

V. International Gender Workshop

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Women in public spaces: When personal becomes political

Mobilization of women's groups: Challenges and setbacks

Why is it important to have women's groups in public space? Should there be women only spaces or not? What is the experience that can be shared?

presentation topic:

Mobilization of women in Turkey for their own agenda:
Basic issues of struggle and campaigns

abstract:

I am hoping to share some of the campaign experiences of feminists in Turkey, along with brief background information regarding women's situation and feminist movement in Turkey. Mainly, I will be referring to streets and the collective spaces we create as public spaces. And my aim will be indicating the importance of the ways of organization, working and relating as much as the political outcome of a campaign.



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Introduction

Within the scope of this presentation, I will focus on some campaigns which are organized by feminists in Turkey that are directly about presence of women in public space. My aim is to demonstrate some of the ways through which we intervene to male-dominant public spaces, while at the same time breaking the division between private space and public space by raising our voice in public, both as a group and individually, for issues that are considered to be a 'private' matter by the society in general.

The examples and experience I want to share here spread over a time period of almost 30 years and physically the main scene of events, politics is specifically streets, parks and public transportation. I will start with the campaign against battering and continue with purple needle against harassment, social media campaign against manspreading, campaign for a feminist candidate at local elections in 2009, the presence of feminists in Gezi park and finally feminist night march as examples of feminist interventions to public space. So that, it will be clear why it is important for us as women to get organized among ourselves, why it is important to insist on being out on the streets and not within defined, closed spaces.

When doing these, I will also provide a general view about the political environment in Turkey, as it has considerable impact on setting the limits and determining the priorities of our own agenda. By doing that, I aim to define the challenges we face whatever our sphere of existence is.

Lastly, I want to note that my presentation will mainly be based on the material and thoughts produced by feminists from İstanbul Feminist Collective and Socialist Feminist Collective at the meetings, discussions and through press releases, declarations.

A new beginning in the history of feminism in Turkey: Campaign against battering

Although neither the history of women's struggle nor feminist movement started with it, I chose to start with this particular campaign for a couple of good reasons. In 1987, feminists organized a historical meeting. When a pregnant woman who had been beaten by her husband opened a divorce case, the judge dismissed the case referring to a Turkish proverb saying, "One shouldn't leave a woman either without giving birth or being beaten". Upon this remark, feminists organized a campaign against battering and they realized the first massive women only march in İstanbul. This was also the first big street demonstration after the 1980 military coup. Also, the first meeting that a trans woman made a speech on the platform.

This campaign can be considered as an effective mobilization, firstly because it was about a common concern known to all of us, whatever our differences may be, without making any kind of division between women, such as saviors and those in need to be saved. Secondly, it was about male violence, which was, and though lesser still is, considered to be a matter between two people within a household.

So, the campaign against battering came up as sort of a challenge towards the general definition of public sphere, which leaves the household outside of it in the private sphere, making male violence untouchable as a 'private' and/or 'family matter'. This way, it undermined the conceptions regarding what is accepted to be told and showed in public and what is not, by which group. What is personal was declared as a political matter. Women declared themselves as the subject of their own struggle, not against the state only but directly against men that they live with who used the privilege of systematic power relations within the society.

Subsequent campaigns against harassment in 1990s and 2000s

Purple needle

During '80s, the most important thing was to make women's voice heard in the public space. The campaigns focused on male violence and sexual harassment. Another historical campaign of feminist movement is purple needle against harassment. It was actually the continuation of whether it is home, workplace or street "our bodies belong to us, stop sexual harassment" campaign in the streets. A group of women came together to express their demand to walk freely in the streets day or night without being alert, use public transportation without being nervous, free from the gaze or touch of men.¹

These women campaigned telling that perpetrators of sexual harassment are not 'some' men who are not educated enough, but it is the patriarchy itself. They called all women for not staying silent, not letting their living spaces narrowed down by men. They went out to streets, squares, bazaars, ferries, bars&taverns in backstreets -which supposedly belonged to men- and everywhere to talk outloud about sexual harassment while presenting the purple needles for women to use against perpetrators of harassment.

They prepared postcards some of which saying "my body, take your hands off", "what i wear is not an invitation", "the shame does not belong to me". It was also the first time, molesting was replaced by sexual harassment as a concept. Purple needle was chosen not for use necessarily but mainly as a symbol indicating that we can defend ourselves, we will not stay silent, we will expose.²

With this very symbolic protest overall is still very important for feminists to expose sexual harassment and to reclaim the public space. Purple needle is a very special and creative symbol of feminist struggle. Thanks to purple needle, that it made our voice better heard when we say: Streets does not belong to men, harassers are not crazy, uneducated but just men, sexual harassment is male violence, our bodies belong to us. Sexual harassment still exist everywhere, yet the mobilization realized via purple needle campaign affected the process of remarkable regulations in the Civil Code. The rise of women in the streets enabled feminists to make some successful political interventions at the same period of time, in 1990s in the legal and institutional structure as well.³

¹ <http://morigine.blogspot.com.tr/>

² <http://bianet.org/biamag/kadin/110595-mor-igne-kampanyasi-19-yasinda>

³ During '90s, apart from the struggle against male violence towards women, founding NGOs and dealing with the state in order to transform the legal and institutional structure have also become significant. Thanks to the political interventions of feminists, remarkable changes have been achieved both in the Civil and the Penal Code. In 1990, there was a campaign about

Purple needles were out in the streets in 1989 for the first time. In 2008 it was appropriated as a campaign tool again by another generation of feminists, when during the new year celebrations at Taksim square a woman was sexually harassed in front of television cameras and the police. Feminists also opposed media coverage of the incident as if a bunch of drunk rambler was responsible from it. In reaction, feminists organized street actions every friday, distributed purple needles and kept claiming the nights and the streets.⁴

Following these two campaigns feminists founded Mor Çatı (Purple Roof) Women's Shelter in 1990 in Istanbul, which is still a unique independent shelter for women who are subject to a form of male violence and seek support.

“Get your legs together, don't invade my space, don't harass me!”

In 2014, as we were talking about our experiences in metro buses and buses while traveling within the city, we realized that we were tired of trying to squeeze ourselves into small spaces left from men. We thought, when men ignore women within a public space and use as much of it as they can as if it belongs all to them is related to their will to power or kind of a demonstration. So, the idea for a social media campaign was born to reclaim our space. The stickers we prepared and shared via twitter and facebook took so much attention and appropriated so widely by so many women that it turned into a campaign almost spontaneously.

With this campaign women named their silent disturbance at public transportation rightly as harassment. And also, we found an easier way to express our disturbance as we may hold back from warning men about the way they sit sometimes. Now, we could just put the sticker without needing a word, which says outright that it is harassment and invasion of space.

The campaign gained extreme visibility and popularity in the media and among men as well as women. Everybody heard about it and it had a positive impact. This visibility also encouraged more women to raise their voices when they are harassed or witnessed such a thing.⁵ It was easy to participate in it and share the experience wherever the person is.

Turkish Penal Code (TCK, article no: 438), which reduces the punishment for men in cases of raping a sex worker/prostitute. This article was removed. Another article changed was that a woman should ask for her husband's permission for paid work. Adultery was legally forbidden for both sexes and it was changed for men in 1996, for women in 1998. A woman can use her own last name -besides her husband's- when she gets married with the change made in 1997 (very recently the law is renewed and women can use their father's surname only if they wish so). In 2001, women's organizations engaged in the dramatic changes in the Civil Code such as abolishment of the definition “head of the household is the husband”, achievement of equal rights within marriage and after divorce. In 2004, another important campaign was against the article telling that no punishment is given to the rapist if he marries the woman. This article was removed, as well. (from the presentation “Fighting Against Patriarchy in Turkey” of Istanbul Feminist Collective Begüm Acar, Ayşegül Taşıtman and Deniz Ulusoy at Feminizm in London Conference, 2014).

⁴ <http://www.sosyalistfeministkolektif.org/feminizm/tarihimizden/kampanyalara/761-bedenimiz-bizimdir-tacize-kars-mor-igne-2008-ocak-mart.html>

⁵ <http://bianet.org/english/women/155006-stop-spreading-your-legs-don-t-occupy-my-space>

Campaign for a feminist candidate at local elections⁶

Before the local elections in 2009, feminists started to talk about what can be done in the election process, they organized forums to discuss entering the local elections with a feminist candidate in Beyoglu-Istanbul, where most feminist organizations are. They formed “feminist collective for elections” to run a campaign. Women decided that feminist candidate is a good idea for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it was significant to put forward feminism as an independent ideology, through which a whole set of policies can be designed, and women as independent political subjects of feminist struggle as equal as other political actors. And elections could provide a suitable environment for visibility of feminism. Moreover, local politics was very attractive as they affect women’s lives directly. Local governance is closely related to what women live in the ‘private’ as well as public spaces. The way water, electricity, heating is used and the extent to which they are accessible most basically is purely political as much as sexual harassment and male violence in the streets and at home.

The campaign provided women the space to dream about what kind of change they want regarding their living spaces. The campaign focused mainly on urbanization and policies about the city, women’s access to safe shelters, child and elderly care, collectivization of carework and house work, social centers that are designed for women’s needs and demands as well as men’s.

I want to point out two characteristics of the campaign process which i consider more important among others. One of them is that, the streets, bazaars were used a lot, which we wanted to transform from the design of the pavements to the sexist ads and male dominance hiding women’s labor and voice. Yet, still there is diversity and freedom and it’s an action space. It’s a space full of chances to build and strengthen women’s solidarity by doing something collectively, hearing and understanding each other’s stories. The other one is, not only the candidate but the whole campaign was feminist. The whole process was open to participation, support and criticism of all women who were willing to do so. Everything was decided and done collectively, including forming a budget, without taking conventional ways of politics as a model.

Overall, with this campaign, for the first time feminists in İstanbul came up with a plan for a comprehensive transformation for the city they live in. It was also the first time that the movement made such an explicit connection between neoliberal policies regarding women with the living spaces.

Feminist interventions at days of Gezi uprising

⁶<http://sosyalistfeministkolektif.org/feminizm/tarihimizden/kampanyalara/754-2009-yerel-secimler-bey-oglu-na-feminist-soezuemuez-var.html>

<http://sosyalistfeministkolektif.org/feminizm/tarihimizden/758-neler-yapt-k-neler-yapabilirdik.html>

Although this is a different category as Gezi was already a collectively created alternative space, I still want to emphasize how the presence of feminists within the park had an effect on the use of language, the slogans and the division of labour.

Feminists were deeply involved in summer 2013's Gezi Park resistance which started with protests mobilized mainly by the illegal urban gentrification in İstanbul, yet changed form and became more vacally anti-government rebellion as a result of heavy police violence. As for us, we took the streets against the patriarchal system trying to confine women to families, to houses and public space to men; against interventions of JDP on how and with whom we live with, how many children we have, our abortion right, what we wear and how we laugh.⁷ During Gezi resistance, feminists run a feminist camp and held women's forums throughout the city. The demonstration was organized by some groups against the overall transformation of Beyoğlu where most of the feminist and LGBTI organizations also reside. The composition of the protesters in Gezi uprising was strikingly broad and half of the protesters were women.

Feminists played a significant role in the uprising trying to transform the sexist approach some groups had. We immediately spread the slogan "Resist persistence, not with swearword" and changed the sexist, phobic tone -against lgbt people and also prostitutes- of resistance.⁸

We built a "feminists' tent" after the occupation of the park as all other groups and individuals did, made workshops there.

We took the streets primarily in reaction against the police violence. It was not only against reclaiming the city but also against the results of the authoritarian, misogynist and homophobic, divisive regime of JDP (Justice and Development Party). The women forums started with the call of İstanbul Feminist Collective spread to different parts of the city and became local platforms where women discussed the ways of struggling against sexism. One of the women forums in Kadıköy continues meeting every week since then.

Besides, it was important that we made our demonstrations as women, despite the divisive discourses against the resistance and women in resistance over nationalism and religion. One example is the demonstration against male violence against women after headscarved women was targeted.

⁷<http://www.sosyalistfeministkolektif.org/english/543-we-are-in-the-streets-for-a-life-without-harassment.html>

⁸ "While you say "son of a bitch" to Tayyip; think about the sex workers -and also all the woman, which are attacked with the very same word 'bitch'-who are resisting shoulder to shoulder with you. How would you feel in their/our case? While you call the police, the government and Tayyip "faggots", how you push LGBT resisters out of the squares. While you chant you are somebody's "soldiers", how you curdle the blood of an entire generation still living with the memories of a torturous military coup, of peace activists and conscientious objectors to mandatory military service. As feminists, we are shouting at the top of our voices ; we raise our voice against sexism, police violence and government. Resist persisting, not swearing!" (<http://www.sosyalistfeministkolektif.org/english/535-resist-persisting-not-swearing.html>).

It is for sure that Gezi process has a lot to tell about, what I mentioned here is limited to the swearword and harassment dimensions of male violence against women, which regressed due to feminists' intervention.

Feminist night march

The last example I want to mention is the feminist night marches that are realized every year on march 8 with the call of İstanbul Feminist Collective to all. Another demonstration for march 8 takes place at the weekend of that week during the day time, with the participation of political parties, unions and professional organizations all getting in line with their own flags and symbols. What makes feminist night march different and worth to mention here is that it is feminist. The only colour is purple and the only symbol we use is femina, no other sign indicating a specific group or political party is used, as we want to be together as women for our common concerns, to shout our rage, spread our words, not for visibility of one group over another. We also organize feminist parties after the march for the last years.

The first feminist night march was in 2003, through Taksim square to İstiklal street. The theme of the march then was war and invasion, "Hitler, Mussolini, Sharon, Milosevic, Bush, Saddam... All men, is it a coincident?" wrote on the banner. In the following years the themes carried on the banners focused on feminicide, male violence and state protection in 2004; disobedience to male system in 2005; "feminist rebellion" in 2006; feminist struggle against capitalism, militarism, nationalism and patriarchy in 2008 and 2009. In 2010, along with the campaign on women's murders the we said "feminist rebellion, we revolt against feminicide". In 2012 we had family policies of JDP on our agenda, with which identified women only within the family as the child bearer, caregiver, cook etc. without touching any of the issues women suffer from, such as male violence, poverty, unemployment as an individual women. And the following years' agenda also demonstrated reactions to the governments extremely misogynist policies and women's appropriation of their lives, bodies and decisions, from a loud laugh in the public, wearing a mini skirt, being out at night, to having sex, defending the right to abortion, divorce, saying "No".

The feminist night march that started with approximately 100 women in 2003 reached to nearly 10 thousand women in 2013. It is a very symbolic space for feminists in İstanbul for struggling against male violence and patriarchy, showing a collective will to appropriate our lives . It is like a celebration of our feminist struggle for us at the heart of İstanbul. The purpose of the night walk is best illustrated with the slogan "we are not leaving the nights, the streets, or the squares!".

Challenges and conclusion

As you might have noticed from what we wrote on our banners on feminist night marches and other material you read or hear, political environment in Turkey is not friendly to any of the dissident voices. Moreover, the continuation of war condition and constant threat of state terror leaves us in a vulnerable and at times hopeless situation, because it blocks and smashes every other political issue. Neoliberal and conservative policies of JDP party has already done

great damage to women by the discourse of fitrat⁹ which naturalizes gender roles, by family strengthening policies -namely making it difficult to divorce, glorification of motherhood, marginalization of women who do not fit in the chaste, moral women definition of itself.¹⁰ Also employment policies for women make it impossible for us to work at a job that will earn us a decent living, which in turn feeds material inequalities between women and men as a source of male violence.

So, both transforming state institutions and fighting for it is harder in the existing environment. Yet, we will keep finding ways for our word to be in the streets, exposing male violence and the state as its supporter, as long as there are not enough women's shelters, laws look for women's consent in cases of rape and release "unjust provocation" verdicts for men who are women murderers, we lack supportive mechanisms when we want to work or divorce.

Whether at home or in the streets, oppression of women by violence preserves the current system of relations. The higher the public visibility of women's mobilization for feminist causes the stronger we become in our private spheres, be it home, school, union or workplace.

And, to me, we can only be strong as long as we can overcome the divisive discourses and practices by the state and within the society..

⁹ An Arabic word with Islamic roots which describes the 'pure' and 'natural' human disposition.

¹⁰ <http://www.sosyalistfeministkolektif.org/english/919-erdogan-is-right-we-do-not-care-about-f-trat.html>