

The Contemporary Women's Movement in  
Turkey: The Potential for Working Across  
Differences

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the challenges faced by the contemporary women's movement in Turkey, which are a result of Turkish political history. After the Turkish Republic was founded in 1923, many political, social, economic and cultural policy changes took place to establish a secular and modern nation-state that set westernisation and modernisation as their primary goals. The century-old women's movement in Turkey, which can be traced back to the Ottoman era in the late nineteenth-century, was mainly under the influence of this Kemalist modernisation process from the 1920s until the 1980s, when feminism came to the fore. In the 1990s, however, a new phase in the women's movement emerged with the rise of religious and Kurdish women's movements, both of which have challenged Kemalism and feminism. This thesis focuses on these fragmentations within the women's movement in Turkey and discusses the possibilities and ways of doing politics together across political and identity differences among women by analysing the potential for solidarity and coalition building/alliance. I explore the differences and similarities among these varied ideological, political and identity positions through 35 in-depth interviews with activists and academics representing each of these different groups. I discuss activist women's perceptions and their positions on gender, religion and ethnicity as well as their views of each other. I analyse the points of tension among them and the potential for working together based on their approach to women's solidarity and coalition work. I argue that coalition building/alliance is a realistic and promising way to bring activists together in Turkey to solve problems related to all/many of them. It fosters an environment for women's solidarity to grow and thus activists can transform their cooperation within alliances into solidarity. Finally, I suggest that coalition politics can pave the way to transversal politics, whereby activists can find a realm aside from the exclusionary structures of universalism and identity politics, which I argue to be one of the main problems of the women's movement in Turkey. It could, then, potentially help activists to overcome the barriers to solidarity by increasing respect and understanding of their differences without becoming trapped by them.

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## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

I declare that all the research and writing presented in this thesis is original and I am the sole author. This work is carried out in accordance with the Regulations of the University of York and it has not been submitted for another award, although a draft of Chapter Five was published in 2017 as 'A Feminist's Fieldwork Notes on Women's Solidarity and Differences in Turkey' in *Discover Society*.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In the section ‘what do I want to achieve from this research?’, Orna and Stevens ask these questions: ‘Why am I looking at this research question? What makes it important for me? A long-standing enthusiasm? Previous experience? A new discovery? Something in my background that makes me a particularly appropriate person to look at this?’ (Orna & Stevens, 2009: 138). My family and friends define me as a good listener. I do like to listen to and read about different experiences, stories and perspectives. Since my childhood, one thing has never changed about me: I have sympathy for anyone who is subordinated in any way, and therefore I have always believed in a magic wand: empathy. I have always believed, maybe naively, that if people listen to each other with an open heart, while putting aside their prejudices and judgements, they can better understand the positions of others, which can then help to build bridges across differences. This is what brought me into this research. The women’s movement is very fragmented in Turkey, because of the political cleavages in the country and the ethnic and religious divisions, which create tensions among groups. There are almost 600 women’s associations, foundations, discussion groups, platforms and research centres, with various political tendencies, such as feminist, Kemalist, Kurdish, or religious. I explore the differences and similarities among varied positions in the context of the women’s movement in Turkey. I aim to understand activist women’s perceptions of and their positions on gender, religion and ethnicity as well as their views of each other. Moreover, I examine activists’ opinions of the possibility of solidarity and coalition building/alliances<sup>1</sup> among different groups of women. Differences between the experiences of women through their political, social, ethnic and religious backgrounds may cause divergence in their positions on and perceptions of events and concepts. There is no unitary identity of ‘woman’, but rather it is interrelated with other social attributes such as class, ideology, religion and ethnicity. Through my in-depth interviews with 35 activists and academics, I wanted to find answers to the following questions: How do they perceive gender issues and other political

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, I use the terms ‘coalition building’ and ‘alliance’ interchangeably and synonymously. I will discuss this in detail in Chapter 6.

issues in Turkey? How do they understand the political and identity differences among them and how does this affect their views of others? What do they identify as the points of stress between them? How do they account for the issues on which they worked together – the examples of solidarity or coalition building they offer? To what extent do they think it is possible or desirable to overcome their differences? These sub-questions revolve around activists' understanding of what divides women and what can potentially unite them. As such they cast light on my main research question: How do they see the possibility of working across differences and the potential for solidarity among women? My data comes from the interviews and accordingly there is a limitation to understanding how these women actually work together across their differences. However, their answers on the possibilities of working across differences still give us clues to a means of facilitating successful cooperation among women through coalition building. My fieldwork revealed that, even though these women hold onto stereotypical judgements of each other, when they talk about coming together on common platforms, they express a willingness to connect even with those who have completely different agendas. Through listening carefully to how my participants discussed their perceptions of other groups of women, how they frame their accounts of working across their political and identity differences, and how they addressed these tricky issues, I was given hope that encounters and alliances among women from very diverse backgrounds and political and identity locations can foster a degree of solidarity among them.

Two works inspired me to pursue this research. The first is a very well-written Master's thesis by a feminist activist, Sibel Astarçioğlu Bilginer, who focuses on the potential for feminist solidarity among women activists in Turkey. She argues that a sustained feminist solidarity should be based on feminism, feminist politics and feminist activism, whilst respecting differences but criticising identity politics (Bilginer, 2009). This thesis encouraged me to work on the potential for solidarity among women in two ways. First of all, and most importantly, I disagree with her conclusion. I believe that equating solidarity among women with feminism and feminist politics is very limited and excludes those women activists in Turkey who do not define themselves as feminists, such as many religious women and Kurdish women. Even though I do define myself as a feminist and I wish that feminism could connect all women, I still argue, especially in the context of Turkey, that only

a small group of women would benefit from this solution. It would leave the majority of women activists out of the picture and would encourage them to remain within their own networks, which could destroy any chance of connecting with them. Defining women's solidarity just as feminist solidarity only sustains this exclusion and ignores the importance of broader forms of women's solidarity. I argue that women's solidarity is not necessarily only based on love, friendship and/or kinship relationships among women but rather can also consist of women's political togetherness, as in feminist solidarity, and embraces diversity among women. Secondly, Bilginer defines her participants as the 'most widely known names within feminist activism in Turkey' (Bilginer, 2009: 54), whereas I wanted to broaden the scope of my research by interviewing women from very diverse backgrounds with very different perceptions of gender, ethnicity and religious issues. I did not want to solely focus on the feminist movement, as she did, but on the wider women's movement in Turkey, involving a more diverse range of activists. Nevertheless, her research gave me valuable information about how activists understood feminist solidarity and solidarity practices in Turkey, which helped me to structure my research.

The second work that inspired me is an interview with Hidayet Tuksal (2012), a very well-known religious feminist, and later a participant in this research, on discussions about the threat of an abortion ban in Turkey in 2012. I do not believe in religion, yet I come across Islamic practices in my everyday life. Islam and its practices can never be strange to someone who has lived in a Muslim society throughout her life. On the other hand, like most of Turkish society, I had a very Kemalist education in state schools, and I think this has had the biggest influence on how I defined Islam as a restrictive religion, especially on women's lives. This is a perception that I started to question during my bachelor's degree. I have never managed to make peace with Islam myself, but I have learnt how to understand and respect religious and Islamist women's perspectives. Hidayet Tuksal is one of those women; I respect her deeply and she is one of the influences that led me into this research. Her PhD thesis, *The Effects of Patriarchy on Narrations against Women*, was the first in the Faculty of Theology to focus on women. Tuksal and her colleagues in the *Capital Women's Platform* introduced the term 'religious feminism' to Turkey, when they intentionally refused to be called Islamist feminists

because of the term's political connotations. Yet, the main reason that she affected me this deeply was her response to the abortion ban. In the published interview, even though she, personally, is against abortion, she was also against the ban and emphasised that not everyone in Turkey believes in Islam and that the ban causes women to make dangerous attempts to conduct self-abortions (Tuksal, 2012). This was how I pictured solidarity in my mind before starting this research. Solidarity meant more to me if it was about something that had no direct effect on your own life. It meant more if you could stand up for a cause that you personally would not practise. During the fieldwork, however, I realised how idealised and romanticised the concept of solidarity is, and how women set this ideal as a goal to achieve and, when they fail, it alienates them from each other and creates more walls between them. Although women's solidarity is widely employed by activists in Turkey, its excessive use means that it becomes almost meaningless and underestimates the importance and effectiveness of other forms of cooperation among women, such as coalition building and alliances, through which solidarity might perhaps emerge. Therefore, my data has profoundly changed my expectations and expanded my understanding of working across differences.

### **Structure of the Thesis**

There are seven chapters in this thesis, including the introduction, in which I discuss the ideological and identity differences among women in Turkey and examine the potential for solidarity and alliances among them. In the first contextual chapter, Chapter Two, I examine the women's movement's century-long history in order to understand the existing fragmentations among women in contemporary Turkey by illustrating its connection with Turkish political history. I point out that the women's movement in Turkey can be traced back to the time of the Ottoman Empire, when women first organised around gender-related issues. I then question the aims of the new-born nation state, the Republic of Turkey, and its Kemalist reforms relating to women. Later, I discuss the emergence of feminism as well as Islamist and Kurdish women's critiques of the exclusionary structures of Kemalist reforms and also of feminism in the 1990s and in contemporary Turkey. In Chapter Three, I discuss my methodology, in which I justify the reasons behind my selection of interviewing in particular and my own position in this research as a feminist. Then I provide

information about my participants, the organisations and the cities in which I conducted my interviews, followed by an explanation of the methods I used. In the following chapter, I discuss how my participants define the women's movement in Turkey, how they approach their differences and the tensions among them by focusing on Kemalism, the headscarf issue and the Kurdish question. In this chapter, I argue that identity politics, along with exclusionary Kemalist ideology, creates fixed identities and forms tension between groups. Chapter Five deals with the conceptualisation of solidarity based on the literature and my participants' views and considers solidarity as an ideal, which is mainly based on womanhood and commonality. I then discuss the successful examples of solidarity described by my participants and their narratives on differences as obstacles to solidarity and how to overcome them. In Chapter Six, I consider coalition building and alliance as useful forms of cooperation by firstly focusing on the literature on their conceptualisation and then discussing their similarities to and differences from solidarity as defined by my participants. Moreover, I examine what my participants characterise as successful examples of coalition building/alliance among women and how they can be established to foster a conducive environment within which solidarity can grow. In this chapter, I also argue that coalition politics can pave the way for transversal politics, which in turn can open up a new path for working across differences, showing how to approach those differences while being critical of identity politics and universalism. In the last chapter, I draw my conclusions by summarising my arguments and highlighting the limitations and also my contribution to the field. I argue that any form of togetherness among women is valuable, especially in such a conflict-ridden environment as contemporary Turkey, and that all those small encounters, cooperations and alliances among women can prepare the ground for sustained solidarity, through understanding and respecting women's differences.

## CHAPTER TWO

### DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN TURKEY THROUGHOUT ITS HISTORY

#### **A Brief History of Turkish Politics**

It is not possible to understand the current political fragmentation in Turkey without considering its political history. Although there is nowhere in the world where women's movements are united and there are and always will be disagreements among women based on their class, race, sexuality, age and other differences, the case in Turkey is particular. It intersects with the political cleavages that divide Turkish society as a whole, specifically between the Kemalist ideology, which has been the foundation of Turkish social and political structures since the establishment of the Turkish Republic as a nation-state, and the Islamists and Kurds. Kemalist ideology, which took westernisation as its primary goal, has shaped Turkish politics while Kurdish and Islamist groups have criticised and resisted its exclusionary character. Therefore, in order to comprehend the contemporary fragmentation within the women's movement in Turkey, the history of these divisions should initially be examined.

Kemalism<sup>2</sup> was established with the foundation of the Turkish state. The Turkish war of independence took place between 1919 and 1923. After the Ottoman Empire's defeat in World War I, Turkey was occupied by the members of the victorious western allies – the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Greece and Armenia. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk started to organise a national resistance in Anatolia, called the Turkish National Movement (Kuva-yi Milliye). This culminated in the Grand National Assembly (GNA), the headquarters of the national movement, which gathered on 23 April 1920, in Ankara. On the same day, the GNA elected Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as its chairman. The Treaty of Lausanne was signed on 24 July 1923 and the independence of the new Turkish state was internationally recognised. The

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<sup>2</sup> Durakbaşa defines Kemalism as a corporatist state of ideology, rather than as an individualist ideology (Durakbaşa, 2000: 152).

Republic of Turkey was established by the GNA on 29 October 1923; Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was elected as Turkey's first President and the one-party state was established at this stage. Zürcher (2004: 4) describes the years between 1926 and 1945 as the heyday of Kemalism, as it came to be called during the 1930s. The basic principles of Kemalism – republicanism, secularism, nationalism, populism, statism and revolutionism (or reformism) – were laid down in the party programme of 1931 in order to achieve the goals of westernisation and modernisation of the new-born nation-state. Republicanism has been the basic principle since 1923. Secularism was interpreted as a separation of state and religion, but at the same time as a removal of religion from public life and the establishment of full state control over religious institutions<sup>3</sup>. Nationalism was used as a nation-building tool through the creation of historical myths and was intended to replace religion in many respects. Populism was the foundation of national solidarity, which put the interests of the whole nation before any other groups. Statism was the supremacy of the state in the economic field. Finally, revolutionism or reformism meant a vow to support the changes of the Kemalist reform programme. These six principles are symbolised in the party emblem as six arrows and they are the foundations of Kemalist state ideology (Zürcher, 2004: 181–182).

When modernity is assumed to equate with westernisation, then swinging towards the West could be seen as the only way to survive, especially as Turkey emerged as a new nation-state after the world war. Therefore, that the Kemalist reform programme as a form of modernisation and westernisation is hardly surprising. Modernity uses emancipation, progress, victory and vitality as future reference points (Therborn, 2003: 298), and these were used by Kemalist modernist elites. Therborn argues that one way to approach modernity is to focus on the historical conflict between the modern and the traditional and between modernity and anti-modernity, which he defines as reactive modernisation. In this type of

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<sup>3</sup> Kandiyoti shows the importance of secularism for the new-born nation-state by summarising its reforms related to religion: 'In a single day, on 3 March 1924, the Caliphate was abolished, education was made a monopoly of the state, and the *Medrese* (religious education) system was terminated. Religious affairs and the administration of the *vakif* (pious foundations) were henceforth allocated to directorates attached to the office of the prime minister. This was followed by the elimination of religious courts in April of the same year. The *tarikats* (mystic religious orders) were banned in 1925. The constitutional provision accepting Islam as the religion of the state was finally abrogated in 1928' (Kandiyoti, 1991: 22).



modernisation, countries such as Japan, China, the Ottoman Empire/Turkey, Iran, and Siam/Thailand were both challenged and threatened by colonial domination; they were externally induced towards modernisation and their internal elites initiated the necessary changes (Therborn, 2003: 298–299). Moreover, he argues that ‘different modernities have had different Others, as obstacles or as categories of reference’ (Therborn, 2003: 299). In the Turkish case, those ‘others’ were religion, the existing culture and customs and the social structure. Therefore, the Kemalist reform programme targeted those and tried to create an entire political, social and cultural change by implementing western ideas and values.

During the years 1945–1950, the transition to democracy started gradually, culminating in the removal of power from the Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People’s Party), the CHP. Therefore, the 1950s constitute a significant era in which a multi-party system replaced the early Republic’s single-party regime. During the 1960s, political movements increased dramatically and the first coup in the Turkish Republic took place on 27 May 1960 as the ruling Demokrat Parti (Democratic Party) began to challenge Kemalist rules about religious issues. After the coup, a new constitution was approved and created a suitable atmosphere for different political social groups to organise throughout the country. Because of the recession during the late 1960s, street demonstrations and strikes were widespread and the second Turkish coup took place on 12 March 1971, which is also known as the ‘coup by memorandum’<sup>4</sup>. After the coup by memorandum, Turkey changed prime ministers 11 times in a decade, which resulted in instability and continuing recession. By the end of the 1970s, the political polarisation between left- and right-wing movements in Turkey had increased significantly and these groups continued their violent clashes in the streets every day, which ended in many deaths. As a result, a third Turkish military coup was declared on 12 September 1980. Following this coup, the military government closed down all political organisations, especially left-wing ones, which were replaced with right-wing, conservative and religious parties. Subsequently, the 1990s witnessed the rise of political Islam in Turkey,

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<sup>4</sup> It is called a ‘coup by memorandum’ because the Chief of the General Staff handed the prime minister a memorandum which demanded a strong and credible government to end the ‘anarchy’ and sustain Kemalist reforms. However, ‘if these demands were not met, the army would “exercise its constitutional duty” and take over power itself’ (Zürcher, 2004: 258).

which resulted in a coalition government led by the Islamist Refah Partisi (Welfare Party) in 1996. However, the fear of Islamism taking control of the country led the Constitutional Court of Turkey to ban the Refah Partisi from politics, arguing that the party violated the rule of the separation of religion and state, which is under constitutional protection. The current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was a member of the Refah Partisi at that time, founded the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party), the AKP, in 2001 with some members of the other conservative parties and toned down their Islamic references. They preferred to use the phrase ‘conservative democracy’ with respect to pluralistic democratic values and refuted allegations that they had an Islamic agenda in order to operate trouble-free in the country. Since 2002, Turkey has been governed by the AKP and the party has become more explicit about its Islamist views after gaining power in each election. It has also reduced the potential of a military intervention by arresting many military leaders in relation to a plot against the government in 2012. Rather than having a strong party identity, the AKP depends on Erdoğan’s charismatic leadership, which appeals to ordinary voters, to protect its continuity. He served as Prime Minister between 2003-2014, before becoming President of Turkey in 2014. Despite being required constitutionally to cut off all of his partisan ties at this point, he still held his effect on the AKP. The AKP has already managed to convert a democratic regime into a near single-party dictatorship over the past 14 years by destroying the independence of the judiciary and increasing control over the state bureaucracy, the police and its citizens’ lives. Moreover, an attempted coup against the government and President Erdoğan in June 2016<sup>5</sup>, followed by a state of emergency for six successive months, which was later extended twice, allowed the government to gain more strength. The government started to use ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorist’ against anyone it saw as opponents, such as academics, human-rights activists, writers and columnists, who had no connection with the coup, to silence any counter-view. In such a polarised environment, it is very difficult to imagine how the already fragmented women’s movement in Turkey will be affected.

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<sup>5</sup> The AKP and Erdoğan accused Fethullah Gülen, a Muslim cleric and the leader of the Hizmet [Service] movement which provides social services, primarily in the realm of education, by operating hundreds of schools in Turkey and around the world. Gülen used to be the government’s long-standing ally, but their ways separated later due to power clashes.

## **History of the Women's Movement in Turkey: From the Empire's Women to the Identity Politics of the Twenty-first Century**

Diner and Toktaş (2010) argue that the history of feminism in Turkey has evolved parallel to Western feminism. First-wave feminism in Turkey, which was about civic and political rights, overlapped with the Kemalist reforms of the early Republic during the 1920s and 1930s. During that period, women focused on legal and political equality between the genders in Turkey. The second wave addressed patriarchy, criticised male hegemony and sought the advancement of women's status in both public and private spheres. It was the 1980s, however, before an independent feminist movement arose. Lastly, third-wave feminism emerged in the 1990s, when the main focus was on diversity among women in terms of their different ethnic, religious or sexual identities, and this has been shaped by Kurdish and Islamist feminism (Diner & Toktaş, 2010: 56–57). This is a fair summary to display the similarities between Turkish and western feminisms. I argue, however, that this classification is problematic since it tends to narrow down the women's movement in Turkey to the feminist movement, even though the majority of women who engage with the Kurdish or Islamist women's movements do not define themselves as feminists. Although the 1980s was a significant turning point in the women's movement in Turkey, as the feminist movement came to prominence, it is actually a century-old movement which started during the Ottoman Empire era in the late nineteenth century (Abadan-Unat, 1981; Tekeli, 1995; Kandiyoti, 1987). Therefore, the meaning and history of the women's movement in Turkey cannot solely be limited to the feminist movement; it can be traced back to the Ottoman Empire, when women first began to organise around gender issues.

### **The Ottoman Era: The Rise of Demands for Women's Rights**

Tekeli (1995) analyses the development of the women's movement in three stages. Although this classification into historical periods is problematic, as it blurs the transitivity between them, it is still useful to aid in understanding the historical background. The first stage occurred after 1908, during the second constitutional period of the Ottoman era. The second stage started during the early period of the Republic. Finally, the last stage came after the 1980 military coup when feminism moved to the forefront. In the first stage, the traditional roles of Ottoman women as

mothers and wives were questioned and the rights to education, work and participation in public life were defended. Moreover, monogamy, freedom of choice in matters of marriage, free choice of feminine apparel, and the adoption of a European Civil Code were also demanded (Abadan-Unat, 1981: 6). However, women were already involved in the foundation of religious institutions from the early years of the Ottoman Empire: They founded about 1533 religious institutions in İstanbul alone and established similar ones in the Anatolian regions, as well as libraries and schools (Çaha, 2013: 32). The nineteenth century, particularly the *Tanzimat* period (1839–1876), refers to the start of the modernisation period by the Ottoman state, when changes in the military, administrative, legal and educational institutions occurred (Çaha, 2013: 34). During this modernisation period, women’s social conditions and roles were discussed in secular terms and new educational programmes and schools for girls were opened in order to use women’s labour later in different areas (Arat, 2000: 7). However, as Kandiyoti argues, the *Tanzimat* period did not introduce significant changes regarding women; it was only when the position of women appeared to be debated in various media (Kandiyoti, 1989: 130–131). During the Second Constitutional Period (1908), however, women started to discuss their own problems with the appearance of publications, such as magazines and journals (Tekeli, 1990: 269; 1995: 11). There were over 40 publications<sup>6</sup> that were not feminist and mostly focused on topics that were assumed to be of interest to women, such as childcare, health and housework. Although most of these journals were owned and published by men, a few were owned and published by women and had only women writers. Among these journals, *Kadınlar Dünyası* (Women’s World) differs from the others in its aim of ‘promoting women’s legal rights’ (Demirdirek, 2000: 66). In these journals, women writers and also their readers addressed women’s issues such as the reconciliation of women’s rights with Islam, inequalities within Muslim families, women’s education and work demands and participation in public affairs (Arat, 2000: 10).

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<sup>6</sup> These publications started with *Muhaddarat* in 1868 and continued with *Âyine* (1875), *Aile* (1880), *Şükûfezar* (1886), *Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete* (1895), *Demet* (1908), *Mehasin* (1908), *Kadın* (1908), *Kadınlık* (1914), *Hanımlar Âlemi* (1914), *Kadınlar Dünyası* (1913), *İnci* (1919), and *Süs* (1923) (Demirdirek, 2000: 66).

After the Ottoman Empire began to modernise, these publications reveal how women struggled to be equal citizens with men: ‘...by writing articles, publishing journals, and establishing associations, Ottoman women had embraced every opportunity that had been provided in their times, although within the constraints and challenges imposed by their Muslim-Ottoman identity’ (Demirdirek, 2000: 66–67). Drawing on articles in these journals, Demirdirek (2000) summarises women’s demands during the Ottoman era as demands for education, employment, changing attire, electoral rights and also opposition to arranged marriages. The demand for education was the most clearly expressed and regularly mentioned since women saw education as a tool that allowed them to exist as separate individuals. This means that they did not need to present themselves through their kinship with their husbands or fathers. Women’s demands for employment stemmed from necessity brought on by such circumstances as poverty, the death of the main male breadwinner, or having nobody to look after them. Nevertheless, women rationalised their demands by emphasising their contribution to the country’s development. Through their journal articles, women also demanded a change of attire. They tried to contest the idea that the veil and *çarşaf* – a black burka that conceals everything except the eyes – were the ‘correct’ attire of Muslim women. It was argued in the journals that the women’s suffrage movement across the world also affected Ottoman women. Even though they did not demand the right to vote at that time, they noted that women would make this demand in the near future. Lastly, women demanded free choice of marriage partners and opposed arranged marriages (Demirdirek, 2000: 67–73). Tekeli argues that women’s primary demand, to reform marriage and the family, confirms that those educated women did not assign any roles to themselves to become involved formal politics, despite the influence of the women’s suffrage movements from abroad, but rather defined their status within the limitations of the private sphere (Tekeli, 1990: 269–270).

During the Ottoman era, many women’s organisations were also established in order to explore women’s issues. These mostly involved upper-class women from urban areas who organised themselves within diverse associations, which aimed to educate women or helped to support the army in order to defend the country (Arat, 2000: 8). Abadan-Unat argues that all these emancipatory movements were class-bounded: ‘Only the girls of wealthy families, who were educated privately by European

governesses, began to aspire to more freedom as a result of their exposure to French and English literature' (Abadan-Unat, 1981: 7). During the Ottoman era, these women came to recognise the hierarchical order and power relations between men and women. However, in the transition to the Republican era, the stress on gender differences was weakened due to a number of positive responses to women's demands and also the emphasis on a new, united society (Demirdirek, 2000: 79).

### **The Kemalist Era and the Rise of the Feminist Movement**

Durakbasa and Ilyasoglu note that the writing of history has always been a problematic issue in Turkey because its role has been seen as crucial in the construction of the nation-state since Turkey emerged as a young Republic. For this reason, women's history has also been written within an ideological perspective, which tells of the benefits of the state-initiated reforms related to women and the mobilisation of women within the nation-building project (Durakbasa & Ilyasoglu, 2001: 195). This second stage of the women's movement, defined as state feminism<sup>7</sup> by Tekeli, started during the early period of the Turkish Republic (Tekeli, 1995: 12). The three decades of Kemalist rule between 1920 and 1950 were the era in which the ideological principles were established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his single-party rule, the CHP. During this era, the party's aim was the creation of a modern nation-state, and secularism was a key element of this modernisation and westernisation process (Acar & Altınok, 2012: 34). The construction of Kemalist women's identity, however, was influenced by male Ottoman reformers and nationalist intellectuals such as Ziya Gökalp, and is therefore directly attributable to the birth and advancement of Turkish nationalism (Kandiyoti, 1989: 128–129). Ziya Gökalp, a Durkheimian sociologist, who died a year after the establishment of the Turkish Republic, rejected the equating of modernisation with westernisation and argued that Turkish civilisation was already modern and women were its guards (Arat, 2000: 14). He argued that women's liberation was one of the most important

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<sup>7</sup> Arat warns about the problematic side of this conceptualisation by offering this critique: 'Although I mostly agree with the analysis of these scholars [Şirin Tekeli and Deniz Kandiyoti], I find their choice of term 'state feminism' in defining the Kemalist reforms unfortunate. In order to call any movement or action feminist it should recognize gender inequalities and male domination, and by treating this as a political issue, it should take conscious measures to eliminate domination. On the other hand, both scholars agree that Kemalist reforms did not show such efforts or intentions.' (Arat, 1994c: 74)

components of pre-Islamic societies (Kadıoğlu, 1998: 92). Therefore, his ideas aimed to build a unified and secular ‘Turkish nation-state’ based on one identity, and thus differs from the Islamic, multi-national and multi-ethnic character of the Ottoman Empire (Arat, 2000: 14). Atatürk referenced Gökbalp as his mentor and Gökbalp’s ideas contributed to the rise of Kemalist ideology (Fleming, 2000: 127). In his theory, Gökbalp claimed that the Turkish nation had all the components of being a ‘modern’ state in its historical past without needing any exterior guidance from Western concepts and ideals (Fleming, 2000: 137). Therefore, he focused on the ancient past of the Turkish civilisation in order to construct the future modern Turkish nation, in which he particularly emphasised the central and pivotal role of women, seeing them as the guardians of the past. He focuses on the woman question in his writings and suggestions regarding the legal and religious reforms and in his approach to politics, language and literature (Fleming, 2000: 127–128). However, as much as Kemalist ideology is influenced by Gökbalp’s nationalist writings and can be seen in Republican government policies, both his feminist aspirations and separation of ‘modern civilisation’ from ‘Western civilisation’ were ignored by the Kemalist state, and modernisation and westernisation are comprehended as being the same thing (Arat, 2000: 14–15).

During the early years of the Turkish Republic, women were politically very active, who were also effective during the Second Constitutional Period, and on 15 June 1923 they established *Kadınlar Halk Fırkası* – the Women’s People Party – and Nezihe Muhittin was elected as the party’s leader. This occurred at the same time as the preparations for the Republican People’s Party and was thus highly criticised for its timing and for being divisive (Kandiyoti, 1991: 41). In their declaration regarding the establishment of the party, they stated the reason behind their motives: ‘Although women are part of the political, social and economic problems in every part of the country and are affected by them, they cannot visibly work in these areas. The aim is to transform the emerging women’s presence and personality into a mass movement’ (Çakır, 2011: 126, my translation). However, the party was not officially approved and party members were instead advised to found an association by the state. Therefore, women established an association, *Türk Kadınlar Birliği* – the Turkish Women’s Union, in 1924 and Nezihe Muhittin became its chairwoman. She emphasised the importance of women’s right to vote and criticised the government:

‘As education has been expanded as mandatory without discrimination, Turkish women cannot be in a lower position. It is not absolutely compulsory for the electorate to be able to read either. Can this right be given to those men who lazily spend their time in the corner of coffee-houses and withheld from self-conscious and perfectly educated women?’ (Muhittin, in Çakır, 2011: 130, my translation). In 1930, women were first granted the vote at local elections and, in 1934, at the national level. After this, members of the Turkish Women’s Union decided to abolish the association in 1935<sup>8</sup>. The history of the Women’s People Party and the Turkish Women’s Union reveals how Kemalist ideology restricted women from active political participation and instead only assigned responsibilities to them that were related to women’s education, which indicates women’s symbolic importance for Kemalist modernisation. Çaha argues that Atatürk advised these women to rather serve the regime by educating rural women since men were educated through the military but the state could not reach women in the rural parts of Turkey (Çaha, 2013: 51).

Within the Kemalist-nationalist framework, men and women were seen as members of the newborn Turkish nation who shared the responsibility for this nation-building process. Both young men and young women were the guardians of progress, modernisation, reform and enlightenment (Durakbaşa, 2000: 141–142). In order to achieve these goals, the Civil Code reform of 1926, modelled on a Swiss prototype, was adopted (Arat, 2000: 15). The Civil Code:

abolished polygamy; prevented child marriages by imposing a minimum age for marriage; recognised women as legal equals of men in certain areas (for example, as witnesses in courts and in inheriting and maintaining property); and granted women right to choose their spouses, initiate divorce<sup>9</sup> and maintain their maternal rights after a divorce. (Arat, 2000: 15)

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<sup>8</sup> The Union was re-established in 1949 and has been active ever since. One of my participants in this research is an active member (See Appendix D).

<sup>9</sup> Abadan-Unat explains the details of asking for divorce under the Turkish Civil Code: ‘The grounds for divorce can be classified in two groups: specifically stated ones of desertion, ill treatment or adultery, and those of a general nature such as incompatibility of character. Since the adoption of the Turkish Civil Code divorces have rapidly increased; divorce is mostly sought in large cities, by couples married from six to ten years. The majority of the divorces are those of childless couples and the most frequently quoted grounds are incompatibility of character, followed by desertion. Another innovation brought about by the Turkish Civil Code is temporary separation of the marriage partners (Art. 38) with a duration of one to three years’ (Abadan-Unat, 1978: 294).



Moreover, the law was based on individual ownership of property, which allowed women to dispose freely of their material goods and have rights of ownership over all their acquisitions (Abadan-Unat, 1978: 294). Abadan-Unat remarks, however, that the Civil Code did not allow absolute equality between husband and wife:

The husband is the head of the family, the wife must follow the husband, who alone is entitled to choose a domicile, unless the wife, by applying to the court, can justify on acceptable grounds such as health, etc., her own choice. The wife is required to participate in the maintenance of the household by assuming tasks in the household. If the wife wants to practice a profession, she has to obtain the open or tacit consent of the husband; in case of refusal she may apply to the court for arbitration. (Abadan-Unat, 1978: 294)

Although Abadan-Unat explains the Civil Code's patriarchal characteristics, she also emphasises that formal emancipation certainly strengthened the position of Turkish women within the family with the creation of a new form of family life based on mutual rights and duties, which gave women some kind of legal power (Abadan-Unat, 1978: 295). Republican reforms and the rights given to women were highly praised by Kemalist women, such as Abadan-Unat and Kagıtcıbası. Abadan-Unat highlights the courageous aspects of these reforms undertaken by Atatürk, especially the changes in the status of women that no other Islamic society had implemented. She explains Atatürk's aim in liberating Turkish women by emphasising his goal of establishing a more egalitarian and harmonious family life and wanting Turkish women to have the same goals as men. She notes that Atatürk was determined to change women's secondary roles as objects (Abadan-Unat, 1978: 293). Kagıtcıbası (1986) also emphasises the importance of legal reforms as they implemented legal and institutional structures for the termination of the sex segregation and unequal treatment that women faced under the law, and they also provided the groundwork for changes in lifestyles. For her, the central point is that, even though these formal arrangements ensured the grounds for necessary adjustments in lifestyles, they did not actually produce these changes. She emphasises that, although Atatürk's reforms have been criticised for not generating extensive changes in women's everyday lives, especially for those who lived in rural areas, it should be stressed that lifestyles cannot be changed solely by legal reforms. Rather, there should be a comprehensive social change which involves modifications of both social structures and attitudes, beliefs, and values. Therefore,

for her it is neither realistic nor fair to expect a complete cultural change to occur solely through legal reforms (Kagitcibasi, 1986: 485–486). Acar explains Kemalist reforms' lack of wider national impact as follows:

Another explanation for the limited impact of the reforms emphasizes the socioeconomic context and holds that impact of the reforms have been limited because of the reforms preceded economic development. Turkey, a largely agrarian society, lacked both a sizeable bourgeoisie and an industrial working class – therefore, women's rights could not be absorbed by its small, apolitical female labor force. The 'state feminism' of Kemalism, therefore, felt short of having a national impact, and of bringing about full liberation. (Arat, 1994c: 58)

Al-Ali reminds us that the Kemalist reforms granted a huge transformation in gender ideology and relations at such a time, even though only a small group of women benefitted from them, and thus their importance should not be completely underestimated (Al-Ali, 2002: 22–23). However, granting women the right to vote before the majority of European countries was persuasive enough to convince Kemalist women to think that they had won their battle and that the Kemalist state had solved their problems. Educating women about their rights, which were given to them by the Kemalist state, was seen as the key element to solving gender inequality in rural areas (Tekeli, 1990: 271). The meaning and aspirations behind the Republican reforms and the rights given to women, however, were questioned by feminists during the 1980s. Kandiyoti, for example, criticises these reforms, not because of their content but due to their aims. She states that these rights were given to women in order to achieve the goal of westernisation and modernisation, not to establish gender equality. Therefore, she justly argues that with those reforms women were emancipated but they remained unliberated (Kandiyoti, 1987). In the same vein, Durakbaşa also notes that the desirable female of Kemalist ideology, as a goal of modernisation and westernisation, reflected the pragmatism of the Kemalist ideology and her image was contradictory: “an educated-professional woman” at work; “a socially active organizing woman” as a member of social clubs, associations, etcetera; “a biologically functioning woman” in the family fulfilling reproductive responsibilities as a mother and wife; “a feminine woman” entertaining men at the balls and parties’ (Durakbaşa, 2000: 147). The last image, in particular, demonstrated the Republic's desire to westernise. Moreover, although the first two

images demonstrate an attempt to change women's place in society, the last two reveal that women's 'female' role still obtained (Durakbaşa, 2000: 147). However, women were also warned not to 'overdo and imitate the promiscuity of the western women, but maintain her modesty' (Arat, 1994c: 62). In *Gender & Nation* (1997), Yuval-Davis discusses the dynamics of nationalist projects and highlights how 'gender relations are at the heart of cultural constructions of social identities and collectivities as well as in most cultural conflicts and contestations' (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 39). Women play a significant role as the bearers of culture – a collectivity's identity and honour – Yuval-Davis argues, and they carry the 'burden of representation' and 'rather than being only seen as symbols of change, women are constructed in the role of the "carriers of tradition"' (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 61) in nationalist projects, as in the Kemalist modernisation project in Turkey.

Kemalist modernisation focused mostly on the public image of women and was not concerned with what happened behind closed doors, in their private lives. Since the main concern was with the public emancipation of women, Republican reformers also harboured fears that encouraging women to be active in public, which also encourages individualism, might create a decline in their sense of family duty and responsibility, thus leading to the moral breakdown of society. Therefore, Republican women's activism and autonomy were circumscribed by conservative morality and the expectation of loyalty to the state's modernising project and state interests (White, 2003: 145; 153) Because Kemalism imposed a form of state feminism, a special relationship between women and the state developed in which women counted upon the protectionism and paternalism of the state (Durakbaşa, 2000: 152). Therefore, women were expected to be loyal and to devote themselves to the Republic in order to end their domestic confinement:

...once equal suffrage was achieved the state claimed that, 'gender equality being a reality in Turkey', women did not need an organisation of their own, banning the Turkish Women's Association, which had formed a bridge between the old feminist movement and the new era. Thus our mother's generation – both because they got some important rights and were given new opportunities, and because they were forced to do so by repression – identified with Kemalism rather than feminism. (Tekeli, 1995: 12)

Moreover, even the Civil Code was mostly formed along patriarchal principles, through its perception of the family as father [male] dominated, which were never problematised. According to Kemalist women, the fundamental problem was education and this was the only reason for oppression. Therefore, in order to end women's domestic confinement and ensure their emancipation from traditional role expectations, women should be educated (Tekeli, 1995: 12; Acar & Altınok, 2012: 34). Since the early Turkish Republic sought to create a modern/secular nation-state with an imagined 'sameness' of all its citizens, including women, gender equality in those years was mostly limited to formal equality between women and men. Although Kemalism as a progressive ideology encouraged women to gain an education and take up professions, and created a space for women in the public realm, it maintained the basic cultural conservatism about gender and male distinctions (Durakbaşa, 2000: 140).

As Durakbasa and Ilyasoglu note, most studies of women's history in Turkey 'are based on an evaluation of official or other public discourses such as Atatürk's speeches, literary works, male ideologues' polemical writings, newspaper articles, etc.' (Durakbasa & Ilyasoglu, 2001: 195). However, oral history, as a more recently discovered field, gives importance to women's personal narratives. In their work, Durakbasa and Ilyasoglu interviewed mostly educated women, such as teachers, academics and doctors, as well as the wives of civil bureaucrats, diplomats or military staff, who were seen as the agents of modernisation and who had experienced the changes directly in their lives (Durakbasa & Ilyasoglu, 2001: 195–196). Based on their interviews, they argue that these women played essential roles as agents of modernisation and were the primary role models for other women in both their professional and family lives by promoting new modern styles in doing the household chores, household activities, eating habits, the organisation of rituals, visiting and hosting. Moreover, Durakbasa and Ilyasoglu's data also reveals that there is a concealed element in the story of these 'modern women': the female servants who helped in the construction of these 'modern women'. Although 'modern women' have always been defined as good mothers, wives and housewives by the public, the help and labour of female servants has been ignored (Durakbasa & Ilyasoglu, 2001: 200–201). It can be argued, therefore, that the state's ideal of the modern Republican woman left out the majority of women beyond a small

urbanised elite, as only about 20 per cent of the population lived in cities and only a small proportion of these belonged to the urbanised elite. So the ideal Republican woman was a privileged ‘citizen woman’, who is urban, socially progressive, but also uncomplaining and dutiful at home, which means that she has to look after the children and raise them ‘scientifically’ according to the latest childrearing and household techniques imported from the West (White, 2003: 145–147), even though they had help from female servants, as Durakbasa and Ilyasoglu’s work reveals. On the other hand, the majority of Turkish women, who were living in towns and villages, had quite different lives from those in the cities. For instance, birth rates were higher and the age of marriage was earlier than in the cities. Moreover, village families relied on their children’s, especially sons’, agricultural labour (White, 2003: 155). This once again reveals that the ideal of Republican women was not related to the women in rural parts of the country – the understanding of modernisation is more urban. Therefore, this resulted in the exclusion and marginalisation of some women from the Republican ideal as modern, secular and westernised. They were expected to behave and dress as the state defined. Women who wanted to cover their heads and who kept to older customs, such as eating at low trays rather than a table, were seen as uncivilised and primitive and were excluded from the Republican sisterhood (White, 2003: 145–146).

Over the following decades, the women’s movement in Turkey was influenced by organisations that were established during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, such as the Turkish Association of University Women (1949), The Society of Mothers (1953), and The Society for the Protection of the Rights of Women (1967). Kılıç argues that, although these organisations drew attention to the legal, political and educational equality of women, their ideological reference point was still Kemalism, rather than feminism (as cited in Ozcurumez & Kılıç, 2011: 23–24). Furthermore, the political events and constitutional reforms of the 1960s had effects on both women’s lives and the political atmosphere. Recognition of labour rights and the improvement in individual rights in the 1961 constitution allowed for the emergence of different ideological groups and organisations that were mostly ideologically distinct opposition groups. Despite the fact that these groups’ central focus was not women’s issues and rights, they affected the women’s movement because they played an important role in women’s politicisation and activism (Arat, 2000: 17–18).

Tekeli defines the 1970s as a period in which left-wing ideological groups became influential across the world as well as in Turkey. During that period, women were told that they could solve women's problems by joining the class struggle with socialist men (Tekeli, 1995: 13). Therefore, like Kemalism, the Left denied women's own problems and rather merged it into their ideology, while giving priority to concepts like labour, the proletariat and revolution (Çaha, 2013: 60). As Tekeli points out, feminism came into focus only after the 1980 coup, which censored all political movements (Tekeli, 1995: 13). During the 1980s, Turkey's landscape was transformed through economic and political change, which gave rise to the emergence of new political dissent (Acar & Altınok, 2012: 36–37). Moreover, the experience that women had gained during the 1960s and 1970s, and also the 1980 coup and its authoritarian policies, such as the ban on political parties and the restrictions on labour unions and other types of organisations, encouraged women to find new ways to organise around women's issues. For this reason, the 1980s has been seen as the beginning of a new feminism and autonomous women's movements in Turkey (Arat, 2000: 18).

Although there was muted disapproval of the limits of formal equality, until the 1980s they were not actively challenged by any women's movement (Acar & Altınok, 2012: 35–36). The feminist movement in Turkey began with intense consciousness-raising groups during 1981–1982 (Tekeli, 1995: 14). In these groups, women questioned the organisational styles of the 1970s and criticised their oppressive and hierarchical characters. These organisations, women argued, were a product of 'male politics', which is based on authoritarian leadership. This understanding had to be reversed and at this stage women emphasised the importance of small groups, within which women can decide collectively by rejecting hierarchy (Tekeli, 2004). These consciousness-raising groups then continued with a symposium in 1982, which was the first public event, and it was here that 'feminism' as a concept was discussed for the first time (Tekeli, 1995: 14). During that period, a feminist movement was first initiated by a small group of educated middle-class women who organised petition campaigns, protest walks and published articles and journals, as well as founding institutions like the Women's Library (Arat, 1994b: 100). Feminist magazine *Somut* (Concrete), for instance, started publishing in 1983 and, although it lasted less than a year, it 'helped sow the

seeds of a feminist consciousness among the urban elite in Turkey' (Arat, 1994b: 103). It was a weekly magazine covering a broad range issues, such as 'abortion, women's day, women and advertising, and ideas inimical to women in folk proverbs, and so on' (Çaha, 2013: 73). The importance of the magazine, however, lay in the experience it gave to these feminists:

The *Somut* experience showed feminists both their potential (inasmuch as their rebellion had awakened great public interest particularly among the young of both sexes) and also the difficulty of turning into a movement. Reaction to feminism came not only from the expected conservative quarters, which traditionally wanted to see women kept within the four walls of their homes, but also from the 'liberated' Kemalist women who claimed that women in Turkey had already obtained their rights and that the doors to professional success were already open to them without their having to neglect their domestic responsibilities. Moreover, the left, or that portion of it which had survived the battering of the 1980 coup, accused feminism of being a bourgeois way of thinking that was reactionary, counter-revolutionary, and even teetering on being fascist! (Tekeli, 1990: 279)

Arat argues that these feminist women also benefitted from Kemalist reforms, which enabled to organise the movement as they were the daughters of first-generation Republican women; they were educated, most of them were professionals and they had been abroad. However, they were also the ones who challenged the inadequacy of Kemalist reforms. They argued that the main reason behind women's exploitation was the patriarchal society, and that Kemalist reforms supported these patriarchal social relations in both the private and public realm, even though they make women's position in society better to some extent (Arat, 1994b: 102). Çaha argues that the *Somut* experience led feminists to agree on the need for 'an autonomous political force, independent from the state, the political parties, or other social movements' (Çaha, 2013: 73). Therefore, later the same year as *Somut* (1983), several feminist groups established *Kadın Çevresi* (Women's Circle), a publishing service and consultancy company in İstanbul, which aimed to evaluate and uphold women's labour within or outside the home. They also formed a book club to translate and discuss feminist classics and other works (Arat, 1994b: 103). From 1985 onwards, different perceptions of feminism have begun to be discussed and women published different journal and magazines, such as *Kadınca* (Womanly –

mostly by liberals<sup>10</sup>), *Sosyalist Feminist Kaktus* (Socialist Feminist Cactus – by socialist feminists), and *Feminist* (mostly by radicals) (Çaha, 2013: 75; Arat, 1994b: 104). In 1986, activists in Ankara and İstanbul cooperated and started a petition campaign for the first time to press the government to put the *1985 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* into action. This document had been signed by Turkey but had been ignored thereafter (Arat, 1994b: 103). In 1987, the first street demonstration after the 1980 military coup was arranged against domestic violence, which continued with a condemnation of sexual harassment in the streets, workplaces and at home. In 1989, the First Feminist Congress and the First Women’s Congress were organised, and through these kinds of actions, the feminist movement gained a certain degree of legitimacy in public opinion (Tekeli, 1995: 14–15). Especially due to the protests in the streets supporting its legitimacy during the 1980s, the feminist movement made its voice heard in a different way within Turkish society (Çaha, 2013). In general, the feminist movement of the 1980s questioned the Republican conception of gender equality, which was criticised for its patriarchal structure that had protected, legitimised, and helped to perpetuate patriarchal organisations such as the family, economy and educational system. Therefore, many public demonstrations and political activities organised by the women’s movements in the 1980s, such as petition campaigns and publications, were seen as reactions against state policies (Arat, 1994a: 244–245; Acar & Altınok, 2012: 37).

Tekeli defines the final stage of the feminist movement as an institution-building process (Tekeli, 1995: 15). During the 1990s, nearly every women’s group became institutionalised in a different way, defining their form of activism and feminism separately, and thus the movement divided at the organisational level (Çaha, 2013: 95). This tendency led to another stage within the women’s movement in Turkey, called ‘project-based activism’ by some feminists, which ‘fuels competition among organizations’ that ‘might result in the internalization of a managerial style in politics’ (Coşar & Onbaşı, 2008: 340). Moreover, by the 1990s, all the different

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<sup>10</sup> *Kadınca* magazine was also classified within the category of ‘popular feminism’ by some feminist scholars and activists and was criticised for promoting consumerism and the objectification of women in their advertisements. Therefore, even though it brought feminist themes to public attention, its format was constrained as a magazine (Öztürkmen, 2000).



women's movements were stressing the importance of an independent identity, which has mostly been seen as a reaction against the constraints, unmet assurances and marginalising aftermath of Kemalist reforms (Arat, 2000: 28). Therefore, women started to organise in their own circles. The increasing number of project-based women's organisations and institutionalisation are strongly criticised in feminist circles. Nevertheless, women who [are] define[d] themselves as 'different' needed their own networks to organise around the issues that directly affect their lives more than those of other groups, particularly religious women and Kurdish women.

### **The Islamist Women's Movement: Challenging the Republican 'Ideal' Woman**

Al-Ali argues that the rise of Islamist movements cannot be simply defined as 'being backward', 'traditional' and 'a rejection of modernisation': 'Islamist movements, in all their variety, are modern phenomenon employing modern concepts related to the nation state, political and economic institutions and the family' (Al-Ali, 2002: 2–3). However, as in other countries like Egypt, a strict separation between 'modern, secular and western' vs. 'conservative, anti-western and Islamic', which blurs the overlaps between these categories (Al-Ali, 1997: 175), is significant to the Kemalist modernisation project. The Islamist movement in Turkey is one of the most important reactions against Kemalism, which aimed to establish secular norms to replace Islamic ones in order to reach its goals of modernisation and westernisation. As Arat states (1998: 123), Republican ideology saw secularism not only as a separation of religion and state but also as state control over religion. As a result, religion was restricted to the private realm. Arat summarises the tension between Kemalist and Islamist points of view: According to Islamists, by embracing western culture Kemalists have estranged the polity from its origins, thus causing a cultural colonisation of Turkey. On the other hand, Kemalists identify Islamists as a threat to secularism, liberalism and democracy. The crucial point in these arguments, however, is that each group thinks it is pursuing the best interests of an ideal society (Arat, 1998: 126–127).

Kemalist reforms targeted the construction of women as public citizens, and thus women became bearers of westernisation, secularism and civilisation in order to achieve the ideal Republican society: modern and western (Göle, 1996: 14). Göle

criticises (1996) the understanding of civilisation and modernism, which is always equated to being Western. She states that once western history, from the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and industrialisation through to the Information Age, has developed into the reference point for modernity, all non-western history becomes ignored in what counts as history. Therefore, for countries such as Turkey, history-making becomes a process towards modernisation and westernisation and this is embodied by the society's political and intellectual elites. For this reason, 'the main objective of modernization, as Turkish modernists have stipulated perfectly well, is to "reach the level of contemporary civilization" (*muasır medeniyet seviyesine erişmek*), as defined by the West' (Göle, 1996: 12–13). In the case of Turkey, this resulted in a decline in the value of Islamic identity, which has never been framed within the terms of modernisation and civilisation. Moreover, women also played an important role in this Republican ideal of modernisation. Since Turkish modernisation was a result of the westernism and secularism of the reformist elites, they thought that liberating women from their traditional Islamic roles would lead to westernisation and secularisation for the wider society (Göle, 1996: 11). The resulting exclusion, however, prompted Islamist women to organise themselves. Acar explains the growth of the Islamist women's movement through Republican ideology:

...to the extent that republican ideology could not translate its promises of social and political equality into everyday reality for large numbers of Turkish women, the public promises of official ideology remained meaningless at the level of personal experience, in the private sphere. In these circumstances it was highly likely that women would search for alternative explanations and solutions to their dilemma. And it is hardly surprising that women born and raised in conservative settings, where the legitimacy of religious explanations has always been essentially unquestioned and Islamic values have loomed large in the background, should turn to Islamic recipes, for self-esteem and happiness. (Acar, 1995: 62)

Islamist women's reply to the Republican way of living became clear at the end of the 1980s. The 1990s were important since Islamist women had become a part of the women's movement in Turkey in diverse contexts, such as protests against the headscarf ban in the universities and support for various Islamist political parties' rise to power (Acar & Altınok, 2012: 38).

In order to comprehend the Islamist women's movement, and to illustrate the Islamist discourse of the 1980s and 1990s, Acar examines three Islamist women's magazines – *Kadın ve Aile* (Woman and Family), *Bizim Aile* (Our Family), and *Mektup* (Letter). As she notes, in these magazines the roles of women as wives, mothers and homemakers were stressed more than any others. *Kadın ve Aile* drew a picture of middle-class, urban women situated in family life as obedient wives, good mothers and pious Muslims, while *Mektup* aimed to deliver fundamental Islamist messages, such as advocating the necessity of wearing the *çarşaf* for Muslim women. On the other hand, *Bizim Aile* stressed the importance of civil society and addressed a relatively more educated segment of the population. Nonetheless, this magazine also shared some common points. It stressed the ideal Muslim woman's image in opposition to the westernised woman, who was characterised as unhappy, overworked, oppressed and exploited. Moreover, they perceived the world in terms of a complementarity of the sexes. In other words, they argued that men and women were naturally different; hence, equality between these different beings was a meaningless concept. Some Islamic rules and practices, such as polygamy, a husband's right to punish his wife, and the ruling that two women's testimony in a court equal one man's, were largely ignored in these magazines. Nevertheless, in all of them, ideal Muslim women were portrayed in opposition to sad, overworked, oppressed, degenerate and immoral western women (Acar, 1995: 49–54). Arat (1995: 66–67) also examines the Islamist journal *Kadın ve Aile* to explain women's Islamic activism during the 1980s. As a result, she notes that the unintended consequences of women's Islamist activities go beyond the idea of whether Islam oppresses or liberates women. She argues that encouraging women to engage with social and political life has introduced them to the concept of individual rights, which could, in the long term, help women to question and challenge the limits of Islamic ideology and claim their own rights. Therefore, in order to be secular and democratic, recognising Islamist women as they are is critical (Arat, 1995: 77). At the end of the 1980s, although Islamist women were still sharing similar opinions with the ones expressed in the journals, a new realm of struggle came into prominence: the headscarf issue.

### *Veiling and the Headscarf Issue*

The headscarf issue is not limited to the 1980s and 1990s. However, its meaning has changed through the Turkish historical and political context and it became much more visible during the 1980s and after. Saktanber and Çorbacıoğlu note that, before the politicisation of the headscarf in Turkey, veiling used to be seen as ‘being guided into the true faith’ and women’s internal search to find faith, and therefore covering was viewed as ‘the highest points of embracing the faith of Islam, which is not granted to every woman’ (Saktanber & Çorbacıoğlu, 2008: 522). Taking a brief look into the changes in the meaning of veiling can demonstrate how it has become a critical issue for public debate in contemporary Turkish politics. Saktanber and Çorbacıoğlu (2008) state that, during the 1920s and 1930s, women’s head covering was not removed by state force. However, unveiling was seen as a commitment to the republican reforms, especially to secularism, and it signified westernisation and modernisation. During the 1940s and 1950s, the headscarf indicated underdevelopment, poverty and tradition and symbolised rural parts of Turkey. During the 1960s and 1970s, it appeared to be a public urban issue with the emergence of right-wing Conservative politics, although the number of women who demanded the right to cover their heads in public institutions was not significant. It turned into a public issue, however, especially during the 1980s and 1990s, and became a sign of the modern, urban, well-educated identity of the Islamist activist women. In 1989, wearing a headscarf in public institutions was banned by the Constitutional Court. Covered female university students were especially affected by this decision<sup>11</sup>. Throughout the years, the meaning and style of veiling have also changed in Turkey. Previously, the *çarşaf* was much more common than the contemporary Islamic dress code. In the 1980s, women wore headscarves with a long, pale-coloured overcoat in order to follow Islamic dress codes. However, during the same period, female university students were wearing the *türban*<sup>12</sup>, which

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<sup>11</sup> Certainly, the headscarf issue is not limited to the Turkish context. Some European countries, such as France, considered it a threat as well. In France, wearing the *hijab* – the traditional covering for the hair and neck that is worn by Muslim women – was banned in state schools in 2004 because it was seen as a threat to the principle of the separation of church and state since wearing the *hijab* was defined as a religious affiliation in public primary and secondary schools. In 2010, France banned veils that cover the face such as the *burqa*, a full-body covering that includes a mesh over the face, and the *niqab*, a full-face veil that leaves an opening only for the eyes, in public spaces (CNN, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> The *türban* is similar to the *hijab* worn in western countries.

is a modernised version of the Islamic headscarf (Saktanber & Çorbacıoğlu, 2008: 519–520). Contemporary veiling is different from traditional Muslim women's headscarves. Veiling can communicate both an effective political statement of Islamism and a confirmation of Muslim women's identity, which is within the boundaries of tradition and passively adopted by women. Today, veiling is much more of an active political statement rather than the re-creation of entrenched traditions. Young Islamist women refuse their mothers' model, which maintains traditions and makes no more demands. Therefore, today, educated, lower- or middle-class religious women claim to know the 'true' Islam (Göle, 1996: 4–5).

In Turkey, the traditional way of wearing the headscarf has never been noticed or problematised. However, young Islamist women's, especially university students', preference for wearing the headscarf has been considered a manipulative tool of the rising Islamist fundamentalist movement. Therefore, it created a highly polarised political tension between secularists and Islamists (Göle, 1996: 5). Also, discussions about the *türban* exacerbated this tension since it was seen as more than an individual choice, but as a part of Sharia strategy, which might lead to total covering (Göle, 1996: 85). Social and political scepticism about the headscarf is related to a highly complex historical context, in which 'the Islamic headscarf was transformed from being a private question of piety to a public question of religious expression' (Saktanber & Çorbacıoğlu, 2008: 518).

As Göle states, veiling is the most noteworthy sign and women the most current actors of the new Islamism. She emphasises the role of veiling between Islam and the 'West' and states that the veil reconstructs the 'otherness' of Islam to the West. Veiling is generally perceived as a challenge to western modernity since it has been identified with women's subordination and seen as an obstacle to gender emancipation and universal progress (Göle, 1996: 1, 4). Many western observers identify Islam as an oppressive religion for women and women in Muslim societies are seen as subordinated by Islamic ideology. However, supporters of the faith have opposed this view. They claim that men and women are equal in the judgement of God. From this point of view, Islam does not promote inequality through the gender-based division of labour between the sexes, but rather complementarity between men and women (Arat, 1995: 66).

At the end of the 1980s, female university students demanded changes in the laws and regulations of educational institutions to allow them to wear their headscarves in the classroom. Thus, the headscarf became an important public issue through demonstrations, sit-ins, protest marches, petitions and also hunger strikes by female university students. As a result, women who dressed in Islamic garb became visible in the political realm:

For the first time in the Turkish Republic's history, the conventional view which equated Islam with women's 'imprisonment at home' was being challenged by the appearance of these women demanding an 'Islamic way of life' through open political struggle in which they, very effectively, used the weapons and tactics of modern democracy. (Acar, 1995: 47)

Since uncovering the hair has been a norm in public institutions for Kemalist reformers in order to protect secularism, headscarves have been seen as a means of propagating a religious ideology perceived to be inimical to the secular foundations of the Republic by these ruling elites. For Islamist women, ironically, this has similarities with the religious men's arguments, which put women in a prison called home:

Some reformists stress that the claims of secular-oriented authorities on a woman's place in society mirror the views of traditional Muslim men: 'They [secularists] say "we don't interfere with your turban in your private life." Their approach overlaps with the religious men's argument that "a traditional woman's place is her home." They both try to force [covered] women to stay at home: one in the name of secularism, the other in the name of religion. (Fatma Akdokur, interview, July 9, 1999, quoted in Marshall, 2005: 111)

Until the 1990s, the public realm was occupied by secularly educated people who followed Kemalist ideology. Under these circumstances, obviously women who wore headscarves were quite isolated and visible in classrooms and universities: 'Even though headscarves were worn to make women publicly less visible according to the dictates of Islam, in the Turkish context the covered women were more discernible' (Arat, 1998: 124). Ultimately, the headscarf issue carried religion into the public realm, which challenges the Republican state's aim of confining religion to the private realm. These women have managed to create a public debate about attending classes in the universities wearing their headscarves or their right to

a public life without any state intervention. As a result, they have also achieved an alternative understanding of secularism, which is opposed to state control over religion (Arat, 1998: 126). Göle notes that the new way of living Islam also empowers these young women by questioning civilisation and westernisation, by providing a collective identity and public visibility. With the new Islamist structure, an elite group of Islamist women has appeared, who participate in political meetings and work intensely for the Islamist party, and who have jobs such as columnists, journalists, writers of best-selling novels and/or film-makers (Göle, 1996: 22).

Religious women received criticism not only from Kemalists but also from feminists. In her article, Marshall compares the way secular feminist women and Islamist women in Turkey approach the issues of head-covering and work (paid and unpaid) based on her fieldwork. She states that, in the Turkish case, feminist and Islamist women have not developed meaningful dialogue even when they hold similar approaches to women's problems. Moreover, this is not just about feminists and orthodox Islamist women; reformist Islamist women and feminists do not have much interaction either (Marshall, 2005: 105). Marshall summarises feminists' perception of Islamist (women's) movements and notes that the majority of feminists she interviewed argue that Islamist women do not have the individual initiative to promote their own agenda but rather are being used by Islamist men to promote a conservative one. Moreover, for many feminists, the Islamist movement maintains a sexist division, gives power to men over women, and Islamist women are trying to rationalise the status quo by emphasising that it is good for them because it is God's command. For this reason, feminists see the *türban* as a symbol of this sexist division (Marshall, 2005: 109). Göle also stresses that many people base their arguments on the Koran and its interpretations that women are enslaved by Islam because of polygamy, veiling, the required obedience of wives to husbands, the right of divorce given to men, and the right of men to beat their wives. Women are portrayed as weak and obedient to men. Therefore, the veiling movement is also portrayed as a sign of women's compliance with male supremacy. Yet Göle also emphasises that these claims are reductionist since these religious groups are educated, upwardly mobile, urbanised and affecting the direction of social change (Göle, 1996: 86, 133).

For both reformist and orthodox Islamist women, head covering is not something that restricts women, as feminists claim, but rather it gives them freedom and underlines their sexuality as a woman. A member of *Capital City Women's Platform*, a well-known religious women's organisation which is also a part of this research, defends the *türban*:

We don't cover our womanhood. On the contrary, we underline it. We show that we exist as women. But the opposite side [feminists and other prosecular groups] understands the unrevealing of sexuality as covering womanhood. I am not going to show my sexuality just because some people want it this way. (Interview, July 9, 1999, quoted in Marshall, 2005: 111)

Furthermore, from Islamist women's point of view, the *türban* also protects women since it makes them less vulnerable to harassment and assault. As Marshall emphasises, Islamist women reinterpret feminist arguments within Islamic ideology and they replace hiding womanhood with underlining womanhood, suppressing sexuality with not emphasising sexuality, and restricting mobility with permitting mobility (Marshall, 2005: 111). On the other hand, Orthodox Islamists notably stress that without head covering women can be easily exploited by men. For that reason, they understand head covering as a moral issue while equating it with chastity, loyalty to one's husband, and honour (Marshall, 2005: 111–112).

Feminist and Islamist women also differ on the work issue. For feminists, working outside the home allows independence from men and also helps women to develop their abilities. On the one hand, Reformist Islamists leave this decision to individual women; for them, whether or not to have a job is up to women. On the other hand, they also believe that paid work should not undermine women's duties as mothers. Orthodox Islamist women, however, argue that women should not do paid work unless they have to (Marshall, 2005: 112–114). Marshall explains their view through her interviews:

As one activist emphasizes, 'If you let women go outside [to do paid work], the balance [between men's and women's roles] will be ruined' (Roportaj 1994, 14) ... These orthodox women argue that God gave specific abilities and tasks to men and women. Islamic rules require men to bring income to the family and take care of women and children financially, while motherhood and housework are



women's responsibilities. Moreover, when women work, they take jobs from men. Orthodox Islamists depict not working outside of the house as a privilege women should enjoy. They oppose the view commonly held by feminists that women should work to have economic independence and gain more power. They advise women not to work outside, prescribing instead exclusive focus on domestic duties ordained by God as a way to prevent unnecessary stress. (Marshall, 2005: 114)

As a result, Marshall emphasises that Orthodox Islamists reject feminism altogether; thus, members of these groups are very unlikely to come together. On the other hand, feminists and reformist Islamists also 'avoid having common activities, informing each other about their agendas, and supporting each other on issues related to women.' Her study reveals that since both groups see the ideology of others as exclusive and only their views as progressive, this negatively affects the possibility of interaction between feminist and reformist Islamist women (Marshall, 2005: 117).

Arat also argues that it is difficult to harmonise Islamic ideology with feminism, even though there are different interpretations of Islamic ideology and various Muslim practices. She states that, even the most progressive or, in Islamic terms, revisionist interpretations of Islam cannot consistently defend male-female equality, which contradicts the feminist perspective of equality between the sexes: 'At best, within Islamic division of labour between men and women, women are not equal, but rather complementary to men' (Arat, 1995: 69). Hence, even if a feminist perspective that stresses difference rather than equality is assumed, the Islamic viewpoint on the gendered division of labour still makes this reconciliation process difficult. Moreover, because Holy Law nullifies individual choices by dictating what men and women should do, it is difficult to reconcile a feminist perspective that advocates women's freedom of choice with Islam as an ideology that dictates to women what they should wear (Arat, 1995: 69–70). These stereotypical reactions against the reconciliation of feminism and Islam underestimate religious women's individual preferences to veil and ignore those religious women who call themselves feminists. Göle shows how Islamist and feminist movements might share common principles through their rejection of some universalistic claims:

The problematization of social issues demonstrates that the Islamic movements share the same critical sensitivity with contemporary Western social movements vis-à-vis Enlightenment modernity... In this regard, Islamism is similar to feminism. While feminism questions the universalistic and emancipatory claims of the category of 'human being' and asserts, instead, women's difference, Islamism problematizes the universalism of the notion of civilization, and asserts Islamic difference. While women reinforce their identity by labeling themselves feminists, Muslims emphasize theirs by naming themselves Islamists. Civil rights activists also asserted the primacy of difference through the use of the motto 'Black is Beautiful', thus rejecting the equation of emancipation with *white* and *Western*. Difference, therefore, becomes the source of empowerment for contemporary social movements and the content of identity politics. It is in this context of the rejection of the universalism of Enlightenment modernity and the assertion of difference that the motto 'Islam is Beautiful' has gained credence among Muslims. (Göle, 1996: 17)

Consequently, it can easily be said that the Islamist women's movement has been a challenge to the Kemalist understanding of 'modern and western' women and to mainstream feminism. However, it is not the only challenge. The Kurdish movement disputes the unitary characteristics of the Republic; likewise, the Kurdish women's movement questions Turkish feminism, dominated by ethnically Turkish and educated women, on the grounds of its ignorance of Kurdish women's subordination.

As Diner and Toktaş emphasise, during the 1990s, the Islamist and Kurdish movements challenged Turkish feminism with their diverse perceptions of and solutions to women's problems. These developed in parallel with the rise of alternative perspectives within feminism across the world, such as black or non-western women's movements. On the one hand, Kurdish nationalists criticised Kemalism's unitary and nationalistic provisions for the organisation of the state; on the other hand, political Islam disputed the Kemalist interpretation of secularism. These Kurdish and Islamist movements created polarisation within Turkish feminism. They both criticised mainstream Turkish feminism for being exclusionary of other identities, like black feminism and lesbian feminism's objections to the white and heterosexual features of western feminism. Similar to the black women's movement, Kurdish women also stressed the dual exploitation that Kurdish women have experienced: the dominant patriarchal tribal system within Kurdish culture and

the impositions of the Turkish state on Kurdish people (Diner & Toktaş, 2010: 42, 47).

### **The Kurdish Women's Movement: Intersection of Gender and Ethnicity**

Çaha discusses the impact of Kemalist modernisation on Kurdish women: 'the nationalist understanding of modernization based on a single language and an official culture oppresses those women who belong to diverse ethnic groups and speaks languages other than the official one, as in the case of Kurdish women. These women are, indeed, the victims of assimilation in the name of modernization or civilization' (Çaha, 2013: 155). Yüksel also argues that the Kemalist Revolution's nationalist policies have contributed to the development of Kurdish nationalism to a significant extent and notes that the Kurdish 'issue' has become a 'problem' as a result of the Kemalist nationalist project's denial of the existence of the Kurds (Yüksel, 2006: 780).

During the 1960s and 1970s, Kurds, as an ethnic group, were politically active within the leftist groups, where the priority was socialism, rather than ethnic problems. During the 1970s, Kurdish women gained some organisational experience, although they were mainly led by men (Çaha, 2013: 156–157). During the 1980s, Kurdish women also worked within the feminist movement once they had both parted ways with the leftist groups. However, when Turkish feminists demanded that they leave aside their problems regarding their 'Kurdishness' and asked them not to hold banners written in Kurdish or shout slogans in Kurdish at protests, the Kurdish women's movement decided to organise as a separate group (Çaha, 2013: 160–161). The Kurdish magazine, *Roza*, points to this fact by writing: 'While Turkish women wanted us to forget our Kurdish identity, Kurdish men wanted us to forget our woman identity... But, we had no intention to forget either of these two identities. No one had the right to demand such a move from us for any reason' (Roza 1996, cited in Çaha, 2013: 161).

During the 1980s, the 'Kurdish question' also marked a new chapter in Turkey through the insurgency of the separatist ethno-nationalist Partîya Karkêren-i Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers' Party or PKK). Since the 1980s, the PKK, which

was originally a communist organisation, gained an ethnic and national character and started to use violence<sup>13</sup> (Gökalp, 2010: 561). Although the party has been regarded as a terrorist organisation by the Turkish state and Turkey's allies since then, it has enjoyed considerable support from the Kurdish population, especially from those in the eastern and south-eastern regions of Turkey. The conflict between the Turkish security forces and the PKK had increased dramatically by 1990, which also created a rise in the number of civilian protests in the streets against government policies (Diner & Toktaş, 2010: 47). The armed conflict between the PKK and Turkish security forces continued until 1999. During this period, more than 40,000 Kurdish and Turkish civilians lost their lives. A ceasefire was declared by the PKK in 1999, when its leader Abdullah Öcalan was arrested, and this lasted until 2004, when armed conflict between the PKK and Turkish security forces resumed. As a result, between 1.2 and 4 million Kurdish people in Turkey have been displaced. The Turkish state dictated who would be displaced, with the help of the chaotic atmosphere that the armed conflict had created. The majority of the displaced Kurds tended to have sympathy with the PKK and they reacted against the Turkish state and its Kurdish supporters who had not been displaced and took over the properties left behind by the displaced people. Many of them went to the city centres in the southeast but a majority finally ended up migrating to Europe to find jobs (Gökalp, 2010: 562). However, as Nadjé Al-Ali argues, there are political divisions within the Kurdish movement, which are mostly based on differences in social class and urban versus rural backgrounds (Al-Ali, 2008: 407). Therefore, it is not a homogenous movement and not all Kurds support the PKK – especially the ones who were already living in big cities.

Displacement also influenced Kurdish women's lives. Gökalp states that a rights-based awareness has developed among the Kurdish women in south-eastern Turkey since the beginning of the armed conflict. The reasons for this development are 'women's experiences with the war, displacement, and the city; their politicization as a result of their peculiar relationship with the Turkish state, based on mutual

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<sup>13</sup> It is commonly stated that the main reason behind the Kurdish movement's transformation from an emphasis on socialism towards ethnic problems was the 1980 military coup and the torture of Kurdish people in prisons during the same period, which paved the way for this transformation (Cemal 2003, in Çaha, 2013: 157).

suspicion and fear; and their propinquity with the Kurdish ethno-nationalist political organization through PKK-dominated ethnic propaganda and mobilization' (Gökalp, 2010: 562). Local and national women's NGOs, human-rights groups, migrants' associations, bar associations, and pro-Kurdish municipalities have run projects to help Kurdish women, who suffer social, economic, psychological and legal problems due to their displacement. Women became involved in these organisations in order to create a new life for themselves and they criticised the injustice caused by the Turkish state, which includes killings, disappearances, torture and displacement (Gökalp, 2010: 565–567). Women's groups and organisations in the region, such as *KAMER*, *DIKASUM*, *Kardelen*, *Selis* and *VAKAD*, focus on the difficulties [Kurdish] women encounter (Diner & Toktaş, 2010: 49). In Gökalp's interview with a representative of a regional women's NGO in the south-eastern province of Diyarbakır, the representative states that displaced Kurdish women have found ways to break down the traditional gender relations imposed upon them for years. Gökalp emphasises that Kurdish women gained the ability to speak and decide for themselves and to distance themselves from the previous patriarchal family structures. Moreover, 'they attempt to do all this without falling into the trap of ethno nationalist discourses written by men who use women and their bodies pragmatically to advance their own interests'<sup>14</sup> (Gökalp, 2010: 563). As Handan Çağlayan<sup>15</sup> notes, in the previous discourses of the Kurdish movement, women were portrayed as sexually 'dangerous' intriguers who may harm the movement. During the 1990s, however, as a result of women's active participation in the movement, those women became trustworthy comrades, who needed to fight to 'save the country'. Nevertheless, in order to be comrades, women need to make serious sacrifices, such as ignoring their sexuality (Çağlayan, 2013: 104–112). Çağlayan argues that, during the 1980s and 1990s, Kurdish women were portrayed as either 'passive objects' – mobilised by nationalist Kurdish men – or 'liberated' by the movement, both of which ignore the contradictory effects of Kurdish women's participation in the Kurdish movement and their subjectivities. Moreover, the first approach underestimates Kurdish women by picturing them as victims, whereas the

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<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that the Kurdish women Gökalp debates about here are the ones who distanced themselves from the PKK discourse.

<sup>15</sup> She is one of the very first to work on the active participation of Kurdish women in the Kurdish movement and to examine the formation of their identity and political activities since the 1980s in her PhD thesis, which was later published as a book (Çağlayan, 2013).

second one degrades the meaning of women's empowerment into being publicly visible. Çağlayan argues that the reality, however, is multidimensional as a result of the intersection between Kurdish women's Kurdish identities and their individual identities resulting from forced migration, violence, poverty and human-rights violations (Çağlayan, 2013: 20–21; 25–28).

As Yüksel argues, Kurdish women were doubly marginalised in Turkey. First of all, their ethnic identity was ignored. Secondly, Turkish women were the ones who benefited from the Kemalist reforms and their civil and political status developed, which created a big gap between these two groups of women. Therefore, he argues that the origin of the oppression and subordination of Kurdish women in Turkey can be understood through this conjunction: 'the interwoven dismantling of Kurdish ethnic identity with the "emancipation" of "Turkish" women' (Yüksel, 2006: 778). Moreover, he also argues that the early chauvinistic attitudes of their male counterparts under the umbrella of Kurdish nationalism helped Kurdish women in two ways: Firstly, they politicised and mobilised through Kurdish nationalism. Secondly, they became aware of the extensive sexism of Kurdish nationalist men, thus a 'feminist' consciousness arose. This process of examination ended with the organised political activism of Kurdish women during the mid-1990s (Yüksel, 2006: 780). Therefore, he notes that Kurdish nationalism was only one of the factors behind Kurdish women's empowerment. The other very important factor was the failure of the feminist movement in Turkey, which he mostly sees as the Kemalist feminist movement (Yüksel, 2006: 780). This argument, however, ignores the existence and importance of an independent feminist movement in Turkey. Even though many Kemalist women prefer to call themselves feminists, there is also a separate and independent feminist movement, which has clearly distanced itself from Kemalist ideology and is instead very critical of state-initiated reforms. Yüksel also criticises the Turkish feminist movement because it mostly failed to see the Kurdishness of Kurdish women, instead just stressing their female identity (Yüksel, 2006: 784), and that has also changed in the contemporary feminist movement<sup>16</sup>. As a result, Yüksel emphasises that Kurdish women have been forgotten by the Kemalist nationalist project, Kurdish nationalism and 'Turkish' feminism (Yüksel,

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<sup>16</sup> See Chapter Four.

2006: 796). Diner and Toktaş also stress Kurdish women's challenge to the patriarchal structure of Kurdish society and their criticism of Turkish feminism, which is dominated by urban, western, middle-class, ethnically Turkish and educated women. They emphasise that most Kurdish women have peripheral backgrounds with lower socio-economic status. They claim that Kurdish women made Turkish feminists question the 'Turkish' character of the feminist movement and their position with respect to the state and to Kemalist ideology. There are some feminist groups and journals, such as Pazartesi and Amargi, which hear the voices of Kurdish women and their criticism of the state's oppressive policies in the east and south-east regions of Turkey (Diner & Toktaş, 2010: 49–50).

Gökalp (2010) argues that Kurdish people's politicisation has become an effective tool in seeking justice. From their perspective, the Turkish state eradicated them, violated their human and citizenship rights, and employed torture, disappearances and extrajudicial killings. Recruitment into the PKK and violence-related deaths created many female-headed households. Moreover, forced migration led to the separation of extended families and extreme impoverishment affected family structures; thus, family ties were loosened. This circumstance provided excuses for close relatives to abandon widowed women, despite the fact that normally tradition encourages Kurdish families to accommodate women and children who lose their husbands and fathers within the extended household. Through the loss of their husbands and sons, many Kurdish women have taken control not only in the household, but also in the public arena and they have become partially politicised. This political awareness led them to realise that their social, economic, political, and gender-related vulnerabilities are actually their strengths. In other words, they are also tools through which they can demand justice. Moreover, some Kurdish women make radical demands, such as the right to have a Kurdish education and the right to an independent Kurdistan (Gökalp, 2010: 544–565), although the latter is no longer being discussed and Kurds in Turkey seem to have abandoned the idea of an independent Kurdistan and are focusing rather on gaining their rights from the Turkish state.

Gökalp argues that the PKK discourse made use of women in the Kurdish struggle. She states that the PKK had two main pragmatic purposes. The first was 'to attack

and challenge the Kurdish tribal system where the notion of “honor” is defined through women’s “purity” and the second was ‘to use women as militants to help populate its guerrilla ranks and disseminate its ideology.’ Many young Kurdish women have joined the PKK in Turkey and surrounding countries. She states that the implications of the emergence of the PKK were important but contradictory for women. Although it has raised ‘female consciousness’ in south-eastern Turkey, it has also exploited women and their bodies for political ends such as making them into guerrilla fighters or suicide bombers. She argues that the irony of the Kurdish women’s movement is that many Kurdish women have been victimised by the armed conflict between the PKK and the Turkish security forces, but also many young Kurdish women have joined the guerrillas and become ‘terrorists’. Gökalp states that these ethno-nationalist tendencies, the pro-PKK politics and the radical politicisation among some Kurdish female activists risks the legitimacy of many Kurdish women’s groups as democratic civic actors (Gökalp, 2010: 566). Although I would never support any sort of violence, no matter whom or what it targets, listening to Kurdish women’s experiences and understanding their reasons for joining the PKK is extremely important. Understanding that they have lived under very poor conditions, experienced forced migration and have not had equal citizenship, where even saying: ‘I am Kurdish’ was illegal until the early 2000s, is significant. Moreover, only defining their engagement with the PKK discourse as exploitation by men rejects or fails to see these women’s own agency to decide for themselves, as in the case of religious women’s decision to veil.

The contemporary state of war between the PKK and the Turkish armed forces unfortunately fosters a conflict-ridden environment and makes reconciliation almost impossible, especially since the peace process between the Kurds and the Turkish government came to an end. The Kurdish-Turkish peace process started in 2012, when Erdoğan announced that the government was in negotiations with Öcalan, to resolve the Kurdish-Turkish conflict, and both parties seemed determined to continue. A couple of months later, Öcalan sent a letter in both Kurdish and Turkish in which he called a cease-fire that included disarmament and an end to armed struggle. This continued with an announcement by the PKK which said they would obey. On 25 April 2013, the PKK said it would begin to withdraw all its forces from Turkish territory into northern Iraq at the beginning of May, which marked the end



of a three-decade conflict (Albayrak & Parkinson, 2013). After this phase, negotiations about constitutional and legal changes to Kurds' human rights started. The government announced a 'wise people committee', which included scholars, writers and intellectuals as well as celebrities, who would be active in seven different regions of the country, to promote the negotiations and explain their content to the public. The negotiations continued until the end of 2014, when they ended due to the spill-over of the Syrian civil war. Many Turkish people supported the PYD, the main armed Kurdish group in northern Syria, as they were fighting against ISIS, although Erdoğan called them a terrorist group (Reuters, 2015a). The PKK responded by condemning the AKP as a supporter of ISIS. ISIS has never been the AKP's primary target and the PKK's mistrust of Turkey's commitment to the peace process increased (Al, 2015). So, when 32 Kurdish activists were killed in Suruç in July 2015, the PKK blamed both ISIS, although they have still not claimed responsibility, and the AKP government. As a result, the PKK renewed its armed campaign and killed two Turkish policemen as a response, so the Turkish military launched airstrikes against them. So, as Serhun Al nicely puts it, the paradox mainly occurred because Turkey had been carrying on a peace process with the PKK at home while the Turkish government developed a hostile discourse towards the PYD in Syria. The Turkish government was sceptical about the empowerment of a pro-PKK group in northern Syria, which has been seen as a major Western ally because the PYD was one of the strongest powers in the region fighting against ISIS (Al, 2015). The pro-Kurdish Halkların Demokratik Partisi (People's Democratic Party), the HDP, also accused the AKP on the issue and said: 'Since July 24, the AKP interim government has not been attacking ISIS, as it claims to be doing, but the Qandil Mountains in the territory of the Kurdistan Regional Government instead, as well as Kurds, democratic forces, democratic politics, civilians, women and the opposition as a whole in Turkey' (Foreign Affairs Commission of HDP, 2015).

Moreover, the general election on 7 June 2015 affected the process because the AKP had lost its nationalist votes during the peace process and wanted to gain them back. After the AKP lost its single-party rule for the first time since 2002, when it came to power, due to the success of the pro-Kurdish party, the HDP, which received around six million votes in the June elections, and gained 80 out of 550 seats in the Turkish parliament for the first time, Erdoğan was accused of ending the peace process in

order to consolidate the AKP's power when he called an early election in November of the same year<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, the HDP has become the target of the AKP (Al, 2015). On 1 August 2015, the wise people committee said that the peace was undergoing a fatal breakdown and added 'various developments, mutual shortcomings and mistakes, mistrust and new dynamics included in the process have spoiled the climate' (Hürriyet Daily News, 2015a).

Several Turkish soldiers have been killed by the PKK in different regions of Turkey, and PKK targets in northern Iraq have also been hit by Turkish warplanes, since the ceasefire ended in the summer of 2015. PKK attacks triggered nationalist anger and Kurd-hatred in the country and almost 130 of the HDP's offices came under attack. HDP officers argued that state security forces had not been willing to prevent the attacks (Foreign Affairs Commission of HDP, 2015). Moreover, these nationalist groups started to attack everyone who spoke Kurdish or even seemed Kurdish. A tragi-comical event happened on 6 September 2015 when Turkish nationalists accidentally beat one of their own members on the presumption that he was Kurdish since 'he had darker skin' (Hürriyet Daily News, 2015b). Furthermore, in Mersin province, crowds attacked buses travelling to Kurdish regions by breaking their windows with rocks (Reuters, 2015b). After that, the HDP called for urgent international action for solidarity and said:

The Turkish state and the provisional AKP government are implementing all sorts of oppressive measures such as forbidding entry into and departure from Kurdish cities against which it launches military operations, cutting off all communication including phone and internet lines, blocking off press and observers to prevent the truth about what is happening on the ground from reaching national and international public attention. A curfew has been in place in the province of Cizre for the past week where 21 civilians have been killed. The province of Cizre have been under siege for days where there is serious shortage of food, water, access to basic health services, preventative treatment of the wounded, and burial of those who have been killed by state security forces. Serious concerns regarding fears of civilian massacre in Cizre have been voiced by the

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<sup>17</sup> This is when the early elections took place because the Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu had reported that the efforts to form a coalition had failed. Under the constitution, Erdoğan should have given the authority to form a government to the second-placed Republican People's Party. However, Erdoğan indicated that he would not do so but rather called for early elections on 1 November 2015 (The Guardian, 2015a).

elected members of the parliament and civil society organizations.  
(Foreign Affairs Commission of HDP, 2015)

The HDP emphasised that it was not part of these violence-based, war-oriented policies but rather was trying to convince both the PKK and the Turkish state to stop this violence (Foreign Affairs Commission of HDP, 2015). However, it did not stop. In the capital of Turkey, Ankara, on 10 October 2015, there were two explosions at a peace rally, whose only aim was to demand an end to the violence between the PKK and the Turkish state. This attack was the deadliest ever in Turkey's recent history, and killed more than 100 people, with many more wounded. People across Turkey have been mourning for the victims and protesting and blaming the government for the attack because it failed to provide any security measures, which I also believe to be the case. After the unsuccessful elections in June 2015, the government increased the tension in the country in order to secure a majority in the early elections in November by paving the way for a deep political polarisation. Even though it could be seen as a natural part of politics, creating hatred, fear and conflict between its own citizens by using violence and killing people as a way to control power can only be seen in totalitarian regimes. Although the government cited ISIS as a prime suspect (The Guardian, 2015b), the HDP's co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş, blamed Erdoğan and the government and said the government has 'blood in its hands' (BBC, 2015).

The country has been paralysed by these clashes, but the tension has escalated since the failed coup against the state institutions, government and President Erdoğan in June 2016. This was instigated by the Gülen movement, a very influential religious movement, which used to be a strong ally of the AKP until they parted ways during the 2010s. After this incident, the government declared a state of emergency in order to remove and arrest all the people related to the attempted coup. Thousands of civil servants, military officials and police officers, teachers and academics, writers and columnists were sacked from their jobs for their assumed connection with the coup. Unfortunately, the AKP and Erdoğan have been using the coup as an opportunity for a crackdown on its opponents. Erdoğan accused the HDP and Selahattin Demirtaş of being the PKK's political wing and in November 2016 Demirtaş and other HDP MPs were arrested. This was followed by a car bombing in Diyarbakır carried out by

the TAK<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, thousands of academics who signed a petition to denounce attacks by the Turkish state on Kurds in the south-eastern region of the country were sacked, ironically under the guise of the ‘fight against terrorism’. At an alarming rate, the regime in Turkey is heading towards authoritarianism, which is causing more polarisation in the women’s movement as well. Likewise, in every group, even in families and between friends, the gap seems hard to bridge. On the other hand, Kemalist ideology as the foundation of the Turkish political and social structure has lost its longstanding power. Meanwhile, the Islamic identity and conservatism, which have always been significant in Turkish society, have gained their power back, especially with the rise of political Islam during the 1990s and currently under AKP rule. Within this environment, it can be clearly stated that the women’s movement in Turkey and the diversities within the movement have strong ties with the Turkish political structure, which also shapes women’s perceptions of gender issues and of each other. Although I conducted my interviews in 2014–2015, when the peace process was still active, the legacy of this conflicting history was still evident in my data. I will discuss the ways in which I collected my data in the next chapter.

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<sup>18</sup> Kurdistan Freedom Falcons, a Kurdish nationalist militarist group established in 2004, which organises suicide and bomb attacks in Turkish metropolitans aimed both civilians and Turkish military targets. They have strong connections with the PKK, a breakaway faction, but criticise them for being passive and ready to come to terms with the Turkish state. Al-Ali argues that Kurdish youth are more radical than many of the PKK fighters and have played an important role in the recent conflict, since they feel disenfranchised by the Turkish state (Al-Ali in *The Daily Campus*, 2016).

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

As someone who defines herself as a feminist but has always worked on theory and documentary sources, in other words being more in the academy than in activist organisations, I have found it an interesting process in itself to come to this research. Although I have a background in politics, which makes me aware of Turkey's fragmented political structure, the initial question of solidarity among different women's groups appeared in my mind after seeing a list of the women's organisations in Turkey produced by a well-known feminist organisation. According to this list, in 2009 there were 569 women's organisations in Turkey (Uçan Süpürge - Flying Broom, 2009). Although there were local organisations, branches of large organisations and just project-based organisations on the list, I was also aware that one of the reasons behind this large number of organisations was the political differences among women. So I asked myself: We know about differences among women based on their class, ethnicity, religion or other identities by which they define themselves, but how much do we know about their experiences, feelings and stances towards solidarity among women and their perceptions on working across their differences? I kept this question in mind while doing the literature review and I realised that there is a lack of research on the issue.

In this chapter, I outline the methods I used to explore the potential for solidarity and alliances among women's groups in Turkey and explore the differences and similarities among them. I decided to conduct interviews with women activists in order to understand their stances towards working across differences but, in order to broaden my knowledge about contemporary discussions before going into the field, I read publications produced by different women's groups. These have helped to shape both my questions and my understanding of the women's movement in Turkey. In this chapter, I start by giving a brief description of these publications. Then, I discuss interviewing as a method and explain how I recruited my participants and decided on the cities where I would conduct my interviews before

discussing the interviewing process. Later, I discuss the transcription and translation processes and how I analysed my data.

### **Before the Fieldwork: The Publications**

Before going into the field and deciding on the issues to raise in the interviews, I wanted to be aware of the contemporary discussions in the women's movements in Turkey. Therefore, I collected all the publications that I could during the summer 2014. All the feminist magazines/journals that I collected – *Amargi*, *Feminist Politics*, *Feminist Criticism*, *Feminist Approaches in Culture and Politics* – were ones that I had known about, even though I had not read all their issues. I continued searching online to discover whether there were any more feminist magazines/journals, but I could not find any. I found all the feminist publications' volumes online<sup>19</sup>, except for *Amargi*, which was posted to me by the publishers at my request. *Amargi* is a feminist theory and politics magazine which has well-known feminist academics on its board. It was established in 2006 to discuss theoretical, political and practical problems of contemporary feminism in Turkey. In June 2015, the editors decided to continue as an online journal and, in August 2016, they wrote a 'farewell letter' on their website saying that *Amargi*, unfortunately, had come to an end. *Feminist Politics* is a part of the Socialist Feminist Collective in Turkey. The first issue was published in 2009 and it was produced three times a year until 2016, when the Socialist Feminist Collective decided to close down, in September 2016. *Feminist Criticism* and *Feminist Approaches in Culture and Politics* are peer-reviewed journals. The former is an online journal of KASAUM (The Women's Studies Centre of Ankara University), which is published in both Turkish and English. It has been published twice a year since 2009, whereas the latter has been published every four months since 2006. I decided to use all these feminist publications as they all shed light on contemporary feminist discussions in Turkey, such as the headscarf issue, abortion, and violence against women, about which I intended to ask my participants.

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<sup>19</sup> I acquired 33 out of 35 issues of *Amargi* as two of their old issues were not in their stocks anymore. I also have 20 issues of *Feminist Politics*, 11 issues of *Feminist Criticism* and 23 issues of *Feminist Approaches in Culture of Politics*.

Even though I had known of Kurdish magazines that had been publishing during the 1990s – such as *Roza*, *Jujin*, *Jîyan* – and religious<sup>20</sup> magazines from the same period – such as *Kadın ve Aile*, *Bizim Aile*, *Mektup* – I had to research online and ask scholars who work in related fields to find the magazines/journals that Kurdish and religious women publish now. As a result, I was able to find just one Kurdish magazine, *Hevîya Jîne*. It was first published in 2007 and aimed to publish every two months. However, there were several investigations and indictments of the magazine, particularly the editors, six of whom were arrested due to the allegation that they were publishing propaganda for the PKK. During the investigations and indictments, unfortunately all the issues of *Hevîya Jîne* were confiscated. Therefore, even though there are more than 25 issues of the magazine, I could only obtain 14 of them<sup>21</sup> since the editors did not have the others. I chose to use this magazine because there were articles about the Kurdish movement and particularly the Kurdish women's movement that helped me to gain an overview of the contemporary discussions in the region. During my online research about Kurdish magazines, I found the website *Femîn Kurd*, which is a Kurdish feminists' website that is mainly in Kurdish but has Turkish translations of many of the articles. The website contains articles on different topics such as war, elections, feminism and fascism, the displacement of the Kurdish people, women and the media and many other issues around the contemporary social and political structure of Turkey. I thought that the website could also broaden my knowledge about the issues that the Kurdish women's movement has been raising.

On the religious women's movement side, even though there were some magazines during the 1990s, currently there are none comparable to those of either the feminists or the Kurds. The religious magazines existing now are fashion magazines, which could not tell me anything about the contemporary discussions within religious women's activism. Therefore, I did not include these but rather preferred to read articles by very well-known religious activist women such as Hidayet Şefkatli

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<sup>20</sup> I used to call these magazines and activists Islamist. However, during the fieldwork I realised that they prefer to be called religious since being called Islamist or Islamic is much more political, rather than personal. Therefore, I refer to them as religious magazines/activists in this research, apart from when I refer to the literature, in which the terms Islamist and Islamic are widely used.

<sup>21</sup> *Heviya Jine*'s editors sent me the volumes from Diyarbakır (see Figure 1).

Tuksal, Yıldız Ramazanoğlu, Cihan Aktaş and Fatma Ünal Bostan, who write in different journals, reviews, peer-reviewed journals and newspapers.

None of these publications are popular among everyone in Turkey; rather, I assume that their audiences are those who share the same identity, ideology or perspective. In other words, feminist ones are most likely to be read by feminists/women activists in the field, and *Hevîya Jine* most likely by Kurdish activists or scholars who work in the field. Even though I did not analyse these publications, I went through all of them before the fieldwork to broaden my knowledge. I checked the themes in every publication to ascertain their main concerns, whether they were inclusive or exclusive about issues that mostly related to other groups of women – such as whether feminists discussed the headscarf or the Kurdish issue as much as they discussed abortion, or vice versa – and whether there were any issues that they had in common, any common titles they had or any shared opinions on contemporary discussions. As a result, I realised that the most common subject that each group was more likely to discuss was violence against women. Moreover, feminist publications tended to have more articles on the Kurdish issue and the Kurdish women's movement than religious women's problems such as the headscarf issue and, even if they did address the latter, the articles, with only a few exceptions, are more likely to be from the feminist standpoint rather than giving voice to religious women.

Although these publications reveal the contemporary discussions, indicating both similar and different attitudes towards particular topics, such as abortion, the headscarf or violence against women, there is a lack of discussion about women's solidarity and activists' perceptions on working across differences. Even though women's solidarity as a term is frequently used in the names of organisations, and on demonstrations and rallies by women's groups in Turkey, its meaning for activists, the possibility of solidarity among different groups of women and how it could be established were missing in the related literature and the publications that I collected as well as coalition building/alliances among women. Therefore, in order to answer these questions and also to see how these different groups of women interact with each other, what they experienced in joint events and what these meant to them, and whether they saw their differences as barriers to solidarity, I had to



listen to activists' own stories and experiences. Thus, I decided to conduct semi-structured, in-depth interviews with women activists from different tendencies.

### **Interviewing as a Research Method**

Interviewing is one of the most common methods in qualitative research. I chose the in-depth interview as a method to understand activists' perceptions of gender issues and the idea of women's solidarity and working across differences among women in Turkey. I would not have been able to understand the issues fully using any other methods since I needed to listen to activists' accounts of their previous experiences with other groups and their opinions about solidarity in order to see the possibilities. However, I also acknowledge that interviews are always situated: 'no two interviews are likely to follow exactly the same format. Interviews are occasions for talk; they are interactional events and what goes on within them depends on a variety of situational elements. The account produced within a given interview is therefore specific to that one occasion' (Jackson et al., 2016: 33). Therefore, interviews are limited but the main emphasis and the scope of this research, showing women activists' approaches to and perceptions of women's solidarity and working across their political and identity differences, necessitates interviewing as a research method. Although interviewing, as a method, does not tell us people's actual practices, it does tell us how they understand and make sense of their situation. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that this research does not claim to be a representative account of women's solidarity and working across differences but rather aims to provide a detailed understanding of the issues based on my participants' perspectives, thus offers a 'snapshot' of the political challenges for the contemporary women's movement in Turkey.

Semi-structured interviews, or semistandardised interviews as Berg defines them (2007), are situated somewhere between structured and unstructured interviews. Even though there are still some predetermined questions and specific topics that are asked of each interviewee, interviewers are also free to digress from their standardised questions (Berg, 2007: 95). In semi-structured interviews, although there are fairly specific topics to be covered, interviewees are allowed flexibility in how to reply to questions. Interviewers may not follow the schedule exactly in order

and may ask different questions that are not included in the guide as a response to interviewees' replies. However, generally, all the questions on the list are asked in a similar way from one interviewee to another (Bryman, 2008: 438).

The related literature often refers to an interview guide, rather than a list of questions (Bryman, 2008; King & Horrocks, 2010; Kvale, 2007). King and Horrocks suggest that flexibility is the key requirement in the interviewing process. Therefore, rather than having a strictly scheduled question list, an interview guide that outlines the main subjects the interviewer would like to cover gives such flexibility to the interviewing process, as it allows the interviewee to lead the discussion in unanticipated directions (King & Horrocks, 2010: 35). I tried to apply this approach while preparing my questions. I decided on five main themes that I wanted to cover, which were: definitions of women's movements, similarities and differences between different groups of women, the meaning of solidarity and alliances as concepts, barriers to solidarity and the potential for solidarity. I then included possible questions on each of these themes (see Appendix C). Although I tried to follow the guide throughout the interviews, I replaced the questions and changed their order, sometimes added more questions or did not ask all of them, when I thought the replies had covered the themes already. I changed the order of my questions, especially ones about the Kurdish problem, the headscarf issue and the abortion ban, depending on my participants' own positionings; for example, I preferred talking about the Kurdish question with my Kurdish participants before discussing the headscarf issue with them.

## **Information about My Participants, the Cities and the Organisations**

### **The Participants**

I conducted my interviews between December 2014 and January 2015 with 35 women activists in five different cities: Ankara, İstanbul, İzmir, Diyarbakır and Van. I should emphasise here that, if I had done my fieldwork after the end of 2015, the results would have been totally different because negotiations with the Kurds have ceased, which has resulted in violence by both parties, the Turkish state and the PKK. The country is currently more polarised than ever. In 2016, more than 300 people lost their lives because of the suicide attacks and explosions carried out by

ISIS, the PKK and TAK. It would also not have been safe for me to travel to the eastern provinces to interview Kurdish activists and I anticipate that my participants' answers to questions about differences among women, current problems within the women's movement in Turkey and their tendency to work together would be different. Therefore, the dates when I conducted my interviews are crucial and have a significant impact on my findings.

In this study, I used purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Bryman defines purposive sampling as when the researcher chooses interviewees who are relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2008: 458). As King and Horrocks argue, in qualitative research one of the most important criteria for sampling is diversity. 'Researchers seek to recruit participants who represent a variety of positions in relation to the research topic, of a kind that might be expected to throw light on meaningful differences in experience' (King & Horrocks, 2010: 29). Since my aim is to understand women activists' perceptions on the possibility of solidarity and alliances among them and to examine their differentiated positions on gender issues, I planned to interview women activists who had different political, ethnic and religious backgrounds. Therefore, I chose women who were activists and/or academics in the women's movement in Turkey within different organisations and groups: feminists, Kemalist feminists, Kurdish women and religious women. These groups, however, are not homogeneous, these categories are interconnected and intersectional, and I acknowledge that my participants do not necessarily represent other women within their circles and organisations. Nevertheless, they struggle for social justice and their specific goals based on the political groups to which they belong, as well as being part of the wide women's movement in Turkey. They occupy different positions, have different experiences based on their diverse identities and have had different access to power throughout the Turkish political history. A differentiation between women's movements and feminist movements is much needed here:

Women's movements, then, can be defined as social movements where women are the major actors and leaders, who make gendered identity claims as the basis for the movement, and who organize explicitly as women. Women's movements, thus defined, permit scholars to recognize and to analyze feminist movements as a subset of the larger group of women's movements... Feminist movements can be distinguished from the larger set of women's movements on

the basis of their goals and aims. Specifically, feminist movements are a type of women's movement that challenges patriarchy, and contests political, social and other power arrangements of domination and subordination on the basis of gender (Beckwith, 2007: 314).

Although all my participants are part of the women's movements in Turkey, in the interviews, I asked them their closeness to feminism and whether they identify themselves as feminists. The ones who work within the well-known feminist organisations (see below) embraced the term. However, feminism is not a monolithic entity. It is important to note that the label 'feminism' encompasses a range of orientations, including radical, leftist or liberal feminisms, in line with the divisions within the feminist movement in Turkey, as everywhere else. However, when I asked them to identify themselves, they only used 'feminist' without attaching any radical, socialist or liberal tags, even though there were implicit or explicit indications of their particular stances in the interviews.

In the Turkish context, as in anywhere else, there is not only one type of feminism and the term 'feminist' applies to different groups. Kemalist women who see 'woman' in an essentialist way call themselves feminists; some Muslim women whose faith plays a significant role on how they define gender relations identify themselves as religious feminists. Even within these groups there are different shades of feminism, some are strong and some not. Among my Kemalist feminist participants, for instance, there are women whose Kemalist tone is more powerful and some who have a stronger feminist stance than Kemalist. However, a common thread is that they are all a part of women's organisations with a Kemalist orientation. Interviewing Emel<sup>22</sup> and understanding her stance, for example, was surprising for me as her feminist tone was much stronger than the Kemalist, although the organisation she works with, *Turkish Women's Union*, is a very well-known Kemalist one (See below). This is the reason behind my preference to call her a Kemalist feminist, as in some ways she represents the organisation.

Some women have ideological reasoning behind their decisions on (not) identifying themselves with one category and some have practical. I had been referring to

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<sup>22</sup> During the fieldwork, some of my participants, such as well-known activists and scholars, wanted their names to be used in my thesis, while many others were hesitant. I decided to use the names of the ones who explicitly asked for it and used both their first and last names. All the other first names I refer to throughout this thesis are pseudonyms.

religious activists as Islamists before I started to conduct interviews, as they appeared in the literature. However, during the fieldwork I realised that they preferred to be called religious activists as the term Islamist, and even Islamic, have a political meaning while their stance was more personal. There were also just a few women who defined themselves as feminists and preferred to be called religious feminists rather than Islamist/Islamic for the same reason. Their arguments can be identified within Islamic feminism as in the literature, since their faith is important to them as well as supporting gender equality. However, considering the equation of Islam with the AKP in the Turkish context<sup>23</sup> and their hesitance to be seen as the AKP supporters, they openly rejected that position. Therefore, I prefer to use the term religious feminist or religious activist for my participants, although Islamist/Islamic are more common terms in the field.

Within the Kurdish group, there are women who are ethnically Kurdish and work in the regional organisations but reject being part of the Kurdish movement and identify themselves with feminism, some who prefer not to be called feminists but rather work for the Kurdish movement, and others who support the Kurdish movement and work for a Kurdish organisation even though they are not ethnically Kurdish. Fidan, for instance, is ethnically Turkish. However, both she and the organisation she works for are part of the Kurdish women's movement. During the interview, when I asked her if she preferred to be called a feminist, she mentioned 'their' differences from feminism by emphasising the Kurdish women's movement's distinctive political struggles. Therefore, I prefer to call her a Kurdish activist, even though she is not ethnically Kurdish herself but a supporter of their cause. Women working in politicised Kurdish circles reject being identified as feminists, arguing that it was characterised by being Turkish, white, educated and middle-class. Therefore, they prefer to embrace the concept of 'jineology', means the science of women, written by the leader of the Kurdish movement, Abdullah Öcalan, who argues in his conceptualisation that without women's freedom a society/country cannot be free. Rather than being just gender-specific, their politics emphasise the necessity of including other political issues, such as ethnicity and class. As a result, these women did not identify the feminist movement as a solution to their problems.

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<sup>23</sup> See Chapter Four for details on AKP's use of Islam as a political discourse.

Interpreting some movements and activists as ‘feminist’, based on their activism in relation to gendered dynamics of power is challenging. As Browne asks, ‘is a woman who battles gender prejudice through activism “feminist” even if she claims not to be?’ (cited in Wright, 2008: 381). If we define feminism as women’s rights advocacy and campaigning for equality between sexes in very broad terms, we could then identify all my participants as feminists and a part of the feminist movement in Turkey. However, as Cockburn notes, ‘feminism is a word that a lot of women, even activist women, feel uncomfortable with’ (Cockburn, 2003: n.p.). My own understanding of feminism is transversal and in line with how Cockburn identifies it: ‘being anti-essentialist, sees gender as lived in many different ways, so that it makes sense to talk about masculinities and femininities in plural. It sees identities, including masculine and feminine identities, as being fluid and changeable, varying from one time and place to another’ (Cockburn, 2003: n.p.). However, this understanding is not shared by all of my participants. The main question here is, ‘for who is to say who is a feminist or not?’ (Kock, 2016: 148). As a feminist researcher, I value women’s self-identification and their lived histories and disagree with imposing labels, which they openly reject, on them. Moreover, as Beckwith argues, merging different women’s movements into a feminist movement, trivialises the significance of alliances among women. Understanding their different stances towards feminism, on the other hand, permits us to explicate in which conditions these groups can form alliances and also barriers to such alliances (Beckwith, 2007: 316). As a result, I decided on six categories to define my participants: feminist, Kemalist feminist, Kurdish feminist, Kurdish activist, religious feminist and religious activist, based on their self-identification regarding their stance towards feminism. When I use ‘Kurdish women’ in this thesis, I refer to both Kurdish feminists and Kurdish activists, while ‘religious women’ refer to both religious feminists and religious activists, thus emphasising the ethnic or religious identity through which women define themselves.

I tried to contact the activists before I went back to Turkey for my fieldwork. Apart from a few well-known activists, I made a list of the women’s organisations from different groups and researched their information online. Since my hometown is Ankara and I was planning to start interviews there, I sent emails to the activists in Ankara through their organisations’ contact information online. In the email, I firstly

introduced myself as a research assistant at Hacettepe University, Ankara, and also a PhD candidate at the Centre for Women's Studies, University of York. Then, I explained my research project briefly and why I wanted to conduct interviews with them. I also gave information about the approximate time the interviews would take. However, I could not reach all of them through emails as some email addresses on their websites were wrong or there were not any written addresses. Consequently, I tried to arrange meetings with the ones who had replied to my emails first. When I went back to Turkey, I dialled the phone numbers on their websites and asked if I could conduct interviews with them for my thesis.

I also used snowball sampling, which is defined as follows: 'In snowball sampling, the researcher uses the initial few interviewees to recommend other potential participants who fit the inclusion criteria for the study. They in turn will be asked to suggest further contacts, and so the sample builds up' (King & Horrocks, 2010: 34). Most of my participants gave me some names and phone numbers of other activist women who might be helpful for my study. However, I also continued to interview the women whom I had already identified by myself. Therefore, in total I conducted just 10 interviews with snowballed participants. One of these was a Member of Parliament at the time, Kurdish activist Sebahat Tuncel, whom I would have been unable to reach by myself. In order to arrange a meeting with her, I had to contact her personal assistant, whose number I have been given by one of my previous interviewees. She was very helpful and I would not have been able to arrange a meeting with Sebahat Tuncel otherwise due to her busy schedule.

Even though I was never rejected, there were two activists whom I could not interview. One of them was a scholar and well-known feminist activist in İstanbul. We arranged a meeting despite her busy agenda, but she had to cancel it because of her mother's illness. Another activist was also a scholar in Ankara, who questioned my research project in a destructive manner through several emails and told me that women activists who were as educated as me would not be willing to be research objects<sup>24</sup>. She criticised my research question and said it was not that interesting. However, she also said that she would like to be a part of the research to help. After

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<sup>24</sup> For a detailed discussion on academia and activism tension while interviewing, see below.

several emails in a row, and having replied to all of them in a polite and explanatory way about my aims, I changed my mind about interviewing her or her organisation, as I would never have felt comfortable after that. After the first few emails, I felt very insecure and started to hesitate over my questions, as she was one of the first people I contacted and was a scholar, which made me feel as though I was doing something wrong. This also shows my perception of my participants, that I see them as much more knowledgeable and experienced than I am. Apart from these two, I conducted interviews with everyone whom I had contacted.

Majority of the organisations that the activists represented were very well-known ones. Moreover, 18 of my interviewees were prominent activists in the field, so that sometimes their reputation was greater than that of the organisations themselves. Therefore, I had the chance to read their articles or news about them before going into the field. Another advantage of interviewing well-known people was that the activists also knew each other. Since my main focus is working across differences, this gave me the opportunity to learn their opinions about other organisations and their stances towards different gender issues in Turkey. In addition, I also conducted interviews with activists who were much younger, or not as well-known as the others in order to broaden the representativeness of my study. Overall, I interviewed 35 activists.

My participants' ages vary from the youngest in their 20s to some in their 60s. Their educational backgrounds also vary, from high-school diploma to PhD. Moreover, the organisations of which they are part are also differentiated through their structures since they include associations, platforms, collectives, initiatives and foundations. Some of the organisations have several branches throughout Turkey. The Association of Republican Women, for instance, has 86 grassroots organisations in seven different regions of Turkey. The reason behind my decision to select my participants with different backgrounds was to increase the diversity of my sample, rather than doing any comparative analysis among groups. Therefore, rather than doing comparison on activists' differences based on their diverse backgrounds, I have chosen to focus on the political and identity differences among them, which forms my main focus in this thesis, unless my participants mention other factors as of significance to their political differences.



## The Cities and The Women's Organisations<sup>25</sup>

I conducted my interviews in five different cities, Ankara, İstanbul, İzmir, Van and Diyarbakır, which are located in five different regions of Turkey, as shown in Figure 1. Even though they differ in terms of their size, population and development, these cities host well-known women's organisations which have cooperated with each other and which represent different political affiliations, and thus their members' lived experiences with each other would provide key insights for my research questions.

Figure 1. A regional map of Turkey



Source: Google Images<sup>26</sup> (Red dots added to identify research sites)

I started my interviews in **Ankara**, the capital of Turkey, with a population of five million. During my fieldwork, I spent most of my time in Ankara, as it is my hometown. I arrived in the city on 2 December 2014 and from there I travelled to other cities and came back to Ankara again. I interviewed the majority of my participants, 14 activists – feminists, religious feminists and Kemalist feminists – in Ankara because there are many important and well-known organisations there and

<sup>25</sup> See Appendix D for a full list of my participants and the organisations.

<sup>26</sup> Available at: [http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-KDZ3Hn66czQ/VdwAFnRLI3I/AAAAAAAAAB9w/98gkVlgIqVks1600/turkiye\\_bolge\\_haritasi.jpg](http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-KDZ3Hn66czQ/VdwAFnRLI3I/AAAAAAAAAB9w/98gkVlgIqVks1600/turkiye_bolge_haritasi.jpg) (Accessed 5 January 2018).

also I had the chance to meet one activist who normally lives in Mardin, a city in the Southeastern Anatolia Region (see Figure 1), and another two activists who normally live in İstanbul. Ankara, as the capital, is the seat of the Turkish Government and the centre for Turkish politics. The Turkish National Parliament and the ministries and all other central departments of the government are located in Ankara. It is also one of the most popular cities in terms of its distribution of women's organisations, which are also differentiated in terms of their political and ideological orientations. I interviewed activists from ten different organisations, three academics and one Member of Parliament.

The first organisation I visited in Ankara was *The Foundation for Women's Solidarity (Kadın Dayanışma Vakfı)* and I interviewed three activists from this organisation. It was established in 1993 and is a very well-known feminist organisation, working on the elimination of violence against women, particularly domestic violence and human trafficking. They organise numerous training programs and consciousness raising activities on fighting against violence against women. They emphasise that they are an independent organisation, by disclaiming any ideological position, and thus they have cooperated with many women's organisations. One of my participants who works for the foundation was also a member of *Ankara Women's Platform (Ankara Kadın Platformu)*, which comprises more than 40 women's and LGBTI organisations and independent feminists in Ankara to form a platform for common action for women's and LGBTI agendas. A related group is, *Ankara Feminist Collective (Ankara Feminist Kolektif)*, of which one of my participants is an active member. They focus on establishing feminist politics and solidarity among feminists in Ankara. They organise different events, from design workshops to feminist night walks. Another well-known feminist organisation in Ankara that I visited is *Women's Coalition (Kadın Koalisyonu)* and I interviewed one of my participants. It is a platform formed by independent local and national women's organisations, which promote women's social and political participation to enable politics based on equality and justice. *Flying Broom (Uçan Süpürge)*, established in 1996, primarily aims at increasing communication, cooperation and solidarity among women's organisations and creating a national and international network. Thus, they define themselves as a 'network centre', which has many experiences of working with different groups of women, which is why I

wanted to include them in my research and interviewed a leading figure from this organisation. Moreover, they also organise projects to improve gender equality awareness, provide information and training to empower women and contribute to the development of gender equality policies.

As the capital of the modern Turkish Republic, Ankara hosts many Kemalist women's organisations. These organisations embrace Kemalist ideology and emphasise the importance of secularism and their approach to gender equality is within the Kemalist framework. *Turkish Women's Union (Türk Kadınlar Birliği)*, is the oldest of these, established in 1924 by Nezihe Muhittin and her friends<sup>27</sup>. In the 1990s, the Union showed effective work to increase the level of education and consciousness-raising of 'modern' women, as envisaged by Atatürk. It has over 80 grassroots organisations in different cities in Turkey, although I only visited its centre in Ankara and interviewed its active member, working in different projects from increasing literacy of women to working against violence against women. Another prominent women's organisation in Ankara is the *Association of Republican Women (Cumhuriyet Kadınları Derneği)*, which is very strongly representative of Kemalist feminism and I interviewed two activists from this organisation. The *Association of Republican Women* expresses their aims as 'protecting, defending and developing economic and political independence, freedom, democracy and enlightenment, which were gained through the National War of Independence and the Republican Revolutions, for the benefit of the country and the people' on their website (CKD, n.d., my translation). *Women's Associations Federation of Turkey (Türkiye Kadın Dernekleri Federasyonu)*, established in 1976 in Ankara, is a platform for 11 women's organisations, mainly Kemalist, working on women's empowerment. It is a network platform for the member organisations as well as organising projects for women's education and 'enlightenment' and I interviewed its leading figure in Ankara. One of the members of the *Women's Associations Federation of Turkey, Association of Turkish Women University Graduates (Türk Üniversiteli Kadınlar Derneği)*, is based in İstanbul but I had the chance to meet its member in Ankara for the interview. Established in 1949 by the first women university graduates of the Republic, the association emphasises

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<sup>27</sup> I discussed a detailed history of the Union in Chapter Two.

secularism and modernity as their core values and aims to contribute women's development in the light of Atatürk's principles and revolutions.

One of the most active religious women's organisations in Turkey, *Capital City Women's Platform (Başkent Kadın Platformu)* is also based in Ankara and I interviewed three activists from this organisation. It is considered to be an Islamic organisation but unlike other religious women's organisations, Capital City Women's Platform has cooperated with other women's organisations from various political backgrounds. Their initial aim is to solve the problems arising from the discrimination against religious women in modern society, as well as challenging the religious interpretations and beliefs that reinforce the image of traditional women. Therefore, it is a platform that works both against the Kemalist understanding of 'modern woman', and also the interpretation of Islam that imposes a restrictive lifestyle for women. Their main arguments based on the headscarf issue revolves around 'women's freedom of choice'<sup>28</sup>.

The second city that I went to for interviews was **Van**. I went there on 25 December 2014 for two days and I conducted three interviews with activists from two different organisations whose members were mostly Kurds, although my interviewees defined themselves as feminists rather than members of the Kurdish movement. As can be seen in Figure 1, Van is situated in East Anatolia Region and close to the eastern border of Turkey, adjacent to Iran. The relevant literature, newspapers, my two-day experience there and exchanging opinions on the subject with my friends living there show that the population has a very high proportion of Kurds. I visited Van both for this reason and also because I had heard repeatedly about the strong and well-known women's organisation, *VAKAD*, in Van from my previous interviewees in Ankara.

I interviewed two women from *VAKAD – Van Women's Association (Van Kadın Derneği)*, which was established in 2004 as an independent feminist organisation. Even though the majority of its volunteers and members were ethnically Kurdish, they did not want to be part of the Kurdish politics. They organised events and

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<sup>28</sup> See Chapter Four for details.

activities to empower women at a range of different economic, social, individual, cultural, legal and political levels, as well as combating violence against women. However, even though they did not define themselves within the Kurdish political movement, after the coup in July 2016, the association was closed down by the government along with some other women's organisations in the south-eastern region on the pretext of combating terrorism (Gazete Karınca, 2017). Another organisation in Van, *YAKA-KOOP*, works particularly for women's health and education and offers training workshops for women such as making handicrafts and also directs women who have exposed to violence to institutions where psychological and legal support can be obtained. As an active organisation in Van, a highly Kurdish populated city, my participant also distanced *YAKA-KOOP* from the Kurdish political movement. *YAKA-KOOP* was not closed after the coup and has remained active. One potential reason for not being targeted by the government could be that it is not as popular nation-wide as *VAKAD*.

After the interviews in Van, I went back to Ankara for the weekend and then, on 29 December 2014, I went to **Diyarbakır**, which is situated in Southeastern Anatolia Region. Like Van, Diyarbakır has a very large Kurdish population. Also, Diyarbakır is seen as a centre of both the Kurdish movement and the Kurdish women's movement and the PKK has strong sympathisers in the province, even though it is also a home for women activists who have distanced themselves from the PKK. That being said, being based in Diyarbakır makes any organisation vulnerable to the stigmatisation as pro-PKK. I went there for a one-day visit and interviewed four women from three different organisations. Although I contacted most of my interviewees personally throughout my research, I had problems arranging the ones in Diyarbakır because I did not have any personal contacts there and, worse, I could not find any contact information online, except for one organisation. Therefore, in order to arrange those meetings, I had help from a scholar whom I had met during the summer of 2014, and who works on the Kurdish women's movement. She gave me some activists' telephone numbers and, thanks to her, I organised the interviews. Another problem with arranging meetings in Diyarbakır was that many women activists were in Suruç, a rural district of Şanlıurfa province of Turkey, near the Syrian border, where one of the biggest refugee camps was located. Thousands of Syrian Kurdish families had fled across the border to escape from the fighting with

Islamic State (ISIS), which had started in mid-September 2014. Since September, ISIS had been trying to take Kobani, a Syrian town, and was battling against the People's Protection Units, YPG, which is the armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, PYD, in Syrian Kurdistan. It was also backed up by thousands of Kurdish fighters from Turkey, YPJ (Women's Protection Units) and also US-led airstrikes. Finally, Kobani was recaptured from ISIS in January 2015. However, during those five months, Suruç camp was the home of many Syrian refugees and was run by unpaid volunteers, mostly Kurds, in Turkey. Therefore, during December 2014, while I was conducting my interviews, many Kurdish activists from Diyarbakır were in Suruç in order to help in the camp.

Two organisations that are part of the Kurdish political movement that I visited in Diyarbakır, and arranged meetings with the help of the scholar, were *Selis Women's Association (Selis Kadın Derneği)* and *Association of Women's Academy (Kadın Akademisi Derneği)*. I interviewed two women from *Selis Women's Association*, which was established in 2003, which offered counselling services to women who are subjected to violence and provided social, legal, health, educational and psychological support to women, as well as awareness-building activities before it, like *VAKAD*, was closed down in December 2016. A member of the organisation said that they used to receive 10-15 application per day but the closure made it impossible for them to reach women in need (Bianet, 2016). The second organisation, the *Association of Women's Academy*, was established in 2009 and I interviewed one activist from the organisation. They take responsibility for raising awareness of women's problems by organising training, writing and sharing articles and training activists to be trainers themselves to achieve a 'mentality revolution' as a part of the Kurdish women's movement. As indicated in their name, the association has an 'academic' role to educate women to raise awareness of gender in Diyarbakır. Despite being openly a part of the Kurdish movement, their name was not listed among the closed organisations. Another organisation I visited in Diyarbakır was *KAMER (Women's Centre – Kadın Merkezi)*, which I approached myself using their online information and I interviewed its leading figure. Unlike other organisations in Diyarbakır, *KAMER* refuses to be part of the Kurdish

movement<sup>29</sup>, even though the majority of its volunteers are ethnically Kurdish, and define themselves as a feminist organisation, particularly working on violence against women. They have grassroots organisations in other 23 Kurdish populated cities in the south-eastern and eastern regions of Turkey and organise awareness activities for women's human rights, as well as an emergency support programme, women's entrepreneurship, early childhood education and support to refugee women and children and they are still active.

After Diyarbakır, I went back to Ankara again. Although I was planning to go to **İstanbul** immediately afterwards, unfortunately I caught a bad case of flu and therefore I had to defer my interviews in İstanbul for a week. Eventually, I went to İstanbul on 7 January 2015 and stayed there for eight days. İstanbul is a transcontinental city which forms a bridge between Asia and Europe and is the largest city in Turkey. It is located in Marmara region and has very active, strong and diverse women's organisations as in Ankara, which is the reason behind my decision to include it. There, I conducted interviews with eight women from six different organisations, four feminists, one Kurdish activist, one religious feminist and two religious activists. The interviews there were difficult in terms of transportation. On the first day, I had two meetings, one on the European side and one on the Asian side, and it took me hours to reach the second place, as traffic jams are an everyday problem in İstanbul.

One of the best-known feminist organisations in Turkey, the *Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation (Mor Çatı Kadın Sığınağı Vakfı)* is based in İstanbul. Since its establishment in 1990, the Purple Roof has been offering women's shelters and legal and practical support for women who are victims of domestic violence. Using 'women's solidarity' as its motto, the foundation also established a network between women's organisations which run shelters and consultation centres by initiating the Women's Shelters and Consulting/Solidarity Centres Convention<sup>30</sup>. My participant from the *Purple Roof* was also an active member of the *İstanbul Feminist Collective (İstanbul Feminist Kolektif)*, which is a sister platform of *Ankara Feminist*

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<sup>29</sup> See Chapter Four for a detailed analysis of KAMER's relation to the Kurdish movement.

<sup>30</sup> My participants discussed the Convention meetings as a good example of coalition building among women. See Chapter Six.

*Collective* and runs similar events throughout the year such as feminist workshops. Another very well-known and old feminist organisation that I visited in İstanbul is *Women for Women's Human Rights – New Ways (Kadının İnsan Hakları – Yeni Çözümler)*. Established in 1993, *Women for Women's Human Rights – New Ways* aims to improve human rights of women both in Turkey and in the world. The organisation has contributed to spreading awareness of women's rights as well as initiating campaigns for legal reforms<sup>31</sup> and I interviewed one woman from this organisation. *Women's Solidarity Foundation – KADAV (Kadınlarla Dayanışma Vakfı)* is based in İstanbul and I also interviewed one activist from this organisation. The foundation defines itself as a solidarity group for women based on feminist politics. It particularly works on violence against women by giving support to women who are exposed to violence, and also runs different activities to improve women's employment and support women's labour rights. In recent years, they have also started to organise events for immigrant women, imprisoned women and LGBTI people. During my stay in İstanbul, I also visited *Rainbow Women's Association (Gökkuşluğu Kadın Derneği)*, which was an active member of the Kurdish movement before its closure in December 2017 along with other women's organisations I mentioned, and interviewed two activists. The association supported Kurdish women as well as other women in İstanbul and organised events on gender violence awareness by following judicial cases of male violence and bringing them into question, together with giving legal support to women in collaboration with other Kurdish women's organisations in Diyarbakır. *Muslim Initiative Against Violence Against Women (Kadına Şiddete Karşı Müslümanlar İnsiyatifi)* is another group based in İstanbul, in which I interviewed two of its members. The initiative is composed of young Muslim women who aim to combat inequality, discrimination and violence that women suffer from because of being a woman. They emphasise that while women face all sorts of violence daily, there is a lack of Muslim discourse and stance on the issue and thus they intend to develop an Islamic discourse and perspective to prevent violence against women. They were also very active during lifting of the headscarf ban in secondary school discussions in 2014<sup>32</sup>. They emphasise that they are open to establishing solidarity with any women's

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<sup>31</sup> *Women for Women's Human Rights* had an active role in changing the Turkish Penal Code in 2002. See Chapter Six for details.

<sup>32</sup> See Chapter Four.



organisation, which is one of the reasons why I wanted to interview them. Some of its members initiated *Reçel Blog* in September 2014 and since then it has become a platform for women, particularly for religious women, to share their everyday experiences, their perceptions of social affairs, their memories, troubles, hopes and struggles in online blog articles.

After İstanbul, I went directly to **İzmir** on 15 January 2015 for four days. İzmir is one of the largest cities in the Aegean Region and it is mostly known for its secular and Kemalist population. In spite of AKP' success in both local and national elections since 2002, Kemalist originated Republican People's Party – CHP still wins the majority in İzmir. It was not as easy to access interviewees in İzmir as I had expected. I sent emails to them and called them several times but received only one reply. So I decided to go there and try to arrange meetings face to face. Therefore, the meetings in İzmir occurred spontaneously. Nevertheless, I was lucky enough that the first woman whom I went to visit introduced me to one of the leading activist figures in İzmir. As a result, I interviewed three women from two different organisations, two feminists and one Kemalist feminist. A well-known Kemalist organisation in İzmir, *The Association to Protect Women's Rights (Kadın Haklarını Koruma Derneği)*, aims to protect and improve the women's rights which have been preserved by Republican laws and puts emphasis on the Republican modernity. I interviewed its active member during my stay in İzmir. The association is also a member of *Women's Associations Federation of Turkey* (I interviewed one of its member in Ankara). Another organisation I visited in İzmir was *İzmir Women's Solidarity Association (İzmir Kadın Dayanışma Derneği)*, which is a feminist organisation working on combatting violence against women, together with providing solidarity, counselling and assistance to women against any kind of discrimination they face based on traditional gender roles and I interviewed two of its members.

As a result, I interviewed 35 activists from 24 different organisations based in five different cities in Turkey. While I do not consider my sample as representative of the whole women's movement in Turkey, given the limited sample size, selecting highly visible and recognised women's organisations from five big cities, which were diverse ideologically and politically, helped to represent divisions within the

movement to some degree. Moreover, since the majority of these organisations have participated in common platforms, I benefitted from my participants' extensive experiences of working with other groups.

### **Interviewing Process: Interviewing from a Feminist Perspective**

Feminist research challenges the basic structures that oppress women by giving voice to women's experiences and knowledge, and exposing stereotypes related to women. Moreover, feminist research aims to empower women and generally feminist researchers use their findings to promote social justice for women (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007: 4). In feminist research, interviewing is a common method. Reinharz defines the importance of interviewing in feminist research as follows:

Interviewing offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher. This asset is particularly important for the study of women because in this way learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women's ideas altogether or having men speak for women. (Reinharz, 1992: 19)

Since I have always worked on theories and documentary sources, interviewing women and adopting a feminist approach to it was very new for me and it was a challenging and enlightening experience. Before starting my interviews with activists, I firstly conducted a pilot interview with a friend of mine who is a scholar and did her PhD on women's participation in local politics. It was very helpful in terms of showing me that some of my questions were leading the interviewee, and I revised these later.

At the beginning of each interview, I gave my information sheet (see Appendix B) to the participant and explained my research in a more detailed way than in the email I had previously sent to them. I asked them to read the information leaflet and ask questions if anything was unclear before starting the interview. A few of them did ask questions, but most of them found the information sufficient. Then I talked about the importance of their consent, showed them the consent form (see Appendix A) and said that their verbal consent would also be enough if they had any hesitation

about signing the form. Most of them were willing to sign it before the interview, and a few wanted to leave it to the end. Nevertheless, all of them signed the form.

One of the very first feminists to question the hegemonic discourse in social science research was Ann Oakley (1981). In a well-known article, she argues that literature about conducting research consists of lists of ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ interviews. Proper interviews generally emphasise the importance of objectivity, detachment and hierarchy; while improper ones include subjectivity, involvement and the ‘fiction’ of equality (Oakley, 1981: 38). She does not approve of these generally accepted opinions about interviewing and stresses significant processes that feminist researchers need to follow, such as avoiding an exploitative attitude viewing interviewees only as sources of data, giving visibility to women’s subjective situations, and establishing a non-hierarchical relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee (Oakley, 1981: 41; 48–49).

While Oakley suggests that establishing a non-hierarchical relationship is a must for feminist research, Letherby (2003: 125) argues that it is impossible to do so because the researcher has the ultimate control over the data collection and presentation:

It is important to acknowledge that researchers often have the objective balance of power throughout the research process. Yet, as Giddens (1985) adds, power is not a simple have/have not aspect of a relationship and in terms of research the subjective experience of power is often ambivalent for both the researcher and the respondent. The researcher usually has control over the order in which the questions are asked and has control over the tape-recorder, a pen, and the associated authority that this brings. Furthermore, it is the researcher who is more often than not responsible for the final analysis and presentation of the data. (Letherby, 2003: 114)

She adds that, although it is important to see things from the participants’ perspectives, researchers should acknowledge their ‘privileged positions’ within the research relationship (Letherby, 2003: 125). In my fieldwork experience, the power relationships were a bit different because I saw my participants as very talented, intelligent and experienced activists, simply better than me. Moreover, most of them were older than me. Therefore, I created a hierarchy in my mind in which I positioned myself below my participants. However, in the field, I only had one

experience where I explicitly felt this hierarchy, with an elderly Kemalist feminist whom I met in Ankara. She was an academic and also an activist. Since respecting elderly people is a cultural rule in Turkey, she openly created a hierarchy between us by calling me ‘my child’. Also, she responded to some of my questions in a very negative manner so that I felt uncomfortable in the interview. Therefore, I just followed my interview guide and left the room as soon as the interview was finished. Otherwise, I felt comfortable with almost every group of women, whatever their ages, other backgrounds or politics.

I used both a digital voice recorder and my smartphone to record the interviews during my fieldwork. The reason behind using two recorders was that I did not want to take notes so I could concentrate on listening. Therefore, I wanted to rely on the recorders without being worried about any technical problems. Although I copied the recordings to my laptop as soon as I got home, I forgot to delete the ones on the recorder after the first couple of interviews. During the fourth interview, I found that the recorder had stopped immediately after we started the interview since the memory was full. After that, I emptied the space in the recorder every day and saw the importance of using my smartphone as a back-up because it saved that interview.

During the interviewing process, just one of my interviewees asked me to turn the recorder off after a question and she gave personal details related to it, which she wanted to be off the record. I generally turned the recorder off when the interview was over. However, most of my interviewees tended to talk more after the recording was turned off and sometimes said very important things. On one occasion, I asked to turn the recorder on again. At other times, I noted down their comments as soon as I went outside but I always asked them if I could use these comments because it would not be ethically appropriate to use ‘off-the-record’ statements (Bryman, 2008: 457).

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, I employed an interview guide with a set of main themes: the definitions of women’s movements, similarities and differences between different groups of women, the meaning of solidarity and alliance as concepts, barriers to solidarity and the possibility of solidarity, and several questions under each heading. This allowed me to change the order of questions, adding new

ones if necessary or adapting them according to the needs of each interview. I used three types of questions, which Berg defines as: essential questions, extra questions, and probing questions (Berg, 2007: 100–101). Essential questions are about the central focus of the study. Extra questions are almost equivalent to essential ones, but are worded a bit differently. I used extra questions when I thought the previous reply had not fully answered my question. Finally, probing questions, or probes, ask participants to elaborate upon their answers. In most of my interviews, I used probes when they talked about their experiences in a non-explicit manner.

I must admit that I was very nervous in my first interview; especially because it was with a very well-known feminist scholar and activist in Turkey. However, we had known each other before as I took a class taught by her while doing my Master's degree at the university where she worked. Therefore, I openly told her that I was nervous and she immediately offered tea and chocolate. As soon as we started chatting, I felt much more relaxed and we began the interview. Although it went well, I was regretful at the end of the whole interviewing process about having conducted this interview at the very beginning, before I became familiar with interviewing, because she is a leading figure in the movement and I could have asked extra and probing questions to obtain more detailed answers. On the other hand, having this interview as the first one was also helpful as she suggested some other well-known activists and I accessed them by giving her name.

Because I was conducting interviews for the first time in my academic life, sometimes I made mistakes such as asking double-barrelled questions<sup>33</sup> so that I had to repeat the second one. I also sometimes asked complex questions, which were long and involved (Berg, 2007: 105), and I had to rephrase them briefly and clearly. Also, during the first few interviews, I sometimes misunderstood silence and tried to explain even when the question was clear and simple. After my first couple of interviews, I experienced the importance of active listening, which is one of the important elements of feminist research. It is more than a simple question-and-answer conversation, but rather 'a fully engaged practice that involves not only

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<sup>33</sup> Berg defines double-barrelled questions as ones that simultaneously ask a participant about two issues in a single question (2007: 104).

taking in information via speech, written words, or signs, but also actively processing it – allowing that information to affect you, baffle you, haunt you, make you uncomfortable, and take you on unexpected detours’ (DeVault & Gross, 2007: 182). Therefore, the researcher needs to listen ‘carefully, discerningly, and intently to the comments of the researched’ (Hesse-Biber, 2007: 134). I would say that being an active listener was one of my achievements during the interviews as I did engage with the process very well apart from a few instances when I was extremely tired. One of these was in Diyarbakır, where I had to conduct four interviews in one day, because it would have been expensive to stay overnight there. However, I felt really exhausted at the end of the interviews. Even though I managed to ask every question in my guide, during the last interview I had no energy to ask any follow-up questions, as I was not able to listen to the answers properly.

Building a rapport with the participants is also seen as part of feminist research. Oakley stresses the importance of interviewers’ self-disclosure of personal information in order to develop close relationships with their participants (Oakley, 1981). DeVault and Gross also stress the value of establishing rapport and mention the effects of similarities and differences between the interviewer and the interviewee. Even though similarities might create over-rapport and differences could be reasons for bias, feminist researchers have developed more complex and reflexive views of identity, and therefore of its effects on interviewing. In other words, even though there are obvious differences between the two parties, such as ethnicity, there could be other similarities based on age, marital status or education which could help to establish rapport (DeVault & Gross, 2007: 179). This was the case in my interviews with the religious women and Kurdish women since I was not a part of their identities but was able to find common ground based on our age, mutual friends, shared experiences or even the same approach to some gender issues.

I conducted my interviews in activists’ offices, or any other places they preferred to meet, such as hotel lobbies, cafés or my participants’ houses. Two of my interviewees in Ankara asked to meet in a café. We did not have any problems hearing each other but I faced difficulties during transcription. Also, in one of the interviews there was a protest outside, which distracted our focus from interviewing

to the reasons for the protest. Nevertheless, I reminded her of where we had stopped and we covered all the issues in my interview guide. Two of my participants asked to meet at their houses. In one of these, my participant had to look after her children. However, her two daughters watched TV and played games quietly in another room during the interview and she only had to check on them once, which did not affect our interview. In Van, I had to conduct an interview with one of my participants, who was the chairperson of a women's organisation, in her clothing shop. Although we had arranged the meeting through emails, when I arrived there was only one activist in the organisation, but not the chairperson, as they had forgotten about our appointment. So I firstly conducted an interview with the activist and then arranged another meeting with the chairperson, for which I had to go to her clothing shop the same evening, because she could not leave the premises for personal reasons. That interview was one of the longest ones, as we had to stop several times when customers came in. Nevertheless, she was very conscientious about the interview so that, even though there were five-minute breaks, she continued exactly where she had stopped.

In my second interview in Ankara, I was expecting to conduct separate interviews with two activists who worked for the same organisation. I arrived at the office 20 minutes earlier<sup>34</sup> than we had arranged and was taken to a big room to wait for them. However, they came together for the interview. So, from the first question I asked, it turned out to be a group interview. The only difficulty I had was that one of them was much quieter; she was younger and less experienced in the organisation than the other woman, which might have been the reason for her silence. Therefore, I tried to direct the questions to her again if I had not received any reply from her. My first meeting in Diyarbakır was also with two activists in the same organisation. As I had experienced this before, I anticipated that it might become a group interview, which was indeed the case. However, I did not have any problems as both of my participants were talkative, the same age and had started working for the organisation at almost the same time.

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<sup>34</sup> I am normally a very punctual person and since I sometimes had to interview two or three people on the same day, I paid extra attention to arrive at the meeting points at least 5–10 minutes early to avoid any delays for the next one.

During my fieldwork I collected books, booklets, brochures and papers that had been published by the organisations I visited. In addition to this, I kept a diary throughout the fieldwork process. I tried to write it up right after the interview or as soon as possible, while my memory was fresh. Once I started to write, I realised that I was noting down almost every detail about the interviews, such as giving a portrayal of the offices or other meeting points, how close the interviewee was to me, what we talked about after the interview, if I had felt comfortable and so on. King and Horrocks define the importance of keeping a fieldwork diary as follow:

These are not field notes in the strictest sense, whereby you record and reflect on unfolding interactions, thus forming the basis of your research data. Rather, the research diary contains the uninhibited, candid and personal thoughts of researchers as they work on a specific project. Nevertheless, for those of us using qualitative interviewing, some of the thoughts and reflections recorded in our research diary may indeed, at a later date, be used as data that can be analysed in its own right, offer elaborations that enhance our analysis and/or provide methodological insight. (King & Horrocks, 2010: 131)

I would also argue that the fieldwork diary is as important as any other method as it gives you a perspective about what has not been said in recordings which provides additional information to analyse and also helps you to be more reflexive about your own work.

Both during the interviewing and after, I received very positive and constructive messages from almost all of my participants. I felt so welcomed and was offered tea/coffee and cookies at nearly all of my meetings. Some feminists told me that they wanted to work with me to organise conferences/seminars on this subject so that I recalled the importance of my work and felt much more confident about it. Additionally, many of my interviewees thanked me for the information leaflet and added that they had never received anything like this before an interview. They also complained about not hearing from other researchers after the interviews. Therefore, I told them that I would send them a copy of my report/thesis whenever I finished it. Also, some of them asked for the transcripts and I sent those. As soon as I came back to the UK, I sent separate emails to each of them to thank them for being part of my research and asked them to keep in touch online thereafter. On the whole, I



found the interviewing process very positive. The only negative experience I had was with the scholar who questioned my research in a destructive manner that made me insecure about my research questions. She clearly disconnected academia and activism by saying that women activists as ‘educated’ as I was, referring to myself being in academia, would not want to be ‘research objects’. In the next section, while reflecting on my position in this research as a Turkish feminist academic and the insider-outsider dynamics, I will also try to refer to her comment on the activism/academia tension by discussing research as activism.

### **Researchers’ Positionality in the Research: Discussions on Insider/Outsider Status**

Early discussions of researchers’ insider/outsider positions mostly assumed that researchers could be *either* insiders *or* outsiders and that each position had its own advantages and disadvantages. Commonly, being an insider means:

easy access, the ability to ask more meaningful questions and read non-verbal cues, and most importantly, be able to project a more truthful, authentic understanding of the culture under study. On the other hand, insiders have been accused of being inherently biased, and too close to the culture to be curious enough to raise provocative questions. (Merriam et al., 2001: 411)

Another disadvantage of being an insider is the risk that participants will show a tendency to explain less since they make assumptions about your similarity with the researched group. Also, a researcher’s previous experiences as a member of the group might affect her/his study, which might result in studies that are mostly guided by the researcher’s experiences rather than the participants’ (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009: 58). Being an outsider is mostly seen as a disadvantageous position since access is not easy and misunderstandings and misinterpretations might occur as the result of being a stranger to the group under study. However, it also has its own advantages, such as being able to ask taboo questions and participants’ tendency to explain and give more information because the researcher is seen as someone who is not familiar with the group’s culture (Merriam et al., 2001: 411). However, studies reveal that insider/outsider status is more complex and that the boundaries between the positions are not so clear and simple because one’s

positionality changes according to race, class, gender, culture and other factors (Merriam et al., 2001: 405).

James Banks (1998) suggests a different typology for cross-cultural researchers. He defines four different positions: indigenous-insider, indigenous-outsider, external-insider and external-outsider. The indigenous-insider supports the values, perspectives, beliefs, behaviours and knowledge of her/his indigenous community and is seen as a member of the community by its people. The indigenous-outsider is someone who was socialised in the indigenous community but has been assimilated by an oppositional culture whose values, beliefs, perspectives and knowledge she/he is now part of. Therefore, the indigenous community perceives her/him as an outsider. The external-insider was socialised within another culture. However, she/he rejects many of the values, beliefs and knowledge of her/his indigenous community and rather accepts those of the studied community. She/he is therefore perceived as an 'adopted' insider by the studied community. Lastly, the external-outsider was socialised within a different community and she/he has very little understanding of the values, perspectives and knowledge of the community she/he is studying, which might result in misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the behaviours of the studied community (Banks, 1998: 8). Even though Banks adds more positions rather than simply being an insider or outsider, I would argue that the line between each position is not that simple and being a complete insider or outsider is not possible. This is how I felt during the interviewing process: My position of being an insider and/or outsider transformed several times during even a single interview.

Dwyer and Bucker suggest another position, which is being in the space between – rather than being an insider or outsider. As they explain, having membership of a group does not mean complete sameness with that group. Likewise, not having membership is not a sign of complete difference. According to them, the origin of the space between lies in the fact that when we note the ways in which we are different from others, we also acknowledge the ways in which we are similar. They argue that, as researchers, we can only be in the space between; we might be closer to the insider position or to the outsider position, but we cannot fully occupy either (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009: 60–61). This was how I felt most of the time.

For the most part, interviewing was instructive and enlightening for me. I would say that I felt comfortable with almost all of the groups of women. The interviewing experience showed me that being an insider/outsider is not a fixed and steady position and that during the interview your position might transform from one to the other. David Chawla puts this clearly about the position of being an insider. According to him, we are all ‘another’ in the field because there will always be sides of us which are similar to the people we are researching, but there will also be other things that emphasise our differences, which results in the fact that we cannot be a complete insider (quoted in Liamputtong, 2010: 119).

Assuming that academic research only consists of predetermined stages that are sharply disconnected, such as ‘literature review stage’, ‘fieldwork stage’ and ‘writing-up stage’, underestimates the impact of researchers’ positionality during the process. Critical reflexivity requires researchers to acknowledge that their ‘period “in the field” was not discretely bounded’ (Maxey, 1999: 203). Therefore, I acknowledge that being born and living in Ankara, Turkey, throughout my life, having a middle-class background, having both a Bachelor and a Master’s degree in politics and my previous knowledge and experiences with the diverse groups of women I interviewed shaped and played around my research in some way. However, as someone who could initially be seen from outside as a middle-class, secular, young Turkish feminist, I argue that these identities cannot be solely the reasons to be an insider/outsider as a researcher. Even though I was born and raised in Turkey, defining myself as ‘Turkish’ when I first meet someone is not my priority as my race and ethnic origin do not have any importance for me. Certainly, I am much more familiar with Turkish culture than any other, but I have never had any patriotic or nationalist views throughout my life. Therefore, even though I might initially have been seen as a ‘Turkish’ feminist from my participants’ points of view, as soon as we started interviewing and interacting, particularly with Kurdish activists, my position as an outsider transformed to that of an insider, as we found common ground. However, as I have said, this is not a fixed position. For example, during the interviews my position of being an insider or outsider changed several times with the Kurdish activists. Although I had knowledge about the Kurdish women’s movement, I have never been to that region of Turkey before, and my knowledge was based on the literature about the movement. Therefore, being there

for the first time as a researcher and listening to their particular problems made me feel like an outsider. Nevertheless, being the same age, having similar educational backgrounds and problematising issues in the same way transformed my position several times during the interviews.

Here, I especially want to emphasise my relationships with the religious women, with whom I would never have imagined having such warm and relaxed interviews, as I had seen myself as an outsider because I am a non-believer. However, I realised that they were similar to me in how they related to gender issues, even in how they problematised the abortion ban and supported LGBTQ rights. Therefore, from the very beginning of each interview, my position as an outsider transformed to that of an insider regardless of our ages, educational backgrounds or classes. Our conversations about the headscarf issue did not make me feel like an outsider either. When I thought about the reason behind this, I realised that, although I was not a part of their community, Islamic culture is common in Turkey and I have had religious friends and relatives, which meant that I was familiar with the issues my participants also raised. Nevertheless, my participants' warm attitudes also affected my perception of being an insider.

My position with my feminist participants also varied. I have never been a part of feminist activism, but have rather been in the academy. In some occasions, I felt like an outsider with feminist activists – who were very supportive about helping me to find other activists' names and phone numbers because if I had been more of an insider they might have assumed that I knew these other activists as well – and an insider with academics. However, sometimes quite the opposite occurred, such as when the Kemalist feminist scholar created a hierarchy between us based on our age difference, so that I felt like an outsider with an academic. I would also say that I was an insider with Kemalist feminists in terms of knowledge, since Kemalism is the fundamental element of the Turkish educational system. However, I became an outsider when they started being exclusive about the Kurdish movement or religious women because I do not approve of their ideologies and political stances. In order to deal with this, I preferred to keep my opinions to myself.

The location where I conducted the interviews with my participants also affected how I felt about my position. When I went to their organisations, I initially felt like an outsider as I was not a part of those places. However, the meetings in cafés, hotel lobbies or my participants' houses helped to quickly transform my position from an outsider to an insider since we were able to develop the bonds between us much more easily in these informal places. As a result, although I felt like an insider and/or outsider during the interviews, I argue that these positions were not fixed and that no one could be a complete insider/outsider to someone else or to a community but rather that these positions are partial, as everyone has several similarities and affiliations but also differences based on gender, age, class, education, ideology and other factors.

Griffin sees insider/outsider status during the interviewing practice as 'a negotiation of shifting positions where the binary structures suggested by the role differences of interviewer and interviewee in the interview situation mask the more dynamic interactions actually at play in that situation' (Griffin, 2016: 16). As she argues, in some researches where the main theme is a 'third', an object, which was participation in public arts, particularly theatre in her research, 'rather than a topic that immediately and obviously required engagement about personal and/or structural traits', led the interviews' focus shift from the self and thus allow the 'third', theatre, to 'function as the initial point of discussion between us'. She argues that this does not imply that the differences and similarities among interviewers and interviewees are not at play but they are not the urgent focus (Griffin, 2016: 21). Even though women's solidarity is not a practical location as theatre is, I still argue that it was the 'third' in my interviews. My position as a young Turkish academic, wanting to conduct interviews with women activists, is maybe open to criticism. However, women's solidarity is a concept that cross-cuts women's academic interest as well as their activism. The aim of my interviews was to display how the theoretically well-defined women's solidarity is perceived by women activists in Turkey. Therefore, rather than just having academic importance, my questions were targeted to highlight women activists' lived experiences regarding the concept and helped to push our 'selves', as a 'researcher' and 'researched', into the background by making these activists' voices heard. The majority of my participants were already familiar with the interviews with academics but I anticipate one of the main

reasons behind their comfort with this research was that my main theme, women's solidarity, is something that they use daily but its meaning and the problems around it are not really talked about by activists. Even though there is an intensive literature on women's solidarity conceptually, the plurality of women's lived experiences of women's solidarity and activists' perceptions of it are rarely heard. Thus, the second most important point is that they knew this work would be an opportunity to voice their problems within the women's movement in Turkey, especially political and ideological ones as I asked, and the ways to reach women's solidarity. As Letherby argues 'feminist researchers start with the political commitment to produce useful knowledge that will make a difference to women's lives through social and individual change (Letherby, 2003: 4). Although I acknowledge that I will ultimately benefit from my research, my main aim as a Turkish feminist woman, was to produce knowledge about women's lived experiences. With this perspective, I aimed to produce knowledge not only about women but also for women, who can benefit from this research to some degree, which, as Brooks argues, 'breaks down boundaries between academia and activism, between theory and practice' (Brooks, 2007: 77). Therefore, my 'self', my academic identity, was not the first major influence on the subject, except that it initially affected my sense of comfort with my academic participants as mentioned earlier. However, being a member of one group does not indicate complete sameness, just as not being a member is not a sign of total difference. None of my participants marked me as an outsider in terms of my knowledge because of my academic identity. Whilst some activists were talking about the history of the women's movement in Turkey, they said 'surely you already know these things', which indicates their respect for my academic knowledge on the topic, even though they were aware that I have not been in any activist organisation. Therefore, rather than seeing my position, an academic researcher, as a block and a sign of an outsider, I generally felt my questions were found to be reasonable, pointing the problematic areas in the women's movement in Turkey. What is more to the point is that there is a widespread belief that academia and activism are two separate worlds, based on the binary divisions between 'mind/body, theory/practice, reason/emotion, abstract/concrete and "ivory tower"/ "real world"', which sets thinking and reflecting in opposition to doing and acting:

... the frequent assumption [is] that academics theorise and write, while for activists ‘action is the life of all...’; academics exercise their cognitive skills, while activists are animated by passion; academics are impartial commentators on the world while activists are partisan, polemical advocates; academics work in elite institutions while activists are embedded in the everyday, ‘on the streets’ or at ‘the grassroots’ (Eschle & Manguashca, 2006: 119).

The hierarchy between these two positions is created in either direction. Either academia is defined with ‘bourgeois theorising’ and its presence in the society is seen far above than people or it is accused of being ‘passive’ by diminishing its less contribution to social change than activism. However, as Grewal argues, ‘the lines between activism and theory are not absolute; they exist at once as both’ (Grewal, 2008: 178). Maxey argues that ‘activism is not a fixed term, but is actively constructed in a range of ways’, including academia, rather than assuming that it is only about ‘going on an action’, which solely represents narrow and exclusionary understandings of activism. The insistence of equating activism only with taking a physical action led to confining it to a discourse of ‘dramatic and “macho” forms of activism with short-term public impacts’ (Maxey, 1999: 199–200). Maxey aptly suggests that the notion of activism should be inspiring, encouraging and engaging as many people as possible and thus the term should be viewed very broadly, without being bounded off from other facets of everyday life:

the social world is produced through the acts each of us engages in every day. Everything we do, every thought we have, contributes to the production of the social world. I understand activism to be the process of reflecting and acting upon this condition. We are in a sense all activists, as we are all engaged in producing the world. Reflexivity enables us to place ourselves actively within this process. Paradoxically, activism under this interpretation often starts from a mental rather than physical process. By actively and critically reflecting on the world and our place within it, we are more able to act in creative, constructive ways that challenge oppressive power relations rather than reinforce them. This is, perhaps, what one activist I spoke with termed a ‘direct action attitude’ (Maxey 1998). For me, activism means doing as much as I can from where I am at. Where I am at, of course, varies politically, spiritually, emotionally, physically and so on. Perhaps the central part of my understanding of activism is that it gives rise to a continual process of reflection, challenge and empowerment. I do not punish myself for the infinite number of things I cannot do, rather I celebrate each moment, each

thought and deed undertaken in this spirit of critically reflexive engagement (Maxey, 1999: 201).

Feminists have discussed the problematic aspects of the ‘objectivity’ in academic thought and emphasised the importance of generating knowledge from women’s everyday lives. This understanding also has re-shaped the relationship between academia and activism, specifically between universities and the feminist movement, with the help of gender studies programmes. Universities have become a significant source of political activism for many feminists (Eschle & Manguerra, 2006: 120). Even though not all academic work can be considered as activism, just as not all activism exists in academia, there are potent overlaps. Therefore, academia can become a mean of activism (Maxey, 1999: 202). Like Maxey, I also reject the binary definitions of academia and activism and highlight the fluidity of these two positions. Considering the recent purge against academics in Turkey<sup>35</sup>, it can be argued that activism should not be limited to demonstrations in the streets. Rallies, protests, signing a petition, researching, trying to expand students’ knowledge in the classrooms are all different forms of activism, with a greater or lesser impact.

### **Data Processing and Writing up**

As Poland notes, ‘the transcription of audiotaped interviews as a method for making data available in textual form for subsequent coding and analysis is widespread in qualitative research’ (Poland, 2003: 267). Transcripts are usually understood as ‘verbatim facsimiles of what was said in interviews’ (Poland, 2003: 267). When I had completed my interviews and returned to the UK, I started to transcribe them all myself, from beginning to end. With the help of my fieldwork diary, I recalled things that were not in the recordings. While listening to the recordings, I remembered the settings in which the interviews took place, my participants’ gestures, and I simply lived the moment again. In some cases, I wished I had asked some more detailed questions and, in others, I was happy with the way I had asked them. Letherby argues that ‘after leaving the field and while writing the research

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<sup>35</sup> The petition initially signed by 1,128 academics in 2015, and more than 1,000 later, titled ‘We will not be party to this crime’, condemned the AKP government’s operations against the PKK youth in the south-eastern cities of Turkey, which had deadly results for the Kurdish civilian population in the region. In his speeches, Erdoğan equated these academics with terrorists, and the majority of those academics who initially signed the petition lost their jobs and the trials of academics started in December 2017, for ‘spreading terrorist propaganda’ on behalf of the PKK (HRW, 2017b).



“findings”, the researcher has ultimate control over the material and authoritative resources’ (2003: 118). One of the example of this control is the researcher’s choice about ‘whether to transcribe, what to transcribe, and how to represent the record in text’ (Lapadat & Lindsey, 1999: 66). In order to minimise my power in the transcription process, I decided to transcribe everything and even noted down the silent moments, pauses, and laughs since every detail about my participants was important to me. I also took notes on any parts in which my participants did not want me to speak about their comments in my thesis, in order to avoid any future misunderstandings.

Poland identifies numerous problems that might occur during the transcription process, such as ‘transcribers’ problems with sentence structure, the use of quotation marks, omissions, and mistaking words or phrases for others’ (Poland, 2003: 270). In order to avoid such problems, I listened to my recordings at least twice, transcribed the tapes as I heard them, did not correct any grammar, and, moreover, I sent the completed transcripts to any participants who had wanted to read them<sup>36</sup>. The majority of them thanked me for writing such detailed transcripts and only two of them made some minor changes – correcting the grammar and punctuation, and clarifying some of their arguments. During the transcription process, sometimes I became very bored typing for hours but, overall, I argue that every detail about it is significant to my research. Therefore, even though the transcription process might seem time-consuming to many researchers, I rather see it as a preparation for the data analysis and also a part of this process. In Poland’s words, ‘data are (re)constructed in the process of transcription as a result of multiple decisions that reflect both theoretical and ostensibly pragmatic considerations’ (Poland, 2003: 268).

After I had finished the transcription process, I moved directly to the analysis because I had decided to analyse my data in Turkish, my mother tongue and the language in which I had conducted all my interviews. The reason behind this decision was that I did not want to alter the meaning of what was said (Poland,

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<sup>36</sup> During the interviews, I asked my participants whether they wanted to see the transcriptions. Only 16 of the women wanted to read them.

2003: 272) or lose any detail during the translation process. Analysing the data started during the fieldwork, with the help of my fieldwork diary, but occurred mainly during the intense transcription process. This stage of analysis, called immersion in the data by Marshall and Rossman, is significant for the researcher: 'Reading, rereading and reading through the data once more force the researcher to become intimate with the material. People, events, and quotations sift constantly through the researcher's mind' (Marshall & Rossman, 2011: 210).

Therefore, at the beginning of the analysis process, I read and re-read the transcripts numerous times in order to familiarise myself with my data. After doing so, what I was expecting from it, especially from women's solidarity, changed dramatically because I realised the particularities in my participants' narratives.

I approached each interview as a whole story told by each of my participants and thus, rather than solely focusing on their answers to each question, I also tried to understand their world. Having done this, however, I looked for themes that cut across the data as well as keeping their individual stories in my mind. Therefore, in order to analyse my data, I used thematic analysis in this study, defined as follows:

Thematic analyses, as in grounded theory and development of cultural models, require more involvement and interpretation from the researcher. Thematic analyses move beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focus on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes. Codes are then typically developed to represent the identified themes and applied or linked to raw data as summary markers for later analysis set. (Guest et al., 2012: 9)

Bryman argues that thematic analysis does not have a distinctive cluster of techniques but rather themes can be generated from many approaches to qualitative data analysis, such as grounded theory, narrative analysis, critical discourse analysis etc. Moreover, a theme and a code are seen as being almost the same by some writers (Bryman, 2015: 584). Nevertheless, thematic analysis roughly follows these steps: familiarising oneself with the data, coding the materials, elaborating many of the codes into themes, searching for sub-themes, examining possible links and

connections between concepts and, finally, writing up the insights from the previous stages to present a compelling narrative about the data (Bryman, 2015: 587–588).

I did not use any computer-assisted data analysis programs because, after re-reading my data several times, I was already familiar with it and I had a good understanding of the main points of focus. Moreover, some researchers have expressed their concern that using such programs might carry the risk of ‘leading to a sacrifice of resolution for scope’, ‘reification of the relationship between the researcher and the data’ and ‘distancing of the researcher from the data’ (Seidel, 1991: 107). Therefore, I decided to do my analysis manually. During the coding process, I used 35 transcription documents, one for each participant, on my laptop and I identified general themes, which can be called ‘basic themes’ (Attride-Stirling, 2001: 388), that were relevant to my participants’ answers to the research questions across the entire dataset. My guidance was the five main themes in my interview guidelines. While coding the data, I highlighted the texts in different colours in relation to these ‘basic themes’ and interview schedule sections: definitions of the women’s movement in Turkey, similarities and differences among women, concepts of solidarity and alliances, barriers to solidarity and potential for solidarity. I coloured definitions of women’s movement in Turkey in red, for instance, while highlighting the similarities and differences among women in yellow. During this process, I identified new themes in relation to my research questions. I also combined ‘inductive/bottom up’ and ‘theoretical/top down’ approaches to thematic analysis. In the inductive approach, themes are strongly linked to the data. In other words, themes have a relation to the particular questions asked during the fieldwork. ‘Inductive analysis is therefore a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions’, although it is not possible for researchers to free themselves of their theoretical commitments (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 83–84). Theoretical approaches, on the other hand, specifically ‘tend to be driven by the researcher’s theoretical or analytic interest in the area, and is thus more explicitly analyst-driven’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 84). I used these approaches together in order to determine my themes and to employ theoretical frameworks in regard to identity politics, conceptualisations of solidarity and coalition building/alliances to explain and analyse those themes. I generated different folders and documents for each theme and copied my

participants' narratives, quotes and line references into them to aid me in the writing-up process. Since I preferred not to use any computer-assisted data analysis, in order to be sure I had not overlooked anything, I checked the remaining data numerous times during both the analysis and writing-up periods until I was satisfied that nothing relevant in the data had been left out of the coding for the main themes or any potential emerging ones. During the analysis period, I sought to remain neutral and to do justice to my participants' narratives. Having a politics background and already being aware of the fragmentations within the women's movement in Turkey was a strength in understanding my data but many aspects of the analysis process surprised me and my data analysis led me to a conclusion I had not anticipated when I started this research. I divided my themes into three analysis chapters to discuss my findings, addressing the political and identity differences within the women's movement in Turkey, approaches to women's solidarity, and ways of working across differences with a focus on coalition building/alliances. However, it should be noted that, although the themes have been divided into parts, they still represent one 'global theme', 'a claim in that it is a concluding or final tenet...[that] tell[s] us what the texts as a whole are about within the context of a given analysis' (Attride-Stirling, 2001: 388): my participants' perceptions on how to work across their political differences.

Once I had completed the analysis, I translated the quotes I wanted to use in the analysis chapters. Since this research depends on my participants' narratives, I wanted to give them the space to speak for themselves. Thus, I decided to use extensive verbatim quotes. However, by doing the translation myself and selecting the quotes to use in this research, I am aware that my position as a researcher has a significant impact on this research:

When collecting data in one language and presenting the findings in another, researchers have to make a number of translation-related decisions. Words which exist in one language but not in another, concepts which are not equivalent in different cultures, idiomatic expressions and/or differences among languages in grammatical and syntactical structures are issues which call for very specific decisions. These decisions along with factors such as, for example, who the researcher or her translators are and what they 'know' have a direct impact on the quality of the findings of the research and the resulting reports. (Birbili, 2000: n.p.)

Therefore, the translation process was the one I was most afraid of because writing, speaking and experiencing in one language is totally different from doing those things in another as it is not just about language differences but also involves cultural issues. Wallmach argues that ‘translation theorists have always grappled with one specific problem in translation – the fact that translations are not the same as their originals and can never be the same’ (Wallmach, 2006: 2). As Birbili argues, having a deep knowledge of both cultures is necessary, as well as an accomplished understanding of the languages (Birbili, 2000: n.p.) in order to convey the original meaning. She argues that some translation-related problems may not be totally overcome, and groups such problems into three categories: gaining conceptual equivalence, comparability of grammatical forms and making participants’ words accessible and understandable (Birbili, 2000: n.p.). I also experienced the importance of two things for translation: Preserving the ‘right’ meaning of participants’ narratives and bearing in mind that it should make the ‘same’ sense for the [English] reader, which I found quite challenging. I used free/functional translation in my research since most of the time literal – word-by-word – translation did not make much sense in English. Functional translation means that the translator imagines what speakers of the targeted language would say in a parallel position (Simon, 1996; in Maclean, 2007: 787). The risk with this form of translation, Birbili argues, is the potential for misrepresentation and losing information from the original text (Birbili, 2000: n.p.). However, ‘translating in this way allows for the fact that language is a product of social interaction that can be shared across languages, while allowing for differences in conceptual schemes’ (Maclean, 2007: 787). In order to avoid any misunderstandings that might be caused by this approach, I have added footnotes to explain some cultural contexts further in order to make them more explicit.

Researchers and linguists suggest finding conceptual equivalence when direct lexical equivalence is not possible (Birbili, 2000: n.p.). I applied this approach during the translation process, especially in order to translate the concepts of coalition building/alliances since the direct lexical equivalence of the Turkish word I used in my interviews would not make the exact same sense as what my participants intended to mean to an English reader and vice versa. In the interviews, I used the term *ortaklık* in Turkish and asked my participants for its meaning and its difference

from solidarity. This term is generally translated as partnership, association, corporation, collectivism, participation etc., which also means commonality. On the other hand, coalition building and alliance in Turkish, *koalisyon*<sup>37</sup> and *ittifak*<sup>38</sup> are words that are rarely adopted in the women's movement in Turkey<sup>39</sup> and if I had used these terms during the interviews, they would only have confused my participants. Even though some of them understood *ortaklık* as 'commonality' and replied accordingly, the way in which they defined it usually corresponded to the ways in which coalition and alliance are conceptualised in the literature. The way in which my participants used *ortaklık* in the interviews could be translated either way, coalition and/or alliance, which makes this distinction redundant. Therefore, while specifying nuances of their use of the concepts, I preferred to translate *ortaklık* as the dual phrase 'coalition building/alliance' in this research, since there is a well-developed literature on these terms, which resonates with my participants' narratives<sup>40</sup>.

Maclean argues that translation is to a certain extent a creative art performed by the translator, since 'there is not necessarily any direct compatibility between languages' (Maclean, 2007: 786). Even the same text read by speakers of the same language will result in different interpretations. Therefore, 'understanding is always an act of construction and creation' (Maclean, 2007: 786). There were times when I felt hopeless and anxious and was afraid of causing misunderstandings and losing the core meaning that my participants wanted to convey. Transcribing every detail truly helped me to overcome this problem. Remembering their tone of voice, body language, silences, laughs and emotions gave me valuable insight that enabled me to find the right words and to translate as close to the original meaning as possible. This was also when my supervisor stepped in with important contributions to avoid translation-related problems by discussing in our meetings what my participants meant and accordingly what the 'right' word might be in English. One particular problem, however, reminded me that English is not my native language and that maybe it will never be as good. Although all of my Kurdish participants speak fluent

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<sup>37</sup> This means formalised organisational grouping in Turkish.

<sup>38</sup> This means formalised international alliances in Turkish.

<sup>39</sup> Only one group prefers to use 'koalisyon' in its name – Kadın Koalisyonu/ Women's Coalition.

<sup>40</sup> See Chapter Six for details.

Turkish, the difference between their word choices and sentence structures and those of a native Turkish speaker's is significant. Even though I tried my best to give the same sense in my translations of Kurdish activists' narratives, I later decided to use the 'correct' English grammar because I could not be certain whether the intentional grammar 'mistakes' would give the same feeling to an English reader. Therefore, while doing the translations, I eventually had to 'tidy up' (Standing, 1998: 190) the transcribed words of all the women from the different groups, although I tried to keep this to a minimum. We all have different regional and ethnic accents and dialects based on our different backgrounds and identities. In a thesis where I talk about our differences, I, unintentionally, had to 'homogenise' women's voices, 'making them all sound (or read) the same' by taking away their distinctive way of speaking based on their cultural background (Standing, 1998: 191). By no means do I see my participants' choice of words, grammar or sentence structures as wrong, but having English as a second language was an insurmountable barrier for me to achieve impeccable translations that value diversity among women's particular voices. However, my choice of leaving the translation until after the analysis period helped me to keep its interference in my findings to a minimum. Hence, I strongly recommend that researchers who are carrying out cross-cultural work do their analyses before the translation process to minimise the risk of altering the meaning of their participants' narratives.

During the fieldwork, and after I had returned to the UK, I received much positive feedback from my participants. The majority of them were eager to read my thesis once it was finished and two of them asked to organise an event with all of my participants to discuss the findings. Their interest in my research once again confirmed the necessity of this study to me. Therefore, once the thesis is complete, I aim to inform my participants, send them my report and, if possible, organise a joint [online] event to share and discuss the findings. I will also be looking at magazines and academic journals to publish articles based on my findings, both in English and Turkish, and in an accessible format, in the hope that women's organisations and activists in Turkey can benefit from this study to some extent and it serves to bridge the activism and academia divide.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN TURKEY: FRAGMENTED AND DIFFERENTIATED

What are the terms for groups of people from different cultural, religious, linguistic, historical backgrounds, who have applied to occupy the same social space, whether that is a city or a nation or a region, to live with one another without either one group [the less powerful group] having to become the imitative version of the dominant one – i.e. an assimilationism – or, on the other hand, the two groups hating one another, or projecting images of degradation? In other words, how can people live together in difference? (Stuart Hall, 2004, quoted in Yuval-Davis, 2006: 213)

During the 1980s and 1990s, new social movements changed the forms of political activism. The discussions on differences based on identities accelerated in Western societies, as well as in Turkey, especially with the arguments from feminists, LGBTQ activists, environmentalists and ethnic and religious minority groups. A new term began to be discussed: The politics of difference. As Young states, the ‘politics of difference is equivalent to identity politics, which is about claims of justice concerning cultural difference’ (Young, 2007: 60). Identity politics in Turkey<sup>41</sup> has helped to raise awareness of issues related to both religious women and Kurdish women. I argue, however, that it has harmed the women’s movement in Turkey more than it has helped because of fixed understandings of identities. In this chapter, I focus on the fragmentations – ethnic, religious and ideological differences among women – within the women’s movement in Turkey and demonstrate how rigid identity politics and the exclusionary Kemalist ideology pose an obstacle to any form of cooperation among women. One of the reasons behind this is the structural nature of difference, which is based on binary oppositions such as male/female, black/white (Ludvig, 2006: 249), religious/secular, Turkish/Kurdish and so on. Such dichotomies, as Ludvig argues, are based on the desire to secure power relationships and inequalities and therefore ‘this encompasses the

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<sup>41</sup> I use identity politics as Hekman defines it: ‘By identity politics I mean the organization of political movements around specific identities – women, racial/ethnic groups, gays, lesbians, and so on – instead of around political ideology or particular political issues’ (Hekman, 2010: 305). Therefore, I consider the religious women’s movement and the Kurdish women’s movement to be identity politics, whereas Kemalism is a political state ideology, which also includes identity formation to some extent since Kemalism places emphasis on being modern, secular and educated ‘Turkish’ citizens.



stigmatizing of people and groups on grounds of difference, the resultant phenomena being xenophobia, sexism, racism and so on' (Ludvig, 2006: 249), which accurately represents the case in Turkey. The politics of difference in Turkey, which is also shaped and encouraged by the political structures and the state itself, forms and reproduces the tension between groups. In order to illustrate this argument, I first briefly discuss the literature on identity politics and then examine the Kemalist feminist, religious and Kurdish women's movements separately, since issues related to these three movements create the biggest tensions with other groups and these issues demonstrate the negative effects of identity politics on the women's movement in Turkey.

### **Theoretical Discussions on the Politics of Difference: Problematic Sides of Identity Politics despite its Advantages**

According to Stuart Hall, identity construction is based on 'a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation' (Hall, 1996: 2). Identities, therefore, are not only personal but also 'collective identity narratives provide a collective sense of order and meaning' (Yuval-Davis, 2010: 267). Although there is no consensual definition of collective identity within the literature, it is very often understood as in Snow's definition:

... discussions of the concept invariably suggest that its essence resides in a shared sense of 'oneness' or 'we-ness' anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity and in relation or contrast to one more actual or imagined sets of others. Embedded within the shared sense of we is a corresponding sense of collective agency... Thus, it can be argued that collective identity is constituted by a shared and interactive sense of 'we-ness' and collective agency. (Quoted in Fominaya, 2010: 394)

Meanwhile, della Porta and Diani's definition of collective identity is also based on shared sets of orientations, values, attitudes, worldviews, and lifestyles, as well as on shared experiences of action. They argue that, although identities may sometimes be exclusive, most of the time they are inclusive and multiple (della Porta & Diani, 2006: 92). Alberto Melucci, who brought the concept of 'collective identity' to the literature on contemporary new social movements, rejects the idea of collective

identity as a given but rather defines it as a network of active relationships which is not necessarily based on unified and coherent attributes. In other words, activists do not need to fully agree on ideologies, beliefs, interests or goals to come together, but their emotional involvement is important. He argues that, rather than shared interests, conflict strengthens group identity and solidarity (Melucci in Fominaya, 2010: 394–395). Nevertheless, Fominaya argues that collective identity can stem from many different sources, but warns that it should not be limited to them:

... although collective identities can be understood as (potentially) encompassing shared interests, ideologies, subcultures, goals, rituals, practices, values, worldview, commitment, solidarity, tactics, strategies, definitions of the ‘enemy’ or the opposition and framing of issues, it is not synonymous with and cannot be reduced to any of these things. (Fominaya, 2010: 398)

She argues that collective identity is constructed through the interaction between more latent daily activities, such as preparing protests, fundraising, decision-making processes, and visible mobilisations, such as actual protests, in which activists develop solidarity and commitment and clarify their identity by understanding their own standpoint and the opposition’s (Fominaya, 2010: 398). Collective identity is important for activists to feel a sense of belonging and to foster their productivity. It may, however, lead to disregarding [intra]group differences, since women have a collective identity by sharing the same gender but differ through their beliefs, ethnicities and ideologies, as in the Turkish case. Moreover, it may also exacerbate activists’ tendency to stay in their small groups. On the other hand, while keeping its problematic sides in mind, sharing a collective identity, such as being a woman, and having similar aims might create an important realm for activists to work together, as most of my participants emphasised during the interviews.

Susan Hekman argues that identity politics can claim some positive achievements in terms of citizenship, despite its problems. Firstly, it discloses the hypocrisy of the idea of universal citizenship by revealing the resistance to ‘others’ in the political realm. Secondly, identity politics has generated a new subject, a ‘relational subject constituted by the social/cultural influences of his/her particular situation’ as opposed to the ‘modernist/liberal subject: the rational, autonomous disembodied

subject of the Enlightenment tradition’ (Hekman, 2010: 302–303). Nevertheless, she argues that identity politics creates more problems than it solves:

Ironically, then, the practice of identity politics has revealed why identity politics is not the solution to the problems it has revealed. Finding that, for liberalism, identity is indeed central to politics, and that conforming to a particular identity is a requirement for political participation, identity politics attempted to alter this requirement by radically redefining the citizen. Identity politics defined an array of identities that political participants could assume. The error of this strategy is that it conforms to the liberal/modernist tradition that makes a particular identity a necessary requirement of political participation. It thus perpetuates rather than transcends that politics. (Hekman, 2010: 303)

Benhabib also warns of the problem related to the ‘mindless empiricist celebration of all pluralities’ and criticises this notion of identity politics and irreconcilable identities, which she calls the ‘fungibility of identities’:

The clash of multiple identities as well as of the allegiances which surround them have come out into the public; the continuous and inevitable fragmentation of identities has made it almost impossible to develop a common vision of radical transformation. (Benhabib, 1995: 24)

What Hekman offers as a solution to the problems related to identity politics is to move beyond identity, since she argues that identity politics has too much identity in it. She argues that political actors should identify with specific political goals and mobilise around those (Hekman, 2010: 302–304). A differentiation between identity and identity politics is very much needed here. Yuval-Davis argues that the former refers to an analytical dimension where belonging needs to be comprehended, whereas the latter is a distinguishing sort of a project of the politics of belonging. Identities are, according to her, the narratives and stories that ‘people tell themselves and others about who they are, and who they are not, as well as who and how they would like to/should be’ (Yuval-Davis, 2010: 266). In other words, they are ‘verbal and non-verbal narratives of self’ (Yuval-Davis, 2010: 267). Therefore, both individual and collective identities ‘are specific forms of cultural narratives which constitute commonalities and differences between self and others, interpreting their social positioning in more or less stable ways. These often relate to myths (which

may or may not be historically valid) of common origin, and to myths of common destiny' (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 43). She argues that belonging becomes politicised only when there is a threat against it. Another difference related to identity politics is its difference from other components of belonging, such as social locations and normative values:

Social locations relate to the positioning of people, in particular times and in particular spaces, along intersecting (or, rather, mutually constitutive) grids of social power. Normative values relate to the ways specific belonging/s are evaluated and judged. These three analytical dimensions relate to each other but cannot be reduced to each other. This is important in order to be able to counter some of the analytical problems that tend to emerge when dealing with identity issues. (Yuval-Davis, 2010: 267–268)

The politics of belonging/identity politics, on the other hand, includes definitive political projects to establish and develop groupings' belonging in a specific way; for instance, by reproducing the boundaries of belonging while emphasising the importance of particular categories of belonging. She argues that this also includes an approval of a specific leadership as the authoritative representative and interpreter of the identity category to show the 'real' version of that identity (Yuval-Davis, 2010: 266). Therefore, what I am critical of in this research is not solely identities or other components of belonging but rather the exclusive and fixed structure of identity politics, and seeing these identities as unalterable and not transitional, which deepens the fragmentation even more within the women's movement in Turkey and stigmatises women in different groups. Thus, emphasising one's ethnic or religious identity should not necessarily be an indication of an essentialist view of these identities. As Arendt argues, one can confirm that one is a 'Jew' but this does not necessitate an emphasis on some fixed essence of Jewishness that every Jew shares (Allen, 1999: 109).

Young argues that there is also a need to differentiate between two versions of the politics of difference: a politics of positional difference and a politics of cultural difference, and emphasises that the latter has gained more attention in public discourse and from political theorists. She argues that, even though these two versions share the same approach to difference-blind policies, they differ in terms of

how they perceive justice and equality (Young, 2007: 60). The politics of positional difference deals with structural inequalities when groups' social positionings limit their circumstances in terms of factors favourable to their well-being. Young refers to the 1980s and gives feminist, anti-racist, and gay liberation activists' struggles with structural inequalities of gender, race and sexuality as examples of the politics of positional difference. She argues that achieving justice and equality based on a politics of positional difference requires applying the same principles to all people regardless of their particular social positioning. Therefore, to eliminate unjust inequality, group differences should clearly be acknowledged and disadvantages should be compensated for by taking special steps. However, this approach has been subjected to criticism because of its ignorance of social positioning differences among and within groups and its reductive interpretation of identifying equality only with equal treatment. In the 1990s, however, a second version of the politics of difference, a politics of cultural difference, emerged, which focused on differences of nationality, ethnicity, and religion. Young argues that most modern societies include multiple cultural groups, some of whom unfairly control the state and its institutions, overshadowing minority cultures and preventing them from living fully according to their cultural values, sometimes to the extent that their survival as a culture might be in danger. When they try to survive, they are likely to face serious economic and political costs. Therefore, this version of the politics of difference highlights the importance of cultural distinctness to individuals, and members of these cultural groups demand special rights and protections for their culture to prosper (Young, 2007: 60–65, 76). As a result, Young argues that both approaches should be affirmed, while being clear on both their conceptual and practical differences:

While they are logically distinct, each approach is important. The politics of cultural difference is important because it offers vision and principle to respond to dominative nationalist or other forms of absolutist impulses. We can live together in common political institutions and still maintain institutions by which we distinguish ourselves as peoples of cultures with distinct practices and traditions. Acting on such a vision can and should reduce ethnic, nationalist, and religious violence. The politics of positional difference is important because it highlights the depth and systematic basis of inequality, and shows that inequality before the law is not sufficient to remedy this inequality. It calls attention to relations and processes of exploitation,

marginalization, and normalization that keep many people in subordinate positions. (Young, 2007: 78–79)

Both approaches, especially the politics of cultural difference, represent debates based on different identities and social positionings in Turkey. However, I argue that the politics of difference produces a misrecognition of differences. Even though the politics of difference/identity politics purports to support diversity, it actually tends to incarcerate groups within simplified categories and reified identities, while assuming an illusionary homogeneity within groups. Therefore, both approaches to the politics of difference have the tendency to ignore intra-group differences and contribute to the perpetuation of existing stereotypes related to the groups, which minimise the potential for interaction among those with different identities.

The debates around the politics of difference have affected women's movements around the world. Yuval-Davis argues that identity politics replaced earlier feminist constructions of womanhood (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 119). Therefore, 'woman' is no longer a unitary category and thus many different agendas have arisen. Susan Hekman discusses the relation between identity politics and feminism. In first-wave feminism, women wanted to be equal citizens with men by gaining the same rights. Therefore, Hekman argues, women wanted to fit into the universal category of *citizen*. Second-wave feminism, on the other hand, emphasised the differences between men and women, hence the universal category of *woman*. Both arguments, however, had their flaws and this created a perfect platform for identity politics to arise. It offers an abundance of identities from which women can pick the one(s) they think represent them the best, instead of holding onto the limited category of *woman*. Therefore 'identity politics has overcome the homogenizing tendencies of second-wave feminism by acknowledging the differences among women and, most significantly, attacking the hierarchy concealed in the concept of "woman"' (Hekman, 2010: 290). However, as Yuval-Davis argues, the replacement of that unitary category of womanhood with differences has sparked off the essentialist notion of difference, such as 'between black and white women, middle class and working class women or northern or southern women' and she offers this critique:

Within each of these idealized groups, the assumptions about 'discovered' homogenous reality usually continue to operate. 'Identity

politics' tend not only to homogenize and naturalize social categories and groupings, but also to deny shifting boundaries of identities and internal power differences and conflicts of interest. (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 119)

Young also discusses the exclusive structure of identity politics. She argues that, when it first appeared in the 1970s, each movement – feminist, African-American, or Hispanic and so on – wanted to construct a core set of experiences, values, and forms of community that defined themselves. However, she critiques identity politics as being unstable from the very beginning and argues that it has been toppled by the movements themselves. Activists within those movements realised its essentialist and exclusionary structure themselves:

Working-class women challenged the class bias in feminist definitions of women's experience; African-American gay men challenged the black movement's definition of manhood, and so on. The result has been an irresolvable tension between the recognition of the generalities of social position and the affirmation of the multiple positionings of each particular person. (Young, 2006: 13)

However, Young argues that the narrow understanding of political identity and group-based political tendencies are not as rigid as they were 20 or 30 years ago and that a wider range of internal differences are now more frequently recognised. Therefore, she calls today's politics of identity a 'misnomer' (Young, 2006: 13). Nevertheless, the essentialist notion of identity politics still strongly exists in Turkey, which frequently leads to ignorance of intra-group differences and creates a false sense of homogeneity within groups.

### **The Tensions among Different Women's Groups in Turkey: Different Ideologies and Identities**

The number of women's organisations in Turkey, which was 569 in 2009 (Uçan Süpürge – Flying Broom, 2009), says a lot about the Turkish women's movement: There are so many different aspects of subordination that women activists need to work on, but more importantly the movement itself is very fragmented, mostly based on the politics and ideological differences among women, which is also connected to the Turkish political atmosphere. Before starting on my fieldwork, I was thinking in terms of women's movements in Turkey, in the plural, since

women's groups have different perspectives on many issues. However, I realised in the field that even though activists emphasised the diversity among them, they were also speaking of the women's movement in Turkey as a whole, with the fragmentations contained within it, but not movements, except for the Kurdish activists. Yet, the problem for Kurdish activists is not calling it a movement in the singular but a movement in 'Turkey'. Therefore, whenever I mentioned the women's movement in Turkey during the interviews with the Kurdish activists, they replied to the questions without including themselves because they call their region Kurdistan, even though their aim of having an independent state has changed. Through my observations in the field and the literature, I decided to use the phrase 'women's movement in Turkey', while using 'Turkey' as a reference for the whole region, the country in which they all live and from which they make demands.

In a very broad sense, and acknowledging the differences within these groups and their intersections with each other, there are four main groups in the women's movement in Turkey: feminists, Kemalist feminists, religious women and Kurdish women. When I asked about this fragmented picture during the interviews, almost all of my participants mentioned the differences among themselves, and some came up with this classification before I mentioned it.

Emine [religious activist]: Definitely fragmented... Well there isn't a monolithic women's movement. It can't be anyway... I don't know how it is in other countries but at least in Turkey there are so many dissociative things: There's ethnicity, there's religion, there are different approaches within religion, there's the state and there's a state feminism, for instance. How could you disengage yourself from it? (İstanbul, *Muslim Initiative against Violence against Women*)

Nazan [Kemalist feminist]: Non-governmental organisations also differ now. Kurdish women are different, we know that the *Capital City Women's Platform* is veiled women... or the *Association of Turkish Women University Graduates* are Kemalist nationalists, who are loyal to Atatürk's principles and reforms... Therefore, of course, it [difference] exists. (Ankara, *Association of Turkish Women University Graduates*)

Almost all of my participants, whether they are religious, feminist, Kemalist feminist or Kurdish, mentioned that the women's movement in Turkey is fragmented and that it has never been united. Whenever I referenced the differences,



the main understanding of the concept was similarly either ideological or identity based:

Berrin Sönmez [religious feminist]: What I mean by difference is ideological, political differences and/or affiliations with certain political parties. (Ankara, *Capital City Women's Platform*)

Emine [religious activist]: What have I been saying here for two hours? I have said feminists, feminists. I will self-criticise. I have said religious community, Islamic community... We have [internalised] these in our everyday language, so that we continue to use them ourselves. Still, when one says differences and what different groups are there in Turkey, we all say similar things. Because they [differences] are all formed in our minds. (İstanbul, *Muslim Initiative against Violence against Women*)

Until the 1990s, differences were mostly related to people's ideologies, participation in different political sides, urban or rural identity, and educational and professional background in Turkey. However, with the rise of demands from Islamist and Kurdish groups, this has changed. Şükran, a Kemalist feminist activist, argues that the reason behind these demands is the participation of women who give priority to their political party's thoughts and guidance, rather than women's problems. She says that the fragmentation is based on ethnic and religious identity, which is taught by men. Therefore, she is, firstly, denying these women's independent agency. Secondly, her argument represents the Kemalist ideology's standardisation – ignoring any differences among women. She does not acknowledge that the ethnic and religious problems that women face are interrelated and intersectional with gender issues, but rather considers them to be part of a political strategy to divide the country.

Aksu Bora, a well-known feminist activist and scholar, defined contemporary differences through identity and movement differences, because of the rise of the headscarf issue and the Kurdish question, whereas for her the differences in the 1990s were mostly ideological. When I asked her to define the *different one* in those groups, she self-criticised as a feminist: '[sarcastically] For example, we are not different. We are the main one as we are middle class, white and Turkish! The different ones are the Kurds and veiled women.' As Benhabib argues, both personal and collective identities are social constructions, rather than naturally given. These

social constructions are comprehended as a process of social, cultural and political struggles to gain hegemony and dominance over other identity categories.

Therefore, she emphasises that ‘the identity of every “we” depends on a power structure; collectivities constitute themselves not only by excluding, but also by oppressing others, over and against whom they define themselves’ (Benhabib, 1995: 27). From this perspective, Aksu Bora’s sarcastic answer accurately represents what is seen as different in the Turkish context and why a politics of difference emerged as a reaction to this monolithic approach, which otherises and excludes anyone not secular, modern and educated. She also emphasises that there is no such difference with working-class women, and that they have never been addressed as different within the women’s movement in Turkey<sup>42</sup>.

The contemporary political atmosphere in Turkey intensifies differences among groups. Since 2002, when the AKP came into power<sup>43</sup>, conservatism and neo-conservatism have expanded and the polarisation among groups has increased, especially due to ethnic and religious differences. Altınok makes a distinction between conservatism and neo-conservatism, whereas the former focuses on maintaining cultural values and institutions, the latter is more about reinventing and re-engineering the social-cultural structure (Altınok, 2016: 137). She argues, therefore, that the AKP government has strong neo-conservative policies, which limit and condemn different lifestyles. In this neo-conservative structure;

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<sup>42</sup> However, class differences among women were mentioned by some of my participants while discussing the obstacles to solidarity, which I will discuss in detail in the next chapter.

<sup>43</sup> The AKP rule can be divided into three periods: The first period, extending from 2002 to 2007, was party’s ‘golden age’ with high and inclusive economic growth, improvement on democratisation by the recognition of minority rights, such as granting language and cultural rights to Kurdish citizens, and achievements in the foreign policy by implementing ‘zero problems with neighbours’ formula. All of these were strongly influenced by the formal EU membership process. The second period, between 2007-2011, was a phase of relative stagnation in those three areas. The AKP’s economic performance was not as notable as the previous period, there was a decline in Turkey’s prospect for the full EU membership, which created a loss of momentum in the reform process, and the foreign policy became more aggressive, with an intense focus on the Middle East. In the third period, from 2011 to the present, there has been a clear reversal in all three respects: Fragile economic growth, rising authoritarianism and decrease in democratisation, and isolation and serious security risks in foreign policy because of the greatly unstable regional environment. However, in spite of these problems, both the AKP and Erdoğan managed to continue their popularity. One of the explanations of this continuing popularity is that the AKP used the benefits of the economic expansion and growth in its first period. By enabling developments in health, education, transport and communications and the improvements in public services, especially at the local level, it guaranteed support from large segments of the population. Moreover, the AKP also effectively used the religion card and articulated popular conservative sentiments (Öniş, 2015).

Security, hierarchy and obedience become important aspects of politics and come to dominate the political discourse; traditional relations, communities and hierarchical structures and forms of relations albeit in modernized forms are promoted; an increasing emphasis on external and internal enemies is visible in the political discourse, demands for equality, freedom or individual or collective rights or for alternative lifestyles are marginalized, delegitimized and excluded. Such developments lead to significant transformations in social, cultural and political domains including the formation of subjects as moral agents monitoring themselves and their fellow citizens for their compliance with the (moralized) norms set by different political/moral agents and taking initiative for the conduct of the sovereign form of power (Altunok, 2016: 137).

The emphasis on morality is one of the most important aspects of neo-conservative politics, which uses ‘moral considerations that are defined prior to politics’, such as acknowledging ‘a certain interpretation of religion as the sole source of morality and promoting a specific worldview as the basis of public ethics or individual conduct’ (Altunok, 2016: 137). Whilst the AKP has employed ‘victimhood’ strategy, the discourse of being victimised under the Kemalist regime, shared by pious Sunni Muslims, to gain their loyalty since it came to power, its use of sectarian and divisive discourse has increased especially after 2008, when the EU membership lost its relevance for Turkish politics, which used to constrain authoritarian tendencies of the AKP. Erdoğan, for instance, deliberately emphasised Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu’s, the CHP leader, Alevi identity<sup>44</sup> during the electoral campaign in 2011 in order to vilify him in the face of devout Sunni voters. During those years it also attracted Kurdish voters by highlighting the ‘common Muslim identity’ that transcends linguistic differences (Tezcür, 2016: 10). More recently, however, AKP’s long-term use of ‘secular/religious dichotomy’ to polarise the country on metropolitan, secular middle-classes, such as ‘Alevi, labour activists, environmentalists, socialists and liberals’ now expanded to ‘the Gülen Community, an erstwhile ally now dubbed as a terrorist organization (FETÖ), and finally to Kurds who, once the targets of a so-called ‘opening process’ in search of peace, are now exposed to the ravages of counter-insurgency operations in the southeastern provinces’ (Kandiyoti, 2016: 105). Thus, the AKP portrays any opposition to its

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<sup>44</sup> Alevism is one of the sects under Islam and Alevi constitute the second largest religious community in Turkey after Sunni Muslims. They reject the equation of Turkish identity with Sunni Islam and claim for their rights to be recognised as a distinct religious group.

authoritarian rule as simply an attack on pious Muslim identity, as well as labelling these groups as populist and apolitical or Eurocentric and Islamophobic. By using ‘serving the nation’ rhetoric, it tries to obscure its democratic failures – such as ‘restricting freedoms of expression by enforcing media blackouts, channelling state funds to loyalist media outlets/businesses, and by subjecting non-loyalist media outlets and businesses to fiscal investigations’ – and classified opponents’ purpose simply with damaging AKP’s power (Çınar, 2016: 15). Understanding democracy as ‘extreme majoritarianism’, the AKP has managed to govern without any system of checks and balances, which exacerbates polarisation and mistrust (Öniş, 2015: 27). As Kandiyoti argues, using a ‘victimhood’ discourse as a ‘prerequisite for rights bearing’ and excluding groups that do not fit into their category of ‘helpless victim’ can also be comprehended as ‘symbolic expulsion from citizenship’ (Kandiyoti, 2016: 108).

The AKP’s divisive discourse to strengthen its position has also affected the women’s movement and created more tension than before. The AKP and Erdoğan have started to use divisive discourse and policy in the realms of gender, sexuality and the family. Kandiyoti argues that the AKP enforces conservative values in three main areas:

first, in shoring up a populism that privileges gender as a marker of difference, pitting an authentically national ‘us’ against an ‘anti-national’ (gayri -milli) ‘them’; second, in the marriage of convenience between neo-liberal welfare and employment policies and (neo)-conservative familism; and finally, in the ‘normalization’ of violence in everyday political discourse and practice (Kandiyoti, 2016: 105).

One of the early signs of AKP’s divisive conservative policies on gender was in July 2010, when at the time Prime Minister Erdoğan stated that he did not believe in the equality of men and women. He claimed that because of women’s ‘biological and divinely ordained nature’ their principal vocation was ‘home’ (Kandiyoti, 2016:104). This was followed by the ‘Uludere incident’ in December 2011: the Turkish military accidentally killed 34 Kurdish smugglers near the Iraqi border

assuming that they were PKK militants<sup>45</sup>, which unexpectedly turned into a discussion on abortion<sup>46</sup>. Erdoğan used the ‘Uludere incident’ to equate abortion with the massacre and described it as a murder. He also suggested that both abortion and caesarean section births were ‘hidden’ plots to reduce Turkish population (Kandiyoti, 2016: 104). The ex-Health Minister Recep Akdağ even stated that ‘abortion should not be an option even for women who were victims of an unfortunate incidence (implying rape)’ and the state would take care of those babies if the mother did not want to (Altunok, 2016: 139). Even though these speeches were read by some as ‘agenda changing tactical moves’, the ‘politics of gender in Turkey is intrinsic rather than incidental to a characterization of its ruling ideology’ (Kandiyoti, 2016: 105). Erdoğan’s anti-abortion statement received response from women’s activists, especially feminists<sup>47</sup>, with protests and slogans, such as ‘My body, my decision’ and ‘Do not touch my body!’. Activists saw this statement as an interference in the private sphere and as neglecting women’s agency in their freedom of choice (Altunok, 2016: 133). The government, eventually, abandoned the bill to limit abortion rights but women’s organisations highlight the fact that it is almost impossible for women to obtain an abortion in state hospitals (Altunok, 2016: 139). As Altunok rightly argues, Erdoğan’s equation of abortion with Uludere is an explicit indication of a neo-conservative political mindset that administers female subjectivity inside the framework of a moralised bio-power and sovereign power, which ends up with the moralisation of politics in general (Altunok, 2016: 133).

AKP’s neo-conservative policies on gender and the emphasis on the ‘family’ was followed by comprehensive institutional changes. The General Directorate of Women’s Status and Problems, which used to watch gender equality in Turkey carefully, as a prerequisite of the CEDAW<sup>48</sup> process, was abrogated in 2011 and replaced by the Ministry of the Family and Social Policies, where the emphasis on discrimination against women shifted towards ‘protection’ of women, as well as the

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<sup>45</sup> The government later stated that the incident was a ‘tragic accident’ and occurred due to miscommunication between civilian and military authorities (Altunok, 2016: 133).

<sup>46</sup> Abortion has been lawful in Turkey since 1983, permitting women to end their pregnancy in the first 10 weeks.

<sup>47</sup> They initiated a website, ‘Say No to Abortion Ban’ both in Turkish and English, which was signed by 55,000 people and 900 organisations globally (Negrón-Gonzales, 2016: 205).

<sup>48</sup> The international treaty The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women is signed by Turkey in 1985.

children, the disabled and the elderly. Therefore, rather than seeing women as full-edged civic subjects, they are now portrayed as objects of protection (Kandiyoti, 2016: 107). The emphasis on the family also reflects the AKP's solution to the problem of social care. By criticising the secular groups in the country, who represent the modern nuclear families, and highlighting the importance of three-generational families, the AKP leadership sees the family as the instrument to meet the needs of the elderly, the disabled, and children (Kaya, 2015: 60-61). As a result, 'traditional gender roles are affirmed and any challenge to such roles or to the structure of heterosexual traditional family such as single parenthood, gay rights, abortion or demands for public care services are seen as threats to the moral structure of society' (Altunok, 2016: 139). Therefore, female subjectivity is confined within the family structure and their primary role is to give birth to at least three children, as Erdoğan explicitly declares (Altunok, 2016: 139).

AKP's use of the discourse of 'violence', sacrificing one's life for their country and leader, has increased as well. In many of the public speeches Erdoğan has declared that 'he has set out on his path "wearing a shroud"', with the mission of establishing a "New Turkey": 're-establishing the Turks as the leaders and redeemers of the Islamic ummah', as opposed to the 'misguided Republican project' (Kandiyoti, 2016: 111). This language, unsurprisingly, targets those citizens, classified as 'traitors' or 'terrorist' by the government on daily basis. In order to consolidate its political order, the government mobilises its citizens 'through fear and loathing of internal and external enemies' (Kandiyoti, 2016: 111). The feminist movement has been in the target of the this neo-conservative AKP discourse of "'enemies', "they (against us or our culture, order or religion)", "terrorists", "lobbies" or "secret operations"'. Opposing discrimination, unequal treatment, confining women within the territories of familial sphere with the reproduction responsibilities, as well as defending women's rights has been considered as 'an assault on the unity of the nation and "moral" values': 'In 2008, the Directorate of Religious Affairs announced, "feminism as an immoral" position' (Altunok, 2016: 142). Both Erdoğan and the AKP representatives have asserted that the feminist movement only represents the views of elite and Western women, rather than the spirit of the authentic Turkish women who constitute the majority (Negrón-Gonzales, 2016: 209). Therefore, the women's movement in Turkey, and particularly feminists, have

been limited in their political capacity as a result of this increased control and attack on female subjectivity (Altunok, 2016: 143).

In consolidating its power, the ‘AKP developed a polarisation-based identity and a combative style, which instrumentalised Islam. Consequently, pro-Western secular sectors of society were vilified and downgraded with an aggressively moralistic and populist language that rejected representative politics and its civility’ (Çınar, 2016: 14). A reflection of this political context was also apparent in my fieldwork. I realised that the main problem with identity categories, apart from their fixed and exclusive structure, is how stereotypes can easily be generated from these categories and how they can be seen and believed as truths. A they/we binary was so noticeable in the interviews and in many of the topics we discussed, and women tended to follow the stereotypes about each other rather than really knowing other groups’ stances. This is a very important problem with identity politics in Turkey, which dissolves individuals’ unique identities into the group identity. An additional, related and central problem is the universalist and exclusive Kemalist ideology. Kemalist state ideology dominated Turkish politics for a long time. Even though it has lost its long-standing power within Turkish politics<sup>49</sup> and the AKP dominates presence, Kemalists still remain one of the most significant groups, particularly for the women’s movement in Turkey. Kemalist women’s reluctance to embrace differences among women put extra barrier to achieve any cooperation among different women’s groups in Turkey.

### **Kemalism: Strictly Secularist and Nationalist Rules**

The new-born Turkish state had two interrelated goals: Modernisation and westernisation. As a modernisation project, Kemalism operated as a social engineering project: Shaping and reshaping the nation to reach the level of contemporary western civilisation and create a unity between the Turkish state and the nation. Through the reforms and this understanding of unity, a secular and

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<sup>49</sup> Kemalists tried to rule the country with a strong emphasis on the central government and its control over the military. However, two significant judicial cases, *Ergenekon* and *Balyoz*, against military officials, including highest-ranking generals, and other secularists such as journalists, TV station owners, business people, writers, academicians, and civil society representatives, who were accused of plotting against the AKP government, led a decline in the military’s power, which strongly supported secularism in Turkey, after 2010 (Müftüler-Baç, 2016: 70–72).

national identity was created (Keyman, 2012: 470). Moreover, women became the main bearers of the Kemalist modernisation project. The ideal Republican woman was urban, educated, enlightened and secular, which by definition otherised women who were living in villages and towns and continuing the old traditional customs. Therefore, this modernisation perception created dilemmas and dichotomies, such as: modern-traditional, Western-Eastern, secular-religious, and has excluded veiled women, as well as Kurdish affiliation, from both the Republic's ideal and the women's movement, as it was a part of the state ideology. In a similar manner, religious feminist Berrin Sönmez commented:

The women's movement from the early years of the Republic was shaped by the state ideology. So, the state has provided some liberties. When freedom was allowed to some particular women, women had to take a part in this particularity... They interiorised those rights and the state ideology and ignored other women's needs. The women's movement in Turkey... has been perceived as working for the benefit of a certain group of women who have a certain ideology and perspective. (Ankara, *Capital City Women's Platform*)

The Kemalist perception of modern womanhood is still pervasive among Kemalists in contemporary Turkey, which creates tensions based on secularism and the idea of a united nation within the women's movement. Having a vision which is heavily oriented towards the West, Kemalists are likely to demonstrate scepticism towards conservative-religious groups in the society, their lifestyles, political aims and orientations (Öniş, 2015: 37), as well as Kurds who are stigmatised as a threat to the country's secular unity. Therefore, within the women's movement in Turkey, Kemalist women have two main disputes with the religious women and the Kurdish women, because Kemalists consider the headscarf issue as reactionary and the Kurdish issue as separatist. When I wanted to talk about the political differences within the women's movement, one of my Kemalist feminist participants, who is a member of the *Association of Republican Women*, a well-known strictly secularist Kemalist women's organisation based in Ankara, completely denied even the existence of differences among women and told me that they were just invented by the AKP and international powers, and she made the most exclusive and marginalising statement I heard during my fieldwork:



Halide: We don't discuss the differences within the women's movement, Tayyip [Erdoğan] does. We don't... Kurds or not Kurds. I don't care... There are smart women and stupid women, this is the difference... When animals evolve, all the species evolve... However, humans' evolution is not for everyone. A part of it develops but the other is still talking with images. This is the difference. (Ankara, *Association of Republican Women*)

According to her and many other Kemalist women, the headscarf issue – this is what she meant by the word 'images' – and the Kurdish question have both been artificially created and, unfortunately, her narrative frankly represents Kemalist women's perspective. Yet it still shocked me and I realised how otherisation by Kemalists persists. Their criticism of the Kurdish issue and the headscarf issue has been severe and, on some occasions, it ended in fights:

Gülşen [feminist]: Once... *Filmmor*<sup>50</sup> came here. It was a weekly thing. Meanwhile, we have a friend in the organisation and she wanted to introduce the association and make a speech about women. She said, 'Kurdish women have done so much for the women's movement'. When she said that half of the room left and [the other half] walked all over her and they were mostly Kemalist, nationalist women from the CHP. (İzmir, *İzmir Women's Solidarity Association*)

Moreover, young religious activist and an active member of the *Muslim Initiative Against Violence Against Women*, Emine's narrative about her roommate's perception of the headscarf issue shows that the modern-ignorant dichotomy still continues in the younger generations. Although the antonym for modern used in the literature is 'traditional', Emine emphasised the word 'ignorant' used by Kemalists, who prefer to use this term because it is a pejorative one:

Emine: While I was living in a dorm, my roommate was a Kemalist-nationalist (laughs)... Once she said, 'you're very enlightened.' I was very surprised; in fact, I was a little annoyed. What does that enlightened woman mean? But that's in her head, you know? She draws a veiled woman prototype and how bad that prototype is actually. She sees us as ignorant although we are at the same university and living in the same dorm. Since she has never seen it [the headscarf], this [saying 'enlightened'] is her way of showing her love. (İstanbul, *Muslim Initiative against Violence against Women*)

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<sup>50</sup> *Filmmor Women's Cooperative* was established in 2001 by women and for women to get involved in cinema, while aiming to increase women's involvement in cinema and the media (Filmmor, n.d.).

Since the modernisation and westernisation process of the Republic excluded veiled women from its category of the ideal woman, Emine's friend's emphasis on how enlightened Emine was is a way saying, 'you're one of us', since Emine is a smart and well-educated woman as well. Yet, the statement shows a lack of awareness of her own Kemalist stereotypical prejudices, and could be read as 'you're different from other veiled women.' Therefore, it reproduces the Kemalist elitist perception of womanhood – judging the headscarf as a sign of underdevelopment and lack of education – and the modern-traditional binary, which poses a significant obstacle to any cooperation between religious and Kemalist women. While discussing my participants' approaches to the headscarf ban, (see below), Kemalist feminist activist Şükran, who lives in one of the most secular and Kemalist cities in Turkey, İzmir, argued for the necessity of the ban by equating unveiling with modernity, which was indicative of the extant Kemalist views:

Şükran: I say you can dress however you want in your private life. However, we say national education, we say government offices. Our state, our constitution is a secular and a democratic republic... In their private life, everyone can do whatever she wants but in a government office we, my association and I, think she should represent a modern woman. (İzmir, *Association to Protect Women's Rights*)

It is not only religious and Kurdish women who have problems with Kemalists, but feminists also identified Kemalist women as the main group with whom they would never want to work. They argued that Kemalist women's perspective is very nationalistic and they endorse the status quo, which results in different approaches from feminists. Gülşen offered this critique: 'For me, their mentality and the mentality of men are the same, there is no difference... Either a man stands in front of me or a woman... Your sex, being a female, is not important. Your mentality should be female but unfortunately theirs is not.' Consequently, Kemalists still pursue a Republican ideal of womanhood, while otherising others, and are very reluctant to embrace the differences among women, which poses an obstacle to collaboration between different groups of women in Turkey. Therefore, it was very clear during the fieldwork that the Kemalist ideology is one of the main breaking points for many women, and their ignorance of differences among women is one of the reasons behind the rise of the politics of difference in the women's movement in Turkey.

## **Religion: The Headscarf Issue**

As Tanabe and Tokita-Tanabe emphasise, modernity itself incorporates dichotomies and requires them for its constitution and establishment. In other words, modernity can only be established by implicating others and consolidating differences (Tanabe & Tokita-Tanabe, 2003: 1, 4). In the Turkish Republic's modernity project, Islam and the headscarf were seen as 'other' and the dichotomies were constituted based on the differences between the modern – the Republican ideology – and the traditional – religion. Headscarf has been very much bound up with the modernity project and over the time I was conducting the interviews, it was still seen a key issue among women's activists in Turkey. A very well-known religious feminist scholar and one of my participants, Hidayet Tuksal, also discusses the difference between veiled and unveiled women through the image of Turkish modernisation's ideal woman, and adds that unveiling was only the first step towards modernity. After that, further levels of uncovering, such as wearing shorts while playing sport and low-necked and sleeveless dresses at social parties, were necessitated and seen as the 'taboos of contemporary life'. She argues that, since 'educating' others was the primary task given to those elitist modernists, they have become the most fervent supporters of the headscarf ban. Moreover, Kemalists wrongly claim that veiled women have increased in number recently, although they were always present, but shut away in their houses (Tuksal, 2013). As Hall emphasises, identity construction is always 'in process', and is never completed. Identification is a process of articulation, which serves across difference and produces symbolic boundaries, since it requires leaving things outside, the 'constitutive outside', to reinforce the process (Hall, 1996: 2–3). In the Turkish context, Kemalism's modern women's identity excluded religious women's Islamic identity, and the headscarf has been the most prominent signifier of this.

For the editors of *Amargi*, the headscarf problem in Turkey also needed to be discussed by feminists. Therefore, they focused on this topic in their very first issue and argued that feminists should take a side in this debate: 'The headscarf is the place where body politics are carried out through chastity codes that become most visible and politicised. This is where feminists should take a stand, by not simply being for or against the headscarf ban, but by discussing the headscarf debates

through feminist analysis' (Amargi'den, 2006: 3, my translation). Aksu Bora, for instance, emphasises the economic class issue within the headscarf debate and argues that covering has been perceived as a marker of lower-class women, who have been seen as 'traditional' by modernists and elitists. However, the problem occurred, according to her, when these 'traditional' women unexpectedly demanded education, which was interpreted as a transgression of boundaries (Bora, 2006: 22–23). The main debate around the headscarf ban in Turkey came down to either supporting or opposing it. In her interview in *Amargi*, Yıldız Ramazanoğlu complains about feminists' attitude during the headscarf ban by arguing that, except the very few feminists' willingness to listen and understand Islamist women's experiences, there was no support at all (Ramazanoğlu, 2006: 33). During my fieldwork, religious women complained that they had not been supported collectively or clearly by any groups of women, except for some individual support, which was very limited. In respect to this, religious feminist Hidayet Tuksal said that there were some feminist activists and scholars who supported them by signing their petitions, supporting veiled students in the universities, being interviewed by newspapers and explicitly saying that they were against the ban. However, she adds that this was only equivalent to 10% of feminists and thus it was not strong enough to change the ban, even though she still considers what they did to have been hard. It was very clear that religious feminists were disappointed, even heartbroken, because of the lack of support, and Tuksal explains the reasons behind it by offering this very strong critique:

Hidayet Tuksal: ... first of all feminists did not want to understand what the headscarf ban cost women... In Turkey, if you were black you could not change your skin colour but you could divest yourself of the headscarf, so you are the solution. Not to change the system, you will change yourself and the problem will be solved. (Ankara, *Capital City Women's Platform*)

Even two of my feminist participants mentioned that the headscarf issue was not essentially on their feminist activists' agenda. Simten Coşar illustrated these views by saying:

The headscarf issue is the central agenda for *BKP [Capital City Women's Platform]*. Not for me. When you even look from a feminist

perspective, it is one of the women's rights violations but not the one at the centre... However, it is a rights violation indeed and merely because of being a woman... No, there was no support from the feminist movement. I mean, at least a visible and inclusive one with all the feminists. (Ankara, Academic)

A possible reason for this is that the headscarf has never been part of feminists' identity. It is rather equated with the Islamist/Islamic identity and the problems related to it have been ignored or have never been problematised until religious women started to protest the headscarf ban. Nevertheless, most of my feminist participants said that they were against the ban in the universities and many of them said that they had supported religious women:

Gülşen: During the headscarf ban in the universities, I was seeing it as a woman. I was saying... they should have gone open or veiled... I mean if I want to veil, I should. So I am not against the headscarf but of course there is a lot to think about when there is this political stand [of the AKP]. (İzmir, *İzmir Women's Solidarity Association*)

Selma: Well, first of all as a feminist, the obstacle in the way of women's wishes is a problem for me. Therefore, especially for the women of university age who could not go because of their headscarf, it was terrible. I was thinking women should be however they want to be, not only in schools, in all public spaces. (*The Foundation for Women's Solidarity & Ankara Women's Platform*)

This differentiation in their narratives creates another level of tension because, on the one hand, feminists expect religious women to support them on contemporary issues as they think they supported religious women during the bans. On the other hand, religious women complain about the lack of feminist support and find it hypocritical that they ask for help now. Remarkably, Kurdish activists' place in this picture was not mentioned by any of my religious participants, although Kurdish activist Lale honestly explained her hesitancy about supporting the lifting of the headscarf ban at the time through a Kemalist view on the issue, which possibly explains how religious women read such hesitancy. Her answer demonstrates the ambivalence around the headscarf issue felt by many women at the time: Fears about what the headscarf could represent in the future versus respecting women's choices as agents.

We did not have a prominent stance but individually I signed the petition... What were my feelings at that moment? What was my perspective? It wasn't my agenda that much. Sometimes it scared me, what if the headscarf ban was lifted? Because the system made us perceive the mentality like this. What will happen if it is set free? Will *Sharia* come? I was looking that simple and that positivist but we have never been prejudiced against the headscarf nor defined it as primitive. We have always believed that, if a woman wants to cover her head, her body, wherever, it is her choice. The important thing is not to leave it to men's control, not to do what someone else wants. Therefore, we see the political instrumentalisation of the headscarf issue as devious. Especially having men discussing the issue. (Diyarbakır, *Association of Women's Academy*)

Her question, 'will *Sharia* come?' explains the Kemalist understanding of the issue and most of the Kemalist women's perspectives perfectly, and summarises the impact of Kemalist education on people's opinions, even on Kurdish women. It might also represent, however, an understandable fear, given the AKP's trajectory. Two of the Kemalist feminists whom I interviewed supported the headscarf ban through public-private life differentiation and the dress-code regulations. One Kemalist feminist academic, Halide, even argued that it should not be called a 'headscarf ban' since all official institutions have their dress codes: 'If a police officer has a dress code, if a soldier has a dress code, an official institution [university] should also have a dress code.' This approach also represents the perspective on the headscarf issue of the Kemalist organisation of which she is a member, *Association of Republican Women*, which has had a pivotal role to oppose veiled women's demands. Halide said in our interview that she could not see her veiled students' mentality as scientific and then dismissed their reasons for veiling as being due to pressure from their families.

Another argument related to the headscarf ban is the difference between traditional veiling and the *türban*. One of my Kemalist feminist participants mentioned it:

Türkan: I have always seen it like... the headscarf is a different phenomenon... the *türban* is a different... I mean the *türban* is a clear closure motion against women, a part of women's bundling... The headscarf has always been in Turkish society's life... I mean, my mother also covered her head... a more traditional cloth... but now the *türban*... seeing it as a flag and having continuing debates over it... People were deprived of their educational rights, which was wrong. That was unfair, not being able to use the most basic rights because of their apparel...

However, from the perspective of the current political power's implementations, which led the movement, I feel like we were aware of the danger. (Ankara, *Association of Republican Women*)

The main problem with the *türban* occurs because it is seen as a political symbol of the AKP, rather than as religious. Therefore, the traditional way of veiling has not been publicly problematised by any groups. On the other hand, Canan Güllü, the head of *Women's Associations Federation of Turkey* in Ankara, a federation mainly consists of Kemalist women's organisations, accepted that she had made a mistake in supporting the ban, though she pointed out that the headscarf issue was not her primary concern:

I just told you, my mistake. One of my faults... At that time I thought, it was an artificial agenda... Does this issue concern 500 women who cannot go to university? So what is my biggest problem right now? The economic crisis is coming. There are no women in employment. They can't go to school, they're beaten. It was when the violence against women was not on the agenda [of the women's movement]. Therefore, the *türban* is not my first problem. (Ankara, *Women's Associations Federation of Turkey*)

Despite the ongoing discussions on the headscarf ban, the AKP delayed taking political action on the subject until 2008, to strengthen its position before dealing with the opposition. In the aftermath of 2007 elections, when the AKP gained an absolute majority of parliamentary seats and the secular President Ahmet Necdet Sezer was succeeded by Abdullah Gül<sup>51</sup>, the Foreign Minister of the AKP at the time, the AKP government finally made an amendment in the constitution, emphasising the right to education for all, which allowed women to wear the headscarf in the universities (Kaya, 2015: 55). Moreover, in 2013 the ban on wearing the headscarf in public offices, except for the military, the judiciary and the police, was lifted. A few months before I started to do my fieldwork, in September 2014, the Turkish government announced the lifting of the headscarf ban in public schools. The previous regulation, which had been applied in Turkey for decades,

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<sup>51</sup> Abdullah Gül's nomination for presidency received strong resistance from the Kemalists because of his religious background and his wife Hayrünişsa Gül's headscarf (Müftüler-Baç, 2016: 67), since there were no veiled women in governmental service at the time. It continued even after he was elected and senior military officials, who are seen as representatives of the Kemalist regime, would not attend official receptions. With her appearance in politics, as a veiled First Lady, the normalisation of the headscarf officially began.

said that ‘inside school premises, students must be bareheaded, hair should be clean and un-dyed, students cannot wear make-up nor grow a moustache or beard’ and the government removed the term ‘bareheaded’ from the regulation (RT, 2014) and allowed girls to cover their hair from the fifth grade to the twelfth, so that the rule applies to students in secondary and high schools. This change has created a heated debate within the country. The head of the main opposition, Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People’s Party) – CHP – Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, said that the Islamic veil had no place in schools. Also, a former teacher and deputy of the party, Engin Altay, said, ‘those of majority age (18) are completely free to decide. But the government cannot decide in the place of minors’ (Akıncı, 2014). Many people saw this change as a signal of a wider Islamist change in the near future: ‘Don’t please even attempt to tease our wisdom, possibly in the not so distant future, by coming up with a proposal to end mixed education [and] that this is also going to be done to respect people’s freedom’, Çiğdem Toker of the *Cumhuriyet Daily* said (Daloglu, 2014). The change in the regulation has also created a debate within the women’s movement. During my fieldwork, the headscarf controversy was the most mentioned issue, since the lifting of the headscarf ban in schools had recently occurred. On the one hand, religious women saw it as an improvement in terms of freedom and human rights;

Berrin Sönmez [religious feminist]: We see this issue as a freedom of girls’ education. We know that in many parts of Anatolia, not just regional but also in the cities and towns, the headscarf ban was one of the obstacles to girls continuing at school... Everyone knows that when the headscarf ban lifts, these families [which did not send their daughters to school because of the ban] would be prevented... and the headscarf would make this easier... We, as a platform, see it like this. (Ankara, *Capital City Women’s Platform*)

On the other hand, Kemalist feminists took it as a threat to secularism. Emel said she was very angry with religious women on this matter, since they showed themselves to be victims and defended it. Moreover, Canan Güllü said that The Federation of Women’s Associations of Turkey had filed an appeal in the Council of State, Turkey’s highest administrative court, against the lifting the headscarf ban by the AKP government. She emphasised that religion should be private and the state should not be involved until the age of puberty, when individuals can make their



own decisions. Another Kemalist feminist, Halide, did not even want to mention it and said that they would walk to Parliament to protest. Nazan, a Kemalist feminist, highlighted the warnings that Kemalists had made during the headscarf ban in the universities, which summarises the current situation perfectly for her:

While the headscarf was an issue [in universities] in Turkey, many feminists took a stand with the veiled women. They said this was a matter of freedom and women's outfits could not be interfered with. Women can dress as they wish and therefore they had a debate with women who define themselves as Kemalist. Kemalist and nationalist women said that it [wearing a headscarf] was not okay, that one shouldn't go to university wearing it. It could cause trouble for secularism in the future... When I look back today, what they said has become worryingly true. Because while feminists were defending the freedom of the veiled women, now they [veiled women] don't behave in the same way as we think. They did not behave on 9-year-old children's headscarf issue, in primary education<sup>52</sup>, as we had thought. (Ankara, *Association of Turkish Women University Graduates*)

Most of the feminists whom I interviewed evaluated the lifting of the ban in secondary and high schools as patriarchal mentality's control over girls' and young women's bodies and also as the government's attempt to increase the degree of conservatism in the country as a part of social engineering, which needs immediate action. Their stance was criticised by religious activists. Head of *Capital City Women's Platform*, Nesrin Semiz, for example, accused feminists of reading the intention wrongly when they considered it as a retrogressive sign and conservatism, whereas it is an expansion of freedom for women by removing previous enforcement. She compared it with the headscarf ban in the universities and said that feminists' reflexes on the headscarf have not changed much. The regulation has also created a heated debate between religious women and feminists who explicitly supported religious women during the university ban. Feminist scholar Aksu Bora is one of them. She says the situation with the secondary schools was different and she did not support it and they have not talked since then with religious women, which created distance among activists: 'Because it seems like the old stuff again:

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<sup>52</sup> Even though some Kemalist feminists and feminist activists gave the example of lifting the headscarf ban in primary schools, the regulations on the headscarf ban in primary schools have not been changed yet and it only affects secondary and high-school students. Therefore, when they refer to primary schools, it is activists' fear of its potential to happen because lifting that ban was also being discussed at the time.

Kemalists, nationalists and leftists are on the same side, veiled women on the other. In fact, it's not like that but it's very difficult to separate. Also the polarized agenda of Turkey at the moment does not allow it.'

Kurdish activists share almost the same concerns as feminists, particularly about increasing conservatism in the country. A member of *Selis Women's Association* in Diyarbakır, an organisation that is part of the Kurdish political movement, Dila, said Islamism in Turkey was at the forefront and it was reverting to the Ottoman period. So rather than seeing it as a freedom to wear the headscarf in secondary schools, she said it was almost becoming compulsory, which should never be accepted. Another Kurdish activist, Lale, also said that she found it very problematic and read it as a part of the policy of AKP, which is truly sexist. The change in the regulation was also criticised in an article by the Socialist Feminist Collective, entitled: 'Girls' Bodies Are Not Your Ideological Battlefields', where the regulation was seen as a part of AKP's tendency towards religious conservatism, so that a submissive female identity could be created.

A 9-year-old girl is expected to be covered, limit her manners and act like a woman instead of running around and playing games. Because this mentality sees a girl as a woman as soon as she has her period... By encoding a female body as a sexual object from childhood, controlling women's sexuality and the increasing pressure and control over children's bodies, they aim to create submissive 'prudish' women of the future... We are against any prohibition against freedom of thought and belief as well as the right to wear a headscarf. However, families cover their 9- and 10-year-old daughters, who have not yet discovered their bodies, with the permission of the state, which is nothing to do with girls' free will... Girls' bodies are not your ideological battlefields! Sexism and discrimination towards girls by saying 'freedom of headscarf' cannot be left to families' arbitrary treatment. (Sosyalist Feminist Kolektif, 2014, my translation)

İdil, who defines herself as a feminist, shares similar concerns. According to her, lifting the headscarf ban in secondary schools is not comparable to the situation in the universities. She sees the former as part of a long-term programme by the AKP to make society more conservative than before. It is obvious that feminists, Kemalists and Kurdish activists are mostly against the regulation and stood together, while religious women defended it on their own.

The *Muslim Initiative against Violence against Women*, who are young religious activists, some of whom took part in this research, replied to the *Socialist Feminist Collective*'s article with this title: 'Our Bodies Are No One's Ideological Battlefields', in which they criticised feminists' approach to the headscarf issue in secondary schools. They argued that feminists ignore girls' capacity for judgement and through this ignorance they are also trying to teach a lesson to religious women, whilst not seeing any 'modernist' influence on girls as a problem:

All Muslim families are portrayed as oppressive and all daughters of Muslim families as weak and miserable in relation to their families. The possibility of girls' free will to veil is ignored and fathers' pressure is certainly condemned. We must place our own realities against these imaginary types of Muslims. According to our experiences, a girl can cover her hair at secondary-school age by her own decision. Furthermore, those people who decide of their own free will, are not exceptions. Unfortunately, these girls who take this decision are faced with the state at the school gates every day and experience the trauma of having two separate identities on the two sides of the gates... The claim that girls would lose their freedom, become detached from their games, be feminized and made submissive by covering their hair is a product of assessing Muslims as a homogeneous group. Girls with headscarves can run and play games in the streets as well as they can be rebellious against the bully state... When Muslim families transfer their values to their children, it is seen as 'leaving the child to the mercy of her family', whereas the transfer of non-religious families' values is not seen as problematic. The enthusiasm of a girl to wear jeans from seeing her mum wearing jeans is seen as 'normal' whereas a veiled mum's daughter's enthusiasm to cover her hair is considered as imparting the 'wrong ideas' to children and the state is called in to protect children. (Kadına Şiddete Karşı Müslümanlar İnsiyatifi – Muslim Initiative against Violence against Women, 2014, my translation)

Their criticism was followed by that of other religious women, such as Hidayet Tuksal who also criticised the imaginary meaning of the headscarf, which has never been discussed. She argued that the headscarf had always been seen as criminal, negative and terribly worrying – especially on young girls – whereas uncovering is seen as neutral, symbolically value free, and she asked: 'Is it really so?' (Hürriyet/Ayşe Arman, 2015). Berrin Sönmez also reacted to feminists' claims by emphasising that families put pressure on their children in every aspect of life, such as choosing their schools, and this is considered normal, but not the headscarf. She suggested that the priority should be girls' education first, then they could make

their own decisions and no one, neither their families nor husbands, would put pressure on them when they had a career. Therefore, the headscarf bans in universities and secondary schools are the same for her. On the other hand, Hidayet Tuksal accused feminists of being hypocritical since they did not react in the same way when they witnessed veiled girls' humiliation. She asked: 'So is this poor girl not a child? [Why] do you not speak out? Here we are losing our very precious secular values [she is being sarcastic], so something immediately [needs to be done]' and she compared the current situation with the headscarf ban in the universities:

In the past, when the women's headscarf issue was being discussed, it was said that 'the headscarf ban is political. Their husbands are making them veil, Erbakan<sup>53</sup> is making, he is making, this is making' was said, as if we are objects, without our own will. We are tools; someone is making us veil. Now this debate is over. Now the girls' headscarf issue is being discussed again with the same jargon, like they are children and their families are making them cover their hair. These children's free will is irrelevant. Well, five years ago, you said the same thing about women with free will. (Ankara, *Capital City Women's Platform & Academic*)

In her article, 'No Political Symbols Left, What About Role Models?', Hidayet Tuksal reminds us of this general statement, '[we] are not struggling against women but against reactionist men who cover them by force' and adds 'there is "no woman" for them covering herself with her own decision owing to a religious, traditional or any reason but there is the man making use of her.' (Tuksal, 2013). In order to show that her personal choice of veiling has been made without any pressure, she says that veiling is a crucial element in the lives of three generations in her life story: her grandmother, her mother and herself. She says that, even though she has been a religious person throughout her life and has respected veiled women, she initially reacted against being a veiled woman herself. For her, it was never pressure from a man in her life but rather being affected by other veiled women, such as her grandmother and mother. Moreover, after reading a book about veiling by Şule Yüksel Şenler, one of the first public figures to wear the headscarf in Turkey, she decided to veil herself for the sake of being a more devout Muslim. She tells her

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<sup>53</sup> Necmettin Erbakan founded and inspired many Islamic political parties in Turkey, such as the Welfare Party (RP) and the Felicity Party (SP). He became Prime Minister in 1996 and held the post for a year.

story to demonstrate that veiling is women's personal choice rather than being due to pressure from others (Tuksal, 2013).

As a result, it can be said that the headscarf issue continues to be a divisive subject among women in Turkey. However, there is also a clear power shift regarding the issue. In the 1980s, religious women were struggling with the headscarf ban and asking for support, whereas now it is the freedom to wear the headscarf in schools that causes problems between women's groups. The similarity between these two cases, however, is that women's bodies are still the symbols for the politicians to further their goals. Over time, the AKP managed to shift the symbols associated with the headscarf: The headscarf, which represented backwardness and tradition in the Kemalist era, retrieved its power again by being seen as a symbol of 'morality' strictly defined by the AKP regime. In other words, the headscarf, particularly, is used to delineate the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' by the AKP. As Kandiyoti argues, it is defined as the symbol of 'pious generation'. An example of this, among various others, can be seen in Erdoğan's discourse. During the height of the Gezi protests<sup>54</sup> in 2013, an alleged attack on a veiled woman in Kabataş, İstanbul, which later challenged by CCTV footage as likely fake, provoked Erdoğan to categorise the protesters as violent and anti-religious by emphasising the discourse of 'our veiled sister' (Kandiyoti, 2016: 105–106). Since the lifting of the headscarf ban in universities, state buildings and recently in secondary and high schools, the headscarf has found a realm in public life. The power shift regarding to the issue has direct effects on the lives of women who refrain from wearing the headscarf. Rather than just expanding freedoms, lifting of the ban has also created social pressure and judgement on women with less conservative garb. On the other hand, assuming that veiled women's status in society has been immensely improved under the AKP regime is not entirely true, given the utilisation of their identities and symbolisation of their bodies for broader social and political purposes (Unal, 2015: 15).

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<sup>54</sup> These initially began for environmental reasons in May 2013 to protest against the government's decision to demolish İstanbul's Taksim Gezi Park. However, the brutal response of police officers, who used tear gas and water cannons against the sit-in protestors, brought the public onto the streets. It eventually became a general resistance and civil unrest, with the help of social media usage, to protest on a wide range of issues, such as freedom of expression, freedom of the press and any authoritarian decisions made by the government. The main importance of the protests, however, lies in their success in bringing very different parts of society together – including both right- and left-wing individuals. They continued until late August 2013.

During the fieldwork, it was interesting to see that, whenever we started to talk about religious women with other groups, the main issues were the headscarf ban and their ties with the current government, the AKP, although none of the religious activists I interviewed had any connections with the AKP. I argue that this is one of the stereotypes that simplified identity politics has created – equating every religious person with the government because it is Islamic too. The tendency to homogenise identity categories is dangerous because it contradicts the initial aim of identity politics: to acknowledge and respect differences. During the interviews, however, the approach of most of the activists to those identities was essentialising. Religious feminist Berrin Sönmez complained about this and said how uncomfortable she feels about this generalisation of religious women’s politicised identity, as though they were a homogenised organism, and because of this sometimes they even feel more comfortable with atheists than with other women activists: ‘We feel comfortable with non-Kemalist groups and very comfortable with atheists! I mean it. Because they don’t have prejudices against us. They don’t otherise us as religious people... They see human as human.’ She also said that, even though she feels comfortable within their own organisation, *Capital City Women’s Platform*, she prefers working with secular women rather than with other religious groups since conflict and disagreements develop more often with them. She specifically mentioned how other religious groups bring issues related to ‘family’ to the foreground, saying that ‘families are in danger’ and ‘divorce rates are increasing’ and she disagrees with them. Therefore, she emphasised her dilemma: ‘So rather than talking to Islamist women or men, it is much easier to talk with feminists, atheists or other groups of women and men. Such a strange dilemma.’ Her narrative demonstrates the problems related to identity politics – generating both internally and externally fixed identities. As Hekman (2010) argues, on the one hand, internally, members of a certain identity create an ideal to which they anticipate other members will conform. In other words, they police them to comply with the group’s ideal. On the other hand, externally, the identity of the group is fixed by the dominant political group in democratic politics. This is another way of policing the group’s identity by presenting a false homogenised façade to the political world, which gives permission to the state to police its members. Hekman states that this can be done in two ways: Either by creating formal categories, such as a definition of a protected group, or informally such as a recognised voting block as women’s vote, the gay

vote etc. Both ways have the same result: ‘The identity that has been constructed as a site of resistance is reified and fixed, stripped of ambiguity, fluidity and individuality. It becomes a vehicle by which state power is extended rather than limited’ (Hekman, 2010: 297). The historical tension and the fixed secular-religious divide, strengthened with conservative divisive politics, has some serious effect on the women’s movement in Turkey. Women’s groups hold onto their stigmatised identity categories and refuse to understand each other’s positionings and the AKP uses these to polarise the country in order to consolidate its power. Therefore, finding ways to move beyond conflicting identity politics is a must in order to work across differences without essentialising those differences.

The religious women’s movement has been a challenge to both Kemalism and mainstream feminism. However, it is not the only one. The Kurdish movement disputes the unitary characteristics of the Republic; likewise, the Kurdish women’s movement questions Kemalism, which is dominated by ethnically Turkish and educated women, for their ignorance of Kurdish women’s subordination, and feminism.

### **Ethnicity: The Kurdish Question and the Peace Process**

The Kurdish question, Turkey’s long-lasting problem, has affected the whole society and the country over the years. Kurds had to live some of the worst conditions in the country – forced displacement by the state, which caused unemployment and poverty, legal restrictions on their language, living under the state of emergency for years etc. The Kurdish question became an issue of identity politics only in the 1990s. From the 1920s to 1980s, it was seen as a ‘regional problem’, deriving from pre-modern economic and cultural structure and backwardness: It was articulated through Islam, with tribal affiliation, in the 1920s and 1930s and through Marxist-Leninist discourse in the 1960s and 1970s, rather than a question of identity or an ethno-political demand for recognition. Therefore, the solution was defined within the realms of political modernity, which indicates a unity between the state and its citizens. However, especially since 1990s, the Kurdish question has transformed into a quest for identity and recognition, as the unitary idea of modernity and national identity of Kemalism have been questioned. As a result, fragmentation in the

political culture occurred, which resulted in ‘the crisis of the state-centric and monolithic understanding of secular reason, organic society, and the republican (duty-based) model of citizenship, which has given rise to different claims to identity and recognition’ (Keyman, 2012: 471). This resulted in the emphasis on ‘Kurdishness’ of the Kurdish question. Moreover, Kurdish demands did not find parliamentary expression, which strengthened the radical ethno-nationalism and use of violence and terrorism for recognition (Keyman, 2012: 472).

During the 1980s and 1990s, Kurdish women also criticised the nationalistic and unitary character of Turkish feminism, which they have generally seen as Kemalist that adopts the Turkish identity as the essential origin of unity. However, one should keep in mind that the contemporary feminist movement is not entirely Kemalist, even though Kemalist women mostly define themselves as feminists, but rather it is mainly against strictly Kemalist and nationalist policies. In the interviews, almost all my feminist participants said that they found the Kurdish women’s movement very successful and expressed their admiration. Halime Erçetin, for example, said she considered the Kurdish women’s movement to be the most dynamic and well-organised movement. In the same way, Betül emphasised that the Kurdish women’s movement, especially the women’s revolution in Rojava, was fascinating and had inspired the feminist movement.

Kurdish activists were also very positive towards questions about the feminist movement, although some offered constructive criticism. Lale’s narrative about how she identifies the problems within the feminist movement entirely describes the Kurdish women’s movement’s perspective on feminism:

Lale: Since we value the feminist movement and want it to become stronger, we criticise it. Firstly, they pursue their struggle within the governmental and legal dimensions. There is this deficiency in the social aspects of the struggle, you know, a stateless struggle, which relies on self-power... Yes, there is an elite appearance associated with leaving the public out... I mean, being obsessed with concepts, the deskbound, conferences, panels and theoretical debate-oriented, and it needs to get out of that a bit. It should be more organised against this system and carry on while raising the level of the struggle... Another criticism is that we are still having troubles on the common definitions and creating an arena... If somehow half of the world’s population is oppressed and



exploited just because they're women, there should be its definition. What is really being a woman?... We have a criticism about that conceptual mess... Well, it might be offensive but we can see the effects of the nation state's mentality on some feminist friends who have grown up with it since their childhood... We don't find feminism sufficient... Our women's movement is not just interested in the gender problem... Our movement carries out the women's liberation struggle, the democracy struggle and the ecology struggle all together, but putting women's liberation at the centre. (Diyarbakır, *Association of Women's Academy*)

Lale's narrative explains why the Kurdish women's movement cannot/should not be classified under the category of the feminist movement in Turkey, since she makes a clear distinction between the two and emphasises their differences. In a similar manner, Kurdish activist Fidan said, 'while feminism merely focuses on women, the Kurdish women's movement tries to embrace lots of things.' Also, Dila said 'we have suffered twice: both as a Kurd and as a woman,' and added that she found the feminist movement very passive, which is similar to Lale's critique. Therefore, the main problems with feminist activism, as defined by Kurdish activists, were its distance from intersectionality, only focusing on gender, and pursuing their activism within the boundaries of the state. There were two main related issues between the feminists and Kurdish activists in their narratives during the interviews: 8 March and Abdullah Öcalan. On the one hand, feminists want to celebrate 8 March as a women's event by keeping all other ideological and political affiliations out; on the other hand, Kurdish activists would like to bring the Kurdish question and Öcalan's freedom issue to the march.

Özge [feminist]: Certainly, the Kurdish women's movement ... is a part of a larger politics, which has its own agenda. Therefore, the Democratic and Free Women's Movement (DÖKH)<sup>55</sup> always recommends Öcalan's freedom as the agenda of 8 March and we argue that it is not possible... It is one of our fundamental conflicts with the Kurdish women's movement, so that every time we discuss it... (İstanbul, *Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation & İstanbul Feminist Collective*)

Halime Erçetin [feminist]: 8 March is not for men or politics but for women's messages. I don't want to see Abdullah Öcalan there either. I don't want to see slogans like 'Hooray CHP! Hooray AKP!' except for

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<sup>55</sup> It was established in 2003 and is the largest organisation of the Kurdish women's groups, includes more than 40 organisations and Kurdish women in politics, and works for democracy and gender equality.

the ones about my labour, my body, my own identity. (Ankara, *Flying Broom*)

As a head of a very well-known feminist organisation in Ankara, *Flying Broom*, Halime Erçetin's answer is a recognised feminist position, arguing that she would not want to see any political parties there, since International Women's Day should only be about women. Moreover, following a male leader has been problematised and found contradictory by feminists. Yet, the Kurdish activists' replies, and seeing their love towards Öcalan, were very interesting since they stressed that they did not see him as a man but as a philosopher:

Navin: Their criticisms might be right if they think of him as a male but for us our leader transcends his masculinity. He says that he kills his masculinity in his defences... If we just look from the male point of view, as if following a man, their [feminists'] criticisms might be right but we don't see him as a man. He teaches us to be better women with his writings. (Diyabakır, *Selis Women's Association*)

Lale: In fact, it's the most stressful issue with the feminists... The leader of the Kurdish people always tries to overcome his masculinity and we don't see him as a man. As an identity, you know, biologically he is a man but we're interested in his philosophy and his ideology. If he didn't think and decide, could we be like this? As a result, from our point of view, he is a leader and a philosopher... He realised this: He said no, I can't be successful in this struggle without women's freedom. Therefore, we value him. Not because he's the leader of a national struggle but because he understands the reality and leads the movement to reveal women's reality. His philosophy is our philosophy. (Diyarbakır, *Association of Women's Academy*)

Even though I knew of the importance of Öcalan for Kurdish activists through their writings, during the fieldwork I realised just how strong their feelings are – a transcendental love – and how impossible it is for them to ignore the issue of Öcalan's freedom on 8 March. Another issue that feminists had with Kurdish activists was about the militarism within the Kurdish women's movement:

Betül: That it [the Rojava women's revolution] is a women's revolution, needs to be highlighted. It was an example to us, a hope that shows how challenging and effective women could be, who take the floor in politics. However, I had a concern... The commodification of the women's identities there and blending it with a militaristic rhetoric,

which we discuss in our group. Because they define themselves as freedom fighters, but on the other hand we're against the war, so how can we adopt these women while being against the war? (Ankara, *Ankara Feminist Collective*)

The feminists argued that every act of violence contributes to the 'consolidation of male domination'. Thus, they emphasised the importance of criticising the violence executed by the state, the PKK or the husband altogether. They argued that militarism is not only employed by the state but also by the armed organizations, in the name of liberty, which contrarily contributes to the consolidation of male domination (Sancar, 2008: 12). This is one of the major problems of the Kurdish movement in general, since it is difficult to separate the demand for equal citizenship and recognition from violence and terror, with which has gone hand in hand, discursively and politically (Keyman, 2012: 468). However, not all the Kurdish women I have interviewed define themselves within the Kurdish women's movement as discussed earlier; some identify as feminists. The *KAMER Foundation*, for example, is one of the biggest feminist organisations in the east and southeast regions of Turkey, with 23 different centres. It was founded in 1997, mostly by Kurdish women who were suffering from violence, particularly domestic violence, and they later broadened their goals to end human rights violations and change the negative effects of culture and tradition upon the well-being of women and children (Diner and Toktaş, 2010: 48–49). *KAMER* was born to address local needs. Knowing the region, speaking Kurdish and witnessing violence against women led Nebahat Akkoç, head of *KAMER* and a participant in this research, and her friends to found *KAMER*, located in a Kurdish dominated city, Diyarbakır, to support and empower women (Arat & Altınay, 2015: 14). Nebahat Akkoç<sup>56</sup> was personally subjected to state violence in the course of ethnic confrontation and eventually found feminism (Arat & Altınay, 2015: 14). In our interviews, she said that before 1994 she was very distant to feminists, was even angry with them, thinking that 'they were spoiled women wanting luxurious things whilst the world collapses' but now identifies herself as a feminist. Her personal experience of

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<sup>56</sup> Both she and her husband were engaged with leftist politics in the 1970s and later with Kurdish politics. Her husband was arrested and tortured and later was killed in 1993 by an unidentified assailant. Then she was detained and viciously tortured and was put on public display as 'armed terrorist'. She later took the case to the European Court of Human Rights and received indemnity from the Turkish state. She used the fund to establish *KAMER* (Arat & Altınay, 2015: 14).

gendered violence surely plays a crucial role in her identification with feminism. Gökalp defines the aims of *KAMER* and the criticism of their aims by politicised Kurdish circles:

KA-MER used the alliances to attract attention to the occurrence of honor killings and suicide among young migrant Kurdish women, in tandem with the decline of political tension in the region in the late 1990s. Yet, more politicized Kurdish feminist circles<sup>57</sup> accused KA-MER of being a ‘pragmatist, elite organization’, aloof from Kurdish reality and struggle. (Gökalp, 2010: 567)

I also argue that there is a very sharp distinction between these groups, and there is criticism of *KAMER* by Kurdish activists. One of my Kurdish participants, Lale, working at the *Association of Women's Academy* in Diyarbakır, which is a part of the Kurdish movement, emphasised clearly that they are ideologically different and she identifies *KAMER*'s ideology, based on its perspective on the state and recommended solutions to women's problems, as problematic. She notes, however, that in the early 2000s they approached *KAMER* a few times but were accused of being a political and ideological organisation and were told that *KAMER* did not have those aims but only aimed to focus on women's emancipation through projects. Therefore, their relationship was frozen and Lale thinks there is no way to bring them together, since they prefer not to use any state funds or work on projects, unlike *KAMER*. On the other hand, the head of *KAMER*, Nebahat Akkoç, said in our interview that violence was the reason behind her decision to distance herself from the Kurdish women's movement: ‘All of a sudden I realised that I was advocating violence. Even if I am against it spiritually, the language and the behaviours were violent... I have had situations where being a woman and violence were thought at the same time.’ She mentioned that some researchers go to talk to them as the ‘Kurdish women's movement’, since they work in the same region, particularly in Diyarbakır, where the Kurdish movement is dominant, even though *KAMER*'s aims are different. She said in our interview that 90% of *KAMER* volunteers are ethnically Kurdish but the same percentage would also define themselves as

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<sup>57</sup> As discussed earlier, in my fieldwork, I realised, however, that those ‘more politicized Kurdish feminist circles’ that Gökalp discusses prefer not to be called feminists. They mentioned that they have problems with the concept of feminism and support Öcalan's form of gender equality, called ‘jineology’, which means the science of women, in which he mainly argues that, without women's freedom, a society/country cannot be free.

feminists. Therefore, as an autonomous feminist organisation in Diyarbakır, distant from the Kurdish women's movement, *KAMER* had problems. Akkoç criticised some feminists in our interview, who cooperated with the Kurdish women activists in Diyarbakır, rather than *KAMER*, since Kurds are the powerful ones in that geographical context. Therefore, she argued that before the peace process they were seen as 'others' in Diyarbakır. However, she emphasised that they could become closer since the violence had stopped due to peace process<sup>58</sup>. My other two Kurdish participants defined themselves as feminists as well. One of them said she found *DÖKH* very exclusive if you are not a part of it and the other emphasised that feminism should be independent of any political parties. Therefore, the general tendency to see the Kurdish women's movement as a homogenised single entity is highly questionable, considering the different factions within it.

The relationship between Kurdish women and religious women has been mostly good since there are religious groups within the Kurdish movement as well. The Kurdish movement is not limited to its national aspect. Apart from the 'national' or 'ethnic' issue, the Kurdish movement represents extensive socio-cultural and socio-political mobilisation. It also involves pro-Islamic Kurds, who put emphasis on their religious identity. Even though there is also diversity within this group, the general tendency is seeing 'the highly modernist, secular and left-wing groups as an ideological and existential challenge to Islamist values, culture and social order in the Kurdish region' (Çiçek, 2016: 152). The AKP discourse also has some effect on this. In order to deal with the Kurdish issue, the AKP initially pursued a strategy of inclusion and highlighted the wrongfulness of the emphasis on ethnicity and aggravation of differences between Turks and Kurds, but rather put emphasis on the religious identity of Kurds, which was believed to have a unifying effect: 'By utilising this discourse of religious unity and giving voice to the Kurdish constituency, AKP elites believed that they would eventually convince the already conservative "pure Kurdish people" to turn against the secular and nationalist "corrupt PKK elites" and undermine the influence of the Kurdish political movement' (Balta, 2016: 20). However, my religious feminist participant Berrin

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<sup>58</sup> I will discuss my participants' perceptions of the peace process and how the process ended later in this chapter.

Sönmez's narrative clearly shows the problematic side of the identity politics on the subject. Assuming that groups would act homogeneously under the unifying identity category, such as religious identity as in the AKP discourse, simplifies individuals' and groups' multiple particularities:

Berrin Sönmez [religious feminist]: We aren't a single organism as religious women. There are women within our group who share the same views as the government in terms of the Kurdish issue. There are very nationalist ones who don't recognise them. There are ones who have never been to the eastern region and never thought of going. (Ankara, *Capital City Women's Platform*)

Categories such as 'religious women' or 'Kurdish women' are most often comprehended as fixed identities and it is wrongly expected of these women to act homogeneously, whereas, as I have argued, there are also differences within these identity categories. On the other hand, there is an obvious tension between the Kurds and the Kemalists, who usually see the Kurdish movement as separatist, supported by 'international powers':

Halide: Of course I would like to support everything that women have done, for womanhood. However, the Kurdish women's movements are Soros-backed<sup>59</sup> movements. Therefore, a movement supported by Soros, either given into the hands of women or an angel from the sky, it doesn't matter. In the end, it is to destroy the country. (Ankara, *Association of Republican Women*)

However, overall, the attitude towards the Kurdish question was rather positive and the main reason for this was the ongoing peace process between the government and the Kurdish groups at the time I was doing my fieldwork. The peace process created a widespread hope of dealing with the Kurdish question, in line with demands of democracy and equal citizenship, rather than understanding it as a form of 'terrorism'. Even though setting policies to satisfy a wider scale of the members of the Turkish society simultaneously is difficult, during my fieldwork, activists from all different geographical locations, including some of the Kemalist feminists, were hopeful that women could possibly be connected with each other, and even united,

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<sup>59</sup> She refers to Hungarian-American investor, George Soros, who donates for political causes not only in the U.S. but also in Central and Eastern Europe and Africa.

by the end of the process. They hoped that women from different backgrounds could live together. Kurdish activist from Diyarbakır, Zeynep, for instance, said she hoped that other women would understand them better now with the help of the process and change their negative attitudes towards Kurds, since they would see that Kurdish women only want to build a common life together. Therefore, she added that the peace process was so meaningful and significant, because at least there were no longer any deaths. Many other activists also emphasised its importance and mentioned that women's participation in the process was a must. Kurdish activist, Fidan, for example, emphasised that the process was not solely about changing a few laws and saying 'okay, we recognise Kurds now' but rather, it was actually a democratisation process for Kurds, and therefore women should be involved in it. Overall, my participants', particularly Kurdish activists' from Diyarbakır, perspectives on the peace process were rather positive.

On the other hand, negotiations were not totally transparent and civil society organisations were not notified about the progress in terms of how the action plan and the time schedule would take place. Moreover, the peace process did not penetrate into the everyday lives of ordinary people. Thus, rather than talking about a peace, it was more about a period of 'non-conflict' (Kaliber, 2016: 69). For some of my participants, the peace process did not mean much, mostly because of the uncertainty about what it really meant and how its goals would be achieved, and also whether it meant not discussing problems openly in order not to harm the process:

Emine [religious activist]: The peace process is not a process that I follow very much but on the other hand it's become so complicated that it can't be followed anyway... I think the peace process has become something like, as though we need to sweep things under the rug. Especially from the Kurds' side. People think like, the process continues so we shouldn't say this or shouldn't make that an issue. On the other hand, of course I wish for peace and to silence the guns, but not like at any cost. I think peace is not a peace if it isn't among equals... When we accept those demands, and equality as a society, then peace seems to be possible. (İstanbul, *Muslim Initiative against Violence against Women*)

Lerzan [Kurdish feminist]: Peace process, empty words. The people's minds aren't very clear. It isn't clear what's going to happen. I think it's a lot more confusing... I don't believe in the peace process. I don't find it sincere. I don't find either party sincere... When you look at it from the Kurdish side, it means to take a step backwards, which might end it

all. This dialogue is probably going to fail altogether. (Van, *YAKA-KOOP*)

Lerzan's comment proves prescient. The peace process enabled the issues regarding the Kurdish question to be discussed, which was previously considered as taboo in Turkey. However, it did not successfully engage with Kurdish movement's demands. Moreover, although there was a keen interest in the peace process, there was also a 'peace process fatigue', because of the lack of transparency and inclusion of civil society and other actors (Baser, 2017: 11–13). During the interviews, Nebahat Akkoç, a Kurdish feminist, also explained its problematic side by arguing that it depended too much on people, who are unreliable, and this is what really harmed the process in the end. It stopped due to clashing political goals and the conflict with the Kurds has started all over again and is worsening every day. Rather than seeing it as a problem of democracy and democratisation, the Kurdish question has again become an issue of 'terror' and 'separatism'. The AKP only included and responded Kurdish demands when other agents, such as the HDP or the PKK, did not challenge the supremacy of the AKP's power in 'solving' the Kurdish question. However, the pro-Kurdish party, HDP, received 13.1% of the vote in June 2015 general elections, received many votes from Kurds who had previously voted for the AKP and prevented the AKP from forming a single party government and making the necessary changes to convert the current parliamentary system into a presidential one. The peace process, therefore, had not marginalised the pro-Kurdish politics by putting more emphasis on the religious identity rather than the ethnic, as the AKP wanted, but rather empowered Kurdish political actors. As a result, they became a threat to the AKP's power and the AKP has started to use populist discourse to segregate the country into two homogenous and opposing groups: 'the pure people', the AKP's supporters and 'the corrupt elite', its opponents (Balta, 2016: 19–22). Therefore, AKP's Kurdish policies are far from promising and the resolution of the Kurdish question is unlikely. The country is more polarised than ever, considering the decline in the freedom of speech and violation of other vital rights due to AKP's authoritarian regime, especially after the failed coup attempt in 2016. It is very challenging to open up new spaces in which to further the dialogue from where it stopped and strengthen the culture of living together across differences in such an environment. The AKP uses this polarisation for its benefits, arguing the need for a



strong government, but as Keyman nicely puts it: ‘it is not possible to make Turkish modernity multicultural, Turkish democracy consolidated, Turkish economy sustainable, Turkish society a society of living together; and Turkish foreign policy proactive, multidimensional, and effective, without solving, or at least disarming, the Kurdish question’ (Keyman, 2012: 468). Rather than using a polarising discourse, essentialising, fixed and unchanging identities to strengthen its power, the state should focus on the democratic solution and lessening the ethnic tension, which necessitate the inclusion of Kurds into the political system. This also shifts the emphasis on identity politics into demands for citizenship rights (Keyman, 2012: 472).

## **Conclusion**

Diversity within the women’s movement in Turkey inevitably has connections with the current Turkish political atmosphere. Differences are becoming more destructive, especially due to recent events, and these also shape and change women’s perceptions of gender issues and of each other. The underlying reason for this and the main problem, I argue, is the extant identity politics and being locked in these exclusive identities, which bring with them stereotypical judgements and otherisation. In other words, the politics of difference fragments the women’s movement even more, rather than paving the way for working across differences. The main reason, I argue, is seeing identities as fixed categories. As Susan Hekman aptly puts it:

Once a political movement fixes on an identity, it becomes the foundation of the new political truth that the movement espouses. The identities of identity politics are not tailored to individual differences. Nor do they recognize identities as fluid and constructed. Rather, they fix identity in a new location. (Hekman, 2010: 295)

As Yuval-Davis argues, ‘dichotomous notions of identity and difference, when theorizing the boundaries of individual and collective identities, are more misleading than explanatory’ (Yuval-Davis: 2010: 263). This is how the politics of difference works in the current political atmosphere of Turkey, with the help of the exclusionary Kemalist ideology, which does not even recognise that there are differences among women. Also, women who are ‘different’ are locked into their

generalised ‘differences’, such as all religious women being seen as part of the government or Kurdish women being accused of being separatist, whereas what they really want is to have equal rights as equal citizens. Yuval-Davis explains this as two interrelated problems of reductionist identity politics. Firstly, social categories and social groupings are assumed to be the same and it is also claimed that if one belongs to a particular social category, one must also belong to a specific group. The same attachment and the same understanding of that identity is also expected by its members. This approach towards identities not only essentialises identities but also privileges just one category and assumes its centrality in that person’s identity, such as being a woman, a Black etc. or a fragment in their identity, such as being a black woman. A second problem is related to the studies on identity and questions whether the macro social categories, such as race, ethnicity, gender, class etc., are really so important in people’s everyday lives and whether they are used by people to define themselves. Therefore, this position considers identities as irrelevant social categories. However, Yuval-Davis argues that when people do not mention their social positionings, this does not necessarily mean that their interpretation of the world, their concerns and perspectives, are not affected by those positionings (Yuval-Davis: 2010: 268–269). This second position is particularly relevant here since even my most exclusively Kemalist feminist participant, Halide, said she would not discriminate against Kurds, Arabs or any other ethnicity or identity in her everyday life, yet all her answers to my questions regarding religious women and Kurdish women were discriminatory. Therefore, I would also argue that the views expressed by my participants during the interviews were directly related to their positionings. Although Kemalist ideology is an ideological positioning, it is also a product of being ethnically Turkish and middle class and thus the denial of other positions relies on their social positioning.

In a recent video I watched by TV2 Danmark, called ‘All That We Share’, this was said about categorising people: ‘It’s easy to put people in boxes. There’s us and there’s them... There’re those we share something with and those we don’t share anything with.’ Then people were divided into groups and categories based on their nationality, occupation, religion, age, where they live etc., related to existing

stereotypes of each group. Then, however, you hear these questions<sup>60</sup>: ‘Who in this room was the class clown? Who are stepparents? Who have seen UFOs? Who do love dancing? Who have been bullied? Who have bullied others? Who are broken hearted? Who are madly in love? Who do feel lonely? ...’ and in answer to each question, people from different categories come together and unite and finally you hear: ‘So maybe there’s more that brings us together than we think’ (TV2 Danmark, 2017). We are different, but we also have similarities across our differences. In other words, we can identify similarity with others in terms of some of our differences. Problems arise, however, when we interpret some of our differences as more important than others. As Seyla Benhabib says, we must ask ourselves: ‘the “difference” of whom from whom, and in the name of what?’ (Benhabib, 1995: 31) She argues that identity construction includes clashes and conflicts between groups. However, sometimes this construction, which she calls ‘constitution’, takes place without subjects’ wilful participation or agency. Therefore, what constitutes subjects is power matrices (Benhabib, 1995: 27). In the Turkish case, it is assumed that groups like religious women and Kurdish women are only about their differences, and those differences are used by the people who wield political power to polarise the country and the women’s movement even more than before. Therefore, what is more important is how we approach those differences: as barriers to solidarity or sources of solidarity instead? Benhabib argues that we need a new politics of civility and solidarity that is powerful enough to unite social forces, which are separated through fragmentation and factionalism. In order to achieve this, she argues, some outdated and discredited ideals of utopian feminism could play a part. The very hard political and moral step then would be ‘to move from the logic of redistributionism to the ethics of solidarity with those who are different’ (Benhabib, 1995: 31). How can solidarity be established across our differences? Would universalism still be an essential component of solidarity? Is solidarity even necessary? In the next chapter, I will discuss these questions through a consideration of solidarity in the women’s movement in Turkey.

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<sup>60</sup> This part of the video is in Dutch, with English subtitles.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### WOMEN'S SOLIDARITY: AN IDEALISTIC AND ROMANTIC CONCEPT?

Sometimes I stare longingly at women who I will never know  
Generous, laughing women with wrinkled cheeks and white teeth  
Dragging along chubby, rosy-cheeked babies on fat, wobbly legs  
Sometimes I stare at Chinese grandmothers  
getting on the 30 Stockton with shopping bags  
Japanese women tourists in European hats  
Middle-ages mothers with laundry carts  
Young wives holding hands with their husbands  
Lesbian women holding hands in coffee-houses  
Smiling debutantes with bouquets of yellow daffodils  
Silver-haired matrons with silver rhinestoned poodles  
Painted prostitutes posing along MacArthur Boulevard  
Giddy teenage girls snapping gum in fast cars  
Widows clutching bibles, crucifixes

I look at them and wonder if  
They are a part of me  
I look in their eyes and wonder if  
They share my dreams. (Genny Lim, 1981: 25)

Women's solidarity has been widely appealed to and has often been romanticised by different women's movements around the world, although there is no single definition of it. Dai argues that the concept of solidarity is important for two interrelated reasons. Firstly, from an epistemological perspective, women are subjected to different types of gender oppression and solidarity is a political strategy for them to come together and support each other. This has also enabled them to see gender oppression on a larger scale. Secondly, from a political perspective, women need solidarity to withstand structural gender oppression (Dai, 2016: 71). But what does women's solidarity mean to women activists, particularly in Turkey, who hear and use this phrase in their everyday lives? Is it more achievable between women who share the same ideologies, beliefs, and identities, or is it possible to act in solidarity with women who are very different in some way? Do women articulate common goals to achieve this or is merely sharing the same self-identified sex enough, given women's subordination in general? Are our different beliefs, ethnicities, ideologies, classes, and ages seen as barriers to solidarity, or is there any potential for solidarity despite our strongly fragmented identities? In this chapter, I

aim to understand the nature of women's solidarity from my participants' perspectives. Therefore, I first discuss the meanings of [women's] solidarity as a concept: a part of women's common condition and unity; an ongoing commitment based on the political commitment to end sexist oppression; common differences among women and differences as sources of solidarity. Next, I turn to my participants' perceptions of the concept by discussing its meaning for them, what solidarity entails, events in Turkey that they define as successful examples of solidarity, what they see as barriers to solidarity, and whether they think solidarity is necessary.

### **Conceptualising Solidarity: Commonalities vs. Differences**

We, my sisters, who are *we*?

...

Will you turn away from me, at a moment of my truth, because you do not believe in truth? Because you do not believe my truth? Because you are wary of complicity and collusion? Because you are afraid?

...

Who is my sister?

I cannot find her in the abstract where no one lives and struggles and laughs and loves and dies.

Where is my sister?

To the south, to the north, to the east, to the west.

Before me, behind me, beside me, among me.

She is where she needs to be, where she is free to be, where she has chosen to be.

She is where she had not chosen to be, where she would never choose to be, where she is rooted and nailed to the spot.

She is where I least expect her to be where I am with her where I cannot be with her

*The direction that needs to come back into the movement is the coming together of the separated. (Urvashi Vaid)*

...

I am sisters with that woman, this woman, those women, not because our provenances are the same, our directions the same, our lives the same, our struggles the same in all their particular and unequal complexities. They are not. Some of us, in all our four truths and more, have privileges and freedoms denied to most others, but freedoms not shared are oppressions imposed, which keep us apart.

...

Will you sister me?

We need each other or some of us will die  
for different reasons in different places in different ways  
as we do, already, damned and dead, every day.  
An uncertain number most certainly die because no one gives a  
damn.

In sister deprivation lies no salvation. (Smyth, 1997: 10, 14–15)

This strong poem, ‘Sistering in the Skin’ by Ailbhe Smyth, written in memory of Audre Lorde, explores discussions around the concept of sisterhood and represents the critics of undifferentiated sisterhood: ‘Sisterhood is Powerful!’ However, the difference from Smyth’s poem is that the concept of global sisterhood in early second-wave feminism was merely based on commonality rather than embracing the differences among women. As bell hooks argues, it was mainly bourgeois white women who believed that the concept of common oppression would help to establish solidarity among women. However, it was a false term, which disguised and mystified women’s complex social reality (hooks, 1986: 127). Therefore, it failed to encompass the different priorities women had within the women’s movement (Simmonds, 1997: 20) and excluded many from this ideal of global sisterhood. hooks emphasises that when women of colour criticised white feminists for how racism had formed feminist theory, they ‘turned their backs on the vision of sisterhood, closing their minds and their hearts’ (hooks, 2000: 16). Black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde (1984) argues in her book *Sister Outsider* that she always found herself to be other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong and always felt it was her duty to teach the oppressors their mistakes. She discusses the three ways in which we handle difference:

ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant,  
or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for  
relating across our human differences as equals. As a result, those  
differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of  
separation and confusion. (Lorde, 1984: 115)

But how do we recognise those differences without recreating hierarchies and instead embrace everyone? Is that kind of solidarity achievable or just an ideal?

Robin Morgan (1984) discusses women’s unity and the potential of universal sisterhood in her very well-known women’s movement anthology, *Sisterhood is*

*Global: The International Women's Anthology*. In the introduction, she talks about the common condition that is attributed to being a woman, and argues that all countries are underpinned by a patriarchal mentality. Therefore, being male is defined as being human, whereas being female is defined as being other and invisible. She argues that women suffer more from the world's problems, such as war, poverty, refugee crises, hunger, disease, illiteracy, overpopulation, ecological imbalance, the abuse or exploitation of children and the elderly etc., although they are not consulted about possible solutions (Morgan, 1984: 2). According to Morgan, what unifies women across cultures is their common condition:

The quality of feminist political philosophy (in all its myriad forms) makes possible a totally new way of viewing international affairs, one less concerned with diplomatic postures and abstractions, but focused instead on concrete, *unifying* realities of priority importance to the survival and betterment of living beings. For example, the historical, cross-cultural opposition women express to war and to our healthy scepticism of certain technological advances (by which most men seem overly impressed at first and disillusioned at last) are only two instances of shared attitudes among women which seem basic to a common world view. Nor is there anything mystical or biologically deterministic about this commonality. It is the result of a *common condition*, which despite variations in degree, is experienced by all human beings who are born female. (Morgan, 1984: 4–5, italics in original)

In her article, Morgan also gives examples of the common conditions that all women share, such as controls over women's bodies related to birth and abortion, marriage as an institution and the family myth, experiences of rape and battery, and women's labour. She emphasises that even though patriarchy tries to divide women by focusing on their differences, all the articles in the anthology identify similarities between and among women (Morgan, 1984: 22). As strategies for the future, she first suggests reversing the negative, which means turning the negative aspects of women's conditions inside out to tactical advantage. She asks, 'what if we spent less energy being humiliated than most male power structures still consider feminism an "unserious issue" and began instead to use the temporary margin of mobility that very perception permits us tactically?' (Morgan, 1984: 39). Secondly, she suggests seizing control of the system by organising and voting as a bloc, which means more women running for public office and actively supporting those women. She then recommends that women challenge the system by being in the legislatures and in the

streets and preserving their autonomy as a movement (Morgan, 1984: 39–41). Lastly, she wants women to think beyond the system, to think beyond what has been taught to them by their governments, and rather see the international aspect, listen to other women and recognise one another. As a result, she asks: ‘are we then so very different?’ and says that women’s underlying similarities begin to surface if they ask sincere questions about their differences (Morgan, 1984: 42–43).

Morgan’s approach to solidarity – or in her terms global sisterhood – has been widely criticised because she uses the common condition that is attributed to womanhood as the only realm that can bring women together. Chandra Mohanty, for instance, argues that this common condition is not enough for solidarity and she criticises Morgan’s analysis and states that her account is based on shared good will among women. She says that, in Morgan’s article, women are unified by their shared perspective, shared goals and shared experience of oppression. In other words, Morgan’s cross-cultural work addresses women’s singularity as a group and describes universal sisterhood based on women’s shared oppression and their status as victims of the patriarchal system (Mohanty, 2003: 112). Even though I would agree that Morgan’s conceptualisation is very commonality centred and therefore limited, it should also be remembered that her anthology was a very early one and gave voice to women from around the world while putting different experiences together.

Mohanty argues that Morgan’s notion of universal sisterhood erases the effects and history of contemporary imperialism and places all women, including herself, outside contemporary women’s history, which can have dangerous implications for women who are not part of white, Western, middle-class privilege. Therefore, she argues that the common condition that Morgan defines based on a universal patriarchal mentality is shaky at best (Mohanty, 2003: 110–111). Mohanty draws attention to the differences between First- and Third-World women and criticises Morgan’s analysis through her generalised identification of women’s commonality, which excludes the very divisive class and ethnic lines that exist among them and erases material and ideological power differences within and among groups of women. She prefers to use the terms feminist solidarity or coalition, rather than universal sisterhood like Morgan, since for her universal sisterhood denies women’s



agency. According to Mohanty, women's unity is not given but is rather something that must be worked for and struggled towards: 'What we need to do is articulate ways in which the historical forms of oppression relate to the category of "women" and not to try to deduce one from another. And it is here that a formulation of feminist solidarity or coalition makes sense (in contrast to a notion of universal sisterhood)' (Mohanty, 2003: 115–116). According to her, what unifies women and can form the basis of deep solidarity is their 'common differences' and women need to struggle to achieve this despite unequal power relations among them (Mohanty, 2003: 225). She argues that what brings women together is the 'common context of struggles against specific exploitative structures and systems' (Mohanty, 2003: 49). Moreover, she emphasises the connection between the local and the universal and explains her understanding of differences as sources of solidarity:

... differences are never just 'differences'. In knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities because no border or boundary is ever complete and rigidly determining. The challenge is to see how differences allow us to explain the connections and border crossings better and more accurately, how specifying difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully. It is this intellectual move that allows for my concern for women from different communities and identities to build coalitions and solidarities across borders. (Mohanty, 2003: 226)

With this common differences approach, Mohanty shares a similar opinion to bell hooks, who says that women unite in their appreciation of diversity. In her early works, hooks rejects Morgan's idea of a common condition among women and argues that common oppression is an inappropriate starting point for establishing solidarity since it erases women's diverse social reality, which is divided by their sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices. In order to establish sustained women's solidarity, these differences should be confronted. She criticises male supremacist ideology, which teaches women that their only value lies their relations with men and that women are each other's enemies, so that solidarity can never exist between them. She suggests that women have to unlearn these lessons and build sustained solidarity by learning its value and true meaning (hooks, 1986: 127).

Rather than using shared victimisation or common oppression to develop political solidarity, hooks argues, women have to bond on the basis of a political commitment that aims to end sexist oppression (hooks, 1986: 129). She argues that sexism, racism and classism form divisions among women, which also initiate disagreements and different strategies and special-interest groups that create barriers to establishing solidarity (hooks, 1986: 137). She emphasises that, 'as long as women are using class or race power to dominate other women, feminist sisterhood cannot be fully realized' (hooks, 2000: 16). For her, the solution is for women to accept their responsibility to fight on issues that do not affect them directly. Thus, showing concern for the collective is an important way to strengthen solidarity among women and one should realise its difference from support as the latter can be occasional whereas solidarity is an *ongoing commitment* (hooks, 1986: 138, my emphasis). She highlights the need for, and the importance of, communication among women because, when women come together, they realise their differences and develop strategies to overcome fears, prejudices, and competitiveness related to these divisions. Hence, hooks argues that differences among women are not necessarily barriers to solidarity:

Women do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression. We do not need anti-male sentiments to bond us together, so great is the wealth of experience, culture, and ideas we have to share with one another. We can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity.  
(hooks, 1986: 138)

One problematic aspect of hooks' definition of solidarity is understanding it as an ongoing commitment. Although she construes solidarity in an all-embracing way and emphasises differences among women, I argue that defining it as an ongoing commitment excludes women's short-term togetherness, placing it outside the category of solidarity and minimising its value, which makes this a very idealistic definition.

Both bell hooks and Chandra Mohanty focus on the political aspect of solidarity. They define it as a struggle against oppression and try to include every group of women. Like them, Jodi Dean (1996) also discusses differences among women as

sources of solidarity. She defines different types of solidarity among women. She mentions ‘affectional solidarity’ and ‘conventional solidarity’, where the former refers to the solidarity that arises from intimate love and friendship relationships, whereas the latter grows out of common interests, concerns and struggles. However, she defines them as limited solidarities since they cannot extend beyond a particular group (Dean, 1996: 17–19). According to her, these models create ‘us vs. them’ binaries, which she offers to replace with an inclusive ‘we’, by avoiding the exclusion of any groups, and this she calls ‘reflective solidarity’, which uses a Habermasian communicative action account. It is an alternative way to establish solidarity, in which the differences, diversities and disagreements among women become the sources of solidarity:

Simply put, solidarity can be modelled as an interaction involving at least three persons: I ask you to stand by me over and against a third. But rather than presuming the exclusion and opposition of the third, the ideal of reflective solidarity thematizes the voice of the third to reconstruct solidarity as an inclusionary ideal for contemporary politics and societies. On the one hand, the third is always situated and particular, signifying the other who is excluded and marking the space of identity. On the other, including the third, seeing from her perspective, remains the precondition for any claim to universality and any appeal to solidarity. Conjoined with a discursively achieved ‘we’, the perspective of a situated, hypothetical third articulates an ideal of solidarity attuned both to the vulnerability of contingent identities and to the universalist claims of democratic societies. (Dean, 1996: 4)

Reflective solidarity includes two moments: opposition to those who exclude or oppress another and mutual recognition of everyone’s specificity (Dean, 1998: 4). She defines reflective solidarity as a ‘mutual expectation of a responsible orientation to relationship’ (Dean, 1996: 29) in which communicative efforts by both parties are needed, while not being exclusive: ‘Reflective solidarity entails that we give the other *the space to be* the person she is. Thus, we don’t try to make her a feminist *or* African American; we don’t ask her to be a lesbian *or* anticolonialist. We respect the depth of her difference and trust her enough to stand with her’ (Dean, 1996: 39). Although Brenda Lyshaug acknowledges Dean’s conceptualisation of reflective solidarity based on mutual recognition, she also finds it very formal and aptly offers this critique: ‘Her theory of reflective solidarity does not address the question of what enables us to adopt the sort of respectful and responsible stance required by

communicative engagement when we dis-identify with our interlocutors in significant ways' (Lyshaug, 2006: 84). Another problem related to Dean's account of reflective solidarity is defining its limits. We do not ask 'her' to be a lesbian or anticolonialist but do we not need to ask 'her' not to be anti-Kurd, anti-headscarf etc. and how will the communication efforts start despite these stances? It is very important to consider these questions when one of the main problems in Turkey is the strong secular and anti-separatist views of Kemalist groups.

With the concept of 'reflective solidarity', Dean rejects identity politics, the assumption of 'some feminine essence that grounds a collective identity', as the basis of solidarity, which necessitates agreement and consensus on all issues among women (Dean, 1997: 245–248). However, she also sees coalition and affinity, which bring women together around common goals and interests as inadequate; for her short-term, instrumental and tactical solidarities degrade the meaning of solidarity. She argues that 'they cannot keep us together; they do not provide the basis for a sustained relationship' (Dean, 1997: 249). She considers solidarity as 'our ability to connect with one another through the discursive questioning of the norms and practices of our common endeavors as well as through our continued confrontation with specific hegemonic cultural interpretations and relations of exclusion and domination' (Dean, 1997: 250). Dean's account, however, falls short of providing any practical means to achieve the necessary self-transformation towards establishing long-lasting solidarity among women.

These writers, with the exception of Morgan, discuss the potential of solidarity across differences, and their accounts seem applicable to the Turkish case, since the problem facing the establishment of solidarity in Turkey is primarily one of women's different political commitments and ideological beliefs. However, although all of hooks', Mohanty's and Dean's arguments seem very inclusive of every group of women, as they all focus on differences, their suggestions for how to achieve solidarity are ambiguous and finding ways to encourage women to come together is not easy. Dean herself warns of the potential risk in her conceptualisation, as reflective solidarity itself is a more abstract term than 'affectional' and 'conventional' notions of solidarity (Dean, 1996: 46), which might not encourage women to act together.

## Fieldwork Notes on Solidarity: ‘Long Live Women’s Solidarity!’

### Solidarity as an Ideal

Long live women’s solidarity! I heard this phrase several times during my fieldwork and realised once again how idealised and romanticised the concept of solidarity is. The concept of women’s solidarity is widely used by all groups of activists in Turkey: in their associations’ names<sup>61</sup>, in their meetings, in their protests, in their booklets, brochures and so on. Most of them see it as a goal to achieve and an ideal that is urgently needed in the women’s movement. In the interviews, we started talking about solidarity, both as a concept and its practical possibilities, after we had discussed fragmentation within the women’s movement in Turkey. Although my participants were mostly critical about each other on political issues in Turkey, when it came to talking about solidarity, as a concept, almost everyone, from all different backgrounds, was completely positive:

Halime Erçetin [feminist]: Solidarity is a magic thing, I think, something to keep in cotton wool. (Ankara, *Flying Broom*)

Emine [religious activist]: Solidarity is welcome in all circumstances. Long live women’s solidarity! I’m already open to it personally and the initiative as well. Solidarity, of course! Could there be a life without solidarity, emotionally speaking? (Laughs) But it really is... (İstanbul, *Muslim Initiative against Violence against Women*)

Şükran [Kemalist feminist]: We have to act with solidarity to be strong. We need to be together. Without solidarity we have nothing. We can’t do anything if we don’t trust each other. Solidarity is particularly important in Turkey for the advancement of women. (İzmir, *Association to Protect Women’s Rights*)

Navin [Kurdish activist]: Really, women’s friendship is important. Women’s solidarity is important. Women’s love is important. (Diyarbakır, *Selis Women’s Association*)

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<sup>61</sup> Generally, organisations’ names consist of the name of their city or town and women’s solidarity. A few examples:

Ankara Kadın Dayanışma Vakfı (Ankara the Foundation for Women’s Solidarity)

İzmir Kadın Dayanışma Derneği (İzmir the Association for Women’s Solidarity)

Antalya Kadın Danışma ve Dayanışma Derneği (Antalya Women’s Counselling and Solidarity Centre)

Çankırı Kadın Danışma ve Dayanışma Derneği (Çankırı Women’s Counselling and Solidarity Centre)

Erciş Kadınları Koruma ve Dayanışma Derneği (Erciş Women’s Protection and Solidarity Association).

Solidarity has positive connotations for almost everyone and there is nothing negative associated with it. Whenever I have talked to friends, working either in academia or elsewhere, I have heard nothing negative about solidarity from them either. Although no one had a clear definition of the term, one thing was clear to me: It is about emotions and about practice. Solidarity as a concept and its content are not well defined by activists in the women's movement either. It is a widely used term, sometimes excessively used, but when it came to defining what it means to activists, this was not an easy question to answer, even for some whose association's motto is women's solidarity. This is the case with the *Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation*, an established feminist organisation in İstanbul, of which Özge is an active member:

Özge [feminist]: Solidarity is something that is attributed lots of meanings and that I find too difficult to understand. I work in a place that constantly talks about solidarity, which is actually my work itself... A question comes to my mind: Whatever we call solidarity is accepting someone as however she is? I don't know. (İstanbul, *Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation & Istanbul Feminist Collective*)

One of the reasons behind the difficulty of defining solidarity is trying to do it in a theoretical context. This is because what is more important for these activists is how they feel when they are taking action – it is therefore more about practice. Hence, it was much easier to think about this concept when reflecting on 'doing' solidarity with others, rather than finding a definition for it in the abstract. As Steans argues, 'feminist solidarity is not a sentiment based on an abstract idea or ideal' (Steans, 2007: 739). Women's previous experiences might shape their understanding of the concept negatively in some cases. Religious feminist Melike, for instance, defined solidarity in a very positive way as a concept:

Melike [religious feminist]: Solidarity brings coexistence and it brings a common vocabulary. Feeling that you're not alone in your experiences, so that you're getting stronger. When you see it like this, woman's solidarity, all the victimisation, oppression and exclusion become apparent and solidarity is a tool to do something about them. (İstanbul, *Reçel Blog*)

However, when she thought about what she had been through during the headscarf discussions, she became negative, mostly based on her disappointment about the lack of solidarity she had felt:

Melike [religious feminist]: Solidarity could be something where one party supports the other when she suffers more. So, for example, the headscarf issue. When I think about them together [solidarity and headscarf], solidarity sounds like a lie. I don't know, it doesn't say much actually. It doesn't say what to do... When solidarity is said, we [religious women] feel like it's a lie. Such an ambiguous word again. Like it says something but actually doesn't. (İstanbul, *Reçel Blog*)

On the other hand, the word I heard most often when my participants, either Kurdish or Kemalist, were defining solidarity was power: An active member of the *Selis Women's Association* in Diyarbakır, Navin, a Kurdish activist, defined it as 'feeling power is on your side in every area and in every way.' Likewise, head of the *Women's Associations Federation of Turkey* based in Ankara, Kemalist feminist Canan Güllü said solidarity means 'to give your strength and energy to each other and transfer your share in the process.' Most of my participants think that, if women were ever to successfully act in solidarity, then it would bring power to the movement and would make women feel more powerful on a personal level and in their everyday struggles. As Dai argues, the goal of solidarity 'is to realize certain personal or collective interests that are not possible without establishing a relationship to others. Solidarity increases strength and influences confrontation with an adversary' and, therefore, defines solidarity as collective resistance and empowerment (Dai, 2016: 72).

According to my participants, when they think about how they experience solidarity it means seeing the shared oppression, having other women around when you suffer from something, and having a common interest:

Gülşen [feminist]: If you see many people, many women, many men, many children beside you, when you feel hard done by, this is solidarity. For example, we use solidarity in our association's name. Here is the main objective: Not just to provide information or educate a woman who feels bad about herself and is exposed to violence, but also to stand by her, walk beside her, touch her. I perceive solidarity that way. (Feminist, *İzmir Women's Solidarity Association*)

Lale [Kurdish activist]: When I think of solidarity, something comes to my mind. There is an enemy... that hegemonic state structure, masculine mentality. Therefore solidarity is sometimes a common interest and also when someone is oppressed and exploited, to succour her. So it's a common voice. (Diyarbakır, *Association of Women's Academy*)

This understanding of shared oppression and acting together against it is very close to Morgan's emphasis on solidarity, when she defines it as based on women's experience of oppression and the shared goal of eliminating it. Moreover, for some it is not just about the goals themselves but setting those targets together. Feminist activist Halime Erçetin, who has been working on building networks among women activists at *Flying Broom* in Ankara for many years, emphasises the importance of deciding the problems together by warning that 'it's not acting with solidarity otherwise, but rather mauling each other.'

Solidarity also represents collectivity rather than individual support for some activists. Religious activist Emine, for instance, emphasised that, when women are together, it 'thunders'. In a similar manner, Simten Coşar mentioned the importance of collectivity but as a feminist academic also offered this conceptual definition of solidarity, in which she placed the emphasis on the transition between individuality and one's organisational belonging:

Simten Coşar [feminist]: Solidarity means acting together for the same purpose in such a way that ensures transitivity of their individuality and organisational identity... So it's not just organisational gathering or issue based or just because you love each other. It's somewhere between individualism and the organisational level. It's a bit, this might sound romantic, an effort to do something together for the same ideals. (Ankara, *Academic*)

Simten Coşar's emphasis on women not coming together just because they love each other is similar to Dean's conceptualisation of affectional solidarity, which arises from your personal relationships. However, differently from Dean, Simten Coşar does not exclude affectional solidarity from her definition. It is included in solidarity but it is more than that. Dean defines both conventional and affectional solidarities as limited since they only include particular groups and suggests the need to move beyond them. I would argue that political solidarity should also



include one's own personal relationships, and that these solidarities should be valued; they are potentially as significant as the ones activists establish in their own political circles. It should be considered that, sometimes, these personal relationships can also be developed with women from totally different groups<sup>62</sup>. Activists' answers on collectivity are also very similar to hooks' understanding of solidarity: Even though what brings them together might still be common oppression, solidarity is based on the practical actions to end that oppression by having the same goals and the same ideals. Moreover, for Aksu Bora, 'solidarity is to see that thing that oppresses all of us and establish the link between different oppressions.'

For my participants, sustained collectivity, from the beginning to the end, is needed to fight different levels of oppression, while being supportive of each other. Head of *Capital City Women's Platform's*, Nesrin Semiz's, answer made a significant impression on me, while we were discussing the abortion ban debates during the interviews, as she defined solidarity in such a way that support does not come from common problems and/or targets:

Nesrin Semiz [religious activist]: Solidarity, in fact, is to support someone's rights, even if you don't believe 100% in the subject. Like abortion. I don't want any woman to have an abortion. In my belief, yes, this is a sin. However, this doesn't require the removal of this right from other women. Me supporting them is a form of solidarity. (Ankara, *Capital City Women's Platform*)

Nesrin's position on abortion is reminiscent of some feminists' approach to the headscarf ban, opposing the ban even though they were concerned about the Islamist restrictions on women's lives. It also shows that religious feminists are interested in other women's issues rather than just the headscarf, as is often assumed. They use both Islamic and liberal secular arguments and, as Arat argues, 'they act as a bridge between their conservative community and the secular feminists' (Arat, 2016: 127).

When I later read Avtar Brah's (1991) article, in which she talks about the power relations she has experienced, I remembered this narrative of Nesrin's. Brah writes

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<sup>62</sup> See Chapter Six for details.

that she is subjected to racism as an Asian woman who lives in Britain. However, she also holds a powerful position in relation to lower-caste women as a member of a dominant caste within her specific community. According to her, although she has different power positions and uses different methods to deal with them both, as a feminist she should be opposed to casteism as much as racism (1991: 172). Even though Brah does not mention solidarity, but uses it implicitly, it was this form of solidarity that Nesrin Semiz was also emphasising during the interviews. For both of them, it is about seeing the bigger picture and not accepting being a part of any kind of power relations. In Brah's case, it is about being against her 'advantageous' position and, for Nesrin Semiz, it is supporting another woman to retain the right to do something you personally oppose. This also fits with bell hooks' argument on how to establish and strengthen solidarity, in which she says that the acceptance of becoming involved in issues that do not necessarily affect you is the solution. Nesrin Semiz's definition also partially reflects Dean's idea of solidarity, in which reflective solidarity gives women the space to be the person they want to be and respects their differences while trusting each other enough to act together. On the other hand, understanding solidarity as full support for someone, or an ongoing commitment as hooks defines it, is problematic for some of my participants, as it is difficult to be together without being even slightly critical:

Özge [feminist]: Solidarity can become the other party's demand: To approve and stand by her, whatever she does. [It turns out to be] criticism-free and turns into affirmation whereas solidarity is a trust relationship that makes conflict possible. But what does this mean? And I think it surely describes something like that [affirmation]. (İstanbul, *Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation & İstanbul Feminist Collective*)

Berrin Sönmez [religious feminist]: Solidarity is not surrender. I don't see it as surrender. I see it as justice whether we agree or not... If I see the case as right, then I will act with solidarity. (Ankara, *Capital City Women's Platform*)

Therefore, the problem with solidarity begins if we understand it as always necessarily meaning full and unequivocal support for another's position, where critique is not permitted. As both of my participants mention, criticism of another's stance could be construed as an anti-solidarity act, whereas it could be argued that solidarity should entail being able to express one's hesitations and criticisms. Only

this can establish a fully open dialogue among women, which also brings with it the need for debate to try and understand each other's differences. Here, Mohanty's and Dean's conceptualisations are helpful, as they see all those criticisms, differences and particularities as the sources of solidarity, since those criticisms would pave the way to seeing the connections and commonalities. However, as idealistic as this sounds, the practicability of this embracing and inclusive solidarity is still ambiguous since it is not clear how it could be achieved.

### **'Woman' as a Unifying Category**

What does solidarity entail? In other words, what is this thing that could bring all women together? Dai argues that feminist solidarity should emphasise 'women's group identity because women are oppressed *as women*' (Dai, 2016: 72). Butler, however, justly criticises this position and argues that *women* has become a troublesome term, which causes anxiety, and she offers this critique:

... there is the political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term *women* denotes a common identity. Rather than a stable signifier that commands the assent of those whom it purports to describe and represent, *women*, even in the plural, has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety... If one 'is' a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered 'person' transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (Butler, 1990: 3)

Along similar lines, Haraway also criticises the argument that being 'female' should naturally connect women. She argues that having fragmentations among women, as well as feminists, in every single aspect has made the term 'women' elusive and even 'an excuse for the matrix of women's dominations of each other'. Therefore, she states that 'there is not even such a state as "being" female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices' (Haraway, 1991: 155). It is currently widely accepted that 'women' is not a *unitary* category. However, the question is: can it still be a *unifying*

category? As Martha Minow says, '[c]ognitively we need simplifying categories, and the unifying category of "woman" helps to organize experience, even at the cost of denying some of it' (quoted in Rhode, 1990: 617). Maynard also argues that 'woman' can be a unifying category as it is not rooted in essentialism but rather in social conditions, to which groups of women have been historically subjected, and which may differ under specific circumstances. Therefore, Maynard draws attention to common experiences, through which commonality and community might be established (Maynard, 1995: 275). Brah also suggests that developing a global feminist politics is possible, which necessitates a massive commitment to understanding different structures of inequalities (Brah, 1991: 172). When I asked my participants what solidarity entailed, most of them defined 'being a woman' as its basis. In that sense, an embodied view of 'woman' as a unifying category was seen as very important. It was interesting to see how identity politics is problematic for many Kemalist feminists and some feminists when it comes to religion and ethnicity, but it nevertheless constitutes the basis of women's solidarity since they tend to define 'woman' as the foundation of solidarity. Begüm, a feminist, for instance, says that being a woman, which is having a common female consciousness, could bring all agencies together. In the same way, feminists Bahar and Ayşe also mention being a woman and womanhood as the basis of solidarity, and Berrin Sönmez and Sebahat Tuncel emphasise the common experiences of women that could bring solidarity:

Berrin Sönmez [religious feminist]: I call this woman's interest. In different cultures, there are some things that affect all women, despite different lifestyles. If we see those things that affect all women, just because they are WOMEN [said with emphasis], despite their differences, we need to become partners for woman's benefit. (Ankara, *Capital City Women's Platform*)

Sebahat Tuncel [Kurdish activist]: Being a woman... I mean being a woman equals to suffer, to be the other, to be subordinated, to be the victim of power and hierarchy. This means poverty, inequality, violence, being excluded from society, discrimination... So it is a continuous struggle. Therefore common female identity. There should be a common struggle against all these impositions against our gender. (Ankara, *Member of Parliament – HDP at the time*)

Kurdish activist Lale's response is a very strong one, in which she also mentions common female identity but also emphasises the importance of understanding women's shared history and identity, which explains the need for solidarity:

Lale: If we can define a common female identity and uncover women's history, the reason why we need to act with solidarity should also be revealed. Perhaps a female friend in a very rich district in Istanbul can go out late at night but if a female friend in Konya cannot, the problem is right here. She is also a woman, you are a woman too but because of your family circumstances, maybe you are a little bit luckier, you might not be subjected to violence but this does not mean that you will never be subjected... It is also me who was raped there. It is my identity that was exposed to violence... Why don't we feel the pain? What is it that alienates us so much?  
(Diyarbakır, *Association of Women's Academy*)

I would argue that what 'alienates' women is having multiple reified identities. Women's ideologies, social class, ethnic and religious identities can alienate them, especially when they are understood as fixed terms and as fixing women's identities. Although I do agree with her from the bottom of my heart, working out how one can define a common identity of woman is still problematic. What is that definition going to include or exclude? Would every woman be happy with that definition? Is it not the main problem in the Turkish case that different ideologies are so strongly held and women end up being organised within different groups? For some of my participants solidarity is still seen as 'sisterhood' and it does not have much room for differentiation. Conceptualising solidarity based on womanhood is compatible with Morgan's definition of solidarity, where she defines it along the lines of global sisterhood. She emphasises a common condition that affects every woman since all countries have some degree of patriarchal mentality. Like bell hooks, Steans argues that establishing solidarity on the basis of 'shared victimhood' prevent activists from seeing their own particularities and understanding and appreciating their differences (Steans, 2007: 737). Therefore, is womanhood a sufficient foundation for solidarity? For some of my participants, it is definitely not. Dilvan especially emphasised that she would never act in solidarity just because of sharing the same gender, but rather sharing the same political views is important:

Dilvan [Kurdish feminist]: No, not being a woman, political stance and viewpoint. That's it. I'm not in solidarity with every woman. I

even fear some women's malice. So, not solidarity with every woman. (Van, VAKAD)

During the interview, Dilvan, as a Kurdish feminist based in Van, was very critical of the Kurdish political movement. She talked about how she felt an 'outsider' because she does not share the same political values and complained about the negative experiences she had had within the movement. She also mentioned some bad encounters she had had with Kemalist feminists because of her 'Kurdish' identity. Therefore, her personal history plays an important role in her negative, but also realistic, attitude towards not seeing woman as a unifying category. İdil also mentioned the impossibility of seeing 'woman' as a connective point, but rather women's liberation. Her example shows that there can be many reasons for women to act together:

İdil [feminist]: Not being a woman... Common oppression may be a factor to begin with, and it is most of the time, but I wasn't an oppressed woman. When I think about why I am here, and it's the same for many women... The priority for me was women's liberation and their free thought. This idea came and I organised through it. For someone else, something else can come to the fore. We have a friend, for instance, when we talk about eco-feminism, she says ecology is all right but I don't understand the feminism part. For me there is not enough left of the world's life. She says ecology but she lives like a feminist, she thinks like a feminist but she doesn't define herself as a feminist. It doesn't matter. We can produce something on the political ecology part together. How can I say it? There is not necessarily only one criterion for solidarity. There can be many. There can be many reasons but there must be one and it's the target of being able to walk together. (İstanbul, *Women's Solidarity Foundation*).

Seeing womanhood and sharing the same gender as the main criterion for solidarity is very limiting, although it is important to keep the common oppression to which women are subjected in our minds. Most of my participants defined the main reason behind acting in solidarity not as just womanhood but as subordination and suffering, which actually stem from being a woman:

İlknur Üstün [feminist]: I say many different forms of exclusion because of being a woman... I think basically what brings us together, the common issue, is a very strong exclusion based on gender, which is getting stronger, in many different places, albeit for different reasons. Anyone can set up its language differently. But even the

effort itself to do something about it can ensure taking part in this alliance. (Ankara, *Women's Coalition*)

Nebahat Akkoç [Kurdish feminist]: We meet in the common ground of womanhood. Commonality based on stories of violence, subordination. (Diyarbakır, *KAMER*)

Nesrin Semiz [religious feminist]: We're together because we're victims, not just because we're women. Really, we come together because we're uncomfortable with the existing situation, we're all uncomfortable. So, we are side by side to change it. (Ankara, *Capital City Women's Platform*)

Türkan [Kemalist feminist]: It's not enough being a woman. Common problems we've encountered, subjects that discomfort us, mainly inequalities. These can be more unifying. When we can speak the same language, when we can talk about the same problem, then the solution can be achieved together. (Ankara, *Association of Republican Women*)

In a similar manner, for some of my participants it is not only the reasons – which are mostly negative attributions of our gender – that bring women together, but also the solutions, common goals and hope about the future itself, which Kemalist feminist Canan Güllü defines as 'being a woman at [with] the common goal'.

Berfin [Kurdish feminist]: The world we imagine should be a bit alike indeed. I think this mobilises and brings us together, freer, better. A common purpose, I would rather say. The dream of the world we want, goals, what we want, yes, that's what brings us side by side... I'd say a common purpose. (Van, *VAKAD*)

Simten Coşar [feminist]: Not only caused by being a woman, but working together to eliminate inequalities, which we understand better as we are exposed to them and since they are originally caused by being a woman... I can describe it as a practice to combat inequality. (Ankara, *Academic*)

Emine [religious activist]: ... our hopes unites us... You want to change things. You believe that it can be more beautiful. You imagine how beautiful it can become if that happens. Those dreams and hopes bring you together. (İstanbul, *Muslim Initiative against Violence against Women*)

As a result, 'being a woman', exclusion, victimisation and subordination based on gender and also sharing the same goals and the hope of abolishing inequalities are the main common denominators to establish solidarity according to my participants.

Later, I asked them on which issues solidarity is possibly and easily established for them. Since they mostly defined solidarity as being based on commonality, I wanted to see whether issues that affect many women, such as violence, would be an easier way to bring women together. Some of them gave violence as an example, as I had expected. Türkan [Kemalist feminist] says: ‘I think violence is a unifying issue for women. Women unquestionably act together on that.’ She also adds that they can act in solidarity on issues related to politics, political rights, and women’s empowerment in economic terms. Head of *KAMER*, Nebahat Akkoç [Kurdish feminist], who has been working on the elimination of violence against women for 20 years, also reminds us that all women around the world work together on violence, whereas Aksu Bora thinks it is a delusion to believe that violence can create such a realm for women to act together: ‘First of all, it’s not true that violence unites women. As we say it too much, I guess we have started to believe in it but there are so many different practices that we define as violence.’ Nevertheless, she adds later that solidarity can be established on any subject and political objectives in the near future make it easier, although it sometimes might be the opposite, since conflicts can be intense in short-term political objectives. Hence, she thinks it is not easy to say that solidarity can be established on some matters but not on others in principle. On the other hand, religious feminist Berrin Sönmez says that it can be possible when related to general issues, when a principle is affected; likewise, for Nesrin Semiz, solidarity can be established in anything related to women, except for ideological things, and she adds:

Nesrin Semiz [religious feminist]: Issues that don’t include world-view, beliefs etc. but involves women’s right to work, women’s economic freedom or nursery rights. Actually, for all the rights women want to have in the Civil Code, solidarity can be established and we already act with solidarity on these kinds of issues as far as possible. (Ankara, *Capital City Women’s Platform*)

Their tendency to leave ideology out of the picture of solidarity is mainly due to the experiences they have had with the strictly nationalist and secularist Kemalist group during the headscarf ban discussions, when no middle ground could be achieved between them. Therefore, women’s personal and organisational histories with each other shape their understanding of acting together. In other words, it is not just the



issue that brings women together but additionally their experiences with each other affect their decisions about whether to come or not to come together.

Berfin [Kurdish feminist]: I mean, solidarity can be established on many issues. As I said, it's related to the aim of those associations, groups, collectives and their purpose... In general, there are already organisations where you can act with solidarity in everything and some where you can't. (Van, *VAKAD*)

But why would activists be willing to work with some groups/organisations but not all? Religious feminist Hidayet Tuksal mentions the difficulty of establishing sustained solidarity among women and is critical of women's lack of patience in understanding each other: 'Long-term sisterhood and solidarity couldn't be established on the issues, which require elaborate work, sympathy, and understanding because we don't allow time for these, but it can be established in the concrete things.' During the interview, she was mainly being critical about the lack of support she had received during the discussions around the headscarf ban in universities and public institutions and, likewise, feminists complained about the lack of support during the abortion ban process. It can be said that although almost all of my participants have very positive opinions about solidarity, when it comes to how to achieve it, they seem to prefer to stay in their safe spaces, their own organisations.

### **Successful Examples of Solidarity**

I asked my participants to tell me about events that came to their minds as successful examples of solidarity in Turkey. All the examples they mentioned were either ones in which they were actively involved or were about an issue that is related to their group, which also demonstrates the significance of identity politics in the women's movement in Turkey. According to some religious activists, one successful example was the group called 'We Look After Each Other', which was established by both veiled and unveiled women, believer and non-believer, in 2008 to raise awareness of the headscarf issue and the sexism women experience. They published a petition entitled: 'A "public sphere" that we cannot walk arm in arm is not our "public sphere"!' This was signed by more than a thousand women from many different groups. They say they oppose the racist subjection that veiled women face and the

sexist behaviours that non-veiled women experience and emphasise the importance of acting together against these inequalities:

...We know that the oppression and exploitation of women are facilitated by the created among them. And we think that the suppression of women can be overcome only in an environment of peace and by the practice of rights and liberties would be able to overcome the suppression over the women...We, the women reject the control over our bodies in the name of modernism, secularism, republic, religion, tradition, custom, morality, honor or freedom...We, the women are not suspicious of each other, but we look after each other! Because we, the women stay together with whom we recognize! (We Look After Each Other, 2008)

A participant in this group, Nur, religious activist, emphasised the importance of the group in our interview and added, 'we witnessed that the walls between women collapse, sometimes'. The group lasted for four years. One of my participants, Melike, who was also involved with the group's meetings, explained how it ended:

Melike [religious feminist]: Disengagement happened during the third period of the AKP, after the prohibition of alcohol and conservatism had been intensively discussed. Those intense discussions, like, can we sit together at a drinking [alcohol] table? Can we break fast together? Such provocative and categorised [questions]. So, after we started labelling and categorising each other, in fact, it was always like this in the group, we fell apart. (İstanbul, *Reçel Blog*)

It is very clear that the group intended to establish solidarity and achieved it for a while but that it ultimately collapsed. Melike's narrative shows that the group failed because members expected reciprocity for their actions and because fixed and reified identities negatively affected the future of working across differences. The general political atmosphere in Turkey also affected activists' reactions to each other and the headscarf issue lost its priority among non-veiled activists. Some activists of course felt solidarity during the 'We Look After Each Other' period but the way in which it ended shows that it was more about support given to veiled women than a sustained solidarity.

According to Kurdish activists and some feminists, the women's revolution in Rojava and the Women's Initiative for Peace are examples of big achievements in

the women's movement in Turkey. During the Syrian Civil War, in 2012, the Syrian government withdrew its forces from three Kurdish areas and left them to local militias. People's Protection Units (YPG) and Female Protection Units (YPJ) started to defend Kurdish areas in Syria and liberated Kobane from ISIS in January 2015. Clashes continued in Rojava, a region in northern Syria that consists of three cantons, Kobane, Afrin and Jazira, between 2011 and 2012. The Syrian Democratic Kurdish Party (PYD) announced regional autonomy in January 2014 and the Constitution of Rojava, which is based on direct democracy, gender equality and freedom of religion, was approved. For Kurdish people, Rojava became the centre of the Kurdish revolution.

During this period, women fighters played a very important role. There is an impressive story written by Wes Enzinna, the *New York Times* journalist, who went to Rojava for a week to teach journalism to young Kurdish men and women. One day he met with a Yazidi student who had grown up outside Syria, in a small village in Western Iraq. In 2014, ISIS attacked his village and butchered thousands of his neighbours. When he and his family were trapped on a mountain for four days, YPJ fighters created a path for them to escape, while fighting with ISIS. Enzinna quotes his feelings after this: ““The battle made me think of women differently,” he told me. “Women fighters – they saved us. My society, Yazidi society, is more, let's say, traditional. I'd never thought of women as leaders, as heroes, before”” (Enzinna, 2015: n.p.). While I was conducting interviews in December 2014 and January 2015, Kobane was besieged by ISIS until YPG and YPJ took control again on 26 January 2015. Lale, my Kurdish participant, questioned perceptions of YPJ and emphasised the long history of the Kurdish [women's] movement, which is the underlying reason for the emergence of YPJ:

Lale: [People] have been mentioning women's resistance in Kobane. YPJ. Such a perception is created, as though YPJ emerged in a day. It didn't actually. Nobody knows about its 40-year history. What is this? A perception... If someone writes the history of Kobane, how does he write? ISIS came, the people there were armed and fought? As simple as that? But as long as history is in the hands of the rulers, it will be written like this. (Diyarbakır, *Association of Women's Academy*)

In her recent work on the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, Al-Ali points out the hypocrisy of the media and how these female Kurdish fighters are presented and celebrated as Amazonian, exotic and sexy warriors, whilst classifying the PKK, the organisation from which they actually stem, as a terrorist group (Al-Ali in *The Daily Campus*, 2016). One explanation for my feminist participants' perspectives on this respect, who opposed the PKK but supported the YPJ and women's revolution in Rojava, can be that these women were fighting against the tyranny and abuse of the ISIS, a terrorist organisation, and thus were celebrated, whereas the PKK has been killing civilians for its cause, which cannot be as easily justified. Along with Lale, all the Kurdish activists and some feminists gave Kobane and Rojava as examples, while we were talking about the achievements of women:

Fidan [Kurdish activist]: At the moment, for us, I don't know, maybe the world sees it as well, there is a serious women's revolution in Kobane. It might be transferred very simply to the outside, but no. There is a serious women's revolution over there by fighting, resisting to death. Because of this resistance, ISIS started to decline actually. I think this resistance is an example to us and to many women. (İstanbul, *Rainbow Women's Association*)

Betül [feminist]: The Kurdish women's movement incredibly inspired the feminist movement with Rojava's women's revolution. It is a women's revolution and it needs to be highlighted. It was an example to us, hope for us that showed how challenging and effective women could be, when they can take the floor in politics. (Ankara, *Ankara Feminist Collective*)

Another example given by Kurdish activists and feminists was the Women's Initiative for Peace, which was established in 2009 against male domination and war. Therefore, surprisingly, they support both Kurdish fighters and peace activists. The Women's Initiative for Peace aims to support negotiations with Kurdish people and opposes the relentless violence that has been happening in the region. On their website, they define themselves as 'women who have come together to struggle for peace' and add:

We are a group of women who come from different social and political backgrounds; who have different identities, beliefs, and sexual orientations, yet we all live in the same country and thus are affected by the same kinds of violence. We have all been struggling against war and male dominated violence for many years. We know

exactly what war means for women. (Women's Initiative for Peace, 2013)

They also say that, although those who profit from the war want to make people believe that 'the Kurdish issue' is insoluble, they do not believe this to be true (Women's Initiative for Peace, 2013). Some Kurdish activists gave the Initiative as a successful example of solidarity. However, Lale emphasises that it is not just Kurdish women who work on it:

Lale [Kurdish activist]: There is the Women's Initiative for Peace. It's not just a Kurdish women's movement or Saturday Mothers<sup>63</sup>. There are feminists, the Kurdish women's movement and other different circles. Therefore, I believe that with much stronger diplomacy more joint alliances can be experienced. (Diyarbakır, *Association of Women's Academy*)

The platform indeed brought different women groups together – leftists, Kurds, feminists, religious women – and created common ground for women from different social and political camps (Fisher Onar & Paker, 2012: 387). It was, however, perceived as a Kurdish group by Kemalists and thus disregarded.

It is very clear from all these examples that solidarity is something you feel while experiencing it, rather than relating yourself to it on a theoretical level, since all these success stories of solidarity were ones in which the activists themselves were actively involved. However, in none of these examples did women from all the different political groups come together. Is this even possible?

### **'Being Together Despite Our Differences'**

Steans defines differences as sources of solidarity and also considers conflict as a tool and a creative resource that might demonstrate where common ground can be established (Steans, 2007: 730, 736). It is mostly accepted within the women's movement in Turkey that acknowledging differences is an inevitable step towards women's solidarity. It is unclear, however, what the phrase 'women's differences'

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<sup>63</sup> Saturday Mothers is a group who gathers together every Saturday at 12pm in the city centre of Istanbul. Even though the mothers had to end their silent protest for their 'lost' loved ones during the military coup era of 1980s and the state of emergency era of 1990s in Turkey, the group have started gathering again in 2009 and their demonstrations are in its 636th week now, in 3 June 2017.

refers to. 'Being together despite our differences' is a motto which is embraced mainly by feminists, but it is also used by different groups of women in Turkey, in their meetings, rallies, protests and journals/magazines to emphasise the importance of women's solidarity despite their differences. During the interviews, however, I realised that some feminists, in particular, find the motto highly problematic. What Aksu Bora sees as a problem is the word '*despite*' and she offers this critique: 'if we are together *despite* our differences, it's not togetherness. So it's not a good thing.' Most of my participants share her views:

Betül [feminist]: Being together despite differences is still important... but... I think more like *with* our differences, rather than *despite* differences. We need to move beyond the negative connotations of 'despite'. (Ankara, *Ankara Feminist Collective*)

Lale [Kurdish activist]: Yes, I care very much about what we call differences but that 'despite' word is so problematic. It isn't meaningful to highlight it... Despite them, as if they [differences] obstruct. (Diyarbakır, *Association of Women's Academy*)

Hence, their main criticism was the negative connotations of the word '*despite*' has. Another problem related to the motto was mentioned by religious activists, who, along with Kurdish activists, are the group mainly defined as 'different'. Some thought that the motto creates a delusional idea of homogeneity within groups, making the assumption that there are no differences within the groups and therefore that one person can represent a whole group. Furthermore, such a position fixes an individual within a specific category:

Emine and Nur [religious activists]: [Emine starts] Honestly, I feel uncomfortable with these things, as I've been encountering them a lot myself as well... [It's like] let's put one Kurd, one religious woman, one veiled woman... one Armenian. What are we doing? How did we go beyond [cultural] mosaic rhetoric? How much in fact did we otherise each other? While saying take a stand against otherisation, we did this. So I don't lean towards these. [Nur continues] I mean, are religious people homogeneous? Are Kurdish people homogeneous? Veiled women homogeneous? So we take one from them and put her there. It's so problematic. (İstanbul, *Muslim Initiative against Violence against Women*)

Hidayet Tuksal [religious feminist]: Well it was once the meetings' sine qua non. It was making people sick. Why? Because you're here just for your difference. Someone said recently in a meeting, 'one

from the homo category, one from the veiled category, one from the Alevi quota.' True. As if we have no commonality with other people and we're just about our differences. It's a psychological mantra. (Ankara, *Capital City Women's Platform & Academic*)

Berrin Sönmez [religious feminist]: I mean, a veiled woman is not a single organism. I have to say this all the time... So, you're wearing a headscarf, you're somewhere, saying something, so you're a part of AKP. It's intolerable! That totalising modern perception has surrounded everything indeed. There are women with so many different political views among religious women. There are women with the same political view, who are involved in different parties. So will people get it in time? They don't understand, it's just changing its shape: the tendency to categorise people. (Ankara, *Capital City Women's Platform*)

These narratives are also accurate representations of what identity politics have come to and why they are problematic. As argued earlier, identity politics create fixed and exclusive identities, as well as internal – group members' – and external – other groups' – expectations that individuals will be and behave in a certain way and comply with the attributed norms of the aforementioned identity categories. Another result of this for religious women is that they accuse feminist activists of assuming all veiled women to be a part of the AKP. This tension creates another layer of fragmentation between religious women and feminists:

Aksu Bora [feminist]: There are things that we've politely ignored over the last few years. Things about the AKP government. Some of our veiled friends are not from the AKP [and] there are people who identify veiled women as members of the AKP and criticise them. Hence they [religious women] are very angry... The young veiled women, for instance, who are the founders of Reçel Blog... are so nice and their hearts were broken. Because it seems like the old stuff again: Kemalists, nationalists and leftists are on the same side, veiled women on the other. In fact, it's not like that but it's very difficult to separate. Also, the polarised agenda of Turkey at the moment doesn't allow it. (Ankara, *Academic*)

This is one of the main problems when discussing differences among women. Even though, in this study, I still categorise them based on their political orientation and identity categories, since most of them used these categories for themselves during the interviews, we should not ignore intra-group differences among women. Also, as

Hidayet Tuksal ironically said, emphasising only those differences among women locks them into their ‘homogeneous’ spaces.

For some other activists, the motto ‘being together despite our differences’, is associated with an unrealistic approach and sounds like a cliché, which is not achievable in practice. Furthermore, even if it can be achieved, it only lasts for a short period of time, given its inherent superficiality:

İdil [feminist]: Well, it sounds like some sort of cliché to me, which makes things superficial, like delivering yellow flowers on 8 March<sup>64</sup>. If we don’t specify what kind of differences we’re talking about, then such a thing isn’t possible. (İstanbul, *Women’s Solidarity Foundation*)

Dilvan [Kurdish feminist]: It’s very artificial and unrealistic... like very sloganistic. Very difficult in reality. (Van, *VAKAD*)

Berrin Sönmez [religious feminist]: What does it mean? I think it often means hypocrisy when you see what’s done afterwards... It seems like standing side by side... but it’s a self-seeking adjacency. For that moment, for that task. Then it doesn’t continue. (Ankara, *Capital City Women’s Platform*)

The solution, as İdil suggested, is to name the kind of differences we are talking about. Being together *across/with* differences, is the term I prefer to use, because it is more inclusive and positive, and thus necessitates discussing these differences fully and openly in the first place. One of the biggest problems in the Turkish context, however, is that Kemalist women mostly do not recognise differences and therefore working across differences becomes irrelevant. My Kemalist feminist participant, Şükran, for instance, did not accept the motto itself and argued that there was no need to emphasise differences, by which she means emphasising ethnicity and religion and thus, I argue, this ideology blocks the potential for working across differences in Turkey:

Şükran [Kemalist feminist]: It means nothing to me. I don’t like it either, I don’t agree with... I hope it means our different ages, our beauty or our height! I don’t think women use it knowing its

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<sup>64</sup> She is referring to the tendency to celebrate 8 March like Mother’s Day in Turkey, where almost all companies advertise their new products and suggest that people buy gifts such as jewellery, kitchen utensils or at least flowers for women to celebrate, rather than emphasising women’s rights.



meaning... They [those women who use it] harm the women's movement. (İzmir, *Association to Protect Women's Rights*)

Unfortunately, this is a very typical Kemalist comment. It was shared by another Kemalist participant of mine, who refused to talk about differences. I could not even ask the question about what she understands by this motto because she was slightly aggressive around the topic. Their approach is not associated with a political position that highlights the limits of identity politics, as discussed in this research. On the contrary, the majority of Kemalist feminists see womanhood as a unitary category; therefore, they still advocate identity politics, and approach religious and ethnic differences among women as divisive, since they are seen as a threat to the country's secular unity. Therefore, they are aware of the existing differences among women but do not think they matter. As Butler argues, this universalistic claim based on a shared/common female identity is normative and exclusionary and she offers this critique, which accurately represents the Kemalist refusal to accept women's multiplicity: 'the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of 'women' are constructed' (Butler, 1990: 14).

Apart from these examples, the rest of my participants were positive about the motto, 'being together despite our differences', and they saw it as a source of solidarity and alliances among women. Kurdish feminist Berfin, for instance, emphasised its importance as a potential for solidarity among women and said that women are victims of different things, although these are different aspects of the same system. Navin, also a Kurdish activist, mentioned that not everyone will be the same, even though they work in the same organisation and the same women's movement. Thus, speaking together despite women's difference is particularly important. Although feminist activist Yelda was also very positive about the motto, she also highlighted the importance of praxis – fulfilling it with your demeanour in your everyday life:

Yelda [feminist]: It's a good, important thing. There isn't any other group like women, who are together despite their differences... [but] it should be fulfilled well. I mean, if you say this and then stand somewhere that excludes Kurdish women and the Kurdish language,

bin it. Or humiliating lesbian women and being homophobic, or with working-class women, making classism, throw it away. (İstanbul, *Women for Women's Human Rights – New Ways*)

Betül, on the other hand, emphasised that none of her feminist friends start their relationships with 'I stand by you despite our differences' motto. She argued that it only came to life when those differences hit them; if something happened, then they would think about it.

The head of *KAMER*, Kurdish feminist Nebahat Akkoç gave their experience in *KAMER* as an example of 'being together despite our differences'. She emphasised that in their grassroots organisations they focus on the different identities in that province and try to include volunteers from those groups. Therefore, she noted: '[in our meetings] there are women with a headscarf, mini skirt, women with all beliefs who speak all kind of languages – Turkish, Arabic, Kurdish'. Nebahat mentioned that new *KAMER* volunteers spend a year to raise awareness of different types of violence in their lives, discuss discrimination and learn how to actively listen to each other. In addition, they have supervision sessions, where every two months they gather together to address their problems with each other facilitated by psychologists. Bringing women with deep hostilities together to struggle against gender based violence makes *KAMER* an impressive example, considering the fact that it emphasises non-violent activism in a militarised ethnic nationalist context. On the one hand *KAMER* is stigmatised as being apolitical, if not a traitor to the cause, by political Kurdish women, on the other hand *KAMER*'s Diyarbakır background is simply enough to be seen as a PKK supporter. In such a conflicted environment, working with different groups of women, including but not limited to Kurdish, Turkish, Arab, Sunni, and Alevi, *KAMER* manages to present an independent stance (Arat & Altınay, 2015: 12, 16).

Another important example of 'being together *with* differences' was the feminist *Amargi Women's Cooperative*<sup>65</sup>, which used this motto and principally emphasised women's different identities other than gender and opened their platform to any

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<sup>65</sup> Feminist journal *Amargi* that I mentioned earlier while discussing the publications I had collected to structure my interview questions included women from *Amargi Women's Cooperative* when it was established in 2006 but in 2010 the journal became independent.

woman to highlight the lack of freedoms women experience on various grounds. It was established in 2001 by young Turkish academics, politicised Kurdish women and transsexual women and for more than ten years it was a home to women with different identities to discuss their particularities and encounter with each other. *Amargi*'s feminism was not only about women's rights but had a very intersectional approach problematising different kinds of power relations and forms of domination. Thus *Amargi* adopted an anti-militarist approach as well as being against of racism, nationalism, homophobia, heterosexism, classism etc. One of the reasons behind *Amargi*'s ability to attract diverse groups was one of its founders, Pinar Selek<sup>66</sup>, a well-known sociologist who has worked on vulnerable communities in Turkey such as transsexuals, sex workers, street children and Kurdish people. Therefore, *Amargi*'s sustained and strong emphasis on diversity brought these vulnerable and marginalised identities together. Therefore, as Özakın (2012: 77–78) emphasises, the identities with additional problems such as being Kurdish or Armenian, being a transsexual or lesbian/bisexual woman were welcomed with more enthusiasm in *Amargi*. However, religious women were not a part of this group. Moreover, there were other notable absences, particularly women who hold some power, such as heterosexual Turkish women or those with upper-middle class had problems in finding a place in *Amargi* and volunteers with hegemonic identities occasionally felt intimidated (Özakın, 2012: 121–127). Therefore, despite its success to bring women together from different social locations, *Amargi*'s emphasis on 'being together with differences' prioritised 'common marginalised identities/differences'. Hence it did not successfully create a realm where women with different degree of social power could come together to connect and establish solidarity across their differences.

During the interviews, after mainly positive discussions on solidarity with my participants, we started to talk about the barriers to solidarity and discussed whether they saw ethnic or religious identity, social class and ideological differences among them as barriers. Some of them defined these as sources to establish solidarity, as

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<sup>66</sup> During her PhD work on the peace process between the Turkish State and the PKK, Pinar Selek was taken into custody, where she was exposed to violence, to reveal the members of the PKK in Europe and later unjustly accused of being a suspect of an explosion that happened at the Spice Bazaar in İstanbul in 1998, which was later recognised an explosion caused by leaked gas, not from a bomb (Özakın, 2012: 62). After almost 20 years and being acquitted and the verdict being overturned, her court case still remains open.

Mohanty and Dean suggest, although some saw them as important obstacles. And a question came to my mind: Is solidarity even necessary?

### **Differences as Obstacles to Solidarity: Is Solidarity even Necessary?**

During the interviews, I preferred to leave the discussion about barriers to solidarity until the end of our conversations to see first what they thought about solidarity itself before focusing on the obstacles to it. Therefore, after talking about solidarity as a concept, how they define it, what is needed to achieve it, what it is based on and what they think are successful examples of it, I asked my participants whether they see any ethnic, religious, ideological or class differences among them as barriers to solidarity. Some said that they did not see their differences as obstacles. Young Kurdish activist Navin who actively takes part in the Kurdish movement in Diyarbakır, for instance, highlighted masculinity as a barrier, not women's different identities:

Navin [Kurdish activist]: No, definitely [differences are] not... obstacles and if we unite, they're afraid of this actually. Male mentality puts barriers in front of us or we can say masculinised women and it's the worst one. The masculinised women type. This puts barriers in front of us. I think first we need to get rid of this. Otherwise, religion, sect, race are not obstacles. When you capture the spirit as a woman, when you capture women's friendship, nothing can prevent us. (Diyarbakır, *Selis Women's Association*)

In line with Navin's comment, feminist Ayşe makes similar points. She is an experienced activist who used to work in the leftist circles previously joining to *The Foundation for Women's Solidarity* in Ankara. She discussed problematic side of focusing on class, ethnic and religious differences when it comes to women's problems and rather emphasised womanhood as the basis of solidarity:

Ayşe [feminist]: According to my point, it shouldn't be... There's this perspective: She's already a rich, bourgeois woman, who cares if she gets beaten up? I don't see it that way. That bourgeois woman has problems too. She has problems about her womanhood, problems at her house, her work, a restaurant she goes to. Of course, apart from the woman problem, we will have conflicts around class issues. But the woman problem is something else. Me not being with her because she's from another class doesn't sound right to me... [ethnic and religious differences are] the same, when it's the woman problem, it doesn't change. (Ankara, *The Foundation for Women's Solidarity*)

Her experiences within the leftist circles, who prioritised class struggle and argued that women's problems could be solved within socialism, surely had an impact on Ayşe's feminist stance and her present emphasis on seeing womanhood as a connective concern. It is very clear from these narratives that, even though women have different identities, activists think that they can still meet on the ground of shared identity as women and see the broader women's problems regardless of class, ethnicity, and religion and this is what will make the movement powerful. In fact, two of my participants specifically defined those differences as the basis of and opportunity for solidarity that could create a convenient environment to move away from identity politics:

Nesrin Semiz [religious feminist]: No, they're not barriers to solidarity. In fact, there is solidarity since these [differences] exist. Otherwise, everyone would be the same, like the support veiled women give to each other. This is not solidarity. This is solving our common problem. There's not a difference there, everyone's problem is the same. Everyone's suffering from the same thing, and being hurt. So you try to do something together. But it is solidarity when others who are completely different, who don't think and believe like you, support you and add strength to your strength. Frankly, if there were no differences, there wouldn't be a word like solidarity. Then we would be all the same. I'm glad we're actually not. (Ankara, *Capital City Women's Platform*)

Simten Coşar [feminist]: No [they're not barriers to solidarity]... On the contrary, it's the starting point for alliances... When you find the space where oppressions based on identities touch each other, it turns into solidarity. There, you begin to move beyond identities. (Ankara, Academic)

These views resonate with Jodi Dean's (1996) and Chandra Mohanty's (2003) analyses by defining the differences and diversities among women as sources of solidarity. They recognise women's 'common differences' and, by doing so, they see what sort of commonalities women also have, and this paves the way for solidarity. Most of my participants, however, defined all these differences as barriers to solidarity that need to be overcome. Here, I especially want to give voice to my participants and listen to their stories about differences among women:

Gülşen [feminist]: Yeah, they are obstacles, absolutely obstacles. In some organisations, solidarities, there are some women who don't want Kurdish women or women from minority groups with Kurdish

origins and this makes me very uncomfortable. They behave as though they're the owners of the country. They speak like 'I', 'you', 'they' or 'we'. Yet they live in this country like I do. As much as I have a say in things, they should have too... I'm not a minority but I know very well how they're being treated... I mean, as though Kemalists and nationalists are the owners of this country and others are transients. Command them, rule them. (İzmir, *İzmir Women's Solidarity Association*)

Nur [religious activist]: Class differences, definitely. Ethnic differences, maybe... If I define myself as someone with rural origins, I will have difficulty connecting with a middle-class women's movement. Because my experiences of womanhood will be so different from theirs. Since my experiences will be so different from those of an urban, middle-class woman who grew up in an intellectual family, I cannot be in solidarity for everything anyway. Maybe I will be in solidarity on violence. Maybe I'll be in solidarity on women's subordination in academia and women's subordination [in general], but I cannot act with solidarity about family dynamics. Because the dynamics of my family will be very different and the dynamics of their family will be very different. (İstanbul, *Muslim Initiative against Violence against Women*)

Özge [feminist]: I think they are barriers... Even in a very small organisation, when you discuss voluntary work, a very rich woman who can devote her life to this and you who have to work and study etc. You are at war with her not seeing her position as a class privilege... but rather defining it more as a sign of volunteering. And this will seriously change your way of communicating. Likewise, ethnicity, the Kurdish movement. You need to reckon with your whiteness. There is no other way and your whiteness blocks acting with solidarity, even if you don't want... or another position... which defines whatever the Kurdish movement does as right without any criticism involved and defines their critical position by the whiteness of the feminist movement and I think [this is in fact] the whitest position. (İstanbul, *Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation & Istanbul Feminist Collective*)

These three narratives show how ideological differences, class differences and identity politics in Turkey play an important role in activists' perceptions of each other and they directly shape the future of women's solidarity. Gülşen's and Özge's responses in particular illustrate how the political polarisation in Turkey has had a great impact on activists' approaches to diversity and differentiates their stance on issues related to other groups. What Özge said is especially important because sometimes a tiny criticism can be seen as an anti-solidarity act, whereas solidarity can only be established through an open dialogue among women, enabling them to

understand each other. Among other issues, class differences were emphasised by almost all of the groups as obstacles to solidarity. According to Aksu Bora and Melike, these particularly arise depending on the type of activity women want to organise:

Aksu Bora [feminist]: Depending on what you do. I mean, if you do something like a meeting... then you're doing something primarily verbal, supporting middle-class and college girls, anyway, what is a woman from the lower class gonna do there as she will have difficulties speaking... So then it becomes an obstacle. But if you organise in a neighbourhood, you do something else. So then it wouldn't be an obstacle. It depends what you do and how you do it. (Ankara, *Academic*)

Melike [religious feminist]: It depends on what kind of a struggle you set up the solidarity for. If you act like there's no such thing as class, then class of course turns into an obstacle against solidarity. For instance, if you don't look back and think, we do these events but why are there no women from the lower classes, if you don't ask this question, then it becomes an obstacle. (İstanbul, *Reçel Blog*)

Therefore, how activists organise also has an important effect on achieving solidarity across differences; but, more than that, as an active member of *VAKAD*, Berfin, a Kurdish feminist, emphasises it is not women's differences that are obstacles but rather not acknowledging them is. Melike's answer clearly shows that if activists ignore other women's belonging at their events, this ignorance is likely to turn into a failure to achieve solidarity. Moreover, the dynamics within organisations and personal relationships could also be reasons for the lack of solidarity. Aksu Bora, for instance, gave the example of *Amargi* and said that arguments were never due to identities or ideological differences but rather occurred as a result of the ways of doing work and organisational ethics, and therefore were very personal. However, she said, those arguments then translated into ideological differences. İlknur Üstün emphasised that, even though it is not easy, there have been occasions when activists overcame the difficulty of coming together across their differences:

İlknur Üstün [feminist]: From time to time, of course. I mean, I know at some meetings I couldn't bring them together because of the tension. It's not very easy but these are deep discussions and we continue when we can overcome this. When we can't, we reach a deadlock, and the general political agenda in Turkey supports this blockage. Experience of fighting about many things all this time is

the main tool to overcome these and we have managed to do it. But it's not always easy... There's a difference between starting the conversation and proceeding together, and starting from scratch. (Ankara, *Women's Coalition*)

Therefore, communication and interaction among activists is one of the most important keys to achieve solidarity because, as İlknur Üstün said, once women achieve some level of interaction it is much easier to continue.

After almost all of my participants talked about solidarity as something very important that needs to be achieved in the women's movement, as a final question I asked them whether sustainable and ongoing solidarity is something that is possible and/or necessary for everything related to gender equality. Surprisingly, the majority of my participants, from all different groups, said no, it is not necessary, mostly because it is not possible. One of the reasons for this was mentioned by Betül, feminist. She said that if someone starts with this maxim, then they will sacrifice a lot from their own policy. Religious feminist Melike and Kemalist feminist Nazan both said they could work together on one subject but not another and that this is enough and thus emphasised the importance of issue-based alliances among women. Halime Erçetin, feminist, also highlighted the fact that she could feel in solidarity with lots of women around the world but also could not with many others. This was surprising because some of these women had earlier defined solidarity as a magical thing, a very important concept and a source of strength. On the other hand, personally, I share the same views: Even though solidarity is a very powerful concept, I do not think it is possible to expect women to act together on every problem relating to different groups among them. bell hooks' definition of solidarity, in particular, as an ongoing commitment is only idealistic. Some of my participants explained the reasons behind this impossibility and lack of necessity:

Özge [feminist]: I can't help myself thinking why it would be necessary... Of course, we need to have alliances in certain things, we must act together... To oppose the Penal Code all together as women is of course important... but we surely don't need to act together for everything. It can't be, it's not possible. No movement is like that... It's something about doing politics... So I think it's not necessary, we don't necessarily act together. Because I think this [necessity] itself can make doing politics impossible. I can't say my own words [i.e. express my own views] in order to say something in common with



Capital City Women's Platform or with the Kurdish movement but I have women to say my words with and I think they need to be said. (İstanbul, *Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation & İstanbul Feminist Collective*)

Emel [Kemalist feminist]: I care about the transformational power that being together brings but the question about whether it's necessary made me think. It's not that necessary. Because unfortunately coming together raises a hierarchy at the same time. That hierarchy is destructive and divisive, a very male thing. Because what happens there? When we come together, a knowledge hierarchy is established. Our feminist big sisters. Everyone becomes like if they're saying things right, cos there are confirming authorities. (Ankara, *Turkish Women's Union*)

These two interrelated narratives underline the importance and the impossibility of speaking one's own views openly in order to establish sustained solidarity. Özge emphasises the impracticality of doing politics together all the time, because it limits a group's policies as activists would need to sacrifice some of their own beliefs to find a middle ground with others. This is the reason why most of the activists have difficulty with solidarity in particular, as I have heard from different activists on a couple of occasions. Aksu Bora said, however, that if women ever manage to overcome the problems and talk to each other without hiding any of their ideas, then solidarity will be sustainable. Along the same lines, but focusing on the internal hierarchies, what Emel said is just as significant. She emphasises that the pressure of working together with well-known activists might silence some, especially young, women. Religious activist Nur approached the issue from the opposite perspective and argued that her own views might be inadequate to say something for others or join their campaigns, since she does not feel experienced or knowledgeable enough:

Nur [religious activist]: Even if it was possible, wouldn't it be inadequate, me saying something on an issue I've never experienced? I mean, it sounds problematic to me. You know, I ask myself what I can say for LGBT people. I can only say [problematise], at most, killing transsexuals and transsexual sex workers at work and on highways and the invisibility of this is persecution, but what can I do to claim their rights? (İstanbul, *Muslim Initiative against Violence against Women*)

It is interesting to see that, although all of the activists state that sustained solidarity with every group as unnecessary, their justifications are quite different. From

women's different understandings of organisational ethics to a generation gap, many differences play a role on their approaches to solidarity. The result, however, is the same. They prefer to work with women in their own political circles, where they have similar problems as well as similar goals or, as Nesrin Semiz's answer indicates, they need to come together if there are concrete problems that intersect different women's interests:

Nesrin Semiz [religious feminist]: Does it need to be continuous?... it's not necessary to do something constantly. When it's necessary, yes, we need to come together but otherwise, if there are no problems, we'll come together for afternoon tea then (laughs).  
(Ankara, *Capital City Women's Platform*)

However, an interesting point was made by one of my feminist participants, Yelda, who argued that differences among women are not fragmentations but a sign of clarification, and therefore she thinks that women do not need to be together all the time:

Yelda [feminist]: I don't see things as fragmentation after 2005–2006, but clarification. Depending on the perspective. I think people see things as very traumatic. As if we would need to act together all the time. I don't think so. It is a problem if we don't do it when it's needed but as a Kurdish woman I don't need to act together with Kemalist women all the time. It's not possible, we'd kill each other. Or, with a religious woman, I agree on one thing but disagree on another. Everyone goes their own way and does their politics from their spaces... Then, ah, the women's movement is fragmented. Of course, it will be! There's nothing more natural. Because different things are happening. I mean, the type of violence that a Kurdish woman is experiencing and a woman from Aydın<sup>67</sup> is not the same. There are similar things but, if we fetishises it, there would be discussions like in the conventions. They would bring the police<sup>68</sup>, just because she spoke Kurdish and got somewhere totally absurd... You can't unite women with your commonality fetishism. This is the Kemalist perspective. (İstanbul, *Women for Women's Human Rights – New Ways*)

Therefore, according to her, women do not need to act together and this is not something negative but is very natural. On the other hand, some of my participants

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<sup>67</sup> A city in the western part of Turkey.

<sup>68</sup> In one of the Women's Shelters and Consulting/Solidarity Centre Conventions, Kemalist women called the police and Kurdish activists had to leave the meeting early, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

still emphasised that solidarity is very important and necessary for the women's movement. They argue that it is the biggest power apart from the law, which has the potential to influence people; all the inequalities, injustices and exploitations women face are linked and solidarity is the way to resist and the key to overcoming them. They also added, however, that it is difficult to establish solidarity within the current political atmosphere.

## **Conclusion**

I argue that solidarity cannot be taken for granted when women start a new event together, because not everyone necessarily experiences or feels it in the same way. Moreover, sharing the same gender is not enough to act in solidarity with every woman. I agree that it is important to see the bigger picture and realise the links between the different oppressions and exploitations that women face. Moreover, solidarity establishes an environment that reminds women that they experience oppression because of their gender and it gives them a space to resist together, a realm for collective political action. However, expecting other women to act with you in return for your support of them only brings tension to the women's movement and very short-term support that generally leads to disappointment for both parties. Accepting from the beginning that women do not need to be together constantly and do not need to support everything that other groups think and do is a very fruitful way forward that could bring solidarity in the end. Because, as I said earlier, solidarity is about how activists feel while engaging in activism; it is what they experience. It should not be seen as a goal or an end in itself. Making solidarity a compulsory condition, a must do, endangers the potential of solidarity itself. This problem was mentioned by one of my religious feminist participants, Berrin Sönmez, in relation to the headscarf discussions: 'Our [feminist] friends who gave individual support to us did not make it explicit in front of society. Now they all say, "we've supported you", when they ask for a signature on an issue.' Therefore, it is very clear that activists ascribe a lot of meaning, responsibility and expectations to women's solidarity, which eventually becomes disheartening. Butler asks:

Is unity necessary for effective political action? Is the premature insistence on the goal of unity precisely the cause of an ever more bitter fragmentation among the ranks? ... Does 'unity' set up an exclusionary norm of solidarity at the level of identity that rules out

the possibility of a set of actions which disrupt the very borders of identity concepts, or which seek to accomplish precisely that disruption as an explicit political aim? (Butler, 1990: 15)

She argues that ‘without the presupposition or goal of “unity” and the compulsory expectation that feminist actions should stem from an agreed and unified identity, those actions can begin more quickly and seem more congenial to a number of “women” for whom the meaning of the category is permanently moot’ (Butler, 1990: 15). During the interviews, I wanted to discover whether solidarity means something different from coalition building/alliances to my participants. Even though some activists used them interchangeably, when I asked if they refer to something similar or different, most defined them differently. According to most of my participants, alliance means doing something together in order to reach a goal, a common behaviour, being able to act together, a coalition building in which you can productively work together and then separate after you achieve your goals and come together again for something else if needed. On the other hand, they see solidarity as something more advanced because it is expected to be sustained. It is a final step to achieve as one my feminist participants, Halime Erçetin, said: ‘I think there are steps, like first to see you’re not alone in what you’re going through, to hear, to make it visible, to act, to organise. Solidarity is the last step.’

On the basis of what my participants said and how it is discussed in the literature, I argue that alliances among women may be a more fruitful way forward that would work better for the women’s movement in Turkey, and these could provide an important realm for women to develop solidarity. Therefore, in the next chapter, I would like to discuss how solidarity and alliances are seen as different and/or inclusive in the literature and consider the potential of alliances for the women’s movement in Turkey. Moreover, I suggest transversal politics as a future possibility to establish dialogue among women and to illustrate the ways of working across differences.

## CHAPTER SIX

### COALITION BUILDING/ALLIANCES: AN ALTERNATIVE TO AND A REALM FOR SOLIDARITY

You don't go into coalition because you just like it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that's the only way you can figure you stay alive.

Bernice Johnson Reagon, 2000

Divisions among women run very deep in Turkey, especially since negotiations with the Kurds came to an end, and unfortunately women still have numerous prejudices against each other. However, differences are inevitable and women need to acknowledge that the idea of woman as a unitary category is no longer acceptable. I argue that one of the reasons behind this fragmented movement is the strong identity politics in Turkey, and in the women's movement in particular. In this chapter, I discuss coalition building as the most productive way forward for women's organisations in Turkey. Coalitions could establish an environment that is based on intersectionality, not fixed and narrow identity politics, and they could also create a convenient realm for activists to develop a degree of solidarity. Coalition politics, therefore, will be discussed as a potential way to move beyond identity politics and pave the way for transversal politics.

Discussions about coalitions in the literature are quite different from those on solidarity, since coalition is not romanticised or idealised in the same way. Solidarity, either political or otherwise, has an emotional connotation: You feel solidarity. If you are in trouble and there are other women around you, you emotionally experience solidarity. Coalition, however, is more concrete, strategic and instrumental. When I started reading the literature on coalition building and alliances, I was confused about the concepts since the terms are either used interchangeably or the difference between them, if any, has rarely been discussed. Three works, however, differentiate between these two concepts: Burns uses coalition as one type of alliance (Burns, 2006: 2), while Johns et al. define alliance as one of the four forms of coalition (Jones, A. et al., 2001: 209). Lisa Albrecht and

Rose Brewer (1990), on the other hand, offer two different definitions for the concepts. They define coalition in the same way as it is typically conceptualised in the literature:

Coalitions have traditionally referred to groups or individuals that have come together around a particular issue to achieve a particular goal. These groups operate autonomously and are usually not connected to each other; most organizations have different agendas as well. Upon completion of the shared goal, coalitions often dissolve and organizations go back to their own work. (Albrecht & Brewer, 1990: 3)

Their understanding of alliances, however, is in tune with how solidarity is usually defined in the literature: ‘a new level of commitment that is longer-standing, deeper and built upon more trusting political relationships’ (Albrecht & Brewer, 1990: 4). Allies, they argue, are therefore people who struggle together for a longer period on more than the one single issue that motivates coalitions. Thus, coalitions are short-term solutions, whereas they view ‘alliance formation as ongoing, long-term arrangements for more far-reaching structural change’ (Albrecht & Brewer, 1990: 4).

One of the reasons behind my decision to use coalition and alliance synonymously is the difficulty of translating the concepts from Turkish to English, as I discussed earlier. Moreover, the notion of alliances in Albrecht and Brewer’s work is how my participants define solidarity – more about an emotional investment. The successful examples of coalition building in the women’s movement in Turkey explicitly suggest that women who worked for a single cause and in the short term were, beyond any doubt, also allies at that time. They failed, however, to establish sustained solidarity for numerous reasons that I will discuss later in this chapter. Thus, based on the literature and my fieldwork, I would argue that coalition building and alliance have very similar meanings and therefore I use these concepts interchangeably and synonymously.

## **Conceptualising Coalition Building/Alliances: Getting out of our ‘homes’**

### **Coalition Building as a First Step in Moving Beyond Identity Politics**

As Kimberlé Crenshaw says, identity politics has given strength, a sense of community and intellectual development to groups such as African-Americans, other people of colour and gays and lesbians. However, as discussed earlier, she argues that the problem with identity politics occurs not because it fails to transcend differences but due to its tendency to ignore intra-group differences. She emphasises that ignoring the differences within groups contributes to conflict and tension among groups (Crenshaw, 1995: 357), which is certainly the case within the women’s movement in Turkey. Moreover, as Judith Butler states, establishing foundational identities as the basis of coalitional politics prevents the emergence of unpredicted ones. Therefore, she argues that:

coalitional politics requires neither an expanded category of ‘women’ nor an internally multiplicitous self that offers its complexity at once... An open coalition, then, will affirm identities that are alternatively instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure. (Butler, 1990: 16)

Coalition politics, I argue, could be an answer to the question of how to move beyond identity politics by offering an alternative arena for activists to unite, even if temporarily, in pursuit of a common goal, where they acknowledge each other’s subjectivities as well as commonalities. Although I do not approach coalition politics as an ultimate and ideal way to do politics, I still argue that it has significant potential to bring activists together who would otherwise prefer to stay within their identity-based organisations.

Bernice Johnson Reagon, a scholar, singer and social activist, is one of the well-known names whose work on coalition politics is widely cited. Her most significant work on coalition was in 1981, when she gave a speech at the West Coast Women’s Festival on the importance and necessity of coalition work, which was then published in *Homegirls: A Black Feminist Anthology* in 1983. As Howard says, Reagon defines coalition as people working with others who are different from

themselves. However, she neither ignores nor celebrates the differences among groups and she does not see them as sources of loving relationships either. Rather, Reagon defines differences as necessities for developing shared principles among groups (Howard, 2011: 4).

In her speech, Reagon criticises women's organisations for creating homogeneous safe spaces based on narrow identity politics and warns women that there can no longer be a place that is 'yours only':

We've pretty much come to the end of a time when you can have a space that is 'yours only' – just for people you want to be there... There is no hiding place. There is nowhere you can go and only be with people who are like you. It's over. Give it up. (Reagon, 2000: 344)

In order to explain the differences among women and the nature of coalitions, she uses the 'barred room' as a metaphor. She says women decide that inside the barred room they will only deal with X or Y or Z. Therefore, only Xs or Ys or Zs can go in, which would make it a nurturing place. She acknowledges the potential necessity of this: Being X or Y or Z might be very difficult in this society, where the rulers may want to kill you. So you find a place with a barred door and check people before letting them in. Reagon warns, however, that there is no chance of surviving if you stay inside the barred room, women's nurturing space (Reagon, 2000: 344–345). She continues her metaphor of the barred room with examples of racism, where her arguments on coalition appear. She says that if you and all the others in the barred room are white and if you do not want others to think that you are racist, you would let some Black women into your room. They are compatible with your checklist, and you let them in. However, there would still be other Black women outside, different from the ones on your checklist. They would knock on your door to be let in as well, as the room is for Xs, all Xs. She says this is when the room becomes uncomfortable and does not feel like home anymore, and this is where the coalition begins. Because, according to her, coalition work cannot be done at 'home' but has to be in the streets, while not seeking comfort:

Coalition work is not work done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets. And it is some of the most dangerous work you



can do. And you shouldn't look for comfort. Some people will come to a coalition and they rate the success of the coalition on whether or not they feel good when they get there. They're not looking for a coalition; they're looking for a home! They're looking for a bottle with some milk in it and a nipple, which does not happen in a coalition. You don't get a lot of food in coalition. You don't get fed a lot in a coalition. In a coalition you have to give, and it is different from your home. You can't stay there all the time. You go to the coalition for a few hours and then you go back and take your bottle wherever it is, and then you go back and coalesce some more. (Reagon, 2000: 346)

Coalition work is not necessarily as sustained and ongoing a commitment as solidarity. It is a realm where you come together, despite all of your differences, in order to 'survive', or reach the targets you are aiming for, but you can go to your 'safe spaces' – homes – as soon as you finish your job there. Therefore, as Gamson defines coalitions, they are 'temporary, means oriented, alliances among individuals or groups which differ in goals' (Gamson, 1961: 374). He argues that in a coalition there is generally little value in consensus but also a requirement of tacit neutrality. According to Gamson, the pursuit of power is the ideal basis for coalitions, since it helps to achieve very different and incompatible goals in the future (Gamson, 1961: 374). Coalition building in politics and in social movements, however, are different because, in the latter, the main objective is mostly not about power, but rather challenging power structures and is more about reaching certain objectives, which can easily be seen in the coalition-building examples of women activists in Turkey, such as changing existing laws, which I will discuss in detail later.

What brings women together is problematic for Reagon, as she says that common experience based on womanhood is a myth that the women's movement has perpetuated. Here she is being critical of white feminism by using the 'barred room' metaphor again. She says if you are the same kind of [white] women, as in the barred room, then having that same definition of 'woman' may be correct. However, as soon as other women decide to come into your room, since they are also women, they would find the definition of womanhood in the barred room totally different. Because "woman" in that space does not mean "woman" from your world. It's a code word and it traps' (Reagon, 2000: 347). By saying this, she is emphasising differences within those groups that are based on similarity. For her, coalition work

is about moving beyond sameness and it can be achieved, across differences among women, by working together. Reagon argues that, in order to have effective coalition work, there should not be prioritised issues decided by some women while putting down those of others. Women need to deal with more than one thing at a time. Nevertheless, respecting the space within coalition must be learnt, since talking about every concern together will not bring a solution (Reagon, 2000: 350). As Bunch argues, there must be a common cause, a broadly or narrowly defined shared goal for coalitions in order to motivate different groups to work together. Once groups come together for a common cause, understanding diversity at a deeper level will have a greater probability of success (Bunch, 1990: 50).

As Chandra Mohanty argues, Reagon's account of coalition building is based on 'the cross-cultural commonality of struggles, identifying survival, rather than shared oppression, as the ground for coalition' (Mohanty, 2003: 117). Mohanty sees Reagon's emphasis on moving out of the barred room as recognition of imperial history and narrow identity politics. She discusses Reagon's arguments on 'women-only' and 'woman-identified' spaces and argues that what is significant to Reagon is the exercise of violence by creating a legitimate inside and an illegitimate outside in the name of identity, which is enforcing a premature form of sisterhood or solidarity. Common experiences based on womanhood create an illusionary unity, whereas the significant thing for Reagon is the meanings attached to gender, race, class and age through history (Mohanty, 2003: 117–118). Therefore, according to Mohanty, Reagon's particular location of those intersections lead her to discuss coalition building, while emphasising the exclusive structure of 'homes' (Mohanty, 2003: 119). These issues that Reagon is criticising reflect the case in the women's movement in Turkey. Women's organisations are, mainly, separated through their narrow identity politics; divisions based on religious, ethnic and ideological differences limit the potential of doing work together and exclude other women who are not on their lists from their safe homes – the 'barred rooms'.

Like Reagon, Susan Bickford (1997) also discusses problems attached to those political 'homes' and their exclusive structures. She argues that, in recent decades, groups based on identity have created places such as coffee houses, cultural centres, shelters and newspapers, where political groups are formed and people feel like

insiders. Therefore, these platforms empower their members. However, these places, ‘homes’ as Reagon calls them, turn out to be based on exclusions and/or a false sense of sameness and homogeneity (Bickford, 1997: 123). One of the positive outcomes of identity politics, as Yuval-Davis argues, is intersectionality since it permits attention to the ‘differential situatedness of different social, economic and political projects’ (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 4) and coalition building can provide a convenient environment for activists from different social locations to gather in order to achieve a shared goal.

### **Coalition Building as a Realm for Intersectionality**

Intersectionality as a term was first suggested by Black American feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, when she used the term to emphasise the intersection between gender, class and race while discussing black women’s employment in the USA (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 4–5). Crenshaw defines intersectionality as ‘the multidimensionality of marginalized subjects’ lived experiences’ (cited in Yuval-Davis, 2011: 8). Intersectionality scholars examine ‘systems of power and oppression based on multiple forms of difference that are interconnected and cannot be understood in isolation from one another’ (Tripp, 2016: 382). This indicates that identities cannot be understood on their own and cannot be pulled apart from each other. People hold multiple identities and can be privileged in one power relationship while marginalised in another (Tripp, 2016: 382–383). Yuval-Davis analyses the literature on intersectionality and argues that many Black feminists only use the intersection of race, gender and class; some others add categories such as age, disability, sedentarism and sexuality (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 8). Yuval-Davis argues that intersection of categories is not additive but rather mutually constitutive. Intersectional analysis should not be limited only to marginalised groups but rather should be applied to all members of society because ‘intersectional analysis does not prioritize one facet or category of social difference’ (Yuval-Davis, 2016a: 369).

Elizabeth Cole (2008) discusses coalition building as an effective tool and model for intersectionality. She develops her argument based on her review of ten archived oral history interviews with feminist activists who engaged with coalition work.

Cole and Luna<sup>69</sup> argue that, rather than only focusing on the pain and effort that coalition work necessitates, as Reagon does, we need to remember that many women, whether involved or not, benefit from those coalitions (Cole & Luna, 2010: 95). Although coalition work forces activists to recognise the differences among them once again, it also reveals their hidden similarities. Cole argues that one needs to view intersectionality at a macro level, which will illuminate some shared common experiences of groups that the system of categorisation presumes to be fundamentally different (Cole, 2008: 445). She asks, ‘Which social identity groups are “natural” allies?’ and argues that feminist activists’ narratives show that taken-for-granted political alliances within similar groups are both straightforward and problematic. Because, even though groups seem homogeneous, they may still include differences based on generation, immigration status, social class and sexuality and therefore include subgroups (Cole, 2008: 445–447). Cathy J. Cohen’s narrative is a good example of this situation. Cohen, one of the interviewees, who mainly works on queer issues within communities of colour, says that, since her organisation focused on queer issues, they received many criticisms from older Black organisations and those criticisms led members of the group to debate and rethink their broader and inclusive agenda. This shaped their understanding of group identity:

It wasn’t about kind of running away in any way from race, because we are all kind of strong, proud Black women. But it also meant understanding that just because someone shared a racial identity with us didn’t mean that they also shared a political identity with us... And it was kind of an important and growing moment in understanding the distinction between the two. (Cohen in Cole & Luna, 2010: 80)

This could also be defined as a strength of intersectionality. As Ludvig argues, intersectionality focuses on ‘otherness’ and therefore it avoids the essentialised, fixed and homogenised characteristics of identities. It highlights other differences between women, rather than just focusing on gender (Ludvig, 2006: 246) or race, religion, ethnicity, etc.

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<sup>69</sup> A later work by Elizabeth Cole, with Zakiya Luna, which is also based on the same feminist activists’ narratives.

Apart from its focus on the similarities among and within groups, Cole and Luna state that there are two other types of obstacles to coalition: ideological differences and unequal power across the collaborating groups. They argue that, even temporarily, ideological differences must be worked through in order to increase the number of supporters of coalitions (Cole & Luna, 2010: 86). Cole warns that different level of power within coalitions may threaten alliances among groups. Activists' narratives show that power inequalities among groups sometimes make them strategically choose short-term alliances (Cole & Luna, 2010: 94). However, cooperation is one of the keywords to overcoming this risk. By giving examples of the narratives she analyses, she argues that in successful alliances both parties recognise their differences in understanding the issues and the resources they put into the partnership. More importantly, the key factor is the willingness of those with more power, financial or political, to relinquish their privilege and share the decision-making process by giving value to all the opinions of the less powerful (Cole, 2008: 448). Cole and Luna state that almost all of the activists they interviewed emphasised the importance of establishing solidarity with oppressed people around the world (Cole & Luna, 2010: 84), which may show that the ones with power are willing to relinquish that power. Steans reminds us that standing in solidarity with women who are struggling for their rights not only means to 'understand the oppressive relations in which women are enmeshed well enough to serve them in the struggle against those relations, but to also make available to them discursive and material resources to assist in that struggle' (Steans, 2007: 739). She argues that only in this way will activists be able to understand their differences and offer help to women in need (Steans, 2007: 739).

Cole and Luna argue that the narratives show them once again that feminist activists see identities, from which political alliances arise, as crafted lived experiences and the personal experiences attached to them. Many activists say that their early experiences, especially childhood ones, taught them to feel empathy towards people with different social identities and to see the connections across differences (Cole & Luna, 2010: 81). Moreover, activists who have taken part in coalition work already see the necessity of coalitions and have the ability to recognise similarities across differences, which increases their skill and capacity for engagement (Cole & Luna,

2010: 85). As a result, Cole and Luna argue, activists' narratives reveal two conclusions for the future possibilities of coalitions:

On the one hand, activists drew on their autobiographies, imaginations, and intellects to construct broad and inclusive political identities capable of inspiring connections and solidarity, both within seemingly 'natural' constituencies and externally across groups deemed different. On the other hand, their organizing strategies suggested the importance of dealing with difference explicitly in order to sustain the collective activities necessary for accomplishing political goals. The synthesis of these two conclusions, as instantiated in these activists' work, represents a fruitful way forward for feminist organizing across difference. (Cole & Luna, 2010: 96)

From this point of view, inclusiveness is the only way to establish wide-ranging social change and in order to make it effective women need to recognise that social categories are historically based and constructed through power and that our lives are a result of all these different intersections (Cole, 2008: 451). Cole, therefore, argues that political intersectionality can be a source of successful alliances:

Based on the insights of activists building coalitions across diverse groups, I argue that our understanding of intersectionality cannot be limited to identifying differences between social identity groups. We must also employ the analytic tool of political intersectionality in order to understand race and gender as social processes, and to find and make use of similarities arising from these social and historical processes that cross-cut identity groups. (Cole, 2008: 451)

As Bickford argues, the recognition of multiplicity has led feminists to question 'home' as a model of political togetherness, and they have realised that political togetherness does not necessarily need to depend upon an already-existing group with fully shared experiences, but can rest upon alliances and coalitions. Coalitions are a particular type of togetherness, which is not simply determined by one group's identity. Hence, they are a good example of democratic intersubjectivity (Bickford, 1997: 123–124), which also strengthens their potential to foster transversal politics.

### **Coalition Building as a Potential Tool for Transversal Politics**

Transversal politics as a way of working across differences is what I hope that women activists in Turkey can achieve, since it suggests a way of doing politics without falling into the trap of the universalism versus identity politics duality.

Transversal politics was popularised in Anglophone world by Nira Yuval-Davis but the concept has also been taken up by many other feminists (Cockburn, 1999, 2014; Collins, 2009, 2017; Lim, 2015). Yuval-Davis took the term from Italian feminists, introduced it in English and has used it widely in her works. In the first paragraph of one article (1999), she writes that, like many other activists, she had been in search of a name to define what they are doing, such as unity in diversity, and finally she found it at a meeting organised by Italian feminists in Bologna with Palestinian and Israeli women in 1993. Later she learnt that transversal politics had been used in left-wing politics in Bologna for a while. She emphasises that transversal politics has been developed as an alternative to both the ethnocentric and exclusionary universalistic politics of the left and also essentialist identity politics that homogenise the individual into the collective and concretise boundaries between groups. Another important scholar who consistently uses transversal politics in her works, Cynthia Cockburn, emphasises the importance of transversal politics in her collaboration with Lynette Hunter:

It answers to a need to conceptualise a democratic practice of a particular kind, a process can on the one hand look for commonalities without being arrogantly universalist, and on the other affirm difference without being transfixed by it. Transversal politics is the practice of creatively crossing (and re-drawing) the borders that mark significant politicised differences. It means empathy without sameness, shifting without tearing up your roots. (Cockburn and Hunter, 1999: 88–89)

Transversal politics are based on three important principles. The first is standpoint epistemology, which recognises that different positionings will create different opinions and that all of them are important, although all of them are also unfinished – as opposed to invalid. Therefore, the only way to reach the ‘truth’ is to engage in dialogue between people from different positionings. The second principle is the ‘encompassment of difference by equality’, which means that notions of difference should encompass notions of equality. This serves to create non-hierarchical relations among differences, to respect the positionings of others and to acknowledge differences in social, economic and political power. Thirdly, Yuval-Davis states that transversal politics accepts that people’s positions, identities and values might differ. In other words, people who are in the same group or collectivity can be positioned differently based on their class, gender, ability, sexuality or stage

in the life cycle, and also people with similar positioning/identity might differ based on their social and political values. Therefore, the boundaries of transversal politics are common values, such as ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’, rather than common positionings or identifications (Yuval-Davis, 1999: 94–95, 2010: 278, 2011: 21).

As Yuval-Davis argues transversal politics are dialogical politics (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 110). However, activists should not see themselves as representatives of their constituencies – ‘representing all women or even all women from their national/ethnic/religious/etc. collectivity’ – but rather advocates who work to promote their cause and still have to be conscious of other positionings, both in their own constituencies and others – the multiplicity of one’s particular positioning. Also, those advocates do not need to be members of the constituencies since it is the message that is important, not the messenger (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 120; 1999: 96; 2016c: 345). This representation, which Yuval-Davis sees as the main problem of identity politics, can only be solved, then, with activists’ acknowledgement of their positionings: seeing themselves only as advocates. An example of this occurred during my fieldwork with one activist, Fidan, who supports the Kurdish women’s movement and works for a Kurdish organization but is not ethnically Kurdish herself; Fidan is Turkish. When I asked her, during the interview, whether she preferred to be called a feminist, she emphasised ‘their’ differences from feminism by emphasising the Kurdish women’s movement’s particular aims and struggles. Therefore, even though she does not share the same ethnic identity, she is an advocate of the Kurdish women’s cause. Transversal politics emphasises that it is not the identity of the messenger that is important, but the message and the communication.

Butler argues that ‘dialogue is culturally specific and historically bound, and while one speaker may feel secure that a conversation is happening, another may be sure it is not. The power relations that condition and limit dialogic possibilities need first to be interrogated’. She warns about the risk of assuming that the all parties in a dialogue hold equal positions of power (Butler, 1990: 14–15). This, as Brandt notes, could be seen as a problematic aspect of transversal politics. She argues that transversal politics does not carefully examine the problems of power inequality between women in coalition work regarding their visibility, recognition, social



advantages etc. (Brandt, 2015: 497–498). It could be said, however, that transversal politics had already anticipated this problem and offered an answer to this issue by emphasising the importance of constructive dialogue. In their early work, Cockburn and Hunter state that transversal politics does not deny differences within groups and is sceptical about an undifferentiated sense of community. It supports constructive dialogue, which is the core of transversal politics: ‘it is about foregoing the dream of finding a common tongue and ... taking up the challenge of learning each other’s languages’ (Cockburn & Hunter, 1999: 91). Yuval-Davis explains how to achieve this with the terms ‘rooting’ and ‘shifting’:

The idea is that each such ‘messenger’, and each participant in a political dialogue, would bring with them the reflexive knowledge of their own positioning and identity. This is the ‘rooting’. At the same time, they should also try to ‘shift’ – to put themselves in the situation of those with whom they are in dialogue and who are different. (Yuval-Davis, 1999: 96)

The core requirements for rooting and shifting, then, necessitate reflexivity and empathy. Despite her criticism of transversal politics, Brandt also acknowledges that transversal politics rejects aspirations for unity and homogeneity, by emphasising ‘rooting’ and ‘shifting’, and acknowledges groups’ various positionings and partial knowledges. Transversal politics, then, argues that ‘the mobilized group is a political construction, not a natural given’ (Brandt, 2015: 497).

Yuval-Davis also reminds us that transversal politics does not assume that every conflict of interest is reconcilable or that dialogue can be achieved without any boundaries. She adds that it is difficult to define the boundaries of coalition politics because, based on specific historical conditions, feminist campaigns can vary so much and also there are so many different strands among feminists, which lead to very serious differences of opinion. Moreover, political campaigns vary from – ‘a tight formal organisation to an informal network, from an ideological alliance to a single-issue-based coalition’ (Yuval-Davis, 1999: 96). On the other hand, since transversal politics does not privilege any positioning or identity, it can simultaneously prioritise different projects undertaken from different standpoints. For example, activists can prioritise the legalisation of abortion at the same time as prioritising a campaign against forced sterilisation. Yuval-Davis emphasises that

both events can take place at the same time, organised by the same groups. She warns, however, about the possibility of lack of human and financial resources, when groups need to choose and there is no transversal way of choosing only one of them (Yuval-Davis, 1999: 98). The point where transversal politics stops is ‘where the proposed aims of the struggle are aimed at conserving or promoting unequal relations of power, and where essentialised notions of identity and difference naturalise forms of social, political and economic exclusion’ (Yuval-Davis, 1999: 97).

In her later writings, Yuval-Davis continues to emphasise the importance of common values for transversal politics and argues that ‘transversal politics developed as an alternative to identity politics and are often aimed at establishing a collective “us”, across borders and boundaries of membership, based on solidarity with regard to common emancipatory values’ (Yuval-Davis, 2010: 277–278). She also discusses what is necessary for transversal politics to continue, and the importance of understanding that:

the relationships of the feminists participating in such dialogue are often not symmetrical, that some of them are more critical of their national collectivities than others, but they all share feminist politics, respect each other and look for ways to transcend, if not to transform, their national and ethnic conflicts. (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 110)

This is where one potential problem of applying transversal politics in the women’s movement in Turkey occurs, especially because of Kemalist groups’ preconceived opinions about the Kurdish women’s movement and religious women. Their reluctance to embrace, and sometimes even to talk about, women’s differences is the main barrier to achieving any dialogical politics. However, as can be seen in the examples of successful alliances among women, which is identified by my participants and discussed later in this chapter, coalition building creates the potential for women to develop transversal approach to their differences.

In her works, Yuval-Davis offers an intersectional analysis, where gender, race, ethnicity and other social categories are enlaced and constitute the particular experiences of groups and individuals. Thus, as Byrne has recently noted, her analysis of transversalism is also ‘a kind of intersectional praxis which attempts to

transcend any single subject position' (Byrne, 2014: 113). In her elaborated work on politics of belonging, Yuval-Davis argues that transversal politics should be based on mutual respect and mutual trust. Activists, therefore, should care about each other, as in caring about transversal allies, not the needy (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 199). This form of feminist politics of belonging is based on a feminist ethics of care, as Yuval-Davis (2011) argues, which is a normative ideal that transcends other traditional forms of the politics of belonging, such as citizenship, nationalism, religion or cosmopolitanism. It is the most significant and necessary form of the politics of belonging, which does not 'neglect to reflect upon the relations of power not only among the participants in the political dialogue but also between these participants and the glocal carriers of power who do not share their values who need to be confronted, influenced, and when this is not possible – resisted' (Yuval-Davis, 2016a: 378). In this understanding of transversal politics, it is not only established as an alternative to identity politics but also as a form of and prerequisite for a feminist ethics of care. Respect for differences requires a symmetrical relationship. Thus, activists' care for each other should not be based on dependence but on political trust: 'that others share the value system and that they undertake daily practices that sustain the project. Such a political project of belonging needs to cross borders and boundaries of class, gender, lifecycle stages, ethnicity, nationality, religion and ability' (Yuval-Davis, 2016b: 436).

Transversal politics has also been taken up by many others, which shows its utility in variety of contexts and justifies its standing as being of contemporary value. Cole and Philips (2008), for instance, explain the policy of transversalism in gender-mainstreaming practices in Latin America, specifically in Brazil and Ecuador. They argue that both governments follow an explicit policy of transversalism to accommodate gender issues in their programs by initiating dialogue and participatory mechanisms to reach a wider audience and to ensure that women's issues are addressed in policy development, particularly in order to tackle violence against women. Lim (2015) on the other hand addresses transversal politics in the context of transnational feminism in Hong-Kong and how to establish solidarity in a pluralist feminist community. She argues that in such a highly transnational place as Hong Kong, transversal politics provides a productive space for feminist negotiations by keeping universalistic claims and identity politics out. Transversal

politics has also been consistently used and developed by a prominent Black feminist scholar, Patricia Hill Collins, to discuss solidarity within the Black women's movement (Collins, 2009, 2017). In her most recent work, she addresses violence as a social problem, which, she argues, requires a sophisticated account of transversal politics that takes intersecting power relations into consideration to understand its complexity (Collins, 2017).

In her analysis, Collins demonstrates the significance of transversal politics in understanding groups' histories as intersectional. Collins argues that transversal politics conceptualises 'intersecting oppressions and group behavior in resisting them' (Collins, 2009: 368). She identifies six issues that are significant to the potential effectiveness of transversal politics, which clearly shows its difference from identity politics and why transversal politics is still needed. First, in transversal politics binary thinking, where groups must be *either* one thing *or* the other, such as either being an oppressor or oppressed, either racist or an antiracist individual, a sexist person or not, is rejected. Instead, transversal politics requires *both/and* thinking, where individuals and groups hold multiple positions: 'Depending on the context, individuals and groups may be alternately oppressors in some settings, oppressed in others, or simultaneously oppressing and oppressed in still others' (Collins, 2009: 265). The second, and related, issue is about transversal politics' approach to groups that are historically constructed. Rather than understanding groups as 'fixed, unchanging, and with clear-cut boundaries', in transversal politics groups are perceived as fluid and thus group boundaries are not fixed but instead there are bonds, overlaps and intersections across these boundaries, as well as internal differences and boundaries within the groups themselves (Collins, 2009: 265–266). The third issue is related to the 'internal process of self-definition'. This critical self-reflection is significant for transversal politics. Therefore, each group and individual should be aware of their own particularities and responsibilities: 'coalitions are built via recognition of one's own group position and seeing how the social location of the groups has been constructed in conjunction with one another. Empathy, not sympathy, becomes the basis of coalition' (Collins, 2009: 266). This point leads us to the fourth issue associated with transversal politics, which is that groups cannot define themselves in isolation. This means that group histories are relational and interdependent (Collins, 2009: 266–267). However, the fifth issue of

transversal politics is that the acceptance of being interdependent does not mean that group experiences are equivalent. Rather, each group is characterised by ‘distinctive constellation of victimization, access to positions of authority, unearned benefits, and traditions of resistance’, based on ‘the overall placement of the group in relation to other race/gender groups, as well as variations within the group stemming from class, citizenship status, sexuality, and age’ (Collins, 2009: 267). This necessitates acknowledging women’s varied positions, their access to power and intra-group distances, which is neglected by identity politics. The final important dimension of transversal politics, related to the fifth one, requires the acceptance of the dynamic nature of coalitions: ‘Coalitions ebb and flow based on the perceived saliency of issues to group members. This non-equivalency of group experience means that groups find some oppressions more salient than others’. In a specific context, for instance, a group can regard gender as the most salient, in another one race, class etc. can play an important role (Collins, 2009: 267–268). I argue that this is where one of the most important features of transversal politics lies. It accepts that coalitions with some groups are just not possible, thus does not recreate essentialist views on working across differences. Transversal politics does not offer consensus at all costs and it does not necessitate total agreement to form coalitions among women.

Because Yuval-Davis emphasises the strength of transversal politics lies in common values rather than common political action, she does not classify coalition building as being part of transversal politics. She warns that, in rainbow coalitions, ‘differential positioning might dictate prioritizing different political actions and strategies’ (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 197–198). I argue, however, that although it is not wholly possible to achieve transversal politics within coalition work, this is still the best platform, particularly in Turkey, for transversal politics to be cultivated. As Collins argues, since in transversal politics groups are not established around identity categories, they can be formed around an issue or an affinity. Hence, transversal politics involves varied coalition formations (Collins, 2009: 317). Transversal politics recognises differences such as ethnicity, class, religion etc. as situational, rather than fixed. Coalitions, likewise, ensure fluidity among diverse subjects and are practically better at dealing with political and identity differences

among women by organising them around specific and shared goals rather than unifying arguments of solidarity.

There are many ‘truths’ in a transversal approach and dialogue is the key to reconcile them. How to handle ‘identity’ whilst constructing a dialogue is important:

A person’s subjective sense of self is not necessarily congruent with the identity or identities with which others inscribe her (Hall 1996). Her ideas, beliefs and desires, therefore, may not be “read off” from her apparent “name” – “Jew” or “Palestinian,” let’s say. Identity is something that calls for questioning, not closure. Thus, transversal politics transcends identity politics. It questions the very notion of identity, setting a clear space between the “name” with which a person is identified, or labeled, by others, and that person’s lived sense of self (Cockburn, 2014: 441).

Transversal politics was originally developed as an alternative to essentialising identity politics in ethnicised conflict areas. Byrne, however, argues that identity politics can form the basis of resistance for some women in various ethnonational communities in conflict and post-conflict zones and thus it contributes the emancipatory politics, which should not be irreconcilable with transversal politics. Thus, she disagrees with the exclusion of identity politics from transversal politics (Byrne, 2014: 107–109). The rise of the emphasis on religious and ethnic identities in the Turkish case is a consequence of a particular political history. However, whilst Byrne’s argument on the necessity for identity politics in particular regions and for specific groups may be justifiable in some cases, I still argue that identity politics is very limiting to understand groups’ and individuals’ multiple particularities. Moreover, transversal politics does recognise women’s different social locations and identifications. However, when the emphasis is not on the ‘message’ but the ‘messenger’, ‘there is a danger of essentialist construction of womanhood and gender roles’ (Yuval-Davis, 2016c: 344).

In her most recent elaboration of the idea of transversal politics, Patricia Hill Collins (2017) identifies transversal politics as a form of political engagement, which is also significant to understand organised political resistance. She argues that Yuval-Davis’ concept of transversal politics involves elasticity and flexibility. Collins notes that Yuval-Davis focuses more on the ‘the authority of nation-states in

creating and reproducing historically constituted, socially stratified population groups', rather than the 'groups that are based solely on self-chosen identities or identifications'. Therefore, Yuval-Davis' focus is not in line with the contemporary emphasis on individuals and their rights but more about what historically constituted groups bring to coalition politics in terms of opportunities and constraints. This approach, Collins argues, creates a realm for inter-group politics to be usefully analysed, as in transversal politics (Collins, 2017: 1470), which is one of the shortcomings of identity politics. One might argue that transversal politics is an abstract, unrealistic and aspirational construct. However, as Collins discusses, the two main dynamics of transversal politics, 'rooting' and 'shifting', enable groups to develop coalitions whilst not 'losing one's own rooting within historically situated communities and the intellectual and political sensibilities that rooting engenders'. Therefore, it is far from previous understandings of solidarity, where groups need to ignore their particularities for the 'greater good'. This is also where one aspect of transversal politics' importance lies: 'remaining rooted while shifting constitutes a viable if not essential political option' (Collins, 2017: 1470). Transversal politics require mutual engagement and common action of the parties; thus, it also acknowledges the importance of the 'self'. As Collins argues, transversal politics enables women to 'root' in their own particular group histories, however, at the same time they realise in order to establish dialogue with other women across their differences, they must 'shift' from their centres (Collins, 2009: 265).

Transversal politics emphasises reflexive dialogue among differently located women. However, one can ask what happens when some unnegotiable differences play a part in the coalitions, where shifting is simply not possible, as in the Kemalists' reluctance to embrace differences. 'Shifting' must sustain the diversity of viewpoints both within and across groups. It can be seen as the acknowledgement of Kemalists' own complicity, in the Turkish case for instance, in the rise of identity politics by implementing a unitary understanding of modernity, which does not allow for differences to manifest themselves. This is the challenging process within transversal politics. However, it is important to emphasise that transversal politics does not assume that each conflict of interest is reconcilable, which shows that transversal politics rejects any essentialist views of differences and working across them. Here, Collins argues that coalition politics should be understood within a

context of intersectional power relations and must be seen as under construction and not as ideologically fixed (Collins, 2017: 1470–1472).

With these features, transversal politics still offers the best possible analytic tool to find a realm apart from the exclusionary nature of identity politics – which focuses on fixed and reified identities and ignores intra-group differences as well as neglecting inter-group relationality – and universalism – that establishes womanhood as the basis of solidarity – within the women’s movement in Turkey. The contemporary situation in Turkey is similar to the one Cockburn describes in her work, the ‘Women Building Bridges Project’, in which she states that in some places our differences are enriching but in some others, such as Northern Ireland, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Israel/Palestine, ethno-national identities are something for which people are ready to kill or die (Cockburn, 1999: 99). The ongoing war with the PKK, explosions and bombings around the country by ISIS, and ideological fragmentation to a dangerous extent reflect extreme polarisation in Turkey. Yet it is clear to see that encounters among women over the past few years have shaped and somewhat changed their perceptions of each other. Transversal politics suggests that it is possible to ‘criticize political ideologies and daily practices of all people, whatever their social, economic and political positionings’, for example, without being called Islamophobic or racist for criticising Islamists. ‘It would be racist to not differentiate among members of the same ethnic, national, racial or religious group and automatically assume that criticizing ideologies or practices of some is to be against all’ (Yuval-Davis, 2016b: 436). Establishing transversal dialogue among activists in Turkey, then, requires moving beyond identity politics and respecting women’s multiple positionings. It would allow women, for instance, to oppose the headscarf ban whilst rejecting the government’s conservative politics based on gender discrimination or to criticise the militarism within the Kurdish movement while acknowledging Kurdish women’s dual exploitation because of their location as an oppressed ethnic minority and supporting them. Transversal politics enables us to discuss these intertwined problems separately and simultaneously, which fulfils one of the main shortcomings of both identity politics and universalism. Moreover, it does not necessitate changing one’s ‘rooted’ position. Feminists, for instance, can still evaluate the headscarf issue from their ideological viewpoint and the same applies to religious women’s position on abortion. What is necessary for dialogical



politics is the importance of ‘shifting’: to see how veiled women or feminists approach the same issue. Therefore, self-transformative work is required for change in coalition work and transversal politics offers practical means of achieving this. ‘Rooting’ and ‘shifting’ explain how to change one’s perspective from self-interested to common values. ‘Shifting’ enables participants to understand and acknowledge other ‘rooted’ positions. Thus, transversal politics does not homogenise women under any category whilst establishing respect for their differences. It brings critical awareness of women’s multiple positionings along the transnational matrix of power. Therefore, opening up a dialogue is a must and coalition work provides a convenient space for this.

### **Coalition Building/Alliances in the Women’s Movement in Turkey: Strategic, Instrumental and Effective Ways of Working Together**

#### **Coalition Building/Alliances vs. Solidarity**

Reagon’s arguments on coalition as an uncomfortable realm, in which women need to move out of the comfort zones of their identity-based organisations, are very applicable to the Turkish case. In particular, her metaphor of the ‘barred room’ is a good way to explain the fragmented situation in the women’s movement in Turkey, since women mostly prefer to work within their own safe spaces based on their identities and ideologies. When I was reading the literature on solidarity, however, one question remained unanswered: How do women come together initially? As Bunch argues, successful coalitions should aim to take significant action on something about which its participants care deeply. Once you see the effects, it is then worth going to the trouble of making it work (Bunch, 1990: 56). During my fieldwork, I realised once again that, although activists explain solidarity with all sorts of abstract definitions, coalition building is something very concrete and instrumental in their minds. Therefore, the reasons behind it should be very concrete as well, such as changes in the law or actions to oppose violence against women:

Emel [Kemalist feminist]: Alliances could be about something concrete. A certain time, a certain target... I mean, we can’t be in alliances when there are more theoretical and abstract things... I can be in alliances with everyone, if we go to the same place to reach the same target. (Ankara, *Turkish Women’s Union*)

Hidayet Tuksal [religious feminist]: Support and alliances by women from all strata can be established on practical issues concerning women's lives, as they are visible and can be understood by almost everyone. (Ankara, *Capital City Women's Platform & Academic*)

Most of my participants define coalition as different from solidarity, the former being seen only as an ability to work together, mainly to reach a target, whereas the latter means seeing the common thing that oppresses every woman and should be continuous:

Halime Erçetin [feminist]: We shouldn't confuse solidarity with collaborations<sup>70</sup>. Collaborations can be established in and between issues but solidarity has its principles, ethics and needs to be built with such things. When I say I'm in solidarity with you, there cannot be an unsafe environment anymore... Solidarity needs to continue. (Ankara, *Flying Broom*)

Nazan [Kemalist feminist]: To me, alliance is to come together around a specific issue as women and to be able to resolve that issue. So it's not possible to have it for everything but we can do it for specific issues. In fact, we are doing... In alliances you can come together for a certain subject and then leave. But solidarity is always mutually reinforcing. (Ankara, *Association of Turkish Women University Graduates*)

There is a clear difference between my participants' approaches to the two concepts: while alliance is more strategic, solidarity is the next, maybe last, level of togetherness. Solidarity, therefore, has a more idealised meaning than coalition – it is the goal itself, whereas coalition has its own concrete goals. However, for some activists, coalition building has similar meanings to solidarity, since each has an impact on the other:

İlknur Üstün [feminist]: Solidarity as a political concept is not a love affair but rather to get the commonality between your issue and others' and thus to see you actually do something for yourself while working for others. This, itself, should be in alliances as well. (Ankara, *Women's Coalition*)

Fidan [Kurdish activist]: Alliance is a kind of solidarity as well. Each solidarity also brings alliances. (İstanbul, *Rainbow Women's Association*)

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<sup>70</sup> She uses another Turkish word here, *işbirliği*, while replying my question on *ortaklık*, which has very similar meanings and also indicates that there is no consensus on conceptualisation.

Navin [Kurdish activist]: Solidarity means the same thing as alliances. Without solidarity, alliances remain unfulfilled... But solidarity is to feel the power at your side in every area and in every way. (Diyarbakır, *Selis Women's Association*)

As discussed earlier, solidarity can arise while working together on coalition building. For Aksu Bora, the keyword is activism. She thinks activists can feel solidarity while they are in the movement together. Therefore, she also agrees that solidarity can be developed through alliances:

Aksu Bora [feminist]: Probably they [alliances] should be about common behaviour. So I think it's different from solidarity. Because solidarity is a bit like seeing the thing that oppresses all of us and establishing the connection between different oppressions... Therefore, solidarity can be established later than alliances. So alliances mean being able to act together. You come together for the Civil Code, a common target. But it is possible to develop solidarity within alliances. Solidarity is not something that can be established through theoretical discussions. There [in alliances] you can see who you can be in solidarity with and who not. While acting. (Ankara, *Academic*)

Therefore, alliances can also give you the opportunity to be involved in activism. The concept of alliances has some similar positive connotations, like solidarity, such as sharing, togetherness and power. Nevertheless, most of my participants think that there are very likely to be debates and conflicts within coalition building, which is very natural. Özge [feminist] emphasises that it is not about thinking in the same way but, on the contrary, something that enables the possibility of conflict. Another aspect that was emphasised by my participants is that alliances last for a short time, yet they are a very fruitful way of working:

Berrin Sönmez [religious feminist]: Being an ally on a certain text or a certain work is generally perceived as something that encompasses an entire life. For me, it's possible to have conflicts on one issue and commonalities on another. And this is what's important to me, actually. This is what's useful... Not that we need to agree on everything. I think issue-based alliances are sustainable. (Ankara, *Capital City Women's Platform*)

Nesrin Semiz [religious feminist]: To be able to do things together, to support or help each other on some issues... You establish alliances in there [Civil and Penal Code reforms]. You work together around an

issue. You prepare a joint action plan to finalise that issue and you work on that plan and you achieve the win. After you reach that conclusion, that alliance is set aside but it can be established again for another issue. (Ankara, *Capital City Women's Platform*)

Melike [religious feminist]: I think this is the most productive way of working. Being in an alliance in a particular matter, in which we may have a common vocabulary. I mean to say, maybe we don't imagine the same world but we come together on this issue and establish a strategic alliance. When you say strategic, it sounds as if it's unethical but it isn't. That is to say, I can establish alliances here but not there. (İstanbul, *Reçel Blog*)

It was interesting to see almost all of the religious women emphasising the importance of coalition politics. One possible reason could be that they have experienced the impossibility of sustained solidarity on all issues. They emphasised their disappointment at the lack of solidarity they had received during the headscarf ban discussions. This is the main difference between solidarity and coalition work, where activists do not see any problem in working separately on some issues and joining forces for others when they share common aims. Therefore, during our discussions around coalition work, I heard almost nothing negative from activists about other groups, although many of them blamed each other for not acting with enough solidarity on issues that only affected them. Berrin Sönmez, for example, finds coalition work to be the best way of working together, whereas she defines solidarity as unproductive:

Berrin Sönmez [religious feminist]: Even if solidarity is acknowledged as the basic working style of the women's movement, I don't think that's very accurate. Praising solidarity, in fact, hinders producing common policies. I mean, we do things, when we don't reject our differences. But the main thing is the effort to speak with a common voice, despite our differences. Solidarity actually restricts. It causes [people] to quit. I mean people say, 'I've done enough, I did my best.' (Ankara, *Capital City Women's Platform*)

Lyshaug, on the other hand, argues that coalition politics is problematic since it does not harmonise diversity with the need for unity: 'It honors the claims of diversity among women while ignoring the importance of commonality. The tactical ties that it creates fail to enact the kind of mutual recognition on which feminism, as a movement for social justice, depends' (Lyshaug, 2006: 78). According to her, in order to reconcile diversity and commonality, alliances must be responsible for

ethical self-transformation, which she calls ‘enlarged sympathy’, where ‘individuals claim a kind of kinship across differences, can facilitate the establishment of political ties that honor both the differences that separate women and the shared humanity that unites them’ (Lyshaug, 2006: 79). As a consequence, she argues that coalition politics is an inadequate model to establish such connections. However, her account of working across differences fails to offer a practical way in which women can establish mutual respect and recognition. When one considers the fact that political history has a strong influence on women’s perceptions of each other in Turkey, simply expecting them to understand and support each other naturally is insufficient, no matter how necessary it is. I argue that coalition politics, however, offers a practical arena for women to work together and to enhance mutual respect. In Reagon’s terms, in coalition work women leave their ‘homes’ in order to ‘survive’ and allow others to enter to their ‘barred rooms’ but after they reach their targets as planned, they go back to their safe ‘homes’. I would argue that this type of work is more efficient than making solidarity the primary goal, since it does not put any pressure on women and therefore they come together naturally without any exterior force, and this generates (mostly) successful outcomes.

### **Successful Examples of Coalition Building/Alliances**

During my fieldwork, the most often cited example of successful coalition building among activists was reform of the Civil and Penal Codes. They see the Civil Code reforms in 2000–2001 and the Penal Code reforms in 2002–2005 as major achievements and an example of success for women from all the different groups. In the previous forms of the Civil and Penal Codes, men were given supremacy in marriage and women were deprived of their social, economic and civil rights, which created human rights violations against women. These regulations have been extensively changed with the Civil and Penal Code Reforms after sustained efforts by the women’s movement in Turkey to establish gender equality. Women activists from all different groups faced resistance from conservative and nationalist groups in Parliament, as well as from government officials and the media, and they had to find effective ways to publicise their agenda and make their demands heard (Anil et al., 2005: 3–4).

The new Turkish Civil Code, which establishes full equality between men and women in the family by abolishing the supremacy of men in marriage, was approved in 2001. Some of the other changes in the new Code are: equal division of property acquired during marriage, assigning an economic value to women's hidden household labour, setting the legal minimum age for marriage at 18 for both genders (it was previously 17 for men and 15 for women), giving the same inheritance rights to children born outside marriage as those born within marriage, allowing single parents to adopt children and redefining family as an entity that is based on equality between spouses (Anıl et al., 2005: 4). However, the process of gaining these rights was very difficult for women. Religious conservatives and nationalists in Parliament argued that equality between women and men would create anarchy and chaos in families and therefore threaten the foundations of the Turkish nation (Anıl et al., 2005: 7).

At the beginning of 2001, 126 women's groups from all different tendencies and all around the country initiated a major campaign, which played a crucial role in overcoming the resistance of the religious conservatives and nationalists in Parliament (Anıl et al., 2005: 7). After the successful campaign had led to the desired changes in the Civil Code, the İstanbul-based feminist organisation which is also a part of this research, '*Women for Women's Human Rights (WWHR) – New Ways*', initiated another campaign to change the Turkish Penal Code, called '*Campaign for the Reform of the Turkish Penal Code from a Gender Perspective*' (Anıl et al., 2005: 9). In 2002, the *WWHR – New Ways*, organised a national working group with the participation of representatives from NGOs and bar associations, and academics from various regions of Turkey to work on addressing women's rights violations in the Penal Code. They wanted to achieve a holistic reform by changing the philosophy of the Penal Code, which considered women's bodies and sexuality to be the property of men, family and society, and the state. The group prepared recommendations and proposed articles and sent them to all MPs, NGOs and media representatives in 2002. They were faced, however, with government officials' persistent intransigence and the group initiated a massive public campaign in 2003 with a big press conference. As a result, Penal Code Reform was accepted in September 2004 (Anıl et al., 2005: 10–12). The new Turkish Penal Code contains more than thirty amendments. Sexual crimes are

regulated as crimes against the inviolability of sexual integrity, rather than crimes against society, family or public morality. Moreover, references to chastity, morality, shame, public customs, and decency have been eliminated and such crimes against women are defined within global human rights standards. The new code brings:

higher sentences for sexual crimes, criminalizes marital rape; brings measures to prevent sentence reductions granted to perpetrators of honor killings; eliminates previously existing discrimination against non-virgin and unmarried women; criminalizes sexual harassment at the workplace and considers sexual assaults by security forces to be aggravated offences. (Anil et al., 2005: 14)

Moreover, provisions regulating the sexual abuse of children are explicitly defined as sexual abuse by removing the notion of ‘consent of the child’. Provisions that legitimise rape in cases where the perpetrator marries the victim have been abolished (Anil et al., 2005: 14).

According to my participants, both the Civil and Penal Code Reforms are very important success stories within the women’s movement in Turkey. One of my participants, who was a Member of Parliament at the time, mentioned the difficulties she faced and the importance of activists’ work to gain those rights:

Nazan [Kemalist feminist]: I took a very active role with the women’s NGOs to change the law, the replacement of Article 10 of the Constitution and the Turkish Penal Code, as women want. A little anecdote: Everything had happened, the sub-committee was over, committee was over and it came to the General Assembly. The two parties at the General Assembly agreed and the law began to pass quickly. I mean without making speeches. But we especially wanted to talk about Article 89, where there would be unjust provocation and a speech on honour killings as they just put moral crimes, not honour crimes. There had to be a speech. If a Member of Parliament talks, judges can decide by looking at that, say women lawyers. Therefore, I definitely had to speak. And it was going so fast. I called Hülya Gülbahar<sup>71</sup> to ask what I had to say. She was on the train and I was having lunch. I took notes of the things I had to say on a napkin and I went out and spoke. When I spoke, Bekir Bozdağ<sup>72</sup> responded. Therefore, we really very actively worked. (Ankara, *Association of Turkish Women University Graduates*)

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<sup>71</sup> A very well-known feminist activist and lawyer.

<sup>72</sup> MP, Justice and Development Party.

Betül, feminist, emphasised the importance of women from all different groups acting together for those reforms: ‘I remember nationalist or Kurdish women put their identities aside and could meet on this issue.’ Kurdish feminist Dilvan also mentioned that it was a very important time, as this acting together connected them to each other. Kemalist feminist, Şükran, on the other hand, emphasised that there had not been so many divisions among women at that time, after arguing that there were more alliances than now during that period. Differences among women, however, were/are always here. As Nebahat Akkoç [Kurdish feminist] said, the most important thing during that period was that women managed to meet on common ground. The only negative attitude towards legal changes came from a Kurdish activist, Lale, who did not criticise activists’ efforts but rather state-oriented reforms in general:

Lale [Kurdish activist]: We have a problem with the state itself. In fact, the state’s law, its constitution, its laws legitimise society’s social morals and try to manage it by monopolising society. It really is a very liberal thing. Changing the state’s law is significant because it is one step further than previously but it may not mean anything in the solution of the problem itself... The state self-maintains, he continues. He sometimes makes feminists angry, they heat up and sometimes like a valve, is he trying to degas, what is this man doing? By man, I mean the state itself actually. Yes, the law is changing but when we look back 20 years later, that law can revert so easily. What I’m trying to say is, if we women could set up our own organised state within neighbourhoods, we could decide on our own, the state itself will become unnecessary already. (Diyarbakır, *Association of Women’s Academy*)

She is, therefore, not sceptical about the reforms themselves but about reforming the state, which is patriarchal to its core, and this is why she refers to it as ‘he’. Apart from her, most of my participants defined these reform processes as important success stories and talked about them while we were discussing examples of solidarity. When I asked, however, whether they saw those reforms as examples of solidarity or alliances, after thinking for a while most of them preferred to use alliances as a term. Only religious activist Nur defined them as examples of solidarity: ‘If we call it high politics, doing something on the basis of the law, yes. Since it touches upon a certain subject, it’s an example of solidarity.’ And Bahar thinks those processes include both alliances and solidarity:



Bahar [feminist]: That time, there was a variety of actions. For example, tables were set up in front of the Police Departments and everyday custody, everyday beating and everyday obstinacy [happened]. It is an incredible story of persistence and eventually the law was changed to an extent. Is it exactly like we wanted? No, not how we wanted. So it's very different. Solidarity, alliances, individual struggle, there was everything in that process. (İstanbul, *Rainbow Women's Association*)

Solidarity can surely be developed while women work together within alliances. If we defined solidarity as an ongoing commitment, however, as bell hooks (1986: 138) does in a very idealistic and unrealistic way, it would be too hard to define that period as an example of solidarity, even though it is very obvious that women felt solidarity in those days. I would argue that these reform processes are clear examples of coalition building among women, during which they also achieved a degree of solidarity, which did not last long after they reached their goals. Aksu Bora openly explained why they failed to continue feeling solidarity after that period:

Aksu Bora [feminist]: On the one hand, Civil Code discussions were very successful, but on the other hand we bit our tongues in order to establish the alliance. I mean, especially our opinions on family. Why? Because we wanted to act together with those CHP [Republican People's Party] and Kemalist people. I'm not sure what would have happened, if we hadn't acted like that but if things are going to be sustainable, it can only be achieved without swallowing your words. That Civil Code was really something where we acted together DESPITE our differences. We had to talk to each other to make it WITH our differences<sup>73</sup>. After all, you can still talk to a woman in a skirt suit<sup>74</sup>, if you feel strongly enough. We crossed the stream where it was shallowest, did it more by focusing on the results. I don't know if we could act less pragmatically but maybe we can try next time. (Ankara, *Academic*)

Therefore, she defines these reform processes as problematic because activists were not totally open about their opinions. I would argue that it was a conscious decision of choosing not to push their own lines too hard because that would have harmed the aim of the campaign – changing the laws. Coalition, as my participant İdil [feminist]

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<sup>73</sup> She is referring to the motto, 'being together despite our differences', which was discussed in Chapter Five in connection with women's solidarity.

<sup>74</sup> She used the term *döpiyes*, Turkish translation of a suit with skirt, *deux pièces* in French, which is a stereotype of Kemalist women's clothing.

defined it, is mainly about setting aside your targets, institutional or individual, to walk together towards a common goal, to facilitate this walk for each other. On the other hand, Aksu Bora's critical stance towards issues concerning the changes in the Civil Code is very understandable. Divisions on issues related to the Civil Code, however, are not easily reconcilable since finding a middle ground between feminists, Kemalists and religious women on issues around the family is not simple and might end up in disappointment, as Aksu Bora implies. Nevertheless, as Cole and Luna suggest, ideological differences in coalitions must be worked through, and this will increase the number of supporters (Cole & Luna, 2010: 86). Women need to talk to each other openly about their positionings within coalition work as well, rather than classifying it as a component of solidarity, which may only be achievable in the next step, because conflicts and solutions are also included in the coalition work itself. Conflict should not be understood as the opposite of cooperation. Rather, it is essential in working across differences because it assists the progress of reflection and dialogue (Steans, 2007: 739).

An example that was defined as both solidarity and alliance by two of my participants was the *Women's Coalition*. This is a platform including 120 national and local organisations aiming to increase women's social, economic and political participation. They define themselves as a transformation movement that aims to transform current political culture into an egalitarian one (Women's Coalition, 2013). İlknur Üstün, an organiser of the *Women's Coalition*, explained their aims in our interview and said that their first agenda item was local politics and local participation by women and the second one was elections – both local and general. Both Aksu Bora and İlknur Üstün, who worked together for the journal *Amargi*, define it as a very successful example of both alliances and solidarity:

Aksu Bora [feminist]: Women's Coalition is the latest successful example I know of. There are so many different women. They work separately from each other and bring their separate works together and test them against each other. Then they realise that's a collaborative work. Amazing work, since 2002... Very different, small, local women's organisations, whose names nobody has heard of. So very far from that feminist 'high society'. That's why I like it. They do a very real job... It looks like a project team, but it's not. There is no project. (Ankara, *Academic*)

İlknur Üstün: Of course, we walk together in the Women's Coalition... This is an alliance... At the same time solidarity. There has to be solidarity in alliances, but solidarity does not necessarily mean alliances. According to me. Maybe these concepts are not that sharp. (Ankara, *Women's Coalition*)

The *Women's Coalition* is a good example of coalition building among women. It mainly focuses on the local participation of women – therefore it is again an issue-based alliance among women – and it brings activists together to work. It also demonstrates that coalitions among women are not necessarily short term. It rather gives women a cause to gather around and work together for as long as it takes, which itself creates an opportunity to transfer this collaboration into transversal politics. I argue that women in coalition work are more likely to accept and work with different positionings to reach their initial aims. As strategic as this sounds, coalition politics establishes an environment where encounters among women can help them to develop empathy for other positionings and be reflexive. The only possible problem with the *Women's Coalition*, as I observed during the fieldwork, is that not many activists were aware of it, and Aksu Bora also criticised its lack of advertising. Another example mentioned by my participants that I would argue as a good example of coalition building and an important realm to develop solidarity and transversal politics, is the Women's Shelters and Consulting/Solidarity Centres Convention. It was first organised as an initiative of the *Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation* in İstanbul in 1998 with the participation of various feminist and independent women's organisations that ran shelters and consultation centres and/or were working on the elimination of violence against women. Since 1998, the Convention has been hosted by different women's organisations in different cities and provinces each year, including İstanbul, Mersin, Antalya, İzmit, Ankara, Çanakkale, Diyarbakır, Van, Adana, Söke, and Nevşehir. The Convention is the biggest platform bringing activists together who work on the elimination of violence against women to share their knowledge and experiences. Almost 80 women's organisations around Turkey and hundreds of women join the Convention each year. My feminist participant İdil, defined it as a great example of an alliance:

İdil: Alliances... There is this convention that has continued for 17 years in this country. Many fights happened there and are still happening. There are still lots of subjects that we disagree on but it's still continuing after 18 [17] years. Because there's a need. Not only

that, there's a will. The need for the elimination of violence against women and the will to do it... Women who go there and participate benefit from it, all women and all organisations. (İstanbul, *Women's Solidarity Foundation*)

The elimination of violence against women creates synergy among women to work together and the Convention is a good platform because women from all different groups join it, even though it has its own problems. The main issue mentioned by my participants was the arguments between Kemalist women and Kurdish women. Özge and many others told me this was because of the Kemalist women attacking the Kurdish women for speaking Kurdish or using the word 'Kurdistan'. One especially bad incident occurred when the convention was organised in Nevşehir and ended up with some Kemalist women calling the police:

Dilvan [Kurdish feminist]: They called the police... So glad I didn't go to Nevşehir. There was also a group collecting signatures to prevent Kurdish women from joining the convention. Only nine people signed it though. (Van, *VAKAD*)

Selma [feminist]: Nevşehir was a really bad example. The host organisation was in a tight situation but behaved badly. The police came, women had to leave early, women from the eastern part had to run away. (Ankara, *The Foundation for Women's Solidarity & Ankara Women's Platform*)

Kemalist women perceive Kurdish women speaking Kurdish or talking about the specific problems that Kurdish women face as derailing the main topic of the convention – the elimination of violence against women.

Şükran [Kemalist feminist]: There is great disrespect there. There are manipulated women who go there to disrespect others and channel the subject onto other issues. This seems so wrong to me. How can a woman accept this for any reason? Our common interest and subject is shelters but it's so clear that they want to change it to something else... What I'm saying is, let's not fall into this trap. Let's talk instead of calling the police. Can we talk? No, we can't... You say, do it, and they don't and I've started thinking about not going anymore. I send my younger colleagues. Why? Maybe they know methods I don't know or haven't achieved so far. (İzmir, *Association to Protect Women's Rights*)

However, I would argue that this is more about the Kemalists' 'fear' of separatism and therefore they ignore the Kurdish problem and Kurdish women's particular

needs. What Dilvan experienced at one of the conventions summarises this ignorance well:

Dilvan [Kurdish feminist]: I guess it was the third women's convention. Me, Arzu, Gül, Rojda<sup>75</sup>, four women from VAKAD, we're sitting there. There were women from Adana. One of them said 'my daughter Dilvan, what did you study?' I said I studied economics. Your name she said, 'what language is that?' I said Kurdish. She said hmm. Then Rojda's name sounded different. They asked her. She also graduated from a good university. Gül graduated in public administration, and the other in agriculture. So we're all university graduates. She said 'well so what more do you want? You all use your own names and studied at a university. What more do you want?' [Dilvan laughs]. We argued a bit but this is the mentality... I only went for a few years. Then thought: I'm breaking down and I don't want to go anymore. (Van, VAKAD)

The Kemalist understanding of seeing woman as a unified category and rejecting any other differences that a woman might have is one of the main barriers to establishing any sort of togetherness among women – either alliances or solidarity. Nevertheless, I would still argue that these encounters help to develop communication and understanding among women because such an extreme example as calling the police has never happened again and they have started to tolerate each other more. The way Berfin defines the importance of these encounters explains it perfectly:

Berfin [Kurdish feminist]: For example, someone said 'Kurdistan' and Çanakkale<sup>76</sup> took umbrage... But they [women from Çanakkale] were also saying that they don't have a Kurdish problem and they don't distinguish Turk or Kurd... So it was a bit positive but some reacted too. But some [explained] like, the Kurdish movement is this, why does it cause problems to say Kurdish or Kurdistan? and the others didn't persist and the argument ended... We see each other; even if it's [only] toleration, the main thing is to choose to be in places where we can be together. Because things can be overcome. You argue, sometimes they annoy you so much but you're still in the same place. You don't say: 'I won't come if she's there'... I've been going to the Convention for the last two years. The atmosphere seems a bit more positive [than in the past]. As I said, they get used to each other... Because when you work together, you see their inner worlds, their sensibilities, their victimisation. (Van, VAKAD)

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<sup>75</sup> These are all pseudonyms.

<sup>76</sup> The women's organisation in the province of Çanakkale, Çanakkale Kadın El Emegini Değerlendirme ve Kadın Danışma Merkezi (ELDER).

Having said that, Berfin is much younger than Dilvan and Şükran, who used to go to the Convention for years but later decided not to join again, which indicates how exhausting it can be to exert perpetual effort on coalition work. Nevertheless, some of my participants share similar views with Berfin and think that coming together every year and listening to others has shaped women's attitudes towards each other. Selma, feminist, emphasised that even Kemalist women came to the point where they said things like 'calling the police should never have happened', as my Kemalist feminist participant, Şükran, also said, which Selma thinks is valuable and important. Kurdish feminist Lerzan, likewise, said that issues with Kemalist women had been overcome, maybe not totally but partially, and the reason, according to her, is women coming together at these meetings. Yelda summarises the history of the dialogue among women at the Convention and also emphasises its importance:

Yelda [feminist]: When we were talking about this Kurdish women problem in 2002, 2003, 2004 at the Convention, we were so alone. Only two or three women. There was a silent majority. We didn't know exactly what they were saying but they were quiet. There was also a counter group. When I compare those years with now, there is a remarkable difference. There are a lot of women now who would argue with them more than I do. Sparkling! Minds are changing. This has changed in 10 years. Being together with differences is not empty words. We came to the point after discussions, being hurt, suffering. Is it enough? No. But I can't say it doesn't exist... The main thing at the Convention is that we're different but similar, not homogeneous. (İstanbul, *Women for Women's Human Rights – New Ways*)

Common platforms like the Convention clearly help women to find a common tongue and encourage constructive dialogue, which are the main components of transversal politics. They manage to talk through their differences and feel empathy with other positionings without using the homogenising 'sameness' rhetoric. This does not mean that it prevents activists from seeing their commonalities but rather that it is about finding an alternative space instead of revolving around the sharp 'same-different' binary. Transversal politics' main components of 'rooting' and 'shifting' can be applied once the dialogue is established. Nazlı's answer indicates that face-to-face interactions among women and seeing their realities is also different from reading other women's stories elsewhere:

Nazlı [feminist]: I have no connections with the Kurdish movement or the Kurdish women. But I also went to The Shelters Convention in

Diyarbakır... I like it so much there. Because they live a completely different life, the things they told... It broadened my horizons. I never knew that much. It's so different listening to it from those women rather than following the media. (Ankara, *The Foundation for Women's Solidarity*)

These narratives clearly show the power of communication among women: things can transform and solidarity can be established if only an opportunity is given to listen to each other. Because it is very apparent that women's attitudes and opinions about each other have changed over the last 10 years due to hearing more about their experiences, and the Convention is a good platform for this. However, it should not be expected that the Convention will be a solution for all the problems women have or that it will satisfy everyone because it is a platform designed to achieve a specific goal – the elimination of violence against women. An article by one of the previous attendees on why the conventions are important mentions this:

Of course there are different feminist approaches of women who join the Convention. The Convention brings them/us together on a specific field. The conventions may not be entirely satisfactory for a socialist feminist woman and it is not entirely enough for Kurdish women's needs. This is also true for the Kemalist and Islamist women. (Sunata, 2009: 23)

She also emphasises, however, that the conventions create an environment that helps women to understand each other while working to oppose violence against women and this sharing should not be underestimated (Sunata, 2009: 23–24). One of the main problems with solidarity that activists mentioned was the expectation of being and acting together all the time. The Convention and other forms of alliances among women are good examples to solve this as they are issue based – the elimination of violence against women or increasing women's participation in politics – and they are opportunities for activists to share their experiences and to connect with each other. My participants' answers made it very clear that these encounters among women, particularly at the Convention, have changed Kemalist activists to some degree in that they have become more tolerant compared to previous years. Thus, coalition building among women can allow activists to 'shift' from their centred positions.

## **Establishing Coalition Building/Alliances and Solidarity**

Jakobsen argues that ‘the basis of alliances must be created within the context of the relations of productions of those “differences” that necessitate alliance – both the economics of differentiation that produce particular differences and the economy of the same within which these economies operate’ (Jakobsen, 1998: 101). Participants from all the different groups generally think that if they can increase the opportunities for encounters among them, it then helps to establish solidarity in the women’s movement. Aksu Bora [feminist], argued that there needs to be a common target to start with, through which activists can try to sustain solidarity and develop collective behaviour. When they reach their goal, therefore, they do not necessarily fall apart. For some, the key is activism because this is where they touch each other and actually learn. One way to do this is via issue-based platforms, where Berfin, Kurdish feminist, thinks that talking face to face and seeing each other’s world and sensibilities makes activists more attuned to other women’s victimisation.<sup>77</sup> For her, these common areas are the ones that no one can easily leave and therefore platforms can forge closer ties. Another important element is finding a reason to bring women together, which can be a common target such as during the Civil Code period. Alliances within these coalitions, however, need some sacrifices to be made by all parties to meet on the middle ground and to hear others’ voices:

Berrin Sönmez [religious feminist]: The Civil Code was really a matter of concern to all women. Something that concerns all women like this, how shall I say it, we need to find top issues which are enough to ignore ideological differences... Groups need to minimise, question or ignore their ideological baggage for a while. It needs sacrifice. It requires compromise, cooperation on some issues and taking a step back – without taking a step back we don’t leave a space to talk. During that cooperation on the Civil Code, the Capital City Women’s Platform<sup>78</sup> took a step back and ignored the things done to them and they [other groups] also stepped back by accepting the presence of the Capital City Women’s Platform and ignoring their own judgements. But everyone has to do it. (Ankara, *Capital City Women’s Platform*)

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<sup>77</sup> This is the concept that most of my participants have preferred to use.

<sup>78</sup> Berrin Sönmez is an active member of the platform.



For many others, however, platforms are not productive ways of establishing solidarity among women, since they create some degree of mechanical and formal forms of relationships among them. Feminist İdil argues that women should stop assigning meanings to organisations because solidarity does not have to be about great expectations or great political changes. She adds that women can act in solidarity only on one subject and with many different reasons. Another problem in establishing solidarity at the organisational level is that activists feel responsible to their members and it becomes complicated. They argue that solidarity can thrive in informal spaces such as friendships, where women share and experience things together. A member of the *Muslim Initiative against Violence against Women*, Nur [religious activist], for instance, says that in her personal relationships solidarity arises naturally and she does not experience many tensions in her social circles, although she is friends with many women from different groups. For her, the reason behind this is that it is not mechanical. In other words, when you are friends you listen to each other and make an effort to understand. When I asked her how to extend this to the women's movement in Turkey, however, she said it then became mechanical with a single discourse and added the main problem: 'When there is a collectivity, individuality disappears.' Religious feminist Hidayet Tuksal also emphasised the importance and efficiency of friendships among women to achieve the solidarity ideal. When I asked what is needed for sustained solidarity, she replied that platforms or any kind of organisational solutions are not the best way to do it but that friendship among women is essential. She said that when women from different backgrounds are friends, then they already affect each other and smooth ruffled feathers, but when they are not, then it just becomes a formal meeting, where they gather and leave without any real contact. Then she mentioned how friendship ties are stronger in the Eastern regions of Turkey than the West and described the impossibility of sustained solidarity, when women have no real connections:

Hidayet Tuksal [religious feminist]: When you go to the East, they meet you at the airport, they care, they show you around but when there is a meeting in Ankara, everyone goes to their hotel by themselves and then you say goodbye and leave... anyway [one day] I met friends [in a city in the East], showed them around and we were talking. A friend said 'now we talk about legal freedoms here but I have a daughter... If my daughter was like how we defend the rights

here, neither we nor society would accept her.’<sup>79</sup> So what’s happening now? You force people to pretend to be like you and these women act as if they agree with you but they don’t in reality... Therefore I don’t know how solidarity can be sustainable... How can it be between Kemalists and religious women? I don’t know. It’s problematic. (Ankara, *Capital City Women’s Platform & Academic*)

Here, Tuksal is being critical of the formality that has been prioritised by women’s organisations in the western regions of Turkey, compared with the informality and warmth in the eastern provinces, which enable women to open up and discuss what they see as problems. She then added that ways of achieving solidarity should be more personal, informal and spontaneous because personal connections can be turned into an opportunity. However, as much as intimacy among women is important to ‘hear’ each other’s voices more effectively and friendship can surely constitute a valid foundation for solidarity, relying solely on friendship as the basis of solidarity is limiting because it then means solidarity can only be established with personal acquaintances. Apart from her emphasis on activism during the interviews, Aksu Bora’s video on the *Women’s Coalition’s* website sheds light on how they managed to establish coalition among women while still retaining individuality: starting the work with the women they already knew, trusted and loved. She says there were many times when she felt herself to be useless within the feminist movement but the *Women’s Coalition* changed this perception of herself because everyone in the group knows the others’ limits very well and they developed their skills together by ‘knowing each other and letting yourself go.’ She adds that, even though they started it with the women they already knew, she met several other women while doing coalition work and also came to love and trust them. Therefore she summarises her experiences in the *Women’s Coalition* as a ‘touching, encountering and intimacy story’ (Kadın Koalisyonu, 2015). Her video shows the core of alliance and solidarity among women while working together, which is mutual trust. In her discussion on transversal politics, Yuval-Davis states that trust is a key component of working together across different positionings and that it is based on common values (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 198). According to Berrin Sönmez [religious feminist], the solution is also establishing and feeding a trust relationship

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<sup>79</sup> Tuksal’s friend is referring to one of the formal meetings of the women’s organisation and how she actually disagreed with the women there, saying that she would not wish that kind of a lifestyle for her own daughter, but acted as if she approved because of the pressure she felt.

among women: ‘In an equal space, as partners, we need to talk and reflect our conversations into the text, decisions, debates, and until then we shouldn’t compromise our egalitarian and libertarian approach.’ Her emphasis on equality resonates with transversal politics’ stress on establishing equal and non-hierarchical work among women and respecting each other’s positionings. Aksu Bora emphasises the importance of friendship to establish solidarity among women as it is ‘selected affinity’ (Bora, 2017). However, affinity as a relatedness and a political kinship by choice, rather than based on identity, can also be the foundation of coalitions (Haraway, 1991). Coalition building in Turkey, despite its questionable structures, is still the leading meeting place among women, where they can have an impact on their perceptions of each other and it is where women from various groups work together. Kemalist feminist Şükran emphasises the importance of making an effort to converge and mentions conventions as a significant opportunity for this: ‘Talking to each other, understanding, extending a hand... conventions, of course. I think it’s very significant to share information and love and respect each other in those common places.’ Sebahat Tuncel also affirms that common places foster women’s awareness of each other’s troubles.

Sebahat Tuncel [Kurdish activist]: To have an umbrella organisation is important... because when you discuss things there everyone sees how others approach the problems. Even if there are differences, you see these differences... It also strengthens solidarity. Because if you understand, if you notice, you act in solidarity... The local problems that women have are so much deeper and, in order to be aware of them, we need to connect with each other. Therefore, everyone will be in their organisations but with these umbrella organisations they will get to know each other, be aware of each other and be sensitive to the problems they have. (Ankara, *Member of Parliament – HDP at the time*)

The importance of these platforms is that, at the moment, they are the only places where activists can come together and have a chance of connecting with each other, and perhaps developing informal relations as well. Therefore, the solution should not be to abolish them but rather to solve their problems or find alternatives. Kurdish feminist Lerzan says that women’s organisations must come together more often and suggests regional meetings: ‘I really wish there were resources for cultural trips... I wish that was possible and organisations in the villages and cities do alternative things to understand each other’s lives... Coming together can resolve things,

understanding each other.’ Halime Erçetin [feminist], who has been working on establishing networks among women’s organisations for several years, on the other hand, recommends two steps: Asking, ‘where you are’ first and drama theatres [role-playing] to understand each other:

Halime Erçetin [feminist]: You know when you go to the shopping centres or subways abroad, there are boards to tell you where you are. That ‘you are here’ makes you feel good. It’s a road map for you to decide whether you should turn left or right. Even if you’re alone you feel as strong as though someone is describing the way to you. We need to do the same in the meetings with women: Where are you?... I mean, there is so much disarrangement and disconnection; so in order to work together we should ask, ‘where are we?’ first... The second step, we have new training formulas like drama theatre so women can feel the role... In Turkey women and women’s organisations are so intolerant. We need to try something else. Have I managed? At the moment we can’t either but women should be close to each other with such methods. (Ankara, *Flying Broom*)

Her suggestion of defining ‘where you are’ and knowing others’ positions is similar to ‘rooting’ in transversal politics and is a very useful way for activists to develop an embracing relationship with each other. Drama theatre can also be a good example of ‘shifting’, which may allow activists to put themselves in others’ situations and understand them better. The only problem related to these suggestions, especially drama theatre, is the potential for their application within the broad women’s movement in Turkey. It may quite possibly be too difficult to bring activists together for such an event, but it can be tried within the existing common platforms because they represent a potential way to apply transversal politics in the women’s movement. Another problem with joint actions, expressed by religious feminist Berrin Sönmez, is that groups receive calls to support petitions from others without having a prior debate on the draft and this generally leads to a lack of participation by some groups. She said that, if a petition does not reflect their priorities, then signing it becomes unacceptable. She suggests that, in order to reach more people, groups should draft the texts together and a way of doing this could be to prepare the texts in email groups that include at least one person from each organisation because equality would be established in this way.

All of these suggestions for how to establish solidarity among women reveal one crucial element of transversal politics: active listening. Establishing empathy and dialogical politics as the basis of coalitions enables activists to acknowledge women's multiple positions, overlaps and intersections of belongings and women's relational identities. Leah Bassel considers listening to be an act of and challenge for solidarity (Bassel, 2017). She argues that it is a difficult act, especially when the one who needs to be listened to offers a different and complicated version of events that demands change from 'Us' and challenges the 'existing distributions of voice and power' (Bassel, 2017: 89). She argues that 'listening functions not only as "an act of attention that registers uniqueness of the other's narrative" (Couldry 2010: 9) but also as a *political* form of recognition' (Bassel, 2017: 72). In her analysis, which is based on her research on migrant justice activists and Indigenous activists in Canada, she argues that the politics of listening as solidarity is central to political equality and emphasises the importance of 'recognition of others as capable of political action and therefore meant to be listened to, not cared for' (Bickford 1996, in Bassel, 2017: 78). In other words, the politics of listening necessitates 'seeing and listening to others as interdependent equals', which brings along a change in established views and awakens new thoughts (Bassel, 2017: 86). This practice, therefore, as Bickford argues, is a way of constructing meaning together: 'a practice of political listening ... is best understood not as an attempt to get at an "authentic" meaning, but as participation in the construction of meaning. And I think we democratic theorists need to begin to imagine supple institutional spaces that might support such interaction and foster and sustain coalition politics' (Bickford, 1997: 126).

## **Conclusion**

Butler argues that the motive behind coalition building, which assures unity as the outcome, should not be set in advance. The insistence on 'unity' understands solidarity as 'a prerequisite for political action' (Butler, 1990: 14). The process of interviewing has shown me that solidarity can only arise when it is not the initial aim. It consists rather of an informal, somewhat personal and spontaneous connection among women. Solidarity is something they feel and experience while doing activism; therefore, it cannot be set as a primary condition to achieve. When it

is set as a target to reach, however, then it becomes a ‘must do’ and is reduced to a mechanical relationship, in which women do not show their true selves, and this damages their existing, weak connections by creating reciprocal forlorn hopes of each other and as a result women tend to move back into their own safe spaces. It should be remembered that the women’s movement in Turkey is not homogeneous and includes women from very different ideological, political and socio-economic backgrounds, and it cannot be reduced to any of them. Women activists in Turkey should see themselves as political actors and advocates/messengers, aiming to shape emancipatory messages for women. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the importance of not transforming solidarity into an imposition, in which solidarity is understood as an essentialist category. The emphasis on ‘sustained and ongoing’ solidarity essentialises the term since it neglects the impact of women’s varied positionings on establishing solidarity among them. Transversal politics, on the other hand, acknowledges that sometimes cooperation among women is not possible. Moreover, under the current polarised political environment in Turkey, establishing issue-based alliances can be seen an effective as well as a realistic way to tackle women’s problems, considering women’s diverse ‘rooted’ histories. There is a greater likelihood of bringing women together through a joint action shaped by a common cause, and they work more productively in such alliances. Successful examples of alliances reveal that there has to be a core issue on which activists are willing to work together. Even though the basic interests of women’s organisations differ based on their identities and political standpoints, they still tend to come together if there is a common concern, such as violence against women or women’s political participation. In these cases, they have built very successful alliances in Turkey and have made a difference in women’s lives. Therefore, it is very clear that women’s organisations are more likely to come together in issue-based and/or event-based alliances, where they can spontaneously foster a degree of solidarity. Moreover, platforms, like the Convention, help activists to listen and understand each other, despite their problems, and this paves the way to transversal politics by recognising and respecting different positionings, thus achieve ‘shifting’. Therefore, as Bassel argues, ‘through the spontaneous quality of speaking and listening collective action is possible’ (Bassel, 2017: 86–87). Encounters among women help them to resolve the dilemma of identity politics and the idea of universalism, which does not prevent seeing both the commonalities and differences among women. It is

also possible in these platforms to develop informal ties among women, which they see as sometimes being a more important component in establishing solidarity because it is in these relationships that they feel trust most strongly, and this encourages activists to approach their differences openly. In coalition work between groups, it is possible to try to foster transversal politics by emphasising the importance of listening to each other and being able to develop a common tongue. Activists can discover their preconceptions, which encourages them to move beyond existing stereotypes about each other towards new potential solidarities that were previously seen as improbable. Finding ways to bring activists together to ensure interaction among them is critical, and the primary way to do so is activism that establishes constructive dialogues among activists.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONCLUSIONS: REFLECTIONS ON THE KEY FINDINGS

So what is my political project of belonging?

It is multi-layered – recognizing the importance of belonging and the politics of belonging without essentializing this or prioritising any form of naturalized boundaries within the complex glocal realities in which we live; it is transversal, rather than cosmopolitan – transcending borders and boundaries while also recognizing the importance of situated gazes, nevertheless rejecting identity politics and emphasizing the differentiation between social locations, identifications and social values; it is emancipatory, advocating for universal human security, and while recognizing the tremendous importance and value of caring relationships it does not ignore the importance of accounting in these relationships for their contextual power relations. (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 203)

So what is my political project of belonging? Although I cannot define it in as sophisticated and elaborate a way as Yuval-Davis, one thing is clear to me when I answer this question: I understand and respect the different positionings that people take up, although I also know the danger of fixed differences and identities, and believe in the importance of establishing constructive dialogue among people, particularly women, to promote working across differences. Therefore, I approached women's stories and identities as intersectional in this research – seeing them not only in terms of their gender but also in relation to their ethnicity, religion, class and other social positionings and locations.

I was motivated to conduct this project by the lack of research on the understanding of what women's solidarity means and entails, especially for activists within the women's movement in Turkey. When I first started working on this project, my initial aim was to demonstrate the value and necessity of sustained and ongoing solidarity among women. I trusted the concept completely, so I remember the disappointment that I felt after the fieldwork. I had hoped that my participants would argue that strategic cooperation among women was not enough, by ascribing a negative meaning to the term 'strategic', and that they would be genuinely willing to act in solidarity with other women, no matter what their differences were, and some of them did say this. Women's solidarity was a romantic ideal for me, as it still is for



the majority of my participants, and I used to define anything else as simply fake. However, analysing the data has told me something else: There is a desire for solidarity – an idealised stage that women want to reach – but this desire, setting solidarity as a goal in itself, not only harms the potential for women’s cooperation to a certain extent, but the expectation of reciprocity also causes disappointment and encourages women to remain in their own circles. My analysis of ‘how do women see the possibility of working across differences and the potential of solidarity among women?’, my main research question in this thesis, has led to an unexpected shift for me. By entering into this field, I entered into 35 stories narrated by women with different perspectives, which opened up a new window to understanding their worlds. Before the fieldwork, I could not have anticipated the worth of strategic alliances among women, and I hoped that my data would trivialise their value and instead aggrandise women’s solidarity. However, data analysis has shown me that alliances among women have enormous potential, particularly within the women’s movement in Turkey, to establish and strengthen cooperation among women, as well as to create a conducive environment for activists to develop solidarity. The analysis showed me the importance of any sort of togetherness among women, without degrading their value by creating hierarchies between ways of doing politics, especially in such a conflicted environment as contemporary Turkey. Therefore, I argue that any kind of encounter among women is valuable and worthwhile.

Activists’ understandings of differences and cooperation between women from different positionings have direct connections with the political atmosphere in Turkey. Therefore, in Chapter Two, my contextual chapter, I first briefly examined Turkish political history and then focused on the history of the women’s movement in Turkey in order to explain the current state of fragmentation within the movement. I began my discussion with the Ottoman period, but focused particularly on the Republican era in order to demonstrate its impact on the contemporary discussions within the women’s movement in Turkey. From the early period of the new-born nation-state, The Republic of Turkey, women were granted some legal rights, such as the right to vote in 1934, when the process of modernisation and westernisation began. During this stage of the women’s movement, defined as state feminism by Tekeli (1995), women were seen as the bearers of culture (Yuval-Davis, 1997), and also as icons of modernity during the modernisation process.

However, I argued that this process only included women who were secular, educated and urban, and thus left the majority of women out of the picture of ‘ideal woman’. When feminism came to the fore in the 1980s, it questioned Kemalism’s exclusive ideology. The biggest reaction against this exclusion, however, came from religious women and Kurdish women, who challenged both Kemalism and feminism and emphasised their distinctive problems based on their religious and ethnic identities.

From the very beginning, my main aim was to understand my participants’ worlds and perspectives in all respects. Although I was familiar with feminists’ and Kemalist feminists’ arguments, I was not as knowledgeable about religious women’s or Kurdish women’s views. Therefore, I tried to read everything I could find written by those women to help my interviews. Although this method helped me to see some aspects of the contemporary discussions within the women’s movement and broaden my knowledge, it did not yield the type of information I needed to answer my research questions, and this justified my choice of interviews as a research method. I conducted 35 in-depth interviews with women activists and academics with different ideological, political, ethnic and religious backgrounds; working in different type of organisations such as associations, platforms, collectives, initiatives and foundations with different tendencies – feminist, Kemalist, religious and Kurdish. I felt very lucky during the fieldwork that I was able to conduct interviews with almost everyone that I wanted to within seven weeks in five different cities. As tiring as this sounds, it was also rewarding in that the majority of my participants commented on how important it is to talk openly about the understanding of women’s solidarity in Turkey and the problems associated with it, and they thanked me for giving them this opportunity to discuss the issues they have problematised. Their comments and approaches to my research convinced me again of the necessity of this research. The in-depth interviews with individual women activists and academics, along with the group interviews (all discussed in Chapter Three), generated rich and valuable information, which is presented in the three analysis chapters based on the three main themes of this research.

In my first analysis chapter, Chapter Four, I discussed the fragmentations within the women’s movement in Turkey by focusing on Kemalist ideology, the headscarf

issue and the Kurdish question, and argued that the exclusionary Kemalist ideology and strict identity politics deepen the alienation among women. My fieldwork has shown me the structured prejudices and stereotypes that women have about each other and how challenging they are to resolve. Kemalist women, especially, tend to maintain the Republican ideal of woman and still define woman as a unitary category, which makes them uncompromising allies. On the other hand, although the majority of feminists have managed to challenge the entrenched Kemalist ideology that previously permeated every aspect of women's lives, and are more willing to embrace differences, issues such as the headscarf ban/freedom and finding common ground to work together can still cause differentiation within the movement.

My participants agreed that the women's movement in Turkey has never been united and that the differences are ideological and/or identity based. I discussed Kemalist ideology's failure to acknowledge the differences among women but rather its tendency to see them – particularly ethnic and religious differences – as threats dividing the country's secular unity and thus damaging. In a way, the politics of difference in Turkey arose against this monolithic approach. However, identity politics created fixed and exclusive identities as well as the unchanging stereotypes that are generated from those categories and harm the women's movement. Moreover, since 2002, the AKP government has continued to polarise the country, which has affected the women's movement in Turkey and created profound tension between different groups of women.

I argued that modernisation and westernisation, which were Kemalism's primary goals, only included urban, secular and educated women as the bearers of culture in the new-born nation-state, which resulted in the exclusion and otherisation of women who carried on the old customs. Kemalist ideology perpetuated the modern-traditional, Western-Eastern, secular-religious dichotomies; and religious women opted out of the 'modern woman' ideal. This Kemalist perception still persists in Turkey and it creates another level of tension among activists within the women's movement, based on the discussions around the headscarf and the Kurdish issue. Kemalist women consider the headscarf issue to be reactionary and the Kurdish issue as separatist. One of my Kemalist feminist participants even rejected the

differences among women and argued that other women's emphasis on Islam and Kurdishness were just invented by the AKP and international powers – therefore she ignored these women's own agency. It became very clear during the fieldwork that Kemalist ideology is an insurmountable barrier against working across differences among women. Their judgements on the headscarf as a sign of underdevelopment and lack of education – simply not being modern enough – and seeing Kurdish women only as separatists rather than listening to their rightful demands based on equal citizenship, alienate these women and lead to their reluctance to cooperate with Kemalist women. On the other hand, it is not only religious and Kurdish women who have problems with Kemalists, my feminist participants also mentioned their unwillingness to work with them, arguing that Kemalists endorse the status quo.

One of the issues that has created much tension among activists is the discussions on the headscarf ban and later the rescinding of this decision. Apart from the obvious dispute it creates with Kemalists, it also created problems between feminists and religious activists. Religious women argued that feminists had not supported them, while feminists claimed that they had, although some of my feminist participants acknowledged their lack of support, arguing that veiling was not on their agenda as it was seen as part of an Islamic identity. Another related reason was seeing the *türban* as a political symbol of the AKP and equating every veiled woman as being part of the government based on their stereotypical judgments. Therefore, it can be said that the headscarf issue is still a divisive subject among women in Turkey.

When I was interviewing my participants, the peace process with the Kurds was still under way and therefore the general atmosphere and my participants' approaches were generally positive, apart from the majority of the Kemalists. Almost all of my feminist participants expressed their admiration of the Kurdish women's movement, commenting upon how successful and dynamic they were. Kurdish activists were also positive regarding questions about the feminist movement in Turkey; apart from a few comments on Turkish feminism's law-oriented – and therefore passive – nature compared to the Kurdish women's movement. Two issues create tension between feminists and Kurdish activists – 8 March and Abdullah Öcalan – since feminists do not want to focus on anything except gender on 8 March and see

following a male leader and militarism within the movement as problematic. The same issues were raised by Kurdish feminists, who distanced themselves from the Kurdish women's movement, and there is a clear tension between these two groups as well.

I argued that understanding categories, such as 'religious women' or 'Kurdish women', as fixed identities create an illusionary homogeneity within groups, whereas in reality there are many differences within these identity categories as well. Moreover, it is assumed that these groups are only about their 'differences' and they are treated accordingly at some joint events. Although the discussion on the politics of difference raised awareness regarding issues related to both religious women and Kurdish women, it has harmed the movement more than it has helped. It is also intentionally used by the state itself to create and reproduce tension between groups. Therefore, diversities within the women's movement in Turkey have direct connections with the political atmosphere in the country. It was very clear during my fieldwork that identity politics, as well as Kemalist ideology, were the main breaking points for many women and the reason behind their decision to stay in their own circles.

In Chapter Five, I examined my participants' narratives in order to answer the following questions: How can solidarity be established across our differences? Would universalism still be an essential component of solidarity? Is solidarity even necessary? The phrase that I heard the most, which also reveals how idealised and romanticised the concept of solidarity is, was 'Long live women's solidarity!' Even though my participants were critical of each other on issues relating to the headscarf ban, Kemalist ideology and the Kurdish women's movement, when it came to defining solidarity, the majority of them were positive, emphasising the importance of it and mentioning how it would bring power to the women's movement and women's personal lives. In general, however, it was difficult to define the concept in abstract terms; thus, activists generally reflected on 'doing' solidarity with others and thought about the successful examples of women's solidarity in Turkey. However, their examples of women's solidarity did not include all groups with their diverse access to power. Based on their definitions, one thing was clear: Solidarity is about the practice, because all of their successful examples of solidarity were ones

in which they were actively involved. However, this also led to a change in activists' perceptions of the concept when they thought about their previous experiences with other groups. Religious women, especially, expressed their disappointment about the lack of solidarity they had felt regarding issues around the headscarf; likewise, feminists mentioned how they had felt abandoned during the discussions on the threat to abortion rights. Therefore, it can be argued that activists' previous experiences with each other have a significant impact on their understanding of the concept of solidarity.

The majority of my participants defined 'being a woman' as the basis of solidarity. Therefore, it can be argued that womanhood is still seen as a potentially *unifying* category (Martha Minow, in Rhode, 1990; Brah, 1991; Maynard, 1995) and commonality as the basis of solidarity. Moreover, exclusion, victimisation, oppression and subordination based on gender, along with sharing the same goals and the hope of abolishing inequalities, are also expressed as the main common denominators to establishing solidarity. Political objectives that affect many women, such as working against violence against women, are likely to bring women together by emphasising women's solidarity. However, a number of my participants also rejected the idea of commonality as the basis for solidarity. They highlighted the fact that sharing the same gender is not enough to guarantee acting in solidarity, and gave examples of past experiences with other groups to show its impossibility. Therefore, as Aksu Bora said, seeing the links between different oppressions is a must to if women are to act with solidarity across differences.

The problem with solidarity occurs when it is understood as full and unequivocal support for another's position, where any critique is seen as anti-solidarity. I have argued that women's solidarity should include discussing hesitations and criticisms openly and freely. However, it should be remembered that women are not only about their 'differences' either because this assumption, ironically, fosters an environment based on homogeneity – locking women into these differences and creating a fixed notion of differences. Most of my participants defined any ethnic, religious, ideological or class differences among them as barriers to solidarity. Some, on the other hand, mentioned that they did not see these as obstacles by emphasising women's shared identity. I argued that it was not the differences

themselves that put barriers in the way of solidarity, but ignoring these differences. I also concluded that expecting women to act together on every issue related to different groups is not possible, as well as not being necessary. This expectation, unfortunately, only creates disappointment and disengagement among women. Solidarity should not be taken for granted when starting a new event together, or set as a target to be reached. Therefore, it should not be the initial aim. When it becomes a 'must do' or a favour in return for someone's previous support, then it loses its potential to create a realm for collective political action and damages activists' existing connections by creating unrealistic reciprocity, and they rather tend to stay in their own groups.

In my final analysis chapter, Chapter Six, I argued that coalition building/alliance among women is a more fruitful way to work together, and has the potential to bring different groups of women in Turkey together to work productively, without creating any pressure. I argued that coalition building/alliance is different from solidarity in terms of how it is seen as strategic and instrumental cooperation among women, whereas solidarity represents a higher level of togetherness that implies something continuous. Therefore, solidarity has a more idealised meaning than coalition because it is seen as the goal itself, whereas coalition has concrete targets – such as changing the law or eliminating violence against women. It was also interesting to see that, while conflict within women's solidarity was not discussed much by my participants, it was seen as a natural part of coalitions. Thus, I argue that coalition building could be a valuable platform from which to see the importance of intersectionality and could lead activists to construct an open dialogue among themselves to pave the way for transversal politics. In such an environment, solidarity can arise naturally without being set as a goal to achieve. I argue that common platforms based on coalition work help activists to understand each other and respect each other's differences.

My participants argued that setting a common target is the main component of coalition work and paves the way for women's solidarity, as well as forging a trust relationship and friendship among women. They emphasised how solidarity arises naturally within different groups in their personal relationships, in informal spaces, because friendship involves listening to each other and making an effort to

understand. However, I argued that relying solely on friendship as the basis of solidarity is limiting because it then means that solidarity can only be established among personal acquaintances. Nevertheless, trust is a key factor that needs to be established in order to achieve solidarity among women, which emphasises a relationship among equals, as in transversal politics. The main places for activists to come together are still common platforms, where they potentially have an impact on each other's perceptions. My participants' narratives revealed that joint actions are very likely to bring activists together, where they can work productively and connect. Their perspectives on informal spaces could potentially be implemented within those platforms by encouraging the importance of listening to each other. I argued that coalitions could establish an environment that is based on intersectionality, rather than fixed, exclusive and narrow identity politics, where activists can also develop a degree of solidarity. Therefore, ensuring interaction among activists is a valuable component of working across differences, and activism has the greatest potential to foster this.

One limitation of this research is the fact that the majority of the organisations for which my participants work – especially feminists and Kemalist feminists – are well-known ones since I restricted my research to five big cities due to limitations of time and resources. During the analysis, however, I questioned whether my data would have been different if I had added small cities and local organisations to my research. This revelation leads me to suggest a future study that focuses on the understanding of women's differences and solidarity in much more intimate and small spaces than formal organisations. Such a study could be valuable and could also be extended through a comparative study that focuses on different approaches to women's solidarity within both urban and rural settings. Therefore, further research might expand the number of locations and the diversity of organisations to provide a sustained understanding of what working across differences entails for women activists in Turkey.

My aim in 2013 when I started to do this research was to fill the gap in knowledge about the conceptualisation of women's solidarity and its meaning to women activists in the women's movement in Turkey. The only previous study that discusses feminist solidarity in Turkey in this respect (Bilginer 2009) suggested that



feminist politics should be the basis of women's activism, which I argued would exclude women other than feminists (see Chapter One and Chapter Three). When I mentioned her research to two of my feminist participants, because they asked if there were any other studies on this subject, one of them found its conclusion to be very elitist and the other one said that if she had told her friends, who were not feminists, that the solution was feminist politics, no one would have ever sat down at the table to work with her. While there has been some work done in the area of the politics of difference, focusing particularly on either the Islamist movement or the Kurdish movement in Turkey, as well as research that shows the relation between feminism and the Islamist women's movement or the Kurdish women's movement, my research is original in terms of the wide group from whom I collected data. Therefore, this thesis, as far as I am aware, is the first full-length study of the contemporary women's movement in Turkey with a focus on women activists' perceptions of the politics of difference, women's solidarity and coalition building/alliances among women. This study has also made a significant preliminary contribution to the literature on women's solidarity by drawing a distinction between women's solidarity and alliances among women, emphasising the importance of both, as the relation between the two is under-researched. I hope that my study will make a small degree of contribution to the women's movements in Turkey, especially working across political and identity differences, and will generate interest and dialogue among different groups of women.

Doing this PhD has been both an intellectual and an emotional journey for me. It pushed my limits and my knowledge and helped me to confront myself, learning the value of reflexivity. When I started this research in September 2013, the political atmosphere was somewhat different in Turkey: It was after the Gezi Park Protests, where the resistance against the government's totalitarian rule was significant and connective. Even though many people lost their lives during these protests, they still gave hope to the opponents of the government and showed that people can unite to resist together. The protests also gave me the hope to pursue this research. Moreover, the peace process with the Kurds was still under way and the general atmosphere was rather positive. Five months after I finished collecting my data, however, in the summer of 2015, the ceasefire between the Turkish state and the Kurds ended, and since then the country has been paralysed by violent clashes. The

tension has escalated immensely since the attempted coup in July 2016, and the government has been silencing its opponents with severe punishments that cost people's jobs and threaten their lives. As I write this conclusion to the thesis, a prominent feminist activist, and one of my participants in this research, İlknur Üstün, was detained in a 'terrorism investigation' on 5 July 2017, along with nine other women's and human-rights activists, one of whom is also a well-known activist in the women's movement in Turkey. They were at a workshop meeting in Büyükada – an island near Istanbul – to discuss how to protect the work of human-rights defenders (HRW, 2017a), but the government accused them of being associated with Gülenists, whom they blame for the attempted coup in July 2016 (Conectas Human Rights, 2017). A day later, the *Women's Coalition*, of which İlknur Üstün is a founding member, published an article stating that they are in solidarity with their colleagues and calling their detention an attack against the women's movement and all the women in Turkey (Women's Coalition, 2017a). When their seven-day period of detention was extended for another week, 141 women's and LGBTI+ organisations shared a joint article to condemn the attack on these human-rights' defenders and emphasised that they stand by their friends. They emphasised that the accusations about the activists were lies and they perceived this as an attack on the women's movement and on the rights defenders' devoted work to secure an equal and fair life. They called on the government to stop violating the Constitution and international declarations and conventions and free the activists (Women's Coalition, 2017b). On 18 July 2017, six human-rights activists arrested for 'helping an armed terrorist organisation', and the other four, including İlknur Üstün, were released on the condition of judicial control (Aljazeera, 2017). However, shortly afterwards, on 22 July 2017, two of these human rights activists, including İlknur Üstün, were arrested again (Hürriyet Daily News, 2017) and after 113 days of imprisonment they were released on 25 October 2017 (Bianet, 2017). In such an atmosphere, there were times when I lost my motivation and hope for this research: 'working across differences' and 'women's solidarity' became empty words in a country where the power's initial aim was to homogenise people based on their values. Therefore, my journey to continue and finish this research was challenging, and sometimes painful, but since the beginning I knew its necessity and I have held onto my belief in my participants' and women's power to change this world for the better. Being a doctoral student in an international research

environment and supported by women in my department has also been of great value and has shown me that ‘we are together across our differences’. As Yuval-Davis argues, rather than constructing a homogeneous political order, we should pursue a transversal dialogue that is based on common political values, while recognising different locations and identifications and valuing global discourse (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 176).

My fieldwork has shown me the power of communication among women. When we openly listen to each other and establish a constructive dialogue, differences as obstacles can become sources of women’s solidarity. In coalition work among women, it is possible to foster transversal politics by maintaining dialogue and developing a common tongue. Therefore, I want to end this conclusion with Bassel’s words. In her work, in which she talks about the importance of the politics of listening, she asks, ‘why listen?’ and replies: ‘The answer is very simple and impossible at the same time: political equality’ (Bassel, 2017: 6).

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Consent Form

#### PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Title of the study:** The Contemporary Women's Movement in Turkey: The Potential for Solidarity across Differences

This form is for you to state whether or not you agree to take part in the study. Please read and answer every question. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

Have you read and understood the information leaflet about the study? Yes  No

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the study? Yes  No

Do you understand that the information you provide will be held in confidence by the researcher? Yes  No

Do you understand that you may withdraw from the study for any reason? Yes  No

Do you understand that the information you provide may be used in future research? Yes  No

Do you agree to take part in the study? Yes  No

If yes, do you agree to your interviews being recorded? Yes  No

*(You may take part in the study without agreeing to this).*

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Date	Signature

## **Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet**

### **Information Sheet for Research Participants**

#### **1. Research project title**

The Contemporary Women's Movement in Turkey: The Potential for Solidarity across Differences

#### **2. Invitation**

You are being invited to take part in this research project. Before you decide whether or not you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being conducted and what your participation will involve. Please take some time to read the following information carefully, and discuss it with others if you wish. Please contact me if anything is unclear or if you would like more information. Take some time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

#### **3. What is the purpose of the study?**

My aim is to understand how the experiences of women from diverse backgrounds and politicisation processes shape their perceptions and their positions on gender issues in Turkey. I would like to explore differences and similarities between women occupying varied positions in the context of women's movements. Moreover, I would like to examine the possibility for solidarity among these different groups of women.

#### **4. Why have I been invited?**

You are being invited to take part in this study because it focuses on different groups of activist women within the women's movement in Turkey and you are involved in one of these groups. This research with different groups of activist women is in a good position to offer insight into the potential for solidarity within the women's movement across the differences between them. In addition to yourself, 24 other participants will be recruited for this study.

### **5. Who is organising the research?**

The research is organised by PELIN DINCER, PhD candidate at the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of York.

### **6. Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide. I will describe the study and go through this information sheet, which I will discuss with you. I will then ask you to sign a consent form to show you have agreed to take part. If you do not want to sign the form, you may give your consent verbally. You are free to withdraw at any time until September 2015, without giving a reason. If you withdraw from the study, all your data will be withdrawn and destroyed.

### **7. Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This project has been ethically approved by the ELMPS Ethics Committee at the University of York. The contact information for the chair of the ELMPS is:

Lucia Quaglia

Department of Politics

Derwent College, University of York, York YO10 5DD

### **8. What will participation involve?**

Respondents will be involved in a conversational interview with the researcher. The interview will take approximately one hour. The interview can be carried out at your workplace or in your home, or wherever would be more convenient for you. The date and time of the interview will be set based on your preference. If you agree, the interview will be tape recorded, and later transcribed into text form. Recordings of interviews will be deleted after transcription.

### **9. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. No one will be able to identify you in any reports or publications.

## **10. What will happen to the interview data?**

The data will be used for the researcher's PhD thesis and related publications. You are very welcome to a copy of the final report. You will not be identified in the thesis. Your comments will be quoted, but you will remain anonymised. The data may be used for future research.

## **12. Contact for further information**

If you wish to obtain further information about this project, please contact the researcher and her supervisor.

### **Researcher:**

Name: PELIN DINCER

Address: Flat 4 Block D1, Wentworth Graduate College, Heslington, York, YO10 5NG, UK

Email: pd642@york.ac.uk

Tel: +447463737272

### **Supervisor:**

Name: Professor Stevi Jackson

Address: Centre for Women's Studies, Grimston House, University of York  
York, YO10 5DD, UK

Email: stevi.jackson@york.ac.uk

**Thank you for taking part in this project.**



## **Appendix C: Interview Guidelines**

### **Interview Guidelines**

Can you give me some information about your organisation and its aims?

#### **I. Definitions of the women's movement**

How do you define the women's movement in Turkey?

Could all the organisations, groups, or movements that work for the benefit of women be considered components of the women's movement?

What is the scope of the women's movement? How do you define your stance within this scope?

What do you see as the main agenda of the women's movement?

What do you think should be included in the agenda of the women's movement?

What are the reasons of differentiation within the women's movement?

Do you see any problems within the movement?

Is there any hierarchy among the different groups within the movement?

#### **II. Similarities and differences**

When and how did 'differences' become an issue within the women's movement?

Who are the 'different' ones?

What are the issues about which women's groups differentiate themselves?

What do you think about the headscarf issue? (Law about secondary-school students)

What do you think about the peace process and the Kurdish question?

What is your position on abortion? (Abortion ban discussions two years ago)

What do you think about how differences among different women's groups affect their perceptions of each other? (What is your relation with Islamist, feminist, Kemalist, Kurdish groups?)

With whom do you feel most comfortable working? With whom do you feel most uncomfortable working?

### **III. Concept of alliances and solidarity and solidarity practices**

What do alliances mean to you?

What does solidarity mean to you?

What do alliances entail?

What does solidarity entail? (Being a woman? Common objectives? Etc.)

About which issues is solidarity possible?

Are there any issues where solidarity can be established?

Do you think solidarity can be established much more easily when the issue is common oppression, such as violence?

What joint actions of women in Turkey do you think have been successful? (Are they examples of solidarity or alliances?)

Have you ever been in solidarity actions with other groups?

Is there any issue where solidarity among women should have been possible but could not be achieved?

### **III. Barriers to Solidarity**

What do you think gets in the way of establishing solidarity among different groups of women such as feminists, Islamists, Kurdish and Kemalist women?

Do you think class, ethnicity, religion or identity can be barriers to establishing solidarity?

(Depending on the answer to the previous question) Why is it so hard to establish solidarity among people from different class, ethnic, religious, and identity backgrounds?

Should all the different groups be together?

### **IV. Possibilities for Solidarity**

How is solidarity possible?

How can commonality/unity be established?

‘Being together despite our differences.’ This motto, which has been repeated at rallies, what does it mean to you? Is it a way to establish solidarity?

To what extent can differences be overcome?

What should be the agenda for establishing solidarity and alliances?

Are there any means that you can suggest for acting in solidarity? (Such as platforms or campaigns) What should be the model of organisation?

What do you think about the future possibilities for solidarity in Turkey?

#### Appendix D: Information about the Participants

Name	City	Organisation	Orientation of the Participant	Date of Interview
Aksu Bora	Ankara	Academic	Feminist	08.12.2014
Ayşe	Ankara	The Foundation for Women's Solidarity	Feminist	10.12.2014
Nazlı	Ankara	The Foundation for Women's Solidarity	Feminist	10.12.2014
Emel	Ankara	Turkish Women's Union	Kemalist feminist	11.12.2014
Nesrin Semiz	Ankara	Capital City Women's Platform	Religious feminist	12.12.2014
Betül	Ankara	Ankara Feminist Collective	Feminist	13.12.2014
Halide	Ankara	Association of Republican Women	Kemalist feminist	15.12.2014
Canan Güllü	Ankara	Women's Associations Federation of Turkey	Kemalist feminist	15.12.2014
Nazan	Ankara	Association of Turkish Women University Graduates	Kemalist feminist	16.12.2014

Selma	Ankara	The Foundation for Women's Solidarity & Ankara Women's Platform	Feminist	16.12.2014
Berrin Sönmez	Ankara	Capital City Women's Platform	Religious feminist	18.12.2014
Simten Coşar	Ankara	Academic	Feminist	22.12.2014
İlknur Üstün	Ankara	Women's Coalition	Feminist	22.12.2014
Berfin	Van	VAKAD – Van Women's Association	Kurdish Feminist	25.12.2014
Dilvan	Van	VAKAD – Van Women's Association	Kurdish Feminist	25.12.2014
Lerzan	Van	YAKA-KOOP	Kurdish Feminist	27.12.2014
Navin	Diyarbakır	Selis Women's Association	Kurdish activist	29.12.2014
Dila	Diyarbakır	Selis Women's Association	Kurdish activist	29.12.2014
Lale	Diyarbakır	Association of Women's Academy	Kurdish activist	29.12.2014
Nebahat Akkoç	Diyarbakır	KAMER	Kurdish feminist	29.12.2014
Türkan	Ankara	Association of Republican Women	Kemalist feminist	02.01.2015

Emine	İstanbul	Muslim Initiative against Violence against Women	Religious activist	08.01.2015
Nur	İstanbul	Muslim Initiative against Violence against Women	Religious activist	08.01.2015
Melike	İstanbul	Reçel Blog	Religious feminist	08.01.2015
Özge	İstanbul	Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation & İstanbul Feminist Collective	Feminist	09.01.2015
Yelda	İstanbul	Women for Women's Human Rights – New Ways	Feminist	09.01.2015
İdil	İstanbul	Women's Solidarity Foundation	Feminist	12.01.2015
Fidan	İstanbul	Rainbow Women's Association	Kurdish activist	13.01.2015
Bahar	İstanbul	Rainbow Women's Association	Feminist	13.01.2015
Şükran	İzmir	Association to Protect Women's Rights	Kemalist feminist	16.01.2015
Gülşen	İzmir	İzmir Women's Solidarity Association	Feminist	16.01.2015

Begüm	İzmir	İzmir Women's Solidarity Association	Feminist	16.01.2015
Sebahat Tuncel	Ankara	Kurdish activist & MP	Kurdish activist	22.01.2015
Halime Erçetin	Ankara	Flying Broom	Feminist	23.01.2015
Hidayet Tuksal	Ankara	Capital City Women's Platform & Academic	Religious feminist	26.01.2015

## GLOSSARY AND ABBREVIATIONS

AKP – Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi [Justice and Development Party]

Çarşaf – a black burka that conceals everything except the eyes

CHP – Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi [Republican People's Party]

Demokrat Parti – Democratic Party

DÖKH – Demokratik ve Özgür Kadın Hareketi [Democratic and Free Women's Movement]

GNA – Grand National Assembly

HDP – Halkların Demokratik Partisi [People's Democratic Party]

Refah Partisi – Welfare Party

Kuva-yi Milliye – Turkish National Movement

PKK – Partiya Karkêren-i Kurdistan [Kurdistan Workers' Party]

PYD – Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat [Kurdish Democratic Union Party]

TAK – Teyrêbazên Azadiya Kurdistan [Kurdistan Freedom Hawks]

Türban – In the Turkish context, the *türban* is similar to the *hijab* worn in western countries.

YPG – Yekîneyên Parastina Gel [People's Protection Units]

YPJ – Yekîneyên Parastina Jin [Women's Protection Units]



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