

## Turkey 'the fight is against power'

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**There are 15-20,000 political prisoners in Turkey. Student, worker and ecologist demonstrations are regularly broken up and demonstrators arrested and tortured. There is a state of emergency in five eastern provinces as the large Kurdish community continues to fight for its survival. Meanwhile, the regime makes the superficial move towards liberalism, which are necessary for its application to join the EEC to be accepted. In the following interview Jill Bend from Off Our Backs talks to three Turkish radical feminists. Because of the need to protect their anonymity, their names have been changed.**

**OOB:** *How did Turkish women begin talking about women's liberation ?*

**Aysel:** After the coup d'état in 1980, there were some women from left wing groups that started talking about their experiences in these groups.

They were feeling frustrated about questions of power. The socialist movement wouldn't end their problems as women. 'Kadin Cevresi' (Women's Circle) began about that time. We were one of the few political groups that were allowed to operate legally during the period of martial law.

**OOB:** *Have repressive measures been taken against Kadin Cevresi since the authorities will apply the same treatment to feminists that they have to other groups when they begin to see a threat ?*

**Didar:** The repression is not going to come just from the state, you know, I am very much afraid of the Islamic movement that is getting quite strong in Turkey. In our first women's protest, in March 1987, we spoke against wife-battering and the comments of the judge hearing the trial of a man charged with the violent assault of his wife. It was during the holy month of Ramadan, and this woman speaker was reading some extracts from the Koran... Mohammed's words on wife-battering. It is quite obvious that he said you could beat your wife. We were hundreds of women shouting out against Mohammed. For one moment I thought what is happening ? This is quite dangerous. After that, they became quite sensitive about us and began writing against us in the Islamic and fascist newspapers.

**OOB:** *When the women in Istanbul talk about feminism or, for*

*example, organise this protest against wife-battering, do you consider how to reach out to women in the villages or east Turkey where society is more traditional ?*

**Aysel:** Politically, we don't believe in representation. I don't want to talk for the women in the villages, women that I haven't seen in my life. This is a political point of view. Yet I know these struggles. If my father can batter me, he can batter my mother. They get battered in the villages too. If I do something about it here, it may help them in the villages also.

**OOB:** *What about the violence against women on the street ?*

**Seviya:** I don't think it is as bad a problem here as it is in Europe or the States because the men here can do whatever they want to their women, waiting at home, so they don't need women on the streets.

There are some women waiting in the houses for that oppression, for that violence, and those rapes.

**Didar:** I don't feel safe on the streets here. Women are always getting touched. You don't have to get raped to be abused. They walk all over you. You can't get used to it.

**OOB:** *Pornography is a controversial issue in the West. Does it even exist here and what is the feeling about it ?*

**Seviya:** Pornography is illegal, but it is very official. Hardcore cheap pornography can be found everywhere, but they will take you to court for writing about human sexuality or erotica. Most of the Turkish weekly papers, even with an article against pollution, they will use a slightly naked woman as the cover page. What is the difference between this and pornography ? If you yield to this, what is the point in being against pornography ? It is as bad. I don't think any when there is still abuse of women's bodies.

**OOB:** *Brothels are legal and state-run, an incongruous situation because the population is 99 % Muslim and the Turkish government is secular. What is the reality of this paradox ?*

**Aysel:** Prostitution is legal and transsexuality is illegal. But you get illegal suppression if you are gay, transvestite or transsexual. It is the same as torture... It is not legal, but the States does it !

**OOB:** *I heard there is a radical Islamic feminist group that protested at the university of Istanbul for the right to wear the veil to class.*

**Aysel:** Yes, that happened but they do not call themselves feminist. There are some Muslim women who are sensitive about male domination and they are talking about it. They don't carry their husband's name. But it doesn't affect Islamic politics. They can't organise Islamic politics. It is organised by men and they are very against us.

**OOB:** *Turkey had a military coup in September 1980 and only lifted martial law in 1986. There are still a few hundred women political prisoners, some facing the death sentence. Two of you were subjected to torture and prison during that period. What reasons were women arrested for ?*

**Aysel:** It is very difficult to be someone politically important as a woman in Turkey. They put that sort of woman in prison. Most of them are in for being a member of an illegal organisation. I was inside for that reason.

**Didar:** Me too. The arrests were not always for being a member of a guerrilla group, but it could also be simply for being a member of a communist group. These groups were banned and became illegal groups.

**Seviya:** The thing is that, before 1980, those groups were legal but after the coup you could spend five years or more in jail for

working in such a group. They suddenly became illegal. When the military takes over, there is *only* the military regime.

**Aysel:** There is no rationalisation in a coup d'etat... talking about communism, being a communist, organising for communism and propaganda about communism is all forbidden in Turkey, still. It is forbidden to be against the State. It is forbidden to say that one social class is oppressing the other one.

**Seviya:** Legally it is like that. If you say one social class is under oppression from another one, you can be condemned to death.

**OOB:** *You have learned a different outlook on the relation between freedom and struggle, because of these experiences ?*

**Aysel:** One thing I have noticed is that it is easier for a woman to talk about torture than a man. We used to joke about torture a lot in prison. Things like coming up to each other and saying 'okay, tell me your name'. When I talk with my husband about this, he said they never talked about being tortured themselves. It was different for us because it was always a man torturing us and it is normal for a woman to get violence from a man. For the men prisoners, it is something that makes their male pride break down because it is a man torturing them.

**OOB:** *They are not used to the powerlessness...*

**Aysel:** The men talk, especially if they torture their own wives or rape their wives. The wife who gets raped, she doesn't talk. It is not a problem of getting physically hurt, it is a problem of getting powerless. Women are not used to power, especially physical power. It is very difficult for a woman to torture another woman. It happened in history, there were Nazi women, but it is very rare. Women are more alienated by violence.

**OOB:** *Are the feminists supportive of these women in prison, trying to keep in touch and act in defense of their cases ?*

**Didar:** We don't forget but we can't do much. There is no real close relationship between political prisoners and us, as feminists. It is rare. Some of them write to us because they find us interesting, this new trend in our society.

**Seviya:** If you look from the woman's point of view, it is not so important the number of women in the jails, but the women in the jail of the home. This is a more important subject for us because there is a majority of women being tortured and imprisoned in the home.

**OOB:** *Do women in Turkey debate the political positioning of patriarchy versus capitalism as the enemy ?*

**Aysel:** In Turkey, you get industry and nightlife and proletariat and marginal sexual groups and the villages... everything. But it is

getting very fast to urban and capitalist. To think that in under-developed, or Eastern, or Third World countries, that there should be any different approach to organising is what I call 'Orientalism'... meaning to think that less is good for the East, or that in the East we can demand less. There can be a unique approach in every country, of course, but we don't want to demand less than you. Because there is torture going around, and because people are poor, doesn't mean we shouldn't think about wife-battering.

In Turkey we are discussing whether we are oppressed by men, or by capitalism. I feel we are oppressed by men, and exploited by men. Our political group wants to analyse power, relationships. I am against power. That is all I know. I am against all kinds of power.

(Reproduced from **Off Our Backs**, May 1988).

The following information is drawn from "**Turkey Newsletter**" published by **Committee for Defense of Democratic Rights in Turkey**, 84 Balls Pond Road - London N1, U.K.

## Women in prison

In the prisons women political prisoners braved beatings and ill-treatment to take an active part in last years prison hunger strikes. Women also played the lead in setting-up the radical TAYAD (Association of Families of Prisoners and Detainees) which has transformed the whole political prisoners issue in Turkey.

Women in Turkey are definitely 'coming out of the kitchen' and are fighting shoulder to shoulder with men both for their own rights and for general freedom and democracy.

## Second class citizen

A woman who was sexually assaulted took her attacker to court where he was charged with attempted sexual assault and attempted rape. He was found guilty of molestation and given a six month suspended sentence. The High Court was asked to review the case and requested that the first charge against the defendant should not be dropped. The lower court rejected the appeal and the presiding judge recorded that 'The behaviour of the victim was not acceptable to society ; she has been divorced twice and is a woman of some experience'.

The victim made a formal protest to the Committee for Judges over the judge's comments. A case was opened against them on the grounds that he had insulted the women in a written form. She stated 'Those who are here to dispense justice have insulted me on paper... I have no right to seek justice purely because I have had two marriages. This kind of treatment is quite normal'.

## Legal discrimination

Despite improvements, women are still legally discriminated against. The Turkish Civil Code still contains articles such as: Article 159: 'Work for women other than housework depends on her husband's permit... a wife may be engaged in work or a handicraft with her husband's explicitly or implicitly expressed permission'. Or Article 155: 'It is the husband who represents the

unity of the act of marriage... ' The same article limits the wife's role to '... the permanent needs of the home'.

There is also the degrading provisions of the Turkish Penal Code Article 440 according to which a woman who is convicted of committing adultery can be punished with between six months to three years imprisonment. Whereas a man committing the same offence can only be punished if he brings an unmarried woman to his home where he lives with his wife.

## Women fight back

Despite bans, a wide range of women's organisations have emerged in Turkey in the last two years. These include for the first time feminist movements modelled on those in Europe in the 1970s. They range from 'separatist' groups to just more militant versions of Semra Ozal's type of organisation. Those who just argue that the problems of Turkish women are due to men in general or their own lack of consciousness and who don't make a habit of street demonstrations are often given official encouragement. An example of this were recent TRT (State TV) programmes in which they were allowed to express their views. This was highly unusual on TRT which is normally a monopoly of the ruling ANAP party.

Other women's groups concentrate on campaigning against serious issues such as wife-beating. They have taken cases to court, held demonstrations and in last October started street collections on petitions. This has led to a big increase in support including from men.

The main trend among working women has been towards participation in trade unions and leading the resistance in the Gecekondu (shanty towns) to evictions.

The Gecekondu movement has caused the rapid politisation of many women. The movement is led by ordinary working women and housewives. In the last year it has leapt from a movement of largely passive protest and petitions to a stage where women are stoning the security forces and fighting barricade battles to defend their homes as almost a matter of routine.

## Women take action in coalfield

On 26th January a major protest reached its peak in the mining village of Alpâgut.

Alpâgut is famous in Turkish labour movement history. In the 1970s miners and small farmers seized the coal mine and staged a work in which demonstrated that the workers could continue production without management of owners.

The most recent action was caused by the mining company violating an agreement whereby in return of giving up their land for the mine, a villager's trucking cooperative would have the contract to transport the coal. After the villagers had pooled their resources and brought trucks, the company gave the contract instead to a private trucking firm.

In anger the villagers (with the miner's support), blocked the entrances to the colliery with their trucks. When the paramilitary gendarmes arrived they retreated. However, the next day the village women returned and smashed the mine offices and equipment and fought with gendarmes. Out of 57 villagers arrested, 35 were women.

## Prostitution

Mass poverty caused by the regines policies has led to a big increase in prostitution.

According to a survey carried out by the Aegean University, the number of registered prostitutes has risen from 5400 in 1980 to 338 000 in 1987 - increase of 6,259%!

The survey reported that many of these women are looked on as wage earners by their families and are not repudiated as in the past.

Many return home after a days work as a prostitute to husbands and children and lead a normal family life.

There has been a particularly dramatic increase in rural areas along the main tracking roads. Young village women forced into "motorway prostitution" near Adana stoned journalists taking photographs of them. As one said 'food is so expensive I cant afford to eat ... how can we eat?... Ozal (Prime Minister) is responsible for this'.

*For anyone wishing to support the **Turkish Womens Movement**, there is one concrete way you can help against the widespread censorship and repression. Send feminist and political books "english or french" to:*

*Kadin Cevresi, Klodfarer Caddesi. 41/36, Servat Han. Cagaloglu, Istambul, Turkey. They publish and distribute a Turkish language magazine, **Feministe**, from that address.*

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