

# The Development of a Women's Economy in North Syria

Jo Taylor

For just over one year, Jo Taylor has been working on the *Cooperative Economy in Rojava and Bakur* research project, analysing and translating reports relating to the emerging co-operative economy in the predominantly Kurdish regions of north Syria and east Turkey — known to their Kurdish populations as West and North Kurdistan, respectively. This emerging economy is part of a wider social and political shift towards a new democratic model of self-governance, a democracy without a state, from which the world has much to learn.

A radical experiment with direct democracy and women's liberation is now in its sixth year in the north of Syria — the region Kurdish people know as Rojava, literally meaning “the West” in Kurdish. The region has recently made the headlines in international news, primarily because women's battalions are fighting — and winning — against the self-styled Islamic State (IS). What rarely, if ever, makes the news though, is the radical political ideology that forms the backdrop to this phenomena — an ideology that is, in many ways, the polar opposite of IS.

Attempting to describe the new political system in Rojava is, in some ways, like trying to describe a new colour that falls outside of the colour spectrum we are used to. Understanding it necessitates a kind of paradigm shift. It's not just that the new political model is different — in many ways it is far older than representative government, patriarchy or the nation state — but the canvas these new colours are being painted onto is also very different from the fabric of life in Britain. In some ways, that's why it is working so well.

Capitalism never really reached North Syria. They went straight from feudalism — still very much present today — to National Socialism under Assad's Ba'ath Party. There are no multinational companies, no banks, no corporate mindset. There are some big landowners, yes, but in general there are peasants and a petite bourgeoisie who own small shops, raise livestock, or perhaps manage a small construction firm. Transactions are cash-based, and money is stored, one presumes, under the bed or in a hole in the garden.

Another big difference is that the family and community structures were never eroded in the way they have been in Britain. There is a very strong sense of social responsibility, ensuring that social obligations are generally met, elderly relatives cared for and generosity is expected to be repaid. Of course there are also dodgy characters, monopolising traders, people who cheat on one another and steal. It's no paradise, but there is much that we can learn from.

There are also downsides to the strong family and community structures — which can be quite burdensome, particularly for younger people — especially when it comes to the pressures and expectations on women. Women are expected to marry, usually at a young age, to keep the house clean and the dinner on the table, and keep away from the eyes of other men. Until the start of the revolution in 2012, women's educational levels were lower than men's. Women were unable to inherit property, and were often told who and when to marry.

The Women's Law has changed much of this. Created by the Women's Movement and enacted into law in November 2014, it forbids, among other things, forced marriage, under-age (under 18) marriage, the dowry, honour killings, domestic abuse, polygamy, and gives women equal inheritance rights. But how did the Women's Movement reach the stage where it was able to bring in such a law?

The answer is: forty years of the Kurdish Freedom Movement; but in order to understand the reasons for this, we need to delve a little into history.

At the end of World War I, the predominantly Kurdish-inhabited region was split into four with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and subsequent repartitioning of the Middle-East, primarily by British and French diplomats. North Kurdistan found itself in the newly-created republic of Turkey, while South Kurdistan wound up in the British Mandate of Iraq, and West Kurdistan became part of the French Mandate of Syria. East Kurdistan remained in Iran, where the British imposed Reza Khan as Prime Minister after helping to overthrow the Qajar Dynasty.

In all four of these new nation states, Kurds made up a sizeable minority — the largest being in Turkey, at an estimated 18-20% of the overall population — but had few, if any, cultural rights. In Turkey, for example, a state-imposed process of *Turkification* made it illegal to give children Kurdish names or to teach Kurdish in schools; all names of towns, villages, rivers and mountains were Turkified. People were even fined if caught speaking Kurdish on the street.

The rise of the Ba'ath Regime in Syria following a successful military coup in 1961 led to a similar situation there, which continued until the Rojava Revolution in July 2012. According to a Human Rights Watch report<sup>1</sup> from 1996, Kurds in Syria were not allowed to officially use the Kurdish language, register children with Kurdish names, start businesses that do not have Arabic names, build Kurdish private schools, or publish books and other materials in Kurdish. The country was now called the Arab Republic of Syria, influenced by fascist movements in Europe.

As the mass protests demanding revolution in Syria which had begun in 2011 spiralled into civil war, Kurdish people in the impoverished north of the country proclaimed their independence from the Assad regime. Since then, the society has seen a massive shift into a new kind of bottom up direct democracy based on a complex web of interconnected communes, committees, councils and co-operatives, who send rotating, mandated, recallable delegates — always a man and a woman, or two women if it's a women's structure — to the district, city and then canton levels, with decisions made at the level they affect. What they are aiming at, in fact, is a democracy without a state.

A new Social Contract<sup>2</sup> has been drawn up which gives a basis to the new system. There is a 40% quota for both men and women on all organising committees, with a male and female co-chair of every governing body. There are also quotas for Arabs and Christians, the two largest minorities in the region. In each municipality, for instance, the top three officers have to include one Kurd, one Arab and one Assyrian or Armenian Christian, and at least one of the three has to be a woman. In keeping with the spirit of pluralism on which this new system has been created, the official name for the region is now the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria — formally omitting the Kurdish name Rojava.

The ideology underpinning this paradigm shift has several important key principles. Aside from women's liberation and ecology, considered the two leading principles of the revolution (despite the fact that the ecology side of this is still not well developed), is the transition to a co-operative economy. Co-operatives, like the other structures, are autonomous, but connected to the wider system.

Co-operatives are open for anyone to join by buying a share. The price of these shares sound gigantic, often with figures like 15,000 or 20,000 SYP (Syrian pounds), but when we take into account the nosedive deflation of Syria's economy, \$1 USD is currently around 500 SYP and this is actually a little under a tenner. Some of the more adventurous industrial co-operatives, such as the recently announced bulgur wheat factory,<sup>3</sup> are up to \$100 USD to participate, but this is really the highest rate. Many projects announce that they are prioritising the lowest income families, with loans offered to help people afford the fee, which is then only paid back when the family can afford to pay it from their dividends. In short, the whole system is set up to help the people.

People buy shares in the co-operative and they elect the workers, which in some cases can be only two to four people for a small shop. The other co-operative members, or "participants", as

they are generally referred to, receive dividends from the profits and have a say in decisions. The number of shares is generally restricted in order to rein in monopolisation, currently a big problem in the region as traders take advantage of the economic siege imposed by Turkey. They also have all kinds of complex anti-monopolisation and corruption rules, such as prohibiting more than one person in a family to join the same co-operative, or especially the same organising committee.

Among the more than 200 co-operatives that have been founded since the start of the Rojava Revolution, approximately a quarter of these are women-only co-operatives, which form a cornerstone in the construction of a new *women's economy*. The idea behind this is that women have long been subservient to men (for 5,000 years now, according to the predominant narrative of the Kurdish Women's Movement<sup>4</sup>), and in order to redress this balance, they need to raise their skills and confidence by working autonomously from men. Consequently, women's bodies have the right to veto decisions made by the general "people's" structures (there are no autonomous men's structures, since they consider the world to have been dominated by men for the past 5,000 years).

A Women's Economic Committee has been set up to encourage and support women's co-operatives, often providing loans which only get repaid if and when the co-operative does well enough. It is not always easy to inspire women to join such projects, since women have been told for their entire lives that they are unable to do the work of men. The vast majority of women have never done any heavy manual labour, such as working in fields and building houses and have never been permitted to have a paid job. Now there are women's agricultural co-operatives, women's dairy, bakery, and consumer co-operatives — even a women's village is now being constructed, with women collectively building all of the houses and infrastructure themselves.

During her visit to some of the women's co-operatives in March 2016, Rahila Gupta asked Kongreya Star coordinator Delal Afrin why they felt the need to have separate women's co-operatives. She replied:<sup>5</sup>

With the rise of patriarchy, women lost these freedoms and were oppressed not just in this region but all over the world. Women are attempting to overcome the past. The rights of men and women should be the same regardless of the differences between them. The historic imbalance of power cannot simply be corrected by introducing quotas for women or the principle of co-presidentship shared by one man and one woman. The confidence that men and women bring to the job will be different unless the confidence of women is built up through the self-reliance, knowledge building, and training they acquire in the setting up of co-operatives. A society that is able to organise an economy where women are given productive roles is the sign of a mature and reflective society. When the economy is not in the control of men, women will be able to express themselves freely. The freedom of the woman will promote the freedom of the society and of the man. When both men and women become free we will achieve a free society.

Since returning from my own visit to the region, coincidentally at the same time as Rahila's, I have been pondering these ideas in relation to western feminist movements and the situation of women in the UK. The question I have been asking myself is: Do we have something to gain from an autonomous network of women in co-operatives?

At the Worker Co-operatives Weekend in May, 2017, I called for a women's meeting to discuss this situation. A large percentage of the women attending the gathering joined this meeting and shared their experiences of working in co-operatives as a woman. There was a strong feeling that a women's network would be useful, and so we have now set up a mailing list as the first step. The women's movement in Rojava is very keen to be in contact with other women's movements around the world, and I look forward to some future fruitful communications between networks of women who are organising in very different paradigms, often facing very similar problems, albeit it in different ways.

## The Author

Jo Taylor is Coordinator of the project *Cooperative Economy in Rojava and Bakur*, aiming to research and build solidarity with the co-operative movements of Rojava (North Syria/West Kurdistan) and Bakur (South Eastern Turkey/North Kurdistan). Jo has been involved in various co-operatives for more than 10 years.

## Notes

- 1 <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Syria.htm>
- 2 Full text of the Social Contract at <https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/charter-of-the-social-contract/>
- 3 <https://cooperativeeconomy.info/bulgur-factory-project-to-start-work-in-november/>
- 4 The political ideology of the Kurdish Freedom Movement and the Kurdish Women's Movement are taken from the political thought and writings of Abdullah Ocalan. His thought on the origins and affects of patriarchy are summed up in his essay *The Revolution is Female*: <http://www.freedom-for-ocalan.com/english/hintergrund/schriften/ilmanifesto.htm>
- 5 The full report can be found at <https://cooperativeeconomy.info/womens-co-operatives-in-rojava/>