

# **CONVERGING AGENDAS? DIALOGUE BETWEEN MUSLIM AND SECULAR ACTIVISTS IN TURKEY'S WOMEN'S MOVEMENT**

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## **Abstract**

In the spring of 2006 a book on the history of human rights discourse in Turkey will be published by an American professor of Turkish heritage. She, along with her Turkish colleagues from various universities in Turkey, has produced the most comprehensive English language volume on human rights discourse in Turkey. Although it will certainly be a plethora of knowledge, there is one glaring oversight in this edited volume: the authors never seriously tackle the issue of human rights in a Muslim context. In fact, when myself and an American professor brought this oversight to the authors' attention at a conference, the issue was glossed over both by the authors and the Turkish academics in the audience, as if we had brought to light a taboo subject that was better left unaddressed.

This paper seeks to directly address this oversight by focusing on the ways in which human rights, and more specifically women's human rights, have been defined by diverse activists in Turkey. In order to accomplish this, I trace the competing and complimentary narratives among the diverse non-governmental organizations (NGO) in Turkey that are concerned with women's human rights. By "narratives" I mean the ways in which distinct NGOs have chosen to define a woman's roles and rights in society, and the specific issues which these distinct NGOs have chosen to focus on. It is clear that schisms exist between religiously-oriented women's advocacy NGOs and secular feminist NGOs; and neither side denies this. For example, most secular feminists would never dare support the reversal of the headscarf ban in Turkey, whereas, this is perhaps the most important issue for Islam-rooted women's NGOs. Indeed, a candid essay published by a Turkish secular feminist in an online women's rights journal laments the tendency of "secular feminists" and "religious feminists" to compete rather than cooperate; a tendency that is not only evident in Turkey but throughout the Muslim world.

Hence, this paper seeks firstly to provide an overview of the competing and complimentary narratives of both Islam-rooted and secular women's advocacy NGOs in Turkey. Secondly, using social movement theory as my theoretical guide, I assess to what degree, if at all, this lack of solidarity between competing women's groups hampers the effectiveness of either side's advocacy; and also to what degree there is a potential for convergence between competing narratives. Thirdly, I examine whether external (international) funding, which is provided mainly to secular women's organizations, has had any effect on the ideological divisions between secular and religious NGOs in Turkey; and to what degree this challenges the American academic consensus on the benefits of external funding.

# GÜNDEMLER ÖRTÜŞÜYOR MU? TÜRKİYE KADIN HAREKETİNDE MÜSLÜMAN VE SEKÜLER AKTİVİSTLER ARASINDA DİYALOG

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## Özet

Bu tebliğ doğrudan Türkiye’de ki farklı eylemciler tarafından tanımlanmış olan, insan hakları ve özellikle kadın hakları konusunda gözden kaçırılmış olanları araştırıyor. Bunu gerçekleştirebilmek için, Türkiye’de kadın hakları üzerine çalışan değişik sivil toplum kuruluşlarının rekabetçi ve övgüye değer yollarının izini sürmektedir. “Yollar” kelimesiyle kastedilen toplum içindeki kadının rolünü ve haklarını tanımlamak için seçilen STK’lar ve bu STK’ların çalışmak üzere odaklandığı diğer önemli konulardır. Şurası açıktır ki dinî görüşün hâkim olduğu kadın hakları savunucusu STK’lar ile seküler feminist STK’lar arasında, her iki tarafın da yalanlamadığı ayrımlar vardır. Örneğin başörtüsü meselesi, merkezinde İslam düşüncesi olan kadın STK’larının en önemli konusu olduğu hâlde, seküler feministler Türkiye’de başörtüsü yasağı hakkındaki kararın bozulmasını desteklemeye cesaret edemiyorlar. Aslında, online olarak yayınlanan bir kadın hakları dergisindeki samimi bir yazıda, *seküler feministler* ve *dinî feministler* arasında yardımlaşmadan ziyade rekabet eğiliminin olmasının yası tutulmaktadır. Bu eğilim sadece Türkiye’de değil, bütün Müslüman dünyasında yaşanan rekabet eğilimine bir kanıttır.

## CONVERGING AGENDAS? DIALOGUE BETWEEN MUSLIM AND SECULAR ACTIVISTS IN TURKEY'S WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

There is a lot of talk these days about the compatibility of Islam and democracy and whether the world is headed for a clash of civilizations. Turkey has been at the center of such global discussions and as the proverbial bridge between East and West is co-sponsor with Spain in the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations initiative. Ironically, from the founding of the radically secular Turkish republic to the present, there has been consistent tension within Turkey between East and West in the form of the Islam-secular divide.

This paper provides a brief analysis of the ways in which the Islam-secular divide has been manifested within Turkey's women's rights movement. Is there a dialogue between religious and secular activists within this movement and to what degree do their agendas coincide?<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the polarization that has plagued Turkish politics more generally is also evident within the women's movement; and tensions between Muslim and secular activists are seemingly the most pronounced. In recent years, however, ideologically diverse coalitions have been established as some feminists in Turkey gradually embrace diversity within the movement and emphasize the need for solidarity among all women irrespective of overarching political ideologies such as Kemalism, socialism or Islamism.

A social movement serves as a space where varied voices collide and coalesce, and although dialogue between activists with strongly opposed viewpoints may further exacerbate pre-existing tensions, a movement may also function as a space in which tolerance is developed as new friendships are forged and previously disconnected civil society networks are connected. While an in-depth discourse analysis is beyond the scope of this paper,<sup>2</sup> I provide here a brief examination of the specific issues within Turkey's women's movement that are generally agreed upon by religious and secular activists and those issues which continue to divide these groups and thereby impede solidarity.

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<sup>1</sup> I avoid using terms such as "Islamist feminist" and "feminist" in order to sidestep all the problems associated with superimposing labels on individuals. Although many women's activists define themselves as "feminist," a surprising number of secular women I spoke with did not and preferred to avoid such labels. One activist quipped that in Turkey, and elsewhere, many people don't even know what feminism means, including some self-proclaimed feminists, therefore these labels are not useful. Moreover, some secular activists preferred not to be identified as feminists. Muslim women were similarly unwilling to regard themselves as "Islamic feminists." Hence, because I have attempted to capture the subjective identifications of activists within this movement I follow the preferences of many to avoid such labels and I will use "religious" and/or "Muslim" and "secular" here simply for the sake of distinguishing the two groups. More importantly, we all have multiple identities and subordinating all others under one threatens the other identities and often gives us a rather simplistic perspective of the complexity that surrounds identity issues. For example, in observing "women claiming Islam," Cooke (2001) talks of "speaking positions," which is helpful in capturing how women claim and articulate their beliefs from a religious or non-religious standpoint while avoiding getting too caught up in the tangled issue of identity.

<sup>2</sup> This synopsis is part of my broader dissertation project on the convergence and divergence of interests between ideologically diverse social groups within Turkey's human/women's rights movements spanning the past 3 decades. I carried out 18 interviews with activists in Istanbul, Ankara and Diyarbakir and conducted archival research of ten women's organizations' websites and publications (newsletters, brochures, informational CDs, educational materials, etc.) between December and April 2006. The organizations studied include: Kadınlar İnsan Hakları/Yeni Cozumler; Mor Cati, Ak Der, Ka Der, Baskent Kadın Platformu; İnsan Hakları Derneği, Mazlum Der, Ucan Supurge, Turk Kadınlar Birliği, Cagdas Kadın ve Genclik Vakfi.

## **A Brief History of Women's Rights in Turkey**

Ataturk's reforms brought many rights to women in Turkey during the early years of the republic; indeed, women in Turkey gained the right to vote before many European women. However, despite these advancements, the hegemonic Kemalist discourse pre-empted feminist discourse in Turkey, and a woman's role and rights in society were defined according to the all-encompassing modernist-nationalist project. Several women's organizations were founded during this time; however, these did not spawn grass roots activism and functioned as state-sanctioned institutions whose role was to display the ways in which the new republic paved the path to modernity and women's emancipation. After the early republican years, women's issues were de-emphasized (Ecevit 2005).

Women's issues re-emerged during the tumultuous 1970s; however, due to the severely polarized political environment during the 70s and 80s in Turkey, women's organizations were overwhelmingly the extensions of left-wing political parties. For example, the Association of Progressive Women, the most powerful women's organization between 1975 and 1980 with 33 branch offices and 15,000 members, primarily defined itself as an organization dedicated to solving the problems of working class women. Although its members focused on women's issues and carried out activities to improve the lot of women as a whole, their activism was rooted within the greater political struggles and collective identity of the broad left-wing movement in Turkey (Tekeli 2005). Indeed as one of the pioneers of the women's movement recalls, "women's organizations were almost like a cover up for the illegal main organizations. None of them could pursue women's politics. Women were trapped in the ideology of their groups" (Tekeli 2005:12). This changed after the 1980 coup. After the coup, organizations were closed, men were jailed, and women were left to pick up the pieces and make sense of the chaotic events. It was during this time that women experienced an awakening of sorts and began to shed the shackles of extreme left ideologies as they began to embrace "independence." As one activist recalls, "what we meant by independence those days was being independent from the socialist movement. While we were trying to define gender inequality as a political problem we were also trying to stop it from getting lost among other political problems." (Bora 2005:30). Kemalist feminist identity was also highly criticized during this time, as women began to feel that a women's movement will become more influential in society only when it breaks free from the dominance of male ideologies such as Kemalism, revolutionary Leftism, and Islamism.

Hence, the second wave of the women's movement that began after 1980 was characterized by demands for individual autonomy and was greatly influenced by Western feminist ideology. These women defined feminism as the struggle to claim their rights on their 'labor', 'bodies', and 'identities'; and their goal was to eliminate patriarchy and sexism in both the public and private spheres. These early post-coup women's organizations displayed secular feminist characteristics and have succeeded in keeping the women's issue in the national political agenda by consistently questioning patriarchy and criticizing actions that run counter to the principle of gender equality.

The most significant characteristic of the post-1990s women's movement, according to Ucan Supurge, a leading women's organization, is the diversity of the types of organizations, the wide range of their membership and the constructive and creative environment that has been created in order to solve the problems of women ([www.ucansupurge.org](http://www.ucansupurge.org)). Indeed, during the mid-1990s several Islam-rooted women's organizations were founded, resulting in an entirely new group of activists added to the mix. Although diversity within the movement is now being regarded as something positive and desirable as evidenced by the aforementioned statement made by Ucan Supurge, the struggle for common ground remains a challenge as Muslim women increasingly find their common voice and assert a position aside their secular counterparts.

## **Cacophony or Consensus? Diverse Voices within the Women's Movement**

Social movement literature suggests it is particularly difficult to form a social movement among non-homogenous groups because social movements emerge among like-minded individuals who join forces under a unifying ideology and who usually engage in intense regular contact with each other (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996:9). However, "master frames" (Snow and Benford 1992) such as "human rights" and "women's rights" provide a reservoir of very basic shared understandings of human worth and dignity (Sikkink 1998) that can serve as the building blocks for collaboration between ideologically diverse groups. Hence, social movements also often result in new social networks as individuals who were previously unacquainted learn to see themselves as similar and develop ties to one another (McAdam 1982). More importantly these interpersonal relationships between activists lead to new understandings of the social and political environment in which they are embedded.

Indeed, a social movement functions as a site of meaning production, as a great deal of intellectual and ideological work goes into the development and maintenance of a social movement (Steinberg 1998). Although master frames serve as the discursive framework that holds varied narratives together, a shared master frame does not eradicate the underlying ideological commitments of diverse actors. Master frames such as "women's rights" can encompass a wide variety of specific rights from varying philosophical and ideological foundations, and diverse activists within organizations and between organizations must continuously engage in negotiation in order to define what those rights should be and how they should be achieved. The organizations within a social movement often engage in informal information exchange, however, organizations occasionally find it strategically beneficial to pool resources by forming more formal coalitions. Such coalitions are ideal sites to explore "frame disputes" between diverse actors (Benford 1993). Too much fragmentation resulting from disagreements about specific ideas and agendas can potentially hamper a coalition's effectiveness against a powerful state that will use these internal divisions to de-legitimize the movement.

A certain degree of solidarity within a social movement, or at least the lack of extreme fragmentation, especially within a human/women's rights movement in a democratizing country, is also important for other reasons. First, as politically vocal actors, social movements attempt to set policy agendas and to shape the contours of public debate on behalf of a specified group, in this case "women." While democracies are always evolving, even in the Western world, the democratizing process (which has been occurring at a "one step forward two steps back" pace for decades in Turkey) is a critical period when the foundations of democracy are firmly set into place. Especially as a result of its European Union candidacy, Turkey's democratization, and more specifically its legal reform, is moving forward at a dizzying rate and groups that want to shape the outcome of this process must work quickly and diligently before the window of opportunity closes. The women's movement in Turkey recognized the political opportunities that opened up as a result of the EU harmonization package, and several leading NGOs set up national coalitions that were consequently extremely successful in shaping the reforms made in 2001 and 2004 to Turkey's civil and penal codes.

Secondly, because social movements potentially provide a space for bridging the gap between diverse actors, social movements in Turkey can function as sites for reconciliation between polarized groups. This is especially true with regard to human rights and women's movements, which in theory apply to everyone and are accordingly utilized by a vast array of groups. In a politically polarized environment, such as the one that exists in Turkey, the women's rights movement can provide a space for the "bridging" of disparate social groups within civil society by deepening interpersonal trust and tolerance and thereby building the type of civil society deemed necessary for a well functioning democracy (Putnam 2000). As will be subsequently

illustrated, several national coalitions have indeed brought diverse women's activists together; however, the hurdle over the Islam-secular divide continues to be a challenge.

### **Mutual Concerns, Converging Agendas**

There has been a continuing enmeshment of secular and Islamic "feminist" discourses and projects throughout the Islamic world. What has been called "Islamic feminist" thought is concerned about how to apply Islamic ideals of equality and justice to modern society, while the ideals of secular feminist thought are largely in accord with the basic principles of religion. Hence, the gap between secular feminism and Islamic feminism throughout the Muslim world is gradually diminishing as Muslim and secular women are increasingly learning to come together in common cause to address the problems that all women must face in patriarchal societies. Although one scholar notes "it is becoming increasingly difficult to pretend that gender equality and social justice are alien to Islam" (Badran 2005), due to the dearth of widespread Islamic activism on behalf of women and the often muted voices of Muslim women along with the secularism that undergirds Western feminist thought the perception persists that Islam does indeed oppress women.

Are the agendas of Muslim and secular women's activists in Turkey irreconcilable or complimentary? Is solidarity between diverse groups deemed necessary? Regarding the latter question, a recurrent theme among all the women's groups evaluated was the call for the unification of all women in Turkey regardless of background. Every woman interviewed, irrespective of ideology, ethnicity, religion, or socio-economic status, and every publication reviewed lamented that the status of women in Turkey as "second-class citizens" is what binds the fate of all women together. Accordingly, Turkey's largest and best funded women's organizations have made a concerted effort to engage in dialogue with women throughout the entire country in order to build interregional networks. Moreover, changes in Turkey resulting from the European Union process as well as developments within the international women's movement have provided Turkish women's organizations with the impetus to forge even deeper solidarity networks.

All women within the movement, irrespective of ideological standpoint- from Kemalists to anarchists to Muslims- regard physical and emotional violence to women as unacceptable and as the most serious problems facing women today. Issues such as rape, domestic violence and honor killings are regarded as particularly unsettling and in dire need of immediate remedies. Due to Turkey's abysmal shortage of women's shelters throughout the country, all activists have called on the Turkish government to allocate funds for the construction of women's shelters.

Moreover, all activists demand their right to be active and influential in the public sphere. In the words of one activist, "academicians, writers, religious women, etc.- we all believe that exclusion of women from the public sphere is a form of violence. So despite different priorities this common belief brings us together."<sup>3</sup> One secular organization, KaDer, has been particularly successful in joining together women political candidates under the goal of increasing women's participation in local, regional and national elections and the number of women in decision-making positions more generally. Women representatives from all political parties, ranging from the left to the right, train together "as women not as politicians"<sup>4</sup> in order to advance their shared mission to improve women's status.

Turkey's candidacy to the European Union and the necessary reforms that accompany this have also provided an opportunity for diverse women to join forces in order to advance these shared

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with leader of Turkish Human Rights Association on April 7, 2006 in Ankara, Turkey.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Ka Der leader on April 3, 2006 in Ankara, Turkey.

goals and thereby shape Turkey's democratizing system. Since 2000 the Turkish government has undertaken major legal reforms and women's groups collaborated on a campaign to change the civil code, which was accepted by the Turkish Grand National Assembly in November 2001. Shortly after this coalition, Women for Women's Human Rights/New Ways spearheaded another nationwide coalition called the Campaign for the Reform of the Turkish Penal Code from a Gender Perspective. The campaign lasted from 2002 to 2004 and as a result of this coalition the new Turkish penal code includes more than thirty amendments recommended by the women's coalition (Turkish Civil and Penal 2005). Legal definitions regarding patriarchal constructs of chastity, morality, public customs and so on were changed as a result of the coalition's recommendations, and events such as sexual harassment in the workplace and marital rape were criminalized.

The national coalitions for the civil and penal code reforms were not the only joint efforts of women. Indeed, in much the same way as the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides a useful focal point for human rights activists from varied backgrounds to converge, the CEDAW (Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women) has functioned as a common framework for diverse women's activists. Turkish activists have attended global women's conferences and have imported ideas and strategies to the Turkish context. However, not only have these international meetings provided a venue for collaboration and for the exchange of ideas among women from many countries, they have also provided both a common discursive framework and the impetus for women within Turkey to come together in order to present a united front at these international meetings.

Indeed, CEDAW has had a particularly unifying effect on Turkey's women's movement. Turkey signed CEDAW in 1985, and ratified the optional protocol in the year 2000, and the state submits official reports regarding women's issues to the CEDAW committee. Women's groups in Turkey, dissatisfied with these official reports, have united in order to construct "shadow reports" as an alternative to the official reports. Flying Broom led a national coalition of women's organizations to form the CEDAW Civil Society Forum, which worked diligently to prepare a shadow report to present to the UN CEDAW committee at the international meeting held in New York City on January 15-23, 2005. For two years this coalition worked to determine the contents of the report and in April 2003 453 women representing a wide array of women's groups throughout the country gathered in Ankara to make the final decisions concerning the report.

Flying Broom prides itself on its ability to bring together ideologically diverse women from all regions of the country during the efforts to write the shadow report, as part of its founding mission was to build solidarity and cooperation between women's groups by establishing a communication network between women's civil society organizations in Turkey. As secretariat of the coalition, Flying Broom established working groups for the different topics of interests to be covered in the shadow report and within each of these working groups anywhere from 12 to 60 different women's organizations were represented.<sup>5</sup> When asked about divisions within the coalition, one Flying Broom leader admitted "Islamists, lesbians, Kurdish, socialists- over the past there has been more of an effort at unification. Muslim women from Baskent Kadın Platformu were even with us in New York. Of course, some women from other organizations asked, 'Why are they here?' so there was some tension..."<sup>6</sup> Although the secular activists interviewed were less eager to point to the tension between Muslim and secular activists and only revealed the existence of discord when specifically asked, none denied the existence of tension when asked and only one secular activist was overtly unreceptive to the presence of Muslim activists within the coalition.

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<sup>5</sup> See "Participatory Organizations to the CEDAW NGO Forum" in Flying Broom's special English edition, *Flying News*, 3: January 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Flying Broom leader on April 5, 2006, in Ankara, Turkey.

The hesitance among longtime activists, most of whom are non-religious, to embrace the participation of Muslim activists is based on their view that Muslim women's organizations are only concerned with the headscarf ban, which Muslim women claim exposes them to gender discrimination. However, these organizations were founded before the widespread clashes over the headscarf ban during the late 1990s as a result of interest in and exposure to the more general women's issues that were being discussed internationally and within Turkey's own women's movement. For example, Capital City's Women's Platform was founded as a direct result of the dialogue created after the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women, and its members have participated in the CEDAW and Habitat II international meetings (Diken 2005). Organizations such as Capital City, Women's Rainbow Platform, and Ak Der have been from their inception concerned with other issues such as violence against women, although it is true that they are generally more vocal about the headscarf ban. For example, Capital City's Women's Platform will begin work on a project to provide assistance and education to the mothers of handicapped children, and it roots its activism not only in Islam but also in the need in Turkey to build democracy based on human rights.

Similarly, AkDer has recently worked to change articles within the penal code concerning sexual crimes, particularly rape, and it has prepared reports pertaining to honor killings as well. One of its leaders plans to become involved in Mor Cati's continuing development and operation of women's shelters throughout Turkey. Ak Der, like Capital City's Women's Platform, places its activism within the larger project of building a society based on the rule of law and human rights, albeit in a way that does not counter the religious obligations of its members. In actuality, then, the agendas of Muslim and secular women's organizations are overall quite compatible, and these diverse activists have come to agreement on many of the issues of import within the aforementioned coalitions. However, there are some divisive issues and different prioritizations among these two groups.

### **Dissonance and Divergent Priorities**

As expected, there were some divergent views among secular and religious activists within the two national coalition to address the civil and penal codes from a gendered perspective. For example, Muslim women tended to side with Prime Minister Erdogan on the issue of adultery when he argued that adultery should be considered a crime punishable under state law. This issue was widely followed in Turkish and even international media as accusations that Turkey's secular state was under threat from Islamic radicalism flooded airwaves and filled newspapers. Most secular activists strongly disagreed with Erdogan's opinion, particularly Women for Women's Human Rights, which was leading the coalition. Consequently, as the coalition was overwhelmingly guided by secular activists, the coalition's recommendation was that adultery not be regarded as a crime (Turkish Civil and Penal 2005:38). Other sensitive issue areas included in the coalition's recommendations were the recommendation to eliminate discrimination based on sexual orientation and the statement concerning violations of young women's human rights by penalizing the consensual sexual relations of young people.<sup>7</sup>

One broad issue of concern is women's economic independence. Several articles in the civil code regarding inheritance, rights of women deserted by their husbands, and damages in divorce were addressed and reformed as per the national coalition's recommendations. Economic independence has been top priority of all activists beyond the scope of these national coalitions, and most women's NGOs offer short-term and long-term solutions to ameliorate this problem. However, there is one solution to freeing women from violent situations that has caused great rifts between secular and religious women. While both secular women and religious women tend to emphasize

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with WWHR/New Ways program officer on November 28, 2005 in Istanbul, Turkey.



that new shelters in Turkey and more opportunities for women's economic independence from their families are the primary solutions to domestic violence, religious women also regard the lifting of Turkey's controversial headscarf ban<sup>8</sup> as one way that violence against women can be decreased. In the words of one headscarved activist, "we consider many problems to spring from the headscarf ban, which keeps our girls out of school and our women with fewer choices for employment. If a woman cannot get an education or go to work she cannot exercise other freedoms and she will be under the total control of her husband because she cannot work."<sup>9</sup>

Hence, many religious activists, like their secular counterparts, link the solution to domestic violence to economic independence; however, religious activists in turn link the issue of economic independence to the headscarf ban. Not surprisingly, Muslim women's organizations have been founded and are led by women who have been expelled from university, who have lost their job, or have faced other discrimination as a result of their headscarf.

Muslim women have unfortunately become slaves to the headscarf issue, as they are the only ones who will address the problem. Moreover, the broader republican and secular debates within the country have become even more intense since the AKP took power after the 2002 elections, as secular state elites and the secular media work diligently to discredit the AKP and to question whether Muslims' are sincerely dedicated to democracy. This has caused many to claim that the headscarf ban is the only women's problem that concerns Muslims. For example, one secular activist claims, "We should not confuse the issue of women's rights with ideologies about scarves and if they try to bring this issue to the top of the agenda of this movement I disagree with this. I do not support it. There are more dire issues. There are honor killings, millions of women in Turkey can't read, etc."<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, the headscarf issue sparked debate and caused tension within the CEDAW Civil Society Forum according to members. Only two issues were deliberately excluded from the coalition's shadow report to the CEDAW committee in New York: the headscarf issue and the special needs of Kurdish women. The reason cited to me by secular activists interviewed was that violence and economic independence are top priority issues whereas the headscarf issue is not an urgent problem. Due to the exclusion of the headscarf ban in the platform's shadow report, a headscarved activist independently lobbied officials at the United Nations. After this lobbying effort the UN committee wrote in the 2005 recommendation to the Turkish government that they want to know the exact number of women unable to attend school because of the headscarf ban. Despite the exclusion of this issue in the shadow report and the tension that consequently ensued, Dr. Hidayet Tuksal, theologian and co-founder of Capital City's Women's Platform and a highly respected women's activists among both secular and religious women claimed that "the impact of ideological differences that made solidarity among women difficult and sometimes impossible was felt at this forum too, but this impact was not strong enough to hinder the dialogue and empathy among us" (Flying News: p.23).

Nevertheless, the women of Capital City regarded this exclusion as a wake-up call to Muslim women, and the general secretary reported the following in its bulletin regarding the CEDAW Civil Society Forum held in Ankara.

"The most important thing we determined was this: in our country, the women who made statements and determined the political agenda pertaining to women's problem were those who belong to the represented NGOs, which were in general secular. We were happy to learn many

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<sup>8</sup> It is illegal for a woman to wear a headscarf in a public building in Turkey, which has resulted in the expulsion of thousands of women from universities and from their jobs.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Ak Der leader on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2006 in Istanbul, Turkey.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Turkish Women's Union leader on April 5, 2006 in Ankara, Turkey.

things from them but in the points expressed concerning our own problems we were experiencing difficulties from a lack of empathy (Kadin Bulusmasi 2005:3).

She implored religious women in Turkey to build solidarity among Muslim women so that religious women in Turkey, like their secular counterparts, can construct their own agenda while following the broader agenda of both the global women's movement and Turkey's agenda in order for their concerns to be incorporated into the state's policy agenda.

Clearly, there are strong disagreements about whether the headscarf issue should be either a top priority or regarded as discrimination within the women's agenda. In addition, the mere presence of the headscarf itself has at times stood as an obstacle to interpersonal communication between activists. For example, one headscarved lawyer explained her experience when she participated in a joint meeting, "Before we even said anything, they did not want us to join-only because of the headscarf. The problem was not what we had to say- our suggestions were not so different from the others... unfortunately, for some people the outside matters more... but once we get to know each other as individuals we become friends and colleagues."<sup>11</sup>

Hence, although religious and secular women have collaborated on certain projects, one headscarved activist lamented that headscarved women in the movement sometimes felt like "outsiders." However she explained that, "There is one positive side to our cooperation- they're accepting me and our members because they know us and they know we're dedicated to improving women's situations. But although they accept us because they know us personally, they still continue to think negatively about other headscarved women on the street. Also, through our cooperation at least now they do see that headscarved women are not necessarily from the lower class. They see that we're doctors, lawyers, teachers- so this is positive too."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the Muslim activists within the movement represent the growing number of professional and intellectual religious women in Turkey who are challenging discriminatory interpretations of Islam; nevertheless, they are perceived as exceptions among Muslim women and their headscarf stands as a symbol of Islamic oppression in the eyes of many secular feminists.

Although many secular activists believe that there are more dire issues confronting women in Turkey other than the headscarf ban, it must be noted that most secular activists do not regard Turkey's gender discrimination as rooted in Islam. For example, one secular activist sums up the general sentiments of most secular activists quite nicely, "I do not believe our gender discrimination comes from Islam. It comes from patriarchy and this is everywhere. Turkey and the Muslim world are not unique in this regard."<sup>13</sup> Most secular publications are careful not to pinpoint Islam as the root of women's problems and instead specify, "traditional customs" and "patriarchal society" as the culprits, although there are undertones of blame and sometimes there are explicit displays of surprise when Muslims address women's issues. For example, in a secular organization's bulletin, they issued special thanks to three members of the Islam-rooted Justice and Development Party for advancing the women's agenda "in spite of the fact that they come from a conservative background with traditional roles for women" (Flying News: p.20).

Part of the reason women's secular activists feel uneasy around headscarved activists is because many perceive them to be representatives of radical Islam, which is deemed to be oppressive to women. However, it should be made clear that many secular activists are simply wary of overarching ideologies more generally, and consequently, Muslim women are not the only ones viewed as falling under the trap of a "male ideology." Broader discourses concerning anarchism, leftism, Kemalism and Kurdish nationalism are also viewed with suspicion. For example, <sup>14</sup>one

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Ak Der leader on April 10, 2006 in Istanbul, Turkey

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Capital City's Women's Platform leader on April 7, 2006 in Ankara, Turkey.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Ka Der leader on March 29, 2006 in Istanbul, Turkey.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Turkish Human Rights Association leader on March 29, 2006 in Istanbul, Turkey.

activist notes her disagreement with leftists, “usually leftist women have an agenda of achieving socialism first as an avenue for making women free but we think women should be independent first.” Indeed, women’s activists are also attempting to free the movement from the grip of the broader discourse of Turkey’s Europeanization process, as politicians and others regard women’s issues merely as a strategy to achieve EU membership.

### **The Impact of Turkey’s Road to the EU**

As stated earlier, the women’s movement had to struggle to free itself from the binds of the extreme left during the early 1980s; hence, many women continue to disapprove of broader ideologies that may threaten to swallow the movement. The only “ism” allowed is feminism, and not all activists even adhere to this ideology. One long-time activists asks whether an independent women’s movement is ever possible, particularly recently with possible EU membership.

Women in civil society are now divided into the “no to EU” camp, which includes “Kemalist nationalists” and women in small leftist groups- “these women position themselves on a Kemalist line and even thought they do not express it openly, oppose the weakening of the national state. This opposition is done within a mode of speech that postpones the question of ‘well what will happen to gender equality issue?’ and even secondarizes it. Just like in ‘the good old days’ women are willing to be soldiers of the great causes. (Bora 2005:30).

The other camp is the pro-EU group, which is varied and includes groups from the left to the right (including the Islam-rooted AKP government), but which in spite of vast differences share in the primacy they accord to women’s issues (at least rhetorically) within their pro-EU stance.

What is interesting within this pro-EU camp is that even some secular women are using Islam as a reason for Turkey’s membership into the European Union. For example, the president of the Women’s Fund-Women’s Entrepreneurs Association claims the EU’s recognition of Turkey as a candidate country “signifies that Islam can coexist with pluralist democracy and the rule of man-made law” (Boyner 2005:33). Similarly, chairwoman of the Women’s Initiative for Turkey in the EU said: “With increased migration and a growing Muslim population women’s issues in Europe face the challenge of becoming polarized into different spheres. It is here that Turkish women, as part of the European Union can play an important role.... in few Muslim societies have women’s rights been able to move beyond a means of achieving an agenda and have been recognized as an end in itself for the sake of itself. And clearly Turkey is one of them.” (Yalcindag 2005: 34). Indeed, many secular activists mentioned their hope that positive developments in Turkey can stand as an example to other Muslim countries. In contrast, perhaps because of the general suspicion held by many Muslims toward the EU, especially after the European Court of Human Rights’ recent decision in the Leyla Sahin case, which upholds Turkey’s headscarf ban, religious activists do not tend to emphasize the importance of the EU for women’s rights. In their view, the European Court of Human Rights has exacerbated hostility and bolstered the laws that result in their discrimination.

Overall, Turkey’s EU candidacy has had various effects on the women’s movement and more specifically on the relationship between Muslim and secular activists. The high degree of Islamophobia in Europe has certainly not encouraged Turkey’s “radical secularists” to reconcile their differences with Islamists, nor has it encouraged Islamic radicals to embrace Western conceptualizations of democracy and human rights. The self-proclaimed secular feminists who make up the majority of activists within the women’s movement are leery of religious voices in the public sphere and concerned that the integrity of the secular state is under threat; and tensions are perpetuated due to developments in EU countries such as the headscarf ban in France as well as the European Court of Human Rights decision to uphold Turkey’s headscarf ban in the Leyla Sahin case.

Nevertheless, Turkey's candidacy and more specifically the vast legal reform undertaken to meet the Copenhagen criteria have provided women in Turkey with a momentous political opportunity to advance their goals. Studies concerning coalition work within social movements suggest that although coalitions are notoriously difficult to develop and sustain, diverse groups within a movement will pool resources and form formal coalitions when environmental conditions provide a serious threat or a new opportunity for a significant victory (Staggenbourg 1986; Zald and McCarthy 1980). Turkey's EU candidacy greatly increased the likelihood of victory in the area of legal reform and consequently, two national coalitions were indeed developed. Similarly, CEDAW international meetings have had the same unifying effect.

Despite the antagonisms between activists with divergent opinions that surfaced during these coalitions, all the activists interviewed maintained that further efforts at widespread solidarity should and will be sought. New professional relationships have developed and disparate social networks have intersected as a direct result of these coalitions; hence, in this regard, the EU process has provided favorable conditions for the bridging of previously disconnected civil society networks. Moreover, the Muslim activists that participated in these coalitions have come to realize their need to both enhance their efforts at mobilizing Muslim women and to further professionalize their organizations if they wish to achieve their distinct goals, and secular activists are gradually beginning to become more aware of the discrimination that headscarved women experience. However, an increased presence of Muslim women within the movement and/or further collaborative meetings and campaigns between diverse activists will not necessarily lead to enhanced reconciliation. There is always the possibility that increased dialogue will lead to deep animosity rather than conciliation.

## **Conclusion**

For decades secular women have directed the women's movement in Turkey. However, over the past decade, Muslim women have been increasingly finding their common voice and are attempting to assert a position aside their secular counterparts. As in all social movements, there are some issues which connect diverse activists and others which thwart unity. For example, irrespective of ideological standpoint, everyone from Kemalists to anarchists to Muslims regards physical and emotional violence to women as unacceptable and as the most serious problems facing women today. Moreover, all women, including religious activists, demand their right to be active and influential in the public sphere. A recurrent theme among all the women's groups evaluated is the need for solidarity among all women. All women interviewed, irrespective of ideology, ethnicity, religion, or socio-economic status, lamented that the status of women in Turkey as "second-class citizens" is what binds their fate together; however, not one denied that there are some "prejudices" within the movement which sometimes make it difficult to see eye to eye and many admitted that they must continue to work more diligently to eradicate such prejudices.

The existing divisions within the movement are certainly not only between secular and religious activists and the grouping of Kemalist, liberal, socialist, anarchist, and Kurdish activists under the umbrella term of "secular" should in no way imply that divisions do not exist between these secular activists as well. In fact, in some ways Muslim and secular activists who root their activism with the greater project of democracy more closely resemble each other when compared to self-proclaimed anarchist and socialist feminists. Nevertheless, the religious-secular divide appears to be the most pronounced gap within the movement.

The disagreements and uneasiness between secular and religious activists stem largely from misunderstandings about Islam and more specifically from differing opinions about the legal ramifications surrounding Turkey's headscarf ban as well as personal intolerance toward those

who wear the headscarf because they are not perceived to be modern or independent women.<sup>15</sup> Other issues of contention have included the issue of adultery, sexual relations among youth, and homosexual rights and antidiscrimination measures for homosexuals, with religious women expectedly taking a much more conservative stance on these issues.

Religious activists in Turkey root their dedication to resolving women's problems within their religious duty and within their personal experiences with gender discrimination due to "misinterpretations" of sacred texts<sup>16</sup> and a patriarchal society. While they advocate a role for women in the public sphere, they also emphasize, to a greater degree than their secular counterparts, the importance of their role as mother and the centrality of family life in society. With regard to their dedication to end violence and gender discrimination and to improve women's healthcare, emotional well-being, literacy and family life, religious and secular activists are overall quite similar; and it is within the smaller and more specific issues where deep contentions may arise. Indeed, there has been a continuing enmeshment of secular and Islamic "feminist" discourses and projects throughout the Islamic world, and hopefully this will be a continuing trend in Turkey and elsewhere.

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<sup>15</sup> See Nilufer Gole's *Forbidden Modern* 1996.

<sup>16</sup> See Hidayet Tuksal, PhD. *The Traces of Misogynist Discourse in the Islamic Tradition*

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