

**Clashes, Collaborations & Convergences:  
Evolving Relations of Turkish and Kurdish Women's Rights Activist<sup>1</sup>**

**Nadje Al-Ali and Latif Taş**

Centre for Gender Studies, SOAS University of London, 10 Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London, WC1H 0XG

SOAS University of London and the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, 200 Eggers Hall, Syracuse, NY 13244, USA

**CONTACT:** [na@soas.ac.uk](mailto:na@soas.ac.uk), [lt14@soas.ac.uk](mailto:lt14@soas.ac.uk)

**Abstract**

This article discusses the various ways the Kurdish women's movement has impacted feminism in the Turkish context. Against the background of the problematic historical relationship between Turkish and Kurdish women's rights activists, we will explore the shift in perceptions of, attitudes towards and relations of feminists in Turkey with the Kurdish women's movement. Our article will show that a "new generation of feminists" in Turkey appreciates and is inspired by the Kurdish women's movement, and rejects the Kemalist and nationalist undertones of earlier generations. Without wanting to belittle on-going nationalism and the rise of women cadres linked to the authoritarian Turkish regime, our article analyses the various ways the intersectional long-term struggle of Kurdish women is being perceived, recognised as well as critically engaged with by many Turkish feminist activists.

**Introduction**

Any observer of international women's day demonstrations in Istanbul would be impressed and moved by the sight of "intersectional feminist politics" in action. Over the past years, large 8 March demonstrations have involved thousands of women of different generations shouting slogans against gender-based violence, in support of LGBTQ rights and, crucially, also against state violence and repression, particularly of the Kurdish population. Feminist activists have

been singing and shouting slogans, carrying colourful banners and creative signs in both Turkish and Kurdish as they are marching from İstiklal Street in Beyoğlu towards Gezi Park at Taksim square, the centre of the 2013 anti-government protests. Occasionally, the peaceful protests turn violent, when, as for example, in 2014, riot police prevented the feminist activists to enter the square. Even during the height of political repression in 2017 and 2018, when hardly any overt opposition was possible, feminists in Turkey defied the odds, and, in daring and extremely brave acts, protested against state repression, increased authoritarianism as well as the specific crack-down on Kurdish towns, activists and politicians.

Yet only a decade ago, Turkish and Kurdish women's rights activism in Turkey was deeply divided along ethnic and political lines, with limited cooperation around gender-based violence.<sup>2</sup> Despite the critique of Kemalism as patriarchal and authoritarian by the more radical and autonomous Turkish feminist organizations that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, the specific plights of and challenges for Kurdish women's rights activists were largely ignored or dismissed by third wave Turkish feminists.<sup>3</sup> A number of authors have convincingly illustrated the various ways that Turkish feminists initially reproduced Kemalist modernizing discourses and later on, while being critical of Kemalism, continued to ignore or dismiss the specific plights of Kurdish women.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, since the 1980s, Kurdish women's rights activists have been highlighting not only their marginalization and oppression within Kurdish society and within the political movement, but have also been very critical of Turkish feminists' complicity with the authoritarian and nationalist Turkish state. Marginalised and estranged by the Kemalist modernization project,<sup>5</sup> Kurdish women became initially politicized in leftist movements during the 1960s and 70s, followed by larger scale mobilization through the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK) in the second half of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> Their involvement as "sexless militants"<sup>7</sup> and political activists for the Kurdish nationalist cause involved side-lining gender-based forms of inequalities and discriminations. Kurdish feminist organizations emerged both as a reaction to patriarchal structures within Kurdish society and political organizations, as well as marginalization and lack of recognition within the Turkish feminist movement.<sup>8</sup>

It is against this historical background that the contemporary feminist movement in Turkey is remarkable for its intersectional character. Especially young feminists have shifted from earlier nationalist perspectives, recognizing not only the plurality of women's experiences within Turkey, but also the various ways different power configurations based on gender,

ethnicity, sexuality and class intersect. This generation is influenced by transnational feminist politics and solidarities that recognise the connection of struggles of marginalized and oppressed peoples, for example with feminist organizations and campaigns in neighbouring countries.<sup>9</sup> All generations of Turkish feminists increasingly credit their Kurdish counter-parts for their critique of authoritarian and nationalist politics and their radical approaches against gender-based violence. Yet, tensions and differences persist amongst and within both Kurdish and Turkish feminist organizations.

In this article, we will explore different trajectories, perceptions and political positions of feminists in Turkey who have been working to address issues of diversity, inclusivity and cooperation between Turkish and Kurdish feminists. The existing literature on the relationship between Turkish and Kurdish women's rights activism stresses that, during the past decades, political spaces for collaboration and collective action opened up during more peaceful times, while increased tensions and outward conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdish movement have created tensions and rifts between Turkish and Kurdish feminists.<sup>10</sup> Our article will investigate whether and how the context of heightened conflict, state violence, general political repression and authoritarianism, and a shift towards a more conservative gender regime as a consequence of changing state discourse and policies might have impacted on Turkish feminists' perceptions of and relations with Kurdish women's rights activism.

The article is emerging out of our wider project about the Kurdish women's movement and intersections between peace and feminist activism in Turkey. We have engaged in qualitative research amongst Kurdish and Turkish feminist activists in Istanbul, Diyarbakır, as well as London and Berlin between September 2015 and February 2018, a period during which particularly Kurdish regions in Turkey faced intense conditions of war and conflict. This time was also characterized by a significant increase in government authoritarianism and repression, involving the persecution and arrest of many activists, journalists, academics and opposition politicians. Our research for this article involved informal interviews with 37 Kurdish and 28 Turkish women activists, as well as 6 focus group discussions and participant observations in our different fieldwork sites. We are using pseudonyms throughout the article to protect the anonymity of our respondents and to avoid the risk of them becoming more vulnerable due to state repression and the targeting of academics and feminist activists.

In what follows, we will be outlining some of the established insights and reflections on the history of Kurdish and Turkish feminist tensions and co-operations, before delving into the current context. We will be exploring personal and political trajectories of feminists as well as

a range of positions within a contemporary feminist politics that attempts to diverge from earlier ethnocentric attitudes and tries to be inclusive and intersectional in approach.

### **Reconsidering Past Relations**

The vast amount of literature on feminist activism in Turkey is illustrating the range of demands and the emergence of different groups at distinct periods,<sup>11</sup> generally distinguishing between Turkish feminism and the Kurdish women's movement.<sup>12</sup> Various forms of state supported initiatives around "the woman's question" focused on women's education, labor force participation and involvement in public life as part of the modernist and developmentalist undertones of the Kemalist Republic.<sup>13</sup> Turkish feminism was initiated largely by middle and upper class educated, secular and Kemalist women who were rather remote from society at large and tended to have close relationships and connections with the state and its underlying ideology.<sup>14</sup> It is only after the coup of 1980 that an independent feminist movement started to emerge in opposition to prevalent state feminism. Influenced by international advocacy around women's rights as human rights and campaigns linked to the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985), feminists in Turkey mainly mobilized around gender-based violence, but also women's legal rights, particularly in relation to the civil and penal codes. Widespread street protests were followed by the establishment of several initiatives, most prominent amongst them the Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation (*Mor Çatı Kadın Sığınma Vakfı*) in Istanbul initiated in 1990, which provided shelter to women and focused on domestic violence.<sup>15</sup>

There seems to be consensus within the wide-ranging academic literature that modernization and development discourses as well as narratives of Turkish unity continued to characterize much of Turkish feminist activism in the 1980s and 1990s, despite increasing critiques of Kemalism on behalf of leftist and radical feminists. Meanwhile, Kurdish and Islamic women's movements increasingly critiqued Turkish mainstream feminists for being ethno-centric, class-based and exclusionary of other identities,<sup>16</sup> similar to the way Black and lesbian feminists critiqued white and heterosexual positionalities associated with the second wave Western feminist movement.<sup>17</sup> According to our interviews, Kurdish women's rights activists reacted to and challenged what they perceived to be patronizing behavior, accusing Turkish feminists of behaving like a big sister –*ablalık yapmak*.

From the 1990s onwards, Kurdish women activists created their own women's associations and journals and started to openly critique the nationalist and militaristic character of the Turkish state, for example, in the feminist journal *Pazartesi* (Monday), *Jujin*, *Jin u Jiyar*

(Women's life), and *Roza*.<sup>18</sup> Later on, Kurdish women in the diaspora established separate women's organizations, such as Roj Women's Association (London) and Destan (Berlin). These associations have helped the Kurdish women's movement' to become transnational, as well as intersectional, cooperating not only with progressive Turkish women activists but also with western leftist, ethnic minority and black women's organizations. Transnational campaigns included 'Justice for Women', 'Stop Honor Killings', and 'Freedom for Öcalan'. Importantly, Kurdish women made links with struggles of other marginalized and oppressed peoples and communities, as well as progressive opposition groups in different international contexts, increasingly perceiving links between different claims and forms of inequalities, such as those linked to racism, workers' exploitation and discriminatory attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers.

Many Kurdish women initially got politicized via the PKK and its affiliated women's organizations, which grew over the past decades.<sup>19</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to go into any depth in terms of the history of Kurdish women's rights activism, which has been written about eloquently by several authors.<sup>20</sup> Here we would like to mainly stress the significance of the wider Kurdish movement in generating a vibrant and outspoken Kurdish women's movement, partly by enabling women's participation in both armed and political struggle but also, inadvertently, by marginalizing women and displaying patriarchal attitudes towards gender norms, which led to gendered resistance within. Elsewhere we have discussed the dialectic process through which the support of Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned founder and leader of the PKK, has worked to create political spaces for Kurdish women, who, nevertheless had to struggle hard to convince their male counterparts of the importance to implementing gender-based equality and justice into political organizations, decision-making processes and every-day lives.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, as stated in the literature and based on our interviews with Kurdish women's rights activists, Kurdish feminism also emerged in relation to the exclusionary and nationalist character of the Turkish feminist movement.<sup>22</sup>

Increasingly since the 1990s, more and more Turkish feminists started to take the critique of Kurdish women seriously and began to question their own positionality and politics, particularly vis a vis "the Kurdish Question". However, it became obvious that a critical reflection on Turkish feminists' relationship to the conflict with Kurds entailed an interrogation of Turkish feminists' relation to the Turkish state. As this feminist scholar and activist put it:

For decades, I have worked on gender studies and have been part of Turkish feminism. I went to Diyarbakir, a Kurdish dominated city, for the first time in 2001.

It was also the first time that I met with Kurdish women activists and feminists. Since then I have continued to work closely with different Kurdish women and have worked in partnership with them to campaign to prevent honour-based crimes in the region. I recognized that family-based violence and honour crimes are directly connected to state-based violence. It was the time when I, and many other Turkish feminists, started questioning the conservative, conformist, middle class dominated, Istanbul based, nation state perspective of the Turkish feminist movement. [...]Kurdish women have shown us that unless we recognize the masculinist perspective of the state and remain uncritical of the nation state, the feminist movement cannot achieve much and won't extend its influence beyond its own circle. [...] The Turkish feminist movement, especially leftist and liberal feminists, has learnt and is still learning many things from the Kurdish women's movement.

The view expressed above resonates with several other respondents who all agreed that the Kurdish women's movement shook the Turkish state's modernization theory from its base and forced Turkish feminists to reflect on their relationship to the state, to Turkishness and their own privileges. This shift also led to a recognition of the largely elite social class basis of the Turkish feminist movement that, unlike the recent Kurdish women's movement, has been rather remote from wider society.

One of the first initiatives that explicitly tried to challenge the exclusionary legacy of Turkish feminism by seeking and recognising difference, particularly in relation to Kurdish women's positionality and struggles, was Amargi. When first established in 2001, Amargi took an explicitly anti-militarist stand and refused to see the Kurdish Question as a separate issue from sexism: "militarism and war were seen as the ultimate expressions of masculinity".<sup>23</sup> Hence, Amargi's feminism was inherently a feminism critical of the underlying authoritarian, militarist, nationalist and patriarchal character of the Turkish state. Amargi initially consisted of a majority of Kurdish women's rights activists close to the Kurdish movement, although one of its most prominent founders, Pinar Selek, was a Turkish scholar and activist critical of Turkish state militarism. Aside from challenging state patriarchy and violence, Amargi also showed solidarity with women who wanted to wear the headscarf at a time when it was banned by the state.

Despite its initial commitment to diversity and inclusivity, tensions and rifts developed over time revolving around attitudes towards sexuality as well as diverging views towards Kurdish

resistance to the Turkish state. Merve H. was one of 9 people who left Amargi, in November 2012:

In theory, Amargi had an idea that we are all together with our differences and we discuss our different ideas. But in the practice, we were not able to discuss our differences and the group created some taboos, such as around militarism and violence resulting from war. We, the people who left, were not part of the Kurdish political movement, but the reasons were political and ideological differences. We were all feminists who were based in Istanbul. We published a declaration to state why we left the group.<sup>24</sup>

According to Merve, after Pinar Selek, one of the founders of Amargi, and other Amargi members went to prison, the group began to disintegrate and change its position towards state violence. In her view, the collective started to be controlled by a group of feminists who were opposed to centering ethnic conflict and militarism in their struggle and privileged issues around domestic violence and LGBTQ rights. She argues:

They claimed that they were against violence but they were not including people who face state violence or who had to defend themselves against state violence. The group claimed that they had a pluralistic perspective but the only ideology they welcomed was a liberal ideology. They did not want to even listen to other perspectives and ideologies. They claimed that liberalism is natural and does not take sides. But we know that liberal ideology takes side and it is mostly the hegemonic state's side. Also, during heavy conflict and violence to not take side, to stay silent, is taking a side, and this side is the side of who is using the violence.

Obviously there exist very different narratives and interpretations about the developments and tensions within Amargi. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide an in-depth analysis of the various positions, but what became apparent to us is the significance of evolving differences around the issue of state violence and the conflict with the Kurdish movement in Turkey. While some members felt it was their responsibility and an inherent part of their feminist politics to speak out against state violence in relation to Kurdish communities and activists, others felt unable or unwilling to criticize state violence due to their opposition to the armed resistance of the Kurdish movement. One contributing, even if not necessarily decisive factor, to the different political positionings relates to diverse entry points into feminist activism. Below we are

exploring the personal trajectories of women who have been involved in organizations or initiatives that have reflected on issues of diversity, inclusivity, cooperation and peace.

### **Personal and Political Trajectories**

A close exploration of feminist activists' personal and political trajectories in terms of their involvement in feminist politics that involves the cooperation of Turkish and Kurdish activists reveals a range of different backgrounds, experiences and politics. Personal and family background, specific political experiences and relationships as well as wider national, regional and international political developments, influence women activists' choices and interpretations of feminism. In the Turkish context, militarization, authoritarianism, the increase in Islamism and the rise of more conservative gender norms, as well as ethnic and political conflict, have shaped generations of activists. Particularly the younger generation of feminists is influenced by transnational feminist politics that stresses the intersections of hierarchies of power and inequalities on the lines of gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and class.<sup>25</sup>

Although not necessarily "typical" of feminist activists' trajectories, occasionally a close family background with and relationship to Turkish militarism and nationalism might trigger or contribute to a feminist consciousness and resistance. Seda G., a young Turkish feminist activist and academic, whom we met on a couple occasions in Istanbul, has been involved in feminist and peace activism, mainly through the Women's Peace Initiative, is critical of state authoritarianism and repression, particularly in relation to Kurdish communities. We asked Seda for the reasons she started to get involved in feminist activism. She replied:

There are many different reasons. First of all, I am aware that not everybody shares my privileged background. So I feel I need to do something for others. My father was part of the military and he was a soldier. [...] He witnessed so many atrocities and saw how local people suffered at the hands of the Turkish state. He told me that the Kurdish regions were like an occupied country of an enemy. He said that most Turks don't know and don't hear anything about the real situation in these parts of the country. Instead we only hear about the heroism of the soldiers, which is not true. A few years later, my father retired. He hated the military a lot after that. It was at that moment when my Turkish nationalist father was saying all these things that I realized how bad the situation was. It was a wake-up call for me to do something. I started to educate myself and to get involved more. But my father does not want me to be involved very much. He does not want me to go further and to

get into trouble. He knows that the state can be even against their own Turkish people who feel sympathy for Kurds.

Several of our respondents referred to their reaction against and resistance to the nationalism and militarism of previous generations, whether it was their parents, their extended families, or even earlier generations of feminists. The awareness of privilege, especially in relation to what is commonly referred to as “white Turk”, the descendants of prominent families in Turkey, seems to be a contributing motivation for several feminist activists we talked to along a liberal to radical spectrum. Yet, many women we interviewed experience tensions and dilemmas dealing with their families and loved ones who do not share their anti-nationalist and anti-militarist political positions.

In Diyarbakir, we met with Özlem N., who had her own problems with her family, linked to her involvement in a feminist NGO (KAMER). Her personal trajectory into feminist activism also includes a father working in the military. Only her experience was radically different as her father is Kurdish:

I am the daughter of a driver who was working for the Turkish military. We were living in Diyarbakir because of his work. We were living in a military accommodation within a compound with hard barriers to the outside where Kurdish people live. We, that is my family, faced double barriers and challenges in the context of my father’s work. We were never welcomed and accepted by other military personnel’s families because of our Kurdish background. In the military compound, there was discrimination against us: we were perceived as ‘half Turks’ (*Yarim Turk*) and ‘broken Turks’ (*Kirma Turk*). But we were also marginalized by our wider extended family members, because my father was working for the Turkish military.

Özlem continued to explain her first encounter and involvement in the feminist organization called KAMER, which was initially due to financial need:

During the 1990s, when I was 18 years old, there was heavy conflict between the Turkish army and PKK guerrillas I was a young university student in Diyarbakir. During my early university time, I discovered that there was a restaurant in Diyarbakir run by women for women. Later I learned that the restaurant belongs to KAMER and that it was by KAMER’s women. I started to work at that restaurant

to earn some money for my education and also to help my family. It was not because of any feminist conviction that I started to work at that restaurant, but out of financial necessity. Working closely with KAMER helped me to question many things. It was a learning process for my gender identity. But the conditions were not good during the 1990s in our region, just as it is not good today. Working for a feminist organization like KAMER was sufficient reason to be excluded by my university friends, who started to view me as a weird person. They started teasing me, saying that I started to hate men. That experience showed me that gender inequality runs very deep and is very common in our society. Some might try to destroy you physically, but others tease and undermine you.

Discussions with friends, fellow students and lecturers during university education, the political involvement in non-feminist organizations or direct encounters with feminist initiatives, as with Özlem above, all contributed to the awakening of feminist consciousness amongst our various respondents. In Özlem's case, it was not only her university friends who teased her for her involvement in feminist activism, but also her family who was initially taken aback by her growing interest and concern with gender-based equality.

While in Diyarbakir, we talked to a third woman activist in KAMER: Ayşe T. arrived in 1991 as a teacher after having studied in Ankara. She acknowledges that she had been brought up with a range of stereotypes and misconceptions about Kurds, and felt initially rather unhappy of having been placed in the town to work. Working in a primary school, she learnt that Kurdish women, although facing a range of oppressions from society and their families, are strong and active. She also started to recognize the various forms of discrimination and oppression Kurdish people have been experiencing at the hands of the state. Her introduction to KAMER was life changing:

I joined group discussions at KAMER and I learnt a lot about my own life and inequality I faced since my childhood, which I had perceived to be normal. I realized that I had limitations and that I had to obey my family's men, whether my father, my uncle, my brother or my husband. We used to look down to Kurdish women and feel pity for them, but I have discovered that I, an educated Turkish woman and teacher, have faced similar problems by Turkish society, by my own family. Diyarbakir and Kurdish people offered a mirror for me to discover my own identity. I have discovered and learned that without women's rights and full equality

in society, at home and at the work place, it is not possible to create sustainable peace in any society.

Peace is a reoccurring theme amongst the women we talked to. Achieving peace appears to be a significant value motivating many of our respondents as we have discussed in greater depth elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> However the strategy of how to achieve peace and attitudes towards anti-militarism vary, especially in relation to attitudes toward the Kurdish armed struggle. Some members of KAMER although Kurdish themselves, refers to the PKK as a ‘terrorist’ organization, signaling their distance to the Kurdish armed movement. Meanwhile, other feminists, including ethnic Turkish feminists, have a different attitude towards the PKK, generally recognizing its shift in strategy and political aims. Merve H. and her friend Yeshim G., for example, are both involved in the same Women’s Peace Initiative that Seda has been active in. We asked them for their political trajectory. Merve said:

Both of our involvements started because of our feminist identity and activism. Peace is one of our priorities. The first feminist organization I was involved with was Amargi. I left Amargi on 2 November 2012 together with a group of people because of our disagreement of focusing on different types of violence. We believed that the group should have focused on anti-militarism and violence coming from the military conflict. But others were not sharing our view and did not want to discuss militarism as part of violence. We believe that within conflict, especially military conflict, violence against women and different minorities increases, and without dealing and focusing on this problem it would not be possible to understand and stop violence easily.

It was obvious that Merve’s attitude was shaped by her knowledge of and close collaboration with Kurdish women activists. She has not only been to various cities in south Eastern Turkey but had also been involved in solidarity activism in relation to Kobane. Her friend Yeşim, a member of the Socialist Feminist Collective, told us:

I am coming from another feminist collective movement. There, we did not have this discussion and disagreements at all. We started in 2008. Since the beginning, most of us have been pro peace supporters. We have been against all sorts of violence, including state violence. We have also found HDPs<sup>27</sup> approach very promising for peace. The state and society has not given them enough credit for

what they have been investing for peace. [...] There is a tradition of socialist feminism in Turkey, which started in the late 1980s. The founder of the recent Istanbul feminist collective is coming from this 1980s tradition. One important thing about socialist feminism is to provide a space to discuss liberal, multicultural or radical feminism in Turkey and globally and to find out what kind of gaps they have left behind. Most other feminist movements have not moved away from materialism and capitalism.

The different accounts of varying entries into feminist activism shared here only provide a small glimpse into the range of experiences and trajectories of feminists recognizing diversity and being committed to an inclusive and intersectional feminism. In what follows, we will more closely explore the way different activists and organizations maneuver the complex political landscape in Turkey in relation to the conflict and violence between the state and the Kurdish movement.

### **Organizing Difference**

One feminist organization that works across different ethnicities to focus on women's needs, particularly various forms of gender-based violence, is KAMER. Originally founded in 1997 in Diyarbakir by Nebahat Akkoç, herself a victim of state violence and repression, to address local needs, the organization now works in 23 provinces of South East and East Anatolia, and has established over 40 centres. Although initially established with a majority of Kurdish members, KAMER does not define itself as a Kurdish organization and stresses its independence from any political organization<sup>28</sup> As Hülya F. explained to us when we talked to her in September 2015 just after the violent crackdown on Diyarbakir and other cities in South-Eastern Turkey started following the elections of June: "To be independent is one of our most important values. The second aim is to think globally and work locally. The third aim is to work from the bottom up. Fourth, our aim is to work for the benefit of women and to cooperate with who support us in this." When pressed to explain the idea of thinking globally and working locally, Hülya explained that KAMER tries to establish local and transnational alliances, attempting to translate international standards of women's rights with local culture.

Consciousness-raising and awareness workshops have been crucial elements of KAMER's attempt to combat gender-based violence over the years. More practical service provisions include an emergency helpline for victims of domestic violence as well as income generating

projects and non-sexist childcare centres.<sup>29</sup> As Arat and Altınay<sup>30</sup> stress in their in-depth discussion of KAMER, the organization has cultivated transnational links and global networks and has been plugged into international human and women's rights funding and advocacy opportunities. KAMER has increasingly become known as an NGO that provides services for women aside from engaging in consciousness-raising and advocacy.

In the context of the increased conflict and violence between the Turkish state and the Kurdish militias in the Kurdish region, three women we talked to stressed KAMER's independence and neutrality. One of the Turkish activists acknowledged the difficulty in keeping this position during times of heightened conflict:

The most important thing with KAMER and my wish to work for KAMER was that it was an independent women's organisation. They do not belong to any political ideology or private entity. Women's problems are their only interest. But I also know that to have this position, during conflict, especially when there is a huge polarization, is very difficult.

Many Kurdish and Turkish women's rights activists we talked to during our stay in Diyarbakir and Istanbul were critical of KAMER's position. Linked to the wider Kurdish movement, they perceived KAMER's stated neutrality as an implicit act of taking sides with the state. These allegations are compounded by KAMER's increased outreach and service provision, which our respondents frequently referred to as an example of NGOisation and so-called "project feminism". However, Özlem justifies KAMER's position, and explains:

Our work is for women and we need to work closely with local authorities, mayors and also state representatives. If women need any help, due to medical problems or violence at home, then we need to work with state authorities and the police. There was a long time we were very comfortable, especially during peace times<sup>31</sup>, but again, during the conflict, especially the Kurdish movement criticizes our work because of working closely with state.

Allegations of complicity weigh heavily on activists belonging to KAMER who are clearly engaged in a difficult balancing act in terms of both its diverse membership as well as its relations with state institutions. KAMER's attempt to stay neutral and focus on gender-based violence and separate women's issues from the violence used by the state has become increasingly problematic given the state's growing authoritarianism, repression and violence.

At the same time, it has allowed for collaborations and interactions that would usually not be possible in Turkey's complex ethnic and political context. As Arat and Altınay show:

KAMER was able to introduce both the Kurdish nationalist Alevi women of Tunceli as well as the Turkish nationalist orthodox Sunni women of Elaziğ to a cosmopolitan feminist discourse through its awareness workshops. Women of Tunceli and Elaziğ who were assumed to have irreconcilable differences could then talk to one another overcoming intersectionally shaped ethnic, religious and gendered violence in their lives.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, the escalating violence has radicalized many Turkish feminists who were initially critical of the Kurdish movement. When we first talked to Seda, for example, the activist and academic mentioned above who is involved in the Women's Peace Initiative, she told us in September 2015 in Istanbul: 'The word peace is somehow becoming an empty signifier. You organize a peace rally, and then people display posters of Öcalan. It is a contradictory position. You revere a military leader. So are you for armed struggle or are you for peace?' However, a few months later, when the conflict and violence had escalated drastically, Seda stressed in a follow-up interview that she had lost her reservations about the way the Kurdish political movement approaches and conceptualizes peace: 'State power and oppression have consolidated my position and my commitment to peace.'<sup>33</sup>

The Women's Peace Initiative was initially founded in 2009 to ensure women's involvement in peace negotiations, but since 2015 the network has played an important role in challenging the state's brutal crackdown on the Kurdish region in south-Eastern Turkey, as well as resisting increased state repression and authoritarianism more broadly. It was obvious to us that there existed a range of different positions *vis a vis* the meaning of peace and the attitude towards Kurdish armed resistance. Merve, previously a member of Amargi, and now an active member of the Women's Peace Initiative, makes it clear that she does not blame either the wider Kurdish movement nor the HDP for the escalation of conflict, and confirms her commitment to work for peace jointly with Kurdish women's rights activists:

Of course, it is important what you can prioritize and what you can leave behind. Different feminist activists have different views and priorities. Peace and women's rights are my first priority and I would like to put my energy for the mobilization for peace and stopping conflict. I think that the June 2015 elections provided a momentum for Turkish and Kurdish people to live together, to collaborate and to

achieve sustainable peace. We, that is around 1000 feminists in Turkey, published a declaration supporting the HDP. It was the first time that there was a clear support and declaration from the feminist movement. It was not because the HDP is a feminist party, which it is not, but their approach was very close to us and it was for peace, diversity and equality.

Seda, Merve, Yeşim and many others like them, have been risking their jobs, careers, reputations, connections and family relationships over the past years in their ongoing commitment to challenge state authoritarianism and brutality, and in their recognition that gender-based violence needs to be tackled intersectionally.

### **Conclusions**

Against the historical background of state feminism, and the earlier critique of the state's attempts to monopolize "the woman's question", often still imbued with ethnocentrism and lack of recognition of the structural inequalities experienced by Kurdish women, the more recent shifts in feminist attitudes and practices in Turkey are remarkable. While some feminists in the 1990s started to identify themselves and other activists of different ethnic backgrounds as feminists in Turkey as opposed to "Turkish feminists," the acknowledgment of the specific plights faced by Kurdish women goes beyond an appreciation of difference. Unlike previous periods when conflict escalated between the state and the Kurdish movement, e.g. during the 1990s, and between 2005 and 2013, we could not detect a shift in emphasis away from an intersectional analysis and struggle to one solely focusing on patriarchy, gender-based violence and LGBTQ rights. Instead, our research findings indicate that in the current context of heightened conflict, state violence, a shift towards a more conservative gender regime and general political repression and authoritarianism, Turkish and Kurdish feminist activists have been converging in their critique of the state and patriarchy. Although there still exist many different emphases and interpretations of what a feminists struggle should like in today's Turkey, there appears to be a large consensus that this struggle entails a critique of and resistance to the growing conservatism, shift to Islamism, authoritarian encroachment and violence of the state.

In a context where any spaces of opposition and dissent have been shrinking following the June 2015 elections, and even more extremely after the failed coup of July 2016, it is feminist activists who have been at the forefront of creating bridges and collaborating across ethnic and

political lines as well as voicing their opposition to the state. While Islamic feminism was marginalized in the past, not only by the state but also the Kemalist-oriented secular feminist movement, the current government's conservative gender policies provide a more conducive context for those women trying to work for increased women's rights from within an Islamic framework.<sup>34</sup> As secular political spaces are shrinking in Erdoğan's controlled Turkey, Turkish secular-oriented feminists of all ethnic backgrounds are working hard to maintain and save political spaces, legal rights and social norms long fought for. However, it is important to emphasize that not all secular activists are critical of the state and not all religious ones are close to the AKP (Justice and Development Party) ruling the country.

Feminism in Turkey, and even Turkish feminism, exists on abroad spectrum. In the context of this research, we have not talked to feminists who are close to the current Islamist government and those who are holding on to ethnocentric Kemalist ideas about gender equality. The activists we talked to exist on a continuum of liberal, progressive and socialist feminisms, all imbued with elements of transnational feminism that is informed by an understanding of the intersectional forms of oppression, marginalisations and inequalities. LGBTQ activists, members of the socialist collective, feminist academics, peace activists and NGO activists involved in consciousness-raising and welfare initiatives, all have different personal and political trajectories and interpretations of feminism, but they share an understanding of the continuum of violence in terms of militarism, state-based, gender-based and domestic violence. Moreover, the feminists we talked to also share a recognition of the important role that Kurdish women have played in forging a Kurdish women's movement on the one side and transforming feminism in Turkey on the other. The transformation and influence is wide ranging and includes a growing awareness of the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and class-based inequalities. While women activists have different attitudes and relationships to the wider Kurdish movement, and might have also different views about tactics of that movement, especially in relation to armed resistance, there is a considerable recognition of achievements and respect for Kurdish women activists who have been struggling on many fronts for many years.

The main source of tension, in our view, is the radically different conceptualization of and attitude towards sexuality, which could be subject to future research. The Kurdish women's movement attempts to construct equality on the basis of "sexless militants," activists and society, perceiving discussions and campaigns around sexuality as symptoms of individualism, liberalism and capitalism. Meanwhile, liberal and progressive feminists in Turkey frequently feel alienated by the tabooisation of sexuality, the emphasis on collectivity at the expense of

individual freedom and choice and the inherent social conservatism in glorifying sexless beings. Without wanting to undermine or ignore the very real structural differences and positionalities of Kurdish and Turkish feminists, solidarity and collaboration have become integral to a significant part of feminist activism in Turkey. It remains to be seen how political developments inside Turkey, as well as regionally, will shape this dynamic relationship in the future.

---

<sup>1</sup> The two authors are equal co-authors.

<sup>2</sup> M. Yüksel, 'Diversifying Feminism in Turkey in the 1990s', MA Thesis, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Bilkent University Ankara, 2003; M. Bodur, *Modernity, Social Movements and Democracy. Feminist Movements in Post-1980 Turkey*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Carleton University, Ottawa, 2005; Ç. Diner and Ş. Toktas. 'Waves of feminism in Turkey: Kemalist, Islamist and Kurdish women's movements in an era of globalization', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 12(1), 2010, pp. 41-57; Ö. Çaha, 'The Kurdish Women's Movement: A Third-Wave Feminism within the Turkish Context', *Turkish Studies*, 12(3), 2011, pp. 435-449; N. Sirman, 'When Antigone is A Man: Feminist Trouble in the Late Colony', in J. Butler, Z. Gambetti and L. Sabsay (eds.), *Vulnerability in Resistance: Politics, Feminism, Theory*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2016, pp. 191-210.

<sup>3</sup> A. Bora and A. Günel (eds), *90'larda Türkiye'de Feminizm, İletişim*, İstanbul, 2002; F. Acar and G. Altunok, 'Paths, Borders and Bridges: Impact of Ethnicity and Religion on Women's Movement in Turkey', *Paper prepared for the QUING Conference*, October 2-3, 2009, Budapest Deliverable No. 47/49: Series of explanatory country and thematic comparative reports in WHY; Diner and Toktas, op. cit; Çaha, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Yüksel, op. cit; H. Çağlayan, *Analar, Yoldaşlar, Tanrıçalar: Kürt Hareketinde Kadınlar ve Kadın Kimliğinin Oluşumu*, İletişim, İstanbul, 2007; Diner and Toktas, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> M. Yüksel, 'The Encounter of Kurdish Women with Nationalism in Turkey', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 42 (5), 2006, p.777.

<sup>6</sup> See for the relationship between Turkish left and Kurdish movement: N. Al-Ali and L. Taş, 'Kurdish women's battle continues against state and patriarchy', *Open Democracy*, 12 August 2016 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/nadje-al-ali-latif-tas-g-ltan-ki-anak/kurdish-women-s-battle-continues-against-state-and-patriarchy->; M. Yeğen, 'The Turkish Left and the Kurdish Question', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 18(2), 2016, pp.157-176.

<sup>7</sup> Çaha, op.cit; N. Al-Ali and L. Tas, 'Dialectics of Struggle: Challenges to the Kurdish Women's Movement', *LSE Middle East Centre: Social Movement and Popular Mobilisation in the MENA*, 2018b.

<sup>8</sup> Diner and Toktas, op. cit; Çaha, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> H. Çağlayan, 'From Kawa the Blacksmith to Ishtar the Goddess: Gender Constructions in Ideological-Political Discourses of the Kurdish Movement in post-1980 Turkey, Possibilities and limits', *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 14, 2012; Y. Arat and A. G. Altınay, 'Kamer, a woman's center, and an experiment in cultivating cosmopolitan norms', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 49, 2015, pp. 12-19.

<sup>10</sup> N. Al-Ali and L. Taş, "'War is like a Blanket...'" Feminist Convergences in Kurdish and Turkish Women's Rights Activism for Peace', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 13(3), 2017, pp. 354-375.

<sup>11</sup> Ş. Tekeli, 'Emergence of the New Feminist Movement in Turkey', in D. Dahlerup (ed.), *The New Women's Movement*, Sage, Beverly Hills, 1986, pp. 179-199; D. Kandiyoti, 'Women and the Turkish State: Political Actors or Symbolic Pawns?', in N. Yuval-Davis and F. Anthias (eds.), *Woman-Nation-State*, Macmillan, London, 1989; Z. F. Arat, 'Turkish Women and the Republican Reconstruction of Tradition', in F. M. Göçek and S. Balaghi (eds.), *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994; Y. Arat, 'Toward a Democratic Society. The Women's Movement in Turkey in the 1980s', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 17(2-3), 1994, pp.241-48; Y. Arat, 'Feminists, Islamists, and Political Change in Turkey', *Political Psychology*, 19(1), 1998, pp.117-131; M. Müftüler-Baç, 'Turkish Women's Predicament', *Women Studies International Forum* 22(3), 1999, pp.303-316; Y. Arat, 'From Emancipation to Liberation: The Changing Role of Women in Turkey's Public Realm', *Journal of International Affairs*, 54(1), 2000, pp.107-125; A. Altınay (ed.), *Vatan, Millet, Kadınlar*, İletişim, İstanbul, 2000; A. Saktanber, *Living Islam: Women, Religion and the Politization of Culture in Turkey*, I. B. Tauris, London, 2002; Y. Arat, 'Contestation and collaboration: women's struggles for empowerment in Turkey', in R. Kasaba (ed.), *The Cambridge history of Turkey: Volume 4, Turkey in the modern world*. Cambridge: CUP, 2008; S. Coşar and F. G. Onbaşı, 'Women's Movement in Turkey at a Crossroads: From Women's Rights Advocacy to Feminism', *Southern European Society and Politics*, 13(3), pp.325-44; B. Turam, 'Turkish Women Divided by Politics. Secularist Activism versus Pious Non-Resistance', *Internal Feminist Journal of Politics*, 10(4), 2008, pp.475-94; G.A. Marshall, 'Authenticating gender policies through sustained-pressure: The strategy

behind the success of Turkish feminists', *Social Politics*, 16(3), 2009, pp.358-378; F. Acar and G. Altunok, 'Understanding gender equality demands in Turkey: Foundations and boundaries of women's movements', in S. Dedeoğlu and A. Y. Elveren (eds.), *Gender and Society in Turkey: The Impact of Neoliberal Policies, Political Islam and EU Accession*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2012, pp. 31–45; G. A. Marshall, *Shaping Gender Policy in Turkey: Grassroots Women Activists, the European Union, and the Turkish State*, State University of New York Press, New York, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Yüksel, 2003 and 2006; Diner and Toktaş, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> D. Kandiyoti, 'Emancipated but Unliberated? Reflections on the Turkish Case', *Feminist Studies*, 13(2), 1987, pp. 317-338; A. Durakbaşı, 'Cumhuriyet Döneminde Kemalist Kadın Kimliğinin Oluşumu', *Tarih ve Toplum*, 51, 1988, pp. 39-43; N. Sirman, 'Turkish Feminism: A Short History; Dossier 5-6 Women Living Under Muslim Law, December 1988 - May 1989', <http://www.wluml.org/node/260>, 1989; D. Kandiyoti, 'End of Empire: Islam, Nationalism and Women in Turkey', in D. Kandiyoti (ed.), *Women, Islam and the State*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1991, pp.22-47; . Tekeli, 'Europe, European Feminism and Women in Turkey', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 15(1), 1992, pp.139-43; D. Kandiyoti, *Cariyeler, Bacılar, Yurttaşlar*, Metis Yayınları, İstanbul, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Y. Zihnioğlu, 'Kadınlarasılaik-islamcikutuplaşması: Nereyekadar?', *Pazartesi*, 20, 1996; Y. Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap. Nezihe Muhiddin, Kadınlar Halk Fırkası, KadınBirliği*, Metis Yayınları, İstanbul, 2003; A. Bora, 'Feminizm, Sinirlar ve İhlal İmkani', *Birikim*, 184-185, 2004, pp. 106-112.

<sup>15</sup> Arat and Altınay, 2015, p.14.

<sup>16</sup> Bodur, op. cit; H. A. Aksoy, *Engendering Democracy in Turkey: Participation and Inclusion of Women's Civil Society Organizations under AKP Rule*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Sozialwissenschaftlichen Fakultät der Eberhard Karls Universität, Tübingen, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Diner and Toktaş, op. cit; A. Ü. Özakin, *Accommodating Diversity within Feminism in Turkey: The Amargi Women's Cooperative, 2001-2011*, Unpublished MA Thesis, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Arat, 2008; Diner and Toktaş, op. cit; Ofra Bengio (ed.), *Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> N. Al-Ali and L. Taş, 'Reconsidering nationalism and feminism: the Kurdish political movement in Turkey', *Nations and Nationalism*, 24, 2018a, pp. 1–21.

<sup>20</sup> Yüksel, 2003; Çağlayan, 2007; Diner and Toktaş, 2010; Al-Ali and Taş, 2016 and 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Ali and Taş, 2018b; N. Al-Ali and L. Taş, 'Kurdish women's battle continues against state and patriarchy: Interview with Diyarbakir's Co-Mayor, Gulden Kisanak', *Open Democracy*, 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/nadje-al-ali-latif-tas-g-ltan-ki-anak/kurdish-women-s-battle-continues-against-state-and-patriarchy-> (accessed 11 March 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Al-Ali and Tas, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Özakin, 2012, p.113.

<sup>24</sup> See the link to statement, 'Feminist Tartışmalar: Amargi'den Gidenlerin Ayrılık Sebepleri (Feminist Discussion: The reasons of people who left the Amargi): <https://fakfukfon.wordpress.com/2012/11/05/feminist-tartismalar-amargiden-gidenlerin-ayrilik-sebepleri/> (accessed 18 September 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Diner and Toktaş, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Ali and Taş, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> The People's Democratic Party (HDP – *Halkların Demokratik Partisi*) was founded in 2012 as a Kurdish dominated political movement. But since its establishment it has widened into a broad based progressive movement which has included many Turkish leftist, liberals, ethnic and religious minorities, and other marginalized groups, including LGBTQ activists. The HDP received more than six million (13.1 percent) votes (80 seats) in the June 2015 election and managed to pass the 10 percent threshold.

<sup>28</sup> Arat and Altınay, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> The Turkish state and the Kurdish movement engaged in 'peace process' talks between 2013-2015. The process ended in June 2015 when heavy conflict started again.

<sup>32</sup> Arat and Altınay, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Al-Ali and Tas, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, A. G. Ayata and F. Tütüncü, 'Party Politics of the AKP (2002–2007) and the Predicaments of Women at the Intersection of the Westernist, Islamist and Feminist Discourses in Turkey', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 35(3), 2008, pp.363–84; S. Coşar and M. Yeğenoğlu, 'New Grounds for Patriarchy in Turkey? Gender Policy in the Age of AKP', *Southern European Society and Politics*, 16(4), 2011, pp.555–73; Y. Arat, *Rethinking Islam and Liberal Democracy: Islamist Women in Turkish Politics*, SUNY Press, Albany, 2012; H. A. Aksoy, 'Invigorating Democracy in Turkey: The Agency of Organized Islamist Women', *Politics & Gender*,

11(1), 2015, pp. 146-170; A. G. Ayata and G. Doğangün, 'Gender Politics of the AKP: Restoration of a Religio-conservative Gender Climate', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 19(6), 2017, pp.610-627.

**Prof Nadjé Al-Ali** teaches at the Centre for Gender Studies, SOAS University of London. She is specialised in women and gender issues with reference to the Middle East and its diasporas; particularly Iraq and Egypt, and more recently Turkey and Kurdish issues.

**Dr. Latif Taş** teaches at the Politics Department, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University. He holds a Marie-Sklodowska-Curie Global Fellowship and specialised in comparative politics, socio-legal, transnationalism, conflict and peace, gender, diaspora and citizenship studies with reference to the Middle East and its diasporas. This article is part of Dr. Taş broader research project on the politics of gender, justice and transnationalism, has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 703201. SOAS (London), Syracuse University (New York) and MPI for Social Anthropology (Halle) are hosts of his research.