

## **Report on the Research Project “Women’s and Gender Studies at Universities in Turkey: Institutionalisation and Transformation” (December, 2019):**

Following the feminist movement of the 1980s, Women’s Studies as an independent academic discipline was established in the early 1990s at Turkish universities, primarily in Istanbul and Ankara. The founding scholars were academics who were mostly involved in women’s movements.

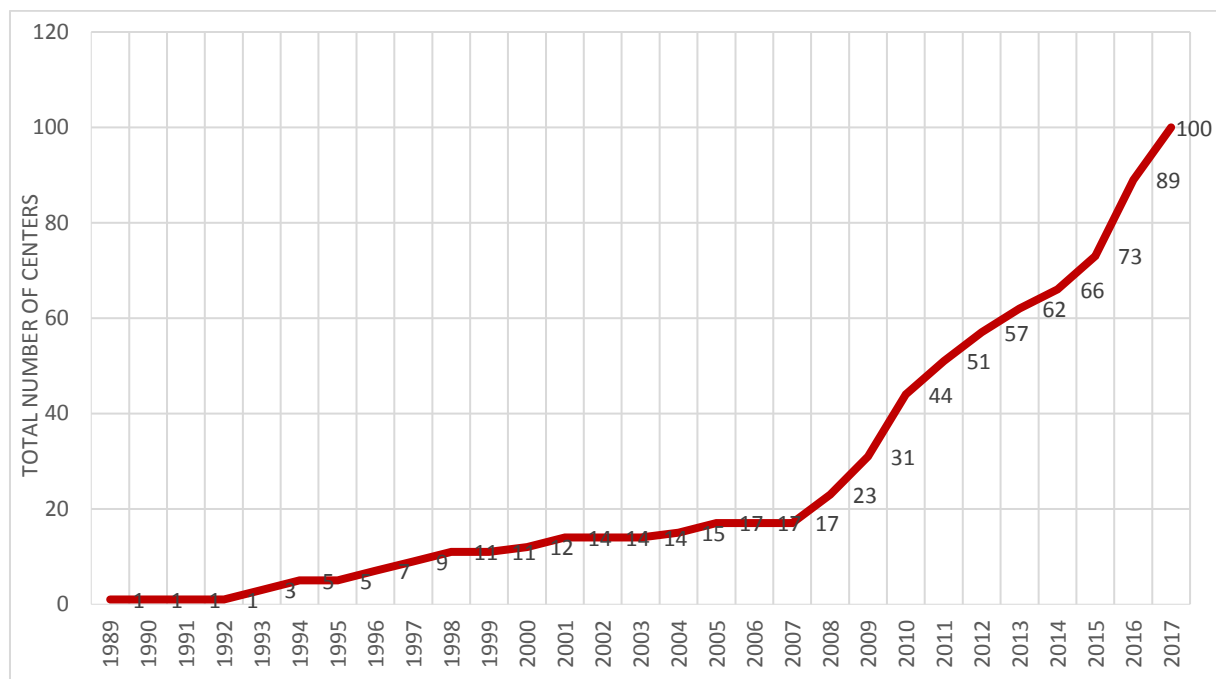
By the year 2017, about 100 Women’s and Gender Studies Centres (WGSCs) at public and foundation universities existed in Turkey, both in big and in small cities. Out of these centres, 13 WGSCs are included in the research sample for this study based on certain criteria. The research project examines the institutionalisation and transformation processes of WGSCs at universities in their relation to academia, state, and civil society in Turkey.

Based on expert interviews and document collections, the project investigates representatives’ statements, websites, activities (such as teaching, research, publication and events), as well as institutional documents for a purposeful selected qualitative sample of WGSCs. Thereby, the study gains insights into both the different and shared academic and political motivations that shape the field of WGSCs at universities in Turkey.

Following a literature review on Women’s and Gender Studies in Turkey, the US and UK, as well as Germany, a web search on WGSCs in Turkey was carried out to create an inventory for the purpose of selecting the WGSCs to take into consideration for a deeper analysis in this study. Subsequently, the research sample was designed based on certain criteria to represent WGSCs from: different central and periphery regions of Turkey; early and recently established centres; different types of university funding (state vs. foundation); and WGSCs with different political-ideological orientations evident in their activities, discourses, and collaboration partners.

The literature on WGSCs as the primary academic institutional form of the discipline starts to appear in the early 2000s. Prior to this date, the field of Women’s and Gender Studies was constituted of a growing literature by the first generation of WGS scholars which addressed the structural issues faced by women in Turkey, mostly from the perspective of a Kemalist-modernist paradigm. The primary reference book of this period was written by Nermin Abadan Unat, entitled *Women in Turkish Society* (first edition in 1979), a compilation of several studies focusing on the status of women in family, at work, in politics, and in society. The existing literature on WGSCs has developed in the last two decades and mainly gives rather descriptive information about the existing units’ main profiles, goals, and activities, which are reflected in their precepts and/or websites (Çilingiroğlu 2001; Bahar-Özvarış & Akın 2003; Eroğlu 2004; Alptekin 2011; Balcı 2016). Keresteçioğlu and Özman’s work presents the first example of analysis of the centres presenting a critical approach towards neoliberalism’s intervention in universities and is based on document collection and semi-structured interviews with the directors and other members working at a small group of WGSCs (2017: 182). The authors conclude that “women’s/gender studies currently face a threat under the neoliberal politics’ weakening of and transforming feminist knowledge production in line with its own political and strategic priorities.” Another work conducted by Savaş et.al. (2018) is based on a survey study in which the research areas of WGSCs’ directors, centres’ activities, opportunities, education programmes, problems, and possible solutions are investigated. These publications form important sources of primary information on the characteristics of these units, as they focus on them as central research objects. However, their comprehension is limited if one wants to understand the dynamics and driving forces behind the foundation and operation processes of these units. With our research, we fill the void in which the institutionalisation and transformation processes of these entities are analysed thoroughly and multi-dimensionally, in a design where the perspectives of interactions with academia, state and civil society structures are taken into consideration as crucial elements.

Due to the centralised structure of the higher education system in Turkey, the WGSCs are not autonomous. They are founded with the decision of the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) and governed by the rectorate’s office within universities. The higher education system in Turkey dates back to *Darülfünun* (House of Science) of Istanbul which was founded during the Ottoman Empire in 1863 and kept its existence until the early years of the Turkish Republic (Hatiboğlu 2000: 99; Mizikaci 2006: 15). Since then the university system in Turkey has gone through several transformation periods in line with the political history of the nation. The most prevalent development in the field of higher education realised following the 1980 coup d’etat and was the enactment of the Higher Education Law No. 2547, which established the CoHE as “an autonomous body with a legal personality which governs all higher education, directs the activities of the institutions of higher education, within the context of duties and powers given by the Higher Education Law (YÖK 1988, Art. 6).”<sup>1</sup> The role of the CoHE for WGSCs is immense as they are dependent on the approval of the CoHE to be established. Additionally, there were two official recommendations by the CoHE in regards to the institutionalisation of the centres at universities. The first was issued in 1995 and the second in 2016. Both directives, though remaining merely as advisory, asked for a wider-expansion of the centres and the further integration of women and gender courses into the higher education curricula. In the post-2015 period, we witness the CoHE taking a bigger role in the expansion of the centres and the network building, through organising annual centres’ meetings together with the centres’ representatives country-wide.



The graph, which was created by the research team, shows that the number of WGSCs in Turkey has increased dramatically and steadily since 2008, increasing the number of WGSCs by more than 400%. The signalling transformation of the field in size calls for a greater exploratory study on what types of dynamics and factors lie behind the numerical growth of the field.

<sup>1</sup> The translated version of the law is taken from Mizikaci 2006: 28.

As part of the field research, the researchers visited the centres, and in cases where libraries and archives existed, collected documents, such as leaflets, posters and conference programmes, as well as conducting expert interviews. In total 28 expert interviews were conducted in Turkish between October 2017 and January 2019 by members of the research group.

According to Meuser and Nagel when referring to expert interviews, the expert is characterised by an “institutionalised competence for the construction of reality”. Expertise can be described as the opportunity to “hegemonise in practice in a particular organisational functional context” and thus “to structure the conditions of action of other actors” (Meuser & Nagel 2008: 466-470). Thereby, experts are not seen as “objects” of the research, but as “witnesses” to the processes being researched (Gläser & Laudel 2009: 10–11).

The expert interviews were transcribed, coded and categorised with reference to Flick’s proposal for Thematic Coding (1995) which is based on the Grounded Theory method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

Our research focus concerns ‘Application and Research Centres’, which are not only the first institutional model through which Women’s and Gender Studies found a place for itself in academia since the early 1990s, but are also dynamic institutional academic spaces constituted through ongoing contestations between the state, academia and civil society. Therefore, in this research, by focusing on WGSCs, we attempt to explore the ways in which these important institutional units have been established and transformed on the basis of continuing struggle among different influential actors and institutions. The field is far more than the centres, but embraces the centres as an institutional form and practice. WGSCs in this case become just one lens to read the overall picture of Women’s and Gender Studies.

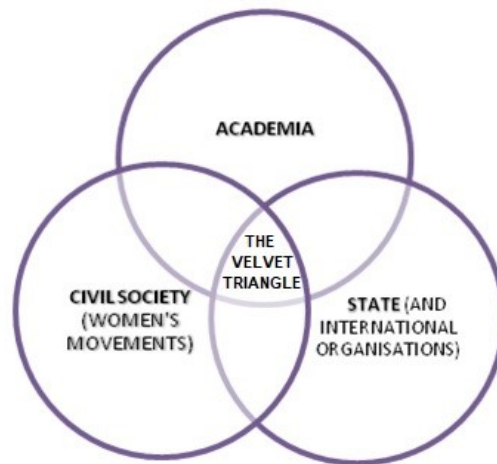
We have several sub-questions concerning this general process of institutional formation/transformation of WGSCs: What kinds of support and barriers did WGSCs face since their foundation? To what extent women’s movements have been, and still are, a reference point for the institutionalised Women’s and Gender Studies? What are the impacts and repercussions of the changes in national and international political conjuncture on these centres?

For this purpose, the ‘Velvet Triangle of Gender Politics’ developed by Woodward (2001: 35-38) to conceptualise women’s policy networks is used as an analytical perspective. Woodward notes, how “actors with their specific gender-policy related biographies interact in a multilevel process” (ibid: 35). She uses the concept to describe the interplay of (1) feminist oriented bureaucrats and politicians, (2) women academics and (3) speakers of the women’s movements (ibid: 36).<sup>2</sup> In our study, we attempt to apply Woodward’s model from the angle of academia – in the sense that the common characteristic of the interviewed experts is that they are all academics and it is then

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<sup>2</sup> Subsequent to Woodward, Kandiyoti brings also together different elements and actors of influence when contextualising the development of Women’s and Gender Studies (WGS) in the context of Turkey. In this regard, she argues that WGS “are the product of the confluence of at least three temporally distinct, but mutually reinforcing sets of influences: women’s movements; the epistemological/ analytic challenges of feminism to academia; and the global ‘institutionalisation’ of standards and mechanisms for gender equality through the workings of the United Nations (...) system and major international donors” (Kandiyoti 2010: 166–167). While skipping the role and the influence of the state institutions, Kandiyoti draws a bigger emphasis on the influence of international actors, besides of the role of the women’s movements and ‘academic feminism’, for the institutionalisation of WGS in Turkey.

possible to visualise Woodward's velvet triangle as an overlapping triangle formed through the convergence of the three fields:



It is concluded that the analytical concept of Woodward's velvet triangle has produced diverse results when applied to the analysis of WGSCs in Turkey. The first category of the results is *the velvet triangle itself*, in which we find centres that accommodated scholars with transitive identities; they were under multiple influences; and involved in joint activities that are relevant to all the three fields. The second category is *the overlapping spaces of the two fields: academia-civil society and academia-state*. It is important to note here that these relations were shaped differently in the different phases of WGSCs in Turkey. One general finding is that in the foundation phase of the centres (the 1990s), the activist academics take up important roles in the foundation processes. The third category is *no overlapping spaces* formed among the three distinctive fields. For several cases, we realised that there were no overlapping spaces formed, or scholars with multiple identities detected. The scholars we interviewed were assigned to these positions and during the interview they put forward only their academic and administrative identities in the respective centres, or universities.

Furthermore, our study shows that, WGS scholars demanded the establishment, and struggled for the foundation, of the centres. This generation of scholars granted us the visibility and the legitimacy of an autonomous academic discipline with different institutional models. Despite the lack of resources, there has been a considerable amount of literature developed in the field of WGS. Besides, the changes in the activities and discourses, and differences in content and approaches in education and research pose a new threat to the field: Does this raise the question whether there is a critical epistemological break in Women's and Gender Studies at universities?

The empirical data show that in general we cannot identify a basic political-ideological orientation that characterises a single WGSC. Moreover, diverse WGS scholars' political-ideological stances and/or various scientific paradigms over the years shape the centres differently. For five cases within the research sample a clear allocation to a specific scientific paradigm is difficult. The analysis of the seven other cases point to the fact that paradigm shifts appear within and between the WGSCs: These centres adopted in particular modernist, feminist and/or neo-conservative approaches. The selection of the centres' names, topics, and terms such as 'gender equality' vs. 'gender justice' indicates the WGSCs' different academic concepts of women and/or gender.

According to Bourdieu (1998), who developed his concept for the Western higher education system, universities are embedded in a social – scientific – field, which operates quite autonomously with its own rules. It can be understood as a ‘battle field’ between the actors of the field who have different levels of power based on their ‘scientific capital’ and thus can influence paradigm shifts within their academic discipline. However, our analysis suggests that the paradigm shifts in WGSCs in Turkey can be explained, by considering the influential factors of generational belonging, academic feminism<sup>3</sup>, and international WGS debates, as well as especially recognising the impacts of the civil society and the state.

According to most of the literature, Women’s and Gender Studies (Centres) and women’s movements – as the most prominent actors from civil society for the WGSCs – have a close and mutual relationship in Turkey (e.g. Arat 1993; Sancar 2003; Binder & Dağ 2020). Following the concept of the velvet triangle, this is not surprising and reflected in other national contexts, e.g. in European countries and the US, there is a close relationship between women academics and social activists (of the women’s movements). For some cases within our research sample this thesis can be confirmed by our data. However, for the other selected cases civil society organisations did not play an important role for the centres’ institutionalisation and transformation processes even though all centres aim at reaching women in society with their activities.

The varying intensity of the relationship between WGSCs and civil society actors can be explained with the centre’s foundation process (bottom-up vs. top-down), the affiliated scholars’ political-ideological stances, and the funding of the university, but not with the sample’s selection criteria ‘old-new’ and ‘centre-periphery’. The interview partners’ different approaches towards civil society (organisations) show that the debate ‘civil society vs. academia’ is very controversial and not decided within the WGSCs in Turkey (yet). At least on the level of relations and interactions, we argue that all of the selected WGSCs are more or less in contact with the actors from civil society. In our sample, we could trace this especially for civil society organisations with Kemalist, feminist or religious-conservative orientations, and less so for organisations from the LGBTI+ and Kurdish women’s movement. This means that the diversity of the women’s movements in Turkey is only partly represented in the WGSCs (Karakaşoğlu 2017).

Relations with the state was the final perspective we concentrated on in our analytical understanding of the material. By state, we refer to the specific state institutions, which have been tagged as influential in the institutionalisation and transformation processes of the centres during the expert interviews. While explaining the influence of the state, the interview partners list several national and international political developments. And the referred to state institutions in this case hold the agency of the transmission of this influence generated by the political conjuncture. The international political conjectural events are listed as: the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1985, the UN Beijing Conference in 1995, the start of EU access negotiations in the late 1990s and to the early 2000s, and finally the Istanbul Convention in 2011. The national political conjectural developments that affected Women’s and Gender Studies in Turkey are listed as the foundation of the Directorate General on Women’s Status in 1990, the issuing of *the Approach Document* and the establishment of the Unit on Academic Women’s Studies (UoAWS) at the Council of Higher Education (CoHE), the emerging discourse of the president in regards to gender equality, and finally the processes and reactions to the Peace Petition, Emergency State and the Governmental Decrees (KHKs) in the post-2015 period.

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<sup>3</sup> For a definition and a chronology of the institutionalisation of academic feminism in Turkey, see Uçan Çubukçu in O’Neil & Bencivenga 2018.

Despite the diverse opinions on the presence and role of the CoHE in the field, the majority of the experts find the function and the role of the council important for the expansion of WGSCs. Also, it is seen that the same experts evaluated the foundation of the UoAWS and the issuing of the Approach Document in a different context than they did for the role of the CoHe and the UoAWS in the government's reaction on the processes of Peace Petition and in the framework of the instalment of the Emergency State, although all the mentioned processes were generated and executed under the same roof, that is to say by the CoHE.

We draw three main conclusions from this picture: First, the immense importance of the international network Turkey is situated in and the changing domestic political climate for the establishment and further development of these academic entities could be proved. Second, from late 1980s to the early 2000s, international conjuncture was the dominant political factor in the institutionalisation processes of the centres. In the post-2010 period the influence of international conjuncture was gradually replaced by the conjuncture created by the developments in the domestic politics of Turkey. And third, in the period of 2017-2018 a new institutional landscape for the WGSCs presents two important observations: 1.) *'The intellectual shrinkage of WGS'*, despite the numerical expansion of the centres, taking place in terms of personnel and intellectual formation and freedom. For instance, the field study proves the diminishing of MA and PhD programmes both quantitatively and qualitatively. This shrinkage is a top-down process and enforced by university management, who after the political and governmental processes have become adversary and critical towards the field and the WGSCs. One result of this shrinkage is that scholars are divided into *insiders vs. outsiders*. The remaining scholars are now working to maintain the current status quo of the centres and struggle in re-aligned institutions, under the strict control of university management, within the waning of academic freedoms. In that sense, WGSCs are *'in retreat and preserve'* mode, seeking to protect the field and its institutional space from further shrinkage. Whereas outsiders continue their academic and non-academic activities through outside university options such as solidarity academies, informal scholarly networks, and specific fellowships in abroad that allow their continued contribution to the scholarship. This finding is applicable for the centres who were openly critical to the government and for those who were adopting a critical gender lens in their activities before these processes began. We do not see parallel results by the centres in which scholars' research interests concentrated on women from the perspective of family, or in centres which had the predominance of religious sciences in its organisational structures.

Based on these finding, we can observe that the concept of the 'Velvet Triangle of Gender Politics' has been shown to lose its influence in recent years as an engine for the academic work on women and gender in Turkey. Instead, we see that the state has taken over the field of WGS through tools of centralisation and control (CoHE, Directorate General on Women's Status), as well as directing e.g in our research sample we came across one WGSC which had been established at a foundation university and was working in close cooperation with a government-organised NGO. In all other cases the WGSCs try to stay – after the changing face of personnel from the top-down after the failed coup d'etat in 2016 – 'neutral' in terms of political activities and concentrate on purely academic output.

Turkey, due to its political circumstances, is currently a difficult research field. This is especially true for the academic field, which is threatened by restrictions in freedom of speech and the growing influence of the restrictive government on state universities. Many critical scholars have been expelled from their positions and suspicion and mistrust amongst different political camps, also reflected in academia, is growing. Thus, collection of data and the use of experts interviews from the field has proved to be very sensitive and in some cases even impossible. Consequently, the anonymisation strategy for this study was developed both in consideration of the (ethical) standards for qualitative research and of the feminist methodology, which should enable visibility of and

simultaneously ensure protection for the interview partners. Thus, depending on the form of publication, we argue that the anonymisation strategy has to be negotiated with the interview partners in a continuous communication process.

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#### Research sample:

İstanbul Üniversitesi Women's Problems Research and Application Centre (*Kadın Sorunları Araştırma ve Uygulama Merkezi*) KSAUM (1989)

Ankara Üniversitesi Women's Problems Research and Application Centre (*Kadın Sorunlarını Araştırma ve Uygulama Merkezi*) KASAUM (1993)

Orta Dođu Teknik Üniversitesi Gender and Women's Studies Department (*Toplumsal Cinsiyet ve Kadın Çalışmaları Anabilim Dalı*) TCKÇ ABD (1994)

Çukurova Üniversitesi Women's Problems Research Centre (*Kadın Sorunları Araştırma Merkezi*) KADAUM (1994)

Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi Women's Studies and Gender Equality Research and Application Centre (*Kadın Çalışmaları ve Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliği Araştırma ve Uygulama Merkezi*) KASAUM (1997)

Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi Women's Problems Research and Application Centre (*Kadın Araştırmaları ve Uygulama Merkezi*) DEKAUM (2009)

Dicle Üniversitesi Women's Problems Application and Research Centre (*Kadın Sorunları Uygulama ve Araştırma Merkezi*) DÜKSAM (2010)

Anadolu Üniversitesi Women's Studies Application and Research Centre (*Kadın Çalışmaları Uygulama ve Araştırma Merkezi*) AKAUM (2010)

Sabancı Üniversitesi Gender and Women's Studies Excellence Centre (*Toplumsal Cinsiyet ve Kadın Çalışmaları Mükemmeliyet Merkezi*) SU Gender (2010)



Kocaeli Üniversitesi Women's Problems Research and Application Centre (*Kadın Sorunlarını Araştırma ve Uygulama Merkezi*) KASAUM (2011)

İstanbul Ticaret Üniversitesi Woman and Family Application and Research Centre (*Kadın ve Aile Uygulama ve Araştırma Merkezi*) KAUAM (2013)

Marmara Üniversitesi Women's Studies Application and Research Centre in the Economic and Social Field (*Ekonomik ve Sosyal Alanda Kadın Çalışmaları Uygulama ve Araştırma Merkezi*) ESKAR (2016)

Anonymised WGSC representing the centres which are newly established at state universities in provincial areas of Turkey.

Map of the research sample:<sup>4</sup>

## Research Sample



### Keywords:

Women's and Gender Studies; Women's Studies; Gender Studies; Academic Feminism; Women's and Gender Application and Research Centres; Universities in Turkey; Higher Education; Academic Freedom; Velvet Triangle of Gender Politics; Contemporary Turkey Studies

<sup>4</sup> This map is licensed under CC-BY-3.0 ([www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/deed.de](http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/deed.de)) and from the Ginkgo Maps Project ([www.ginkgomaps.com](http://www.ginkgomaps.com)). Some changes have been made to this map. The original map can be viewed under the title #2: Landkarte Türkei (Türkei: Umrisskarte II) on [www.ginkgomaps.com/landkarten\\_tuerkei.html](http://www.ginkgomaps.com/landkarten_tuerkei.html). The anonymised WGSC, which is located in the Eastern Black Sea Region of Turkey, is not marked on the map to secure its anonymisation.

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[www.blickwechsel-tuerkei.de/en/projects/current/Women\\_Studies/index.php](http://www.blickwechsel-tuerkei.de/en/projects/current/Women_Studies/index.php)