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Turkey

Fighting for Women's Rights in Turkey

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The attempted rape, murder, and burning of 20-year-old university student Ȧzgecan Aslan on Feb. 11th touched a nerve in a society where male-on-female violence has been a chronic problem. Massive demonstrations throughout Turkey followed soon after, but what will it take to stem the surge in femicide over the last decade or so? Mattia Gallo interviewed Turkish socialist feminist Selin Cagatay about the background to the situation.

Mattia Gallo: Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan said that women are not equal to men. His public statement is only one piece of a policy pursued by his party of conservative neo – liberalism, a policy that increases precarity and poverty for men and women, and which tries to control and subordinate the role of women. What have been the effects of this policy on Turkish society since 2002, the year that brought Erdoğan's party, AKP, to power? What are the issues that feminists have faced?

Selin Cagatay: This is not the first time that Erdoğan has stated his disagreement with gender equality. In 2010 when he was the Prime Minister he said, "I do not believe in the equality of men and women. I believe in equal opportunities. Men and women are different and complementary." More strikingly, he said this at a consultation meeting with women's NGOs, which included long-standing feminist organizations, during which he addressed women exclusively as mothers.

In the following years, AKP governments launched a rigorous campaign to monopolize the politics of gender in Turkey. This campaign rests upon two pillars: (1) women's flexible, precarious inclusion in the labor force – that is, the exploitation of women's paid labor while maintaining their subjection to male control; and (2) women's exclusive responsibility for housework and care work in the familial sphere – a full-fledged exploitation of women's unpaid labor. The consequence of this campaign for women is the perpetuation of the sexual division of labor and the overselling of fertility and motherhood. In other words, what we call "women's entrapment between paid and unpaid labor."

The AKP's catch-phrase for this campaign is "Strengthening the Family." In practice, this means that women are to be the main (if not the only) providers of housework and care work. This hampers their access to paid employment, which pushes them into low-paid, flexible and insecure jobs. Women in return become dependent on the men in their families. Needless to say, this isn't specific to Turkey but is a global trend, especially after the 2008 economic crisis. Many governments in Europe and elsewhere take measures that will result in the further exploitation of women's labor in paid employment and guarantee the reproduction of the labor force while maintaining the patriarchal organization of gender relations.

However, this takes a peculiar form in Turkey under the AKP regime: the imposition of a Sunni-Islamic worldview. This is because religion provides a legitimate framework for the exploitation of women's bodies and their labor. Women should be pious, preferably covered, materially and emotionally dependent on men. They should behave according to their "fiyat" (purpose of creation), as it is popularly said these days. The AKP and conservative women's organizations, which operate as the party's auxiliaries among women, call this "gender equity" and they claim that they've gone beyond gender equality by replacing the abstract term "equality" with an Islamic understanding of "justice."

The result of AKP's neoliberal-conservative campaign is devastating especially in the fields of women's employment, sexual rights, and violence against women. Here I will note some of the very recent developments in these fields.

Fighting for Women's Rights in Turkey

Despite all the efforts made to use women as a cheap source of labor, women's labor force participation hovers around 30%. Why is this so? We can understand this by looking at the time-use data provided by the state itself. Women spend four times more time than men on domestic tasks, including care work. When asked, women point at household responsibilities as the main obstacle to their participation in paid employment. Moreover women's unemployment is on the rise: officially 13.3%, but actually 25.2% when you add those who are not looking for a job because they are "hopeless." Women's unemployment increases also with their level of education. That is, the unemployment of women with higher education is twice as much as the unemployment of men with higher education. Apparently, employers do not think that hiring women is as profitable as hiring men.

This situation is supported by the AKP's population politics which deprive women of their sexual rights. Following Erdoğan's claim that "abortion is murder" in 2012, the government took measures to regulate abortion and birth control. Even if the AKP did not ban abortion, the introduction of doctor's right to conscientious objection made abortion inaccessible, especially for women of the lower classes. Getting an abortion at a state hospital is virtually impossible in many cities and towns in Turkey. Similarly, previously state-provided means of birth control are now much harder for women to access. These policies and many others are in line with Erdoğan's insistence that every woman should give birth to three to five children. Only this month, the government launched a program to "protect the family and ensure a dynamic population" where it promises a increasing cash allowance for women who give birth. When the promotion of motherhood is this aggressive without any emphasis on the father's role in care-taking and sharing other household responsibilities, it is not realistic to expect gender equality in the field of employment.

Finally, violence against women. In 2009, feminist organizations in Turkey found out that femicide in Turkey under the seven years of AKP rule since 2002 had increased by a scandalous rate of 1400%. The fact that at least three women were murdered every single day caused a great furor among different sections of Turkish society. The AKP responded to this by passing a new law to eliminate violence against women in 2012 but this law seeks to protect women only within the family, meaning that it doesn't address women who are not married. The law also prioritizes solutions to violence against women within the family institution instead of ensuring that women pursue their lives independently from the perpetrator.

Five years later, the Ministry of Family and Social Affairs conducted research on violence against women. And they didn't share the results with the general public! The results, which were recently leaked to the media, are as follows: Women experience physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence at an unchanging rate of 40% in the last six years. 89% of them do not seek any official help. The most severe cases of violence are faced by women who are divorced or who have left their partners. Similarly, femicide is most prevalent among this group of women. This means that women face the most extreme cases of violence when they attempt to become independent of men. Here, the religious-conservative ideological imposition that women should behave according to their purpose of creation is the discourse that perpetuates violence against women because it encourages men to "punish" women who step outside the confines of patriarchal family.

MG: In June 2013 the protests of Gezi Park broke out in Taksim Square and mobilizations continued for a long time after. What was the role and importance of women in this cycle of protests? In this regard, what were the initiatives organized after Erdoğan's claims that "women are not equal to men"?

SG: When we discuss women's participation in the Gezi-inspired protests, we must distinguish between women's and feminists' presence in the revolt. Women, just like men, took part in the protests because the issues at stake were directly related to their lives. Again, just like men, women belonged to different political groups that participated in the protests: Kemalists, Kurds, worker's unions, left/socialist organizations, LGBT activists, anti-capitalist Muslims, etc. Women and men together expressed their dissatisfaction with the AKP and its politics such as the commodification of urban space, the exploitation of natural resources and the destruction of forests, the conservative, anti-secular and authoritarian administration of the public sphere, the increasing exploitation of waged-labor, the replacement of universal welfare provisions with poor relief and conditional social allowance, and so on. In this

sense, women's participation was not particularly different from that of men.

On the other hand, the AKP's sexist, conservative, and anti-secular take on gender issues like the government's failure to eliminate violence against women, misogynist comments by high-rank party members including (or primarily by) Erdoğan and the attacks on women's sexual rights like the attempt to ban abortion in 2012, contributed to women's involvement in the protests. Moreover, women generally have more interest in reclaiming the public sphere because the authoritarian regulation of public space perpetuates the patriarchal control over their lives.

When we come to feminists, they also actively took part in the protests individually as well as collectively. We were a constituent of the organizing committee inside Gezi Park, but we also organized a number of events and demonstrations as "feminists" during the protests. Our specific political contribution was to link the "public" matters that were politicized during the protests to the less visible "private" matters, in particular to women's oppression in the familial sphere. In other words, feminists protested against the authoritarian, conservative regulation of the whole social organization, not only of the public sphere. So we provided the link between the anti-democratic administration of the public space and the increasingly conservative regulation of gender relations both in public and private.

The protests triggered a significant political mobilization in the social opposition in Turkey. Neighborhood forums, squatted houses, green initiatives, and formation of groups against the commodification of urban space are some examples. Women are of course part of these initiatives. Following the protests feminism too became one of the influential political discourses for the young population mobilized by the revolt. Therefore, many young women are now recruited into our ranks or they closely follow feminist politics. Another important outcome of the Gezi-inspired protests was the rise of social media activism. This significantly strengthened the hand of feminists in responding immediately to the misogynist attitudes or claims of the cabinet members or other high-rank state officials or Islamist intellectuals. These responses are also more visible and more popular thanks to the prevalence of online social media.

MG: When was the Sosyalist Feminist Kolektif born? What is its analysis of the situation of Turkish society? What are the campaigns and initiatives that this organization has led since it was born?

SG: As a group of feminists, we founded the SFK in Istanbul in 2008. The SFK instantly grew into a collective with some 250 members and organized in five cities: Istanbul, Ankara, Eskişehir, Izmir and Adana, plus individual members in other cities and abroad. The SFK was born out of the need for strengthening the anti-systemic grassroots feminism in Turkey. We thought that the feminist movement was becoming increasingly dependent on the state and capital and therefore less radical. We knew that neither the state nor capitalist institutions would genuinely support women in becoming collectively autonomous from men. Therefore, we are a completely autonomous collective; we don't receive funding from or cooperate with state or capitalist structures. This way we are able to both build our own independent agenda and mobilize women into grassroots activism at the same time.

The SFK has a materialist understanding of feminism. Women's labor lies at the center of our analysis; women's paid, unpaid, productive, reproductive, emotional labor. Through the concept of women's labor, we show how patriarchy and capitalism operate as two different but mutually coexisting systems of oppression. Our political project is to mobilize women against conservative-Islamist neoliberalism in Turkey to overthrow the patriarchal control over their lives.

In this aim we previously ran campaigns with a focus on women's labor, especially on women's unpaid labor in the family. For example, in the campaign "We want our due back from men!" we demanded equal share of housework and care work between men, women, and the state. Similarly, in our campaign "There's life outside the family!" we drew attention to women's entrapment in oppressive familial relations.

Fighting for Women's Rights in Turkey

Currently the SFK is involved in a number of joint initiatives with other feminist individuals and organizations. Among these, "Immediate Action against Femicide" urges the government to take specifically preventive measures against femicide, for example by opening shelters instead of increasing the punishment for the murderer. In other words, in order to eliminate violence against women we demand women's empowerment not as a family member but as an autonomous individual. Similarly, the campaign, "Abortion is a Right, Decision Belongs to Women" demands free and unconditional access to abortion and that abortion be defined as part of women's right to health. Women's Initiative for Peace, on the other hand, is a platform where we contribute to women's involvement in the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish conflict with our feminist agenda. The current war in Syria and its consequences for women refugees in Turkey is right now the most burning issue that the Initiative deals with.

Other than these, we organize public discussions and publish the quarterly journal Feminist Politika. At the same time, we are highly involved in street activism where we collaborate with other feminist groups and individual activists. While our activities mostly focus on local issues, we also take part in feminist conferences and gatherings abroad in order to share experiences with socialist feminists in other countries.

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