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Homemaking and Homelessness after Forced Migration in Kurdish Contexts

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Abstract

This Special Issue examines Kurdish experiences of homelessness and homemaking in contexts of forced migration and displacement. Conceptualizing home as both loss and reconstruction, it foregrounds the agency of displaced people who recreate spaces of belonging amid violence, surveillance, and exile. Addressing the debate between “forced migration” and “displacement,” the contributions emphasize the coexistence of coercion and agency. Home is approached as a site of power relations extending beyond the household to the neighborhood, city, and homeland, and as a process constituted through both homelessness and homemaking. Focusing on the Kurdish case, where displacement is both historical and ongoing, the Issue explores how enduring structural conditions shape forced migration. It aims to reveal the intersectional dimensions of homemaking, highlight displaced people’s agency in reestablishing belonging, and situate these practices historically, offering comparative insights into homemaking in post-displacement contexts globally.

Keywords

Kurds – homemaking – homelessness – forced migration – displacement – intersectionality

This Special Issue explores the loss of home as a consequence of forced migration and displacement among Kurds and the struggles to remake home. Given home's foundational role as a spatial symbol of human subjectivity and agency—deeply tied to belonging and identity—it is unsurprising that those who lose their homes often begin rebuilding them immediately. We therefore conceptualize home as a dialectical process, composed of both homelessness and homemaking. In this framework, forced migration appears as a specific form of homelessness that is inherently linked to practices of emplacement and re-rooting. From both our personal experiences and scholarly work, we observe that displaced people often begin recreating spaces of belonging shortly after resettlement.

In this Issue, authors employ either “forced migration” or “displacement,” reflecting a debate in Kurdish studies since the 1990s in Turkey. The term “migration” highlights migrant agency, while “forced” underscores coercion. First introduced by NGOs such as the Göç Der Association, which produced pioneering reports on the 1990s and 2015 waves of Kurdish displacement, “forced migration” soon transcended NGO discourse to acquire critical and transformative significance in academia.¹ Emerging in Turkey in the early 2000s to describe the 1990s Kurdish displacement experience, it was applied mainly to internal displacement, though the qualifier “internal” was rarely used. The term also carries disciplinary weight, as sociologists and political scientists were its primary users. By contrast, “displacement” directs attention to affect and in-betweenness. More flexible in English (e.g., “displacement-induced homemaking,” “displacement and emplacement”), it resonates with phenomenological and conceptual openness, including exile and voluntary displacement.² It also extends to “displacements without movement,” the focus of Ömer Özcan's contribution to this Issue, though most cases of forced migration involve actual movement. Our aim, therefore, is to examine homelessness and homemaking among the majority of forced migrants, while acknowledging the analytical richness of less common cases. Both terms are thus employed

1 Özdoğan and Ergüneş, *5233 Sayılı Yasa; Göç İzleme Derneği, Sokağa Çıkma Yasakları; Çağlayan, Özar, and Doğan, Ne Değişti?*

2 Beeckmans et al., *Making Home(s) in Displacement*.

interchangeably, guided by the conceptual pairings in the contributions (e.g., “forced migration and homemaking”; “home induced by forced migration”; “displacement and emplacement”).

The intertwined history of homelessness and homemaking is nearly as old as humanity itself. At the same time, feminist scholars—particularly socialist and existentialist feminists—have long critiqued the common understanding of home as a site of care and safety, emphasizing that it often also involves gendered oppression and exploitation.³ As the embodiment of the heteronormative family, the home has also been identified as a central construct of the nation-state,⁴ a guardian of private property,⁵ and, particularly in the Global North, a nostalgic repository of idealized memory.⁶ While we share the critical perspectives of these thinkers along with postcolonial feminist philosophers such as bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Barbara Smith, we recognize the home’s transformative and existential significance, particularly when examined through the lens of forced displacement.⁷

We consider home to be significant for three main reasons.

First, home must be understood as a site of power relations that exceed the household.⁸ It encompasses the household, the neighborhood, the city, and sometimes even the homeland.⁹ To fully grasp its meaning, one must consider daily social relations, belief systems, and structural conditions.¹⁰ In contexts of colonial domination, for instance, the household may become a space of cultural production when cultural practices in the public are repressed.¹¹ For instance, in 2015–2016, there were intense armed clashes between organized Kurdish youth and Turkish forces in several towns and neighborhoods in Turkey’s Kurdish regions that resulted in state violence against local populations under siege, mass destruction, and displacement. During this period, women in Sur (Diyarbakır) and Nusaybin (Mardin) cooked collectively in pri-

3 De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*; Ferguson, “The unhappy marriage of patriarchy and capitalism”; Hartmann, “The unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism”.

4 Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women*; Kandiyoti, “Emancipated but unliberated?”; Sirman, “Kadınların milliyeti”.

5 Engels, *The Origin of the Family*.

6 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*.

7 hooks, *Yearning*; Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the intersection”; Smith, *Home Girls*.

8 Ahmed, Sara, et. al., *Uprootings*, 1–22; Beeckmans et al., *Making Home(s) in Displacement*; Gola, “Home displacements”.

9 Young, *Intersecting Voices*; Blunt, “Cultural geography”; Alkan and Maksudyan, *Urban Neighbourhood Formations*; Mills, “Boundaries of the nation”; Low, “Homing the city”; Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

10 Brun and Fabos, “Making homes in limbo”.

11 hooks, *Yearning*.

vate homes, and residents sheltered together on the lower floors of apartment buildings in Nusaybin, demonstrating how private spaces can transform into spaces of public life. Second, home is constituted by both loss (homelessness) and reconstruction (homemaking). Each act of rebuilding reveals the profound agency people exercise in reshaping their lives and environments. And third, the dynamics at home are intimately connected to forced migration. For example, patriarchal violence within the household may influence women's decisions to migrate, highlighting how the experience of home shapes and is shaped by displacement.

We focus on the forced migration of the Kurdish population for three interrelated reasons. First, forced displacement is both a historical and contemporary reality for Kurds. Since 2010, large-scale displacements have occurred across the Kurdish regions (Syria, Iraq, Turkey), continuing a century-long experience of life under shifting sovereignties that have often used displacement as a strategy of repression, governance, and social engineering. Consequently, nearly every Kurd has either experienced or witnessed forced migration—many more than once.

Second, beyond its temporal persistence, forced migration is shaped by enduring structural conditions.¹² Kurds have repeatedly been direct targets of displacement as a tool of assimilation by being removed from their socio-cultural milieu.¹³ At other times, they have been caught in broader regional conflicts, such as the civil war in Syria, where Kurdish *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (People's Defense Units), and *Yekîneyên Parastina Jin* (Women's Defense Units) fought both for autonomy and against ISIS between 2013 and 2016. Scholars have variously framed the structural roots of Kurdish displacement through concepts such as neoliberal urban transformation and authoritarianism,¹⁴ racialized governance,¹⁵ and neoliberal political economy,¹⁶ while others situate it within contentious politics.¹⁷ The unresolved and often prolonged legal and political processes surrounding return—sometimes spanning decades—further underscore the deep-rooted structural nature of Kurdish displacement.¹⁸

Lastly, we approach forced migration similarly to how we approach home. By accepting displacement and emplacement as two aspects of forced migration

12 Bezwan and Keles, "Displacement, diaspora, and statelessness".

13 Beşikçi, *Devletlerarası Sömürge Kürdistan*.

14 Taş, "Displacing resistance in Kurdish regions".

15 Ay and Turker, "Post-conflict urban renewal".

16 Yadırgı, "Turkey's Kurdish question in the era of neoliberalism".

17 Bakan, "Socio-spatial dynamics", 254.

18 Göç İzleme Derneği, *Sokağa Çıkma Yasakları*; Kurban and Yeğen, *Adaletin Kıyısında*.

and as a contingent condition and form of homelessness and homemaking, we connect displacement with the place of home to reveal the agency of forced migrants.

Drawing on the long history, ongoing continuity, and structural dimensions of Kurdish forced migration, this Issue foregrounds Kurdish homelessness and homemaking under political violence through an intersectional lens. We believe that the *Kurdish Studies Journal* is the right “home” for these discussions. The Issue examines different kinds of displacement, from international forced migration to internal displacement to the loss of home as a place, either private or public, imbued with a particular sense of belonging and orientation in space and time. Experiences of displacement do not necessarily involve (forced) movement. People can lose their homes while staying in the same place, like in the case of Gever, where—as Özcan shows in this Issue—“displacement without dislocation” takes place through surveillance, raids, and the everyday management of fear. Simultaneously, we hope that the Issue will be of particular interest for non-Kurdish studies readers due to the ethnographic, historical, and conceptual discussions on home and forced migration. It may offer valuable comparative insights for other homeless and homemaking populations in post-war conditions, as well as general insights relating to the historical and ontological significance of the home in human life. This Special Issue was inspired by the workshop “Homelessness and Homemaking in Post-Displacement Contexts in the MENA Region”, held in November 2023 at the Institute of Asian and African Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. The workshop and ensuing discussions shaped our collective questions and thematic priorities.

In this Issue, we pursue three main aims. First, to reveal the intersectional dimensions of home induced by forced migration across geographies, historical periods, and Kurdish populations which are elaborated below. Second, we emphasize that displaced and homeless people are not passive victims, but active agents whose emplacement and homemaking practices begin immediately after or during their displacement. All contributions foreground this agency and its transformative power. Third, we frame forced migration and homemaking as historically embedded phenomena. Articles span from the late Ottoman period to the present. For instance, Kumru Toktamış, in her contribution in this Issue, traces the shifting boundaries, sentiments, and ideas of home during the political transformations that the Ottoman Empire underwent in the early twentieth century. Similarly, Özcan shows how state violence—militarization, surveillance, and counter-guerrilla operations—has transformed private homes in Gever into sites of fear, reflecting the continuity of repressive mechanisms in the Republic of Turkey.

Where displaced communities settle—whether near their lost homes or in the places they choose—affects the character of *ethnic* tensions.¹⁹ For instance, Küçükkirca in this Issue shows that until the curfews in 2016, Kurdish was widely spoken in Nusaybin and a part of everyday life. Drastic decrease in the usage of Kurdish in public becomes an indication of the experience of displacement, rendering Kurdish, as an ethnic aspect of identity, a subject of fear. In a context of increased militarization, everyday violence, and forced intervention into public spaces, residents no longer feel at ease to use Kurdish in their everyday lives. Similarly, Katharina Brizić and Ilka Konopatsch's article addresses the effects of ISIS's massacres in 2014 in Sinjar, Iraq, on female Êzîdî survivors and provides detailed insight into women's individuality and intimacy. The authors show how Êzîdî women in exile in Germany regain language, voice, and agency, and how Kurmanji, the language of home, gradually becomes a home to collective remembrance. Furthermore, Çağlayan in this Issue shows how international Kurdish forced migration to Berlin provides ground for the development of a non-territorial national identity within diasporic communities. Easing oppressive mechanisms as well as immigrant organizations in exile create new possibilities for belonging and the remaking of home, linked to the enjoyment of ethnic identity and the use of the Kurdish mother tongue.

Class plays a pivotal role in shaping displacement and post-displacement trajectories. While conflict affects all classes, its burden falls disproportionately on the lower class. In Nusaybin, for instance, displacement and the closure of the Turkish-Syrian border eliminated agriculture and border trade—two key sources of livelihood. The destruction of neighborhoods also dismantled local economic solidarities rooted in neighborly relations. People displaced from Sur, Diyarbakır, in 2016 lost all their economic resources and networks, as well as access to close-by hospitals and schools, and had to move 30 kilometers away from the city center to TOKİ buildings in the middle of a “desert”.²⁰ Yörük and Sarı's contribution to this Issue argues that that Kurdish displacement has effectuated a transformation from rural livelihoods to an urban informal employment among Kurds, which also triggered a transformation to the urban informal proletariat aligning with ethnic inequalities. Thus, Kurdish displacement has accelerated the informalization of the Turkish labor market as an unintended consequence. Class positionality is also an important parameter shaping experiences of international migration. Çağlayan's contribution to this Issue emphasizes that although migration journeys and stays in transit

19 Akesson, “We may go”; Harker, “Spacing Palestine”; Jamal, “1967 bypassing 1948”.

20 Küçükkirca, “Thinking Suriçi”.

countries are shaped by socioeconomic backgrounds of migrants, their homemaking experiences depend on the quality and availability of socio-economic opportunities in the host countries. Such services, when gender-sensitive, available and robust, can transform displacement into opportunity.

Gender is a critical axis of both displacement and homemaking. Women's bodies and domestic spaces often become primary targets of violence during conflict.²¹ Women are also disproportionately exposed to sexual violence during cross-border migration and in refugee camps.²² Yet women are central to homemaking. They create homes through language and education and even love, as Toktamış's contribution to this Issue makes clear.²³ Brzić and Konopatsch point out that working on individuality and intimacy through therapeutic dance movement may help women to regain Kurmanji, the language of home. Küçükırca's article on Nusaybin shows how gardens and *tendûrs* are primary places to make homes that are initiated and organized by women. Özcan highlights that under conditions of political violence and repression, women are the ones who exhibit strength and courage to continue dwelling and making home as a site of collective memory and defiance. Çağlayan's contribution underlines that international forced migration may change the traditional male breadwinner and female homemaker roles, as women adapt themselves better to their new environment due to their linguistic and social skills. The case studies presented in this issue show the intersectionality of forced migration, displacement, and home-making, where the relations and shifting dynamics of ethnicity, class, and gender crucially shape people's experiences.

The intersectional positionality of researchers is also an important part of knowledge production and representation. This is why we recognize the importance of reflecting on our positionality. We come from different political, socio-cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, yet thanks to digital communication we have had a chance to work together closely for years now. Although geographically distant, we share "similar" struggles in academia that have caused us to lose our (academic) homes at different times of our lives, which then transformed into multiple homemaking processes in various parts of the world. English is our second language; we are both responsible for care work in our families. Yet compared to many of our interlocutors, we hold relatively privileged educational backgrounds. While this Issue consists of scholarly articles, we have strived to maintain a reader-friendly tone and to foster collective knowledge production. In this process, the editors of the *Kurdish Studies Journal* have

21 Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases*; Protner, "Reading and feeling gender".

22 Freedman, "Sexual and gender-based violence".

23 Çağlayan, Özar, and Doğan, *Ne Değişti?*

collaborated closely with us, taking on a significant role in providing detailed feedback, alongside the reviewers. The knowledge production process was thus shaped by the entire editorial team of KSJ, reviewers, authors, and ourselves. We have sought to maintain critical distance from our material in the spirit of academic rigor. At the same time, following the example of many displaced and migrant researchers, we did not hesitate to share our positionalities and personal histories with our interlocutors and team members. We believe in the value of collaborative production through shared experience and uphold the significance of both subjectivity and objectivity. In this sense, we argue that any understanding of the “real” emerges through the negotiation of subjective experiences and objective conditions.

This Special Issue consists of six contributions. İclal Ayşe Küçükırca's article explores Kurdish women's agency through homemaking practices following the 2015–2016 urban clashes in Nusaybin (Mardin). She conceptualizes home as both private and public, arguing that their joint destruction constituted a dual loss. Based on displaced women's narratives, she shows how intersecting spaces—such as gardens and *tendûrs*—function as sites of agency and home-making.

Handan Çağlayan's article, based on ethnographic research in Berlin (2020–2022), examines the post-2010 cross-border displacement experiences of Kurdish women. Adopting an intersectional lens, she highlights the challenges they face—ranging from trauma to discrimination—while foregrounding their agency. Despite adversity, Kurdish women actively rebuild their lives.

Katharina Brizić and Ilka Konopatsch examine the experiences of Êzîdî women survivors of genocide, focusing on the Dance Movement Therapy of a German humanitarian programme. Challenging three dominant assumptions—that healing requires verbal expression, that female collectivity supersedes individuality, and that empowerment must be public—they highlight how therapeutic movement fosters individual and intimate pathways to recovery. The authors show how survivors gradually reclaim voice, agency, and Kurmanji as the language of home and collective remembrance.

Erdem Yörük and Enes Sarı's article, the only quantitative contribution in this Issue, examines the intersection of class and forced migration. Analyzing the 1990s evacuation of over 3,000 Kurdish villages, they link displacement to neoliberal reforms that pushed Kurds into precarious, low-wage labor. They argue that displaced Kurds have been largely confined to the informal working class, illustrating how forced migration and neoliberalism jointly reproduce ethnic inequality in Turkey.

Kumru Toktamış's article explores exile as a continuum of home through the life of Yashar Khanum, set during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the

early twentieth century and the division of the Kurdish homeland. Drawing on Edward Said's notion of the "contrapuntal," Toktamış traces Yashar Khanum's gendered journey amid rebellion, displacement, and shifting territorialities. The narrative foregrounds intersectional dynamics of gender, class, and ethnicity, culminating in a homemaking act—described as "home as love"—in a cave shared with her mother and husband. The article offers a nuanced account of female subjectivity at the intersection of imperial decline and emerging nation-states.

Ömer Özcan examines the notion of home in Gever as a continuum from the 1990s mass displacement and ongoing state violence, with attention to ethnicity, religion, and gender. Framing Turkish state-making as a sustained intrusion into domestic space, he foregrounds the Kurdish concept of *mal* ("home") as a site of social and material relations. Özcan shows how dwelling amid surveillance, displacement, and loss becomes an active process of political becoming.

All contributions in this Issue examine homemaking and emplacement among Kurds after displacement and homelessness. The first four articles foreground intersectionality in historical contexts, while the final two emphasize historical continuities without neglecting intersectional dimensions. Ethnicity is central across all contributions, and all but Yörük and Sarı also incorporate gender. Only Çağlayan and Yörük and Sarı explicitly address class. Temporal foci differ. Toktamış traces homemaking within a longer historical continuum; both Özcan and Yörük and Sarı engage with the violence of the 1990s and the displacement it triggered, Çağlayan and Brizić and Konopatsch analyze post-2010 international forced migration, and Küçükırca explores internal displacement within in Turkey's Kurdish region after 2015. Narratives range from transnational homemaking through love to displacement without movement.

We are aware that this Issue cannot provide a complete picture of forced migration and homemaking of the Kurdish people, but what we hope to convey is a picture of Kurdish forced migration and homemaking through a lens of intersectional, spatial experiences in a historical context. In this way, we hope that the Issue will open up new conceptual discussions in different contexts.

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