

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

III.2.A. Examples of women’s movements in Turkey taken from research fields

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This text aims to map the recent status of women’s movements in the light of the field work carried out in six cities in different regions of Turkey (Ankara, Diyarbakır, Muğla, Denizli, Trabzon, and Merkez and Hopa districts of Artvin). In this section, we will examine the women’s movements as defined during 65 expert interviews conducted in order to analyse the status of women’s movements in Turkey and the political response to such movements and to the notion of gender with a regard to the multicultural, complex structure of the Turkish society composed of multiple identities. We will first discuss these differences before turning to the central topic, namely an examination of the efforts made by women’s movements to build a coalition despite their differences and the extent to which they are working together.¹

Most of the results of this section were drawn from answers to the question “Which movements in Turkey do you think count as women’s movements?”, posed during the expert interviews held as part of the field research. A literature review was carried out before the field research; subsequently, the self-definitions and answers provided in response to the above question were categorised heuristically and a map was drawn up of the women’s movements in Turkey. The participants in the regions selected for the field research considered the following movements to be a part of the network of women’s movements in Turkey:

- Feminist movement(s)
- Feminist movement(s)
- The Kurdish Women’s Movement²
- The religious–conservative women’s movement
- The LGBTI movement

Rather than viewing these movements as disconnected entities, this list should be seen as a

¹ See sections III.3.A and III.3.B.

² A detailed analysis of the Kurdish Women’s Movement is provided in section III.2.B. entitled “The Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey and the Adventure of Becoming Visible” (Azizoğlu Bazan, 2017).

rough effort to draw up a map of these movements that represents their different approaches. Other examples of categorisation of this kind can be observed in various academic studies (Çaha, 2013; Diner and Toktaş, 2010; Şimşek, 2004). Academics in Turkey discussed these categorisations during the workshop organised by the research group and hosted by Ankara University Women’s Studies Centre in April 2016 and during Building Bridges -Networking Workshop for Women’s and Gender Politics in Turkey and Germany, held in October 2016 by academics and activists working in the field of gender and women’s policies at the University of Bremen.

The female academics that participated in these workshops agreed, in general, that the notion of multiple women’s movements — in order to represent the variety of women’s movements in Turkey — could weaken the women’s movement overall. It is therefore important to note that, while these movements that have been categorised heuristically in this research are continuing their struggle for gender equality and women’s rights, they have differences of opinion with regard to certain situations. İlknur Üstün of the Women’s Coalition (2014: 20) emphasised the importance of this diversity regarding the issue of “where we are able to work together and where we are not; how close or divided are we”. She also stated that these differences cannot be distinguished in a clear-cut fashion. However, according to Üstün, “everything is fairly blurred, and the edges have mostly disappeared, which is why it is better to dilute the points of separation”. For this reason, this research project and this ensuing text should be seen as an effort to map the women’s movements in Turkey and, in doing so, to emphasise their diversity. The transmissivity of ideas between the movements is a key factor that should be taken into consideration on all occasions.

1.1 Feminist movement(s)

As Bihter Somersan’s argues in her work “Feminismus in der Türkei” (Feminism in Turkey), the feminist movement that appeared in the 1980s was heavily affected not only by the solidarity and collaboration policies of the 2000s, but also by the discussions regarding NGOs,

professionalisation and project feminism.³ The discussions held concerning the hegemonic relationships within the movement have also become one of the main topics (2011: 86).⁴

The information and views on the feminist movement(s) expressed by the participants in the expert interviews may be clarified by comparing the notions of the feminist movement and women’s movements in different contexts. A more detailed analysis of this subject is provided in the previous section of this text.⁵

Nevertheless, this comparison is evidence of the up-to-date and vivid manner in which the discursive and conceptual issues mentioned in the studies regarding the women’s movements in Turkey are tackled, in parallel with the other issues. While the topic of the previous section (III.1.B.) is feminism and women’s movements, this part focuses on feminist movements by combining them with various adjectives in the light of the expert interviews. As it is not possible to clearly and separately tackle the possible overlaps between these two sections, as well as the statements on the subject matter, they have been intentionally left out in both sections. The reason behind the parallelism and similarity between the two sections may stem from the observation that the leftist/ socialist women are the most important representatives of the overlap between feminism and women’s movements.

The title of this subsection reflects the fact that the feminist movement is viewed differently by the academics and activists who contributed to the research project. Although some argued that the feminist movement does and should involve the women’s movement (Bora, 2014: 18; Cön, 2015: 14), others defend a definition that distinguishes between women’s movements and the feminist movement (Sancar, 2014: 22; Üstün, 2014: 26). However, certain participants stated that a sharp contrast between these two notions cannot be drawn (Acar, 2014: 8; Özkazanç, 2014: 4; Semiz, 2014: 20; Keleş Yarışan, 2015: 16). While these different perspectives represent the diversity of opinion, the participants came to these

³ “Project feminism” will be discussed in greater detail in section III.3.A. on the separating factors for women’s movements in Turkey entitled “Unifying and Separating Perspectives in Women’s Movements in Turkey” (Polatdemir, 2017), under the subheading “Organisational (Structural)/Institutional Differences”.

⁴ For more information on the autonomous, socialist and radical feminist movement, see Bora and Asena, 2002, Çakır, 2005 and Akal, 2011.

⁵ See: III. 1.B. “(Feminist) women’s movement(s)? Definitions suggested by women’s and gender political experts”.

opinions based on their own standpoints. In this regard, the definition of feminism provided by Nebahat Akkoç of KA-MER Diyarbakır (2014: 43) shows similarities with the definitions provided by the participants’ varying, subjective definitions of feminism:

For me, there is no “one” definition of feminism. I agree with bell hooks: there are as many definitions of feminism as the number of feminists in the world. One of the most important reasons why we became and were able to become widespread in this region was that we asked the women in every city to define their own feminism.

Although the secondary status and oppression of women form the main axis on which the feminist movements converge and agree, Aksu Bora of Amargi (2014: 18), whom we interviewed in Ankara, highlighted the importance of the feminist movement in defining the various kinds of oppression experienced, creating awareness and turning those efforts into a political struggle:

What is different about being a feminist is these various women-specific situations, these different kinds of oppression that are experienced, including the kind of oppression that has nothing to do with gender. Feminism embodies a theory that can draw a correlation between these different aspects. It has become a political movement, which is tied in with this theory.

According to Aksu Bora, it is feminism’s theoretical background — the fact that the feminist movement uses theory to link distinct types of oppression — that makes it stand out. İlknur Üstün (2014: 50) also mentioned the determining and leading role played by the feminist movement in policy-making. Alev Özkazanç (2014: 4) suggested that, as with feminist policies, the separation observed among women’s movements stems from their different feminist interests and concerns, which should be analysed as a whole:

Naturally, there are ideological differences, as well as differences in approach and attitude, interests and concerns. I suggest that these should

all be viewed as a whole. [I think that] this is true feminism, rather than thinking about what constitutes wrong feminism (2014: 4).

In addition to the different standpoints within the feminist movement and the diversity that these views create, the integrative role of the feminist movement is another important factor that is worth highlighting (Özkazanç, 2014: 4; Üstün, 2014: 50).

Serpil Sancar (2014: 28), who defined the feminist movement as an ideological movement fighting against the patriarchal system, argued that the aim of the feminist movement is to achieve gender equality: “The feminist movement [...] aims to reduce and eliminate male dominance, that is to say, it is a more systematic and structured approach to combating the patriarchal mentality”. Similarly, Özem Şahin Güngör of Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University (2015: 26) highlighted the gender equality objective of the feminist movement, as well as the social transformation which it hopes to achieve:

When I talk about the feminist movement, I’m referring to the organisations that take a serious stand against the problems of gender inequality that have the political willpower and drive to [...] organise women in order to transform society (2015: 26).

Nonetheless, Gaye Cön (2015: 14), a feminist activist from Muğla, referred to the essential objectives of feminism that cannot be disregarded, such as knowing and valuing each other and existing equally and harmoniously, in addition to the principles of feminist organisation: “feminist organisation embodies the principle of non-discrimination. [...] It also rejects structural hierarchy, separation and violence, no matter where it comes from. These are the principles on which it is founded” (2015: 14).

The interviewees often mentioned that the approach to the feminist movement should include the objective of achieving dynamic societal transformation and that the movement should be organised with that objective in mind. As regards the definition of the feminist movement, the participants agreed that, although feminist policies take different approaches to feminism, a shared focus is placed on achieving change — such as in the struggle for

equality and rights — and that the feminist movement should work collectively to that end.

Leftist/socialist feminist movement

The leftist/socialist feminist movement was also often cited during the interviews as a part of the women’s movements in Turkey. This group, with whom the representatives of the women’s movement are keen to remain in contact (Aras, 2015: 12), was created by actors from within the leftist movement. The women’s movement itself is generally more left-leaning in its political views (Atasü Topçuoğlu, 2014: 23). Women’s organisations working under the banner of leftist/socialist political parties form a key demographic of this group. According to Selen Doğan of Flying Broom (2014: 30): “They have different identities, different political arrangements, but they are in a sense still involved in the women’s movement and in producing something feminist and contributing to its growth.”

The women who broke off from the parties as a result of conflict with men and the patriarchy played an important role in the development and establishment of the leftist feminist movement. Gülsen Ülker of the Women’s Solidarity Foundation, Ankara, described a movement that “came into existence thanks to the women who came together through their own experiences” in the 1980s. Before 1980, these women organised themselves within socialist organisations, in groups such as the Progressive Women’s Association (İKD) (Ülker, 2014: 17–18). The leftist women in the İKD, who were involved in leftist parties, were said to discuss their own agendas in the form of a parliament, rather than providing support to the parties (ibid, 2014: 24). Other examples included the SDP (Socialist Democracy Party), BDP (Freedom and Solidarity Party) and HDP (Peoples’ Democratic Party), as well as unions as mixed-gender organisations such as the Education and Science Workers’ Union (Özkazanç, 2014: 3; Ülker, 2014: 17–18).

Examples of feminist women who are “leftist, socialist” (Özkazanç, 2014: 31), or who have leftist inclinations, but have organised themselves independently include the Socialist Feminist Collective, which is active in Ankara, İstanbul and other regions of Turkey, the Ankara Feminist Collective, which is active in Ankara, and the İstanbul Feminist Collective, which is active in İstanbul (Özkazanç, 2014: 31). According to Alev Özkazanç (2014: 31), these

collectives “produce independent women’s policies and are effective”. In addition, the articles that she wrote and interviews that she conducted as an academic and activist were published in Feminist Policy (Feminist Politika) magazine, published by the Socialist Feminist Collective. In the cities covered during the field research, the activities and work of the Socialist Feminist Collective is followed by Zeze (a participant who wished to remain anonymous) of Muğla Vegan Feminists (2015: 22). This is an example of the effect that the collective exerts over different cities. An activist from the Ankara Socialist Feminist Collective (SFC) (Anonymous, 2014: 33) emphasised that her organisation developed leftist and women’s policies that criticised capitalism: “SFC is an organisation that generally falls outside of what we know as the women’s movement; for example, it prioritises female labour and works to that end.” She also listed the areas of priority for the collective in order to highlight how it differs from other feminist organisations due to its leftist ideological stand.

Sevinç Hocaoğulları (2014: 16), who gave an interview on behalf of Ankara Halkevci⁶ Women (an NGO), pointed out that the defensive lines adopted by the leftist feminist movement are determined by the problems caused by neoliberal policies: “We think that the areas of recent political activity among women develop out of the struggle for rights and against neoliberal exploitation and the neoliberal loss of rights.” This also demonstrates the fact that Halkevci Women approach the growing women’s movement from a leftist point of view. Dilek Gedik (2015: 9) of Muğla Education and Science Workers’ Union argued that socialist women were included in the feminist movement and that they had been the actors of the leftist feminist movement in 1980s and 1990s: “The majority of the women who identified themselves with leftist views moved towards the feminist movement.”

The line of separation between the feminist movement and leftist/socialist movement is drawn by the central position of the idea of “class (conflict)”. Following this observation, Nurcan Vayiç Aksu, representative of the Women’s Platform of the Socialist Women’s Assemblies in Hopa (Sosyalist Kadın Meclisleri), which currently exists as a group on the social media platform Facebook, argued that, as a leftist activist, she did not consider women’s issues and the socialist struggle to be separate. Vayiç Aksu defended the idea that female

⁶ Literal meaning: “women for people’s housing/community centers”.

identity should be merged with class identity rather than bodily identity. Although she argued that this was the path along which the women’s movement would be able to advance, she also underscored the necessity that the women’s movements embrace leftist ideology. Furthermore, she mentioned that class conflict was an essential element of female emancipation (2015: 15):

I don’t think that women’s movement will be able to make progress if it fights only against violence or rape. There must be an identity under which all these [aims] can be united. This [identity] should adopt a leftist view, so that [the women’s movement] can reclaim its class position.

Environmental movement and feminist movement(s)

With the exception of the Vegan Feminists in Muğla, the topic of environmental feminist movements that tackled not only gender and women’s issues, but also environmental issues, was discussed infrequently during the expert interviews. However, some activists and academicians who identified as feminists defined the environmental movement as a feminist struggle. As such, the environmental issue can be defined as a sub-category of the feminist movement and women’s movements. Sevinç Hocaoğulları (2014: 16) of Halkevci Women stated that the environment was a topic on which women engaged politically:

When women face a barricade or a bulldozer in order to protect their own villages, creeks or rivers, they are also taking a step towards freedom and subjectivisation.

İlknur Üstün of the Women’s Coalition also argued that environmental issues could be viewed from the perspective of gender equality or feminism, given the connection between women’s movements activists and environmental movements (2014: 12). Selen Doğan of Flying Broom included environmental issues as part of her definition of being woman. According to Doğan, the desire to defend sustainable life is a value that must be internalised (2014: 28). Handan Çağlayan (2014: 26), who teaches at Ankara University and participates in union activities, explained why the ecological struggle must be both anti-capitalist and gender-equalitarian:

If you are fighting to protect the ecological balance, you cannot ignore the negative effects of capitalism on the environment [...] You also cannot ignore the fact that the capitalist system is patriarchal.

Similarly, Nilüfer Akgün (2015: 14) of Black Sea Women’s Solidarity Association also defended the idea that activists involved in the women’s movement should not be apathetic to environmental issues and that the environment should play a role in women’s movements. In short, it can be said that the environmental movement and (feminist) women’s movements feed into one another. While women’s movements tackle environmental issues from a feminist perspective, women who are environmentally aware and who are involved in the environmental movement can work with women’s movements through their efforts to protect the environment. It may therefore be concluded that there exists a form of synthesis between women’s movements and environmental movements.

Among the cities selected for the field research, it was in Muğla and the Black Sea cities that environmental research was most frequently mentioned as a part of the women’s movements. According to Zeze (2015: 32) of Vegan Feminists, women’s movements in Muğla have ties with ecology. Similarly, Dilek Gedik (2015:25) of Muğla Education and Science Workers’ Union gave an example of a local seed project that had been carried out by the Women’s Assembly of the Muğla City Council. The academician, Özlem Şahin Güngör, stated that: “You will probably not find another location where feminist and ecological movements are this strongly tied together.” She also added that, in Muğla, all women of every class are environmentally aware (2015: 44).

Through the interviews carried out in the Black Sea region, it became apparent how strongly women’s movements in the region have internalised the environmental struggle. The research showed that the most important reason for this awareness is the fact that women are a part of the production chain and are aware of their associated responsibilities. Filiz Karakuş (2015: 50–51) of Artvin Eğitim-İş Union explained that women’s involvement in the environmental movement is a result of their awareness of nature and the fact that they are required to live in close proximity to nature on a daily basis:

As Artvin is quite a rural location, people are used to living with and in nature [...] they do not want it to disappear. Women love their children as mothers and know full well that if they allow nature to be lost, their families will be harmed. That is why they are so engaged in this topic. [...] It is also partially related to the fact that the head of the environmental agency is a woman and she is one of the most prominent women in Artvin. What encourages them, [...] in my opinion, is the fact that they have a woman leader.

According to Karakuş, the fact that the environmental movement is led by a female activist is one of the most crucial factors in steering women towards the environmental struggle. However, it is worth noting that the above-mentioned view defines women through motherhood, as a subject that protects nature. Moreover, the statement also emphasises the importance of female figures and role models in social movements. Melike Arduç (2015: 4), who participated in the study in Artvin, expressed the view shared by her friends that women are leaders in the environmental movement owing to the fact that the harm suffered by nature ultimately results in women’s suffering: “As it is the women who suffer when creeks or rivers are pillaged [...] naturally they are the ones who are willing to stand up against environmental issues.” Arduç (2015: 4) also explained why, in general, women are leading the struggle throughout Turkey: “Because women suffer more as a result of every problem, they have developed a resistance movement and are leading the way.” Similarly, Nurcan Ay Katırcı (2015: 40) of Artvin Women’s Solidarity Platform emphasised the fact that women from every class and of every age participate in the environmental movement, as the topic is “quite a crucial one”.

The level of involvement in environmental issues appears to be strongly linked to the geographical region in which the activists are located and should be evaluated in the context of regional variation in the activities of women’s movements. Although there is no Turkey-wide active environmental (feminist) women’s movement that could be evaluated within the scope of the social movements defined in these interviews, women’s movements that operate locally and that work towards environmental issues are an important line of struggle.

1.2 Kemalist women’s movement

The discussions about the headscarf⁷ that took place in the 1990s (Çolak, 2008) and the development of the religious–conservative movements paved the way for Kemalist/republican and secular women to reorganise and become politically active (Arat, 1994: 246). While the active stakeholders in this movement discussed female equality with regard to legal and societal matters, they also defend the application of Kemalist values. The women’s groups that support those values have organised under the banner of Kemalist associations and foundations with the aim of developing education opportunities and advice centres for women (Somersan, 2011: 102). It could be said that, in doing so, they have adopted a maternalistic take on Kemalist paternalism. In addition to achieving equality of opportunity in education and professional life, female political representation is another important topic⁸ for activists within this movement.

When asked which movements could be considered to be women’s movements, a number of interviewees cited these movements, in reference to several different definitions. Although the Kemalist women’s movement was not generally mentioned during the interviews, the Kemalist values of the Association for Turkish Mothers and the Turkish Women Association were highlighted (Atasü Topçuoğlu, 2014: 23; Üstün, 2014: 34). Various *raison d’être* for this women’s movement were described, which is associated with notions such as republicanism, Kemalism and secularism. For instance, Hatice Kapusuz Kütküt (2014: 23) of Association for Supporting Women (KA.DER), who participated in the study in Ankara, explained that “these women’s organisations see themselves as protecting the values of the republic”. These movements were also defined as “secular women’s movements” (Bostan, 2015: 18). Özlem Güngör Şahin (2015: 26) of Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University defined Kemalist/republican women’s organisations as a part of the women’s movement: “The women’s branch of the Republican People’s Party has started to play a role in the women’s movement and we are

⁷ This topic, known as the “headscarf issue”, is one of the most important issues in Turkey. The women affected by the headscarf ban, which also applied to governmental institutions, described it as discrimination on the grounds of their gender and/or religious preferences and called for end of the ban in the institutions such as universities (Göle, 1996). Starting in 2007, the ban was gradually overturned during the rule of the Justice and Development Party.

⁸ For more detailed information about Kemalist/republican/secular women’s movements, see: 1997; Özdemir 2010; Persentili 2013.

now making distinctions between Islamist feminists, radical feminists, Kemalist feminists, etc.” In describing these distinctions, the unique structures of these movements, which are seen as part of the whole, gain visibility. Similarly, İlknur Üstün (2014: 12) of the Women’s Coalition, who participated in the studies conducted in Ankara, made the following observation: “There are women from the Kurdish Women’s Movement, religious women and women from the LGBT movement. There are also feminists and Kemalists.” These statements clearly show that Kemalist women are a part of the general women’s movements in Turkey and that the Kemalist women’s movement is seen as a part of a coalition that brings together various different women activists in the capital city. A female academic from Pamukkale University (Anonymous, 2015: 29) highlighted the nationalistic character of the Kemalist women’s movement by referring to it as “the nationalistic part of the national women’s movement”. A majority of the participants did not refer directly to the Kemalist women’s movement, but rather mentioned organisations that worked to promote education for young girls and the inclusion of women in professional life. These descriptions of the movement in reference to Kemalism and secularism provide the basis for both the title of this section and the name “Kemalist women’s movement”.

Jale Eren of Muğla Republican Women’s Association summarised the aim of her association as follows: “to retain and defend the economic and social independence, and the freedom, democracy and enlightenment, that were gained through the Turkish War of Independence and the republican reforms and to improve these for the benefit of the country and its people.” She also highlighted both the political activities of the association and its work as a women’s organisation, stating that the association seeks to “defend those reforms both as a part of the women’s movement and in a political sense.”

Jale Eren from Muğla and Nurten Karakiş of Denizli Association of Women’s Rights Protection both placed a focus in their activities on improving the education and socialisation of women in local areas (Eren, 2015; Karakiş, 2015), which supports the observation drawn from the literature that Kemalist/republican women’s associations prioritise the education of women in rural areas (Somersan, 2011). When examined critically, the activities of associations viewed as a part of the Kemalist women’s movement can be seen as promoting “top down empowerment”, in line with the Kemalist state mentality. It should be also noted that,

through their work, such associations offer a wide range of activities to the women in the Aegean region. In the literature (e.g. Çağatay, 2008) and in the research conducted for this text, the Association for the Support of Contemporary Living, the National Council of Turkish Women, the Graduate Women International (TUKD), the Association of Republican Women (Cumhuriyet Kadınları Derneği), and the Association of Women’s Rights Protection were all considered to be a part of the Kemalist women’s movement.

1.3 Religious–conservative women’s movement

Religious–conservative women not only played an important role during the Welfare Party campaign in the 1990s, but they also took to the streets to protest against the headscarf ban at universities, they were politically active and, with their demands, they contributed to the rise of a variety of women’s movements in the 1980s which adopted a critical view of the feminist movement. The criticism expressed by religious–conservative women, who started writing articles in the 1980s, was that Eurocentrism⁹ and the Western feminism values internalised by feminists in Turkey without any filtering were the root cause of the current situation. In the interviews, this movement was referred to alternatively as the “religious–conservative movement”, the “Islamist women’s movement” and the “Muslim women’s movement” (Acar, 2014: 22; Atasü Topçuoğlu, 2014: 2; Özkazanç, 2014: 22–23).

The interviewees considered the religious–conservative women’s movement to be a complementary and substantive part of the women’s movement in Turkey. Alev Özkazanç (2014: 22–23) of Ankara University’s Women’s Studies Centre argued that, although religious–conservative women did not, in general, identify as feminists, “every time they talk, write or worry about women’s problems and every time they act for the benefit of women, they are naturally a part of the movement”. Feride Acar (2014: 22) of Middle East Technical University defines the “Islamist women’s movement” as “a women’s movement which is organised based on religious principles [...] namely self-identifies through religion, but which also works in the context of women’s rights”. According to Serpil Sancar (2014: 34), an academic, another characteristic of the religious–conservative movement — which is defined

⁹ For more information about religious-conservative women’s movements and Islamist feminists see: Göle, 1996; Samandi, 1997; Wedel, 2000; Özçetin, 2009.

as a group that works for women’s rights but takes its reference from religion — is that it focuses on the family rather than on the individual, while viewing male and female roles as innate.¹⁰ In other words, it adopts a biological explanation for the bipolar gender system of society. Some interviewees (Atasü Topçuoğlu, 2014: 23; Aras, 2015: 12) defined the religious–conservative women’s movement as “Islamist feminists”. They also stated that the organisations, which based their activities on charity sales and the provision of aid, did not use the adjective “feminist” and that they had started organising slowly in the early 2000s and had become involved with the women’s branch of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), among other organisations.

In the interviews, some participants mentioned close ties between certain women’s associations and the ruling party, Justice and Development Party, which has been widely criticised in recent times for the statements made by certain members of the party regarding women’s issues and the policy proposals submitted by women’s groups. The interviewees therefore concluded that such associations could not be considered to be true women’s movements (Kalkan, 2014: 17).

Conversely, academic Feride Acar (2014: 26) argued that a relationship persists between the feminist movement and the religious–conservative movement, but that the relationship has weakened over the previous years. According to Acar, the main reason for this weakening is the fact that the ruling party is conservative and that it had become increasingly difficult for Islamist women to question their position by separating themselves from the party. Many (feminist) activists emphasised that they have distanced themselves from this movement because of its stand on women’s right to exist as an individual and the place of women in family and because of their own opposition to the ruling party.

The activists involved in the other branches of the women’s movements highlighted the special position held by the Capital City Women’s Platform; this was highlighted in particular

¹⁰ The definition of “Being woman” was also mentioned by certain activist involved in the Kemalist women’s movement in the context of a natural, biological, God-given, bipolar gender distinction. A more detailed analysis of this topic can be found in the section entitled “A Central Concept and the Perception of this Concept in the Research Field: Being Woman” (Binder 2017).

during the interviews conducted in Ankara (Atasü Topçuoğlu, 2014: 23; Kapusuz-Kütüküt, 2014: 21). Reyhan Atasü-Topçuoğlu (2014: 23) of Hacettepe University stated that she considered the Capital City Women’s Platform to be different than the women’s organisations that did not identify as feminist and that focused on charity sales and the provision of aid. The spokesperson for the Capital City Women’s Platform, Nesrin Semiz (2014: 6), said that she attempted to distinguish her organisation from religious–conservative women’s movements, which focused on education and aid, as follows:

Many other women’s associations, especially religious women’s organisations, [are focused] on providing financial aid and promoting education. We, [however, do not engage in those areas,] especially financial aid. [...] We do not focus on providing financial aid or scholarships, but rather we work purely and directly to develop women’s policies.

The provision of financial aid can be seen as a pragmatic approach designed to empower women. Nonetheless, certain women’s organisations criticise the fact that such an approach is not a sustainable way of enabling women to help themselves and that it does not make any attempt to change the social structure.

Some activists who self-defined as not belonging to any religious–conservative women’s movement argued that Islam and women’s movement were incompatible and underscored the strict tie between the notions of woman and family, woman and fertility, and religious views (Alataş, 2015: 17). Mukaddes Alataş of Diyarbakır Kardelen Women’s Centre (2015: 17) supported the criticism that religious–conservative women’s movements were incapable of developing a critical view of manhood and that they merely reproduced patriarchal values: “I don’t think that a women’s movement can have an Islamist point of view, because in doing so it is supporting manhood”. Conversely, Emine Altundaş of the women’s branch of Trabzon Justice and Development Party repeated the criticisms put forward by the religious–conservative women’s movement regarding the feminist movement in Turkey and highlighted the arrogant attitude of the feminist movement in Turkey. In her opinion (2015: 8), while some “women’s organisations and movements [...] aim to empower women, they, in a way, are actually causing the unity of the family to deteriorate”. She also added that the

religious–conservative women’s movement is respectful of “the privacy of society” and that the right strategy is to take action according to the needs of the locals (2015: 8). In other words, it is crucial that feminist approaches are more strongly contextualised by the specificities of each region. Nesrin Semiz (2014: 24) of the Capital City Women’s Platform, describing the movement as a monolithic block, criticised the distance maintained between the women’s movement and religion and underscored the hardships that she had experienced in trying to keep religion and the women’s movement together:

The women’s movement considers religious sensitivity and perspective — i.e. living religiously — to be the biggest hindrance that women face. This being the case, an automatic clash is inevitable, because we try to follow our beliefs in our own lives as much as possible. Crossing this [...] threshold was quite difficult for us. [...] For example, while feminist women automatically claimed that the headscarf was forced on women by men and that you could not both wear the headscarf and be a feminist or be involved in a women’s movement, years later [...] they realised that they were the ones who were oppressing us.

Although there are points regarding family, religion, traditional women’s roles, manhood and patriarchy on which the religious–conservative women’s movement and the other women’s movements do not agree, there are also some points on which they are of accord. Figen Aras (2015: 12) of Diyarbakır Women’s Academy Association stated that, following the crises in Middle East, they are making an effort to meet with and create a dialogue with Islamist feminists. It was revealed in the interviews that, although the relationship between religious–conservative women — who managed to create a coalition in response to the headscarf issue in the 1990s — and other women’s movements in Turkey had been weakened by the policies of the government and by the rise in conservatism, they continued to form various coalitions and to communicate. Examples of these coalitions will be analysed in section III.3.B. entitled “Examples of Women’s Coalitions taken from the Research Field” (Binder, 2017).

1.4 LGBTI movement

In his work “The Dynamics of the Queer Movement in Turkey before and during the

Conservative AKP Government” (2016), Zülfikar Çetin states that, while in the 1980s the LGBTI movement in Turkey was lead mostly by trans individuals, as of 1990 the main actors in the movement were gay men.¹¹ Around the turn of the century, lesbian and trans individuals strengthened their representation in the movement. The LGBTI movement, the visibility of which has increased in the form of associations, organisations and civil society institutions, is one of the most important social movements to focus on social gender policies in Turkey.

One of the results that came to light during the interviews conducted with activists from different backgrounds and cities was that academics and activists who identify with different feminist movements do not view the LGBTI movement as separate from women’s or feminist movements. On the contrary, it is considered to play a crucial role in women’s struggles. According to an activist (Anonymous, 2014: 33–34) interviewed on behalf of Women Belong in Politics (KIPS), which holds events at universities (such as that held at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara in 2014), “we should definitely cooperate with LGBT groups”. A female activist (Anonymous, 2015: 76) from the Denizli Women’s Solidarity Platform, who was interviewed in 2015, emphasised the relationship between LGBTI individuals and women activists and described it as an example of a struggle fought on common ground: “The LGBTI movement and the women’s movement automatically have close ties, as both of them suffer under the same heterosexist system.” Although the same activist defended that the idea that the LGBTI movement should fight on different fronts — namely to uphold the rights of trans and lesbian women — she highlighted the intersection that existed between the LGBTI movement and women’s movements on the grounds that lesbian and trans women also face problems “because of their womanhood”. Hatice Kapsuz Kütküt (2014: 21) of the Association for Supporting Women Candidates expressed the following view: “[The LGBTI movement] is fighting against heteronormativity, which is what we are also struggling against, in addition to the inequalities that heteronormativity creates. Their struggle is invaluable.” This view highlights the importance of the LGBTI movement’s struggle against heterosexist norms in widening the horizons of the women’s movements. The interviewees who were involved in women’s movements as activists stated that, in addition to heterosexism, the LGBTI movement also focuses on topics such as gender, the gender issue

¹¹ For more information on the LGBTI movement in Turkey, see: Engin, 2015; Köylü, (ed.) 2015.

and gender transformation. For example, Serpil Sancar (2014: 32) of Ankara University mentioned that she considered the LGBTI movement to be a part of the women’s movement and emphasised that the movement focused primarily on topics “related to sexual orientation and preferences”, which was an important field of work for all women’s movements.

The interviewees commended the focus placed by the LGBTI movement on topics such as heterosexism and heteronormativity, which are secondary topics of focus for women’s movements. Certain women’s movements support the events held by the LGBTI movement, which helped the rainbow flag gain visibility in the public arena during the 2000s. Gülsen Ülker (2014: 24) of Ankara Women’s Solidarity Foundation stated the following: “All LGBT organisations are not only quite active, but also, in my opinion, they are doing very important work with regard to gender transformation [...] and the gender issue, which I think is of real benefit to women’s causes in general”. She also emphasised the dynamic nature of the movement and its practical expertise. According to Ülker, the work of the LGBTI movement, and the focus of that work, helped to expand the variety of topics tackled by women’s movements. Some activists from feminist movements and women’s movements made reference to the discussions that had taken place in response to the question “Is the subject of the women’s movements or the feminist movement solely women?”, which is another crucial point of discussion. Alev Özkazanç of Ankara University (2014: 24–25) gave the following explanation for this discussion, which was reported to have surfaced in particular during the 8th March demonstrations and events:

For the past few years, we have experienced problems with LGBT individuals and trans women marching on 8th March. This situation begs the questions: Are trans individuals involved in this? Are LGBT individuals also a part of the women’s movement? [...] In my opinion, the feminist movement is there for them too. I think it is linked to the LGBT movement.

Speaking on the topic of why there was a discussion as to whether trans women were part of the feminist movement, an activist from Ankara KIPS (Anonymous, 2014: 31–32) stated: “We used to fight a lot about this: who should be the subject of feminism? Can trans women be

subjects?”

The LGBTI movement has encouraged important discussions as to whether the women’s movement works to the benefit of trans individuals. The LGBTI movement has provided examples of these discussions in their work with women’s movements. This raises the question of whether the LGBTI movement is seen as part of the women’s movement or as merely a coalition partner. Moreover, such discussion may also be seen as evidence that some women’s movements have not yet reached a consensus on who exactly they are working for. The interviewees emphasised the fact that, on this issue, a strict split exists between certain women’s movements and the LGBTI movement. This split and the issue of women and trans individuals as a category is discussed in detail in section III.1.A. “A Central Concept and the Perception of this Concept in the Research Field: Being Woman” (Binder, 2017) and section III.3.A. “Separating and Unifying Perspectives in Women’s Movements in Turkey” (Polatdemir, 2017).

Another important finding identified during the research were the examples of regional events organised by women’s movements in cooperation with the LGBTI movement. Denizli Metropolitan Municipality Women’s Council reported that they had screened a documentary entitled “My Child”, which depicted the stories of five families with LGBTI children. Bahar Bostan of Trabzon Bar Association/ Women’s Rights Commission stated that they had organised workshops in Trabzon in collaboration with the LGBTI organisations KAOS GL and Pink Life and that they were working to raise awareness among lawyers of LGBTI rights and discrimination issues. Alev Özkazanç of Ankara University Women’s Studies Centre gave as an example of cooperation the lectures that the centre had held in collaboration with KAOS GL. In addition, Fırat Varatya of Purple Fish, the student LGBTI group at Trabzon Black Sea Technical University, said that they had worked with KAOS GL to give presentations about the media and LGBTI issues at the university’s Faculty of Communication. It may therefore be concluded that the LGBTI movement collaborates with the universities and feminist movements and organisations in the cities in which the field research was conducted. Most examples of this were recorded in the capital city, Ankara. The reason for this may be that the headquarters of KAOS GL are located in Ankara. However, it is also worth mentioning that, as the above examples show, KAOS GL supports and even works with LGBTI groups and other

social movements in other cities, in its role as an important actor in the LGBTI movement. Other examples of coalitions between the LGBTI movement and other women’s movements include the Women’s Coalition and the European Women’s Lobby Turkey Coordination. Bahar Bostan (2015: 16) claimed that it was impossible to separate the queer movement from the women’s movement, or from any other kind of human rights movement, and categorised all coalitions between women’s movements, feminist movements and LGBTI movements under the umbrella of the human rights movement. Alev Özkazanç stated that her academic work helps cement the relationship between the woman’s movement, feminist movement and LGBTI movement, noting that the academic community has also started to discuss the topics that she has brought to the fore. It should be noted that, although other women’s movements support the fact that the LGBTI movement focuses on taboo topics and gives priority to topics such as gender, sexual orientation and sexuality, which has led to the creation of cross-party policies, the question remains open as to whether the LGBTI movement is a separate movement or simply part of the women’s movement.

Jülide Keleş Yarışan (2015: 12) of Denizli Soroptimist Club explained how the focus placed by the LGBTI movement on sexuality and the controversial topic of sex workers can create divisions between the LGBTI movement and other women’s movements:

The distance maintained between the women’s movement and sex workers, or the distance we, [...] the women’s movement, place between ourselves and sex has varied, but the fact that the LGBT movement is very vocal on this topic may prevent us from standing together at first. However, [...] I believe that these two can work together.

Sex work is an important point of discussion among the LGBTI movement. LGBTI activists in Diyarbakır and Trabzon in particular stated that women’s movements avoid discussing this topic. Similarly, Sema Kendirici Uğurman of the Turkish Women’s Union (2014: 23) stated that religious–conservative women’s movements refuse to stand alongside LGBTI movements during events for religious reasons. However, according to Jülide Keleş Yarışan, discussions on morality and religious disagreements do not prevent women’s movements and the LGBTI movement from working together.

LGBTI activists who were interviewed, in particular those in Diyarbakır, Ankara and the Aegean region, stated that they consider the LGBTI movement and the women’s movement to be linked. Dilan Çiçek of Diyarbakır KESKESOR LGBT Formation expressed the belief that the fact of being woman forges a connection between the LGBTI movement and women’s movements (2015: 10): “Being woman is related to everything: it is directly related to militarism, manhood, masculinity, the LGBTI movement”. In that connection, Arif (2015: 152–159) of Hebung, an LGBT organisation active in Diyarbakır, stated the following:

If the women’s struggle to exist gains ground, it will create more space for us as well, which will help [...] us, too, to make progress. However, when the women’s movement is in a bad place, the LGBT movement cannot make progress either.

This may be interpreted to suggest that the LGBTI movement is not a part of the women’s movements, but, nonetheless, it is largely dependent on it. Arif appears to emphasise the co-dependency between these two movements. Two activists stated that they do not give greater consideration to the LGBTI movement and the struggle against heterosexism than that paid to the struggles faced by women’s movements, highlighting the importance for both groups of mutual support. LGBTI activists interviewed in Diyarbakır stated that the first groups to accept their organisations as LGBTI organisations were women’s organisations. However, they also noted that disagreements remain between certain LGBTI movements and the women’s movements and that they yet to be accepted fully. Seçin Tuncel (2014: 16) of Ankara KAOS GL emphasised the differences within the LGBTI movement and criticised the perspectives that overlook this variation:

It seems as though, when people refer to one LGBTI movement in Turkey [...] they are thinking of one stereotype; however, the reality is that [...] sexual orientation and sexual identity are very different. At the same time, I am [...] a homosexual woman living in a big city, so the problems faced by a homosexual woman living in a rural area may be quite different than mine.

This may also be interpreted to mean that LGBTI activists are not insensitive to their environments when carrying out their activities.

Hatice Kapusuz Kütküt (2014: 3) stated that, in Ankara specifically, the LGBTI movement plays an important role in coalition politics:

In Ankara in particular, we always include LGBT perspectives into our activities. In this sense, we try to tackle every area that is excluded by patriarchal politics, and women’s policies [are one of those areas]. We therefore act in solidarity with the LGBT movement.

Firat Varatyan of Purple Fish noted that, as a result of their activism in Trabzon, the visibility of LGBTI issues has increased in the city. He summarised how it felt to wave the rainbow flag during the 1 May celebration, despite all difficulties that they had faced (2015: 19):

It was a dream come true for me to receive the support of the professors from the university. Marching here on 1 May was also a dream come true. Being able to carry the rainbow flag while marching [...] was the best moment I have ever had in Trabzon, because it was the only day I could march while carrying all my identities.

The expert interviews show that, despite the disagreements, there is a strong connection and desire to collaborate between women’s movements and the LGBTI movement. This connection was described during many of the interviews as a co-dependent relationship. The more that women’s movements consider the LGBTI movement to be a coalition partner, the more that these two parties are able to strengthen one another in terms of power and dynamics. As trans women become more visible and familiar to women’s movements thanks to their identities as LGBTI activists, they are finding that their female identities are becoming accepted in another area of society.

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