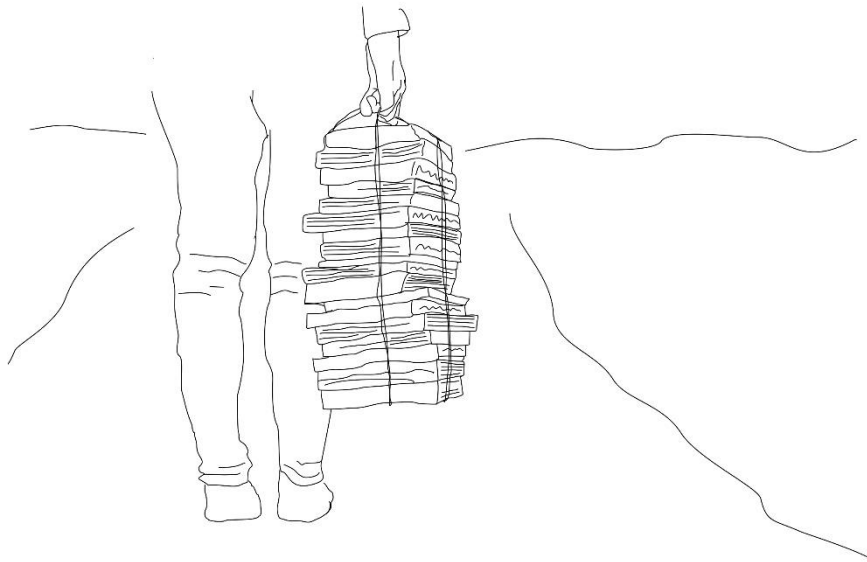


## Research Project Report “Comparing women’s movements in different cities in Turkey”

I. Introduction by the project manager and editor of the research report entitled “Comparing women’s movements in different cities in Turkey”: *Preliminary remarks on the political frameworks and their impact on the research process*

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## **I. Introduction by the project manager and editor of the research report entitled “Comparing women’s movements in different cities in Turkey”:**

### ***Preliminary remarks on the political frameworks and their impact on the research process***

A research project that aspires to analyse such a special form of social protest in Turkey as the women’s movements — when framed by such drastic political events as the Gezi protests (2013) and the attempted coup (2016) — must precisely and explicitly thematise this “frame”. As desired by the logic of third-party-funded university projects, the financing and infrastructural equipment provided have helped this project come to fruition; the project team has disbanded and the members have joined new projects. The core data, to which our study refers to and from which knowledge is drawn, was collected between 2014 and 2015, at a time when the interviewees were still recovering from the experiences of the Gezi protests and (although they did not yet know it) the drastic experiences of the night of the attempted coup and — even more disturbingly — the resulting executive orders which were declared under the ongoing state of emergency.

Furthermore, the increase in military interventions in the predominantly Kurdish-populated regions of south-eastern Turkey, following which war-like conditions prevailed, imposed limitations on the on-site surveys in Diyarbakır, as the security of the staff could no longer be assured. Although some interviews with the representatives of the Kurdish women’s organisations were carried out in other regions of Turkey, some interviews could not be performed at all. Further limitations were placed on sample-gathering owing to the limited field access to the representatives of some Kurdish and religious–conservative women’s organisations. In both cases, the request for an interview was rejected as neither of the field researchers were viewed as members of the movement.

As the research team, we decided to be as transparent as possible about the framework within which we carried out the project. This included a commitment to treat the data gathered before the coup attempt as such and to formulate the insight that, under the given research conditions, an “actualisation” in terms of, for instance, a “post-inquiry” of the

interviewees was not possible, even though it would undoubtedly be very worthwhile and, therefore, desirable.

Would the results presented here be replicable under the given circumstances, a claim that quantitative–empirical surveys should hope to place on the reliability and validity of their data? We do not believe that they would be, because the most recent decisions taken under the extraordinary measures — including the closing of associations and women’s and gender research centres and the freezing of subsidies — have, without a doubt, had an impact on the self-understanding of the organisations, on their radius and forms of action, on their solidarity and on their dividing lines. The social fragmentation in Turkey expressed by the referendum results for the presidential system held on 11 April 2017 points to the deep splits between different social actors, including women’s political activists, which would have been reflected in the interviews.

Are the research results presented here therefore obsolete? Given the qualitative–empirical design of this study, which sits at the interface between social and cultural scientific observation and surveying methods, we do not think so. Science cannot allow itself to be dominated by the commonly expressed desire to keep everything up to date; science is about capturing historical processes and analysing their genesis. In this project, we also sought to understand the research findings on the forms of expression and action, topics, activists and coalition politics that arose during the years between these two tumultuous political events, which serve as a focal point for the process, as this is of particular interest from a historical point of view.

Scientific analysis of women’s and gender politics under the current political conditions in Turkey is more relevant than ever, as evidenced by, among other things, the fact that around 40,000<sup>1</sup> individuals took part in the feminist night walk held in March 2017, setting a new record.

The severity of the changes experienced under the current political climate by the field

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<sup>1</sup>This number was cited in several newspaper articles, e.g. <http://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/dilara-gurcu/taksimde-40-bin-kadin-8-mart-feminist-gece-yuruyusunu-duzenleyen-kadinlar-anlatiyor>, 16800.

chosen for study is made evident by the ban imposed on the following associations, with whose representatives we conducted interviews.<sup>2</sup> We view it as our ethical duty to name those associations here, as a stand against political forgetfulness:

- Anka Kadın Araştırma Merkezi, Ankara (Anka Women’s Research Centre)
- Jîn Haber Ajansı, Diyarbakır (Jin Women’s News Agency)
- Kınalı Eller Kadın Derneği, Diyarbakır (Women’s Association Hands with Henna)
- Kongreya Jinên Azad, Diyarbakır (Congress of Free Women)
- Selîs Kadın Derneği, Diyarbakır (Women’s Association Selis)

At this point, particular thanks must be paid to all the interviewees across Turkey who agreed to be our interview partners and made themselves fully available to participate in the interviews and most of whom were initially prepared to give those interviews under their own names. A further indicator of the highly explosive political nature of this field of research and of our research results is the fact that, owing to the political state of emergency in Turkey, and in part as a reaction to our inquiry, some interviewees subsequently requested that we anonymise their interview excerpts. This concern was not raised during the course of data collection. Additionally, the project was directly affected by the fact that, in the framework of the decisions made on academy and academicians under the extraordinary measures, our cooperation partners at the universities of Istanbul and Ankara were urged to apply for early retirement and were subsequently cut off from the institutional connections and resources to which they previously had access.

## Purpose of the research project

The project “Comparing women’s movements in different cities in Turkey”, which was funded by the Mercator Foundation as part of the interdisciplinary programme entitled “Blickwechsel: Contemporary Turkey Studies” (“Blickwechsel: Studien zur zeitgenössischen Türkei”), analysed the diversity of women’s movements throughout the country, which

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<sup>2</sup> <http://tr.boell.org/de/die-frauenbewegung-der-tuerkei-widerstand-aufstand-sieg>

embody a diverse range forms of action and organisational structures and which strive to achieve gender equality in Turkey. Furthermore, in qualitative interviews with activists and scientists, topics and areas of action dealt with by women’s movements — such as female employment, body politics and gender violence in transnational, urban and rural spaces — were discussed.

The focus of the research was placed on the identity and coalition policies of different women’s and gender political movements in various regions of Turkey. In this way, the study moved away from the approach to women’s and gender political organisations in Turkey that has, so far, focused primarily on the large, western metropolitan areas. Instead of a deficit-oriented approach, comparable to the victim discourse used in the German media to discuss Muslim migrant women from Turkey (Steinbach & Cremer, 2006; Karakaşoğlu, 2006), the focus of the analysis was placed on the activities and debates undertaken by women’s movements, which view themselves as socially critical and which are developing alternatives and actively shaping politics.

The main focus of international feminist debate has shifted to questions of identity and related power positions since gender differences were acknowledged in the 1990s. Owing to the processes of globalisation, transnationalisation, neoliberal restructuring and debates on identity politics, international gender research has identified a “crisis in feminist movements”, especially in “Western” societies, since the 1990s (Schulz, 2007: 8). Even in contemporary Turkey, feminists and women’s groups, in particular Kurdish and religious-conservative activists, continue to focus on identity during critical interventions. There are therefore groups that define themselves as radical, lesbian, queer, trans, socialist, religious-conservative, Kemalist, dis/abled, Kurdish, Alevi and Armenian. However, despite the deconstruction of the collective subject “we women”, which has also occurred in Turkey, the continued existence of structural discrimination and violence against women raises questions about how to constructively deal with diversity, whether solidarity can be developed and whether coalitions can be formed.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The concept of gender is re-constructed and re-centered as a homogenous, universal category due to the interventions by queer, feminist and post-structuralist theoreticians and the identity policies of social movement’s (Kerner, 2007).

The positioning of women, as well as gender and family relations, have “not only undergone a rapid change in Turkey in recent decades, but are marked by dramatic contradictions, inequalities and discrepancies” (Kreile, 2012: 306). In particular since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) took power in 2002, the relationship between religion, politics and gender has been redefined in an interplay with neoliberal politics and Turkey’s EU membership negotiations (Dedeoğlu & Elveren, 2012).

Adopting a differentiated view of women’s movements as a civil societal reaction to gender and family relations and policies in Turkey emerges to be a research field that has been almost entirely ignored by German-speaking research conducted on Turkey.<sup>4</sup>

Due to this background, the results of our research project are of particular interest because, in scientific debate on contemporary Turkey, at least a uniform women’s movement that works beyond ideological borders on common issues, publicly criticising gender relations and, in doing so, formulating a radical social critique is mentioned (cf. Somersan, 2011). In this way, the women’s movement (in its singular form) is also discussed as an important agent in civil society, primarily in opposition to the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) and, therefore, as a pioneer of social change in Turkey (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2011: 48). If religious–conservative women’s organisations are defined as part of an independent religious–conservative women’s movement (as we have done so in the framework of our research project owing to the way in which religious–conservative and secular women’s organisations delineate themselves from one another), then opposition to the AKP cannot be presented as a unifying feature of women’s movements in Turkey. The identity and coalition policies adopted by women’s and gender political activists in the large cities of Ankara and Diyarbakır, as well as in smaller cities on the Aegean coast (Muğla and Denizli) and on the Black Sea coast (Trabzon, Artvin and Hopa), were compared and contrasted in qualitative–empirical single-case studies, in order to examine the regional differences in these policies and other defining factors, as well as the coalitions developed

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<sup>4</sup> For example, see the research fields of Center for Studies on Turkey and Integration at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Turkey Europe Center at the University of Hamburg, Orient-Institut in İstanbul, or the academical network: Network Turkey. Moreover, the Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung) does not sufficiently focus on gender relationships under the heading of Turkey (2011, 2012).

between women’s and gender political activists with different ideologies.

The data collected from documents, field observations and expert interviews provides an insight into the influence of diverse socio-economic and political conditions on the topics addressed as well as the form of expressing these topics that is adopted by regional women’s movements (in the plural form). Transnational, national and local networking processes have been included where appropriate. Unfortunately, women’s movements from other ethnic–religious minorities, such as the Alevis, Jews or Armenians, were not taken into consideration due to time and financial limitations despite the fact that an analysis of those groups would have undoubtedly yielded findings that are of interest to our research question as well.

While gathering the empirical data and conducting the data analyses, the following questions served as research guidelines:

- Which topics, areas of action and movement, strategies, means of communication have the particular power to mobilise women’s movements in Turkey?
- What definitions are given for the terms “feminism”, “women’s movement(s)” and “gender”? Does the category “being woman” continue to be a crystallisation point for the social movement(s)?
- To what extent do women’s and gender political activists organise collectively — under the category of “being woman” — in the selected research fields? How can the various movement communities be described through an intersectional perspective? To what extent is diversity acknowledged and reacted to by women’s movements while, among other things, choosing issues to address or selecting strategies? How important are identity politics in this context and which coalition policies are therefore (not) implemented?
- What are the common features and differences between women’s movements in large cities versus smaller (provincial) cities? To what extent can central and peripheral movement centres be identified?

## Main research findings and further research required

The summaries of the research findings provided below set out the main results obtained from our study, which are examined separately in greater detail in each section of this research project.

- Women’s movements cover a diverse range of their topics and forms of action depending on their identity-based self-alignments and, as such, they are a central, dynamic part of the oppositional social movements in Turkey.
- In theory, it is appropriate to analyse, using an intersectional perspective, women’s movements in Turkey as social movements in their threefold positioning in regional, national and transnational space.
- The empirical findings show that it makes sense to speak of women’s movements in plural form, because political and ideological differences (from radical feminist to religious–conservative) as well as regional differences in Turkey (central, south-eastern, southwestern, north-eastern) have a significant impact on which topics each movement addresses (the environment, ethnic self-determination, etc.) and which forms of action they use (street protests, saloon events, etc.) as well as with regard to the possibilities for developing coalitions with other groups. Controversial debates are held in particular on the topics of ethnicity, religion/conservatism and sex/ sexuality/ sexual orientation and on what forms of organisation are appropriate to the political aims and whether certain groups make suitable coalition partners. The question of whether women’s organisations can accept men as coalition partners and whether autonomy in content and forms of action can be ensured if a group accepts State support are also controversial issues that are discussed internally and with other women’s movements. Ethnicity, gender/ sexuality/ sexual orientation, political ideology and religious identity/ self-description were identified by the experts as particularly dividing or unifying aspects of social identity. On the other hand, social class and age/ generational differences were hardly mentioned.
- In this context, it is important to note that women’s and gender researchers at Turkish universities in all regions, regardless of age, do not usually differentiate between their identity as an academic and their identity as an activist, but rather they



see their academic work as contributing to strengthening the women’s movement(s).

- In the chosen research locations, for the research period (2014–2016) we identified 12 regional women’s coalitions, which were extremely heterogeneous in nature and which targeted but did not limit themselves to specific groups. This is evidence of the fact that gender, which was decentralised or rather deconstructed in the framework of (post)structuralist, postcolonial and queer–feminist critique in activist and scientific discourse in Turkey, nonetheless functions as a crystallisation point for social movements in Turkey — at least on certain occasions.
- Despite the political–ideological differences between the women’s movements, (temporary) coalitions are formed around the main common themes such as gender violence, body policies, “child brides”, women’s rights, education, employment and women’s political participation, as well as 8 March International Women’s Day or the demand on implementation of international standards such as the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Another question that can be answered with further research is what kind of an effect the highly varied socio-economic and political–historical conditions in the various regions of Turkey have on the development and expression of the women’s movements in each region. Additional topics of further research include, among other things, the impact of the political upheaval in Turkey on women’s movements, the importance of social media in forming coalitions between women’s movements or the special role of Istanbul in developing women’s and gender political activism in all regions of Turkey.

### **Publication format and languages of the publication**

We have decided to publish this final report online, as it is an internationally accessible form of publication. This kind of publication also complies with main aim of the project: to make the results easily accessible to the experts that participated in this research and to a broader community which is interested in this topic.

The individual contributions authored or co-authored by the team members describe each

aspect of the findings in the form of separate articles. The report was redacted and edited by the project manager, Yasemin Karakaşoğlu. She bears responsibility for ensuring basic coherence among the texts. Nevertheless, each text, for which the author was individually responsible, addresses one specific topic and is designed to be understood independently of the other texts. In line with actor-centred research ethics, it is important that we publish the texts in the mother tongues of the interviewees, given that a project such as this, which sits at the interface between science and social movements, must strive to return its results into the field from whence they were drawn and thanks to whose participation it was developed, so that the results may be reflected and discussed as part of the requirement of participative feminist research. In addition to German and English, which are the relevant languages for scientific publication in Germany, the report has also been translated into Turkish and Kurdish, the primary languages used in the research location, with the aim of ensuring that the results are not only fed into academic discourse but also give activists on the field -where self-organisation takes place- an opportunity to analyse our findings critically.

In addition, we think that we provide the readers with the option of choosing the chapters of their interests by making the independent text contributions electronically accessible, in the form of a thematically categorized “compilation”.

The publication contains three sections, focusing on the topics of definitions (1), descriptions and analyses of women’s movements (2) and the examples of coalitions between women’s movements (3). The individual articles provided under each section deal with the perception of “being-woman” in the field (1.A) and the suggested definitions provided by women’s and gender political experts for the term “(feminist) women’s movement(s)”, in both its singular and plural form (1.B). They also provide an overview of the women’s movements observed in the field (2.A) and highlight the Kurdish Women’s Movement as a particularly important actor, which — depending on one’s political position — is seen as a model to strive towards or to avoid altogether (2.B). Finally, they identify the issues that divide and unify the women’s movements (3.A) and describe the women’s coalitions present in various regions (3.A).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Interview sample, a list of interviewees, a map of the four research regions and the interview details are provided in the section “IV. Attachment”. We have also prepared a chronology of women’s and gender politics in the Ottoman Empire and in Turkey, in addition to short biographies of the key participants in this publication.

The contribution by Betül Yazar was placed at the end of this online publication to provide an outlook for the future. It is not based on this research project itself; the text is a transcript of a keynote speech which Betül Yazar delivered at the workshop “Building bridges: Networking Workshop on Women’s and Gender Politics in Turkey and Germany” on 1 October 2016 in Bremen. Given the way in which she embeds women’s and gender political discourse into the political framework and into social transformation processes, her contribution provides a meaningful theoretical–analytical complement to our empirically based insights into women’s and gender political movements in Turkey.

This online publication is part of a series of publications and announcements in which we have presented our findings for discussion. We have therefore presented our results during the course of the project in the form of published articles, conference presentations, a press kit to celebrate 8 March 2016, university lectures and press announcements to the broader public; we have also fed the results into various general–social and scientific–technical discourses. While preparing this final publication, we particularly valued the constructive criticisms received about the research design and results and the controversial discussions during four workshops held with scientists, experts and activists at the University of Bremen (at the beginning and the end of the research period) and at Ankara University and İstanbul University (May 2016), which were our partner universities for this project.

## Acknowledgements

At this point, it is important for me as the editor to thank the scientific staff involved in the project — Dr. Charlotte Binder, Aslı Polatdemir and, as additional support staff, doctoral scholarship holder Münevver Azizoğlu Bazan — for their great commitment under such unforeseen, challenging and geopolitically and linguistically complex conditions. Working with them was not only a professional, but also personal gain.

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