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Women's Rights vs. Gender Justice? Exploring Oppositional Women's Organizations and the Reshaping of Feminist Engagement in De-democratizing Turkey

Anna Ehrhart*

Abstract

Reflective of a wider, global trend of changing civil society space and anti-gender backlash against women's rights, research is increasingly interested in exploring the dynamics and implications of hybrid and authoritarian regimes strategies toward civil society, and women's organizations in particular. Nevertheless, few have focused on studying the role of governmental women's organizations – so-called women-GONGOs - as mechanisms of regime strategies, such as in the case of competitive-authoritarian Turkey where women-GONGOs aim to constrain civil society space and feminist, gender equality-oriented discourse and practice. In this study, the aim is to explore how feminist, oppositional women's organizations, despite their "outsider" positions in Turkey's civil society, use and reshape feminist strategies to adapt, renegotiate or resist women-GONGOs as mechanisms of control, co-optation and regime interference.

Based on in-depth interviews with 21 women's organizations in Turkey, the study finds that "outsider", feminist women's organizations in competitive-authoritarian Turkey perceive the influence of women-GONGOs as central to possibilities and limitations in civil society and women's organizing. Consequently, interviews show that "outsiders" employ a variety of feminist strategies, mostly in combination, to create or maintain their activism and operations within the Turkish de-democratization context, for example turning to grassroots in combination with finding new alliances, or connected to

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sustaining activities within broader democratization movements. However, the study suggests that the changing space of civil society in Turkey affects these “outsiders” in different ways; for example service-oriented women’s organizations are less constrained in their feminist strategies compared to claims-making “outsiders”. Lastly, the study illustrates how the dominant role of women-GONGOs in Turkey impacts feminist discourse and practice of “outsiders”, thereby providing empirical insights and theoretical contributions to better understanding transformations of feminist engagement in Turkey and similar gendered de-democratization contexts across the Mediterranean and beyond.

Introduction

“They say gender justice and when you use that word it seems innocent and close to our way of thinking, but actually their main purpose is not to empower women and overcome gender inequality. It is defined in a more traditional way; like women are weak [...] and they use the consolidation of the role of gender in society as their tools” (Organization 14)

In recent years, gender scholars and practitioners point out how anti-gender mobilization increasingly challenges the status quo of women’s rights and achievements toward gender equality across the world. Feminist scholars draw attention to patterns of anti-gender mobilization against (transnational) feminist activism in a civil society with shrinking or changing space, as well as threatening legal frameworks and policies (Grzebalska/Pető 2018; Özkazanc 2019; Ewig/Marx Ferree 2013). Moreover, more research focuses explicitly on how authoritarian governments strategically use women’s rights provision as a tool for the control of civil society, promotion of norms and values, or legitimation of party coalition or government, rather than fostering actual women’s empowerment (Donno/Kreft 2019; Lorch/Bunk 2016).

Nevertheless, despite the rich scholarly attention given to the role of feminist engagement and women’s rights activism in democratization processes (Waylen 1994; Alvarez 1999; Paxton 2000; Beckwith 2013), less focus has been placed on exploring how governmentally-operated women’s organizations, so-called women-GONGOs¹, challenge feminist organizing. Women-GONGOs may

¹ Throughout this paper, I will refer to government-operated women’s organizations as women-GONGOs (Diner 2018). As Dursun (2018) writes, the concept of gender justice propagated by the AKP government and its women-GONGOs grounds on anti- and post-feminist discourses that criticize the perceived

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operate as hybrid or authoritarian governmental actors opposing and threatening gender equality activism in civil society, thereby reshaping power constellations within civil society.

Even though recent scholarship increasingly points out the relevance of conceptualizing hybrid and authoritarian regimes based on civil society and gender perspectives (Wilde et al. 2018), only a handful of empirical studies look at how (changing) feminist engagement responds to authoritarian control through government-operated (anti-feminist) women's organizations in contested civil society (Doyle 2018; Zhang 2015; Toepler et al. 2020).

Nevertheless, to disentangle gendered power relations and dynamics between such women-GONGOs and "outsider" women's organizations opposing incumbent hybrid or authoritarian regimes, further studies are needed that focus on better understanding feminist engagement strategies of "outsiders" in relation to women-GONGOs and within contested civil society space. Throughout this paper, I understand women's organizations as "outsiders" in comparison to women-GONGOs as "insiders" based on their respective positions within Turkish civil society, albeit not necessarily chosen in the former case, and their relationship with the incumbent government.² Those women's organizations inhabiting "outsider" positions were interviewed as part of this study and are considered feminist based on their own definitions.³

insufficiency or inappropriateness of feminism. Rather, they conceptualize an Islamic-oriented understanding of gender justice as opposed to gender equality, where differences between men and women are emphasized and the traditional role of women in society and family – with reference to Islam – is re-instated (Diner 2018).

² The "insider-outsider" distinction of civil society actors is relevant from various perspectives in literature. As Ewig and Marx Feree (2013) describe, feminist organizing may stem from the *outside in* through autonomous groups, as well as from the *inside out* via feminists (or "femocrats") within organizations acting on women's behalf (p. 446). Furthermore, social movement literature distinguishes forms of NGO inside activism such as attending hearings or approaching staff members/politicians, from outside activities such as protest (Uhlin and Kalm 2015, p. 5). In addition to trends of NGOization (Alvarez 1999) and state feminism (McBride and Mazur 2002), scholars find that combinations of outside-inside feminist strategies proved effective (Ewig and Feree 2017). Similarly to what Toepler et al. (2020) point out, "outsiders" may not necessarily be completely cut out from maintaining relationships with government within hybrid or authoritarian regimes, yet instead of national-level government these may remain on local or regional level.

³ See a more detailed discussion in the 'case selection' section of this paper.

Literature provides several relevant conceptual and theoretical perspectives to approach perceptions and usages of feminist engagement strategies in hybrid/authoritarian regimes and in relation to women-GONGOs. Briefly, these conceptualize feminist engagement within gendered democratic backsliding (Kriszan/Roggeband 2018), women-GONGOs and women's rights provision as mechanisms for legitimization and resilience of hybrid and authoritarian regimes (Donno/Kreft 2018; Lorch/Bunk 2016), and emphasize the connection of gender relations and changing civil society in such regime contexts (Wilde et al. 2018; Topler et al. 2020).

This paper explores the empirical case of competitive-authoritarian Turkey and aims to understand the dynamics between feminist organizing by outsider women's organizations in a women-GONGO dominated civil society. Drawing on qualitative semi-structured interviews with 21 outsider women's organizations in Turkey, the paper addressed the following research questions:

1. How do outsider women's organizations perceive the influence of women-GONGOs in competitive-authoritarian Turkey?
2. Which feminist engagement strategies do "outsider" women's organizations use and how does the influence of women-GONGOs require them to renegotiate and reshape their feminist strategies?

Turkey presents a relevant empirical case to study changing feminist strategies of "outsider" women's organizations in relation to women-GONGOs for several reasons. First, with the country's steady move toward autocracy, shrinking civil space overall and feminist claims of gender equality in particular are increasingly targeted by the government's efforts to promote a traditional, Islamist-conservative understanding of gender politics in Turkey (Adak 2019; Arat 2019; Kreile 2018). Second, governmental control, oppression and co-optation of civil society and women's organizing through women-GONGOs makes the Turkish case relevant for analysis of authoritarian resilience strategies and feminist counterings (Yabancı 2019; Keysan 2019).

Lastly, the Turkish case may also provide relevant considerations for better understanding feminist women's organizing in relation to women-GONGOs in other similar settings – not solely as mechanisms of hybrid and authoritarian regimes, but also in a larger transnational context of anti-gender mobilization and rising authoritarianism (Kretschmer/Meyer 2013; Verloo 2018). As such, this case study of Turkey exploring dynamics between women-GONGOs and feminist response strategies also corresponds to recent analyses of developments such as "authoritarian gender-washing" (Bjarnegård/Zetterberg 2022) and the relevance of various political movements opposing gender equality and women's rights in the MENA region, including authoritarian, Islamist-conservative forces (Griffon et al. 2021; Eslen-Ziya/Kazanoğlu 2020).

Feminist organizing and women-GONGOs in hybrid regimes

In this study, I refer to various theoretical perspectives and previous research, which encompass gendered democratization scholarship, hybrid regimes and legitimation strategies, changing civil society space and insider-outsider dynamics, and feminist engagement. To build a conceptual framework that allows to study how “outsider” women’s organizations reshape feminist strategies in relation to women-GONGOs, illustrated with the case of Turkey’s hybrid regime, each of these theoretical perspectives contributes with relevant entry points.

Women’s civil society activism and feminist organizing have long been a focus of democratization literature with gender perspectives, demonstrating the important driving forces for democratic transitions and gender equality policies (Waylen 1994; Alvarez 1999; Wang et al. 2017; Jaquette 2018). Less attention has, however, been given to the role of anti-feminist women’s organizing, or so-called (women-) GONGOs (Kretschmer & Meyer 2013) and implications for feminist civil society in hybrid and authoritarian regimes.

In hybrid and authoritarian regimes, the implications of such non-democratic regimes on the opportunities and roles of civil society are complex, also considering to what extent civil society organizations build relationships with or against governments, and whether they act as drivers of democratization, opposition or regime stabilization (Toepler et al. 2020). As research increasingly emphasizes the central role of gender and civil society in understanding authoritarianism and democratic backsliding (Wilde et al. 2018; Beckwith 2013), moving beyond traditional democratization literature that neglects considerations of women’s political participation (Brownlee 2007; Brooker 2009; Levitsky/Way 2012), the need to better situate dynamics between authoritarian governments, women-GONGOs as regime-loyal or regime-controlled actors, and feminist women’s activism becomes apparent.

In the Mediterranean region, such developments have been evident as well. While women’s organizations throughout time have become more effective and vocal in their mobilization shaping political debate; promoting democratic mechanisms; strengthening human rights; and advancing women’s status; repressive governmental mechanism of co-optation targeting particularly women’s rights and gender equality policy contribute to blurring lines between state-civil society relations (Regan 2012; Kelly/Breslin 2010; Leigh-Doyle 2016). Historically, government-imposed state-feminism efforts such as in Jordan (Regan 2012), Egypt (Hatem 1994), or Turkey (White 2003) had significant effects in women’s empowerment, such as legal rights or education.

Yet, at the same time, women’s (feminist) organizing continues to face backlashes and gendered obstacles to women’s political participation remain.

Not the least following the Arab spring uprisings and aftermath posed a decisive rupture and transition period across the Mediterranean, providing both new openings to women's mobilization yet also implications for women's activism and their limited influence in post-uprising state-building projects, such as new Islamist movements threatening women's rights (Dalacoura 2019; Johansson-Nogués 2013).

Feminist strategies, women-GONGOs and authoritarian resilience

Hybrid and authoritarian regime contexts pose particularly interesting and complex civil society settings for women's organizations. On the one hand, feminist-oriented women's organizations are often crucial catalysts for advancing women's rights and gender equality policies, yet they easily come to experience risks of becoming too political and facing constraints or threats to their operating within such regimes. On the other hand, hybrid and authoritarian regimes also strategically use gender politics and regime-loyal or controlled women's organizations in particular – thus, women-GONGOs – as mechanisms to control and co-opt civil society in order to promote their discourses, norms and policy changes.

A number of studies point out the relevance of further exploring the dynamics between feminist women's organizing and anti-feminist (conservative) women's actors within authoritarian/hybrid regimes. Empirical examples of GONGOs in hybrid or authoritarian regimes emphasize how these governmentally-operated or loyal actors limit space for oppositional actors in civil society, serving as mechanisms for regimes to co-opt civic space, as studies on China (Zhang 2015) and Russia (Turbine 2015) show. Furthermore, the case of Uganda (Tripp 2001) illustrates how women's organizations in hybrid regimes may to a certain extent succeed in advancing women's status while at the same time facing various constraints on maintaining their activism, such as co-optation or legal restrictions.

Hence, empirical case studies provide insights into the actors and varied state responses to feminist civil society and women's movements, but also draw attention to gendered institutional structures and practices, as well as the political opportunities – even if limited – for women's organizations (Beckwith 2007). Furthermore, such research emphasizes the central role of civil society as both a space to challenge and oppose authoritarian regimes, yet also for the promotion of state feminism or co-optation (Lorch/Bunk 2016; Donno/Kreft 2019; Doyle 2018). For example, Donno and Kreft (2019) find that advancing women's rights is often top-down and determined by the authoritarian regime's objective to capitalize from women's rights provision. In the MENA region, such mechanisms of anti-gender opposition by incumbent

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governments appear evident in restricting and countering already achieved progress on gender equality and women's right, as cases of Egypt or Turkey among others illustrate (Griffon et al. 2021; Dalacoura 2019).

Similarly, Lorch and Bunk (2016) identify how authoritarian regimes instrumentalize gender politics to strengthen authoritarian resilience, whereby civil society and women-GONGOs play a central role. For one, the usage of women's rights and gender politics may be used as a legitimization strategy by such authoritarian regimes. Moreover, social divisions may be strategically instrumentalized to maintain the duality of women's public and private status in society. Furthermore, hybrid and authoritarian regimes may use women-GONGOs to serve as mechanisms for the co-optation of civil society, as exemplified in the case studies of Algeria and Mozambique. At the same time, Lorch and Bunk's framework neglects to incorporate "the other side": that is oppositional or "outsider" women's organizations with feminist objectives that are targets of such women-GONGOs and authoritarian resilience strategies. More specifically, how is feminist organizing in hybrid and authoritarian regimes impacted by women-GONGOs as part of authoritarian resilience strategies?

Feminist strategies to gendered democratic backsliding

In addition to drawing on literature that conceptualizes how hybrid and authoritarian regimes use women-GONGOs to co-opt and control civil society space and particularly feminist organizing, turning to literature that illustrates feminist strategies within such contexts of gendered democratic backsliding provides further useful elements. When put in dialogue, those different perspectives contribute to a framework that allows to study the dynamics and impact of women-GONGOs on feminist organizing in hybrid regimes. Here, two central aspects are pointed out by previous literature.

For one, the understanding that changing feminist strategies are an arena to measure gendered democratic backsliding, as proposed by Kriszan and Roggeband (2018). Here, *changing feminist engagement* in the contested political arena of hostile regimes is understood along different patterns of coping: feminist engagement strategies of grassroots and disruptive protest, where women's movements or organizations develop radical response strategies toward regime hostility and control. However, to what extent disruptive strategies are used by women's organizations to react or counteract against de-democratization may depend on movement capacities and infrastructures, both before and during backsliding processes (p. 96).

Furthermore, patterns of feminist engagement strategies as new forms of coalition-building reflect how de-democratization threatens democratic

values and human rights, where common external threats by a hostile regime may bring together women's rights defenders with broader democratic movements. New forms of coalition-building may contribute toward more long-term sustainable feminist strategies against de-democratization, yet also depend on the extent of pre-existing linkages between women's movements and other pro-democratic forces in larger civil society (ibid.).

Another pattern of feminist response is likely emergent when feminist actors find themselves in hostile contexts of long-term threat and oppression, resulting in abeyance as a "last resort" strategy to produce movement continuity in a state of survival (p. 97). Krizsan and Roggeband argue that more systematic research needs to better understand factors that may determine when and why hostile settings lead to abeyance or demise of women's movements.

In addition to looking at diverse feminist strategies as responses to gendered democratic backsliding, giving attention to how different actors may experience civic space in hybrid and authoritarian regimes as changing, rather than shrinking or closing, is relevant (Toepler et al. 2020). More specifically, this approach to studying civil society in hybrid and authoritarian regimes suggests that the role of civil society actors at times may be dual or conflicting, for example that some civil society organizations are supported by the regime or voluntarily align with it, while others face repression and constraints. Hence, the authors propose that distinguishing types of civil society actors, such as claims-making, service-providing, and loyal NGOs, serves as a more useful analytical approach toward understanding relations between civil society and hybrid/authoritarian regimes, as well as how civic space is changing. Here, it is particularly claims-making actors that tend to face suppression and constraints within civil society, as well as require diverse coping strategies. Similar to Krizsan and Roggeband (2018) conceptualizing changing feminist strategies, literature points out that civil society – regime relations, and thereby to what extent civic space is constrained for some actors while opening for others, are dynamic and complex rather than static.

Research design and methodology

Case selection

Turkey provides a relevant case study for studying women's organizations' changing feminist strategies in relation to women-GONGOs within a hybrid regimes context. Since the second half of the AKP government, shrinking civil society space and particularly women's feminist organizing is increasingly controlled, suppressed and co-opted (Koyuncu/Özman 2018; Yabancı 2019;

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Arat 2019). Furthermore, despite long-lasting struggles toward democratization and institutionalization of the feminist women's movement, gender politics in Turkey in recent years has been characterized by polarization of the Islamist – secular tensions and the country's move towards autocracy, paired with the government's conservative norms on the role of women in society (Bodur Un 2017; Keysan 2019). To some extent, the relation of the Kurdish women's movement with the Turkish women's movement has historically been characterized by ruptures that defined whether solidarities were loosening or strengthened (Küçükkırka 2018).

Lastly, with the country's historically complex relationship to democracy, Turkey's move toward autocracy under the AKP government – including changes to a presidential system, increasing control over executive and judiciary, questionable status of free and fair elections, weak opposition, and suppression of academic, media and civil society voices – indicates that Turkey's current hybrid regime is relevant case for studies of gendered de-democratization (Kalaycıoğlu 2019; Turan 2019; IPC 2017).

Moreover, Turkey provides also a relevant empirical case in the wider Mediterranean and Middle Eastern context: for one, the study may contribute with locating hybrid-authoritarian developments across different countries in the region show patterns and similarities in repressing feminist organizing, as well exploring feminist strategies responding to broader trends of anti-gender mobilization across and beyond the region (Griffon et al. 2021; Verloo 2018). Furthermore, the case study may provide insights into where distinct differences and variations of Turkey's feminist organizing against rising Islamist, conservative and patriarchal developments and authoritarian mechanisms lies in comparison to other cases in the Middle East (Al-Ali 2002).

Sampling and material

This qualitative study focuses on experiences of oppositional, "outsider" women's organizations based and active in Turkey (table 1). Empirically, it draws on fieldwork conducted as semi-structured in-depth interviews with 21 women's organizations in two phases between October 2018 and May 2019.

All interviewed organizations identified themselves as women's organizations and their respective agendas and objectives explicitly addressed women's issues from various dimensions, such as women's labor participation, women's rights, violence against women or women's political empowerment. With the focus of this paper on oppositional women's organizations defined as "outsiders", this refers to the understanding of a contested civil society divided between the pro-government Islamist-conservative women's organizations

(women-GONGOs)⁴ as “insiders” and the broad range of oppositional (feminist) women’s organizations as “outsiders”. The 21 interviewed organizations in this study clearly inhabit the “outsider” positioning, despite their diversity in political-ideological backgrounds and positions.

Among the 21 women’s organizations⁵ selected, three were Kurdish women’s organizations, one identified as an Islamist women’s organization and, of the remaining interviewed organizations, nine described themselves as explicitly secular feminist. All interviewed women’s organizations described themselves as being independent from political parties and the government but most of them upheld some sort of collaborative relationships – for instance, pursuing common projects at the local municipality level. The 21 interviewed organizations were spread across the seven geographical regions of Turkey and pursued activities and networks at the local, national and international levels, independent of their respective resources, sizes and geographical locations.

With the objective of focusing on “outsider” women’s organizations in Turkey, the fieldwork relied on a combined purposive and snowball sampling approach (Ritchie et al., 2013; Silverman, 2010). Purposive sampling was used to produce a sample representative of those women’s organizations in Turkey that clearly can be categorized as “outsiders” engaged in feminist organizing; that is, their work, activism or claims-making is reflective of feminist principles and oriented toward achieving gender equality, due to which their direct access to national decision-making mechanisms is limited. Based on prior research, databases and personal contacts, such women’s organizations as potential interviewees could be mapped and then contacted with interview inquiry. Moreover, snowball sampling was partly used whereby interviewees

⁴ Important to note that there are Islamist-conservative WO’s that are not governmentally-operated or controlled (= women-GONGOs) and are critical of the incumbent government. See Keysan (2019).

⁵ In my interviews, I asked participants to define their respective women’s organization and to what extent they would consider the organization as “feminist”, including their definition of feminism. It is worth noting that in many of the interviews, several members of the same women’s organization participated actively in the interview and hence, within the same organization, there are different understandings and perspectives of defining “feminist”. The categories I use for the interviewed women’s organizations in this study derive, therefore, from how members find consensus and self-describe their respective organization along labels such as Kemalist, Islamist, Kurdish, and (openly) feminist. For a more nuanced discussion on identity politics in the women’s movement in Turkey, see Dincer (2020).

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recommended or referred further women's organizations to potentially participate.

In this study, the interviewed organizations and their representatives are not identified or described for reasons of protecting their confidentiality. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at the facilities of respective organizations and with at least one representative from each women's organization, although, in almost all cases, several representatives participated in the interviews. Out of the 21 interviews, seven were conducted in English without an interpreter present, while the rest were conducted in Turkish with an interpreter present. All interviews were voice-recorded and transcribed. The length of interviews varied but, on average, they lasted approximately 1.5 hours. In a few cases, shorter follow-up conversations and consultations of the organizations' websites and materials were conducted to crosscheck or follow-up on the information gathered in the interviews.

The interviews were semi-structured using a set of open questions based on a thematically structured interview guide (Appendix A). The central thematic sections of the interview guide focused on women's political representation, women's engagement in civil society and the ways in which linkages between formal politics and civil society could be described. In addition, the interview questions also addressed the respective organization, its background, activities and objectives as well as its self-identification regarding women's issues and gender politics in Turkey. In the majority of interviews, the discussion of topics exceeded the interview guide, yet the overall thematic structure and focus was always followed.

Semi-structured interviews are an appropriate and advantageous method within the scope and feminist research practice I adhered to in this study (Ackerly/True, 2010). First, this method provides space for in-depth exploration of questions and topics discussed during interviews, allows for spontaneous follow-up and gives opportunities for interviewees to further illustrate and contextualize their narratives beyond or against the researcher's pre-defined expectations (King/Horrocks, 2018; Pfadenhauer 2009). Moreover, with the ambition to make visible and accessible the narratives of "outsider" women's organizations, semi-structured interviews provide room for how interviewees reflect on their experiences within the broader social, political and cultural context of women's feminist organizing in current Turkey (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Letherby, 2003).

Analysis

This study uses reflexive thematic analysis (TA) to approach the analysis of the interview material, following Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012; 2017; 2021). In

comparison to other schools of TA, reflexive TA relies on qualitative data, values and practice in research (“Big Q”) and applies a constructivist epistemological understanding that acknowledges the researcher’s central role and subjectivity in various stages of analysis, such as coding, theme generation and overall analysis. In this study, I refer to Braun and Clarke where using reflexive TA means that coding and theme generation are primarily guided by the study’s research questions, but draw on previous theories and research fields as a source of inspiration to discover patterns of understanding (Braun/Clarke 2017; Alvesson/Sköldberg 2017).

While I understand reflexive TA as a creative, engaged process that constantly moves forward and backward across the material and research, also in line with a feminist research practice, I followed the six stages of TA (ibid.). First, the interviews were transcribed and reread to familiarize with the interview material; second, initial codes were generated based on interesting features in the interviews and with relevance for the scope of this study. Since the interview material analyzed is rich, encompassing also other research topics than the scope of this study on “outsider” women’s organizations and their feminist strategies in relation to women-GONGOs, I consider it particularly important that the analytic process of TA is constantly engaging and reflexive, both regarding coding and theme generation, as well as my own positionality toward the research material as a Western, white, feminist researcher (Ackerly/True 2010).

The theme generation followed, third, searching for themes and, fourth, reviewing themes in relation to codes, the entire interview material, and by outlining a thematic overview. In the ongoing analysis, themes were refined according to the overall story of the interview material and selected quotes/extracts for this study (steps five and six).

Discussion

The empirical case of “outsider” women’s organizations in Turkey suggests the relevance of studying feminist organizing in civil society within hybrid and authoritarian regimes not only in relation to the incumbent government, but also specifically connected to women-GONGOs as mechanisms to control, co-op and change civic space. In fact, interviews with 21 “outsider” women’s organizations in Turkey emphasize that their changing feminist strategies in a women-GONGO dominated civil society result from the implications posed by these emergent governmental actors. In the Turkish case, feminist organizing in civil society is particularly targeted by women-GONGOs (Leigh Doyle 2018; Yabancı 2019; Diner 2018). This discussion will illustrate how “outsider”

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women's organizations in Turkey perceive the influence of women-GONGOs on their feminist activism and describe how these "outsiders" renegotiate their changing feminist strategies within Turkey's women-GONGO dominated civil society.

Renegotiating feminist strategies as "outsiders" in a women-GONGO dominated civil society

The interviewed women's organizations in this study perceive that with the emergence and established dominance of women-GONGOs in Turkey's civil society, their positions as "outsiders" have been manifested. The increasing presence of women-GONGOs, such as KADEM, on the local, national and international levels is viewed as the government's strategic mechanism to legitimize itself, and promote its conservative, Islam-oriented, and anti-feminist discourse (Diner 2018).

Domestically, "outsiders" experience a variety of threats as consequences of the dominant role of women-GONGOs, such as difficulties in sustaining financial or human resources, a lack of political opportunities or access, and implicit security threats. As one of the interviews tells, "outsiders" for example struggle to remain operative because the emergence of KADEM and the governmental pressure on feminist women's organizations has impacted their organization's membership. As organization 3 describes,

"After KADEM was founded as a GONGO, a huge portion of our right-wing members left and joined KADEM. There are still some left with us, but really few. But we are struggling under these conditions".

Internationally, "outsiders" experience that the presence of women-GONGOs is strategically used by the government to exert pressure on international women's rights legislation (Ayhan 2019; Çağatay 2019), most recently exemplified by Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul convention in 2021. Several interviewed women's organizations reflected on their participation in international CEDAW meetings and the presence of KADEM, such as:

"[Recently] they are becoming more active not just nationally or on the grassroots, but they are also active and advocating on international level [...] like in the last CEDAW meeting". (Organization 6)

Disruptive elements as feminist strategies against women-GONGO discourse

With women-GONGOs as emergent, key actors in Turkey's civil society and as a tool to exert control over feminist organizing, "outsider" women's organiza-

tions at times turn to grassroots and disruptive protest as feminist strategies to respond and resist gender discourses promoted by women-GONGOs (Kriszan/Roggeband 2018). Interviews indicate, however, that “outsider” women’s organizations employ *elements* of disruptive or radical feminist strategies, and in cases where such strategies reflect a more radical activism already embedded in the respective organization’s claims-making tradition and feminist understanding.

As two examples below demonstrate, turning to disruptive or radical strategies toward women-GONGOs is merely a discursive form of protest signaling resistance or opposition.

“recently, there was a [governmental] meeting on early marriage in [city]. One of our members attended, but she was attending only after forcefully disturbing them [government] for a week ahead”. (organization 15)

In another interview, a representative from organization 9 illustrates their understanding of a flexible, disruptive feminist activism as resistance to (potentially) increasing government hostility, by saying “*if sharia comes, I organize [feminists] while wearing a purple burqua*”. Nevertheless, interviews importantly find that generally “outsider” women’s organizations in Turkey (still) understand turning to elements of radical or disruptive feminist strategies as not specifically targeted toward women-GONGOs themselves.

Rather, these aim at confronting or disrupting the Islamist-conservative gender politics paradigm, discourse and norms these are intended to promote within Turkish civil society, as mechanisms of the incumbent government. Last, it appears that “outsider” women’s organizations interviewed in this study also view such elements of disruption or radical feminist strategies useful as tools to support their claims-making advocacy for women’s rights within the women-GONGO dominated civil society in Turkey.

Reorientating feminist activism from the national to the grassroots

Most of the interviewed “outsiders” in this study describe that the formation of Turkey’s women-GONGO dominated civil society has inhibited a turn away from their feminist activism on the national level and toward the grassroots. Among interviewed “outsiders”, a distinction is evident among more claims-making women’s organizations and other, more service-oriented women’s organizations (Toepler et al. 2020). Here, the former tend to have increased their grassroots-focused feminist strategies as a consequence or coping mechanism due to Turkey’s de-democratization and the dominance of women-GONGOs, where they themselves remain “outsiders” in the political

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arena with lack of funding or loss of institutional access (Toepler et al. 2020; Eslen-Ziya/Kazanoğlu 2020).

For one, claims-making women's organizations can employ grassroots-related feminist strategies to continue mobilization or advocacy at the local when national-level access to exert influence in political decision-making has mostly been disrupted or constrained for them as "outsiders". Grassroots-informed practice for the interviewed women's organization is also part of mobilizing and advocating for women's rights and gender equality, especially in light of increasing governmental oppression to threaten such already achieved legislations and progress.

"Now it's not about women's issues anymore. They [government] put all in a box called 'family' or 'social services'. So we have to find new ways of dealing with this [them]. We always tell the grassroots women [in our network] to have a relationship with their municipality if they don't have, because it's always beneficial for both parts". (organization 5)

Turning to the grassroots, and to some extent away from national decision-making, is also relevant for "outsiders" who categorize more as service-providing women's organizations, for example women's organizations providing training programs to women or offering legal, financial and psychological support to victims of gender-based violence.

The difference from claims-making women's organizations as "outsiders" in the Turkish case is, however, that service-provision already has a longer history of operating on the local, regional and grassroots levels. For these women's organizations in the study, the turn to grassroots merely refers to the parts of their feminist activism that include advocacy, while the actual service-provision activities in most cases predominantly occur on grassroots even before. Nevertheless, a turn to the grassroots, especially due to the dominance of women-GONGOs, for both claims-making and service-providing "outsider" women's organizations goes in hand with coalition-building strategies, mostly with municipalities.

Combined feminist strategies in a women-GONGO dominated civil society

Facing the increasing control and co-optation of Turkey's civil society through women-GONGOs, interviews with "outsider" women's organizations in this study suggest that a combination of different feminist strategies are retreated to in order to renegotiate space and opportunities for feminist organizing. In addition to the grassroots-turn illustrated earlier, "outsiders" also refer to

coalition-building strategies – in combination with grassroots or abeyance strategies (Kriszan/Roggeband 2018).

Coalition-building strategies are not completely new feminist approaches for the interviewed women's organizations, considering they locate themselves as part of the women's movement(s) in Turkey and some also have a history of close cooperation with other democratization or human rights movements, where coalition-building are elements of mobilization and advocacy activities to strengthen resources and cooperation – also independent from changing dynamics in civil society through women-GONGOs (organizations 12; 21).

Interviews show, however, that some aspects of coalition-building are focused on more extensively by "outsiders" as efforts to balance the increasing role of women-GONGOs, for example strengthening linkages with political parties. In some cases, women's organizations refer to their alliances with oppositional political parties, describing that

"We will have alliances with HDP. They are women-friendly, feminist [...] sometimes with CHP, the main opposition party in the parliament, but not like [it used to be] before". (organization 1)

For others, coalition-building entails establishing connections with parliamentarians that reflect or support similar feminist positions. For example, organization 7 describes their approach to coalition-building by demanding parliamentarian support in local government:

"We will have local elections in the near future. We plan to visit the democratic candidates and present them with a contract based on women's demands in this region". (organization 7)

At the same time, as organization 14 perceives it, such relationships can also provide opportunities for women's organizations to pressure political actors on certain policy issues – particularly if direct access to influence political decision-making increasingly is limited for such outsider women's organizations:

"Making them to keep their promises and following their actions in the sense of their promises [...] the continuity of pressure mechanisms is important otherwise we are not effective". (organization 14)

For the interviewed women's organization locating themselves within the Kurdish women's movement, these alliances are more strongly embedded in the Kurdish liberation struggle overall:

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*"Sometimes in the party [HDP], sometimes in the neighborhoods, we kept carrying on our work in every aspect of life".
(organization 17)*

While such coalition-building strategies do not target women-GONGOs directly, they serve as reactive strategies to the constraints emergent with the role of women-GONGOs in Turkey's civil society, such as co-optation of discourse or resources. "Outsider" women's organizations understand and employ coalition-building strategies largely in combination with grassroots-related feminist approaches as presented before, or connected to abeyance strategies.

Abeyance strategies to buffer the "feminist threat"

As the interviews brought forward, the ongoing process of de-democratization and implications for civil society and particular feminist organizing in Turkey is perceived as a push to diminish feminist voices and claims. Referring to examples of women's organizations that were closed down by the government in recent years, interviewees describe demise or dissolving as a serious risk and possibility for women's organizations opposing the government and its gender justice paradigm. As organization 15 describes their experience, sustaining the operation of a women's organization in light of such risks is an evident struggle, but one they continue to choose:

"We are trying to keep it [organization] on its feet with 10 people [...] we really had difficulties [...] [but] they have their own ways, we have ours, too. We are not desperate. Actually, when their strategies are developing, we develop ours by finding new ways".

Similarly, organization 9 believes that being an "outsider" women's organizations under such circumstances as those in Turkey's women-GONGO dominated civil society requires renegotiating how feminist organizing can function.

"After 15th of July necessarily, one needs another kind of organizing [...] of course, they are narrowing down our space but unless you narrow yourself down politically, it gives a message to all women as well [...] it is doable to continue [despite]".⁶

Thus, interviewed "outsiders" understand their feminist organizing as a perceived threat by the government, and, hence describe abeyance strategies – also in combination with other feminist approaches – as ways to reduce or reshape the potential of being a "feminist threat". Strategies to minimize the "feminist threat" potential as an "outsider" are diverse among those women's

⁶ The failed coup attempt on 15th July 2016.

organizations interviewed. Self-imposed cautions to critical and feminist discourse are mentioned by some of the “outsiders”, such as organization 4 who describes that

“we say the truth, [but] we just don’t cry it out [openly]. We don’t go to the media, we stay within our [civil society] network”.

Similarly, organization 3 tells that “after 2002, the political transformation in Turkey naturally affected our organization. We started to pay utmost importance to our discourse”.

Other interviewed women’s organizations share these experiences and, as organization 1 explains, “outsider” women’s organizations are aware of the potential risks involved and retreat to strategies of reducing their “feminist threat” potential:

“Because women’s organizations don’t feel safe, they don’t work as they used to [...] many women’s organizations were closed by the government and [those remaining] as themselves ‘what about us?’, so they try not to be dangerous”.

Hence, some of the interviewed organizations categorizable as claims-making women’s organizations, tend to increase their emphasis on defining themselves, or their activities, as “civil society” rather than “feminist” or “women’s rights”. At the same time, this strategy is not reflective of all interviewed organizations in the study, yet the awareness of the “feminist threat” is shared among all. As organization 1 narrates in the interview,

“identifying as feminist is kind of radical. Some [women’s] organizations do not even identify themselves as women’s organizations; they say we are a NGO, we are civil society”.

As such, “outsider” women’s organizations in Turkey’s women-GONGO dominated civil society perceive that renegotiation space also includes forms of abeyance as ways to sustain their feminist activism, even in less public or potentially riskful ways. Interestingly, interviewed women’s organizations tend to not relate these feminist strategies directly to women-GONGOs and their dominant role in Turkey’s civil society, which indicates that the feminist threat perception is attributed to the government (in terms of political institutions) rather than women-GONGOs as their mechanisms.

Conclusion

This study explored how “outsider” women’s organizations perceive the influence of government-operated and -loyal women’s organizations, so called

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women-GONGOs, in competitive-authoritarian Turkey. Furthermore, the study analyzed how such “outsider” women’s organizations renegotiate their changing feminist strategies in relation to the dominance of women-GONGOs in Turkey’s civil society.

The Turkish case illustrates relevant characteristics of regime mechanisms through women-GONGOs employed and how feminist strategies are sought by “outsiders” in response. As such, this case study is even relevant from a comparative perspective interested in how anti-gender developments situate within the wider Mediterranean (and MENA) region. Though trends of gender backlashes against gender equality demands and actors have been evident in the region and challenging women’s political empowerment (Griffon et al. 2021; Kelly/Breslin 2010; Dalacoura 2019) – in some countries even more so due to post-uprising transitions – the Turkish case suggests both some commonalities as well as distinct differences.

The experiences of “outsider” women’s organizations demonstrate the central role they observe that women-GONGOs in Turkey’s civil society have come to inhabit (Leigh Doyle 2017; Diner 2018). As “outsiders”, women’s organizations experience a lack of financial resources, have lost institutional political access and are exposed to security threats. Women-GONGOs on the other hand, have taken over funds, networks and political opportunities, while “outsiders” are required to retreat to different (combined) feminist strategies as ways to cope, renegotiate space for activism, and sustain their feminist organizing. Interviews demonstrate that “outsider” women’s organizations in competitive-authoritarian Turkey use and reshape different feminist strategies, often in combined ways, for example a retreat to the grassroots combined with establishing alliances or together with abeyance strategies.

Furthermore, this case study of “outsiders” in Turkey also illustrates the relevance of distinguishing among how various types of women’s organizations, such as claims-making or service-provision, find themselves in different preconditions in relation to the hybrid regime influence through women-GONGOs – hence, this consequently means they also perceive that different feminist strategies are useful for the diverse goals they mobilize or work for. At the same time, the study finds that women-GONGOs are not perceived as direct targets by interviewed “outsider” women’s organizations, but rather understood as the governmental mechanism to exert control, legitimize and promote Islamist-conservative discourses on gender justice, and co-opt resources and political access.

This case study of “outsider” women’s organizations and their changing feminist strategies in relation to women-GONGOs in competitive-authoritarian Turkey brings forward a number of implications for existent literature and further research. First, it emphasizes the relevance of in-depth analyses of civil

society actors, and particularly women's organizations, in hybrid and authoritarian regimes. Thus, drawing on perspectives that incorporate gender relations into understanding dynamics at play in the changing relations between regimes, women-GONGOs as their strategic mechanisms, and those "outsider" women's organizations in opposition and resistance within hostile regime contexts (Wilde et al. 2018). Additionally, it supports literature that speaks of the complex duality of civic space for different civil society actors in such regimes, suggesting that feminist organizing in Turkey – similar to other regional examples – requires a variety of different coping strategies (Toepler et al. 2020; Solera 2015; Leigh Doyle 2016).

Second, with an explicit research focus studying the influence of women-GONGOs on feminist organizing within hybrid and authoritarian regimes brings new insights into how state resilience and legitimization strategies of such regimes connect to gender politics, strengthening a shift in research that moves beyond strict institutional accounts of such regimes (Kriszan/Roggeband 2018) – and for example considers how such legitimation tactics or instrumentalization includes discursive elements such as the "gender justice" paradigm of Turkey's incumbent regime. By centering how gender politics and women's rights are main targets of hybrid and authoritarian regimes, scholarship may continue exploring further the mechanisms and dynamics of such regimes across the intersections of gender, civil society and democratic backsliding, not the least in the Mediterranean.

Last, it also widens knowledge of anti-gender mobilization against feminist organizing, by shedding light on empirical cases of hybrid and authoritarian regimes such as this study on competitive-authoritarian Turkey (Kretschmer/Meyer 2013). As such, this study is taking further conversation about the gendered nature and dynamics at play in de-democratic, illiberal transformations in Turkey (Eslen-Ziya/Kazanoğlu 2020; Yabancı 2019), as well as the Mediterranean and European region (Feliu 2005; Wang et al. 2017; Grzebalska/Petó 2018).

While similarities appear in how hybrid and authoritarian regimes in the MENA region (and beyond) strategically instrumentalize and oppose gender equality and women's rights (Griffon et al. 2021), the particularities in Turkey unfold especially in the central role given to women-GONGOs in contesting feminist activism and furthering polarization within the women's movement and civil society (Al-Ali 2002). In Turkey, feminist organizing currently merely operates from an "outsider" position as a consequence of the country's gendered de-democratization. Thus, research may further benefit from studies of feminist strategies across different decision-making levels within such hostile regime contexts or across regional-global civil society intersections (Beckwith

2007), but also under which circumstances cooperation or alliances between "outsiders" and women-GONGOs may be possible.

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Appendix

Table 1. Overview of interviewed women's organizations (by geographical region in Turkey; confidential)

Organization	Region
Organization 1	Marmara
Organization 2	Marmara
Organization 3	Marmara
Organization 4	Marmara
Organization 5	Marmara
Organization 6	Marmara
Organization 7	Mediterranean
Organization 8	Aegean
Organization 9	Aegean
Organization 10	Mediterranean
Organization 11	Marmara
Organization 12	Black Sea
Organization 13	Central Anatolia
Organization 14	Central Anatolia
Organization 15	Southeast Anatolia
Organization 16	Southeast Anatolia
Organization 17	Southeast Anatolia
Organization 18	Mediterranean
Organization 19	Mediterranean
Organization 20	East Anatolia
Organization 21	Marmara

Interview guide

Part 1: Introduction and background

Can you introduce the women's organization briefly? What are your main activities/programs; what are the organization's objectives as a women's organization in Turkey?

How would you describe the relevance of your women's organization on local/regional level? How in relation to the women's movement in Turkey?

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Can you describe the values of your organization?

To what extent would you describe yourself as a feminist women's organization? How does your organization define "feminist"/feminism?

Part 2: Civil society and women's organizations in Turkey

How do you describe civil society and the women's movement(s) in current Turkey? How do you locate your women's organization within these?

Given your activities/programs/goals as a women's organization, how do you experience the civic space/political space for you to realize these in Turkey currently?

To what extent has your women's organizations perceived that this space (or the circumstances to operate in this space) has changed, and how?

What role do you consider that women's organizations such as yours have for women in Turkey?

Follow-up 1: Do you consider your organization as representing/supporting all women in Turkish society?

Follow-up 2: What role do you perceive that other women's organizations in Turkey have?

Part 3: Linking civil society, women's organizations and women's political representation in Turkey

How do you describe the link/relationship between women's organizations in civil society and women in formal political decision-making in Turkey?

Is the question of women's representation in politics in Turkey relevant for the activities/programs/objectives of your organization? If so, how?

Do you think that increased political representation of women in Turkey would have implications for women's organizations in civil society such as yours? How?

Do you consider your organization's activities/programs/objectives connected to women's political empowerment (direct or indirect), and if so, how?

What barriers to women's political empowerment in Turkey do you perceive/experience?