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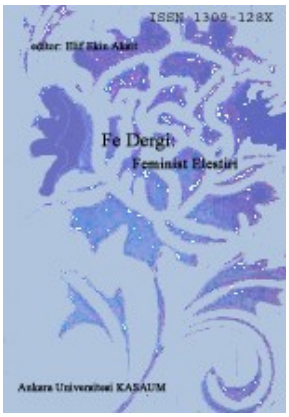

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Mobilizing for women's organizations: getting into activism

Elif Gazioğlu*

This paper focuses on women activists. It centres on the activists' perceptions and experiences of becoming and being activists in women's organizations in Turkey. Turkey has witnessed a gradual increase in the number of women's organizations since the 1980s. While increasing political and cultural diversification shaped Turkish politics in general throughout the 1980s, women with diverse socio-cultural backgrounds and particular political, religious or ethnic affiliations started to mobilize in women's organizations. Respecting this, this paper explores how and to what extent the process of becoming and being a woman activist is shaped by the activists' backgrounds and affiliations.

Key words: activism, women's organizations, political, religious and ethnic affiliations.

Kadınlar Örgütleniyor: Kadın Hareketi Aktivizmi

Genel itibariyle Türkiye'deki kadın hareketi aktivizmine odaklanan bu çalışma, kadınları örgütlenmeye taşıyan süreç ve etkenleri anlamayı amaçlıyor. Türkiye 1980lerden itibaren kadın örgütleri sayısının hızla arttığına tanık oldu. Aynı dönemde ülke çapında siyasi arenayı şekillendirmeye başlayan politik ve kültürel çeşitlilik, farklı sosyo-kültürel, politik, dini ve etnik aidiyetlere sahip kadınların oluşturdukları örgütlenmelere de yansıdı. Bu bağlamda bu çalışma, farklı çevreler, deneyimler ve aidiyetlerden gelen kadınların, kadın örgütleri ile karşılaşmaları, örgütlenmeleri ve kadın hareketinin birer parçası haline gelmelerine giden süreci inceliyor ve bu tür farklılıkların örgütlenme sürecine nasıl yansıdığı sorusunun yanıtını arıyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: aktivizm, kadın örgütleri, siyasi, dini ve etnik aidiyetler

Introduction

When we consider women's activism we may well tend to think of the public aspects of that activism. Indeed, when I think of the term women's activism, one particular image appears in my mind; women holding banners in their hands marching in the streets and shouting for women's social, legal, economic and political rights. And although most of us who are feminists may well believe that the personal is political, I want to argue that we do not think enough about activists` personal lives. The matter of this paper therefore is the personal histories of the activists who take part in the women's movement and the ways in which the activists perceive their personal lives to be related to their entry into activism.[1] To understand the ways through which women encountered activism, I conducted interviews with 33 women from 17 women's organizations located in five cities in Turkey (Ankara, İstanbul, Van, Diyarbakır and Trabzon). I chose these cities because they are different from each other in socio-cultural and economic terms so that I could to see how those differences reflected on women's organizing in the Turkish context. The vast majority of the participants were aged between 20 and 40. Regarding marital status, the majority were single (never married or divorced). A significant number of the informants had a bachelor degree and most of them were employed. Although some had a tribal background (particularly those living in Diyarbakır and Van), they were mostly urban, middle-class, educated women. Importantly, political, religious and ethnic affiliations of the informants varied significantly. The largest group of activists identified themselves with feminist orientations. This was followed respectively by secular, religious, Kurdish, socialist and feminist LGBT groups. There were also activist women who did not specify an orientation.

The ways in and the environments through which women, in this study, encountered women's organizations varied greatly. The participants also had different motivations and means for joining women's organizations. Some of them first encountered activism directly through women's organizations, while others did so through their previous gender-mixed organizational experiences. For some, their immediate relationships – with tribe or family – played an important role in their access into activism, while for others friendship and neighbourhood functioned as important means. Similarly, their daily experiences in activism and in terms of their immediate environments were different. Thus, the matter of this chapter is how the personal is related to the

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entry into women's organizations and activism. In the context of women's activism in Turkey, the personal, as I found, plays a significant role.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first one focuses on social networks in gender-mixed spaces – such as political parties and workplaces – and networks in immediate environments –neighbourhood and kinship - defined by my data as routes that carried the participants into women's organizations. Here, I analyse those networks. The second section focuses on the role of the political, ethnic and religious affiliations of the participants in their entry into activism. The final section discusses the other factors that impacted on the participants' entry into women's organizations. Overall in this paper, I argue that the participants' socio-cultural and political backgrounds have had considerable impact on the ways they encountered women's organizations.

The Role of Social Networks in Women's Participation in the Women's Organizations

The importance of social networks in drawing individuals into social movements and organizations is commonly accepted by social movement scholars.[2] Drawing upon Passy's explanation of the role of networks in individual participation, I shall state three main reasons which clarify that role for the participants.[3] First, social networks intervene in the process of participation by reinforcing individuals who have the potential for participation.[4] According to della Porta and Diani,[5] people are more likely to participate in collective action when they have connections to those who are already involved in the action or have a tendency to be involved. It is usually those connections that shape potential activists' decisions to participate. Therefore, secondly, as well as establishing a link between activism and individuals, social networks have an effect on the decisions of those individuals. Thirdly, also related to this, according to Passy: '[...] social networks are not only instrumental ties enabling or constraining participation', but are also a web of meanings through which individual perceptions regarding collective action are shaped.[6] Briefly, in order to reach an understanding of the mechanisms and dynamics influencing individuals' participation in collective action one needs to identify and explain the social networks that carry people into activism. I shall therefore now look at how my interviewees perceived the impact of their social networks on their participation in women's organizations.

The instigators of the majority of my interviewees` activism, as they told me, were their social networks. In their accounts, of the 33 participants I interviewed 21 referred to their friends` direct impact on the process of getting involved in their current organizations. Nine participants out of 21 had actually established the organization they worked in with their close friends. Ten indicated their friends as the medium that introduced them to the women's organizations they became involved in afterwards, and two said that they participated in the foundation of the women's organizations after their friends had decided to establish one. Thus, nine women had been directly involved in the decision-making process to establish a women's organization along with their friends, two also participated in the foundation process and nine were introduced to an organization by their friends. The women indicating their friends' impact on their entry into women's organizations activism identified political parties (seven out of 21), other previous organizations (seven), their neighbourhood (five), and workplaces (two) as the settings where their networks were established. That friendship relations are important for women's entry into women's organizations in Turkey have also been confirmed by other studies.[7]

Also, nine interviewees (some of whom were among those that mentioned social networks) indicated military coups as factors that played a role in their entry into women's organizations. Classes taken in the university (one), certain books read (three), and individual applications to women's organizations for advice (two) were also among the factors which contributed and which will be analysed below. For now I turn to the social networks that were established in gender-mixed spaces, which carried some of the participants into women's organizations.

The Role of the Social Networks in Gender-mixed Spaces

As mentioned above, the greater part of the informants talked about their social networks in the political parties and other gender-mixed organizations as factors through which they encountered women's organizations. Emine said, for instance: 'We left the party with some friends and got organized in here'. Similarly, when talking about the foundation process of her women's organization, Oya, who was one of the founder members, said:

> A couple of friends of mine [in the political party] shared with me their desire to establish a women's organization. Then each women involved told this to another woman who was

> supposed to be interested. We were 15 or 16 in the beginning. Then the number increased with other women joining.

These quotes show that the participants getting into – or establishing – women's organizations required more than one individual. Thus, even the activity of getting into women's activism itself was a collective activity for these women. In these cases, collectively made decisions were part of the individuals' mobilization for women-only activism. Those collectives were composed of friendship relations established in various settings. Thus, friendship relations played a significant role in these women's participation in women's organizations and even in encouraging them to stay involved, as in Sevim's case: 'I was to quit due to health problems but [the chair of the organization who is Sevim's close friend] never let me go.'

The setting in which those relations were established impacted on the ways through which the participants got involved in women-only organizations. For Hatice, for instance, this setting was her workplace where she was allowed to work with her headscarf. She met her friends who introduced the women's organization to her in her workplace. She said:

> I had started working in İSMEK [Istanbul Metropolitan Art and Professional Courses] as an English teacher then. I met these friends when I was there. I encountered the [organization] through them actually.

İSMEK, a professional course provider, is run by the Istanbul Municipality, which is governed by a religious and conservative administration. Due to the religious stance of the administration of the municipality, a number of covered women were employed as teachers in the institution. The course participants' profiles were quite similar to those working in the institution in terms of religious affiliation. Hatice's relation to her friends sharing a similar background and the same context with her made her encounter the women's organization in which she was to get involved afterwards. Thus, the setting which paved her way into women's activism also reflected on what sort of women's organization she was to be involved in, which in Hatice's case was a religious one.

On the other hand, it was not merely sharing the same contextual backgrounds, but also sharing similar perceptions of gendered experiences within those gender-mixed spaces that was at the core of mobilizing for women's organizations. This was revealed in these women's narratives regarding their previous experiences which were intertwined with their dissatisfaction, disappointment and frustration. Figen said, for instance:

> I used to be in the women's branch of a left-wing party. But I saw that women cannot make themselves exist there. The parties were using the women. They need women's labour. [...] They ignore your work. I stopped my relation with the party totally. My friends there still expect me to go back but I never will.

Two main issues are raised in this quote regarding the participants' self-perception; the feeling of negligence and ignorance. Figen was angry; as her statement highlights, she thought that women's work in political parties was ignored, though it was used when needed. And, actually, it was this feeling of one's labour being ignored which caused her to feel unable to exist or be present in the gender-mixed environment she talked about. Demet said: 'It is hard for us [women] to be the subjects of our work in gender-mixed organizations. But in fact it is always women who do the hard work, who run much.' Demet talked of the 'unjust treatment' that women are subjected in gender-mixed spaces. These women perceived themselves as part of a group who were treated unfairly. Feeling part of a mistreated group can lead to friendship relations, which were established in those gender-mixed organizations. Identification with the 'exploited group' was also observed in other interviewees' accounts. For instance, Nuray said:

> I worked with this group for helping Bosnian people in war. [...] It was us [women] working to collect money to send to Bosnia by having *kermeses*[8] and cooking. We knocked on doors and collected the money, clothes and other stuff. Women work in a self-sacrificial way. Men simply leave when they see things are getting harder.

Similar to Nuray, Vildan also thought that men were for 'easy jobs': 'Men like to show off. They like to do speeches before the cameras, debating their ideas and so on. But all the hard work is prepared in the kitchen where women are.' The expectation that women work `in the kitchen` of gender-mixed organizations by `having *kermeses*, cooking, doing house visits to collect money and clothes` while men `make representations, speeches and decisions` is very much reminiscent of the traditional labour division between a husband and a wife within marriage. The location of female members within gendered-altruist-indoor activities and male members in equally gendered outdoor activities that focus - to some extent - on self-promotion highlights the re-production of the public/private division of personal life in the public sphere of the gender-mixed organizations.[9] Moreover,

the similarity between the lack of recognition and invisibility of women's labour, as it is indoors most of the time, in the gender-mixed organizations and at home is significant. This 'invisibility of women's work' caused women's agency to be ignored and their work underestimated.

The reproduction of traditional gender roles within gender-mixed organizations in this way had an effect on the participants' behaviours and self-perception as reported by them. Meral's comment revealed this:

> When I was working in [a left-wing political party], I used to behave differently since I was aware that I was seen as the *namus* [honour] of the party. I had to be careful all the time with my behaviours not only in the party but everywhere since I represented the party somehow.

On the basis of her experiences, Meral identified herself as the *namus* of her party then, since she thought she was thus perceived. In the Turkish context, a woman is the '*namus*', the honour of her family. In the context that Meral employed the term, it refers literally to a married woman's loyalty to her husband or a single woman's rejection of sexual engagement out of marriage. Within this particular context, then, it is very much related to the traditional understanding of women's responsibility not to bring shame on their families by behaviours that challenge the social expectations of their gender. This is, obviously, a reflection of the traditional approach that constructs a family's public image on the basis of outsiders' perception regarding family women, as discussed above. So, briefly, the participants felt the reproduction in gender-mixed organizations of culturally constructed gender roles and social meanings given to women's behaviours which prevail in Turkish society, and pertain to the private as much as to the public sphere.[10]

In gender-mixed organizations, the routines were ordered according to the life style of the dominant gender, which, in the participants' cases, were men. This impacted women's participation negatively. For instance, Hatice said of her involvement in a gender-mixed organization:

> The majority in [a gender-mixed youth NGO] was men and meetings started at 9 pm and lasted until midnight. We were not able to stay that late. When we complained about it they simply said there was no other time that was more convenient. Here [in the organization] we arrange the hours as we wish. We meet at breakfast or right after work.

'Meeting hours' were very important. Those were the times when the members of the organizations gathered, discussed the issues considered significant and came to certain decisions collectively. However, in the cases with the participants with gender-mixed organizational backgrounds, meeting hours were arranged according to male members who, in contrast to women, did not feel obliged to be at home before late at night in the Turkish context. Thus, the arrangement of meeting hours according to men resulted in the exclusion of women from meetings. Moreover, the negative response to Hatice's request for a change in working hours also highlighted the fact that male-dominated structures are reluctant to work with women. Working in women-only organizations, on the other hand, as revealed in Hatice's quote above, provided a proper work schedule for these women to balance the pressure they faced, from their families in particular regarding the hours to be back at home. This arrangement also enabled them to participate in their own organizations' decision-making processes.

In some instances, according to some of the participants, the reluctance of gender-mixed structures to involve women in central activities such as meetings, took a concrete shape in excluding women from decision mechanisms initially, and from party politics totally, afterwards. For instance, Suzan said that in her previous party a significant number of women, including herself, were excluded from the party for attempting to raise the issue of women's work. According to her the common characteristics of those women excluded were that 'they were single, divorced or had left their partners'; they had given themselves totally to political work and they were known within the party as the 'feminist cadre'. So, according to Suzan, the common characteristic of women who were excluded was that they did not fit into the traditional gender roles. She saw this as the reason for their exclusion from the party.

Suzan's view of why women were excluded was commonly shared by those interviewees who had political party experience. Figen also said for instance that women in the party were deliberately 'not allowed in decision-making mechanisms'. Demet also said that they were `not allowed to create politics` in the political party she was once involved in. The participants' comments on gender discrimination which left them in a secondary position in gender-mixed organizations overlapped with the findings of the research by STEP (The Project of Civil Society Index in Turkey, 2006) which revealed that far fewer women than men are represented in decision-making and almost no women in leading positions in gender-mixed NGOs across Turkey.[11]

Gül's story below, on the other hand, indicated how these women also perceived their prevention from creating politics within gender-mixed organizations as the result of an invisible 'glass ceiling'[12]:

> When I was involved in [a gender mixed organization] we had regular meetings. In those, I never felt comfortable. I mean, you cannot express yourself fully. They [men] make you feel that they are stronger and more intelligent. Even though you know much about a particular topic, you do not feel strong enough to voice it. I feel more confident and comfortable in women-only spaces.

Male dominance functioned to oppress women's voices and this resulted in women feeling unconfident and insecure in male-dominated environments, which, in Gül's case, was a gender-mixed charity. As Gül's comment above highlights, women-only spaces functioned to increase women's self-confidence. Gül's feelings of such environments were shared commonly by the women in my research, even by those who did not have a gender-mixed organization experience. Nazan, one of those women, said for instance:

> To be honest, even the idea of working along with men scares me. [...] We do not have hierarchical rules here, we are all involved in the decision-making process. [...] It is easier to work in a sphere where they [men] do not exist. Because what we do here is fed by our common experiences.

Nazan had encountered the women's organization through her friends who were involved in it already. As mentioned, she did not have a gender-mixed organization experience and as the quote highlights, she never considered it. She had several reasons for this; she thought, as some other participants, women would not be able to participate effectively in decision-making in gender-mixed organizations. She also assumed a link between non-hierarchical organizing and women-only organizations. Ultimately, according to her, women's common experiences made it easier to work with women and hence women-only organizations were more desirable to be involved in.

Alongside those who went for a women-only organization directly, there were also those who tried women's commissions within gender-mixed organizations first. Some of the participants, for instance, attempted to create women-only spaces within the gender-mixed organizations they were involved in previously. One of those women, Vildan, had tried to establish a women's commission with her friends in their association. However, their attempts encountered strong opposition by the male members of the association. In Vildan's words:

> We had to struggle a lot with the men in the association who said there was no need for a separate commission by women as we were all equal already. They said there was no need for being so feminist!

As this quote also highlights, the negative representation of feminism or feminist was not rare in the participants' experiences. Despite this reaction though, Vildan and her friends were `were really keen` and established the commission. However, she said: `men dominated the commission's decisions.` Ultimately, she and her female friends thought they needed to go for a women-only organization in order to feel that they exist in the political arena. Hande, who had also been through a similar process with her friends, said:

> We have become aware during that process that women needed to organize independently in order to do politics free from male domination. We needed to organize our power out [of gender-mixed spaces] so that we could exist as a political force.

According to Hande then, women's existence as a political force in the political arena was not possible in gender-mixed political organizations. The way to effect policies was to organize women-only organizations, which meant to her, independence from male domination.

As all this shows, the participants perceived their previous gender-mixed political spaces among the reasons paving their way to women-only organizing. In their interpretations of those experiences, certain feelings and emotions played a very significant role; they felt restricted, oppressed, exploited, their labour was underestimated, or ignored. In this sense, my data adds to Hercus's argument that women's feelings contribute hugely in their entry into women's movements.[13]

Overall, the informants` previous gender-mixed organizational experiences had a two-fold impact on their entry into women's organizations. The first one was that the male-dominated structures of those organizations and gender-based discriminations that the informants suffered made them question gender relations within the organizations. The second was that those organizations became mechanisms through which the women found a proper ground to get together with other women who had similar experiences and thought in similar ways. Thus, as well as providing women with social networks carrying them into women's organizations, gender-mixed structures contributed to this process by making them question their gendered experiences.

Briefly, the majority of the informants, particularly those who had previous gender-mixed organizational experiences saw significant differences between working in gender-mixed and women-only organizations. Those differences were mainly defined in terms of exclusion, unequal division of labour and unjust treatment of women. Thus, my data showed that the participants interpreted involvement in a women-only organization as a process, which was triggered by friendship networks and was intertwined with common experiences with those friends in gender-mixed spaces, be it a political party, workplace or association.

Alongside those who emphasized the effect of their experience in social networks established in gender-mixed organizations on their involvement in women's organizations, there were also women in my research who noted their neighbourhood and kinship relations as the environments in which social networks that carried them into women's organizations were established. I now turn to analyse those networks.

The Role of Neighbourhood and Kinship

Although the majority of the informants became involved in women's organizations through networks in gender-mixed organizations, there is a considerable number of interviewees for whom their neighbourhood (five out of 33) and kinship (four out of 33) took on that function. Kinship functioned as a mediator between the participants and women's activism in the regions where a tribal family structure was common. This was usually the case with the informants who lived in the eastern cities.[14] For instance, Figen said that many women from her tribal background followed her steps into her organization, after Figen's involvement in it. Meral said, on the other hand:

> Organizing is something we inherited from the family. We already thought of doing something with [my sister] then. [...] [My sister] came to me one day and told me that she met this woman who talked about women's rights and all that stuff. She said she thought like us. Then [my sister] completed the workshop [regarding women's human rights in a women's organization]. She found some other women there and decided to establish a women's association.

Meral joined them when her sister and friends went to apply for legal status for their association. In Meral's case then, first her family, already organized in the Kurdish movement, and then her sister's desire to establish a women's association, played a huge role in her own involvement. Meral's mother also followed her daughters and became involved in the organization.

In some interviewees' cases, it was the interviewees themselves who caused their acquaintances to get involved in women's organizations. Figen, for instance, led her cousins and other women from her tribal background into women's activism and into establishing a women's organization. She said: 'Women from the tribe who were very critical towards my activism at the beginning, after seeing what we achieved, established a local branch [of a women's organization] in Van with our help.' As this highlights, kinship relations functioned as a medium for some women to participate in the women's movements in certain cities. What connected these respondents' acquaintances to women's organizations was their relational proximity to those who were already involved in women's activism. Thus, my data adds to the research arguing that relationships of a private nature can encourage individuals to participate in collective action.[15]

In cases with neighbourhood, similar to those discussed above, usually the participants themselves attempted to function as instigators of their neighbours' contact with women's organizations. Fatma said, for instance: '[When I go to the women's organization] every time I invite my neighbours as well.' Thus, what connected these respondents' acquaintances to women's organizations was their relational and geographical proximity to those who were already involved with women's activism.

This was usually the case with those interviewees who lived in rather disadvantaged areas. These locations provided the men with opportunities for various social networks through *kahvehanes*,[16] fellow country men's associations and the political parties` offices. However, women were very rarely able to get involved in those. As Sezen put it: 'Women usually socialize at *mevlid*,[17] funerals and religious feasts.' At these events, women have the opportunity to socialize with other women who are from their immediate neighbourhood. Apart from these rare occasions, it is usually the case that women have contact only with other women who live in the same block they live in, as in Fatma`s and Yasemin`s cases in Mamak. Hence, the immediate neighbourhood and kinship becomes an important medium for the informants from disadvantaged areas for getting involved in women's organizations. In conclusion, women's lack of social networks outside their tribe and neighbourhood led to the

informants benefiting from tribe and kinship relations as social webs, which turned out to be a medium for them to become involved in activism.

The Role of Political, Ethnic, or Religious Affiliations and Military Coups

Several analyses in social movements literature have concentrated on political variables as one of the most influential determinants of collective action.[18] Most of the informants` accounts also highlighted the significant role played by their political stances in their participation in various women's organizations. Thus, I shall now focus on the participants` affiliations, which emerged in their stories as secular, socialist, Kurdish, religious and feminist.

A significant number of the informants had political experiences prior to working in women's organizations. For those who had political experiences either in political parties or other organizations, this organizational membership provided them with a ground to develop political affiliations that, afterwards, had direct or indirect impacts on their involvement in women's organizations. There were also some respondents without previous political experiences who still had certain affiliations.

Considering the military coups in Turkish history, one can argue that contemporary Turkish political history is a history of military coups. 27 May 1960, 12 March 1971 and 12 September 1982 mark the dates when military regimes came to power through *coups d'état*. In each case, the military held power, banned political parties from holding seats in the national assembly and changed the constitution and laws. The 28 February 1997 Memorandum, on the other hand, is referred to as a 'soft coup' as the military was content with a warning to the government, forcing it to resign. Especially the latter two coups (1980 and 1997) had an important impact on some of the informants becoming involved in the women's organizations, and I shall focus on these in particular. In this section then, I shall investigate the ways in which those affiliations and the coups reflected on the participants' becoming involved in women's organizations activism.

The beginning of the year 1997 witnessed intensive discussions in the public and the media in Turkey regarding politics. The Refahyol coalition in power was the first coalition government including a pro-Islamist party in the Republic's history. Some actions by this party, such as organizing demonstrations in certain cities to which Arab countries` ambassadors were invited to give speeches and the call for Islamic Law in Turkey,[19] stimulated the military to publish a memorandum to the government on 28 February 1997.

The Islamist party's actions provoked not only the military but also some activist women who identified with the Republican principle of laicism. Some of the respondents` stories revealed that they passed through this process and became involved in secular women's organizations at the time. What actually mobilized them was their sense of their rights granted by the Republic being threatened. Vildan, for instance, said that the government's actions were threatening women's rights. She said: "There was an attack on the Republic then."

Another secular respondent, Sevim also revealed how this sense of threat led to them mobilizing:

> Refahyol was in power. Everyone was very anxious. Mullahs [radical Islamists] had started to take positions in government departments and ministries. They did not hesitate wearing robes at work.

The issue of what to wear where was at the core of the discussions of whether there was an attack on the Republic or not. Not only men's but also, and probably more often, women's clothes were taken as the symbolic tools for evaluating the intensity of the perceived threats. As a reaction against the steadily increasing visibility of religious clothes in the public sphere as Sevim mentioned, the opposition against them also increased. The media conveyed the news about the secular women's demonstrations against Islamist government in 1997. Those demonstrations and meetings impacted on Sevim and her friends' decision to found a women's organization. She noted: 'What made us organize that march also made us determine our aim and decide on our title and name for

our association.' Sevim was among the organizers of the march and after seeing the huge participation in the march, she and her friends decided to take that action further by establishing a women's organization.

On the other side of the coin there were religious women on whose shoulders pressure increased heavily, particularly after the military memorandum of 1997. With the increase in sensibility against religious signifiers in the public sphere, the main stream media's concentration on similar issues particularly concerning religious women with headscarves increased as well. Hatice, who was a university student then, for example, experienced this:

> [A journalist] had taken our pictures secretly when we were at the university and published them in the newspaper with the statement `There are veiled students? [*kapalılar*] at the university`. We were banned from the university the day after the pictures. It was the midterm exams period. I mean, I was able to go in there the day before and I was banned the day after. It is such an arbitrary regulation.

Hatice's interest in women's activism had, as herself put it, `started with the headscarf bans`. Particularly after the 28 February 1997 Memorandum, following military pressure on the religious party in power, the pressure on religious women with veils and headscarves increased. Actually, it was particularly women with headscarves in the advanced western cities who felt the pressure in the most profound way. Nuray, for instance, said that she was able to follow her profession in Konya, a city in the middle of Turkey known for its relatively conservative and religious population, but she could not find a job after moving to Ankara, due to her headscarf. Like Hatice in Istanbul, Nuray was excluded from public and private institutions and was almost left without any option for participating in the public sphere. As several of the informants from religious women's organizations indicated, many employed women with headscarves were fired and many university students were excluded after 28 February. This led aggrieved religious women with headscarves to mobilize to seek their rights to work and education and to establish religious women's organizations. Thus, joining the women's movement, these women gained visibility in the public sphere, particularly in spaces, which were not under the direct control of the state and also had the opportunity to have a job through employment in these new women's organizations. The women's accounts show that their political and religious affiliations, in relation with the coups, served as catalysts for their entry into women's activism. The role of that affiliation was so strong that it even impacted on some of my respondents' shaping their future plans in a way which would enable them to remain in activism. To pursue activism regarding the headscarf issue in Turkey, Hatice, for instance, did not want to stay abroad but came back to Turkey. She said: 'It was my reason for coming back from Sweden anyway. […] I wanted to fight against the situation which exists in Turkey`.

The 12 September 1980 coup, on the other hand, impacted mostly on those with left-wing and pro-Kurdish affiliations in the development of women's activism as a whole. According to Hande who had been tried after the coup for her involvement in left-wing pro-Kurdish activism, for instance, this process was as follows:

> Kurdish women who were not able to go out of their houses due to the feudal social structure went out to visit their male relatives in jail [after the coup]. [...] From small scaled family and tribe systems they moved into a larger social system, they went out when going to visit their brothers, when searching for their sons who had disappeared under arrest, when looking for their husbands. When they met the system, they saw how they were treated by men. The more they got into the [left-wing pro-Kurdish] struggle the more they found out about their secondary position within the struggle.

According to Hande, this resulted in Kurdish women 'flowing into the women's struggle.' Indeed, according to the Kurdish respondents, the main motivation of the Kurdish women to become involved in activism was their desire to be involved in the Kurdish struggle. She added that 'I have always been in the left-wing Kurdish opposition. […] We cannot isolate our present awareness and consciousness from those experiences we had within the [Kurdish] movement.' Burcu said, in a similar way: 'I became involved in activism through the Kurdish struggle, like many Kurdish women. We all went to the field with political demands.' Both Burcu`s and Hande`s accounts point the importance of the Kurdish movement for Kurdish women's activism.

According to my Kurdish respondents, as Hande's account above indicated, the imprisonment of the Kurdish men created a need for new members for the armed opposition in rural areas. The start of the feminization of the PKK (the underground Kurdish Workers Party) in this period, both politically and practically, therefore was not a coincidence but a result of this need.[20] But, according to Hande, this also led the

Kurdish women to realize their secondary position within the struggle itself. In Hande's account, then, similar to Suzan's, the coup made women question their position in relation to their male counterparts. But also, by hampering oppositional activism as a whole through closing down all kinds of organizations, putting activists in jail and sending them into exile, it opened up a space for alternative activisms to exist in the political arena. As Esra said:

> The first organizations established after the 1980 [coup] were women's organizations. [...] [They were] formed by small women's groups from the left but they were women who had put their ideological identities aside. And this was what we aimed at indeed. We all were coming from different fractions but we wanted to focus on women.

Thus, the coup, one could argue, produced a new commitment, one that was gender based. The participants' experiences and comments confirmed Bodur and Francheschet's observations that '[in] Turkey, the military coup, paradoxically enabled women to organize and set their own agendas.'[21] Consequently, the military coups and the political, ethnic, or religious affiliations of my respondents impacted on their entry into women's activism. As the quotes above highlighted, in some of these cases, social networks fostered participation in women's activism only when there was such an affiliation. For instance, when Vildan decided to join her friends in establishing a women's association, her worries regarding the Republic's future were already there. In fact, this was what had triggered them to mobilize. Similarly, Nuray saw herself as a victim of the headscarf bans before she contacted the religious women's organization. Thus, one can argue that, getting involved in women's activism was more than the result of a web of relations carrying women into organizations. In fact, social networks functioned in relation to affiliational backgrounds of the participants in these cases to activate them.

Conclusions

In this paper, I looked at the process of how the participants became activists and got involved in women's organizations. My data pointed to a number of factors and settings playing a role in that process. Those factors and settings varied according to the participants' socio-cultural and political backgrounds, where they lived and the political situation that the country was in.

My data showed that the activists in most cases encountered women's organizations through social networks. Those networks were established in different environments including gender-mixed NGOs, political parties, workplaces, and neighbourhood and kinship networks.

According to those who had a western-urban background and had experience of working in gender-mixed organizations prior to their involvement in women-only ones, gendered power relations were reproduced in gender-mixed organizations and women were not able to break those relations as long as they remained in those gender-mixed spaces. According to many of them, society's perception of women in family and marriage was reflected and reproduced in gender-mixed organizations. The women who felt dominated and pressurized by the reproduction of traditional gender roles in gender-mixed organizations went for women-only organizations in which they said they felt more confident and secure.

Those living in the disadvantaged locations either in eastern cities or in the western cities, on the other hand, usually came to activism via their neighbourhood and kinship relations. For those with strong political, ethnic, or religious affiliations, those affiliations played a significant role in participation in women's activism. For the religious activists, for instance, it was mainly the headscarf bans which motivated them to mobilize. Related to this, two significant dates in Turkish political history, the 12 September 1980 *coup d'état* and the 28 February 1997 Memorandum, impacted on the activists' entry into women's organizations. In this, the 12 September 1980 coup affected left-wing and pro-Kurdish activists' participation more whereas the 28 February 1997 intervention reflected on religious and secular women's mobilization more.

[1] The data and conclusions presented in this article are based on my PhD thesis penned during my scholarship between 2007-2010 at Centre for Women's Studies, University of York.

[2] Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); Mario Diani, *Green Networks: A Structural Analysis of the Italian Environmental Movement* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995); Cheryl Hercus, *Stepping Out of Line: Becoming and Being a Feminist* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Florence Passy, "Social Networks Matter But Why," *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action* ed. Mario Diani and Doug McAdam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[3] Passy, "Social Networks."

[4] Passy, "Social Networks," 22.

[5] della Porta and Diani *Social Movements: An Introduction*, 117-121.

[6] Passy, "Social Networks," 23.

[7] Hale Nebile Çamer, Başkent Kadın Platformu Derneği, Cumhuriyet Kadınları Derneği ve Uçan Süpürge'de Yer Alan Gönüllü Kadınların Gönüllülük Deneyimlerinden Elde Ettikleri Kazanımlar [Gains of the Volunteers involved in the Capital Women's Platform, the Republic Women's Association and the Flying Broom Association] (Unpublished MA Thesis Submitted to the Graduate School of Social Sciences of the Middle East Technical University, 2005).

[8] *Kermes* is an event during which people usually sell what they cook and sometimes handmade stuff for an income for the institutions or organizations they work for.

[9] Such similarities between the gendered labour within traditional marriage and political party becomes reminiscent of Aynur İlyasoğlu`s reference to divorce as a metaphor to describe some left-wing women activists - who were organized within gender-mixed left-wing organizations in the 1970s - giving up their participation in them and, thus, freeing themselves to become independent participants of feminist organizations (1996: 14).

[10] For scholarly works on "namus" in the Turkish context, see Işık and Sakallı-Uğurlu (2009) and Vardarlı et al. (2010).

[11] STEP, "*The Project of Civil Society Index in Turkey*," TÜSEV (2006). http://www.tusev.org.tr/userfiles/image/Uluslararasi%20STEP%20Turkiye%20Ulke%20Raporu.pdf

[12] Identifying 'glass ceiling' as 'those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individual from advancing upward into management level positions' (US Department of Labor, 1991: 1, quoted in Gibelman, 1998: 148) Margaret Gilbelman details research revealing the existence of glass ceilings in both private and public organizations (ibid., 148).

[13] Hercus, *Stepping Out of Line: Becoming and Being a Feminist*.

[14] In these regions, women's relations to other women proceed in a very similar way to those in other Middle Eastern countries. The structure of those relations is summarized by Rosanders and Joseph as: 'For most women in the Middle East "groups of women" consist of females with whom one shares ties of kinship or affinity. In those rural areas where production is carried out within an almost exclusive kin-ordered environment, female groups obviously tend to coincide with kinship groups.' (Chatty and Rabo, 1997: 18)

[15] Diani, *Green Networks: A Structural Analysis of the Italian Environmental Movement*.

[16] *Kahvehane*s are traditional coffee shops that allow only men.

[17] *Mevlid*s are religious rituals to celebrate the birth of the prophet Mohammed and/or wakes to mourn the dead.

[18] della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, 196.

[19] Feroz Ahmad, *Turkey: The Quest for Identity* (Oxford: One World, 2005), 172.

[20] Handan Çağlayan, *Analar, Yoldaşlar, Tanrıçalar: Kürt Kadın Hareketinde Kadınlar ve Kadın Kimliğinin Oluşumu* [Mothers, Comrades and Goddesses: Women in the Kurdish Movement and The Construction of Women's Identity] (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2007).

[21] Marella Bodur and Susan Franceschet, "Women's Mobilization in Chile and Turkey," *Rethinking Empowerment: Gender and Development in a Global/Local World* eds. Jane. L. Parpart, Shirin M. Rai, and Kathleen Staudt (London: Routledge, 2002), 113-114.

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