



“KAMER, a women's center and an experiment in cultivating cosmopolitan norms”

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SYNOPSIS

In this article, we shall focus on KAMER-Women's Center, the largest women's NGO organized in Eastern and South Eastern Turkey to see how it negotiates and nurtures cosmopolitan norms among women of conflicting persuasions. KAMER is a striking case because it has been successful in bringing together women with deep hostilities and uniting them over human rights based feminist values in a struggle against gender based violence. KAMER thus cultivates cosmopolitan norms through its unique struggle against gender based violence. Its non-violent activism is particularly noteworthy because the organization reaches women in the context of militarized ethnic nationalisms, both Turkish and Kurdish, in Kurdish populated Southeastern Turkey.

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Danielle S. Allen, in her book *Talking to Strangers* (Allen, 2004), advocates “political friendship” to deepen democracy. She argues that “citizenship is not fundamentally a matter of institutional duties but of how one learns to negotiate loss and reciprocity” (ibid, 165). According to Allen, it is by “talking to strangers” especially those one fears that we can cultivate trust and expand democratic citizenship, which in turn can help expand opportunities as well as autonomy. In this piece, we examine how the Women's Center, KAMER, in its struggle to fight against gender based violence, provided an opportunity for women to “talk to strangers”. We argue that it is by talking to strangers, that we can cultivate cosmopolitan norms among people with competing visions of the good life and different identity claims.

By cosmopolitan norms we have in mind those norms that operate at a universal level because of our commitment to the transcendent and equal dignity of all persons (Post, 2006, 2). Endorsement of these cosmopolitan norms involves the interaction between the particular in the local contexts and the universal upheld in the international/global one. Rather than serving as tools of imperialism that the strong employ to

dominate the weak, they are meant to expand opportunities for the people who seek to live by them (Benhabib, 2006). Cosmopolitan norms are expected to be the weapons of the weak to seek justice, freedom and civil rights. Accordingly, human rights and as such women's rights are based on cosmopolitan norms.

Turkey has rightly been identified as a context with various implications for the debate on cosmopolitan norms and the prospects of building cosmopolitan citizenship (Fisher Onar & Paker, 2012, 376). The founding of the Republic embodied the promise of cosmopolitan norms, despite the hold of local restraints. However, what gained prominence was a narrowly defined secularist and unitary nation building project, which precluded the fulfillment of the promise. Although democratization became a popular organizing principle for governments after the 1950s, Turkey's political experience in the past 60 years has been shaped by military coups and authoritarian governments which have not respected civil liberties or universal human rights norms. The arduous struggle for democratization is taking place in a heterogeneous context where the ideal of a homogenous nation state has been challenged effectively at least since the 1980s. Within this heterogeneous context of citizenship, conflicting visions of a good life including those of conservative Sunni Muslims, heterodox Alevis, and ethnic Kurds as well as secular liberals compete with one another.

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Nora Fisher Onar and Hande Paker examine how women's groups with different persuasions and diverse understandings of women's rights come together over particular goals, to shed light on cosmopolitan practices (*ibid*). In this article, we shall focus on one specific women's organization, KAMER-Women's Center, to see how it negotiates and nurtures cosmopolitan norms among women of conflicting persuasions. KAMER is a striking case because it has been successful in bringing together women with deep hostilities and uniting them over human rights based feminist values in a struggle against gender based violence. KAMER thus cultivates cosmopolitan norms through its unique struggle against gender based violence. Its non-violent activism is particularly noteworthy because the organization reaches women in the context of militarized ethnic nationalisms, both Turkish and Kurdish, in Kurdish populated Southeastern Turkey.

We briefly explore how KAMER does so in the two neighboring provinces of Tunceli and Elazığ based on research we conducted from January 2006 to June 2007 on gender based violence in Turkey. As part of this project, we visited twenty of the twenty-three local provincial KAMER organizations in Eastern and Southeastern Turkey.² We conducted in depth interviews with 83 women associated with KAMER including those in positions of leadership as well as others who received support from KAMER and attended the "awareness workshops" convened by the organization. We were able to conduct focus groups with women who attended or were attending these workshops. We made use of secondary materials published by KAMER, including the project evaluation report commissioned by the organization in 2006.

CONTEXT of KAMER ACTIVISM: intertwining of the global and the local with Kurdish and feminist links

KAMER generates a dialog between cosmopolitan norms and local concerns in a globalizing context. After 1980, Turkey exposed itself not merely to global markets but also to the influence of expanding universal human rights regimes. In 1985, she signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Types of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). In 1987, she applied to the European Union for membership, recognized the right of individual complaint to the European Commission of Human Rights, and later signed both the Council of Europe and the United Nations Conventions for Prevention of Torture and Inhuman Treatment (Toprak, 1996, 97–98). In 1990, she signed the Paris Charter for a New Europe and in 1992 the Helsinki Summit Declaration on Human Rights. In 1999, Turkey became a candidate country to the EU and began accession negotiations in 2005.

It was in this context where institutional endorsement of universal human rights norms deepened that identity based conflicts surfaced in Turkey. Meanwhile, feminist ideas penetrated Turkish borders, and a significant feminist movement began demanding the expansion of women's rights. The concept of women's rights as human rights gradually permeated the society. Concomitant with this opening up was the intensification of Kurdish revolt against the state and the armed struggle that followed. In the 1990s, both the feminist movement as well as the Kurdish insurrection were inspired by and made the universal concepts of human rights pertinent in the local context. Problems of hierarchy, patriarchy, domination

as well as rights to self-preservation, cultural rights, and group rights became familiar concepts. Both the Kurdish issue and the local feminist context were shaped in the global context of cosmopolitan norms. KAMER was founded in this juncture. We shall briefly underline the local underpinnings of this juncture.

Local Kurdish context

The Kurdish minority in Turkey can be examined, in Appadurai's words "as a metaphor and a reminder of the betrayal of the classical national project" (Appadurai, 2006, 43). Even though the war of independence (1919–1922) was fought by a coalition of Muslim groups, particularly Turks and Kurds, against the Greeks in the West, Armenians in the East, and the French in the South, soon after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, a separate ethnic and linguistic Kurdish identity was formally denied (Yegen, 1996). During the formative years of the Republic, between 1924 and 1938, there were 18 revolts in the Eastern regions of the country and 16 of these involved the Kurds (Kirişçi & Winrow, 1995). In 1937–38, the local resistance to national state authority in Dersim – a province we shall further discuss in this paper – was used as a pretext to a major state operation which resulted in massacre, annihilation, and the renaming of the province as Tunceli. The relationship between the Turkish state and the Kurdish groups took its most violent turn after 1980s as the PKK (Workers' Party of Kurdistan) emerged in armed struggle against the state for independence. Between the years 1984 and 1999, at least 30 thousand people died in combat between the state and PKK, hundreds of people disappeared, at least 3500 villages were evacuated and at least two million people were internally displaced (Bozarslan, 2008, 352–353).

The centralizing Turkish state failed to provide economic development and political liberalism to the Kurdish dominated Eastern region. Economically the most underdeveloped in the country, the region was not offered the educational and health services available to other regions. As late as 1992, the GNP per capita in most eastern provinces was merely about \$300 in contrast to the \$2032 average in Turkey (cited in Bozarslan, 2008, 334). Kurdish demands for cultural rights such as education in mother tongue were denied and severely repressed. Until the late 2000s, the state aimed to enforce homogeneity to cultivate a unified nation of Turks. Meanwhile, as Nicole Watts put it, "pro-Kurdish" activists, "linked by ideas, institutions, technology and travel" established a "Virtual Kurdistan West" (Watts, 2004, 122) in pursuit of Kurdish rights. The local ethnic conflict was framed as a human rights issue by the Kurds despite the efforts of the Turkish state to the contrary.

Local feminist context

The expanding feminist consciousness and feminist discourse in Turkey were the other important links to the cosmopolitan human rights regime in the local context of KAMER (Arat, 2008; Berktaş, 2001; Bora & Günel, 2002). Since the early 1980s, second wave feminism began taking root in Turkey. Women organized in defense of their rights and in defiance of the state

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