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(Un)politicising Awareness –
Gender Projects and the State in Southeast Turkey
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1. Introduction

"Jump in, Zeynep!" Aliye said, from the front seat of a truck and with a big smile on her face. It was a few days after she started to wear a headscarf following the abolishment of the headscarf ban for civil servants.[1] Her completely new look was strange to my eyes, but I was starting to get used to it. We were heading to the "awareness workshop" that she was coordinating as part of a larger gender project. Aliye seemed proud of arranging the vehicle and the driver, which were necessary because the workshop was going to take place in a far-off neighbourhood on the outskirts of the city. When we arrived at the state-sponsored women's centre, housewives were working busily to produce labour-intensive handmade souvenirs, which were going to "empower them" by being sold to tourists. The women had already been informed that there was going to be some sort of training on women's rights. Aliye gathered them and briefly explained the day's program. Then, she quickly hung up posters for the project and prepared biscuits and soft drinks as offerings for each workshop participant – these incentives were effective in ensuring "participation and project ownership by beneficiaries," as grant proposal guidelines state. She also took some pictures, to be later used as evidence, as demanded by the funding institution's progress reports.

Moderators then grouped us, ushered us into separate rooms, and the workshops started behind closed doors. Our moderator was a psychologist working at the state-funded women's shelter. She introduced herself and then asked us to find a name for our group. "What about 'snowdrops,'" somebody said quickly. Another proposed, "Aren't we women all 'two legged demons'?" Everybody laughed. Then, a woman offered "desperate housewives" but her neighbour rejected, stating firmly: "Of course not! What is the point of attending this workshop if we are 'desperate'?" Finally, one of the participants ran out of patience and said that we had lost enough time: "Just cut the discussion!" Then the moderator interrupted and asked with a soft voice: "Have you ever thought about why we have such different ideas?" One woman replied that they are not aware of each other's thoughts because they avoid having sincere conversations out of fear of giving cause for gossip, "which is very common among us Kurds," she said. Perhaps gossiping was not about being Kurdish, but about their level of education, another woman argued. They all agreed that educated people also misbehave, but that the damage caused by gossip varies between different groups. In the end, the group deemed that the difference between the place of educated and uneducated girls

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[1] Turkey lifted rules banning women from wearing the headscarf in state institutions (except for the judiciary, military, and police) in 2013.

in their society was enormous. One woman explained bitterly that her parents had not allowed her to study, and added, "I wish I was born male." To which another woman added: "Then my parents wouldn't have force me to marry at an early age."

"Gender awareness" workshops, such as this one, are designed to guide participants to critically reflect on their personal experiences and to shed light on the ways in which gender inequalities operate in their everyday lives. These are the primary activities of women's organisations in the context of the "NGOization of feminism," or the "shift away from experience-oriented movement politics toward goal- and intervention-oriented strategies" in singular and isolated projects (Lang 1997, 116). Together with skill-building training courses, and incentives to initiate entrepreneurship and schooling, gender awareness workshops are the main tools that women's NGOs use in their projects and for the larger goal of women's empowerment.

In this article, I provide a critical assessment of empowerment in the context of the Southeast Anatolia Region of Turkey (or southeast Turkey), using the example of one particular gender awareness project. I focus on women's responses to, and engagements with, the empowerment discourses and practices that surround them, besides other normative political projects. I look not only at women's organisations, and their relations with public institutions, but also at participants' perceptions of gender projects and differences among women more generally. I aim to contextualise empowerment in this particular locality instead of looking at national level feminist activist/scholar circles, which have already been addressed in the literature (Coşar and Özkan-Kerestecioğlu 2013). For this purpose, I use data collected during my yearlong ethnographic fieldwork project conducted in 2013/14 in Tigris,[2] an ethnically mixed provincial centre. I chose this particular city because it had become the hub of funds for gender and development projects.[3] I visited women's centres, spoke with development experts, as well as with various national, regional, and local women's organisation members. I talked to women who were targeted by development business of the nation-state of Turkey and also by globally-framed women's human rights concerns. I included actors and institutions with transnational, national, and local connections. For this reason, my field is multileveled and my analysis is multifocal. I collected biographies of coordinators, trainers, and participants within these women's centres as well as volunteers and professionals engaged in civil society organisations, and asked questions about their experiences and perceptions of gender-related projects. I analysed the material by following the situational intersectionality approach of Nira Yuval Davis (2011), which makes a differentiation between social agents' positionings in the course of socio-economic power relations, their identification and belonging processes, and their ethical standpoints or normative values.

I observed, however, that gender awareness workshops do not "adopt" an intersectional approach, which is particularly relevant for the everyday lives of women in southeast

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[2] "Tigris" is a pseudonym like all other names in this text. I have anonymised all information about the research setting, including the location name, in order to preserve anonymity and help ensure the protection of interlocutors.

[3] Amongst all the other cities in the Southeast Anatolia Region, I decided to conduct my research in Tigris because it was not directly influenced by the infrastructural efforts of state-sponsored development. However, the number of social projects targeting women and youth were higher in Tigris in comparison to other places. Interest in gender issues, by international organisations, was rather concentrated in Tigris because it was relatively safe from military conflict compared to other cities in the region.

Turkey. While there was a clear focus on gendered identifications and related differences, as well as inequalities, other identifications, such as ethnic belonging or class, were not questioned and discussed during the workshops. Rather, the latter were reduced to homogeneous and abstract dichotomies. Besides, as I will show below, gendered power structures embedded in governmental bodies were visible already when women work to organise events for empowerment. The available tools, provided by the state and various women's organisations, for those who want a life outside of the family are neither sufficient nor powerful. Particularly in southeast Turkey, the state is not open to claims for more rights and freedoms - let alone women's objections to gendered structures and critical standpoints. Consequently, women with gender awareness mostly prefer to make small modifications in their lives and focus on their self-improvement or individual careers, which holds them back from politicising private spheres in a collective fashion.

2. Situating Empowerment in Southeast Turkey

While Naila Kabeer (2005) conceptualises empowerment in terms of a change in one's position towards being able to make choices, she underscores that the availability of *alternative* choices is a must. She also adds that "alternatives must not only exist, they must also be seen to exist" by subordinate groups like women, who "are likely to accept, and even collude with, their lot in society, if challenging this either does not appear possible or carries heavy personal and social costs" (2005, 14). Similarly, while conceptualizing empowerment, Jo Rowlands (1997) points to "power within," or analysing personal experience to understand how power operates in everyday lives, and developing the self-confidence in order to act for change towards a better state. For her, empowerment relies on "power within" together with "power to," or collective action to challenge structural bases of inequalities (Rowlands 1997). When the link between power within and power to is absent, a "paradox" emerges between powerless groups who do not have the means to effect change and demand rights (Kabeer 2005).

Research shows that the version of empowerment that dominates discourses and practices in various parts of the world fails to have the relationality between "power within" and "power to," that is, gender awareness and collective action (Cornwall and Edwards 2015, 400). "Empowerment" is useful for governmental or non-governmental organisations while writing externally-funded project proposals, as it is a globally established term of development language embedded in grant rules and guidelines. It was established as a norm in United Nations (UN) development programs to eradicate poverty (Oxaal and Baden 1997) and turned into another technocratic "buzzword" (Cornwall and Brock 2005; Merry 2011). In most of the cases, women's organisations tend to propose activities focusing on trainings and workshops for skill building and income generation for increasing women's education, employment, and participation levels, instead of carrying out activities for outspoken advocacy or activism for the expansion of rights – and more importantly, for mobilising women. Promoting the neoliberal logic for self-improvement (Sharma 2008), the empowerment rhetoric functions as an "anti-politics machine" (Ferguson 1990) by replacing the feminist political project for equality and justice within economic goals of capitalist growth (Cornwall, Harrison, and Whitehead 2007). However, "women's empowerment" as a development tool still dominates political strategies, for example within the European Union's (EU) latest Gender Action Plan 2016-2020, which once again suggests activities for building awareness (EU,

2016). The question is, then, how these policies and strategies work, interact with cultural and religious norms, and travel on the ground to different localities (Kardam 2004; Walby 2004).

In Turkey, the state is the key mediator, or filter, between global ideas and practices, as well as within their local footprints. Regardless of being national, international, or supranational, all organisations and bodies must act through the laws, regulations, institutions or officers of the state. In this context, women reflecting state-sponsored empowerment projects in southeast Turkey were stuck between feelings of alienation with regard to integrating their empowerment practices and marginalisation in terms of their self-understanding of themselves as part of a larger feminist movement (Savran 1998, 3). Externally funded projects are essential for women's movements in Turkey to sustain themselves and for lobbying (Tekeli 2004). However, within the limits of project-based activism, or "project feminism" (Bora 2006), feminists had to compromise more comprehensive and long-run political claims. On the one hand, because the state provides financial assistance only to projects and organisations that are in line with governmental ideologies and interests, women's organisations define and limit their activities accordingly. On the other hand, due to the selective funding of projects and organisations, the job market created by the project-based development industry is not open to everyone with a good idea.

Since the 1990s, transnational discourses and practices of empowerment have been dominant in the Southeast Anatolia Region. Therefore, gender awareness development practices have been going on for a long time now in this region, where the majority of the Arabic and Kurdish populations of the country live. This concentration was connected to a long-lasting, state-sponsored, rural agricultural development project, which adopted the "human development" approach and initiated social projects to empower women.[4] National and transnational women's organisations have also been actively involved in empowerment activities in the region, with the financial support of transnational development organisations such as the UN and the EU. Together with the state, these diverse organisations and development actors create an "assemblage of objectives, knowledges, techniques, and practices" (Li 2005, 386). I understand the work of this assemblage in the Southeast as a small modernisation project of "social engineering" (Çarkoğlu and Eder 2005) within the larger modernisation project of the Turkish Republic. This modernisation project relies on binaries which highlight a break from the Ottoman past, such as Islamic-secular, traditional-modern, and backwardness-development. It is also a deeply gendered project (Kandiyoti 1987), putting the expectation on female citizens to be modern housewives (Navaro-Yaşın 2000; White 2003). Furthermore, Turkish modernisation is at the same time a project of nationalism, which excludes non-Sunni and non-Turkish groups – such as Armenians, Alevis, and Kurds – from being full citizens (Maksudyan 2005; Yeğen 2009; Ünlü 2016). Accordingly, human social development programs in the Southeast were criticized for being an alternative governmental strategy to military measures against the Kurdish uprising,[5] and of having a hidden agenda of attempting to assimilate the Kurdish population in the region (Özok-Gündoğan 2005; Çağlayan 2013). Although these projects are still well received by

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[4] This state-sponsored regional development project is called the Southeast Anatolia Project or simply GAP (the Turkish acronym for *Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi*).

[5] The armed conflict between the Turkish Military and the Kurdistan Worker's Party or PKK, which is the main armed organisation of the Kurdish nationalist movement, had already been going on for thirty years, since 1984.

housewives living in the urban settlements of the region, they remain controversial concerning minority rights, and are therefore exhaustively discussed within critical feminist groups.[6]

Beyond the development context, there is a new political condition in Turkey, which has been created by the single party governments of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi,* or AKP). When the AKP came to power in 2002, it was a convincing model of religious democracy both for Euro-American powers and for other Muslim societies. In its more than 15 years of rule, however, the party has changed everyday life in Turkey, but there have been no advancements in terms of rights and freedoms. This is particularly traceable in the AKP governments' gender policy and perspective on the Kurdish question. For instance, in 2005, reforms recognising the sexual and bodily autonomy and rights of citizens – women especially – in the Turkish Penal Code entered into force. This was the result of government pressure by women's and queer communities' organisations. In this way, Turkey showed determination to end violence against women (İlkkaracan 2007). However, gender equality has never been the priority area of politicians, whose political perspectives tend not to be very stable, and support for gender equality depends on the socio-political context in Turkey (Kardam and Acuner 2003, 103). Accordingly, women's bodies and sexualities were strategically and increasingly utilised by the AKP "as discursive opportunity structures that ensure the maintenance of the patriarchal gender regime" (Cindoğlu and Ünal 2017, 3). Moreover, the AKP demonstrated a partial acknowledgement of the use of the Kurdish language and symbolism in public - owing mostly to grassroots movements utilising the climate of the European Union accession process for Turkey (Ayata 2011). The AKP lifted the state of emergency rule in southeast Turkey,[7] and Kurdish culture and politics as well as civil society organisations and activities in the region were more visible as an extension of the so-called "peace process" when I was conducting my fieldwork.[8] However, no peaceful and sustainable solution could be achieved regarding the Kurdish question. Therefore, despite the change of the political regime in Turkey, central powers continue to use the broad contours of an existing repertoire, especially in the fields of gender policy and the Kurdish question – with interpretations and modifications defined by the needs of the day.

According to Dicle Koğacıoğlu (Ayata 2011), the nation-state – together with global discourses – historically and systematically located "tradition" in the Southeast and fixed

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[6] In 1990s, in *Pazartesi,* a feminist weekly published in Istanbul, author Ayşe Düzkan blamed the state for having "hidden agendas," such as the assimilation of Kurdish women and exploitation of cheap labour for the emerging industries in the region via the women's centres. For the article, see: Ayşe Düzkan, "Devletin Eli Uzanıyor Mu Kalkıyor Mu? [State's Hand, Reaching or Threatens?]," *Pazartesi*, Nisan 1998. In response, Ayşe Gül Karayazgan criticized Düzkan in the same publication for speaking on behalf of women who actually participate in the activities of women's centres, rather than showing respect for their decisions. See: Ayşe Gül Karayazgan, "Biz Kadınlar Diyememek Bir Türlü… [Inability to Say 'We Women…']," *Pazartesi*, May 1998. Karayazgan's critique undermined power relations in the region, which should be taken into consideration while hearing and representing women's voices. For a discussion on the debate, see: Hande Sözer, "ÇATOM Project: Field Supervisors In-between 'the State' and 'the Social'" (Boğaziçi University, 2004).

[7] Due to armed conflict, almost all provinces in southeast Turkey had been under a state of emergency rule on-and-off for 15 years since 1987.

[8] Most of the Kurdish education institutions and media organisations, as well as civil society organisations, working in the region or on issues related to the Kurdish question that existed during the time of my fieldwork were closed down during the state of emergency declared after the failed *coup d'état* in July 2015. See: Bilge Yeşil, "Authoritarian Turn or Continuity? Governance of Media through Capture and Discipline in the AKP Era," *South European Society and Politics* 23, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 239–57.

cultural connotations of tradition – especially, gender-based violence – to the Kurdish iden-
tity. Erasing political agency in a highly political context, the idea of "saving (other) women"
from the dangers of their culture, which has to be improved and modernised in line with
Western liberal ideas of women's human rights, was also criticised by Lila Abu-Lughod
(2013). For her, such an understanding is dangerous in itself, because it has already been
utilised to create grounds for military interventions, for example in Afghanistan and Iraq.
In the extensions of this understanding to transnational lives in a European context, Sabine
Strasser (2014) shows how the Austrian legal provisions to prevent "violence in the name of
tradition" among Turkish minorities create a "repressive autonomy" that limits the free
choice of women. Therefore, housewives in the Southeast of Turkey, as innocent figures
free from the messiness of market and politics, but also victims of the violent culture that
they were born into, constitute the perfect candidates upon which to direct attention of
power to empower development strategies. I suggest understanding the institutional prac-
tices of the state, and other organisations targeting women in the Southeast and in the
name of empowerment, within this framework of political morality.

3. A Project of "One's Own": We Are Women!

On a sunny afternoon in autumn Aliye, Nalan, and I were sitting in the kitchen, which was
the warmest part of Nalan's new office. Outside of the window, we were watching loud ma-
chines drilling into the earth as they began construction on another multi-storey apartment
house, the type of which was being erected everywhere in the modern part of Tigris. These
modern structures were neither bizarre nor surprising. But we viewed them as unfortunate
in relation to the charming old town area of Tigris. In fact, tall buildings and unplanned
urbanization are a shared pattern in both big and small settlements all across Turkey. The
government has been encouraging them and people call it "development."

The rhythmic sound of construction machines was filling the room while Nalan's vo-
lunteer, Hazal, was serving tea for us. Nalan and Aliye were having an intense conversation
on the form, content, and approach of the awareness workshops that they were organising
together. Nalan was not providing full support to Aliye. "I am not officially involved in this
project. I cannot lend my handbook for your workshops because it is copyright material, you
know. It would be illegal to share it with you," explained Nalan. Aliye was disappointed but
stopped insisting more.

Aliye is the daughter of one of the most powerful families of Tigris with an Arabic eth-
nic background. She started to work for the municipality, the elected local government, after
she graduated from university and came back to her hometown. Since then, she had shown
a genuine interest in women's organisations as well as the meetings and events of on-going
gender projects in Tigris. As a worker for the AKP municipality, she was also enthusiasti-
cally taking part in the party's regular visits to recruit party members to households. I never
heard her define herself as a feminist although I knew she was curious about feminist ideas.
Her main impulse was to do something for other women who needed to be saved. Her in-
spiration was the president of the AKP's women's branch in Tigris, who was coordinating

many projects aimed at women's empowerment, and who received financial backing from local governments through state funding.[9]

Aliye's enthusiasm towards build a career in civil society was welcomed by the local coordinator of the UN project on gender equality, a woman named Oya from Izmir, Turkey's third largest city located on the western coast. According to the objectives of the UN project she was working for, Oya was supposed to establish a Gender Equality Office in the Tigris Municipality and find suitable personnel. Aliye was the perfect candidate for this office, and therefore, Oya invested in training her. Oya also designed a project with the purpose of developing the municipality's "capacity" for gender equality activities. The project was based on awareness-raising workshops moderated by psychologists, targeting women living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, which are usually where Kurdish people with rural to urban migration backgrounds reside.[10] She encouraged Aliye to apply for financial support, on behalf of the municipality, from the project grant that the local government distributes. This is how the *We Are Women!* project came into being, and how Aliye's career began.

Oya strategically formulated Aliye's project proposal in the way that the local government would accept and fund: Workshops were defined as psychological support groups aimed at helping women develop a stronger sense of self-worth rather than spaces to reflect on the structurally disadvantageous positioning of women in the society due to their gender. Moreover, Oya established a local cooperation between the municipality and an openly feminist organisation by avoiding certain unwritten rules precluding them from local funding. She first told Aliye that she was not experienced enough to coordinate a project on her own, and then asked for external and unofficial support from Nalan. Nalan has been working for the Kamer Foundation and could ensure that the project would be run more in line with the objectives of the UN's empowerment approach. Both Aliye and Nalan agreed to work together in *We Are Women!*

Oya knew that Nalan's official involvement would put the financial support of Aliye's project at risk because state officials perceived Kamer as a pro-Kurdish organisation.[11] The Kamer Foundation is a well-established regional women's organisation working against violence – and especially gender-based violence – in the southern and eastern provinces of Turkey since the early 1990s (Arat and Altınay 2015). Until the 2000s, the word "organisation" (*örgüt*) in Turkish connoted the armed organisation of the Kurdish movement, the PKK,[12] and was therefore criminalised, especially in the context of the southeastern part of Turkey. However, the establishment of civil society organisations was facilitated and encouraged after legal amendments to expand freedoms of association were passed by the Turkish Parliament in accordance with Turkey's EU candidacy. Turkey's EU accession process enabled women's organisations in the region to become established and to multiply in number (Keysan 2012). Kamer was established in this context and opened offices in all eastern provinces.

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[9] This funding body is named SODES. It was first initiated in the Southeast Anatolia Region in 2008 with the aim of supporting public institutions and local NGOs in the development of human resources in the region. However, it later became very popular and spread to other cities across Turkey. Currently, the financial source of SODES is the Ministry of Development within the central government. For more information see: "T.C. Kalkınma Bakanlığı Sosyal Yardım Programı," accessed January 9, 2018, http://www.sodes.gov.tr.

[10] Towards the end of my fieldwork, "Syrian migrants," people running away from the civil war in Syria and moving to the outskirts of Tigris, replaced "Kurds" in this tacit definition of target groups.

[11] In other cities, Kamer's local projects enjoyed access to local grant schemes.

[12] This was the case in the judgement of youth political organisations after the *coup d'état* of 12 March 1971.

The foundation also launched "awareness workshops" which transformed over the years to adopt a non-hierarchical philosophy between the moderator and participants (Belge 2012). The Kamer Foundation's feminist political stand resonates very much with the gender perspective of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, or HDP). Moreover, due to the fact that Kamer operates in provinces with majority Kurdish populations, most of the women working for the organisation have organic ties with the Kurdish political movement. This proximity enabled state officials to reach quick conclusions about the Kamer Foundation and to criminalise women who work for them on these grounds. Although neither Nalan nor the previous Tigris representative of Kamer had a Kurdish background, civil servants and military officials accused them both for supporting terrorism on various occasions and tried to prevent their activities. In such situations, Nalan usually reminded officials that her brother is a well-known scholar who sympathises with the ruling party.

Not only Nalan, but also Aliye and Oya, were facing different forms of resistance coming from local state officials against gender-oriented activities and projects. Aliye experienced challenges while organising her workshops, especially when trying to arrange a space for gathering participants. For instance, on one occasion Aliye wanted to hold a meeting in the Quran schools which are regulated by the state. However, this time she could not get permission from the *müftü,* the provincial authority of the central government's Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı).*[13] The *müftü* used to allow her to use Quran schools for the municipality's other activities, but this time he was against it because he did not want to support a project run in cooperation with the UN. His rationale was that "UN agencies were serving alcohol during their events." The project had nothing to do with the UN, except for Aliye's unofficial cooperation with Oya.

On another occasion, Aliye was repeatedly complaining about a particular *muhtar,* the lowest-level governmental administrator elected directly by the residents of a neighbourhood. Aliye was organising one of her workshops in the neighbourhood where she was residing with her family. She said that when she asked for a space for women to gather for the workshop, the *muhtar* refused her request in an unexpected way. He said that he would never allow her to gather women together to teach them how to disobey their husbands at home. This was a serious problem because the *muhtar* is the one through which welfare benefits are distributed.[14] These social benefits are crucial for women to provide for their households. Therefore, afraid of losing their access to these benefits, women living in the neighbourhood hesitated in participating in Aliye's project.

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[13] The Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs is a governmental body that provides and regulates official Islamic activities in Turkey. All mosques belong to *Diyanet*, and all *imams* (Muslim preachers) in those mosques are life-long appointed civil servants assigned by the central government. After the 1980s, *Diyanet* became the largest transnational network of Islam in Europe as well. For more on this subject, see: Thijl Sunier and Nicolaas Landman. *Transnational Turkish Islam* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Pivot, 2014).

[14] The *muhtar* acts like an information source and is also a facilitator of benefit distributions. In the brochure for the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, various social supports are listed under the titles of "Family Support," "Education Support," "Health Support," "Disability Support" and "Supports for Extraordinary Situations." It is important to note that *muhtars* have been becoming more important political actors since Erdoğan began organising monthly meetings with them beginning in October 2015. He has invited them to become closely involved in collaborations with higher administrative bodies within the central government. For additional information, see: Tülay Çetingüleç, "Orwell's 1984 Comes to Life in Erdoğan's 2015 Turkey Read," February 8, 2016, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/ turkey-erdogan-intelligence-support-from-headmen.html.

In both cases, Aliye could ask help from the municipality, where she was working as a salaried officer. However, it was not clear whether she could reach someone above the *müftü* or the *muhtar,* who were directly connected to the central government. Therefore, Aliye decided to ask for help from her male kin. For instance, to change the *muhtar*'s mind, she relied on her brothers, who are powerful and influential men in Tigris. After they had gotten involved, the *muhtar* stepped back on his threats of preventing her project. However, Aliye still had to find another space for organising her workshops. Angry and frustrated with such problems, she later told me, "I learned that one has to be able to move through a very tiny hole in order to achieve something in this city when it comes to gender-related work. And one has to be persistent."

However, this also means that it is more difficult for an outsider to be flexible, or fit into "the tiny hole." For instance, when Oya offered to give gender training to the religious affairs personnel of Tigris, her offer was not accepted by the same *müftü* who had denied Aliye a place to meet. As I learned from Oya, the *müftü* rejected her proposal because she was not veiled, although the veil was not an official requirement for anything. Besides, according to the state hierarchy, the *müftü* was expected to provide the necessary assistance to Oya because she was technically working at a higher level than him, linked directly with the Ministry of Interior. This link with the most powerful agent of the central government was supposed to give a legal basis to Oya's bureaucratic authority and protect her project in the face of difficulty with local governments. However, neither Oya's authority nor that of her project was clearly defined by the public administration so that too much left up to local interpretation. After facing so many blockades, the planned training never took place because the *müftü* refused further negotiations. The proposed gender training became a dead-end because Oya, unlike a local organizer like Aliye or Nalan, was unable to develop a solution.

As her vague position demonstrates, Oya's project represents a perfect example of a lack of determination by the state, as well as the absence of government coordination and coherence, for gender equality. Working with the AKP governments requires creativity, flexibility, and alliances between women's organisations. Alternative solutions demand greater flexibility from some parties involved in alliances compared to their partners/co-organizers. Nalan's unofficial but personal involvement in Aliye's project illustrates this point. While partnerships are for short-term, project-based activities and not for structural change, women in this process accommodate within existing power relations. An example of this is Aliye's utilisation of the power of male kin to create a space of manoeuvre for local women working in NGOs. Therefore, the link between awareness and collective action is already broken at the organisational stage of the workshops. Still, core feminist ideas promoted by various transnational feminist networks do not totally melt away, but manage to haunt women in different ways. In the case of Aliye, for instance, who ambitiously holds onto the dream of having a project of her own, and thus, a seat among women defining the civil society scene of Tigris, she found herself going beyond career goals and reflecting on gendered roles and expectations in her personal life.

4. "Life and words" of Aliye

When Aliye left Nalan's office, Oya entered through the door. Nalan started to complain about Aliye's lack of feminist socialisation: "She believes that being subjected to violence is

about women's *fitrat* (nature)!" This was unfortunate wording. Denoting the Islamic doctrine of creational differences between women and men, the Arabic word *fitrat* created a public debate[15] after it was used to emphasise women's maternal roles by the Prime Minister at the time, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Özyeğin 2015). As the head of Kamer's Tigris Office, Nalan's experience working with women was based on various workshops and meetings planned by her organisation, which has organic ties with feminist circles critical of the government's gender policies. Therefore, she was familiar with this debate.

Soon after I learned about Aliye's *faux pas*, she told me that she did not believe in natural differences between women and men. Therefore, I understand that *fitrat* was a popular word of the day and that she used it just as a figure of speech. Aliye was neither familiar with the aforementioned circles, nor was she familiar with the feminist lingo or debates. Her experiences were based on the activities of local women's organisations that did not necessarily define themselves as feminists who are, for example, defending pro-choice arguments. Aliye initially started to work on gender projects within the AKP, as well as with pro-government state officials and local bureaucrats, who were quick in adopting Erdoğan's language.

Aliye supported Erdoğan and his government; however, this did not mean that she was defending all ideas behind his and his followers' discursive performances. After one of the awareness workshop sessions, Aliye and I were having lunch downtown. She was complaining about Oya's and Nalan's bossy behaviours in return for the little help they had given for her project. When I said that I could sympathise with Oya, as I used to work for the UN just like her, I could finally sense Aliye's attention and respect. She wanted to learn more about my research, and me. I explained to her my curiosities about gender and power in reference to what had been discussed during the workshop. Aliye said, "Well, I experience similar things with my boyfriend all the time." She was involved in a long-distance relationship, but she also confessed feeling emotionally distant from him for a while. He had seemed like an easy-going person at the beginning of their relationship but had become more intrusive in her life as time passed. After hearing this I asked:

> Z: In what ways, do you mean?
> A: For example, he says, I should not work extra hours, you know, for the project…
> Z: Perhaps his job doesn't demand working extra hours. Is that so?
> A: No, he works a lot and all the time! Even at nights.
> Z: Then, why doesn't he want you to work as much as you want?
> A: Because of his religious beliefs, [according to which] "women don't work!" [Muttering]
> Z: But you are a religious person too, and you want to work hard, right?
> A: Exactly. I don't share his opinion. When he sends me *hadiths* [sayings of the prophet Muhammad, intended to support his argument], I tell him that it is his misinterpretation. But then, he tells me that "certain things cannot be questioned in religion."
> Z: I understand the difficulty of arguing against holy sources… but perhaps you can explain to him that religious views and women's rights belong to separate fields of discussion.

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[15] In 2014, when Erdoğan repeated his views on gender equality, feminist groups released public statements to criticize his position. One of these statements was from the prominent feminist NGO Women for Women's Human Rights − New Ways: Basın Açıklaması: Fıtrat Değil Anayasa: "Kadınlar ve Erkekler Eşit Haklara sahiptir [Press Statement: Constitution not Nature: "Women and Men Have Equal Rights]." January 13, 2016, http://www.kadinininsanhaklari.org/basin-aciklamasi-fitrat-degil-anayasa-kadınlar-ve-erkekler-esit-haklara-sahiptir.

A: I am aware of it. I tell him that conditions were different in the prophet's time. Now we live in a different world…

I knew that Aliye's boyfriend would not be convinced by a non-religious argument – especially a feminist one. However, I was not knowledgeable enough about the Quran to build an argument that would win him over, and besides, the gender equality discourse that Aliye was using against him did not belong to religious reasoning but to a secular one. She was learning these arguments while she was organising workshops for others. However, Aliye made a distinction between the participants of the workshops and herself, which was inherently contradictory to the aim of building group identity through gender awareness.

Nalan explained to me once that empowerment was a process, and therefore, she did not assume that she was in a position to teach others. In this sense, she refused the idea of saving others. In workshops that she moderated there was no hierarchy. For her, it was an opportunity to share and acknowledge common problems so that everybody could learn from each other. She did not view herself as teaching Aliye either, although Aliye found Nalan's behaviours domineering. Meanwhile, Aliye was treating women in workshops in an authoritarian way. At times when I witnessed, she acted as though she was above everyone, including the moderators and participants. For instance, during one of the workshops when moderators were introducing the confidentiality rule, Aliye took the floor and authoritatively said: "I do not want things we talk about here to go out of this room. Never! I forbid you to gossip with your neighbours after these workshops!" When Nalan or Oya told her that she should behave differently, Aliye did not comprehend on what grounds they were criticising her. As a result, she became bitter and distant from them.

On the one hand, Aliye perceived herself not as a "victim" but as a "saviour." On the other hand, in our private conversations, she was eager to talk about how close she felt to women complaining about their husbands because she had very similar and unresolved conflicts with her boyfriend. Her belonging as a Muslim woman conflicted with the way that her boyfriend was positioning her. Additionally, the more she heard other women talking about their gendered experiences, the more convincing feminist arguments became for her – even if she would not yet reflect upon the emerging mismatch between her life and words. She was adopting new values, and her in-betweenness was confusing both for her and for others, who relied on her despite her apparent contradictions.

5. Differences Negotiated (or Not)

Here I narrate my observations from a particular session that Nalan organised and moderated in the scope of a project that the Kamer Foundation ran with the help of third party funding in the beginning of November 2013. Questions I was interested in learning about, as I observed this workshop and others, included: How do women learn from each other? How do they discuss the heaviest topics in their lives open-heartedly with strangers? How do they claim autonomy about gender relations and how do they develop resistance to their "sister's" claims? By this I mean, how do they deal with tension while negotiating their conflicting values? And finally, where does gender awareness leads? In general, within the workshops that I witnessed, women's stories and their reactions to the facilitator's answers were very similar to each other, although individual workshops, their content, and the composition of participants varied. Usually, the moderator introduced themes step by step and

asked women to share and reflect on their personal experiences. Most of the time the discussion flowed spontaneously. Another important aspect was that sometimes participants had previously attended other, similar workshops, and these women tended to stimulate the debate for those who attended for the first time. Interestingly, while listening, I found that the Kamer session greatly resembled sessions of *We Are Women!*

The session started at the large room of Kamer's office precisely at the planned time. We were a dozen women sitting in a circle, and some women's children were playing in the next room, without interrupting us. After introducing ourselves to each other, Nalan began the first theme, which was childhood. She asked why dresses and toys for boys and girls were different from each other. Women started to discuss the topic freely with examples from their own lives. A woman remembered that she never had a gun because she was a girl, although she liked gun toys a lot when she was a child. Others also gave similar examples. Highlighting differences between girls and boys evolved to a realisation of parents' different attitudes to their daughters and boys. A woman said that she never felt loved as much as her male siblings. She said her parents loved her brothers more only because they were boys. It was clear that this remark made women reflect on their own childhood memories. They were suddenly deeply sad, and this created a cold silence in the room. Moments of cold silence, such as this, recurred frequently after other difficult discussions during the session. A woman broke the silence by referring to the desire to have a male child, and that she had a lot of children for this very reason. Another woman supported by saying, "And we all know that this is especially the case here, in the East." She was referring to a national-level divide within Turkey. Other women nodded with their heads that "the East" was different from "the West" of the country in terms of parents' gender-based discrimination against their own children.

We moved from talking about childhood to marriage. Somebody said that while a man could get married after divorce, it was not easy for women to do the same because of the moral judgements of the society. "Yet… there is a double-edged exception!" one said with a bitter tone, "Widower women are forced to marry their deceased husband's brother." Another woman reminded that men also could have more than one wife, although it was not legal. She said, "Whereas, a woman can never have two husbands!" A woman with big blue eyes reacted with an exaggerated expression: "Oh! I can't deal with one, what I would do if I had two husbands? May God forbid!" Everybody laughed at this joke and the heavy air in the room finally dissipated.

The name of this blue-eyed woman, in her 30s, was Nazmiye. This was her first time in an awareness workshop and Hazal, the volunteer from Kamer, invited her. Nazmiye was not shy, in fact she was very vocal and from time to time a challenger. She made jokes to entertain people but, at the same time, her statements were provocative and oppositional to Nalan's inputs. She came from a well-off family and was married to a successful local businessman.

Nazmiye was also a mother of two adolescents, whom she admitted that she treated unequally. While her boy, who was the younger one, had a cell phone and spent most of his time on the Internet, Nazmiye did not permit her daughter to have cell phone: "I also don't allow her to spend time on the Internet because I am afraid that she might find a boyfriend or what so ever. Then she would stop studying. I want her to study." But an experienced participant named Hale confronted Nazmiye. When she was a teenager, Hale had a

complicated relationship with her mother, who forbid her from using the Internet.[16] How-
ever, Hale was always finding a way to connect, and she met her husband via a friend-ma-
king website. As Hale explained:

> Yet, my mother still doesn't know that. When we finally decided to marry, I asked my hus-
> band to ask my hand from my father but we arranged things so that it looked like an ar-
> ranged marriage. We hid the fact from our parents. Believe me, your daughter can also
> find a way if she really wants to break your rules… [Pauses] Oh, for a moment I felt like my
> mother is sitting on your seat.

As she said, not only this experience but also many other things in her relationship with
her mother made Hale feel weak and even insecure. Awareness workshops that she atten-
ded made her feel powerful, but she was still hesitant about telling her mother the secret
about her choice of spouse. For her, to meet a strange man on the Internet, establish a ro-
mantic relationship based on trust, and eventually have a family were important achieve-
ments in her life – mainly because she did them all on her own, with consciously taken
steps, and without harming her honour.

Hale continued the discussion by saying that it was difficult for her to express herself,
not only to her mother but also to others. She shared a story about how she felt terrible about
sharing her opinions in public. Once, during a family dinner at her in-laws' house, she men-
tioned her desire to go back to high school. Her husband mocked her by saying, "So I should
hire a Russian nanny for the kids." Since migrant women from Russia are stigmatized as
disgraceful, the husband was implying that he might also have an affair with the nanny.
Hale had replied in range: "Fine with me, but then, you'll be ok when I'll hang out with boys
at the school." While Hale's husband found her reply amusing, others in the dinner took a
dim view of her. According to Hale, people who judged her for her remark preferred to take
her joke seriously rather than her wish to study. In this way, they questioned her morality
and punished her for demanding something for herself. Again Nazmiye broke the heavy
atmosphere in the room: "There are not any Russians but rather Syrians here, don't worry!"
Female migrants escaping from the war in Syria were also stigmatized in Tigris in the same
manner. Then, this time, she directed her criticism to Hale: "But you said that you were flir-
ting with men on the Internet rather than studying. So, I don't understand your ambition to
go back to school now, what's the point?" Hale explained that she had had a difficult family
life, and that she agreed to marry only if her husband would allow her to continue her stu-
dies. Although distance education was always an option, things didn't go as planned and
she had to postpone studying. She didn't want to postpone herself anymore.

The emphasis on schooling and having a degree made a woman, who had been silently
listening, speak for the first time. As I learned from others, she was the second and unoffi-
cial wife of a married man who doesn't allow her to work in a paid job. She said, "You know
what I've been through but please also know that I was educated for all this time. I mean
education does not always protect you." However, Hale defended the importance of educa-
tion. She gave the example of how her father lied to her mother about what is written in the
Quran. "Mother was illiterate and believed him when he said that the Quran forbids girls to
own or inherit property. This is why she didn't invest in me; she didn't even prepare a dowry

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[16] For a comprehensive ethnographic study on the role of communication technologies in everyday life in
Southeast Turkey, see: Elisabetta Costa, *Social Media in Southeast Turkey* (UCL Press, 2016).

for me. When it came to my brothers, however, she agreed to get a loan from the bank. It still hurts me. It is nothing other than discrimination. I will never treat my own daughter the way my mother treated me!" Hale's comparison between herself and her brothers demoralised the women again; the air was heavy. Nazmiye, on the other hand, was thankful for small blessings: "Thank God that we are not living in the prophet's time, back then men were burying their daughters alive." Women laughed again when somebody asked Nazmiye: "So you mean, we should be grateful that they don't bury us alive?"

Nalan then switched to a 24-hour exercise, which aims to make women realise how much unpaid work they do during the day in comparison to men. During the exercise, the moderator divides the women into four groups, each of which is given the empty schedule of an imaginary couple. The four imagined couples have differences primarily based on their class background, where they live, and the number and age of their children. Women are asked to fill the couple's daily schedule in a realistic manner and later reflect upon it. Nalan also participated in this exercise. She then asked her audience to tell the group what their imagined everyday lives looked like. This strategy lead women to reflect upon each other's lifestyles, which led to judgmental assessments, instead of inspiring full reflection on their own experiences. For example, when a newly married woman said that her husband also prepares breakfast on the weekends, somebody said, "My husband would put me out of the door (*kapının önüne koyar*) if I would be a wife like you." With some pushy guidance from Nalan, the women finally reached a point where they complained about carrying all the responsibility of the household on their shoulders. Only Nazmiye was filled with gratitude, once more: "Thank God that we all are healthy and can do all the housework. My sister has been in a permanent vegetative state for years, she can't even move her fingers. What if we would be like her?"

The conflict between Hale and Nazmiye was unexpected and entertaining for the participants of the session. In general, women were respectful towards each other's stories, and they were aware that they couldn't talk about these topics freely in the presence of their husbands. In fact, one of the participants stated, "If I tell my husband what we discuss here, he would never let me join you again." Another one also said, "My husband would get angry if he finds out that you open my eyes here (*burada benim gözümü açtığınızı fark ederse*), you should organise similar workshops for our husbands too." For this reason, Nalan was advising women not to share what was happening during the workshops with others.

However, Hale was impatient. She urged women in the room to "act together and do something!" But her urge remained unanswered. In such moments Nalan had a tendency to talk about "the society," which existed out of the room. This almost transcendental being called "the society" was regulating women's lives very strongly. "We aim to change it," Nalan was repeating, without saying exactly how. She knew that awareness alone was not enough to make women's lives easier: "If you inform them about gender-based violence, for instance, and do not tell them how to fight against it, you leave them with burning anger within. It harms them more." It was true that workshops were creating anger when women reflected on their everyday life from a gender perspective. One participant was particularly hurt because her in-laws were not attentive in their treatment of her: "Our freedom is restricted. As an individual, I know when I should be at home. However, they constantly remind me of it. It is not my husband but his father who puts his nose into my business. We live in separate houses but eat together. Now, I wonder, a married woman is responsible to whom?" When

other participants of the workshop said that she should respect her in-laws, the woman replied furiously: "But who will respect me? Then, I want to be respected too!"

Nalan once told me that she had not been aware of the violence that she had experienced as "a perfect housewife, a dedicated mother and a good wife" before going through years of awareness-raising workshops. She says that it was extremely challenging for her to strip herself away from her previous self. She was proud of being a professional woman working for other women's wellbeing. Yet this linear story doesn't apply to every participant, mainly due to unaddressed structural boundaries drawn by unequal access to resources and social exclusion that some ethnic or religious groups experience.

Surely awareness is a step forward. It could be the start a process, where women go through stages of anger and frustration until they finally decide to face the power imbalances between women and men in society and accept its dominance in their lives. However, the lack of an intersectional approach to power relations, which is highly relevant for women in southeast Turkey, disconnects gendered experiences from others. Class positions and ethnic identifications, which divide not only Hale and Nazmiye but also "the East" and "the West" that all workshop participants imagined and referred to, were not a part of the discussion. In the same vein, women discussed what kinds of state services are available, but they didn't discuss what else was needed and how existing support systems could be developed. However, as the case below illustrates, building oneself as an independent individual with gender awareness in and beyond the household is bounded by state policies, some of which are specifically targeting particular cultural and political biographies.

6. Afterlife of Workshops: Hazal's Pieces

"You know what? If I could study, I would be someone like you!" Hazal said to me during an interview. I first met her in our Kurdish language class. Naturally, she was one of the most successful students because it was her native language, and she was following the courses to improve her knowledge. We became friends when she started to volunteer for Nalan, at the Kamer Foundation's Tigris Office. The moment she furiously said, "I would be someone like you!" has stayed with me long after my fieldwork was completed.

Marjorie Shostak once asked simply: "What was it like being a woman in a culture so outwardly different from my own? What are the universals, if any, and how much would I be able to identify with?" (Shostak 2000, 5) I had a more or less similar reflective experience while conducting this research. Although I was not raised according to the same gender norms that Hazal was shaped by (and is also shaping), her image of me was an exaggeration. Gender norms that surround her were not "outwardly different from my own" and therefore, I was not totally an "outsider" to her experiences. Still, I developed a curiosity about the women in the Southeast by bearing in mind the critique of feminist ethnography regarding the assumption of similarity of women's gendered experiences all over the world (Abu-Lughod 1990). In general, I took the insider/outsider dilemma in my research as a constructive force by looking at how women, who shared their lives with me, perceived me. Therefore, Hazal's statement was not only about me. She was also, or perhaps moreover, talking about herself. As a person who went through a series of awareness workshops, she had obtained the "skill" of critical reflection on her own biography starting from her childhood. She had come to

realise that she was not happy about where she had ended up in life. She was angry because the gap between her existing self and the person she would like to be was troubling her.

Hazal was born in a large town primarily populated by Kurdish people. She went to school until fifth grade, but her father took her out of school when she reached puberty. Her father was an influential figure in the Kurdish national movement. As Hazal explains:

> In people's eyes, my father was a modern [çağdaş] man, and this is why women in the movement were surprised when they heard that he didn't send me to school. I said, "My father behaves like a modern man to outsiders, not to us." I mean he is authoritarian at home. For him, women have a different place [in society] than men have, and this is not open to discussion.

Similar to her father, Hazal was a supporter of the struggle for Kurdish identity politics. However, her father's vision of Kurdish politics didn't match with hers. In fact, in Hazal's view, her father's behaviour was in contradiction with the ideals of the Kurdish political project, which was supposed to be for gender equality, and therefore also for encouraging girls to study and become independent individuals.[17] This critique of the movement suggests a demand for change. It also indicates that women like Hazal, as members of Kurdish community living in Turkey, could initiate a structural change. In fact, the gender awareness workshops that she attended had the potential to help create the grounds for political participation and collective action. Yet, even if Hazal's father would allow her to engage in politics – or perhaps she wouldn't strictly rely on his permission anymore – the state wouldn't do so. While state practices were always restrictive against Kurdish political demands in Turkey, it became more severe as the movement got stronger. After successfully crossing the 10% election threshold in 2015, the pro-Kurdish party, HDP, came under attack by the ruling state power of the AKP. During this time, a number of MPs, co-mayors, district heads, and party members, were arrested and jailed. Women were especially, but not exclusively, targeted.[18] Therefore, the contradiction is not only in Hazal's father's behaviour but also in state practices, which are against women's participation in politics and self-representation – and eventually empowerment, in the strict sense of the word.

Despite her father, Hazal never gave up on her dream to study. She even accepted engagement with an *imam* (i.e. a Muslim preacher) 11 years older than her when he promised to send her to school, although she disliked him from the beginning. It was too late when she changed her mind. Her mother cried for hours thinking that it would be dishonourable

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[17] A similar critique was raised by at least one other participant within this research project. She also blamed her husband for being a hypocrite, for being a socialist idealist in the presence of other people while preventing his wife from work outside home.

[18] As of June 2017, more than 80 co-mayors and 13 parliamentarians, including the co-presidents of the HDP and one parliamentarian of CHP, were arrested. I took this information from the report entitled "Report on Local Governments and Appointment of Trustees to Municipalities" prepared by the Union of the Southeast Anatolia Region (*Güneydoğu Anadolu Bölgesi Belediyeler Birliği,* or GABB), which also listed the 29 municipalities where trusteed were appointed by the central government and 16 female co-mayors who were arrested in the region. To read the report, see: "Report on Local Governments and Appointment of Trustees to Municipalities," Diyarbakır: Union of Southeastern Anatolia Region Municipalities (GABB), November 29, 2016, http://en.hdpeurope.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/EN_Reporton_LocalDemocracy-29-11-16.pdf. Two months after the report was released, however, the central government appointed a trustee to the administration of the GABB itself. For more see: "Güneydoğu Anadolu Belediyeler Birliği'ne de Kayyım Atandı [Trustee Appointed to Union of Southeastern Anatolia Region Municipalities]," Evrensel.net, January 27, 2017, https://www.evrensel.net/haber/305786/guneydogu-anadolu-belediyeler-birligine-de-kayyim-atandi.

to break the engagement. In the end, Hazal had to give up and accept marriage in order to please her mother. Since she married at a young age, she compares herself with child brides she sees on TV. Specifically, the promotional film for the social responsibility project "Dad, Send Me To School" was heartbreaking for her. The film opens with a classroom scene where the teacher calls the roll. When it comes to girls, the camera leaves the classroom and travels in various places where girls actually are: fields, greenhouses, gardens, and houses, where we see school-age girls working and shouting, "Here I am!" The final scene is in a bedroom where a girl in a wedding dress with a red belt sits on the bed. She looks into the camera with her heavily made up face and repeats the same words in a close-up shot from a high angle (Irmak 2010). Referring to this last scene, Hazal said, "That's me."

Her husband kept his promise and registered Hazal for school one week after their wedding. After giving birth to two children, she started university and earned her diploma. However, Hazal never really liked her husband and defined every sexual intercourse as marital rape. Violence in her marriage was so intense that Hazal decided to see a psychologist. Regular therapy sessions worked, and she felt better. Although her husband got jealous and insisted on her doing so, she never stopped seeing her psychologist, even secretly.

During the interview, Hazal defined herself as a victim of her parents' decisions. However, it was also clear that she has developed a sense of belonging with a group of women who can change their lives after following gender awareness workshops. She married to get an education, found shortcuts to earn a diploma, and managed to have a full experience of student life at the same time. Her volunteer job at the Kamer Foundation was the first step towards working outside of the home. In this way, she started negotiating with her husband to work at a paid job. Her husband's wish was for Hazal to work at a public institution so that they could have another baby, because the government provides many childcare benefits to public officials. Hazal was interested in the job but not in having another child, as she explains:

> He says, the state provides all the possibilities, milk money, maternal leave, etc., in such circumstances you would easily bring a child, he says. He also says, even if you would be appointed to somewhere else, you could stay here only because you are pregnant. Imagine! He tells me all these things... And I say, yeah, right. He thinks that he can fool me with all these. Too late, it's gone!

Here, state policy puts Hazal in a situation where she should submit to the path designed for her as a mother and a housewife by retreating from the emancipated self that she built during awareness workshops. What she wanted was to work, not to take paid maternity leave. Yet, the way in which she utilised state policies that idealise women primarily as mothers while negotiating with her husband to get a job is similar to the way she utilised marriage to bypass her parents in order to have access to education. Considering the fact that the cost of having access to education through marriage was marital rape and unhappiness, however, it is not certain whether she would be able to convince her husband to work outside home and not pay him back for the opportunity to be employed by giving him another child or not.

7. Conclusion

In the 1990s, southeast Turkey has been used as an object for self-reflection by national level women's organisations based in western cities, such as Istanbul or Ankara, and has been at the centre of the "project feminism" debate. Since the mid-2000s, however, women's organisations based in the region have been involved in activities which conceptualise empowerment within the frames of externally funded projects. In this way, these projects also create employment opportunities for women, most of whom belong to the local elite. Not only regional women's organisations but also local organisations on provincial, and sometimes neighbourhood levels, began competing with each other for funding. Until recently, organisations acting on the transnational level were dominating the field of financial assistance. With more accessible local funding mechanisms, however, the state also answered to the dynamism of civil society organisations and became a significant player with the power to indirectly dictate the content and form of activities. The *We are Women!* project is an example of how the state took over the role of financial support source for local NGOs from transnational development actors and national level non-governmental organisations.

The local funding enabled Aliye, who was an officer of the municipality and also a member of the AKP, to be the coordinator of a gender project. As a young, educated woman, she observed others and understood the potential of the civil society scene in the city. Running her own project could be a potential jump-off point for a position in the women's branch of the party or another powerful position. While Aliye gained experience in the field within which she wants to pursue a career, Oya put a check in the planned activities list of the UN project she worked for. In this way, Oya could write in her report that an emerging "woman leader" in Tigris was supported, and also that a project on "gender awareness" was designed and organised with the "technical assistance" of UN agencies and in cooperation with "local bureaucratic partners." Furthermore, *We are Women!* was the product of a burdensome alliance between the municipality and an "objectionable" NGO like the Kamer Foundation. Although Oya managed to bypass selective funding, she failed in navigating within local power structures as an outsider.

Plans for women's empowerment that were carried from other parts of the world and filtered through national – and almost totally male – bureaucratic structures to the locality of Tigris have, for the most part, not fit within local power configurations. Being local enabled Aliye and Nalan to work within the structural confines and mindset of men who represent the state and create obstacles for women's empowerment work. However, both women justified their activities by addressing powerful men behind them. I argue that these types of actions contradict normative ideas regarding empowerment, which suggests a challenge to power structures rather than simply an accommodation to them. Still, feminist ideas that circulate through short-term project-based activities found a place in Aliye's understanding of her own gendered subjectivity. Aliye's self-perception as a career-pursuing Muslim woman exists in conflict with her boyfriend's worldview, which as her language suggests, are perspectives she used to agree with prior to running the gender workshops. While she was in the process of making sense of all the new confrontations to her prior worldview, Aliye's differences of opinion were challenging for Nalan and Oya.

Women who joined the awareness workshops were often going through a similar process. For Nalan, similar to her perception of Aliye's confusion, both Nazmiye's sarcastic resistance to change and Hale's impatient demand for more autonomy were expected

outcomes. In any case, gender awareness is a challenging process during which anger and impatience hits women hard mainly because they do not have the means to transform their lives with the knowledge that they gain during the workshops. After the workshops, inequality becomes crystal clear, but the rest becomes blurrier. I argue that this is because women often do not speak publicly about differences, such as the gap between household incomes among participants, which was a totally untouched topic.

The category of "woman" as a whole signifies motherhood and family in state policy, and women from southeast Turkey can be understood through the lens of the government as divided into a few generic social categories: the "innocent" housewife to be "empowered," the "criminal" political subject to be punished, or the angry and disappointed women navigating silently but steadily through their individual lives. As proud Kurdish woman, Hazal both volunteered in women's struggles in a regional level organisation that is outspoken about women's human rights, and she also challenged gender structures at home. Despite what is visible at first glance, however, the theme underneath her narrative was telling about the burdens defined by state policy targeting women in the Southeast.

In sum, this article aims to show how women's organisations find innovative solutions to help generate gender awareness with the hope of altering power relations and tirelessly untying knots[19] of gender expectations and limits for women in southeast Turkey. Under the conditions defined by overlapping regimes of power, I narrated individual stories and also encounters with different women – both those who dedicate themselves to "opening the other's eyes" and those who want to be better, like two mirrors facing each other. In either case, they do not carry the knowledge that they practice in gender awareness workshops to politicise their personal lives within wider publics.

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[19] I use this metaphor in reference to a guide book on "being local woman's organization," which starts with the following statement: "So many problems, knick up, like a clot stand in front of us – who cares! Knowing about knots is a part of woman's knowledge; a heritage from our grandmothers. We keep untying life's knots patiently, tirelessly: and now, we'll try to carry this knowledge that we use in our personal lives to politics." Aksu Bora and Ceren Işat, *Düğüm bilgisi [Knowledge of knots]* (Ankara: Ka-Der, 2006).

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