

# **Women and LGBTQI+ Actors as Lifelines of Each Other: Relations, Alliances, Disjunctures in the Field of Human Rights**

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This report is written within the context of our “Defending Others, Liberating Themselves: WHRD’s experiences in Turkey” project that is being co-implemented with our partner ISHR (International Service for Human Rights) and supported by the German Foreign Office.

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Hatırladığın kadarsın, sewing on fabric,  
123x79cm, 2011

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## INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

These three short reports, published in scope of Hafıza Merkezi Berlin's project **"Defending Others, Liberating Themselves: Women Human Rights Defenders' Experiences in Turkey"**, are the product of a long-term research aiming to analyze the gendered structure of civil society and the struggle for human rights in Turkey, and the gendered experiences of the actors in the field from a feminist perspective. The common concern of these three reports is to expose the latent gendered structure of this field, which is often defined as an undisputed "safe space", and to depict the experiences of women, queer, and non-binary subjects in the sphere. By approaching this issue from different angles, these reports aim to make a modest contribution to the gendering of human rights and to the empowerment of women, queer, and non-binary civil society actors in Turkey.

The first report, **"Women and LGBTQI+ actors as lifelines of each other: relations, alliances, disjunctures in the field of human rights"**, draws on the experiences of the actors in the field to question the disjunctions between the feminist and LGBTQI+ movement and the human rights movement and to reflect on the reasons for this distance. The report firstly discusses the ways in which women and LGBTQI+ actors who participate in political movements, work in non-governmental organizations or who are part of other activist networks and struggles in Turkey are involved in these movements and institutions. Based on these different forms of involvement, the report traces the dynamics, tensions and relationships between the human rights movement and various political movements in Turkey. The aim here is to understand what kind of impact the changing sociopolitical conditions in the country has had on the disjunctures, interactions, and relationships between movements especially in wake of the shrinking of civic spaces after 2015, and how the actors involved in the feminist, LGBTQI+ and Kurdish women's movements have developed their organizational practices and advocacy and activism strategies in this period.

The second report, **"Defending Rights Between Institutions, Identities, and Subjectivities: A Gender Perspective on Civil Society"**, aims to reveal the gendered structure of civil society and the struggle for rights, and to determine how women are affected by these gendered patterns in the field of human rights in their everyday lives. Focusing on the actors daily experiences, the report reflects on the patterns and mechanisms through which gender-based inequalities and challenges are reproduced in the field of human rights in Turkey. In doing so, the report considers the everyday experiences of women in the context of the different organizational models in which they are involved. It thus tries to show how gender-based inequalities, discrimination, and challenges —especially when combined with other social and economic inequalities based on age, class, ethnicity, and education level— become manifest in women's daily, concrete, and real experiences, and how this shapes women's lives and the way they perceive and narrate themselves.

The final report, **"A Feminist Discussion on the "Human Rights Defender" Paradigm in Turkey"**, introduces a gender caveat to the "human rights defender" discourses and mechanisms that are increasingly influential in Turkey, thus hoping to contribute to the gendering of the field and, on this occasion, to make women's gendered experiences visible. In pursuit of this goal, the report first addresses feminist criticisms of the "human rights defender" paradigm, lending an ear to the long-standing feminist struggles for the gendering of "human rights defender" discourses and protection mechanisms in different geographies around the

world. Subsequently, the report focuses on the concept of “women’s human rights defender”, an achievement of the feminist struggle that has assumed different meanings over time to discuss what kind of debates this concept has enabled in Turkey; how it has provoked us to think about the gendered structure of the field of human rights; what this concept means for actors of the field, and finally, whether this concept can be an empowering tool for women in the field.

For this research, we conducted semi-structured online interviews with 30 people from non-governmental organizations, the feminist movement, the Kurdish women’s movement, LGBTQI+ institutions, and activist networks. In selecting our interviewees, we tried to create a diverse sample in terms of age, gender identity, sexual orientation, area of work, working style, and political or ethnic identity. Only two of our interviewees were working in the same institution, while the remaining 28 participants came from different institutions and networks in the field. With one third of the interviewees working as professionals in civil society organizations that receive funding, the remaining two thirds were involved in human rights or civil society organizations that mostly rely on voluntary support in carrying out their work or engaged in feminist or other political networks.

2015 was a turning point for Turkey, marking the beginning of a new period in which different forms of violence once again began to dominate political and daily life in the country. Meanwhile, on a global scale we have been going through an era in which authoritarian regimes and different types of racist and xenophobic movements are getting stronger, which makes defending rights, waging political struggles, and being an active subject in the public sphere more and more difficult. In other words, we carried out this research at a time when, as many individuals and institutions involved in the fields of civil society and the struggle for rights point out, civic space is shrinking. Developing the framework and the main questions of our research, we tried to take the impact of the present conditions into consideration. With increasing oppression and violence forcing everyone in civil society to withdraw into their shells, we wanted to understand how women experience this dynamic in their everyday, professional, and political lives. At the same time, however, to avoid putting our interviewees’ personal safety at danger, we chose to preserve their anonymity and made sure that their identities are not revealed in any of the quotations included in the reports, even though the names of institutions are at times mentioned.

Finally, we consider it necessary to speak about the limitations of both the research process and the reports. For example, while creating our sample of interviewees in line with the above-mentioned criteria, we confined ourselves to the cities of Ankara, Istanbul and Diyarbakır. Our research therefore cannot sufficiently account for experiences that occur in other provinces. We also need to submit that our research is limited to interviews with people we already knew, albeit indirectly, as more or less public figures working on issues related to gender. We took care to include as many different movements and groups as possible in our sample, but we did not listen to our interviewees as spokespersons of their institutions. Therefore, we would like to point out that their narratives may not reflect the views of everyone in their respective fields. Bearing this in mind, we did our best to include the efforts and activities of our interviewees’ institutions, networks, and movements in our reports.

In addition, since our research aims to uncover the gendered nature of civil society and human rights in Turkey and the experiences of female and non-binary actors in the field, we mainly focused on the experiences of cis and trans women. That said, we do touch upon the experiences

of queer subjects and LGBTQI+ movement/rights organizations and use the terms “female”, “non-binary”, “queer” and “LGBTQI+” together in some places. There are several reasons for this: First, our effort to gender the field of human rights is not limited to problematizing the binary concept of gender but paying particular attention to the experiences of all those who are “shut out” because their ways of being do not conform to gender roles. Subverting the ways of relating to one another permitted within the binary system, we further try to comprehend the overall gender dynamics governing the field. Therefore, our aim in using these terms together is certainly not to equate diverse experiences, but to include all those who are exposed to patriarchal and cis-heteronormative forms of inequality on a daily basis. Also, given that two of our interviewees defined themselves as non-binary, it would have been impossible for us to ignore their particular experiences in the field. Although we have only limited knowledge about the experiences of non-binary people in the field of human rights, we tried our best to discuss their experiences in our reports. Needless to say, these two interviews alone were not enough for us to present a comprehensive analysis of how the experiences of non-binary actors in the fields of rights advocacy and civil society differ from those of trans and cis women rights defenders. We might therefore say that our reports have a greater focus on the intersections between the experiences of non-binary people and cis and trans women rather than their specific experiences, given that the former too are affected by the social construction of womanhood, since a large part of our society perceives them as “women”.

We want to underline that this work, both the research and the writing, is the product of a thoroughly collective effort. We would like to thank everyone we interviewed for taking their time to share their thoughts and feelings with us in such hectic and pressing times. We also want to express our endless gratitude to Özlem Kaya and Özgür Sevgi Göral, who accompanied and supported us with their careful readings and thought-provoking comments and criticisms while we were writing these reports. We hope that the reports will contribute to opening and deepening debates on gender in the field of human rights in Turkey.

DURU YAVAN – GÜLİSTAN ZEREN – HANDE GÜLEN

## I. INTRODUCTION

The human rights movement in Turkey has had a varied experience since the 1980s, fighting against serious human rights violations, impunity policies and state crimes with the participation of different subjects. The practices of inclusion in the human rights movement, occasional tensions, contacts and disjunctures of women and LGBTQI+ subjects from different fields, movements, institutions and networks, which this study desires to look at, are also important parts of this experience. Undoubtedly, it is not possible to consider these experiences without focusing on the conditions of violence and war, which were escalated by the state in Kurdish provinces following the end of the peace process in 2015. This was furthered by the gradual shrinkage of the civic space with the declaration of a state of emergency after the July 15<sup>th</sup> coup attempt. Therefore, throughout the report, the abuses that the civil sphere has been subjected to by the judiciary in recent years; the strategies of power and the changes in the means of policymaking; the forms of organization, and the relations of the movements with each other constitute the main reference point. The human rights movement and the practice of advocacy are not dealt with herein historically and conceptually. Rather, the mobilization of feminist, LGBTQI+, and Kurdish women's institutions and organizations within this field, objections they raised by going outside this field from time to time, and their own autonomous existence forms are opened to discussion considering the human rights movement as a platform of struggle.

In this context, the first chapter titled “Women and LGBTQI+s in the Human Rights Movement” discusses the struggle for existence of women and LGBTQI+ subjects in the human rights movement, especially since the first half of the 2000s, and their relations with the field of human rights. By drawing attention to the gendered nature of the human rights field, Kurdish women and feminists' main criticisms of cis hetero male dominance mostly blocking the forms of policymaking in this field are explored. In the chapter titled “Queer Existences in Rights Struggles”, the difficult experience of queer organizations in the field of human rights is studied through a consideration of current examples. Criticisms such as the fact that prominent institutions and organizations in the field of human rights do not problematize cis and heteronormative ways of thinking, that the representation of subjects in this field is mostly at a symbolic level, and recent developments are elaborated upon, by highlighting the narratives of people we interviewed from different institutions and networks.

The way in which different subjects of the human rights movement relate to each other is one of the main issues the second chapter titled “Movements that are Lifelines for Each Other: Relationships, Disjunctures and Affinities” aims to look at. Unlike the first part, here, the relations between feminist, LGBTQI+, and Kurdish women's organizations in recent years, the way they see each other, partnerships that are gradually fading with the shrinking of the civil space, public representations and pursuits are discussed. In addition, in this section, the affiliations of women who take part in the struggle for the city and ecology to the feminist movement, and the intersections of spatial movements with rights advocacy are considered, albeit at a limited level.

The third chapter, titled “Fields Shrinking After 2015”, deals with the daily lives of women, their activist experiences and the changes in their professional affiliations since 2015, when they entered the spiral of violence. The dismissals and trustee policies after the state of emergency are explained through the narratives of Kurdish women's organizations in Diyarbakır. The controls that gradually engulf the civil sphere after the state of emergency, the strategies developed by women, non-binary and LGBTQI+s in non-governmental organizations, their ways of survival and solidarity relations are also discussed in this chapter.

Finally, this chapter discusses the activist forms that women and LGBTQI+s have developed –especially in the digital sphere–, the exposure movements that shout louder and louder things that kept under the rug in the past, the feminist movement’s convergences with the queer and transfeminist activism forms and intergenerational relations, although the narrowing of the civilian space has reduced the opportunities for organizing and public existence.

## II. WOMEN AND LGBTQI+S IN THE HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT

### A. Intersections With the Feminist Movement and Women’s Different Subjectivities

Feminists have been and are still one of the actors of the human rights movement in many forms since the second half of the 1980s. These forms have included the “black action” protests<sup>1</sup> against the post-coup militarist practices and state violence, the “Don’t Touch My Friend” campaigns protesting the detention and removal from the parliament of Kurdish representatives in the 1990s and later on with the Saturday People/Mothers movement, which they took an active role in organizing, and with the BİKG (Women’s Initiative for Peace) struggle, which gathered under the umbrella of İHD (Human Rights Association) in 1996 and reunited in 2009 with the call of feminists.<sup>2</sup>

*Feminists were at the forefront in the struggle for human rights in Turkey after the 80s. They were the ones who quickly responded to the Kurdish issue, one of the most important conflicts in Turkey. In 1993, when the DEP representatives were hurriedly expelled from the Parliament, during a period of terrible state of emergency conditions, a “Don’t Touch My Friend” movement was born, led by feminist women. And this “Don’t Touch My Friend” movement drew attention not only to the Kurdish issue, but also to the experiences of Armenians living in Turkey. “Don’t touch my neighbor, don’t touch my friend, don’t touch Kurdish MPs” ... it turned into a form of organizing. Feminists are also among the founders of the Human Rights Association. Therefore, I think the relationship between these two is a positive and developing relationship.<sup>3</sup>*

In our interviews, women who have been taking part in the human rights movement from the 1980s to the present stated that from the second half of the 80s to the 2000s, they preferred the term “women’s rights”, considering that the concept of human rights had a signification that left women in the background. In 1980s, the feminist movement in Turkey had a practice of struggle that questioned the previous styles of organizing, and they also organized campaigns against post-coup militarist practices. By the 90s, the activism experiences of the 80s were diversified with institutional women’s organizations. In this period, which is also referred to as the institutionalization of feminism, dozens of foundations and associations were established

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1 For black action protests, see: <http://www.sosyalistfeministkolektif.org/kampanyalar/tarihimizden-kampanyalar/cezaevlerindeki-siddete-kars-siyah-eylem/> For women’s rights movements in 1990s, see: <https://bianet.org/bianet/kadin/161091-aksu-bora-anlatiyor-90-lardan-bugune-turkiye-de-feminizm>

2 For the role of feminists in the human rights movement based on the experience of the Women for Peace Initiative, see: Feride Eralp (2020), “Barış Talebi Feminist Bir Talep midir? BİKG Deneyimi İçinden Yakın Tarihe Bir Bakış”, *Modern Türkiye’de Siyasi Düşünce: Feminizm*, Ed: Nacide Berber & Feryal Saygılıgil, Volume:10, İstanbul: İletişim Publishing, p. 307-309.

3 Interview no. 14, 16.06.2021, online.

focusing on women's agendas.<sup>4</sup> In our interviews, women stated that during these years, they felt the need to define the boundaries of their struggle for rights with a common discourse of "womanhood".

The 1990s also represent the years when encounters with Kurdish and Muslim feminists and the search for common ground came to the forefront in terms of feminism in Turkey.<sup>5</sup> With the establishment of the first women's party, PJKK (Kurdistan Women Workers' Party) on March 8, 1999, and the DÖKH (Democratic Free Women's Movement), which was formed by the parliamentary representation of the Kurdish political movement along with 20 women's organizations in 2003, Kurdish women initiated their first experience with autonomous organizing. In the second half of the 2000s, the feminist movement and Kurdish women continued to voice their demands for peace and justice through common platforms and associations. The encounters that took place in the 90s emerged as permanent partnerships in the 2000s. In addition, the emphasis on "womanhood", which came to the forefront in the 90s when feminism was institutionalized, was frequently criticized by Kurdish women for ignoring the inequality they were exposed to and disregarding their experiences and subjectivity. These two movements, wherein affinity and criticism are intertwined, have maintained their partnership by creating various courses of interaction with its dynamic quality. In the following period, the feminist and Kurdish women's movement expanded the channels of communication by establishing partnerships centered around the struggle for peace: they organized actions on March 8ths and November 25ths, and campaigns during the enactment of the Civil Code, and endeavored to move forward by thinking together on fundamental issues of feminist policy, such as the problematization of the public and private spheres.<sup>6</sup>

A participant we interviewed, who was in the Kurdish women's movement for a while and now takes part in HDP's (People's Democratic Party) work in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, says that the legal achievements of the human rights struggle have a transformative power in terms of opening up areas of freedom in women's lives. She states that although there is an accumulation of experience and memory with the efforts of women, gender is not adequately at the forefront. A feminist activist, who has been in the human rights movement and the feminist movement since the 80s, says that the inclusion of the concept of women's human rights in the field of law can result in gains in women's lives. Similarly, she states that due to the dominance of the human rights field by cisgender heterosexual men, the emphasis on gender may remain in the background, and therefore it is essential to formulate the concept and practice of rights advocacy in a way that includes women, non-binary and LGBTQI+s. This experience undoubtedly extends to the rights struggles of the 2000s. During these years, there were important achievements such as the criminalization of marital rape in the Penal Code, the inclusion of harassment in the workplace as a crime and its inclusion in legal regulations. It is thus possible to summarize this as a period when new organizations, publishing activities, advocacy and solidarity networks became widespread, and their claims for rights and their discourses became prominent in feminist and women's organizations.<sup>7</sup>

*When it comes to women's rights, we need swift achievements, mechanisms that we cannot postpone and can use now. (...) But since we cannot postpone our lives until this happens, we*

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4 By the end of the 90s, the number of these organizations was around 350. For a detailed review, see: Birsen Talay Keşoğlu (2020), "Yalnızlıktan Meşruiyete... 1980 Sonrası Kadın Hareketi ve Kurumsallaşma", *Modern Türkiye'de Siyasal Düşünce: Feminizm*, Ed: Nacide Berber & Feryal Saygılıgil, Volume: 10, İstanbul: İletişim Publishing, p. 151.

5 Aksu Bora & Asena Günel (2014), *90'larda Türkiye'de Feminizm*, İstanbul: İletişim Publishing.

6 "Looking at the Peace Struggle through Women's Movement", *Seeking Peace, Transforming Law: The Case of Women's Courts*, Özlem Kaya & Özgür Sevgi Göral, Hafıza Merkezi. <https://hakikatadaletahafiza.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/barisi-aramak-hukuku-donusturmek.pdf>

7 Nacide Berber (2017), "2000'li Yıllar: Değişen Yasalar, Yazılan Projeler ve Yeni Adımlar". <https://tr.boell.org/tr/2017/09/18/2000li-yillar-degis-en-yasalar-yazilan-projeler-ve-yeni-adimlar>

*need mechanisms and rights that will provide us with a breath of air, make our lives easier, and prevent us from losing our lives. I define these “breaths” as women’s human rights.*<sup>8</sup>

Although feminists have many years of experience and knowledge in common with the human rights movement in the fight against impunity, violations, and state crimes, they differ in opinion with the human rights discourse. In our interviews, the view that the feminist movement could not fit into the human rights discourse and movement was quite dominant:

*Our relationship with the human rights discourse is ambivalent... On one hand, we are talking about the right to alimony, however on the other hand, we are talking about destroying the family. We have to do so. We have no other choice. It’s a vital thing, that right and we don’t have the luxury of sacrificing it. But our view is not that we should be content with that right. We have always claimed rights on the one hand and problematized it on the other. That’s why we have a certain distance from rights organizations.*<sup>9</sup>

*The struggle for human rights is basically a movement against the state, against the violence of the state and against the sovereignty of the state. That’s where it originates from. And it is struggling to rein, limit the state, to bring it into the human rights field, the law. That’s the main reason. However, ours is something much more transcendent, as it is not limited to the state, it is something that targets those inside that movement, that human rights movement, and that targets men as well.*<sup>10</sup>

However, as it stands out in the narratives of women, although the conceptualization of human rights is delimited, the feminist movement, which in recent years has a priority of making sure there is no backlash in terms of achievements, and organizes public actions with a demand for rights arising, is at the center of the rights struggles. Almost all of the women we interviewed insisted that the subjects who enable the practice of advocacy on the street in today’s political environment are feminists and LGBTQI+s:

*We are going through a period where no one can speak up, yet women and the LGBTQI+ movement are speaking out despite everything. (...) In my opinion, for a very long time, the two most influential and defining movements have been the women’s and LGBTQI+ movements.*<sup>11</sup>

It is possible to say that the basis of these comments is the objective changes that took place in the roots of feminist organizations. As is known, since 2016, there has been a period in which feminist organizations were disbanded and re-established. Founded in 2014, the Kadın Cinayetlerine Karşı Acil Eylem Grubu (Emergency Prevention Group Against Femicide) today continues with the Kadınlar Birlikte Güçlü (Women Are Strong Together) organization. The March 8 Night march and the November 25 march are organized through this network. The Istanbul Feminist Collective was dissolved in 2015 and many digital feminist channels emerged in its aftermath. Kongreya Jinên Azad (KJA), which was established in 2015 to replace DÖKH, was closed in 2016 with a Decree-Law. Today, they continue under the name of Tevgera Jinên Azad (TJA) and take part in the Kadınlar Birlikte Güçlü organization.

Established in 2016, Çatlak Zemin (Cracked Ground) is one of the digital feminist policy-making spaces. The feminist activist we interviewed from Çatlak Zemin states that she does not define the fields she is involved in as human rights advocacy. She states that there

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8 Interview no. 14, 16.06.2021, online.

9 Interview no. 13, 13.06.2021, online.

10 Interview no. 20, 20.06.2021, online.

11 Interview no. 6, 27.05.2021, online.

have been discussions about the way of making policy from a human rights perspective in the BİKG and points out a paradigm difference between engaging in politics from a human rights perspective and deciphering state violence. However, she also says that considering the conditions in Turkey, the human rights framework offers a concept and demand that cannot be ignored. She states that the BİKG experience, in the period it was active, created an important space of interaction with other rights-based organizations and formations in terms of policy-making. As it is known, BİKG focused on “revealing the devastations of the war, identifying the violence and demands of women during the war, and ensuring their active participation in the peace process”<sup>12</sup>, and brought together women from different fields such as academia and activism.

Another feminist participant states that the feminist movement, which has struggled for the implementation of the rights obtained and built the channels of institutionalization from the 2000s to the present, is in a practice of fighting for reclaiming the achieved rights. For example, she says that while the institutionalization experience in the 90s was criticized by different feminist groups with terms that have “negative” connotations such as “project fetishism” and “playing NGO”, today this form has been targeted by the current government and therefore has become a field of struggle: “We see that what once seemed like mainstream has now lost its mainstream status and therefore has become a field of struggle.”<sup>13</sup> In the interviews, not only those in activist networks or non-governmental organizations established at the center of women’s and LGBTQI+ rights, but also participants working in different fields express similar views on the change in the form of rights advocacy:

*(...) is it a non-governmental organization or a human rights organization? In other words, it has become so strange that we live in such a time that it is almost as if the entire civil society is actually working in the field of human rights. You are faced with great oppression and intimidation policies that your very existence turns into a struggle for rights.*<sup>14</sup>

In a significant part of our interviews, the field of human rights was described as an area based on a mixed organization model, mostly distant from new means of activism, and to which one should only be included if one is willing to pay a certain “price” under difficult conditions of struggle. Therefore, the practice of advocacy is perceived as similar to the view of the field of human rights, and although it is an area where the number of wage workers and professionalism have increased recently, it continues to be seen as the area of those who have been responsible for these struggles historically. For example, one participant we interviewed states that although she works professionally in the field of rights violations, she does not prefer to call herself a human rights advocate. She says that she is reluctant to include herself in this definition, and that it is better to take a step back when there are advocates who “paid a price” in this field.

*Human rights advocacy means also dealing with discrimination against women, fighting for freedom of expression in culture and arts, and fighting for LGBTQI+ rights... And in this sense, we can think that feminism is also advocating in this area. But it seems like it doesn’t work that way in real life. It works as if there are human rights advocates, there are feminists, there are LGBTQI+ activists. Do we talk about their transitivity that much, do we act together? Is there a situation of unification under a human rights umbrella, it seems not.*<sup>15</sup>

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12 Handan Çağlayan (2021), “Kürt Kadın Hareketi ve Feminist Hareketin Deneyimleri Bağlamında Barış Talebi”, *Demos*. <https://demos.org.tr/kurt-kadin-hareketi-ve-feminist-hareketin-deneyimleri-baglaminda-baris-talebi/>

13 Interview no. 13, 13.06.2021, online.

14 Interview no. 2, 26.05.2021, online.

15 Interview no. 2, 26.05.2021, online.

As stated in the interviews, the distance between feminists and the human rights movement since the 1980s stems not only from political differences but also from the mixed organization model of human rights institutions and organizations:

*The women's movement is a movement that has come to this day by trying to distance itself from mixed movements. It always had such a reflex because it separated from the left, claiming to be a movement other than the left and came forward to say we are not the same thing as you. That's why it always had a skeptical relationship with mixed politics... (...) I mean, it is not only about human rights, but also about all mixed fields of struggle, there is a separation that comes from its history I think.<sup>16</sup>*

Although the distance of feminists from mixed organizations and groups seems to be a common discussion, their demands for forming independent organizations, pursuits and platforms of expression without cisgender heterosexual men are still valid. As mentioned in a significant part of the interviews, the way women exist in mixed spheres, both in their professional fields and in their rights advocacy experiences, can be blocked by cis hetero men who establish a labor-age-experience hierarchy. As a feminist activist lawyer who has been in different rights organizations for many years underlined, there is a risk that women's holding separate activities in the field of human rights sometimes pushes women to a line where they speak only about women's politics. For example, while established hierarchies are predominant in decision-making mechanisms and cis hetero men control these, the alliances that do not problematize this seem to be in a deadlock:

*As women, we have a sense of holding meetings without men and expressing ourselves comfortably, but this should not confine us into a space that only talks about women's politics, it should not also completely exclude men. Here, workshops specific to women and LGBTQI+s can be held, and sometimes mixed workshops can be held. If we all want our world to touch someplace. In fact, the position of the feminist movement in human rights activism could not be defined out loud because there is always another agenda. But I think those who are active in the field of human rights have never thought about this either, they can't place the idea anywhere.<sup>17</sup>*

It is expressed by women working in the field of civil society or taking part in mixed human rights organizations that the struggle of the feminist and LGBTQI+ movements in recent years has been instrumental in changing the language within institutions and questioning hierarchies.

## **B. Queer Existences in Rights Struggles**

The struggle of the LGBTQI+ movement in the field of rights advocacy dates to the second half of the 80s, similar to the feminist movement. As LGBTQI+ activists and institution employees stated in the interviews, the existence of LGBTQI+s in the field of human rights and their acceptance by rights advocates became possible because of difficult struggles. On the other hand, while LGBTQI+s were trying to exist in different institutional organizations in the 90s, they also focused on a struggle to establish their own spaces of organizing. During these years, lesbians and trans people problematized political representations and turned to separate organizing experiences and formed organizations such as the first lesbian initiative, Venüs'ün Kızkardeşleri (Sisters of Venus).

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<sup>16</sup> Interview no. 14, 16.06.2021, online.

<sup>17</sup> Interview no. 20, 20.06.2021, online.

Until the New Associations Law adopted in 2004, LGBTQI+s came together around their own comradeship; institutionally, they were also coming together under the umbrella of human rights institutions, feminist organizations and leftist organizations. After this date, LGBTQI+ initiatives attained official association status with the establishment of Kaos GL in 2005 and then Lambdaistanbul.<sup>18</sup> The first trans rights organization with an official status, Pembe Hayat (Pink Life), was founded in 2006. The 2000s can be summarized as the years when the struggle experiences of the 90s diversified with achievements, the number of organizational styles increased, institutional networks started to be built with official association status, and the public visibility of the LGBTQI+ movement came to the fore. When we come to the 2010s, it should be said that the Gezi Resistance, which was expressed as an important threshold in our interviews, represents a moment when public visibility for LGBTQI+s reached its highest level ever.

The rights defender we interviewed, who has been working in civil society for many years on documenting rights violations, states that when she looks from her own field, awareness of the demands of LGBTQI+s increased after the Gezi Protests, and that more partnerships were sought in different common channels, from documenting violations to institutional partnerships. She says that the forms of oppression and inequality were more loudly expressed by multiple public experiences made possible by Gezi, and therefore the human rights movement has shifted the momentum of its work to LGBTQI+s.<sup>19</sup> Another feminist activist we interviewed makes a similar comment about the feminist movement:

*Until Gezi, the feminist movement was something that the social opposition did not accept as a subject. We became visible in Gezi. It is the same for the LGBTQI+ movement. The feminist movement produced so many things, it also wrote ideologically. It can be easily seen that what was built up by the feminist movement in Turkey is not trivial at all. But we have come to be accepted by social opposition not with what we produced or what we did, but with time.*<sup>20</sup>

Another interviewee, a trans non-binary rights defender from Pembe Hayat, says that her relationship with the LGBTQI+ movement first started by meeting with the LGBT Block circle during the Gezi Park protests. She states that the Gezi experience has a special place in the sense that it has helped queers outside of LGBTQI+ networks find each other, meet each other, and then proceed with other initiatives. The feminist queer activist we interviewed with from Kaos GL, on the other hand, emphasizes the efforts of LGBTQI+ organizations when assessing relations with the human rights movement:

*I think the fact that, for many years, LGBTQI+ organizations [for example] Kaos GL organized very long training sessions, took it as a mission to try to establish relationships even if they were small, or to organize in bar associations, and to be active in unions, had a great impact. It was built step by step, obviously. Of course, with Gezi in 2013, these relations became stronger, more relations began to be established. But I feel that they [LGBTQI+ organizations] have been left alone for most of the time.*<sup>21</sup>

Activist-rights defenders working in LGBTQI+ organizations we talked to in our interviews say that the human rights movement is more inclusive today compared to the first half of the 2000s, but they think that the different movements are disconnected from each other.

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18 Zülfiyar Çetin, "Türkiye'de Queer Hareketin Dinamiği", Access date: September 2021. <https://tr.boell.org/tr/2015/11/04/tuerkiyede-queer-hareketinin-dinamigi>

19 The same can be said in terms of urban and environmental struggles. Urban commons, spatial interventions, and space-based activism practices were not among the priority agendas by the subjects of social opposition until the Gezi Resistance.

20 Interview no. 20, 20.06.2021, online.

21 Interview no. 5, 04.05.2021, online.

Criticisms such as the “human” centeredness of the human rights movement, the failure to problematize animal exploitation, cis and heteronormative thought patterns, and the fact that the relationship with LGBTQI+ organizations remain “on paper”, are the ones that stand out:

*We cannot say that there is no development. But this development is like, it is mostly on paper, okay well, we talked about it in our report, we had a meeting with you, what do you want more! This is sort of what happens, it seems a bit insincere to me. And unfortunately, with the first crisis, these groups are separated from each other. (...) No group has a real, organic relationship with each other. I think it's very disconnected. (...) For example, human rights defenders are not animal rights defenders at the same time. However, we say that defending rights is a whole, we look at rights defenders like this, the right to life is the most basic right of every living thing.<sup>22</sup>*

Kaos GL has decades of experience in being in contact with the field of human rights. However, from today's point of view, in our interviews what came out was that the encounters with human rights institutions in the early stages of institutionalization are affinities that cannot exceed the level of meeting with the concern of securing a certain representation, rather than building partnerships:

*My earlier encounters with the field of human rights were more of an invitation like a showcase. For example, frankly, most people do not see LGBTQI+ activism as human rights activism. There are real human rights activism and organizations, they do human rights activism, and there are those of us who promote identity politics... Like, they put the issue of women on their agenda. Or putting the issue of LGBTQI+ on their agenda. (...) But in fact, you are not invited there as a comrade, it is not a search for a common remedy etc. you are invited there just for that legislation, just to be attached to it, and maybe as a sign that will make it seem as though the legislation is more democratic.<sup>23</sup>*

There has been an event that made Kaos GL feel very uneasy and lonely in recent years. According to the leaked document from military intelligence in 2016, they were on the target list of ISIS.<sup>24</sup> Upon the “capture” of the bombing plan of the Kaos GL office by the intelligence, they were called by the police, who told them that they did not have enough personnel and therefore they were simply “warned” against ISIS. The Kaos GL activist we interviewed states that they were left alone by non-governmental organizations at that time and that they were trying to get through those days with the networks of solidarity they had established:

*While we predict that if this threat had come to another institution under normal conditions, much more voice would have been heard in the field of human rights, here no one said, “Guys, are you okay, what are you going to do, what's going on?” Indeed, we were able to continue somehow with the trust networks we established ourselves at that time. (...) In that period, we received almost no support from different organizations and networks of human rights defenders, not even a single email of solidarity. Frankly, I think it would have been different if it had happened to another institution, to another relatively legitimate group in the field of human rights.<sup>25</sup>*

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22 Interview no. 3, 25.06.2021, online.

23 Interview no. 5, 04.05.2021, online.

24 “Emniyet’in haberi yok, Genelkurmay da kendine ivedi”, April 8, 2016. Access date: September 2021. <https://kaosgl.org/haber/emniyetin-haberi-yok-genelkurmay-da-kendine-ivedi>

25 Interview no. 5, 04.05.2021, online.

They say that although they had hoped that solidarity would increase in times when oppression was most closely felt, they encountered the opposite, that each institution focuses on strengthening its own security and areas of existence and prioritizes its own survival strategies. This situation seems to have created a lack of communication between institutions and organizations. The remnant of this lack of communication has caused the solidarity mechanisms to be damaged and the feeling of uneasiness to increase gradually.

When Ali Erbaş (the president of the Directorate of Religious Affairs) targeted LGBTQI+s and those living with HIV on April 24, 2020, the reactions from political parties, non-governmental organizations, bar associations and unions, and the solidarity and support messages received by LGBTQI+ institutions created great hope.<sup>26</sup> The activist-rights defender we interviewed from Kaos GL stated that they have not seen this level of solidarity for a long time and that a similar wave of solidarity against LGBTQI+s being targeted in the protests that continued against the appointment of a trustee rector to Boğaziçi University is a new thing that has not happened in the past:

*Frankly, another development that I couldn't foresee is that many bar associations have made declarations against Erbaş's statement... Normally, this would not have happened, he mentioned LGBTQI+, while we thought it was going to be forgotten, there was a very strong criticism not only from LGBTQI+ associations, but also from human rights organizations, unions and also bar associations in Turkey. I think it was a tremendous example of solidarity. And maybe it was an example of solidarity that even the government did not expect. (...) In the recent past, with the Bosphorus [University] events, a new wave has come against LGBTQI+s. For example, during this time, many women's organizations and human rights organizations made statements criticizing state's interventions. Or if they didn't, at least they wrote to the association. We're actually just starting to see this solidarity, and I think it's a tremendous development. Both for us and for them...*<sup>27</sup>

Feminists, Kurdish women and LGBTQI+s have intersecting and disjoint experiences with the human rights movement. However, as tried to be expressed in this section, the relationship that these movements try to establish with the actors of the human rights movement by preserving their own political existence describes a long-term struggle experience. Objecting to cishnormative and patriarchal forms of inequality, and not only struggling against rights violations and state crimes, but also making demands for the recognition and inclusion of multiple subjectivities and affiliations, constitutes the main axis of these struggle experiences and their relations with the field of human rights.

### **III. MOVEMENTS THAT ARE THE LIFELINE OF EACH OTHER: RELATIONS, DISJUNCTURES AND AFFINITIES**

#### **A. Symmetrical Policy Paths: Relations Between Movements**

Due to the period of increasing violence in recent years, movements and grounds of social struggle had to undergo radical changes in terms of organization, political tools, modes

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<sup>26</sup> For the reactions to Erbaş from political parties, non-governmental organizations, bar associations and trade unions, see: <https://kaosgl.org/haber/diyanet-in-nefret-hutbesine-tepkiler-buyuyor> ve <https://bianet.org/biamag/lgbti/223476-diyanet-baskani-erbas-in-nefret-soylemlerine-tepki> Access date: August 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Interview no. 5 04.05.2021, online.

of expression and discourse. During this time, feminist groups and collectives broke up; initiatives that put the struggle for peace at the center had to stop their activities that created public visibility. Despite everything, the March 8 and November 25 marches continued to be organized, and despite the police oppression and harassment, people gathered on the streets. Since 2015, Pride Parades are not allowed on Istiklal Street. However, despite all these bans, LGBTQI+ associations and formations continue their activities and marches.<sup>28</sup>

It is possible to say that towards the end of the 2000s, the partnerships between the feminist movement and the LGBTQI+ movement have increased. Organizing around campaigns, joint actions and intellectual efforts are at the forefront of these initiatives. Although increased difficulties in creating this type of contact due to the shrinking in the civic space in recent years has weakened the ties between these two movements, it is necessary to specify that the experience of “*learning from each other*”<sup>29</sup> spread over many years. Lesbian, trans and bisexual feminists who took part in the LGBTQI+ movement in those years were a bridge between the two movements; their great efforts to intersect the struggle against patriarchy with the struggle against heterosexism and normativity brought about the proliferation of partnership grounds. Since the end of the 2000s, agendas such as transfeminism, trans rights, and the problematization of heteronormativity have also become a part of feminist politics:

*When we talk about patriarchy today, if we do not gloss over its connections with heterosexism and cissexism, if we do not gloss over its connections with violence against women, homophobia and transphobia, this is the achievement of the LGBTQI+ movement. It's a gain from the perspective of the feminist and women's movement. I think there is a similar gain in terms of general politics and from the perspective of the leftist movement. I think it made its own existence accepted as an indisputable reality.*<sup>30</sup>

Along with the space opened up by the peace process, a significant number of actors of the Kurdish women's movement, feminist groups and LGBTQI+ organizations came together around the demand for peace. These encounters, which centered on expanding the means of existence by considering the private and public sphere struggles of different subjects, began to produce an idea of togetherness. The Gezi Protests, which emerged in the social conditions enabled by the peace process, allowed the visibility of the LGBTQI+ movement to increase as never before, and it can be said that it was instrumental in connecting different social and political movements with the demands of LGBTQI+s. Therefore, the period that started with the peace process, continued with the Gezi experience and included public mobilizations until June 2015, refers to a time when different movements were most closely related to each other in public, and due to the relative palliation in the civil sphere, they established affinities by taking the agendas of activists and rights defenders, such as peace, the right to the city, and anti-militarism to the center. In our interviews, the participants from feminist and LGBTQI+ movements stated that the learning relationship between the two movements in this period was at a level that allows for interactions and alliances. However, especially in the process following the state of emergency declared after the coup attempt of 15 July 2016 which continued for two years, the loss of public spaces for all established common grounds and the end of spatial juxtaposition with the increasingly oppressive environment caused activists and rights defenders to become more withdrawn. While the actors who were publicly excluded from

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28 In 2016, after the police attacked the Istanbul Trans March with a warning to “disperse”, the action committee held Pride Week marches and celebrations in different districts of Istanbul, especially Beyoğlu, with the call “We Are Dispersing”. Similarly, after the public ban on LGBTQI+ events on the grounds of public safety and health since 2017, activists tried to create new spaces with digital marches and events.

29 Interview no. 20, 20.06.2021, online.

30 Interview no. 13, 13.06.2021, online.

the political arena lost the spaces where they had contact with each other, they also witnessed the gradual fading of the way the feminist movement and the LGBTQI+ movement related to each other, which they describe as the “*process of learning together*”<sup>31</sup>.

This attenuation is closely related to the shrinking of public space. However, as expressed in our interviews, the lack of spatial opportunities that could harbor the possibility of a way-out during periods of contraction and that would allow for juxtaposed movements to see each other and breathe together, even if not in the sense of public visibility, seem to have increased the disjunctures between the two movements. Interviewees state that partnerships are gradually decreasing as the feeling of introversion comes to the fore and security concerns become vital. Furthermore, the current attacks on achievements leave room for new pursuits and cause movements to remain reactive:

*We have been under constant attack since almost 2015; (...) Istanbul Convention (...), there is the right to alimony... We are at a point where those attacking groups attack the feminist and LGBTQI+ movement at the same time, and this state of being alone and looking at it from where we stand does not lead us anywhere, moreover at one point, it broke off relations.*<sup>32</sup>

Although the channels of interaction between the two movements are blocked from time to time, we see that the feminist and LGBTQI+ movements are the ones whose voices are heard the most in the shrinking civic space. Beyond the usual forms of action, the way they engage in politics in social media, their ability to quickly respond to protest bans in digital spheres, and the fact that dynamic, anonymous and individual activists increase the number of their forms of struggle despite difficulties in terms of organizing, help both movements to increase their legitimacy through unpredictable and creative practices. A significant part of our interviews reveal that the disjunctures between the feminist movement and the LGBTQI+ movement are increasing; however, it is also stated that the subjectivities and struggles of the two movements contain important commonalities. The problematization of cissexism, the fact that only a portion of the women in the feminist movement are heterosexual, and the prominence of queer subjectivities within the feminist movement are among the commonalities:

*When we look at the feminist movement, the feminist movement, in fact, despite so much criticism, although most of the criticism is justified, it is actually the social opposition that is most closely related to the LGBTQI+ movement. Not only spatial relations or operational relations, but also that many people involved in the feminist movement are queer and this is becoming more and more visible, patriarchy is a very obvious source of common oppression, patriarchy and heterosexism are intertwined in that sense, which we cannot really distinguish from each other... The feminist movement also has common problems with the LGBTQI+ movement in many respects. There may be places where it diverges, but there are a lot of commonalities. And the political partnership is also a very personal partnership. For example, I think very few of us are hetero. I may not be actively organized within the LGBTQI+ movement, but it is my struggle. I also live a lesbian life, or a non-hetero life. That's why it's a struggle that represents me as well, I'm sure many in the feminist movement feel this way. They see it as their own struggle. They may not be the subject of the same movement, but they see themselves as a subject of the struggle.*<sup>33</sup>

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31 Interview no. 5, 04.05.2021, online.

32 For the interview with Berfu Şeker and Özlem Şen from the Women's Human Rights-New Solutions Association (KİH-YÇ), see: <https://kaosgl.org/haber/simdi-tam-da-sirasi-feminist-hareket-ozcu-ve-muhafazakar-olamaz-olmamali> Access date: September 2021.

33 Interview no. 13, 13.06.2021, online.

On the other hand, the feminist rights defender we interviewed from Kaos GL said that the two movements have a difficult relationship with each other. When she looks at the feminist movement as someone from within these movements in Ankara, she states that the fact that lesbian, bisexual and trans activists are among the feminist activists creates ties with the LGBTQI+ movement. She adds that before the pandemic, they were able to create learning spaces through reading groups or initiatives. Not only the feminist and LGBTQI+ movement coming together at the venues of action, but also the opportunities to come together and talk in a daily and intellectual context on the occasion of common or intersecting agendas have gradually decreased, both with the effect of the State of Emergency declared after 2016 and the contraction brought about by the pandemic:

*Even before the pandemic, the bans on the events that the political atmosphere brought, the oppression it made you feel, etc., also deprived us of the things that brought us together.<sup>34</sup>*

As stated before, the most important platform that increases the interaction between the movements is the spaces where common grounds are created. After 2016, with the bans, these spaces mostly withered and left their place to small solidarity networks. Following the pandemic wave that started at the end of 2019, the quarantine conditions that lasted for almost a year brought along a deprivation from the already shrunken solidarity networks and affiliations. After such pessimistic days, it is possible to say that the campaigns for the Implementation of the Istanbul Convention brought a breath of fresh air to women and LGBTQI+s. Women's and LGBTQI+ organizations demanding the implementation of the Istanbul Convention have come together in many cities for nearly two years and organized campaigns, marches and events.<sup>35</sup> It can be said that coming together with the demand for the implementation of the Istanbul Convention in recent years, when pride marches were banned and feminist night marches were subjected to police harassment, was a breath of fresh air for both movements. Of course, the President announcing the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention on the grounds that "It is being manipulated by a group trying to normalize homosexuality, which is incompatible with Turkey's social and family values"<sup>36</sup> created uneasiness in terms of women and LGBTQ+ rights and security and continues to do so.

In our interviews, it was stated that the uneasiness created by the government's views that target LGBTQI+s and correspondingly points out the necessity of withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention, is reflected in the joint action platforms. As Article 4 of the Istanbul Convention pertaining to party states not discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity while fulfilling their obligations was being targeted, one of the main criticisms is that the responses of LGBTQI+ organizations are not heard by some actors in the platforms where the struggle is carried out:

*Although everyone seems to be LGBTQI+ friendly, we know that this has no reflection in the field. This is something that shows itself very clearly in the slightest crack. Lately, this happened in the matter of the Istanbul Convention. For example, some LGBTQI+ organizations had to leave the EŞİK (Women's Platform for Equality) network.<sup>37</sup>*

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<sup>34</sup> Interview no: 5, 04.05.2021, online.

<sup>35</sup> Networks such as the Women's Platform for Equality (EŞİK), which consists of more than 300 women and LGBTQI+ organizations demanding the implementation of the Istanbul Convention, and the Enforce the Istanbul Convention platform were at the center of the campaigns.

<sup>36</sup> For the statement made by the Presidential Directorate of Communications regarding Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, see: <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/haberler/detay/turkiyenin-istanbul-sozlesmesinden-cekilmesine-iliskin-aciklama> Erişim tarihi: Access date: October 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Interview no: 3, 25.06.2021, online.

*There is incredible oppression of all movements, and this oppression prevents the movements from interacting with each other. Because everyone gets lost in their own problems so much they stop being in close contact. One of the best examples of this is the Istanbul Convention debates within the feminist movement and the queer movement. After the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, the fact that some feminist organizations came out and said, “The Istanbul Convention has nothing to do with LGBTQI+s, it does not give them any extra rights, the Istanbul Convention is a more closed convention, there is no such thing”, was in a way something like an attempt of the feminist movement to try to break the close contact for its own purposes. Some organizations, by the way, but not all. The reason why the gaps are getting wider is the increased oppression on us all, actually. Or, as the oppression increases, instead of coming together more, in my opinion at least, we’ve become even more apart.”<sup>38</sup>*

The participant we interviewed from Kurdish women’s movement, on the other hand, states that they have experienced great changes in the forms of their struggle since 2016. She states that with the closure of women’s centers, associations and foundations by decree laws, and with women from the Kurdish women’s movement, representatives and mayors being imprisoned for years, they have been deprived of their solidarity networks. The same participant says that as they withdraw into themselves, each movement has to struggle against the forms of attack directed at themselves, on some level, alone. According to her, the state’s current efforts to punish the partnerships built during the peace process and the criminalization of the peace struggle through “fight against terrorism” strategies make it difficult to re-establish solidarity networks. The participant also adds that the regression of the solidarity relationship is not one-sided. She says that the struggle waged by LGBTQI+s has been the most legitimate ground of struggle in Turkey in recent years, and that they are part of multifaceted exclusion:

*After a trustee was appointed to the Bosphorus [University], we saw how much LGBTQI+s were demonized and criminalized. Just because one is LGBTQI+, it is a very revolutionary point to defend it alone, it is a very radical point now. Defending LGBTQI+ rights has now turned into something very militant in Turkey. That’s why, at the same time, perhaps for exactly this reason, it has come to a point where it is not talked about in the public arena.”<sup>39</sup>*

In addition to these statements, the same participant states that HDP is the party that protects the rights of LGBTQI+s the most among existing political parties. However, looking beyond the party program and the statute, she maintains that the practical reflections are quite different. She says that HDP has also started to mince its words in this area and remains silent due to the increasing oppression, arrests and narrowing of the political space in recent years:

*At times when the violence intensified, the first targets have always been LGBTQI+s, then Kurds and Alevis in Turkey. In that order, they tried to make them all invisible. At this point also in HDP, that is, in the institution I work for, unfortunately it is the same for the other two institutions, the LGBTQI+ rights struggle is not at a very central point. (...) At the center of HDP is women’s freedom, women’s empowerment. HDP already has a tremendous women power, women council, women spokespersons. But despite this, the LGBTQI+ struggle is unfortunately not at a central point for the time being. And even to a point where it fell behind its own schedule and charter.”<sup>40</sup>*

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38 Interview no. 18, 30.05.2021, online.

39 Interview no. 9, 29.05.2021, online.

40 Interview no. 9, 29.05.2021, online.

A feminist activist, who has been involved in joint formations with women who have been actively struggling in the Kurdish women's movement for many years, states that the issue of peace is almost no longer on the agenda at this point. After the attacks that followed the declaration of Academics for Peace titled "We will not be a party to this crime" against the ongoing war policies in Kurdish provinces in 2016, and the subsequent criminalization of support networks such as "Everyone for Peace" on a par, establishing a peace-based partnership seems to be becoming increasingly impossible. Ongoing partnerships of the Kurdish women's movement, feminist, and LGBTQI+ organizations before 2016 also faded in time with this wave. Even though similar efforts are now limited to petition campaigns, prison visits and litigation for Kurdish women politicians in prisons, relations of solidarity are tried to be maintained.

## **B. "Feeling Having to Wage Multiple Struggles"<sup>41</sup>**

In our interviews with women's rights defenders who take part in the struggle for the city, public space and ecology, we see that the ties established between the LGBTQI+, feminist, and Kurdish women's movements are not related in the eyes of urban movements. Although the women participating in these movements see themselves as a part of multiple movements, they think that there is not enough common ground and that the movements are separate from each other:

*All these movements actually live in the same space. Every change made in this space, the closure of a square, the demolition of Sur, the closure of Taksim Square, the closure of Gezi Park, Lamda's street... All these are about space... The right to shelter, the right to housing, the right to the environment, the right to the city. ... Because of that, it is the point where all three groups actually converge. (...) When you engage in politics of space, you have to be in all these situations. (...) Of course, every group, every class, every layer has its own problems and struggles in this regard. But unfortunately, we do not have such comforts in this period: I am not interested... No, there is no such life when it is like this.<sup>42</sup>*

The participant we interviewed from Havle Women's Association states that the feminist movement and LGBTQI+ movement have captured many intersections, however she couldn't see the same for the ecology struggle.

*The most resistant point is the ecology movement. Because there is a perception as if the ecology movement is separate from all these. However, in fact, human rights movement, ecology movement, feminist movement, they are all intertwined. (...) It is very original, for example, talking about ecology at Havle's social media accounts. Few women's organizations have done and are doing this, under normal circumstances this needs to be done a lot. We're talking about the food and water crisis right now, warnings everywhere that we might come to a point where we can't talk about anything else after three or four years. But we are not able to talk about it.<sup>43</sup>*

The participant we interviewed from Kazdağları Brotherhood/Sisterhood says that though she is not actively involved in the feminist movement, she can find intersections with the feminist movement through her relationship with the ecological struggle. She states that she sees the struggle for human rights as equal to the right to life, and therefore, she thinks

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41 Interview no. 21, 07.07.2021, online.

42 Interview no. 21, 07.07.2021, online.

43 Interview no. 17, 23.06.2021, online.

these two struggle practices should see each other. She says that rights such as the right to assembly, the right to water, the right to property should be directly a matter of human rights and that it is difficult to separate these areas from each other. For example, she states that the inability to use the right to information properly in the struggle for ecology is a fundamental violation. She conveys that they get belated answers, mostly no answers, to the applications for information made to the judiciary regarding the course of spatial interventions, and therefore are excluded from the participation processes. She thinks that the obvious violations created by this situation should not only be on the agenda of the city, environment and ecology movements, but also a part of human rights movements in the broadest sense. She states that different movements support each other on the street, that it is possible to come together in joint actions and solidarity activities, but the grounds for establishing intellectual partnerships have not yet been formed. She also says that the fact that different generations have different experiences can be a barrier in establishing this closeness, and that commonality cannot be achieved in the frequently changing conceptual terminology. This can lead to a widening of the distance between groups, individuals and institutions in a practical sense.

#### IV. SHRINKING SPACES AFTER 2015

##### A. Years and Experiences of “Transfer to the Field of Human Rights”

While the civic space has gradually shrunk after 2015, women’s daily lives, activist existences, and professional affiliations have also changed. What happened after the June 7 elections, the end of the peace process, and the return to war policies were the beginning of the “difficult times” experienced today.<sup>44</sup>

*The most dominant thing in my personal history after 2015 is probably the violations of rights in Kurdish provinces, the basements where people were killed, and this strong sense of helplessness and loneliness we feel about this. 2015 just reminds me of that. Afterwards, the Academics for Peace process started from the beginning of 2016. I started following those cases. My life has actually been spent in discussions about the violations of rights in the basements of Cizre and the acknowledgment of the violations of that time by the courts and the state. As a feminist, I continued to follow women’s causes, where I continued to be a feminist, but in my personal history those few years were when my breath, my mind, and my thoughts were devoted to these. Those were the years when I transferred in the field of human rights.<sup>45</sup>*

With the state of emergency declared after the 15 July coup attempt, many women were expelled from the public service with Statutory Decrees. While the activities of more than 50 women’s institutions were terminated, departments such as vocational training courses and women’s commissions were closed down by trustees appointed in place of mayors.<sup>46</sup> In the intervening four-year period, women who were expelled by decree laws developed different survival strategies and sought ways to continue with new tools. Rosa Women’s Association is

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44 Özlem Kaya & Pınar Ögünç (2020), “Chess, Hide-and-Seek and Determination: Civil Society in Difficult Times”, Anadolu Kültür. [https://www.anadolukultur.org/\\_FILES/Contents/991/aksiviltoplumraporu\\_full\\_web.pdf?v=20211024000328](https://www.anadolukultur.org/_FILES/Contents/991/aksiviltoplumraporu_full_web.pdf?v=20211024000328)

45 Interview no. 20, 20.06.2021, online.

46 “More than 1,300 non-governmental organizations were closed down by emergency decree laws on the grounds that they were affiliated with ‘terrorist’ organizations, and these closed organizations could not effectively appeal against the decisions rendered against them in administrative courts.” Amnesty Report, “Fırtınaya göğüs germek: Türkiye’deki korku ikliminde insan haklarını savunmak”, Access Date: August, 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org.tr/public/uploads/files/RaporFirtinaya%20Gogus%20Germek.pdf>

one of them. It was founded by women who were expelled from public service. It is currently the only association in Diyarbakır that aims “to fight all kinds of societal, political, social, cultural, economic, sexual and psychological violence against women; eliminating all forms of discrimination against women” and carries out work in this field.<sup>47</sup> They have been operating for three years and they think that it is difficult to act in this field alone, since all associations working in this field have been closed in Diyarbakır, so they are establishing a network to combat violence together with the Diyarbakır Bar Association, İHD and ÖHD’s (Libertarian Jurists Association) women’s commissions. As it came to the fore in our interview, the feeling of uneasiness experienced after the expulsion is also reflected in its activities today. They are hesitant to recruit members with official registration, so they do volunteer-based work. The end of their professional life overnight with the decree-law and the uncertainties experienced in the judicial processes in the following period bring along a shared sense of uneasiness that has been carried over to the present.

Similarly, a rights defender lawyer we interviewed tells that she found herself working in the field of human rights with the start of the curfews, when she had never thought of starting a legal practice:

*I went to an internship at the human rights court. Curfews were declared within two months of my return. Especially in Şırnak... While I was starting to deal with the violations of rights there, I suddenly found myself in the heart of human rights violations. And I started practicing law, I had to practice law. In fact, I continued to work for non-governmental organizations, report or make applications on behalf of other lawyers, without my own name being seen and so on. As of the beginning of 2016, I found myself working as a lawyer. Since then, I have been actively practicing law for over five years.<sup>48</sup>*

In our interviews, women stated that the fields of professional life, occupation, activism and advocacy can be intertwined due to the narrowing of the civic space and the difficulty in making policy in recent years. On the other hand, the professional field describes an experience that is always in interaction with the practice of advocacy and activism for women, LGBTQI+s and non-binary people who are part of social movements. However, especially considering the increasingly oppressive environment in recent years, making statements about human rights from within the professional field means an increased risk for women’s rights defenders.

As the boundaries between professional identity and advocacy are blurred, changes are taking place in the way people with activist affiliations and representations act. For example, during our interviews, especially women who met feminist and queer ideas in the 2010s stated that they see themselves as a part of these movements, even though they are not part of any feminist and LGBTQI+ organization. Friendships, solidarity groups, personal acquaintances provide an opportunity for contact with all these movements, and they can also be instrumental in shaping the professional field. The feminist journalist we interviewed states that after she started reporting in the field of women’s rights, she started to meet a lot of people from this field, socialized, made friends, and therefore the story that started with a profession began to intersect with advocacy:

*I am trying to do the activism part through the news. Rights advocacy, journalism and activism are intertwined, I don’t think it’s a very good thing. It would be better if it wasn’t, but the country is in such a state. (...) It’s a harsh environment, and because we are really*

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47 <http://www.rosakadindernege.com/index/kurumsaldetay/rosa-kadin-dernegi/>

48 Interview no. 6, 27.05.2021, online.

*exhausted, the borders between those are getting very close to each other. That's why I became something like a women's rights activist over time. This country dragged me to it. (...) It's like I became a part of the women's movement while reporting on the field. My process of politicization in terms of feminism coincides with my work in the field for journalism. The two run parallel.<sup>49</sup>*

Another consequence of the post-2015 years of transferring to the field of human rights is migration. The “desire to leave” in recent years, as a feeling brought about by the political recessions, insecurity, and the constant fear of being investigated or detained, is being expressed more and more frequently. The number of people leaving Turkey for political, professional and educational reasons is constantly increasing. The doctoral researcher working in the field of peace we interviewed says that even though she did not leave on the grounds of political risk, she felt like she was in exile abroad:

*We are leaving Turkey, a lot of people have left, whatever we were doing three years ago, we can't do any of those now. Now we are at risk, that friend of mine was taken in, this happened to this friend, etc. When I came here, I wanted to do my doctorate, but I came here feeling like I was in exile, I wasn't fleeing from Turkey or anything, I was very happy to be there. But yes, I came in feeling like an exiled, and I know a lot of my friends live like that. (...) almost none of my close friends live in Turkey at the moment. The feeling that something has been destroyed (...) is already very bad. Also, if you have built most of your life around political and social issues, and that area is suddenly too risky or an area that is treated as if it doesn't exist anymore, the things you have built about yourself collapse like this. Therefore, it still pushes me so hard, that's why I can't think of returning to Turkey. Because I have no peace of mind. Living with the idea that something will happen to me all the time... Maybe I'll get used to it, I don't know, but it's hard, I don't want to risk such a thing. (...) I see this in a lot of people.<sup>50</sup>*

The trans non-binary rights defender from Pembe Hayat we spoke with states that the current oppression environment is not new for trans people. She states that every political era has directed its own means of oppression to trans people, and therefore the situation they face today is not new to them:

*Although the dose of attacks has increased, that is, their visibility has increased at this point... Because at some point there is something like this, maybe for those who remain, there is talk of Turkey all the time, whether it's a police state, a state of law, are we becoming a police state, are we becoming authoritarian, etc. In fact, this country has always been a police state for trans people.<sup>51</sup>*

## **B. Trustees and Its Aftermath**

In the report of Diyarbakır Network for Combating Violence Against Women in 2020, it is stated that shelters run under the trustee policy did not receive new applications, citing the pandemic period. While it is legally required for municipalities with a population of more than one hundred thousand to open women's shelters in Diyarbakır, which has been governed by trustees since 2016, this right is ignored and the existing support mechanisms are not operating. In shelters operating under the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Policies, new

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<sup>49</sup> Interview no. 8, 25.05.2021, online.

<sup>50</sup> Interview no. 23, 05.06.2021, online.

<sup>51</sup> Interview no. 10, 02.07.2021, online.

applications are blocked on the grounds of overcrowding, and women are forced to return to places where they were subjected to violence.<sup>52</sup>

The rights defender from the Rosa Women's Association we interviewed says trustees have confiscated information about women who were subjected to violence:

*We lost all the data we had with those trustees during the state of emergency. Data is of great importance in terms of both seeing that violence map and having a tally. As you know, it is numbers that are mostly taken into account the most in international mechanisms. Everything else feels like a story.*<sup>53</sup>

After the documents containing the data were confiscated, the anti-violence network established by the Rosa Women's Association, Diyarbakır Bar Association, İHD, and ÖHD's women's commissions started to work on data mapping again. They produce reports every six months and they document types of domestic violence, psychological violence, and state-induced violence.

The founders of the Rosa Women's Association experienced the state of emergency very harshly; they were exposed to expulsions, investigations, and violations of rights. In the last year, they have been the target of various judicial harassments. In May 2020, many institutions from the civil society, especially the Rosa Women's Association, faced arrests and detentions. The charges include organizing a March 8 rally, forming a purple convoy against sexism and violence in traffic, holding a workshop on "what kind of peace do women dream of", making a press statement against the war, and organizing actions against trustee policies.<sup>54</sup>

What happened during this process was also shared in our interview:

*We have been subjected to serious judicial harassment in the last year, five police operations and two raids... All our members were detained. Almost all of them spent an average of three months in prison. I was detained like that for a while. In the second operation, I was released after four detentions. I was taken during operations twice in the early morning. We realized at this last plenary meeting, they accomplished what they wanted to do. Women are very cautious about being our official members or managers... They are very willing to carry out our work voluntarily. For us, that official affiliation doesn't matter, they don't have to be members.*<sup>55</sup>

During our meeting, it was frequently mentioned that the struggle against trustees is also a women's struggle. First of all, trustees' closing of women's centers, trying to make the shelters null, and the closure of leading rights defender institutions in the city by making them targets are just a few examples of the aftermath of state of emergency in Diyarbakır. It is a fact that has been witnessed for years that Kurdish women's movement organizations, which have strong experience of struggle, are attempted to be abolished by being accused of "terrorism". In our meeting with the Rosa Women's Association, criticisms came to the fore, such as the fact that

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52 For the Diyarbakır Bar Association report on violence against women, see: <https://www.diyarbakirbarosu.org.tr/haberler/kadina-yonelik-siddetle-mucadele-aginin-diyarbakir-ilindeki-son-bir-yila-iliskin-kadina-yonelik-siddet-rapor-aciklamasi> & Women for Women's Human Rights – New Ways (WWHR) Istanbul Convention Turkey Monitoring Report (Shadow Report), <https://kadinininsanhaklari.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Istanbul-Sozlesmesi-Golge-Rapor-ENG.pdf>, Access date: August, 2021,

53 Interview no. 1, 03.07.2021, online.

54 In Diyarbakır, "5 operations were carried out in May and June, 76 women's rights defenders and politicians were subjected to detentions and arrests and harassment by the judiciary". For detailed information, see <https://www.sessizkalma.org/defender/rosa-kadin-dernegi/>

55 Interview no. 1, 03.07.2021, online.

the political process that took place during and after the state of emergency was not heard enough by different feminist circles and that they were sometimes left alone in their struggle against trustees.

### **C. The New Wave After the State of Emergency: Audits**

Audits that have become more frequent in the last year are at the forefront of the interventions against civil society after the state of emergency. The Law on the Prevention of Financing the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, which was passed in the Parliament in December 2020 and enacted in January 2021, threatens the work of non-governmental organizations. The law makes it possible to both dismiss the members of the board of directors of non-governmental organizations and to close down the institutions. It allows the state to seize control of the of the association if an investigation has been launched against an employee or a member of the board of directors of the NGO in scope of the Anti-Terror Law. The law also authorizes public officials to conduct audits when deemed necessary by the Ministry of Interior.<sup>56</sup>

As can be expected, the audit practices faced by civil society were frequently mentioned in the interviews. The fact that individual legal processes can be cited as grounds for closure or sentencing also hinders women's activism experiences:

*It is indeed a huge risk area, since we provide all our information to the Presidency with the Turkish ID numbers and addresses of all our members. (...) For example, I do not personally go to certain protests. I feel that I have to do less activism, though we established this association for activism. I do not go to more risky protests. Indeed, right now, the detention of an association [member] has become something that affects the association as a whole.<sup>57</sup>*

With the increasing impossibility of street mobilization and freedom of association in recent years, civil society has come to the fore as an area where bigger opportunities for advocacy can exist. In addition to institutions that have existed for a long time, academics and researchers excluded from institutional academia, new generation of women, non-binary and LGBTQI+ subjects, feminists and rights defenders from different fields are also trying to expand their policy-making tools and their fields of existence through institutions, associations and foundations where they can exist in the civil field. While new spaces are being opened, a protection mechanism for survival comes to the fore as a result of the oppression mechanisms directed towards the entire civil sphere. Compared to previous years, functions such as documenting and publicizing permanent mechanisms, legal demands and violations have been replaced by efforts to ensure that civil society does not lose its grounds of legitimacy.

A feminist rights defender, who has been working in various fields of civil society since the beginning of the 2000s, said in our interview that civil society focuses on surviving by protecting its existing rights. She states that the project applications they received in the past years were mostly in the fields of transitional justice, peace process dynamics and memory studies that go in parallel, but recently they have not received any applications related to these fields. She says that because of the audits, they had to go through self-censorship in the recent period.

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<sup>56</sup> For the Human Rights Joint Platform fact sheet, see <https://ihop.org.tr/kitle-imha-silahlarinin-yayilmasin-finansmaninin-onlenmesine-iliskin-kanun-teklifine-dair-degerlendirme/> Access date: 2021

<sup>57</sup> Interview no. 26, 24.05.2021, online.

Pembe Hayat, on the other hand, has been audited dozens of times in the past year. The trans, non-binary rights defender we interviewed states that Pembe Hayat received an audit from the Ministry of Interior for the first time in its history. While the audits of other institutions lasted a maximum of one week, the audit carried out by the Ministry of Interior lasted about four months. Due to the educational activities they organize, they were also audited by the Ministry of National Education. She conveys that they could not be active during this entire audit as the documents were being examined. Along with the audits, the institutions they receive funding from have also started to interfere with the content of the events:

*Consulates are providing support in some way, they can support gays more easily. For example, we hear and experience things like this. We say, we are going to organize an event about sex workers, they say we can support you, but how about if there were no sex workers at your event... Because they don't want to be mentioned with them, that is, they want to be called as though they have this vision, but on the other hand, they don't want to be mentioned so openly with you. You are already suffering from these, and on top of that, a lot of fines...*<sup>58</sup>

The activist we talked to from Kaos GL states that they have had difficulties in doing all kinds of public activities since 2017. This difficulty stems not only from the ongoing policies of oppression, but also from the weakening of solidarity relations. She states that immediately after Süleyman Soyulu's statements regarding LGBTQI+s, people who had previously contributed to Kaos GL's publications or website had their names deleted, and requested that their articles be removed. She also states that people cannot find the motivation to write due to the feelings of anxiety, so they are unable to contribute.

#### **D. Solidarity Relations in Narrow Spaces and What Is Lacking**

The constriction of civic space, the decrease in street movements and the gradual weakening of public visibility cause the channels of interaction between different movements to become blurred. In the interviews, it was frequently emphasized that living under pressure is increasingly damaging the relations of the movements with one another. The reflection of injustice extending from the judiciary to daily life is undoubtedly reflected in the struggle for existence of activists and their interactions. While non-governmental organizations have established networks of solidarity among each other in the face of increasingly frequent audits and inspections in recent years, solidarity alliances with social movements seem to have weakened compared to the period before 2015. During our meetings, we frequently talked about an environment where everything became more difficult after the state of emergency, engaging in politics deemed dangerous, and freedom of expression was restricted and curbed by judicial harassment. In this field, different subjects of the human rights movement, all the while trying to establish contact points together, seem to have distanced instead.

From the perspective of a queer activist, who is part of the LGBTQI+ movement and has been working in the field of civil society in recent years, the situation is as follows:

*Right now, everyone is particularly disconnected from each other. But I think it will get better when we start to be on the street together, for example, when we are together again on March 8th. While everyone was together at the time of Gezi, now it has come to a place where they are increasingly distant from each other. This comes from focusing on their own problems*

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<sup>58</sup> Interview no. 10, 02.07.2021, online.

*and trying to stay away from what they might see as problematic in as many different ways as possible while trying to solve their own problems.*<sup>59</sup>

In our interviews we see that women, LGBTQI+’s and non-binary people in non-governmental organizations and activist networks feel disconnected from their former spaces for coming together. While there is a strong desire for spaces that can offer the possibility of discussing, debating, thinking together and establishing partnerships, the feeling of waiting and preserving the existing stands out. Anxiety and insecurity reduce policy making tools; individuals and institutions give priority to creating and providing safe spaces. On the other hand, spontaneous sociability seems to have decreased with the pandemic. It is possible to say that solidarity parties, joint social and political activities and spatial encounters are vital in terms of creating and maintaining contacts for different networks, institutions and movements. It should be noted that the public spheres that seem to have shifted to the digital realm today, together with the diminishing of these relations, are far from a positive uniting potential compared to the past. Putting in parenthesis discussions such as digital activism and new policy tools, the view that the movements’ potential to learn from each other by seeing from each other has decreased with the shrinking of the civil space, was frequently emphasized in our interviews:

*Every institution, organization or individual has a priority that is survival. Very tangible survival and security challenges, such as surviving as an organization or not being in prison, or unemployment and so on. Or the constant struggle of something acute, such as the Istanbul Convention, trying to protect a gained right from a far behind. I think that at least in Turkey’s conditions, in order to act together we need a more democratic, relaxed environment. In the absence of that, there is this desperate effort to maintain one’s own existence... We do not have the environment we need to come together.*<sup>60</sup>

The pressures and judicial harassment, especially on Kurdish women and the LGBTQI+ movement, cause a decline in interactions with other movements:

*The reason why the gaps are getting wider is the increased oppression on us all, actually. Or, as the oppression increases, instead of coming together more, in my opinion at least, we’ve become even more apart.*<sup>61</sup>

The feminist activist we interviewed from Kaos GL describes the field she worked until 2015 as follows:

*Finding joy in which I can also realize my own existence and be together with my loved ones, and also keep creating... Frankly, looking at it from today it seems like a fairy tale (...) after the protest where you talked about politics, you danced and partied, it was like a comradeship platform from which a joy was derived from that activism itself.*<sup>62</sup>

Today, however, she describes the spaces she is in as places that have “lost their joy”. She says that small friendship networks have replaced the forms of socialization and partying created after protests, events and meetings, houses have become a place of socialization and with the effect of the oppressive environment, they are “more and more confronted with that ugly

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59 Interview no. 18, 30.05.2021, online.

60 Interview no. 23, 05.06.2021, online.

61 Interview no. 18, 30.05.2021, online.

62 Interview no. 5, 04.05.2021, online.

political, heavily oppressive atmosphere”. Looking at the situation in Ankara, she states that the October 10 massacre left a feeling that is difficult to cope with in everyone’s lives and that their public affiliations have been gradually lost since then.

## E. New Tools and Methods

One of the points we sought answers for in our interviews was what kind of new tools emerged in the field of rights advocacy with the narrowing of the civil space, whether women and LGBTQI+s used these new tools in different ways, and what kind of strategy changes were produced. From this report’s viewpoint, when we think about the movements, the spaces of coexistence for those working and struggling in different non-governmental organizations, activist networks and groups are largely realized through digital tools.

Digital activism, which has become increasingly prominent in Turkey, especially with the 2010s, seems to have taken gained ground against the streets in recent years. Obstacles in terms of organizing and difficulties in rallying on the street brought about the emergence of the digital space as a new form of publicness. Digital media is one of the leading policy-making tools as the place where the feminist and LGBTQI+ movements announce their street protests to large audiences with campaign-type hashtag works, and where “the demand for justice, anger and riots after male violence, women and LGBTQI+ murders are shared”.<sup>63</sup>

In terms of non-governmental organizations, it should be added that social media has not yet been accepted as an activist model beyond its function as a means of communicating and sharing the produced content. The participant, working at the ESHİD (Association for Monitoring Equal Rights), thinks that civil society should have strong ties with the digital field, but it is still far from establishing that relationship. She says that the means of publicizing rights violations do not create enough public visibility, long reports do not attract attention, and the existing language does not catch up with the younger generation.

One of the prominent opinions voiced in our interviews is that the active use of digital tools, especially by the new generation of women, non-binary and LGBTQI+ activists and rights advocates, has begun to challenge the authorities in the human rights movements. One of the prominent views is that the hierarchies caused by the constant selection of speakers who have a “*strong capacity to make presentations*”<sup>64</sup> at conferences and events or who have a good command of academic and theoretical terminology may gradually weaken, with the increase in speaking opportunities in digital media. Although judicial harassment due to social media is still a threat, as one activist participant in our interviews stated, digital tools eliminate the idea that “*only authority can speak and authority can write.*”<sup>65</sup> The feminist activist from Çatlak Zemin states that after the disintegration of feminist organizations, digital tools politicized women and LGBTQI+s one by one, and turned them into politically engaged subjects. She maintains that feminist politics allows for the dissemination of individual networks, whether organized or unorganized, and that feminism can socially prevail more than ever before in this way.

Another space opened up by digital activism is the opportunity to convey the experiences of women and LGBTQI+s in direct ways by exposing cis hetero men –with/without public presence – perpetrators of harassment and sexual assaults to which they were subjected, providing

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63 2010-2020: Hashtag’lerle feminist aktivizm, Çatlak Zemin, Access date: September 2021. <https://catlakzemin.com/2010-2020-feminist-hashtaglerle-dijital-aktivizm/>

64 Interview no. 30, 25.06.2021, online.

65 Interview no. 30, 25.06.2021, online.

an opportunity to speak up for what is covered up, not seen or not heard. The participant we interviewed from Susma Bitsin [Speak Up Make It End] platform, defines this initiative as a “movement for finding and strengthening each other”<sup>66</sup> against harassment and sexual attacks in the cinema, advertisement, and TV industries. They follow lawsuits, organize social media campaigns, and come together with women from different fields to fight for the empowerment of the movement:

*How the exposure culture is visible in digital media and how it turns into something effective has led to discussion among us, and this is a positive discussion, no doubt. Especially about where these exposures will lead. Because you can always expose, and then what? (...) Actually, I can say that Susma Bitsin was also mobilized within these discussions.*<sup>67</sup>

In addition to all these, as highlighted in our interviews, the disclosure of trans exclusionary arguments through social media, which have become almost a very dominant agenda of feminists and LGBTQI+s in recent years, has also come to the fore. In the summer of 2019, there were intense discussions on social media among trans activists and radical feminists, including academics, on what the category of woman includes like “granting the right to use hormones to trans children, determining legal gender based on declaration, and the inclusion of trans women in public spaces open to women”<sup>68</sup> Some feminist academics and feminist circles defended TERF (trans exclusionary feminist) arguments, which advocate that trans women are not women, or more implicitly make this case with biological gender reductionism, associate sexual violence with gender identity, and characterize trans politics as a means of infiltrating women’s spheres of existence.<sup>69</sup> These discussions continued for days on social media, and against the increasing transphobic wave, many feminist and LGBTQI+ organizations and institutions made statements expressing their reactions to the aforementioned arguments and circles. In our interviews, it was stated that there is an attempt to dominate the feminist field with TERF and essentialist arguments, as a reflection of the spread of anti-gender movements and right-wing populist power strategies feeding from their counterparts in different geographies. A participant from Kaos GL states that one of the reasons for the high level of anger in the TERF discussions on social media is that the discussion was stuck in one area:

*Somehow, we had a common space to share during those conversations and readings. Not so much now. I mean the channels and arenas that can bring feminists and LGBTQI+’s together... That’s why it seems to me that acrimony is on the rise. This is how I feel. Of course, that acrimony may also be related to this: so we are now convinced that nothing constitutes the sense of justice, right, there is no such thing at the moment, and everyone seems to be in a position to establish their own justice. And that’s why they write much more viciously, they write much more angrily.*<sup>70</sup>

As is known, these discussions continued on a inflammatory level due to the transphobic and hateful arguments trans people were exposed to. However, as highlighted in our interviews, the re-voicing of privilege forms, cisnormative relationship styles, and the binary gender regime in terms of these privileges leaves a significant residue in terms of the partnerships of trans, feminist and LGBTQI+ movements:

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66 Interview no. 27, 25.05.2021, online.

67 Interview no. 27, 25.05.2021, online.

68 Sema Semih, “TERF”, *Feminist Bellek*, Acces date: September 2021, <https://feministbellek.org/terf/>

69 Feride Eralp, “Background of TERF dispute: How did it all come down to the locker rooms?”, *Çatlak Zemin*, Access date: September 2021, <https://en.catlakzemin.com/background-of-terf-dispute-how-did-it-all-come-down-to-the-locker-rooms/>

70 Interview no. 5, 04.05.2021, online.

*People, even if they are silent or people who think like them, who were directly involved in the movement were exposed. (...) In our environment, such, let me say, problematic people in this regard were not exposed as TERF because they were not engaged in social media discussions. In other words, because they did not form such sentences... But they also questioned and changed their own positions through this discussion. (...) Indeed, this discussion left behind a debate as to whether it is possible to be a feminist or not, without accepting the idea of transfeminism and a perspective that problematizes binary gender.<sup>71</sup>*

The trans non-binary rights defender from Pembe Hayat we spoke with states that when she thinks in terms of movements, transphobia and trans exclusionary arguments can be found in both movements:

*LGBTQI+ organizations, feminist organizations, they all have trans exclusion in some way, there is no organization acting as trans-specific. And a place where you can get rid of that domination, that is, that cis domination, where I feel at home, where I really feel like a member of the family... And we work in the field of sex work similarly. If you look at it like this, it is perhaps one of the most radical organizations in Turkey. Because you work with transvestites and whores, do I make myself clear, it is a place that is always seen as the most despicable and is at the center of all insults and profanity, where you embrace the identities that people use to humiliate others, where you carry out your activism.<sup>72</sup>*

## **F. New Language, In-between Generations and Intergenerationality**

Among the interviewees, there were many women in their thirties who started university in the second half of the 2000s and experienced the Gezi and peace process environment. Women and non-binary students in this age group, who became students and participated in movements in the periods when feminist organizations were not yet disintegrating, different movements could come together, and street protests came to the fore, defined their own generation as an in-between generation based on their experiences in the field of civil society. The definition of an in-between generation that maintains a balanced relationship with the older generation, which has become politicized by being influenced by the political experiences of the previous generation, but after noticing the binds over time has started new pursuits, steps forth.

*I am mostly with the generation older than me now. The group that I am involved in and fight for human rights with, is generally composed of people over the age of 35-40. I see that the things I have lived, such as ousting people, is not the same with the generation after us, that everybody knows each other and they start to support each other more, and everyone is within the field they are trying to gain expertise within the human rights – be it LGBTQI+, refugees, political litigation, prisons, etc. That's why, I think, as a generation coming from solidarity and an in-between generation, we have difficulties in communicating and working together with the older group.<sup>73</sup>*

The feminist rights defender we interviewed from *Havle Women's Association* thinks that as a woman from the in-between generation, she is in an area of tension and that there is a difference between generations that oscillates between working harder and being heard more:

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<sup>71</sup> Interview no. 13, 13.06.2021, online.

<sup>72</sup> Interview no. 10, 02.07.2021, online.

<sup>73</sup> Interview no. 6, 27.05.2021, online.

*I am at a very transitional point, I know the busy working order of the previous generation, I also work with the younger generation and it's a very in-between position. In our first experience, women who worked in other associations would come and share their experiences. I mean, so much has been done even on the basis of volunteering there, I don't know, they say "we just wrote that report voluntarily, why do we need a project, why we are doing this if we wouldn't have done it without a financial contribution", there was a perception like this. Generally, of course, the older generation accuses the younger generation of being lazier... They accuse them of being less systematic. However, at the point we have arrived at, the dissemination rate of the contents produced by them is very different from the rate of these contents that are deemed unqualified. While we can easily disseminate a small image in its simplest form or bring it to the agenda, in another world, ten, fifteen people read those huge reports they wrote. The new generation always feels this. There is always such an area of tension. Between working harder and being heard more...<sup>74</sup>*

This participant we interviewed thinks that this tension is largely due to traditional ways of doing business. She states that long meetings, hard-to-read reports, and casting aside quick and practical information as "unqualified" are the main tension points in the civil society experience. Among the new tools, she states that, rather than the years of cooperation, the styles that allow to come together around the main problem produce solutions and enable the formation of new forms from within and will lead to the development of civic space.

In our interviews, it was often said that the generation popularly known as Z –the new generation, as women put it–, creates new learning spaces for those coming from different backgrounds, generations and experiences. Sharing practices in digital media, in which the anonymous, everyday language comes to the fore and the problematization of the private/space is centralized, is multiplying these learning spaces. Expressing that she sees herself as an "in-between generation", the rights defender says that the new generation is quite self-confident and they have more knowledge of daily life and the private compared to their own generation:

*(...) what is healthier is that this is a generation that participates more actively, they know what they want, and perhaps are unapologetic from the very beginning to the things we were exposed to and had to struggle with in a different way, and they just don't discriminate that way from the very beginning...<sup>75</sup>*

*I think it is very valuable that someone is doing and expressing this on social media in a way that is not limited to just hashtags. Because on the one hand, you can influence a group much larger than what you actually can reach on the street. (...) If there were such podcasts in my time, at least we wouldn't have experienced such toxic things, maybe things would have been different.<sup>76</sup>*

According to the participants in various feminist networks and organizations, while the feminist movement used to be more intergenerational compared to today, a "a more singular generation, younger" style has come to the fore in recent years. Following the definition of the in-between generation mentioned in our interviews, they state that their generation may be the last one to have the "experience of engaging in politics together with older and younger people"<sup>77</sup> and the

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<sup>74</sup> Interview no. 26, 24.05.2021, online.

<sup>75</sup> Interview no. 30, 25.06.2021, online.

<sup>76</sup> Interview no. 6, 27.05.2021, online.

<sup>77</sup> Interview no. 13, 13.06.2021, online.

main reason for this differentiation is the radical change in advocacy and activism tools and the fact that these tools are now determined by digital media. The growing queerness of feminism, the rapid change potential of the political language and the fact that the forms of expression are closer to the everyday, increase the interest of the new generation in the movements.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

First of all, we aimed for this report to enable us to think about the work of feminist, queer and Kurdish women's organizations and the existence and experiences of the actors in movements, institutions and networks in the field of human rights and advocacy. Of course, it is necessary to point out the difficulties of dealing with many important issues all at once, each of which deserves to be studied meticulously and separately. But above all, we tried to deal with the gendered structure of the field of rights advocacy and the gendered experiences of the actors, which we wanted to problematize throughout the whole of the study, by considering different movements in the context of this report. In this sense, this report aimed to look at the rights violations experienced by women and LGBTQI+s, solidarity relations in increasingly constricted spaces, opportunities for organization and symmetrical routes of engaging in politics, especially following the contraction of the civil space in recent years.

As stated in the report, while a significant portion of the people we interviewed saw themselves as members of the LGBTQI+ and feminist movements, the number of those who were currently involved in a formal or informal organization was less. As it stands out in their personal stories, we saw that they were involved in the activist networks of these movements during their student years, when the civil sphere had spaces of relative freedom, or before they took part in the civil society professionally. It is possible to say that belonging to the movements has changed form due to the active existence of LGBTQI+ and feminist networks in digital spaces, and the fact that social media provides a great opportunity to follow current discussions, and digital public spaces allow for different forms of juxtaposition as the street is increasingly no longer a field of expression. On the other hand, the diversification of the ways of being involved in feminist and LGBTQI+ movements in recent years and the participation of the new generation queer and feminists in the civic space through associations and networks shaped around their subjectivities, seem to have diversified the forms of involvement. The increase in these experiences has brought with it more questioning of the forms of activism, policy development and the forms of relations in the civic space. Established hierarchies and sexist forms of relationships caused by cisgender-hetero male dominance are increasingly problematized compared to before. In addition, with the increase in queer representations within the feminist movement and networks, the category of women is reconsidered, objections to gender regimes/arguments based on biological gender reductionism are increasing, and more are pondering channels of interaction with LGBTQI+ movements and networks.

Our interviews reveal that although feminists have been in the human rights movement for many years, this field is seen as the area of those who are responsible for the struggles that have historically focused on gross violations of rights. Participants from different generations and movements often make similar comments on the field of human rights. In this definition, the actors involved in the movements insistently emphasize the vitalness of engaging in politics by seeing and learning from each other. However, as the report emphasizes, waves of oppression and security policies following the end of the peace process cause movements to prioritize survival and creating safe spaces. In the field of civil society, it is difficult to say

that the movements have been able to provide these mechanisms mutually, while networks of solidarity that will be the lifeline of each other, especially against the intensified audits and controls, are being established. It should be added that the Kurdish women's movement has not received enough support and solidarity in the face of being criminalized on the grounds of the "fight against terrorism" strategies in the spiral of violence that has been increasing since 2015. The partnerships that feminist, LGBTQI+ and Kurdish women's organizations built on the basis of the struggle for peace, truth and justice before the state of emergency have mostly faded today. Therefore, the disappearance of common grounds causes the Kurdish women's movement actors, who have become targets, to struggle almost alone against judicial harassment and pressure.

We aspire for this report to remind us once again how vital the relations of solidarity are, what is lacking and the existence of spaces that can serve as a breather/lifeline to each other in difficult times. Hopefully, it will enable people to imagine the strength, joy and perseverance of the actors who will reclaim public space when social and political conditions allow.



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