

**THE POLITICS OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT:  
THE TRANSFORMATIVE STRUGGLES OF KAMER AND MOR ÇATI AGAINST  
VIOLENCE**

**by  
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## **ABSTRACT**

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**Keywords: Women’s Empowerment, Transformation, Project Feminism, Mor Çatı, KAMER,**

Violence against women continues to prevent women from participating in social, economic, political, and cultural life as active subjects and women’s empowerment in all fields of life that is generative of a shift in gendered power relations is one of the key mechanisms for women to transform a life of violence. The purpose of this ethnographic study is to analyze the possibilities of a feminist politics based on women’s empowerment and its transformative potential in women’s lives at two levels with a particular focus on two renowned women’s organizations in Turkey, KAMER and Mor Çatı.

The first level of analysis is the individual women who are active and who get involved in these women’s organizations. It is questioned that how the individual and collective empowerment strategies of these women open up a multi-dimensional and transformative space that is productive of lasting changes in women’s lives. Women’s organizing around the shared grounds of oppression and subordination as well as violence lead women to question their lives as the first steps of their own empowerment processes. So they become “aware” of the “political-ness” of their “private” experiences. Therefore, the emphasis on becoming “aware” of women’s internalized oppressions plays a crucial role and is a recurrent theme of this study.

The second one is on organizational level that scrutinizes the tensions involved in women’s organizations doing “projects” on women’s empowerment. An analysis of to what extent women’s empowerment “projects” present alternatives to the development models and how the term “project feminism” is tackled by women’s organizations helps to reveal the tensions of feminist organizing in the Turkish context. The focus on Mor Çatı’s and KAMER’s participation in development practices in the form of “projects” on women’s empowerment serves furthermore to articulate the challenge they present to the mainstream developmentalist framework.

## ÖZET

### KADINLARIN GÜÇLENME POLİKALARI: KAMER VE MOR ÇATI'NIN ŞİDDETE KARŞI DÖNÜŞTÜRÜCÜ MÜCADELELERİ

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**Anahtar Kelimeler: Kadınların Güçlenmesi, Dönüşüm, Projecilik, Mor Çatı, KAMER,**

Kadına yönelik şiddet kadınların sosyal, ekonomik, politik ve kültürel hayata aktif öznel olarak katılmalarını engellemeye devam etmektedir. Toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı güç ilişkilerinde dönüşüm yaratmayı sağlayacak olan, kadınların hayatın tüm alanlarında güçlenmesi şiddet dolu bir yaşantıyı dönüştürmenin anahtarlarından biridir. Bu etnografik çalışmanın amacı Türkiye'nin iki önemli kadın kuruluşu olan KAMER ve Mor Çatı'yı merkezine alarak kadınların güçlenmesine dayalı feminist politikaların neler kazandırabileceğinin ve bu politikaların kadınların hayatlarında dönüşüm yaratma potansiyellerinin iki katmanda incelenmesidir.

Birinci katmanda bu kadın kuruluşlarında aktif olarak çalışan ve temasta olan kadınlar incelenmektedir. Bireysel ve kollektif güçlenme stratejilerinin kadınların hayatlarında nasıl kalıcı değişimler üretebilecek, çok yönlü ve dönüşümsel alanları açtığı sorulmaktadır. Kadınların baskı, itaat ve şiddet yaşantılarının ortak zemininde buluşup organize olmaları, kendi güçlenme süreçlerinin ilk adımı olan hayatlarını sorgulamalarına yol açar. Böylece kadınlar kendi "kişisel" deneyimlerinin "politik"liğinin farkına varmaktadırlar. Bu nedenle kadınların içselleştirilmiş baskıları "fark etme"leri üzerine yapılan vurgu bu çalışmada önemli bir yere sahiptir ve tekrarlanan konularından biridir.

İkinci katman ise kadın kuruluşları üzerinedir ve kadın kuruluşlarının kadınların güçlenmesi üzerine yaptıkları "projeler"den doğan gerilimleri incelemektedir. Bu projelerin gelişmeci modellere ne gibi alternatifler sunduğunun ve "proje feminizmi" kavramının kadın kuruluşları tarafından nasıl ele alındığının analizi Türkiye'deki feminist örgütlenmedeki gerilimlerin ortaya çıkarılmasına yardımcı olmaktadır. KAMER ve Mor Çatı'nın gelişme pratiklerine kadının güçlenmesi için yapılan "projeler" yoluyla katılmasına odaklanılması da anaakım gelişmeci çerçeveye bu iki kuruluşun getirmiş olduğu alternatiflerin dillendirilmesini sağlamaktadır.

*To Fatma, Figen, Sabri, Güney, and all of the women who changed my life...*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
1.1 Women’s Power Coming From Within.....	3
1.2 The Story of the Feminist Movement: From Personal to Political.....	5
1.3 My Story about KAMER and Mor Çatı .....	15
1.3.1 Diyarbakır and KAMER.....	15
1.3.2 İstanbul and Mor Çatı.....	17
Chapter 2: Empowerment: A Challenge and Transformation.....	22
2.1 Empowerment: From Feminist Consciousness-Raising to “Third World Development” .....	23
2.2 Multi-dimensional and Transformative Edge of Empowerment.....	28
2.3 Consciousness-Raising and Empowerment in Turkey.....	32
2.4 “Flying with your Wings” .....	44
Chapter 3: Empowerment Through Projects.....	55
3.1 From Ungendered Development to “Women’s Empowerment” Projects.....	56
3.2 Women’s Projects in Turkey.....	61
3.3 Debating “Project Feminism”.....	63
3.4. Mor Çatı and KAMER on “Project Feminism” .....	67
3.4.1. The Thorny Question of Independence.....	68
Chapter 4: Conclusion.....	81
Bibliography.....	88

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

“Violence shattered my soul into pieces. It is even better if your entire bones crack, at least they heal quickly... All those years, I have tried to put those lost pieces of my soul together...”

“Violence is a tight dress tailored for women. We have many dresses as women. Each time you take one of them off and they put on the other. This even starts from the day of your conception ...”

A woman described to me the violence in her life with these words. This is just one of the thousands of narratives in which women have recounted their stories of violence. Millions more are buried in the depths of women’s memories, locked in a way that is supposed not to come out. Millions of women, who are subjected to violence, harshly discriminated, and deprived of a body and a language of their own, continue to keep these stories to themselves. Violence, by penetrating into women’s lives, by throwing them into the confines of the little space of “the private,” prevents their full participation in social and political arenas as active subjects, as subjects that are thinking, speaking, and acting for themselves, by themselves.

It was not until my early twenties that I started to think about violence in my life, within my family and my kin. This was triggered on a bright sunny spring day when my bell rang insistently for a few times. As I rushed the door, I saw the eyes of that tiny woman, my cousin, looking at me in terror. The moment she hugged me, she collapsed and burst into tears. I tried to calm her down while looking at the bruises on her arms, lumps of hair missing on her head. She had escaped from home while her husband was at work, taken a taxi without knowing the exact address, and barely found the way to my place. She was suicidal when she arrived, after being subjected to physical, verbal, economic, sexual, and psychological violence during her three-year marriage. For months, I listened to her stories of violence and tried to help her overcome this traumatic experience in her life. Yet, there were moments when I did not know what to do and what to say. Being wordless and helpless initiated my own journey towards questioning violence against women.

This experience opened my eyes to a new perception of my world where I developed new sensibilities towards life. The first thing I discovered was the close connection between violence and the power dynamics underlying it and the second was the need for women’s empowerment against it. It was clear to me that most men exerted power either to enforce



obedience or to disguise a lack of power. There were thousands of women who were exposed to extreme forms of male violence just because they were not “docile” enough. It was also significant that, in this “patriarchal system of power relations”, violence was men’s tool for “maintaining the secondary status of women” (Akkoç 2004, 121). However one defines violence, for me, the relation between violence and power and the necessity of women’s empowerment to fight it needed attention.

My new sensibilities on violence against women brought me to the point of writing this thesis. Determined to find the possible ways to challenge violence in our lives, I got involved in two research projects; “Gender-Based Violence: Analyzing the Problem and Struggle Against It” (by Yeşim Arat and Ayşe Gül Altınay) where I started my research on violence against women and “Redefining Women’s Place in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia; The Case of KAMER” (by Ayşe Gül Altınay) where I began my ethnography of KAMER. These two works opened a new horizon for me about our power as women to challenge and transform a life of violence. I decided to conduct an ethnographic study of two well-known women’s organizations in Turkey; Mor Çatı (Purple Roof) as one of the oldest and KAMER (Women’s Center) as one of the most widespread. My research on the two organizations would focus on their politics of women’s empowerment in struggling against violence. However, I would soon realize that this would be my own story of empowerment where I started to question and tried to transform the things in my life that I took for granted for many years.

My own story of empowerment led me to the basic question addressed in this ethnography: In what ways do KAMER and Mor Çatı create a politics of women’s empowerment and to what extent this politics opens up a field of possibilities that would challenge and lead to a transformation of power relations in women’s struggle against violence? I will try to analyze this question at two levels. First, I focus on individual women: to what extent do feminist empowerment processes lead to a transformation in the lives of the women active in women’s organizations and the women who get involved in these organizations? The second level is that of the organization: What are the tensions involved in feminist women’s organizations doing “projects” on women’s empowerment? To what extent do women’s empowerment “projects” practiced by women’s organizations present alternatives to the development models of women’s empowerment?

In the following pages, I discuss different conceptualizations of power that played an important role in feminist thinking on the issue of violence and women’s empowerment. Then, I provide a brief historical background on feminist struggles on violence against women

in the Turkish context not only to familiarize the reader with the women's movement that paved the way and made this struggle possible, but also to historically situate Mor Çatı and KAMER. As I move on to my opening chapter, I reflect on and present an analysis of the politics of women's empowerment in Mor Çatı and KAMER within the framework of my ethnographic research. In this first chapter, I address the question of how the processes of women's empowerment both on individual and collective levels lead to a transformation of power relations in women's lives. The second chapter deals with this question from the framework of women's organizations and their involvement in developmental practices both as a source of finance and as an attempt at empowerment for women. I tackle the newly coined term "project feminism" and its implications in the Turkish context. In this chapter, I discuss how the Mor Çatı and KAMER challenge and subvert the mainstream developmentalist framework for women's empowerment.

### **1.1. Women's Power Coming From Within...**

Emerson Dobash and Russell Dobash, two important researchers in the field of violence against women, point out that women around the world started to describe their stories of violence where they disclosed the common nature of male violence and its sources for the first time, in 1970s (Dobash & Dobash 1997, 267). Basing upon women's accounts of violent events, they explain four central sources of conflict in male violence towards women: "men's possessiveness and jealousy, men's expectations concerning women's domestic work, men's sense of the right to punish 'their' women for perceived wrongdoing, and the importance to men of maintaining or exercising their position of authority" (Dobash & Dobash 1997, 268). According to Dobash and Dobash, men's violence has been a source of silence along with the feelings of shame and fear for many women (Dobash & Dobash 1997, 268). This explanation assumes that violence is an expression of male power over women, used by men to maintain their status and authority, positioning women as the "victims" of this power.

There are various ways to conceptualize the different uses of power. Dobash uses the term as men's power *over* women. In fact, power as "power *over*" is one of the most widespread understandings of the term where particular groups or person succeeds to take control over other's actions and choices (Rowlands 1998, 14). The exercise of men's "power over" women and resistance against it has been one of the key arguments of the feminist

movement from its early days. Jo Rowlands proposes that the exercise of “power *over*” model usually results in an “internalized oppression” on the part of the dominated, where people believe in the messages of their oppression and adopt this internalization as “a survival mechanism,” thus mistaking it for reality (Rowlands 1995, 102). She points out that violence objectifies women to the extent that they start to withhold their opinions, and finally “come to believe that she has no opinions of her own” (Rowlands 1995, 102). In this way, men’s power *over* women can be maintained.

However, the use of a single model of different exercises of power cannot provide a nuanced analysis of power relations, which lies at the core of empowerment debates. Therefore, we need to look at the conceptualization of different uses of “power”.

In addition to the power *over* model, Rowlands portrays its various uses such as “power *to/with/from within*” (Rowlands 1998, 14). I think, for an analysis of women’s empowerment, it is useful to make a distinction between these different exercises of power. Rowlands defines “power *to*” as “generative or productive” power and “power *with*” as “a sense of the whole being greater than the sum of individuals” (Rowlands 1998, 14). “Power *from within*” is the “spiritual strength” that is based on “self respect” (Rowlands 1998, 14). In this scheme, it becomes possible to look at women’s empowerment processes where women realize their power coming *from within* and use that power *to* act and become empowered *with* other women.

Women’s recognition of different uses of power as “power *over/to/with/from within*” and resituating those powers to act with other women is an important aspect of women’s individual and collective empowerment. Thinking about power as “productive” of different forms of relations extends the meaning of the concept of “power” from domination to a “capacity to act” (Radtke and Stam 1994, 1). So it becomes possible to consider power both as a mechanism of constraint and oppression and as something that is enabling and liberating.

Lorraine Radtke and Henderikus Stam underline this dual aspect of power, which is worth quoting. For them, power is “both the source of oppression in its abuse and the source of emancipation in its use” (Radtke and Stam 1994, 1). When we think about this in terms of women’s empowerment against violence, the “use” of women’s “power *within*” becomes something liberating as well as enabling and the abuse of this power *over* women makes it a source of oppression and domination. In an analysis of empowerment of women against violence, I find it vital to recognize these multiple ways and take women’s empowerment as a generative and transforming process of power relations. This kind of conceptualization makes it possible for women to understand the multiple ways they have *power to* act, act to have

*power with* other women. Yet, the most valuable aspect is to become aware of that *power* coming *from within*, not as something exerted or granted by somebody else but as a long and painstaking process where women begin to use that power to transform their lives.

In this thesis, I seek to explore the ways in which different analyses and exercises of power inform feminist theories of empowerment and feminist activism against violence in Turkey. Therefore, throughout my research, I will be focusing on a feminist analysis of power that is alert to the fact that gendered power relations working at all levels of women's lives and a feminist use of power that is reproductive of transformations for women. Instead of solely focusing on the limiting approach of a "power *over*" model which confines us to the binary scheme of the gendered distribution of power, I will also use Jo Rowlands' various categorizations of the uses of power as "power *to*," "power *with*," and "power *from within*," which I find useful in conceptualizing women's empowerment against violence. (Rowlands 1998, 13)

Since from the very early days of feminist movements, women's power has become an important aspect of their empowerment, in the following section, I will be presenting how women were able to come to terms with their own powers within in the history of women's movement's struggle against violence in Turkey.

## **1.2. The Story of the Feminist Movement: From Personal to Political...**

The history of feminism in Turkey dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, yet, this epoch was absent from feminist literature until the 1990s, when feminist researchers such as Serpil Çakır, Aynur Demirdirek, Yaprak Zihnioğlu started unraveling the voices of Ottoman women demanding women's rights at the turn of the century (Çakır 1996; Demirdirek 1993; Zihnioğlu 2003). We now know that this "first wave" of feminism that goes as far back as the 1860s and extend to the 1930s witnessed the mobilization of women around suffrage rights, the right to education, equal wages, as well as demands to limit polygamy and arranged marriages. Neither violence against women nor women's sexuality was mentioned by these women. Instead, they organized around basic legal and citizenship rights and made claims to these rights from the State. By the 1930s, like most nation-states, the Turkish Republic had conceded to women's demands and reformed some of their policies on these issues. This phase of earning their rights side by side the pressures coming from the single party regime created an illusionary feeling of success in women and resulted in their retreat from the public

arena (Tekeli 1998, 338). However, this retreat was later turned against women in the discourses of state feminism where the State obscured women's struggle by claiming its position as the protector and grantor of women's rights.<sup>1</sup>

Until the 1980s, it is not possible to talk about a feminist movement. Şirin Tekeli calls the period between the 1930s and early 1980s "barren years" (Tekeli 1998, 338). The second wave gained momentum in the 1980s with the influence of the western women's movements as well as the ideological cleavages that came as a result of the suppression of both the leftist and the rightist movements by the military coup of September 12, 1980 (Arat 1994, 107). According to Yeşim Arat, the women's movement of the 1980s contributed to the "redemocratization" of the Turkish state by exercising their political will "during a period when political will was curtailed" (Arat 1994, 107). Therefore, the emergence of women's movement was significant since it came into sight at a time when all gatherings of any kind were strictly banned and punished by the military regime. However, these women disguised their gatherings as "apolitical" meetings by manipulating the view of the regime on women's activism as "insignificant".

In addition to opening up a space for democracy, one of the major contributions of these women and its major difference from the first wave was "naming" violence against women and carrying it to the realm of the political along with many other issues that were long buried in the realm of the private, thus made invisible. Bearing this in mind, in the following pages, I discuss the second wave in detail since I find this period crucial to my point where the foundations of feminist methodologies for women's empowerment against violence were laid.

In the first half of the 1980s, educated, middle class women started to gather around in small groups of first feminist consciousness-raising activities mostly in two major cities of Turkey; Istanbul and Ankara<sup>2</sup>. Their fascination with discovering feminist solidarity as well as talking about their experiences of violence and subordination as women for the first time, paved the way to the mass campaigns, protest walks, feminist journals, a women's library, women's solidarity centers and women's shelters against violence. In 1982, a symposium, held by Publication and Production Cooperative of Writers and Translators (YAZKO)<sup>3</sup> in Association of Journalists<sup>4</sup> where "feminism was publicly discussed and defended for the first

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<sup>1</sup> For an insightful analysis, see Zihnioglu 2003, Çakır 1996.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Çakır 2005, Timisi and Gevrek 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Tr, Yazarlar ve Çevirmenler Yayın Üretim Kooperatifi.

<sup>4</sup> Tr. Gazeteciler Cemiyeti.

time” formed the initial stages of the newly emerging feminism (Tekeli 1995, 33). It was followed by feminist publications in literary journal *Somut*. Şule Torun on February 4, 1983, heralded the preliminary feminist views in her column (Torun 1983). The first mass campaign was conducted by the delivery of a petition signed by 7000 women. They demanded the execution of the articles of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), where Turkish government officially committed to undertake series of measures in 1985, yet ignored subsequently (Sirman 1989, 16). By the time the translation and publishing collective Women’s Circle was established and the feminist journals *Kaktüs* and *feminist* were published, feminism had culminated its power and women were ready to march in the streets. Consequently, the accumulation of feminist knowledge resulted in women’s demonstrations in the public sphere raising their voice in a series of campaigns against the battering of women in Solidarity Against Battering Campaign, on May 17, 1987, against sexual harassment in the Purple Needle Campaign in 1989, against the Article 438 of Turkish Criminal Code<sup>5</sup> in 1990. (Savran 2005)

In 1987, Duygu Asena, a journalist and the editor of a renowned women’s magazine, put these women’s voices into words in a groundbreaking novel *Women Has No Name*<sup>6</sup>. Asena’s “semi-autobiographical” (Tekeli 2008, 5) work, which was about a young woman’s experiences from “her childhood to maturity” soon reached its forty-eighth edition (Öztürkmen 1999, 280). Many women, including myself, read this inspiring book as a feminist manifesto, with its intimate but explicit portrayal of women’s sexuality, feelings, and violence. Its controversial theme and language resulted in a ban by the Censorial Commission on public morality<sup>7</sup> (Öztürkmen 1999, 280), decreeing the book as “a harmful publication for children” which was later acquitted. Nonetheless, Duygu Asena became an icon for feminism in Turkey, crying out to women “You are free! Be aware of your power!”<sup>8</sup>

Most of the women in the feminist movement were previously active in the leftist movement before the 1980 military coup suppressed all political activities. Therefore, this was not the first time these women were involved in political action. However, women’s role in leftist organizations was not very different from their traditional gender roles (Aytaç 2008,

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<sup>5</sup> According to the Article 438, if women who work as prostitutes are raped, the rapist gets a reduction by two-thirds of the sentence. This creates a dichotomy between chaste and unchaste women, where unchaste women are considered to deserve rape.

<sup>6</sup> Tr. *Kadının Adı Yok*

<sup>7</sup> Tr. “muzır kurulu”

<sup>8</sup> Tr. “Özgürsünüz, gücünüzü bilin!”

42). They were coded as either wives or “sisters”<sup>9</sup>, which deprived women of their sexuality (Çakır 2005, 15). According to the leftist men, women’s liberation would trickle down from people’s salvation through Socialism (Aytaç 2008, 42) and feminism was a “bourgeois ideology” that threatened the solidarity within the movement (Çakır 2005, 15). However, in 1980s, after these women gathered around their shared experiences in consciousness raising group meetings, they became aware of feminist solidarity. And within feminist movement, women gathered and raised their voices for only themselves this time, not “for their nation, their class, nor for their husbands, brothers and sons” (Sirman 1989, 1). Or if we put it in Yeşim Arat’s terms, the primary purpose of women’s organizing was “to foster acceptance of women as individuals in control of their lives, not as mere members of communal groups in which men had higher status and more rights” (Arat 2008, 397).

The most significant thing about the second wave feminist movement was that domestic violence and women’s sexuality crossed the boundaries of the sacred home and became a political matter for women. The challenge to the public/private dichotomy and their motto “Personal is Political” formed the political framework of the movement. With the contribution of mass scale feminist campaigns, feminist journals, and feminist groups, discourse on violence against women became legitimate and women started to claim their rights for a violence free life. Establishing women’s solidarity centers and women’s shelters came out as one of the most important empowerment mechanisms in women’s struggle against violence. And the feminists of the second wave kept these issues on the top of their agenda since this initial moment.

The 1990s witnessed the institutionalization of the feminist movement and the permanency of the struggle against violence in terms of solidarity centers and women’s shelters was one of the most important steps in the context of this institutionalization (Işık 2007, 47). When women realized that they should go beyond the “structureless”, “small friendship networks that functioned as consciousness-raising groups” and start to establish feminist organizations, some women disagreed with this move towards institutionalization (Arat 1999, 297). Despite these women’s concerns, women started to establish women’s organizations and Mor Çatı, opened in Istanbul in 1990 and Ankara Kadın Dayanışma Derneği, opened in Ankara in 1993, pioneered these institutions.

Yeşim Arat insightfully analyzes how these “feminist demands for individual autonomy” that came from “feminist awakening” were imaginatively directed towards

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<sup>9</sup> Tr. “bacı”

“building institutions” (Arat 1997, 106). She underlines that women successfully created their own institutions by “acting as women for women” rather than something that was granted to them by the State (Arat 1997, 106). In addition to the newly emerging women’s organizations, the feminist movement had its impact on the State and the institutionalization took place at the level of the government concerning the women’s issues. In this decade, the Directorate of the Status of Women<sup>10</sup> was founded, General Directorate of Social Services<sup>11</sup> started to open women’s quest houses<sup>12</sup> and programs for women’s empowerment in Community Centers. The State Planning Organization handled the issue of violence against women in their report and Women’s Status Units<sup>13</sup> were opened in 13 provinces (Işık 2007, 61-63). All these changing structures of state institutions and establishment of women’s foundations in Istanbul and Ankara paved the way to new women’s organizations that spread to the rest of Turkey. In a little more than a decade, its number had reached up to three hundreds.

Nevertheless, the 1990s also witnessed the peak of the Civil War between PKK (Kurdish Worker’s Party) and Turkish Armed Forces. Although violence against women had become something that the governmental institutions began to take some measures against (as a result of the tremendous efforts and lobbying activities of women’s organizations), another form of violence, the violence of war in the East, double-burdened women in its militarized forms in addition to its patriarchal and nationalist accomplices. Cynthia Cockburn calls these three, “brother ideologies”. She says;

“Patriarchy, nationalism and militarism are a kind of mutual admiration society. Nationalism is in love with patriarchy because patriarchy offers it women who will breed true little patriots. Militarism is in love with patriarchy because its women offer up their sons to be soldiers. Patriarchy is in love with nationalism and militarism because they produce unambiguously masculine men.”<sup>14</sup>

In her definition, it becomes possible to understand the close link between domestic violence and military values where constructions of certain gender roles go hand in hand with patriarchy and nationalist discourses. In the eastern Turkey, women suffered from the three

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<sup>10</sup> Tr. “Kadının Statüsü Genel Müdürlüğü”

<sup>11</sup> Tr. “Sosyal Hizmetler ve Çocuk Esirgeme Kurumu (SHÇEK)”

<sup>12</sup> Tr. “kadın misafirhaneleri”

<sup>13</sup> Tr. “Kadın Statüsü Birimleri”

<sup>14</sup> Retrieved November 20, 2007 from

<http://cynthiacockburn.typepad.com//Blogfemantimilitarism.pdf>



“brother” ideologies. Yet, in this highly politicized region, the terrors of war victimized them the most.

Nevertheless, neither the war nor military regime did not stop women independently organizing to problematize violence in the home, in connection with other forms of violence. The seeds of an independent women’s center, KAMER were planted in Diyarbakir in the middle of the civil war where violence was internalized in every part of life under the rule of exception (Akkoç 2007b, 29). Mor Çatı, as one of the first independent women’s organizations, was founded on experiences of women’s movement that formed the initial stages of mass political action in the years of military regime (Arat 1994, 107). Since I will be referring Mor Çatı and KAMER throughout this study, in the following part, I will be giving brief historical information about the initial stages of their establishment and organizational structures.

Mor Çatı, founded in 1990, in Istanbul, was one of the first institutions coming out of second wave feminism in Turkey. These women decided to institute it as a “foundation” rather than an “association” due to the legal constraints and financial requirements of the “Association Law”<sup>15</sup> ( Arın 1996, 147). It was more appealing to their objectives to establish a foundation since they could “pursue trade and run corporations to generate income” (Arat 1999, 304) for further goals. After they were able to find the financial support from an international agency, they officially established Mor Çatı Women’s Shelter Foundation. Their primary purpose was opening a shelter that is away from hierarchy, authority and professionalism but run by feminists and based on principles of feminist solidarity (Arat 1999, 302). From the very early days, these women insistently emphasized the need for women’s shelters working with women’s solidarity centers as the most effective mechanism to struggle against the violence in women’s lives.

Unfortunately, five years had to pass before Mor Çatı could open its first shelter. This shelter could only survive for about five years and was closed down due to financial problems (Arat 2008, 404). Still, 350 women and 250 children stayed in the shelter in these five years.<sup>16</sup> In the meantime, the foundation hired a place in a central neighborhood of Istanbul, which functioned as a “women’s solidarity center” (Arın 1996, 149). A psychologist, Feride Yıldırım, who came from the United States and had experience in women’s shelters as a counselor, did a workshop with volunteer women on the feminist methodologies of struggling against violence (Arın 1996, 149). After the training courses which they called “training of

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<sup>15</sup> Tr. “Dernekler Kanunu”

<sup>16</sup> Retrieved October 2008 from <http://www.morcati.org.tr/neleryapiyoruz02.php>

the volunteers”<sup>17</sup>, the volunteers in the center started to receive phone calls and counsel women who were subjected to violence (Arat 1999, 303). The center also started a number of services where women were offered psychological, legal counseling and, in some cases, employment (Arat 1999, 303). In addition to the counseling they gave, they also organized public meetings, street gatherings; prepared brochures, handouts, press bulletins on violence against women; attended panels both nationally and internationally (Babalık and Özcan 1996,158). All of these were attempts to make the feminist struggle against violence more visible, which they successfully achieved. Moreover, they regularly gathered in “Tuesday Meetings” where they discussed the daily problems of the women’s center and assembled in “Wednesday Meetings” (they sometimes call this the collective meetings) where they discussed their feminist politics. (Babalık and Özcan 1996,158-162).

They had also concerns for economic sustainability; therefore, they tried to do some income-generating activities, such as book stands they opened in TÜYAP book fair, second-hand clothes sales in the open-air market of Beykoz, an organization agency for feminist gatherings and conferences, named FEM-TUR and a refreshment kiosk, selling baked potatoes. (Babalık and Özcan 1996, 162). All of these attempts were realized with the incredible efforts and sacrifices of these women, yet, only some of them turned out to be permanent business enterprise for the financial support for the foundation.

Because these women saw women’s shelters as central to the women’s struggle against violence, they started to run a women’s shelter for the second time in 2005, yet, this time, it took place in collaboration with the Beyoğlu district administration, which provided the building and some financial support. For Mor Çatı, this was their first NGO-State collaboration (Eyüpoğlu 2007, 9). Unfortunately, the local government announced that they were not going to work with the foundation by December 31, 2008 and for the time being, this collaboration came to an end.

Despite all these unfortunate experiences, Mor Çatı inspired many women and women’s organizations and constituted a model for future women’s centers with its feminist methodologies against violence as well as their empowerment strategies against it. In almost two decades, Mor Çatı has supported more than 20.000 women which contributed greatly to the accumulation of their experience and feminist knowledge (Eyüpoğlu 2008, 3). However, we can say that the biggest achievement of Mor Çatı was making “violence” visible and the struggle against it nation-wide. Violence had been a private matter for both women and men

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<sup>17</sup> Tr. “gönüllü eğitimi”

until feminist campaigns started uttering it on the streets in the late 1980s and then institutionalized the struggle against it. This shift came with the incredible efforts of many devoted women. Mor Çatı, by sharing its own experiences nurturing from the feminist movement, played a pivotal role.

While Mor Çatı symbolized the institutionalization of women's movement and the women's empowerment against violence in Istanbul, women's organizations spread to the rest of Turkey, adding up their own empowerment mechanisms to the feminist methods in 1990s. Seven years after Mor Çatı's establishment, in the east end of Turkey, a small group of women who were involved in a research project conducted in the eastern and southeastern part of Turkey, later founded an independent women's organization, KAMER, in Diyarbakır. The results of the research were dazzling because violence and gender inequalities were ubiquitous and these women became aware of the fact that women experienced similar things wherever they live, whichever language they speak. (Akkoç 2007c, 206). The founder of the foundation, Nebahat Akkoç herself was a victim of prevalent violence in the region and survived its traumas. She witnessed the assassination of her husband in the peak of civil war in 1993 on his way to school. A year later, she was taken into custody for ten days and was tortured due to a statement she gave in a newspaper. But, she turned her agony and her anger into a women's center with the aid of thousands of other women like her, to put it in their words with the solidarity of "women who fell from the roof."<sup>18</sup> It was from such experiences that these women started to question violence in their lives. Living the terror of the civil war and state violence along with the rigid socio-cultural norms that defined gender relations that twice marginalized and victimized women for several decades, KAMER women began to question and became aware of violence in the streets, in the workplace and at home (Akkoç 2007b, 29). Violence was everywhere. It was so natural and prevalent, and, thus invisible. Yet, they figured out that domestic violence was at the core of women's subordination and was its most invisible form (Akkoç 2007b, 29).

KAMER was founded as a "corporation" since it only required a small capital and minimal legal procedures to start it as a firm. To establish it as a foundation meant that you had to overcome bureaucratic difficulties and financial requirements. They also did not choose to be an "association" since the "Association Law" had its formal obligations (Akkoç 2007c, 208). However, in the following years, KAMER changed their legal status into a foundation and in ten years time, they opened up an association in Diyarbakır and women's

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<sup>18</sup> Tr. "Damdan düşen kadınlar"

centers in 23 provinces, women's chambers in 179 districts of the East and Southeast Turkey (Akkoç 2007a, 9).

Their first attempts about questioning violence in their lives resulted in implementing a consciousness-raising program on women's human rights. They called this study "awareness groups" since consciousness-raising connoted a hierarchical relationship of the "liberated" women raising the consciousness of "ignorant" women (Akkoç 2007a, 21). In these groups, which are still practiced in every province twice a year, ten to fifteen women meet once a week for fourteen weeks and discuss certain issues with the guidance of a "moderator" (Akkoç 2007c, 210). The issues discussed weekly vary from women's human rights to legal rights, civil code to domestic violence, sexuality to communication, gender roles to education of girls, feminism to discrimination. Those who complete these groups can easily become moderators after they attend a workshop on "moderator training" (Akkoç 2007c, 210). In this way, new volunteer women start their own groups with other local women as a part of bottom-up organizing strategy.

In addition to women's empowerment through awareness groups, KAMER also formed the "Emergency Hotline"<sup>19</sup> situated in 23 provinces and in more than 90 districts (KAMER 2007, 11). In the initial stages, they collaborated with Mor Çatı on their feminist methodologies in struggling against violence. In September and October of 1997, two women from Mor Çatı visited KAMER in Diyarbakır for a workshop to share their experiences. Then, women from KAMER went to İstanbul and joined Mor Çatı's training workshops for volunteers. After these workshops, women stayed there for one week and started to counsel women. "When we were sure that we were ready, 'Emergency Hotline' for women to call was put into practice," writes Nebahat Akkoç (Akkoç 2007c, 211). These lines were initially started to provide emergency support to women who were exposed to domestic violence and to support potential victims of the killings committed in the name of "honor" (KAMER 2006, 24). Women seeking support either called this line or came to the women's centers. In their last report, *We Can Stop This*, published in 2006, KAMER reports that 158 women, who were under the threat of honor crimes, asked for support from KAMER between January 2003 and December 2006 (KAMER 2006, 32).

While working with women on violence, KAMER women realized that women who were coming to the center or joining awareness groups were usually not alone. Many had pre-school children accompanying them. This made women's participation more difficult. Even if

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<sup>19</sup> Tr. Acil Destek Hattı

women could come to the center, they knew that children should not witness their mothers in pain and in tears. Having this in mind, KAMER women first tried to “keep these children busy” in separate rooms full of toys. Nebahat Akkoç told me that a sunny Wednesday would be the turning point regarding their work with children. That day, she took care of the children while a psychologist was counseling the women in the center. The children refused to go inside since it was a bright sunny day. She took care of these children all day long out in the streets. From then on, they knew that a corner full of toys would not work. They realized the need for childcare centers to “facilitate women’s participation” in workshops (Tekay 2007, 9). They consulted KEDV<sup>20</sup> for sharing their experiences about the childcare centers they opened as a part of their Early Childhood Education project. They also worked with experienced women’s organizations from Germany while searching for gender equal, violence-free education models which placed the child at the center and which were not contradictory to their institutional principles and feminist perspectives. As a result, they opened Wildflower Children Daycare Center<sup>21</sup> in 1999. In the following nine years, many childcare centers were opened but now only four of the centers, Diyarbakır, Nusaybin, Kızıltepe and Hakkari, are running.

Like many women’s organizations in Turkey, KAMER had concerns for their economic sustainability. Although these childcare centers were opened to make women’s participation in awareness groups possible in the first place, they also became an enterprise in the coming years. They also started entrepreneurial businesses such as restaurants, cafes, run by KAMER and staffed by KAMER women and started income-generating workshops which were later sold in Mor Çarşı<sup>22</sup>. Certainly, not all of these attempts turned out to be sustainable enterprises. Yet, their first venture, a restaurant, called “KAMER’s Place”<sup>23</sup> not only became a lucrative business but also functioned as a socializing center for women (Akkoç 2007c,

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<sup>20</sup> Kadın Emegini Değerlendirme Vakfı (KEDV) is a women’s organization working particularly on women’s economic empowerment. They constituted a model for the education of children and mothers and started a project called “A Childcare Center for Every Neighborhood” (Her Mahalleye bir Yuva) where they opened “District Childcare Centers” (Mahalle Yuvaları) or “Play Rooms” (Oyun Odaları) and formed groups called “Mothers of the Neighborhood” (Mahalle Anneleri) in the disadvantaged neighborhoods of Istanbul as well as in some parts of Southeastern Anatolia. (KEDV 2008)

<sup>21</sup> Tr. “Kır Çiçekleri Çocuk Yuvası”

<sup>22</sup> “Mor Çarşı”, Purple Bazaar in English, is a project initiated by KAMER as an income generating activity where women from all over eastern and southeastern Anatolia sell their hand made products.

<sup>23</sup> Tr. “KAMER’in Lokali”

213). Last year, they opened both a café “KAMER’s Courtyard”<sup>24</sup> and a restaurant “KAMER’s Kitchen”<sup>25</sup> in Diyarbakır in the Hasan Paşa Inn, which also proved to be good enterprises.

I will be discussing in detail the significance of organizational strategies and empowerment mechanisms of both KAMER and Mor Çatı in my second chapter. But, before moving on to that, I will briefly explain my first encounter and my own involvement in two women’s organizations.

### **1.3. My story about KAMER and Mor Çatı ...**

#### **1.3.1 Diyarbakır and KAMER**

My first visit to Diyarbakır took place as a part of the research project “Redefining Women’s Place in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia; The Case of KAMER. Before that, I had never thought about going to this “faraway” place, especially for conducting fieldwork. I realized this when my professor asked me if I would participate in a research project in Diyarbakır, and my initial response with the slip of a tongue was “Diyarbakır is very far away for me.” This was my internalized prejudices speaking. Before I could pull myself together and express that I did not mean what came out of my mouth, I was faced with the question of why I considered it so far away. I had traveled all around Europe via interrail without ever feeling that I was going “faraway”. In fact, my parent’s response to my research assistantship in Diyarbakır was illuminating about why this city was coded in my mind as distant. When she learned about the project, my mother said to me, “My daughter, aren’t you ever going to do something ‘normal’?”<sup>26</sup> What was “abnormal” about this city? I could feel the tension my parents had during my first visits when they called me a few times a day and asked how things were going on “there.” What did “there” signify for me and for them? In our lives, the East represented the war, thus violence, the Kurdish people, poverty and underdevelopment. These were the taken-for-granted images lying at the base of my perception of the East. Up

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<sup>24</sup> Tr. “KAMER’in Avlusu”

<sup>25</sup> Tr. “KAMER’in Mutfağı”

<sup>26</sup> Tr. “Kızım, sen hiç ‘normal’ bir şey yapmayacak mısın?”

until that conversation where I hesitated about Diyarbakır being “faraway,” I had never become aware of my prejudices.

With its dense Kurdish population and association with “war/terror,” Diyarbakır has been one of the most unpopular places for the State as well as for ordinary Turkish citizens from other parts of Turkey for a very long time. My first days in the city passed between the hotel where we were staying and KAMER’s center. I had the chance to see the place called “new city” and its surroundings, which was a relatively wealthy neighborhood with its modern-looking, adjacent apartments. Because I had not seen the quarters of evacuees of forced migration yet, at first sight this city was not very different from my neighborhood in Istanbul. The only thing that attracted my attention was the license plates of the cars. Although the plate number for Diyarbakır is 21, most of the cars were 06, (the number for Ankara) or 34, (the number for İstanbul). When I asked why there were so many cars from Ankara or İstanbul, they told me that these people were in fact natives but that it was not very popular to have 21 as your plate number. They wanted to avoid harassment by the police or the military and by others when they travelled outside of the region. This was in June 2007 and the state of emergency was abated long ago, yet, the prejudices along with tensions in the region were still pervasive, increasing day by day with the rising tension between military forces and the PKK. I also felt this “unpopularity” when I mentioned my work in various family and friends circles where either skepticism or astonishment appeared on people’s faces. They probably asked themselves what a “well-educated, white, middle-class young woman” was doing with “these people.” Why would I ever choose to work with “those” people “there” in Diyarbakır, instead of doing a “normal” research “here” or somewhere close to “here”?

In contrast to these preconceptions that shaped the reception of the East for many people, the women in KAMER embraced me tightly the moment I stepped in to the Foundation. I was fortunate because I visited KAMER as a research assistant of an academician and a friend of KAMER women, Ayşe Gül Altınay, whom they had known for a long time and trusted. This trust provided me with an advantageous position at the initial stages of my research since these women welcomed me in without any questions other than my name. This position had its reflections on the later phases of my ethnography where I had the opportunity to observe and participate more “intimately”.

Until my first day in the center, I had only heard their voices from the sound-recordings I was transcribing for the research project. I had heard their stories, felt their pain and the power coming out of their narratives. Yet, the energy overflowing through the door

into the people who came in marked my first day. I walked around dizzy the whole day, trying to figure out what was happening to me. With the intensity of my feelings, I put them into words as follows;

“I was carried away by the wind KAMER women was blowing<sup>27</sup> the moment I stepped in the center for the first time where these women hugged and kissed me instead of shaking my hand. All of them embraced and kissed me as if they had known me for years. With their shining eyes, the smile on their face and the fine lines near their lips, they immediately took me in. I was enchanted by these powerful women blowing the wind without even noticing it. This was the charm of the women, transforming their lives where they sometimes stumbled, yet, knew how to rise stronger.

I wrote these lines to a “surprise book” prepared by Ayşe Gül Altınay as a “gift” to KAMER’s 10<sup>th</sup> birthday. (*Adınız Aklimızda, Yüreğiniz Yüreğimizde*, 2007) It was a collection of short letters by 55 women to KAMER women about how KAMER touched their lives. When I put this into writing, I was unaware of how this “embracing” would be important both for my relationship with these women and for my research.

### **1.3.2 İstanbul and Mor Çatı**

2008 has been my tenth year in Istanbul. I spent nearly one-third of my life in this huge city (or I should call it a metropolis). When I think about the ten years and how much I know about this city comes as a shocking awareness to me. I spent nearly one-third of my days in Taksim and it was not until I began my ethnography a year ago that I gave much thought to this. Why was Taksim so central for my life and for many others like me? Although my parents, living in a small town in the west end of Turkey, were always worried about my presence in this crowded and uncanny city, I usually found myself walking through its less trodden corners with a feeling of safety and belonging. İstiklal Street with its neon-lit, aging facade of historical buildings was always enchanting for me. The absurdity buried in its texture, the adrenaline ready to rise in my veins with the readiness of turmoil any moment and the pulsing heart of art and fun at the same time have allured me since my undergraduate years.

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<sup>27</sup> The sign signifying the KAMER foundation is a woman blowing the wind. I refer to that image.



My first visit to Mor Çatı was for an interview as a part of a documentary film on domestic violence which a woman from the United States, Emily and I were shooting together. Since I was familiar with many of the cross streets, I could easily find the location of the women's center. However, for those who do not know the neighborhood well, ironically, it is hidden in an insignificant corner of the most visible and central places of the city, thus, a difficult place to find. This place was a safe haven for many women with its existence in one of the main centers of the city on the one hand, not easily accessible with its concealed visibility on the other.

I decided to do one part of my fieldwork with Mor Çatı because it was one of the most important and visible women's organizations in Turkey. In fact, Mor Çatı was one of the first names that I learnt in reference to feminist movement in Turkey. That is why, when Emily told me that she also wanted to interview with some women's organizations, I advised her to shoot it with Mor Çatı without any hesitation. Like many other women, they have been a source of inspiration for me in my own struggle against violence. After making a detailed research about the foundation and realizing how central it was in the history of feminist movement, I decided to include one of the most established women's organizations in my research on the struggle against domestic violence in Turkey.

I met Figen from Mor Çatı coincidentally, in the celebrations of KAMER's tenth year in Diyarbakır. After the celebrations, both Figen and I prolonged our visit to do some research; she with another women's organizations, DİKASUM, I with KAMER. When I returned to İstanbul, I called her and told about my research topic. She kindly agreed to meet me at the center. I arrived Mor Çatı, conscious of the intensity of the center's workload. I knew that I would have to wait for some time before I could speak with the women working there. During that time, however, I had an unfortunate encounter with some women in Mor Çatı and left the center with different feelings from my experience in Diyarbakır. Those two hours shaped the course of my ethnography. The first incident that marked my first day at the center took place after they requested me to wait for a while until things slowed down in one of the backrooms. While I was waiting, a woman from Mor Çatı was working there. Soon, another woman came in. This was the first woman I made an eye contact with as I entered the center. She had been sitting at the entrance, and waiting. Then she entered the room I was asked to wait and stood there for a while after she gave some papers to the woman behind the computer screen. I smiled and she started to tell me her own story. She told me where she came from, what her husband did to her, how he abducted one of her children and how she could survive all these and was now applying for green card (to get free healthcare). She was

so proud of herself. As she continued in excitement, I started to ask questions to show my interest in her story. A few minutes later, the other woman in the room sharply warned us to be quiet. This came as a shock to me. The woman fell silent and I felt agitated not only by her attitude but also by the fact that I was witnessing this in a women's center.

The second incident occurred the moment I had to explain what I was doing before I could interview some of the women from the center. Six of us were in one of small and cozy rooms when I started to tell the ethnographic work I was conducting with KAMER and expressed my intention to include Mor Çatı in it to be able make a more comprehensible study on the politics of women's empowerment and the struggle against domestic violence in Turkey. The moment I mentioned KAMER's name, the coziness of the room was filled with tension. They felt uncomfortable and told me that if I were intending to make a comparison between KAMER and Mor Çatı, they would not be a part of this project. While I was trying to explain my intentions for doing this research, Figen interrupted and explained the reason why they were so nervous about the issue. With her intervention, I was once again in that cozy room. I asked for an appointment to the closest woman sitting next to me, but, she turned me down. Yet, the others accepted me and we agreed to meet in the center a few days later.

The intensity of this "inquisitorial" moment left me confused in the initial stages of my ethnography since I tried to be "extra" careful about my questions in the interviews. Yet, as we started to get to know each other, the tension left its place to in-depth conversations about the foundation. Nevertheless, I could never retain the "intimacy" with Mor Çatı the way I had with KAMER. Therefore, my positionality within both women's organizations shaped the course of my ethnography. In the activities I participated in Mor Çatı, I usually stayed as an observer and our conversations with these women were usually about the organizational structure or other women's experiences of violence and their empowerment narratives rather than their own stories of violence. With KAMER women, I was as if one of them, participating in their meetings, working in their café, even chitchatting but, at the same time, I was a distant observer, asking them personal questions about their lives, interviewing about the workings of the foundation etc.

Being a woman, working with women on violence along with my feminist sensibilities positioned me in this work not as the detached, so-called "objective" observer but as an "intimate stranger" that is aware of her emotionally involved and scholarly distant stance. The intimacy that shaped much of my field research helped me to recognize the pain and the power of women's stories. Not very much different from other ethnographies, mine reflects upon "a partial truth" as James Clifford puts it (1986). My "partial truth" is a feminist one.

Therefore, I define my study a feminist ethnography. Borrowing from Lila Abu-Lughod, the word feminist calls for “being sensitive to domination” and being a feminist ethnographer stands for “being aware of domination in the society being described and in the relationship between the writer (and readers) and the people being written about” (Abu-Lughod 1993, 4). In other words, as a woman researcher conducting a research with women about women double burdens me where it becomes necessary that I should be as reflexive as I can about my positionality and the power relations of this position in the research, both as a distant observer and as an intimate stranger trying to make the strange familiar.

Within the feminist methodology I have adopted, I do not have claims for objectivity in the classical understanding of the term which “requires the elimination of all social values and interests from the research process and the results of the research” (Harding 1991, 144). In contrast to such a demand for neutrality, my feminist objectivity that is very much influenced by Haraway, provides me with the tools of being aware of the fact that “only partial perspective promises objective vision” which would come from a “limited location and situated knowledge” (Haraway 1998, 583). At this point, I am situated as a woman, and reflecting all my knowledge from my experiences as a woman. As Haraway points out, this position is not an innocent one. And in fact, it is “socially situated” (Harding, 142). By questioning about whom I write, what I work on, how I write it and for whom I do it, (Abu-Lughod, 6), I am trying to see myself as a woman seeing through other women and vice versa.

My story as the ethnographer started in June 2007 with KAMER as a part of the research project I mentioned earlier. I was very lucky because I was also there as a part of a book project, *Ben Varım*, which I will explain further in the following chapter. This gave me the chance to meet more than 40 women from KAMER and travel more than 1200 km from Diyarbakır to Siirt, Bingöl, Elazığ and Adıyaman passing through various provinces, valleys, plains of the area. Getting just a glimpse of the region, visiting KAMER’s centers province by province brought me closer to this land that initially felt so “faraway.” During my fieldwork, I traveled to Diyarbakır six more times, observing and participating in the celebrations of KAMER’s tenth year, activities on March 8<sup>th</sup>, the final meeting of a project KAMER implemented, their supervision meetings of women working in the 23 provinces. My last two visits were for another book project on early childhood education in October and November 2008, respectively. Each time, my schedule was tight, filled with women and their challenging activities. I usually had to wait for the evening since they were working very hard in the day time. I made semi-structured, in-depth interviews with five women, Nesrin, Asya, Necla, Serpil, Helin, several times, from which I insert passages in the following chapters. I

recorded and transcribed each of these interviews. In addition to that, I also conducted unstructured, interviews with various women working in the foundation, in the center and in the restaurant where I took field notes right after our conversations. Consequently, I situated my position and knowledge upon such experiences with women and the region, and started writing about them.

Six months after my first visit to KAMER, in December 2007, I went to Mor Çatı without any hesitation of its location, which I could find with my eyes closed. However, I left the center with a dazzled mind, tired of the questioning. This led to me to be “extra-cautious” about my questions, my attitudes, and, overall, my position as an ethnographer for a while. I went to the center three more times to make semi-structured interviews with four women; Zeynep, Figen, Ülkü, Gamze. I also recorded and transcribed these interviews. Additionally, I visited the center two times as a participant observer, making unstructured interviews with women coming to the center. I attended one of their panels organized for the activities of March 8<sup>th</sup> Women’s Day and joined their small income-gathering street festivities, having chance to talk for each women for a short time. In the mean time, I followed their publications and press bulletins. Yet, the intimacy I had initially felt with Figen and the feeling of coziness of the room when I first entered the center was never restored. The “distant” land became closer and the closer one distant. My ethnographic work was build upon these experiences and my story as the ethnographer was built upon these women’s narratives that came out of our conversations and the moments of laughter and pain of our shared experiences.

## CHAPTER TWO

### EMPOWERMENT: A CHALLENGE AND TRANSFORMATION

Initially, I intended to do my ethnography on the politics of empowerment, focusing on how women's organizations used "empowerment" as a tool to fight against violence against women. I planned to look at the ways women perceived and defined their own empowerment processes as well as the way they practiced them as a politics of empowerment within these organizations. I knew that I would learn a lot in the process, but I did not think that the story of this fieldwork and the process of writing this thesis would become the story my own of transformation and empowerment. My interviews and other interactions with women, listening to their stories of struggle and realizing their power within made me turn into myself and think about the internalized oppressions, discrimination, and violence in my life. Each time I thought about what was happening in my field, I found myself questioning my life.

The most difficult and yet most empowering experience came with my involvement in the book project I mentioned in the introduction. *Ben Varım* (2007) has been not only a book about women's transformative journeys but also my first journey both into the east of Turkey and into the depths of my own empowerment. As I sat down and started to transcribe the thirty-hour sound recording we made with more than twenty women from KAMER's centers from different parts of the region, I faced my blindness towards the region and the stories of violence intersecting with ethnicity, culture and war. I started to learn a new language of possibility, where women taught me to imagine, to believe in and to make it happen. This widened up my vision both vertically and horizontally where I came to understand the possibilities of transcending one's positioning after listening to the situated knowledge of others and the possibility of seeing the world through their eyes without losing the language of your situated knowledge. My own empowerment story came with such belief in the possibility of imagining a world that is non-discriminatory, non-sexist and violence-free.

In this chapter, I will be analyzing the possibilities of a feminist politics based on women's empowerment and its transformatory potentials in women's lives. Since empowerment is a very new term with its vague content, I will first be looking at how empowerment is defined in feminist politics throughout the world and then move to its

perception in Turkey. Then I will be discussing my fieldwork on the strategies that KAMER and Mor Çatı use, analyzing the ways in which they create “subversive” and “transversal” politics towards women’s empowerment.

## **2.1 Empowerment: From Feminist Consciousness-raising to “Third World Development”**

I find it relevant for my work to give different approaches to women’s empowerment primarily and then position my point of view within its widespread use since this will reveal the theoretical basis of my discussion and on what grounds I will be laying my research. Therefore, I will begin with an analysis of the “story” of the term “empowerment.”

Empowerment has become a very popular, and yet, a vaguely defined term that changes in time and context. There are hundreds of ways to define it and all of them refer to different aspects of empowerment. A variety of institutions, agencies, and NGOs use the term with a focus on economic and political development, while some others emphasize its potential to create alternative approaches to socio-cultural improvements. We know that different priorities of various organizations in diverse places and times bring in different emphases on its meaning. For example, for some social activists, empowerment is a grassroots attempt for alleviating poverty through individual and collective participation. Development agencies (especially in 1990’s) see empowerment as a means for increasing efficiency and production in the way to progress. Interestingly enough, most of these approaches to empowerment underline the capacity for making use of “*power over* institutions, resources, and people” (Parpart, Rai and Staudt 2002, 5).

The concept of women’s empowerment has entered into the lexicon of feminist thinking in the last couple of decades. The concept gained its popularity in the late 80s and emerged especially from the dissatisfactions of the “third world” feminists with the apolitical and economic models of developmental intervention policies (Batliwala 2007, 1). In 1985, a network of feminists from India formed a project called “Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era” (DAWN) and explicitly articulated the need for an “empowerment approach” (Sen and Grown 1985, 18). The feminists of the “third world” discussed the need for women’s empowerment to “challenge the patriarchal and socio-political inequalities”

rather than the “Western notions of development, with their focus on economic solutions to development problems” (Parpart, Rai & Staudt 2002, 10).

Women’s empowerment approaches have become visible in the mid 1980s in the global south, yet, it was widely used by a variety of organizations throughout the world in different contexts and places in 1990s. With the rise of instrumentalist approaches to empowerment, a wide range of social change programs with a particular focus on women and gender were implemented by international, national or local agencies, but usually failed to make lasting changes in women’s lives. Still, feminists of the world took crucial steps to define and practice women’s empowerment with their gender-sensitive approaches. The 1995 United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing played an important role in the popularity of the term, especially for state actors. In the Declaration, women reaffirmed their commitment to:

“the empowerment and advancement of women, including the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, thus contributing to the moral, ethical, spiritual and intellectual needs of women and men, individually or in community with others and thereby guaranteeing them the possibility of realizing their full potential in society and shaping their lives in accordance with their own aspirations. (United Nations 1995, para 12.)<sup>28</sup>

This was the first global call for women’s empowerment in all aspects of life, from cultural to economic, political to personal (Moghadam 2007, 1). The Conference Declaration and the Beijing Platform for Action proved to be a unique accomplishment in calling for action about women’s human rights and women’s participation and empowerment in political, economic and cultural arenas (Moghadam 2007, 3). Thus, looking at empowerment as a multifaceted attempt of “economic and political processes, social and cultural dynamics” in the “constitutional and legal framework”, as “education, human rights,” along with “the role of central and state governments as well as voluntary agencies and the perception and participation of the group and the community” was emphasized globally by feminists (Shamshad 2007, 140). This brought the utmost visibility to gendered power relations at work in the micro, meso and macro levels in women’s lives and women’s empowerment became central for feminists as well as a variety of institutions throughout the world.

However, although the term “women’s empowerment” was coined by the “third world” feminists, its roots go back to the consciousness raising groups of second wave feminists. In other words, the feminist movements of the 60s, which were later channeled into

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<sup>28</sup> Retrieved November 2007, from <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/beijingdeclaration.html>

feminist organizations, organized around the goal of achieving women's empowerment from its early days without naming it as "empowerment." Women, by sharing and analyzing their experiences, became aware of their oppressions as well as its sources and outcomes. They came together and formed small groups to discuss various topics from their daily lives. They asked simple questions such as "why did you marry your husband?," "which do/did you prefer, a girl or a boy baby?," shared their experiences of their relationship with men and women, their childhood and adolescent experiences. After hours and days of critical reflection on their roles as mothers, wives, their sexual lives, violence at home, in these small groups women found out that their "personal" feelings were, in fact, very "political" problems (Hanisch 2000, 113). The rediscovery of the "private sphere" that was long abandoned as "trivial" in the modernist, male-centered thinking became the key for feminists. Kathie Sarachild, as one of the leading figures of a radical feminist group New York Radical Women (NYRW) of the late 60s and the formulator of consciousness-raising method, underlined that the so-called "trivial" matters were in fact the sources of women's power that came out in these groups:

"Women have all long been generally in touch with their feelings and that their being in touch with their feelings has been their greatest strength, historically and for the future... In our groups, let's share our feelings and pool them. Let's let ourselves go and see where our feelings lead us. Our feelings will lead us to ideas and then to actions." (Sarachild 2000, 273)

Sarachild's reaction against the undermining of women as being led by their feelings by the dominant male culture and her emphasis on discovering and relying on one's feelings as the starting point of empowerment is crucial for the method of consciousness-raising that came out of these small gatherings of women, which aimed at awakening "consciousness" in themselves and "on a mass scale" (Sarachild 2000, 274). It is evident that these small groups became the places for developing an ideology and ways to action against women's oppression by recalling their own experiences instead of functioning as a therapy session or a self-help group. Sitting in circles, women started to learn to turn the mirror to themselves and began to analyze their lives individually as well as collectively in a non-judgmental space without a leader. Their various methods of bitch sessions, opening ups, sharing feelings and experiences were intended to reach an understanding of "the social conditions of women by pooling the description of forms oppression has taken in each individual's life" (Allen 2000, 279).



As a result of these meetings and the newly emerging feminist movement, the “personal” which found its place in the socio-political praxis turned out to be something that is highly “political” and “the personal is political” became the motto of the second wave feminist movement. This provided women with the tools of understanding the relation between “women’s experience of oppression and exploitation” and its political implications (Kelly 2000, 171). We need to acknowledge that the private sphere being political was a radical statement and that this was implanted in the consciousness-raising groups of women of the 60s and 70s where the very personal experiences of women were shared, analyzed and linked to the (socio) political spheres. This shift in crossing the boundaries of the private space revealed its biggest impact on the visibility of violence against women. Violence that was once confined to the realm of the personal and the private made its appearance in the agenda of women’s organizations and spread to the national and international institutions. Many feminist groups saw violence as one of the biggest obstacles for women to achieve their full potential as active subjects, acting in all social, economic and political fields of life. This paved the way to a feminist politics that foregrounded not only women’s solidarity but also women’s individual and collective empowerment as a mechanism for struggling against violence.

Christine Kelly, in her article “What Happened to Women’s Liberation? Feminist Legacies of ‘68” criticizes the Women’s Liberation movement for assuming a universal category of “Woman”, which was later challenged by lesbians, black, chicana or working class women (Kelly 2000, 167). Although the second wave feminists radically achieved to “operationalize” (Kelly 2000, 165) collective political action through the use consciousness raising, their belief in consciousness raising as a process that “itself would unearth material conditions of women’s oppression” was not applicable to “poor or working class women”, therefore, not generalizable to the oppressions of that universal category of “Woman” (Kelly 2000, 174).

Feminist movements of the so-called “third world” or in its new definition the “global south”, added the “material conditions” of their own oppressions to their agenda. Latin American and South Asian groups in particular introduced distinctive methods for women’s empowerment by bringing “consciousness-raising into the realm of radical organizing and movement-building for gender equality” (Batliwala 2007, 1). Similar to the western models, this method also played an important role for these women, yet, with a particular focus on economic, political and cultural aspects as a bottom-up organizational strategy, especially for the marginalized and the poor, where they came together, shared their experiences of scarcity

of resources, isolation within the community and discrimination due to their gender, class and race.

It is important to acknowledge that the use of consciousness raising gave women the tools for denaturalizing their *internalized oppressions* where they critically analyzed the patriarchal system through their shared experiences. Stella Ovadia, an important name of second wave feminism in Turkey, describes these sharing moments of consciousness raising as coming to terms with the commonality of your own specific oppressions as women, which opens up spaces for a new political consciousness for women (Ovadia 2008, 39). Another feminist from Turkey, Şule Aytaç explains the meaning of consciousness raising for women as a recognition of both their own “internal chains”<sup>29</sup> and their ability to cross its boundaries through solidarity with other women (Aytaç 2008, 42). Therefore, it would not be wrong to claim that women also developed strategies for women’s empowerment in political, economic or social arenas through this kind of recognition of their “internal chains”.

In these groups, women attempt to transform the power relations that oppress them, by becoming aware of the sources of their subordination as well as their own powers to change it. This becomes as the first steps of individual empowerment. While doing this, other women’s solidarity plays a crucial role since women realize the commonality of their experience where they begin to act against these power relations collectively and carry it to the realm of the political.

In the third world, consciousness raising gave its examples at the grassroots level as a bottom-up strategy. For the second wave feminists, it became their most important weapon against patriarchy. Looking at these examples, I find it worth noting that the interconnectedness between consciousness raising and women’s empowerment is a valuable transformative and generative strategy against violence in women’s lives to create permanent changes in both the private and public sphere.

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<sup>29</sup> Tr. “kendi iç zincirlerini”

## 2.2 Multi-dimensional and Transformative edge of Empowerment

While I was doing my research on “empowerment”, three aspects of the term came to the foreground. The first was the close connection between women’s empowerment and women’s own powers. The second was empowerment’s transformative edge and the third was the need for a multidimensional analysis. In the following pages, I will be discussing these three aspects.

As I mentioned earlier, the relation between power and empowerment has always been an important point of analysis for feminists since the word itself is build around the concept of “power”. Jo Rowlands is one of those feminists, who makes an examination of different uses of power while drawing a connection between an analysis of gendered power relations and an analysis of women’s empowerment processes (Rowlands 1998). She underlines that if we are tackling the notion of empowerment, this requires “a brief detour into” different types of exercise of power; that is power *over/to/with/from within*. (Rowlands 1998, 12) Although the widespread use of the term is power *over*, her emphasis on various models of power is illuminating since, in this way, it becomes possible to consider empowerment as a process that can be can be achieved through multiple forms of power relations. Rowlands describes the “picture” of women’s empowerment as something:

“which encompasses women moving into positions of ‘power over’, but which also embraces their movement into ‘power to, with and from within’” (Rowlands 1998, 15).

To Rowland’s description of different manifestations of power and her “picture” of empowerment, I add Haleh Afshar’s powerful expression. For Afshar, empowerment is “a process” and “something that cannot be done to or for women”, but something that “has to emerge from them” (Afshar 1998, 4). Therefore, I base one of my arguments about women’s empowerment on both Rowland’s picture and Afshar’s expression. Their emphasis on empowerment process as something that is not granted by someone else but as a process that emerges from the recognition of women’s own potentialities that gives them their power within is a recurrent theme of this study. I think, it is both valuable and crucial to see women’s empowerment as a process that is very much based on this productive side of power that is not bestowed but comes from within.

Another aspect of empowerment that frequently unearthed throughout my research is its transformatory potential. It is usually pointed out that women’s empowerment entails a

change in gendered power relations that operates at multiple levels. This change in power relations paves the way to a transformation in women's lives, thus, emphasizes the possibility of lasting changes in the women's lives. Srilatha Batliwala, a renowned feminist scholar from India, defines empowerment as "shifts in political, social and economic power between and across both individual and social groups" with its transformative potential (Batliwala 2007, 1). She underlines that the relations of power in ideologies that produce social inequalities, the relations of power in controlling economic, natural and intellectual resources and the relations of power in the institutions that reproduce inequalities are challenged by this "transformatory" edge of empowerment (Batliwala 2007, 2). As I pointed earlier, women usually make the first move toward transformation in their lives through consciousness-raising. Batliwala gives the example of her experience from India, where consciousness-raising as an initial stage of empowerment was used as a common strategy and the shift in the consciousness was then turned into a collective political action against all forms of power that oppress women (Batliwala 1993). What's more, she calls empowerment through consciousness-raising a "spiral process" which involves "the individual, the active agent, the collective and the community" and requires "changing consciousness, identifying areas to target for change, planning strategies, acting for change, and analyzing action and outcomes, which leads in turn to a higher level of consciousness and more finely honed and better executed strategies" (Batliwala 1994, 132). The shift in the consciousness level combined with a transformative process in all relevant spheres and sources of power together with its agents become the tools of women's empowerment. In other words, the transformation of the power relations in political to social, economic to cultural arenas in women's lives requires a politics of women's empowerment that starts with the recognition of power *within* through consciousness-raising and transforming that power into a political action *with* other women that would lead to permanent changes for women.

Another important figure in the debates around women's empowerment is Naila Kabeer. Similar to Batliwala, she underlines the need for a transformative potential of power *within* that comes from women's recognition of their own self which would lead to a challenge of gender inequalities both in the private and public sphere (Kabeer 1994, 224-9). And parallel to Afshar's definition, she proposes that "such power cannot be given; it has to be self-generated" (Kabeer 1994, 229). She also adds that women should build on the *power within*, to collaborate *with* other women, "to control resources, to determine agendas and make decisions" (Kabeer 1994, 229).

The three make a feminist analysis of the uses of power and empowerment as a non-linear and time-consuming process and are critical of the development approaches to women's empowerment. In the instrumentalist jargon, many scholars, activists of development studies see empowerment as something that can be measured and quantified on "solid and objectively verifiable grounds" (Kabeer 1999, 436). Many development programs such as UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI), Gender and Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), United Nation's Millennium Development Goals for promoting "gender equality" and women's empowerment, UNESCO's gender equality projects evaluate women's empowerment with numbers. Kabeer points out that measuring the impact of specific interventions on women's empowerment with statistical numbers, making comparisons between places and time for desired policy objectives usually result in a loss of transformatory edge and strategic value of the concept of empowerment that aimed at overthrowing the patriarchal power and authority in women's lives (Kabeer 1999, 436). As Richa Nagar points out, by losing its critical edge, women's empowerment in struggling against violence can simply become "an item in a long list of indicators, which measure women's access to resources, their agency, and achievements" (Nagar 2000, 343). Both Kabeer and Batliwala warn us against the risk of instrumentalization and mainstreaming when empowerment becomes a concept that corresponds to poverty alleviation, providing services or maintaining economic sustainability of women. This kind of use of the term strips off the term's "original meaning and strategic value" of challenging and transforming gendered power relations (Batliwala 2007, 1).

The emphasis on women's own potentialities as their power that is coming from *within*, the need for putting that power into action in socio-economic, political and cultural spheres with a multi-dimensional feminist perspective and seeing the transformative edge of empowerment that can lead to permanent changes in women's lives is not coincidental. Because women's oppression, subordination and violence against women take place within existing power relations of patriarchy, racism, militarism and nationalism, defining women's empowerment would require an analysis of and a challenge to these powers with a critical, gender-sensitive look. Permanent changes in women's lives, within their families together with political, economic and socio-cultural arenas start from women's confrontation with their very own self at the initial stage and then spread to other levels. For feminist theorists and activists, empowerment is a life-long and demanding process that is in constant conflict with the number and time obsessions of the instrumentalist development policies.

Finally, women's empowerment is not a unilateral act where one group of women has the power and gives it to other women. Women become empowered, individually and collectively, in this time-consuming and painstaking process by sharing their personal experiences of womanhood, by demystifying the violence in their lives or by denaturalizing their internalized oppressions. What's more, empowerment is not a one-dimensional process. Women's struggle against all forms of oppressions and subordinations, therefore power relations, requires a multi-dimensional approach since gender inequality is embedded in all political, economic, social and cultural spheres of women's lives. Hence, it is a process that is very much inclined to failure unless well-developed, multi-dimensional, transformatory policies especially in the area of gender equality in all fields of life are implemented by the state and its actors, development assistance agencies, development professionals, NGOs, and sine qua non feminist activists.

I underline the feminist perspective since revealing the underlying gendered power relations, which confine women into domestic sphere and exclude them from all kind of resources and active participation into public sphere, is a very central aspect of women's empowerment. Tackling gender inequalities to remove male bias and uplift women's subordination is not an easy task and necessitates economic, political, socio-cultural and legal actions to be taken not only by women on an individual level but collectively as well. That's why, a transformatory empowerment cannot take place by challenging power relations of a single field but requires multi-dimensional view of women's status.

Consequently, we know that the transformative edge of empowerment works on levels of raising women's awareness about the prevalent sources of their subordination, submission and secondary position as well as raising consciousness about their power within, to challenge and transform these oppressive structures. Certainly, social change is not an easy task and there is no magic formula that would empower women in all fields of life while shifting the ossified structures in a couple of years. This takes time and patience. As Nagar and Raju underline, "empowerment processes do not occur in a linear progression and can sometimes have contradictory effects." (Nagar & Raju 2003, 8) Plus, empowerment in one field might lead to disempowerment in another. Therefore, it is crucial for women's organizations to contextualize and historicize the targeted change in women's lives without losing their critical perspective about their role as agents.

## 2.3 Consciousness-Raising and Empowerment in Turkey

I will now move to the question of how women's empowerment is defined and how these theories are put into practice in the feminist thinking by the women's organizations in Turkey with a particular focus on Mor Çatı and KAMER. I find it very important to analyze the works of these two women's NGOs, since both Mor Çatı, as one of the first independent feminist organizations, and KAMER, as an independent grassroots feminist organization, played and continue to play a crucial role in the development of women's empowerment methods in Turkey by drawing our attention to violence and the need for women's empowerment in all fields of life.

Feminist as well as the development agencies started to use the term "empowerment" widely in the 1990s. In the meantime, the feminist movement in Turkey was going through a period of institutionalization. In nearly two decades, the number of women's organizations has reached up to 370 (Uçan Süpürge 2004).<sup>30</sup> Not all organizations focused on violence against women, however, working with women on women's issues meant that you have to deal with different forms of violence that prevented women from participating in the public sphere as active subjects. Therefore, many organizations developed methods to create a violence-free life. These mechanisms varied from feminist solidarity networks to consciousness-raising groups, from job training courses to psychological and legal counseling.

In the early 90s, the concept of "empowerment" was not a part of feminist language. Instead, for instance, the Mor Çatı collective emphasized "women standing on their own feet"<sup>31</sup>, women's "self-reliance"<sup>32</sup>, "economic freedom"<sup>33</sup> or "taking control of her own body"<sup>34</sup> with the support of women's solidarity (Mor Çatı Kollektifi 1996). Towards the end of the decade, women began to refer to women's powers and women's empowerment in various fields. Kadın Adayları Destekleme ve Eğitim Derneği (KA-DER),<sup>35</sup> founded in 1997,

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<sup>30</sup> For more detailed information, see the website: <http://supurge.bulupe.com>

<sup>31</sup> Tr. "kadınların kendi ayakları üzerinde durması"

<sup>32</sup> Tr. "kendine güvenme"

<sup>33</sup> Tr. "ekonomik özgürlük"

<sup>34</sup> Tr. "bedensel özgürlüğü"

<sup>35</sup> For further information, please visit KA-DER's website: [www.ka-der.org.tr](http://www.ka-der.org.tr)

started to work for the implementation of equality policies in the political arena for the political empowerment of women (Bora 2007). Being one of the most widespread and dynamic organizations of 1990s, they are now trying to establish collaboration among women in the political parties and among women's organizations on gender inequalities in decision-making apparatuses of local and national politics. Another women's organization, Women for Women's Human Rights – New Ways has been working in the field of women's human rights since 1993 with the aim of helping women gain awareness of their rights at national, regional and international levels towards mobilization around their own needs for social change. Around 5000 women from more than 30 provinces have participated in their “Women's Human Rights Education Program,”<sup>36</sup> The implementation of this education program in cooperation with the General Directorate of Social Services in the Community Centers<sup>37</sup> has proved to be a successful state-NGO collaboration since 1998 and an important attempt to struggle against violence against women nation-wide as well as at the level of state agencies.

In 2000s, both empowerment and women's power became a part of feminist language. Women Entrepreneurs Association of Turkey (KAGİDER), for instance, a woman's organization founded in 2002 by Turkish female entrepreneurs, defined its aim as “empowering women economically through women's entrepreneurship.”<sup>38</sup> To this end, they have been doing their own projects on women's “economic and political empowerment” as well as creating resources for women's NGOs, such as the “Women's Fund,” which has funded 13 NGO projects, distributing 175.000 € in total until now.<sup>39</sup> The striking motto of the Women's Fund is “We are giving women's power back to women”<sup>40</sup> while in the “Water Drop” project, they explicitly use women's empowerment as their slogan; “The water drops are growing, Turkish women are becoming empowered.”<sup>41</sup> KAMER, from the day of its establishment, uses the term “women's empowerment” in struggling against violence. Nebahat Akkoç points out that women need to become empowered to eliminate violence in their lives, and this can take place through “women's empowerment” in all fields. (Akkoç 2007a, 9) Mor Çatı's recent project is titled “Empowerment of Women through Solidarity Centers in the Combat against Domestic Violence”.

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<sup>36</sup> Retrieved May 2008 from [www.wvhr.org](http://www.wvhr.org)

<sup>37</sup> Tr. “Toplum Merkezleri”

<sup>38</sup> Retrieved May 2008, from [www.kagider.org](http://www.kagider.org)

<sup>39</sup> Retrieved May 2008, from [www.kagider.org](http://www.kagider.org)

<sup>40</sup> Tr. “Kadınların gücünü kadınlara veriyoruz.”

<sup>41</sup> Tr. “Damlalar büyüyor, Türk kadını güçleniyor.”



This list goes on. In more than two decades, different women's organizations have been referring to diverse phases of empowerment with a particular agenda. In the following pages, I will be discussing how the two women's organizations I have worked with, KAMER and Mor Çatı, define their politics of women's empowerment in their struggle against violence against women; what their strategies are and how they implement these strategies. Since both KAMER, in the eastern part of Turkey, and Mor Çatı, in Istanbul, are working to eliminate violence and develop policies that will lead to women's empowerment, I will be analyzing, to what extent, Kamer and Mor Çatı can achieve lasting changes in fighting against violence in women's lives.

On the eight of March, 2008, I was in Diyarbakır, enjoying the activities that KAMER women had prepared for International Women's Day in the Hasan Paşa Inn. This old "inn" is situated at the center of Diyarbakır's old down town. A year ago, it was a male-dominated place, where women usually did not go in, and if they did, they usually left in a hurry. After KAMER opened its café "KAMER's Courtyard" in September 2007, women alone or with a group, day or night, started to come, drink tea and talk for hours. On March 8, 2008, KAMER women were particularly busy preparing the food, serving tea, organizing the activities that would take place. The inner court was full of people and many of them were standing as there were no chairs left. In the second floor, there was a performance called "One Woman, One Room" where in each room a phase of womanhood, from violence to motherhood, from militarization to wifhood, was performed with collaboration of KAMER women, volunteers from another NGO Children Under the Same Roof<sup>42</sup>, and the Diyarbakır Art Center.<sup>43</sup> As I walked up the decrepit and chipped stairs, I did not know what to expect. Then I started to go in and out of the rooms one by one. In each, I felt more dazzled. The most dazzling one was the "wet room" where I saw the colored skirts, hanging from the ceiling as I read the stories, being reflected on the wet floor from a projector, of women killed in honor crimes in the first person. I left the room feeling chilly not only because of the wet ground but also because of the pain of remembering these women. That day, hundreds of men and women, children and young girls and boys watched the performance. I finished the performance by writing my wish on a white paper with a purple colored pen, then folded it into a paper plane and threw it to the inner court. Like many others, I wished for a world without violence, oppression and discrimination.

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<sup>42</sup> Tr. Çocuklar Aynı Çatı Altında (ÇAÇA)

<sup>43</sup> Tr. Diyarbakır Sanat Merkezi (DSM)

As the performance was over, one of the women working at KAMER, Cahide started to sing Turkish, Kurdish, Zaza and Armenian folksongs in her beautiful voice. This was Cahide's first public performance and she told me later that she had to sit down on a chair while singing because she felt her legs shaking. She was a divorced Zaza woman from a conservative family, but that day, she was there standing in front of hundreds of people and singing enchanting songs in four languages. Except for the Turkish ones, I did not know any of the lyrics, yet, I knew what they said. I kept recollecting the image of that day in my mind; circles of women and men, dancing their folkdance "halay"<sup>44</sup>, tightly holding hands. I could feel the centripetal powers of these women, drawing me, and many others, in.

On March 8th, KAMER women were transforming the male dominated center of the old city into a public house run by women, for women. During the performance, an old woman came closer to me and whispered with her accent, "Yaw, I am 70 now, but I have never stepped in here even once, this is the first time I come here. What a beautiful place here is!"<sup>45</sup> I smiled and she left with a pleased but confused face. I saw many confused faces that day, which were confused about the transformation taking place. Tens of women from different parts of Turkey joined this transformation and ended the night with a feminist theater reading *İşte Böyle Güzelim* (Altınay, Adak, Düzel and Bayraktar 2008), composed of women's first person narratives of their sexuality. KAMER women formed the majority of the "readers."

I will be referring to the significance of this day further in my analysis of the empowerment politics of KAMER and Mor Çatı. Now, I will look at these women's empowerment mechanisms both at individual and collective levels and try to analyze how Mor Çatı, and KAMER, developed a politics of empowerment as a strategy to struggle against domestic violence.

As I mentioned earlier, "violence" has been a private matter for women and men until the second wave feminist movement carried it into the public sphere in Turkey. Therefore, the narratives of violence were unspeakable for a very long time because its utterance was perceived as a threat to the sanctity of the family as an institution. Ayşe Parla underlines that these narratives were silenced and made invisible in the social and cultural domain since it stood in contrast to the "legitimized cultural, legal and religious discourses of the sacred

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<sup>44</sup> Halay is a folkdance practiced very commonly in Turkey and takes different forms according to place and time.

<sup>45</sup> Tr. "Yaw, 70 yaşına gelmişem, ama daha buraya bir kere bile adımımı atmamışem. İlk defa geliyom. Ne güzel yermiş bural!"

family” (Parla 1996, 57). The Turkish saying that “Kol kırılır, yen içinde kalır” which literally means when the arm is broken, it remains hidden behind the sleeve and figuratively signifies the need for silence on the part of women, has been one of the most significant and powerful expressions of this invisibility.

Nonetheless, women’s stories of violence became visible with the diligent work of many dedicated feminists. To this day, Mor Çatı is one of the first names that comes to mind when talking about the struggle against violence in Turkey, both in official and popular circles. In one of my interviews, Figen told me a story about an applicant who came to Mor Çatı for support as an example of this visibility. This woman was subjected to violence by her husband and was asking legal counseling from the foundation. When she came, she said:

“I came here to apply for 4320 Mor Çatı Law.”<sup>46</sup>

Figen told me that there are other women who come to the center with similar remarks. Gamze’s examples covered not only women but also the police and the “unknown telephone numbers” services:

“There is, of course, the network among women but, in fact, everybody knows Mor Çatı. It is as if all of the shelters in Turkey are Mor Çatı’s shelter. For instance, the unknown telephone numbers service gives Mor Çatı’s number in the first place. It is the same with the police. They send women directly to Mor Çatı.”

Both Figen and Gamze were flattered and felt empowered by such visibility. From state institutions to the media, Mor Çatı continues to be a renowned women’s organization in the struggle against domestic violence.

Aside from this visibility, Mor Çatı established a variety of mechanisms for women’s empowerment with the contributions of many women from the second wave feminist movement or who come to the center. Institutionalizing the methods of this struggle several years after it was uttered by feminist campaigns was revolutionary. It was not only the women who came to the center but also the volunteers who were working there started to realize and denaturalize violence in their lives. Two Mor Çatı volunteers, at that time, wrote about their experience as counselors in Mor Çatı as follows:

We realized our own experiences of violence while we were listening to the applicant women. Luckily, the counseling we get about how to differentiate between or collectivize these experiences helped us through. The volunteer groups we formed and our counselor guided us in dealing with the difficulties we faced in counseling sessions with women. We learned how to face our own experiences of violence, and even to benefit from them. We became aware of

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<sup>46</sup> Tr. “Mor Çatı kanunundan yararlanmak için geldim buraya.”

and learned to distinguish different forms of violence apart from its physical form. We started to realize the violence of our partners more easily. (Taylı & Mefkür 1997, 81, translation mine)

Listening to other women's stories of violence initiated their own self-questionings. These processes led to individual empowerment by facing the violence in their lives and started the demystification of their internalized oppressions. Interestingly enough, when I asked each woman I interviewed in Mor Çatı what was their own story and how they ended up there, becoming aware of violence in their lives did not form the core of their narrative. Figen Ülkü, and Gamze told me that they were involved in feminist movement and later in Mor Çatı from its early days and Zeynep, as a younger generation, mentioned that she first met feminism and then Mor Çatı in her university years. Yet, they never shared with me any story of violence except for those experienced by the applicants. They positioned themselves within Mor Çatı, therefore within my research, as feminists who were involved in the second wave feminist movement or feminists who joined the volunteer workshops that the center was giving. When I asked them about the reflections of working on domestic violence on their private lives, they talked about its psychological effects but not shared any particular story of violence from their lives. Thus, their individual voice in their own experiences of violence was usually muted in my ethnography.

This was in complete contrast with my fieldwork with KAMER women, who placed narratives of violence in their lives at the center of their narration. Although I asked the same question about how they ended up in KAMER, they started from the very beginning to the day they came to KAMER, as if we were in a counseling session where we were both crying most of the times. The way they articulated their story within KAMER, thus within my research, as feminists who were once "applicants" who then stopped the violence in their lives, changed the direction of my research. This difference in their narration situated my analysis of their individual empowerment stories at different levels. Therefore, while discussing the politics of individual empowerment in both organizations, I will be referring to individual experiences and empowerment stories of KAMER women whereas for Mor Çatı, I will usually be recounting the transformation stories of the "applicant" women.

As for the politics of collective empowerment, however, I found the chance to observe and speak in detail in both centers. For instance, on the day I went to Mor Çatı to talk to Zeynep, there was a "supervision" meeting (previously called "Wednesday meetings") that they held weekly where women in the center came together regularly and took a critical look at themselves, their work, and their internalized hierarchies as a self-assessment process.

Since these meetings are not open to other women, I could not attend one. However, I was told by Zeynep and others that sometimes with a professional psychologists sometimes with women from the shelter, they gather in these meetings to discuss women's empowerment through the lenses of a certain "feminist ethic," to put it in Zeynep's words. Figen told me that in these meetings, they have the chance to look at their internal structure as well as their methods of individual and collective empowerment. She described the purpose of these meetings as follows:

"In these meetings, we gather with women from the shelter and the center. We discuss certain events and evaluate these events with a feminist ethic that focuses on the empowerment of women who are staying in the shelter. For example, you say, "I was very affected while I was working with Figen". Or "I held back my anger." With the counseling of the supervisor, we look at what caused your anger. Why? What was the reason? You said something that slip out unintentionally. You do not judge, you do not make comments but you said it. What was the motive behind it? This becomes an awareness not only for you but also for everyone in the group. In addition to these, we discuss the ways of women's empowerment in which we can support women and children who have been through serious psychological traumas as a result of a life of violence better. For instance, how can we collaborate to get her to take her medication regularly, etc..."

These meetings function to foster collective empowerment of both the staff of the shelter and the volunteers of the center. They gather and take a critical look at what they do in the center and in the shelter. This leads to an awareness on their part and helps to develop policies and methods for women's empowerment.

I knew that to do an ethnography on Mor Çatı would mean that I could just have a glimpse of the two decades they spent in the feminist struggle against violence. And I was aware that with the accumulation of experience and feminist knowledge, they devised their own mechanisms of empowering women individually in face-to-face conversations or collectively through the counseling sessions in the center and in the shelter. They have provided psychological, legal and to some extent economical aid to women who came to the center. They constantly emphasized the need for co-existence and cooperation of women's solidarity centers and women's shelters as the most important empowerment strategy against violence. Their two-shelter experience I mentioned in the introduction proved the importance of this collaboration (Eyüboğlu 2007, 9). When the shelters were open, they directed the applicants to their own shelter, where these women continued to get counseling and became collectively empowered with other women on the shared grounds of their experiences.

Otherwise, they helped these women to go to “women’s guesthouse”<sup>47</sup> of the General Directorate of Social Services or the shelters of the local governments. For them, the primary aim was to let the women decide what to do next. She could either choose to “stand on her own feet” by becoming aware of her own capabilities and use her powers to transform her life into a violence-free one or decide to live within existing situation. In other words, it was within the powers of these women to create changes, while women in the center acted as agents of support in this process. Women decided on their own with the collective support of other women. (Kerestecioğlu and Kaşker 2005, 267; Ovadia 1996, 179-181).

The emphasis in women’s transformative powers within has also been the source of inspiration for KAMER women. These women started to organize in the eastern part of Turkey as early as 1993 and founded KAMER in 1997. In the meantime, Turkey witnessed the peak of civil war between Turkish Armed Forces and PKK. With the intensity of this militarized form of violence, these women became aware of the prevalence of violence in their lives together with its various forms. However, they figured out that domestic violence was the most naturalized and unspeakable form and started from there (Akkoç 2007b, 29). While doing this, they realized the need for women’s empowerment to be able to transform their lives into a violence-free one. And it was within the powers of these women, too, to transform their lives. I find it important to contextualize KAMER’s work in the region since I believe that the local dynamics played an important role in KAMER’s organizational strategy as well as their politics of women’s empowerment.

When I told people that I was doing an ethnography on domestic violence in a women’s organization in Diyarbakir, their first reaction was usually a feeling of “pity” for the oppression and subordination of the women “there”. For many, the women in the east were oppressed and subjected to violence more than rest of Turkey. However, in contrast to the mythic world of the exotic but primitive east of modernist discourses, pumped up by Turkish media in form of TV serials such as “Sıla,” a recent survey conducted by Yeşim Arat and Ayşe Gül Altınay showed that there was not a significant difference in the statistical data on physical domestic violence against women in the east and west of Turkey. According to the results, one in three women was subjected to physical violence in Turkey (Altınay and Arat 2007, 79). What was striking about the east was the inequality in income and educational levels. In the research, 21 percent women report that the income of their family is less than 250 YTL while, this decreases to 9 percent in the west/middle of Turkey (Altınay and Arat

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<sup>47</sup> Tr. “Kadın Konukevi”

2007, 107). The results of education levels showed that the percentage of illiterate women in the east was 42 percent whereas, in the west/middle, it was 16 (Altınay and Arat 2007, 107). They also gave an example of the research on education that the World Bank carried out in 2005, in 10 provinces of the region. And its results showed that annual education expenditures by the state for a single student varied between 614 to 813 YTL while Turkey's average was 1250 YTL (Altınay and Arat 2007, 72).

As the numbers reveal, what is different between the east and west of Turkey is not the percentage of domestic violence in women's lives but the levels of gross national product expenditures they get on education and economic investments. Yet, the biggest share this region gets is the military expenditures. Therefore, in addition to these inequalities, there is tension among people due to years of civil war that shed blood and enmity among ethnic groups, mostly the Kurds and Turks. In contrast to the cosmopolite structure of Istanbul, the boundaries between various ethnic, religious or cultural groups are rigid in the east of Turkey. This became most clear to me when I listened Bermal's story while we were working on the *Ben Varım* book project (2007, 119). Bermal was a Sunni women living in one of the conservative provinces of East Anatolia. While we were talking about discrimination, she admitted her own discrimination against Alevis. An Alevi boy she loved proposed to her but she turned him down because he was an Alevi. She even told us that she thought about their children and how they would raise them; as Alevi or as Sunni. However, now after she had been through awareness groups, she thinks that if one day she has children, they can choose whichever religion they want. Her story was just signaling the margins of religion. Yet, the discrimination in the region was also based on differences such as class, ethnicity, gender, culture, language. When I thought about the colors of cultural diversity in Turkey that *Ebru Project*<sup>48</sup> made me recognize such as Turks, Zazas, Kurds, Arabs, Circassians, Romans; Alevis, Sunnis, Hanefis; Christians, Jews, Muslims, I realized the multiple combinations of these dynamics intersecting each other. I put this side-by-side KAMER's work in the region that spread to 23 provinces. Then, I noticed the significance of their "independence" and understood the reason why they organized around the local dynamics of the region as a vital strategy without prioritizing any difference, any identity or any positioning. (Yuval-Davis 1999, 95)

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<sup>48</sup> *Ebru Project* is a photographic work by Atilla Durak that aims to illuminate the cultural diversity of Turkey, which was turned into a book, called *Ebru: Reflections on Cultural Diversity in Turkey*. (2007) For detailed information, see website: <http://www.ebruproject.com/>

KAMER women adapted the feminist principles into their local conditions and created their distinctive methodology by “thinking globally, working locally.” Understanding the need for a multi-sided approach to women’s empowerment that works in all spheres of life, they started with unraveling their internalized oppressions, related it to local power relations and carried it to the political arena to transform women’s lives. To be able to do this, they began with awareness groups.

Placing these “awareness group workshops” at the basis of their organization was a critical empowerment strategy since women started to speak a new language of their own acting as the subjects of this new language. Nebahat Akkoç defines this new feminist language as “non-judgmental, not humiliating, not commanding, not prescribing but based on empathy” (Akkoç 2007b, 30) They told me that only with a new feminist language, it becomes possible to denaturalize violence in our lives. During the time I spent with KAMER, I realized how important it was to become aware of these internalized oppressions. They told and taught me that women’s strongest weapon against violence was to be able to realize their long suppressed capacities and to be able to put that power into action, they needed to become aware of the roots of their internalized oppressions as the basis of violence in their lives. They did not lecture me about discrimination, communication, or violence. All of these points came out, often in between the lines, as they spoke. The more I started to think about these issues, these lines began to pop up in my mind as significant references. Since then, I am careful about my language because I am aware of the fact that all the power relations I took for granted comes out through my language. The utterance of a seemingly “innocent” word might turn out to be a sexist one.

I also became aware of the fact that changing one’s lives is to some extent turning the world upside down. Therefore, I agree with what Haleh Afshar says, that empowerment is not something that can be done to women, but “has to emerge from them” (Afshar 1998, 4). Very much in line with this view, KAMER believes that the first step should come from women. However, what is unique to them is the way they use awareness groups as an individual and collective empowerment mechanism that is systematically spread in a bottom-up networking in 23 provinces of eastern Turkey (Altnay and Arat 2007, 23). As a consequence of this systematic, grassroots organizational method, in ten years time, they have reached more than 30.000 women. More than 10.000 of these women joined their awareness groups. They helped 200 women that were under the threat of killings in the name of “honor”. They traveled more than 1.500.000 kilometers to reach women in 23 provinces of Turkey (KAMER 2007, 11).



Awareness groups constituted the basis of their politics of women's individual and collective empowerment. However, they knew that empowerment was a multi-sided process and starting to question gender inequalities, becoming aware of them was its first step. In fact, they realized that violence in women's lives was naturalized from the very early days of informal or formal education processes, within the family or at school. The patriarchal system guaranteed its survival via children (Akkoç 2007d, 16). Therefore, KAMER started an early childhood education program, which they implemented in their own childcare centers. Although they initially opened these centers to "facilitate women's participation" (Tekay 2007, 9) in awareness workshops, they became aware of a very important aspect of early childhood education. They noticed that a gender-equal education system that is non-racist, non-discriminatory and non-violent in early childhood would be an essential step to create models that will eliminate sexism and violence in women's lives, which will in turn contribute to women's empowerment.

These childcare centers were also opened as an employment strategy for women. The educators of the care centers were graduates of vocational schools, recruited locally after a period of training. Women who participated their workshops could also work in the centers, turning these centers into an economic empowerment mechanism for survivors of violence. In addition to these centers, the business enterprises I mentioned in the introduction such as their restaurants, cafes, childcare centers, and income-generating workshops were initiated as projects for creating both employment opportunities for women and financial resources for the foundation. In fact, when I conducted my first interviews towards the end of 2007, economic sustainability was high on their agenda and they had already made their annual plan for economic sustainability for 2008. Consequently, the restaurant and café in the Hasan Paşa Inn in Diyarbakır proved to be good investments. Economic empowerment in the form of sustainable business enterprises is an important aspect of KAMER that separates them from many women's organizations, in my context from Mor Çatı.

Certainly, this is not to say that Mor Çatı did not consider economic empowerment and economic sustainability. Women in Mor Çatı told me that they always tried to create (find) their own financial resources<sup>49</sup>. Their book stands they opened in TÜYAP book fair, second-hand clothes sales in the open-air market of Beykoz, FEM-TUR and their refreshment kiosk for selling baked potatoes (Babalık and Özcan 1996, 158) were imaginative projects developed for creating their own financial resources. They also tried to raise their own funds

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<sup>49</sup> Tr. "Kendi yağımızla kavrulmaya çalıştık"

through donations, income-gathering activities or contributions of volunteers. Their recent fund-raising activity was a street gathering where they introduced two books coming from Mor Çatı publications.<sup>50</sup> They were not charging money for the books but were accepting donations. They also sold sandwiches and drinks. This gathering was a symbolic activity where a women's center at the one end and a feminist café on the other spread to the neglected street with its old buildings and turned it into a feminist street party. When I congratulated Zeynep about this genius activity that I am not very used to seeing in Istanbul and asked how they came up with the idea, she told me that they were in a financial crisis, so, thought that they can organize a party as a fund-raising activity and introduce the new books they published. Unfortunately, these attempts were usually temporary solutions to the financial problems of Mor Çatı and they failed to be sustainable enterprises.

KAMER women are also struggling in the midst of the financial crisis. For example, while doing the final meeting of the "An Opportunity for Every Women" project, they told me that they had used all the limits of their personal credit cards and were not getting salaries for months. Still, they were full of energy and motivation for the coming meeting. They were also transferring the money coming from the restaurant and café to other expenses of their activity. Hence, what is significant about them is that they are trying to find the means for economic sustainability through entrepreneurial attempts and trying to establish a feminist politics on this.

So far, I have tried to describe both the organizational structures and empowerment strategies of KAMER and Mor Çatı. Despite the differences and similarities of their individual as well as collective empowerment mechanisms, one thing that continuously came out throughout my research was the discourse on the need for a change, a transformation for women's empowerment in struggling against violence against women. From now on, I will move on to the discussion of how these women and their strategies challenge the existing power relations and to what extent, they achieve alternative places for transformation in women's lives.

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<sup>50</sup> Eyüboğlu, Beril. 2008. *Sorularla ve Yanıtlarla Erkek Şiddetine Karşı Kadın Dayanışması*. Mor Çatı Yayınları:İstanbul. Eyüboğlu, Beril. 2007. *Şiddetten Uzakta: Bir Sığınak Nasıl Kurulur? Nasıl Yürütülür?* Mor Çatı Yayınları:İstanbul.

## 2.4 “Flying with your Wings”

What I portrayed above could be seen as the picture of women’s struggle against violence and women as the subjects of this empowerment processes in the last two decades. To see and believe in women’s power to struggle, survive and challenge has been inspiring not only for the women’s organizations but for individual women themselves. Both KAMER and Mor Çatı organized around such fascination with women’s power to change the world they are living in. Not surprisingly, in this long journey, they devised their own individual and collective ways to deal with and transform what has trivialized this power and suppressed it with its social, cultural, political and economic apparatuses.

Mor Çatı as one of the first women’s organizations confronted the existing structures of patriarchy and violence as early as 1990s. Although the term “empowerment” has entered their lexicon recently, their belief in women’s power within has never changed. In the interviews I conducted with them, nearly all of them emphasized women’s power and the role of women’s organizations constantly. Figen described their role as:

“We support women in recognizing their power within, the suppressed, forgotten power within her. She rises up, stands still, and decides how to use that power on her own. Power is not something that can be granted. I am not giving power to anyone. It is a mutual process but you act as an agent, helping that long suppressed power to come out. We act with women’s solidarity.”

Similar to Figen, Zeynep pointed out:

“Women are not powerless... Can you say that Güldünya was weak?<sup>51</sup> Women are powerful. We need to know that. But they are not given the opportunity to realize their powers, their creativity within. We just support them. They are the ones who become aware of their powers and decide what to do.”

In a recent article, Taylı and Yalçın described women’s power and their role in very similar terms:

“It is impossible not to see applicant women’s power and their struggle to survive who come to Mor Çatı. In fact, what we do is to help them realize that power (Taylı & Yalçın 1997, 49, translation is mine).

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<sup>51</sup> Güldünya Tören was a woman who was killed in a honor crime in 2004. She was raped and impregnated by his cousin in Bitlis. Then, she was sent to Istanbul. Her two brothers shot her in Istanbul but she survived. She was shot again in hospital for the second time. This time she went in a coma and her family asked for euthanasia and rejected taking the body for a proper funeral.

What is common to these three quotes is a women-centered approach where women need to become aware of their own potentialities. Within her capabilities, her power lies and this power is considered to come from within. Mor Çatı activists see their role as to help to catalyze this long oppressed strength to come out and let women canalize it into more powers that is shared by other women.

KAMER, from the very beginning of its establishment, used the term “women’s empowerment” and identified it as an important mechanism in struggling against violence. They have defined their role and objective as “empowering women individually, socially as well as in legal and economic spheres in order to struggle against the cultural and traditional practices that harm women” (Akkoç 2003, 38). Like Mor Çatı, the emphasis on women’s own potentials as well as the importance of the role of women’s organizations in supporting women who take the first step towards change has been prominent in their feminist politics. They acknowledge the fact that looking into your own self and becoming aware of your taken-for-granted hierarchies, oppression and subordination is not an easy task. Many women call this moment as “bottoming out”<sup>52</sup>. At this point, women need significant power and support to change their lives. This is when women need other women to lean their back against. Nesrin described this painstaking but transforming journey where women became “aware” of their power *within* and needed a helping hand that would carry their transformation to a higher level in these terms:

“This is not a short-term process; in contrast, it is a life-long thing. It never ends. During this period, woman becomes aware of new things and puts them into practice in her life. She starts to question. Each time, she questions something else and begins to change her world where she tries to create a new language and a freer space to live. She wants to do something for herself. She says ‘I must participate in public life as an active agent and express myself, my thoughts’, ‘I should go to a training course’, ‘I should start running a business’, or ‘I need to improve my capabilities in a certain field’. She comes and shares this with us. She says ‘Okay! I came here. I realized, questioned and started to change. But I need a helping hand to take it one step further.’”

The frequent use of “becoming aware” in Nesrin’s narrative is not coincidental. Its importance as an individual empowerment mechanism is constantly emphasized among KAMER women. One of the women, interviewed for *Ben Varım*<sup>53</sup> book project, *Çilem*,

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<sup>52</sup> Tr. “dibe vurmak”

<sup>53</sup> Some of the stories that are narrated in *Ben Varım* are the transcriptions of the interviews Ayşe Gül Altınay, Nilgün Yıldırım and I conducted with women from KAMER centers in different provinces.

resembled her “bottoming out” moment to “being hit by ten people”<sup>54</sup> and “falling into an abyss.” Then, she described the process of “becoming aware”<sup>55</sup> as “flying with her wings”<sup>56</sup> and “seeing everywhere from above”<sup>57</sup>. (KAMER 2007, 22) *Yekbun* told us that the first thing she realized was dedicating her life to her family and her kin. And in her “bottoming out” moment, she expressed how she cried for days and could not eat anything. However, she shared with us that after she joined awareness groups and became aware of her oppressions, she said “no” to her sister for the first time when she rejected to take care of her niece thereafter (KAMER 2007, 22). These stories reveal that “becoming aware” is crucial for challenging and changing one’s life. All these women refer to “becoming aware” as the initial stage of their empowerment processes. That is why, KAMER’s awareness groups are sine qua non for their empowerment strategies.

The awareness groups also help women to lay the foundations of a strong self-esteem and self-reliance where they feel the power within to do something for themselves and to change their world. They feel strong enough to stop the violence in their lives, to divorce or start working. Nesrin told me that the transformatory effects of empowerment came from this self-reliance building. Nonetheless, this is not to say that all women who join these workshops attempt to make changes. Since this process often means “dropping like a rock”, “falling apart into bits and pieces” and then “rising up stronger” to put it in their words, not all women choose to face this shattering moment. This process of “undoing your internalized oppressions” (Nagar and Raju 2003, 4) and rebuilding them with the new non-sexist, violence-free ones takes time and patience. Yet, the moment a woman decides to change and do something solely for herself, she needs other women’s solidarity to become empowered. In this way, she feels not only individually but also collectively empowered.

What’s more, women’s empowerment is a bilateral process. Figen, who was working in the second shelter run by Mor Çatı<sup>58</sup>, repeatedly expressed how empowering her experience in the shelter was both for her and for the women she met face to face. She told me that this was a two-way relationship where she felt empowered to see the woman was changing and growing stronger gradually and the woman felt empowered when she was in solidarity with other women. Like her, Gamze from Mor Çatı explained how fascinating it was for her to

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<sup>54</sup> Tr. “Sanki on kiři gelip beni dövdü.”

<sup>55</sup> Tr. “Düşüyormuşum çukurun içine”

<sup>56</sup> Tr. “Kanat takıp uçuyorsun”

<sup>57</sup> Tr. “Böyle her yeri görüyorsun.”

<sup>58</sup> I conducted my first interview with Figen in February 2008. By December 31, 2008, Beyoğlu district administration sidelined Mor Çatı from the shelter.

witness women's power and to experience this two-sided relationship of individual and collective empowerment through sister bonding:

“You see that women have been through a lot of things. The way they define their experiences of violence and their struggle against it is so powerful that you learn a lot from them. It is very important to hear her own voice. They make you realize the things you did not consider before. This becomes your own awareness. Plus, it is very important to notice her own powers. You see that it is such power that keeps her and her children alive in a life full of violence. When you think about these, you turn into yourself. You experience similar things just because you are a woman. You share a common ground. You realize that women are not powerless, they are not ‘victims’ but ‘survivors’. And when you see that struggling power, you understand why men try to suppress women. At that moment, you become empowered through women's solidarity by sharing your experiences.”

Women's solidarity has been one of the major sources of motivation in women's collective empowerment. Gamze also added that if you were working with women, questioning yourself, your life, your gender, hierarchy, authority, everything in your life became an important aspect of this individual and collective empowerment. For Gamze:

“It is very important not to stop questioning. This is a life-long process. The gender roles are so internalized that even how you pour the tea is a gender role. You should always be alert to them. What's more, even if you question, you may forget. Because you are still living within these roles. It is very difficult to look from a distance. Sometimes you find yourself practicing what these roles expect from you. Learning feminism, socialism does not necessarily initiate questioning yourself. Working with consciousness raising groups and put what you become aware of into practice in daily life is what makes you question yourself. This is what I observed.”

Despite her emphasis on the importance of consciousness-raising groups for one to continue self-questioning that leads to demystifying her internalized oppressions, Mor Çatı has never used consciousness-raising groups institutionally as an organizational strategy. Neither the volunteers nor the women who come to the center experience a systematic use of consciousness-raising as a mechanism for empowerment against violence. There is only an intense workshop for the new volunteers, which has evolved from two weeks into a three and a half-day workshop in time. They admit that three and half-day training is just a symbolic introduction to questioning the internalized gender oppressions for volunteer women. Yet, they believe that the main training comes with entering into the field. Zeynep notes that:

“The most important thing is counseling the applicants. You learn from these sessions. This is such an empowering experience not only for the applicant but also for me.”

They also come together in supervision meetings or in the collective to discuss their feminist politics and problems. For them these meetings are crucial because they function as the moments to look at themselves. Gamze gives the example of her empowering experience in the collective:

“When you are a part of the collective and start to speak there, you and your women friends become empowered collectively. First, you continue to question yourself. You question everything starting from your past, your hierarchical feelings, power relations etc. Your friend becomes a mirror and reflects your image and you start to see from there. You sometimes ‘bottom out’ but this makes you stronger and more conscious. It is not solely counseling women but also I became empowered within the structure of Mor Çatı.

During my research, turning into yourself and questioning it came out as a common experience women share while working with other women on violence. To this end, empowerment is considered as a never-ending process since women’s self-questionings continue life-long. Each time they become aware of a new form of oppression buried either in the depths of their mind or in the social praxis. Nearly all of the women I interviewed expressed that their own awareness at different points in their lives has changed them tremendously. Asya from KAMER narrated her own bold confrontation with herself as follows;

“I felt that I was shattered into pieces. After that, I started to question every moment and every inch of my life, from the first day I remembered. And this still continues. Every day I become aware of something new. In the first days of this realization process, I felt very weak, fragile, and naked. However, at the same time, this has been empowering. If you achieve to replace it with something else, you become empowered. You have your internalized gender roles and I refuse to act according to these traditional roles. If I can replace these roles with something I choose to do, then it is empowering for me. I feel empowered to the extend I achieved this replacement. It is like discovering America. I discover life, my own self and replace it with something new. I create my own self, my brain and you reject everything that oppresses you. It is difficult to reject but you become stronger with the things you change. It is something like this. It never ends, never, never...

Complementary to Asya’s story, Nesrin recounted how groundbreaking awareness groups have been for her and her family. Before she attended these groups, she had been through a marriage full of every form of violence. On the one hand, she worked hard for years but did not spend a penny for herself. She told me that she always blamed herself that she must have done something wrong so that this man turned out to be the man he was. On the other, she had “a very social life” where she ran a Beauty Saloon, was the president of the

Society for the Protection of Children, and so on.. In her words, she was helping everyone but herself. In her first meeting with Nebahat Akkoç, she said, “I came here to help other women.” Nebahat answered, “Fine, it is very nice to see you here but I think, you should first do something for yourself, then you can do something for us,” and invited Nesrin to join an awareness group. Nesrin left in annoyance. She put into words her annoyance as follows:

“I went home in anger, murmuring to myself, ‘What kind of a women she is! I offer her help, she tells me to do something for myself. What is the matter with me! I am a very social woman. I raised three children, my background is this, I worked for years. What else I can learn for myself! I have learned what I should learn!’”

Nevertheless, when she attended the group, she understood that she really needed to do something for herself. To understand this important shift, shared by many other KAMER women, let us look at this lengthy quote:

“Every time I joined the groups I became aware of something new and every time I realized something, I felt like I hit the wall. While we were talking about communication, I collapsed. When we were discussing violence, my whole world fell apart. Then I started to name everything; ‘This is psychological violence, this is discrimination, this is negative and this is positive discrimination...’ I unraveled my life like a puzzle. Becoming aware brings suffering. The more I tried to unravel the more I suffered. I attempted to change but first of all I knew I had to internalize it. I should attend the awareness group every week with a difference in my life. If I did not put what I realized into practice, I know that it would not do any good to me... At home, there had been incredible changes in my relationship with my children. After his father died, my son and I became so dependent to each other and we changed that. After we discussed the education of daughters in the groups, I tried to speak to my daughter. I told her ‘Shall we talk?’ and she turned to me and asked ‘Do we know each other?’ I was hurt. Indeed, until that moment we did not know each other. She was sixteen then. My world turned upside down and it fell apart. I suddenly realized. I had never sat down and attempted to speak to my daughter. In the groups, we write letters to our children and I wrote a letter to my children and posted it. After then, my daughter accepted to talk to me. Before that I did not know how to communicate with her. But after every group meeting, I started to question something different and felt shaken. Every day, I unravel myself. It never ends. A new awareness comes and I begin unraveling and changing again. It goes on like this. And this process still continues for eight years.”

For her, the change in her life came when she began to change herself. Starting from the self, by becoming “aware” of it and transforming the tiny details of her life was the way her empowerment led to structural changes in her life. Now she is coordinating the awareness groups in 23 regions, travelling thousands of kilometers every year, but she says that, everyday she is feeling stronger by adding up the powers of other women to her own.



It is noteworthy to say that these women told me that most of the women I interviewed from KAMER were once subjects of violence and had come to the center for support. But, all of them they have been through these awareness groups. These groups have been one of the major sources of individual and collective empowerment for women in transforming the burdening and trapping conditions of their lives. For them, starting to unravel the cycle of violence within themselves has been the driving force in their feminist work on combating violence against women. As a consequence, through the systematically implemented awareness groups with local women in 23 cities of east and southeast of Turkey, KAMER started the process of “undoing” (Nagar and Raju 2003, 4) their internalized oppressions. And they continue this collective and individual empowerment process by supporting women in their decisions to act as the subjects of their lives in socio-economic to cultural, political to legal fields. Like Nesrin, thousands of women after they met KAMER, decided to change something in their lives and they started with tiny but vital details in their lives. During the interviews we conducted for *Ben Varım* (KAMER 2007d), I both “witnessed” the transformation in women’s lives and listened to the incredible empowerment stories of these women about how they transformed their lives filled with oppression, violence and subordination. *Havva* narrated that a month before the interview, she could not have left home without the permission of her husband, but at the time of the interview, she was in Diyarbakır for supervision meetings (KAMER 2007d, 87). *Kardelen* calls this transformation “a revolution” in her 25 years of marriage full of violence and her husband “a dethroned king” (KAMER 2007d, 13). *Çilem* has started wearing red, blue, and green instead of black and is sharing her transforming power with her son, her husband, her mother-in-law and other women around her (KAMER 2007d, 21).

Similar to these stories, Mor Çatı women also recounted stories of empowerment. For instance, Figen gave an example of feminism’s transformatory effects from her own experience in the shelter. She told me the story of a woman who came to the center with her three children. She was subjected to extreme physical violence and had a broken rib. In the counseling meetings with Figen, she first refused to give her children to the General Directorate of Social Services and insisted to start a new life with them. With the help of the women in shelter, she was able to set up a new life with her three children in the shelter. In the meantime, she started to realize that she needed a lot of strength and energy to overcome the economic difficulties in addition to physical and psychological ones. Hence, she decided to give her children temporarily to SHÇEK. She said to Figen:

“Now, I should find a job, rent a house and become economically empowered. Then I can create a more sustainable life for my children.”

According to Figen, this was a very important step in her life as she chose to reformulate the “sacrificing mother role.” Figen described her transformation as follows:

“We did not give her any training. It was completely due to her experiences in the shelter. Experience, solidarity, and counseling... We do not talk about theories in our interviews. We just share our experiences. She realized that a different mother role is possible. From the things we shared about gender roles, she became aware of this possibility. She could foreground her own self in this process. She realized this on her own. We supported her in setting up a life she wanted at the beginning. But she needed a lot of energy to sustain that life. She noticed this. She had experienced extreme forms of violence and one of her ribs was broken when she arrived in the shelter. But after some time in the shelter, she realized that there is another role for her as a mother other than the traditional one. Now she goes at the weekends and supports her children in SHÇEK. I witnessed her power. She said ‘I can do this’ and she did. And she knew that we will always be supporting her in every decision she gave. Seeing her power and her will made me feel very strong.”

A volunteer from Mor Çatı’s early days narrated a similar transformation story published in the center’s first book, *Evdeki Terör*, where the founders shared their experiences (Mor Çatı Kollektifi 1996). Nurser wrote that Neriman was 28, married for eleven years with two children. She was working as a babysitter and looking after the household since her husband was an alcoholic, beating her for a very long time. When she came to Mor Çatı, four volunteers supported her. She got legal and psychological counseling. After three months, she was looking for a new house to move in and getting ready for a divorce. She stopped violence at home and had confidence in her powers. Her husband said, “You changed a lot” (Öztunalı 1996, 165). Indeed, she had changed herself, her life and her relationship. She transformed the sources of her oppression, to some extent, and she knew that she was not alone anymore. The writers in the book continuously emphasized that it was empowering to watch a woman become aware of violence in her life and stop it with support, gain her economic freedom and self-esteem, and change her own and her children’s life.

In their last book, *Narratives Against Violence: The Experiences of Survival and Solidarity*, sixteen women from different backgrounds (writers, academicians, journalists...) interviewed and recounted the empowerment stories of fifteen women who were supported by Mor Çatı volunteers (Mor Çatı 2008). These narratives of violence include the stories of “physical, sexual, psychological, verbal and economic violence” as well as the powerful stories of survival and empowerment that women shared with Mor Çatı for twenty years (Mor Çatı 2008, 6). *Nermin* tells how she struggled against the sexual abuses of her father (Koç

2008, 92) while *Zeynep* starts telling her story from the day she began to build her new life (Sirman 2008, 139). *Metanet*'s escape from a life of violence and her determination to set up a new one helps her to find Mor Çatı. She says "If I had known I was so strong and I could survive, I would have done this long before" (Karakaşlı 2008, 91).

It is worth noting that the individual empowerment narratives of women from Mor Çatı told me were usually the stories of the "applicant women" instead of their own empowerment processes or experiences of violence. This was usually the same in their publications (Mor Çatı Kollektifi 1996; Mor Çatı Kollektifi 1998). They usually defined their own individual empowerment in terms of being involved in feminist movement or in Mor Çatı. Their transformation and violence narratives were usually the stories of women who come to the center or women in the shelter. However, in their last publication, three women representing three generations of Mor Çatı shared their experiences in the center and in the shelter along with their personal empowerment stories. Siper as one of the founders of the foundation expressed how she became aware of other forms of violence than the physical in her relationship which was "seemingly equal" after her experience in the center (Ahıska 2008, 185). Zelal gives an example from her relationship with her partner to explicate the mutual empowerment that comes from sharing experiences (Ahıska 2008 188). I think it was a bold confrontation for these women to tell their personal stories. Mor Çatı as an institution has always been a model and inspired many women and feminist organizations. Their visibility I mentioned before brought its difficulties to these women since they were usually publicly known. This made it difficult for them to share their stories of violence. In all of their publications except for the recent one as well as in our interviews they focused on the survival and empowerment narratives of applicant women.

I also find it worth noting that there are thousands of stories of other forms of confrontation with violence and empowerment against it. Yet, not all of these confrontations result in miracles. In my interviews, both KAMER and Mor Çatı women emphasized that neither women's organizations nor the women have the magic wand that can change the deep buried power relations of discrimination, oppression, and social, cultural, economic, and political inequalities easily. They are aware of the fact that gender-based power relations, therefore, violence in women's lives is difficult to transform but women are searching for the mechanisms to change it. Therefore, one of the outcomes of my ethnography was that women's empowerment is not a linear or unilateral process where women can find the magic formula to alter these rigid structures in a couple of years. I realized the multiple factors working on different levels, "undoing" what women are "doing". I think, the most striking

example of this was the second shelter experience of Mor Çatı where the local government succeeded to “undo” what Mor Çatı did for a violence free life for many women.

The need for a multi-dimensional process of sharing the power within, helping it to come out and putting it into political action with other women formed one of the basic subjects of our conversations with the women I interviewed. And KAMER’s awareness groups, functioning both as collective and individual empowerment mechanism for women, achieved to share their power *within*, put that power into transformatory action *with* thousands of women in 23 provinces.

Women’s empowerment is both an individual and a collective task. However, if we fail to see this relationship as a non-hierarchical, equal act of solidarity, there is a risk that we reproduce the power relations of the male world. Both KAMER and Mor Çatı claim that their task is not saving women who need to be saved. No woman is “saved” since each woman faces and experiences different forms of violence in a different context and time. The role of women’s organizations at this point emerges as founding the concrete grounds of non-hierarchical, non-judgmental and non-violent places where women’s solidarity can grow. As a result of this collaboration, “the personal” appears in the agenda of the socio-political arena where they can develop applicable methods and policies in struggling against all forms of violence against women.

During my interviews, all of the women working in the centers emphasized the need for internalizing a feminist perspective and working with feminist solidarity methods in the process of women’s collective and individual empowerment processes. They told me that how women have been deprived of their human rights, how they have become disempowered in the power relations of the patriarchy becomes questionable among the solidarity networks of women in the centers and in the shelters.

Thinking about the stories I listened during my fieldwork, empowerment came out as a life-long and a multi-sided process that needs a continuous questioning of yourself and what you have internalized, becoming aware of what you have taken-for-granted, acting to change it and replacing it with new ones. I figured out that both Mor Çatı and KAMER prioritized several aspects of this multi-sided process according to their local needs. For instance, one of the prominent politics of empowerment for Mor Çatı was the cooperation of women’s shelters and women’s centers in supporting women against violence in their lives. According to these women, the legal, psychological and social support they provided for women in their center and in the two shelters has formed the basis of the collective and individual empowerment processes. KAMER, by placing awareness groups in the core of its organizational strategy

constituted a unique model of a grassroots women's organization that challenged gendered power relations at work in all fields of life that are disempowering for women. They also tried to create opportunities for women in terms of economic empowerment, which they considered as complementary to women's empowerment processes. Moreover, they significantly focused on the early childhood education as a way of "undoing" the internalized oppressions, starting from childhood. Implementing awareness groups as an empowerment mechanism as well as an organizational strategy has been one of the major differences between KAMER and Mor Çatı. Despite their emphasis on its empowering power for them, Mor Çatı, as a women's organization that emerged from consciousness raising groups of the second wave in late '80, discarded consciousness-raising method where they once denaturalized their own internalized oppressions, hierarchies and subordinations systematically.

Returning to the event that took place in March 8<sup>th</sup> in Diyarbakır, the significant thing about it was the transformation that was taking place at multiple levels at the same time. The women were becoming empowered through women's solidarity that joined them all around Turkey. The place was transformed itself from a male-dominated place into a café and restaurant run by women, for women. Through the performance that was taking place, people were becoming aware of different forms of violence in women's lives. With the songs Cahide was singing in four languages, we were celebrating our cultural diversity. For me it was a day of empowerment where I could see women's transformatory powers coming from *within* and a day of possibilities where I could imagine a world that is multi-lingual, that encompasses "difference by equality" thus, creates its desegregated place without prioritizing identities, positions and values (Yuval-Davis 1999, 95). I call this a "transversal" day of empowerment. (Yuval-Davis 1999,

## CHAPTER THREE

### EMPOWERMENT THROUGH PROJECTS...

On July 11, 2008, seventy-one women and three men from all over Turkey gathered in a two-day meeting in Diyarbakır. I was one of the participants of this final meeting of the first three-years of the project “An Opportunity for Every Woman” implemented by KAMER since 2005. There were academicians, feminist activists, women from other women’s organizations, a psychologist, a psychiatrist, a lawyer, a school principal, an ambassador and a department chief from a state institution. All came together to listen and share their own views on KAMER’s grand project taking place in the 23 provinces of eastern Turkey. The event started with the ignition of the Millennium Development Goal 3 Champion Torch, which had been given to Nebahat Akkoç on behalf of KAMER due to its commitment to achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment in 2008<sup>59</sup> and continued with the discussion of the strategies, problems and experiences of the last three-years and the future of this project. During these two days, women from KAMER’s centers in other provinces as well as the other women and (two) men from different backgrounds evaluated a variety of subjects. In the first day, they discussed the pros and cons of KAMER’s bottom-up organizational structure that spread to 23 provinces and in the second, the problems and ethics of feminism. All of these were nurtured by a beautiful lunch and dinner in KAMER’s Kitchen in the Hasan Paşa Inn with accompaniment of music, folk songs, dancing and “halay” as sine-qua-non for a classic night with KAMER women.

This meeting was an important gathering because it was a kind of self-criticism and self-assessment process for KAMER. In fact, many women’s organizations undergo such processes of self-evaluation in the form of either annual or periodic meetings within their organization or together with other women’s organizations. Women’s Shelters and Women’s

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<sup>59</sup> MDG3 Champion Torch is given to the representatives of the private sector, NGOs, the media, individuals and international organizations as a part of a global campaign launched by Denmark in Copenhagen on March 7, 2008, symbolizing Denmark’s global call to action on promoting gender equality. More than 100 torches traveled around the world until the UN MDG meeting on September 25, 2008. For detailed information, visit website: <http://www.mdg3action.um.dk/en/menu/MDG+3+Torch/Torch+Campaign/>

Solidarity Centers Assembly<sup>60</sup> held annually is a notable example to this form of sharing. In this chapter, I will be searching and analyzing the potentialities of feminist organizing through the realization of externally funded “projects.” In the first part of the chapter, I provide a historical overview of how projects entered women’s lives both globally and locally in order to contextualize KAMER and Mor Çatı’s project work. In the second part, I discuss the tensions involved in doing “projects” as a politics of women’s empowerment and the ways KAMER and Mor Çatı implement these projects, reflecting on KAMER’s evaluation meeting in Diyarbakır in 2007.

### **3.1 From Ungendered Development to “Women’s Empowerment” Projects**

The history of projects implemented for women goes back to the international development practices that became widespread after the 1950s. These development practices first ignored, then centered women on the top of their agenda. The ruins of the Second World War paved the way to an international development practice where the world was conceived as a “single entity” that is politically and economically dominated by the European nation-states as well as U.S forces (Porter 1999, 5). One of the first attempts came from the United States with the aim of recovering some parts of Europe. As a result, the Marshall Plan was enacted, which proposed an “aid-based strategic planning” that would bridge the gap between developing countries and the industrialized world (Visvanathan 1997, 2). This plan planted the seeds of development projects. In addition to this background, development as a separate practice stemmed from President Truman’s “Point Four Program” where he proclaimed, “We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas” (Porter 1999, 6). The program’s goal was to improve the living and help the native people to “modernize” with technological advances. The “hidden” agenda of a particular global market economy that would no longer be a threat to the opulent West was obscured by the humanitarian and missionary discourses of aiding and developing the poor countries of the “Third World” (Porter 1999, 6). The emphasis upon the expansion of the Western model and economic prosperity signaled the patterns of the international development strategies. These strategies resulted in the implementation of “superior” technological practices and education

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<sup>60</sup> Tr. Kadın Sığınakları ve Dayanışma Merkezleri Kurultayları

systems in the “less developed” parts of the world, which were expected to bring a raise in productivity levels with well-trained workers and managers, thus an increase in people’s incomes and living standards by evolving agrarian societies into modernized ones (Rathgeber 1990, 490). The contention was that better living conditions, health and education services, as well as higher wages that come with economic growth, would find their equal share in different socio-economic classes. Wealth was assumed to “trickle down” from the rich to the poor and to “trickle across” from men to women and children (Ertürk 1996, 347).

Accordingly, large-scale projects, funded by the international agencies of “developed” countries, were designed for economic progress through technological advancement that would result in an increase in the living standards of people in the years to come (Kümbetoğlu 2007, 159). Indeed, people’s living standards did change in the 1960s, yet, the course of the projects and the direction of development did not follow the way anticipated. Ignoring the various socio-economic structures widened social inequalities rather than alleviating them. Women were never considered as a distinct unit of attention and it was believed that male experience of development would ultimately lead to improvement of women’s lives.

The limited “progress” achieved through development projects did not flow from the rich to the poor nor from men to women and children. The shifts in the economic structures as well as in the production and the consumption processes narrowed down women’s participation in both economic life and daily praxis that required the necessary skills for survival in the developing “modern” world (Ertürk 1996, 344). Consequently, women were double-burdened by the gender-blind development plans and programs whereas men reaped all of its benefits from education to access to credits and technological advances.

Realizing the inefficiency and low-sustainability of these mass-scale projects, micro-level projects came to the foreground in 1970s. The idea behind these projects, which aimed at empowerment of individuals or groups, was that people’s active partaking would be easier within a narrower objective in a range of social, political and economic arenas (Kümbetoğlu 2007, 160). As a result, women and children, who were deprived of basic needs, yet, made up “the majority in the poorest segment of world’s poor,” became the main target groups of these newly implemented projects (Fazlıoğlu 2000, 43). Still, as Moser points out, although the developmental policies realized that women might be essential to the success of the total development efforts, development did not necessarily bring improvements in women’s status (Moser 1989, 1813). In fact, for a long time, development policies were inclined to regard women not as integral to economic development processes. Welfare policies that have been investing in women’s reproductive roles have been the proof of this approach. Welfare



approaches regarded women as recipients of health care, literacy, social services and family planning rather than as active actors in the economy. When the shift came with projects that considered the productive role of women in development, women were provided with small investments in income-generating projects. However, these projects often failed due to lack of sustainable development concerns by offering women short-term employment in “traditionally feminine skills” such as knitting, sewing and crafts that have limited markets (Mehra 1997, 142). As a result, valuable sources for empowering women have often been wasted or misallocated in the context of national and international development projects.

One of the major challenges to these policies came in 1975 at the First World Conference on Women organized by the United Nations and held in Mexico City. Here, women from different parts of the world underlined the unequal status of women in the economy and their neglected contribution to development for the first time.<sup>61</sup> They proclaimed 1975 as the International Women’s Year with the themes of “Equality, Development and Peace” and put into effect a World Plan for Action (Antrobus and Christiansen-Ruffman 1999, 178). As a result of these attempts, the shift towards women-integrated development programs within many governments and several international agencies took place.

The 1970s witnessed the heated debate on and new approaches to women and their role in development. The first approach that became popular was the “Women in Development” approach, which came into use in the early 1970s after Ester Boserup’s (1970) publication of her book *Women’s Role in Economic Development*. For the first time, Boserup made a systematic analysis of the sexual division of labor in agricultural economies on a global scale emphasizing the changes that took place in rural areas with the introduction of modernizing processes that affected the work done by men and women differently (Mehra 1997, 140). Boserup’s documentation of the negative effects of development strategies on women’s lives led to the reconsideration of development policies. Since women’s exclusion from development practices was seen as the major problem in women’s disadvantaged position, their integration into existing economic systems and increasing their productive capacity formed the basic demand of the “Women in Development” approach (WID). This approach was closely related to theories of “development-as-Westernization” that dominated

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<sup>61</sup>Report of The World Conference of the International Women’s Year, 1975, Mexico City, accessible at:  
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/otherconferences/Mexico/Mexico%20conference%20report%20optimized.pdf>

the international development field from the 1950s into the 1970s (Rowlands 1998, 12). It also spoke to “liberal feminism” and “modernization theory” that equates development with industrialization. In this view, women’s involvement in economic structures of the society is a major step towards increasing women’s living standards (Hoşgör & Smiths 2007, 185). The WID approach did not address the existing power dynamics in gender relations but saw liberation through the tools of modernity, such as industrialization, technology and economic advancement through education. “Power” was considered as something that can be *bestowed* by someone over others. Women were situated as the passive recipients, not the active participants of this modernization process. What’s more, within WID, women were considered a homogeneous group where the intersections of gender, class and ethnicity as well as their social roles within the household were ignored (Porter 1999, 10). Consequently, WID projects tended to be income-generating practices where women were taught particular skills along with family planning, childcare and literacy (Rathgeber 1999, 492). Focusing on “the gender of development and modernization strategies” was a crucial step in the gender-blind development practices (Rathgeber 1990, 490). Yet, many feminists would argue that radical changes were needed rather than simply integrating women into the existing structures.

The alternative “Women and Development” (WAD) approach, very much influenced by Marxist feminist ideas, took up this unquestioned issue of women’s roles in the economic sphere with a particular focus on class and women’s invisible work at home and outside the formal economy. WAD proposed that women had always been economic actors of the development processes and that their work at home and outside had been vital to the economy. Yet, similar to WID, the WAD approach neglected the intersecting relations of class, ethnicity and gender. As Rathgeber puts it, WAD failed “to undertake a full-scale analysis of the relationship between patriarchy, differing modes of production, and women’s subordination and oppression” (Rathgeber 1990, 493). Therefore, WAD did not suggest a systemic change in power relations of gender in the social arena.

A third approach emerged in the 1980s: “Gender and Development” (GAD). Feminists realized that women’s equality with men is not enough to make structural changes in the male-dominated system. This new approach brought a gender perspective to development by dealing with distribution of the unequal power relations between women and women and between women and men (Hoşgör & Smiths 2007, 187). A recognition of “gender” would make clear these unbalanced relations and its reflections in family, society and culture, so, might open up the possibility for change in power relations. Unlike WID and

WAD, GAD distinguished women as a diverse group in which the issues of power relations of class, gender and ethnicity were at work. This view was also important in the sense that it included the political, social and cultural factors into its analysis rather than the economic concerns of previous perspectives (Porter 1999, 10). In this approach, all aspect of women's lives were taken into account, instead of a prioritization of their economic empowerment. By systematically questioning the reasons for women's secondary position, GAD practitioners placed gender at the center of their analysis. GAD challenged and asked for a transformation in existing structures rather than integrating women into an existing one.

WID and to some extent WAD dominated the development field in the past two decades where women's subordination was usually discussed in terms of socio-economic inequalities rather than the socio-cultural patterns. Gender-blind development strategies focused on the better allocation of services to the disadvantaged women with preset social and economic agendas rather than challenging the sources of their deprivation. It was usually thought that women's economic empowerment would give her some control over her life without considering the ossified patterns of inequality. Since GAD underlined a structural change of traditional patterns where women became active participants as well as required a gender consciousness which was a time consuming process, few programs considered the gender aspect in their agenda.

Alternative to these three approaches, Caroline Moser, in her famous article "Gender Planning in the Third World: Meeting Practical and Strategic Gender Needs", developed a five-stage description of development approaches to women, which are welfare, equity, anti-poverty, efficiency and empowerment (Moser 1989). She evaluated each approach according to their capacity to meet women's "practical gender needs" which were urgent such as basic services, employment and housing and their "strategic gender needs" such as legal rights, prevention of violence against women, removal of all forms of discrimination against women, which had to be met to make a change in women's secondary position, (Moser 1989,1803). The welfare approach focused on improving women's role as mothers, thus, as passive recipients, whereas the equity approach, under the influence of western feminism, emphasized the need for more than simple legal equality. The anti-poverty approach addressed small-scale projects and micro-credit plans while the efficiency approach stressed women's efficient and effective participation in development (Moser 1989, 1808). All of these approaches dealt with practical needs that stayed within the boundaries of existing structures. According to Moser, only the empowerment approach that came from Third World feminist writing and grassroots organizing addressed women's strategic needs to transform the traditional structures of

oppression through “a bottom-up process of organizing around practical needs” (Visvanathan 1997, 21). This approach was most visible in the 1990s and assumed developing women’s “own internal capacity”<sup>62</sup> by providing the necessary information, skills and resources that would give women the essential means of survival as active agents in their daily life (Ertürk 1996, 349).

In theory, GAD and Empowerment approaches have become the most popular approaches in recent years. Yet, the difficulty of their implementation has been revealed in the statistics about women’s status around the world. In 1990, UNDP<sup>63</sup> published *Human Development Report*, which was about “people” (UNDP 1990); five years later published another report that focused on “gender” (UNDP 1995). According to the report, there were twice as many illiterate women as men. Out of 130 million children, girls made up the majority without access to primary education. Although over one-third of women were economically active, they were paid half the wages men got, or even less. Women held just 10 percent of seats in lawmaking and 5 percent in politics (UNDP 1995). Unfortunately, in more than a decade, the picture has not changed much. What this report and others like it have accomplished, though, is an increased visibility. Women and children now make up the focus of many international and local projects.

### 3.2 Women’s Projects in Turkey

Similar to the world but with a ten-year time lapse, the development projects that were initially put into practice in Turkey were in the field of women’s and children’s health, nourishment and family planning. Until the end of the 1980s, women were often provided the resources to maintain their domestic roles in the private sphere (Kümbetoğlu 2007, 162). In time, women’s economic involvement also became one of the concerns of these projects, as a result of which income-generating workshops were added to their agenda.

One of the most important and precursor of development projects implemented in Turkey can be seen as Southeastern Anatolian Project (GAP), which was initially envisaged as an irrigation project that covered nine provinces in Southeast Anatolia (Adıyaman, Batman, Diyarbakır, Gaziantep, Kilis, Mardin, Siirt, Şanlıurfa ve Şırnak) and the basins of Euphrates and Tigris, which were combined as a single-source watering system (Ecevit 2007, 8). It

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<sup>62</sup> Tr. “kendi icmel kapasitesi”

<sup>63</sup> United Nations Development Programme

started as a simple economic development project mostly in agriculture. The initial step came in 1989 when the State Planning Agency (DPT) prepared the GAP Master Plan. This plan changed the scope of the project from a developmental irrigation project into a “multi-sector and integrated regional development endeavor” where investments in “education, health, transportation, industry” became a necessary part of the development plan (Fazlıođlu 2000, 46). A shift in the focus that emphasized raising the living standards of women and children in all aspects of life with human-centered, participatory projects came in the 1990s due to global changes in development approaches. Women’s empowerment through small-scale projects that involved economic, socio-cultural or political policies became the medium of development planners both at the national and international level. Women, who were long absent in the development plans, became the center of attention in Turkey as well.

One of the significant models that viewed women as agents of development, was put into practice in the east of Turkey, known as Multi-Purpose Community Centers (ÇATOM). The first of these community-based centers was opened in 1995 as a part of the GAP project with the support of UNICEF. ÇATOM defined its target group as the disadvantaged women from age of 14 upwards. The administrators of the centers designed the programs according to the local needs of the target women, which varied from literacy, computer, home economics programs to health issues, from skill building and income-generating courses to pre-school training programs. The basic aims, as Fazlıođlu put it, were “to raise the status of women, to start a gender balanced development process and to contribute to a sustainable human development” (Fazlıođlu 2000, 49). Fazlıođlu as a coordinator of the project claimed that due to a variety of women related projects taking place in the region, there were significant changes in women’s lives economically, socio-culturally both within and outside the household.

It is worth noting that ÇATOM project has reached a considerable number of women in the region from its most marginalized parts, yet, appealing to the “practical needs” of women rather than their “strategic needs” if we put it in Moser’s terms. While I was in Diyarbakir for my fieldwork, we were talking with Necla about women’s projects in KAMER’s café at the inner court of Hasan Pasa Inn. She underlined the critical line between empowering women as active agents of development and disempowering them without a gender-sensitive agenda. What ÇATOMs achieved in the region was great in the sense that it gave women the opportunity to go outside the borders of the house. Because these centers were state-supported places, some people trusted more and let their young girls attend their training courses. These courses varied from income-generating skill-training courses such as

needlework, hairdressing, aesthetician to socio-cultural activities such as theater plays, exhibitions, and collective wedding ceremonies. Necla pointed out that the crucial question to ask was whether women's access to education, skill-trainings lasting changes for gender inequality within the family or society in general. I would get the answer towards the end of my ethnography.

From the 1990s onwards, the numbers of development projects supported by the government, international agencies and local or national NGOs have risen tremendously (Kümbetoğlu 2007, 162). A lot of these projects and plans placed women at the center and ÇATOM was certainly an important example of these projects. However, the implementation of these projects for women's empowerment brought its problems for feminists and women's NGOs in Turkey. In the following section, I will be discussing the developmental projects on women in Turkey that emerged along with neo-liberal policies of the state.

### **3.3. Debating “Project Feminism”**

The rise of development projects that focused on women's empowerment overlapped with the rise of neo-liberalism in the 1980s in the world, although, this concurrence was not coincidental. Neo-liberalism, which advocated a free market system, brought the withdrawal of the state from allocating its resources on social programs and recession of its activity in the economy both in its “regulatory capacity” and as “a player in economic sectors” (Green and Voyageur 1999, 156). The triumph of global capitalism and neo-liberalism resulted in the states' retreat from the socio-economic arena, as a result, providing and allocating social capital to necessary ends was left to the hands of non-governmental organizations, international development agencies and their foreign aid programs as well as humanitarian projects.

The transition of developing countries to a neo-liberal market economy and democratic polity resulted in privatization, restructuring of education, agricultural and legal reforms, democratization of institutions, and a developed civil society (Sampson 1996, 121). Nearly all around the world, these reforms were articulated in the forms of projects, which created, as Steven Sampson puts, “a world of projects” (Sampson 1996, 121). It is not wrong to say that 1990s became a decade of internationally funded development projects that extended from the global south to Central Eastern Europe and the former USSR. With the

expansion of capitalism and neo-liberalism through the blurred boundaries of the global world, NGOs, which were mostly bolstered by international agencies, became the implementers of democracy, human rights and women's rights.

The world of projects had its contradictory effects on women's organizations in Russia throughout '90s. With incoming international funds, the number of women's NGOs proliferated and women's activism opened to the transnational feminist arena. However, these projects were criticized harshly by the feminists for their collaboration with international foundations as well as for being top-down approaches rather than a grassroots activism, therefore, considered to be far from common people's interest (Hemment 2007, 5). Julie Hemment in her book *Empowering Women in Russia* talks about the tensions involved in the implementation of these projects brought to feminism in Russia (Hemment 2007). She points out that as a result of internationally funded projects, some feminist NGOs became less concerned with local issues but more with "pleasing" the donor agencies and "securing" their "organizational sustainability" (Hemment 2007, 6). Whereas some others continued to focus on the local problems, but were made responsible for offering the social services that were previously provided by the state before the demise of socialist regime due to neoliberal and global interventions (Hemment 2007, 6). Without a sustained support of the state, the rise of neoliberal economics and the free market system after the descent of socialist state that left its place to 'civil society' had calamitous effects on Russia where the state industries were cut back, social security system collapsed, the basic services such as health, education were downsized and people were left with unemployment (Hemment 2007, 139). In addition to that, despite the focus of the international donor agencies on Russia's transition to democracy and market economy in the early '90s, this support plummeted at the end of the decade due to the changes in global politics. The fact that the NGOs or the "third sector" in Russia, as Julie Hemment puts it, were bound to international foundation support for their sustainability, women's organizations had serious financial crises in the ongoing projects as the second millennium was approaching (Hemment 2007). In Russia, women's NGOs turned out to be top-down organizations rather than engaging in grassroots activism that would lead to lasting changes in women's lives.

Parallel to the rest of the world, Turkey also underwent a similar process of restructuring starting from 1980s in parallel with the Turkish State's transition to a free market economy. The State's retreat from the socio-economic arena and the emergence of a considerable number of NGOs as service providers in the social, economic and political arenas brought the restructuring process from military rule to democracy.

The women's movement in 1980s, which made its appearance on the streets with their struggle against violence against women, was the first political activism after the coup of September 12, 1980. When women's political activism entered a phase of institutionalization in the 1990s, a variety of women's organizations spread to all over Turkey (Işık 2007; Arat 1999). However, this process of "institutionalization" was "a multi-level process" where the women's movement instituted its organizations on the one hand, and transformed the state institutions on the other. (Altınay and Arat 2007, 20). In the meantime, both women's organizations and the state institutions started to implement externally funded projects and women, who were very critical of collaboration with state institutions in its initial stages of the movement, began to work together (Altınay and Arat 2007, 20). During this period, financial sustainability has been one of the major problems of women's organizations. In fact, they fought with financial difficulties from its early days. With the increasing focus of international foundations on women, funding from these institutions became available for women's organizations. Some entered into the "world of projects" and started to make use of these resources provided by international development agencies. The others resisted since these projects were seen as a threat to their "independence".

The term "Project Feminism" was coined to refer to this phase of the women's movement where women's organizations attempted to challenge and change women's secondary position in all fields through the implementation of "projects" instead of mass campaigns. The term was initially made up as an assault on feminist groups where women were blamed for their financial and ideological dependence upon funding institutions, which were usually international and capitalist (Arat Z. 2006, 30). Since independence was one of the most important principles of feminist organizations, many women's NGOs have been suspicious about getting funds from what they perceived to be "capitalist," development institutions like the World Bank, United Nations or the European Union.

In line with these views, Hacıvelioğlu sees "project feminism" as a threat to independent organizing and points out that when a women's organization is involved in a project funded by international donor agencies, it becomes difficult for the women's organization to criticize the funding agency (Hacıvelioğlu 2009, 16). She gives the example of EU, which recently implement policies that sharpen gender inequalities and asks the question of how a women's organization doing projects with the funds coming from EU is going to react against its policy (Hacıvelioğlu 2009, 17). For her, this bears the risk of "auto-censure" on the part of women's organizations (Hacıvelioğlu 2009, 17).



In addition to the debates about independence, Sirman criticizes the duality that came with the “development discourses” of these projects, which divided the society into two as “developed” vs. “undeveloped” (Sirman 2006, 22). This dichotomy creates not only a hierarchy of the “liberated” and educated women doing projects to liberate “victimized,” poor and uneducated women (Hacıvelioğlu 2009, 17) but also “virtual” women who are reduced to numbers and who are in need of “development” (Sirman 2006, 22). Sirman indicates that the “virtual feminism” that is created through realization of development projects disregarded the feminist methods of consciousness raising to criticize the world from a feminist perspective (Sirman 2006, 22). Instead, it constructed “virtual women” that are reported to the funding agencies in terms of the number of the kids they have, their literacy levels or their knowledge on constitutional rights rather than perceiving women in a multi-dimensional socio-cultural space (Sirman 2006, 22).

Similar to Sirman’s emphasis upon the hierarchical relationship between the “developed” vis-a-vis the “undeveloped”, Üstündağ underlines that it is usually the middle class women who have easier access to the projects since they are qualified enough and it is usually the women’s NGOs founded by middle class women that work on the “education” of lower class women. This also forms the hierarchy among women where a group of middle class women makes “projects” for empowerment of lower class women through the means of education (Üstündağ 2006; Hacıvelioğlu 2009). The discriminatory and developmentalist practices of projects that divide women into segments of class and ethnicity conflicts with feminism that foregrounds women’s collective liberation without classifying them as “liberated” women and women waiting to “be liberated” (Hacıvelioğlu 2009).

Furthermore, the projects implemented in Turkey usually focus either on the education of women for giving them the opportunity to obtain necessary skills for empowerment or on integrating them into economy with income-generating activities (Üstündağ 2006, 24). However, these projects aim at supporting women in their “practical gender needs” such as literacy, employment, health problems, child-caring within the existing structures (Moser 1989). In that sense, they try to maintain women’s empowerment through implementing projects without considering the gender aspect and the necessary means to transform gender inequalities that is disempowering for women. What’s more, foregrounding the practical needs sidelines the importance of putting the strategic needs into practice as well. Zehra Arat, informs on how women’s organizations are going to prioritize and balance the practical and strategic needs of women while implementing projects on women’s empowerment is still not resolved in feminist thinking in Turkey (Arat Z. 2006, 31). She emphasizes that the projects

can either focus on raising feminist consciousness or deal with the daily problems of women. Yet, the important thing is not to lose the gender perspective while doing projects on women's empowerment (Arat Z. 2006, 31).

One last point that comes to the forefront in a discussion of project feminism is the competition the funds create among women's organizations that stands in contrast to women's solidarity as a basic principle of feminist thinking. It is clear that reaching the funds requires certain qualifications and a certain capital. This is one source of competition among women's organizations. Moreover, after they get the funding, women are burdened by the workload these projects bring to them. In addition to the workload, they have to progress and report it to the donor agency in rigid formats in the form of numbers to be able to secure the next funding. The success of the projects is usually assessed with the numbers of the women reached. The competition to reach more women and to get more funding rather than sharing their knowledge with other women in solidarity stands as a threat to feminist solidarity. Hacivelioglu warns us against the risk of using the power and the knowledge obtained from the projects as a source of competition and hierarchy among feminists (Hacivelioglu 2009, 17).

In the following section, I will be analyzing how Mor Çatı and KAMER is situated within these different views on "project feminism" that extends from discussions of independence to the criticisms of hierarchy among women.

### **3.4. Mor Çatı and KAMER on "Project Feminism"**

In my second visit to the Purple Roof, the women I was going to interview that day were in a rush. I thought that this was a routine day in the center. Yet, I soon discovered that they were preparing for a seminar for local administrations and municipalities as a part of a European Union funded project. This was one of the requirements of the project and they were so unwilling to do it. Ülkü as the coordinator was having trouble with reaching the target group because there was a lack of communication between the municipalities and the center. Our interview was first interrupted by Gamze, asking a question about the coming seminar and its bureaucratic procedure. Then, in the middle of our conversation, while Ülkü was telling me about how she ended up in Purple Roof, the telephone rang and she suddenly started to talk about the size of the posters they were going to use for the seminar. The only support the municipality could provide was hanging these posters on the back windows of the

public buses, but they had not given the appropriate size, so Ülkü was waiting for that. She sighed and said, “These projects make us do things we would not be doing otherwise.” Indeed, all were complaining about the difficulties of working with state institutions and burdening bureaucratic processes. They were busy with preparing brochures, flyers, and sending e-mails to public institutions. Gamze’s words were very revealing of the situation they were in. She said, “All these unnecessary details return to us as major workload. This steals from the time I should be spending with women. This is distracting for me. When I focus on something here, a phone call from the local administration makes you lose your concentration.” As I was leaving the center, I felt their unwillingness and exhaustion about the paperwork and their distraction.

This was one of the contradictory effects of “project feminism” on women’s organizations in Turkey. On the one hand, they needed to create their own financial resources, due to lack of a sustainable state policy on the empowerment of women, in this case via projects, on the other, projects were burdening due to their demanding format and requirements, adding up to women’s organizations’ demanding work with women. In this part of the chapter, I will be discussing the way these women’s organizations approach to the issue of independence, the drawbacks as well as advantages of the professionalized structure the projects, the hierarchy projects brings to women movement and the problems caused by a lack of state’s policy on the struggle against violence against women.

### **3.4.1. The Thorny Question of Independence**

Independence for women’s organizations has been one of the vital organizing principles from the very beginning of the movement in Turkey. In the initial years, feminist women’s organizations were more suspicious about collaboration with state institutions, but with the changing global system, they are now drawn more into such relationships. Still, the controversy prevails. Yeşim Arat and Ayşe Gül Altınay (2007) in their recent research on the struggle against violence against women in Turkey, discuss this independence issue, based on interviews with nearly 50 women’s organizations . An example they give is very significant in showing the contradictory effects of project feminism on women’s NGOs. A women’s platform Yerel Gündem-21, which prepared a program for women’s active participation in urban life and paved the way to the institutionalization of many women’s organizations, was

initially supported by local governments. When the support was cut off, they had financial difficulties. They were torn between raising funds for economic survival and working for women's empowerment. When they were asked why they do not use external resources, one of them said; "I love Turkey very much, those who get money would also take orders; that's why I don't take money" (Altınay and Arat 2007, 34-35). The irony was that while they were resisting external funds in order to remain "independent," their most "amazing work," in their own words, was a "woman's camp" funded by an international institution. What's more, they refer taking funds from international agencies as a threat to their "independence", yet, are usually dependent upon local governments for financial support.

Similar hesitation and dilemmas about losing their independence by internationally funded projects occur within many women's organizations. Mor Çatı is one of those who take a more "critical" attitude towards taking money from external sources. This was a vital concern in the early days of its establishment since they considered collaborating with central city municipality in their first shelter experience as early as the mid 1990s as a threat to their independence (Arat 1999, 302). They told me that they are still very "selective" about the projects they choose. Now, they are doing a project funded by the European Union, called "Empowerment of Women through Solidarity Centers in the Combat Against Domestic Violence." Like many others, they have the dilemma of financial concerns on one side, the workload these projects bring to them on the other.

In contrast to relating independence to financial sources, some women's organizations prefer making use of these funds. KAMER is a unique example to this where they implemented a wide range of internationally as well as nationally funded projects on women's empowerment, but, they do not consider this as a threat to their "independence". During my fieldwork, each time I went to Diyarbakir, I learned about a new project they either had already started doing or were in the application process. My first impression was they were writing projects as a spontaneous attempt because I usually heard them referring to various grants from ambassadors, international agencies. Then, I recognized a very detailed plan behind these applications. Every September, the women from all centers meet and determine the needs for the coming years' objectives and strategies on women's empowerment. At the time I started my ethnography with KAMER, they were reaching the final phase of the "An Opportunity for Every Women Project" that I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter. This was a huge project that covered women's centers in 23 regions, thus had a significant funding. This project, like many others, were written by the Foundation and then the funds were distributed to the centers. The monthly cost of the basic needs of the centers in 23 regions

such as the rent, bills was 100.000 YTL. This was a serious workload for Diyarbakir. However, in my last two visits, I learned that the centers were writing their own projects and applying for their own funds. Gaziantep KAMER, Malatya KAMER applied for funds from Iş-Kur<sup>64</sup> and waiting for reply.

For them, none of these attempts was perceived as criteria for questioning their independence. However, this did not mean that they adopted an “anything goes” policy, either. They always put forward their target for the coming year, search for funds that suits to them as well as search for the source of that fund. Necla explained her concerns on independence as follows:

“For instance, during Iraq war, we rejected all the funds coming from United States. We told them ‘This might be absurd but we do not want to take your money’. It was a reaction against the war in Iraq. We also do not take money from men who beat their wives. Some of them offered, but we refused. Aside from these, I would take money from wherever I want to actualize such a big project of a women’s organization that spread to 23 provinces. I do not care about the people who criticize me for taking funding from the Open Society Institute. I think, nobody can say anything about KAMER’s independent standing. Independence has nothing to do with making use of these sources. It is related to how you make use of them and how you interact with the funding agency.”

Despite the indispensable aspect of independence for these women’s organizations, we need to contextualize the significance of the term independence for both KAMER and Mor Çatı. Undoubtedly, independence for both organizations entails a rejection of any affiliation with political organizations as well as the elimination of all sources of financial and ideological domination. Yet, in a region of blacks and whites, where you are either on the State’s side or in the Kurdish movement, independence gains a different meaning than taking money from external sources. KAMER has confronted accusations coming both from the State and Kurdish movement. The State was suspicious about KAMER’s political affiliations with the Kurdish movement and the Kurdish movement blamed KAMER for dividing the movement. Therefore, KAMER by creating its own autonomous place in the region, faced isolation from other women’s organizations, state institutions and Kurdish movement.

The Eastern Anatolia is divided into such positionings. The complexity of working in the region became obvious when the meetings all over Turkey to curse terrorist attacks, therefore PKK, were being held after the war between PKK and Turkish armed forces

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<sup>64</sup> Tr. Türkiye İş Kurumu

intensified. At that time, Asya was working in one of KAMER's centers in the Southeast Anatolia. She told me that:

The center of this province is incredibly statist. One day, they invited us to the meetings they organized to curse the terrorist attacks. It is something if you attend another if you do not. Of course I did not go. Which side I would be cursing! I would curse all the violence that is taking place. You do not attend but then, this turns against you. The officials of the governor and the police know who attend these meetings and who do not. This kind of things reveal where you stand. Or the celebrations of Zafer Bayramı... If I were a women's organization working in İstanbul, no one would invite me to these events. Even if they did, they would not care about whether I attend these meetings or not. But it is not the same here. They invite you on purpose."

Eastern Anatolia, very similar to internal dynamics of this place, has its thick boundaries among different religious, cultural and ethnic groups. Although the region has unique richness of different cultures, different languages and different religions, they often do not intermingle. These groups live without interacting with each other. The Sunnis do not buy from an Alevi shop. In its initial years, KAMER women were always questioned for their intentions by the women in other provinces before they started awareness groups since KAMER women were coming from Kurdish populated city of Diyarbakır. Therefore, in a region torn by clear-cut boundaries, dealing with these intersecting positions, identities and values becomes possible through a firmly established independence policy that is free from all political groups, positionings and ideologies. Because many people either the inhabitants of the region or people from various parts of Turkey could not even imagine this kind of independence, it took nearly a decade for KAMER to get them to understand the unifying force of independence without eliminating as well as prioritizing the differences in it.

Another aspect of independence for women's organizations comes from the fact that ideological concerns of donor institutions might have restricting effects. Women's worries about these concerns also came out in my interviews. Gamze expressed her discomfort about the demands that came from the European Union when they applied for the shelter project. She was critical of the restricting effects of funding that came from donor institutions with a particular agenda, thus, distributing grants to the projects that fit into their agenda. In the early 2000s, European Union grants were being distributed to the projects that targeted state (public institution)-NGO collaboration, and women in Mor Çatı experienced this as a "demand" coming from the European Union. Its officials responded to their application that they would fund the project if they collaborated with a state institution. At that time, Mor Çatı rejected this. A few years later, they signed a protocol with Beyoğlu District Administration "when the

conditions were ripe” and “when they felt they were ready for it” to put it in their words, and opened the shelter with a two-year funding from the World Bank. They admit that this project was possible because of the local governor Kamil Başar’s “good intentions.” Most of the women I interviewed told me that Mor Çatı decided and chose to work with the district administration, not because of the impositions of the European Union or any other institutions but because they were aware of the pros and cons of using external funds and they were strict about their own feminist principles. Ülkü described their policy on projects and using international funds as follows:

“I think it is important to be conscious about what you are doing while you are making projects and I believe we can make use of the public funds. EU funds are also public funds and there is a reservoir of money accumulated by the contributions of various States. We make use of that public fund. What’s more, we know where that money comes from. We are aware of what EU is trying to do and what we want to do. Both EU and Mor Çatı have certain agendas, we collaborate on the shared grounds but never let them dominate our agenda. Therefore, it is crucial for you to determine what you want to do beforehand and prevent them from interfering with your project. If you can define your objectives clearly, you can eliminate the disadvantages of this collaboration. You need to be alert to prevent these kinds of impositions.

Being aware of the positive and negative effects of this collaboration is an important aspect of implementing projects. However, project feminism can be turned into a drawback for feminism and women if the principles of the organization are reorganized in the direction the funds are given and this, in fact, might be considered as threatening to independence. Although feminist organizations are cautious about these kinds of outcomes, in our conversations with Zeynep, she expressed that there are organizations that do not have feminist perspective in their agenda but using these funds given to women’s development and empowerment projects under the title of “aiding women” because they have the sources and necessary skills. She was shocked by an e-mail she got from a consultant firm, which was titled “EU Donations are a pie. So what are the methods for getting your share from that pie?”<sup>65</sup> She was furious about the language and content of the e-mail and underlined the need to distinguish between such organizations and feminist ones;

“You have a political standing as an institution. It is one thing to do projects that overlaps with your institutional policy, another to say that there is a problem and I should make a project on this. Some institutions, which have nothing to do with women and feminist politics, apply for these funds and get their share from this ‘pie’. Because they have their own sources and in the first place they can write these projects... We have to choose between whether we

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<sup>65</sup> Tr. AB Hibeleri bir pasta. Bu pastadan pay kapabilmenin yöntemleri nelerdir?

are standing on the firm grounds of feminism or a pretense of feminism. I do not think that Mor Çatı shares the same ground with this kind of organizations.”

Similar to Purple Roof, KAMER women complained about such companies, which call them and offer writing projects on the condition that they use KAMER’s name. As a women’s organization, which make use of the funds coming from a variety of sources, Necla insisted on the necessity for overlapping of agendas of both organizations. She told me that women needed to make a distinction between creating resources for your needs and creating needs for reaching those resources. Actually, she was worried about the waste of funds since those companies were bound to fail because they did not know the field.

It is important to see that both KAMER and Mor Çatı as well as many women’s organizations in Turkey are like-minded on the significance and implications of considering projects as an instrument in achieving their goals but not as the purpose, in other words, seeing them as the means, not the end. This is one of their basic principles of doing projects independently. Still, I must acknowledge that the two are Turkey’s established women’s organizations, therefore, have the power to choose and resist the temptations of these donations. However, many women’s organizations in Turkey are not as qualified and well established as they are and sometimes do projects to reach the sources to overcome financial difficulties rather than using them as instrument to achieve their goals.

As for the positive and negative effects of the professionalized and report-based structure of projects on women’s organizations, one of the most visible problems, I believe, comes from reaching to these sources, which might bring competition to feminist organizing, producing hierarchical power relations among women. Because the reports as well as the budgets have difficult formats, writing projects requires advanced skills. Getting familiar with systems of report writing become a necessity to be able to reach the funds. As a result, many women’s organizations which lack these skills, try to find their way out either by hiring capable staff with high salaries or find someone to do it for themselves. Asya gave a thought provoking example to this situation:

“The other day, I was shocked by a telephone call by a woman from Urfa. She told me that ‘If you write our project, we can pay you the amount you want.’ Why did she say that? Because KAMER is perceived as an organization that can write projects and you are one of the members of its project team. So she thinks that if she writes our project, then it is likely that it will be accepted. And she offers money for this. I asked her ‘When your organization was established?’ and she answered, ‘We are new.’ I said ‘Why you offer to give this money to me! I will write your project if I have time, I promise you that.’



And the women insisted that I should take the money. How is going to pay that money? Perhaps she will give me her salary or collect it from the members. How can I take it? I responded ‘I am not going to do that but I will help you with your project.’”

Although Asya’s story turned out to be one of feminist solidarity, not all collaborations result like this one. In addition to the counseling firms Zeynep talked about, women’s organizations ask other women for writing projects to get their share from this pool of projects. However, this is not to undervalue the efforts of the new or small feminist organizations. Instead, they are very diligent about using these sources for women. The problem, here, is the impositions and the burden projects bring into these women’s lives. Because the funds are distributed according to a specific agenda the international agencies determine, some women’s organizations do projects on those issues to be able to reach the sources even if they are not working in that area. What’s more, these women are usually doubled burdened by the difficult formats of the projects, spending most of their energy for doing the budget or writing reports rather than using it in working with women.

Another necessity, thus problem, is the language, that is a good command of English. Since English is the “esperanto” of the world of projects, women’s organizations need language skills to be able to reach many of the international sources. As I mentioned before, Mor Çatı is an established women’s organization. Plus, it was founded by the educated feminists of the second wave and had the advantageous position of being situated in Istanbul where access to these skills is easier than in other parts of the country. Therefore, English has not been one of the major obstacles for Purple Roof women. Still, Ülkü told me that the budget formats were extremely demanding even if they had good command of English. In KAMER, however, none of the women speaks English, except for Ömür who joined KAMER six months ago and Gülay who recently left. I learned that some of them attempted to learn English, but did not persevere long enough.

The last time I was in Diyarbakir, I realized that dilemma of the necessity of English on the one side, its meaninglessness on the other in a funny way. My trip coincided with the visit of coordinator of the KAMER’s children project. Rita Swinnen was from Bernard van Leer Foundation, located in the Netherlands, working on early childhood development with KAMER for nearly eight years. She was there to evaluate the last three years of the project. For three days, Ömür and I were the only English speakers, so I spent most of my days making translation. After the first day’s intense meeting, we went to KAMER’s restaurant for dinner together with the members of another NGO working on children, Children Under the

Same Roof. It was a typical KAMER night of dining, wining, and singing. Ömür was absent that night, so I was the only translator. Realizing that I was torn between translating what was going around and trying to communicate with people, the women started to tell their stories about private English lessons that the Foundation provided for them. Although, most of these women spoke Kurmanci or Zaza and Turkish and these were the main languages they needed to work in the field, they decided to improve their skills and started to take courses on English to be less dependent upon English speakers. Their attempts turned out to be in vain since they were already spending most of their time working with women on violence and the time left, with their family. Cahide, who speaks Turkish, Kurmanci and Zaza, was joking about how she imitated the pronunciation of the English teacher and how he wrongly assumed that she was very good at English. We were laughing as she was telling the story, yet, the irony was that they already had the necessary skill, language or the other, to communicate with the women they targeted. They are qualified enough to deal with the local dynamics that were at work in the region. But to be able to update themselves about what's going around in the world in the field of women's struggle against violence as well as to be able to reach the external resources, they have to express themselves with a good command of English in strictly formatted reports.

However, despite its contradictory effects for some NGOs, projects become an impulsive force in increasing their efficiency and organizational abilities for future plans. For instance, in contrast to its burdening tasks, Ülkü from Mor Çatı acknowledged the positive effects of their projects on sharing their experiences on a regular basis with the media. She said to me :

“We think that we can share the information gathered in Mor Çatı more with the use of projects. Our experiences and knowledge compile here in years time and through the implementation of projects, we report them regularly and share these with the media. For example, one part of this project involves the analysis of the database we have in the center. Therefore, this project is going to bring in some professionalization about sharing our knowledge with public. I think it is a responsibility to share my knowledge with other institutions, other women, and the public. Before this project, we did not have regular press bulletins but now we do it once a month. They are published in Bianet<sup>66</sup> and this is important for us.”

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<sup>66</sup> Bianet (Independent Communication Network) is an online journal, accessible at [www.bianet.org](http://www.bianet.org).

In contrast to the criticisms of competition and hierarchy of knowledge, Mor Çatı finds it crucial to share the years of experience accumulated in the center as well as in the shelter. And their recent project becomes an instrument of this act of solidarity. Like Ülkü, Asya from KAMER emphasized the positive aspects of projects:

“I think the projects are helpful in this way; for instance you send a schedule to the funding agency which includes a series of activities that includes the steps of your project within a causal relationship. You analyze the risks, problems and its solutions. You have to think about every dimension of this project. This provides you with a higher consciousness about what you are doing. This becomes your road map and a disciplining force. I know what I am going to in my next step. I work with a schedule. In that sense, projects are helpful.”

Actually, with a critical look upon the projects, by questioning what this collaboration means, by putting the feminist principles into practice and analyzing to what extent their principles overlap with the donor agencies, funded projects can be a significant and beneficial endeavor on the part of women’s organizations. For instance, despite the difficulties with working with a male dominated state institution, Mor Çatı has performed a challenging job in the shelter since 2005. They provided the shelter with psychological, legal, social and pedagogical counseling through the support of their volunteers. They modeled a shelter run by feminist principles that collaborated with a state institution and this was the first collaboration of its kind. The project was even awarded by the World Bank as a “model project.” The money coming from external sources initiated a very important project and this did not come as a threat to their independence since, as they put it, they were conscious of the advantages and disadvantages of this collaboration.

Unfortunately, the threat came from the state institutions. After the project ended and money from the World Bank was cut off, financial problems peaked and Mor Çatı was forced to find its own financial resources. Despite their attempts, six months ago, the pecuniary support to the personnel of the child center was cut and the district administration announced that they are not going to work with Mor Çatı after December 31<sup>st</sup>. They told me that they were even blamed for not contributing financially to the shelter. They are angry about the trivialization of their volunteer work on legal, psychological and pedagogical support, not to mention their support in the empowerment of women in the shelter. Moreover, they are angry about being forced to find the financial support that the state has to provide in the first place.

Recently, they have insistently tried to force the state institutions for a sustainable feminist policy on women’s shelters where the shelters are run by feminist principles but its investment and financial support comes from the state. In fact, they have been doing this for

the last twenty years. Mor Çatı and other organization working in this field have been trying to transform state policies on struggling against violence against women and asking for a sustainable state policy on women and women's shelters as an effective empowerment mechanism. In their latest press bulletin and campaign on the shelter, they underlined four points, which laid the emphasis on the threat of being imposed a certain type of NGO-State relationship model.<sup>67</sup> They asked for a sufficient and sustainable budget for their shelter. They underlined the need for the institutionalization of a state and women's NGO collaboration in struggling against violence as well as the need for women's organizations and implementation of their feminist principles in shelters, and the urgent need for a policy of sanctions on implementation of Circulation Letter of the Prime Minister.<sup>68</sup>

Even though Mor Çatı has been successful in challenging and changing state policies on women with the collaboration of other women's organizations, the first women's shelter they opened in 1995 was closed down due to financial problems and the recent shelter is fighting with it. To prevent the closure of the shelter they have been running with the state, they started a campaign and organized a press meeting where women supporters and some of the media were there. In their bulletin "We Don't Want Refuge but Shelter", (Barınak Degil Siginak Istiyoruz), they criticized the implementation of projects instead of sustainable state policies on this issue. They point out that:

"In this situation, no sustainable steps are taken other than making projects in preventing violence against women. This struggle requires more than implementing projects. It is not enough to open women's shelters under the name of women's guesthouses. It is vital that these shelters are run by international feminist principles and aim at empowering women. We, as a part of feminist movement, are going to pursue this. We are the subjects of the struggle against violence. We are not going to allow the shelters to become refuge houses where women and children eat and sleep."<sup>69</sup>

Their struggle against state policies that aim at turning women's NGOs as service providers as well as forcing them to create financial resources is shared by many women's organizations. In the first years of the second wave movement, women tried to open their own

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<sup>67</sup> Check the website for the bulletin of the campaign: [www.morcati.org.tr](http://www.morcati.org.tr)

<sup>68</sup> According to the article of Circular Letter of Prime Minister (Başbakanlık Genelgesi), the municipalities should open a women's shelters in every district, populated over than fifty thousand. And adds: "Sivil toplum kuruluşları tarafından kurulmuş ve kurulacak olan bağımsız kadın sığınma evi ve kadın danışma merkezlerini açma ve işletme girişimleri yerel yönetimler ve il özel idareleri tarafından mali destek de dahil olmak üzere çok yönlü desteklenmelidir."

<sup>69</sup> Retrieved from [www.morcati.org.tr/barınakdegilsiginakistiyoruz.php](http://www.morcati.org.tr/barınakdegilsiginakistiyoruz.php)

independent shelters but soon figured out that running a shelter requires a massive budget and demanding volunteer work on the part of women's organizations. Consequently, this turned out to be an unsustainable attempt. Moreover, as Mor Çatı and many others pointed out, protecting women from violence through shelters as well as other means is the state's responsibility, where the state opens and financially maintains shelters but lets the women's organizations run those shelters with feminist principles. In the recent incident where Mor Çatı is being sidelined from the shelter, Mor Çatı carried this to the agenda of the minister of state in charge of family and woman condition, Nimet Çubukçu and to various parliament members. They met them and asked for taking precautions as well as mobilizing women through various forms of protest such as sending faxes, collecting signatures, and so on.

This is a very important collaboration among women's organizations where they underline the need for a state policy on struggling against violence against women. They also rejected burdening women's organizations with the responsibilities the state institutions should be taking such as creating its own financial sources for a women's shelter. Fighting violence against women requires more on the part of the state than solely attributing it to women's organizations through implementations of projects. In fact, as Russian women's NGOs experienced the cutback of the international funds at the end of the 1990s due to the global policy changes, this signaled that projects are temporary solutions to the struggle against violence against women. In a country where one woman in three is subjected to physical violence (Altınay and Arat 2007), not to mention its other forms, a sustainable state policy becomes a must since violence against women can be most successfully held at multiple levels from education to media institutions, economy to politics, family members to children. Purple Roof's shelter experience also explains this urgent need to take precautions on the state level. Moreover, the lack of a state policy leaves women's organizations in financial crisis most of the time. Women's organizations while trying to raise funds for their work face the risk of losing touch with women. This steals from their activism and rather than reaching and supporting more women, they end up in their offices writing reports before the deadlines.

Apart from these, economic sustainability comes to the foreground as an important issue. KAMER has modeled a unique economic policy on women's empowerment through the use of sources coming from projects. They started their café and restaurant in the Hasan Paşa Inn as a part of Women's Entrepreneurship Project<sup>70</sup>. It has been one year since it was

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<sup>70</sup> Tr. Kadın Girişimciliği Projesi

opened and finally the cafe and the restaurant have secured economic sustainability, moving towards a profit making enterprise. In 1998, when they first opened KAMER's Kitchen, it was "unusual" for women to work at a restaurant. They created this model of business enterprises run by women, for women and now in Diyarbakır, women are working in the restaurants or opening their own. These entrepreneurial attempts were initially planned as an economic empowerment strategy for women but now turned into economic sustainability strategy for the foundation as well as the center. Nesrin told me that their major concern is to combine feminism and enterprise activities by creating its language and its politics. I think the key word here is creating the feminist language and the feminist politics of economic sustainability.

To conclude, project feminism has been a debated issue with its contradictory effects on women's organizations. Financial concerns on the one hand, questions of "independence" and "hierarchy" as well as "competition", dilemmas of report-oriented professional NGO-ization and fear of losing touch with the masses on the other, women's organizations have differently positioned themselves in the "world of projects." Gülnur Savran in an interview, expresses her critical attitude toward projects where she underlines her worries about the transformation of feminism through projects into social service providing. She distinguishes KAMER from other examples of project feminism. She says that KAMER's model is nurtured by the local dynamics of the Southeast, and became a movement that goes beyond project feminism<sup>71</sup> (Günçikan and Öğüt 2008, 19).

It is true and important to recognize that they organized around local dynamics with universal feminist principles and put the external sources into use to realize a women's organization that spread to 23 provinces. KAMER women achieved this by coming together "across differences, understanding where each other is coming from" but at the same time were "able to overcome those differences, however painful and difficult they are" (Mulholland and Patel 1999, 134). They crossed the rigid boundaries of ethnic, religious and cultural differences in the region through the implementation of a huge project funded by a variety of institutions, yet, enabled a communicative arena where differently positioned women came together in awareness workshops to discuss feminism, discrimination, violence in their lives along with many other subjects. Another thing that made KAMER distinctive was making projects that applies to women's both the practical and strategic needs at the same time. "An Opportunity for Every Women" started as a consciousness raising project on

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<sup>71</sup> Tr. "Projeciliği aşan bir hareket haline geldi."

women's human rights by opening women's centers in 23 provinces of eastern Anatolia. Yet, it also functioned as a center that provided women with their basic needs in daily praxis. Therefore, KAMER rather than working on a specific field, achieved to balance the strategic and practical needs of women by placing gender perspective at its center.

Having all of these in mind, let me return to the meeting I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. What was significant and unique about it? What does it mean stand for project feminism to do a women's projects that covers 23 provinces in the eastern Turkey and share its past and future with differently positioned people? For me, what was bold and daring about this meeting was its multi-perspective character that valued multiple points of views that came from not solely feminist organizations but a wide range of people in an evaluation process of a project they have successfully implemented for three years. Rather than creating a hierarchy of knowledge, the transparency about its deficiencies, its errors and the openness to criticisms coming from a variety of people crossed the boundaries of the report-oriented projects implemented by some organizations, which are usually more involved in guaranteeing the next grant for the sustainability of the project.<sup>72</sup> What KAMER did in "An Opportunity for Every Women" project, as Savran points out, was crossing the boundaries of project feminism. Yet, it was not solely the "local dynamics" that led to this shift. They implemented the project as a bottom-up organizing strategy that aimed at women's empowerment in all fields through awareness workshops in the first place, going beyond the criticisms of independence, professionalism and losing touch with masses. With a firmly established policy on independence a long with an grassroots organizational strategy, they succeeded in doing something more than "project feminism". Therefore, the significance of this meeting and the project comes from its potential to create an alternative where these women try to see themselves through other women's eyes and see the others through their own. Criticisms they direct to themselves along with hearing the other voices coming from many other women and men from different backgrounds constitutes a transparency that transforms the rigid and limited formats of the reports and turns project feminism into a transversal and transformatory political space.

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<sup>72</sup> Here, I do not intend to undervalue the efforts of these organizations but to underline the importance of multi-sided evaluation process that comes both within and outside the organizations.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

Starting to write about my empowering journey as an ethnographer about the politics of women's empowerment against violence has been confrontational for me; therefore, concluding it is even harder. When I trace back the two years I spent doing this ethnography and then writing about it, I see that this has been one of the biggest challenges of my life. At every stage, it opened up my vision to new sensibilities of women's power, feminist solidarity as well as a feminist language and my heart to a belief in the possibility of imagining a new world that is violence-free, non-discriminatory and non-sexist. This work has implanted the seeds of hope in me of making a change in the world, starting from my own self, then, spreading my seeds to the others while letting them sprout with the powers of more women.

My first thoughts on violence and women's empowerment led me to consider the need for a more nuanced analysis of power. I realized that the widespread use of the term power as *power over* is not appropriate for an analysis of empowerment against violence. Although the exercise of male power over women and resisting it has been one of the key motivations for feminist movements, borrowing from Jo Rowlands' (1998) model, a conceptualization of the differing exercises of power as "*power to/with/from within*" has been vital for my work. In this ethnography, women's recognition of their own potentialities as the sources of their power *within*, which is usually initiated by consciousness raising, appeared to be the first steps of their empowerment. This is central since one of the primary reactions of women who are subjected to violence is the feeling of a loss of inner strength and self-esteem. I noticed that a realization of her powers that comes from questioning the sources of her oppression and subordination enables women to act against violence in their lives. However, this individual empowerment is not an easy task, thus, requires leaning back against other women where women actualize their powers *with* others in solidarity to resist and transform violence in their lives.

The importance of becoming aware of women's *power within* as individual empowerment and using that *power with* other women as collective empowerment was frequently emphasized in the narratives of the women I interviewed. Women referred to the significance of women's inner strength as well as the need for feminist solidarity to put that



into collective political action. And this was considered as central to women's empowerment. A similar conceptualization is developed in the Staudt, Rai and Parpart's (2002) book *Rethinking Empowerment*. They consider empowerment as "sequential", which moves from "a process that develops power *within* to the *power to* act on one's own and *with* others to engage publicly in action for change" (Staudt, Rai and Parpart 2002, 244). In other words, although this sequence might not be a linear one, the individual empowerment of women is further channeled into collective empowerment mechanisms. This can take place through women's solidarity where women transform gendered power relations as a part of collective action.

Through a multi-dimensional approach that covers political, economic, social and cultural spheres, the process of empowerment gains a transformatory edge that enables women to make permanent changes in their lives. The transformation of existing power relations in all fields of women's lives as a valuable empowerment strategy was the second recurrent theme throughout my ethnography. This was pointed out not only by individual women but by women's organizations as well, as a significant part of their empowerment politics. Most of the women transformed their lives starting from their home where they start denaturalizing their internalized oppressions and began to change gendered power relations and carries this transformation to other spheres.

Basing my argument on the transformative edge of empowerment that is generative of lasting changes in women's lives along with the centrality of becoming aware of women's powers within to challenge the prevailing sources of oppression and subordination, I focused on the politics of women's empowerment at two levels: individual women and the organization. I analyzed, to what extent, women's empowerment both as a feminist politics and in the form of projects is practiced by KAMER and Mor Çatı women. I kept asking the question of how their politics of empowerment opens up a transformative space for women to challenge violence and the change power relations underlying it.

Throughout my interactions with them, Mor Çatı presented a closed internal structure that was not easy to access. At KAMER, I was usually not only "the researcher" but also a volunteer woman who was there for support. At Mor Çatı, I was usually kept at a distance and positioned as a woman researcher. Nonetheless, some of the feminists in Mor Çatı spared valuable chunks of their time with me and shared their experiences and views on women, feminism, and violence, while some others refused to talk to me.

What's more, to generalize my personal experience to nearly twenty years of experiences in Mor Çatı certainly will be undermining the value of their work and their

influence for feminism in Turkey. On the contrary, Mor Çatı, introducing its feminist methodologies in the struggle against violence and women's empowerment, pioneered this struggle on an institutional basis and established the grounds for individual and collective empowerment against it. Through face-to-face interviews, with legal, psychological and social support, they have supported more than twenty thousand women in the center as well as in their shelters.

In the interviews, they emphasized that women need to realize their power within and this was an important individual empowerment mechanism. They also underlined the importance of consciousness-raising where women shared and came to terms with their internalized oppressions and subordinations. However, although consciousness-raising used to be an important practice in the initial stages of the foundation, it was not used as an organizing strategy of empowerment in the following years. Stella Ovadia underlines the importance of "collectivizing". the shared experiences of womanhood while criticizing that feminists have never used consciousness raising as strategy for the expansion of feminist movement in Turkey, therefore, have never opened up these collectivized experiences to other women's use (Ovadia 2008, 39). Along the lines of Ovadia, consciousness-raising was constantly emphasized by a wide range of feminists as the initiator of the women's empowerment processes globally (Batliwala 1994, 2007; Nagar and Raju 2003; Kabeer 1999). Since this method led women to become aware of the political-ness of their private experiences, which in turn formed women's solidarity on shared grounds of oppression and subordination, its widespread and systematic use was considered as an important aspect of the politics of women's empowerment.

Using consciousness raising or in KAMER's term awareness building as an empowerment mechanism as well as an organizational strategy was one of the major differences between Mor Çatı and KAMER that came out of my ethnography. KAMER, by systematically implementing awareness workshops as a bottom-up strategy, reached up to more than 30.000 women in 23 provinces. They expanded the boundaries of their feminist language, feminist solidarity and feminist powers through these groups, by sharing and collectivizing around the commonness of their experiences and the equality of their differences. Thinking about this unique grassroots organizational strategy, a question usually popped up in my mind. What would this mean for a politics of women's empowerment? From my situated knowledge, I can talk about two things. First is the transformative space this collective and individual empowerment opens up for women in their struggle against violence. Second is the empowering possibility of communication across differences by

crossing the boundaries of single identities, positionings while celebrating the multiple ones. KAMER, with its desegregated centers, crosses the boundaries of ethnic, religious or cultural differences among women speak a feminist language.

For me, this double-edged process was embodied by Serpil. Her descriptions of violence in her life that buried her alive in the house was in complete contrast to the strength of Serpil that I met in the summer of 2007. Each time I flew to Diyarbakir, I was excited to get to the center to see all those women. But Serpil has always fascinated me with her power to transform her life one step further. Although she was in love with learning, she was taken from school at the age of 12 just because a boy made a pass at her. Yet, each time I came to the center, first I saw her working in the restaurant, then learning to use computer and last doing the accounting of the foundation. For me, with her powers within her heart, she is the embodiment of women's empowerment. This became most obvious to me when she said to me :

“For example, before I came to KAMER, I had a single identity. But now, I am a woman, I am a sister. I am both a Kurdish and a Zaza. I am from Turkey. I am a KAMER woman and I am also here as a friend. I have so many identities!”

I was not totally aware of the significance of her words until I approached towards the end of my ethnography. As I began to bring together the pieces of my fieldwork, I realized that KAMER is not only forming a politics of multi-sided and transformatory empowerment for women but also opening up a “transversal” communicative space that transgresses the boundaries of single identities, single positionings and single values.

Cynthia Cockburn and Lynette Hunter define transversal politics as “the practice of creatively crossing (and re-drawing) the borders that mark significant politicized differences.” (Cockburn and Hunter 1999, 89) Putting Ovadia's criticisms on one side, KAMER's politics of empowerment on the other, I see KAMER as offering a transversal and liberating space for feminism that bears the transformative possibilities of a multi-sided communication where women share their collectivized, yet not trivialized or prioritized experiences with millions of more women.

In discussing the politics of women's empowerment through the implementation of projects, the need for a state policy on struggling against violence was frequently stated by women's organizations. Although different women's organizations positioned themselves differently in the “world of projects,” to put it in Sampson's words, one thing was common to all: women's organizations agreed that they should not be undertaking the state's

responsibilities in struggling against violence against women as they enlarge their field of activity through projects. Mor Çatı's shelter experience revealed the fact that an established state policy on the protection of women against violence is needed instead of project-based endeavors. Since the failure of the two independent shelters established in the early 1990s by Mor Çatı and Ankara Women's Solidarity Center, feminists have more reason to argue that opening up shelters and providing their economic sustainability is and should be a state responsibility. This view seems to be shared by the women population at large. As Altınay and Arat's research indicates, 85 percent of women think that the numbers of women's shelters are insufficient and 87 percent agree upon the use of their taxes for opening up women's shelters (Altınay and Arat 2007, 101).

The issue of "independence" was one of the most debated issues related to project feminism since using external funds was usually associated with threats to the independence of women's organizations. Since economic sustainability was a major concern for independent women's organizations, creating their own resources has been one of the biggest problems for them. And because independence has been one of the sine-qua-non of feminist organizing, taking money from international agencies pressured these organizations. The dilemma of concerns about independence and the need for financial support have made "project feminism" a controversial issue. When the report-oriented, donor-driven format of the projects were added to women's agenda, implementing externally funded projects became a burdening as well as a demanding task for them.

What both KAMER and Mor Çatı converged on regarding project feminism was the significance of not turning the means to an end. With a firmly established feminist policy on empowerment through projects, they agreed that the projects were the sources that could be conveyed into productive feminist empowerment processes despite their drawbacks. Yet, what they did not concur upon was establishing a feminist policy on economic sustainability through the use of sources coming from projects. In contrast to Mor Çatı's "cautious" attitude towards externally funded projects, KAMER is running a number of projects from violence against women to women's economic empowerment, to early childhood education. They are not only using these sources for the empowerment of women, but also creating its own financial means for economic sustainability. They open restaurants, cafes or gift shops which can be considered as long-term solutions to economic sustainability. Mor Çatı, on the other hand, choose limited number of projects but also try to direct these sources to income-gathering activities such as the book sale of street party where the book was funded by the EU

projects they were doing. However, this is not a long-term policy but only a temporary attempt at economic sustainability.

I see KAMER as offering a way out of the dilemmas of project feminism. I would argue that they have redefined the term “project feminism” by making use of the local dynamics along with the feminist language and feminist methodologies they have created. “An Opportunity for Every Women” project proved to be something more than project feminism. Putting such an enormous project into action was a double-edged empowerment process. On the one side, women were becoming empowered individually and collectively in awareness building workshops, on the other this was a women’s empowerment project that spread to thousands of women. This was going beyond the fears of women’s organizations of losing touch with the masses, but connecting through a new feminist language and around a feminist politics of empowerment. The final meeting of this project that I mentioned at the beginning of my third chapter was significant in that it gave both women from KAMER and women from a variety of positions an “opportunity” to listen to each others’ stories. This became a “transversal” space for communication where, as Yuval-Davis puts it, “from each positioning the world is seen differently” (Yuval-Davis 1999, 95). Füsün from Gaziantep KAMER, Asya from Mardin KAMER, Remziye from Batman KAMER shared their experiences while Gülsen from another women’s organization, Figen as an academician, Fügen as an NGO activist described what they saw from their own standing. Nobody acted as the “authentic voice of their communities” nor as “the messenger” (Yuval-Davis 1999, 95-96). What took place there was far beyond the report-oriented projects, but was a transformatory political space that enabled communication across different positions.

What’s more, they presented an alternative to the harshly criticized gender-blind developmental projects, which mainly centered on women’s practical needs, therefore, economic empowerment such as WID or WAD. In fact, feminists that made a distinction between women’s “strategic” and “practical” needs, criticized development strategies that did not address the underlying structures of women’s subordination, thus their strategic needs (Moser 1989; Molyneux 1985). KAMER’s model was a gender-focused alternative that made tactical use of both women’s “strategic” and “practical” needs simultaneously, which also exceeded the GAD approach or the empowerment model of the development discourses. Because women’s strategic and practical needs changed in time and context, they organized around an empowerment strategy that intervened at the level of women’s “condition” by the use of practical needs while also aimed at transforming their “condition” through working on their structural needs (Batliwala 1994, 135).

However, their most important contribution to debates around project feminism can be seen as their feminist politics of economic sustainability. When I asked Nesrin what they were going to do when these funds were cut as Russia's women's NGOs experienced, she told me that they were certainly not going to lock the door and leave. She added that they were getting ready for this and making plans about it. The child day-care centers, the restaurants, small workshops for income generating activities that are later sold in Mor Çarşı are all opened as an outcome of their economic sustainability politics. Yet, I think their biggest leap is going to be the four-floored building in Tunceli they will be opening in the spring. They designed the upper two floors as a guesthouse and the lower as a women's center. The guesthouse will function as a source of financial support to KAMER while they will be supporting other women in the center.

When I think about all these different strategies about women's empowerment either in the form of projects or through building awareness, a question comes to my mind. What does it say to me about the politics of women's empowerment? Rather than a formulated answer, it reminds me of a sentence that was on the posters all around Diyarbakır on September 7, 2007. It said:

“We believe that women will make a new world possible with the methods they developed to do away with violence in their lives.”<sup>73</sup>

In this world, with its feminist language and feminist politics, I believe that women will become more empowered through sharing and questioning violence, through the bold confrontations of their past and present as well as their future, and through feminist solidarity of multiple voices, identities and positions.

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<sup>73</sup> “Kadınların şiddetten kurtulmak için geliştirdikleri yöntemlerin yeni bir dünyayı mümkün kılacağına inanıyoruz.”

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