

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Secondary Trauma Exposure of Women Activists in Women's Organisations

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Abstract

This article aims to examine the exposure to secondary traumatisation of women who carry out activism in women's organisations. In this context, women who carry out activism in women's organisations operating in Diyarbakır, Van and Mardin were interviewed. Qualitative research method was used in the study. Within the scope of the research, 21 women's rights activists were interviewed. Purposive sampling technique was used in sample selection. MAXQDA qualitative data analysis programme was used for the analysis. The findings were analysed by interpretative phenomenological analysis method. According to the main findings of the research, it was concluded that activists carry out activism in an environment that can lead to secondary traumatisation, that secondary trauma affects their physical health as well as their mental health, and that professional therapeutic support as well as community support and social support mechanisms are very effective for the treatment of secondary trauma. It is seen that community solidarity and social support mechanisms are very important for activists to cope with this situation. It was also emphasised that activists should be encouraged to spare time for themselves and to establish their own self-care routines. It was stated that training programmes and awareness raising activities can help activists to recognise the symptoms of secondary trauma and develop coping strategies.

Keywords: Secondary Trauma, Women Activism, Women's Organizations, Community Solidarity

Öz

Bu makale kadın örgütlerinde aktivizm yürüten kadınların ikincil travmatizasyon maruziyetlerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu kapsamda Diyarbakır, Van ve Mardin'de faaliyet yürüten kadın örgütlerinde aktivizm yürüten kadınlarla görüşülmüştür. Araştırmada nitel araştırma yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Araştırma kapsamında 21 kadın hakları aktivistiyle görüşme yapılmıştır. Örneklem seçiminde amaçlı örneklem tekniği kullanılmıştır. Analiz için MAXQDA nitel veri analiz programı kullanılmıştır. Bulgular yorumlayıcı fenomenolojik analiz yöntemiyle analiz edilmiştir. Araştırma sonunda ortaya çıkan temel bulgulara göre, aktivistlerin ikincil travmatizasyona yol açabilecek bir ortamda aktivizm yürüttükleri, ikincil travmanın ruhsal sağlıklarının yanı sıra fiziksel sağlıklarını da etkilediği, ikincil travmanın sağaltımı için profesyonel terapötik desteğin yanı sıra topluluk desteği ve sosyal destek mekanizmalarının oldukça etkili olduğu sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Aktivistlerin bu durumla baş etmelerinde topluluk dayanışması ve sosyal destek mekanizmalarının oldukça önemli olduğu görülmektedir. Ayrıca, aktivistlerin kendilerine zaman ayırmalarının ve kendi öz bakım rutinlerini oluşturmalarının teşvik edilmesi gerektiği vurgulanmıştır. Eğitim programlarının ve bilinçlendirme çalışmalarının, aktivistlerin ikincil travmanın belirtilerini tanımalarına ve başa çıkma stratejileri geliştirmelerine yardımcı olabileceği belirtilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İkincil Travma, Kadın Aktivizmi, Kadın Örgütleri, Topluluk Dayanışması

Introduction

Women's rights advocacy plays a critical role in the global struggle for gender equality and an end to violence against women. Women's organizations are the most effective platforms for this purpose. However, activists working in these organizations carry significant emotional and psychological burdens by working with women who are constantly subjected to violence and discrimination. This intense and continuous exposure can lead to secondary trauma (Figley, 1995). Secondary trauma is defined as stress and trauma symptoms resulting from exposure to the traumatic experiences of others (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Women's rights activists may be affected by these traumatic experiences while listening to the stories of those who have been subjected to violence and discrimination and solidarizing with them. This can lead to serious problems such as emotional exhaustion, depression, anxiety and even burnout syndrome (Bride, 2007). Campbell (2002) stated that professionals working with victims of sexual violence often show high levels of stress and trauma symptoms. Similarly, Baird and Kracen (2006) found that professionals working with trauma often have secondary trauma symptoms. This secondary trauma that women's rights activists are exposed to reduces their motivation to struggle in the field. Moreover, this situation may lead them to experience burnout in the long term and even move away from the field of activism. Cohen and Collens (2013) emphasized that continuously dealing with trauma negatively affects the emotional and psychological health of professionals and that this effect can be long-term. In this context, it is of great importance to provide the necessary support mechanisms for activists working in women's organizations to cope with secondary trauma. Michalopoulos and Aparicio (2012) stated that the development of protective measures against trauma exposure is critical in protecting the emotional and psychological health of activists. Such support mechanisms enable activists to both protect their own health and sustain their advocacy work. Although the literature on secondary trauma has largely focused on individual-level consequences such as emotional distress and burnout, recent studies have increasingly highlighted

the structural dimensions of trauma. Feminist approaches, in particular, argue that secondary trauma is shaped not only by interpersonal experiences but also by broader social and political conditions, such as gender-based oppression, political violence, and systemic injustice (Baird & Kracen, 2006; Wasco & Campbell, 2002).

Secondary trauma literature has often focused on individual-level effects such as traumatic stress and burnout. Feminist approaches in particular emphasize that secondary trauma is not only an individual experience, but is also influenced by structural factors such as gender inequalities, social injustices and political oppression (Baird & Kracen, 2006). The research mainly focuses on the secondary trauma exposure of women activists who carry out activism in women's organizations, and aims to reveal the difficulties encountered and methods of coping with these difficulties. The research was conducted in Diyarbakır, Van and Mardin provinces. These three cities were chosen to reflect the region. Direct trauma is quite common in the region due to political tensions and oppressive traditional structure. There are many studies on primary trauma in the literature. Particularly those operating in hostile or repressive environments. Activists working on gender-based violence, refugee rights, or conflict resolution may become direct targets of state repression, threats, detention, or violence (Nah, 2017; Amnesty International, 2021). In Turkey, women's rights activists have similarly reported experiencing direct violence or criminalization during protests and advocacy efforts (Keskin, 2020; Özler, 2013). Such exposures constitute primary trauma and not only threaten activists' physical and emotional well-being but also undermine the sustainability of their work. Recognizing and addressing this form of trauma is essential to building long-term, resilient movements for social justice.

This study focuses on the secondary trauma that women's rights defenders are exposed to when working with women who have been directly traumatized. However, this study distinguishes itself by specifically addressing the effects of secondary trauma rather than primary trauma on women's rights defenders who work closely with traumatized individuals. This focus fills an

important gap in the literature by exploring the indirect yet deeply impactful emotional consequences of activism in a politically tense and socially conservative region. This reveals the originality of the study. In addition, the social pressures that activists are exposed to, empowerment and repair strategies for the difficulties encountered were tried to be analyzed. In this respect, the study aims to contribute to the literature.

Secondary Traumatization

Secondary traumatization refers to a mental state that occurs when professionals and activists who work directly or indirectly with traumatized people carry the effects of traumatic events experienced by traumatized people into their inner world. This phenomenon is especially common in professional groups such as social workers, psychologists, health workers and activists (Figley, 1995; Dursun, 2014). Secondary trauma defines the psychological effects that occur as a result of a person witnessing the traumatic experiences of others or continuously acquiring information about these experiences (Figley, 1995). Primary trauma, on the other hand, is defined by the psychological and physiological reactions experienced by the individual as a result of direct exposure to a traumatic event. These traumatic events can take various forms such as natural disasters, accidents, violence, war, sexual assault or childhood abuse. The effects of primary trauma include symptoms such as intense fear, helplessness, terror, anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Yüksel, 2019). The relationship between primary and secondary trauma is particularly evident in the emotional processes experienced by professionals working with trauma. Those who work with traumatized people may themselves be exposed to the effects of traumatic events while listening to their experiences and trying to support them. This process takes place through the mechanisms of empathy and identification. The pain and stress experienced by victims of primary trauma are felt by helping professionals and this leads to secondary traumatization (Kaya, 2020).

The symptoms of secondary traumatization are similar to those seen in individuals exposed to primary trauma. These symptoms include intense anxiety, depression, emotional numbing, hyperarousal, sleep disturbances, nightmares and flashbacks of traumatic events (Bride, 2007). In addition, symptoms such as loss of functionality in work and private life, social isolation, emotional burnout and hopelessness may also be observed in individuals exposed to secondary traumatization (Baird & Kracen, 2006). Secondary traumatization can seriously affect the emotional and psychological health of individuals and may lead to burnout syndrome in the long term (Cohen & Collens, 2013; Dursun, 2014).

Secondary traumatization occurs as a result of continuous and intensive work with traumatized people. Witnessing traumatic events, listening to the stories of traumatized people and providing support to them may cause the people providing support to carry these traumatic events into their inner world (Figley, 1995; Kaya, 2020). This situation is closely related to empathy and identification processes; support persons deeply feel the pain of traumatized people, which leads them to be emotionally and psychologically affected (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995). Factors such as difficulties of the working environment, inadequate social support and personal trauma history may also increase the risk of secondary traumatization (Michalopoulos & Aparicio, 2012; Kaya, 2020). Therefore, it is critical for professionals and activists working with trauma to recognize the signs of secondary traumatization and develop coping strategies. While women's rights activists work with great devotion to support women subjected to violence and discrimination and to continue their quest for justice, they may risk jeopardizing their own psychological health in this process. Research in the literature reveals that professionals who continuously work with traumatic events are likely to show secondary trauma symptoms (Baird & Kracen, 2006). There are different coping methods for the treatment of secondary trauma. Especially solidarity and social support mechanisms have a serious effect on the recovery of secondary trauma.

Solidarity and Coping Methods

Solidarity is very important for the treatment of secondary trauma exposure of women's rights activists. Solidarity is an important support system that reduces the effects of secondary trauma for activists. Shared experiences and collective action are known to increase resilience and provide emotional support (Sullivan & Smith, 2019). Women's rights organizations place great importance on building community where activists can share their feelings and experiences without judgement. This collective approach validates emotional struggles and strengthens a sense of belonging by reducing feelings of isolation and helplessness (Karam, 2020).

In addition to solidarity, specific coping methods are also necessary to deal with secondary trauma. Mindfulness practices, peer support groups and access to professional mental health services have been effective in increasing psychological resilience (Bercovitch et al., 2021). For example, regular supervision sessions allow activists to reflect on their experiences, process their emotions and develop coping strategies. These structured settings help activists to reduce the impact of secondary trauma by sharing the challenges they face. Training and awareness programmes play a critical role in helping activists recognize the symptoms of secondary trauma and learn how to cope with them. Awareness-raising initiatives can help activists recognize early signs of anxiety and implement self-care routines (Sullivan & Smith, 2019). Learning about the effects of secondary trauma contributes to organizations building a supportive culture that prioritizes mental health and well-being. This holistic approach not only helps individual activists in their personal struggles, but also increases the overall strength of the women's rights movement.

Social Support Mechanisms

Social support refers to the emotional, informational and practical help that individuals receive from the people around them. In order for women activists to cope with the difficulties they face during their struggles, social support mechanisms

need to function effectively. These mechanisms alleviate the emotional burden of activists and increase their psychological resilience (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Social support providers such as family, friends, colleagues and community members can help activists cope with stress and maintain their motivation. Activists, especially those working in women's organizations, need regular supervision and counselling to cope with the emotional challenges of being exposed to traumatic stories. Such support can be effective in reducing activists' secondary trauma symptoms (Bride, 2007). In addition, organizational trainings and awareness-raising activities can raise activists' awareness about protecting their own emotional and psychological health.

The Role of Solidarity Networks

Solidarity networks are structures where individuals who come together for a common goal support each other. Women activists' participation in solidarity networks makes them feel that they are not alone in social struggle and increases their impact by creating a collective power (hooks, 2000). Solidarity helps activists to maintain their morale and motivation in the face of the pressures and threats they face. These networks not only provide emotional support, but are also important for sharing information and developing common strategies. Solidarity networks enable activists to learn from each other by sharing their experiences and enable them to develop more effective methods in their struggle (Yüksel, 2019). Solidarity between national and international women's movements also contributes to the global recognition and support of local struggles (Moghadam, 2005).

Social Support and Solidarity in Practice

Various social support and solidarity strategies can be implemented to help women's rights defenders cope with the challenges they face. For example, support groups formed within women's organizations allow activists to share their experiences and receive emotional support. These groups can come together regularly and help their members cope

with emotional problems such as stress and burn-out (Dursun, 2014). Social support mechanisms and solidarity networks are of great importance for activists struggling for women's rights to cope with the difficulties they face. These supports enable activists to continue their struggle by meeting both their emotional and practical needs. For the sustainability of the struggle for gender equality, women's rights defenders need to increase their access to such support.

Activism in women's organizations is of great importance for the defense of gender equality and women's rights. However, activists in this field face various challenges. These challenges manifest themselves at both the social and institutional levels and make the work of women activists difficult (Kocacık, 2017). One of the most important challenges faced by women's rights activists is gender inequality and discrimination. In a patriarchal society, women are often prevented from taking an active role in the public sphere or are underestimated. This makes it difficult for women activists to make their voices heard and causes them to face resistance to their struggles (Özınanır, 2016). In addition, social perceptions and prejudices against women's organizations can also reduce their effectiveness. Women's rights activists are often marginalized and criminalized. In addition, they have to struggle in an environment where their work is devalued.

Method

This study focuses on the exposure to secondary traumatization of women's rights activists in women's organizations operating in Diyarbakır, Van and Mardin provinces. A total of 21 activists from 6 different women's organizations operating in Diyarbakır, Van and Mardin were interviewed. All 21 participants in the study were born and raised in cities within the region. Kurdish is the native language of 20 participants, while one participant's native language is Arabic. All participants are women. Diyarbakır, Van and Mardin provinces have a social structure with conservative and traditional codes as well as a structure that supports women's struggle and challenges gender roles. The strength of the women's movement in these cities

can be attributed to the presence of political structures that prioritize gender equality, the robustness of the labor movement, and the active involvement of civil society organizations and professional associations engaged in rights-based initiatives. In the region, professional organizations such as the Medical Chamber, the Bar Association, the Social Workers' Association, and TMMOB (Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects) have had women's rights commissions for many years. Furthermore, women's organizations like Kamer, Rosa Women's Association, Kased, Star Women's Association, and Şahmaran Women's Platform have been active for a long time. The establishment of women's rights committees within trade unions has also contributed to the strengthening of the women's movement. Additionally, organizations with a strong Islamic orientation, such as Hak İnsiyatifi and Mazlum-Der, also have women's commissions, which play a significant role in facilitating the development of a strong women's movement in the region. Generational differences, socio-economic status, level of education and political views may play a role among the factors affecting the perspective on women in the region.

It was thought that revealing the secondary traumatization experienced by activists in women's organizations and their coping strategies through qualitative research would strengthen women activists and organizations. Since it is thought that social and political pressure affects secondary traumatization in the cities where the research was conducted, this issue was investigated.

In this study, qualitative research method was used to collect and analyze the data of the study, to obtain in-depth information and to reach the most appropriate, valid and reliable results. Within the scope of qualitative research method, in-depth interview technique was used as a data collection tool. In this interview technique, it is essential to obtain in-depth rather than superficial information. In this study, in order to make an original contribution to the literature and to provide a more flexible and holistic reading of the secondary trauma exposure of women activists in the field of women's rights activism, the data obtained were

evaluated with interpretative phenomenological analysis. In this study, the phenomenological research design one of the qualitative research approaches was adopted in order to understand in depth the lived experiences of women's rights activists who are exposed to secondary traumatization. Phenomenological research aims to explore how individuals perceive and make sense of a phenomenon they have directly experienced. Interpretative phenomenological analysis is an integrative qualitative research method with philosophical roots in phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography. This research method aims to examine in detail the individual's personal perception of the phenomenon. It tries to obtain an insider perspective (from the participant's world of interpretation) for the experiences (İlerisoy, 2023). In addition to examining the detailed analysis of the experiences of a small number of participants, it emphasizes the level of convergence and divergence of experiences related to a particular phenomenon (Patton, 2018). This methodology allowed for an in-depth analysis of the findings by focusing on the themes of secondary traumatization experiences and coping methods that disempower activists. It is believed that this method, which focuses on people's insider evaluations of their experiences, will be a good choice for the analysis of this research. The research examined in detail women's rights activists' personal experiences of secondary traumatization, the difficulties they face while conducting activism and their coping strategies.

During the interviews, a structured sociodemographic form and a semi-structured interview form were used. The semi-structured interview form was carefully designed to explore the experiences of women's rights activists, with a particular focus on their exposure to secondary trauma. The questions aimed to trace the participants' personal trajectories into activism, the forms of violence they encountered through their work, and how prolonged engagement with trauma narratives has affected their emotional well-being. Key questions addressed participants' awareness of secondary trauma, the psychological and social symptoms they experienced, and the coping mechanisms they employed at both individual and institutional lev-

els. The form also explored the availability of support systems within the organizations they work for—such as supervision, therapeutic support, or legal and educational resources—and how these systems influence activists' capacity to manage emotional burdens. Additionally, questions examined how societal attitudes toward gender-based violence and activism contribute to feelings of isolation or marginalization, further complicating the emotional toll of activism. By focusing on these aspects, the interview guide provided a rich foundation for understanding how secondary trauma emerges, is experienced, and is managed within the context of feminist activism in a politically charged and socially conservative region.

Purposive sampling technique was used to include the participants in the study. Purposive sampling focuses on in-depth understanding and examination of the phenomenon, not on making empirical generalizations to a universe. In purposive sampling, it is aimed to reflect the differences of the selected subjects and to reveal a holistic picture of the phenomenon (Patton, 2018). Participants were recruited using the snowball sampling method, which is particularly effective in reaching individuals engaged in sensitive or hard-to-access fields such as human rights activism. Initially, a small number of women activists working within women's rights organizations were contacted and provided with detailed information regarding the aims, scope, and ethical considerations of the research. Based on the referrals and recommendations of these initial participants, further interviewees were identified and contacted, thereby expanding the sample in a purposeful and trust-based manner.

The fieldwork was carried out over a three-month period, with the first interview conducted on February 21, 2024, and the final interview completed on May 24, 2024. This time frame allowed for the establishment of relation with participants, the collection of rich and detailed narratives, and the opportunity to revisit emerging themes throughout the process. The gradual and relational nature of the sampling process was particularly valuable given the emotionally demanding and politically sensitive context in which the participants operate.

Ethical Considerations

This research has been approved by the Ethics Committee of Hacettepe University, ensuring its ethical compliance. Detailed information regarding the purpose, process, and confidentiality guarantees of the study was provided to all participants, and informed consent was obtained. In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, the names of the associations where they conducted the study were not included. All participants were selected from among activists engaged in civil society organizations dedicated to women's rights advocacy. Five of the interviewees reported that, in addition to their activism, they were also employed in a professional capacity within the organization in which they were active. The remaining participants stated that they carried out their activism on a voluntary basis, without holding a formal employment position within their respective organizations. Notably, eleven participants also served as members of the executive board of the civil society organization in which they were involved. Participants' confidentiality has been preserved, and all ethical principles were strictly followed.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software was used. Through this software, the data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, and the connections between themes and categories were thoroughly examined. This process ensured that the data was analyzed in a systematic and reliable manner.

Findings

After the interviews were conducted, the research was analyzed under two themes and various categories that constitute them. The findings were analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method. IPA is a qualitative research approach aimed at exploring how participants assign meaning to any given experience. This method, which focuses on how individuals

assess their experiences from an insider's perspective, was considered a good choice for this research, as it allows for an in-depth evaluation of activists' secondary trauma exposure and coping strategies from an insider's viewpoint. The findings of the study were thematized around the secondary traumatization experiences that undermine women's rights activism and the coping methods and resilience levels of activists in dealing with secondary trauma.

Table 1. Theme Table

Theme	Category
1. Experiences of Secondary Traumatization Undermining Women's Rights Activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systemic Pressures and Social Barriers • Confronting Traumatic Events • Emotional Effects, Physical Symptoms, and Behavioral Changes
2. Coping Strategies and Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual Coping Mechanisms • Social Support Mechanisms • Professional Therapeutic Support • Community Solidarity • Collective Identity and Belonging

The findings of the study were thematized based on the analysis of interviews conducted with 21 activists. Information about the participants in the interviews is provided in the table below. Participants whose numbers start with "D" are currently conducting activism in Diyarbakır, those starting with "V" are active in Van, and those starting with "M" are engaged in activism in Mardin.

Experiences of Secondary Traumatization Undermining Women's Rights Activism

Since women's rights activists work with women who have been exposed to traumatic events, they may become emotionally and psychologically affected by listening to the deep pain and trauma women experience and witnessing their stories. This situation can lead to the activists themselves becoming traumatized. Secondary trauma manifests in activists through symptoms such as depression, anxiety, burnout, and hopelessness, and these symptoms can affect not only the activists' personal lives but also their relationships with

their social circles, while simultaneously hindering their activism activities.

Table 2. Participant Table

Participant Number Education and Profession	Age of Participant	Duration of Activism
D1 (University graduate/ Lawyer)	27	5 Years
D2 (University gradu- ate/Lawyer)	35	14 Years
V1 (High School graduate/ Activist)	30	7 Years
V2 (Master's graduate/ Fi- nancial Consultant)	48	25 Years
V3 (University gradu- ate/Psychological Counse- lor)	23	5 Years
D3 (University gradu- ate/Teacher)	62	33 Years
D4 (University gradu- ate/Social Worker)	35	15 Years
D5 (High School gradu- ate/Activist)	34	4 Years
D6 (High School gradu- ate/Activist)	38	1 Year
M1 (University gradu- ate/Civil Servant)	41	25 Years
M2 (University gradu- ate/Social Worker)	35	16 Years
D7 (University gradu- ate/Social Worker)	31	4 Years
V4 (University gradu- ate/Social Worker)	41	12 Years
M3 (High School graduate/ Project assistant)	44	8 Years
V5 (University graduate/ Psychologist)	27	8 Years
D8 (University graduate/ Social Worker)	26	4 Years
M4 (University gradu- ate/Lawyer)	34	8 Years
M5 (University graduate/ Teacher)	32	4 Years
V6 (High School graduate/ Activist)	28	9 Years
M6 (University graduate/ Sociologist)	29	8 Years
D9 (University graduate/ Psychologist)	37	11 Years

Based on participants' responses to the question, "What kinds of difficulties do you face while carrying out activism?", three main categories were identified under the first theme: Systemic Pressures and Social Barriers(1), Confronting Traumatic Events (2), Emotional Effects, Physical Symptoms, and Behavioral Changes(3). The most

frequent references were made to systemic pressures and social barriers, indicating the structural and cultural challenges activists face in their environments. Within the subcategory of confronting traumatic events, participants also described experiences of secondary trauma. These were further conceptualized into three dimensions: (1) emotional responses (such as anxiety, sadness, and emotional fatigue), (2) physical symptoms (including sleep disturbances and fatigue), and (3) behavioral changes (such as social withdrawal or avoidance). While these aspects are detailed later in the analysis under the theme of secondary trauma, their early appearance in the context of general activist challenges illustrates how deeply intertwined activism and trauma can be.

Systemic Pressures and Social Barriers

A large majority of the activists interviewed described many of the challenges they face in the women's rights struggle as difficulties arising from the system. According to them, the insufficiencies of women's policies, the inadequacy of implementations, the impunity policies applied to perpetrators of violence, and the pressures on activists and organizations working for women's rights make it extremely challenging for activists to carry out their work.

"In fact, the public's social policies have brought the issue to this point. Therefore, while these policies are certainly insufficient, there is also a lack of political will to even implement what already exists. For example, when we talk about legal regulations, we say that even the existing legal frameworks are actually insufficient. We criticized this in the past, but now we have reached a point where we are simply asking for the existing laws to be upheld. In other words, we are facing a system that has fallen behind even its own written laws." (D1, 27 years old, 5 years of activism)

Some participants also referred to financial difficulties as an example of systemic barriers. Financial difficulties and the lack of sustainable economic power not only disrupt educational activities but can also cause delays in essential tasks. Particularly, covering fixed expenses such as em-

ployee salaries and rent creates a pressure on activists. The lack of a regular and sustainable income prevents long-term planning.

"We cannot hire enough professional staff because our financial situation is not very good. That's why we ask for volunteer support from institutions like the bar association, medical chambers, unions, etc. but that only goes so far. You want to do something else, you want to buy materials, but we end up doing it out of our own pockets, and that can only go so far. You want to organize a women's meeting, but there's no money. The limited resources often tie your hands." (M4, 34 years old, 8 years of activism)

Activists working in women's organizations also face financial shortages and material impossibilities. Many women's organizations struggle to find sustainable financial support, which endangers the continuity of their projects. In recent years, particularly following Donald Trump's election victory in the United States and the growing influence of right-wing parties across Europe, there has been a significant decline in financial support provided to civil society organizations in Turkey. This development has weakened the financial capacity of women's rights organizations in the region. The limited financial resources restrict the activities of organizations and lead to women activists working as volunteers (Arat, 2016). In the long run, this can lead to burnout and loss of motivation. Financial shortages and the lack of a regular financial source result in the activists missing out on regular orientation, supervision, educational activities, legal support, and professional psychosocial support.

Some of the societal pressures are legitimized by the criminalization of the women's movement. The patriarchal mindset and the fear of losing the privileged position granted by the patriarchy creates societal pressure on women's rights activists. According to Acik (2003), women activists, who are positioned at the intersection of oppressive policies, are often seen as threats or deviants in their activism. This situation can even lead to the criminalization of women's struggles for universal values such as peace and human rights. The women's rights activists interviewed expressed that another challenging issue they faced during their activism

activities was the barriers imposed on them by society. They generally attribute the societal obstacles they face to the deliberate criminalization of the women's movement by the system.

"The most difficult moments are sometimes in neighborhood activities. Honestly, it's because there is a segment that thinks like the ruling power, we know this. We face times when this segment puts obstacles in our way, or we are labeled by the ruling power in a way that they want to label us. In fact, we face these barriers in all areas of social life. Sometimes, we also face violence." (D1, 27 years old, 5 years of activism)

"Before this, I was in a small district in the region; I don't know how many times I changed houses. The landlords would kick me out based on what a local imam said. When you are in a small place, there's nowhere to run. Your reputation gets damaged. The women I meet, their husbands and fathers would warn them not to speak with me, saying I would influence them and they would be going against the family. What I mean is, the environment you live in matters. When society puts pressure on you, you can't breathe." (V4, 41 years old, 12 years of activism)

The sexist prejudices activists face from various segments of society are reinforced by systematic efforts to stigmatize them and silence their voices. This stigmatization functions to limit the visibility and impact of women activists both at national and local levels, while also laying the groundwork for the rejection of societal change demands by the wider community.

Confronting Traumatic Events

Some of the activists interviewed mentioned that the impact of the traumatic events they confronted sometimes hindered their activism activities. Witnessing an act of violence or experiencing public violence can have a demotivating effect on activism efforts. In January 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic, which originated in China, led many countries around the world to implement quarantine measures. However, homes, which should have been safe spaces for everyone, became a risk zone for women. With the pandemic, women were suddenly confined at home with violent men, entering a situation where the risk of domestic violence sig-

nificantly increased (Ünal & Gülseren, 2020). During the pandemic, domestic violence against women significantly increased globally (UN Women, 2020).

"Sometimes I'm afraid, honestly. During the pandemic, a man who was laid off due to lockdowns, and who was my neighbor, was beating his wife every day at home. We reported it, but he kept coming back, and this time he beat her even more. I still hear those sounds in my ears; I can still remember those helpless screams even after all these years. Yes, I'm angry, but sometimes I'm scared. Sometimes it frightens me. Sometimes I worry that those who use violence against their wives or daughters might do the same to me because I defend their rights." (M4, 34 years old, 8 years of activism)

It can be said that the participants frequently confronted traumatic events because they witnessed numerous societal events with traumatic impacts, brought on by the society they live in.

Emotional Effects, Physical Symptoms, and Behavioral Changes

The interviews revealed that secondary trauma has a wide range of emotional effects, physical symptoms, and behavioral changes on activists. Among the emotional effects of secondary trauma, symptoms such as depression, anxiety, burnout, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anger, and emotional numbness were commonly observed.

"Last year, I was on the application commission and was receiving a lot of applications. It went on like this for about 6-7 months. The things I heard, and then knowing that nothing would change, were a bit demoralizing. I went to a psychiatrist. They said it was depression and prescribed medication. After that, I left the application commission. When I got home, I didn't want to do anything. I would sit still for hours, sometimes." (D5, 34 years old, 4 years of activism)

"There are times when my energy runs out. You say, well, that's it, but when you see the things that happen, the pain, you recover. It happens a few times a year. You feel like you can't go on anymore. Sometimes, the phone battery runs out, and you need to charge it, but the phone battery is broken, no matter how much you charge it, it won't work. Sometimes, I feel like a phone with a broken battery; no matter how much you charge it, it doesn't help." (V6, 28 years old, 9 years of activism)

It can be seen that secondary trauma has very different emotional effects on the participants. Activists exposed to secondary trauma, by witnessing the deep pain and sorrow of others, may also exhibit depressive symptoms. These symptoms include hopelessness, a constant state of sadness, and an inability to enjoy life (Figley, 1995). Secondary trauma can create a constant state of anxiety and fear. Activists may fear the recurrence of traumatic events, which can lead to a state of ongoing stress (Bride, 2007). When activists are constantly exposed to traumatic stories, they may feel emotionally and physically exhausted. This can lead to a decrease in their commitment to their work and a loss of motivation (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Some activists may experience PTSD symptoms as a result of witnessing others' traumas. These symptoms include constant reliving, avoidance behaviors, heightened arousal, and emotional numbing (Figley, 1995). Secondary trauma can also lead to increased anger and irritability in activists. This emotional response may affect both their relationships with colleagues and personal relationships (Sprang, Clark, Whitt-Woosley, 2007).

"One of our applicants came and mentioned that her husband was abusing her economically and psychologically, but I felt nothing. After seeing, hearing, and experiencing such heavy things, some things don't affect you anymore. Or when someone in social life talks about a problem, for example, someone at work who has been wronged, I don't really care. That's when they say you've lost your emotions." (D4, 35 years old, 15 years of activism)

Constant exposure to traumatic events can lead to emotional numbing in activists. In this case, individuals may become desensitized to the pain of others and feel emotionally detached (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995). Secondary trauma, in addition to its emotional effects, may also have physical consequences affecting health. Some psychosomatic effects were reported during the interviews. Particularly, physical changes such as headaches, migraine attacks, sleep disorders, muscle contractions, menstrual irregularities, and loss of appetite were mentioned.

"After they said they were withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention, I was really affected in the following days. It felt like the shield protecting you was taken

away. Especially at that time, when I heard a woman's story, I felt helpless. Every evening when I got home, I would have a migraine that lasted for days. Painkillers didn't help either." (M1, 41 years old, 25 years of activism)

"It really affects my sleep. Since I started this job, I don't remember having a proper sleep. Sometimes I can't even fall asleep, and when I do, I wake up in the middle of the night. There's no cure for it. Even if you separate from it, it doesn't help. Something bad has happened, and you've heard it—how will you get it out of your head?" (M2, 35 years old, 16 years of activism)

Türkiye, withdrew from the Istanbul Convention on March 20, 2021. The removal of the legal protection mechanisms provided by the Convention has limited the ways in which women who suffer violence can be protected. As seen in the above statement, this situation negatively impacted the motivation of women's rights activists. This situation has also affected their physical health, as seen in the statements above. As Yüksel (2019) argued, in addition to the effects of secondary trauma on mental health, it also affects physical health through psychosomatic effects. Particularly, in some participants, the discomforts affecting their physical health have had long-lasting effects. Secondary trauma has an impact on the behavior of female activists. Due to the effects of witnessing stories of violence, changes in behavior toward men have emerged.

"I started to hate men. In daily life, I can't relate to or talk to any man. It doesn't matter who they are. When I talk to them, I avoid looking them in the eyes. It's not something I can control. I'm trying to get over it. One part of me says not all men are the same, but on the other hand, the feeling that distances me is stronger." (V3, 23 years old, 5 years of activism)

As a result of the effects of secondary trauma, some behavioral changes in family and social environments emerge. The interviewees emphasized that they had decreased the frequency of meetings with their social circles, the relationship had been cut, or their desire to meet had decreased compared to before.

"As I said before, my father was someone who thought violence was the solution. He never used violence on us, but he fought a lot outside. There were also many instances where he yelled and insulted my

mother. Back then, I would still love him even though I was angry, but recently, when I visit his grave, I can't feel anything. Even though he's dead, I can't feel it. When a woman who has been abused tells her story, I even get cold towards my own father. You realize that there is no 'small' or 'big' violence." (D9, 37 years old, 11 years of activism)

The fact that the perpetrators of violence are men can lead to changes in feelings and attitudes toward men. This change in attitude toward men can affect their social lives. They may avoid social environments where men are present. Additionally, the secondary trauma may lead to flashbacks, taking them back to past traumatic events (Figley, 1995). Some participants expressed that their desire to participate in social activities was diminished. These changes can also extend to romantic relationships; for some, the trauma has led to difficulties in establishing trust and emotional intimacy with male partners. Research has shown that trauma-related distrust and emotional withdrawal are common barriers in romantic involvement for survivors of violence (Cohen & Hien, 2006).

Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

In interviews with activists involved in the women's rights struggle, coping mechanisms for secondary trauma and levels of resilience were categorized into individual coping mechanisms, social support mechanisms, professional therapeutic support, community solidarity, and finally, collective identity and belonging.

Individual Coping Mechanisms

Among the individual coping strategies employed by the activists to deal with secondary trauma, various physical activities, hobbies, and meditation were commonly mentioned. One participant expressed that running regularly helped them feel better, stating:

"I try to run every morning in the park near my house when there are no people around, without thinking about anything. Sometimes there are interruptions, but I always try to do it. I think taking time for myself makes me feel good." (D8, 26 years old, 4 years of activism).

Another participant described the positive effects of listening to music and drawing:

"I listen to music, for example. I draw a lot, something I've been doing for a long time, but especially when I want to express emotions I'm not aware of, I do it more often. For example, the picture I draw, or want to draw at that moment, tells me something about my current mood and state." (D8, 26 years old, 4 years of activism).

Yet another participant shared that they practice meditation:

"I do meditation. I try to watch movies that make me happy. Recently, I've been into mindfulness. I used to do yoga, but now there's a bit of stiffness, so I need to get back to it." (M4, 34 years old, 8 years of activism).

As seen in the above statements, participants engage in different activities and make time for their personal interests, developing individual coping mechanisms to deal with secondary trauma. Bride (2007) emphasizes the importance of creating environments free from the topics one is exposed to in traumatic fields. According to this, spending time on self-care and hobbies has a healing effect. It is clear that by dedicating time to themselves and engaging in activities they believe will help, participants are able to mitigate the effects of secondary trauma.

Social Support Mechanisms

Nearly all of the participants emphasized the empowering role of social support mechanisms and their healing effects on the emotional toll created by activism. For instance, one participant mentioned their spouse as the most significant source of support:

"My husband is my biggest supporter. Of course, my family is also supportive, but without my husband's support, I couldn't do this. We are both lawyers, so while I'm running around with these cases, he handles my legal work and always manages it, and on top of that, he encourages me." (D1, 27 years old, 5 years of activism).

Another participant shared their experience of receiving support from their family:

"My family has been fighting for years in union. Especially my father, he's my biggest supporter in this regard. Sometimes I tease him, calling him a democrat man, but he's always there for me, even when we don't

agree on everything. He's paid a price, and I know that if I pay the price, he'll understand me the most." (M2, 35 years old, 16 years of activism).

Family members, friends, colleagues, and community members, as social support providers, help activists cope with stress and maintain their motivation. Activists working in women's organizations, in particular, often face emotional difficulties due to exposure to traumatic stories, and they require regular supervision and counseling services to deal with these challenges. Such supports can be effective in reducing the symptoms of secondary trauma (Bride, 2007). The participants highlighted how they draw strength from their social environment while carrying out their activism. They specifically mentioned that interactions with their support networks helped refresh their motivation during times of discouragement.

The emphasis on the importance of social support mechanisms aligns with the literature on the subject. Studies suggest that factors such as insufficient social support and personal trauma history can increase the risk of secondary traumatization (Michalopoulos & Aparicio, 2012; Kaya, 2020). Additionally, strong social support mechanisms not only enhance work motivation but can also help reduce the impact of secondary trauma (Arat, 2016).

Professional Therapeutic Support

Five out of the 21 activists I interviewed indicated that they were currently receiving therapeutic support. All of these participants expressed a positive view of therapy's impact on the healing process of secondary traumatization.

"There's this support program from the Türkiye Human Rights Foundation (TİHV) that's been running for a year, and I've been seeing a therapist through it. I can say it really helps. It's great that other organizations are offering this kind of solidarity." (D6, 38 years old, 1 year of activism)

"If you're working in this field, you absolutely must get psychological support. Because you don't realize it, but inside, you're decaying sometimes, and you can't see it. When I first started therapy, it hurt so much to talk about, I can't even explain it to you. I had shut things off or hadn't even noticed them." (D2, 35 years old, 14 years of activism)

Participants emphasized that professional therapeutic support plays a crucial role in healing the effects of secondary trauma. Figley (1995) notes that providing regular psychosocial support to those working with others' trauma is essential in combating secondary trauma.

Community Solidarity

Community solidarity has a powerful and empowering effect. It is also seen as a key factor in overcoming feelings of isolation within the women's movement. The collective strength of women's gatherings at both regional and national levels is emphasized as having a significant positive impact. Participants talked about the strengthening effects of solidarity:

"There are gatherings of women's organizations where women from all cities come together. There, I understand that no matter the ideologies or nationalities, being a woman unites us. We also have our own internal meetings, but large women's gatherings give me an extra excitement. Sometimes, problems arise due to differences, but despite everything, women's solidarity is good, and necessary." (D4, 35 years old, 15 years of activism)

"We meet once a month for breakfast somewhere outside. These types of events have become a tradition for us, and they are very, very important. Even if you don't do anything, just being together, being by each other's side, is enough. You see that, it shows in some way." (V6, 28 years old, 9 years of activism)

Solidarity networks are structures where individuals come together to support each other in pursuit of a common goal. Being part of solidarity networks helps women activists feel they are not alone in their social struggle, and by creating collective power, they increase their impact (hooks, 2000). Support groups within women's organizations allow activists to share their experiences and receive emotional support. These groups regularly meet to help members cope with emotional issues such as stress and burnout (Dursun, 2014). Being part of solidarity networks has a significant empowering and healing effect on activists, and it also appears to boost their activism motivation.

Collective Identity and Belonging

One of the most significant sources of motivation expressed by the activists interviewed is the collective identity and sense of belonging that comes with being part of the women's movement. The participants generally note that while activism is challenging, being part of this struggle and the identity, it fosters is a source of pride. Activists frequently mention the pride they feel in being part of the women's movement. One participant expressed that the women's struggle is the meaning of her life:

"Recently, a friend was teasing me, saying 'it's all about women, women's rights, there's nothing else.' Then I thought to myself, what would be left if you take the women's struggle out of my life? Actually, not much. But I'm not complaining about that. It has become the meaning of my life, and I'm glad it has." (M1, 41 years old, 25 years of activism)

Another participant expressed her alignment with the women's rights movement:

"You identify with certain values, what could be more honorable than being the living representative of something you believe in?" (M2, 35 years old, 16 years of activism)

Yet another participant reflected on the difficulty of activism, but noted that it has become the meaning of her life:

"Yes, struggle is sometimes hard, exhausting. It requires paying a price. Sometimes, you have to go against those you love. But, if you ask me, it is the meaning of life." (V2, 48 years old, 25 years of activism)

The sense of belonging and the reputation associated with the identity provided by activism not only enhance the motivation for activism but also create a strengthening effect in dealing with challenges (Figley, 1995). Furthermore, we can speak of a strong shield that comes with being a women's rights advocate. This identity allows activists to feel strong, offering them resilience in the face of adversity.

Conclusion

This research is designed to understand the psychological, social, and emotional challenges faced by women human rights defenders, focusing particularly on secondary traumatization. In this con-

text, it has been observed that the secondary traumatization frequently encountered by women rights activists leaves deep marks in their personal lives.

The women's rights movement, within the existing patriarchal state system, must open a new space, and in order to do this, it must develop relationships with the state through civil society organizations (CSOs). Furthermore, women's rights organizations always feel the necessity to have an independent space from which they can draw strength (Uğuz, 2017). The activists interviewed emphasized that the political policies of systematic obstacles and social pressures frequently hinder the struggles needed to create this independent space.

In the cities where the research was conducted, it has been observed that the pressures from the system on activists are highly exhausting. However, it would also be accurate to say that these pressures can transform into a form that strengthens the activists. This is because the pressure from the system can foster a sense of solidarity, where activists support each other. As a result, while the system's pressures make life more difficult for activists, increasing the effects of secondary trauma, we can also say that these pressures have led activists to develop solidarity with their peers who are subjected to the same pressures, reinforcing organizational bonds.

The criminalization of women's rights activists' efforts within society may lead to various challenges in their everyday lives. As reported by some participants, they have experienced difficulties in securing housing. Furthermore, it was stated that they were socially excluded by certain individuals in their neighborhoods due to their involvement in activism.

The research findings reveal that women activists experience various emotional, psychological, and physical symptoms as a result of secondary traumatization. These symptoms include depression, anxiety, burnout, hopelessness, sleep disorders, and physical health problems. The constant exposure to traumatic stories strains their ability to empathize and emotionally connect, negatively affecting their biopsychosocial well-being. The long-

term effects of secondary trauma must also be carefully considered.

The study highlights the importance of self-care and social support in mitigating the psychological burden experienced by women's rights activists. In particular, structured professional support such as regular therapy sessions, supervision, and orientation programs emerges as vital. However, for such programs to be truly effective, they must go beyond general psychological support and provide targeted content. Orientation programs, for example, should include modules on trauma informed care, coping strategies for secondary traumatic stress, burnout prevention, and strategies for boundary-setting in emotionally intense work environments. Institutions might also incorporate training on legal frameworks regarding gender-based violence, community-based intervention models, and activist self-protection strategies. In addition to individual supervision, the inclusion of regular case presentation meetings can offer an enriching space where activists discuss complex cases collectively. These meetings not only foster professional development and shared learning but also strengthen emotional bonds and solidarity among activists through mutual recognition and support. The establishment of peer support groups—where activists with similar experiences share their emotional load—also plays a crucial role in countering isolation and promoting emotional resilience (Herman, 1992). Women's organizations that systematize such multi-layered therapeutic and educational frameworks demonstrate greater effectiveness in alleviating secondary trauma. As reflected in the findings, community solidarity, shared political commitment, and a collective sense of purpose remain vital components of psychological endurance.

In light of these findings, recommendations must be structured to address the multi-dimensional nature of secondary trauma. At the individual level, it is essential to provide access to mental health services that are trauma-informed and culturally sensitive. Activists should be encouraged to engage in regular self-care practices and be offered training in psychological first aid, stress management, and mindfulness-based techniques.

At the organizational level, women's rights organizations should develop institutional policies that recognize and respond to the risk of secondary trauma. These may include limits on caseloads, scheduled mental health breaks, and institutionalized access to mental health professionals. Developing internal mechanisms for emotional debriefing, safe dialogue spaces, and solidarity circles can also enhance collective resilience.

At the community level, it is important to raise awareness around the emotional toll of activism through public discourse and educational campaigns, thereby reducing the stigma faced by women activists and fostering a more supportive environment.

At the policy level, states and funding bodies should recognize secondary trauma as a legitimate occupational hazard and allocate resources specifically for trauma recovery and support within civil society. Creating legal protections against the criminalization and harassment of activists is also vital to ensure their safety and well-being. These recommendations, spanning from individual to systemic responses, aim not only to support the emotional well-being of women human rights defenders but also to contribute to the sustainability and transformative potential of their activism.

This study contributes to the literature on secondary trauma by considering the political context and examining the pressures of the geographical setting in which women's rights activists operate. Reducing and managing the exposure of women rights defenders to secondary traumatization requires a combined effort at both the individual and institutional levels. This research shows that understanding the effects of secondary trauma and developing strategies to cope with it will significantly contribute to ensuring that women activists can continue their work sustainably and effectively.

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