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From solidarity to selective engagement: boundaries of feminist praxis and refugee women in Turkey

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Abstract

This article investigates how feminist praxis in Turkey incorporates refugee women into their advocacy practices, and uncovers the extent to which these interactions expose the boundaries of solidarity. Anchored in Gramscian political theory, it asks whether feminist activism continues to operate as an inclusive counter-hegemonic political sphere, and the degree to which refugee women are incorporated within it. Drawing on interviews with feminist- and migrant-led non-governmental organizations in Turkey, the analysis demonstrates that interactions with refugee women frequently unfold through short-term, humanitarian-oriented, project-funded initiatives rather than collective practices of solidarity. These dynamics highlight tensions between the emancipatory claims of feminist politics and the selective solidarities that take shape under conditions of intersecting inequalities and governance frameworks. Rather than offering a definitive critique of feminist politics, the article treats the question of refugee women as an analytical lens through which the constraints of solidarity within contemporary feminist politics in Turkey become visible.

Keywords: feminist solidarity in Turkey; NGOization; neoliberal governance; refugee women; European Union funds

Introduction

Over the past few decades, feminist civil society has become entangled in a web of contradictions shaped by the accelerating diffusion of neoliberal governance and fragmented alliances, rendering feminist solidarity a contested terrain and prompting renewed critical scrutiny of its capacities. Some scholars (Alvarez 1999; 2009; Fraser 2013; Lang 2023; Prügl 2015; Roy 2015) argue that feminist organizing models have become increasingly enmeshed in technocratic mechanisms and managerial rationalities, marking a shift from solidarity to competition that fuels the depoliticization of feminist praxis and attenuates its transformative potential. Complementary to these critiques, non-Western feminist scholars have further

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problematized mainstream non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for their lack of intersectional awareness and their tendency to marginalize the voices and lived realities of racialized, displaced, and subaltern women. From both critical perspectives, political detachment emerges as a central concern, reproduced through practices of “othering” that place certain groups of women outside the boundaries of political belonging (Özgür Baklacioğlu 2017b).

Today, with their displacement across Western and neighboring countries, refugee women have emerged as a paradigmatic site of othering, which crystallizes intersecting marginalization and hierarchies within feminist solidarity. Attending to refugee women as a political subject is analytically crucial, as their experiences manifest how claims to belonging are differentially granted, suspended, or denied within feminist politics. In this regard, Turkey constitutes a particularly compelling case, not only because it hosts a large refugee population, but also due to the historical strength, organizational capacity, and political visibility of its feminist movement, which together provide a dense terrain for tracing the conditions under which solidarities are forged, limited, or reconfigured.

In the academic literature on refugee women’s struggles in Turkey, scholars working on the feminization of migration have illuminated the gendered nature of precarity by highlighting exploitation in domestic and care work (Uğur and Yanık 2016; Yalçın 2015), vulnerability to trafficking and sexual exploitation (Coşkun 2016), participation in sex worker organizing (Duman 2020), implications for welfare restructuring (Barın 2015), and the broader challenges faced by undocumented migrant women (Coşkun 2017). While these studies make significant contributions to ongoing debates, the relational dynamics between refugee women and the women’s movement in Turkey remain largely underexplored. Accordingly, this paper asks how solidarities between these two groups of women are constituted and whether they coalesce into common political claims or fragmented struggles. In order to answer this question, this paper adopts a Gramscian perspective that conceptualizes the feminist movement as a form of counter-hegemonic politics operating within civil society and contesting patriarchal hegemony. Based on the findings of a qualitative study, it focuses on organizations in Turkey that explicitly define themselves as feminist and engage in broader feminist advocacy, while operating under specific institutional and funding constraints.

Methodology

Drawing on empirical findings, this paper argues that although feminist civil society in Turkey has historically positioned itself as a counter-hegemonic force, its engagement with refugee women has largely remained confined to externally funded, project-based initiatives, with limited expansion into sustained advocacy or political inclusion. To account for this outcome, the article adopts a tripartite analytical structure moving from theory to political subject formation and organizational practice, tracing how patriarchal–neoliberal hegemony shapes the boundaries of feminist solidarity. The first part develops a Gramscian framework to analyze feminist solidarity as a counter-hegemonic project within civil society, focusing on how dominant power relations restructure organized forms of solidarity and reproduce new forms of othering. The second part turns to refugee women as a contemporary

figure of “the other,” examining how labor precarity, institutional marginalization, and exclusion from feminist platforms are experienced in everyday life. The third part brings these strands together by analyzing feminist NGOs in Turkey and how solidarity is operationalized under patriarchal–neoliberal conditions, including which forms of inclusion are enabled, constrained, or selectively produced.

The study is based on fifteen semi-structured interviews conducted between 2019 and 2023 in İstanbul, Ankara, Gaziantep, Mardin, and Van. The dataset includes six interviews with representatives of migrant–refugee organizations and nine with feminist organizations. Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and online (via Zoom). Interviewees are anonymized and coded by organizational type and location. Within this sample, on the one hand, advocacy-oriented feminist organizations (F1–F5) based in İstanbul and Ankara increasingly operate through donor-funded project cycles in their engagement with refugee women. On the other hand, feminist organizations (F7–F9) in eastern and south-eastern Turkey draw on prior experiences of conflict, internal displacement, and proximity to the border, enabling rapid, care-intensive responses through service-based projects. Alongside these, an independent human rights organization with a religious identity (HR), an anti-funding feminist collective (F6), and a migrant women’s network (M1), all based in İstanbul, approach refugee issues outside institutional funding frameworks, adopting explicitly anti-capitalist and anti-project logics grounded in horizontal, everyday forms of solidarity. Finally, organizations working on migrant and refugee issues (M2, M3, M4, and M5) in İstanbul, Ankara, and Gaziantep challenge the sociocultural distance of mainstream feminist spaces while also benefiting from externally funded, advocacy-oriented research projects.

All interviews were transcribed and analyzed through thematic coding, focusing on patterns of engagement with refugee women, including service provision, advocacy practices, and the role of project-based funding. These organizations are treated not as representative of feminist politics in general, but as analytically relevant sites for tracing how counter-hegemonic claims are articulated within international funding frameworks. The selection therefore aims to examine how funding regimes restructure feminist practices and priorities. Particular attention was given to women’s organizations supported through the European Commission’s Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance II (IPA II), the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), and other international sources to implement projects targeting refugee women. While EIDHR funding supports rights-based advocacy, these organizations also rely on IPA II funding to provide service-oriented assistance for civil society.

From consent to contestation: rethinking feminist solidarity in a Gramscian framework

Solidarity is essential for nurturing democratic and egalitarian political engagement through active collective struggles that transcend empathy and confront domination. As a dynamic and situated practice, it emerges through efforts to build political alliances across difference and asymmetry. Rather than a static moral ideal, solidarity constitutes a process of relation-making, challenging exclusions and constructing new forms of belonging and resistance (Gould 2007). Yet despite its normative appeal,

solidarity is often depoliticized when reduced to a matter of ethical obligation or humanitarian compassion, which is an interpretation that obscures its strategic and transformative potential within power-laden contexts (Gould 2007; Lyshaug 2006). To reclaim this potential, it is crucial to contend that foreground solidarity not as an abstract value, but as a contested and relational practice embedded in ideological struggles; since it is a spatial and discursive practice negotiated within hegemonic formations (Agustín and Jørgensen 2018). In this context, Antonio Gramsci's conceptualization of hegemony, civil society, and collective will offers a powerful framework for analyzing politicized solidarity as a contested field structured through consent, alliances, and ideological leadership. Hegemony must be understood as a complex, multi-layered configuration of power traversing political and civil society, forged through the dialectical unity of force and consent (Gramsci 1971). While political society operates through legal and institutional coercion, civil society secures consent by embedding dominant ideologies within cultural practices, moral worldviews, and everyday routines. Hegemonic formations are sustained not only externally but internally, through affective bonds, moral authority, and organized modes of identification that generate their own solidarities. Civil society thus constitutes the terrain of hegemonic struggle, where solidarity operates both as a mechanism of consent and as a potential vehicle of resistance, with intellectuals playing a decisive role in consolidating ideological dominance through the normalization of ruling groups' interests as "common sense."

Gramsci foregrounds the possibility of counter-hegemonic solidarity among subaltern groups, particularly those who are marginalized, as a condition for challenging dominant forms of power. Such solidarities emerge within spaces of resistance that contest prevailing notions of legitimacy, expand the boundaries of the political, and enable the formation of a collective will. His reflections on the "Southern Question" (Gramsci 2005) illustrate this vision by emphasizing solidarity across historically divided groups, grounded not in sameness but in shared subordination and the relational constitution of struggles, a process that requires situated understandings of the other rooted in material experience and political commitment. Such a counter-hegemonic bloc entails building alliances across social and political boundaries, generating an alternative common sense, and developing the organizational capacities required to transform everyday life (Bieler and Morton 2004). In this process, the organic intellectuals of subaltern/suppressed groups play a central role in articulating fragmented struggles into collective political projects, mobilizing not through coercion but by reworking consent and cultivating emancipatory forms of solidarity.

One of the most compelling illustrations of Gramsci's conception of a counter-hegemonic field forged through unity can be found in the historical trajectory of the women's movement. In terms of feminist ideology production, the women's movement is also derived from solidarity since women have become increasingly conscious of their secondary position and the gendered inequalities consolidated by patriarchal hegemony. Historically, women have been subjected to intersecting forms of inequality – reproduced through the state, family, cultural norms, and the labor market – all of which function to manufacture societal consent to the hegemony of the patriarchal order (Enloe 2017). While the patriarchal hegemonic sphere is sustained through entrenched social norms and cultural codes, the state is often

positioned as the primary actor through which redress is expected. Headed by their own organic intellectuals, the women's movement pursues a two-front struggle: one directed at securing gender equality through institutional reforms while holding the state accountable for their implementation; the other aimed at unsettling the patriarchal common sense that underlies dominant forms of social organization. Central to this aim is the cultivation of feminist solidarity, not merely as collective resistance but as a counter-hegemonic praxis, capable of reconfiguring both institutional frameworks and the symbolic order that legitimizes gendered subordination. From a Gramscian perspective, women who develop political consciousness and engage in practices of solidarity contribute to the formation of a counter-hegemonic field by articulating a path towards common sense that challenges dominant patriarchal norms.

Yet, the conditional nature of women's solidarity has been subject to critical scrutiny across diverse socio-political contexts by feminist scholars. As feminist scholars who look at the case from a political economy perspective have noted, the consolidation of solidarities into a coherent common sense remains deeply contentious, particularly in the context of the institutional entrenchment of neoliberal logics within feminist praxis (Eisenstein 2005; Fraser 2009; Korolczuk 2016; Rottenberg 2014). According to them, the incorporation of these logics into civil society has not only diversified feminist alliances but also made it increasingly difficult to sustain a transformative politics of solidarity capable of challenging dominant hegemonic patriarchy. To Fraser (2009; 2013), contemporary feminist solidarities are distinguished by their relative power, in which dominant groups possess the authority to set the terms of political debate and define the boundaries of what is perceived as "political," which distinguishes the other. This dynamic partly stems from the fact that solidarity under neoliberalism has been fractured by misplaced alliances (Mayo 2016), and within this paradoxical context, solidarity practices have increasingly been enacted in diverse settings, prompting renewed contestations over the very meaning of the "common." Accordingly, although solidarity groups may act as counter-hegemonic publics composed of women intellectuals challenging dominant patriarchal hegemonies, it is crucial to recognize that struggles over internal hegemony can and do emerge among the oppressed themselves. As Rottenberg (2018) argues, what warrants a critical approach is not merely the coexistence of feminism and neoliberalism but the incorporation of neoliberal rationalities into feminist discourses and practices. This process first depoliticizes feminism by emptying out the structural meaning of key concepts; it then re-politicizes such discourses by producing a new neoliberal feminist subject who is conscious of the persistence of gender inequalities, yet internalizes market logics, disavows structural causes, and embraces personal responsibility for self-care and well-being.

Moreover, these feminist scholars argue that the ideological restructuring of feminism under neoliberalism has contributed to the consolidation of hegemonic patriarchy, particularly through NGOization, which fragments collective action into episodic and depoliticized forms of civic engagement. Financial assistance programs promote technocratic funding schemes that operate as tools of soft power, encouraging forms of feminist engagement that prioritize manageability and competitiveness over systemic critique. Drawing on Gramsci's notion of hegemonic consent, which suggests

that domination is sustained not only through coercion but also through the promise of gradual reform and selective inclusion, feminist organizations increasingly adapt their strategies to donor expectations, replacing structural demands with depoliticized notions such as empowerment and resilience. In this process, sponsoring institutions, acting as organic intellectuals of patriarchal hegemony, translate feminist resistance into bureaucratic outputs – trainings, workshops, and awareness campaigns – thereby diluting the transformative potential of solidarity (Ledwith 2009).

Therefore, these feminist political economists constantly underline that the restructuring of the women’s movement’s civic space through NGOization has reshaped how solidarity is articulated through institutional logics, while simultaneously reproducing the figure of the other at its margins. From this perspective, the formation of autonomous political consciousness and the emergence of a “collective will” are increasingly mediated by donor-NGO dynamics, embedding feminist organizing within the neoliberal architecture of patriarchal hegemony. This critique resonates with Gramsci’s conceptualization of hegemony as a historically situated and relational formation, in which consent is not passively given but actively produced through the normalization of dominant interests across civil society. What is often presented as empowerment or civic participation may, in fact, function as a strategy for absorbing dissent and redirecting oppositional energies. Hegemonic power, in this sense, does not simply exclude but incorporates resistance by embedding dominant norms into organizational practices. As Chin and Mittelman (2000) describe, the result is “domination within domination,” as spaces of resistance are reorganized to replicate the very logics they once contested. Counter-hegemonic forms are thus neutralized less through suppression than through mimicry and instrumental alliance-building. In such conditions, political transformation requires more than reactive mobilization; it demands participatory, horizontal, and rhizomatic practices that unsettle entrenched boundaries between the hegemonic self and the other (Gramsci 1971). Feminist critiques of NGOization emphasize how this process restricts the creation of organic alliances with marginalized actors, who remain peripheral to dominant feminist praxis.

Today, feminist engagements with the figure of the “other” become analytically generative when read through the experiences of refugee and migrant women. Their displacement constitutes a critical juncture for understanding how feminist movements have responded, or failed to respond, to new forms of marginalization. The extent to which refugee women have been incorporated into local feminist movements is especially significant given the influx of national and international donor funding directed toward refugee-focused projects. Yet reliance on what has been described as a humanitarian club of Western agencies has simultaneously enabled access to resources and circumscribed political agendas, often sidelining the layered and intersectional dimensions of displacement and structural violence (Al Munajed 2020). Against this backdrop, the experiences of refugee and migrant women raise pressing questions about whether feminist solidarity can be reimagined beyond donor-driven frameworks and resist absorption into patriarchal orders.

Between displacement and survival: Syrian women and need for solidarity

Migration has long been gendered, but the increasing visibility of migrant/refugee women has brought into focus not only the structural drivers of migration, such as

shifting labor markets, political crises, and humanitarian emergencies, but also the gender-specific vulnerabilities they face (Barın 2015; Demirdizen 2013; Körükmez et al. 2022; Özgür Baklacioğlu 2017b; Toksöz et al. 2012). While the feminization of migration itself is not new, feminist scholars have paid greater attention to it since the 1990s, especially in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse and the eruption of multiple civil wars. These dynamics were further exacerbated by the Arab Spring, which forced many women to migrate across borders and into new geopolitical contexts, where they have been subjected to emerging forms of exploitation and violence, as documented by international institutions and women's organizations (Amnesty International 2016; European Network of Migrant Women 2017; Reliefweb 2019; 2022; UN Women 2016; Women for Women International 2024).

According to various studies, (Syrian) refugee women in host countries face three specific challenges. The first is precarity in the labor market, where migrant women are often confined to informal and exploitative sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, domestic and care work, and, in some cases, commercial sex services (Caraus 2018; Doğutaş 2019; Kılıncım 2016; Toksöz et al. 2012). As Rother (2020) emphasizes, despite the structural violence and transnational marginalization they endure, migrant and refugee women retain the potential to be agents of social and political transformation within capitalist market economies. Hence, they are reduced to docile workers by exploitative labor regimes that simultaneously expose them to gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, and social stigma (Coşkun 2016; Doğutaş 2019; Paker 2019). The second challenge is refugee women's vulnerability to physical and sexual violence, exploitation, and forced prostitution. Smugglers, security personnel, and even fellow refugees have taken advantage of their desperation to coerce them into sexual exchanges. These forms of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) are not limited to the journey itself but continue in both transit and host countries, where the intersection of war-related trauma, legal precarity, forced prostitution, and other patriarchal norms exposes women to ongoing risks (Coşkun 2014; Freedman et al. 2017; Özgür Baklacioğlu 2017a; 2017b; Paker 2019). For instance, in many host and transit countries, Syrian women are exposed to sexual assault, rape, trafficking, and abuse by military forces or government agents, as they navigate displacement under insecure and often undocumented conditions (Amnesty International 2016; Council of Europe 2019; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2024). Even when such violence is perpetrated by officials, women often refrain from reporting it due to fears that doing so could jeopardize their already precarious legal status in the host country – fears that are compounded by the heightened risk of coerced prostitution or forced marriage to local men, often arranged by family members seeking to obtain legal status or humanitarian aid (Support to Life 2018). The third challenge concerns bureaucratic struggles, as refugee girls and women face significant administrative obstacles, including language barriers and difficulties in obtaining identity cards, which in turn hinder their access to essential services such as healthcare, security agencies, and legal assistance aid (Support to Life 2018). Despite being granted a protection status that theoretically provides legal identification, this status has restricted access to formal employment, forcing many to seek work in the informal labor market (Knappert et al. 2018).

Refugee arrivals from Syria began with an initial wave to Turkey shortly after 2011, and gained pace from 2014 onwards, peaking between 2018 and 2021 at around 3.7 million people. In 2015, hundreds of thousands of refugees crossed Turkish borders towards European Union (EU) countries. Following the EU–Turkey statement of 2016 that sought to stem refugee arrivals into Europe from Turkey, Syrians in Turkey have been subject to the Regulation on Work Permits for Foreigners under Temporary Protection, which formally allows applications six months after registration but in practice severely limits access to formal employment. These constraints affect both men and women, as only a small fraction of Syrians hold work permits and the overwhelming majority are concentrated in informal sectors such as agriculture, construction, and textiles (Şanlıer 2024), with women facing additional gendered barriers (UN Women 2018). While the challenges experienced by Syrian women in Turkey broadly reflect those faced by refugee women more generally, they are also shaped by context-specific dynamics operating across both formal and informal socio-legal domains. For instance, many Syrian women remain excluded from regular, income-generating employment (International Labour Organization 2025) and continue to encounter substantial barriers, including language difficulties, childcare responsibilities, and intra-household restrictions imposed by male family members. This legal precariousness is further intensified by the growing demonization of refugees in Turkish political and media discourses, where Syrians are frequently portrayed either as threats to public order or as burdens on the welfare system (Deniz and Aksu Kargın 2023). Within such homogenizing narratives, the specific gendered vulnerabilities of Syrian women are rendered invisible, as they are subsumed under generalized representations of the refugee population. These xenophobic discourses not only reinforce mechanisms of social exclusion but also legitimize discriminatory practices and deepening existing inequalities (Freedman et al. 2017). The framing of Syrian refugees as a social burden intersects with Turkey’s broader crisis of hegemonic patriarchy, further entrapping Syrian women in informal or exploitative arrangements that restrict their access to rights, protections, and meaningful participation in social and economic life (Körükmez et al. 2022).

One of the key factors fueling xenophobic attitudes toward refugee women, particularly among local women, is the informal and unlawful practice of refugee women being “sold” as second wives to Turkish men (Aksu Kargın 2018; Duman 2020). Patriarchal control shapes refugee women’s lives through practices such as early marriages, often pursued as survival strategies amid poverty and exclusion (Kıvılcım 2016; Özgür Baklacioğlu 2017a), and are frequently framed as “cultural” and left unchallenged, obscuring the structural coercion they entail (Freedman et al. 2017). Women married outside the civil registry are excluded from legal protection and social services, leaving them doubly marginalized. When combined with precarious and informal employment, these conditions intensify refugee women’s subordination within intersecting economic and patriarchal structures. Turkish legal frameworks further compound their disadvantage by labeling them as “vulnerable” while reinforcing gendered hierarchies that position them as dependents – typically mothers, wives, or “victims,” without providing institutional mechanisms to secure their rights (Kıvılcım 2016). As Doğutaş (2019) observes, many women are married off to Turkish men in arrangements that resemble forced prostitution rather than genuine marriage. These practices are sustained by patriarchal family dynamics and

legal loopholes that consistently fail to protect refugee women (Kıvılcım 2016). Yet despite such structural constraints, refugee women exercise agency. Some Syrian women, as research indicates, became primary breadwinners and household heads for the first time in exile (Al Munajed 2020). While these shifts open possibilities for empowerment, they remain precarious and conditioned by neoliberal exploitation and patriarchal control (Barın 2015; Körükmez et al. 2022).

In an effort to respond swiftly to the challenges faced by refugee women, the EU has provided support both directly and indirectly through funds allocated within the framework of the Commission's regular financial assistance to NGOs, as well as through Turkey's agreement with the EU on refugees.¹ The primary beneficiaries of these funds have been local women's organizations, since the EU was aware that without sustained alliances between women's organizations in Turkey and Syrian women, these fragile forms of agency risk being absorbed into exploitative labor regimes and exclusionary nationalist frameworks (Freedman et al. 2017). Since 2011, the EU has increasingly allocated funds to NGOs and these funds were primarily disbursed through two main instruments: the IPA which focused on strengthening civil society dialogue and organizational capacity; and the EIDHR that funds rights-based organizations working on democracy, gender equality, and minority protection. Although refugee women have not always been explicitly prioritized, many projects indirectly addressed their needs through broader themes such as women's rights, gender-based violence, and refugee protection. Under the IPA II framework (2014–2020),² the EU supported a series of grant schemes that included refugee-related components. While the 2014 and 2015 civil society dialogue programs funded projects focusing on refugee protection, women's empowerment, and anti-trafficking, the 2018 Civil Society Dialogue Program supported several initiatives specifically targeting women and refugee integration, including projects on women's entrepreneurship and refugee children. These programs aimed to foster long-term cooperation between Turkish and European NGOs, improve public perception of a future EU membership, and encourage inclusive dialogue on justice, freedom, and security over refugees. In parallel, projects under the IPA Civil Society Support Programme emphasized strengthening the institutional capacity of NGOs working with refugees. Some initiatives aimed to build networks among NGOs and create mechanisms for cooperation between NGOs and public authorities, with a focus on women's integration and legal protection. These projects not only addressed immediate needs but also aimed to build sustainable civil society frameworks that could support refugee women's long-term inclusion. The EIDHR³ Program, particularly its Country-Based Support Schemes from 2014 to 2020, offered more direct support for initiatives addressing the rights of refugee women. Between 2016 and 2019, EU-funded projects in Turkey provided legal aid, psychosocial counseling, literacy training, vocational courses, and gender-based violence prevention, with several initiatives explicitly

¹ Further information is available at https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/turkiye/eu-support-refugees-turkiye_en (accessed 11 June 2020).

² Further information is available at https://www.cfcu.gov.tr/grant-page?tid=All&field_grant_organization_ref=All&field_grant_program_ref=All&combine= (accessed 20 July 2020).

³ Further information is available at https://www.eas.europa.eu/delegations/t%C3%BCrkiye/eu-and-human-rights_en?s=230 (accessed 11 June 2020).

addressing refugee women's rights, health, and social protection. Yet, despite their scope, these initiatives have been critiqued for instrumentalizing women's empowerment through a technocratic logic that privileges compliance and quantifiable outputs over structural transformation (Ertorer 2021; Paker 2019). Consequently, many rights-based organizations shifted from political advocacy to service delivery agents, a transformation that repositions feminist actors within the managerial apparatus of neoliberal governance rather than as challengers of its structural hierarchies (Williams et al. 2022). That is, this shift reflects the reorganization of civil society as a terrain where consent is consolidated through institutionalized forms of participation, thereby circumscribing the emergence of an autonomous collective will among refugee women and limiting solidarity's transformative potential.

The resonance of refugees in Turkey's women's movement

To understand how solidarity with refugee women is constructed in practice, it is necessary to situate these dynamics within the historical and organizational trajectories of the women's movement in Turkey. The women's movement in Turkey has developed through historically layered political trajectories shaped by women's roles in state-led modernization, their resistance to state-driven codes, and competing ideological differences among women's groups. During the late Ottoman times, early mobilization emerged largely among urban, educated secular women whose claims intersected with modernization reforms. While the state of the Republic of Turkey institutionalized women's rights, state feminism also set the boundaries of legitimate activism, constructing women primarily as modern citizens aligned with secular nationalist ideals (Kandiyoti 1987). From the 1960s onward, a growing sensitivity to women's issues emerged in Turkey, yet women's mobilization largely unfolded within socialist movements, where gender inequality was primarily articulated through class struggle and broader socialist transformation (Diner and Toktaş 2010). A more visible and autonomous feminist movement developed only after the 1980s, largely led by urban, educated women in major cities, with debates focusing on legal equality, reforms to the Civil Code, and other women's rights issues (Tekeli 1990). At the same time, Kurdish and Islamist political movements fostered their own forms of women's organizing, producing parallel trajectories of mobilization that rarely converged with dominant feminist networks. By the 1990s, these dynamics had generated a dispersed, yet plural, field of women's activism characterized by multiple ideological and organizational strands (Ozcurumez and Sayan Cengiz 2011). After the 2000s, legal reforms, particularly changes to the Law on Associations, further institutionalized women's organizations within civil society, encouraging forms of NGO-based activism centered on policy advocacy, project-based initiatives, and external funding (Bal 2022).

While these organizations occasionally converge around symbolic moments such as March 8 mobilizations or campaigns against femicide, the broader structure of women's activism continues to operate through differentiated networks rather than a unified movement. Since the government's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021, the rise of anti-gender mobilizations has significantly narrowed the space for policymaking, intensifying pressures on feminist and LGBTI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual,

transgender, intersex, and the “+”) organizations. Within this increasingly restricted civic environment, it becomes crucial to consider how refugee women are positioned within feminist advocacy and to what extent their experiences are incorporated into women’s policy agendas, as despite distinct trajectories, refugee women in Turkey increasingly encounter overlapping structural inequalities with local women, raising questions about the scope for solidarity between established feminist organizations and refugee women.

Findings

Against this historical and institutional backdrop, when refugee women arrived in Turkey, there was no readily available system of social assistance, and well-established and active feminist organizations in major cities did not address the refugee issue in a comprehensive manner, despite occasionally supporting refugee women through EU-funded, service-based programs. For instance, feminist organizations from İstanbul and Ankara, which are mostly composed of educated urban women experienced in advocacy-making, identified some main reasons for their lack of attention to refugee women. First, they were unaware of the refugees’ conditions and did not fully embrace their circumstances and viewed the refugee case as another pragmatic policy of the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi; AKP), whose leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had made himself a hero among Muslim countries by accepting refugees from a Muslim-majority country, namely Syria. Consequently, given their opposition to AKP policies, feminists found it difficult to associate with refugees and opted to distance themselves (F1, İstanbul, 2019; F2, Ankara, 2019). This distancing was further reinforced by the prominent role of the government-backed women’s NGO Foundation for Women and Democracy (Kadın ve Demokrasi Vakfı; KADEM), often associated with the AKP’s “organic intellectuals” on women’s issues (in a Gramscian sense), in refugee-related initiatives, leading feminist organizations to view the field as politically aligned with the government.

Such organizations assumed that refugees would soon either return to Syria or move to European countries and left it to humanitarian organizations to provide support to refugees (F4, İstanbul, 2019; F5, Ankara, 2020). However, they increasingly felt obliged to focus on refugee women once they realized Syrians would stay for longer (F1, İstanbul, 2019; F3, İstanbul, 2019). However, when compelled later to engage with refugee women, many feminist organizations encountered challenges beyond their prior experience, the most immediate of which was language. Although support is formally extended to all women, sustained assistance to Syrian women remains limited, as most refugees do not speak Turkish and often communicate in regional dialects that are difficult to understand, creating persistent challenges for effective communication alongside broader structural constraints such as the lack of interpreters and limited capacity to produce outreach materials (F2, Ankara, 2019; F3, İstanbul, 2019). As a result, they were not always able to fully grasp the problems Syrian women face or respond to their needs in meaningful ways.

The second difficulty for these feminist organizations is bureaucratic obstacles. Since Turkey is less versed in migration flows and lacks a well-developed administrative structure, refugee cases were complicated to solve for them especially

if the woman was undocumented (F3, İstanbul, 2019). Third, feminists in Ankara and İstanbul encountered Syrians' cultural codes with which it was difficult to cope. Even when acting within these organizations' areas of expertise, Syrian males could hinder these organizations' work by creating cultural tensions. For instance, if feminists deal with forced child marriage, Syrian males viewed this as interfering with their family life and traditions (F2, Ankara, 2019; F4, İstanbul, 2019; F5, Ankara, 2020). The fourth challenge is that Syrian women often live in the peripheries of cities, making it difficult for urban-based feminist organizations, typically located in city centers, to maintain sustained contact due to access constraints, with only a few organizations reporting that they can visit refugee neighborhoods regularly (F1, İstanbul, 2019; F4, İstanbul, 2019). Fifth, feminists indicated that their organizations do not have the requisite institutional capacity and financial resources to address refugee women's problems comprehensively. Many of them are understaffed, without translators, psychologists, lawyers, or social workers (F2, Ankara, 2019; F4, İstanbul, 2019; F5, Ankara, 2020). Most are funded by Western donors, but unless they conduct specific service-based projects, their budgets do not cover the costs of meeting refugee women's needs, as the following words of the representative shows:

International organizations are more closely aligned with the Turkish government's policies. Therefore, we deal with various challenges. Donors may support us in our efforts to help refugees, but we still need to tailor our policies to their conditions. For instance, we are asked to run projects with the municipality; otherwise, money is not donated. But our position is to resist all governmental bodies. Here, we must decide and often prefer to work in our own field of expertise and search for different sources (F1, İstanbul, 2019).

In contrast to many women's organizations in Ankara and İstanbul, which initially remained somewhat distant from the refugee issue, the second cluster of feminist organizations in south-eastern and eastern Turkey responded immediately to the arrival of Syrian refugees. This approach was shaped by their existing engagement with vulnerable communities and the proximity of the region to the Syrian border. As the war escalated, these organizations mobilized quickly, forming spontaneous volunteer networks to deliver humanitarian aid, often without formal funding mechanisms in place. As these organizations' representatives noted, their interventions were grounded not in bureaucratic obligation, but in an ethic of care and solidarity toward displaced women arriving in urgent need of food, shelter, and safety (F7, Gaziantep, 2019; F8, Mardin, 2020; F9, Van, 2020). Compared to organizations in İstanbul and Ankara, feminists in eastern Turkey were better positioned to respond effectively due to their long-standing experience with both patriarchal oppression and identity-based conflict. Many had received EU and international support since the early 2000s and built operational capacity over time. Notably, some of their members spoke Arabic and Kurdish dialects, reducing language barriers and facilitating more direct engagement with refugee women. These organizations emphasized that their feminist values, including prioritizing non-discrimination, shared womanhood, and a commitment to anti-violence, enabled them to connect more meaningfully with refugee women. As one interviewee remarked, "There is only a border between us . . . I am a woman, and she is a woman

too. We both are suffering the same sorrows. When she tells her story, I find myself in her story” (F8, Mardin, 2020). This sense of mutual recognition allowed for a deeper, more empathetic form of solidarity that was rooted in shared lived experience rather than institutional frameworks.

Past experiences with internal displacement among Kurdish populations also gave these organizations a strategic advantage in dealing with bureaucracy. As another interviewee noted, “If you have close relations with people in the bureaucracy and business sector, you will find it easier to manage your affairs” (F7, Gaziantep, 2019). Hence, the response of women’s organizations in eastern Turkey reveals a form of engagement shaped by local knowledge, shared experience, and institutional resilience. While their efforts have often exceeded the capabilities of their counterparts in the west of Turkey, their ability to sustain this work still remains dependent on political space, funding structures, and broader alliances, which remain fragile in Turkey’s increasingly authoritarian context. Despite these advantages, women’s organizations in the east have also faced political pressure. Some were banned by the state over alleged ties to political movements, while others managed to survive due to their size, their regional reach, bureaucratic relations, and international visibility (F9, Van, 2020). Their established status eventually allowed them to partner with United Nations (UN) agencies on programs focusing on women’s health and vocational training. Yet even these more experienced organizations expressed ambivalence, often stating that they had done their part and needed to return to “their core advocacy work” (F7, Gaziantep, 2019; F8, Mardin, 2020).

On the issue of integrating Syrian women into their advocacy agendas, women’s organizations from both eastern and western Turkey highlighted the importance of intersectional awareness. Several groups collaborated on initiatives such as shadow reports on the İstanbul Convention and community-based activities involving refugee women (F1, İstanbul, 2019; F4, İstanbul, 2019). Still, they acknowledged that addressing the needs of refugee women was an ongoing challenge, as one participant stated, “Syrian women’s issues are exceedingly difficult to solve. The state has to step in, yet our relationship with the state is also strained” (F3, İstanbul, 2019). Interviewees claimed that they practice self-reflexivity as much as possible, seeing it as a “feminist duty” to address the issues affecting Syrian women. In addition to their efforts, interviewees in both eastern and western regions reported that, although they seek state funding to support initiatives for Syrian women, they are already dealing with their “own challenges” and believe that responsibility for refugee issues should lie primarily with the state rather than civil society. For example, during the early stages of the fieldwork, feminists were campaigning for the full implementation of the İstanbul Convention. Since 2021, feminist and other women’s groups – those that do not identify as feminist – have mobilized against Turkey’s withdrawal from the Convention and sought to keep the issue on the public agenda.

Alongside the EU Commission’s funding programs, women’s NGOs in Turkey benefit from German and Swedish foundations, the Dutch Embassy’s Matra Fund, the Dutch women’s fund Mama Cash, UN Women, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). This support sustains both their refugee-related work and their institutional survival. Funding for projects on refugee women is channeled into four primary areas. First, SGBV training enables women to recognize violence, respond effectively, and develop awareness of bodily

autonomy and potential risks. Second, health and wellness initiatives focus on hygiene and basic protection. Third, organizations employ legal, psychological, and translation professionals to provide specialized support during the project cycle. Fourth, empowerment and vocational programs seek to integrate women into formal and informal labor markets. While women's organizations across Turkey have secured EU and UN funding to sustain refugee-oriented projects, interviewees critically underscored the structural contradictions of such support.

These external assistance programs, though indispensable, entrench a dissonance between donor priorities and refugee women's lived realities, revealing the inherent limitations of donor-driven frameworks in addressing layered displacement, entrenched inequalities, and the political economy of feminist praxis. One interviewee highlighted the bureaucratic rigidity of international funding frameworks, noting that attempts to align with donor priorities often create tensions, as local understandings of women's issues diverge from the categories and expectations imposed by funders (F1, İstanbul, 2019). Despite the reservations, these organizations continue to seek external funding, revealing a persistent tension between political critique and practical necessity. While a critical awareness of donor-driven constraints is particularly evident among feminist organizations in İstanbul and Ankara, this awareness has not translated into a rupture with project-based funding logics. Instead, continued reliance on externally funded projects has progressively narrowed the terrain of solidarity by delimiting engagement to specific groups of women, issue areas, and spatial contexts that are both organizationally manageable and aligned with donor priorities. As a result, critical consciousness of neoliberal constraints coexists with practices that reproduce selective inclusion, exposing a persistent gap between critique and feminist praxis.

On the other hand, a feminist collective forum established in İstanbul following the 2013 Gezi Park protests offered a distinctive perspective on refugee issues. According to the interviewee "unlike institutionalized NGOs, the Forum defines solidarity with refugee women not as a duty but as an ethical imperative grounded in shared womanhood" (F6, İstanbul, 2022). Committed to anti-funding principles, the Forum members address the needs of all women without privileging specific categories such as Syrian refugees. The interviewee indicated that when any women approach them with experiences of violence or needs related to housing and employment, members collectively seek informal, community-based solutions. They emphasize sustained solidarity to ensure that refugee women do not feel isolated or forgotten, asserting that being a woman in a structurally disadvantaged position is sufficient for support. As a principle, Forum members reject Western funding, arguing that such mechanisms reinforce hierarchies among women and undermine horizontal solidarity. Moreover, they criticize donor-driven programs for producing short-term relief rather than structural solutions, while also fostering competition among organizations – an outcome they view as contributing to the fragmentation of women's alliances (F6, İstanbul, 2022).

From the perspective of migrant and refugee women's organizations, refugee women remain insufficiently represented in the discourses and practices of feminist actors in Turkey, with limited access to reliable information about Syrians further reinforcing this gap and motivating the establishment of organizations centered on refugee women (M2, Ankara, 2021; M3, İstanbul, 2021; M4, İstanbul, 2019). While

neither directly engages in service provision for Syrian women, both operate as migrant-focused organizations with academic expertise, conducting extensive field research – often supported by Western funding – to address informational deficits. Their aim is to challenge widespread biases and misrepresentations surrounding refugee women in both the media and public discourse. To this end, they publish their findings in academic journals as well as popular media outlets to promote broader public awareness. By contrast, a representative from a human rights organization argued that the disconnect stems not only from lack of information but also from the socio-cultural distance between many feminists in Turkey and Syrian women (HR, İstanbul, 2022). According to this interviewee, feminists often inhabit relatively privileged, urban, and intellectual spaces and, in seeking to construct a unified voice, may inadvertently disregard cultural and ideological diversity, highlighting the need to recognize and incorporate engagement with a non-Western epistemological framework. Especially given the problems of Islamic geography, the interviewee contends that the international feminist movement remains alien:

In Turkey, the feminist movement has gained impetus since the modernization ideals of the Turkish Republic. Syria, on the other hand, is a country that is much more attached to the Islamic tradition. Yet some cities in Turkey are close to Syria and have similar traditions. Feminists try to reach them with their current discourse, which is consolidated with Western donors, and certainly their activities are inconclusive. Because feminists are already alienated from their countries' local realities regarding women, they will undoubtedly be distanced from the problems of Syrian women. Unless they create a new rhetoric that engages with issues unique to their own geographies, feminists will not easily reach Syrian women (HR, İstanbul, 2022).

Feminists in Ankara and İstanbul were also criticized by some organizations for failing to step up when support was possible, and for approaching migration and refugee issues in fragmented rather than holistic ways, which in turn prompted the establishment of a migrant women's organization that brings together both migrant and feminist actors (M4, İstanbul, 2019). The representatives of the organization argue that their organizations' members work with refugee women closely, understand their struggles, know where to find them, and what to do for their rights. The interviewee further contends that:

Feminists' awareness of Syrian women has recently grown, but it took them some time to realize that these women also face comparable challenges. Feminists still don't completely understand this. For instance, refoulement-deportation and displacement debates are illegal according to international law. Feminists do not protest against these procedures or the government's pragmatic approach to Syrians. Women's organizations do little when the state does not take this into account for Syrian women and are unaware how these procedures adversely affect Syrian women (M4, İstanbul, 2019).

Because feminists in Turkey are seen as key organic intellectuals, they are expected to exert pressure on public institutions to establish dedicated units for Syrian women

and other migrants. However, according to migrant-focused organizations, feminists tend to assume that refugee women's problems will be resolved only once the broader migration issue is addressed. As a result, they do not prioritize the lived experiences of refugee women, treating migration as a secondary concern in their praxis and engaging with it primarily when funding opportunities arise. Likewise, a representative of a migrant women's network comprising feminists advocating for refugee and migrant women argued that, in the absence of the state, civil society should support migrant and refugee women through a feminist collective will (M1, İstanbul, 2020). The interviewee notes that Syrian women have trouble in reaching hospitals or shelters because local police forces do not speak Arabic or are insensitive to their cases. According to the interviewee, this situation poses a profound challenge for Syrian women, requiring not only service provision but also a politicized response grounded in transnational feminist solidarity, which is reflected in feminist interventions in legal cases of gender-based violence against undocumented migrant women, as well as in public marches, statements exposing structural patterns of sexual and labor exploitation, and advocacy efforts that enhance the visibility of migrant women.

Representatives of both the feminist collective (F6, İstanbul, 2022) and a migrant women's network (M1, İstanbul, 2020) argue that, due to their anti-capitalist stance they reject project-based funding and instead rely on their own limited resources to cover essential services such as interpreters, legal support, and psychotherapy when needed. Hence, their organizational model is solidaristic, anti-hierarchical, and avoids a professional monetary relationship with Western donors. However, representatives also pointed out that there were many cases where they were freestanding, as well as repeatedly asking the state to protect refugee women, but to no avail. The most notable recent development is the establishment of refugee women's own civil society organizations, where they believe that they can find solutions to the challenges they experience. For instance, one of them was founded after a young Syrian woman realized that the most common problem in the refugee camps was early-age forced marriages. This organization deals with all types of SGBV cases in which refugee women have been constantly exposed, and tries to make its voice heard through its advocacy works. As the representative indicates, when their organization realized that the SGBV issue could not be handled on its own, the members contacted other feminist organizations, but was told that they lack the capacity to cope with refugee women's problems (M5, Gaziantep, 2023). Interviewee comments that Turkey's feminists know little about Syrians while their organization's awareness-raising activities also cannot meet refugee women's needs:

Many training and outreach activities are conducted primarily to secure project funding from international organizations, often disregarding refugee women's lived realities. Refugee women already recognize the violence they experience, yet when they seek support, women's organizations frequently claim they are not the relevant unit. Existing projects tend to focus on empowerment through vocational training, but once these projects end, women return home without work permits and remain exposed to violence. There is little sustainability or follow-up, and the challenges women face afterwards are rarely monitored (M5, Gaziantep, 2023).

The interviews reveal a significant fracture within feminist and humanitarian engagement with refugee women in Turkey, not necessarily along traditional ideological lines, but through a distinction between migrant and non-migrant women. Rather than adopting an intersectional approach, many women's organizations have treated Syrian refugee women as a homogeneous and passive category in need of empowerment, overlooking class, locality, and context-specific dynamics (Al Munajed 2020). While feminist actors have been reorganizing their praxis in response to the AKP's anti-gender politics, they have largely sidelined refugee women, whose cultural background they often view as incompatible with their own secular-progressive or ideology-based trajectory. Simultaneously, the AKP's selective embrace of refugee women through its own organic intellectuals has further alienated mainstream feminist groups. Refugee women remain caught between state-led paternalistic inclusion and NGO-driven technocratic projects, without being recognized as political subjects, as dominant groups monopolize the definition of what counts as "political" and thereby exclude those at the margins from equal participation. In Turkey's context, this marginalization is reinforced by the bureaucratization of feminist organizing, which, despite global engagements, often remains bounded by national institutional frameworks. Keskinen's (2018) notion of "white border guard femininities" further highlights how the representation of refugees as others consolidates exclusionary boundaries under the guise of solidarity. Ultimately, the experience of Syrian refugee women in Turkey calls into question whether women's solidarity can be genuinely sustained within neoliberal governance frameworks that favor service provision over structural transformation.

Conclusion

Is feminist solidarity still a historically grounded, politically organized counter-hegemonic alliance, or has it become a fragmented and conditional engagement shaped by new hierarchies of inclusion? This study has addressed this question through an analysis of feminist and migrant organizations to understand the degree of their engagements with refugee women in Turkey. While the interviewed organizations constitute a central site of feminist politics, particularly within institutionalized and donor-funded contexts, they do not encompass the full spectrum of feminist mobilization, which also includes more diffuse, collective, and non-institutional forms of political action. However, in the studied feminist and migrant organizations, the analysis demonstrates that feminist praxis in the context of mass displacement is marked by deep ambivalences. Although feminist organizations in Turkey have historically been grounded in solidaristic ties that collectively opposed patriarchal hegemony, their engagement with refugee women in this solidarity network has largely unfolded within the boundaries of humanitarian programming and externally financed, project-based initiatives. These engagements, while symbolically inclusive, rarely transcend the technocratic rationalities imposed by donor institutions. In practice, solidarity with Syrian women is frequently articulated discursively yet remains limited in terms of sustained political inclusion. Refugee women are thus positioned less as subjects of a common sense and more as recipients of care, located outside the feminist collective will, producing a form of semi-inclusion that blurs the boundary between solidarity and benevolence.

The study further shows that these boundaries are discursively sustained through the recurrent separation of the “problems of refugees” from the “struggles of women,” a binary that undermines the formation of durable coalitions. Culturalized representations of refugee women, often framed as incompatible with secular feminist ideals, further entrench this divide, a process reinforced by the mobilization of refugee issues within the gender politics of AKP-affiliated women’s organizations. The resulting field is one of layered contestation, in which feminist NGOs rooted in oppositional traditions may simultaneously resist hegemonic power while remaining implicated in practices of othering. At the same time, the analysis identifies emerging, albeit fragile, efforts to re-politicize solidarity. Some feminist and migrant-led organizations have claimed that these financially sponsored civic spaces are the new arenas for political dialogue, foster intersectional consciousness and push back against institutional constraints. Yet these initiatives remain shaped by neoliberal rationalities that prioritize manageability, measurability, and short-term outcomes, limiting their counter-hegemonic potential. This suggests that feminist solidarity risks becoming absorbed into the logic of governance unless it confronts the conditions of its own institutionalization. That is, the refugee condition not only unsettles dominant citizenship regimes but also exposes the internal fissures of feminist politics. If feminist movements are to reclaim their transformative promise, solidarity must be understood not as a fixed identity but as an ongoing struggle, one that requires discomfort, reflexivity, and sustained structural critique.

From a Gramscian perspective, these findings point to a reconfiguration of civil society as a terrain of hegemonic struggle, in which feminist organizations operate not only as sites of resistance but also as vehicles through which consent to dominant logics is actively produced and reproduced. The reliance on donor-driven, project-based frameworks reflects a form of hegemonic incorporation, whereby dissent is not suppressed but reorganized within the parameters of neoliberal governance. In this context, the fragmentation of feminist engagement with refugee women signals not merely a limitation of practice but a failure to consolidate a coherent counter-hegemonic bloc capable of articulating a collective will across difference. This also underscores the uneven role of feminist and state-aligned actors as competing “organic intellectuals,” shaping the boundaries of what is recognized as legitimate feminist politics.

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