

Article

Losing the *One*, Caring for the *All*: The Activism of the Peace Mothers in Turkey

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Abstract: This article focuses on the political activism of the Peace Mothers in Turkey, a group of Kurdish mothers whose children were either *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* (PKK) guerrillas or political dissidents during the conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK. The peace activism of the Mothers is a distinctive case that speaks to the tension between the domains of the familial and the political—a tension that appears in everyday discussions as well as in feminist literature. In this article, I suggest that the Peace Mothers’ struggle to bridge national and local peace-making ideals is a subtle effort to resolve that tension and to transform the realms of family and politics. The mobilization around “motherhood” aims at peace on the national scale, but has led to an unexpected form of activism in the Kurdish community, where the Mothers now mediate local family conflicts in the wake of war. While the Mothers’ activism has not been successful in achieving its main goal of securing a national peace settlement, I argue that it transforms both the political and the familial spheres to a significant extent. The Mothers conceive of motherhood broadly: as the state of being an agent with the capacity to connect to the All via a sense of loss and care. In engaging with feminist debates on motherhood, activism, and care, this article presents a novel framework for understanding the persistent boundary between the political and the familial and calls attention to the role of gendered politics and maternal activism in understudied local settings.

Keywords: politics of motherhood; peace-making; care and loss; war; local politics; Turkey

1. Introduction

The figure of the protesting mother has become prevalent in social movements across the world, from the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina (Taylor 1997; Bouvard 1994) to the Palestinian Mothers (Hammami 1997; Peteet 1991, 1997) and many others. Although each group pursues distinct political ends, human rights activism by mothers often has a common ground: the struggle against war and state violence as experienced by themselves or by their family members. However, scholars have found that maternal movements often dissipate before achieving their goals.

This article focuses on the maternal movement of the Peace Mothers against war and violence in Turkey, arguing that their activism cannot be reduced to simple “success” or “failure” in ending war or state violence. My analysis shows that they transform the realms of “the political” and “the familial” to a significant extent by integrating the language of loss and care into their efforts at peace-making—both in their struggle to end the Turkish–Kurdish conflict and in their work as mediators of local family conflicts. Through this language of care and loss, the Peace Mothers connect areas of conflict that, in Turkey, appear to be worlds apart: on the one hand, those of the Turkish public and state, and on the other, those of marginalized local Kurdish communities.

The Peace Mothers organization was formed in 1996 by a group of Kurdish mothers. They came together on behalf of their children, who were either guerrilla fighters with the armed organization PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, or Kurdistan Workers’ Party) or were imprisoned or killed for activism

around Kurdish rights. The founding of this group is rooted in the long history of war between the Turkish state and the PKK, going back to the beginning of the conflicts in 1984. Despite the lack of an official, and systematic tally of casualties in the conflict, human rights organizations estimate that the violent events of the 1990s in Turkey's Kurdistan region resulted in the death of more than 34,000 individuals; the military evacuation of more than 3400 Kurdish villages; and the extensive forced migration of Kurds across Turkey (see [Kurban 2012](#)). The capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan by Turkish authorities in 1999 sparked a new process for the Kurdish movement¹, which gradually shifted its political goal from "building a Kurdish nation-state" to "democracy and peace."

With this ideological and political shift, "peace" (along with "democracy" and "human rights") became one of the words most frequently uttered within the discourse of the Kurdish movement. This new context spurred the Peace Mothers to strive for a more active and visible role from 1999 onwards. The joining of the terms "peace" and "mothers" in the group's name draws on the common assumption that associates women, especially mothers, with peace and men with war. This powerful assumption would enable the Mothers to earn credibility in the eyes of the Turkish public, the Turkish state, and the Kurdish community. Their preference for identifying as a peace organization was also inspired by other "mother" movements around the globe, with which the Peace Mothers have aligned themselves in their quest for international solidarity and visibility.

Similar to other such movements across the globe, the Peace Mothers have mobilized in reaction to the intertwined processes of war, violence, human rights violations, and forced migration. In particular, they recently contested the belligerence and authoritarianism of the current government, AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, or Justice and Development Party). Since 2002, Turkey has witnessed major shifts under its rule. A peace process begun in 2013 and collapsed in 2015, leading to rising authoritarianism and an extended state of emergency.

In this process, the AKP's politics and discourses around motherhood and family have been prominent. The AKP has embarked on the task of creating a moral and political regime dictating the ideal woman and mother—and therefore, dictating who has the right to life and to give birth. Although motherhood has long been a contested site of governance in Turkish politics, the AKP's moral and political regime has put a new emphasis on motherhood as a "career", along with questioning the legality of abortion and equality between men and women. For instance, in a 2008 speech, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then the Prime Minister, urged women to have "at least 3 children," warning that there were "threats" that could eliminate the Turkish nation. In the perspective of the country's historical identification with the Turkish nation as a racial/cultural entity, this statement implied that Kurds, and especially Kurdish mothers, were one of these threats.

In this context, Turkish and Kurdish political language propagate two conflicting images of Kurdish mothers. Within the discourse of the Turkish state, the Peace Mothers have long been depicted as morally flawed "breeders of terrorists" and not as proper Turkish mothers who raise obedient citizens. In sharp contrast, the Kurdish movement portrays mothers as procreators of a revolution-to-be; as "matriarchs" of the family; and as the most visible, dramatic face of the suffering of Kurdish women. Noteworthy here is that each side defines mothers primarily through their intimate, and therefore fixed and unbreakable, familial attachments to the Kurdish movement. Yet I argue that these Mothers have developed important political roles in their own right through their specific approach to activism, challenging hegemonic ideas of the familial and the political in both dominant discourses.

The Peace Mothers' main and most high-profile goal is to ensure a peace settlement on the national scale between the Turkish state and the PKK. To do so, the Mothers organize nation-wide protests, rallies, and sit-ins to very publicly appeal to the Turkish state and the public for the acknowledgement of their pain. This activism intends to create a network of alliances based on shared feelings with

¹ The Kurdish movement encompasses the outlawed PKK and Kurdish political parties, and many activist groups and organizations.

“Turkish mothers” (specifically, the mothers of Turkish soldiers); and in general, to bridge the two communities of “Turks” and “Kurds”. The Peace Mothers’ other form of activism is a less widely visible one, in which they pursue communal peace through their presence in local mediation groups dedicated to solving intra-Kurdish conflicts. By crafting a nexus of Kurdish collectivity around loss and care, the Peace Mothers aim to build local alliances, particularly with family and kinship groups.

I contend that through such activism, the Peace Mothers recreate themselves as political activists without sacrificing their “familial” role of motherhood. Their motherly care and experiences of loss move from the familial domain into the political and become a means to connect with the All; their activism, in turn, renders them *political* and *communal* mothers. To put it differently, I explore the conditions through which Kurdish mothers, in their fight against the dominant politics of war and violence, become political agents. Meanwhile, this struggle provides them with the leverage to participate in local community politics where they are acknowledged as communal mothers and as political beings.

To clarify, I approach the political and familial as domains complementing each other in Kurdish and Turkish politics alike. In the Kurdish setting, for instance, most people have their first experiences with war within the household. The family, as a whole, together witnesses the torture, murder, and forced disappearance of parents, spouses, brothers, and sisters, or sees family members join the guerrilla. And bereaved family members react to the loss of kin by participating in political activities.

Kurdish mothers have become primary narrators within the political arena of such painful experiences and acts of resistance within their families. My findings demonstrate that mothers translate what are seen as “family matters” into political ones, and vice versa. For example, the white headscarf traditionally signifies women’s honor, and women used to throw down white headscarves to call for an end to Kurdish family conflicts. The Peace Mothers have transformed this familial symbol into a signifier of protest by using it in their anti-war actions. They thus go beyond the typical role of women in anticolonial conflicts: that of reproducing the subjugated nation. Instead, they transform gendered familial relations and political spaces. My analysis, therefore, extends our understanding of what aspects of familial experience women make political in their activism.

In what follows, I first discuss scholarly debates over whether and how motherhood can be a ground for politics. Second, in the background section, I first foreground the history of the Turkish state’s regulatory policies towards Kurdish women qua mothers. Such regulations have made motherhood a deeply politicized topic in the Kurdish region. Following that, I examine the context of the 1990s war and violence, in which the Peace Mothers have mobilized. Third, I explain my methods of participant observation and interviews, and explore how the Peace Mothers conceptualize motherhood. Lastly, I summarize the findings of my research, which contribute to a new understanding of motherhood and politics, by examining how the Mothers attempt to merge the boundaries of familial and political spaces as well as of national and local politics.

2. Feminist Debates on Activist Mothering and Care

Maternal movements have attracted widespread support and utilized a range of strategies, from public gatherings and performances to national and international campaigns (Bouvard 1994; Bejarano 2002; Naples 1992; Carreon and Moghadam 2015). Although activist mothers may claim a political and moral authority against oppressive and authoritarian power regimes, mothers often demobilize in the face of violent backlash from the state, or may simply lose momentum with time (Taylor 1997, 2003). Activist mothers in Turkey, as in other global examples of mother movements, have long encountered violent backlash, mostly from the Turkish state. They nevertheless continue to be a significant part of activism in Turkey. A number of scholars (e.g., Çağlayan 2007; Can 2014; Aslan 2007; Ahiska 2014a; Karaman 2016; Tambar 2017) have focused on the highly visible national political movement of mothers, mobilizing to ask for accountability for human rights violations and for the whereabouts of the disappeared detainees as well as to demand a peace settlement in the

Kurdish-Turkish conflict. Scholars have not, however, examined women's activism in other areas, such as their local communities.

In addressing this gap, this article builds on three areas of the literature on motherhood, activism, and care: (1) the tension between motherhood and political action; (2) the participation of mothers in revolutionary and nationalist movements; and (3) debates around the ethics of care.

Despite feminism's insistence that the personal is political, feminist theorists have often had difficulty reconciling the intertwined nature of familial roles and political action for maternal activists. In the long-standing controversy among feminists over the relationship between feminist action and motherhood, some feminist scholars (Dietz 1985; Phillips 1991) contend that acting on motherhood reproduces the mother's role as a caregiver, and that women must make political claims as *citizens* rather than as mothers (Dietz 1985; Phillips 1991). For these scholars, care is indelibly linked with women's invisible labor, exploitation, and oppression (for a detailed discussion see: Tronto 2001; Gilligan 1993; Poole and Isaacs 1997). From this perspective, women *as mothers* are not seen as eligible to take political action, nor can motherly care constitute the ground for a political collectivity.

Zerilli (2015) insightfully complicates the relationship between the personal and the political in a way helpful for this debate. She notes that the feminist slogan "the personal is political" does not indicate a *straightforward* association between the personal and political, but is a "transformative claim about how they ought to be seen" (Zerilli 2015, p. 3). Some feminist scholars (e.g., Roberts 1993, 1999; Collins 1994) working on Black women's mothering experiences have further demonstrated that motherhood is an inherently political category, and they approach Black motherhood as a politically dynamic and dialectical institution, a "catalyst for social activism" (Collins 1994, 2000, p. 176). Likewise, I discuss the ways in which the work of mothering (beyond its familial functions) can create a political ground, particularly under protracted conditions of violence when some mothers do not have the option of political participation based on "equal citizenship."

Despite the significance of these accounts of motherhood, most of these debates around the personal and political have originated in North America, where war does not define women's everyday lives. In war, the supposedly disparate realms of personal, familial, and political constantly intersect and constitute a zone of struggle in women's lives. These accounts also take the Western model of state and citizenship for granted and are not sufficient to explain the dynamics of conflict-ridden societies, where it is hard to assume a democratic or even stable state structure (for a detailed discussion, see (Ray and Korteweg 1999).

Given this, I now turn to the scholarship of revolutionary and nationalist movements. This scholarship offers us new ways of articulating the relationship between the political and the personal or the family, particularly under conditions of war. I identify two main frameworks in this literature. One framework looks at how women become the iconic representations of nationalist and revolutionary struggles, and women's reproductive potential is celebrated (Carreon and Moghadam 2015; De Volo 2001; Oprea 2016). For instance, the Palestinian liberation struggle has long mobilized mothers primarily in the name of reproducing the nation in resistance. In this setting, the movement views the loss of children as a "contribution to the nation" in the pursuit of resistance (Hammami 1997, p. 167). This view seems to elevate the status of mothers to "mothers of martyrs" (Peteet 1993). A second framework in this literature shows that rather than being mere nationalist icons, mothers might themselves become active members of revolutionary and nationalist movements through their activist struggles (e.g., Peteet 1997; Kaufman and Williams 2010; Åhäll 2012; Gentry 2009; De Alwis 1998).

Yet, even to describe mothers as "simultaneously" the *symbols* and the *active members* of nationalist and revolutionary movements is to point to the enduring tension between the political and familial domains. Most nationalist and revolutionary struggles, indeed, attempt to rearticulate this alleged political/familial division by mobilizing women *either* as mothers or as non-mothers. Nevertheless, many feminist scholars assert that once the revolution succeeds, newly formed nation-states generally restore patriarchy by quickly closing down the public space that allowed women to participate in the struggle, then removing women to the private space of the home (Mulinari 1998; Sharpley-Whiting 1999).

I contend that an analysis of the Mothers' intervention in the tension I have described between the political and the familial has the potential to shift the meanings attributed to two worlds often opposed within feminist theorization: politics and care. This takes us to the third area of scholarship, that of feminist ethics and politics around care. Many feminist theorists have long approached care and morality as the opposite of the political ideals of freedom and self-determination (for exceptions, see [Sevenhuijsen 1998](#); [Tronto 1993](#); [Larrabee 1993](#); [Held 1993](#)). [Tronto \(1993, p. 161\)](#) challenges this with her suggestion that "the practice of care is [already] also a political idea".

In her analysis of displaced women's lives in Colombia, [Lemaitre \(2016, p. 13\)](#) writes, "Strength gendered in the feminine is demonstrated by caretaking: the stronger the woman, the wider she casts the net of her caretaking to include in an expanding, concentric circle, beginning with herself and extending to her family, neighbors, and community". She notes that this gendered strength is central for woman's recovery and for the formation of her moral and political agency.

In a similar vein, I rethink the notion of care and care work through loss and displacement. I suggest that upon the loss of the initial object of maternal care—that is, *the child*—maternal care may reach beyond the familial domain. The Peace Mothers, through their experience of the loss of their children, transfer their familial and motherly care to a care and struggle for "the All"—people in general—in their activism. In this way, they aim to form a political collectivity bridging the conflicting political worlds of Turks and Kurds, as well as the political and familial realms.

By building on the existing literature on motherhood, care, and activism that gives an extensive account of mothers' presence in politics, I show the transformative effect that mothers' political activity can have on both familial and political contexts. My study brings together multiple areas of women's activism, as women turn motherly feelings of loss and care into the political means for peace-making. In this context, mothers' loss does not stand as "a contribution to the nation," the way revolutionary and resistance movements often imagine it to. Their loss is reconfigured in a way that turns their maternal care for the One (the child) into care for the All (see [Sevenhuijsen 1998](#)), as the Mothers recreate themselves as full-time activists, political and communal mothers. Also, [Ray and Korteweg \(1999\)](#) urge us, in their work on Third World women's movements, to study the local. This article, too, underscores the significance of studying distinct sites of activism, from the national to the local, where women might change gender and political relations without necessarily giving up traditional gender roles.

3. Background

3.1. *The Politics of Motherhood in Turkey*

This section traces the intersecting histories of motherhood and war first by analyzing the stakes of the political governance of motherhood in Turkey. As in other national and modernist projects, women became signifiers of modernization, carriers of modern cultural practices in Turkey ([Kandiyoti 1987](#)). Different reforms targeted women, ranging from education and monogamy to women's suffrage in the 1920s, yet these reforms remained limited in scope and did not bring about gender equality between men and women, particularly in areas such as marriage and divorce ([Kandiyoti 1987](#)). Scholars agree that these new policies simply created new sites of inequality and exclusion for women ([Kandiyoti 1987](#); [Sirman 2004](#)). The representation of the "new woman" as the citizen of the Turkish state has depended on women's embrace of their roles as mothers and wives of the nation, responsible for raising healthy and educated male citizens ([Kandiyoti 1987](#); [Tekeli 1982](#)). The ideal Turkish woman was represented as a "moral mother," who can benefit from the modernization project insofar as her life is circumscribed by the codes of morality embedded into the new modern society.

Some scholars further suggest that the reforms of the Turkish modernization process never went beyond city centers, and that women living in rural areas (such as Kurdish women) were left out in this project of modernization ([Arat 1997](#)). As [Çağlayan \(2008, p. 8\)](#) notes, for decades, Kurdish women have been invisible, represented as "rural" and/or "Eastern" women in official discourses and within the social science literature in Turkey—apparently marginal subjects of little interest to

modernizers. But the hidden side of modernization involved the implementation of extensive new political technologies to assimilate different ethnic and religious communities into the new national Turkish identity, including by forcing women into the image of ideal motherhood. The representations of Kurdish women as “rural” and “non-modern” serve to justify the policies that the Turkish state employed to severely regulate the activities (and especially mothering practices) of Kurdish women and to assimilate Kurds into Turkishness.

Educational institutions played an early role in the effort to assimilate Kurdish women into idealized Turkish motherhood. The Elazığ Girls’ Institute was a major example of the boarding schools established in the late 1940s in the Dersim region², a non-Turkish and non-Sunni area devastated by military operations by the Turkish state. Educating Kurdish girls to raise obedient Turkish-speaking future generations proved to be a vital part of a larger national project to Turkify the Kurds through the “penetrat[ing of] the village by ‘mothers’ who spoke Turkish” (Türkyılmaz 2001, p. 118). Türkyılmaz (2016, p. 169), in reference to the Elazığ Girls’ Institute, describes boarding schools as a “symbolically violent project of assimilation and maternal colonialism”. More recently, since the 1990s, boarding schools have been instrumental in policing Kurdish youth and attempting to prevent resistance to the state (Işık and Arslan 2012).

In times of conflict, the Turkish state has consistently pursued biopolitical projects aimed at Kurdish women. This has included during the recent intensification of conflict in the 1990s. For instance, the Multi-Purpose Social Centers (ÇATOM in Turkish), initiated by the Turkish state in the Kurdish region in 1995, had a similar aim of “educating” women between the ages of 14–50 about health, social and cultural education, motherhood, and family planning (Kutluata 2003, pp. 68–69). These women’s centers have created controversy because many Kurdish women view these centers not as places of education, but as sources of cultural and linguistic assimilation (Çağlayan 2013). These examples illustrate that in state politics, Kurdish mothers are not seen as legitimate mothers of the nation unless they act as the breeders and carriers of Turkish national culture. Such biopolitical projects targeting Kurdish women mean that the political mobilization of Kurdish mothers cannot be properly understood without grappling with the assimilation and violence against Kurds and particularly Kurdish women.

3.2. *The Politics of War and Violence in the 1990s*

Since the beginning of the war between the Turkish state and the PKK in 1984, the above-mentioned techniques for assimilating Kurdish populations have occurred in concert with more direct forms of violence against Kurdish women, including arbitrary detention; sexual and gender-based violence and torture (Keskin 2006); and forced migration (Ayata and Yüксеker 2005; Üstündağ 2005; Darıcı 2011; Çelik 2005).

The intensification of clashes between the Turkish military forces and the PKK in the 1990s marked a turning point in state policies towards Kurds, as the Turkish army implemented various “security measures” in the Kurdish region (Ayata 2011, p. 70). Extra-judicial killings and the use of paramilitary forces were widespread (Göral et al. 2013). After the 1990s, state authorities further developed and deployed the language of terrorism to justify the use of such military and security measures against the Kurds (Ayata 2011, p. 70). Later on, the categories of “terrorist” and “supporter of terrorists”, both combatants and civilians, become blurred in important ways, and the terrorism label is expanded to include those beyond armed combatants.

² The history of the Dersim province—a very mountainous region located in eastern central Turkey—was marked by many rebellions and resistance movements from the Ottoman period to the Turkish nation-state period. At the time of the nation-state formation in Turkey, Dersim became the target of intensive military operations in 1937–1938, known as the Dersim genocide, which were accompanied by a series of assimilationist policies implemented in the region. See also the works of Üngör 2008; Beşikçi 1990; Van Bruinessen 1994; Ayata and Hakyemez 2013; Watts 2000.

Ayata (2011, p. 73) summarizes the 1990s' military and "national security" strategies as follows: (1) the capture and killing of terrorists and (2) the equivalent treatment of those who provide moral and material support for terrorist groups. One of the central methods the Turkish army has used to interfere with the moral and material support of the PKK is "a strategy of depopulation" (Ayata 2011, p. 73). The state officially referred to this depopulation as "terror migration" rather than forced migration, with the being PKK framed as the main perpetrator of violence. The state's depopulation strategy resulted in the destruction and evacuation of approximately 3428 villages and hamlets in the region (Ayata 2011; Kurban 2012). Between one and four million Kurds were forced to leave their villages and migrate to urban centers in the Kurdish region or to cities in the Western part of Turkey such as Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara (Ayata 2011; Müller and Sharon 2007). The Turkish state used displacement to suppress the Kurdish community's politicization; to fragment and weaken the movement, which was originally located in Turkey's Kurdistan; and to forcefully assimilate Kurds into Turkish society by cutting their ties with their homes and pasts.

However, displacement did not succeed in preventing Kurdish political mobilization. On the contrary, it shifted the locus of the conflicts from remote rural areas to urban centers in Turkey. In these cities, Kurds found new political opportunities and spaces where they could realize their political and cultural goals (Ayata and Yüксеker 2005). The mobility of Kurds in the context of war, migration, and displacement has deeply affected both Turkey's "Kurdish issue" (Gambetti and Jongerden 2015, p. 1) and the terrorism discourse used by the state. In the words of Gambetti and Jongerden (2015, p. 1), the "Kurdish issue" in Turkey is "no longer one of identity and of the colonization of a particular region": indeed, it is a question of democratization and peace-building for Turkey and even for the whole Middle East.

In sum, migration and displacement in the wake of the 1990s war and attendant violence constituted the context within which Kurdish mothers have politically mobilized across Turkey and the Kurdish region. As their children and husbands joined the guerrillas, with many of them suffering extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances, Kurdish mothers have witnessed these intersecting processes of war and forced migration. Beyond witnessing violence, they meanwhile become targets of state violence and discrimination themselves. This sequence happens in particular through the "terrorist" label, which renders Kurdish IDPs (internally displaced people) "not [as] *political subjects*, but rather [as] *political suspects* in the eyes of the state and the larger Turkish society" (Ayata 2011, p. 86). In the analysis of my findings, I will further discuss this labeling of the Kurdish mothers as "terrorists" or "supporters of terrorism"; first I will explain how I studied mothers' political mobilization using life-story interviews and participant observation.

4. Research Setting and Methodological Considerations

This research focuses on the Peace Mothers' political actions, public speeches, and narrations of their life stories. The first phase of my fieldwork took place in Istanbul from 2012 to 2013; the second in Diyarbakır (known as *Amed* in Kurdish and also historically as *Diyarbakir*) from 2013 to 2014. I also conducted follow-up observations and interviews in 2015 and 2016. Istanbul and Diyarbakır are the two largest cities known for receiving victims of forced migration that started with the intensifying conflict of the 1990s. Each city has different political dynamics. Unlike the Kurdish city of Diyarbakır, encounters and interactions between Turks and Kurds are frequent in Istanbul; for this reason, the Peace Mothers there mainly discussed how mothers could work towards making a peace settlement between "Turks" and "Kurds." Meanwhile, in Diyarbakır, mothers played a distinctive role in Kurdish local politics. Diyarbakır is significant for the mobilization of the Peace Mothers particularly because of the city's symbolic and political meaning for the Kurdish resistance and politics. The city, viewed as the capital of Kurdistan and the "castle of resurrection" (Şengül 2013, p. 35), has long been the center of demonstrations, street protests, and mass mobilizations of Kurds. Lately, it has become home to many political organizations, parties, and civil society/human and women's rights organizations.

As I stated in the introduction, the Peace Mothers Organization was first established in 1996 by the mothers of PKK guerrillas. There are also mothers of individuals who have died or gone missing during the war in the region. The Peace Mothers began larger-scale activities in 1999 after the capture of Abdullah Öcalan (the leader of the Kurdish movement), and since then, they became known for their highly visible activism, such as sit-ins and marches to the capital.

I conducted interviews with 30 Peace Mothers (17 in Istanbul and 13 in Diyarbakır), ranging in age from 40 to 77. Almost all of the mothers I interviewed are native Kurdish speakers (they mostly speak *Kurmanji* Kurdish) and learned Turkish later in their lives. Most of them had moved to the big cities as a result of forced migration in the 1990s. To identify potential participants, I first used my personal connections from feminist groups and attended the meetings at the Peace Mothers' offices, then relied on the snowball technique to expand the number of the interviewees.³ In the interviews, I employed a life-story interview method, asking open-ended questions to guide the participants and clarify their thoughts. Most accounts addressed where and when they born; their identity; everyday life in their birthplace; family relations; and the political affiliations of family members. These childhood memories were generally followed by stories of war, violence and migration experienced on a collective level, including stories of marginalization and anti-Kurdish discrimination.

In gaining access to the Peace Mothers and conducting interviews with them, I encountered simultaneously two opposing reactions: desire and reluctance to speak. Many Peace Mothers were concerned about not being heard or understood by others, although they were continuously telling their stories in public spaces such as demonstrations and press releases. The act of telling their story was politically significant, since their goal was to circulate their unheard, silenced, marginalized stories among different publics. This included the desire to relate not just their own stories, but those of others. In this sense, many Mothers were willing to talk to me about their past and present experiences, since such personal stories on the part of the Peace Mothers contributed to the Kurds' collective story of war, violence, and struggle. For them, the act of narrating their experiences is a quest for recognition, as well as a plea for action to collectivize their resistance around peace. The Mothers also expressed their weariness and exhaustion with being in the position of narrator. They complained about being a "topic of interest" among several national political, human rights and women's groups. This posed a challenge for me to convince them to pursue my fieldwork. They often questioned me about what I was going to do with their stories, and they had a sense of suspicion, as they do not really know what people do with their collected stories.

Although it took a while for me to establish a trust relationship, in most instances I was welcomed warmly by the Mothers. For many of them, I was a feminist, researcher, and an academic who became part of their political and academic networks. In some occasions, language created a barrier between the Mothers and me, because most of them speak *Kurmanji* Kurdish and only a little Turkish, whereas my understanding and speaking of Kurdish is limited. In those moments, I was treated as a complete outsider, as "Turkish," or as a "Turkish academic." Despite being perceived as an outsider, I was still being treated as someone who would share their stories of loss and demands for peace with the international public.

In addition to the interviews, I drew on methods of participant observation. Throughout my research, I divided my time between the Peace Mothers' offices, homes, and political events. Besides the weekly Saturday Mothers sit-ins⁴, the Peace Mothers engage in diverse activities including: street protests; trips to the parliament in Ankara; meetings with other political groups; conferences; hunger

³ To protect participant confidentiality, I use pseudonyms throughout the article.

⁴ The series of protests known as the Saturday Mothers sit-ins originally began in 1995 in Istanbul (Can 2014; Ahuska 2014a) as gatherings repeated every Saturday to protest political disappearances and killings. In Istanbul, the Saturday Mothers sit-ins take place weekly at noon in Taksim Square, one of main squares of the city. Similar sit-ins take place in cities across the Kurdish region. A weekly sit-in action started in Diyarbakır in 2008 in a park called Koşuyolu.

strikes for the release of political prisoners; and local dispute resolution processes. I did not tape-record daily conversations and meetings at these events, instead taking detailed notes immediately afterwards.

I found that the Mothers' life stories often shared important turning points: memories of state violence and collective witnessing; displacement and migration; children joining the guerrillas, and/or the loss or imprisonment of children; and the process of becoming an activist. The following sections explore these life stories in terms of how the Peace Mothers have become "communal" and political mothers, and how their motherly care and loss turn into a collective loss and care for the All.

5. Discussion

5.1. *Beyond the Loss of a Child: An Alternative Politics of Loss and Mourning*

The Peace Mothers' interviews connect many different forms of loss—not just the loss of a child, but also the loss of their Kurdish identity and language. This shows that their mobilization depends on many factors. In particular, forced migration played a significant role. As discussed in the background section, much of the forced displacement of Kurds occurred during the late 1980s and 1990s, when the military, reacting to the emerging PKK, impelled many rural Kurdish families to migrate to urban centers (Ayata and Yüксеker 2005). Particularly in large cities outside the Kurdish region, displaced Kurdish mothers encountered both racism and sexism in various forms. They publicly circulated stories of loss and violence, addressing a Turkish audience that they saw as silent about the war and the Turkish state's violations of Kurdish women's rights.

The interview I conducted with a Peace Mother named Berivan (58) exemplifies the intersecting experiences of loss and violence that Kurdish mothers faced in the wake of forced migration. Berivan is an active member of the Istanbul Peace Mothers Organization. She lost her sons in the conflict in the early 1990s. When I asked her to talk about her life story, she began by describing her experience of forced migration as a "disaster." Her village was burnt down by the Turkish military, after which she had to migrate to Istanbul. Like almost all the Mothers with whom I spoke, she experienced the displacement process as a total loss—a loss of home, language, and identity. As she put it:

When we came here, we were not even able to speak Turkish. We had no language and we were forced to live in a different world. I asked myself, even though our identities were the same and we had the same identification cards, why were we so different? I was a Kurd, but I again asked myself why I did not have an identity and why I could not speak Turkish. *We lost our identities and we lost our language. In the world, each language has an identity. Why don't we have an identity? We want our identity back and we want peace.* [Emphases added]

In the chaotic environment of the cosmopolitan city, Berivan felt lost in many ways. She communicated her acutely felt need to learn Turkish (which she repeatedly stressed was difficult for her, at the age of 45) and also to be part of a collective Kurdish identity in what appeared to be a totally foreign world. Her engagement with the peace movement, then, meant more than a demand for a peace settlement; she wanted to claim her identity and be able to speak her native language in everyday life.

Another Peace Mother, Emine (60), had lived in Mardin (at the border of Turkey and Syria) before being forced to migrate to Diyarbakır in 1993. Gendarmes repeatedly raided her home, interrogating her about her husband's presumed political affiliations, and detained her husband at the local gendarmerie station on one occasion. Her entire family was stigmatized by the gendarmerie due to their perceived connections with the PKK. Much like Berivan, Emine cried out during her interview: "Enough! What is my sin? What did we [Kurds] do? Our only fault is being Kurds. [Pause.] I lost my family; I lost everything: my life, and also my identity." When women's family members were imprisoned, tortured, disappeared, or killed, as in the case of Emine's husband, many Mothers described a sense of enclosure, stating that they felt imprisoned themselves.

The Mothers share their stories not only in interviews, but publicly, through protests, conferences and press releases. Their audiences range from the general Turkish public to the state and the

international community. Individual stories of loss thus create a common language of loss and suffering—one of the foundational elements of their activism. Although the language of loss can easily create a victim positionality, in the narratives of the Peace Mothers, each statement of displacement begins as a story of loss and pain, but ends in the tone of rebellion and resistance. This includes women’s daily resistance in protecting family members against war, violence, and city life, including resisting police and the military, remaining silent during interrogations, and refusing to cry. The process of war and forced migration turns women into resistant, resilient beings and enables mothers to “go beyond the walls of home” (in the words of one Peace Mother). Still, the Mothers have an ambivalent relationship with the family, as they maintain their familial identity while striving to transform family relations and conflicts through their activism. They thereby open up a ground for challenging the meanings attached to their motherhood particularly within hegemonic Turkish politics.

5.2. Political Discourses around Motherhood

In this section, I examine the ways in which the Peace Mothers strive to expand the boundaries of Turkish politics by confronting the dominant discourse of terrorism⁵ through the language of loss and pain. In mainstream political discourse, the Peace Mothers are usually seen as “instruments” of the PKK. Their language of loss and pain does not appear authentic and pure; it is instead glossed as “political rhetoric.” This involves questions of whose motherhood and loss is counted as legitimate in the context of the historical policing of Kurdish motherhood.

As [Aslan \(2008, p. 13\)](#) observes, every encounter between the Peace Mothers and the Turkish state and/or public calls into question the legitimacy of Kurdish mothers in general. The Turkish state’s discourse around Kurdish “terrorism” maintains a foundational dichotomy between “proper” motherhood and “pseudo” motherhood ([Aslan 2008, p. 13](#)). “Proper” mothers are the mothers of soldiers, and thus procreators of the mechanism of war; instructors in hegemonic discourses; and protectors of the state’s morality and legitimacy (see [Aslan 2007](#); [Çağlayan 2007](#); [Bayraktar 2011](#); [Şentürk 2012](#)). In contrast, Kurdish mothers are under suspicion of not being real mothers, as they could be aiding and abetting “terrorism.”

One of the Peace Mothers from Diyarbakır, Pervin (56), explained the divisions constructed among mothers as follows:

We are the real Peace Mothers, but the [Turkish] state calls us the pseudo Peace Mothers. But they don’t know what we’ve experienced in this struggle We are real Peace Mothers; we are real mothers. A mother of a soldier whose son was killed in the war should come [to me] so I can embrace her. Then this dirty war would have to end We always call on all the mothers of soldiers, but the state doesn’t allow us to reach out to them.

Pervin’s emphasis on being real Peace Mothers shows the extent to which the state questions their status as mothers. The state’s deployment of police and soldiers against the Peace Mothers when they attempted to contact the mothers of fallen soldiers (which Pervin alludes to above) shows that any encounter between “Turkish” and “Kurdish” mothers is perceived as a threat to the key dichotomies that the state uses to justify war.

The alleged division between “pseudo mothers” (the mothers of guerrillas) and “real mothers” (the mothers of soldiers) originates from the distinction between soldiers and guerrillas as fundamentally different actors. Fatma (77), from the Istanbul Peace Mothers, objects to this distinction:

All the dying children, on both the Turkish and Kurdish sides, are our children. They went to the same schools; they’ve taken the same courses. If they become guerrillas, they have to

⁵ In Turkey, the typical referent of “terrorism” is the PKK. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, many Kurdish politicians and activists have been prosecuted on terrorism charges.

kill soldiers. And similarly, if they're taken by the military, they have to kill guerillas. We as mothers want to create a peaceful space between them.

Peace Mothers frequently invoke (often idealized) depictions of peaceful coexistence among "Kurds" and "Turks". Here, Fatma points to two dichotomous positions in the war: "soldier" and "guerrilla". But she intentionally equates the actions of soldiers with those of guerillas: both have to kill. Fatma's words reject the state's fundamental distinction between soldiers and guerillas based on the designations of (il)legality in which guerillas' actions are categorized as "terrorism". The Mothers' discourse seeks instead to unify Kurdish and Turkish mothers around the collective suffering experienced with the loss of a child.

"Mothers' tears have no color" is among the Peace Mothers' most common slogans. The slogan announces the Mothers' wish to build a collectivity around their loss, in which motherhood and the loss of a child is connected to the political ideal of peace-making. The slogan verbalizes the Peace Mothers' intention to bond with other women from different ethnic backgrounds, especially Turkish mothers, and involve them in peace activism.

Even as the Turkish state denies moral authority to the Peace Mothers (fraught with the state's power to target and punish Mothers for their political activity by invoking the discourse of terrorism), the Mothers still insist on their legitimacy. Their confrontations with the state, in turn, endow them with respect among Kurds. In the following section, I examine how the most visible protest symbol of the Peace Mothers, the white headscarf, moved from being part of a traditional gesture of mediation to a means of protest. In tracing that transformation, I show that the struggle of the Peace Mothers goes beyond the ideal of a peace settlement at national scale. It includes changing political and familial relations.

5.3. Mediating War and Local Conflicts through the White Headscarf

In the Kurdish community, mothers are traditionally seen as having a peacemaking role in tribal conflicts, blood feuds, and family fights. Many local conflicts and blood feuds go back to the establishment of the Turkish nation-state, originating (as the Peace Mothers narrated) in disagreements over land, honor-related issues, and abductions of women. Since the 1990s, new conflicts among Kurds have started as a result of the war between state military forces and the PKK. Starting in the 2000s, many families began demanding in court that the land from which they were displaced be returned to them (Jongerden 2001, 2007). However, the courts had already redistributed the lands inequitably and denied most claims. The resulting disputes over land ownership have led to recent blood feuds.

Interestingly, almost all the Mothers I interviewed brought up the traditional peace-making role of women in the Kurdish region. For example, Nebahat (66) described Kurdish women's roles in such disputes:

In the past, in order to stop the blood, women were involved in stopping fights between families. They would throw their white headscarves to the ground to stop the tribal and family conflicts. We even did this against state [military] operations; when the first military operations against the PKK started, we threw our headscarves to the ground to stop war. *The white scarf was our honor*, and whenever we threw it to the ground, that conflict would stop [emphasis added].

Here and in many other stories, there is a fixed division between men, portrayed as the perpetrators and targets of violence, and women, either primary witnesses of violence and/or mediators. I heard many stories in which women became involved in conflicts at the last moment and, through the act of throwing a white headscarf (*beyaz tülbent* or *laçık*) onto the ground, assumed the power to end violence among groups. Considering that we do not have knowledge about the "actual" effect of the white headscarf in the mediation of local conflicts, I am interested in the symbolic function of the stories circulating about the white headscarf, including the description of the headscarf as constituting "women's honor".

In general, honor operates as a regulatory mechanism shaping relations among men and women (including the familial realm). The spread of war in the early 1990s brought new meanings to the notion of honor in the Kurdish region. A sense of collective honor grounded in political affiliations has now come to outweigh familial honor in many instances, since war constantly threatens the “collective honor of the Kurdish people” (Sirman 2013, p. 9).

A change in the use of the white headscarf has taken place at the same time of this change in the meaning of honor. The Peace Mothers refigure the traditional use of the white headscarf by reappropriating it as a gesture of making peace, not just intervening in tribal conflicts (Can 2014; Çağlayan 2007). For example, in 2015, a group of Peace Mothers from Mardin (a city in the Kurdish region) organized a march to the office of the Governor of Mardin to demand an end to escalating conflict between state forces and Kurds. The Mothers marched on the Governor’s office chanting “no to war, peace right now!” but were quickly stopped by the police. The Mothers responded by holding a sit-in, ending the protest by throwing their scarves on the ground. In their press release on the occasion, one Peace Mother stated: “We have nothing but the white headscarf in our hands representing peace.”⁶

There have been three main effects of the white headscarf’s appearance in the Peace Mothers activism. First, men (not just women activists) often mention the white headscarf in narratives about mediation. This shows that many men and women in the local context accept stories about the white headscarf and with them, the legitimacy of Kurdish women’s role as mediators. Second, as the white headscarf has gained a political meaning through its use by the Peace Mothers, the idea of honor attached to it has gone from family honor to the collective honor of the Kurds. White headscarf protests make the concept of honor part of the political domain, as the white headscarf travels from its alleged original setting (the local and familial context) into the realm of activism. Third, narratives about the white headscarf reveal intersections between stories about two forms of violence that may initially seem dissimilar: state violence and local family conflict. I now turn to the link the Peace Mothers make between different forms of conflict through their participation in local peace commissions.

5.4. Peace Commissions: A Collectivity around Mourning and Loss

On a humid summer day in 2013, I attended the 236th sit-in of the Saturday Mothers in Diyarbakır.⁷ Every Saturday, around 40 women (primarily from the Peace Mothers Organization) come together in one of Diyarbakır’s main public parks, Koşuyolu Park. They sit on the ground, wearing white headscarves and clutching framed photos of their missing or dead children. That day, the sit-in was cut short. The women seemed to be waiting for something. When I approached one of them to find out why they had ended the event so abruptly, she told me in Kurdish that they were about to go to Hazro (a small town close to Diyarbakır) where a violent clash between two families had taken place. She explained that the Peace Mothers had to go there immediately to mediate a dispute that had broken out between the warring families.

Later, I searched through newspaper articles and talked to other Peace Mothers to learn what had happened in Hazro that day. One of the Mothers eventually told me that they were too late. When they arrived at the village, they learned that one of the families had already killed men, women, and children from the other family. One newspaper headline about the event read: “On the road to peace, Diyarbakır left bloody.”⁸ The headline referred to both the then-nascent process of reconciliation⁹ between the Turkish state and the PKK, as well as the simultaneous rise in unexpected, shocking conflicts among families.

⁶ <https://www.haberler.com/kadinlarin-valilige-beyaz-tulbent-asmagina-polis-7646705-haberi/> (accessed on 5 March 2018).

⁷ For more info on the Saturday Mothers sit-ins, see also footnote 4.

⁸ <http://www.demokrathaber.net/m/guncel/baris-yolunda-diyarbakir-kana-bulandi-h21973.html> (accessed on 5 January 2016).

⁹ The reconciliation process between the Turkish state and the PKK started in the spring of 2013 after the public reading of the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan’s letter at the celebrations of the Newroz holiday. The letter openly initiated a peace process and declared a new phase in which PKK guerrillas would withdraw from the borders of Turkey.

While family and tribal conflicts have a long history in the Kurdish region and cannot be identified as a mere extension of the war between the state and the PKK, I observed that many Mothers do draw connections between the war and the seemingly newly emergent local disputes. This event shows how these elderly Kurdish women do not just pursue a national peace settlement, but also take up a peace-making role locally, through their participation in local mediation groups (referred to by the Mothers as peace commissions or mediation commissions¹⁰).

Local mediation groups have a long history in the Kurdish region (Van Bruinessen 1992; Taş 2013a, 2013b), as some ongoing conflicts are traceable to the Ottoman era. Local mediation groups were once comprised exclusively of male tribal leaders, local authorities, and religious figures called *seydas*. Conflicts mostly occurred between men, and only men were viewed as parties of mediation. That is, women could not be part of traditional mediation groups, able to act only by using the white headscarf to call for an end to the dispute.

What differentiates traditional from more recent mediation groups is that, while the former groups are put together by male leaders (tribal and religious leaders, as well as elder men), the latter are organized, in large part, by the Kurdish movement. Such commissions do not have a fixed structure or set of members, and are formed based on necessity when one of the parties of the conflict asks for the help of the Kurdish movement. Many Peace Mothers mentioned that in these conflict situations, people prefer to call for the help of the mediation groups rather than police or the military. This is in part because of the general deep distrust of the state and the law—one of the enduring effects of war in the region.

According to the Peace Mothers' narratives, their groups began to actively participate in dispute mediation starting around the mid-2000s. I suggest that the Mothers were able to join mediation groups thanks to the political leverage and respectability they have gained in local Kurdish politics through their national-level peace activism since 1999. They have now come to play an essential role in organizing and mobilizing peace commissions. Meryem (67), from the Diyarbakır Peace Mothers, explains this process of local mediation around various family disputes:

For us, the Peace Mothers Organization doesn't only target the issue between Turks and Kurds. For instance, we're also interested in blood feuds. . . . We try to mediate between families. We do everything for peace. In the case of abduction [the kidnapping of a girl or woman], we talk to the girl, and we talk to the father of the girl to convince them to negotiate.

The Peace Mothers' participation in mediation of local disputes is not a highly visible part of their activism; they are much more visible through their protests and sit-ins calling for a peace settlement. Although these two activities seem disparate, the Peace Mothers see them as part of the larger agenda of making (and keeping) peace.

In addition, because local conflicts are rooted in the tensions of patriarchal families, each attempt to mediate conflict involves transforming existing family relations and power dynamics. For the Kurdish movement, family is fraught: it is simultaneously a locus for political mobilization (through family allegiances) and a hotbed of the "feudal values" that the movement opposes (for an example, see Darıcı 2011; Neyzi and Darıcı 2015). The Peace Mothers often invoke a sense of communal "responsibility" transcending the family order and responsibilities to kin. Kurds' shared experience of loss and war opens up a space for creating a collective memory, and thus a potential political unity, within the Kurdish community. It is this shared experience that the Peace Mothers emphasize in trying to mediate conflicts.

The Peace Mothers combine their own experience of loss as mothers with their activist credibility in order to give weight to this narrative. Kurds in the context of the Turkish state-PKK war have developed a moral economy around death, as Özsoy (2010) points out. Within this moral economy

¹⁰ See Barrett and Barrett 2004; Taş 2013a, 2013b for further literature on dispute resolution.

around death, social status accrues to those who have experienced loss—with a particular status reserved for mothers who have lost children in the conflict. “More losses” in the immediate family, [Özsoy \(2010\)](#) demonstrates, mean more respect. Yet I find that the Mothers’ role in local politics cannot be understood solely in terms of their special status as “mothers with losses”. The Peace Mothers gain respect among Kurds to the extent to which they commit their lives to activism and confronting the Turkish state. They refer extensively to this political experience, along with their own experience of loss, as a way of convincing warring families to engage in peace commissions.

Here I will provide an example of one such mediation process. I asked Cevher of the Diyarbakır Peace Mothers how the group convinced warring families to negotiate and end disputes. She responded with the story of a dispute between two families in Lice (in Diyarbakır province). The dispute took place just before the municipal elections of March 2014, a time when emphasis on Kurdish unity was strong due to the upcoming elections. The hostility between the two related families began with one family’s unlawful occupation of the other’s land. Cevher described the mediation process in this way:

The state has already been killing us for years. We’re struggling against the state system; we’ve been fighting against hostilities for so long. I said to the family, “You are a family.” There were two people from the family in conflict. One was named Mevlüt, the other Ahmet. I said to Mevlüt, “Look, if I get up and slap Ahmet, I’m sure that you’ll jump up and try to stop me. You don’t want harm to come to him; he’s your blood. Lots of people have already died on these lands, at these borders. How can you kill each other just for a piece of land?” This really affects me as a mother. [Her voice grows louder.]

Ahmet and Mevlüt are paternal cousins. Their families had been engaged in a land disagreement for around 50 years. Cevher said that since the two men were “real” brothers (that is, they shared kin ties), they should be allies, not enemies. In this portrayal, the state appears as the only legitimate enemy; Kurds cannot be enemies. Another Peace Mother from Diyarbakır, Ayşe, puts it this way: “When Kurdish guerillas are fighting for common goals with the ideal of making peace, it becomes meaningless to have a conflict over a piece of land”.

These statements illustrate the extent to which the discourse of mediation is dominated by comparisons between loss in war and loss in local family conflicts. Both result in the loss of land, social status, and loved ones; the fragmentation of family ties; and a threat to the unified body politic of the Kurdish community. Such comparisons function to convince families to end disputes by underlining the “insignificance” of losing land in local disputes compared to loss in war. The Peace Mothers thus reconcile politics with everyday kinship, political discourse with personal and collective stories.

But such bridges between seemingly disparate fields are not always easy to build, and the Mothers’ powers of persuasion often depend significantly on the warring families’ political standpoints. Mediation appears to be more easily implemented with pro-PKK families. Such families respect not necessarily the institution of motherhood in general, but Kurdish mothers’ special relationship to their children in the PKK. For families who support the Turkish state, however, the Peace Mothers’ have no special respect other than that accorded to community elders and mothers. In the next section, I will discuss how the Peace Mothers work to become communal mothers, evoking the language of care to resolve disagreements.

5.5. Caring for the “All,” from Local to National Scales

I suggest that the Peace Mothers reach beyond an individualist, hierarchical, and familial understanding of motherhood. They turn the “primary” relationship of care between the mother and the *one*—that is, the child—into a struggle for the All, and therefore a ground for peace activism (see [Sevenhuijsen 1998](#), p. 18; [Ahiska 2014b](#)). The Mothers deploy a discourse of care in which caring for the community comes prior to caring for the family. Indeed, this discourse transforms the primary attachment between mother and child into a collective political attachment. This elevates

motherhood to a communal and political state, as the words of Gülizar (62) from the Istanbul Peace Mothers demonstrate:

If today I make a claim in order to bring about the return of only my own child, I cannot guarantee that other children will not go to the mountains to fight. Because your children are going to struggle for my children and my children for others, all of our children's fates are dependent on each other. If we seek the return of all [guerrilla] children, if we want to guarantee our children's future, the war has to end.

In Gülizar's statement, there is no conflict between individual and collective demands or memories. One mother's story becomes everyone's story, her children become the children of others, and the Peace Mothers become the mothers of all children involved in the conflict, irrespective of ethnic, religious, or class divisions. This is communal and political mothering. Borrowing Collins' term, Peteet (1997, p. 123) calls this form of mothering "other mothering." Through other mothering, Peteet says that Palestinian mothers recreated a "gendered way of relating to the nation and the state, one they insisted recognized different ways of being in the polity as compatible with equality".

In addition to implying a different way of existing in the polity, the Peace Mothers' claims of *other mothering* and becoming communal mothers are part of an attempt to collectivize individual experiences of loss and suffering. The state of motherhood, here, cannot be defined in biological terms through the attachment between mother and child. Rather, motherhood is reconstructed through the rearticulation of care and the redeployment of the link between mother and community to form a political community of Kurds. Motherhood is politicized insofar as it entails an abstraction, in the sense that each woman can potentially become a mother irrespective of whether or not she has children. And mothers who have lost their children in war can continue their work of mothering through their activism, gaining an ethical voice and political standing that results in the Kurdish movement's embrace of them as Mothers (with a capital M) of the movement.

Reflecting back on Ahmet and Mevlüt's story of conflict that I addressed in the previous section, Cevher told me how she became the Mother of the conflicting parties in those mediation commissions:

I said to the two brothers [Ahmet and Mevlüt] that my only wish was to see them embrace each other. I said that I had two sons; one is in the mountains. My only dream is to see my two sons embrace each other one day. I said to [Ahmet and Mevlüt], "You're my children too; your age doesn't matter to me." In the commission, the other men and also some other Peace Mothers talked to them, to convince them to negotiate. They later made peace with each other and they invited us to have a peace dinner.

Commission members addressed the Peace Mothers as "mother" (*dayik* in Kurdish); the Peace Mothers also used this term of address among themselves. This form of address, rather than establishing a hierarchical or commanding relationship, works as a founding element of political and social solidarity among Kurds. The Peace Mothers' discourse of being the Mothers of all children (and their acknowledgment as such by many Kurds) transforms the identity of "mother" from a familial one to a communal and political one. As the Mothers of all children, the Peace Mothers are anticipated to resolve existing and potential tensions, disputes, and fights among *their children*. The Peace Mothers have established their position of being "mothers of the movement"—a position based on a relationship of trust and respect—through their extensive political activities. These political acts, in turn, give the Peace Mothers the moral and political responsibility to raise issues of peace and justice in multiple contexts.

This alternative discourse of care and motherhood is neither limited to Kurdish mothers' own children, nor even to Kurds. The Peace Mothers actively employ this discourse to compare the sufferings of Kurds and Turks. This includes police officers, gendarmes, soldiers, and their families. For instance, Xace (68) relates, "We [Kurds] have been living together with Turks for centuries. We have the same blood in our veins. I am a Kurdish mother, but when I hear a soldier died in the war, I feel

pain. Those soldiers are also our children.” This sort of language, in general, evokes historically existing relations of peace between Turks and Kurds. In most interviews, the Peace Mothers treated Turks and Kurds as essentially brothers and sisters, sharing the same blood, and not inherently and historically hostile nations.

The Peace Mothers continuously act on this discourse of care by trying to reach out to other families and children. This includes their actions whose target audience is the Turkish state and the public. The discourse of “caring for the all” may be able to transform those political domains where motherly care is marginalized as “non-political” and confined to the private family realm. Whenever the Peace Mothers use the language of care, they attempt to embed their motherly care into the realm of political by asking that they be acknowledged as Mothers. This represents a consistent effort to challenge the exclusionary practices of a mainstream political sphere where they are marginalized as “breeders of terrorists.”

6. Conclusions

As the image of the grieving and protesting mother has become familiar in political protests worldwide, it is easy to notice the similarities these activist mothers share. Many examples around the world demonstrate that attempts by women of various ethnic and racial origins to mobilize around motherhood and peace have not always been successful or long-lasting. Yet unlike many examples of maternal movements, the Peace Mothers have long mobilized effectively. They have done so, as I have explored here, by garnering legitimacy within the Kurdish local setting through their confrontational activist struggle, their experience of loss, and their emphasis on care for the All. However, the Mothers’ politics of care does not easily cross the Turkish-Kurdish divide, since the Mothers use this form of care in a national political context where the Turkish state refuses to recognize it as care or motherhood, instead framing it within a discourse of terrorism.

My arguments here demonstrate that the possibility of articulating “mothers” as moral and political figures depends strongly on the question of who is entitled to be a mother in a normative sense, and who is entitled to be proper citizen of the state. Some feminist scholars may see motherhood activism as merely replicating women’s practices of caregiving in the home. Yet in cases where women’s right to participate in politics as normative citizens is denied, organizing politically around motherhood may simply be the most powerful political tool that marginalized groups of women can use to combat the hegemonic conceptions of politics, morality, and motherhood that limit them. In this way, motherhood can be the political ground for women to speak against injustices and violence when they are otherwise unable to.

In this article, I have suggested that the activism of the Peace Mothers rearticulates motherhood as a political (dis)position and practice with the capacity to nurture collectivity among differently ethnicized and conflicting groups. The case of the Peace Mothers proves unusual despite their apparent failure to reach out to the Turkish public and the state. The Mothers respond to severe constraints on their activism by extending their political action from gatherings before privileged publics towards a more familial and local politics. These are local contexts in which motherhood signifies something more than the Turkish state’s nationalist trope of the ideal moral mother. When mothers engage in activism around narratives of loss and pain, they work to generate political collectivity among different groups, conceived as recipients of their care—and in the process, they politically redefine motherhood.

In a context where the constant state of war means local Kurdish politics is defined by the widespread experience of suffering, the Peace Mothers mobilize their suffering through a language of care and peace. The Peace Mothers’ language of care and peace moves between different realms of the familial and the political; between cities (Istanbul and Diyarbakır); and between multiple political imaginaries (tribal, local, and state). The Peace Mothers’ simultaneous mobilization at various scales of politics transforms their public performances—such as protests and sit-ins—into acts that can alter the course of politics and familial relations alike. Researching such dynamics can lead us to new insights about gender in the largely uncharted domain of local politics and everyday kinship relations.

The practice of caring for children, formerly conceived as the primary role of mothers, now becomes an act with a political end: caring in order to rehabilitate society and demand peace for all.

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