

IMAGINING PEACE: PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT ON THE KURDISH QUESTION IN TURKEY - Final Report

While women are commonly engaged in civic activism for peace in various places around the world and in Turkey, they are seriously under-represented in formal politics. Moreover, it is not clear when elected, whether women, as political elites, make a difference in their understandings of violence and imaginations of peace. This study aims to study whether their presence in formal politics in the form of parliamentary representation bears the potential for a more peaceful Turkish society by understanding women politicians’¹ perceptions about violence, peace and conflict pertaining to various levels of violence in the Turkish society in general, and the violence against women and the Kurdish Question in Turkey in particular. It tries to understand what accounts for the differences among women in their understanding of different forms of violence and their imagined future for Turkey. It also studies whether women politicians have a broader agenda of fighting against all forms of violence and whether and how this affects their imaginations. Employing a semi-structured in-depth interviewing methodology and secondary data analysis, the research aimed to find out the differences and similarities among female representatives in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA), which could potentially point out possible collaboration areas among women who dream for a more peaceful country.

Previous studies in Turkey and elsewhere have mostly concentrated on the themes of women, politics, violence and peace in three main axes: 1) women as targets in war and conflict (such as rape during war and the policies of war crimes over the female body), and new imaginations of women during peace processes, 2) women working in the civil society and their impact on policy-makers, 3) feminist approaches used to understand war and peace

¹ The usage of “woman” as opposed to “female” is a conscious decision. I chose the representatives based on their sexes not on their gender roles. This is to avoid generic criticism that some leaders, most commonly cited example being Margaret Thatcher, although being woman do not act like a female leader. The two important works which inspired this study also chose to use this terminology (Arat 1989; Cowell-Meyers 2002).

especially in the International Relations literature (which claim that the increasing number of women politicians would have a positive impact on the peace proliferation). Although contributing significantly to peace and women's studies research, what these three axes of studies miss is how different experiences of women, their ideologies, how they perceive their identities and the ways in which they confronted with their gender roles shape their understanding of peace and violence in Turkey.

Methodology:

The aim of this research was to shed light on the women politicians' perceptions of peace by bridging the literature on women's studies, power/politics and peace and conflict research. It tried to answer the following questions: 1) How do different identities and experiences of female representatives affect their understanding of peace and conflict in general and Kurdish Question in specific? 2) Does gender identity play a bridging role in their understanding of the methods and strategies to be used to reach a peaceful society in Turkey? 3) Do ideological differences shape their imaginations of the future pertaining to the Kurdish Question in Turkey? If so, what accounts for these differences? 4) Do they see a link between various forms of violence at different levels (i.e. domestic and societal) and struggles against violence (e.g. campaigns against patriarchy, domestic violence, etc.)? If so, how?

Turkey had its national elections on June 12, 2011 resulting in 79 women MPs in the parliament (See Table 1 for the distribution of women MPs according to political parties). This is the highest number ever elected to the Turkish National Assembly (14,38%). To answer the questions posed in this research, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 28 women politicians and as a control group with 3 male M.Ps from the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia between October 2011 and July 2012. The aim of the interviews was to

understand the MPs' individual backgrounds, the reasons behind why they chose to become politicians, what they aimed for in politics, how they perceived peace and conflict at various levels (individual, domestic and national), what they see as solutions to these conflicts and how these affected. Most interviews took place in the MPs' offices or in the TGNA during the breaks in the regular sessions. A few interviews were conducted in Istanbul. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes to 1.5 hours. Besides the interviews, I also utilized the information about the MPs available at the TGNA website and newspaper articles.

Table 1. Number of Women MPs in the TGNA

Parti	Number of Women MPs	Number of MPs in the TGNA	%of Women MPs
AKP	46	326	14,11%
BDP*	11	35	31,42% (**)
CHP	19	135	14,07%
MHP	3	52	5,76%
KADEP	0	1	0%
Total	79	549	14,38%

* Two of the women MPs and four male MP are also put under this category. Because of the restriction for political party membership put on them by the Constitutional Court, they could not join BDP. However, they are considered as part of the BDP since in fact, they are *de facto* BDP members.

** Excluding the independent MPs, the percentage is 31,03%.

Table2. Number of Women Interviewed

Parti	Number of Women MPs	Number of Women MPs Interviewed	%of Women MPs Interviewed
AKP	46	17	36,96%
BDP	11	3	27,27%
CHP	19	7	36,84%
MHP	3	1	33,33%
KADEP	0	0	0%
Total	79	28	35,44%

Findings:

Studies about women parliamentarians emphasize the necessity of formation of a “critical mass” to talk about women power in parliaments (Lovenski 2005; Devlin and Elgie 2008; Ayata and Tütüncü 2008). However, they also argue that sexual identity (being woman) per se does not necessarily lead to “feminization of politics” and that feminization of politics does not necessarily have an effect on policy-making. Most women MPs I talked to emphasized that they do not consider themselves as “women” MPs but would like to be known as MPs representing their parties and constituents (MPs of the governing party having the highest number). Some of these women, however, acknowledged the fact that women are still a discriminated group in the society and underrepresented in politics. They argued that the reason why they do not emphasize their gender is the fact that they do not want to be seen as elected due to their sex but because of their capacities as politicians.

It is important to note that a majority of women believes that women are different than men in many aspects, mostly emphasizing their “emotional” and “emphatic” characteristics (18 out of 28), however only a small percentage believe in the argument that women are more peaceful (%32). Those who argued that women are more peaceful showed how women in parliament usually refrain from fights or use a different language in their address to the “other”.

In the interviews, I asked women MPs how they define violence, and asked them specifically to talk about two violence types in the Turkish society: violence against women and violence we witness in the Kurdish Question. There were two trends among the women MPs on how they defined violence and peace: those who saw violence as defining an “other” and oppressing them (“othering”), and those who saw violence solely as physical and differentiating between violence against women and violence relating to the Kurdish Question. Among those who defined violence in relation to the “othering” process, however

also differed in their responses to how to effectively deal with violence. Since in the former case, violence is seen as “victimization” it was easier for women MPs to empathize and condemn violence whereas in the Kurdish question, the presence of a group that also employs violence led to the divergence of opinion among the women MPs. There is no doubt that ethnicity, rather than gender, was more explanatory in this divergence. However, the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity is a very powerful variable in understanding this divergence. In these two cases, violence is only seen as a continuum by those who feel they are discriminated against because of their identities.

One of the striking findings of this research is that there were more similarities between the two opposition parties, namely CHP and BDP MPs, who are ideologically more distant to each other on their understanding of violence and peace more than they do towards the governing party, the AKP. This suggests that Turkish politics is mostly dominated by government-opposition dichotomy than allowing the collaboration of like-minded MPs to work together. In other words, in a highly polarized society, ideology separates and discourages the bridging role that gender could possibly play.

Regardless of the hope that there are ways in which women could cooperate to diminish violence, the domination of partisanship in Turkish politics still prevents women to see each other as collaborators. In other words, in most cases, party identity clashes with gender and/or ethnic identities. Also important is how the issue is perceived by the MPs. The issue of violence against women is considered by almost all women MPs as an issue “above party politics”. Of course, this is also related to the fact that there was an enormous increase in the crimes against women in the recent years, pushing MPs to act to reduce violence. Even though the opposition parties still clash with the MPs of the governing party for their understanding of how women should be seen in the society, it seems like this is somewhat set aside in policies to deal with violence against women. On the other hand, despite years of

experience of violence and pain, the issue of Kurdish Question still could not reach a position “above the party politics”. As expressed in the words of a woman MP, “nobody is truly crying after the losses we have in this conflict. I do not believe it because if they were, they would sit down and find a solution to it” (Interview with a CHP MP, 1 November 2011). Of course, resolving the Kurdish Question is much more difficult than addressing the violence against women since the former requires radical changes in the governing structure and acknowledging group rights, whereas the latter can be diminished by changes in educational system, legal protection and individual freedoms.

Conclusion:

Cowell-Meyers (2001) argues that women have the potential to make a difference in policy-making *if* they have different political views than men, reach a critical mass, form women caucuses, if there are institutional opportunities for women to voice their demands and if they attach a ‘meaning’ to the notion of representing women. In terms of representing a different political view, most MPs while acknowledging that women are different, still argued that political ideologies were more important than gender identity and that there was more room for women and men to work under the same political party than with women from different political parties. Yet, when an issue is defined as “above party politics” it bears this potential.

Secondly, although the number of women increased over the years, it still did not reach a critical mass. However, even though reaching a critical mass would most probably increase effective address of the violence against women and diminishing structural barriers for women to progress in the society, it looks hard to have more peaceful approach to Kurdish Question even with a critical mass of women given the fact that most women MPs emphasize their ideology as opposed to their gender roles.

Thirdly, one of the reasons why there is more collaboration among women MPs to address violence against women is the fact that women MPs are present in commissions related to the areas that influence the role of women in the society and the women MPs in these commissions are connected to the civil society organizations which pressure these commissions. Yet, even though there are institutional opportunities for women to express their voices, the highly politicized environment of the 24th period of the TGNA makes it hard for women to leave aside their ideological differences.

Lastly, there is less belief among women MPs that they represent women. Yet, especially in the issue of violence against women, women MPs believe that they understand this type of violence because they themselves are women. That is why also ethnicity brings in a different and more collaborative position to understand the Kurdish Question. However, it is mostly the presence of PKK, an organization that resorts to violence that prevents women of different ideologies to understand each other and imagine a more peaceful society. That is perhaps why we see more collaboration among women MPs in the post-conflict societies (Cowell-Meyers 2011) than in those where violence continues.

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Selected Publication:

Dilek, Kurban and Deniz, Yüksekler and Çelik, Ayşe Betül and Turgay, Ünal and Aker, A.Tamer, Coming to terms with forced migration: post-displacement restitution of citizenship rights in Turkey, Istanbul: TESEV, August 2007.

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