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## **‘Breaking the Silence’: The Religious Muslim Women’s Movement in Turkey.**

Hilal Ozcetin<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This article explores the emergence of the religious Muslim women’s movement in the 1990s in Turkey, and its relation with the broader women’s movement, including the exclusion of religious Muslim women from the women’s movement. My analysis is based on interviews I conducted in April and May 2006 with religious Muslim women who work in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and participate in joint projects with other women’s NGOs in Istanbul and Ankara, Turkey. I argue that because of a modernist perspective which views both the headscarf and religious Muslim women as ‘backward’, as opposed to the ‘ideal female citizen’ as secular and ‘modern’, religious Muslim women have been largely excluded from women’s movements in Turkey. However, religious Muslim women are challenging this binary categorization and struggle to break the stereotype of ‘backwardness’ that is put upon them; instead they are seeking to reconstruct an identity that is neither ‘modern’ nor ‘anti-modern’.

*Keywords:* headscarf, religious Muslim women, modernity

### **Introduction**

A letter from Canan Aritman, a member of the Turkish parliament, to Emine Erdogan, the headscarf-wearing wife of the current President, illustrates the perception of ‘ideal’ Turkish woman:

Your dress style injures the image of Turkish women. Your personal choices cause an incorrect image of Turkish women abroad. If you will not change, stay at home...I respect your personal choices. But modern Turkish Republican women are not wearing headscarves, and have adopted the Western, civilized dress code.<sup>2</sup>

As Aritman’s statement reveals, the modernist conception regards the headscarf as a sign of ‘backwardness’ and ‘uncivilizedness’. Even though Turkey’s population is mostly Muslim, the modernist view of the headscarf and Islam as a threat to secularism is prevalent, and has deep roots in the adoption of the secularist discourse of modernity in the early years of Turkish Republic. During the early Republican years, the ‘ideal’ female citizen was constructed as non-headscarf wearing, urban, educated and visible in the public sphere, in contrast to women who were wearing headscarves, who were construed as uneducated, rural, ‘anti-secular’ and ‘anti-modern’. This binary categorization along

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<sup>2</sup> <[http://www.sonsayfa.com/news\\_detail.php?id=7985](http://www.sonsayfa.com/news_detail.php?id=7985)> (May 24, 2006).

with the implementation of the ban on the headscarf in universities during the 1980s, has produced two polarized groups among Turkish women's movements: one supporting the ban on the headscarf and the other countering the ban on the headscarf.

This article deals with the emergence of the religious Muslim women's movement in Turkey in the 1990s. It consists of the analysis of interviews I conducted during Spring 2006 with women from four leading religious Muslim women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs): *Baskent Kadin Platformu-BKP* (Capital Women's Platform, Ankara); *Hazar Grubu* (Caspian Group); *Ayrimciliga Karsi Kadin Haklari Dernegi-AK- DER* (Women's Rights Association Against Discrimination), and *Hanimlar Egitim ve Kultur Vakfi-HEKVA* (Women Education and Culture Foundation). Based on these interviews, and the journals and websites of these groups, I explore the religious Muslim women's movement's relation with the broader movement, as well as the exclusion of religious Muslim women from the women's movements in Turkey. I argue that because of the modernist perception of the headscarf and the categorization of religious Muslim women as 'backward' as opposed to the 'ideal female citizen' as secular and 'modern', religious Muslim women have been largely excluded from women's movements in Turkey. However, I claim that religious Muslim women are challenging the binary categorization and struggle to break the stereotype of 'backwardness' that is directed at them, instead constructing new identities that are neither 'modern' nor 'anti-modern'.

### **The Modernization Process in Turkey and the Construction of Turkish Woman's Citizenship**

The modernization process commenced at the beginning of the nineteenth century during the Ottoman Empire with the 1923 foundation of the Turkish Republic, and accelerated through the reforms of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, and the modernizing elites in the early period of the Republic (1920s and 1930s). The new state placed a heavy stress on secularism and modernity (Mert, 1994). During the nation-building process of the Turkish Republic, the modernizing elites aimed to invent a 'new' nation that broke its bonds with the Ottoman Empire; they created, in Benedict Anderson's term (1991), an "imagined community" by transforming the empire from a "divine-ordered, hierarchical dynastic realm" into a nation-state detached from its Ottoman heritage. The transformation from empire to nation-state and the process of modernization were shaped according to the principles of Kemalism<sup>3</sup>. Transforming the state and society from an Islamist into a secular, 'civilized' one was the most essential goal of the modernity project that shaped the Kemalist discourse.

The new Constitution and institutions did not contain Islamic principles, and religion was defined as a private, individual matter that should not be displayed in the social and political sphere (Lombardi, 1997). In other words, state policies were directed toward the "privatization of religion"; the state sought to prevent the inclusion of religion within the identity of its citizens (Keyman, 2003). In order to achieve this goal, religion was taken under the control of the state at a constitutional, institutional and social level, and secularism as a discourse was embodied by the state, particularly the Kemalist discourse, to form and regulate its 'modern' subjects through state policies and

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<sup>3</sup> Kemalism is the official ideology of the Turkish state defined by the principles of republicanism, secularism, nationalism, populism, statism and revolutionism (or reformism), as established by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

institutions. This Kemalist discourse aimed to create a homogeneous secular national identity that held Islam as the “other” to Kemalist secularism. Cindoglu and Zencirci argue, “This homogenization and modernization of the nation was carried out by initiating various reforms which were not only directed at creating a modern state apparatus, but also were intended for penetrating into the lifestyle, manners, behaviors, and daily customs of the people, that is the formal elements of change of the daily lives of citizens.” (2008: 794).

The state abolished the Caliphate and *Sharia* in 1924, and instead introduced a new civil code; it created a new system of national education (1928) and banned the Islamic schools that provided religious education<sup>4</sup> (Davison 2003; Gokariksel and Mitchell, 2005). Another reform that took place in the early Republic period was the Hat Law of 1925, which replaced the *fez* (the Ottoman man’s headwear) with a European style hat. In the Ottoman Empire, the clothes of men were used as symbols that showed their status, ethnicity and religion. The Hat Law sought to erase these social differences among its citizens, as well as the difference between Turkey and other perceived ‘modern’ and ‘civilized’ nations (Cinar, 2008; 2005; Kandiyoti, 1997; Olson 1985).

Even though the Hat Law targeted men’s attire specifically, Atatürk and the state were much more actively engaged in promoting the new ‘modern’ and secular images of women in the public sphere (Cinar, 2008; Ozdalga, 1993; Olson 1985). Indeed, women had a crucial role in the modernization process in Turkey. Thus, Cinar argues that the modernizers were “...quite aware that European perception of the Turks [was] sharply conditioned by an orientalist view that saw the Islamic lifestyle as one that confines women behind harem walls and by images of veiled women as a symbol of oppression and barbarism” (2008: 900). The Kemalist discourse, sharing the European orientalist view, targeted women’s bodies to symbolize the break with Islam, ‘backwardness’ and the ‘barbaric’ ways of the Ottoman Empire. From the Kemalist viewpoint, the female body must be erased of the religious symbols, the most significant of which was the headscarf.

The Kemalist modernity project used the public visibility of women as a strategic means to display Turkey’s new secular character. Thus, modernizing elites sought to make women publicly visible, socially and politically active, and to form a mixed-gender social and public sphere (Gole, 2004; Cinar, 2008). Women were perceived as the carriers and symbols of secularism and modernity; hence, ‘women’s rights’, ‘women’s liberation’, and ‘women’s visibility’ became essential to the Kemalist discourse (Gole, 2004). The Turkish state promoted a ‘state feminism’, and “made women’s equality in the public sphere a national policy” (White, 2003: 145).

Under the new secular democracy, even though the headscarf was not banned, it was greatly discouraged. The secular discourse of early Republican period created a binary opposition between women who wore headscarves and women who went without them. On the one hand, those adorned with a headscarf were associated with ‘backward’, ‘pre-modern’, ‘traditional’ rural and lower classes (Gokariksel and Mitchell, 2005; Cinar 2008; O’Neil 2008; Secor 2002; Gole, 1996; White, 2003). On the other hand, the ‘modern’, ‘ideal’ Turkish woman was identified as virtuous, nationalist, educated, powerful and emancipated – hence unveiled. “Since the new Republican woman

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<sup>4</sup> Only Prayer Leader Schools were left to give religious education for training *imams*, but they were brought under the control of the state. To this day, Prayer Leader Schools remain under state control.

represented the modern, secular Westernized state, she was expected to behave and dress in what the state defined as a modern, Western manner” (White ,2003).

### **The Invisible Becomes Visible: The Rise of Islamist Movements**

Turkish modernizers either could not or did not choose to recognize the significance of Islam in the value system and the everyday lives of ordinary people. In fact, their attempts at transformation were mostly only successful at the elite level, whereas the masses continued their allegiance to Islamic traditions (Kandiyoti, 1987). In spite of many attempts to establish a control over and to privatize religion, Islam continued to exist, and the strict secularist discourse showed a slight decline during the period of transition to multi-party politics, between 1946 and 1950 (Zurcher, 2004).

The most salient challenge to secularism came in the 1980s with the reemergence of Islam as a political force, especially with the influence of the fundamentalist Iranian Revolution (1979), as well as the liberalization of the political sphere. The political sphere became more liberal because “the army had been conditioned to see socialism and communism as Turkey’s most deadly foes [...] it saw indoctrination with a mixture of fierce nationalism and a version of Islam friendly to the state as an effective antidote” (Zurcher, 2004: 288). As a result, the public sphere became open to the Islam in the 1980s and this created new spaces for Islamist economics, politics and culture (Gokariksel and Mitchell, 2005; Navaro-Yashin, 2002).

The 1990s were a significant period for Islamists movements in two ways. First, an Islamist political party, the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi), won its first significant electoral victory in the 1994 local elections in several major cities, including Istanbul and Ankara (Cinar, 2005). Secondly, Turkish Muslim businessmen began to commercially engage with the global economy, giving rise to a new class: ‘Islamist capitalists’ (Atasoy, 2005, p.58). Islamists started contributing to economic production, political activism and civil society, and there also appeared an Islamist media (Islamist radios and television stations), and new patterns of consumption (in particular the fashion of *tesettür*, the Islamic dress code). Islamist people created their own middle class, composed of urbanized, educated professionals (Gole, 2000). As a result of participation in the global economy, education, politics and consumption culture (in brief, participating in the ‘modern’ public sphere) a ‘new’ Islamist social group has emerged that challenges the secularist Kemalist group that dominated the public sphere for six decades. Due to the changes in Islamists’ positions in the economy and politics, this Islamist group has constructed its own subjects who turned out to be neither ‘modern’ nor ‘anti-modern’. In the 1990s, Islamist movements have emerged as “identity-building movements” which asserted their difference from the homogeneous Turkish national identity (Gole, 2003). As Gole (2003) claims, Islamist movements are a response to the assimilative modernity whose aim is to transform the society into a homogeneous Westernized one. Thus, Islamist movements challenged the modern homogeneous identity and created new ‘modern’ subjects who emphasize their difference, namely their religiosity.

Like the Kemalist discourse, Islamist discourse views the image of women in the public sphere as an important site of contestation. In the 1980s, the ‘woman question’ was introduced into the Islamist movements’ discourse with the headscarf issue. Until the massive rural to urban migration, which began in the 1950s, the headscarf had been associated with rural peasant life. This association changed once peasants began moving

to cities and, as a result, their children became the first generation of the peasant class to access higher education. Women who wear the headscarf have, in a certain sense, taken advantage of the opportunities that were afforded them by modernity, the result of which is that they became urbanized and educated participants of modern society (Gole, 2000). As a result, a 'new' Muslim woman has come into the picture since the 1980s: she is urbanized, educated and wears a headscarf.

The Islamist women's lifestyles can be juxtaposed not only with those of Kemalists, but also with the traditional image of the Muslim woman. Many Muslim women now assert their difference from both the homogeneously constructed 'ideal' Turkish woman and the 'traditional/anti-modern' women, as is evident in the different lifestyles and attire they have chosen. Hence, the new persona of the Muslim woman has almost nothing in common with the image of traditional women who were uneducated, rural and devoted to their family (Gole, 1997). On the contrary, young Muslim women are educated, urban, and politically and socially active (Gole, 1997). Muslim women, especially those who have attended universities or have a professional career wear stylish models of headscarves and coats, and even sometimes tight-fitting garments and cosmetics, in clear defiance of the Islamic code (Cinar, 2005).

This increased visibility of Islam in the public sphere, particularly in the universities, has not been welcomed by Kemalists. In 1985, with their increased visibility at the universities, the headscarf became a matter of public debate when the Higher Education Council (Yuksekk Ogrenim Kurumu, YOK)<sup>5</sup> issued a decree in which the *turban* was stipulated as a modern clothing item, and students were allowed to wear it in universities. By this decree, the YOK thought that they could remove the political connotations of the Islamic headscarf by calling it a *turban* and defining it as a modern clothing item (Cinar, 2005). The *turban* was described in a way that could be differentiated from the traditional headscarf which did not cover all of the hair in the front and in the back, and the ear lobes. Cinar observes that, "By 1987, it was obvious that this rhetorical strategy had failed miserably. Even though the secularist media were now using the word *turban* to refer to the Islamic headscarf, the result was not the anticipated de-Islamization of the headscarf, but rather an Islamization of the word *turban*" (2005: 79).

Whether it was called a *turban* or a headscarf, women's head coverings had increasingly become visible in the public space by the end of the 1980s, generating belligerent, anti-Islamist responses from secularist groups. The YOK responded by passing another decree in which they stipulated that "the *turban* had actually replaced the headscarf, and it came to symbolize certain ideological orientations. The new decree stated that students should wear 'modern clothing' and that interpretation of what 'modern clothing' meant was for university administrations to decide" (Cinar, 2005: 81). From that point forward, students were increasingly forbidden to enter universities with their headscarves (Cinar, 2005). However, students refused to take off their headscarves, which became a form of resistance; in 1987, the number of demonstrations and protests grew (Cinar, 2005).

With the emergence of the Islamist movement and its entrance into the political domain in the 1990s, the image of a woman wearing a *turban* was used as a symbol of Islamist political parties, which was (and still is) perceived as an 'Islamist threat' to

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<sup>5</sup> The YOK is the state institution that regulates higher education in Turkey.

secularism and modernity (Cinar, 2005; Gole, 2000). The *turban*, which had been invented by the YOK to avoid the politically Islamic connotations, ironically turned it into an Islamist symbol (Cinar, 2005). As a result, the Constitutional Court declared in 1989 that the YOK's decree, which had liberated the headscarf, contradicted the Constitution's first articles, which define "the Form of the State" as secular. The Constitutional Court repealed the decree, and, as a result of the increased visibility of Islamists in the political domain and in the public, the ban on the headscarf was tightened in 1998, which was implemented after the 28 February military intervention.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the aforementioned soft coup ended with the closure of the Welfare Party which was perceived as a threat to secularism. However, the intervention and the ban on the headscarf could not put an end either to the formation of new Islamist political parties nor the debate over the headscarf; on the contrary, it served as the flashpoint for an increasing number of demonstrations and debates.

After the victory of the new Islamist party, Justice and Development Party (AKP), in the last two national elections (2002 and 2007),<sup>7</sup> and particularly after the government's proposal to the amendment in the Constitution to abolish the ban on the headscarf at the universities in 2008, the debate on the headscarf and secularism in Turkey has intensified. However, after long discussions on the proposal in the assembly, the Supreme Court rejected it on the basis of the secularist foundation of the Turkish Republic on June 5, 2008. Undoubtedly, this rejection would not end the contestation over the headscarf; indeed, it has accelerated it.

### **The Religious Muslim Women's Movement**

While the female body has become the site of contestation that has been shaped by the conflicting discourses of Islam and secularism, during the 1990s resistance emerged from religious Muslim women themselves.<sup>8</sup> Although religious Muslim women were active participants in the Islamist movements, they also criticized the Islamist discourse and traditional gender roles (Cayir, 2000). Since they could not combine their education with the traditional identification of Muslim woman – who is imprisoned into the domestic sphere – they found themselves stuck between the discourses of modernity and Islam (Cayir, 2000). In the 1990s, religious Muslim women began to reshape their identities and to demand *participation* instead of *representation*, and women who wore headscarves founded several organizations to participate in the political sphere and in the women's movement in Turkey (Cayir, 2000).

"The emergence of a women's movement in Turkey, as a social movement, challenging the roles bestowed upon women by the early foundational discourse, occurred at the same time as the emergence of political Islam and accompanying Islamist women's movement," explain Cindioglu and Zencirci (2008: 797). Particularly with the revival of the women's movement after the Beijing International Women's Conference

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<sup>6</sup> The military intervened in politics on February 28, 1997, in what was called as 'postmodern' or 'soft' military coup, when a column of tanks passed in symbolic procession through Sincan in Ankara.

<sup>7</sup> In the national elections of 2002, AKP won around 34% percentage of the votes and stood alone in the government even though in the National Assembly at that time was composed of both AKP and CHP [Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP), the Republican People's Party]. In the 2007 elections, AKP won around the half of the votes (47%), and they now stand alone in the government.

<sup>8</sup> Since Muslim women's NGOs identify themselves as 'religious Muslim women', I prefer this term over 'Islamist women' or 'veiled women'.

(1995) and the Habitat II Conference (1996), religious Muslim women founded various NGOs. They established 'platform' coalitions that include various specific associations, enterprise groups and commissions. This establishment of platforms serves to avoid bureaucratic procedures and financial problems. Today, the most effective ones are the *Gokkusagi Kadin Platformu* (Rainbow Woman Platform) in Istanbul, especially its member organizations *Hazar Grubu*, *AK-DER*, and *HEKVA- Baskent Kadin Platformu* in Ankara (Pusch, 2001).

Even though women who are wearing headscarves are identified as 'Islamist women', 'veiled women' or 'Islamist feminists', they define themselves as religious Muslim women to differentiate themselves from Islamist movements, as well as from more secular Muslims in Turkey. By doing this they aim to break the perception of the headscarf as a symbol of Islamist movements as well as to demand their differences as being religious. For example, one member of the Capital Women's Platform (BKP) in Ankara identified herself and the organization as:

We [as a Platform] define ourselves as religious Muslim women. If we would just define ourselves as Muslim, others would say that we are not Muslim! And we do not accept defining ourselves as Islamist because it indicates a political meaning; it refers to an Islamist party. But we define ourselves as religious which means that religion is in the center of our lives.

None of the participants identify as feminist, either due to the perception that feminism entails a secularism that rejects the possession and control of God over humans' bodies, or because of its pejorative connotations in Turkey which prioritize women *over* men and suggests 'man-hating'. Even though the compatibility of Islam and feminism has been widely discussed in the literature, as Cindioglu and Zencirci (2008) argues that Islamist women's movements share a common ground with feminist movements by creating resistance to the role and the place of Turkish women in the nation. "The feminist movement challenged the expectation that women were to be subservient and traditional in the private sphere, and the Islamist women's movement challenged the assumption that becoming modern and entering the public sphere meant that one left religion behind" (Cindioglu and Zencirci, 2008: 798).

Religious Muslim women's movements as socio-political movements resist the Kemalist discourse's definition of modernity that associates religion with backwardness and what it means to be modern in public sphere (Cindioglu and Zencirci, 2008). They develop an alternative modernity where they define themselves as headscarved but also educated modern women which blurs the division of the common image of traditional women with headscarf and the 'modern' Turkish woman:

I am wearing a headscarf just as our mothers and grandmothers did. We have no differences from our mothers. My mother was also wearing a *salvar*<sup>9</sup> and a headscarf. The difference is that I am educated. I am the modern, educated and self-confident version....

The interviewees stated that they cover their head because they are religious Muslim women, rather than for political reasons, as it is argued by secularists. However,

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<sup>9</sup> *Salvar* is a kind of traditional dress mainly worn by rural women.



because of the association of the rise of political Islam with the resistance of headscarved women, and making the headscarf as the object of the fear of Islamization has concluded with the exclusion of religious Muslim women from the public sphere. In this context, activist religious Muslim women have developed a new discourse on their right to wear headscarf in the public sphere within the liberal framework of human rights (Saktanber and Corbacioglu, 2008). Thus, religious Muslim women have begun to claim that the ban on the headscarf is a violation of their human rights. Because of the ban on the headscarf, women who are wearing headscarves cannot go to universities and work in public services; therefore, they consider the ban as a violation of their right to education and work, which they perceive necessary for women to become independent individuals, and active participants of the public sphere. The following narrative of a member of the *BKP* clearly reveals the effect of the ban on her life:

Because of this ban, women cannot go to schools and cannot work. Consequently, they do not have economic independence, and economic independence is so important. While I was working, I could stand on my own legs, but since I was expelled, I am dependent on my husband. It is really hard to accept it psychologically. I have equal education but I am dependent. Sometimes you do not have money to come to the office [*BKP* office], and you are working as a volunteer and you do not earn money. How can you participate in social life if you do not have money?

In contrast to the general assumption that religious Muslim women's NGOs were established because of the ban on the headscarf, and that they are dealing only with that issue, three of the four NGOs I studied (all but *AK-DER*) were founded before the 1998 re-enacted ban on the headscarf. While the headscarf is a significant issue on their agenda, their activities are not only directed toward lifting the ban on the headscarf; they have also been conducting projects to expand women's rights. For example, one of the members of the *BKP* stated that immediately after the Beijing UN Conference (1995), they decided to found the *BKP* to produce solutions for the problems of women independently of Islamic orientations. Moreover, in their journal, the *BKP* states as its objectives: "Determining women's problems and producing alternative perspectives, theoretical and practical solutions to improve women's intellectual, psychological, social and economic situation; providing dialogue, communication and solidarity between women; and conducting activities by gathering different women around common benefits" (April 2003).

These religious Muslim women's NGOs are also challenging the lack of education, the lack of legal rights of women, and the poverty rate among women in Turkey. For instance, all of the participants perceive the education of women and women's right to work as pivotal for women to acquire economic and social independence. They produce education programs for women that are a combination of Islamic and scientific education to encourage women to participate in Islamic and scientific knowledge production.

Even though religious Muslim women's movements work on women's rights issues like other women's organizations in Turkey, because of the image of the 'modern' Turkish woman and the stereotype of the 'backward' Muslim woman, participation of women wearing headscarves in the wider women's movement is problematic. Many feminists and women's organizations see Islam as a religion that oppresses women and

argue that “...men use Islamist women at the forefront of the growing Islamist movement to promote a conservative agenda” (Aldikacti Marshall, 2005: 109).

### **The Exclusion of the Religious Muslim Women from the Women’s Movement**

Religious Muslim women’s NGOs participated in common projects and activities, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), *TCK Kadın Platformu* (Turkish Penalty Code Women’s Platform-TPC Women’s Platform),<sup>10</sup> and the March 8 demonstrations and activities with other women’s NGOs. However, the binary opposition between ‘modern’ and traditional women as well as the politicization of the headscarf has generated a division in women’s movements in Turkey which prevented secular and religious Muslim women’s organizations from engaging in meaningful dialogue. According to narrations of the participants of my study, the stereotype of the ‘backward’ Muslim woman which was created by the Kemalist discourse is prevalent in the women’s movement, at least among the Kemalist women’s organizations. For example, Professor Necla Arat, a significant name in the Kemalist women’s movement in Turkey, stated:

[Veiled women] cannot and do not want to break away from the backwardness of the past. They sustain the traditional, submissive image of woman, and try to abolish women’s rights that the Republic granted them... Modern and secular-minded women do not, on the other hand, define their honor (*namus*) with a piece of cloth that covers one’s head [and] enjoy being equal and respectable members of Turkish society from the establishment of the Republic to this day. (quoted in Keskin-Kozat, 2003).

Due to the dominance of the Kemalist view of the headscarf as the most dangerous threat to modernity and women’s rights, religious Muslim women are excluded from the movement, particularly by Kemalist women’s organizations. One interviewee from *BKP* asserted:

We are faced with women who claim that they have the right to speak in the women’s movement and they are regarding themselves as the defender of women’s rights; they are defining themselves as secular and Kemalist [...] They exclude us. Some of our founders were able to handle this but when we (*BKP*) sent our new members, they were ignored, and sometimes they were testing us to whether we were Kemalist and *good citizens* [her emphasis].

Religious Muslim women complain that they are measured as to how ‘modern’ they are and whether they are ‘good citizens’ based upon their appearance, rather than their education and their participation in the struggle against discrimination against women. Moreover, modernist discourse has attempted to silence their voices through the homogeneous construction of a Turkish woman’s identity that delivers a message that “a woman can have a voice in public only as a secular individual” (Seckinelgin, 2006: 762).

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<sup>10</sup> The Turkish Penalty Code Women’s Platform was formed in 2002 to propose changes to the articles that contradict the equality of the sexes. On May, 2003, the government proposed a New Turkish Penalty Code to the Turkish Parliament, and since that time, the TPC Women’s Platform has been analyzing the New Turkish Penalty Code and proposed a series of changes to the government. On July 1, 2006, the New Turkish Penalty Code was implemented. [http://www.kadinininsanhaklari.org/tck\\_kampanyasi.php](http://www.kadinininsanhaklari.org/tck_kampanyasi.php) (May 23, 2009).

Hence, they are not seen as subjects who can act, who can take responsibility for themselves, and who have a voice of their own; they have been confined into a stereotype and perceived as a threat against the secular and modern features of the Turkish state. However, religious Muslim women demand the recognition of their differences, but as equal citizens. Thus, they base their struggle against the headscarf on the secular feature of the state and the freedom of conscience granted to its citizens. One of the members of the *BKP* posits:

The Republic defines itself as secular. That is to say, the state should not interfere in religion and religion should not intervene in the state. Religion does not intervene in the state but the state does intervene in religion. For example, the [General Directorate of] Religious Affairs<sup>11</sup> is not independent... There can be abuses of religion, but the state has the power to prevent them. Instead of this, they are controlling religion with the military... The power of the president and the military should be limited. What should a person from the military do in Religious Affairs or in the Turkish Council of Higher Education?

Religious Muslim women have questioned this problematic relation of the concepts of freedom and conscience and secularism, and they have demanded their right to wear a headscarf in public sphere in the name of freedom, and the right to follow their own conscience as a human right. Moreover, one of the crucial critiques of religious Muslim women towards the women's movements in Turkey is that women's organizations are ignoring the violation of religious Muslim women's rights. They noted that the main reasons for this are the lack of communication and the stereotype of Muslim women.

The narratives of the interviewees emphasized the importance of communication to break the stereotype of 'backward' Muslim women, which would ameliorate the possibility of solidarity between secular and religious Muslim women's organizations. They argued that the most effective way to accomplish this would be to form and collaborate in joint projects on women's rights. One example of such a project is the TPC Women's Platform, where many women's NGOs from around the country come together to pressure the government to make changes in the New Turkish Penalty Code. *Hazar Grubu*, *AK-DER* and *BKP* actively participate in this Platform, and they asserted that these kinds of platforms prepare fertile grounds to introduce themselves, and to establish lines of communication. They hope that the prejudice against them will diminish as other women's NGOs come to know them personally.

Religious Muslim women's NGOs acknowledge that establishing communication and breaking down stereotypes will not be an easy process. Even though they have participated in common projects, they have only been able to change their images as individuals. A member of the *BKP* commented:

Even though we have had so many problems, we have made advances in communication. When they began to form a relationship with us, when they started to know us, they began to think that I am different from the stereotype of women with headscarves. But most of the time, they think that I am an exception as an individual; thus, the stereotype remains. On the other hand, even this has never happened with Kemalist women; women wearing

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<sup>11</sup> The General Directorate of Religious Affairs, whose office was annexed to the Prime Minister, monitors and regulates religion.

headscarves have always been a threat to secularism.

While most women's organizations follow a secularist agenda, some feminist women's organizations have created more respectful arenas in which women can discuss issues and problems. For example, the feminist journal *Pazartesi* gave some space to religious Muslim women to redefine their identities and express their views on the headscarf issue and political Islam (Arat, 1998). Secular and Kemalist women have attacked these initiatives, arguing "...that they might encourage the effort to Islamize society" (Saktanber, 2006: 26). Some feminist readers of *Pazartesi* criticized it for supporting religious Muslim women; in response, the journal issued an editorial clarifying, "...their understanding of feminism was critical of Kemalist discourse on women and involved solidarity with women who shared a common subordination despite many differences" (Arat, 1998: 129). Another recent example of solidarity between women's groups and religious Muslim women is the feminist initiative *Birbirimize Sahip Cikiyoruz* (We Look Out for Each Other), which is composed of women academics and activists from various religious, ethnic and political orientations. This initiative tried to bring the discussion into a new platform that is open to diversity and differences, claiming that "they were against the stereotypes that discriminate against women as 'Islamist robots' and immoral 'sexual objects' and announcing that 'they reject a public sphere where every women cannot walk arm in arm'" (Saktanber and Corbacioglu, 2008: 516). This initiative aims not only to bring religious Muslim women and secular women together, but also to create solidarity among women from different ethnicities, political, religious and sexual orientations to stand against any kind of discrimination against women.

Even though some communication platforms have formed among some women's organizations and groups, religious Muslim women pointed out that women's organizations (especially Kemalist ones) are reluctant to communicate with religious Muslim women. One of the members of the *BKP* explained that:

On March 8 [2005], all women prepared a declaration about the problem of Kurdish women, women who are wearing a headscarf, etc. But some organizations, like Kemalist and leftist ones refused to participate because of us. They did not tell this to us, but to other people, that they did not want to participate in the project with women who are wearing headscarves.

Despite religious Muslim women's effort to integrate into the broader movement, due to the negative perception of the headscarf and unwillingness of secular women, particularly Kemalist women, to meet with and share the same platform with women wearing headscarves, there appears a polarization among women's movements in Turkey. In other words, as Saktanber notes, "Making women's headscarves the object of fear of Islamization has also obscured the common problems that are shared by both secular and devout women" (2006: 28). This fear augmented the inability to cope with differences in the society.

## **Conclusion**

Religious Muslim women struggle to gain rights of citizenship in the form of their access to the public sphere, closed to them due to the fear of the Islamization of society.

Even though they have been generally perceived as allies of the Islamist movement, which is dominated by Islamist male elites, they have criticized both Kemalist and Islamist discourses. Indeed, religious Muslim women who have questioned the Islamic patriarchy have been condemned for misinterpreting Islam by male Islamist intellectuals. Moreover, as Saktanber notes, “they have criticized the Islamist male elite and, more recently, the current government for not taking any steps toward solving the problem of the headscarf ban other than advising that covered women be patient and moderate while men enjoy the blessings of being in power” (2006: 27).

Because the demonstrations of university students demanding their right to wear headscarves paralleled with the rise of Islamist movements, Saktanber and Corbacioglu argue, the headscarved women’s “...insistence on defending their headscarf as a religious requirement and a personal choice, both of which were articulated within the framework of human rights, have led to accusations of *takiye* (dissimulation)—the notion that Islamist activists are concealing their real intentions and goals of destroying the secular order of the Turkish state and society, instead of revealing them honestly in public” (2008: 526-527). This fear of the Islamization of society and the epitomization of women as symbols of secularist and Islamist movements has prevented many democratic secular women from entering into attentive discussions with religious Muslim women (Saktanber, 2006).

More importantly, the dominance of the stereotype of religious Muslim women as ‘backward’, uneducated and ‘anti-modern’ results in ‘othering’ and marginalizing the religious Muslim women’s movements within the broader movement. Even though religious Muslim women have constructed new subjectivities that includes modern features, and despite their struggle against discrimination against women, because of the lack of communication among women, their struggle and agency has been ignored. Moreover, the polarization between secular and religious Muslim women’s movements complicates communication and prevents establishing a dialogue in which differences are respected and recognized. As Cindoglu and Zencirci argue, “If there is to be any future for feminism in Turkey, it is certain that feminists in the secularist and Islamist orientations need to form a bridging identity for the women of Turkey that can go beyond the constructed differences and achieve collaboration on main political agendas” (Cindioglu and Zencirci, 2008: 805). In this way, a women’s struggle can be inclusive and meaningful for all women in Turkey.

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