

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

III.2.B. The Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey and the adventure of becoming visible

Münevver Azizoğlu Bazan

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This text, which focuses on the mutual association between the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey and the other women’s movements in the country, has been written in response to the statements and observations garnered during the expert interviews conducted on the subject of the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey as part of a study to compare and investigate women’s movements in different regions and cities in Turkey. In this sense, this study aims to unveil how the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey is perceived by the other women’s movements in Turkey and vice versa, while also trying to shed light on the points of agreement and disagreement.

The section entitled “Examples of Women’s Movements in Turkey taken from Research Fields” is an important part of this research report. It includes a solid literature review and expert interviews and reflects the variety of women’s movements in Turkey.¹ The Kurdish Women’s Movement also presents itself as a movement that is defined within this framework. Most of the participants described the Kurdish Women’s Movement as important among women’s movements in Turkey and evaluated it with regard to its approach to gender, the “Kurdish problem”, its political views, its ideological standpoint, etc. They also provided a useful insight from both within and outside the movement.

Before turning to the ideas and observations put forward in the expert interviews, it is useful to take a glance at the process through which the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey gained visibility among the women’s movements in Turkey. Later, this text will investigate how the issues tackled by the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey are viewed, both from inside and outside the movement. It will also identify the points on which the movement concurs with and differentiates itself from the other women’s movements in Turkey and the effects of these parallelisms and disagreements on building a coalition and achieving mutual goals.

¹ For more information, please see the section of the report entitled “III.2.A. Examples of Women’s Movements in Turkey taken from Research Fields” (Polatdemir, 2017).

1.1 Historical development

The formal organisation of Kurdish women in Turkey and Kurdistan² during the Republic period dates back to the 1970s. Kurdish women’s groups, who started to organise themselves more actively after the military coup in 1980, started to take shape in metropolises “independent of political parties, Turkish feminism and men” (Açık, 2003: 134) and as communities of Kurdish women’s magazines. Kurdish women’s groups, which started to make more political demands as of the 1990s, were heavily affected by the numerous “serhildan”³, by migration to the West and by the active participation of women in the “Kurdish Movement” (ibid: 134–136).

The organisation of Kurdish women in terms of associations, groups and magazine communities since 1990 can be grouped into two main categories. There are, on the one hand, feminist Kurdish women groups who self-identify as independent of any kind of political party or establishment and, on the other hand, there are groups that relate to the developing “Kurdish Movement” and act in parallel to it. The “independent” feminist Kurdish women’s groups (such as the *Bağımsız Kürt Kadın Grubu* (Independent Kurdish Women’s Group), which was established in 1990) operated mainly in Istanbul and continued to exist as part of various magazines until the end of the 1990s (Roza, Jûjîn, Jin û Jiyan, etc.). The women’s organisations that developed in parallel with the “Kurdish Movement” (such as the Patriotic Women’s Union, established in 1991) also obtained their official identity in Istanbul. However, owing to the oppression inflicted by the government, these organisations were repeatedly banned; they therefore tried to continue their work under different names in Istanbul and other cities (Açık, 2003: 135 ff.; Aktaş, 2015: 2).

The periods of “city riots” — known as the “serhildan” periods (Strohmeier/Yalcin-Heckman, 2000; Açık, 2003; Çağlayan, 2007) — were led by Kurdish women and played a vital role in

² The notion of “Kurdistan” means “the native land of the Kurds” and it does not refer to an independent country whose borders are set in stone. Kurds have been living permanently in Asia Minor and Mesopotamia for thousands of years, and the notion of “Kurdistan” has been in use for a thousand years. (Strohmeier/Yalcin-Heckmann, 2000: 20).

³ *Serhildan* (Kurdish): Civil rebellion.

their organisation. All research studies on Kurdish women emphasise the significance of the “serhildan” periods. Sara Aktaş (2015: 2), a Kurdish Women’s Movement activist and the spokeswoman for the Free Women Congress (Kongreya Jinên Azad-KJA) at the time of the interview, analysed the subjectivisation of Kurdish women in detail:

In that sense, the prison rebellions in the 1980s, the “serhildan” periods before and during the 1990s and the level of Kurdish women’s participation in the fight for freedom ensured that, as of the 1990s, events have taken place that have emphasised the fact that Kurdish women came to the forefront and took the lead in the struggle for freedom as dynamic elements, important figureheads and a primary, pioneering force.

The involvement in this process of the Kurdish mothers⁴ who waited for their children outside the prisons and who lost children to armed conflict brought the work of the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey to the mainstream, thereby differentiating it from the earlier women’s movements. However, it is also notable that the number of female fighters involved in the “Kurdish Movement” increased; in 1994, 2000 women were reported to be fighters in the Movement (Açık, 2003: 144). This encouraged Kurdish women to participate actively in the political parties that focused on the “Kurdish issue”, the PDP (People’s Democracy Party, HADEP) and the parties that incorporated women’s issues into their activities and programmes from an early period on. However, a patriarchal mentality continued to prevail in every part of the political system, despite the substantial number of women who were participating in political parties and organisation activities, and society continued to uphold gender roles, which led the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey to examine the causes of these phenomena. Subsequently, as of 1993, it adopted a more autonomous structure, which aimed to break off⁵ from men, family and the system in order make women more politically and militarily aware and give them greater self-esteem.⁶

⁴ Regarding the analyses of the Kurdish women’s image(s), see: Çağlayan (2007), Yalçın-Heckmann (1999).

⁵ Theory of Break-off: The Kurdish Women’s Movement based their approach on the ideas put forward by Abdullah Öcalan regarding women and Kurdish society.

⁶ Feminist science emphasises that all “ethnic” movements will have to reckon with gender issues at some point (Yalçın-Heckman, 1999).

1.2. The challenge of feminist and women’s movements in Turkey with the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey

The first organisational association between the women’s institutions of the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey and the other feminist organisations in Turkey became possible in the early 2000s thanks to the “Women’s Meeting Projects” organised by Amargi, a feminist association.⁷ Other feminists from Turkey have criticised their own lack of association with Kurdish women and feminists, stating that the reason lies in the way in which feminism in Turkey has developed (Al-Rebholz, 2012: 262). The feminist mentality in Turkey, which limits the focus of feminist politics to the common problems experienced by women, is disturbed by the demands of Kurdish women that emphasise not only their female identity, but also their ethnic identity (ibid: 263). The criticism that, by emphasising ethnic identity, activists are ignoring the various gender-based relationships of dominance remains valid. Kurdish feminists, however, highlight the elite and nationalistic character of the dominant form of feminism in Turkey and argue that it is because of these characteristics that those who are different are ignored. Furthermore, as early as 1990, Anil Al-Rebholz (ibid: 264) referred to feminists and feminism-seekers who questioned whether “we can stand together and create policies despite our differences”. The increase in the 1990s in the number of women’s organisations who defined themselves according to their different ideological, cultural and ethnic identities has made it obligatory for feminist movements and the people involved in them to learn about people who are different to them and who are not one of their own (ibid: 219).

The (lack of) cooperation between the other women’s and feminist movements in Turkey and the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey was one of the subjects covered during the interviews carried out for this text. While Hande Çağlayan (2014: 20) drew attention to the visibility of the political contributions and struggles of the Kurdish Women’s Movement since the 2000s, İlknur Üstün (2014: 48) of the Women’s Coalition argued that the Kurdish

⁷ Amargi’s Women’s Meetings: Diyarbakır, Batman and Istanbul Women’s Meetings (2001), Women Walk Towards Each Other (Kadınlar Birbirine Doğru Yürüyor) (2002), Let’s Organise our Liberation (Kurtuluşumuzu Örgütleyelim) (2002), Struggle Experiences in the Women’s Movement (Kadın Hareketinde Mücadele Deneyimleri) (2002–2003).

Women’s Movement had distanced itself from the feminist movement:

Because [...] the feminist movements before or during the 2000s [and] the Kurdish Women’s Movement grew together [...] Now, although there is a kind of cooperation, [...] [the fact that the Kurdish Women’s Movement] defines itself by clearly distinguishing itself from feminism is a crucial point.

In her above-mentioned work, Al-Rebholz mentions that the feminist movement does not consider the Kurdish Women’s Movement to be a real feminist movement. This view, together with the fact that Kurdish women are not acknowledged and that their demands are ignored, is associated with the stand adopted by the feminist movement. The participants in this research argued that the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey is not considered to be a feminist movement, despite the efforts made to work together, because of the position adopted by the movement itself (Üstün, 2014: 48).

The increase in the organisational power of the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey as of the 1990s played a key role in helping the Kurdish Women’s Movement gain recognition among the feminist movement. Al-Rebholz argues that collaboration and the exchange of ideas between the Kurdish Women’s Movement and the feminist movement could be achieved if certain conditions, identified by Aksu Bora (ibid: 264–265), are met. These conditions could be achieved if the feminist movement were to seriously reconsider its approach to Turkish nationalism and its Kemalist modernism mentality. Aksu Bora (ibid) argues that the relationship between Kurdish women and feminists in Turkey cannot be improved solely by acknowledging their differences and that such a relationship must also pave the way for feminists to reassess their own feminism.

The rising organisational power and subjectivisation of the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey in the 1990s also helped boost the visibility of the movement and turn it into a recognised force. According to Al-Rebholz (2012: 264), before the 2000s, the feminist movement in Turkey did not “see” the Kurdish Women’s Movement as either a concept or a movement; however, after 2000, efforts were made to come together at an ideological level.

The commonly held image of Kurdish women in the eyes of the feminist movement in Turkey can be summarised as “peasant, eastern, ignorant, victim” (Sancar, 2014: 34; Alataş, 2015: 38; Güngör, 2015: 30) and has been subject to particularly virulent criticism by Kurdish women, on the grounds that the feminist movement neither speaks for nor represents Kurdish women, who are subaltern.⁸ According to Spivak (1988; 2008), the fact that the hegemonic, elite feminism does not “see” Kurdish women goes further than failing to listen to those who are subaltern. Crehan (2002) argues that the fact that Kurdish women have organised themselves independently of the feminist movement can be seen as the creation of defensive awareness through rejection.

The academics and activists interviewed as part of this project highlighted the criticisms made by Kurdish women against the feminist movement in Turkey and underscored the importance of these criticisms. Serpil Sancar, who contributed to this research through her role as the head of the Women’s Studies Centre at Ankara University (AÜ KASAUM) and through her work as part of the Association for Monitoring Gender Equality, emphasised the importance of constructive criticism in helping to unite Kurdish women and feminists. Agreeing with Aksu Bora, she also added that these criticisms have forced feminists in Turkey to re-examine their own beliefs (Sancar, 2014: 34):

The criticisms lodged by the Kurdish Women’s Movement on this matter, namely that the Turkish approach to modernisation focuses too narrowly on the Turkish people to the exclusion of non-Turkish individuals and that peasant-born, eastern, uneducated women are facing exclusion, are very important. Rather than widening the gap between Kurds and feminists, this view has driven feminists and Kemalists apart. Feminists [...] have distanced themselves from the idea of “modern Kemalist women’s rights”, which dates back to the 1920s and 1930s, and have started to more closely associate themselves with the Kurdish Women’s Movement.

Mukaddes Alataş (2015: 38), from Diyarbakır Kardelen Women’s Centre, expressed the view

⁸ The concept of “subaltern” in postcolonialism is borrowed from Gramsci and refers to socially marginalised groups.

that the prejudices mentioned by Sancar have been partially overcome:

Now we collaborate quite often with women’s movements in Turkey. In the past, they used to look at us [differently]: PKK members, terrorists [...] In other words, they thought that we were vulgar and that we knew nothing, which is exactly how the media, the government and the system depicted Kurds. These prejudices have been partially overcome [...] They have seen that, in reality, this organised force is capable of doing a lot.

Özlem Şahin Güngör contributed to this research both through her academic work and as an activist in the Muğla Karya Women’s Association. In her view, although the increased strength and popularity of the “Kurdish Freedom Movement” has been effective in overcoming the prejudices held by the feminist movement in Turkey with regard to Kurdish women, the attitude towards Kurdish women remains a breaking point (Şahin Güngör, 2015: 30):

The second one is the “Kurdish question”. Those who position themselves around the first axis that I mentioned [secularism], who have socialised [in this circle] and are politically aware, used to perceive the Kurdish question as a matter of poor women who needed to be saved, who were struggling to cope with traditional values and honour killings [...] When we compare the movement, the relationships and the gender relationships in the region in the 1980s and the early 1990s to now, [we see that women] have undergone a great transformation. [We have witnessed] the high-paced and wide-spread organisation of women and a process that has strengthened women greatly. Although [the feminist movement in Turkey] sees and acknowledges this, their own ideological and political limitations in their minds prevent them from establishing a relationship [with Kurdish women] in order to tackle the problems common to all women.

In her article on ethnography, in which she evaluates the image of Kurdish women, Lale Yalçın-Heckman (1999) argues that the process of war helped develop new labels and public understandings of identities such as “us” and “others”, “Turkish” and “Kurdish”. She

emphasises that this is a process that questions the image of Kurdish women and the traditional description of them, as well as “their position in society and family” (ibid.). Her observation that the image of Kurdish women has changed around the axis of ethnic struggle shows similarities with the perception of Kurdish women as “others” (*Fremdbeschreibung*). The key point is that the dynamic of the change accomplished by Kurdish women within themselves has played a great role in changing existing perceptions.

1.3 “Us” vs. “Them”

Tackling the concepts of “us” and “them” that appear in the following statements made by the participants is, firstly, necessary to understanding their approach to these concepts. The participants’ frequently referred both to organisations and associations of which they were not a part either personally or organisationally and to the Kurdish Women’s Movement as “they” in the interviews. These differentiations and discriminating aspects occurred mostly when making comparisons and in the context of “defining those who are not one of them”. An academic and activist from the Aegean Region was one of the participants that touched upon the fundamental core of this issue:

[There is] yet another split [...]: “the perception of us and them”. [...] victims, unfortunate people. Take the example of a Kurdish individual who is a victim of forced migration. Yet while approaching Kurdish women, [there is a commonly held view that] they don’t speak the language and they are unfortunate women who do not have access to education. [...] There are many associations [that take] such an [approach] and when they carry out their work, they [advertise like] “we took our women to the cinema”, “our women did this and that”, etc. I mean, this is not a bad thing. They obviously love what they do, but this creates a distinction between “us saved women” and “those victims who haven’t yet been saved”. [...] At least in the way that language is formed. (Anonymous, 2015: 31)

Similarly, it was observed that other participants used the concepts of “us” and “them” in various contexts. Alev Özkazanç (2014: 29) of Ankara University stated that the reason why two different movements were mentioned in the discourse stemmed from the way in which

the Kurdish Women’s Movement defined itself:

We do not refer to ourselves as the ‘Turkish Women’s Movement’, but [when we refer to] them as the ‘Kurdish Women’s Movement’ and they do the same, it causes the division. We have a rich relationship with them.

The Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey is considered to be exemplary due to its ongoing struggle and the experience that it has gained and is thought to paint an ideal picture; this is explained by the dichotomy of “us” and “them” that appears in “external” descriptions. A female activist (Anonymous, 2014: 3) from Ankara Socialist Feminist Collective stated the following: “We support Kurdish women and vice versa. We are determined to hear their voices and link their struggle with our own.” She also emphasised, however, that it was their —or “our”, in her own words — duty and responsibility to struggle alongside “them”. Similarly, Selen Doğan (2014: 30) of Ankara Flying Broom organisation described the educational quality of the struggle launched “there” against that split: “The men there have also always supported the movement so that the women could become free and strong. This is a very important practice and, in fact, they are the ones who taught us that”.

In this research, disagreements were observed between women’s movement(s), different action practices and the use of “us” and “them” in questions regarding different agendas. The fact that the agenda of the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey includes the Kurdish issue, human rights, the issue of mother tongue use, citizenship demands and cultural rights, in addition to women’s and gender issues, provokes both agreement and disagreement on these matters (Kapusuz-Kütük, 2014: 23; Arif et al., 2015: 16).

Another key take-away from this research is that the fact that, although the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey emphasises its desire and the need to cooperate and fight side by side with the women’s movements in Turkey, it also differentiates itself clearly from other women’s movements in Turkey. In this sense, it can be concluded that the activists working with associations involved in the Kurdish Women’s Movement use the concepts of “us” and “them” both to make comparisons and to highlight their own differences. These differences are emphasized in particular in the aforementioned examples of dichotomy and

in observations shared in interviews (Alataş, 2015: 34; Aras, 2015: 14; Zin & Emek, 2015: 39) that the Kurdish Women’s Movement “has a stronger organisational structure and acts more bravely and persistently while putting its decisions into action” than other women’s movements in Turkey. The view was also expressed that activists in the Kurdish Women’s Movement referred to the “us” vs “them” dichotomy in rather critical terms. For instance, Mukaddes Alataş (2015: 34) of the Kardelen Women’s Centre described many differences between her organisation and the women’s movements in Turkey, which she referred to as “them”, and cited the struggled against Violence Prevention and Monitoring Centres (VPMCs) as an example:

They couldn’t do this, why? Because they didn’t have a local government, [...] [even if] they had a local government, they couldn’t fight. That is, they couldn’t fight against the VPMCs, they merely criticised [...] we fought though and we still stand by the decisions we have made.

Figen Aras (2014: 14), a board member of Diyarbakır Women’s Academy Association, used similar language — “we” and “they” — to define the disagreements that the Kurdish Women’s Movement has with the other women’s movements in Turkey when planning large-scale women’s action: “That’s why we say this when we argue with them: You come up with and plan great things, but we have to say that we will do those things with all women. This is what we aspire to.”

Another observation that should be noted is that an activist from the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Diyarbakır referred to other women’s movements as “they”. Although different explanations can be offered for the fact that most activists from the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Diyarbakır who participated in this research did not mention the ideological and organisational variety of the women’s movements in Turkey; considering the scope of the study, the fact that these interviews were carried out in Diyarbakır likely explains this.

1.4 Ethnicity: is it a separating factor?

As mentioned before, although the participants stated that the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey is an important role model for the other women’s movements in Turkey, the

subject of ethnicity, which is categorised as a subset of “separating factors” in women’s movements in Turkey, was one of the most frequently touched-upon issues.⁹ It is important to note that these separating factors, which include ethnicity and the Kurdish Women’s Movement’s agenda, stem from the experiences and observations gained by the participants through various platforms and at various events, rather than their own personal views.

Although the Kurdish Women’s Movement has demonstrated that women’s issues cannot be tackled separately from social reality and events, it is sometimes confronted by the “red lines” drawn by the statist mentality. The determining factor in this split can be seen as a sign of how effective “statist” reflexes are in women’s movements, even though statist or Kemalist women’s movements do not play an effective role in determining policies or agendas.

In particular, the prominent features of the “Kurdish issue” in terms of Turkish politics and society play a significant role in women’s movements in the country. An activist from the Denizli Women’s Solidarity Platform (Denizli Kadın Dayanışma Platformu) approached this issue in a different way than the other participants: “The ‘Kurdish issue’ is the most significant one in Turkey. The approach to the Kurdish issue actually creates a split in the approach to women’s issues” (Anonymous, 2015: 90).

Hatice Kapsuz-Kütük of the Ankara Association for Supporting Women Candidates stated that the borders between women’s movements, which she defined as “red lines”, appear in more general platforms such as politics, democracy and the constitution (Kapsuz-Kütük, 2014: 23). She, like many other participants, also explained why the Kurdish Women’s Movement had become so polarised (Kapsuz-Kütük, 2014: 23): “The autonomy that stems from the Kurdish movement and the Kurdish language, which is a matter of human rights, led to this polarisation”.

Serpil Sancar (2014: 34) refers to a line of conflict regarding “violence, justified violence, unjustified violence and demands placed on the government for equal citizenship, as well as

⁹ For more detailed information about ethnicity, see the section entitled “Separating Topics” (Polatdemir, 2017).
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the recognition of cultural differences.” Selen Doğan (2014: 38) of Ankara Flying Broom explained how this situation caused tension during coalition meetings: “At large meetings where women’s organisations come together, one organisation might accuse another of being nationalist, and then that organisation accuses them of supporting the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) because they defend Kurdish women’s rights”.

Another frequently mentioned source of tension was Kurdish manifestos, posters and chanting in Kurdish at events and protests. Sema Kendirici Uğurman (2014: 23) of Turkish Women’s Union, Ankara, gave an example of how Kurdish posters and manifestos had become problematic even on the subject matter of abortion, a topic on which all women’s organisations could agree: “Three years ago, there was quite a lot of controversy about abortion, there we were again [...] [holding] posters. Does it really matter if it is in Kurdish or Turkish if the message is ‘freedom for women, hands off my body’? However, some people left because there were [slogans in Kurdish]”.

Adalet Aydın (2015: 24), from the Muğla Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), recounted a similar example that had occurred in Muğla:

Politics brings up certain privileges and disagreements [...] We, in our movement, fight for the freedom of the Kurdish movement, we support the Kurdish struggle and we care about the native language [...] This is our primary course of action. Our slogan is “Jin Jiyan Azadî” — “Woman, Life, Freedom”. There were women who were against this slogan, however. Why is that? What is actually being said? They have different political views to the Kurdish Freedom Movement, they oppose [the slogan] — which is meant for women — just because it is [in Kurdish], which is a language that I don’t speak, but some other people do quite well. This is one of the main problems.

The fact that the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey uses Kurdish during their activities and events as an expression of political identity is accepted by women’s associations with different political viewpoints; and yet, they reject the language itself and the political

meaning attached to it.

While Adelet Aydın defends the use of Kurdish as a main mother tongue during political action, Jale Eren (2015: 24) of the Muğla Republican Women’s Association evaluated the situation within the context of submission and rejected the use of Kurdish:

We do not have any Kurdish individuals here, but we have to write in Kurdish [...] Frankly, this bothers me. If it is about equality, I think everyone is equal. If there is something that shouldn’t be done there, it also shouldn’t be done here. However, until now, this has always been one-sided. [...] We are finally making progress but cannot agree on these issues.

With regard to the cities and regions other than Diyarbakır, we observed that the topics grouped under the title of “ethnicity” were raised more frequently in institutional settings (especially in discussions during platform and coalition meetings, at protests and events, etc.). However, in the Aegean and Black Sea Regions, some changes have occurred on account of the ideological structure of the city (in a way that emphasises the nationalistic character of the city). Issuing statements about the Kurdish movement can therefore be rather controversial and it puts many women’s associations and activist in a difficult position. This was one of the experiences shared during the interviews. Dilek Bulut (2015: 9) of the Karya Women’s Association painted a striking picture of how the concepts of “Kurd/Kurdish” are approached from a political perspective:

[Referring the city of Muğla] Its view on the Kurdish issue is quite strict. Any topic related to Kurdish people, be it women’s problems or something else, no matter how neutral your language is or how much you try to explain yourself, will receive a [negative] reaction. And then they use you and this situation to spread propaganda.

Firat Varyatan (2015: 62) of Purple Fish (Mor Balık) gives a similar example with regard to the city of Trabzon:

Here, the conversation is over as soon as we mention ethnicity or anything that makes people think that the country’s integrity might be in danger. The moment we go against the mentality of Turkishness, Islam and Turkeyism, they bring out one of those famous red crosses [...] And yet, the anatomy of the city makes this inevitable.

Another academic and activist from Artvin (Anonymous, 2015: 35) mentioned that demonstrating sensitivity to the Kurdish issue has turned them into a target for attack:

Because we cannot assemble, the platform does not work and every women’s association works individually. They otherise you, for instance. A couple of my friends and I were accused of being Kurdish sympathisers and they turned us into targets [...] In the governor’s office, for example, they said that we were promoting Kurdish politics, but that was not the case at all.

1.5 Criticism of the prioritisation of Kurdish identity

In her article titled “Contexts Determining the Struggle of Women in Turkey for Their Rights (2006)”, Serpil Sancar lists the different aims and priorities of various women’s associations, while identifying the priorities of the Kurdish Women’s Movement as “[promoting] the mother tongue [and combating] torture and human rights violations”. In this sense, certain activists criticised the fact that the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey does not limit itself only to women’s issues, but rather has a more general agenda. The chair of a women’s association from Ankara evaluated this problem from the point of view of the women involved in the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP).¹⁰ The activist (Anonymous, 2014: 37), who stated that “the women in the PDP put their ideologies before the priorities of the women’s movements”, expressed the concern that this situation can push gender issues into the

¹⁰ The Kurdish Women’s Movement consists of many women’s associations and organisations, which are particularly present in Kurdish cities. It is represented on city, district and local councils, as well as on women’s councils within the Peace and Democracy Party and the Peoples’ Democratic Party. The Kurdish Women’s Movement is also represented by NGOs (Gökkuştağı, Selis, Kardelen, etc.) in many cities throughout Turkey and Kurdistan.

background. Nurber Güldal of Trabzon Life Women’s Centre Association expressed her discomfort at the fact that the issue had led to discrimination against “Turkish–Kurdish women” in various platforms and meetings. Şükran Üst, the director of Trabzon FeminArt, also underlined the fact that the emphasis placed by Kurdish women on their ethnic identities on every platform was the sole point of separation between Kurdish women and other women’s activists. Conversely, Şükran Üst (2015: 14) defended the right of Kurdish women to establish a different position for themselves and noted that this creates a reverse “othering” experience.

During the interviews carried out in Diyarbakır, greater emphasis was put on the focus placed by the Kurdish Women’s Movement on political and ideological identity than their focus on “Kurdish” identity. Nebahat Akkoç from KA-MER stated that the involvement of Abdullah Öcalan in aspects of the work of the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey makes it difficult for the Kurdish Women’s Movement to engage independent women’s associations (Akkoç, 2015: 57). Dilan Çiçek (2015: 23) of Diyarbakır KESKESOR, argued that although the women’s movement showed initiative and strength, it was susceptible to disappearing into the “Kurdish movement”.

During the interviews, a number of different perspectives on this problem were observed which offered an insight into the effects of regional and local political processes on the activities of women’s movements and the probabilities of a coalition. Mukaddes Alataş (2015: 13) highlighted that, in addition to women’s issues, the Kurdish Women’s Movement also tackled issues associated with being Kurdish and that it must concern itself with both issues in a simultaneous and complementary manner, despite the difficulties that it faced:

We are not the same as a women’s organisation in Istanbul, for instance, because we attend a funeral every day at the same time. Almost every individual we work with here has lost someone close to them in this war, which is obviously quite important. Here, you are not only supporting the women’s movement, but also fighting against the system. You’re a part of the “Kurdish Freedom Movement”. It is all inter-connected. This leads to a sense of weariness [...] we do not have regional separation.

Arif (Arif et al., 2015: 46), an activist working on behalf of Heburn (LGBT Organisation, Diyarbakır), and other activists also drew attention to the differences between “here” and “there”:

Women in western regions are political, not militant. This is the mentality we have here: militant women, but in the west, political women [...] there is no military mentality among women [there]. That’s what we have here: militant women. I am talking about guerrilla women in the mountains and the city militants, because [having] a weapon in one’s hands is not the only thing that makes you a militant. There are also city militants. I think that this is the difference between these two, because the needs and problems of “here” are unfortunately different than those of “there”. You [referring to the researchers] may have also noticed the differences between Istanbul and Diyarbakır.

Although those “outside” the Kurdish Women’s Movement believe that its agenda focuses primarily on the “Kurdish issue”, the activists of the movement define their core area of struggle as “fighting against men and the patriarchal system” (Alataş, 2015: 19). Moreover, they feel a connection with women’s movement’s in Turkey through “their approach to the violence exercised by men and the government”. Mukaddes Alataş (2015: 23) elaborates on this idea with an example:

For example, we stated the following in the Platform Against Violence: “Dear friends, there is an active village guard system in the region and this system leads to violence against women, because [...] these guards work for the armed forces, carry weapons and are not supervised. [...] They inflict violence on their wives and have asserted overwhelming dominance over them. This affects the women around them, those in their family, but not other women.” That is why, when we said that the village guard system must be abolished, most of the women from Turkey with whom we share a platform said: “This is not our problem.” They did not want the system to be abolished. [...] They are not looking at this from the women’s point of view.

Any woman who supports the village guard system is not looking at it from the women’s perspective. There are points on which we disagree here that can be given as an example, and they are quite crucial.

Although the striking example of the “village guard system”¹¹ provided by Mukaddes Alataş demonstrates that the social conditions of women’s rights movements vary from region to region, the Kurdish Women’s Movement does not view the struggle against the patriarchal mentality as specific to a region or group. According to Figen Aras (2015: 2) of Diyarbakır Women’s Academy Association, the movement is working to achieve a mental revolution by struggling against the patriarchal mentality and promoting gender awareness. Sara Aktaş (2015: 13) also emphasised the fact that the Kurdish Women’s Movement sought to achieve a radical separation and that it was engaged in “a far more ideological struggle”:

But similarly, there are many women’s organisations struggling for women’s freedom in Turkey. Maybe they are not approaching [the issue] as radically as we are or [...] do not support the break-off theory, the view that women’s liberation ideology involves a complete and true break-off from civilization, the system and male mentality. Maybe their solution is to work more within the system or [...] to focus more on [...] achieving equality between men and women.

1.6 An exemplary experience of struggle

As analysed above, the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey includes in its agenda not only its ideological approach but also social needs and realities, under sub-topics such as “ethnicity, ideological differences and the Kurdish issue”. The reflection of this issue among women’s movements in Turkey varies, however. When speaking about this subject, although the majority of the participants mentioned the importance of the experiences of Kurdish women, they also argued that the reason for the transformative power of the Kurdish Women’s Movement and its ability to maintain a strong social dynamic lies in the fact that it

¹¹ Para-militant forces that are armed, trained and hired locally in Kurdish cities to fight against the PKK.

does not limit itself to women’s issues and gender struggles. An activist from Muğla Karya Women’s Association (Anonymous, 2015: 33) noted that the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey had been a source of power and inspiration for other women’s movements in the country:

The Kurdish Women’s Movement leads the way in everything in Turkey. I do not know if you have also noticed this, but in the entirety of Turkey, especially Ankara, İstanbul, Diyarbakır [...] and İzmir, many women’s movements are following in the footsteps of the Kurdish [women’s] movement.

When asked “What do you consider women’s movement(s) to be?”, Seçin Tuncel (2014: 20) of Ankara KAOS GL responded, “when you say women’s movement [...] what comes to mind, for some reason, is the Kurdish Women’s Movement.” This emphasises both the organisational power of the Kurdish Women’s Movement, which almost all participants defined as a unique movement, and its visibility as a women’s movement. Selen Doğan (2014: 30) highlighted the fact that the Kurdish Women’s Movement plays a vital role in the struggle for both women’s and human rights and freedoms. She also drew attention to the fact that Kurdish women have taught others “how to organise their struggle from a different place”. Handan Çağlayan (2014: 30) stated that “the experience and models that they have developed provides an important example for women in Turkey and in other countries in general”. Ayşe Balkanay (2015: 36) of Denizli Supporting Entrepreneur Women Association (GİKAD) emphasised the “stubborn and resistant” character of the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey, hence their resolve to defend their views in any kind of environment:

Maybe [the uniqueness] of the women’s movement in the east stems from its superior resistance, the fact that their stubbornness has existed for a longer time or the fact that they have the resolve to fight against much more visible issues. They are resistant to both feudalism and certain forms of oppression in the region [...] and they make a point of being everywhere and trying to say the same thing everywhere.

Jülide Keleş-Yarışan (2015: 16) of Denizli Soroptimist Club associates the power of the Kurdish

Women’s Movement with its collectivism:

The women’s movements [...] — Kurds do have a women’s movement, after all — the fight that they are putting up there is different. It is directed more at the system. Maybe they experience [women’s issue] more clearly in their families and [...] in social life; maybe that’s why their movement is stronger.

1.7 In lieu of a conclusion

As we have observed, women’s movements in Turkey share a common reflex towards remaining generally engaged in and reactive to political and social issues, in addition to considering themselves to be addressees. In the light of the interviews, the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey appears to be the organisation that exhibits this reflex most successfully during its many-pronged struggle for women’s rights, thanks to the issues on which it focuses, its political and ideological approach and the demands for identity that it puts forward.

Both the activists that evaluated the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey “from the outside” and the activists of the Kurdish Women’s Movement that provided an “inside” perspective agreed on the observation put forward in this research that it is the “ideological stand [of the Kurdish Women’s Movement] and the policies that it pursues” that distinguish it from the other women’s movements in the country. Although this state of “taking a different position” was driven primarily by criticism of the “Turkish” feminists mentioned in the analysis of the movement’s historical development, issues of “ethnicity” also created tension and division. This finding is supported both by this research and by the association between the Kurdish Women’s Movement and other women’s movements in Turkey throughout its development.

Within the framework of this research, in which we compare women’s movements in different cities, it can be concluded that the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey is seen as a powerful factor on which varying levels of agreement had been achieved in the regions and

cities in which the study was carried out. While issues related to “ethnic identity” and “mother tongue” were particularly divisive in all the regions studied, it was also observed that general agreement had been reached on the themes of gender and women’s rights. Although criticism was voiced for the fact that Kurdish women placed a focus on ethnic identity policies in addition to pursuing the gender struggle, many academics and activists also mentioned the strong dynamic promoted by these policies. The fact that the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Turkey does not limit its scope to the Kurdish region, but rather insists on voicing its demands regarding gender and political issues in all locations in which it is represented, has been the most effective factor in determining their awareness-raising process.

The above observations and conclusions and, most importantly, the statements made in this research regarding the Kurdish Women’s Movement, can be summarised as follows: “This process, which can be defined as one of mutual acceptance and understanding, has made it possible to talk about the distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and the reasons for that distance.”

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