the education system has undergone major changes. For example, the taught language in many cases is now Kurdish instead of Arabic. Although many Kurds view this as a major improvement compared to the times of the al-Assad regime when Kurdish language and culture was oppressed, there were also some criticisms. These criticisms on the new education system varied widely; some respondents said now that the education is in Kurdish, it is difficult for their children to study because they only know how to read and write in Arabic. Few objected to the fact that Öcalan's ideology was infiltrated within parts of the education system. Some said that the teachers were not qualified, and some said that there was a general lack of schools. In terms of accessibility, just two respondents said that sometimes men are favoured. Similarly to healthcare, the majority of respondents said that women were involved in the provision of education and commonly women were teachers.

The provision of basic services such as water, electricity, and food is a major problem for all respondents as described in chapter five. Due to the war, there is a lot of

63 Off the record interview with humanitarian aid worker that lived in the region for several years.
unemployment and a lack of resources in general. According to the respondents, the
ways in which local organisations addressed these difficulties varied. In most smaller
cities and villages, the commune seems to play an important role in the provision of basic
services, but it was often described as being unsuccessful. Some respondents said that
communes lacked the resources to provide effective help, but sometimes it was said that
the communes only acted in their own interest. Moreover, the distribution of these
services by the Self-Administration was reported as being uneven. For example, political
opponents of the PYD said that for them getting access to services was more difficult.
One woman also said that in her neighbourhood in the city, most people did not support
the Self-Administration and therefore got less hours of electricity per day compared to
bordering pro Self-Administration neighbourhoods. A similar pattern was visible with
regards to food distribution and other difficulties in general. This view was countered
however by the representative of the Self-Administration’s office in The Hague. He said:

*We know better than anyone else where aid is needed. The last time I was in
Rojava we saw for example that it was necessary to provide some Arab villages with
electricity. We look at the overall situation to set priorities. We discuss with
the representatives of all areas what is needed. Some people have no water at all.
Other places have water for a few hours per day. Then those who do not have
water at all are the priority. Do not forget that we are at war and are living under
an embargo.*

An important characteristic of Rojava is the presence of women’s only organisations
where women can go to in order to get help. In the Cizîrê Canton, the awareness and
actual presence of these women’s organisations varied. In Derik and Qamişlo, the
majority of women said that there were women-only organisations. In Derbesia, most
women said there were not, and in Serê Kaniyê and Terbaspia, respondents’ answers
varied. Although many respondents reported women’s organisations in their area, most
said that they did not participate. The most common reason for not participating was due
to household responsibilities and childcare duties. Some women said that the
organisations sought educated women, and they were not educated enough to
participate. It was reported that the organisations provided sewing courses, taught
women about their rights, and addressed women-specific problems.

When asked who were the most important organisations addressing SGBV, the
Asayiş, Mala Jin (Women’s Houses), the PYD, and the Women’s Commission were among
the most common answers. All of these services stem from the Self-Administration
model. Some women said that women would not report SGBV because of societal or

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64 Authors’ interview with Sheruan Hassan, representative of the Rojava Representation office in The Hague, on
29 September 2016.
family traditions. Criticisms on these initiatives came mostly from men who said that in cases of disputes the woman is often favoured without properly investigating the problem. These social initiatives sometimes take up tasks typically associated with governance, illustrating the linkage of the Self-Administration and its civil society organisations. One respondent working for the aforementioned SARA organisation said that she intervenes and negotiates between families to prevent them ending up in court. A major obstacle for many providers of social services was security, finance, and a lack of transportation in order to reach all women in the Cizîrê Canton. It proved difficult to assess how often these services were used. Some respondents said that they thought that an abused women would go to one of these organisations. However, most respondents said that it may be difficult for women to do so out of fear to ruin their and their family's honour. This illustrates that, although the development of these local initiatives addressing SGVB is significant, traditions and cultural values are restricting their accessibility.

In addition to organisations designed for women from all ethnicities, there were some specific organisations addressing the needs of Syriac or Arab women. For example, a 60-year-old woman working for the Syriac Union Party explained that she was advocating for the emancipation of Syriac women. Moreover, a 37-year-old Arab woman working for the Arab National Party was also active in the empowerment of women. Although she identified the lack of awareness about women's rights as the biggest obstacle in doing her work, much like all other providers, she said that another obstacle was "to let go of the mentality of the Baath regime". Although these two organisations focus on women with specific ethnicities, they work together through, and with, the local communes and the Women’s Commission.

6.3 Security
Apart from local governance and social services, this research also investigated how women who are active in the realm of security seek to address threats women face in Rojava. As previously stipulated, since al-Assad’s forces withdrew from the north of Syria in the wake of the civil war, Kurdish regional and community-based security providers have sought to fill the security vacuum at the local level. Contrary to most security providers in the Middle East, women are active participants in these newly established military and police forces. The limited academic research that has been done so far suggests they are providing security services to considerable parts of the population in the areas they control (Bateson 2015), but little is known about the perceptions of women on these services. The data gathered for this report shows that nearly all

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65 Syriac is the language spoken by most Christians living in Syria (Minority Rights Group 2015). The Syriac Union Party is part of the aforementioned TEV-DEM structure.
respondents said that women are involved in security provision in the Cizîrê Canton, but opinions towards this differed.

### 6.3.1 Asayiş

A larger structure in which women in Rojava are providing security services to civilians is the Asayiş, the local police force which is supported by the Self-Administration. The Asayiş consists in theory equally of women and men, although it is difficult to verify whether there is truly equal representation. There is also a separate female-only Asayiş force which focuses on sexual and domestic violence against women (Gupta 2016c). The interview data that was collected for this report demonstrates that generally both women and men saw the presence of women in the Asayiş as a positive development. Many respondents said they felt protected by the Asayiş, and some women even said they felt more protected by women than men. As one respondent stated: "When women protect me I feel more safe and comfortable." 66 A Kurdish housewife from Derbësia said, "I feel happy and look at them with respect and appreciation." 67 There were also respondents, however, who said that while they appreciate women’s involvement in the Asayiş, their gender does not determine their effectiveness. One woman from Qamişlo who recently fled to Iraqi Kurdistan for example said: "There is no difference if it is a man or woman." 68 A man from the same village said he also did not feel more or less protected by women than men in the Asayiş. He also said, however, that he saw women’s involvement in the Asayiş as “a positive step” and explained that, "Women in developed countries do the same." 69 He also indicated his appreciation for their work and said, “They are women, and yet they are protecting us!” 70

There were far less respondents who voiced negative perceptions about the Asayiş. Nevertheless, some women said the Asayiş was not doing a good job. One respondent said the “Asayiş did some mistakes before”, 71 and alleged “some of them have stolen money and materials.” 72 Another woman said that “the latest explosion in Qamişlo is an example of their failure.” 73 One woman stated that when she sees the Asayiş standing on guard she goes “outside without feeling safe and protected.”

Respondents who work for the women’s only Asayiş said they face obstacles in doing their job that are related to gender. One female Asayiş member said: “People in the region look at us in a bad way because they do not accept that women can work in

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66 Local researcher’s interview with a 35-year-old Arab woman in Serê Kaniyê, Rojava on 25 August 2016.
67 Local researcher’s interview with a 55-year-old Kurdish woman in Derbësia, Rojava on 29 August 2016.
68 Local researcher’s interview with a 40-year-old Kurdish woman in Domiz camp, Iraqi Kurdistan on 31 August 2016.
69 Interview with a 36-year-old Kurdish man in Derbësia, Rojava on 29 August 2016.
70 Ibid.
71 Interview with a 31-year-old Kurdish man in Serê Kaniyê, Rojava on 25 August 2016.
72 Ibid.
73 Local researcher’s interview with a 34-year-old Kurdish woman in Qamişlo, Rojava on 27 August 2016.
an organisation such as the Asayiş.” She furthermore alleged that men accepted women’s right to work “only because of the war circumstances.” Another female Asayiş member said that, “People are surprised that I am a woman and do work with the Asayiş.” An important obstacle to the work of the Asayiş was, according to this respondent, “The negative way in which the society looks at women and the negative way in which women look at themselves too.” At the same time various female Asayiş members expressed the acceptance of women in the Asayiş is a process which takes time. They also underlined the importance of not involving men in the decision-making of the women’s only Asayiş. One respondent explained: “We are women after all, therefore we understand their problems and what they suffer.” Sometimes the women’s only Asayiş refers women who experienced violence to the Women’s House, an organisation focused on protecting women who experienced violence.

Overall, both female civilians and female Asayiş members are thus generally positive about women’s involvement in the Asayiş. They praised women’s capability in providing security services and helping women, but the involvement of women in the Asayiş did not make women necessarily feel more secure. While some respondents explicitly mentioned that women are better equipped to secure women, other respondents stated men and women are both able to do this. Most members of the women’s only Asayiş that were interviewed claimed that societal norms were hindering women’s involvement in the Asayiş. One woman also reported that these obstacles are decreasing and that since joining she had learnt more about their rights as women.

6.3.2 YPJ

The Kurdish female-led security forces that are most commonly referred to in public debates and media coverage are the YPJ. These “Women’s Protection Units” consist of roughly 7,500–10,000 women, and are part of the larger People’s Defense Units (Gupta 2016c). The structures of the YPG and the YPJ are rather similar with only some noteworthy differences. What sets the YPJ apart is a stronger emphasis on their social role and specific patriarchal assaults: “In order to expel authoritarian patriarchal systems ... the legitimate power of women, carries out the struggle for women's freedom” (YPG 2015). Apart from their military capabilities, they are explicitly tasked to protect women’s values and defend gender freedom (Bateson 2015). Recently, the YPJ became part of the

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74 Local researcher’s interview with a 24-year-old Kurdish woman in the Asayiş in Derik, Rojava on 30 August 2016.
75 Ibid.
76 Local researcher’s interview with a 26-year-old Kurdish woman in the Asayiş in Qamişlo, Rojava on 27 August 2016.
77 Ibid.
78 Local researcher’s interview with a 24-year-old Kurdish woman in the Asayiş in Derik, Rojava on 30 August 2016.
79 Local researcher’s interview with 28-year-old Kurdish woman in the Asayiş in Derik, Rojava on 30 August 2016.
newly established Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which consists of an alliance between Arab, Assyrian, Armenian, Kurdish, and Turkmen militias (Gupta 2016c).

The main strengths of the YPJ that respondents identified are the bravery of the women who fight Daesh and the security they provided for civilians in Rojava. A woman from Qamişlo, for example, said: "We are proud of such women because they defend our lands and guarantee our safety." She furthermore said that she felt more secure "because women are more thorough and more passionate about defending their country." A young woman who was interviewed in the Domiz camp said: "I have friends who fight Daesh. They are very brave girls, I think. I wanted to go, but my mother didn’t let me. She told me to finish my studies. Now I do not want to fight anymore. You know, I cannot save my people." A woman from Qamişlo said: "We are proud of such women because they defend our lands and guarantee our safety.

Some respondents were less positive about women’s involvement in the YPJ. A female respondent from Qamişlo who fled to Iraqi Kurdistan said: "Men are better. The men have experience with using arms, maybe some women do not." A woman from Qamişlo also voiced concerns over women’s involvement in the military. She said: "I’m against that because military work is not suitable for women." A female respondent from Derbesia said that she feels "more protected with men as protectors.

The most contentious issue with regard to women in the YPJ that was identified by the respondents is women fighting in the frontline. Some women strongly opposed this while others referred to the fighting in the frontline to illustrate the positive impact of women in the military. A woman from Derbesia said that she agreed with women’s involvement in the YPJ "on the condition that [they] serve in the backlines." A woman serving with RojPesh in Iraqi Kurdistan explained that "Daesh captured 50 women – they raped them and made a film about them. They beheaded them. This is stigma and shame for us. If it is not necessary we will not go to the frontline." A female respondent from Derik however said that "women are as strong as men, and can fight even on the frontlines." A male teacher in the Domiz camp in Iraqi Kurdistan said, "They [YPJ] fight Daesh in the frontline. This is a good change. We are so happy about this."

80 Local researcher’s interview with a 25-year-old Kurdish woman in Qamişlo, Rojava on 27 August 2016.  
81 Authors’ interview with respondent 25-year-old Kurdish woman in Domiz refugee camp, Iraqi Kurdistan on 25 August 2016.  
82 Local researcher’s interview with a 34-year-old Kurdish woman in Qamişlo, Rojava on 27 August 2016.  
83 Local researcher’s interview with two 28-year-old Kurdish women in Derbesia, Rojava on 29 August 2016.  
84 Local researcher’s interview with a 28-year-old Kurdish woman in Derbesia, Rojava on 29 August 2016.  
85 Authors’ interview with two Kurdish women, 23- and 24-years-old, in Duhok, Iraqi Kurdistan on 1 September 2016.  
86 Local researcher’s interview with a 21-year-old Kurdish woman in Derik, Rojava on 30 August 2016.  
87 Author’s interview with a Kurdish man during a focus group discussion in Domiz refugee camp, Iraqi Kurdistan on 28 August 2016.
6.3 Policy Implications

This chapter has illustrated that women are active in local governance, social services, and security in Cizirê Canton. Most respondents viewed this as positive, although in some instances traditional views on gender roles were prevalent. Threats women faced related to the economy and health care were perceived not to be addressed properly. Moreover, some perceived that the threats they faced were not addressed (by female-led initiatives) because of their political affiliation. With regard to perceptions on how threats related to SGVB are addressed, it became clear that most respondents know about the female-led initiatives, but there are still barriers for women to use these initiatives. Concerning threats related to safety and security, most respondents praised women’s capability in providing security services and helping women, but the involvement of women in, for example, the Asayiş did not make women necessarily feel more secure. Moreover, there was some disagreement about whether women should be fighting at the frontlines.

The case of Rojava shows that in places where a central government – in this case al-Assad’s regime – is not de facto governing a territory, non-state governance actors may step in and fill this gap. The Self-Administration seems to function like a state in some ways, e.g. the coordination of an organised army and the imposition of taxes. Yet, in many ways the case of Rojava is at odds with how governance is often envisaged by western policy-makers. An important implication that can be derived from this is that for many civilians living in conflict settings, non-state actors may be important parties that shape and influence their daily lives.

The exploration of female-led initiatives in the realms of local governance, social services, and security shows that, in some cases, non-state actors have the capacity to govern and address some – though not all – needs of women in FCAS. This does not suggest that non-state forms of governance are necessarily better in addressing threats than the state, but it does draw attention the importance of analysing what “the state” and “the non-state” actually do in a certain context.

Part of the aim of the research was to investigate how current international efforts may be better tailored to the needs of local female led initiatives and women in the Cizirê Canton of Rojava that were discussed in this chapter and chapter five. The next chapter will discuss how international NGOs are currently attempting to provide humanitarian assistance to women in Rojava and what challenges they come across while doing so.
7. International Development Aid and Humanitarian Assistance

Introduction
This chapter outlines the current efforts by international development organisations in providing humanitarian assistance in Rojava. It is difficult to assess exactly how many international NGOs are currently working in Rojava because many organisations keep a low profile due to security reasons. Dutch and international NGOs currently working in Rojava were interviewed in order to develop a clearer understanding of humanitarian assistance and development programs in the region. NGO workers identified the most important challenges while working in the region and they were asked what policy recommendations they would put forward. This chapter will discuss these different challenges listed by NGO workers, after which their policy recommendations are put forward.

7.1 Challenges
The challenges that were identified by NGO workers consist of issues related to border crossings, security, transferring economic resources, and international and regional politics.

7.1.1 Border crossings
Regional politics are causing civilian suffering in Rojava; humanitarian aid, medicine, and food are all being blocked access to Rojava due to inter-Kurdish hostilities and Kurdish-Turkish relations. NGO workers we interviewed were frustrated with the regional political tensions, which in their view prevent them from doing their work. For example, one NGO workers said: “Our main concern every day is access”; and “The only problem is that the border is closed.” Despite the Semalka border crossing between Iraqi Kurdistan and Syria officially being opened again in June 2016 after being closed for months since March, the access that is permitted by both sides is still very limited.

Un Ponte Per (UPP) is an Italian NGO that has been working in different parts of Kurdistan since 1991 and in Rojava since February 2015. They work in Rojava because it is “a unique example of democracy and a place where Christians, Kurds, Yazidis and Arabs live together and build new and democratic institutions despite the everyday war with Daesh” (Un Ponte Per n.d.). Their work largely concerns providing medical care and

89 The NGOs that publically state their past and present work in Rojava on their websites are Medicins Sans Frontiers, the IRC, and Save the Children. The NRC does not explicitly state they work in Rojava yet they emphasise that they are the only INGO working across the whole of Syria.
90 Author’s interview with an employee of Un Ponte Per via Skype from Utrecht, The Netherlands to Duhok, Iraqi Kurdistan on 22 September 2016.
91 Author’s interview with member of Altruism in ’s-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands on 1 October 2016.
92 The authors experienced border difficulties whilst conducting research in Iraqi Kurdistan, as well as all NGO workers interviewed reporting this problem: Author’s interview with an employee of Un Ponte Per via Skype from Utrecht, The Netherlands to Duhok, Iraqi Kurdistan on 22 September 2016; Author’s interview with member of Altruism in ’s-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands on 1 October 2016; Author’s interview with the European Representative of Heyva Sor, in ’s-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands on 28 September 2016.
they work closely with Heyva Sor.93 UPP is one of the only NGOs that is regularly granted access to Rojava, and according to the UPP this is because they have been working in Iraqi Kurdistan for over 25 years.94 Despite this, the border issue was still listed as the biggest challenge for their work, according to an UPP employee that was interviewed. He criticised the KRG for closing the border with Rojava but said that the international attention should be focussed on the embargo with Turkey as the official border identified by the UN is located in Turkey.95

The European representative of Heyva Sor said that her organisation encounters similar problems. Heyva Sor works across all parts of Kurdistan providing medical care and humanitarian projects. The respondent from this NGO said that the International Red Cross (IRC) only works within state borders and because of this, the Kurdish region has been somewhat neglected. She criticised the IRC because it does not work in Rojava, while it does work in Daesh-controlled Raqqa, saying: “There is a humanitarian need and them not working with us is against the Red Crescent’s principles.”96 In Rojava, Heyva Sor has an office in Kobanê and claims to have full access to all areas. UPP works closely with Heyva Sor so that they too can access remote places. However, much of their medical equipment is blocked from entering: "We just can't get our help there."97

The border politics on all sides are not only affecting the transportation of aid and resources but also prevents NGOs based in the West working directly with their local partners. PAX, a Dutch NGO, says they coordinate with local partners in the areas they work, who maintain contact with the necessary political parties. Their work in Rojava is said not to be concerned with the provision of resources but rather focuses on capacity- and peace-building projects. Nonetheless, a member of PAX’s Syria team said that being unable to cross into Rojava makes their work very difficult as they are unable to communicate in person or to conduct necessary workshops. Altruism, a Dutch NGO trying to support the development of the education system in Rojava, also experiences this difficulty. For example, they have 50 computers at their organisation, waiting to be transported to Rojava, but this is not possible because of the border situation. Furthermore, having to rely on online communication – such as Dropbox for sending resources or Skype for direct contact – is inefficient because Rojava frequently encounters internet connection problems.

93 Heyva Sor is the self-proclaimed Kurdish Red Crescent. They were formed in 1993 in response to the large number of refugees that resulted from the Halabja massacre. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement do not allow Heyva Sor to use their logo because only states are authorised to do so.
94 Author’s interview with an employee of Un Ponte Per via Skype from Utrecht, The Netherlands to Duhok, Iraqi Kurdistan on 22 September 2016.
95 Ibid.
96 Author’s interview with the European Representative of Heyva Sor, in ‘s-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands on 28 September 2016.
97 Ibid.
7.1.2 Security
An inevitable risk of working anywhere in Syria is security. As our data showed, security concerns are still the most pressing threats for the majority of people living in Rojava. The same goes for NGOs working there. Two international NGO workers that are based in Rojava were interviewed: one from UPP and the other from an international NGO providing health care.98 The employee of UPP expressed fear of security risks, saying, “we never forget in Qamışlo [that] every day the government could bomb, in other areas Daesh, in Kobanê the Turkish army could bomb”, making clear the multifaceted threats from all angles. The other NGO representative worked exclusively in Kobanê where she said there were many unexploded bombs from both Daesh and US-led coalition airstrikes. Although not based in Rojava herself, the representative from Heyva Sor recited a story about one of their projects in 2014. They sent 36 ambulances filled with medical supplies to Rojava; 35 of them reached people in need but one was captured by Daesh and burnt and the Heyva Sor volunteer that drove the ambulance was killed. This demonstrates the unpredictability of the security situation.

7.1.3 Transferring Funds
In Rojava, there are no banks operating, it is an entirely cash economy. Sending large quantities of cash is unreliable, inefficient, unsafe, and comes with challenges. The Board Member from Stichting Help Kobane said this was a major problem for them. Due to the foundation wanting to buy resources within Rojava itself – in order to contribute to their lagging economy – they did so by sending monetary donations they had received. This proved incredibly difficult because the money had to be sent electronically to Iraqi Kurdistan and then through a local money transfer office to Rojava. There seems to be no better system in place to send financial help to Rojava from Europe.

7.1.4 International and regional politics
As described in chapter 4, there are different political tensions between actors involved in Rojava. This has an impact on the room for NGOs to execute their work. The international community’s listing of the PKK as a terrorist group was raised as an issue during the research by NGOs, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Dutch Consulate in Erbil. There is no separation of the Self-Administration from the PKK, and their alleged ties were repeatedly mentioned as a reason to not provide humanitarian aid and other support to civilians in Rojava. Heyva Sor said that when they collected clothes to send to Kurdish refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan after the Halabja massacre in 1988, the Dutch Government and military worked with them. At the time, the Dutch military allegedly permitted Heyva Sor to store all the donations in a military base, and the government supported the project. However, since the PKK has been listed as a terrorist

98 This international NGO requested that they stay anonymous for security reasons.
group (Court of Justice of the European Union 2008), their work has been negatively affected. According to Heyva Sor, “Turkey has put chains on all our work ... They now label everything Kurdish as belonging to the PKK. A lot of Dutch organisations that were working with us also now stopped. After the ban of the PKK, everybody went away.”99 Currently, the majority of their funding comes from the Kurdish diaspora and individuals “but not organisations, because they don’t want their names linked with us.”100

According to an NGO worker active in health care in Rojava, the fact that international health actors like the World Health Organisation only operate in areas under control by recognised governments means that the Self-Administration does not get any support in setting up a public health system. This has resulted in the absence of a properly developed public health system and a lack of technical expertise.101

As mentioned before, the Dutch Consulate in Erbil described the Self-Administration as an “uneasy” partner in Syria due to their links with the PKK. The Dutch Labour Party’s (PvdA)’s spokesman for Development Aid, van Laar, said that Rojava is the one place in Syria that is stable at the moment and he argued that setting up humanitarian and development aid. He also suggested setting up a monetary avenue so that governments and NGOs can economically support grassroots organisations in Rojava.102 He stated that many refugees are living in Rojava, and therefore this region must be invested in. Christen Unie’s (CU) spokesperson for development aid, Voordewind, and the aforementioned van Laar recently asked the Minister of International Trade and Development Cooperation to provide more aid to Northern Syria (Tweede Kamer 2016).

7.2 Recommendations from experts in the field

The final question in the interviews with NGO workers was what they thought should be the most important policy recommendation for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and international NGOs looking to engage with female-led initiatives in Rojava. An employee from an international NGO referred to the border politics: “Turkey is building a wall. People are getting shot trying to cross the border. Medical humanitarian care cannot enter. This is unacceptable.” She also called on the responsible international health organisations to do more and to build up a good system of health care. In addition, she indicated that there should be more investments in de-mining programs as blast wounds are constantly reported and many more blast wound cases do not even make it to the hospital at all.

99 Authors’ interview with the European Representative of Heyva Sor, in ’s-Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands on 28 September 2016.
100 Ibid.
101 Off the record interview with humanitarian aid worker that lived in the region for several years.
102 Authors’ interview with Roelof van Laar, Development Aid spokesman for PvdA, in den Haag, the Netherlands on 12 October 2016.
The representative from Heyva Sor highlighted the need for psychological help for women, especially Yazidi women that have escaped from Daesh captivity. Again, increased medical care was her priority as she said that there are just not enough supplies and people are dying from treatable injuries. She said much of their organisation’s time is being wasted trying to negotiate access across the border.

A member of PAX’s Syria team was concerned that after the conflict ends, women will go back to the household and to societal traditions, as is so common in post-conflict societies. She said that we “need to ensure gender roles remain changed on a sustainable basis and not just temporarily filling a gap.”

UPP and Altruism both saw a big need to cooperate with the Self-Administration. The employee of Altruism: “Best is to work directly with the Self-Administration ... NGOs must know the vision of Rojava before working there – only the same way of thinking will help.”

The member from Stichting Help Kobane stressed that pressure must be put on Turkey and the KRG to open up their borders for Rojava, and his personal opinion is that “Western governments must stop being hypocritical” as he said they provide military support whilst simultaneously neglecting humanitarian support.

### 7.3 Policy implications

This chapter has outlined the difficulties for international development and assistance to take place in Rojava. Many NGO workers that were interviewed listed access, security, and international politics as the most important challenges that hinder their work. Moreover, this hindered them in addressing some of the threats women face that were described in chapter five. In many ways, practitioners are confronted with the same actors that cause the threats women in Rojava face, notably Turkey, al-Assad’s regime, the KRG, and the Self-Administration.

If policy-makers and practitioners want to mitigate these challenges, they are likely to be confronted with conflicting interests. While one the one hand they often express the wish to better support civilians (and women in particular) in conflict, on the other hand, international relations may become a restriction to achieve this goal. Like many other conflict settings, the case of Rojava shows that humanitarian and development aid may become politicised which in the end impacts the lives of civilians in conflict. A more fundamental issue in humanitarian aid was put forward in this chapter as well: when international actors are unwilling to work together with non-state actors who are de facto in control of a certain territory, this has implications for civilians living in these areas. Policy-makers and practitioners have to weigh carefully different arguments.

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103 Authors’ interview with an employee of PAX’s Syria team in Utrecht, The Netherlands on 7 September 2016.
104 Authors’ interview with member of Altruism in ’s-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands on 1 October 2016.
105 Authors’ interview with a member of Stichting Help Kobane in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, on 30 September 2016.
regarding the need of supporting civilians on the one hand, and working with non-state actors on the other hand. In the next and final chapter, the research findings will be summarised and policy recommendations for different audiences will be given.
8. Policy Recommendations

Introduction
This research has sought to investigate how female-led initiatives in Rojava address the threats that women from various backgrounds face in their daily lives. In this final chapter, the main findings of our research will be summarised. Although Rojava is often presented as a unique case in the Middle East, it does share certain characteristics with other contexts around the world, most notably the crucial role of non-state actors in providing governance, social services, and security. Policy-makers and practitioners engaged with other Fragile and Conflict-Affected Settings (FCAS) can therefore learn from this research. In this final chapter, both general policy implications for FCAS, as specific implications for Rojava will be formulated. This will pave the way to give direct policy recommendations to different audiences, notably the Dutch Government, the Self-Administration, the KRG, and humanitarian aid and development organisations working in Rojava.

8.1 Main findings
The main findings of this report have been structured by firstly investigating the multiple threats women face in Rojava. From there, we have shown how initiatives by women and women’s organisations seek to address these threats and how they are perceived. Based on this assessment, and through interviewing NGO workers engaged with Rojava, we have listed possible entry points for development organisations. Together, these different elements provide indications on how the researched female-led initiatives facilitate or hinder peace and reconstruction processes in Rojava from 2012 onwards. In this section, the main findings will be summarised.

Firstly, in this paper it has been demonstrated that women in the Cizîrê Canton of Rojava face various threats. The most important threats that were identified by the respondents were physical violence due to the ongoing war and a lack of resources due to the weak economy. SGBV and a lack of healthcare were also seen as important threats, and to a lesser extent concerns were raised with regard to education, ethnicity, political affiliations, and societal norms and traditions. From a human security perspective these threats pertain to economic security, food security, health security, political security, personal security, and community security. For policy-makers and practitioners, this mapping illustrates the importance of a contextualised understanding of the multi-faceted threats women face in FCAS. This is vital knowledge in order to develop conflict and gender-sensitive programming aimed at addressing these threats.

Secondly, while the ongoing war in Syria has been reported as one of the most important threats to the physical security of our respondents, it also has enabled new
opportunities to govern and new female-led mechanisms that seek to address the various threats women face. This research has therefore sought to investigate the perceptions on these new modes of governance and female-led initiatives. That exploration has shown that women in Rojava are visible and active in local governance, social services and security. Overall, this is received positively across ethnic backgrounds. However, political affiliations seems to be a restricting factor for participation in local governance and access to social services, thereby affecting perceptions on (the effectiveness of) female led initiatives negatively. 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. With regard to security, the respondents generally praised women’s involvement in providing security services through the Asayiş and YPJ, but the involvement of women in the Asayiş and YPJ did not make women necessarily feel more secure. While some respondents explicitly mentioned that women are better equipped to secure women, other respondents stated men and women are both able to do this. Most members of the women’s only Asayiş that were interviewed claimed that societal norms were hindering women’s involvement in the Asayiş. With regard to the YPJ, some respondents objected to the idea of women fighting in the frontline, while others stressed the braveness of the women in the YPJ and emphasised 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.

Thirdly, 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 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.

Finally, this report has sought to analyse in what ways the female-led mechanisms that we researched have contributed or hindered peace and reconstruction processes in Rojava from 2012 onwards. Galtung distinguishes two forms of peace (1969). A negative peace describes peace as the absence of war or direct physical violence, while a positive peace also includes an increase in social justice and the creation of a culture of peace within and across societies. In Rojava, neither of these two definitions of peace is present, but as this report has demonstrated there are female-led initiatives that seek to decrease physical violence (part of the definition of negative peace). As stated throughout this report, women in Rojava are active in the realms of local governance, social services, and security. Some of the mechanisms such as women’s safe houses, the Asayiş, and the YPJ attempt to address threats to the physical security of women and thus to contribute to a negative peace. Some of our respondents indeed said they felt
more secure by their efforts, while others said the involvement of women did not make a notable difference, and some even said it made them feel more insecure. Respondents from various backgrounds said women can better provide security because they understand their needs, although there were also respondents who said they felt more secure when men provide security. The data thus shows that there are various female-led initiatives that seek to address physical violence, but the perceptions on the effectiveness of these initiatives varies.

Generally, respondents said that the ongoing war and associated violence was one of the greatest threats in their daily lives. It is important to note that while women in the YPJ claim to defend women in Rojava, at the same time they are part of an armed conflict that includes Daesh, the Assad regime, Turkey, and other armed actors. As such, there are both female-led initiatives in Rojava that create and address threats with regard to the physical security of women.

As discussed in chapter two, the NAP 2016-2019 assumes that involving women in conflict creates more effective and sustainable peace and security efforts. On the one hand our data supports this assumption, as female-led initiatives may contribute to a negative peace. However, on the other hand, women are actively contributing to the ongoing war. The assumption of the NAP 2016-2019 is problematic because, as we have shown, the involvement of women in conflict can also contribute to the continuation of war.

Apart from lessons and insights pertaining to the particular case of female-led initiatives in Rojava, there are also implications that apply to a broader spectrum of foreign policy and development frameworks. These policy implications will be discussed in the following section.

8.2 Policy implications
As this report has shown, most policy frameworks and approaches – including the comprehensive approach to human security, the Dutch NAP 2016-2019, and the “Leidraad Geïntegreerde Benadering” – emphasise how civilians in FCAS face a wide range of security threats. In order to address these threats, a combination of strengthening fragile states and supporting local civil society organisations is commonly propagated. 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, these policy frameworks 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 – needs of local populations. This does not imply that non-state forms of governance are necessarily better equipped than state forms of governance to address threats. It does draw attention, however, to the importance of
analysing what “the state” and “the non-state” actually do in a certain context. This report has therefore contributed to the growing body of research that shows how state and non-state actors can both potentially form security threats and can both potentially govern (Arjona et al. 2015; Stel and Frerks 2013; Duyvestein et al. 2015). 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. As Luckham and Kirk (2012: 26) emphasise, donors, humanitarian agencies, and international NGOs in conflict-affected situations are rarely completely neutral. Rather, they can often be characterised by their own modes of hybrid politics and can hence be seen through the same analytical lenses as those used to assess national and local actors in FCAS. By doing that, it becomes clear that 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. At the same time, the international community itself is changing, with emerging powers who now more explicitly challenge Western hegemony (Luckham and Kirk 2012: 26). The case of Rojava furthermore 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.

The relatively limited engagement of the Dutch Government with Rojava can be explained against this background. While it is formally justified as the result of the complicated situation in the region, concerns over ties between the PYD and the PKK, the difficulties of providing “neutral” humanitarian aid due to the PYD’s presence, and limited access to the region, among other things, the Dutch Government omits to mention how the relationship with NATO member Turkey and the recent EU-Turkey refugee deal have affected the Dutch position towards the region. Even though the relationship with Turkey is not explicitly mentioned in policy documents about humanitarian aid and development assistance to Northern Syria, it does seem likely to have affected the position of the Dutch Government towards Rojava. This prompts questions of how geopolitical concerns are balanced against the overriding objectives of humanitarian aid in conflict zones, namely to preserve life, prevent and alleviate suffering, and help to maintain human dignity in the face of natural or man-made disasters with adherence to the fundamental principles guiding humanitarian aid: neutrality, humanity, independence, and impartiality.106 This fundamental tension between strategic geopolitical concerns and the

aim to provide humanitarian assistance to women in conflict zones illustrates how policy-makers manoeuvre in a complex field of stakeholders that are driven by different logics, justifications, and approaches that compete, or sometimes even directly contradict, each other.

**8.3 Future research**

This research was done in a relatively short period of six months. Although it arguably contributed to a better understanding of female-led initiatives in Rojava, there are still questions that remain and new questions that emerged on the basis of our findings. For example, with regard to the reason why (female) participation in local governance structure is low. Moreover, although from this research there were no indications of differences in ethnicities and religions with regards to threats women face and the way they are addressed, it remains unknown if and in what way these factors do play a role. Furthermore, although there seems to be an increase in female participation in the core areas of local governance, social services, and security, it is uncertain whether these altered gender roles will persist in a post-conflict period.

Research on the role of gender in conflict is not limited to women. Although studying the role of men and masculinities was beyond the scope of this research, we recognise that notions of masculinity and the impact this has on people’s experiences during war are crucial to understand. In the case of Rojava, the altered gender roles may change understandings of femininity and masculinity. Its impact on peace and security efforts should be investigated.

**8.4 Policy recommendations**

This research has demonstrated the importance of a contextualised understanding of the multi-faceted threats women face in Rojava and the female-led initiatives that seek to address these threats. Based on our findings, policy recommendations have been formulated for the Dutch Government, the Self-Administration, the KRG, and humanitarian aid and development organisations in Rojava. These recommendations stem from the threats that have been identified with the aim to contribute to mitigating these threats. The recommendations are thus rooted in a humanitarian aid perspective rather than strategic and geopolitical concerns, even though we are aware that the latter may affect the likelihood of recommendations being adopted, as stipulated earlier in this chapter.

To the Dutch Government we recommend:

- To increase humanitarian aid to Rojava in order to meet the needs of the women living there. In particular, we recommend to support the development of women’s health clinics to provide the necessary healthcare and psycho-social support for
women. The general provision of medical resources and expertise is also much needed.

- To support female-led initiatives in Rojava, for example through supporting local women’s organisations that are working to increase women’s economic independency through cooperatives. We also recommend to support women’s rights organisations that are protecting women from SGBV by providing safe houses in society. To support childcare facilities in order to enhance the possibilities for women to participate in local governance and social services.
- To exert diplomatic pressure on the Turkish Government and the KRG to open border crossings in order to secure a corridor for humanitarian aid and development assistance to Rojava.

To the Kurdish Regional Government we recommend:

- To re-open the border crossing between Rojava and Iraqi Kurdistan for humanitarian and development aid.

To the Self-Administration in the Cizîrê Canton we recommend:

- To prevent the politicisation of development efforts and humanitarian assistance.
- To conduct outreach projects so more women with different religious and ethnic backgrounds are aware of the possibilities for them to participate in local governance and social services.
- To make local governance and social services more accessible for women from political parties that are opposing the PYD and the SDF.

To humanitarian aid and development organisations working in Rojava we recommend:

- To recognise that the Self-Administration is in de facto control of large parts of Rojava which requires coordinating development efforts and humanitarian assistance with them.
- To better support female-led initiatives in Rojava by providing financial aid and expertise, particularly in the realms of women’s healthcare, psycho-social support, and women’s economic empowerment projects.
- To support existing female-led initiatives in Rojava, rather than creating new structures that are not locally embedded.
- To systematically monitor and evaluate support for female-led initiatives in Rojava in a conflict- and gender-sensitive way, in order to be able to assess the outputs and impacts during the project’s implementation and to be able to adapt the project to changes at the regional, local and program level.


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Annex 1 - Areas of Military Control in Syria (11 August 2016)


The boundaries and names on this map do not imply endorsement or acceptance by Chatham House.
Annex 2 – Glossary

Conflict
A conflict is a clash between antithetical ideas or interests – within a person or involving two or more persons, groups, or states pursuing mutually incompatible goals. Like all social phenomena, conflicts are usually complex and may emerge on different levels. Each and every conflict has its own history, features, and dynamics. Conflicts may either be manifest through behaviour and action, or latent, remaining inactive for some time, while incompatibilities are not articulated or are part of structures (political system, institutions, etc.) (Berghof Glossary, 2012: 10-11).

Gender
"Gender refers to the socially constructed roles ascribed to women and men, as opposed to biological and physical characteristics. Gender roles vary according to socioeconomic, political, and cultural contexts, and are affected by other factors, including age, class and ethnicity. Gender roles are learned and negotiated or contested. They are therefore changeable." (Bouta, Frerks & Bannon 2005: 4).

Local governance
Governance is a set of social, political, and private institutions from and beyond government coming together in collective action with the aim and purpose to shape, rule and/or control society and state. Although governance per definition is an act, there can never be any actions without actors behind them. Governance tackles issues about the distribution of power, the actors involved or excluded from the process, and the way the agreed rules should be enforced (Dudouet and Lundström 2013). Governance covers three possible dimensions: (1) governance steered by the state (governance by government); (2) governance through cooperative networks of public and private actors (governance with government); (3) governance by non-state actors and self-regulation by civil society (governance without government) (Risse 2013: 9).

Peace
"Peace, as defined by Johan Galtung, can be distinguished into negative and positive peace. Negative peace describes peace as the absence of war or direct physical violence. A positive notion of peace also includes an increase in social justice and the creation of a culture of peace within and across societies” (Berghof Glossary 2016: 62).

Security
Security "is a process of political and social ordering established and maintained through authoritative discourses and practices of power, including but not confined to organised
force ... Security is an entitlement of citizens and more widely human beings to protection from violence and other existential risks including their capacity in practice to exercise this entitlement. As such it is dependent upon social contexts, cultural repertoires and vernacular understandings of those who are secured” (Luckham and Kirk 2012: 5).

*(Sexual and) Gender Based Violence (SGBV)*

“Gender-based violence (GBV) is an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will and that is based on socially ascribed (i.e. gender) differences between males and females. It includes acts that inflict physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, and other deprivations of liberty. These acts can occur in public or in private” (Inter-Agency Standing Committee 2015).
Annex 3 – Map of interview sites

This map illustrates the places were interviews were conducted. From left to right: Serê Kaniyê, Derbesia, Qamişlo, Terbaspia, Derik (all in Rojava) and Domiz (in Iraqi Kurdistan).