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THE RECENT HISTORY OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN TURKEY¹

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the recent history of the women's movement in Turkey with a descriptive method. It particularly centres on women's organizations that were active between 1980-2010 and the women activists mobilized in these organizations. It attempts to make the impact of the women's movement on Turkish political and social life visible.

Keywords: Women's movements, women's organizations, feminist activists, Turkey

1. INTRODUCTION

In parallel with developments in the international political arena since the 1970s, Turkey has witnessed a gradual increase in the contribution of women's organizations to its political agenda (Tekeli, 1993). Alongside feminist activism focusing on sexual harassment and domestic violence against women, which paved the way for the feminist movement² after the 1980s, women with particular religious and ethnic stances started getting organized throughout the 1980s (Tekeli, 1993). This was followed by the rapid spread of feminist organizations and the separation of women with specific religious and ethnic affiliations from gender-mixed into women-only organizations during the 1990s.

Increasing political and cultural diversification shaped Turkish politics in general and women's politics in particular during the 1990s and 2000s. The 2000s also witnessed the establishment of common platforms by women's organizations with diverse backgrounds to promote issues concerning women in general, such as anti-discrimination laws or women's political participation, and, indeed, they achieved significant improvements. It is commonly acknowledged that these platforms, such as the Women's Platform for The Turkish Penal Code (*TCK Kadın Platformu*) and the Women's Platform for The Constitution (*Anayasa Kadın Platformu*), contributed hugely to the in-favour-of-women changes in certain laws (Bodur and Franceschet, 2002; Erçevik-Amando, 2007). Also, by informing people about women's demands and campaigns through conferences and meetings, they turned these campaigns into massive activities and played a major role in informing people about the changes achieved afterwards. As the political activity of women's organizations waned, the political pressures on them intensified.

¹ This article is derived from my unpublished doctoral dissertation titled "Mobilizing for Women's Organizations: Women Activists' Perceptions of Activism and Women's Organizations in Turkey".

² It should be noted that in the context of this paper I do not use 'feminist movement' and the 'women's movement' synonymously. Although both the actors and leaders are women and both aim at mobilizing women, the former is distinguished from the latter by challenging conventional roles ascribed to women 'such as productive and domestic responsibilities' (Hassim, 2006: 7).

The history of Turkish governments exercising pressure on activists and women's organizations goes back as early as the birth of the Republic. One of the first women's organizations of the Turkish Republic, the Turkish Women's Association's (TKB) fate is an example of this. In fact, before the Republic was announced, particularly in the late Ottoman period, there were many women's organizations including Armenian women's organizations, Kurdish women's organizations, and Turkish women's organizations (Çakır, 1996; Ekmekçioğlu and Bilal, 2006). Women involved in these organizations voiced feminist demands that varied widely from changing women's dress codes to increasing women's status within the family, which might be regarded as quite radical for the Ottoman society known as religious and conservative (Berktaş, 2003; Çakır, 1996).

With the foundation of the Republic in 1923, women formed the TKB in 1924 and campaigned for women's political rights such as the right to vote and be elected.³ The TKB was successful in attracting the national assembly's attention to women's demands and in carrying the women's agenda into national politics. However, the government of the new Republic was against women's opposition. The TKB was therefore forced to give up its political activities and work as a charity. Soon after women were guaranteed citizenship rights,⁴ the TKB was closed down by its own members in 1935 (Zihnioğlu, 2003: 256-58).⁵

From this date until the 1960s women's affiliations to political organizations and the women's movement in Turkey consisted of charities and women's branches in political parties. Until the founding of the socialist women's organizations in the 1970s there was no independent women's organization with political demands. According to some scholars, one reason for this gap is the illusion created in women that they were 'emancipated' by the rights guaranteed to women with the foundation of the Republic and the political manipulation created by the modernization project pursued during this period which was meant to assure gender equality (Arat, 2008: 396; Uçan Çubukçu, 2004: 67). However, these rights had limited effects and it was usually only people in urban areas who benefitted from them (Arat, 1998; Durakbaşa, 1998). The huge majority of the population however lived in rural areas and earned their living through farming. In 1955, only 3.8 % of women across the country had professions. Although primary education had been mandatory for more than 50 years, 51.8 % of women were still illiterate in 1975 (Özbudun, 1994: 17).

In contemporary Turkish history, the 1950s symbolize the transition period from the single-party system to a multi-party system and immigration from rural to urban areas. The 1960s then saw a drastic increase in legal and illegal political organizations, trade unions and students' movements. The decade started with the military coup on 27 May 1960. Alongside the structural transition that the country was going through, the relatively convenient atmosphere created by the new constitution paved the way for various social groups across the country to organize and it contributed to the increase in social movements in Turkey. Although this increase was slowed down for a while during another military coup on 12 March 1971, it grew steadily. By the end of the 1970s, political polarization between left and right-wing politics, in particular, had evolved into armed street battles, particularly between illegal factions. The daily papers were full of people dying on the streets every day.

The third military coup on 12 September 1980 established its legitimacy through ending this violence on the streets (Ertunç, 2004: 429). Thousands of those who were identified as belonging to the opposition were arrested (Oran, 2005: 19). Following the coup, the military government excluded left-wing politics from the Turkish political arena completely, banned any kind of political activism, banned oppositional academicians from universities, and put the universities under the control of a higher-education institution, founded by the military government itself, which instituted a series of prohibitions for university students including getting organized (Ertunç, 2004). Left-wing social movements lost their radicalism and their mass support during the 1980s as a consequence of military

³ Women's struggle for political rights in the nineteenth and twentieth century was not limited to Turkey (Berktaş, 2004: 16). Parallel developments between the Ottoman and the Republic women's struggle and struggle for suffrage in European countries occurred. In view of this, some scholars assume a correlation between the developments of the women's movements in Turkey from the nineteenth century and the first, second, and third waves of feminist movement in western Europe (e.g. Kerestecioğlu, 2004: 35).

⁴ After abolishing the Islamic code of the Ottoman Empire, the young Republic adopted a new civil code which was an adaptation of the Swiss civil code in 1926. Through this code, women's status within the family and society was revised. Women gained the rights to divorce and inheritance; polygamy and unilateral divorce were abolished. The abolition of gender segregation in the public sphere paved the way for women to enter education and the professions. Thus, despite its still patriarchal basis (e.g. men were identified as the head of the family and wives were subservient to their husbands), with this secular code women were recognized as equal citizens of the Republic.

⁵ The TKB was re-established in 1951.

pressure (Karagöz, 2008: 172). The government closed down organizations across the country, including political parties and trade unions (Boratav, 2003: 150). These organizations were replaced by right-wing, conservative, and religious political parties which were formed with the support of the military government. The new constitution prohibited women's branches in political parties.⁶

Similar to the feminist movement in the late 1960s and 1970s in western European countries, an important majority of women who became involved in the feminist movement after 1980 in Turkey came from a socialist background (Hercus, 2005: 3; Uçan Çubukçu, 2004: 59). For instance, many women leading feminist activism after the coup had been involved in the Progressive Women's Organization (İKD - İlerici Kadınlar Derneği 1975-1979) which was one of the very few women-only organizations with a socialist affiliation before 1980 (Akal, 2003; Arıkan, Atabek & Çarkçioğlu, 1996). However, the İKD shared a similar fate with other socialist organizations of the 1970s and was closed down in 1979. According to its members' accounts, the İKD was like a school, a ground of experience and knowledge for the feminist activists of the 1980s (Arıkan et al., 1996: 7-13). With the İKD's foundation, women's distinctive needs and demands started getting included in the left-wing agenda. The figure of the woman worker who was a comrade to a male worker in his demands was replaced by activist women who voiced their own demands and attempts in forming their own organizations. Demands such as equal pay for equal work, equality in promotion, an increase in and implementation of maternity leave, and free nursing for children were brought to the agenda during this period (ibid.). Although there are a couple of works about the İKD (e.g. Akal, 2003; Arıkan et al., 1996), the women-only organizations of pre-1980 are mainly invisible in the literature on women's organizations in Turkey.

The women welcoming feminism after 1980 gathered around women's circles and so the feminist movement flourished in small women-only groups discussing feminist theory and activism. At the beginning of the 1980s, some women writers gathering around the YAZKO (The Cooperative of Writers and Interpreters) mobilized to translate texts about and discuss feminism (Uçan Çubukçu, 2004: 60).⁷ The emergence of women's groups identifying themselves as feminists did not take long. The first major activity that was started by the feminist activists was the petition in 1985 for the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (Arat, 2008: 397-98; Uçan Çubukçu, 2004: 61-62). In 1987, the first mass demonstration against domestic violence and in 1989 the 1st Feminist Weekend and 1st Women's Conventions were held with participation from a large number of women.⁸ The spread of the feminist movement into academia resulted in the establishment of women's research units in universities. The first such unit was established at the University of Istanbul in 1989 (Berktay, 2004: 26).

The 1980s witnessed not only a rise in visibility of feminist activities and demonstrations but also an increase in the number of women who organized around religious and ethnic demands. Following the ban on the headscarf in universities, actions among religious students with headscarves extended across the country. Actually, the first record regarding the headscarf ban in universities points to 1968 when an academic with a headscarf, Hatice Babacan, was denied teaching at a university. This was not followed by a strong reaction, probably because it was not implemented systematically. However, following a notice to students by the Higher Education Institution in 1982 forbidding the headscarf, alongside other styles of clothes and appearances, including certain shapes of beards and moustaches for male students, which were assumed to signify certain political stances, action against the ban spread rapidly among covered female students. Since 1982, the headscarf has been prohibited in universities; these prohibitions have been repealed and reinstated several times depending on changing governments' views of this. And every time the prohibitions were reinstated, demonstrations against them increased. In 1987, demonstrations occurred across the country: in Erzurum, the Faculty of Theology students occupied the deanship; students boycotted classes in Konya; students in Bursa sent protest letters to the national assembly.

⁶ The article banning such branches was removed from the constitution in 1995.

⁷ The feminist academic Şirin Tekeli, who personally experienced these developments and was in the YAZKO, presents an insight into the process of the emergence of the feminist movement in Turkey, describing her experiences and observations in the 1980s in her article 'Development of the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1980s in Turkey' (Tekeli, 1989). *The YAZKO experience is very similar to the Australian feminists' experiences in the 1970s, who drew on overseas literature and were particularly inspired by the feminist movements in the United States and Britain* (Hercus, 2005: 18).

⁸ For a more detailed historical account of the feminist movement during the 1980s, see Abadan-Unat, 1999; Çaha, 1996; Tekeli, 1998; Timisi and Ağduk Gevrek, 2002.

Meanwhile the Kurdish women had started joining the minority rights-based organizations. These developments in field of women's activism came along with certain developments in Turkish politics. The 1980s were marked by the rise of the 'imagined enemies of the Turkish state: Kurds and Islamists' (Yavuz, 1996: 99). The government established after the September 1980 coup involved a large number of Islamic sheikhs. In contrast to the rise in their prestige in the political and economic spheres (White, 2008: 369), Islamic groups were excluded from public institutions and higher education.⁹ This atmosphere did not only shape the general character of Turkish social and political life but also deeply impacted on the new women's movements, particularly the headscarf movement, blossoming during the 1980s in response to that exclusion.

In contrast to the regulations on the headscarf, Islamic religious education spread on the military government's instruction. Religious classes in primary and secondary schools were made mandatory and the number of *imam hatips*¹⁰ and other – formal and informal - religious education institutions increased. Correspondingly, religious education particularly among female pupils increased hugely. Between 1980 and 1997, male students' participation in such religious education institutions increased by around 35% whereas the increase among female students was almost sevenfold (İlkkaracan and İlkkaracan, 1998: 5). As Islamic sociologists, such as Barbarosoğlu, have observed, 'In the 1980s, Muslims stopped not sending their daughters to universities and other modern institutions of education' (as cited in Çayır, 2000: 51). However, although primary and secondary education was available to these female students, though on a religious basis, they were not able to go into higher education. These developments were to lead, during the 1980s and onwards, to covered women mobilizing against the headscarf bans in universities.

At the time when the Kurdish women started mobilizing in the Kurdish movement¹¹ the majority of the Kurdish population in the south eastern and eastern regions was still living in a tribally structured rural society (Bozarslan, 2008: 335; Çağlayan, 2007: 40; Kramer, 2000: 39). The Kurdish language was forbidden in public across Turkey, and a State of Emergency Zone (*OHAL*)¹² was established in the Kurdish provinces. The political instability and violence during the 1970s, and the economic crises added to the Kurdish guerrilla-Turkish army conflicts which resulted in the evacuation of the Kurdish population during the 1980s and the 1990s (Bozarslan, 2008: 335). Those who suffered from this the most were Kurdish women living in the region. Alongside the gendarmerie and police in the region, some local men from 'the pro-government tribes' were armed by the government and a 'parallel army, called the village guards [*korucu*]' was formed (ibid., 353). As the World Organization against Torture (OMCT) report indicated, women also suffered hugely from sexual violence that was committed by state agents including the village guards (OMCT, 2003).¹³

Turkey witnessed to important developments in respect of its 'minority population' including Kurdish people and Islamists. At the beginning of the 1990s 'the guerrilla campaign, the coercive response to the state, and the counter-insurgency policy adopted', resulted in an estimated 40,000 people's death - 5,000 civilians - and almost 3 million people's displacement in the Kurdish provinces (Bozarslan, 2008: 353). The Islamist movement also grew rapidly during the 1990s (Delibaş, 2008) and made it

⁹ The Higher Education Institution (YÖK), established after the military coup, prohibited the headscarf in universities in 1982.

¹⁰ *Imam hatips* are Islamic schools for prayer-leaders and preachers.

¹¹ What 'the Kurdish movement' in Turkey refers to is a matter of discussion. Hamit Bozarslan, for instance, relates the emergence of the movement to the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923: 'The Kurdish struggle [...] has been at the basis of a series of revolts between 1923 and 1938 and, later on, in the 1970s-1990s, of urban violence and guerrilla warfare.' (2008: 333). Feroz Ahmad, on the other hand, traces the emergence of 'the Kurdish question in its modern form' back to the 1960s when 'the peoples of the east' started to demand cultural freedom and to question the Turkish state's assimilationist policies (2005: 163). He marks August 1984 as the date when the insurrection began; the year the PKK made its first armed attack on the Turkish gendarmerie in Şemdinli, a district in the eastern region. Thus, Ahmad basically refers to the PKK founded in 1978 when he speaks of the Kurdish movement. 1984 was also the beginning of massive armed conflicts between the state forces and the PKK guerrillas which were to last for years (Kramer, 2000: 37).

¹² *OHAL* (Olağanüstü Hal Bölgesi – Emergency Zone): An 'exceptional administration' zone (Bozarslan, 2008: 353) of the military regime of the 1980s. It was implemented in a particular geographic area including 14 cities in eastern and South eastern Turkey where the majority of the population was Kurdish. In these cities, the government announced a state of emergency in 1987. Within the *OHAL*, Turkish army soldiers and police were furnished with extraordinary powers over local people in the name of preventing 'terrorist action'. This emergency state was abolished at different dates in different cities. It has lasted approximately 10 to 15 years overall.

¹³ The OMCT report on violence against women was submitted to the United Nation Committee against Torture in 2001. The report considered violence against women as part of a systematic punishment and indicated that those who are 'suspected of holding political beliefs that are unacceptable to the government and military' and Kurdish women were more likely to be subjected to arbitrary arrest and torture (2003: 368) Hence, the two-fold impact of the discrimination against Kurdish women from within their community in cooperation with the discrimination against Kurds from without the community was observable in the region. The report points to the fact that most of the cases of sexual violence including rape by state agents went unpunished, for, on the one hand, the state protected its officials and did not investigate their acts of violence. On the other hand, women avoided filing complaints that such crimes were committed against them, out of shame and fear of being considered not chaste (ibid.).

possible for a radical Islamist party, the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*), to establish the government after the national elections in 1995.

The women's organizations passed through a process intertwined with the political situation in Turkey. The pro-Islamist government's policies attracted a reaction from the secular women's organizations as well as other pro-secular circles. Carrying signs and chanting slogans articulating their concerns regarding the government's pro-Islamist politics, thousands of women gathered at the mausoleum of Kemal Atatürk in Ankara for the 'Women's Meeting Against Sharia' on 15 February 1997. The 'Women's Meeting Against Sharia' attracted much media attention. According to some papers, some 20 thousand people attended. The daily newspapers acknowledged that the crowds shouted: 'We want neither Sharia nor junta' and 'Turkey will remain secular'.

The massive participation in this demonstration was interpreted as a sign that secularism was deeply rooted in Turkish society (Berktaş, 2004: 27).¹⁴ A couple of days after this demonstration, on 28 February 1997, the military announced a memorandum pressurizing the government to resign. After the government's resignation the Welfare Party, the Islamist partner of the government, was banned by the Constitutional Court in 1998 for anti-secular activities (Ahmad, 2005: 172-173).

Following the military memorandum, covered women holding jobs in the private sector – as they were not allowed to work in public services already - lost their jobs and female students were removed from their universities. These developments contributed to the increase in the number of covered women participating in the Islamic women's movement.

The increase in the Kurdish insurrection at the beginning of the 1990s was followed by an increase in the number of Kurdish women participating in the Kurdish movement. A Kurdish women's guerrilla army within the PKK was established in 1993.¹⁵ In 1995 some Kurdish women also organized for their relatives who had disappeared under arrest. This segment of the Kurdish women's movement, which was mobilized in a very similar way to the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina (Arditti, 1999; Bouvard, 1994), was known in Turkey as the 'Cumartesi Anneleri' (Saturday Mothers) for they gathered every Saturday in Taksim, Istanbul (Fisher, 1998; Günçikan 1996; Orhan, 2009).

Kurdish women's independent organizations increased rapidly during the 1990s. Those organizations were founded on two different grounds. On the one hand, there were organizations which identified themselves as part of the DÖKH (The Democratic Women's Freedom Movement) which adopted an ethnic-based approach and pursued cultural rights such as education in Kurdish language. On the other hand, there were feminist organizations founded by Kurdish women. These were organized separately from the former and were careful about their disconnection from the Kurdish movement.

Meanwhile, the rise in the importance attributed to gender issues in 'international forums and conferences' since the mid-1970s found their reflections in the national agenda as well (Sikoska, Kardam and de Pou, 2000: 1). The 1990s were marked by Turkey's participation in international conventions, treaties with the UN¹⁶ and its accession attempts to the EU. Turkey was among the countries that ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1985. However, until it withdrew its reservations in 1999, the CEDAW requirements were not fully adopted in Turkey's domestic legal regulations. Yet, in 1990, the government formed the Directorate of Women's Status and Problems [sic] in line with its CEDAW obligations. This directorate paved the way for bureaucrats with feminist affiliations to fill the official ranks and 'work within the state to improve women's conditions' and thus, a new period started for the relationship between the state and the women's movements (Arat, 2008: 399). Women's organizations were seen as partners by the government now; Turkey participated in the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 with an immense report prepared by a commission composed of representatives from various women's organizations and academics as well as representatives of related government bodies. This was the most participatory report on women's status in contemporary Turkish history prepared and presented by activist women for an international

¹⁴ For a discussion on the contribution of this demonstration to the secular women's movement in Turkey, see *Çağatay* (2008: 40-43).

¹⁵ As Handan Çağlayan observes, for young Kurdish women activists, the guerrilla struggle on the mountains was a relief from the strict feudal family structure as well as a struggle for national independence; it provided them with the ground to go out of their homes - the traditional women's locations - and participate in men's locations - streets and mountains (2007: 167).

¹⁶ The UN is often regarded as the most successful international organization in integrating gender issues in national agendas. But there are also critical approaches to the 'gender agenda' created by such international bodies, including the UN. For instance, see Sirman (2006).

body. In this report, three main categories were defined as ‘critical areas of priority’¹⁷ for women in Turkey. Education, health and the economy were the first category; power and national mechanisms were the second; and ‘special areas’ including violence against women and women in decision-making were the third category, defined as playing significant roles in shaping discriminative gender regimes in Turkey. The diagnosis of these problematic areas led to a drastic increase in the number of women’s organizations working in these fields in Turkey.

Turkey’s attempts at gaining full membership of the EU also had an important impact on its developments during the 1990s and the 2000s regarding women (Kıvılcım-Forsman, 2004: 155-156). Since the European Parliament required candidate states to achieve gender equality, the Turkish state committed itself to meeting these requirements after becoming a candidate country for membership in 1999 (Arat, 2008: 401). During the following period, the campaigns by women’s organizations were supported through international pressure and Turkey went through a vast change in its legislation regarding women. This included the adoption of a law protecting women against domestic violence, the reform of the civil code granting women full equality in the family, and the reform of the penal code so as to preserve ‘women’s sexual, reproductive and bodily rights’ (Erçevik-Amando, 2007: 230).

Women’s activism at the international level provided not only ‘legitimacy and support for both national women’s machineries’ and organizations (Sikoska, Kardam and de Pou, 2000: 1) but also access to building relations with donors. As well as multi-lateral donors such as the UN, bilateral donors such as certain states’ embassies and nongovernmental organizations have contributed hugely to engendering the national political agendas by supporting women’s organizations’ activities in several ways including information building, consultation, workshops, conferences (ibid., 11) and financial aid, as my interviews highlighted. However, this support has also brought with it a debate about ‘the legitimacy of gender issues and the extent to which they are a ‘foreign import’ (ibid., 11).

Overall, the women’s movements in Turkey, particularly since the 1980s, have evolved in close dialogue with national and international politics and the policies regarding women’s status in Turkey. They have been very influential in the political discourse, decisions and practices regarding women’s rights and status in the Turkish politics and society. The Turkish political leaders have recognized their legitimacy. Indeed, the women’s movements are effective, efficient, and legitimate components of civil society in Turkey.

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¹⁷ Here, I refer to the Response of the Republic of Turkey to the Questionnaire on the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action which was published by the Turkish Prime Ministry in 2004. For the whole report, see: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/Review/responses/TURKEY-English.pdf>, accessed 10 October 2009. For a world-wide response by certain women’s organizations to the responses of the states, contradicting the inferences of the governments, see: http://www.siyanda.org/static/wedo_beijingbetrayed.htm, accessed 10 October 2009.

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