When the resurgence of Islam in Turkey is debated, Islamist women’s appearance and visibility in public life often forms one of the core topics on the agenda. Discussions often start with a fixed assumption about the presence of ‘covered’ women. But how are place and space claimed in women’s religious activism?

The platforms established during the last decade have had a considerable impact on social practice as well as on theology and ritual performance. In most cases, women’s interest groups established in the post-1983 period function as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and it is these that have had such an impact on social practice in Turkey.

The veritable explosion of NGO activism over the last ten years has caused some confusion in public discourse as regards women’s interest groups’ relations with the state. This became apparent during the preparations for the UN Habitat conference held in Istanbul in June 1996, when NGOs representing very different concerns and strategies in policy making cooperated and discovered – what sociologists had pointed at before – the similar conditions under which they were acting. The legislation for foundations with non-commercial cultural or social activities and the consequences of the liberal changes in economic policies have left extensive amounts of private money available to the NGOs. Through their more presence in civil life, these groups, with their various agendas, have been an open political challenge outside the traditional lines. Thousands of groups are registered as active and have played a determining role in the formulation of political arguments. The changes during the Öcalan regime and thereafter brought about spheres of social autonomies and initiatives of a kind that had never been seen before in the Turkish republic.1

Compared to the situation for female religious activists in Turkey some 10 or 15 years ago, the activities are not only larger in scale but also considerably more visible and public. They are also undeniably part of global events. The situation reveals more than one paradox. On one hand, in contemporary Turkey there are more possible choices of religious life. There are options for variety in religious life. There are increasing numbers of ‘covered NGOs’, cover-affiliated NGOs, representing very different concerns and ideological programmes to conquests of spaces such as university campuses and media. Nilüfer Gole has noted the Islamist groups’ attempts to reappraise control over the orientation of the cultural model problematizing the relations of domination of sex and gender in the household, family and public life.2 For women’s forms of assembly, these changes are apparent and have raised questions about access to public space.

Women’s NGOs and access to public space

Women’s grassroots activities and voluntary work are too often explained as determined by their sex and poverty rather than as the result of conscious choices. The ‘gendered gaze’ as culturally homogeneous, biased gaze as culturally homogeneous, there are options for variety in religious life. There are increasing numbers of ‘covered NGOs’, cover-affiliated NGOs, representing very different concerns and ideological programmes. They execute voluntary work at all levels of society and if not in direct political power, they seek to influence local community – and the general public. The women offer basic religious education programmes and elements of social welfare such as food supplies, clothing, school grants, legal advice, etc. They are voluntary work at all levels of society and if not in direct political power, they seek to influence local community – and the general public. The women offer basic religious education programmes and elements of social welfare such as food supplies, clothing, school grants, legal advice, etc. They execute voluntary work at all levels of society and if not in direct political power, they seek to influence local community. An apparent process of formalization of religious activity has taken place, i.e. a transformation from private to public. For covered women, the establishment of a vakf is often the only way of taking part in local political discussions. Few of the active women go public, according to the perspective of their local community – and the general public. They offer basic religious education programmes and elements of social welfare such as food supplies, clothing, school grants, legal advice, etc. They execute voluntary work at all levels of society and if not in direct political power, they seek to influence local community – and the general public. The women offer basic religious education programmes and elements of social welfare such as food supplies, clothing, school grants, legal advice, etc. They execute voluntary work at all levels of society and if not in direct political power, they seek to influence local community. An apparent process of formalization of religious activity has taken place, i.e. a transformation from private to public. For covered women, the establishment of a vakf is often the only way of taking part in local political discussions. Few of the active women go public, according to the perspective of their local community. An apparent process of formalization of religious activity has taken place, i.e. a transformation from private to public. For covered women, the establishment of a vakf is often the only way of taking part in local political discussions. Few of the active women go public, according to the perspective of their local community. An apparent process of formalization of religious activity has taken place, i.e. a transformation from private to public. For covered women, the establishment of a vakf is often the only way of taking part in local political discussions. Few of the active women go public, according to the perspective of their local community.

Through the vakf, the less visible, the less known women gain not only stability and structure to their activities, but also local public recognition and opportunities to address wider audiences. This change has meant a shift from meetings in family houses or apartments, according to a traditional and conservative practice. However, the small independent Muslim groups have been interested, since long ago, in local discourse and practice – an interest now taken up by activists. The women’s groups are not easily defined in conventional socio-political categories as they mobilize over and above class-bound arieties; they are far from being hailed by the Islamist party, and their agenda embraces both radical and traditionalist issues.

The small independent Muslim groups represent, in general, a heterogeneous counter discourse between the combating master narratives in Turkey: state Kemalism and the conventional interpretation of Islam as formulated by the Directorate for Religious Affairs. Both of these hegemonic discourse have been dominant in offering dominant images of history and in depicting recognized visions of life. In the wake of this failure, new arenas and platforms have opened for interpretation of theology and faith. Consequently, women’s religious activism at a local level is provocative – even if it is not intended to be so – since it challenges the establishment, be it the representatives of the secular state or local religious authorities.3

Notes

1. The author’s fieldwork in Istanbul consisted of following a small and independent group of Muslim women in Istanbul over some years during the 1990s, and serves as the basis for the author’s forthcoming monograph: Under My Sisters’ Protection: Suffren and Zikir in Contemporary Istanbul.


4. Uluhas, Aylin (1996), ‘Protection: Suffren and Zikir in Contemporary Istanbul.’ Distributed by: Curzon Press, 15 The Quadrant Richmond Surrey, TW9 1BP United Kingdom Tel: +44 20 8948 4660 Fax: +44 20 8332 6735 E-mail: publish@curzonpress.co.uk URL: www.curzonpress.co.uk

On page 35 of the IMS Newsletter 6, a book presentation by Elif mahalı was published. The full title of the publication was not mentioned in the main text. The following is the title as it should have been published: Elif mahalı (ed.) (1999), Naqshbandi in Western and Central Asia: Change and Continuity, Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul.