FREEDOM MOVEMENT:
A CASE STUDY OF FEMINIST LEADERSHIP IN KURDISTAN

by

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The Kurds have endured a long struggle to secure a destiny of freedom. Kurdish women are now rising up to achieve their own freedom after decades of war, genocide, and statelessness. This study began in Kurdistan, Iraq with an intimate look at the Kurdish Women’s Freedom Movement, a feminist movement that is shifting its society away from social normative powers that have been dominant for generations. This exploratory case study was based upon academic reports, observations, and interviews with Kurdish female leaders. The case was used to create a critical understanding of feminist leadership from an age-old culture. Using Social Role Theory, this study investigated the experiences of Kurdish women moving into new leadership roles and shifting norms that allow such leadership to emerge. Transcripts from interviews with 20 Kurdish women from Iraq, Iran, Syria, Turkey, and the US and investigative field observations of Kurdish women’s leadership stories were used to highlight a remarkable case of leadership. It contributes to a body of leadership knowledge that supports positive freedom of women globally. The overarching questions posed in this study are:

1. How is feminist leadership being expressed/developed in Kurdistan?
2. How is feminist leadership in Kurdistan changing the positions of women in society?

Primary themes that emerged from the data address impact of history, processes that legitimate women, prominent leadership roles that contribute to legitimacy of feminist leadership, and themes that describe the social impact of feminist leadership in Kurdistan.
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extraordinary women of this world who have been slaves to men, used as weapons of war, and who now use their stories and strength to promote peace and empowerment for women across the globe.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Since the end of World War I, when Britain divided the Ottoman Empire, the Kurdish people have faced conditions of war and statelessness. Their land was divided among four countries: Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq. This event left 50 million people geographically and politically divided (Anzia, 2008). In effect, Kurds have since grappled with demands to assimilate into the dominant Arab culture. The Kurds are currently governed by the regimes of the countries in which they live, which they experience as political oppression. Despite pressure to endure such demands, the Kurdish people refuse to assimilate. They remain steadfast in their commitment to maintaining their culture and implementing structures for self-governance (Voller, 2014). The last 100 years have brought multiple conflicts, regional instability, and unending violence for these people. Women and children have been the most severely affected, with femicide existing as the most prominent aggression against Kurdish women (Kurdish Women’s Relation Office, 2016; Mojab, 2001). In recent years, a unique expression of leadership has emerged in which women have repositioned themselves in society as part of the leadership structure. This shift is best understood within the context of theory that focuses upon social processes.

In March of 2017, this research began with travel to Iraq and an engagement with the Kurdish Women’s Freedom Movement (KWFM), a community charging forward with a “never before seen” feminist leadership movement. The KWFM has been bolstered by a progressive culture and history that has launched new social norms for women in society. The expressed intentions of this movement is to facilitate social
knowledge and action around the freedom of women in all social and political processes. Its end goal is the creation of a direct democracy that wholly embraces women as free and equal. This research is intended to provide a cultural picture of the women who have responded to problems of oppression and inequality by shaping new leadership roles in their society. All societies have norms related to society and gender (Ealgly, 2000). Oppression of any kind shapes those norms, often in ways that are harmful to women (Internationalist Commune, 2017). The KWFM was chosen as the object of study because they have responded to oppression through strategic social processes that elevate women in society, giving them new leadership roles and more power to address the oppressions that affect them directly. Through an exploratory feminist case study, the social process through which those leadership roles are forged was thoroughly explored.

The contributions of women leaders in Kurdistan were seen both from observation and interviews and informed an understanding of how their leadership expression is repositioning them more equally in society. The impact of this repositioning on human rights was also discussed. This movement has in fact begun to reduce harmful systems of conflict, violence against women, and inequality (Internationalist Commune, 2017). Deeper knowledge of its processes will be beneficial for freedom movements and leadership strategies in other oppressed societies around the world. Such accomplishments warrant purposeful examination—lives of all women depend upon it.

Socio-Historical Backdrop

Kurdistan has a rich history and is full of remarkable people. Many of the issues faced by the Kurdish people are not unlike social barriers seen globally. However, Kurdistan faces unique challenges because of its stateless nature. Beginning with the division of the Kurdish region after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1920, the Kurdish
people have faced imperial conditions, struggles for democratic and self-governing
privilege, and ethnic conflict with the ruling regime’s ethnic groups (Voller, 2014). The
issue of the political state of Kurdistan and the Kurdish people is often referred to as the
“Kurdish question” (Voller, 2014). Because of their stateless nature, the Kurdish people,
with 40 million—the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East—are constantly
challenged with ethnic, political, and gendered persecution (Dirik, 2014).

Arab, Turkish, and Persian regimes have brought with them their own versions of
religion and culture to the feudal structures of Kurdistan. This has resulted in ethnic
conflict and unfair uses of power against women (Anzia, 2008). Femicide, a term used
internationally to discuss the impact of inequality and discrimination in a region,
describes the killing of women by intimate partners and family members as well as
gender-related killings within the community (Kurdish Women’s Relation Office, 2016).
An example of femicide is honor killing in which women are viewed as deserving of
violent death when they do not adhere to gender norms. Mason (2010) describes honor
killing as result of neopatriarchal Arab constructs of masculinity and religion. Another
example of unfair use of power is the imposition of Arabic in schools and government
institutions for all residents, which restricts Kurds from using their first language. These
practices began with Arab assimilation and continue to persist today. Such
marginalization of the Kurdish people has led to genocide, femicide, cultural genocide,
continued war, gender violence, and forced relocation. The Kurdish question remains.

Instances of war within Kurdistan are extensive, with Kurdish people always on
the defensive (Voller, 2014). Bloody conflict has been ongoing to differing degrees since
1920. Recently, and significantly related to this study, the Al-Anfal campaign of Saddam
Hussein in the 1990s resulted in the slaughter of 10,000 Kurdish people in their own
territories (Kelly, 2009). Before this campaign, the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s cost both
countries more than 1 million lives. Since 2011, the Kurds have fought to protect the
people and land of northern Syria (Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016). Currently, the Syrian
conflict continues to wound and displace the Kurds, with an estimated two million
seeking refuge in Kurdistan, Iraq, and others dispersing to Europe (Human Rights Watch,
2018). Many Kurds have left the region in order to avoid persecution and the enduring
hardship for women and their families (Anzia, 2008). It is estimated that of the 1.2
million Kurds living in diaspora, 20,000 now reside in the US (Hassanpour & Mojab,
2005).

The ethnic history of the Kurds has led to political goals of autonomy and self-
governance. Historian Kenneth Vickery (2006) describes ethnic identity as one of the
most important affiliations in human history and one of the greatest predictors of human
conflict. In Turkey, it is illegal to speak Kurdish or label the Kurdish region as Kurdistan.
Both acts are considered crimes of “indivisibility of the Turkish nation” (Hassanpour &
Mojab, 2005 p. 2). Outside observers of this culture sometimes question why the Kurds
would not assimilate to avoid the persecution of their ruling regime—why not integrate
into the nation-state that holds command? However, there is an ancient history of culture
and homeland entrenched in the Kurdish identity (Voller, 2014). The homelands of
Kurdistan existed centuries before the partitioning of the Middle East with borders.
Historical records show recognition and existence of a Kurdish land as early as AD 1026,
and written and oral literature defining Kurdish history and culture appeared in the 1500s
(Hassanpour et al., 2005). Ethnic marginalization has remained an oppressing reality for
the people of Kurdistan, despite their grounded heritage (Mason, 2010). For reasons
described in this section and out of respect for the society and participants under study, Kurdish regions will be referred to here as Kurdistan.

An old Kurdish saying goes, “the Kurds have no friends except for the mountains” (Chomsky lecture, 2013). Mojab and McDonald (2001) describe Kurdistan as “a territory without recognized borders and a land whose borders bleed” (p. 1). For this reason, a system of anarchy has emerged, first as a form of revolution, then as a form of governance. Feminism has become an amending force in this revolution. Today, amongst a bloody civil war, bombing attacks from Turkey, femicide, and ISIS invasion, de facto autonomous zones organized by women—which will be discussed in more detail later on—have emerged as political structures. Feminist ideology has steered those political structures and served as a means of self-determination. Self-determination is defined as the power or ability to make a decision for oneself without pressure or influence (Mojab & McDonald, 2011). It is a social process deliberated by both Kurds in response to statelessness and by women in response to gender persecution. It is used synonymously with the term positive freedom. For women, this has meant taking on important leadership roles in order to create consistent leaps towards positive freedom (Tax, 2013). Such a movement is known as a women’s freedom movement.

As noted by Mazur (2015), democratic acceleration for human rights often occurs within a women’s movement. Kurdistan presents a constructive opportunity for understanding the ways in which women lead successfully within the cultural contexts of war and patriarchy. Patriarchy is a socio-cultural ideal that often creates conditions of domestic inequality, social discrimination, and violence against women (Mojab, 2001). MacKinnon (1982) describes patriarchy as a collective social system of disempowerment, exploitation, and subordination of women. This social system influences norms in ways
that inhibit the effectiveness of women and limit the opportunities accessible to them. Kurdistan, like many parts of the world, experiences patriarchal social and political structures that perpetuate social inequality and the mistreatment of women which puts them in conflict with feminist leadership development. Patriarchy remains a universal social condition in many different forms with many social and political consequences. For Kurdistan, patriarchy means dual oppression within the social structures mentioned above. The KWFM is an example of collective action to mend and depart from such circumstances.

The Kurdish Women’s Freedom Movement

The KWFM is an anarcha-feminist movement created to address the oppressions previously discussed. It recognizes an interrelationship of knowledge and power as it exists within a system for all Kurds. The KWFM aims to create knowledge, not only through theoretical debate, but through lived experience and unity of action (Ocalan, 2013). The movement began in 1978 with a man and a woman; Abdullah Ocalan and Sakine Cansiz, philosophical Kurdish leaders and co-founders of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Their leadership processes entailed social role transformation from male to egalitarian. By the design of Cansiz and Ocalan, the women’s movement created autonomous structures using women’s academies, houses, tribunals, cooperatives, and military defense units. Both have paid a hefty price for their ideology. Cansiz was assassinated in Paris in 2015 and Ocalan has spent the last 20 years in a Turkish prison. Ocalan and Cansiz’s philosophical contributions, also known as Apochi, express an ideology of action and a rejection of patriarchy and capitalist nationalism through education and self-governance. This ideology is now central to the KWFM (Dirik, 2015a). During the 1980s, they built academies where women and men could go and
learn feminist ideologies associated with the movement. This education, known as *Jineoloji*, is built upon the principle that, without freedom of women within society and consciousness that surrounds women, no society can truly call itself free (Tzeman, 2018).

Female armed resistance units, direct feminist governance, and collective educational initiatives throughout Kurdistan are integral components of the KWFM directed by the anarchic ideals of Cansiz and Ocalan. Though formed in the 1970s, there has been much acceleration within this movement in the last four years with women rising quickly to action, especially with the ISIS siege and the 2011 Syrian civil war (Dirik, 2015c). Female resistance units across Kurdistan have accomplished two very important charges. First, women are advancing to the political forefront in Kurdish areas currently exposed to fascists and dangerous powers such as ISIS and in helping to overturn the existing state structures of Syria. Secondly, women are organizing and establishing communal democratic areas wherein new social contracts are being initiated by feminist leaders. The KWFM’s method of articulating leadership has been gaining attention because it promotes governing structures that rely on principles rather than power. We now see many Kurdish women using the ideals of feminism to re-articulate women’s liberation. They do so through new social roles that collectively and democratically address the experiences of multiple oppressions.

Currently, the Kurdish region of Rojava, a territory of Kurdish land in Northern Syria, is executing their own nationally recognized feminist policy. The Cantons of Rojava publicly declared their autonomy in 2014. It is an area that that covers 1,400 square miles and is home to 3.5 million Kurds (Dirik, 2015). Cantons are subdivisions administratively divided for political purposes within the Kurdish regions. As seen in
Figure 1, autonomous zones expand to all four regime countries. Rojava, labeled a federal region, is nationally recognized among them.

![Map depicting Kurdish territories, autonomous regions, and military presence](https://example.com/map.png)

Figure 1. Map depicting Kurdish territories, autonomous regions, and military presence (Washington Institute for Near East-Policy, 2016).

The leaders involved in this movement and in the Rojava government use collectivism and the egalitarian practices of democracy. Aretaois (2015) writes, “the autonomy and the administration of Rojava are based on the principle of direct democracy, ‘a democracy from the bottom up’” (p. 10). He notes that women’s freedom depends upon both their militant and political participation. This participation embodies an alternative to patriarchy and is deemed necessary for sustaining democracy. An example of this participation is the everyday involvement of women in local government initiatives where men and women co-chair community councils and equally share in decision making (Dirik, 2015). Based on her own interviews with Rojava leadership, Tax (2015) describes the KWFM as an international solidarity campaign that provides political education about the evolution of Ocalan’s beliefs on women’s liberation, ecology, anti-sectarianism, and democratic governance. The success of this movement
and the forces behind it are all claimed by feminist leadership, a phenomenon that is more closely examined in this study.

![Figure 2](image.png)

*Figure 2.* Family gathering for Newroz celebration. An illustration of guerrilla, activists, and families gathering in the mountains of Qandil (Rains, 2017).

**Purpose Statement**

Cultural leadership knowledge has been shown to alleviate suffering in the world by creating action-oriented steps that fulfill the goal of gender equality within a culture (House, Javidan, Hanges, & Dorfman, 2002; Wakefield, 2017). Democracy has always been strengthened when women have moved together to pursue ambitious goals within the political structures of society (Wakefield, 2017). Moreover, government policies created from those ambitious goals, promoting the rights and status of women, “make democracies more democratic” (Mazur, 2015, p. 1). Feminist leadership research in areas dealing with conflict, poverty, and inequality can help us understand why these harmful systems remain in place and predict what processes are useful in countering such
systems. Oppressive power dynamics and threats to the rights of women are complex.
The social processes through which they are addressed are best understood through the
experiences of the women who are addressing them. Therefore, a feminist framework has
been used to investigate the social processes and normative forces related to the emerging
leadership of women in Kurdistan. Prior literature has not addressed gendered leadership
in stateless and ethnically oppressed regions, and research on Kurdish feminist leadership
is minimal and extends primarily from journalism pieces. Feminist leadership has
emerged in Kurdistan and provides a basis for shifts in equality and human rights (The
Office of Women’s Relations Kurdistan, 2016).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship among social
dimensions, normative forces, and the emergent leadership of Kurdish women to explore
a cultural feminist leadership movement and to expand leadership knowledge to
accommodate a new model. If the leadership of Kurdish women is in fact addressing the
social oppressions described above, then a new model of leadership is warranted in the
future. A final goal of this study is to examine the impact of this movement on the rights
and status of women in Kurdistan.

An exploratory case study methodology was employed through two phases of
data collection. The first phase of data collection occurred in March, 2017 in
Sulaymaniyah, Iraq. Data collection involved interviewing 13 Kurdish women residing in
Kurdistan and observing their leadership in the field. Observations included activist
events, social service programing, refugee camps, celebrations, political proceedings, and
female run businesses. In the second phase, data was collected through interviews with
seven women from Kurdish diaspora families who have fled their homelands in search of
safety and freedom from the oppressions and/or ethnic persecution experienced in
Kurdistan. These women have a current understanding of the KWFM and were asked to comment on the emergent leadership they have experienced both in Kurdistan and in diaspora.

**Research Questions**

Knowledge about gendered leadership can be a powerful tool when attempting to understand macro-level influences on individuals and culture (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). This research used an exploratory case study design, with concentrations on culture and leadership, to observe and discuss the emerging leadership witnessed in Kurdistan. The research questions were first developed at a societal level so that cultural understandings of leadership processes could become clear.

The research question design focused on the leadership experiences of participants around the phenomena of women emerging as leaders in their society. Alice Eagly’s (2003) Social Role Theory (SRT) views gendered leadership roles as a result of culture and contrasting social positions of men and women (Eagly & Wood, 2012). The SRT model provides social dimensions through which leadership observation can begin. Those dimensions are (a) *role distribution*, (b) *differences in gender roles*, and (c) *leadership role structure*. These dimensions are linked by *normative forces* in society. The following research questions are posed to investigate the relationship among social dimensions, normative forces, and the emergent leadership of Kurdish women:

1. How is feminist leadership being expressed/developed in Kurdistan?
   a. How do the experiences of women influence the ways they lead?
   b. What leadership development strategies are being utilized and why?
   c. What leadership roles are being performed by women?
2. How is feminist leadership in Kurdistan changing the positions of women in society?

These questions draw from the experiences of an organized freedom movement by questioning how women use their leadership processes to change their positions in society. Immersion into KWFM activities, along with conversations and formal interviews with female leaders and activists, are the primary ways in which these questions were answered. This research highlights how women actively redistribute leadership roles in their society to achieve freedom. These questions consider the ways in which leadership influences normative forces in support of the advancement of women in society—in essence, examining what can be learned from Kurdish women rising up in leadership roles.

**Theoretical Base**

When observing leadership processes within a specific society, it is useful to approach the discussion with a theoretical framework that explains the mutual occurrence of both culture and leadership. Both constructs are explained in the context of SRT below. This case study utilizes SRT to inform questions of feminist leadership and the social processes with which it intersects. Alice Eagly, a feminist and social psychologist, has dedicated much of her empirical dialogue to feminist leadership, giving emphasis to leadership roles of women. SRT is a theory addressing the reasoning and influences that construct roles to which individuals choose to adhere (Eagly & Wood, 2011). It is a direct predecessor and a structural model of traditional feminist theory. This section reviews both contending and supporting theories to support the utility of the chosen theory of application. *Trait Theory* is presented as a contender and represents a theory of leadership
that places little value on the impact of culture. Status Characteristic Theory is presented as a way to substantiate and strengthen the processes utilized in SRT.

Eagly and Wood (2011) define social roles as a socially influenced set of rights, duties, expectations, norms, and behaviors that a person must face and fulfill. Gender roles are enacted specific to social roles and act as a social influencer based on a set of biosocial processes (differences in gender roles). Those biosocial processes include the physical capabilities of men and women to carry out specific roles (e.g., mother, employee, authority positions). Certain activities are, for efficiency, completed by one gender or the other and then normalized within a group to be the innately appropriate roles for each gender. Roles thus become normalized and systematically essential within a society (Eagly, Wood, & Deikman, 2000). Most of everyday activity becomes the acting out of these socially defined categories (e.g., caregiver, manager, teacher).

SRT approaches social roles through both biological efficiencies of each gender and the circumstances present within the culture of a society. There is a notion that certain positions or behaviors are expected from males and others expected from females. The social aspects of social roles include behavior, status, power, rights, and in this case, leadership fitness. Such roles are flexible and depend on social context (Eagly et al., 2000). SRT explains that gender-differentiated tendencies are the result of social structure and contrasting social positions of men and women (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Normative forces in culture often create cases for feminist leadership deficit (Sidani, Konrad, & Karam, 2015).

Eagly (2000) argues that the combined impact of heritability and learned gender socialization creates the cultural status hierarchies seen between men and women. The social conditions of a culture create gender hierarchies that affect the leadership roles of
men and women. These social conditions should be closely examined when studying leadership because they influence the roles held by men and women in the realms of labor, education, and leadership. Understanding the challenges and obstacles that exist for women in leadership highlights the social conditions that define the path of men and women in work, in relationships, and in response to their social environment. By examining the distribution of roles and differences in gender within a society, SRT can be used to examine leadership role structure just as it is used to examine social role structure. It offers a social vantage point of societies’ role-related processes (Eagly & Wood, 2012). This vantage point was used to understand the leadership processes being witnessed in Kurdistan. For this study, we liken leadership roles to social roles, defining them as dependent upon the social structure and positions of men and women in society.

In Kurdistan, gender roles are being redistributed. This can be observed in the leadership performances of women in Kurdistan. The SRT approach allows for an analysis of this redistribution that takes into account the multi-faceted relationship between normative forces and leadership roles. Using a conceptual configuration of role distribution and differences in gender roles, Eagly’s theory supports an examination of an evolving leadership role structure. Because SRT implies that gender differences result from contrasting roles and differences in power, it is used to understand how distributions of leadership roles re-create gender role norms. Female militia units and co-mayorships are two examples of how women are shifting differences in power. Women-run businesses are examples of shifting differences in status. Re-written laws that make violence against women an illegal act are examples of shifting rights. Women leading councils in their community and commanding militia units into battle against ISIS are two examples of shifting fitness of leadership.
The research questions driving this study demanded a contextual understanding of women’s leadership roles and an assessment of how the use of power, status, leadership, and behavior intersects with and influences their position in society. Figure 3 shows the SRT dimensions that were used to create a revolving and contextual understanding of women’s leadership roles. The normative forces that exist within a culture were included in both upper positions of the model. Likewise, the framework demonstrated how conditions such as leadership, culture, and freedom movements can affect leadership role structures. Role distribution and gender differences were focused dimensions that informed the research questions. Figure 3 shows these relationships. Lastly, this framework focused upon how women are changing their positions in society through leadership.

These dimensions are experienced within society and powerfully affect how roles are structured. This inherently applies to leadership. If roles are viewed as something given through one’s social setting, we can begin to question what is socially necessary for women to be expected to take on historically male leadership roles. The three primary conditions of leadership and culture that theoretically affect the leadership role structure are more thoroughly defined below.
Leadership role structure is the primary condition to be observed within this framework of SRT. Leadership definitions vary according to the theory or society by which they are defined. Batmanghlich (2014) proposes that the phenomenon of leadership is flexible and largely dependent upon what leadership means in the context of one’s prevalent worldview. It depends largely on interpretation and context. Leadership as a term is introduced here through two definitions produced by leading leadership
researchers. Northouse (2015) defines leadership as a process of influence that occurs within a group to achieve a common goal. It is accomplished within culture, which he defines as learned beliefs, values, rules, norms, symbols, and traditions that are common to a group of people. House et al. (2004) define leadership as “the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members” (p. 15). For this analytic process, an integrated definition of leadership as a process shaped through culture—a process that influences, motivates, and contributes toward social progress—was used. The worldviews and social processes that create leadership can be observed through the SRT framework.

**Cross-cultural lens.** There is a general consensus among scholars that understanding divergent views about leadership is important, and that viewing leadership from cross-cultural lenses can help capture the essence of effective leadership (House et al., 2004). Geert Hofstede (2011) describes leadership and culture as a bridge, with one largely depending upon the other. According to Kurt Lewin (1943),

> there is no hope for creating a better world without a deeper scientific insight into the function of leadership, of culture, and of the other essentials of group life. Social life will have to be managed much more consciously than before if man shall not destroy man. (p. 334)

*Culture* is defined as shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations of meanings of significant events that result from common experiences (House et al., 2004). Culture is further defined as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede, 2011, p. 2). Hofstede (2011) notes that societal, national, and gendered culture remain the most deeply rooted within an individual, entrenched at a young age and manifested often as subconscious tendencies. Eagly and Carli (2000) draw a contrast between the male-
associated qualities of assertion and control (power) when discussing leadership that concerns itself with the wellbeing of others in a culture.

Hofstede (2011), in his ground-breaking research, has brought dimensions of culture into leadership through cross-cultural examination. These dimensions of culture have been used extensively in cross-cultural leadership research. *Masculinity versus femininity* is one such dimension that was useful in this cultural analysis of leadership. It refers to the division of roles between men and women. This dimension is represented in the SRT model within the *differences in gender roles* box seen in Figure 3. Many of the interview questions posed in Kurdistan focused on this dimension by questioning the following:

- How has culture affected women in leadership?
- What challenges exist for women as leaders?
- How has Kurdish history affected women as leaders?
- How has being a woman affected them in their leadership and other roles?
- What are some of their beliefs about women in leadership?
- What are some barriers they face as women in Kurdistan?

These questions draw upon the perceived differences that exist for women in the leadership realm. Because it is a goal of this study that the tendencies of Kurdish society be announced in relation to leadership, Hofstede’s dimension of masculinity versus femininity fits within the model because it helps to discover how the social processes of Kurdish culture influence feminist leadership in Kurdistan.

**Normative forces.** Sidani et al. (2015) assesses how cognitive, normative, and regulatory powers work to create feminist leadership deficits and leadership progress. Much like Eagly, Sidani et al. (2015) present gender as a primary force that contributes to
the establishment of relationships, status hierarchies, and the perceived fitness of leadership. *Normative forces* relate to the forces within a culture that dictate what is acceptable or not acceptable. They create a sense of collectivism, equality, and power distance (Sidani et al., 2015). For this study, Sidani’s (2015) leadership context, labeled *normative force*, were used within the SRT framework. Use of this concept can center the observer around the forces by which leadership advances have and can be made.

Literature on the history of Kurdistan has revealed a freedom movement as a powerful normative force that can shift the distribution of leadership roles. This study combined knowledge of the KWFM with the experiences of women to discover how women in Kurdistan are accomplishing new role distribution. Interviews with participants focused on these processes by asking questions such as:

- How would you describe leadership in Kurdistan?
- What do you believe the role is of female leadership in Kurdistan?
- What, if anything, do you think about women in leadership?
- How do you consider yourself a leader and what roles might apply?

These questions attempt to reveal the social processes that women are focusing on along with the beliefs they have as they experience the evolution of leadership roles. There is tremendous social weight in the interpretation of gender roles, and, by extension, of leadership roles in a society. The distribution of roles based on normative forces and perceived gender role differences are the catalyst for change that is examined and presented. Through this organization of inquiry, the processes that women use to advance themselves as leaders can be better understood.
Contending Leadership Theory

Competing theories are important to consider. *Trait Theory of leadership*, also known as Great Man Theory, has produced a framework that examines heritable influences to determine the effectiveness of a leader. Trait Theory focuses entirely on the leader and excludes focus upon the follower or even the social paradigms that exist for leaders (Northouse, 2015). It sets forth a set of traits that might personally define a leader, making the leader’s personality central to the leadership process. Because it disregards the influences of gender and social constructions while ignoring the normative powers of culture, Trait Theory stands in contention with SRT. SRT formulates society as the primary influencer of how leadership is viewed and determined effective (Eagly & Wood, 2012). It is for this reason that leadership knowledge can be so powerful for societies that have been oppressed. Lord and Maher (2002) claim that traits such as intelligence, masculinity, and dominance are significantly related to how leadership is viewed in any given society. These assumptions come into contention with SRT because they ignore the social influence of leadership roles. It further ignores the impact of hierarchy on leadership success. In Trait Theory, impact of leadership falls upon the personal and inherited qualities of the leader rather than on fluid conditions of culture that define the processes of men and women in leadership. Additionally, Trait Theory was formed in the US during a time when male leadership was the prevalent voice in leadership dialogue, evidently ignoring what feminist weight existed in the field.

Supporting Leadership Theory

Jeffery Lucas (2003) offers a compelling look at female leadership through the lens of *Status Characteristic Theory*. He begins by delivering substantial evidence of the undervaluing of women in social interactions and the resulting lower leadership prestige.
Lucas (2003) posits that structural intervention is the answer. He claims that creating beliefs that successful groups require the leadership of women will change the organization structure to one that equally favors women. Status Characteristic Theory assumes that because of the power of status, women with equal ability and proven competence to lead will receive poorer evaluations than their male counterparts, just because they are women. This theory has empirically created a base of attributes that differentiate ability expectations in groups. These attributes are known as status characteristics. They are characteristics upon which individuals base their expectations of ability and performance. Status Characteristic Theory has shown that gaps between individuals with high and low characteristics can be reduced by making low-status individuals “appear to be legitimate for high-status positions” (Lucas, 2003, p. 465). Lucas’s research has shown, through organizational experiments, that appointing women to high-status positions, then additionally making salient positive status information about them, effectively reduces inequality in performance and ability expectations. It is a way of changing the social order through organizational social processes. The perceived legitimacy of women in leadership is not sufficiently attained by legitimately appointing them. Further, institutionalization of feminist leadership is required. This is done so by creating, the expectation that feminist leadership is required for the success of a group in an institution.

Saliency of this theory surfaces when observing leadership cross-culturally for two reasons. First, often, and certainly in the case of Kurdistan, institutionalization of feminist leadership can transpire somewhat accidentally. War, genocide, and economic crisis can serve as events that require feminist leadership for future accomplishment of a society. Second, although feminist movements have called attention to the perspective of
human rights and democracy, the question remains as to whether or not women gained legitimacy through these actions. Equal value in expectation of performance and ability may remain a separate paradigm. It is from use of such theory that leadership researchers can begin applying what is known about human behavior to very complicated forces of culture. It serves as a supporting theory to SRT because of its emphasis on normative powers in society.

**Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study lies in its specific analysis of the leadership expressions of a group of women performed in a way that can broadly impact human rights. Benefits to human rights and the status of women are both significant impacts that can result from feminist leadership knowledge. The lack of gender equality is a fundamental problem for the sustainment of human rights in our world (Wakefield, 2017). Although nations benefit and thrive through the participation of women, the inclusion of women's voices in politics and government has proved a difficult challenge worldwide (Norris & Ingelhart, 2001). Many societies lack direction and theorized dedication to conditions by which women can possess a sustained leadership presence in society. This lack of direction is due to the fact that leadership role transformation—from male centric to egalitarian—is important yet very difficult. The empowerment of women to redistribute leadership roles in their society might be one approach to sustaining human rights (Htun & Weldon, 2012).

Many theorists separate democracy from the sustainment of human rights and place emphasis “onto the demands for effective participation in all communities value processes and for wide sharing in all the values upon which even minimal civil liberties depend” (McDougal, Lasswell, Chen, & Chen, 1980, p. 10). Movements for human rights
require a bolstering of new approaches that focus upon social processes. This study focuses on leadership processes that make human rights a normal expectation. As noted in the introduction of this chapter, women are dying in the absence of civil liberty. Emerging leadership of Kurdish women appears to be managing this charge effectively and in the face of sometimes fatal adversity. It is a breakthrough that can inform educational leaders, policy makers, and the global understanding of human rights. Finally, it is information that can be used to save the lives and dignity of women worldwide.

The Significance of Theory

Understanding and examining feminist leadership through a feminist framework allows for an analysis of the institutional structures in which the abilities of men and women can become equally valued (Butler, 1988). There is significance in bridging the powers of human rights with feminist leadership. The impact is clear, but inclusion of feminist focus in leadership theory has been lacking. Reinharz and Davidman (1992) describe an obliviousness in sociological discourse where the social accomplishments of women have been lost or ignored. They note the importance of feminist case study in reestablishing the social forces for which women are responsible. In this case study, women’s accomplishments are highlighted and analyzed so that they can be integrated into contemporary leadership theory. This case study includes examination of the social processes that are intended to empower women through leadership role development. The KWFM can serve as an example of how leadership roles of women can reform societies in positive ways. This analysis of women in revolution helps to express gendered leadership knowledge in a way that recognizes women for their impact and development of more just societies around the world.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are two objectives for this synthesis of literature. First, the social revealing of Kurdish women is important to set the stage for why and how feminist leadership is surfacing in the region. Next, these roles are exhibited from a historical perspective, allowing the audience to observe the “movement” aspect of feminist leadership in Kurdistan. Then, literature on systems of gender is presented by leading feminist authors. This presentation assists in relating those systems to the movement being witnessed in Kurdistan. Finally, a historical review of Anarcha-feminsim is highlighted as an example of a progressive feminist movement in global history. Prior defined constructs of culture used in leadership discourse are presented and serve as an observational and analytical bridge between leadership and culture. Themes for this review originated through an initial appraisal of Kurdistan, and the feminist leadership therein. Conversations with Kurdish women led this study towards a search of how and why feminist leadership in Kurdistan is important for the advancement of society. What in the history of Kurdish women has compelled them towards feminist leadership? The answers to these questions are presented in this review of literature.

Social Revealing of Kurdish Women

A group of researchers who are familiar with the KWFM have presented extensively on the Kurdish struggle (Anzia, 2008; Dirik, 2014; Hassanpour & Mojab, 2005; Voller; 2014). Anzia, Mojab, and Dirik have focused on the experiences of women through that struggle. Contemporary and harmful developments for women in Kurdistan include hegemonic assimilation, war, genocide, gender-based violence, and the sieges of ISIS (Daesh). The women within this study have experienced this firsthand. Feminist
work began in Kurdistan 30 years ago, but the breakdown of the Syrian regime in 2011 accelerated conditions for a feminist revolution (Cemgil, 2016). Daesh used this breakdown for a *jihad* conquest into Kurdish lands. It most severely affected women when Daesh sieges in the Kurdish mountains of Iraq and Syria ensued and thousands of Yazidi women were taken as slaves. This challenge was met by the Kurds with a military force of protection, and a political-economic plan for autonomy from Syria. Women rose to the occasion and declared roles in protection and political involvement (Dirik, 2015b). They have since been creating movement towards different normative forces for a social system that is counter to the patriarchal norms of their contemporary history. They do so for the lives of their sisters and the future of Kurdistan.

For Kurdish women, there remains a double oppression of statelessness and gender discrimination. Stateless and displaced women, often victims of violence, frequently choose to flee for their safety and for the safety of their families. When people are stateless there is ethnic persecution, and when they are women in the wake of war they are dually oppressed. Dr. Ayten Adlim (as cited in Anzia, 2008), a humanitarian doctor, describes the impact of this dual affliction:

> With Kurdish women being women of a stateless nation, they have always been subsumed under the categories of the dominant state authorities. This situation appears for Kurdish women living in their homeland as well as for Kurdish migrant and refugee women. Women face even more severe problems in finding treatment for disorders resulting from violence, displacement, war, and torture. (p. 3)

In Kurdistan, there remains a patriarchal culture that creates what feminists and social scientists call an intersection of gender and culture (Sidani, Konrad, & Karam, 2015). This intersection is where culture collides with contemporary systems of gender. Many women in Kurdistan are still bound by honor, tradition, a strict Islamic influence, and tribal law that demands obedience (Mason, 2010). Honor killings still exists in tribal
areas (Directorate for Battling Violence Against Women, March 28, 2017). Many women still have little voice in deciding whom they marry or at what age. Kurdish divorce laws have just recently shifted towards more equity for women (Human Rights Watch Summary, 2017). Hegemonic belief structuring remains a common experience in the Kurdish culture, where Islamic and patriarchal influences transmit to ideologies concerning feminist leadership and freedom (Directorate for Battling Violence Against Women, March 28, 2017). Saadawi and Moghissi (1998) describe a hegemonic dynamic existent for most Middle Eastern women where organized and empowered groups of women are considered a threat to institutions, therefore creating resistance to their leadership and true equality. This ideology tends to instigate in societies where tribes are feared and individual voices remain insignificant (Saadawi & Moghissi, 1998).

Torregrosa (2015) discusses the difficulties of progress towards gender equality by exposing what is called a “gender paradox.” Even as women make progress in the realms of labor and leadership, a strong patriarchal system remains in place that demands domestic duty from women and continues to obstruct true equality. House et al. (2004), using 20 years of empirical findings, list the cultural drivers of gender egalitarianism: parental investment, geography, religion, social structure, mode of production, and political system. Monotheistic religions have also been linked to the low status of females in societies (House et al., 2004). In many of the countries in the Middle East where Islam is interpreted more strictly, and where Islamic parties hold political power, gender equality and female political leadership remain the lowest (Paxton, 1997). How will women achieve self-determination in a society where the law is so interconnected with religion? Sidani et al. (2015) discusses the female leadership deficit in the Middle East as a problem of organizational structures standing non-salient in promoting women’s
leadership. A problem for Kurdish women is balancing the normative powers of tradition, religion, and self-determination, while seeking social justice for themselves.

Despite all of this, many Kurdish women remain committed to their culture and resilient in their experiences. Kurdish women own a history of pride, accomplishment, and social responsibility. Women’s activist groups date back to the age of Nefertiti, an early and enduring example of commitment to social responsibility in their homeland and a regeneration of their social roles (Anzia, 2008; Paglia, 2017). Ocalan (2013) describes a time, dating back 5,000 years, when Kurdish culture was more egalitarian, where there were fewer examples of ownership or hierarchy, and where communities sustained themselves through communal action. During this time, there was a mother-goddess religion that is documented in Sumerian texts. At the time, each city was said to be guarded by a goddess and the Sumerian states established temple-education to educate women in beauty, art, philosophy, and, foremost, to become leaders of a new society and state (Ocalan, 2015). More recently, Kurdish women have, despite patriarchal influence, maintained an impressive record of leadership. Kurdistan boasts the first female judges, land owners, and mayors in the Middle East (Mojab & McDonald, 2001).

Persecution of a group along with a perceived shadowed future are both situational dimensions that facilitate radical change in society. They have been known to facilitate anarchy (Axelrod & Keohane, 2011; Mojab & McDonald, 2001). The experiences that women have with these dimensions have created motivation for change by women. Challenges for women have also been converted through dispersion and refugee retreat, putting them into diaspora. Women of diaspora often express a deep connection to their homeland (Hassanpour & Mojab, 2005). They advocate from the outside for policies that support equality, ecology, and democracy. Autonomous efforts
for Kurdistan extend far beyond its borders because of the diaspora. The KWFM is recognized by women in Kurdistan and diaspora as a movement towards processes that are synonymous with women's freedom globally (Mojab et al., 2001). For many Kurdish women of diaspora, activism has become their leadership role outside of Kurdistan.

**Social Revealing of Kurdish Women in Diaspora**

A deeper examination of history revealing Kurdish diaspora provides a better understanding of the experiential context of participants who are now living in the US. The Kurds are the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East, 1.2 million of them live in diaspora, 20,000 of those now reside in the US (Hassanpour and Mojab, 2005). Diasporas have been defined as “expatriate communities that are characterized by their specific relation to a real or imagined homeland” (Alinia, Wahlbeck, Eliassi, & Khayati, 2014, p. 54). Thus, they are characterized as a complex social reaction to social and political turmoil shifts within their homeland. Diasporas are often a response to a collective traumatic history through actions of social organization, community building, and transnational relationship building (Alinia et al., 2014). Kurdish diasporas span the west with the highest population now residing in Germany. They have made important strides in bringing international attention to the Kurdish struggle. Likewise, it is the diasporas that provided a pulse for Kurdish literature, culture, art and music, as such expression was often forbidden in their homeland (The Kurdish Project, n.d.).

Diaspora for the Kurds began at the onset of relentless conflict over the Kurdish homeland. Bloody conflict has been going on to differing degrees since 1970. For centuries marginalization of the Kurdish people has led to mass killing and forced relocation as a practiced means of empire-building (Hassanpour & Mojab, 2005). The last two decades are periods wherein the Kurdish diaspora mobilized in large scale (Alinia et
Immigration of Kurds to the US and other Western nations began in the 1970’s at the onset of the Kurdish revolution when Sadaam Hussein, President of Iraq from 1979-2003, persecuted the Kurds because of their allegiance to Iran. The next mass emigration occurred in the 1990s when Hussein committed his al-Anfal campaign against the Kurds. Today this relocation continues as the Syrian conflict and additional invasions by ISIS in Syria and Northern Iraq left thousands of Kurds displaced. For women, displacement has resulted in victimization and violence. Even under conditions of continued struggle, many women remain committed to their culture and resilient in their experience. Today, there is a historical and immediate accomplishment of social responsibility within many Kurdish women. They have committed to this social responsibility in their homeland and regenerate it into their new settled homes in diaspora. They are asserting themselves socially in ways that raise awareness about the Kurdish struggle. It is from the diasporas that momentum for political and social movement hastens back to their homeland and back to those still inside the conflict.

**Freedom Movement**

*Freedom* can be described in many ways and the use of the word is often abandoned in much contemporary leadership dialogue. However, freedom has been defined by scholars and is often discussed in terms of what it symbolizes. For Anarchists, freedom is an attainable concept, “a concrete possibility for every human being to bring to full development of all the powers, capacities, and talents with which nature has endowed him, and turn them to social account” (Chomsky, 1973, p. 2). Feminists speak of natural and civil freedom often, and it is within feminist movements where freedom is sought in ways that extend beyond merely chasing democracy.
A freedom movement is a unified and organized effort within a society to achieve liberation. It can be based upon the social, political, economic, or religious ideals of the society from which it begins (Duzgun, 2015). Jean-Jacques Rousseau, an influential eighteenth-century political philosopher and contributor to the ideals of individual liberty, defined liberty as the immunity from the arbitrary exercise of authority that requires an agreement or social contract by which an individual enters civil society (Chomsky, 1973: Rousseau, 1893). Kurdistan is experiencing such a movement—a resistance that is being followed up with autonomous political action. Importantly, it has developed out of Anarch-feminist philosophies. Participants of the KWFM believe that women’s liberation can only occur through the dismantling of patriarchy (Tax, 2015). They do so through egalitarian and at times anarchic action (Dirik, 2015). The social contracts essential to this movement focus on human rights, ecology, and women’s liberty. The women involved in this movement use collectivism, action, and egalitarian practices of democracy. They organize themselves throughout Kurdistan so that they may continue to educate communities while protecting and governing newly founded autonomous zones. It is common to find a man and women traveling together and collaboratively facilitating activist events in the communities of Kurdistan.

This movement extends beyond fighting; it is an intellectual battle of feminist theory and economic and political ideologies that are by nature intended to address the specific experiences of patriarchy. We now see many Kurdish women using the ideals of feminism to re-articulate women’s liberation by rejecting patriarchy through self-defense, armed resistance, and social activism (Dirik, 2015). Political activism of women has surged to a level of constitutional amendment where the Kurdistan Regional Government has implemented laws that better protect women against domestic violence. Feminist
leadership has catalyzed an effort to return Kurdistan’s more egalitarian distant past. They focus attention upon the egalitarian practices that will sustain beyond the wars and political adjustments being witnessed in Kurdistan. Many journalistic sources have called it the most radical experiment in women’s rights now underway (Tzeman Lemmon, 2018). It is a movement that is different than those that have preceded it. In the words of a Ilhan Ahmed, a longtime activist and Syrian Democratic Council co-chair:

> We took lessons from revolutions that happened in other parts of the world. Women took part in the revolution and after that they had to go back to their kitchens. For that reason we put freedom of women at the center of our document. (Tzeman Lemmon, 2018, p. 2)

Female leaders of Kurdistan have noted that the 21st century will be stamped by women and by all standards of positive freedom (Office of Women's Relations, 2016).

### Female Defense Units

In Kurdistan, social injustices against women have soared since the onset of the Syrian conflict. Women are targets. The degree of violence against women in these times has yielded the label of femicide (The Office of Women’s Relations, 2016). These injustices have been met with employed female defense units and strong political activism in a male-controlled society (Dirik, 2015b). Rojava's Peoples Protection Units (YPJ/female) consist of more than 15,000 women who are actively fighting ISIS and the Turkish state. These women fight for more than liberty; they fight for ideals they hope can proliferate socially rather than only through their militancy (Dirik, 2015). One commander states, “We don’t want the world to know us because of our guns, but because of our ideas” (YPJ commander as cited by Dirik, 2015). The PKK likewise maintains its own female defense units, all of which have been instrumental in liberating Kobâne and Sinjar in Northern Syria. They maintain a mission of defeating Daesh (ISIS)
while maintaining a strong feminist presence, an added affront to the terrorist group who sees women as objects to be raped and enslaved.

In 2014, Iraq experienced a crisis in Sinjar in which 50,000 Yazidi were trapped in the mountains and under attack by Daesh (Tax, 2015). Yazidi women became targets of violence. The Global Justice Center (2016) lists human rights violations of capture, murder, transfer, rape, slavery, torture, forced marriage, and forced impregnation by Daesh on the Yazidi. In the absence of aid from the Iraqi army or western countries, it was the intervention of the Peoples Protection Units (YPG/male and YPJ/female) and PKK forces, half of which were women-led militia, that ultimately rescued the Yazidi of Sinjar. Hundreds of women remain enslaved. Thousands of women have joined in efforts to protect and defend the Yazidi. Today one can find Yazidi women fighting in female militia units of the YPJ and Peshmerga forces. More importantly, one can see them joining together to raise awareness around the importance of women’s sustainable leadership. It is not just a theory; it is the performance of self-deterministic acts that are taking place as women position themselves politically and militarily, even at the risk of being lethally targeted.

**Direct Democracy**

Following the introduction of Rojava, the autonomous governed area in Northern Syria that was established after the regime breakdown in 2011, an increasing number of Kurdish communities are now seeing female-headed initiatives. They label this form of governance direct democracy, meaning decisions are determined directly by the people through councils elected by the people. They are always headed equally by a man and a woman (Cemgil, 2016). It is being performed in autonomous zones of Kurdistan in challenge of the nation-state paradigm (Duzgun, 2015). Direct democracy embraces
initiatives intended to create a unified social movement based around decentralized collectives that inform communities in place of states. It entails a social administration of resources which requires a localized, and decentralized economy. Cemgil (2016) describes Rojava as a practical model of micro-level policy that contributes to Republican ideas through strong participatory mechanisms of democracy. The notion of freedom consists of the overcoming of hierarchical relations by creating systems within society that are based on equality, complementarity, and accessibility to everyone (Cemgil, 2016). This by definition is a direct democracy. The KWFM aims to create knowledge not only through theoretical debate but lived experience (Ocalan, 2013). No other major movement has authentically placed women at the core of their revolutionary project in the same way (Tax, 2015; Tzeman Lemmon, 2018).

In her work regarding the KWFM, Duzgun (2015) describes a “dominant view which appears to be shared by many Kurdish women and women defense units: gender equality and the liberation of women are essential for the progression of the emancipation of humankind” (p. 25). Female defense units across Kurdistan have accomplished important gender role changes (Dirik, 2015c). Those changes can be observed in the direct democracy being implemented. The KWFM ultimately is organizing and establishing communal democratic areas wherein new social contracts are being initiated and power structures are being renegotiated by men and women together.

**Benefits to Human Rights**

Human rights refer to a broad range of contexts, and many measures can be applied when evaluating the extent to which human rights are protected. Violence against women is now viewed globally as a violation of human rights. Gender is the most powerful predictor of oppression and poverty in our world (Wakefield, 2017), and
feminist leadership has proven to be a contender to such oppression. It improves human rights, connects ideals of democracy, and can create momentous freedom movements in a society (Mazur, 2015). Caprioli and Boyer (2017) conclude that in regions where there are higher levels of gender equality there are also decreased tendencies towards violence in general. Htun and Weldon (2012) demonstrate that feminists movements are primary drivers of change in confronting violence—they broadly work within and across borders but require the creation of institutions willing to advance feminist ideals.

Gender-based violence in Iraq is a primary humanitarian concern, as it ranks as one of the highest violating countries in the Middle East. According to the United Nations (UN) (2013), domestic violence, honor killings, and human trafficking remain a threat to many Iraqi women and girls due to a complex mix of cultural beliefs and traditions. Kurdistan, conversely, has institutionalized feminist ideals within its Iraqi boarders, implementing an act of legislation known as Article 8 Combating Domestic Violence in the Kurdistan Region (Kurdistan Regional Government, 2016).

Based on global perspectives of countries that are advancing in gender-based equality, Kurdistan is rising up. These advances can be translated to human rights largely based on the global gender gap dimensions. Measures of violence against women is becoming a global standard for equality (World Economic Forum, 2016). Though not apparent to the world, when viewed under the lens of the World Economic Forum, Kurdistan is evolving quickly.

Connecting Leadership to Freedom Movements

Dirik (2014), in her speech commemorating International Women’s Day, describes an ability to measure freedom by the democratic participation of women in a region. Rotenberg’s measure of democracy includes a scale in which a country is
measured on its ability to protect the human rights of its citizens (Fatah, 2016). The world is beginning to draw connections between democracy, self-determination of human rights, and feminist leadership. The economic and social benefits of feminist leadership are indisputable (Htun & Weldon, 2012; Norris & Inglehart, 2001; Snaebjornsson et al., 2015). Htun and Weldon (2012) show that autonomous movements that utilize feminist ideals have a significant impact on human rights. We know that culture shapes people’s perceptions of valued phenomena and that leadership is implicit in those valued cultural phenomena. An understanding of how leadership is accomplished within the context of specific cultures warrants qualitative and contextual discovery (Eagly & Carli, 2003).

Research that connects freedom movements and leadership is scarce, and such connection could prove worthwhile to leadership theory. Processes of empowerment run deep in the veins of culture, family, community, and policy. Prior research on leadership has shown that understanding intersections of these social components is imperative for continuity and progress (Clark & Shwedler, 2003). Chomsky (1973) notes the necessity of including and extending the use of freedom into dialogue while exploring the impact and processes of what women will accomplish through the leadership they describe. Women’s freedom movements often begin with a battle against patriarchy, a statement of essentiality for human rights that cannot exist within communities where domestic inequality and violence against women is normal and legitimate (Wakefield, 2017). Patriarchy is the normative force that makes violence against women legitimate in a society. It is a system that extends to global issues that ruthlessly affect the basic human rights of women and the health of a democracy. Women’s freedom movements, therefore, can be understood as battles for positive freedom against illegitimate power.
Systems of Gender

When discussing gender and the influences within a culture, it is important to understand the system of gender present within the social relational context. Ridgeway and Correll (2004) present a study that unpacks the gender systems and its impact on social relational contexts for women. They do so by defining the salience of gender in creating rules and biases in a society. The intent of their study is to illustrate implications for research when asking questions about gender equality in a variety of social relational contexts. Gender is social; the relationship of gender in a society determines the “rules of the game,” and attunes individuals to the levels of power that exist in that society. Beliefs are created and then adopted based on the social relational context of gender (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).

*Power distance* and *hegemonic stereotypes* are terms used to dissect systems of gender in society. Hegemonic stereotypes can be seen as those created and sustained from socioeconomic sources that impress equality action or inaction within a society (Butler, 1988). Power distance is a term that describes a difference in power within cultures, communities, or systems. Power distance can be used to understand inequality based on individual beliefs about how power and status should be shared. House et al. (2004) describe power distance as “the degree to which members of an organization or society expect and agree that power should be shared unequally” (p. 517). Power distance implies a difference in power. Hegemonic stereotype defines a belief created and sustained because of political, economic, religious, or military dominance—this includes the media.

There has been a call for more research by leadership theorists into gender disparity in leadership so that an understanding of the limiting forces that women
experience can be gained (Hofstede, 2011; Sidani et al., 2015). Eagly and Carli (2007) speak specifically to a female leader’s ability to present positive forms of dominance, assertiveness, and the acknowledgement of the rights of others. Laws assume the priority of culture and rights afforded individuals. Ryan and Haslam (2007) show that many traits associated with leadership prototypes are in conflict with gender-appropriate behavior for women in many cultures. These schemes deeply affect gendered leadership, how it is viewed, accepted, and the status applied to it. Progress in gender equality takes knowledge of gender systems (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Gender systems require persistent observation that includes everyday challenges that originate from social power differentials and the economic and political controls present in society. Power distance and hegemonic stereotypes are just two concepts presented here to better capture the dynamics of power differentials and gender perception in Kurdistan.

**Systems of Gender in Kurdistan**

As result of Kurdistan’s history, women have had fewer chances to develop and display attitudes and skills, which might lead in their culture to leadership promotion. This relates, in part, to certain female-held traditions in which women have had the primary responsibility for the traditions that strengthen community and culture. But those held traditions nonetheless serve to subordinate women (Mojab & McDonald, 2001). Women’s domestic and familial responsibilities, though necessary for the health of the community, also prevent them from stepping up as community and political leaders. Additionally, the recent history of war has weakened women, by undermining their influence, freedom, and basic human rights (Mason, 2010). Mojab and Hassanpour (2002) discuss honor killing as a part and parcel of Kurdish culture. Though a struggle for gender equality erupted within the 20th century, honor killing still exists. Experts would
contribute the slowing momentum of equality reform to many cultural forces; however, the experience of war and genocide remain among the strongest forces. Even when regulatory forces change, cultural ones may not. Laws in Kurdistan, though considered progressive have not eliminated honor killings.

Oppressing constructs are values and habits built into the fabric of a culture. Such constructs predict what is normal and expected use or misuse of power in regard to gender. Moreover, such constructs contribute to power distance for Kurdish women. Their struggle has been acknowledged by the Kurdish Women’s Rights Watch. Many Kurdish women have responded with networks of community activists, academics, lawyers, medical professionals, and journalists that work inside and outside Kurdistan for women and human rights organizations. They are one of many Kurdish examples of progressive efforts that use system of gender knowledge for reform.

**Systems of Gendered Leadership in Kurdistan**

Patriarchy remains a contender, if not obstacle, to feminist leadership ascension in Kurdistan. However, Kurds are managing to progress in systems of leadership and gender. Mojab and McDonald (2001) discuss the importance of feminist perspectives in accomplishing those shifts. They recommend a critical feminist look at a community’s leadership in order to assess whether it truly represents and accommodates the needs and interests of women. Feminist perspectives are beginning to prevail in international legal principles of self-determination and secession. It is no surprise that such perspectives come with sacrifice.

Women in Kurdistan have historically faced discrimination and resistance as they concerned themselves with leadership advancement, management, or even military participation. Mason (2010) discusses the transition of women into leadership positions in
Middle Eastern regions. She notes that some leaders recognize a need for female leadership to secure support from women, appease critics, and win international support; this, however, is not the result of a sweeping ideological shift as support from male leaders remains inconsistent. Examples of these inconsistencies can be seen among female Kurdish leaders who paid the ultimate price for their leadership action. Leyla Zana is a name one will hear among Kurdish women, revered as a hero by men and women alike (Democracy Now, 2010). Leyla was imprisoned in Turkey for her political activism that was deemed to be “against the unity of the country.” Today, after a decade of imprisonment, she persists in asserting for Kurdistan through political and feminist activism. She now stands as an independent member of the Turkish Parliament, representing the voices of Kurds and women. Another prominent example of female leaders being persecuted is the assassination of three female Kurdish political activists in Paris in 2015. One of these women was PKK founding member, Sakine Cansiz. Finally, many women have died on the battlefield and at the hands of political violence, they remain unidentified and unknown. However, their liberation efforts and courage has saved tens of thousands of lives (Tax, 2015).

**History and Outcome of Anarcha-feminism**

Anarchy in Kurdistan began with the assertion that female rights and equality can only be achieved through comprehensive democracy, and that a woman, even after attaining individual emancipation, can only feel free after pursuing the liberation of other women (Ocalan, 2013). Anarcha-feminism (AF) is a radical social revolution that happens for freedom and from a feminist perspective. It can be witnessed in the histories of other countries. The perspectives and outcomes of AF are discussed here using two
authors, Shannon (2009) and Acklesberg (2004). They have articulated, in contemporary form, a base of knowledge surrounding the re-engagement of anarchism and feminism.

AF, much like feminism theory itself, draws on a range of perspectives. It originally sprang from a socialist movement during the Spanish Revolution where women organized and trained as militia as a part of a worker’s social revolution. AF serves as a threat to power structures that are hierarchical and focuses on the values of decentralization, anti-capitalism, anti-authoritarianism, and anti-oppression. Shannon (2009) characterizes AF as the movement towards social freedom for women that depends solely upon legitimate power. This often excludes strong political powers or individual leaders. The aim of the decentralized organization of AF is to systematically oppose forms of hierarchy that construct class separation or female oppression (Shannon, 2009). Through communal organization and revolution, AF asserts its central decrees of consciousness-raising, networking, and empowerment of women through education. Champions of such movements include Murray Bookchin, Emma Goldman, and Lucy Parsons.

As stated above, AF began in Spain during the Spanish Revolution. In 1939, the Mujeres Libres mobilized. They were a group of women who took swift social action against the oppression of women in their society. Acklesberg (2004) describes the efforts of Mujeres Libres as an organized and mobilized network of 20,000 women dedicated to consciousness-raising and female empowerment. The outcome of this movement was one that led to the birth of a new left. This resulted in a multitude of social movements focused on cultural concerns, identity, and civic responsibilities to society (Shannon, 2009).
In the US Emma Goldman, an early 20th-century author, celebrated lecturer on social issues, and general anarchist philosopher, helped to incorporate AF into the larger landscape of anarchism. Goldman was an anarchist that supported the reorganization of the state structure in a way that encouraged women to create emancipation by becoming attuned to their own nature and power (Gemie, 1996). In Goldman’s (1906) words:

Anarchism stands for the liberation of the human mind from the dominion of religion and liberation of the human body from the coercion of property: Liberation from the shackles and restraint of government. It stands for a social order based on the free grouping of individuals. (p. 1)

AF was also present in the Black Panthers Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1966, the Black Panthers began defending black neighborhoods to end police brutality. They stood against state structures that oppressed and discriminated. Gender historians are now finding that women began a progressive agenda focused on the community that supported initiatives for housing, groceries, and daycare through the Black Panther Party (Martin, 2014). Through this movement, women were portrayed as revolutionary partners with men: “the portrayal of women as female warriors challenged the traditional female roles of caregiver and homemaker, expanding the ways in which women could contribute to the organization” (Martin, 2014, p. 3). In Europe, Britain underwent its own AF movement in the 1960s. Dixon (2011) discusses British anarchy and feminism as a generation of women that opposed war-time austerity and committed themselves to the free expression of radical social, political, and sexual desires.

**Global Comparisons of Feminist Leadership Movements**

Gender-based inequalities are seen in the differences between women and men, and manifest in the controls, roles, and responsibilities assigned to them through culture (World Economic Forum, 2016). Internationally, women’s leadership has been correlated with significant achievements such as improved access to water, education, childcare,
lowered violence, and economic advancement. Feminist perspectives are being utilized globally to achieve new processes for social care. Htun and Weldon (2012) and Wakefield (2017) have expanded a body of knowledge that highlights the global impacts of feminist leadership movements. They discuss feminist social movements as being the most important effort in confronting domestic violence against women because of the way they introduce new social perspectives to the greater public. These processes of empowerment take place within a large framework of culture, family, community, and policy. There are global examples of countries that have shifted organizational and cultural structures towards the advancement of women and social progress within their region. Kurdistan is not included in the following examples because they are not a country and necessary data is not accessible to the World Economic Forum. However, there are examples of countries that have demonstrated very similar movement trends and achievements.

Rwanda, Senegal, Cuba, Bolivia, and Albania are countries that have risen to face the global challenge of feminist empowerment. Feminist leadership within these countries has shifted in normative directions and have become world leaders in gender equality. These countries, as measured by the World Economic Forum, provide examples of how strategic and progressive feminist movements have or are in the process of leading communities toward higher gender equality. In the last two decades, women of these movements have contended with discriminatory and patriarchal systems through political and grassroots means of leadership (Wakefield, 2017). They have overcome war, genocide, and deadly economic crisis. Revolution has been marked by passing equality decrees that guarantee the rights of women in their societies. The female leaders of these areas are responsible for progress that has changed the local face of political and
educational enterprise (Begikhani & Gill, 2015). Where many countries are still significantly challenged, movements from these countries have made strides in economic empowerment (Htun & Weldon, 2012; Norris & Inglehart, 2001).

Representation and gender equality have changed dramatically with the embrace of new leadership roles in these countries. Figure 4 represents data from the World Economic Forum (2006/2016). The global gender gap index is structured and calculated using four subindexes; education attainment, economic participation and opportunity, health and survival, and political empowerment. Across the Index, there are only five countries that have closed 80% of the gap or more. Figure 5 shows data from Women in Parliament (2017), representing parliamentary ratios of female representation from these countries. The US is represented in these figures as a relative comparison of how movement in these countries exceeds that of what the United States has accomplished in contemporary times.

![Figure 4. Global gender gap comparison of 2006 and 2016. The highest possible index score is 1 (equality) and the lowest possible score is 0 (inequality) (World Economic Forum 2006/2016). The number above each graph represents a 2016 global ranking out of 114 countries.](image)
When observing social relational shifts in leadership, as suggested by Ridgeway and Correll (2014), it is necessary to first focus on the gender systems in place, then the processes by which systems maintain or change. Htun and Weldon (2012) and Wakefield (2017) have researched such processes. They have studied characteristics and outcomes of feminist social movements and describe them as engaging in networking and organizing that brings autonomous activists into contact with government entities. Autonomous feminist movements usually begin independent of government structures then connect with policymakers through a social cycle. In effect, they ultimately impact global norms for women’s human rights. It is becoming more and more evident that feminist activism has become a transnational endeavor that shapes policy around human rights wherever it embarks. The first global document recognizing violence as a violation of the human rights of women did not appear until 1993, in Vienna at a World Conference on Human Rights. Before Vienna human rights organizations did not recognize rape and domestic violence as core violations of human rights.
Organizational strategy of feminist movements warrants a more thorough examination as it connects the leadership roles of women with the problems that women uniquely face. These examples demonstrate strategy that from the view of the World Forum are sufficiently addressing women’s problems. Wakefield (2017) shows a strong relationship between leadership practices that model feminist purpose and the leadership principles of inspiring a shared vision and empowering and enabling others to act. It involves challenging oppressive norms and power. “Movements themselves have proven a deciding factor in creating changes that positively affect women’s lives” (Wakefield, 2017 p. 7). A growing body of leadership knowledge is emerging that uses global examples and research that focuses on strategies of building women’s movements.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

Qualitative methodology was used to explore the experience of Kurdish female leaders. Observations and interviews yielded data for this exploration. SRT was used to reach a deeper understanding of the social processes embraced in their leadership movement. This chapter begins with a summary of the research approach, first posing the questions that were used to study feminist Kurdish leadership. Next it outlines the methods used to access and collect data. Two phases of data collection are discussed. This chapter concludes with a statement of trustworthiness and limitations. As described in the introduction and literature review, the social backdrop of Kurdish women holds many thwarted circumstances. For this reason, this study required access to women leaders who have experienced the emergence of leadership from inside of Kurdistan as well as from the outside: women who are a part of the KWFM and women who have witnessed its bearing from diaspora. This research was designed to feature the essence and experience of a movement that holds promise for the human rights and status of women.

Research Approach

A feminist exploratory case study methodology was used to investigate the relationship among social dimensions, normative forces, and the emergent leadership of Kurdish women. This topic was explored through two phases of data gathering. Both phases examined how women view themselves as leaders and how their leadership is expressed and experienced through the SRT dimensions. The research questions helped to inform a series of more specific questions that were used to interview and observe throughout both phases of data gathering. Semi-structured interview questions were
designed to explore each participant’s experience of the emerging leadership of Kurdish women. This includes each participant’s view of how leadership roles are distributed, the normative forces that affect their leadership, and what this means for them in their leadership movement forward. Examinations of the early influences of family, school, and regime power shifts were included in the data analysis in order to understand the normative forces at play. Finally, this led to the question of how are women using their leadership roles and process to change their positions in society. Immersion into the KWFM activities, social observations, and semi-structured interviews were the data gathering sources used to inform the following research questions.

Guiding Questions

1. How is feminist leadership being expressed/developed in Kurdistan?
   a. How do the experiences of women influence the ways they lead?
   b. What leadership development strategies are being utilized and why?
   c. What leadership roles are being performed by women?

2. How is feminist leadership in Kurdistan changing the positions of women in society?

Epistemology

Theory of knowledge is an integral part of case study success. It is the objective of this study to explore leadership in a rich and useful way. This requires an examination of how and why feminist leadership in Kurdistan is occurring. Epistemology is a way of knowing and discovering. Guba and Lincoln (1986) describe epistemology based upon an interpretive paradigm, as a way of knowing that is created from an interaction between the inquirer and the inquired. Findings become a result of this interaction and cannot exist absent of values because it is a social interaction. This epistemological theory of
knowledge forms an important framework for this research, one that allows the social processes that shapes the realities of the participants to be seen.

There are several compelling reasons why qualitative methods were appropriate for this study. First, information obtained from an extensive review of literature, indicated the need for a study of Kurdish feminist leadership. There is more to the story of the KWFM than what has been written in the news. Many oppressions against women and Kurds have preceded the leadership being studied. Their leadership processes are a response from women in demand of new and free positions within their society. This response is what has set this study into action.

Next, social science requires ways in which to approach and analyze data that highlights and discovers the meaning of one’s experiences (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). The complex context, history, and geo-political location of Kurdistan and the KWFM required flexible and reflexive research methods. Qualitative research methods encourage such reflexivity when analyzing the accounts of people’s lives and experiences (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). This examination of leadership required a holistic qualitative approach that is suitable for observing women within an ethnically and politically volatile region. For this reason, a feminist epistemology was chosen (Doucet, 2006).

Finally, theory and cross-cultural leadership knowledge has been a dynamic endeavor, one that has relied largely on quantitative methods (House et al., 2014). This approach makes full use of differences between people by creating non-standardized information from those occurrences being observed. Qualitative research intentionally moves away from cause and effect discovery and towards holistic treatment of a phenomenon (Stake, 1995). In order to interpret what can be learned from women rising
up into leadership roles, the research methods of this study needed to be able to capture leadership in its most natural occurrence. The social processes involved in their leadership, could be best underlined by talking directly to the people involved and best witnessed through observation of leading women within their own communities.

The contribution of the researcher was to highlight the social processes used to develop leadership and shift the leadership role structure in their society. This required questions about roles, perspectives, and a basic set of beliefs that exist for Kurdish women in their leadership paradigm. From an epistemological standpoint, it was critical that the nature of the leadership roles these women embrace and embody were clearly portrayed so that their perspectives are presented in an authentic manner. These guiding research questions required inductive logic from the ground up using processes that allow for questions within the study to change in order to better understand the larger research problem. Creswell (2014) describes this process as going into the setting in which the processes unfold, exploring the topic in an open-ended way, lifting up silenced voices, creating multiple perspectives, and often contrasting those multiple perspectives with prior knowledge of the topic. Framing the context while richly describing the experience of the participants are both characteristics of a qualitative study and the role of the researcher conducting the research (Ritchie & Lewis, 2008). This approach required extensive conversations with women along with flexible forms of field observation. In light of these requirements, a case study exploratory design, from a feminist paradigm, represented the best methodological approach for this study.

**Feminist Research**

Feminist epistemology can be understood as a way of knowing that draws from a relationship between knowers, creating advanced knowledge of what a phenomenon is
like from a first-person perspective (Anderson, 2015). This approach is the best fit as it accesses what leadership means for women in the power hierarchies that exist for them. Twenty-five years ago, Canadian feminist philosopher Lorraine Code presented an “outrageous question” to the qualitative research community: “is the sex of the knower epistemologically significant” (Doucet, 2006, p. 37)? This question, along with many questions posed by early feminists, began the production of knowledge that exposed power hierarchy and masculinity in modern social science. A significant function of this knowledge production is understanding first the bases of power from which prior knowledge has been created, then asking questions about who’s voices have and have not been present in the creation of that prior knowledge (Gilligan, 2011). It is, as Gilligan titles feminist knowledge, “in a different voice.” Feminist qualitative research reaches towards the feminist ideas and experiences that have for centuries been altogether ignored (Reinharz, 1992).

This qualitative study and ultimately the objective of this research was to report the meaning of the feminist leadership experience in Kurdistan. From the ground up, a feminist epistemology can shape theory and explain how women choose to transcend circumstances of lethal oppression through feminist leadership. Across the globe, in places such as Senegal, Rwanda, Bolivia, and post-communist eastern Europe, women are rising up into leadership roles in a way that is changing the existing power structures (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017). The epistemological approach was used to create a replicable study so that it may be used within other cultures and other feminist freedom movements. In order for this to happen, the methods had to bring together both the purpose and findings of the case study into a body of knowledge that can be compared to other cases in the future.
Capturing complex points of view requires credible and rigorous methods that capture the experience by asking the right questions. The questions were designed to uncover the specific meaning and perspectives of women in their leadership. This was achieved by examining the roles and leadership processes of women in a specific culture and the expectations of that culture by which women define their roles. For reasons such as these, an interpretivist approach is embraced by many sociologists. Interpretivist thought focuses primarily on the meaning of a social reality and is a way to respectfully develop “understanding of the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (Shwandt, 2005, p. 221).

Feminism reflects this interpretivist approach by melding questions of difference with questions of identity (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992). This feminist interpretivist approach allows for a critical focus on gender roles and how they are related to the power structures observed. Doucet (2006) describes social change and issues of power as key concerns of feminist research. Hofstede and House (2011) and Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004) in their groundbreaking work in investigating the effects of culture on leadership, describe a very important value in leadership named power distance. It defines the ways in which people respond to power hierarchy in a culture. The KWFM is a strong response to this cultural value. Hofstede points out that a critical mistake made in contemporary leadership research is the focus on the differences between countries rather than individuals. The voices of the individual women creating leadership movements must be heard, the meaning of their movements must also be seen. For this reason, a feminist interpretivist approach guided the methodology of this study.
Exploratory Case Study

Feminist research often uses case studies as a tool for uncovering social power dimensions and capturing the voices of women within those dimensions. Feminist case study analysis is described by Reinharz and Davidman (1992) as an integrated methodology in the feminist explications of women’s problems, defined as “a method of studying social phenomena through the analysis of an individual case” (p. 165). The case may be a person, a group, an episode, a process, a community, a society, or any other unit of social life. In this instance, the case being studied is a leadership process, generated by a community of women who have developed a freedom movement. It is a case that represents an overlooked facet of feminist leadership research. Feminist case study requires inquiry that aligns with core feminist values, one of which is renaming or redefining realities that are consistent with women’s realities (McPhail, 2008). The feminist case study approach is built upon a broader feminist epistemology.

Yin (2013) specifically defines exploratory case study as an instance where a phenomenon has largely remained inaccessible. Exploratory inquiry solicits an educated first impression. The objective is to capture everyday circumstances and conditions. Kurdistan represents a leadership phenomenon that is relevant while remaining inaccessible in the sense that it has not been seen or examined from an outside perspective. The social and political movements have not been compared to other cultures. The central focus in examining feminist leadership in Kurdistan is “what” can be learned from it. Yin (2013) describes three reasons when exploratory case study becomes appropriate:

a. The research questions are directed toward the “how, what, and why” of the phenomenon being studied.
b. There is limited control over the actual behavior and events being studied.

c. The case offers insight into a situation that warrants future large-scale investigation in an area where uncertainty exists.

The conditions that exist in Kurdistan combined with the questions of this study met these criteria for an exploratory case study.

In this case, an exploratory case study highlighted the “how” and “why” of the leadership being demonstrated. Each participant’s narrative of their own activism and leadership converged with multiple other sources, contributing to an in-depth understanding of feminist leadership in Kurdistan. Case studies engage research by systematically identifying connections between problems, contexts, the issues being discussed, and lessons learned (Creswell, 2014). Case study methods are described by Creswell (2014) as useful for cross-cultural research. A variety of resources such as field work and existing literature are used in case studies in order to examine relevant evidence for clear explorative examination of a phenomenon (Yin, 1981). Stake (1995) describes these methods as a way of “capitalizing on the ordinary ways of getting acquainted with things” (p. 49). It is a tool of observation when contemporary phenomenon is being examined in a real-life context (Yin, 1981). Field work and data gathering methods included prior literature, intimate social observation, and qualitative interviewing. All are distinct and are necessary contributors to a trustworthy exploratory case study.

**Context and Access**

This inquiry involved travel to war torn areas and interaction with people who are wholly dedicated to a social process that stands to liberate them. The data for this study was collected in Kurdistan, Iraq, and Colorado, USA. Upon approval by the UCCS Institutional Review Board, travel and interviews in Iraq were arranged in March of 2017
(please see Appendix A for the initial IRB Approval Letter). A second IRB project that defined the data being collected in Colorado ensued in June of 2018 (please see Appendix B for the second IRB Approval Letter). The Kurds are proud and determined people who expect a basic understanding of their history from those granted access to their culture. To know this culture is to interact with it. Inquiry must begin with respect for a people and an understanding of their struggle. This respect for and knowledge of Kurdish culture allowed for the “quiet entry” necessary for effective qualitative interviews and interaction with Kurdish culture. Reflexive data abstraction created the foundation for interpretation and interaction with their leadership processes. Evolving data abstraction required constant consideration of the “how” and “why” of their leadership. Knowledge of their ever-changing struggle was also necessary. Creswell (2014) notes the capabilities of qualitative methods to provide flexibility in such a shifting context. Sometimes new questions arise and more innovative approaches to research understanding are required. This is certainly the case for feminist leadership in Kurdistan.

**Kurdistan Data**

I was accompanied in Iraq by my guide and translator Allwan and photographer Matt Rains. Allwan is a leader in her community and committed to the ideologies of the KWFM. She has provided professional translation services to the US Marine Corp in Guam, Denver Public Schools, and UCHealth University of Colorado. She has been certified as a legal interpreter for Denver’s Mile High Multilingual Services. Matt Rains, served the US Army as a Black Hawk pilot and after separation, traveled the world in search of cultural knowledge. Neither are strangers to Iraq. Matt has drawn his expertise of Iraq from participation in the withdrawal of American troops from the region. He has spent hundreds of hours behind the lens of a camera documenting both combat and
culture in the Middle East. Allwan brought expertise of Kurdistan’s women, their history, and the essential conventions and customs of their community. They were my experts and an integral part of my cultural orientation. Inherent dangers that accompanied travel included ISIS factions nearby and Peshmerga and other Kurdish defense units at high alert with the recent insurgence of ISIS into Mosul.

The process of orientation and acquaintance with the people and their environment is important and highly desirable for beginning the interview process. Stake (1995) calls this a “quiet entry” (p. 11). Feminist analysis requires inquiry that aligns with core feminist values, one of which is renaming or redefining realities that are consistent with women’s realities (McPhail, 2008). This renaming and redefining can more credibly exist with quiet entries. In the case of Kurdistan, it is a region that has survived war, genocide, and the lethal rule of Saddaam Hussein. Currently, the Kurds are intimately involved in the Syrian conflict. They battle now for Kurdish lands and for the protection of women in Islamic State stronghold areas. In Kurdistan, the term Islamic State or Daesh is used in reference to a fundamentalist group that illegitimately rules and maintains order through violent means and justification of Sharia law.

The primary location of study was Sulaymaniyah, Iraq (Suli). It is a city in Kurdistan, Iraq with a population of 650,000. It is in northern Iraq, approximately 90 kilometers east of the Iranian border. Kurds use three dialects, of which Kurmanji is most often spoken in the north. Other languages encountered in Suli include Arabic, English, and German. For reasons of survival, many Kurds left Iraq, often taking their families with them. The US and Europe provided asylum to tens of thousands of Kurds following the Halabja genocide and during the US invasion of Iraq. Recently, many Kurds from the diaspora have begun returning to Suli. They are returning with a new culture and the
ability to speak several languages. It is common to encounter Kurds who have resided in England, Germany, the US, Brussels, and Sweden. The diaspora history of Kurdistan and the engagement of Kurds with a broad repertoire of cultures and backgrounds additionally impacts the context of the study.

Nearby areas that incorporate the context of study are Erbil, Halabja, and the mountains of Qandil that line the boarder of Iraq and Iran. Halabja is a city near the border of Iran that suffered one of the world’s deadliest chemical attacks imposed by Saddaam Hussein in 1988. After Kurdish Peshmerga forces liberated the city during the Iraq/Iran war, Hussein began a campaign of genocide against the Kurds. It began in Halabja with the gas killing of 7,000 Kurds. The craggy but stunning terrain of Qandil is home and haven to the PKK guerrilla and many participants of the freedom movement (Duzgun, 2015). Their presence is indisputable once one enters this remote region of Iraq. Clinics, sewing factories, and training facilities for PKK defense units are hidden in undisclosed locations of these mountains. Suli is a thriving city and home to many men and women of the movement. Defense unit members fighting in Syrian Kurdistan often retreat to Suli for medical treatment and fellowship before returning to their units. Several celebrations, conversations, and interviews occurred in the homes and streets of Suli. This city and its people are energetic in their commitment to Kurdistan, taking in 30,000 refugees of the Syrian conflict. Kurdistan as a whole currently cares for two million refugees.

**United States Data**

A year after the original data was collected in Iraq—during which time new political events had taken place such as the Islamic State crusade, the Syrian Democratic defense, a bloody conflict in Afrin, and a significant refugee movement—additional data
was collected through interviews with women of Kurdish diaspora living in the US. The experience of diaspora created additional information about the processes being used in response to current events. Further knowledge of the historical events of diaspora helped create a more holistic exploration of feminist Kurdish leadership. Finally, a contrast of the experience of diaspora with that of women immersed in the current conflicts of Kurdistan produced a valuable perspective. Data collection with Kurdish diaspora in the US augmented first-hand knowledge of the successes and failures of the leadership processes discussed in March of 2017.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Voices from active participants are essential to a feminist study that seeks to understand how and why Kurdish women are creating leadership movements within their culture. Participants from Iraq are effectively challenging existing social leadership roles and norms in the wake of sometimes fatal adversity in Kurdistan. Because of this, they have a firm grasp of the implications and social/political reverberations of this process. Kurdistan interviews were completed in Suli, Iraq. The voices of these participants were imperative because they belong to the women creating the movement under study. Interviews were conducted with women through a feminist paradigm and used as tool by which the voices of each woman could be used to identify common themes integral to SRT. Qualitative semi-structured interviews are described by Reinharz and Davidman (1992) as a prominent form of data-gathering in feminist methodology. Kvale (2006) describes dialogue and qualitative interviewing as a powerful methodology for a postmodern society that desires knowledge of the human experience, and as one that is objective, ethical, and intimate. Reinharz and Davidman (1992) describe interview
research as an exploration of people’s views of reality, allowing for interpretation and theory development to generate through the researcher.

Interviews were planned first by creating an interview process that captured a sample of participants; second by attending to the ethics of an interview; third by creating a questionnaire protocol that posed questions relevant to the theoretical framework and research questions of the study; and fourth by building an interaction with participants that produced trust and openness. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of feminist leadership in Kurdistan, three qualitative procedures for data collection were triangulated. The data sources are listed here:

1. Kurdistan interviews were recorded and transcribed during the March, 2017 trip to Iraq.
2. Stateside data was collected through interviews with women in Kurdish diaspora in the US. These members of the diaspora were 1st or 2nd generation refugees who have knowledge of the feminist leadership trends occurring in Kurdistan.
3. Field observations were recorded through memos daily while in Iraq and at activist events in the US. These observations included Kurdish cultural events, lectures, and casual conversations with families, men, and women involved in the movement.

These sources of data were used to triangulate information and direct appropriate attention to the leadership processes being studied. In exploratory case study research, central themes in the life and world of each participant form through rich data collection. SRT frames data in a way that highlights the behaviors, rights, power, status, and fitness of leadership that participants face and fulfill. Essentially it creates deeper knowledge of
gender roles as they apply to emerging feminist leadership. A synthesis of these three sources is outlined in the following section.

**Kurdistan Interviews**

Data abstraction in Iraq was a collective effort, one that sought commentary and experience. Allwan’s dedication to what women are accomplishing in Kurdistan through activism and hard work made the in-country research possible. With her partnership, 13 participants from Iraq were recruited for 60-minute semi-structured interviews. Participants were solicited by an initial recommendation of a consultant connected to the Kurdish community and then by word-of-mouth invitation through participants. This form of solicitation provided the level of trust necessary for inquiry within the Suli community.

Purposive criterion sampling was used to select the participants with the following characteristics: they had to self-identify as Kurdish and be positioned as a female leader in their community. A certain degree of cultural and demographic discussion ensued before the interview to meet the sampling requirements. This interaction established trustworthy relationships, and, for the participants, developed an initial understanding of the phenomena under study. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed for thematic analysis. Casual conversations with male and female representatives of the Kurdish community were drawn from in order to augment interview data. This dialogue allowed for a more objective understanding of the historical and socio-cultural realities that exist for Kurdish leaders.

**Ethics.** Privacy, safety, and confidentiality of each participant were strictly adhered to throughout the recruitment and interview processes. Interview sites were selected by the participants for their own comfort and confidentiality. Most often they...
occurred in the homes of participants. Before the interviews began, the participants read an informed consent and a statement on the aims of the study. Careful attention was given to the informed consent. Arabic copies were provided along with personal statement of the informed consent scope. Eye contact and attentive silence with both the translator and the participant was important. It in essence created a short holding environment for questions and concerns to be expressed. It also allowed the translator to express to me any expressed hesitations from participants. The participants were then given a chance to ask questions and express any concerns before signing the statement of informed consent. This prelude dialogue established an environment of authentic openness to any questions or concerns from participants and helped the participants feel comfortable refusing to answer a question or requesting that something within the interview not be recorded. The participants were made aware that the interview was taking place only by their free will, and that they were allowed to withdraw at any time. Permission to conduct audio recordings, take photographs, and takes notes during the interview was attained before beginning each interview. All data produced, both detailed memos and transcriptions, was stored in a password-protected hard drive to which only I have access.

**Building the interaction.** Relationship-building interactions always occurred before each interview, a process by which participants decided if the study was important and relevant to them. These activities and conversations were documented in field notes. Often, I was asked to sit and eat, drink tea, and engage with a group of women or a family before being offered permission to interview. All interactions first began with a mutual occurrence of appreciation for each moment with the knower. This helped build the trust between the interviewee and myself which was necessary for an honest and open discussion of the participant’s background, leadership ideas, and the political and cultural
structures that related to their leadership.

**Interview process for Kurdistan data.** Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted in Iraq. They covered the themes of Kurdish culture, feminist leadership, and the freedom movement being enacted in Kurdistan. Nine of the interviews were translated, and four were conducted in English. Most translation was completed by Allwan; however, some assistance was provided by local women interested in the study. The interviews allowed for communication with women actively participating in the KWFM and women leading social programs more central to their communities. Before interviewing, I spoke with the participants about my interest in Kurdish culture and the ways in which I believe that female Kurdish leadership is instructive for the field of leadership study. I began with a clear explanation of my reason for seeking their participation, explanation of consent, and a description of the categories to be covered within the protocol.

**Protocol.** The interview protocol was developed using the theoretical framework of SRT (please refer to Appendix C to locate the IRB approved protocol). The qualitative instrument encompassed two categories of inquiry: leadership and culture. These categories within the protocol allowed participants to comment on the experiences that have influenced them in their leadership roles. They focused on experiences that affect structure, distribution, and differences of gendered leadership roles. Figure 6 ties each interview question to the SRT model dimensions.

For each category, detailed memos were produced during and after each interview to ensure the accuracy of the interview. Each section asked questions specific to social roles. An example of one such question in the culture section is: how has your culture influenced your societal roles and leadership? Each interview averaged one hour in
length. Participants were asked throughout what the phenomenon of leadership means to them. Many questions were developed in a way that connects information about a participant’s family, education, and social structures to their current expressions of leadership. Eighteen questions were addressed in the body of the interview protocol. All questions were developed in a way that would abstract data about the social influences affecting the leadership being expressed in Kurdistan.
Participants. The 13 interviews conducted in Kurdistan were with women who resided in Suli, Iraq where they were active leaders in their communities. A collective experience of the contemporary Kurdish history of violent regime rule, genocide, Islamic State presence, gender violence, femicide, hegemonic assimilation, and 100 years of statelessness was shared between all of them. These participants were chosen for the study because of their level of activism in the KWFM or within their own communities. Their birth places included Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq. Table 2 describes the leadership roles of each participant interviewed.

Table 1

Description of Participants
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Place Interviewed</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Birth</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shazan</td>
<td>Kurdistan</td>
<td>Activist and guerilla</td>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>50,s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perwin</td>
<td>Kurdistan</td>
<td>Activist, teacher, and guerilla</td>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>40,s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evin</td>
<td>Kurdistan</td>
<td>Activist, teacher, guerrilla</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>40,s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chian</td>
<td>Kurdistan</td>
<td>Activist, journalist, guerrilla</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>50,s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meral</td>
<td>Kurdistan</td>
<td>Director of REPAK, educated in Germany</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>20,s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Iraq</td>
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<td>3rd grade teacher</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shari</td>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>Activist, political figure, and student of sociology</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>50,s</td>
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<td>Researcher for non-violence programming</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shiren</td>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>Asylum seeker, and Yazidi representative</td>
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In this context, a *guerrilla* is a man or women who is a member of the PKK. They are militia defense fighters trained in Abdullah Ocalan’s feminist ideals. They are well educated and work to protect the young and the vulnerable. The PKK contains one of the largest contingents of armed women militants in the world (Duzgun, 2015). Duzgun (2015) has studied guerrilla militia and describes the PKK as a controversial party wherein the advocacy of women’s rights and social and economic equality is the party’s grounds for the freedom movement. Dirik (2015) describes their efforts as an ideological and physical battle against female enslavement. Where the guerrillas reside and train, there is very little violence against women.

Participants who choose to remain outside of the guerrilla community also hold valuable leadership knowledge. They are women who work within their communities as leaders of organizations and businesses. Their jobs often entail education around political and human rights matters. Social workers, teachers, college students, political leaders, and medical professionals are all roles held by participants. They are advancing social systems that protect women, children, and refugees. Finally, they are creatively influencing the social structures that exist around them by taking on exceptional leadership roles, often those traditionally filled by men.

**United States Interviews**

Interviews conducted with seven Kurdish women in diaspora used a similar consent form and an interview protocol that was adapted from the data collected in Iraq. These interviews produced a data source for triangulation. Interviews contributed to an “outsider” to “insider” perspective of the knowledge already gathered in Kurdistan. Their experience of Kurdish cultural norms combined with an outside perspective of the
KWFM was the desired circumstance for participation in the study. Interviews took place in locations requested by the participants. Specific focus was given to the normative forces observed through feminist leadership in Kurdistan. They provided perspectives that are outside of Kurdistan yet acquainted with the leadership processes being witnessed in Kurdistan.

Seven stateside interviews were conducted. The women who participated in this phase of the study were recruited through snowball sampling beginning with Kurdish contacts in Denver and collaborative activist organizations located in the US. These participants resided in the US as either first or second-generation refugees. Criteria for recruitment required that the participants have knowledge of the emergence of feminist leadership in Kurdistan. To participate they must have had familiarity with the impact of the KWFM and of current events of the region.

**Ethics.** Privacy, safety, and confidentiality of each participant were strictly adhered to throughout the recruitment and interview processes. Each participant was given information about the study and the questions to be asked before the interview conducted.

**Building the interaction.** All interviews occurred in the homes of the participants. Most times there was informal discussion over tea and fruit before beginning. Because of snowball sampling, US participants had some prior knowledge of the study from their peers. Informed consent and protection measures were discussed before each interview. In the case of US interviews, email exchange were used to provide participants early exposure to the consent form and to introduce protocol.

**Interview process for US data.** Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted in the US. They covered the themes of leadership role distribution and social
processes that support feminist leadership in Kurdistan. The interviews allowed for communication with women who have knowledge of the KWFM but are now reflecting upon it from the perspective of diaspora. Participants were recruited through organizations such as Friends of Rojava North America, the Kurdish Democratic Front, and the People’s Democratic Party. Kurdish women residing in Denver also assisted in recruiting new participants. Participants were usually surprised by my interest in Kurdish women. Therefore, I spent ample time discussing my time in Iraq and the reasons why I believed that feminist leadership in Kurdistan is exceptional to leadership study. Each interview was audio recorded with permission and/or memoed in detail.

Protocol. This interview protocol was developed using the theoretical framework of SRT (refer to Appendix D for IRB approved protocol). This qualitative instrument provides questions that specifically target the guiding research questions. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. More attention was given to discovering the normative forces that influence feminist leadership in Kurdistan. For example, participants were asked directly about the social processes used by women in their emerging leadership. A direct question about what normative forces exist for women in their leadership was presented. There were questions that draw from the outside perspective of women when thinking about the leadership they are witnessing in Kurdistan. Each question contributed to one or more of the SRT dimensions listed within the model. Figure 7 shows each question listed on the protocol with the corresponding dimension it helped to inform.
Figure 7. United States Interview Questions

Participants. The seven interviews conducted in the US were with women who were either first or second-generation refugees. Each participant had spent time in refugee camps before being granted asylum and each recalled their journeys to the US. All but two received their asylum in the 1990s following the Al-Anfal campaign against the Kurds. The most recent arrival to the US was that of Shiren, who has resided in Lincoln Nebraska for a year and a half. Shiren’s interview required Allwan’s translation. Birth places of participants included: Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. A collective experience of the Kurdish diaspora and of violent regime rule was shared by all US participants.
Field Observations in Iraq

Field observations are described by Stake (1995) and Yin (2013) as significant in understanding and testing out the veracity of interpretation. They create opportunity for triangulation. Attending lectures and activist events, while engaging with people related to the phenomenon, are all parts of expert reflective practice in case study (Stake, 1995). Reflection of field work with other experts likewise engenders triangulation and can be concurrently accomplished while in the field. Involving multiple forms of data creates the opportunity for critical examination by the researcher as well as other experts in the field. Finally, field observation data draws significant attention to immediate concerns of the case that could be overlooked in the interview process (Stake, 1995).

In the field, I immersed myself into a culture and the cultural behaviors that I hoped to study. The daily activities were accomplished with men and women of the Suli community. In each event I was accompanied by one or more of my participants, further building the interaction and trust. Field work engagements such as discussions at Iraqi women’s shelters, refugee camps, women’s organizations, and activist rallies all contributed to my analysis. Memos of field conversations with men and women representatives of the KWFM and PKK communities served to augment the interview data and provide triangulation. The sites chosen for observation were most often driven by women and allowed for observation of their leadership strategies in the community. Field observations also included memoed discussions with men, politicians, refugees, and family members. Field observations in the US included visits to cultural centers, Kurdish businesses, and family gatherings with participants.
Data Analysis

Case study data analysis requires systematically drawing from data in order to avoid misperception. Yin (2013) notes that case study analysis is a researcher’s prerogative and that it relies mostly on their style of rigorous empirical thinking. Such analysis demands careful use of alternative empirical considerations or prior knowledge of the phenomenon. Stake (1995) suggests that case study analysis is a method that involves giving meaning to impression and final compilation—the taking apart and analysis of observations and impressions. Stake (1995) provides two processes for doing so: categorical aggregation and direct interpretation.

In this study, findings were analyzed through categorical aggregation of codes derived from the interview data and direct interpretation of my notes produced in the field. Direct interpretation was used to produce a feminist driven style of empirical interpretation of field observations and encounters. Direct interpretations are instances where the moments tell the story. They are interpretations shaped from experiences that do not often become clear until multiple encounters are observed (Stake, 1995). Direct observation is an indispensable partner to categorical aggregation in case study research, the two together influence the trustworthiness of the study. Categorical aggregation is the clustering of complex data into categories that hold meaning for the phenomenon being studied. Categorical aggregation was used to articulate the essence of what leadership means for women based on the interview data and field observations.

Findings were derived inductively, moving from specific observations towards categories and then themes of new leadership knowledge. A preliminary deductive process was utilized to employ the framework of SRT so that appropriate leadership questions could be created and used in the field. Observed phenomena arising from
women’s descriptions of culture and leadership were essential in establishing inferences about these women’s leadership perspectives. SRT addresses the social context of human action, arguing that the roles of men and women are generated in part by social structure and communication between individuals and groups (Willis et al., 2007). It is a broad scope theory that can deliver analysis to various role-related processes (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Expectations of roles change depending upon “a moment in time of a cultural context” (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 461). Social structure and communication extant within the participant’s “moment in time” were a source of thematic focus for this analysis. The malleability of social roles, inherent in SRT, was a significant concentration when creating categories. Field observations were viewed more directly with each note being used to expose the background and conditions where the research occurred. An objective of the study was to tell a unique story of leadership, from the sense of women, using codes, categories, and themes.

**Coding**

Stake (1995) emphasizes the impressions and intuition of the researcher rather than use of protocol in data analysis. For this reason, impressions guided each level of coding. To this end, leadership role structure in Kurdistan was defined and presented through an organization of code frequencies into categories and then into themes.

Dedoose, a UCLA developed web application for mixed method research, was used to attach three layers of codes and definitions to each excerpt or statements. A code is a word or phrase that features an aspect or essence of data (Saldaña, 2015). First, codes were formulated using the SRT theoretical framework described in the introduction. The social process and action that surrounded leadership convictions of the participants infused the codes and were crucial to answering the research questions. Coding included
the social processes and normative forces determined to be relevant to leadership emergence. Likewise, properties central to coding were the leadership roles described by participants along with patterns by which those roles were being restructured.

Using Dedoose, excerpts from each interview transcription were highlighted and then assigned a code (Saldâna, 2015). Inductive analysis of possible themes was based on literature review, interviews, and field observations. First layer codes fell under the questioning categories of culture and leadership. More specific or second layer codes were determined by presented values, experiences, behaviors, and perceptions of women expressed throughout their interviews. For example, several participants may have been “encouraged or discouraged to get educated” — a possible second layer code. Third layer codes were added to better highlight the social process used by women to influence power, behavior, status, laws, and perceived leadership fitness of women. A third level of distinguishing created a deeper understanding of the differences that exist for women in re-norming their roles and re-positioning themselves in society. This process of analyzing data was a powerful process by which experiences were turned into leadership knowledge (Saldaña, 2015).

Category Building

Secondly, code frequency charts were created to aggregate categories based on how they fit within the SRT model. Categories were formed based on how the code frequencies applied to the SRT dimensions labeled as follows:

1. Differences in Gender Roles
   a. Freedom Movement
   b. Culture Change
   c. Law Change
d. Leadership Change

2. Distribution of Roles
   a. Behavior
   b. Status
   c. Power
   d. Rights
   e. Fitness of Leadership

3. Leadership Role Structure
   a. Emergent Leadership of Kurdish Women

For example, a code such as “training women to speak in public” might contribute to a category of “leadership strategy.” Leadership strategy falls within the SRT dimensions of distribution because it is a behavior by which women are forging opportunity for leadership in their communities. A code of “role paradox” might encompass the competing role expectations of women who are expected to behave submissively while gaining influence in the workplace. This code contributes to a cultural category of “pressure upon women” which would fit within the SRT dimension of differences.

Unifying this information into categories supports an understanding of how and why women are repositioning themselves in society. This is one example of how codes were aggregated into the SRT model in a way that accounts for the research questions. Categories were organized into a logical chain of evidence that were aligned, compared, and contrasted with the comprehensive body of examined literature.

**Theme Development**

Finally, a collection of categories were grouped together into themes that best fit the interview data and were supported by field observations. Saldâna (2015) defines a
theme as a phrase or statement that identifies what a unit of data is *about* or what it *means*. Themes were developed using two strategies described by Stake (1995) as *categorical aggregation* and *direct observation*. The parallel approach of “relying on theoretical propositions” guided data collection (Yin, 2014, p. 136). This method contrasts with many case studies that approach knowledge from a grounded theory position, developing the framework as the data unfolds. Chapter I of the dissertation describes how SRT provides a framework for analyzing and categorizing each interview into a ‘theme that helps define and outline’ the expression of feminist leadership in Kurdistan.

SRT dimensions were used primarily at the category building level and are further referred to when introducing themes in Chapter IV. After studying the identified collection of categories, specific themes emerged in response to each research question. Figures 8 and 9 display nine themes that were developed to answer the research questions of the study. The related SRT dimensions are noted in parenthesis:
Trustworthiness

A common question in qualitative research follows: how does the research produce “objectivity” when the “subjective” researcher is an active participant in the interactive process of inquiry (De Gialdino, 2009)? This problem is referred to as trustworthiness. This study utilized methods and principles listed by Lincoln and Guba (1986) and DeGialdino (2009) as necessary for trustworthy findings.

Transferability and credibility are terms that Guba and Lincoln (1986) identify as criteria for addressing trustworthiness. In an effort to create trustworthiness, the findings
are presented from an interpretive standpoint, because they are based upon a process of interaction. Through this interactive process, transferability was achieved through giving attention to thick description in the findings. Credibility was achieved through triangulation, persistent observation, member checks, and reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

De Gialdino (2009) presents four principles for interpretive research that create trustworthiness:

1. resistance to the ‘naturalization’ of the social world
2. relevance of the life-world concept
3. transition from observation to understanding and from the external to the internal point of view
4. a recognition of double hermeneutics. (p. 17)

For this research, this meant staying keenly aware of the social world being studied, acknowledging that all subjects’ experiences are self-evident views of the world observed from the inside and the outside of a subject’s existence, and knowing that all forms of communications have varying degrees of meaning and interpretation (DeGialdino, 2009). These principles became part of the inquiry and were foundational during data analysis. It is for this reason that several participant excerpts are displayed for the reader.

**Thick Description**

*Thick description* has been a principle used in qualitative reporting to create transferability. Geertz (2001) discusses thick description as a tool in cultural analysis. It should be comprised of observations and commentary, making the job of the researcher to interpret facts and extract the meaning found in the interviews and observations. It is through these thick descriptions that the context and construction of the data can be
determined transferable to other cultures, leaders, and social processes. The use of thick description and quotations from participants supports credibility of findings (Creswell, 2014). Geertz (2001) notes the importance of thick description when theorizing about culture in a credible way. This study provided a credible account of the case by bringing the lives, culture, and history of the participants into a clear presentation of knowledge. Aggregation of data aligned with thick descriptions of knowers supports trustworthiness in research.

**Triangulation**

Triangulation is a way of assuring credibility in research through the use of a variety of data collection methods and sources (Guba & Lincoln, 1986). Triangulation transpires as a result of varied field activities. Use of interview data, conversations with community members, and leadership activities add to the trustworthiness and reliability of the data collected. Varied abstractions of behavior produce meaningful descriptions of the phenomena being examined within that culture. Because leadership is a phenomena embedded in the complex workings of societies, meaning of participants’ experiences can begin to transform when analyzing data (Guba & Lincoln, 1986). With this approach, diverse ways in perceiving, thinking, and feeling come together to inform the description of leadership.

**Persistent Observation**

Persistent observation is a mark of credibility as it represents an in-depth pursuit of salient elements through prolonged engagement (Guba & Lincoln, 1986). Although my travels to Iraq and in-country field work consisted of a two-and-a-half-week journey, I have been engaging with the Kurdish female leaders for over a year. I remain involved through weekly engagements with women of Kurdistan. I sought further cultural insight
through Kurdish community events in Colorado, and conversations with men and women from Kurdish cultural centers in Chicago, Washington DC, and Denver. The KWFM is a social movement that I research nearly every day. They have christened me a “fighter.” My activism in the US arises through educating people here about the history of the Kurdish struggle and the freedom movement they are now experiencing with evolving feminist exploit. News sources, social media, Department of Defense focus group discussions, conversations with activists, and weekly dialogues with my guide Allwan provide me with daily updates on the geo-political happenings in Kurdistan, the Syrian conflict, and the resulting defeats and accomplishments of the Kurdish female defense units fighting in Syria. It is because of my interaction with my participants, the “knowers,” that I remain persistently engaged in observing feminist Kurdish leadership.

**Member Checking**

Lincoln and Guba (1986) posit a technique known as *member checking* to be most crucial for establishing credibility. For this reason, member checking was used to create a process of informal testing of information through the eyes and ears of involved members. Three participants reviewed and commented on the dissertation findings. This technique allowed members to correct errors, further express intentions, and provided feedback on the study findings. This case included stateside interviews with women leaders involved in the movement allowing for corroboration of themes formulated for those interviews conducted in Kurdistan. Finally, my results were audited by a researcher from the Kurdish Women’s Relation Office. This sort of audit creates what Lincoln and Guba (1986) refer to as a playing back process which allows others to volunteer additional information.
Reflexivity: Researcher’s Position

As a women and human being, I find great purpose in understanding and ultimately alleviating suffering in this world. Van Manen (2006) notes the importance of understanding the nature of how a researcher relates to their participants and objects of study. This allows for learning to occur beyond what our knowledge has explicitly provided. In this study, I am the principal investigator. My background is in professional counseling. It is only recently that I have shifted my professional attention to the study of feminist leadership. I have, however, been devoted to the empowerment of women for quite some time. This research has ignited my curiosity on the feminist potential for leading societies and international policy. The inspiration for further exploration of the KWFM came from preliminary interactions in the US with Kurdish women. I came to understand how important my position as a western woman really was. The political implications that come with my American affiliation were voiced to me again and again. We are seen in the eyes of the Kurdish to hold global influence. The Kurds have long been awaiting international recognition as a worthy ally to the US (Voller, 2014). The US has been a strong supporter and ally of them in their bloody conflict against ISIS, and they desire recognition of their efforts (Voller, 2014).

My position as an independent woman is likewise essential. These women vow to be free of the control of men in order to better serve their communities. In Iraq, I was asked on numerous occasions whether I was married. When I replied no, they smiled and replied, “you are free woman like us.” I involve myself in field experiences and interviews that create access to ideas and memories through their activities and words. Historically, feminists have used interviews for social reform purposes and often they created a better understanding of phenomena when conducted woman to woman
(Reinharz & Davidman, 1992). I suggest that feminist leadership is best studied and understood by feminist researchers. Leadership has often been viewed as a masculine enterprise that demands “masculine” qualities (Eagly & Carli, 2003). The men and women I have encountered seem to have a keen awareness of this fact and offered me the feminist advantage to leadership knowledge, noting that it is best understood and written by a woman. Both men and women in the field voiced the importance of their story being told by an American woman.

**Research Limitations**

Methods of social science inquiry that are qualitative, based on observation and interviews, come with limitations. Those limitations include validity in design and the ability to avoid bias. A qualitative study is especially problematic because there is no presence of a statistical design. Data reflect shifting emphases dictated by new discoveries and are not pointed in any single direction toward the solution of a specific problem (Becker & Geer 1960). Case study design relies on trustworthiness in the research process rather than internal and external checks of validity. Variables for manipulation do not exist. Case study, in qualitative form, is a discovery of reality that is holistic, multi-dimensional, and ever-changing (Merriam, 1998). Multiple approaches of case study exist, and in the social sciences, there is not full consensus on one approach that produces consistent conclusions. It is a form of inquiry that provides the reader with enough detail that the researcher’s conclusions make sense (Yazan, 2015). Causality and generalizability lie in the researcher’s ability to triangulate, thickly describe, and create valid modes of pattern finding. Researcher bias is an additional limitation. In case study research the producing of valid design can vary and is subject to reader conclusion.
Because women’s leadership is of strong interest to me, it becomes more important to use criteria to ensure a trustworthy process. I reported the voices of the women and participants of this movement; however, I remain cautious that my rendering could come with pre-judgment and conclusions based on my own experiences of leadership and human rights. Likewise, bias occurs when participants are recruited based on their interest in a subject area. The voices included in this dissertation come only from those who chose to participate. Though I have incorporated common trustworthiness procedures, this research is interpretive. Its nature is exploratory. Multiple case study or “replication of results by recreating another case study” could address the inherent bias of this design by choice (Yin, 2015, p. 48). This study, as of now, stands alone but can withstand replication through well explained methodology.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the social dimensions, normative forces, and emergent leadership of Kurdish women revealed through a cultural feminist leadership movement. This analysis will do so by introducing strategies, and framing processes of social movement through an exploratory case study. This chapter begins with an effort to set the scene for the study. It then follows with findings for each of the research questions. Perspectives from women in diaspora and Kurdistan were used to answer the research questions:

1. How is feminist leadership being expressed/developed in Kurdistan?
   a. How do the experiences of women influence the ways they lead?
   b. What leadership development strategies are being utilized and why?
   c. What leadership roles are being performed by women?

2. How is feminist leadership in Kurdistan changing the positions of women in society?

Setting the Scene

First Introduction

The Kurdish Cultural Center of Illinois in Chicago was my first exposure to Kurdish people. I contacted the director before my trip to Chicago and explained my research. When I arrived, we were greeted by three men. First there was tea, followed by two hours of a detailed history of Kurdistan and the movement underway. One gentleman handed me a small pink book: Liberating Life: Women’s Revolution. He said, “Please take this book; it will tell you about why women are doing what they are in Kurdistan. It
will help you understand.” I smiled and agreed. He was correct, and I needed to see this for myself in Kurdistan.

Denver offered its own Kurdish community. It is small but spectacular. Most women came here in the 1990s either as young mothers or as children. Their stories were of a refugee experience. They viewed the education and opportunities they received here in the US as a gift. Each woman I met was using her gifts to benefit society. Mostly they were connected, each family intimately aware of the others situation and experience. Several times a year, they gather to celebrate their Kurdish anniversaries. They said to me, “now you are Kurdish too.”

**My Kurdish Family**

Before flying to Iraq, I enjoyed many meals with my guide Allwan and her family. I met all Allwan’s children, their spouses, and her husband, who embraces me every time we meet. Discussions were often political and held in love. Allwan and her family escaped Iraq during Saddam Hussein’s campaign. Both she and her husband worked as translators for the American troops during the subsequent US occupation of Iraq. They are proud Americans, but even prouder Kurds. Many hours were dedicated to improving my understanding of Kurdish culture, and the women’s movement underway. Allwan described the many initiatives occurring in the US, Germany, and Sweden. She provided me a first-hand historical perspective of the Al-Anfal campaign, the preceding wars, and the complex involvement of each regime throughout each historical event. She educated me about a Kurdish-led global movement “whose love of women knows no borders.” Allwan, her daughters, and her son say, “The 21st century will be stamped by women.” I agree.
Kurdistan

Tea was a call-to-order for women to gather, connect, and converse. If the time was right there was hummus, fresh olives, and warm naan, served cross-legged on the floor with a longwinded discussion. When we gathered with guerrilla, their weapons were nearby, usually tilted against the wall near their sleeping pads. They put them aside when they engaged with the people. Their call-to-order was also cross-legged over tea and began with “now we sit and share ideas.”

In Kurdistan, varying levels of community participation were engaged to acquire knowledge about the meaning of feminist leadership. They all began with tea. The context of my field work was created through conversations with men, politicians, families, and women in settings that ranged from business offices in Suli to Apochi celebrations high in the mountains of Qandil. Many people I approached in the field defined their role not as fighters, but as social workers of Kurdistan. They would tell me, “I am married to Kurdistan.”

I found a community driving toward a never before seen feminist leadership movement; access to this community was simply something that must be earned. Connections to these leading women required detailed conversations about why the research was important, what it might mean for them, and how I would report my findings. On several occasions, I was asked to write a book. It was important to them that their story be heard by Americans. Each visit included a short history lesson, a celebration, cultural intelligence of their norms, and empathetic intentional seeking of their frame of reference. They often pointed out during our talks, “you are a free woman like us.”
The Men

I recall one gentleman pointing to a woman holding an automatic Kalashnikov (AK) Rifle and telling me about her leadership in battle. He said, “All the men retreated [during a battle against ISIS], and she did not, she is a very fine commander.” These men were full of pride about the women and their history as Kurds. Iraq produced its own very intimate setting, but the energy of people was not much different than what I had experienced in Denver and Chicago. What stood out in Iraq was the level of engagement and interest I received from men. Most of this research was directed at women. Although interviews were collected from women, I spent countless, unsolicited hours with men. They asked for my time. From my purview, the movement gained legitimacy based on the level of pride the men expressed towards women in Kurdistan. Men were much less modest about what the leadership of women means for Kurdistan. They pulled me aside and told me countless stories of the battles, wounds, and victories of their freedom movement. I was given a tremendous amount of history and timelines from men.

Many of the men described to me a role paradox that the women have experienced. They understand its origins. Many men supposed violence against women to the influence strict Islamic rule, not to Islam itself but to the systems by which it was forced into their culture. They described the success of this movement’s reliability on secularism and equality. One man described to me the guerrilla movement in this way: “Guerrilla is about ideology too, showing the people that freedom and humanity is an option.” He described to me the importance of ideology remaining absent of self-interest. He said to me, “Trump will start problems because of his ideology—because they are not humanitarian, but business minded [US President Trump’s election was very recent].” He explained to me how many business men in Suli are now becoming part of the
movement, how they had shifted from self-interest to humanity. I spent several hours with Dr. Kiani, a prior Parliament representative of the KRG. He referred to a fear and misunderstanding of the PKK in this way: “Do you see the kindness of these people? They will not eat you, they embrace you. Do you see their ways?” Mostly, I encountered men who were very proud of what was occurring in the movement. A common expression was “to know the story of women here, you must first know our history.”

Expression and Development of Feminist Leadership in Kurdistan

This section discusses how leadership is both expressed and developed in Kurdistan. The experiences of women must first be noted before the expressions of feminist leadership can be adequately explained. Next, the leadership strategies of women and the reasons they are being used will be shared. Finally, the leadership roles that women assume will be emphasized to fully explain the expression and development of feminist leadership.

The Experiences of Women Influence How They Lead

The experiences of the Kurdish women’s leadership in response to culture and history are dissected. Chapter II described much of the social history of Kurdish women which noted a long struggle (Dirik, 2015: Voller, 2015). Participants in this study commented that they have been oppressed and cited both Kurdish culture and experience as inherent reasons for their leadership development. Because of their experiences, the new structure of leadership is flourishing. Both diasporas and Kurdistan participants placed significant emphasis on their Kurdish culture when discussing leadership. The Kurdish struggle, in all its fragments, has influenced leadership development in important ways (Voller, 2015). Three themes emerged while considering part a) of the first research question: how do the experiences of women influence the ways they lead?
The themes were:

1. Kurdish Holding of Culture
2. History of Harm
3. History of Powerful Women

**Kurdish holding of culture.** Kurdish *holding of culture* emerged as the most expressed theme when determining how experience influenced leadership. All Kurdistan participants spoke to this theme while 56% of those statements came from diaspora participants. The categories below feature specific experiences of women and how those experiences influence leadership development. When interpreting code frequencies, diaspora participants offered more commentary on culture than Kurdish participants. Diaspora participants (35% versus 65%) appear to do so because of their new positions and foreign homelands. Reflection is required to answer questions of culture. Though culture is a broad theme, the women interviewed seemed to have a firm command over its meaning.

Pride of Kurdish culture was a strong theme for both groups of participants when asked about how and why they lead. It surfaced as a theme that incorporated mindset as much as it did action. The term “holding” was added to this theme because Kurdish culture is not something that has been trouble-free or accessible. Kurdish culture is both an action and a mindset that comes with consequences that can be sometimes quite severe. Kurdish culture has been and continues to be harmed and therefore thwarts women's efforts to hold on to it as they lead. This threat is the primary reason why Kurdish diaspora exists. Each diaspora story began with cultural genocide. A collective description was as follows:

The government system like for example, Saddam says he was killing, he was destroying villages, you know, all those things. I was asking, what can I do, what
should I do for this, you know, to not let them do that? We believe in the 21st century. So, it has to be the power and leadership by women.

Through the interviews, Kurdish holding of culture was defined as an “embrace of old Kurdish roots.” This attention to cultural roots is counter to what the Kurds experience under Arabic influence, state control, or Islam. For the women interviewed, Kurdish culture is something much more primordial. It is a continued connection to what they know of their Kurdish heritage. It was expressed through this research by word of mouth.

Those in the US discussed continual contact with family, frequent visitation to Kurdistan, and a value system associated with "Kurdish."

For example, Meral, an activist from Suli who grew up in Germany, described the holding of her Alawi culture, one that predates Islam and Arabic, as paramount to her Kurdish identity. She currently resides as the director of the Kurdish Women’s Relations Office in Suli (REPAK) and has dedicated many years to the KWFM. Her interview began with her history and the experiences of her female relatives. She described her family's connection to the land and the cultural harm she and her family experienced:

Okay I can talk about my own culture because I'm not-- my family they are not Muslims, they are Alawis and this is a very ancient belief, it has animistic roots, it's a nature religion, you know. It was practiced in communitarian and natural societies in Kurdistan. And they resisted against Islam, and we're massacred a lot because of this. But a lot of them were able to survive. So, me and my family, my mother and my father, they are both Alawis and my mother, she was very active within the Alawi movement because it's also political issue. They are still suppressed, and they are not acknowledged, recognized by the Turkish state. So that means in each ID where they ask for your religion, they write "Islam," although we are not Muslims and you have no right for education and things like that, so it's a general problem, you know, that's something else. But for example, Alawis, how it was is-- the most important institution was the community, they call it "Ocak," you know. And it's like a communitarian society and they have for example no special places or buildings you know like-- to preach for example, to pray or anything else because they believe that God is everywhere, everything of nature is holy because it's made by God so that means every tree, every stone, everything, every lake or anything else is holy and the relation to God is an individual relation, so you are able to communicate with God everywhere in the nature, you know. So, there are no special places like a mosque or a church or
anything else. They don't have a book, it's more oral transmitted. So, because of this, because there's no book, there is no dogmatism inside it because there are no written references, you know. Everything is oral. But the most important meeting are the community's meetings, they are called 'cem.'

Meral provided a clear backdrop of her Alawi culture and the impact that changing regimes had upon it. She ended with noting the importance of oral tradition in sustaining that culture, a social revealing that has remained illegal in many parts of Kurdistan.

**History of harm.** Many participants from Kurdistan described the persecution they faced when expressing their culture. Factors that influenced Kurdish pride for both groups of participants were experiences of *cultural harm* through violence and hegemonic assimilation. The majority of participants (63%) discussed a history of harm, while for all participants there is a consciousness of historical marginalization and punishment for their embracing of culture. The embracing of culture, therefore, has become a responsibility despite further marginalization. It is especially true for diaspora participants who are now, in their new homelands, allowed to freely embrace culture. A distinction between the two groups of participants is the free part of culture. Participants provided examples of the following:

1. **Lethal and violent targeting of Kurds by regime states (Turkey and Iraq).**
   
   Incidents of genocide by Saddam Hussein, and assassination and imprisonment of women by the Turkish state were described by both groups of participants. Turkish targeting of Kurds has been expressed as particularly hard on women due to the frequency by which women are defending and leading within their communities. It was not uncommon to hear of women who had been shot, who disappeared from their communities, and who had been imprisoned.

2. **Forced Arabic assimilation, particularly within the education and political systems.**
3. Illegitimate use of power by government structures to prohibit Kurdish language, religion, and tradition.

4. Habitat destruction (rivers, oil wells, dams, and farmlands).

In August of 2014, ISIS jihadis attacked villages and cities in the mountains of Shingal. Zehra and her family managed to escape, since she has been a very active member of the local activist structures, both male and female, in Sinjar. Zehra described the attack in Shingal as a continuation of cultural harm heralded on the Yazidi. The Yazidi are an ethnically Kurdish community and religious minority that hold ancient Mesopotamian beliefs. The Yazidi were among hundreds of thousands of Kurds persecuted in Saddam Hussein’s violent Al-Anfal campaign. Genocide is the word they use to capture their experience. Zehra described the horror of her experience yet gives detail to the new responsibility of Yazidi women because of it:

I have a responsibility to people and society now. Leadership is helping society. It requires an understanding of Yazidi psychology, it requires trust. Good leadership is knowledge of society, methods that create contact with society, shared, showing others care and always organizing. Yazidi genocide brought loss and pain but now women can organize and lead. Now they are always growing.

Today you will find Yazidi women fighting in female militia units of the YPJ and Peshmerga forces. Moreover, you will see them working together through feminist activism resistance strategies, with women throughout Kurdistan, and raising awareness of the importance of women’s human rights.

Shiren is a young Yazidi participant who was taken and enslaved by ISIS jihadis in August of 2014. She now lives in Lincoln, Nebraska. She was a slave of ISIS for a year and a half. Her experience was described in detail during her interview. She was beaten, raped, electrocuted, and sold on two occasions. According to Shiren, it was her peaceful and very old culture that was attacked. She described here village before ISIS:
Women mostly, they have a simple life in the village. They are working, and they have their rights in our village. It is not like other parts of Iraq, where women don't have rights. Women in Shingal they are taking care of their family, their kids, because the kids were not going to school for so many hours.

She went on to explain what happened to her family the day ISIS arrived:

August 3rd, the day ISIS came in 2014, 47 people in my family has been captured through ISIS. Eighteen people of my family from that 47 are still under ISIS hand. I don't know anything about them if they are alive or not, but all I know they have a miserable life because I've been through that, I know how hard it is to be under ISIS hands. In the first attack, my sister, like, 12 years old, was taken, and afterward, they came back for us. When they came back they keep taking the young women. I pretended that I am married and that my young brother was my son, so they would not take me- but they still took me.

Shiren teared up as she showed pictures of her family members who have yet to be found.

Shiren was interviewed in October of 2018. On November 6, 2018 the UN reported the discovery of more than 200 mass graves in Northern Iraq that are suspected to be Yazidi. The identities of thousands of bodies discovered in the mass graves have not yet been determined. Many Yazidi have never returned to Shingal. They remain disconnected from their Mesopotamian culture. Shiren believes it is unsafe to return; if she were to return, there would be nothing for her.

Both Zehra and Shiren asked for their stories to be told. They stated that their story of leadership must be told by a woman and must be heard by western ears. As one participant noted, “every woman has to express her reality, so we can free each other together.” The Yazidi crisis is one example of cultural harm that mobilized leadership consciousness. It is an experience that has created strong leadership momentum for women in Kurdistan.

Chian is a woman who began her women’s work very young. She left her home and went to train and learn about the feminist ideology of Ocalan. As a young woman
this could only be accomplished safely in the mountains with the guerilla. She described her own experience of the harm done to culture and to women:

They don't like us, that's what I mean, they're killing us. They are against the success of the Kurdish woman. They try to twist her, and they don't like us, they try to destroy us you know? We'd like our voice to be heard through you, practically.

Chian and others described a recent history that included serious pressure upon women. Since the totalitarian rule of Saddam Hussein, religious and Arabic influences weigh heavily on women. When discussing cultural harm, participants described events in which they gained or lost influence. The history of Kurdistan has necessitated dramatic feminist shifts from empowered to un-empowered. War and totalitarian influence dictated these shifts. Patriarchy has continued to dictate the lives of many Kurdish women. Patriarchal influence has gained violent margin through genocide and war. It provides, at times, the motivation to fight, and to empower, but at other times it is imperative to submit and obey.

Shari is Kurdish and immigrated to the US in the wake of Hussein’s massacre. She has lived in Denver for 20 years. She is an activist and student of sociology. She recalls the events entangled with Saddam Hussein’s deadly rule.

In 6th grade I was taught in Kurdish, after Saddam [in 1975], all schools were made Arabic. It was very hard. Teachers came from Baghdad. Historically, Kurdish society it's very close to nature, back in the day women was the head of the family, leader, an agriculture, creating food for society, women had the power. Men protected them. Kurdish women’s culture remains but patriarchy exists still. Kurdish women still have a little bit of power with a man. For instance—my mom with my dad, they have equality, it is equal. Because of the war... the woman has become weaker. War impacts women more than man... sons and husbands killed. Women then have become more oppressed.

The weakening of women due to war and the practice of protection through control of women in times of war was discussed by Shari and others as harmful to the culture. This practice is marked by a patriarchal power paradox.
Participants described a role paradox wherein women must remain vigilant of appearance and honor, submissive, and self-sacrificing for the family, while enacting leadership roles necessary for movement that can address the cultural harm they experience. This role paradox contributes to the holding efforts of women. It is the history and culture of Kurdish women that is allowing women to take on leadership roles like those of their ancestors. Likewise, for many women globally, there is a duality of role expectation—mother, financial provider, and educator. Participants described this role paradox as a process in which they lose and gain influence in their efforts to negotiate the roles expected of them with those roles that stand to liberate them. This paradox also exposes the power distance experienced by women in a patriarchal society. It is within this category where women are described as martyrs for their culture. There are few buildings in Suli that you will enter without seeing portraits of a fallen sister. Women’s work was referred to by many participants as women-led activism and social work within the communities. It is work that is meant to support women while teaching ideologies that regard women as valuable and free in society. Meral, who has lost many friends in this movement, explains the legacy of her comrades in this way: “We say, they are immortal. We say they are immortal because their ideas and so on are living.” It is those roles for which women have originally embarked on, dishonorably leaving their families, homes and arranged marriages to do the “women’s work.” They die heroes.

Religion and Arabic influences play a significant role in shaping this paradox and were listed as strong normative forces that press upon women. They were described as systems of power that continuously affect women. This paradox was seen by diaspora participants in the education system where honor, self-sacrifice, and subservience were not the norm in their new educational community. Guerrilla participants described a
transformation of this role paradox, where 30 years ago it was considered quite dishonorable to fight and train. Today it is seen as honorable for the following reasons:

1. Female guerrilla defense units have contributed to the removal of ISIS in Iraq and Syria.
2. Guerrilla training and participation is viewed as a way for women to escape and address oppressive conditions.
3. Female guerrilla members are supporting their communities through education.
   Their jobs extend beyond fighting and into a realm of social work.

**History of powerful women.** Women from both diaspora and Kurdistan described mythological sentiment of powerful women. Half of the participants offered some example of this either recently or from an ancient perspective. Furthermore, many field observations including conversations with men and their families conveyed this theme. Many times, they would begin by saying Kurdish women have always been leaders. Participants described several cultural narratives where women are socially influential and ecologically conscious and hold significant power within their communities. Knowledge of the role women have played in Kurdish history is important to their holding.

A story told by several participants is that of Lady Adela, Kurdistan’s 1st female mayor. Nuxsha, a participant from Halabja, was Kurdistan’s second female mayor. She proudly told the story of Lady Adela. She added to this history by noting that the power of women is even more distinct in her city. She was a police officer and political figure in a smaller nearby town before being elected mayor. She boasted that Halabja not only had the first female mayors but also female judges, actors, and writers. It was from Nuxsha that I first learned of the old tribes of Halabja as she explained the ideals and traditions of
her own ancient tribe. Nuxsha described her background and the history of Halabja in this way:

My background and family, it’s from Halabja. It’s not just something new from the Halabja’s society to have a woman as a leader or to see the women leading. She’s getting back to 1899 like a hundred years ago. I am Haawramm, the Haawramm is like an old unique language. This is me. Yes, it’s been for a long time in history that women is ruling in our society. For example, if like two families, they have a problem, and they get together, through the people’s, a woman will say let’s talk about that, the problem which you guys have. And always, you know, men do that, but in Halabja, always women were representing and being the members who talk about the problems and make people have peace and to live together. Halabja is unlike other places. It has an environment that makes people come. Here they know how to deal with each other, especially between man and woman, because they’re always working together making things handmaid things and fabric, you know all that stuff. There is always man and woman together, it’s not separate here. Even in agriculture, in the fields they are always together and they’re doing it with each other.

Equality, community, and ecology were all touched upon in her explanation. She described the acceptance of many cultures in Halabja to include Assyrians and Jews. It was Halabja that held the Jewish ghettos before the imperial powers began genocide. Many participants described a Kurdistan of the 1920s where women were prominent in business, art, and politics. These descriptions were verified by field notes with pictures of certain iconic mayors, judges, and actors. Nuxsha was one of many.

Trifa is young woman who has just finished her degree in Denver. She and her family came to the US as refugees in the 1990s. She comments on her own cultural pride, and the way she holds it now:

I love my culture, my language, my people, art food, it affects me daily. I think about my people and how I would want to lead in order to make them happy, give them more opportunity. It has influenced the way I look at life. The struggle of the Kurds is always on my mind and in my blood. It empowers me to work harder and continue fighting in my own way, becoming an educated Kurd who wants to help build a better and independent country. Being a woman in society is hard, challenging pressing, men have more privilege. I also teach my parents that it should be different, I’m learning, and my mom is also learning. I believe that women do have a powerful voice in my culture, the way they raise their
children to respect other cultures, they are welcoming, open and encouraging to all cultures, all can be involved in the same movement.

Holding of culture is a phenomenon that is occurring because of the Kurdish history of powerful women. It has transmitted into the families for generations to uphold. Even those living in diaspora for over 20 years describe a vital embrace of their origins and what their people continue to endure because of powerful women.

Experiences of holding of culture, history of harm, and a history of powerful women, have contributed to Kurdish pride and ultimately to contemporary leadership roles that allow women to resist and transform those origins of harm. It is because of such pressure that both groups of participants described Kurdish holding of culture as an expression of their leadership. The results of such expression are a noted restoration of Kurdish culture inside impervious regimes, a holding of Kurdish lands in all four regimes states, and enduring economic empowerment of Kurds and specifically Kurdish women.

**Leadership Development Strategies: Legitimacy of Feminist Leadership**

Social and political processes have set into motion a shift in the way feminist leadership is perceived. Those processes emerged as strategies that were conveyed by participants. Most of the codes encompassing strategy articulated processes that changed perception. These strategies became sophisticated efforts to legitimize feminist leadership. Many of the processes used to do so were calculated efforts meant to challenge and reframe the leadership structures that serve to exclude women. There were two themes that emerged in answering part b) of research question one: what leadership development strategies are being used and why? Two themes emerged:

1. Social Processes that Legitimize Women

2. Political Processes that Legitimize Women
Several development strategies are being utilized by Kurdish women. Role distribution and leadership role structure are two SRT dimensions that can be woven into this explanation. Participants have described strategies that build legitimacy for women. It has been a battle for women and much remains to be improved; today, however, women are carving out openings for foothold leadership roles in Kurdistan. They are leading with and for the transformation of men into more democratic and free beings. They do so by shifting role distribution in ways that make women’s contributions necessary rather than tolerated.

Legitimacy of leadership occurs with the belief that the success of an organization is attributed to the leadership of a certain group or individual (Lucas, 2003). This improves the influence of that group or individual when elevated to positions of power. For women, the social acceptance of women’s ability to lead contributes to both legitimacy and influence. In this case, legitimacy of feminist leadership practices can be defined as the social acceptance of women’s ability to lead and the justification that they will be ensured human rights equal to that of their male counterparts. Participants have described a combination of these two definitions of legitimacy. According to 80% of them, the success of Kurdistan relies both upon the influence of women and the assurance of women’s human rights. There are several ways in which participants have described their experience of legitimizing the feminine. It is seen in the leadership role structures being accomplished through both social and political processes.
Social processes that legitimize women. Five social processes emerged as significant to the process of legitimizing women: Jineolojy, transformation of man, anarcha-feminism, roles of risk, and horizontal leadership. Most participants (70%) described leadership performance that embraced one or more of these social processes. These processes were evident across many of the first level codes and could be seen in several of the codes used to support leadership, culture, and social roles. Discussion of leadership almost always evolved into conversation centered around the ways in which women were either protected or legitimized by their contribution to Kurdistan. With diaspora participants, this was also true. They all discussed the importance of human rights, and the awareness necessary to achieve such. Rarely did the participants apply the terms of power or hierarchy to their understanding of leadership.
Jineoloji. Jineoloji is a Kurdish term for the “science of women.” Sixty percent of participants referred to this science as a social process used by women to transform a communities’ consciousness around women. Knowing the history of Kurdish women is important in this process and closely related to the prior theme holding of Kurdish culture. More than just an experience, it becomes a mission of education for many of these women. The first diaspora participant I met with, made similar remarks as those in Kurdistan — “you must know our history to know our leadership.” Jineoloji was explained such that the use of historical knowledge, ecology, and society is the way that people come to know the importance of women. It is a science for two reasons. First, it implores a process of critical thought that opposes exercises of power that are unfair to women. Second, Kurdish history is primary in this critical reflection. Shari, a diaspora participant who has studied the ideals of Ocalan, expressed her notion of Jineoloji:

I want women to know themselves, to know their value. I know the woman is strategically administration minded so they can help in everything, better than a man. So, I would like first for the women to be more educated, know their value to act and like freely, and there is a saying which is Jin Jiyan Azad. It means woman, life, freedom. So, with the woman, you get a life, with this like life it has to be free. There is life, and then there is the control (patriarchy) which is not considerate of life. A woman has to be Azad.

This notion is held by almost all participants (90%) from diaspora and Kurdistan. The terms system and patriarchy were commonly referenced when discussing leadership.

Participants noted that both the system and patriarchy impede goals of freedom for women. An example of one such impediment was a battle won by women in Northern Syria. Kobanî was an 85-day battle in which ISIS came in to Kurdish territory to take women and kill men. Shanaz is a guerrilla who fought in Kobanî. She looked ISIS in the eyes. She says:

When women are away from their history, when they don't know of the history of the woman, then they have to be educated, to take like classes or to educate more,
so to know themselves. When they know themselves, they know who they are and what they're doing.

Kurdish women have embraced Ocalan's concern for Kurdish liberation. His strong encouragement of women to take up the struggle against male dominance and establish women’s movement organizations so women can question and reshape themselves and reshape men and their societies. These are important factors inherent in Jineoloji. For example, Shari states two way in which Jineoloji is being used: (1) illegitimate structures are being identified and (2) the role of women is recognized as necessary in dismantling the illegitimate structures that oppress. Many women described what they call the “system,” meaning structures of government that are illegitimate because they are based on power and hierarchy. Some of the illegitimate structures identified were new rules created by new regimes and men such as child marriage, honor killing, and marriage laws that harm women.

Perwin describes her own critical thinking that surrounds the legitimacy of women: “They [men] have been telling me, you are like, you're man. You are like a smart man. And I was thinking why I become a smart man? Why not a smart woman?” Evin, who joined the guerrilla young and now works as a journalist in Suli, described her idea of the system with inference to the patriarchal structure:

Apo says women are not half of society she is the leader of society. She has to lead and the man continues with her. In systematic governments there are policies, women just follow the rules that have been set up by men. Women must lead based on their knowledge from their past.

Perwin, who was actively teaching women Jineoloji in the academies notes the five principals necessary in “staying strong against the system:”

1. Be a good citizen and love your country.
2. Be empowered, this is how to be a free woman.
3. Organize for the women, by the women. There must not be a male influence. Men must be prepared to co-lead; they need to be educated as well.

4. Esteteck, this is the art of being beautiful, not on the outside, but inside. This is gained through educating women about their ability to speak out, give speeches, and create a connection with their communities.

5. We use beauty for activism. We go and protest, go to the streets, and talk to the people.

Transformation of man. Participants described the transformation of men as a social maneuver that helps men understand their power to be more free, equal with women, and open to feminist leadership. It happens in the homes, businesses, and inside of the defense units where gender roles are used to shift perspectives of masculinity. The transformation of man is a process that involves men learning more about their own masculinity. This transformation happens through education and participation of women into leadership roles where men have historically dominated. Men are educated about the history of women and what their communities stand to gain when women are revered as equals. Many Kurdistan participants (70%) described the evidence of this transformation as less violence against women. Early in the movement, Ocalan established academies dedicated to Jineoloji and the ideological education of anyone interested. By the design of Canziz and Ocalan, transformation could be achieved using feminist academies, tribunals, and cooperatives. These academies were the beginning of the KWFM as they initiated the first female fighters. Meral described the education of men as a project central to the academies and necessary for the success of the KWFM:
When you say man, it's not the physical. That was part of the project of transforming the men. So, they had three different educations, each took one year. That was very important because it was at the time when the woman's movement said okay now we organize our self so much that we are ready to open our doors for men. So now they can get inside and we will try to educate or transform them too. You don't have such a thing like this in any case of the world.

Meral went on to describe the demand of these programs, and the screening process that occurred before a man is accepted into an academy. The special education Meral described began in 2002 and ended in 2004 in the women’s guerrilla mountain headquarters. Today, analysis of the male power is embedded in the feminist education of all defense units wherein men and women are taught Jineoloji, and the importance of gender equality in making Kurdistan free. Now male militia are required to analyze the history of male power and dissect their own masculinity. It has become required content in the education they now receive.

The science of this academic transformation of leadership was illustrated by several diaspora participants (30%). It included efforts of women to lead with and next to men. Through this process traditional gender roles disappear while men and women work together to accomplish goals. This process was directly observed in the field. Each event involved men and women speaking together to crowds. On several occasions, men delivered tea and food to the women as we sat and conducted our interviews. Guerrilla described this process in battle where women’s units collaborate with male units, fighting side by side. Havin grew up in Turkey and moved to San Francisco in 2010. Her activism in Turkey resulted in her leaving Kurdistan on asylum. She described this process in the following way:

Traditional men they are also changing. When men are not working they are become more effective in the family. The men, you know, they don't accept woman to see outside or as a leader but when they see woman in the power, they respect their wife more. When the woman wants to do something, they aren’t as
afraid. I can't say the housewife are changing and they may not still be able work, but they can be effective in the family more if they have more role in the family. So, it's not like they're going from housewife to business owner but they're becoming more respected and this is important because the kids are growing up with woman. So, if woman change and then the whole society can change. Like I said it, since 1980's you can't see this, but now there is equality between men and women. Also, when we elect the mayor, they have to have man and woman in-- for mayor election (co-mayorship). So, it's great, so to see this change happening in Kyrgyzstan.

Meral described in greater detail the process by which side-by-side leadership is being expressed in Kurdistan:

This model of co-presidency or co-chair, I think it's very important and it's an example for the women all around the world. And it also did not fall down from sky, it was a development before. So that means for example in leaderships, we had quotas before at the beginning, 20%, then 25%, then 30%, then it would be at 40%, so we had quotas. And beginning 2013 we overcame quotas. We don't have any quotas anymore. We have now equal participation and representation of women everywhere.

**Performative acts of anarcha-feminism.** Anarchy is described by Noam Chomsky as a principal assumption that any structure of authority or domination must justify itself (Chomsky, 2002). Contemporary American anarchist David Graeber defines anarchy as an organization of horizontal networks committed to direct democracy and a genuinely free society (Graeber, 2002). Anarchy requires organization and action. Butler (1988) describes performative acts as “the mundane way in which social agents constitute social reality through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign” (p. 3). Participants described an array of performative gestures of anarcha-feminism. Roles of risk and challenge of hierarchy are valued actions used by participants to demand justification of authority. Each woman was aware of how patriarchy has affected them in their society and of how hierarchical structures curb the potential to realize Kurdish freedom.
Participants believe that prioritizing female human rights is essential to achieving Kurdish freedom for all. They also revealed an appreciation for the freedoms experienced in the western diaspora and wish to use these freedoms to set examples for women in Kurdistan. As noted previously, women in Kurdistan are risking the penance of imprisonment and death. The military service of Kurdish women was presented on several occasions as a powerful gesture of leadership, which led to feelings of empowerment, liberation, and possibilities for equality. Evin, an older guerrilla, described her idea of anarchy in this way:

I cannot say it very quickly. The fight has made women beautiful. When we became beautiful, we become love. When we become loved we will be free. For me, I fight in all the parts: Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and against ISIS too. It's not that I like to fight, but I fight for freedom. Because I like to be free, I fight, because they took my land. We don’t like to fight but sometimes you have to. Every woman has to fight for their freedom, if they don’t fight it's not getting beautiful, we cannot be loved. When I fight, I protect myself. All women have to fight because the system will take their freedom, all over the world.

These words were uttered in some measure by all the participants, each identifying their own notions of expanded rights and leadership roles of Kurdish women against oppression, in pursuit of freedom. She notes the necessary action of the women and their movement for a free society. Evin was one of two participants interviewed who fought to liberate fellow women in Kobanî from enslavement and the real threat of being murdered by ISIS.

*Challenging systems of hierarchy.* Many of these women acted in courageous ways to encourage their fellow women to begin challenging the ideas that hold women inferior to men. “Kurdish women always refuse rules, it is known as Yakhy.” As noted by many participants (60%), they can just go to the mountains [to join the guerrilla]. Descriptions of this theme included several narratives of patriarchy, Islamic rule, and government regime as hierarchies unfair to women. Islam was portrayed by participants
as a “rule” rather than a religion. Women believe and feel that they become trapped inside of these systems. Shari, a diaspora participant, discussed the challenge of religious hierarchy and reasons behind its structure:

Recently they are supporting women to be a leader. There is a certain percentage. The Islamic rules still impacts roles, but the women are not giving in this time. Islamic women want to be good wife, what man wants women gives. There is not encouragement of women to lead with Islamic rules. Women leading affects man at home. Islamic affects our culture a lot. The war affected us a lot also. Before war God was different, after the war religion became more narrow and ridged. In 70s it was mixed with western, it was more equal. After 70s, Saddam’s control, genocide, all this affected the peoples thinking about education, religion, and media. They all became more extreme. Now young women are covered. There is more fear with religion. Its more extreme after the war. Its more extreme in Turkey.

The intention is for women to understand how women in ancient history managed to evade oppressive systems, and it is as much their role and responsibility to continue to participate in this legacy of resistance. Shanaz went on to describe women who do not know their history and their power as slaves:

If they don't know themselves and their history, they become a slave; because most of the systems, they make women a slave. They keep slaving because they know themselves and their history. It was like society, they did not let peoples to be free. They the system, the government systems or all types of systems, they make women to be a slave.

She presented a western example: “Even the Hillary Clinton, she tried to become a leader. She was leading the system, but it’s not leading the real women.” Shanaz mentioned Clinton as an example of how the system can overrule the leadership efforts of women when there is not a strong understanding of the history of male power.

Challenge to the hierarchy was frequently discussed in interviews. Often, they were referring to patriarchy and government structures. The older women seemed to comment more on exposure to the violence and harm of certain systems because they witnessed it first-hand. Many had lost brothers, fathers, sisters, and friends to war and
genocide. They were able to define the harm as more than just war – it was represented as a systemic problem that demanded full attention of women. Systems of patriarchy, Islamic rule, and regime power have harmed women the most. This was touched upon earlier when discussing the experience of cultural harm.

Women empowering other women. Women empowering each other are gestures considered essential in anarcha-feminism and considered paramount in the leadership of all participants. These social processes are expressions of anarchic values. Shannon (2009) imagines social freedom of women and direct opposition to illegitimate power or policy to be the foundation of anarcha-feminism. The exclusive role of the guerrilla, man or woman, is to help shape and empower women in their respective communities. Shari described this priority as one that demands challenge:

Women must do it, make life better for women. We can do it through talking, communicating with other women. There must be a leader if we do not do it the men will not do it. About community and culture, they affect women in Kurdistan; there is a lack of economy after the war. This is all affecting society and it has a stronger effect on women. There is no freedom for women, no democracy. There is no freedom of women.

Shanaz is the second of two guerrilla that fought in Kobanî. She is an activist who is highly respected in her community and she described the importance of a style of leadership that does not exert power:

Women are already leader because she is leading family children, women use their leadership as a power in the community. She is a leader but not in power. There is a big difference. Leadership is a life, power is abuse.

I observed this expression of leadership in Shanaz’s work. Each event and community gathering I attended. She was always there working with the women. In essence, I observed the strategies she described. Here leadership was an essential role that could be observed in her daily interactions with the people. She was “married to Kurdistan.”
Like Shanaz, the majority of participants (80%) consistently approached their roles with a commitment to sovereignty. Eva describes her early exposure to patriarchy and how it led her into thinking about anarchic values and the non-traditional roles in that journey. Her actions eventually changed her whole family’s perspective:

As a young girl, we couldn’t do what we want to do. There are obstacles. When I was a child, I recognize all those differences like, how the patriarchy is with the society. It continued until I got older, under that same rule. Those differences [between men and women], that made me think more about those differences and work to change them. After I left home and I started working with the Guerrillas and it affected my family and my dad’s ideology and now he’s acting nicely with my mom and with neighbors and family. I was able to change it.

Eva described a process that has been unfolding for 30 years. She has witnessed the impact of the work of the guerrilla in surrounding communities and within her family. Her descriptions of her experience can be understood as the transformation of man and challenge of hierarchy. It first started with a fundamental challenge to power that was not justified nor suited for the rights of women. Such actions come with risk.

**Risk taking.** I recall Meral describing how the dreary weather in Kurdistan was hard on one of her sister “comrades.” I asked if it was because of sickness, and she replied, “no it is psychological you see, she has many nights in prison in Turkey, when it is cold, they nearly died.” She described cold, wet, and abusive conditions. She says, “this is what women do here, it is for Kurdistan.” I found in every interview great pride and distinct examples of what the Kurdish women have accomplished through risk.

Several participants (31%), two of which are diaspora participants, have either been imprisoned for activism or enslaved by ISIS. The cost of activism, for these women, has been high. It is these roles of risk that shape the will of women’s leadership in Kurdistan. Women have and continue to gain momentum from each other. Several examples were provided of women taking risks. There is unquestionable risk in the defense activities, but
also in the role paradox described above. Women who choose to participate in the KWFM become, by extension, activists against a powerful system. In turn, they become targets not only of government regimes, but sometimes of their own families. Evin provides her own example of this risky role of activism:

All life is all positive thinking and love and living together like societies, families being for each other. So, our life is like this. Even the partner or friends [inaudible] if been killed or injured they're not letting and running away. So, she's going forward to bring her body or she work, or she fight, you know what I mean? She like keep going forward and we not be afraid and say, Oh, she get killed, I'm going to be killed. So, we just keep forward you know, going forward. Because we love life, we love our people, we love our land, our everything -- it's about love.

Participants routinely expressed pride for the accomplishments of Kurdish women in the movement for liberation, but more so for their daily efforts to achieve equality within their respective cultures. These women would often describe the priorities of men as being aligned with Kurdish freedom, not with women's freedom. Trifa, a student who lives in Denver, described the importance of courage and risk in the following way:

It is ability to be courageous, fearless, front line, help others, benefitting the group as whole. What were the influences that ultimately led you to your decision to get educated? My parents, the came with education, but not considered the same, they had to work hard to give us home and education, I have to work as hard. Parents were a team. Mom carried more emotional burden. Dad always working. I value a loud strong voice, honesty, empathy, and equality when it comes to thinking about the good of everyone.

Ashna is a student studying anthropology in Toronto. She works also as a research assistant who studies violence against women in Canada. She expressed her notion of risk and empowerment in the following way:

I am courageous and take responsibility for initiatives that are hard for others. Every day I find myself raising awareness in my community, presenting new perspectives, leading them to a new consciousness that they might not otherwise have had. I have inspired people to act in many cases international to local. It’s hard not to with all the misinformation out there.

Ashna described an attempt to re-inform her community by taking social risks. Radical
redefinition of roles requires empowerment of women to do that which influences their community to pay attention to the power of women.

Many participants appear to be forging leadership roles by taking risks. Armed defense in Kurdistan became a powerful process that enabled women to make significant strides in cultivating roles of leadership. It was the siege of ISIS that prompted women to act in ways more vivid and pronounced in their society. Chian described the impact of women taking up arms and fighting as a process that contradicts ISIS and the regimes that support them:

It’s like it [courage] started from family and then she just felt it. The Ocalan ideology started like 10 years ago in Rojava and inside each family and individually he was telling the people about his ideas. The people now are fighting if they are women or kids, they are fighting the ISIS now.

Many participants offered the history and origins of Ocalan’s ideology. It’s important to understand the history and perseverance of the ideals she describes. Chian continued:

Ten years ago, Ocalan was giving them courses or ideas, it started when they were kids you know. They pick up that's idea when they were kids and right now, they are fighting Daesh. Women in our culture was looking for this opportunity, when they see it in Apo they pick it up rapidly. All life is all positive thinking and love and living together like societies, families being for each other. So, our life is like this. Yeah, even the partner or friends, if been killed or injured they're not stopping and running away. She is going forward to bring her body or her work or her fight, you know what I mean? She keeps going forward and we will not be afraid and say, "Oh she get killed, I'm going to be killed." We just keep forward you know, going forward. Because we love life, we love our people, we love our land, our everything -- it's about love. Whatever their role is here [the fight], they just kept it. It’s like a Volcano you know.

Chian discussed the armed defense against ISIS. In the US it is common to view this as a fight against terrorism. To Kurdish women it is a fight against illegitimate power over women. They fight because of sex slavery and the threat that it poses to women worldwide. Women are standing up in many ways against violence and by taking risks not customary to the traditional roles of women.
**Horizontal leadership.** Women are standing in many ways with courage and
stratagem of leadership. *Horizontal leadership* is a term most participants (90%) have
described as strategy that considers all cultures, is aligned with the common goals of
citizens, and empowers women to lead those citizens. It might be inferred that this
prioritized approach to leadership emerged in response to the bloody systems of power
that so many of them have endured. Alignment and consideration can only occur by
being near and next to those they lead. The values of family and community come first.
Leaders are in touch with their people and have a good understanding of the reality their
people face. Keen communication and the ability to assess need and respond are
foundations of horizontal leadership. This approach means being aware of the system,
leading within it but never reproducing it. Khenda, a college student and case worker,
articulated her version of horizontal leadership from the perspective of diaspora:

> Ideally any leader, right, should engage with the people and women who, who are

marginalized in Kurdish society in many ways, their perspective should be
brought in to the public sphere in all of these areas. And yeah, ideally, women
who transcend the kind of traditional roles that were relegated to and many times
should bring perspectives, should bring those perspectives and center them in, in
what they do.

Khenda added to her statement the role that men play in legitimizing women and all
marginalized people:

> But, I think that male leaders should do that, too. I think that we, like all leaders

should constantly be aware of the most marginalize members of society and
sensor their perspective because whenever we’re trying to affect social change,
we should be aware of who is the most, who can stand to benefit most in that and
they are the most vulnerable in society.

Arizu, a social worker in Suli referred to some strategies that allow women to lead
horizontally. It requires a certain means of connection. Arizu described a necessary
understanding of self and the people she leads:
There is something it has to be in a leadership like to be loved by the people and also know himself as a person. One must know how to talk to the people, to give a speech. If he [leaders] have an ego and he feel himself is on top on people's and looking down, this is not real leadership.

Nuxsha, the mayor of Halabja described her own esteemed style of leadership:

The good leadership has, first to have patience, servitude, and a lot of knowledge, information and how to deal, how to talk, to act with people around. It depends on the society and you have to know and to be part of that society so, you can understand their problems, their concern so you can fix or deal with it or you know how to fix it or correct it day by day. Sometimes when you talk to the people the way they like with a smiley face and you know, those things make them happy. Even you did not finish all that they wanted, like whatever they want you cannot do it, but you talk to them, the way you’re dealing with situation is making them happy. You have to be fair.

Nuxsha displays confidence in her ability to lead her people fairly with intimate knowledge of what they need. She described the importance of communicating with her people. Sometimes she cannot give them what they need but understanding why she cannot do so is equally as valuable.

_Empowerment._ Horizontal leadership requires that women have confidence in their ability to lead alongside men. Processes of empowerment are required to do so. The roles in which leadership serves as a process that empowers women are those of mothers, teachers, community activists, mentors, and students. They are roles that revolve around the education of women on their ability to lead their communities. Participants describe a path of self-reliance, beauty, and impact. The Kurdish holding of culture was closely associated with this theme as it was integral in teaching women the source of their worth. Zehra is a young Yazidi woman who escaped ISIS in Sinjar. She has represented and advocated for the care of Yazidi women since the crisis in 2014. She describes the process by which women achieve a sense of empowerment:

Now she trusts herself. She has a lot of self- she has a lot of beliefs in herself because she is after experiences, now she can take responsibilities, she is able to be part of leadership, she's able to work, to change people and things like that.
And, she's feeling herself like a green plant, like a plant or a tree, or anything else that is starting to grow. This is something very new for her, and she knows now she's able to do all these things.

Trifa is a young communications professional from Denver. Her family came as refugees in the 1990s. She describes her own perspectives of women and worth from the perspective of a young professional in Denver:

Being a woman in society is hard, challenging and pressing. Men have more privilege. I also teach my parents that it should be different. I’m learning, and my mom is also learning. I believe that women [Kurdish] do have a powerful voice in my culture, the way they raise their children to respect other cultures, they are welcoming, open and encouraging to all cultures, all can be involved in the same movement.

Here she has described Kurdish women in the US and how she regards their holding of culture as necessary for the empowerment of women. Trifa elaborated on the differences between how Kurdish and American women regard culture. She pointed to an emphasis on Kurdish tradition that she did not observe in the US. She believed that Americans do not hold culture as a lifeline such as the Kurds do. An example of this was the expectation to teach young children about respect of all people from a very young age. She believed that teaching young people about their culture is formative in achieving equality in any part of the world.

Khenda is a college student who studied communication in Nebraska. She expressed the notion of her social role in the following way:

I am courageous and take responsibility for initiatives that are hard for others. Every day I find myself raising awareness in my community, presenting new perspectives, leading them to a new consciousness that they might not otherwise have had. I have inspired people to take action in many cases international to local. It’s hard not to with all the misinformation out there.

The raising of consciousness was a common value expressed by participants even in areas where there is not a “fight.” This was their role and responsibility in the global fight for women.
Participants consistently approached their social roles with a commitment to women’s worth. An example of this is the mission both Khenda and Trifa have described, a mission to raise awareness to the ideals of care for all people. This covers the roles taken on and expected of the participants in the context of their Kurdish culture. Zehra described this process as one of hope and one that women bear:

We have the hope that we as women will be successful, because they have a strong will. When the woman decides to make a step forward it’s not very often that she makes a step back. So, if she makes one step forward then she will come new.

Evin drew the two themes together when she discussed the guerrilla’s role to both fight (risk) and to educate (empower). She described her job as being ready for anything her community might need:

Anytime and in an older time it was our job to inform societies about our ideas so, it doesn’t matter if they call us in the mountain we come to the mountain, we come here. We do this, you know. Whatever the mission they told us, we do it. We are accepted as a guerrilla we’re giving away our life for this in society for these people and so, yes with this of course this is our mission and. Yes, of this interaction and this make a love between and us so with this love we can work better together. People love us and we love people so, that makes our work and mission be good like, work better. When you start facing the families and connecting with the people so, it’s a reality it’s not something hearing or reading about it, you know.

Field observations confirm this sentiment. Even the men would stop me to describe the hope and momentum that Kurdish women have instilled. Their words suggested to me a sense of pride that they had for the role that women played in the Kurdish liberation movement.

Non-traditional roles. Non-traditional roles is a theme that emerged as a normative force for women to lead horizontally. Women are legitimizing themselves in ways that are economic and social. These successful attempts at securing jobs, more often held by men, have transformed attitudes of equality. Havin provides a great example of
such roles. She provides a few examples of foothold roles that are legitimatizing women:

You can see this in the society. So, that's like in Rojava or in the freedom fighter women, they are you know, it's definitely equal everything, but between society, it's not like that. If you see the affection in the society, especially if society is religious and traditional. That's means so much. So, that's mean is things are affecting and changing slowly. So, I think that's the most important things. If you see that those men, they are, the one they have family, they have house. If they are changing, I think that's possible.

She described limits of this progress and goes on to say that there are places such as villages where women are still behind, but stresses the big picture through overall progress:

Yeah. And when I say this, those things are still happening in the city and there are small villages, there are small, I can say they are still traditional. Yeah, like there are some places are not like the way I said. It's still they keep their own tradition and they are like no religious and there are woman, they are not able to go to school, but not so common. If you see the whole pictures, like good things are happening. In that point. Yeah.

Havin spoke from her home now in San Francisco; however, she was witness to the pulls of tradition that Kurdish women have faced. She described many of the egalitarian roles of her family members back home. She mentioned that her brothers are also changing, “they stay home now and help with the family.”

Women are in constant progression of enacting non-traditional roles in order to legitimize themselves as leaders. An example of non-traditional roles is that of women refusing marriage to dedicate themselves to women’s work. This was observed in both diaspora and Kurdistan participants. Many women described themselves as “married to Kurdistan.” Their work with women is described as crucial for leading women and Kurdistan.

Pershang is the Director of the Center for Combating Violence against Women. She explained the roles you would observe women in if you were to spend time in the cities of Kurdistan. She noted the contrast that exists now for Kurdish women and those
that live in non-Kurdistan Iraq. She went on to describe the function of religion in roles of tradition vs. non-tradition:

If you go to office in Kurdistan you will see women getting job wherever she wants, minister, parliament, and in business. She will get the same salary as the man if she proves herself. She can manage the man. We prove ourselves to everyone that we can do. We show man what we can do. Fifteen percent of women now are driving. Women in Baghdad are driving but they are covered. The government in Baghdad is now taken by religion in Iraq. Shia is controlling Baghdad now. You know in Kurdistan there is no place for interference of religion in the job. You must work. Here you are free to cover your head or not, but you must work. It has been this way in our culture women have been powerful. We see them working together in the field. From the beginning women are powerful from the beginning. They are working in the field as the man. You will see women controlling everything, the farm the children. Now women work and still controls the home. She proves herself.

Pershang explains a way in which Kurdish women embrace culture. She goes on to describe a common problem wherein women get stuck in traditional roles dictated by religious authority. Leaders have recognized the harm that comes with allowing religion to grow too powerful. They likewise have acknowledged how women are supported when religion is not allowed to determine (or restrict) the rights of women.

Unanimously, women esteemed and celebrated what women are accomplishing in their efforts towards legitimacy. The social structures enacted by women are using implicit values that make the lives of women better through solidarity. Normative leadership processes, through social mechanisms, are shifting role distribution and leadership role structure. Participants have enacted an upward stand that embraces women as leaders and women as free.

**Political processes that legitimize women.** Field conversations and interviews framed a belief that when laws are fused with religion, women suffer. The majority (70%) made reference to political processes being used to support, protect, and legitimize women. The basic human rights of women as fundamental to leadership was discussed by
all participants. Yasin, a Kurdish business man, sat me down and explained this to me in the following way:

Europe has separation of church and state for 250 years. Now they begin this model in Rojava. ISIS evolved because countries are being pressured. The Islamic backing does no good for women. When constitution is based on Islamic rule it is known as Hallafit. With this there is no attention to people’s desires. Fusion of Islam a legal governance creates terrorism. There is immense frustration with this governing now. Ocalan has brought drastic change— the ideals of co-mayorship [man and women governing side by side] has created a way to hold governance accountable.

Kurdistan, has in the last 20 years, created laws in their land that set religion aside and prioritized human rights. Kurdistan has extraordinarily developed its own autonomous political structures in Iraq. Though they are geographically bound to Iraq, they maintain autonomy in policing, military, and law. Beginning in 2011, they have a democratically elected governing structure called the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) that upholds a constitution and a budget. Women have benefitted from this change. They have effectively, but not perfectly, separated religion from law. It is from the principles of solidarity that they have managed to prioritize culture above religious rule. Yasin said to me, “we love everyone for Kurdish not for Shia or Sunni or Yazidi but for Kurdish.”

Participants discussed two types of political processes that are simultaneously contributing to new leadership roles of women. There are those processes that are advancing human rights for women and those that empower women. Both remain priorities for their activism and for the KWFM. Geography and regime are fastened to these differing political processes. Women have made strides in all regions of Kurdistan; however, as noted earlier, cultural harm is still a reality. Women now adhere to a self-determined duty to dissolve harm to Kurds. This self-determination is part of their science and in their history. It is demonstrated in processes that advance human rights and processes that empower women.
Processes that advance human rights. Rotenberg’s measure of democracy includes a scale in which a country is measured by its ability to protect the human rights of its citizens (Fatah, 2016). Kurdistan’s governing structures have been increasingly more committed to international laws that protect human rights of women and children. These changes have not only protected women but empowered them.

Gender-based violence in Iraq is a primary humanitarian concern, as it ranks as one of the highest violating countries in the Middle East. According to the UN (2013) “domestic violence, honor killings, and human trafficking remain a threat to many Iraqi women and girls due to a complex mix of misconceptions in cultural beliefs and traditions” (p. 1). The KRG commenced in the wake of the Saddam Hussein regime that left Kurdistan eager for free, fair, and democratic representation. Their first election took place in May of 1992. Its most recent election ensued in 2009. The KRG institutions exercise executive authority of budget, policing, security, education, health policies, natural resources, and infrastructure all within the framework and stipulation of the greater Iraqi Federal Constitution (KRG, 2017).

Section 6 in the Human Rights Watch (HRW) Executive Summary of Iraq reports that domestic violence against women remains a prevalent problem and that there is no law in Iraq that protects women against rape (HRW, 2015). They also reported that there were no reliable estimates of the incidence of rape or information on the effectiveness of government enforcement of the law. What this means is that Kurdistan has enacted laws that protect women while its greater regime power, Iraq, has not. The HRW report comprises statistics that represent Iraq as a country. This report expresses a difference in constitutional attention when addressing the human rights of women. This is where the intentions of the political process stand out as a reforming effort by Kurdistan to protect
women above and beyond what has been provided by the greater Iraqi Federal Constitution. In 2011, Act 8: The Act of Combating Domestic Violence in the Kurdistan region of Iraq was implemented. The KRG publicized landmark pieces of Act 8 legislation through the following government mandates:

1. Significantly increasing the prison sentence for those committing so-called honor killings.

2. Passing a law against domestic violence.

3. Support for the Duhok-based Centre for Rehabilitation and Support for rescued women from ISIS terrorists that has so far provided psychological and physical treatment to more than 824 Yazidi and Christian women rescued from ISIS captivity.

4. Requests for support from the High Council of Women Affairs of the Council of Ministers, and all women rights and civil society organizations to initiate more campaigns for legal and social awareness in Kurdistan, especially among women (“President Barzani statement” in KRG Cabinet, 2016).

5. Banning all forms of forced marriages and female circumcision, restricted polygamy, and reformed inheritance law to guarantee a fair share for females. These are so called ‘honor killing’ that have been overlooked by the Iraqi law and used as an excuse to justify killing women. (“President Barzani statement” in KRG Cabinet, 2016).

Statistics from the General Directorate of Combating Violence Against Women indicate that the rate of violence against women in the Kurdistan regions is not steady, and that the cases of murder and self-immolation decreased compared to past years (KRG, 2016).
These landmark statues challenge acts of violence against women that would have in the former legal structure and under Iraqi law gone un-admonished (HRW, 2015). These initiatives may be among the most progressive in Iraq or the Middle East. For women, they were paramount.

Act 8, ratified by the KRG, is an example of how policies have shifting for the benefit of women. It is also sobering to consider what women have had to challenge to achieve basic human rights. Pershang’s role in her community is to run shelters for women. These shelters did not exist before Act 8. When I visited Pershang’s shelter I entered a large walled off brick building. I was met with armed guards. I met a woman who was paralyzed from a gunshot wound inflicted by her husband. She was being protected from her husband’s family who seek to kill her for dishonor. Honor is also a system of power that women have had to challenge. Many of the women I met were in the shelter for reasons of honor. Though it is illegal to abuse or kill a woman for any reason, some traditions, never described as Kurdish, deem it acceptable. Pershang describes a political process in Kurdistan that makes violence against women illegal:

Kurdistan there is three shelters to protect vulnerable women. We have a high counsel for the women in the prime ministry. They are managed by the police and the ministry. The cases [women who have been abused or lives are threatened] go to the court to see if they need protection. They will stay here until they are safe. Sometime the case does not close. Some take 5 years. Some of the cases are taken to US to shelters in Chicago, etc. We must take care of them. We provide them with all needs. We have legal staff and social workers. According to the law in Kurdistan she cannot go to court. It is Kurdistan’s law that the cases go through, not Iraq. It is not the same in Iraq. There is not a law to protect women in Iraq. There are no shelters for women there. Women do come from Iraq [to Kurdistan] to get protection, from Baghdad, Kirkuk etc.

Persheng explains how Kurdistan has prioritized the battle against domestic violence. It is her job to stand up and sustain shelters that protect women and children from violence. There are no government funded shelters for women in Iraq or Syria. Amnesty has listed
Turkey’s number of protective shelters as dangerously low. Kurdistan is making strides where most countries in the Middle East have not. Kurdistan remains unique because it is committed to accommodating the rights of women through democratic practices. The leadership of women is significant in this process.

**Processes that empower women.** Recall that the partitioning of Kurdistan occurred just after WWI. There was an expressed holding of Kurdish culture that surfaced in nearly every field observation and interview. Many men enthusiastically described the history of Kurdistan with an emphasis on the power of Kurdish women as necessary in the holding of Kurdish culture. Participants were dedicated to processes that empowered and offered historical reasons for continuing this empowerment. Rojava is exemplar of this empowerment process. The effects of policy can be seen in the cities and in the autonomous zones of Kurdistan, such as Rojava.

Rojova was established in 2014 and is a model of what feminist leadership can accomplish. Rojava’s policies could easily fit into the above category as it is a political response to ISIS, the Syrian conflict, and the violation of human rights against women. Many defense unit members support and participate in its methods. It is a political process that insists upon feminist leadership. Co-mayorship and feminist leadership training are mandated in Rojava. Equally represented counsels of women make most of the political rules for the region. Recall from the literature review that Rojava is a large autonomous zone in Syria and Iraq. Even though not all areas of Kurdistan use Rojava policies, most participants agree that the policies benefit women. Rojava uses a political format of confederate democracy. It holds equality most imperative, meaning that all levels of decision making are accomplished through the representation of all parties. The
stratagem of horizontal leadership is applied. Co-mayorship is foundational in Rojava.

Evin presents her own interpretation of the value of Rojava:

Of course, I have a big hope for this and we already see our efforts. Rojava is a good example so based on our [guerrilla] same ideology so we see it now and we’re going to see it in the future.

Policies are changing to benefit and empower women because their activism in this movement. It is because of this activism that Rojava thrives. Its policies are grabbing hold elsewhere in Kurdistan for reasons that make sense democratically. Rojava policies are now realized in Sinjar, where ISIS invaded the Yazidi. The Ezidxan Protection Force (HPE) was founded in the region in response to the Yazidi genocide. Zara, who is from Sinjar, discussed the responsibility of women now in Kurdistan and in Sinjar:

I have a responsibility to people and society now. Leadership is helping society. It requires an understanding of Yazidi psychology, it requires trust. Good leadership is knowledge of society, methods that create contact with society, shared, showing others care and always organizing. Yazidi genocide brought loss and pain but now women can organize and lead. Now they are always growing.

What was once an ideology has evolved in an organized effort for women to hold concrete positions of power. Meral depicted Rojava:

It is more radical, more systematical, more organized, and better coordinated. So, it was a very, very important stage in our struggle, I would say. And you can see the results today because I don't believe that, for example, it would have been possible to establish women's protection forces in Rojava without this part of the struggle [KWFM]. It's a result. You have to see this all in the line. When you research the movement, it seems so recent. They advertise it as just very recent. That's the problem, you know. I mean because, especially, together with the Rojava Revolution, as if all these women-just jumped up and started doing, right? The strategy gets missed. People again-- and the analytical process and all the work that Ocalan has put into the teaching, it gets missed, for at least for Americans reading it. I mean, you guys--suddenly, I mean, it is that Kurdistan became something like a Mecca for all for women.

Meral gave credit to the work accomplished by activists years before the Syrian conflict and Rojava materialized. Throughout her interview she emphasized the energy and loss of life that has accompanied the KWFM. She described imprisonment that several of her
comrades had endured because of their efforts to empower. It is because of this sacrifice that policies are changing. What the rest of the world sees through media is rapid revolution; what participants describe is 30 years of passion and sacrifice.

**Leadership Roles Performed by Women**

New leadership roles were described by participants as efforts to marshal sustainable leadership by women. Women are socially encompassing behaviors that deliberately dismantle former leadership structures. These roles are being used to elevate women while honoring culture. Part c) of the first research question asks: what leadership roles are being performed by women? Two leadership role themes emerged:

1. Freedom Fighters/Guerrilla
2. Activists and Communicators

There is a blending of themes now as the leadership roles being performed by women are closely related to the development strategies previously presented.

**Freedom fighters/guerrilla.** Kurdistan’s most dramatic and globally recognized role by women is that of the freedom fighters. Four participants in this study were freedom fighters. All but one participant (95%) noted the influence of the fighters. The majority of participants (63%) discussed early exposure to the guerrilla and freedom fighters and described its centrality in the role of feminist leadership in Kurdistan.

Several participants from both diaspora and Kurdistan described how the female freedom fighters and guerrilla have changed the face of leadership for women in Kurdistan. Their contributions have been a powerful norming force by which the differences in gender roles have shifted. The leadership role structure is adapting to the knowledge that women can and have proven themselves in battle.
Shereen is a therapist in Suli. She is considered an activist and communicator and as she described leadership, she focused upon the freedom fighters known as “Kobani’s.” These are the women that battled for 85 days when ISIS entered Kobanî. They protected their land and the women ISIS attempted to enslave. The battle was successful for the Kurds, and it was commanded by a woman. Shereen described Kobanî when asked about what the world could learn from Kurdish women:

We shouldn’t just be doing what men do. There is what I call a high-heel-philosophy. If they design it, they should use it or don’t design it. We learn from Kobanî and Kurdish women making this difference. There are fighters now. They make it that women were good fighter, they say women should not have been in the front line, they are less powerful and scared (referring to an American article). It said that we have to get together and combat the idea that women are not powerful. Kobanî women and all Kurdistan have witnessed what women did with ISIS. Women were commanding the fight. We will get together and see that men will see our brain and not just our beauty. In France they are asking the female commander to come to visit. The Prime Minister asked her to come. She refused (laughs). I think leadership has to be holding of each-others hand, being open minded, not criticizing. This makes leadership from the inside develop.

Persharg also referred to what was accomplished in Kobanî:

Even in the war against Daesh [ISIS] there are women fighting. They are powerful women. They are fighting in Kobanî. Women is managing the fighting in Kobanî, she is a general. She is managing the fight. I say if I have a daughter I will give my daughter her name.

In my field observations the tribute to freedom fighters was prominent. When we entered establishments there were pictures of fallen women. A common and admired portrait was that of Sakine Cansiz. Ashna depicted a Kurdish but western perspective of freedom fighters impact in Kurdistan:

I think the big shift started just before 2011, but I guess with 2011, that's when western media started noticing the female fighters of not just Syria but also Kurdistan and Iraq and how there is women taking arms. I don't like the way that the media shows them just because I feel like it's in a way that takes away from the way that they are struggling. It really romanticizes what they go through. Western media is just like, oh, they're like these badass fighters, but I think once that happened and they like sort of got that international praise, then a lot of people started thinking differently in Kurdistan, all four parts, and they gave
women more like a public platform to have a say.

Ashna described a notion that the romanticizing of freedom fighters may not depict the entire story of freedom for women. The romanticizing of freedom fighters has however drawn attention to the freedoms of women in the region.

Shanaz fought in Kobani. She provided a slightly different perspective as she described what “fight” means to her after 27 years of military service:

Fight makes women beautiful. When it’s become beautiful, when became a beautiful and when we became beautiful to become a lover and like people love her. When become loved, it's going to be free. That's it. I don't know if you get that whole idea. As me, like talking about myself, I fight in all the parts. In Turkey, in Syria, Iran and Iraq. I fight all over, and ISIS too. It's not about that I like to fight, it's not about that I like to go to fight. But I fight for freedom. Because I like to be free that's why I fight. Because they took over my land, I was happy to fight them. It’s not because we like fight, we like battle; but we inspired with of life. They took our life, they took our land, you know. And that's why I fight them. That's why every woman has to fight for their freedom.

Freedom fighters have given Kurdistan visible and international evidence of the strength of women.

Arizu, a social worker in Suli explained that women’s now visible ability to “protect” has changed their status:

Eh, just recently like couple years, it was a big change because before, society was looking as women that they cannot take care of themselves and being protected by the man, but now women protect herself and protect the mans, too.

The words of these women can be observed through the lens of SRT in that they are describing a longing of women to achieve freedom. It is not the fight but the freedom that has once again dignified women’s leadership in Kurdistan.
Activists and communicators. The theme of activists and communicators most comprehensively captures feminist leadership in Kurdistan. The majority of participants (74%) commented on the roles of activism and communication as part of essential leadership performance. This theme strongly overlapped with legitimizing the feminine. Many examples have been presented in previous sections describing the behaviors and values participants draw into their leadership. These behaviors and values fall under the SRT dimensions of differences, as they create normative forces for shifting leadership structures. The history behind those stratagems has been discussed. Prior themes such as: risk taking, social processes of empowerment, and horizontal leadership contribute to
this theme. They represent strategies monopolizing their activism. Diaspora and Kurdistan participants alike have embraced roles of activism.

**Diaspora activism and communication.** Each diaspora participant embraced prominent roles of activism. Many stand up against violence towards women through research and awareness raising. They highlight the violation of rights occurring in the US while using specific cases such as the enslavement of the Yazidi to draw attention to the rights of women globally. Likewise, they use their voice and positions within their community to raise awareness about the Kurdish struggle. Often they make visits to their homeland in order to stay connected to their culture and to their families. Finally, they embrace a responsibility to discuss Jineoloji as a global movement. Each woman provided several examples of doing so. Trifa described her activism in this way:

> I love my culture, my language, my people, art, food, it affects me daily. I think about my people and how I would want to lead in order to make them happy, give them more opportunity. It has influenced the way I look at life. College has been great because my professor and peers welcome difference. It wasn't that way growing up. They really do want to know about my culture. The struggle of the Kurds is always in my mind and in my blood. It empowers me to work harder and continue fighting in my own way, becoming an educated Kurd who wants to help build a better and independent country.

All diaspora participants return to Kurdistan often. Ties with family there are strong, and they use this in their activism. The power of Western influence is important in their efforts. Kurds are keen to the power of the US. Many of them were brought here under the administration of President Bill Clinton, when Saddam Hussein’s bloody genocide was under way. They embrace both the opportunities afforded them in diaspora while staying true to their culture. Diaspora is a rich source of much needed human and financial capital. Financial support of the KWFM comes mostly from Kurds living in diaspora. Likewise, aid to internally displaced people (IDPs) comes from Western supporters who become informed about the conflicts that exist in Kurdistan. It
is up to each of the participants to leverage the benefits of their new positions in society. They take this charge quite seriously. Khenda lives and studies in Lincoln where there is a large Kurdish community. She described her role of activism in the following way:

Yeah. So, I do consider myself a leader in many ways. I think it was hard for me to say at some point, but I’m comfortable saying it now. I like organizing, but in very concrete ways, I do a lot of like community organizing here in Lincoln. I also coordinate a lot with people in the Kurdish movement, like overseas, like on Twitter and in these various outlets. And I often find myself having to make decisions or take initiatives that others don’t feel comfortable taking responsibility of, but express that they want it to happen, so like we’ll take that up. And, also just in like every day, interpersonal relationships and things I find myself just because of my experiences that a lot of people here in Lincoln, Nebraska frankly don’t have wide range of experiences, I find myself even in discussions or conversations presenting new perspectives to people and in that way leading them to new consciousness that they might not have otherwise landed in. Also, I have inspired a lot of people to take actions in various, like local and national and international causes.

Many of the diaspora participants were in their twenties. Their physical exposure to the Kurdish struggle has been limited, yet they remain committed and active.

Finally, there is Shiren, the young Yazidi. Her activism is the most courageous in nature. She speaks out about her experience to Westerners who have little understanding of what women in war endure. Rape and torture of women are common weapons of war. Many US citizens have little exposure to this reality. Yazidi women are changing this. Nadia Murad is an Iraqi Yazidi like Shiren. She was tortured and raped by Islamic State militants and later became the face of a campaign to free the Yazidi people. She was recently awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts to end the use of sexual violence as weapons of war and armed conflict (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2018). These two women stand out because of their experiences but their activism is not unique. Every one of my participants would call themselves activists who are vocal in their communities about what their culture has endured.
**Activism and communication in Kurdistan.** Communication emerged more as a prominent role of leadership in Kurdistan. Communication is used by women in very creative and grassroots ways, such as through poetry or speeches at community gatherings. Often you will see a gathering of activists at the refugee camps working with the families to fulfill needs. Use of media and translation of western books and speeches to Kurdish is another example of creative communication. Even those women in prominent leadership positions described the importance of sitting down with citizens in their homes to discuss needs. Smaller codes that emerged under communication include asserting humanity and creativity in activism.

**Asserting humanity.** This is a striving for change through respectful discussion and persistent education. It is accomplished by finding like-minded people who care about asserting humanity in Kurdistan. Educating children about autonomy and gender equality is a prominent action in this role. It is a grassroots expression of feminism. Women attempt to promote new perspectives on humanity without alienating their traditions. This appears to be a delicate balance in the Kurdish community because traditions are the one thing that has kept the Kurds united. One participant called this "women asserting humanity," describing it as activism for the sake of humanity. Role-modeling and mentorship are also accomplishments inherent in this role. Every participant discussed the importance of mentorship. It is used by women in Kurdistan to accomplish change. Evin described her own version of this:

Yes, when you actually visit their house, seeing them you know about their families. Socially you know and then you can work to give to them well, love them and so they can love you and listen to you. In the beginning, it was very hard for us and for the families like strangers coming in but little by little people know about us and they know we are a good people. Yes, in some case it happened to us in some families, they kick us out, but we keep staying and talking to them, so we can, introduce ourselves to them better and more. So, when they know us, they accept us. If we can be inside each family and they see us how to
act and be. We pick any opportunity to talk to the people to the women. After we knowledge them ideologically and then we can bring them together, from individual to the group. I feel I am protecting women and also teaching them how to protect them self too. This is considered her mission in the society, for these missions now we be in each family every night.

In the field I witnessed this mentorship and connection with families. Many of my participants I saw were out in the community meeting with families and in their homes at night. I was never sure of how they were all connected, but it was certain that they spent significant time with the families of the community.

Creativity in activism. Nian provided some examples of creative activism and communication. Her foundation has translated leadership books and TED talks into Kurdish. She described her activism in the following way:

Yeah, so we introduced - we, as a foundation, we submitted the talks - I'm paying for the talks to be translated and we are putting voluntarily on the site so every people who knows Kurdish in the word, they can go to TED talks, go to Kurdish subtitle and see it. In Kurdish, two hundred of them. Most of them on women empowerment, on education, on happiness, you know? Now we can go down and see the translation. So, it's readable for everyone.

Other examples of creativity were witnessed daily in the field. Women used avenues of connection such as poetry, public speaking, music, and dance. There was always dancing, that has always been my experience working with women, no matter what country I am in. They dance as they lead—side by side. During each community event there was music and speeches. When speeches were given, they were always given first by a women, and then by a man.

The contributions of these women deepen the normative force of feminist leadership globally. Though each woman owns a role of influence in her community, they do so in solidarity. Noam Chomsky, in a Conversations with History interview describes solidarity in the following way: “the reason we don’t all live in a dungeon is because people have joined together to change things. It is through the action of women
that there is an attempt to control destiny, guided by values of solidarity, sympathy, and concern for others. It is solidarity for the sake of humanity. “

Figure 12. Yazidi dancing in celebration. An illustration of community and activism, dancing as they lead, side by side with man (Rains, 2017).

Feminist Leadership Changing Status of Women in Society

Human rights and freedom of women has been described as necessary for true Kurdish freedom. Participants (75%) prioritized the freedom of women above Kurdistan. They revealed an appreciation for the freedoms experienced in western diaspora and wished to use these freedoms to set examples for women in Kurdistan. Participants identified their own notions of leadership that expands the rights of women. They noted necessary action by Kurdish women in their movement for a freer society. The final question remains: how are these efforts affecting women in Kurdistan? Two themes emerged in answering this question:

1. Human Rights
2. Equality

Human Rights

Tako is a young Kurdish man now living in the UK. I met him at a cultural center in Suli. He was quite excited and surprised to meet an American as it is uncommon for Americans to come to Suli. He begins with describing how equality is changing in Kurdistan as he comes back yearly to visit his grandmother. He says “the government ensures that men and women are equal here in [Suli], it feels equal. It is accepting here.” He reinforces the common sentiment that “we need to know the Kurdish history.” He refers to love and hate. The wars that surround Kurdistan are “part of a culture of hate” he says. Tako told me stories of violence against activism in Saddam Hussein’s regime. He then told a story about his father:

The Ba’ath would grab activists and put them in prison and torture them. My father and mother had to go to the mountains to stay alive. My mother was pregnant with me at the time. They found a safe house and my mother gave birth in the night. That is where my name came from. Tako means “togetherness.” We later escaped to Syria and then were given passage to the UK. My father said to me, ‘never forget these people [UK soldiers], I came there with $5 and an infant, they did not hit me with AK’s. They took us in and the soldier gave us black tea and a cheese sandwich{laugh}. They knew what we liked to drink. This country took us in and cared for us. They gave us a place to live. No other country would have done this. Never forget these people Tako.’

Many Kurds have stories like that of Tako’s father. Many of them now live in diaspora. They return home and reflect on those violent times. These experiences now have become reasons they are proud of Kurdistan.

Human rights are necessary for women to raise in status within any society. It is difficult for an individual to be motivated to focus on status and influence when they are tending to their safety (Maslow, 1943). Statistical representations of human rights violation in Kurdistan are very difficult to access. This was also the case in coding interviews as half of the participants discussed both policies and social processes that
have historically inhibited the human rights of women, at the same time describing
current processes that are improving human rights. Rojava was always discussed in a way
that acknowledged human rights for women. The majority of participants (70%)
described social and political processes that are contributing to human rights of women.
Participants from Kurdistan were more likely to acknowledge the improvement of human
rights in Kurdistan than were those living in diaspora. Several factors affect the ability to
determine progress of human rights. First, the number of refugees coming from Syria
every day is raising and this affects the ways in which governments can assess human
rights. Second, there are four country regimes that oversee the statistics that depict human
rights violations and human rights progress. Finally, within Kurdistan there are different
regions ruled by different systems. A few examples are tribal areas, regional government
areas, and autonomous zones. Each address crimes against humanity in different ways. I
will describe three experiences that led me to believe that the rights of women are
improving in Kurdistan. I will conclude with four infographics published by the Kurdish
Human Rights Watch (KHRW). It is their mission to enable IDPs, asylum seekers, and
refugees self-sufficiency through direct assistance and capacity-building. With this
mission comes a responsibility to inform and bolster support for the human rights of
Kurdish people. Improvements in human rights are supported by the stories of
participants who have lived through war and genocide. This is when human rights in
Kurdistan were at their worst. Many areas of Kurdistan are still at war. Although the
Syrian conflict has provided an opportunity for advancing goals of self-determination,
human rights always suffer in war.

The University. I was invited to speak at the local Suli University on Psychology
in Education. It was a simple talk. Bear in mind there is less access to academic journals
and books. Very little literature has been translated to Kurdish. This was the responsibility Nian discussed earlier. Moments prior to the lecture, I watched the seats fill with women. In fact, I was told that there are more women than men attending the University in Suli. They were all very eager and inquisitive. Many young women came to me after and asked about why I was there. They were excited that they, women of Kurdistan, were the subject of my research. They did not ask why, they knew.

As I spoke with men from the University, they described to me the importance of women’s education today. Many of the older participants (25%) described to me the difficulty of accessing education when they were young (during Saddam Hussein’s reign). This is undoubtedly changing. Because of the cultural harm described earlier, many women have been educated in the west and have returned to their homeland with new views and perspectives. They bring these perspectives to the universities. They have used their knowledge to change the status of women in their homeland. As a result, education is increasingly becoming viewed as important and essential.

Zehra came from a village where education was rare for anyone. She now views education differently:

She's saying that her culture is a very ancient culture, a very old culture, and but still they need to know more about their own culture because there is need to get to know about your roots and that she's saying education is very important also because they want to get back to their roots also to their origins. And, therefore education is also needed to be able to identify what your roots are and what your origins are.

Shari stated: “Education is important, without you are not different than an animal.”

Many participants (70%), aside from the guerrilla and Yazidi, were formally educated in western countries. Varin was educated in Suli, where she received a master’s degree in infectious control. She describes the ongoing support of her mother and now her husband. Many of them describe a very supportive family in this endeavor. It appeared that the
education of women is changing because of exposure to western education ideals. Meral, Shereen, and Nian were all educated in Europe, but they have returned to Suli to support women and Kurdistan.

**The camps.** Kurdistan is caring for over 2.5 million refugees. When I entered the camps, it was not unlike what I thought a refugee camp would look like. Women and children made up most of the population. Several of my participants were spending time with the refugees. Visits to the camp provided insight into how the Kurds care for all humans. When I asked where most had come from, they said Syria—many of them were not Kurdish but Arab. There was a culture of care in Suli. There was full access to healthcare if need. The main obstacle to healthcare was transportation to the city, all care beyond that was provided by the city’s hospital. Many of the students from the lecture came to me and asked how to use Psychology in the care of the refugees. It was the most commonly asked question. They have observed the trauma and want nothing more than to help.

**The shelter.** During my visit to Kurdistan, I asked if rape was a problem, if this is what the shelters protected women from. They replied “no, it was for honor violence related to tribal tradition.” According to Pershang, Kurdistan’s government has made the battle against domestic violence a priority. It is not perfect, but they have made great strides to protect women from violence over the last 10 years. It was said that women endure dangerous travel from Baghdad and Syria to access the protection of Kurdistan’s shelters. I had several discussions at the shelter. Though honor killing still exists in Kurdistan, they occur much less frequently than they did 10 years ago. Pershang’s interview and my experience in the shelter helped me understand the history of honor killing, why it exists, and why its prevalence is diminishing. From her perspective it did
have much to do with tribal communities having to assimilating Islamic rule in the last 100 years. Without data that includes key factors related to human rights, it is difficult to know for sure how Kurdistan compares to other countries. It is certain that human rights are improving since Saddam Hussein’s rule. The exact difference is unclear as war still persists. However, female and male defense units have together taken control of those Kurdish areas vulnerable to violation. Most would say that it is because of war and genocide that Kurdistan holds human rights so central to their performance. Men have told me that where the guerrilla work there is no violence against women. Whether this is true, the idea of its truth creates a normative force that supports and protects women.

**Infographics.** The following graphics provide indicators considered essential to the implementation of human rights standards (United Nations Human Rights, 2018). Such indicators have been used to support policy formulation, impact assessment, and progress for human rights in Kurdistan and beyond. A problem facing the processes that improve human rights is the continuing lack of gender equality in political leadership (Norris & Inglehart, 2001). Participation of women in government contributes to democracy (Wakefield, 2017). Figure 13 provides a data point that compares representation of Kurdish women in government positions to the US and England. Figure 14 displays the percentage of Kurdistan’s annual government spending dedicated to education. In most countries, education is perceived not only as a basic right but as a government’s duty to its citizens.
Today, nearly 44,000 people a day are forced to leave their homes and 3.1 million people are asylum seekers awaiting decisions on their applications (United Nations Refugee Agency, 2018). These are emerging trends that pose threats to the human rights of displaced persons every day. Figure 15 represents an accomplishment of aid given to the
care and shelter of several million displaced persons whose care, Kurdistan appears to be dedicated to. A government’s care for refugees can be observed as a devotion to a real threat the world continues to face. It is further proof of an ethics of care described by many of the participants.

Figure 15. Graphic sourced from KHRW, 2013.

The world has seen dramatic changes in the role of women in the military. Several revolutions can be elicited to and re-counted with substantial participation by women. Algeria, France, Libya, and Rwanda are examples of such. As noted in Figure 16, Kurdistan too has commissioned women to design new social boundaries through revolution shared by the service of men and women alike.
Equality

Caprioli and Boyer (2017) conclude that in regions where there are higher levels of gender equality there are also decreased tendencies towards violence in general. The positional theme of equality was much easier to observe. Kurdistan’s ancient history of egalitarian roles has been portrayed in previous sections. In Kurdistan I witnessed equality. I recall several interviews in which men brought women food and tea. Evidence of equality was observed at every event attended. It was depicted in the processes of Rojava, within the defense units, and in the schools. It was also observed through women running businesses and local media corporations in Suli. Nuxsha’s mayorship in Halabja provided convincing evidence of both equality and a Kurdish history that supports equality. The contradicting dynamics of religious rule and equality, however, appear to be very real. More than half (68%) of participants commented on the threat that religious rule poses to equality. Participants likewise described many policy changes that have or are addressing the impact of religious rule within Kurdistan. In Rojava (Syria regions)
this has been systematically and thoroughly addressed. Equality is mandated within the political structures. Kurdistan, Iraq likewise exhibited progressive concentration on equality, with all of Kurdistan participants stating that equality has improved since the reign of Sadaam Hussein.

Equality is advancing but it is doing so at the unwelcomed discretion of tribal and religious law. Though laws of religion have changed in Kurdistan, they have not in Iraq or many of the rural areas of Kurdistan. There are areas in which tribal law supersedes governmental structures. This is where the problems of honor violence persists. Khenda described this occurrence in the following way:

Tribal communities have a lot of influence in administering justice. There are laws against honor killing, mutilation, and child marriage, but they happen all the time. They are not enforced laws. Tribal elites still have influence in the daily lives of people. Top down policies will have to come from the people including education and shifting of culture. It’s hard to separate religion culture, it’s not a foreign thing and its very intertwined with Kurdish culture now. In many communities there is not a tradition of registering people with the government so it’s hard to regulate how women are treated. The laws are Islamic. The enforcers know they can get away with it. I have people in my family that were married at 14, not legal but it happens. There is government incompetence. There is a weird balance of centralization and decentralization. Because Kurdish tradition is so honor based, Kurdish communities have a lot to say about the lives of people. People are informed by these traditions. Some of the traditions are justified by religion, others are not. Justification might be found from different places, with Islam its always been this way. The structure of the community is a source of pride and way of life and so we must change certain things in the culture without changing the Kurdish structure. That is the role of women then to assert their humanity!

Here Khenda presented a system of inequality that happens despite progressive laws.

Observations of equality likely vary from region to region. Shari described what it is like for her when she returns to Kurdistan to see her family:

There was little percentage of women working, 2001, 03 there was lots of change, it was strange then. I kept doing. When you do good stuff, people pay attention, now people are seeing me driving etc. I listen a little but now I am independent. The culture is changing to accept women being more independent. If women do a
good job, people will watch and follow. I was the only women driving back then, now many do. They get used to it. They used to scratch my car, tried to scare me.

Pershang depicts how she views equality of women now in Kurdistan:

If you go to offices in Kurdistan you will see women getting job wherever she wants, minister, parliament, and in business. She will get the same salary as the man if she proves herself. She can manage the man. We prove ourselves to everyone that we can do.

According to Nuxsha, this display of gender equality is also true in her city of Halabja. She mentioned an age-old culture that elevated women in leadership. She herself has accomplished one of the highest positions of leadership. Nian described women seizing jobs that elevate them economically:

There is this woman who have really started participating in the marketplace or something like small businesses, I think it's something, to me, it's a form of leadership that has evolved in the last couple of years that's been really inspiring and has impact on young women and have known the role of it and it's mainly in the food industry. I think it's been quite a risk by the society and the response is very positive. Yeah, for example, Fanima, where I lived, a bakery was established a year and a half ago, the owners have been there because the salaries were special, they didn't cut to a quarter, she started a bakery. She started herself and then I think she had one assistant and now she's not in the bakery anymore, she has five people working and running the business for her.

Observations and interviews produced data that supported improving gender equality in Kurdistan. I was unable to collect direct observations from Rojava, however several interviews provided first-hand knowledge of the egalitarian atmosphere it embraces. Observations were full of political and social activities where men and women worked side-by-side. The ideals of Rojava and the KWFM are based upon feminist ideals that support egalitarian approaches to social engagements. These ideals were observed day by day. Participants described the training of men wherein feminist ideology was instructed. It is from this form of leadership, based on ideals of egalitarian approach and social care that leadership becomes feminist rather than simply feminine.
In my observations those ideals were upheld. Differences in gender most certainly remain. Equality can always be advanced in societies. However, in Suli, the forces of equality were furious and unwavering. Equality is not perfect in Kurdistan. It is however progress created by Kurds in a region where women have been suppressed for hundreds of years. For decades women have been standing up against oppressive systems. Now their work is acknowledged and celebrated.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to investigate the social dimensions, normative forces, and the emergent leadership of Kurdish women revealed through a cultural feminist leadership movement. This study leveraged the SRT framework of Alice Eagly (2000) by creating an avenue to explore emerging leadership in Kurdistan. The literature review provided the reader with historical and social milieus for better understanding the origins of the leadership being explored. Chapter IV discussed several themes that emerged from the interviews and field observations.

Two overarching questions were posed for this study:

1. How is feminist leadership being expressed/developed in Kurdistan?
2. How is feminist leadership in Kurdistan changing the positions of women in society?

Question one queries expression and strategy. Those expressions begin with an injured history but have evolved into altruistic efforts to heal and more importantly transform their social systems into ones that will lessen harm. Now, women have become an integral part in achieving those goals. Their expressions of leadership, moreover, involve new social processes that are restructuring leadership and redistributing gender roles in Kurdistan. They are essentially using leadership strategies that legitimize them as leaders. Those efforts are largely directed through social and political processes. Question two queries impact. Though not perfect, Kurdistan is experiencing improved human rights and equality of women as evidenced by ready care of IDPs, essentiality of female education, and government mandates that promote equality. Today Kurdish women are
expressing readiness to attack social problems they have for generations endured as a result of their ethnicity and gender.

This chapter shares the implications of those themes as they relate to the freedom movement occurring in Kurdistan. While conducting this study, the investigative position of an outside observer attempting to move inside and create meaning from the lived experiences of these women was a critical concern. The goal was to take meanings provided by participants and relate them to a broader understanding of leadership that might help transform the status of women in a variety of cultural contexts. Anzia (2008) described a double oppression that exists for women in Kurdistan due to gender and statelessness. Interviews and field observations supported this finding. Expressions of leadership, presented by participants, may serve to transform this dual affliction and improve their experience of freedom. Equality and human rights are central to this relationship. The implications of this study can be explored through two discussions: readiness and institutionalization of feminist leadership. Based on the themes, these two factors appear to be central to how women are able to obtain freedom and status. They likewise fit within the SRT model, as both points of discussion are normative forces by which leadership roles are structured.

**Readiness**

Timing may at first appear to be a latent factor, one that lies outside of the control of those leaders implementing movement. This was not the case for participants of this study. They were ready. Kurdistan produced female defense units that mobilized quickly and addressed the ISIS siege in timeframes that even the US special forces units have yet to match in Syria (Tzemach Lemmon, 2018). “Readiness” has been defined by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (2018) as the capability of a unit to perform the
missions or functions for which it is organized or designed. SRT classifies this function of organization into the dimension of structure, as it is a new emergent leadership expression by women in response to injustice. As witnessed in the testimonies of the participants, many joined the guerrilla and trained in the mountains decades before ISIS came to Iraq or Syria. Dirik (2015) describes the female defense units and strong political activism of Kurdish women as a necessary and ready stand against injustice. Their organization was steadfast and inexhaustible. In 2014, their readiness paid off.

Existing literature has touched on other feminist freedom movements and their precipitators. Anarcha-feminism was presented as a response to pressures that are deemed illegitimate and subsequently induced resistance (Ackelesberg, 2004; Shannon, 2009). The KWFM began 30 years ago and was recently strategically set into motion as a response to events that few observers could argue were legitimate or just (Duzgun, 2015). The Kurds have endured oppressive conditions for many decades. As Meral stated, their strategies did not “fall out of the sky.” The Kurdish women have been mobilizing and preparing themselves for decades (Duzgun, 2015). When 3,000 women were captured in Sinjar, it was feminist leadership that made this movement visible to the world (Tax, 2015). Readiness and organization of the movement helped establish the leadership strategies used within the movement as legitimate and necessary. The timing of the social and political strategies employed could only be an exemplar response to a vital need.

Not every feminist movement is recognized by the world nor have they always been justified. But it is easy to justify what the women in Kurdistan are attempting to accomplish in the wake of genocide and sexual slavery. Recall the findings of Mojab and Hassanpour (2002), who discuss honor killing as a “custom and manner” with the purpose of instilling fear in women to guard themselves with modesty and chastity.
They also discuss these violent customs as being a product of the “zone of genocide” (p. 87). The impacting wars date back to 1918 for the Kurds, which marked the beginning of a wave of male violence against women (Mojoab & Hassanpour, 2002). The brutal impact of war on women resulted in an intricate and systematic refusal of human rights for women in Kurdistan. It has in effect pressed upon women the immediacy of reconciliation and restoration of their rights.

Timelines are important. Readiness, when the time comes is vital to the strength of a movement (Shannon, 2009; Tzemach Lemmon, 2018). In contrast to reactivity to illegitimate power, readiness creates legitimacy for the actors and the ideology. SRT leverages the interplay of role distribution to determine the success of a new emergent leadership structure. With this framework in mind, readiness of a movement requires early and calculated distribution of gender roles. Participants described the risk involved in this process. They also discussed the role paradox this created for them in their culture. This is consistent with what Teragosa (2015) describes as difficulties towards gender equality because of a paradox that exists for women in fulfilling their roles in society. Participants identified this as a reality that essentially had to be culturally exchanged in their leadership in order to redistribute leadership roles. Even so, they organized and matured over a 30-year period. Participants would argue that women’s freedom has always been necessary and that the changes in their social standing happened gradually, but the crisis in Sinjar fast-tracked a redistribution of roles that was decades in the making of readiness. This rapid distribution in leadership roles is consistent with the SRT dimension of distribution in that it evolved from freedom movement and leadership change.
Implications

Movement readiness can be impactful in different ways. First it is information that can be used to help conceptualize movement strength. Mazur (2015) discusses feminist movements in terms of stages: emergence, growth, and consolidation. This understanding of how feminist movements develop falls in line with the assumption that social movements begin with disruptive political strategies and end with institutionalization. The KWFM moved quickly through these stages after the crisis in Sinjar and Kobanî. There is value in understanding how women embrace crisis, but also in how they become ready for it. The KWFM is demonstrative of a response that legitimizes social processes while accelerating efforts. History of harm was discussed as an experience that affected the way women lead (Mojab & McDonald, 2001). Perhaps it was this history that contributed to the level of readiness demonstrated. When considering strength of movement and ways in which objectives for freedom are accomplished, readiness of leaders within the movement count. Participants consistently cited their history and pointed to the ways in which it provided understanding of their readiness.

Institutionalization of Feminist Leadership

Institutionalization of some desired benefit is typically the focal point of freedom movements (Mazur et al., 2015). Freedom is naturally the guiding force of such desired benefits. Institutionalization can be defined as the action of establishing something as a convention or norm in an organization or culture (Lucas, 2003). Democracy is often discussed in institutional terms; e.g., how is the organization run, what processes are commonly employed, and how are objectives of the organization met? Wakefield (2017) describes the importance of contending with discriminatory systems through grassroots
means, essentially evading the higher powers and legitimizing women through community.

Systems of gendered leadership were discussed in Chapter II. Lucas’s Status Characteristic theory was presented in Chapter I. The intermingling of these two viewpoints delivers explanations for the undervaluing of women in leadership. Lucas (2003) posits that structural intervention is the answer and that the creation of beliefs that the success of an organization relies upon the leadership of women will change the structure to one that favors the leadership of women. Both Status Characteristic Theory and SRT support the function of normative forces in institutionalizing leadership. This appears to be a mindset used within the KWFM to combat patriarchy.

Patriarchy remains a prominent contender for women globally. Mojab and McDonald (2001) have recommended taking a critical feminist look at a community’s leadership in order to assess whether the interests of women are truly being considered. These considerations align with the SRT dimension of role distribution, as it requires changes in law, culture, and leadership in order for legitimacy to truly occur (Eagly & Wood, 2011). The KWFM has made strides to raise the position of women in their society by legitimizing feminist leadership. Though this is how feminist leadership is expressed in the present day, it has not always been that way. Efforts towards transforming those who created the system and those who prolong patriarchy was first necessary.

Recall the social process themes discussed in the previous chapter: transformation of man and horizontal leadership. The participants described the stratagem behind these processes as purposely normative. Consider the transformation of man strategy as one that sustainably raises the position of women in society. Consequently, participants
described a focus upon man and a preparation for movement in a way that was pleasing to men. This is consistent with what Butler (1998) describes as processes that impress “equality action or inaction” within a society. Kurdish women are accomplishing gender “action” through education of men and through assurance of tradition. Leading leadership theorist such as Hofstede and House (2011) and Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004) have produced groundbreaking work on the effects of culture on leadership. They emphasize power distance as the extent by which a culture accepts unequal distribution of power. Hofstede (2011) ranks most countries in the Middle East as high in power distance, meaning less powerful members of society accept unequal distribution of power. According to Hodstede’s dimensions of culture, Iraq scores 95 out of 100 on power distance and 70 out of 100 on masculinity. Transformation of man and horizontal leadership are two ways by which women are deliberately shifting the power distance and masculinity in Kurdistan. The following sections will describe how this is being accomplished.

Balancing feminist leadership with cultural traditions was important in the processes participants described. Recall that feminist leadership was a part of Kurdistan’s ancient history. Mojab and McDonald (2001) found that in Kurdistan, the responsibility of traditions that strengthen the community fall upon the women. Mason (2010) notes a historical concern of Kurdish women to advance themselves into leadership positions while contending with inconsistent support from male leaders. This balancing of leadership with tradition falls into the SRT dimension of differences, as it requires shifts in behavior, power, and status to accomplish institutionalization of leadership. SRT likewise qualifies the use of tradition to win the support of men as a “normative force.”
Several participants expressed the idea that men require leadership of women in order for society to become freer, yet it is most certainly a balancing act. Perwin illustrated how this process of institutionalization can be observed in our own US political structure:

A democratic system is based on women’s power. Women has a co-leadership, and they make rules in every and each decision. In DC women is a leader and the men are continuing this leadership. The women are more important. Apo says women is not half of society she is leader of society. She has to lead and then man continues.

Darya is young diaspora participant and a 3rd grade teacher in Denver. She supported this idea of norming feminist leadership at the familial level. She describes why it must be cultivated with the younger generation:

We have to teach the new generation of men. Maybe someone who would like that and accept it to not be corrupted, someone who would like to grow and uphold roots, but we as leaders, we have to make this basic and train them, right?

Meral acknowledged several conventions present in the KWFM that effectively institutionalize feminist leadership and disturb leadership structures in a way that creates new leadership norms. The unity of women is a strategy used to get men to focus on the rights of women. Meral’s own organization uses education to guide men towards a new understanding of masculinity in their own culture and their own communities:

For example, the women there are also again representing the Women's Movement and the position and the will and the policy of the Woman's Movement, and they are able to veto male candidates saying, "I don't accept this person because he is-- he doesn't represent my principles, it's not democratic person, it's a very patriarchal person, he's violent, he has two wives, this and this and this. He is not respectful, towards the Women's Movement and the values of the Women's Movement and the Women's Liberation ideology line. And because of this we want to veto this person." They have the right or say now. And this is a very important mechanism because by this mechanism, you are strengthening the unit of the women, you are strengthening the collective will and organization of the women, and by doing so as and organized force, and a united force, you are able to influence the common, the mixed structures. You are able to change men. For example, for RJAK organization, we are leading men. Mans is not allowed to
give us advise or rules on us. So, we lead then. We make a rule for them. It's not allowed for the mans to interfere in our organization.

These processes are steadfast among women in the movement. The progress made through these processes was acknowledged by several participants. Nayzan noted the observable shifts being seen among men and in their communities:

And you can see the men, traditional and they talk about that they are like woman—we are, we are same if they are not free, we are not free to. So, they just—they start to recognize what they have been doing in the past and they criticize themselves. So, and definitely you can see this affection in the families.

Horizontal leadership is used in a similar way to help normalize the leadership roles of women in society. The SRT dimension of distribution appropriately construes this social process. Participants and Kurds encountered in the field, expressed an ideal of leading “with” and “next to” the people. Co-mayorship is likewise a form of this expression. Women are leading “next to” men in the political structures. In Turkey the structure of co-mayorship was deemed illegal in 2016. Shortly after, up to 54 women were imprisoned (Khalidi, 2016). Horizontal leadership is a value embraced by the Kurds, but often rebuked by regimes that control them. Yet it continues, women persist. In Rojava horizontal leadership has not only become the standard, but a process by which safety and rights are assured (Dirik, 2015: Tax, 2015). Horizontal leadership can also be found in police organizations and military structures (Dirik, 2015). Autonomous zones in Iraq continue to adopt these structures as well. In the face of grave circumstances, this form of leadership is growing in Kurdistan. It is little by little becoming an established norm in autonomous government structures of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. The advancement of autonomy and feminist leadership structures across boarders supports the work of Htun and Weldon (2012) who demonstrate that feminists movements broadly work within and across borders but require the creation of institutions willing to advance feminist ideals.
This is likewise supported by SRT through the dimension of structure, while distribution of roles and differences in gender begin to shift and become normal, the leadership role structures allow for feminist leadership within the institution to emerge. There are allies of this movement and of the theory that horizontal leadership might culminate into freedom for the Kurds. Such movement aligns with the SRT dimension of structure, as it requires a new structure of leadership roles to accomplish freedom.

Cemigil (2016) describes Rojava as a model of policy that is overcoming hierarchical relations by creating systems based on equality and complimentary power between men and women.

Kurds stand in solidarity from many corners of the world. Their solidarity, land, and people are attracting attention (Neville, 2018). World leaders from the US, Switzerland, Israel, and Germany have stated publicly that the Kurds need to stand together now more than ever. We see normalization occurring in diaspora as they publicize and discuss this way of leading. I encountered the ideals of horizontal leadership first in conversation with Kurdish women living in Denver. They opened my eyes to what the Kurds are accomplishing. Their accomplishments are slowly making their way into global consciousness (Tzemach Lemmon, 2018). Today, when one googles “Kurds,” women are seen side-by-side with men.

Such institutionalization of leadership has come with a fight. Shanaz described what this fight and freedom means to the guerrilla:

That’s why the guerrillas when they fight, they are happy, not because they kill but they think of freedom. Two things . . . you fight against system and also for freedom. Fight for women is how to fight, not to killing. When you fight it’s not about killing, it’s the knowledge of democratic system, break through the politics. I did not enjoy killing, I enjoyed fighting the strategy of the system.
Participants have identified freedom as the foundation and the culmination of their leadership movement. Guerrilla participants described solidarity in their struggle within Kurdistan. In recent cases it has been a stand against ISIS. Evin illustrated an example of solidarity:

The men were running away from ISIS and the women fought. To protect society is the women not the man. The moment when you fight you are not afraid to die you are only thinking about the freedom. Death is coming anyway, any time. Freedom is no coming easily.

Horizontal leadership was likewise offered as a form of normative strategy by participants from the other side of the globe. Ashna provided examples of horizontal leadership present in her own country of Canada:

For example, if I was to make like a clothing drive for refugees and I--it wasn’t for the greater good of making a clothing drive for refugees. It was just so people could think I was a good person or like, you know, just to prove like another point. I think really having your intention be like open and clear and real, it’s something that’s really important in a leader and a lot of people don’t think like, I think. I feel like my generation has a lot of pressure to just be successful and prove to everyone that you’re, you know, that you’re so balanced, etc. I felt it too but it’s just trying to find like an honest middle – yeah, and just like arrogance, being pretentious, like I just not – there’s people who do a lot of great things and I – they would – some people would consider them leaders, but it’s just like they’re so out of reach, you know. I think like of the things about Justin Trudeau that a lot of people like in Canada is that he seemed so accessible, just because he’s always trying to go into like the communities and talk to like everyday people, and I would say that’s a good leadership quality, but I guess versus Trump who’s just in his, like right wing circle of wealth.

In sum, participants describe their fight as one for equality and freedom. They note the sacrifice necessary to lead “with the people.” Their purview of freedom requires systematic dismantling and modeling in society. Some do this through battle and others through their social contributions. Institutionalization of feminist leadership requires both readiness and transformation of those that dictate perception. Transformation of man and horizontal leadership are developmentally accomplishing these goals for Kurdish women.
Implications

Theorists often separate democracy from the sustainment of human rights and place emphasis “onto the demands for effective participation” (McDougal, Lasswell, Chen, & Chen, 1980, p. 10). As noted in Chapter I, self-determination is defined as the power or ability to make a decision for oneself without pressure or influence (Mojab & McDonald, 2011). The world is currently witnessing stand-stills on fronts of effective participation and self-determination. Human Rights Watch Executive Director, Kenneth Roth, lists the surge of authoritarian populists and politicians around the world as the number one challenge to human rights in 2018 because they claim to speak “for the people,” yet proceed to demonize minorities and attack human rights principles (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Roth describes the contradiction as one that fuels distrust of democratic institutions. They are attentive to authority and power that harms. The KWFM and the women therein arrange their efforts differently. They do so through readiness and normative strategies.

Participants overwhelmingly referred to democracy as indicative of human rights, rather than of shared values and participation. Kurdistan sits in the middle of a region that has ranked among the world’s worst violators against the human rights of women (Human Rights Watch Syria and Iraq, 2017). Kurdistan offers a different picture. Though not perfect, Kurdistan is seeing a surge in strategies that normalize the protection of women. Pershang described the government’s commitment to sheltering women. The guerrilla and Kabanîs have demonstrated this in their fight against ISIS. Rojava is prioritizing rights within autonomous and direct forms of democracy that utilize feminist training to transform men. Interviews and field observations provided examples of social care that include the humanitarian support of over 2.5 million refugees. Divorce laws and
inheritance laws now support the independence of women and protection of children (KRG Factsheet, 2017). Htun and Weldon (2012) support the idea that feminists movements are powerful drivers in combatting violence. Violence against women and girls is now illegal in Kurdistan, Iraq. Such legislative protections have helped girls realize their worth in ways they could not have before. Finally, participants of diaspora have described many of their own efforts to support the movement for women’s rights in their new homelands while educating citizens about the efforts of their own KWFM.

Figure 17. Young girl with a flag of Apo during Celebration in Qandil (Rains, 2017).

The emerging leadership of Kurdish women appear to be using a social process that can inform educational leaders and policymakers on the global understanding of human rights. They have bolstered an approach that is by all observations improving human rights. They do so through vehement challenge to hierarchy and power that harms.
Human rights have become a priority through action. This is unlike the authoritarian populists the world is witnessing charge the global political scene. These expressions of leadership are not new to the world’s political scene; they are, however, unique in terms of feminist delivery. Implications are that leadership roles of women can be effective when applied in ways that transform men and legitimize women. Leadership of women can become an institutionalized expression. In effect, it can quickly and effectively shift the rights of women expressing it.

Future Research

Ideally, an exploratory case study provides a representation of what one case might offer a body of knowledge. This case provides an expression of feminist leadership. The findings offer scholars of leadership rich ground for further exploration on the development of a refined and nuanced understanding of feminist leadership in Kurdistan. This research promotes opportunity for two types of future investigation: cross-cultural comparative case study of feminist leadership and theory building that supports leadership for peaceful societies.
A future study might use this framework and accumulation of leadership testimonials to compare multiple feminist leadership movements from several regions and/or several freedom movements. Scholars regularly use case study research methods to develop theories of group processes (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013). Understanding feminist leadership and the use of feminist processes can help us better appreciate the ways that the abilities of men and women can become equally valued in institutions. Htun et al. (2012) have studied characteristics and outcomes of feminist social movements, they describe them as engaging in networking and organizing that brings autonomous activists into contact with government entities. The current study is a case that supplements this dialogue. This organizational strategy warrants a more thorough examination. Use of cross-cultural comparative case study methods can connect the leadership roles of women with the problems that women face by comparing cases across cultures. It may compare intersecting scenarios of culture, gender, leadership, and many other social dynamics.
found across cultures. It could likewise dissect other roles such as mother, teacher, wife, and agrarian contributor that might arise as normative forces necessary in restructuring the leadership roles of women in different cultures. By closely examining successful women’s movements in a variety of countries and cultures, an analysis may highlight how women leaders are not only impacted by these intersections, but also how such intersections prompt women to create their own revolutions in leadership. Comparative case study research could provide leadership strategies that focus on restoring the human rights of a society, specifically those in the wake of crises and cultural harm.

Theory building is often a postscript to exploratory case study research. Ervin Staub is known for his work on the psychology of peace and violence and his more recent contributions on concrete guidelines and strategies for reducing the possibility and frequency of mass violence in our world. He has introduced a new focus he terms altruism born from suffering (Staub, 2015). He describes this process as one that can be observed at both individual and group levels. “Some people who have been harmed, rather than becoming hostile and aggressive, want to prevent others’ suffering or help those who have suffered (Staub, 2015, p. 6). This assertion can too be applied to leadership processes. Staub provides examples of how altruism has been born from cultural suffering, but also how leadership processes have prioritized altruism in the groundwork of their leadership. A possible theory of restorative leadership could be established based not only on feminist forces, but also on the perspectives of people who have suffered. Several examples of altruistic leadership in response to suffering exist. Group examples are those of Rwanda, Jewish communities, Holocaust survivors, Armenian survivors, and Japanese American communities. Altruistic leadership can be seen when harmed groups of people adopt constructive ideologies. The case of Kurdistan
offers a constructive ideology in response to suffering but does so in the context of feminist leadership. Future research could generate new theories based on observed successful altruistic leadership movements in building peaceful societies.

Figure 19. Woman in mourning (wearing of white) in Syrian Refugee camp outside of Suli.

Conclusion

Kurdish feminist leadership has presented itself through an exploratory case study. It is a social and political approach that is emancipating women in Kurdistan. Women are now assembling and leading their communities in diaspora and Kurdistan. It can be seen in the ways in which women have seized social roles of activism, horizontal leadership, and in some cases freedom fighting. There are lessons to be learned from the women who pursue leadership in regions that are war torn, vulnerable to power, and systemically patriarchal. Their crucial roles have been a new achievement in transforming democracy in the region. Participants have narrated the innovative ways in which women
are leading through self-determination. The charisma and values they bring to their social roles are creating political momentum that Gomperts (2013) describes as essential for social equality.

Readiness and activism were unanimously revered as important for Kurdish women in creating change. They have announced a re-articulation of women’s freedom. Data demonstrated that women prefer to do this through strong relationships within their community and engaging in grassroots approaches to leadership. Many participants described their communities when describing their commitment to the KWFM. They conveyed both empowering and pressing cultural paradigms for women through early forms of feminist leadership, dating back to the guerrilla movement of the PKK. They narrated the contemporary gender division and oppression they have endured wherein new strategies towards women’s rights became a life promoting priority. The information, strategies, and organization flowing among Kurdish women of this movement are part of an evolving form of leadership that is recreating the democratic roles of women in the region.

Chapters II and IV discussed several of the social costs associated with the KWFM. The social stakeholders are the women, families, and displaced people of Kurdistan who have made themselves visible through the movement. Stakeholders have likewise been affected by Rojava’s anarcha-feminist policies; the degree of value depends upon affiliation, as this form of leadership remains threatening to certain regimes. Internationally, Rojava has risen as a model for direct democracy in a region where war and violence wounded both the people and political structures. Such conditions allowed for creativity in improving the social conditions of all Kurds. The response by Kurds in regions of violence have elevated positions and status of women.
Through social processes those leadership positions can be made more adaptive, and sustainable. Leading women of Kurdistan have expressed great creativity here as they have listed numerous strategies designed to abolish hierarchies that have harmed women for decades.

Participants have narrated their own values, commitments, and actions that revisit an ancient and feminist response to oppression and human rights violations against women. Though it remains difficult to predict long term outcomes of Kurdistan’s feminist leadership movement, there appears to be great social value in this geopolitical rarity. Their commitment to establishing a feminist leadership strategy extends beyond feminist perspectives and employs value-based and participatory behaviors that fuel change. There are implications for women at community and individual levels as well as at an international level, and for all women who struggle on a daily basis for human rights. The international efforts of governments advocating for equality might benefit from these self-determined approaches to leadership. Women can, through these examples, begin relating new stories of leadership on a global scale.
REFERENCES


Live UAmap. (n.d.). *[SDF are advancing in Nezlit Shihade neighborhood, on the southern edge of Raqqa city]*. Retrieved from https://syria.liveuamap.com/


APPENDICES

Appendix A
IRB Approval Letter January 2017

University of Colorado
Colorado Springs
Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects

Date: 1/20/2017

IRB Review

IRB PROTOCOL NO.: 17-074
Protocol Title: Intersections of leadership and culture among female Kurdish leaders
Principal Investigator: Amanda Metcalfe
Faculty Advisor if Applicable: Dr. Andrea Bingham
Application: New Application
Type of Review: Expedited 7
Risk Level: No more than Minimal Risk
Renewal Review Level (if changed from original approval) if Applicable: N/A No Change
This Protocol involves a Vulnerable Population: N/A (No Vulnerable Population)
Expires: 19 January 2018
*Note, if exempt: If there are no major changes in the research, protocol does not require review on a continuing basis by the IRB. In addition, the protocol may match more than one review category not listed.
Externally funded: ☐ No ☐ Yes
OSP #: Sponsor:

Thank you for submitting your Request for IRB Review. The protocol identified above has been reviewed according to the policies of this institution and the provisions of applicable federal regulations and is approved contingent on receipt of letters of access from any Universities in which you observe classes. The review category is noted above, along with the expiration date, if applicable.

Once human participant research has been approved, it is the Principal Investigator’s (PI) responsibility to report any changes in research activity related to the project:

• The PI must submit all protocol, recruitment, advertising, and consent form amendments/revise to the IRB for approval.
  • The IRB must approve these changes prior to implementation.
• If you are a student, please note that it is required to include the IRB approval letter to the library when you submit the dissertation/thesis.
• The PI must promptly inform the IRB of all unanticipated serious adverse (within 24 hours). All unanticipated adverse events must be reported to the IRB within 1 week (see 45CFR46.103(b)). Failure to comply with these federally mandated responsibilities may result in suspension or termination of the project.
• Review study with the IRB at least 10 business days prior to expiration.
• Notify the IRB when the study is complete

If you have any questions, please contact Research Integrity Specialist in the Office of Sponsored Programs and Research Integrity at 719-255-3903 or irb@uccs.edu

Thank you for your concern about human subject protection issues, and good luck with your research.

Sincerely yours,

Melissa J. Benton
Melissa Benton, PhD
IRB Committee Member

www.uccs.edu/osp/ 1420 Austin Bluffs Parkway Colorado Springs, CO 80920 719-255-3321 phone 719-255-3706 fax

Version 7/13/18
Appendix B

IRB Approval Letter June 2018

IRB PROTOCOL NO.: 18-180
Protocol Title: Intersections of leadership and culture among female Kurdish leaders
Principal Investigator: Amanda Metcalfe
Faculty Advisor if Applicable: Sylvia Meendez
Application: New Application
Type of Review: Expedited 7
Risk Level: No more than Minimal Risk
Renewal Review Level (If changed from original approval) if Applicable: N/A No Change
This Protocol involves a Vulnerable Population: N/A (No Vulnerable Population)
Expires: 25 June 2019
*Note, if exempt: If there are no major changes in the research, protocol does not require review on a continuing basis by the IRB. In addition, the protocol may match more than one review category not listed.

Externally funded: ☒ No ☐ Yes
OSP #: Sponsor:

Thank you for submitting your Request for IRB Review. The protocol identified above has been reviewed according to the policies of this institution and the provisions of applicable federal regulations. The review category is noted above, along with the expiration date, if applicable.

Once human participant research has been approved, it is the Principal Investigator’s (PI) responsibility to report any changes in research activity related to the project.
- The PI must submit all protocol, recruitment, advertising, and consent form amendments/revisions to the IRB for approval.
- The IRB must approve these changes prior to implementation.
- Changes in funding status must be reported to the IRB as quickly as possible to ensure funding requirements are met.
- If you are a student, please note that it is required to include the IRB approval letter to the library when you submit the dissertation/thesis.
- The PI must promptly inform the IRB of all unanticipated serious adverse (within 24 hours). All unanticipated adverse events must be reported to the IRB within 1 week (see 45CFR46.103(b)(5)). Failure to comply with these federally mandated responsibilities may result in suspension or termination of the project.
- Renew study with the IRB at least 10 business days prior to expiration.
- Notify the IRB when the study is complete

If you have any questions, please contact Research Compliance Program Director in the Office of Sponsored Programs and Research Integrity at 719-255-3903 or irb@uccs.edu

Thank you for your concern about human subject protection issues, and good luck with your research.

Sincerely yours,

Michele Olcum, Ph.D.
IRB Reviewer

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Version 1.18.2016

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Appendix C
Kurdistan Interview Protocol
50-minute interview

Demographic Questions
1. How old are you?
2. What was your childhood like?
3. Talk about your relationship with your family while growing up.
4. What were the influences that ultimately led you to your decision to get educated and lead?
5. What was your college experience like?

Leadership Questions
1. How would you describe leadership?
2. What leadership qualities, styles, behaviors, processes, etc., do you value?
3. What leadership qualities, styles, behaviors, processes, etc., do you not value?
4. Why might you consider yourself a leader?
5. How would you describe your leadership style?
6. What are some examples, traits, etc. that good leaders possess?
7. What are some examples, traits, etc. that bad leaders possess?
8. What do you believe are the top five characteristics of an effective leader?
9. What do you think the state of female leadership in Kurdistan is in?
10. What do females bring to the table as leaders?
11. Was there any particular experience(s) or event(s) that influenced your leadership style?
12. What can institutions, businesses, government etc., do to help females gain access to more leadership positions?
13. What Policies (local and US) support women as leaders?
14. What Policies (local and US) inhibit women as leaders?

Culture and Role Questions
1. How has your Culture influenced your leadership roles?
2. How has your Culture influenced your roles in society?
3. How has your Culture influenced your education?
4. In what ways has being Kurdish impacted you professionally?
5. In what ways has being a woman impacted your role in society?
6. What are some of your beliefs about Leadership in your culture?
7. Tell me about the barriers you have faced as a woman in Kurdistan?

Career/Mission Questions
1. What are the factors that influenced your career and leadership choice?
2. What experience, and/or training helped you advance as a leader?
3. What strategies did you use in facing and overcoming any barriers?
4. In what ways has being a woman impacted your professional experiences?
5. What advice do you have for women who aspire to leadership roles?

Extra if Applicable: What was it like being a woman in war? How does this experience contribute to leadership?
Appendix D

United States Interview Protocol

50-minute interview

You are being asked these questions in order to contribute to valuable feminist leadership research. Your thoughts and experiences are essential in understanding how women shift their roles in society to ones that are considered leadership roles. You have been chosen because you are considered a leader in your community. It is my hope that myself and those interested in meaningful cross-cultural leadership might learn from you, your culture, and your life experiences.

Demographic Questions
6. How old are you?
7. What is your job/role?
8. What is your level of education?
9. How long have you resided in _____________?

Extra if Applicable: What was it like being a woman in war? How does this experience contribute to leadership?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>New Protocol Questions</th>
<th>SRT Dimensions</th>
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<td>What leadership roles are being performed by Kurdish women?</td>
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<td>How does Kurdish culture influence your leadership roles?</td>
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<td>When thinking about feminist leadership in Kurdistan, what would you say are social processes that help women rise up in society?</td>
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<td>What norming forces exist in Kurdish culture that influence feminist leadership?</td>
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<td>How have you used leadership in your own life?</td>
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<td>How has being a woman impacted you in your role in society?</td>
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<td>What is the most important mission of feminist leadership in Kurdistan?</td>
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<td>How are the behaviors of Kurdish women changing?</td>
<td>Differences/Structure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>