

NEWSLETTER



Fondazione Marista
per la Solidarietà
Internazionale Onlus

FMSI

Per il Bene dei Bambini

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Revolution in Revolution

The Great Struggle for Kurdish Independence

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The Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria, more commonly known as **Rojava**, is a autonomous region in northern and northeastern Syria that is not officially recognized by the Syrian government. Formed in 2012, following events related to the Syrian civil war, it is considered by Kurdish

nationalists to be one of the four parts of Kurdistan (Turkish, Iraqi, Syrian, Iranian). Within the Syrian state territory lies the smallest of the four parts of Kurdistan. In the face of the outbreak of the bloody Syrian civil war in 2012, the Kurdish region of Rojava declared itself autonomous and since the following year has been experimenting with a form of self-government inspired by the principles of democracy, gender equality, multiculturalism, inclusion and ecology. A unique experiment in the world in the heart of a Middle East battered by war, brutal repression and fundamentalism. In 2014, the three cantons (Cizîrê, Kobane, Afrîn) adopted a legal charter valid for the whole society, the **Social Contract: a document unprecedented in the Middle East, which rejects authoritarianism, militarism, centralism and the interference of religious authority in the civil life of the citizens of the different communities, while protecting each cultural peculiarity**. Through the Contract, or Rojava Charter, the Syrian Kurds and the region's ethnic-linguistic minorities have created a political system that is not a state, but a union of confederated popular assemblies. **The goal is a society based on the coexistence of different cultures and religions, ecology, feminism, social economy and popular self-defense**. Rojava's charter upholds freedom of religion, but categorically separates religion from the State, with the secular intent of building a political and administrative system that ensures peaceful coexistence while respecting the principles of freedom, justice, dignity and democracy. There are three primary aspects of the model implemented in Rojava:

- Democratic Confederalism
- Feminism
- Social ecology

DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM

To best understand what Democratic Confederalism means, one must move just across the border to Kurdish-majority southeastern Turkey where, in 1978, Abdullah Ocalan founded the Marxist-Leninist PKK (Kurdish Workers' Party) with the aim of creating an independent Kurdish socialist state within Turkish borders. The mid-1980s began a bloody conflict with Ankara that made the PKK the number one threat to Turkish national security. In 1999 Ocalan was arrested and jailed; to this day he is still in total isolation. Within Ocalan's critique of contemporary society is the issue of gender, which is more than just a claim to rights. Women's discrimination, according to the PKK leader, has its roots in the patriarchal structure of modern society and the historical union it has made with military culture. This combination has meant that belonging to the military class, and consequently being a man, guaranteed the recognition of a kind of first-class citizenship, making the typical patterns of male aggression a socially accepted term of comparison through which to measure the ability of the soldier and, more generally, the man. Such a conception of social roles has led to the idealization of the concept of masculinity, seen as linked to strength and war activity, conversely feminizing the concept of "weakness," seen as alien to the male part of society (stereotype). Hence a sexist reading of war, which considers men as its only legitimate actors and has led women to be little involved in the wars themselves, or at any rate to play a marginal role in them. The solution Ocalan has always proposed and continues to propose is to recover the values of organic society and at least part of its organizational structure. This is possible firstly by demolishing patriarchy and ensuring the substantive equality of men and women. The recovery of the principle of female power, which is more horizontal than the typically vertical power of the male, is possible because of the new centrality women acquire in public life. Assemblies allow an almost total politicization of collective life: from administration to justice, from defense to economics. Hence the concept of "democracy." What matters is that the individual popular assembly is always given the widest possible freedom of action. Hence the noun "confederalism." Such a change breaks down the hierarchical mentality and the idea that everything or person around us is an object aimed at our satisfaction.

FEMINISM

Within this historical-political framework, the women's story symbolizes the great struggle for Kurdish independence. For decades, women in Kurdistan have opposed repressive societies and governments: but only in recent years have they been recognized for their courage in defending their territories and for their leadership in local government. In fact, in Syrian Kurdistan, better known as Rojava, the women of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) have been recognized for their all-female fighting force—a real force known as the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ). Equality, equity, and feminism as cornerstones of society enable the transformation of relations between individuals from vertical to horizontal and point the way toward alternative forms of government to that of a state holding decision-making power that citizens lack instead.

In 2014, ISIS criminals had massacred the Kurdish population in both the Kurdistan of Syria and the Kurdistan of Iraq, and since then about three thousand women have been sold to the slave market; many of them have been subjected to genital mutilation in cities and villages controlled by the Caliphate. **In all wars that have been fought and all wars that are still being fought today, in 2022, rape of women is practiced as a military offensive implemented to target the civilian population and humiliate them completely.** This is one of the fundamental reasons why Kurdish women are on the front lines, to save their sisters and to defend their homeland, Kurdistan. **Kurdish women have always played a very important role in the liberation** struggle, both in ancient and recent history, having always struggled in all fields as sisters, as mothers and wives, alongside their men, becoming for this reason protagonists of change. The key to the role of Kurdish women is that of a "revolution within a revolution," healthy and pure concept of female solidarity, team spirit, familiarity and unity for the protection and respect of rights that are not only part of women's lives but of every human being. Therefore, the Kurdish female condition represents a progressive element in the Middle East area because Kurdish culture rejects a priori the traditional inferiority of women, perpetrated in the Islamic world. Kurdish women have come a long way; the parliament consists of a 30 percent share of women, there are women ministers, the main political parties include women in their leadership, as well as woman is the president of the regional parliament, a rarity in the Middle East. Honor killings are considered murder, human trafficking, female genital mutilation and child marriage are banned, and polygamy is allowed as it is accepted in Islam, but only by adhering to the strictest rules. Ever since the war broke out in Syria ten years ago, the pages of newspapers have been filled with the proud faces of

Kurdish female fighters. The initial astonishment of journalists and the public at these young women in camouflage has certainly ignited curiosity and even admiration in the Western world, while at the same time arousing a feeling that has always been far removed from a deep awareness of the horror of war.

SOCIAL ECOLOGY

The third point underlying the Kurdish model is the building of a fully ecological and environmentally friendly society. Although other issues might seem more important, without the centrality of an ecological issue, life in the region would no longer be possible as they also heavily touch on economic aspects. Monocultures, for example, have brought consequences that are not only environmental, since vegetables and fruits must be imported from another region, affecting the economy of the area in this. Decentralization and implementation of autonomy in agriculture thus becomes part of solving an economic problem. Ecology commissions are being built at all levels of the council system. In this process it becomes evident that there are no top-down arrangements, but rather shared choices with the intention of creating grassroots structures capable of supporting and dealing with ecological issues. Steps forward, from the standpoint of environmental education, have been taken through the establishment of several nature parks. However, in a situation such as the Syrian civil war, between the conflict with Isis and the Turkish threat, it is still very difficult for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria to quickly implement the path of transformation from the old to the new model of economy. While the culture of feminism and direct democracy have reached an advanced stage, to date the Kurdish context has slowed the expansion of an integrated ecological system, although there has been undoubted progress.

In all three aspects under analysis, Rojava's political system does not fully reflect Abdullah Ocalan's democratic confederalism. While great strides have been made on the feminist issue, the construction of a fully ecological and sustainable society still remains an unreachd—though in the process of being achieved—and it is difficult to understand whether the popular assemblies really count more than the central administration. Equally difficult is whether this is driven by the objective difficulties induced by the continuing conflict with Daesh or whether by any structural weaknesses inherent in democratic confederalism.

¹ Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan

² "Gli stupri come arma di guerra, in Ucraina" <https://www.ilpost.it/2022/04/10/ucraina-stupri-esercito-russo/>

³ Al dawla al islamiya fi al Iraq wal Sham (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant)



5x1000 in Bangladesh

A school that welcomes everyone

Once again our sincere “thank you” to all the supporters who wished to allocate the “5xmille” of their income tax return to the Marist Foundation for International Solidarity (FMSI).

We are particularly happy for the result achieved this year, which went beyond any optimistic forecast. We worked hard in the “door to door” to make ourselves known and to expose our activities in support of the neediest children.

Part of the funds raised this year were donated to a project to purchase computers at the Saint Marcellin School in Moulovibazar (Bangladesh), which has now been in operation for more than 5 years (2 January 2017). It is a school to which everyone has access, but which mainly welcomes children from the tea plantations in the area around Sreemongol - Moulovibazar in north-eastern Bangladesh. Tea plantation workers are among the most disadvantaged human communities in the country, whose wages are below the UN-declared poverty level and slightly above USD 1 per day.

About 75 per cent of the students attending the school come from those plantations or from different ethnic minorities.

From the very beginning, the focus has been on providing them with a quality education, including computer skills and the use of computers. To this

end, 16 computers were purchased in February 2017, a minimal amount that stimulated all the children to get acquainted with this ‘new tool’ that would also help them in learning the curricular subjects.

In the school and the hostels attached to it, multimedia content is now frequently used for teaching purposes, and it is for this purpose that 2 projectors and 2 sound systems were also included in the project. The funding received made it possible to acquire an additional 16 computers which, added to the previous ones, allow all students to make significant use of them. The objectives of the project are as follows

- To offer students the opportunity to better interface with the outside world;
- To promote conditions of greater opportunity in the search for a job in the near future
- To foster the ability to work in teams;
- To equip teachers with technological devices for both pedagogical and administrative purposes.

Such a technology improvement has certainly elevated the educational offerings of a struggling community.



The Zambian government's efforts

Guaranteed education for all

The deadline for Zambia's **Universal Periodic Review** is approaching. FMSI participated in the preparation of the Civil Society report on the situation of children's rights in the Country together with IIMA (International Institute Maria Ausiliatrice) of the Salesian Sisters of Don Bosco, VIDES International (*Volontariato Internazionale Donna Educazione Sviluppo*) which will be presented in this month of July. The report highlights the Zambian government's efforts to ensure education for all, policies for the protection of children, especially those who are most vulnerable, and reforms for juvenile justice, but at the same time points out that unresolved problems such as access to education for children and youth living in rural areas, lack of teachers, prevalence of child labor, school dropouts, and early marriages. Specifically, it is recommended that Zambia increase budget allocations to ensure the quality of education, prioritizing school infrastructure; recruitment, training, and salary adjustment for teachers; provision of textbooks and teaching materials; while increasing efforts to address the root causes of early marriages by aiming to keep girls in school. It is also recommended that specific measures be taken to combat the multiple challenges of education for children living in rural areas; develop poverty alleviation programs aimed at supporting families whose children school drop-out; and strengthen and consolidate social protection structures directed at adolescents to facilitate their safe and productive transition to adulthood. **The UPR is carried out through monitoring the Human Rights situation in all 193 member states of the United Nations.** During the Review, each State is required to report to the others on the actions taken, based on the recommendations received in the previous

Review, to improve the Human Rights situation in its country. **Civil society, and in particular NGOs with Consultative Status such as FMSI, may participate in this process by preparing their own report on the human rights situation in the country under review,** emphasising problems, and providing recommendations that can be presented by the other States. This opportunity to bring to the public situations that would otherwise have no place in the media communication and to monitor the implementation of states' commitment to the promotion of Human Rights is a very important tool in building what is called the "United Nations of the people." Part of FMSI's work is to encourage the involvement of Schools in the process, fostering the education of the new generations to become active citizens. Protagonists in the report elaboration are the local organizations, in this case the Marist Brothers and the Salesian Sisters of Zambia. However, there is still poor knowledge of the UPR at local level, along with the difficulty to find local data number and have resources. Greater participation of local universities would play an important role in overcoming these limitations. **However, it is necessary to emphasize that in making the recommendations, the root causes that in part undermine the internal situations of the States** cannot be ignored, such as, for example: an unfair multilateral trade system, an international division of labor that obligates the countries to become only producers of raw materials and ensures the national food security by importing food from outside, and the payment of international debt increasingly in the hands of private investors that obstacle in the implementation of social policies to promote the human rights for all.

World Refugee Day

"Arise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt".

The Bible tells us, in the Gospel according to St. Matthew (Mt 2:13-14), that Joseph was told by an angel of the Lord to flee to Egypt, together with Mary and the newborn Jesus. *"After they had departed, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying to him, 'Arise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you; for Herod will seek the child to kill him. And Joseph arose and took the child and his mother by night and fled into Egypt'".*

Sadly, human history is littered with **STORIES** of people having to leave their homes, their families, their lands, their lives... to go and live in the new, the unknown. And we say **STORIES** with capital letters because behind them are the lives of people who have suffered and are suffering from uprooting and vulnerability.

Every 20th June, the United Nations commemorates World Refugee Day. As Marists of Champagnat, we too today want to remember the people who are forced to leave their homeland and start a new life far from their homes. The United Nations, and we together with them, want to make this situation known, we want to take the side of those who are suffering.

In much of the world, the news reminds us of all those who have had to flee the barbarity of war in Ukraine. It is not just this country. There are too many situations of war, injustice, hunger... that drive thousands of people to abandon their lives in search of a life of peace and dignity.

Sometimes, without realizing it, we can be immersed in the thought that there are first- and second-class refugees. Why do the media tell us about the war in Ukraine and not in other parts of our world? Why are some leaders in favor of welcoming some refugees based on where they come from? **Are we not also falling into the trap of distinguishing people by where they come from, or by their creed, or by the color of their skin? World Refugee Day 2022 reminds us that it should not matter who these people are, what religion they believe in, where they come from, when how or why they have been forced to flee.**

Pope Francis, in *Fratelli Tutti* (11), tells us that we are always on the way, that we must fight every day to achieve justice and solidarity. We continue to see the need to continue on this path in the newspapers and the media. The world is often broken by pain, broken by the suffering of those who can only flee for their lives and those of their loved ones.

Also, the 22nd General Chapter of the Marist Brothers draws our attention to the need to "make a decisive commitment to defend" the dignity of refugees and migrants, seeking their inclusion in society.

As Marists of Champagnat we are called to respond to this desire of the Chapter. We have admirable projects that try to help thousands of displaced people in these situations. Let us think, for example, of the *"Fratelli"* project that has been going on for years in Lebanon. Initiatives that help to find work, that offer medical care, that provide psychological support services, and above all initiatives aimed at providing a suitable educational space adapted to personal characteristics and needs.

We cannot stand still, we cannot take refuge in the "I" and forget about the "we", which is where the true dignity of all human beings lies.





Emergency in Siria

Health and food assistance to vulnerable families in Aleppo

The Project in brief:

The goal of the project is to improve the living conditions of 830 vulnerable families in Aleppo through the distribution of baskets containing food items.

FMSI is currently engaged in the implementation of the *"Health and Food Assistance to Vulnerable Families in Aleppo"* project. According to the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Syrian conflict has claimed more than 500,000 lives and displaced an estimated 13 million people. Many Syrians are displaced or refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, countries that host the largest number of registered Syrian refugees. The war began after the Syrian regime implemented a crackdown on peaceful civilian protesters. Various factions-Syrian rebels, ISIS, al Qaeda-affiliated organizations, Kurdish-led organizations and foreign militias, including Hezbollah-have engaged in a costly contest for control of territory.

In Syria, in addition to the difficulties caused by the spread of Covid-19, which has contributed to aggravating the country's already precarious health, political and economic conditions, the immediate repercussions of the war in Ukraine have been felt, which has visibly worsened an already difficult humanitarian situation, further complicating the negative situation the country has been experiencing for some time. A continuation of the confrontation in Ukraine or, worse, an expansion of it into a broader NATO-Russia confrontation would jeopardize multilateral cooperation on conflict management and humanitarian issues in Syria. Even before the war, Syria was a low-and middle-income country: 90 percent of the population lived in poverty, two-thirds depended

on humanitarian aid, and 55 percent suffered from food insecurity. In December 2021, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations warned of the risk of famine due to severe drought and a sharp decline in the grain harvest. **Eleven years into the Syrian conflict, six out of 10 citizens do not know if and where their next meal will come from.** Dependence on imports from Russia means that the current crisis in Europe could have serious repercussions in Syria, exacerbating food shortages and causing food prices to soar.

Aim of the Project:

This project aims to improve the living conditions of 830 vulnerable families in Aleppo through the distribution of food baskets carried out by Aleppo's network of 155 volunteers, the Blue Marists. This initiative is essential to meet the basic needs of the beneficiary families by bringing an improvement in nutritional status by mitigating their destitution. During the distribution, people will have the opportunity to feel at home, the comfort of talking with volunteers in the sign of the continuity of an important solidarity network. The food baskets are of two types depending on the size of the family:

- Food Package A: 2 kg of spaghetti, 4 kg of sugar, 1 liter of olive oil, 2 liters of cooking oil, 1 kg of butter, 2 kg of rice, 1 kg of tomato paste, 2 packages of canned meat, 1 jar of jam.
- Food Package B: 1 kg of spaghetti, 2 kg of sugar, 1 liter of olive oil, 2 liters of cooking oil, 1 kg of butter, 2 kg of rice, 1 kg of tomato paste, 2 packages of canned meat, 1 jar of jam.



The Project in numbers:



- 830 families



- 925 Adult Males



- 1078 Adult Females



- 590 Males under 18



- 590 Females under 18



“A new Hope for Hopeville”

Educational programme for children and young people with disabilities

The Project in brief:

The proposal main goal is to empower children and youth with disability through equity of access to quality education in order to provide beneficiaries with the same opportunities as their peers and to reduce stigma.

Children with disabilities in Nigeria face cultural, economic and social barriers from within and outside the education system that directly or indirectly impact their ability to get a high-quality education, such as, for instance, discrimination based on disability, stigma and attitudinal barriers; internalized family misconceptions about children's ability to learn. People or children with disabilities are among the vulnerable population in the Nigerian society.

They face stigmatization and are particularly at risk of being left behind. Health indicators in Nigeria are some of the worst in the African Continent. With its rapidly growing population and development challenges, the Country drags down the socioeconomic indicators for the entire African continent. Achieving SDGs – in particular number 3 (good health and well-being) – remains a challenge. Poverty is still pervasive with 53.5% of the population living at less than USD 1.9 a day. UNICEF reported in a recent document that “preventable or treatable infectious diseases such as malaria, pneumonia, diarrhea, measles and HIV/AIDS account for more than 70% of the estimated one million under-five deaths in Nigeria”. In the Country there is a mix of problems including inaccessibility of quality health care, poor hygiene, malnutrition, lack of access to drinking water, poor health infrastructure,

lack of sufficient health personnel. The annual budget of the Nigeria Government for the health sector is 4.17% of the total national budget, which is equivalent to only \$5 per person per year. Health insurance is not available for most parents, and when available, it may still not cover chronic and long-term care for children. This exposes parents to huge costs of care for their children with disabilities.

Therefore, a mixture of stigma and psychological and financial burdens have combined to prevent many children and adolescents from having the opportunity for any form of intervention, either medical or special education services, despite the existence of the federal law that promises equal opportunities for every Nigerian child.

Aim of the Project:

For all the above-mentioned reasons, FMSI Project “A new Hope for Hopeville”, supported by one of FMSI major Donors, has a preventive value for children and young people with disabilities, to enable them to have the opportunity to complete all levels of education avoiding discrimination and stigma. In fact, beneficiaries live in the Centre, but they attend Secondary Schools and Vocational training courses nearby with their peers without disabilities, helping in avoiding discrimination and social stigma. The Project is under implementation in the Hopeville Rehabilitation Centre, located in Uturu, and will contribute to enhance respect for persons with disabilities, to promote meaningful participation and empowerment of persons with



disabilities, to ensure the rights of children with disabilities and accessibility as a fundamental human right, with a special focus on SDGs 4 and 10. All the 45 children beneficiaries hosted in the Hopeville Centre come from families in economic vulnerable conditions that cannot provide to their education and health necessity. Some of them are orphans, others semi-orphans and even those who have both parents are still housed at the centre because the family is unable to provide for the child's needs.

In the long term, thanks to Project implementation, the beneficiaries will be able to be productive and contribute meaningfully to the society and to build self-esteem, self-confidence and self-worth.

The Project in numbers:



- **91** direct beneficiaries
- **400** indirect beneficiaries
- **1** Rehabilitation Centre involved



- **1** Behaviour change Program to sensitize on children with disabilities' rights and safeguarding in order to promote disability inclusion



- **1** Teachers training on capacity building to effectively implement inclusive education programs for children and young people with disabilities



- **20** wheelchairs purchased



- **30** pair of crutches purchased
- **6** desktop computers purchased

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