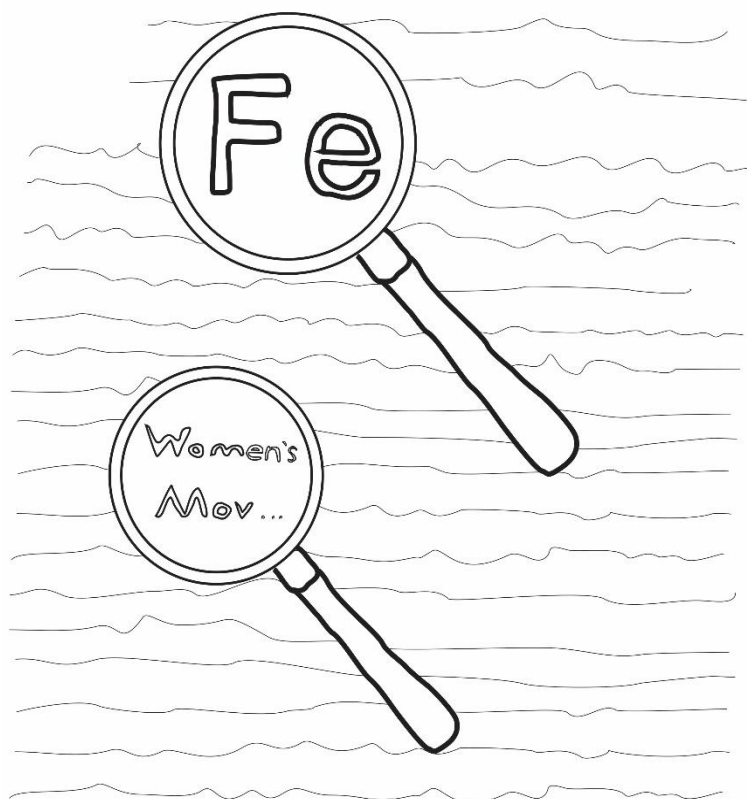


Research Project Report “Comparing women’s movements in different cities in Turkey”

III.1.B. (Feminist) women’s movement(s)? Definitions suggested by women’s and gender political experts

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A definition of the term “women’s movements” that respects the transnational, pluralist social forms of such movements should take into account both the breadth of cultural and social variation and the state of research on (New) Social Movements¹ and, in doing so, the definition should not be normatively judgmental, but rather empirically open. Based on the definition provided by Helma Lutz, Lenz (2010: 867–868) defines women’s movements as follows:

Mobilising collective actors who develop in different socio-historical milieus. In these, persons — primarily women — advocate a more substantial change in gender relations and the associated social inequality and devaluation. They criticise dominant gender models, norms and discourses and design alternatives that may lead to new norms. Women’s movements express themselves in and through modernisation processes and contribute to them in various ways — by promoting and influencing them, as well as by hindering and channelling them.

Lenz stresses in her definition the “inclinations regarding action theory” and the “practice (i.e. mobilisation and collective agency)” of women’s movements, under which the term “persons” is defined as “subjects of collective mobilisation” involved in the “reciprocal relationship between individualisation and the women’s movement” and in the “different experiences and concerns” to which people such as “female professionals, mothers, lesbians,

¹ The historical and social phenomenon of women’s movement(s)? can be understood on the basis of theories developed by New Social Movement Research. There are a vast number of definitions for the term “(new) social movements” (Lenz and Paetau, 2009: 37). A definition provided by Della Portas and Diani (1998: 16) was of particular value to this study; they describe the social movements as “(1) informal networks, based (2) on shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilise about (3) conflictual issues, through (4) the frequent use of various forms of protest”. This definition, in which the construction of a collective identity is not necessarily a criterion for defining a social movement, is both sufficiently specific and broad to be applicable to the research subject of women’s movements in Turkey. However, the concept of collective identity, discussed in Social Movement Research since the 1990s, is understood by most researchers as a “constitutive element of a social movement” (Daphie, 2011: 13) and should therefore also be taken into account in this study in reference to the collective subject “we women”.

migrant women and indeed men contribute in the context of their social position”. She refers to the formation of women’s movements in “different class, ethnic and cultural milieus”, i.e. to their development “in plural” (Lenz, 2010: 867–868). According to Lenz, activists from these plurally differentiated social movements engage on the micro-, meso- and macro-level of social structures with the aim of achieving a change in gender relations (Lenz, 2002: 36–37).

With this idea in mind, it was of interest to this empirical study to identify how the interviewed experts in Turkey dealt with the term “women’s movement” and, in particular, with the usage of the term in its plural form (“women’s movements”), which was introduced during the in-field stage of the research project. In order to determine how the term “women’s movement(s)” was used in the context of Turkey, interview transcripts were analysed comparatively, placing particular focus on the reactions to the interview question “What do you think the women’s movement is — or rather, the women’s movement(s)?” and the follow-up question “Which movements do you think can be included in the women’s movement(s)?”

It was identified that several interview partners described women’s movements as successful and dynamic social movements in Turkey (e.g. Bulut, 2015: 7; Anonymous, 2014: 15; Kapusuz Kütküt, 2014: 15; Üstün, 2014: 12). For instance, Serpil Sancar (2014: 17), a political scientist at Ankara University, spoke of the women’s movement as “a political organisational form” (bir siyasal örgütlenme) which promotes the freedom of women and organises activities to that end. Sancar (2014: 20) also provided a more detailed definition, as follows:

The women’s movement is a political movement which consists of a range of very different organised women’s groups which come together through cooperation and which centres on the actions and social activities required to achieve women’s liberation. [...] a political movement, we can speak of women’s groups and their political actions, which tend to build somewhat horizontal relationships, which act primarily in civil society and which focus primarily on ensuring freedom.

While Sancar places particular emphasis on the organisational methods and the activities of women’s groups and on their goal² — the “freedom of women” (kadınların özgürlüğü) — other interviewees placed emphasis on the reasons for conducting women’s and gender political activities. The women’s movement was described both as “a reaction” (bir reaksiyon) to and “a rebellion” (bir başkaldırı) against the centuries-long oppression (Anonymous, 2014: 20), as well as being born out of necessity (Semiz, 2014: 18). For the Kurdish female activist Mukaddes Alataş (2015: 17) from Diyarbakır, the women’s movement is equivalent to “groups which struggle for a basic existence against a male-dominated system, mentality [and] gender roles” (erkek egemen sisteme, zihniyete, toplumsal cinsiyet rollerine karşı bir varlık mücadelesi veren gruplardır).

Özlem Şahin Güngör (2015: 26) from Muğla, highlighted the very different political and ideological orientations within the women’s movement which, in her understanding, is also formed of women who engage in mixed-gender organisations. Several interviewees referred to the entanglement between capitalism and patriarchy and advocated an intersectional approach in relation to the social position of women (e.g. Akgün, 2015: 14; Can, 2015: 20; Çağlayan, 2014: 26). For Nurcan Vayıç Aksu (2015: 15) from the Socialist Women Assemblies (SKM) in Hopa, one’s physical identity should therefore be linked with one’s “class” identity during social struggles. Owing to the correlation between capitalist and patriarchal structures, Bahar Bostan (2015: 14) from Trabzon Bar Association/ Women’s Rights Commission also preferred not to create a sharp divide between the women’s movement and the “class movement” (sınıf hareketi).

While for some interviewees (Acar, 2014: 8; Cön, 2015: 14; Anonymous, 2015: 4) any social movement interested in “women’s problems”, i.e. that formulates political demands for gender equality, resembles a women’s movement, lawyer Ayla Varan (2015: 19) from Artvin defined the women’s movement as a movement that has developed while combating violence against women.

² For Gülsen Ülker (2014: 16) from Women’s Solidarity Foundation (KDV) in Ankara, women’s movement(s) can be characterised by their similar organisational methods and their shared goal.

Women’s movement(s) were, in part, viewed during the interviews from a very regional, Turkey-centric perspective. In this context, regular efforts are made to place the movement in a historical perspective.³

Another participant referred, among other things, to the women’s movement during the Ottoman Empire, whose participants pursued “a serious search for justice” (ciddi bir hak arayışı). However, after the establishment of specific rights for women under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, most organisations merely offered help and support without making demands for greater rights until the 1980s. After 1980, the concept of women as individuals gained traction and distinct women’s movements emerged in all spheres of life with the goal of broadening female consciousness (Anonymous, 2014: 15). This historical view helps to build a narrative surrounding the tradition of oppositional community-building among women. A concise example of this may be found in the statement by Sema Kendirici (2014: 15), chair of the Turkish Women’s Union (TKB), who spoke of “withholding” the history of the Ottoman women’s movement in the Republic of Turkey and who saw herself as being cheated out of a historical narrative.

In contrast to this perspective, which focuses on national development, Kurdish activist Sara Aktaş (2015: 11) sees the “women’s fight” (kadın mücadelesi) as a phenomenon that has accompanied the entire “history of civilisation” (uygarlık tarihi): “So yes, there is a history of female enslavement, but at the same time there’s also a history of female resistance”. In her view, to consider female resistance only from the 19th century onwards is a very “western-centric” (batı merkezli) and “orientalist” (oryantalist) view. Conversely, Aktaş celebrates the “Hypathia uprising” (Hypatia’nın direnişi) of Alexandria, which took place in the 4th century BC and which marked an important milestone for the women’s movement (Aktaş, 2015: 11)⁴. However, Alev Özkazanç (2014: 4), who teaches in Ankara, described the women’s movement as “a modern movement” (modern bir hareket) which was developed in the West.

³ In this context, several interviewees (e.g. Zin & Emek, 2015: 33-36) referred to female leaders, such as Kurdish and/or socialist activists.

⁴ For Figan Erozan, activist from Bodrum Women’s Solidarity Association (BKD), the women’s movement began around 1600 (Erozan & Karşlı, 2015: 8).

When invited to define the women’s movement(s), the interviewees referenced its connection with feminism in a range of ways. Before examining the relevant references extracted from the interview material, we shall first discuss the scientific understanding of feminism.

For Notz (2011: 12), the term “feminism” describes a political theory, a social movement and, since the 1970s and 1980s, a scientific discipline; it is a term without a clear historical genealogy (Thiessen, 2010: 37–38). Gerhard (2004: 294) describes feminism as “a social theory or a concept of a society [...] which has guided, grounded and carried the social movements of women, just like other ‘isms’ or ‘grand narratives’ of the modernity”. For Lenz, feminism as a political theory covers “the vast number of discourses and ways of thinking about freedom and autonomy, equality and relationality in gender relations” (Lenz, 2002: 36–37). In the scientific discourse on women’s and gender research in Turkey, the concept feminism, which relates to a “Western” tradition, also implies a demand for the fundamental transformation of patriarchal, hegemonic social structures (Somersan, 2011: 112). Serpil Sancar (2014: 28) of Ankara University also describes the feminist movement as a “systemic” (sistemsel), “structured” (yapısal) and anti-patriarchal organisation.

In order to do justice to various aspects of the concept used in the regions in which the research was carried out, the broad and inclusive definition provided by Rosemary Hennessy was adopted for this study. Hennessy (in Thiessen, 2010: 37–38) defines feminism as follows:

An ensemble of debates, critical insights, social struggles and emancipatory movements [...] which want to understand and change the patriarchal gender relations which damage all human beings, as well as the oppressing social powers which especially form the lives of women.

When discussing feminism, it became clear during the interviews whether the interviewee was a women’s movement activist without an academic background or a scientific expert on the subject who simultaneously thought of themselves as an activist in a/the women’s

movement.

Academics placed greater emphasis on the theoretical claim behind feminism; for example, Aksu Bora described almost all movements that dealt critically with women’s rights and the oppression of women, regardless of the sphere and form, as women’s movement(s). In her opinion (2014: 18), the concept of feminism played a connecting role: “There’s the theory of feminism, which can form links between these [women’s movements], and with this theory an interrelated, political movement develops.” In Bora’s opinion, the difference between women’s movements and, for example, the environmental movement or the consumerist movement in general and feminist movements is that feminism is capable of making a theoretical, structural connection between the oppression of women in different parts of society and the state of society as a whole. Feminism is therefore a holistic social theory that does not relate solely to women and women’s rights, but rather has the ability to unite all movements under the same umbrella: “It should be possible to look at the situation more holistically; feminism can do that too” (Bora, 2014: 18).

In contrast to Bora, Alev Özkazanç (2014: 4) referred to the close relationship between the feminist movement and the women’s movement, but emphasised her understanding that the term “women’s movement” should be used as a general term:

Of course, I mean that I don’t see the feminist movement as a part of the women’s movement. I think it is important to call it the women’s movement. I see that diverse feminist doubts, interests and styles exist in various fields, schools and development dynamics within the women’s movement.

Nevertheless, according to Özkazanç, feminist theory cannot be viewed as fully separate from the (feminist) women’s movement. She is convinced that, in her academic work among other things, it is “pointless and very difficult to explain the theory outside of the movement, outside of its development dynamics” (2014: 6).

İlknur Üstün (2014: 50) from the Women’s Coalition in Ankara describes the feminist

movement as the “motorised power” (motorize güç) of the women’s movement: “So, if a policy is set here then it is really a policy made by feminists.” An activist from the Socialist Feminist Collective in Ankara (Anonymous, 2014: 13) described the feminist movement — or rather feminism — as “our priority” (bizim önceliğimiz) and, in a similar manner to Üstün, referred to the central importance of feminism for the women’s movement(s). However, for Suna Başak (2014: 13), an academician at Gazi University in Ankara, “a feminist ideology” (feminist bir ideoloji) is only one of the many ways of thinking to have an influence on women’s movements.

Nebahat Akkoç (2015: 47–49) from the KA-MER Foundation in Diyarbakır defines women’s movements solely as feminist when they fight for equal rights, even if they do not describe themselves as such. In the interview, Akkoç (2015: 43) cited bell hook’s statement that “there are as many definitions of feminism as there are feminists in the world” (‘dünyadaki feminist insan sayısı kadar feminizm tanımı vardır’) in order to highlight the diversity of feminism and the defining power of women. On the other hand, activist Gaye Cön (2015: 14), who is active in the Muğla branch of KA-MER, formulates a more fundamental definition of feminism in reference to the women’s movement, defining it as an “organisational model” with clear criteria that distinguish it from other “organisational models”:

The feminist movement is really a movement based on rights and a movement which is organised from the bottom, from the base up. An organisation model that manages to organise each person based on their own needs. [...] something with a principle that rejects the structural hierarchy, rejects discrimination [...] rejects violence.

According to Cön (2015: 16), the rejection of structural hierarchy is expressed in this feminist organisational model through the “horizontal relationship” (yatay ilişki) between activists.

Although several interviewees (e.g. Acar, 2014: 8; Şahin Güngör, 2015: 26; Üstün, 2014: 50) classified the feminist movement as a (decisive) trend within the women’s movement(s), other experts (e.g. Bora, 2014: 18, 44; Cön, 2015: 14) clearly differentiated between the feminist movement and women’s movement(s). Despite the fact that the interviewees had

not previously used the plural form, the suggested description of the “women’s movement(s)” provided during the interviews was received with interest, partly with reference to an ongoing discussion among scientists and activists about that term. Handan Çağlayan was one of the interviewees who referred to the fact that the usage of singular or plural form was also occasionally discussed in women’s and gender political contexts in Turkey. She herself had come to the conclusion that the plural form was more appropriate when referring to the research subject (2014: 16):

Instead of [starting from] a single [...] common women’s movement, they are instead women’s movements, which — in the same way that differences exist between women — may suddenly appear with many demands or different demands.

Selen Doğan (2014: 30) from the women’s networking organisation Flying Broom (Uçan Süpürge) from Ankara presented a similar argument, reflecting upon the suggestion that we speak of “movements” (hareketler) due to “different sections” (farklı dilimler) and “different ways” (farklı yollar) — in particular with regard to earlier generations of women — as follows:

Women’s movements, I always think of them, frankly, as a whole and [...] I can’t remember whether I ever used women’s movements in the plural before you asked me this question. However, now that we are talking about it, I realise [...] that there is such a need.

For Doğan (2014: 30), the pluralisation and differentiation in the women’s movement(s) is exemplified by the emergence of the Kurdish Women’s m-Movement, the LGBTI Movement and the human and children’s rights movement. İlknur Üstün (2014: 22) from the Women’s Coalition also takes the view that one cannot speak of a single movement, because that would not do justice to the variety of organisation, interests and forms of expression. Üstün (2014: 24) therefore refused to define the term “women’s movement(s)” as it was “categorical” (kategorik) in nature. Üstün (2014: 22) provided the following explanation:

The fact is that you cannot precisely define the structure. It is diverse, it is a dynamic structure; given all these diversities and differences, it wouldn’t be fair to the movement, to the movements, to lump them together. So, I think it’s necessary to talk about a process if you talk about woman, women’s movements or the movements in Turkey.

Üstün refers in particular to the dynamics and processuality of women’s movements and to the respect that must be shown for the diversity of women’s and gender political activists when using the term. According to Üstün (2014: 26), the failure to do so would be to risk obscuring or ignoring certain actors: “It also prevents us from recognising structures that are very different from one other, that are very diverse”. Reyhan Atasü-Topçuoğlu (2014: 11) also rejected the term “women’s movement” in the singular, citing the cooperation between activists who strive for women’s and LGBTI rights and who have created an important “solidarity network” (dayanışma ağı).⁵

Although Alev Özkazanç (2014: 23, 25) used the term in the singular, drawing on her feminist-oriented understanding she also proposed a broader definition that includes the LGBTI movement as a matter of course, as well as Muslim women activists. Feride Acar (2014: 22) also includes the Islamic and the Kurdish women’s movements under the banner of the women’s movement in Turkey. She stressed, however, that they are “movements created by women” (kadınlar tarafından gerçekleştirilen hareketler) and that there is, therefore, a difference between the women’s movement and the LGBTI movement (Acar, 2014: 8).

Nefise Yenigül (2015: 17) from the left-oriented Freedom and Solidarity Party in Hopa presented a fundamental critique of the overly intellectualist debate on terminology for the women’s movement(s) and for the feminist movement and theory in the context of Turkey:

These terms seem to me, in underdeveloped [...] countries such as Turkey, a bit too high a level of discussion. Because the problems of women are real

⁵ LGBTI activist Halil Kandok (2015: 24) from Denizli includes the LGBTI movement, the Kurdish movement and the religious-conservative women’s movement under the term “women’s movement(s)”. However, according to LGBTI activist Arif (et al., 2015: 23) from Diyarbakır, trans-women and sex workers are excluded from the women’s movement.

and they deviate a lot from the subjects we discuss. So, there is really a mass of women who, with or without an identity, without personality, are being neglected and this constitutes a very large majority.

According to Yenigül (2015: 19), the women’s movement has further differentiated itself through such theory-based terminological debates and by ignoring the real circumstances in which women are living.

Conclusion

The definitions suggested by the women’s and gender political experts refer to agents, organisational methods, activities, reasons or subjects and the goals of the women’s movement(s). Several interviewees explained their definitions in the context of regional and/or historical references to social movement(s). Although the question was not posed during the interviews, when describing women’s movement(s) many interviewees related them explicitly to feminism, understood as a movement and/or theory, whereas some distanced the movements from feminism.⁶

The empirical material proves that, in Turkey, the term “women’s movement” is used to a high extent in the singular form among both activists and scientists. Al-Rebholz also uses the term in its singular form in her study on social movements in Turkey in order to describe societal and women’s political activities as a phenomenon within the sphere of civil society. However, according to Al-Rebholz (2011: 29), the plural form of the term relates to the “process of ideological pluralisation and diversification of women’s groups”.

Nevertheless, the empirical findings on women’s movements in the field reflected in the section III.2.A. show that, from the perspective of the research team and in light of the theoretical basis for the use of the term, it is meaningful to speak of women’s movements in the plural, given that political and ideological differences, as well as regional differences in

⁶ During the interviews, several experts also expressed prejudice towards the concept of feminism (e.g. Akkoç, 2015: 43; Eren, 2015: 10; Keleş Yarısan, 2015: 10).

Turkey, play a central role in guiding the focus of activists onto specific subjects or forms of action and affect the possibility that different groups will form coalitions.

During the course of the communicative validation of the research results with activists and scientists during, among other things, a workshop held at Ankara University in May 2016, the discussion on the usage of the singular or plural terms proved to be highly controversial. The usage of the plural was rejected vehemently because it risked weakening the socially transformative power of a social movement consisting of many, plural elements united by their struggle for women’s rights. According to one scientist, the term “feminism” could be split into radical, socialist and liberal subsections to counter this.

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