

THE EUROPEAN UNION’S INFLUENCE ON WOMEN’S ACTIVIST GROUPS’ NETWORKING: A COMPARISON BETWEEN TURKEY AND GREECE

This paper investigates whether the European Union (EU) membership and/or preparation for membership creates new opportunities for better networking, collaboration, and communication among women’s activist groups. The case of Turkey and Greece are taken up to examine how women’s activist groups use the process of EU negotiations to construct stronger networks for improving gender-related policies and discourse in their countries. In this context, the limitations of the EU are also noted.

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“...As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world” Virginia Woolf¹ (1938).

Evidence of low representation of women in governmental structures has prompted widespread debates about gender inequality and its effects in developing policies that closely concern women’s lives such as sexual abuse, violence against women, discrimination, reproductive rights and many other policies that regulate and control women’s lives.² This paper evaluates how women’s activist groups effect policymaking through networking and, by examining the Turkish and Greek cases, how the space created by the European Union makes a difference. More specifically, the paper examines how the international norms, recommendations and rules of the EU have been used by women’s organizations in Turkey and in Greece, and how these become translated into domestic political culture.

In both cases, European institutions’ impact has been, more or less, indirect and thus in domestic rhetoric, not entirely credited by the NGOs that were involved.

The inclusion of civil society in decision-making is used as a means to resolve the democratic deficits in governments and entities. Strengthening civic participation at both local and international levels is important for fostering women’s full participation in creating gender equality. Although there are other ways to scrutinize women’s activism, this study will investigate women’s activism via women’s civic participation.

Civil society organizations constitute a significant component of the EU and EU policy making. Especially since 2000 the European Commission developed a discourse on the role of civil society in which “the discourse on the role of NGOs and intermediary organizations broadened, in terms of its content.”³ In its Discussion Document introduced first in 1999 and published by the Commission in 2000, ‘building a stronger partnership,’ the role of civil society was emphasized. The European Commission White Paper on European Governance also highlights the importance of civil society organizations and calls for a dialogue between the Commission and NGOs.⁴

Commission officials actively seek “both to consult representatives of a range of interests and promote transnational networking between groups with simi-

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*. (Oxford Press, 1938).

² Charlotte Bretherton, “Movements, Networks, Hierarchies: A Gender Perspective on Global Environmental Governance”, *Global Environmental Politics*, Vol.3, No.2, (2003), p.103-118.

³ Stijn Smismans, “European Civil Society-Shaped by Discourses and Institutional Interests”. *European Law Journal*, Vol.9, No.4, (2003), p.473-495.

⁴ The European Commission established its own concept of governance in the White Paper on European Governance. The paper contains set of recommendations on how to enhance democracy in Europe and increase the legitimacy of the institutions.

lar interests.”⁵ An open and structured dialogue between the Commission and special interest groups such as women’s lobby groups has been created. The Commission has thus been active in promoting women’s networks and networking on gender equality issues.

Women’s access to civil society and women’s networks empowers them in influencing policymaking. Women’s increased interest in civil society catalyzes a demand for changing the law and creating a gender balance in our everyday lives.

Women’s Activist Groups in Turkey and in Greece

“...when you work with someone you are stronger and you can push government... to take steps forward”⁶

Interviewees for this study, both in Turkey and in Greece, included activists working within women’s networks, women academicians writing on women’s activism, as well as women working closely with the EU institutions on women’s rights issues. Respondents in Turkey included employees of the Directorate General on the Status and the Problems of Women (KSGM)⁷, and activists from various women’s NGOs such as the Association for Supporting Women Candidates⁸ (KA-DER), the Union of Turkish Women⁹ (Türk Kadınlar Birliği) and Flying Broom¹⁰ (Uçan Süpürge). Similar to Turkey, in Greece, those interviewed ranged from the International and European Relations Department of Research Center for Gender Equality (KETHI)¹¹, to activists from various women’s NGOs such as the Women’s Political Association, the Center for Research and Action on Peace (KEDE),¹² and the Marangopoulos Foundation for Human Rights.¹³

KA-DER and Women’s Political Association share the common goal of supporting women’s participation in politics and decision-making bodies. Flying

⁵ Charlotte Bretherton and Liz Sperling, “Women’s networks and the European Union: Towards an Inclusive Approach?” *Journal of Common Market Studies*. (1996) Vol.33, No.4, p.487-508.

⁶ Journalist-Activist, Greece, 2004.

⁷ KSGM (*Kadının Statüsü Genel Müdürlüğü*), is the state organization in Turkey that assists the government in developing equality policies.

⁸ KA-DER is an association established in order to promote the equal representation of women in all decision-making areas and in politics. KA-DER aims to support women who want to participate in politics and become candidates in elections.

⁹ The Union of Turkish Women (Türk Kadınlar Birliği) existed since 1924 and is seen as the continuation of Ottoman women’s movement. The Union of Turkish Women aims to strengthen the Turkish women’s movement by creating centers for women and families..

¹⁰ Flying Broom is a networking group established in 1996 with the aim to establish a network between women’s NGOs and to function as information and documentation center.

¹¹ KETHI (Κέντρο Ερευνών για Θέματα Ισότητας, Κ.Ε.Θ.Ι.) is the state level organization in Greece that assists the government in developing equality policies. It is a semi-governmental body..

¹² KEDE is a women’s organization that has the goal of promoting peace culture and peaceful resolution of conflict, the protection of human rights in general and women’s rights in particular.

¹³ Marangopoulos Foundation for Human Rights is an NGO that aims to research, study, defend, protect and promote the generally recognized fundamental human rights and freedoms in Greece.

Broom and KEDE, on the other hand, are similar in their focus on the institutionalization of feminism, establishing a network among women's NGOs, and functioning as documentation centers. The Union of Turkish Women and the Marangopoulos Foundation of Human Rights in Greece both have an emphasis on protecting fundamental human rights and freedoms as they work on gender equality. KSGM of Turkey and the KETHI in Greece both work to increase women's participation, and establish a network of cooperation with respect to women's issues between governmental and non-governmental agencies. There are of course important differences between the institutions between which parallels are drawn, however, in terms of scope, the similarities are noteworthy.

All interviews focused on perceptions of women's activism specifically in the context of EU relations. There were two types of interviews, one for the activists as individuals and one that meant to grasp the perspective of the NGOs as institutions. Documentation was also collected from the NGOs.

Preparation for and membership of the EU provides opportunities, networks, problems, debates and policies. These naturally shape respective women's movements, especially regarding networking. Despite their differences there are certain similarities between the experiences of Turkey and Greece in this context.

The women's movement and activism in both Turkey and in Greece is not recent –but dates back to the second half of the 19th century. Although there are many different views on the feminism, activism and effectiveness of Turkish and Greek women's groups, one can argue that significant changes in legal rights and the status of women have taken place. In the past three decades, the women's movement evolved from a grassroots to a more institutionalized form. Laws discriminating against women and many social, cultural and to some degree political changes have begun to take place as a result of women's groups' activism.

The institutions examined all share a common fate when it comes to finding sources of funding. In Turkey, EU funding became noteworthy after accession negotiations began (in 1999) and had an important impact on women's groups' ability to survive and function. As both Turkish and Greek respondents noted:

“[the]EU is a necessity for receiving funding”¹⁴

Similarly the Greek respondent stated that:

“[the]EU is a perfect tool for lobbying for funding”¹⁵

¹⁴ The Union of Turkish Women, Turkey, 2005.

¹⁵ KEDE, Greece, 2004.

Funding was found to be an important impetus for the women's activist groups' EU cooperation. While the women's activist groups in Greece as a member state made use of wide array of social, economic, cultural and educational programs open to member states and partner countries, "Turkey as a candidate country receives over 50 million Euros on average each year specifically dedicated to NGO activities to take place solely in Turkey in a range of sectors. 2.5 million Euros are allocated to human rights and democratization in Turkey proper and several million will be allocated soon to Cross Border Cooperation between Greece and Turkey from which NGOs will be able to benefit."¹⁶ This in return reflects some differences in their different requests from, relations with, and approaches to the EU. Nevertheless, women's organizations both in Turkey and in Greece shared a common "dependency" on project based funding from non domestic sources as well as project based funding. By providing funds and encouraging civil society development, the EU had a positive impact on women's groups' mobilization and networking.

Women's Civic Participation via Networking

Women's groups both in Turkey and in Greece in order to foster gender equality networked and collaborated with other women's NGOs, national organizations, the government, the EU and the European Women's Lobby¹⁷ (EWL). The analysis focused on four types of networking activity –women's activist groups networking with other NGOs, networking with the press and mass media, networking with national government and MEP's and women's activist groups networking with the EU and Member States.

Women's activist groups both in Turkey and in Greece were found to network and cooperate with other women's NGOs in order to improve the capacity, knowledge, experience and the understanding of the situation. Hence the partners to collaborate and network with were chosen according to the topic that they work upon and the other group's expertise. It was found that for women's groups networking was not just getting together and collaborating while working on an issue, or achieving a goal but also sharing experiences; their successes and even their failures. As one of the Greek interviewee's said:

"You cannot work alone. [Due to] globalization, it is frightening when you realize how identical the problems are...and [how] poverty, women's unequal wage, or women's exclusion from decision making is the same in every single country ...under any religion...You cannot be effective if you don't work together. The first thing you learn by networking is, you learn from other NGOs achievements and failures"¹⁸

¹⁶ Meriç Özgüneş, "EU Policy and NGOs and Its Reflection in Greece and Turkey", www.euborderconf.bham.ac.uk/case/GreeceTurkey/GrTOzgunes.pdf, (2004).

¹⁷ The European Women's Lobby (EWL) is a transnational organization with the largest coalition of women's active groups in the European Union. It was established in 1990 as a structure to strengthen and unite the voices of European women.

¹⁸ KEDE, Greece, 2004.

A difference between Turkish and Greek activists is regarding their approach to and perceptions of the EWL. While not all of the Greek women's NGOs have positive perceptions of or are a part of EWL, Turkish women interviewed are very positive about EWL and see EWL membership as a major achievement. In fact the Turkish women's NGOs see EWL membership as contributing to Turkey's entrance in Europe through civil diplomacy. Selma Acuner an activist, NGO member, and academic who was instrumental in the national coordination of Turkish women's organizations with EWL stated that Turkish women's organizations' membership to EWL was a major success and even constituted a form of entry into the European Union ahead of the Turkish State.¹⁹

It was found that the press is a powerful influence on public opinion and that both Turkish and Greek women's activist groups use this power both to promote social change and maximize their goals. Women's activist groups –by establishing networks with journalists, TV reporters and other media representatives– persuaded them to write articles related to issues which women's groups hold to be important. As it was stated by Anna Karamanou from the Women's Political Association:

“...to make our points heard we network with the media...without the media...the TV and the radio, one cannot do or achieve anything.”²⁰

In addition to the media, women's activist groups in Turkey and in Greece, network with the members of political parties and party leaders as well as municipal authorities. The evidence presented in this analysis suggests that both the Turkish and the Greek governments recognize the social significance of women's activist groups. This was demonstrated by the Turkish and Greek governments' request from women's activist groups for their input on certain issues. This could be due to both women's activist groups' far reaching network and initiatives and the fact that dialogue with civil society is an EU requirement. As a result, the recognition of women's NGOs in civil society has resulted in both the Greek and the Turkish governmental as well as semi-governmental units to form advisory bodies consisting of women's NGO members or invite them to consultation on documents on women's issues.

In both Turkey and in Greece the institutions of KSGM and KETHI consult with women's activist groups more than their governments. In other words the semi-governmental bodies like KSGM and KETHI that directly deal with women's issues have better dialogues with women's activist groups than the Turkish or Greek governments. However in discussions with KSGM and KETHI, it was clear that there were also cases where women's groups were excluded from consultation in policy documents or not invited to consultative working groups, the women's activist groups both in Turkey and in Greece nevertheless reflected some stubbornness/insistence for such collaboration. In

¹⁹ Selma Acuner, Turkey, 2005.

²⁰ Women's Political Association, Greece, 2004.

the Turkish case this stubbornness to continue to collaborate with KSGM in the cases where KSGM did not ask for such a collaboration was found to be due to the intensive lobbying and effort given by the women's activist groups that enabled the KSGM to acquire its independent status and the center's liability to the women's groups for its independence and autonomy in taking its decisions. Hence the women's groups felt that they had the right to advise KSGM, or collaborate with it.

Findings indicate that similar to the national governments, the EU is seen as a cooperating, networking union that "broadens" women's organizations' thoughts and provides funding for lobbying. Women's activist groups in Greece in the late 1970's have and in Turkey now, benefited a great deal from the pre-membership process. It was found that the EU's gender equality objectives written documents, resolutions and decisions were used as a point of reference in networking. Women's activist groups in Greece during the 1980's and in Turkey since the candidacy status use the EU accession process and EU's gender equality objectives and standards during their networking process. Also the EU membership criteria guaranteeing democracy, rule of law and human rights and the adaptation of Greek and Turkish laws to EU gender standards found to have a positive impact on women-friendly legislative frameworks coming about. Especially in the case of Turkey, an important element of the EU accession process has been the progress of adaptation of Turkish laws to the *acquis communautaire*. The process of approximating the legal framework with the *acquis communautaire* to meet the Copenhagen Criteria was used as a tool by women's groups in Turkey. Women's activist groups advocated reforms related to EU integration because they also served them in reaching their standing demands. Women's activist groups in Turkey formed networks nationally and transnationally and established links with the EU to further the reform project and to create both gender equality and gender sensitive policy. A Turkish respondent stated that:

"I find networking with the EU important...we have the Copenhagen Criteria to achieve when fighting for gender equality..."²¹

Similarly the Greek respondent stated:

"[The] EU is friendlier towards women's rights...it is more friendly and more in favor of gender equality than the national institutions [in Greece]...I believe that women in Greece benefited a lot from the EU membership so far...what is now happening in Turkey has happened in Greece...we changed all the laws that discriminated women."²²

Yet despite the networks and links established with the EU and EU member states, the analysis reveal that women's activist groups solve their problems

²¹ Flying Broom, Turkey, 2005.

²² Women's Political Association, Greece, 2004.

first by using interior mechanisms lobbying the government and cooperating with other NGOs and never using the EU as a mechanism to tell on their government. In other words, the analysis suggest that the women's activist groups in Turkey would only turn to the EU as a last resort but they cast the EU as a 'tool' rather than as a spying mechanism on Turkey.

Women's groups in Turkey have high confidence and trust in their power to create the desired change. They attribute all their achievements to their efforts. The Turkish women's groups believe that these achievements could have been done without the pressure coming from the EU. Hence while the women's groups did acknowledge that the "political discipline provided by the EU prospect" is useful.²³ They nevertheless emphasize their own power and their success in using networking. Similarly, in Greece the EU is perceived as a means to achieve gender equality and women's activist groups see the successes achieved as a result of their successful networking campaigns. In both countries, other international mechanisms, international legal instruments besides the EU, such as the CEDAW²⁴ recommendations on women or the United Nations Conventions were used during the lobbying process to set the ground for argumentation during the lobbying processes and to acquire funding.

The overall objective of women's activist groups both in Turkey and in Greece has been to achieve gender equality. This was attempted by networking with the government, semi-governmental bodies, the press, as well as the EU. During these processes both Turkish and Greek women's activist groups attempted to use the EU in two ways: 1) For funding and 2) For exerting pressure to their national governments. The latter is based more on the EU's criteria, which includes gender equality standards.

²³ Of Diba Nigar Göksel and Rana Birden-Güneş, The Role of NGOs in the European Integration Process: The Turkish Experience, *South European Society and Politics* Vol. 10 No. 1, (2005) p. 55-70.

²⁴ The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly is consisted of a preamble and 30 articles where what constitutes discrimination against women is defined and an agenda for national action to end such discrimination is set.
