



“KAMER, a women's center and an experiment in cultivating cosmopolitan norms”



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In this article, we shall focus on KAMER-Women's Center, the largest women's NGO organized in Eastern and South Eastern Turkey to see how it negotiates and nurtures cosmopolitan norms among women of conflicting persuasions. KAMER is a striking case because it has been successful in bringing together women with deep hostilities and uniting them over human rights based feminist values in a struggle against gender based violence. KAMER thus cultivates cosmopolitan norms through its unique struggle against gender based violence. Its non-violent activism is particularly noteworthy because the organization reaches women in the context of militarized ethnic nationalisms, both Turkish and Kurdish, in Kurdish populated Southeastern Turkey.

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Danielle S. Allen, in her book *Talking to Strangers* (Allen, 2004), advocates “political friendship” to deepen democracy. She argues that “citizenship is not fundamentally a matter of institutional duties but of how one learns to negotiate loss and reciprocity” (ibid, 165). According to Allen, it is by “talking to strangers” especially those one fears that we can cultivate trust and expand democratic citizenship, which in turn can help expand opportunities as well as autonomy. In this piece, we examine how the Women's Center, KAMER, in its struggle to fight against gender based violence, provided an opportunity for women to “talk to strangers”. We argue that it is by talking to strangers, that we can cultivate cosmopolitan norms among people with competing visions of the good life and different identity claims.

By cosmopolitan norms we have in mind those norms that operate at a universal level because of our commitment to the transcendent and equal dignity of all persons (Post, 2006, 2). Endorsement of these cosmopolitan norms involves the interaction between the particular in the local contexts and the universal upheld in the international/global one. Rather than serving as tools of imperialism that the strong employ to

dominate the weak, they are meant to expand opportunities for the people who seek to live by them (Benhabib, 2006). Cosmopolitan norms are expected to be the weapons of the weak to seek justice, freedom and civil rights. Accordingly, human rights and as such women's rights are based on cosmopolitan norms.

Turkey has rightly been identified as a context with various implications for the debate on cosmopolitan norms and the prospects of building cosmopolitan citizenship (Fisher Onar & Paker, 2012, 376). The founding of the Republic embodied the promise of cosmopolitan norms, despite the hold of local restraints. However, what gained prominence was a narrowly defined secularist and unitary nation building project, which precluded the fulfillment of the promise. Although democratization became a popular organizing principle for governments after the 1950s, Turkey's political experience in the past 60 years has been shaped by military coups and authoritarian governments which have not respected civil liberties or universal human rights norms. The arduous struggle for democratization is taking place in a heterogeneous context where the ideal of a homogenous nation state has been challenged effectively at least since the 1980s. Within this heterogeneous context of citizenship, conflicting visions of a good life including those of conservative Sunni Muslims, heterodox Alevis, and ethnic Kurds as well as secular liberals compete with one another.

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Nora Fisher Onar and Hande Paker examine how women's groups with different persuasions and diverse understandings of women's rights come together over particular goals, to shed light on cosmopolitan practices (ibid). In this article, we shall focus on one specific women's organization, KAMER-Women's Center, to see how it negotiates and nurtures cosmopolitan norms among women of conflicting persuasions. KAMER is a striking case because it has been successful in bringing together women with deep hostilities and uniting them over human rights based feminist values in a struggle against gender based violence. KAMER thus cultivates cosmopolitan norms through its unique struggle against gender based violence. Its non-violent activism is particularly noteworthy because the organization reaches women in the context of militarized ethnic nationalisms, both Turkish and Kurdish, in Kurdish populated Southeastern Turkey.

We briefly explore how KAMER does so in the two neighboring provinces of Tunceli and Elazığ based on research we conducted from January 2006 to June 2007 on gender based violence in Turkey. As part of this project, we visited twenty of the twenty-three local provincial KAMER organizations in Eastern and Southeastern Turkey.² We conducted in depth interviews with 83 women associated with KAMER including those in positions of leadership as well as others who received support from KAMER and attended the "awareness workshops" convened by the organization. We were able to conduct focus groups with women who attended or were attending these workshops. We made use of secondary materials published by KAMER, including the project evaluation report commissioned by the organization in 2006.

CONTEXT of KAMER ACTIVISM: intertwining of the global and the local with Kurdish and feminist links

KAMER generates a dialog between cosmopolitan norms and local concerns in a globalizing context. After 1980, Turkey exposed itself not merely to global markets but also to the influence of expanding universal human rights regimes. In 1985, she signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Types of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). In 1987, she applied to the European Union for membership, recognized the right of individual complaint to the European Commission of Human Rights, and later signed both the Council of Europe and the United Nations Conventions for Prevention of Torture and Inhuman Treatment (Toprak, 1996, 97–98). In 1990, she signed the Paris Charter for a New Europe and in 1992 the Helsinki Summit Declaration on Human Rights. In 1999, Turkey became a candidate country to the EU and began accession negotiations in 2005.

It was in this context where institutional endorsement of universal human rights norms deepened that identity based conflicts surfaced in Turkey. Meanwhile, feminist ideas penetrated Turkish borders, and a significant feminist movement began demanding the expansion of women's rights. The concept of women's rights as human rights gradually permeated the society. Concomitant with this opening up was the intensification of Kurdish revolt against the state and the armed struggle that followed. In the 1990s, both the feminist movement as well as the Kurdish insurrection were inspired by and made the universal concepts of human rights pertinent in the local context. Problems of hierarchy, patriarchy, domination

as well as rights to self-preservation, cultural rights, and group rights became familiar concepts. Both the Kurdish issue and the local feminist context were shaped in the global context of cosmopolitan norms. KAMER was founded in this juncture. We shall briefly underline the local underpinnings of this juncture.

Local Kurdish context

The Kurdish minority in Turkey can be examined, in Appadurai's words "as a metaphor and a reminder of the betrayal of the classical national project" (Appadurai, 2006, 43). Even though the war of independence (1919–1922) was fought by a coalition of Muslim groups, particularly Turks and Kurds, against the Greeks in the West, Armenians in the East, and the French in the South, soon after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, a separate ethnic and linguistic Kurdish identity was formally denied (Yegen, 1996). During the formative years of the Republic, between 1924 and 1938, there were 18 revolts in the Eastern regions of the country and 16 of these involved the Kurds (Kirişçi & Winrow, 1995). In 1937–38, the local resistance to national state authority in Dersim – a province we shall further discuss in this paper – was used as a pretext to a major state operation which resulted in massacre, annihilation, and the renaming of the province as Tunceli. The relationship between the Turkish state and the Kurdish groups took its most violent turn after 1980s as the PKK (Workers' Party of Kurdistan) emerged in armed struggle against the state for independence. Between the years 1984 and 1999, at least 30 thousand people died in combat between the state and PKK, hundreds of people disappeared, at least 3500 villages were evacuated and at least two million people were internally displaced (Bozarşlan, 2008, 352–353).

The centralizing Turkish state failed to provide economic development and political liberalism to the Kurdish dominated Eastern region. Economically the most underdeveloped in the country, the region was not offered the educational and health services available to other regions. As late as 1992, the GNP per capita in most eastern provinces was merely about \$300 in contrast to the \$2032 average in Turkey (cited in Bozarşlan, 2008, 334). Kurdish demands for cultural rights such as education in mother tongue were denied and severely repressed. Until the late 2000s, the state aimed to enforce homogeneity to cultivate a unified nation of Turks. Meanwhile, as Nicole Watts put it, "pro-Kurdish" activists, "linked by ideas, institutions, technology and travel" established a "Virtual Kurdistan West" (Watts, 2004, 122) in pursuit of Kurdish rights. The local ethnic conflict was framed as a human rights issue by the Kurds despite the efforts of the Turkish state to the contrary.

Local feminist context

The expanding feminist consciousness and feminist discourse in Turkey were the other important links to the cosmopolitan human rights regime in the local context of KAMER (Arat, 2008; Berktaş, 2001; Bora & Günel, 2002). Since the early 1980s, second wave feminism began taking root in Turkey. Women organized in defense of their rights and in defiance of the state

and the communal norms that restricted women's choices and controlled their lives. The feminist rhetoric upheld women as individuals in control of their personal lives.

The 1975–1985 Decade for Women declared by the United Nations and the CEDAW acted as major catalysts in mobilizing women in defense of their rights. Feminists in Turkey made their first important public statement with a petition campaign organized in 1986 to demand the implementation of the Convention. The CEDAW framework with its periodic reviews and the extensive criticisms made by the Committee for all breaches of women's rights strengthened the position of feminists in the local context and legitimized their demands.

Feminists in the local context prioritized domestic violence as a major problem around which to organize (Altınay & Arat, 2007). A major street demonstration against domestic violence towards women took place in 1987. The protest initiated a series of events, which led to the establishment of *Mor Çatı Kadın Sığınma Vakfı* (Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation) in Istanbul in 1990 and *Kadın Dayanışma Vakfı* (Women's Solidarity Foundation) a year later in Ankara. Both aimed to open shelters and after much struggle, established their purpose. The foundations provided counseling services to women who experienced domestic violence and became a major voice in legitimizing opposition to domestic violence in the country. The women's movement grew over the years and women became important actors in the amendments of the Civil Code and the Penal Code along universal human rights. Both amendments were important legislative devices in women's struggle against violence toward women and the propagation of cosmopolitan norms. The revised codes assumed that women's rights were human rights. In line with the universally accepted understanding of these rights, law makers deleted vestiges of formal inequalities from both the civil code and the penal code and moved towards a legal framework insuring a more substantive equality.

KAMER: foundation and activism

Both the Kurdish revolt and the women's movement precipitated an increasing awareness of human and women's rights. Even though KAMER does not define itself as a Kurdish group, it is predominantly made up of Kurdish women. The association was found and operates within a war zone of militarized ethnic nationalisms in a globalizing world. Its transnational human rights feminism, which is its most important defining feature, is nurtured by the experience of this violent ethnic strife. The founder of KAMER, Nebahat Akkoç, personally survived the worst of state violence in the course of ethnic confrontation and gradually discovered feminism. Both Nebahat Akkoç and her husband were school teachers engaged in leftist politics in the 1970s and later in Kurdish politics and human rights activism. Nebahat Akkoç's husband was arrested, tortured and imprisoned. In 1993, he was killed by an unidentified assailant, in what is euphemistically called an "extrajudicial killing." At the time her husband died, Nebahat herself was the president of the local Diyarbakır branch of a teacher's union, *Eğit-Sen*, recruiting large numbers of men and women to the union. After her husband's death, she became one of the founders of the Human Rights Association in Diyarbakır and took her husband's death to court, both in

Turkey and later in Europe (personal interviews with N. Akkoç, also see Belge, 2012).

As a result of false allegations, and because she was rumored to be a possible candidate for DEP, the Kurdish Democratic Labor Party, she was taken into custody in February 1994 (personal interview with Akkoç). Her house was raided, during which fake documents 'proving' her links to PKK were left in her room to criminalize her. In custody, she was severely tortured. She was exhibited in front of television cameras as an "armed terrorist". Her court case led to imprisonment, but was annulled by a higher court. Nebahat, no simple victim, later took her torture and her husband's murder to the European Court of Human Rights and received compensation from the Turkish state, which she used to establish KAMER. The European Union and the universal human rights framework it upheld played a crucial role in shaping local circumstances and local politics. Turkey's institutional engagement with the EU, provided both the normative justification as well as the financial means to advance cosmopolitan values, human rights at large and women's rights specifically in the local context.

Under these circumstances, Nebahat Akkoç decided to engage in gender politics. Her experience of gendered violence under custody and her marginalization in human rights activism as a "widow" were critical in her decision. She had also witnessed and shared the plight of many other women as a woman teacher and as the wife of a prison inmate waiting in long lines with other wives. With these experiences in stock, she read and learned about feminism and women's movements. In 1995, she attended the international HABITAT meeting taking place in Istanbul and participated in the Women's Initiative for Peace. In 1996 she helped organize March 8 celebrations taking place for the first time in Diyarbakır. Later that year, she helped a feminist women's rights organization from Istanbul conduct its survey on women's lives in the region. As Nebahat and her friends carried out interviews for this project and listened to the violence laden stories of women in their region, they decided that they could and should do something on their own to fight this oppression at the local level. They knew the region, spoke Kurdish, had witnessed firsthand the violence women were subjected to and had experienced their share of gender based violence (Akkoç, 2002, 206 as well as our personal interviews with Akkoç and other members of KAMER). In 1997, Nebahat Akkoç led her friends to found KAMER.

Located in the heartland of Southeast Anatolia, in the Kurdish dominated city of Diyarbakır, KAMER was thus born in response to local needs. The members of the organization frequently narrate the story of Nasreddin Hoca, the fictitious religious teacher to explain how and why they organized: One day Hoca was falling from a rooftop and one of those who watched him exclaimed, "Hoca is falling, quick, call a doctor". As he was falling, he retorted back, "No, no, I don't need a doctor, I need another who also fell from a roof top". The KAMER women heeded Hoca's advice. They saw and continue to see themselves as people who all fell from rooftops trying to share their experience with others who are also falling so that all of them can commiserate to recover from their falls.

As this Hoca story suggests, KAMER is an NGO organized to heal, support and empower women. Empowerment literature tells us that empowerment work involves "identifying the strengths of individuals", "connecting them with others so that they can augment their strengths" and "obtaining additional

resources for individuals so that they can achieve independence" (Lum cited in Busch & Valentine, 2000, 86). KAMER women do all this and more to empower women and generate prospects for violence-free lives. They travel across the mountainous plains of Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia to reach women "survivors" and stand in solidarity with them in their struggle against the violence in their lives.

The NGO literature warns us against the potential and actual problems of empowerment work. Richa Nagar (Nagar & Raju, 2003) has exposed the unspoken hierarchies of class, caste and language in the collective she worked with in India. Along with the members of the collective she observes that "elitism and hierarchies within the NGO structures parallel and reproduce the very hierarchies that they are ostensibly interested in dismantling" (Sangtin Writers & Nagar, 2006, 114). She warns against professionalization of organizational structures in women's NGOs and how donors dominate the terms, imposing standardization and homogenization of grassroots strategies. Worst of all, NGOs cannot even discuss the problems of hierarchy in their own organization because of professionalization geared to meet the perfunctory demands of the donor agencies (Nagar & Raju, 2003, 5; Sangtin Writers & Nagar, 2006).

KAMER squarely confronts these problems that critics of empowerment NGOs like Nagar underline. KAMER members are all women who have experienced gender based violence as well as ethnic, religious, or socioeconomic violence in their personal lives. All of them have attended consciousness raising groups before they began standing in solidarity with others who have similar experiences. They regularly meet to discuss the problems they confront in their work, are keenly aware of problems of hierarchy and professionalization and address them lest they arise.

Nebahat Akkoç writes that in establishing KAMER, their aim was to "question violence, be aware of violence and make others aware of violence, do something for ourselves" (KAMER, 2007b, 15). In this spirit, KAMER began its successful "Awareness Workshops." The aim in these workshops, literally called "group work" by KAMER members, is to empower women by making them aware of different types of violence in their lives, and help them resist this violence through more effective communication skills. Group work exposes its participants to the basics about feminism, rights, citizenship and democracy which are ultimately about cosmopolitan values. These workshops, usually have 10 to 20 women and last about 13 weeks. In the first two weeks, women who become part of the "group work" learn about "active listening" techniques to develop means of deepening empathy and to better communicate with the people around them. Later, when they discuss the topic of violence and violence toward women, they share their personal experiences of violence and discuss means of confronting them. Through these workshops women become aware of the pervasiveness and impact of violence in their lives and go through painful personal and political transformations. They confront their own prejudices towards others different from them. They realize their responsibilities to themselves, their immediate and broader communities in leading dignified lives. Learning the language of human rights feminism is the critical tool in this transformation that generates further propagation of this language.

The facilitators in the workshops are very careful not to give formulaic answers to the women attending the workshops,

i.e., to not tell women what so as to avoid patronizing them. They expect from and give unconditional respect to the women who need their support, do not judge them and aim to develop empathy. Yet they encourage women to be self-confident, learn to say no, when they do not want to do something, develop stronger selves and respect themselves. Women identify "learning to say no" as one of the key components of this awareness work (KAMER, 2007a).

Equipped with these tools, those who attend KAMER workshops usually turn around and begin transforming their familial relationships with their husbands, children or their in-laws. Even though no one pushes them to end cycles of violence at home or in their close circles, women gain the skills and confidence to transform themselves and their relationships.

KAMER carries on its group work in all the 23 provinces of South East and East Anatolia where it has established centers as well as close to 200 districts. By 2006, it had carried out these workshops with more than 10 000 women (KAMER, 2007a 11; KAMER, 2007b, 9). Every province has a woman from Diyarbakir responsible for that particular province. These women visit their provinces regularly, make the preparations for establishing new centers, develop contacts to initiate the workshop groups and locate women who will be coordinators in these new centers.

Besides this "group work," KAMER uses other strategies to struggle against violence. It has established "Emergency Support Lines" in its centers to reach women exposed to violence or rather to give them the opportunity to reach KAMER. These women usually get psychological counseling, protection, sometimes jobs and bus tickets to other cities for security reasons, because women physically violated usually need to hide in other cities to avoid the persistent pursuit of their violators. Between 2003 and 2006, KAMER undertook a project on honor killings through which about 200 women sought help from the center. Recognizing that violence against women is intimately linked to early childhood socialization, KAMER also initiated day care centers which provide non-sexist child-care, a radical battle to break the cycles that entrench violence. To empower women with income generating skills, in some of its 23 centers, KAMER organizes handicraft studios; in Diyarbakır, Kars and Mardin, there are small restaurants run by women who attended KAMER workshops. All in all, by 2007, KAMER had reached some 30,000 women since its inception in 1997 (KAMER, 2007a, 11).

Global networks and local autonomy

The international links it has developed and global networks that support KAMER initiatives are also behind KAMER's success in reaching numerous women and touching their lives. These networks help cultivate the cosmopolitan human rights norms that sustain KAMER's feminism at the same time as they allow the group to be independent of local political blocks. KAMER can thus have the autonomy to be the feminist group that it is.

Before its inception, women who founded KAMER worked with a feminist organization, Women's Human Rights Project (WHRP) that had been connected to transnational feminisms since 1990s in the West of Turkey. The founding group was inspired to engage in feminist organizing as they carried out a survey that WHRP did in collaboration with Women Living Under Muslim Law. After it was founded, volunteers from the shelter foundation Mor Çatı (Purple Roof) in Istanbul and Kadın

Dayanışma (Women's Solidarity) in Ankara helped train KAMER volunteers in handling cases of violence towards women. Both institutions received funds from abroad and were internationally linked. KAMER thus found out how to apply for international funds and became an important beneficiary of global funds. One of its first sources of funding was money raised by an Iranian Kurdish feminist academic based in Canada, Shahrzad Mojab. One of the most important projects named "An Opportunity for Every Woman" (Her Kadın için Bir Fırsat) that allowed KAMER to spread in the region, was financed by Chrest Foundation, the Open Society Institute and the European Union. The Heinrich Böll Foundation provided key support at different stages of KAMER's ten years of work in the region. Other funders included the European Commission, the Oak Foundation, the Swedish Consulate in Istanbul, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, and the Bernard van Leer Foundation. The KAMER group consulted with the Rehabilitation Center for Victims of Torture in Berlin (KAMER, 2004, 20). In 2004, they collaborated with Amnesty International in the Amnesty campaign "End Violence Against Women." There were also personal links. KAMER members attend conferences and exchange experiences with feminists abroad. A number of them have visited Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany, India, and Armenia, in many cases going abroad for the first time in their lives (KAMER, 2004, 2005, 2006). Feminists from Europe and elsewhere are also frequent visitors at KAMER.

These international links and global networks that support KAMER allow the group to define itself as an independent feminist organization which insists on its autonomy from any political group or party in the region. An important key to KAMER's success operating in a conflict zone and among religious and ethnic groups which have traditionally been biased against one another has been its independent or autonomous status. Autonomy does not mean lack of political engagement. KAMER is engaged in feminist politics, but it does mean eschewing financial or political links to existing political parties of any persuasion as well as the state and being able to use its funds for purposes defined as part of its mission.

As a group of women many of whom have Kurdish backgrounds, in a region that is polarized by war and PKK recruiting among the friends and relatives of some of these women, remaining autonomous has not been an easy task for KAMER members. For many Kurdish women especially those who are affiliated with, support or work for the Kurdish political party in the region, KAMER is seen as an irresponsible apolitical group, if not a traitor to the cause. For the representatives of the state, the bureaucrats, soldiers or ordinary Turkish women, KAMER's Diyarbakir background is a liability in itself. They assume that anyone from Diyarbakir is a PKK supporter if not its militant working to undermine the unity of the state. KAMER, on the other hand, works with women of all groups, including but not limited to Kurdish, Turkish, Arab, Sunni, and Alevi.

Being autonomous is crucial for KAMER not only because it works with groups that see one another as potential or real enemies but also because it has to collaborate with numerous institutions to protect women in physical danger, including the public security office, the police, the gendarme, the public prosecutor, the local bar association, the governor of the province, the Institution of Social Services and Protection of Children, the State Registry of Births. To this end, it has to

transcend prejudices and maintain the confidence and trust of various state institutions. A focus on the two neighboring provinces of Tunceli and Elazığ that are a foil to one another can help us better understand how KAMER's awareness raising through an autonomous feminist discourse is both its weakness as well as strength in transforming the gender relations in the region and locally planting the seeds of cosmopolitan citizenship.

Tunceli and Elazığ

Tunceli province which was called Dersim till 1937 is one of the least economically developed regions of Eastern Anatolia with few links to the broader economy. Agriculture is its main economic activity; however the mountainous terrain of the province leaves little land to cultivate. Neither private nor public investment is made and trade and services are also underdeveloped.

Alevi Kurds constitute the majority of the Tunceli population (www.tunceli.gov.tr), (White & Jongerden, 2003). Alevis are a non-Sunni Muslim minority in Turkey and Alevi women are active participants in socio-economic and political life of the province. Women in Tunceli are visible in the streets without any head covers, going about their business and working outside the home.

Dersim-Tunceli had been a semi-autonomous region since the Ottoman times, with the help of its tough geography, where the apparatuses of the modernizing Ottoman Empire, and later, the Turkish state had not been able to establish themselves. Determined to maintain this status, Dersim remained resistant to any form of governing until the state initiated a major military campaign in 1937–38, killing at least 7000 people and leaving thousands homeless (Bruinessen, 1994; Beşikçi, 1992). Dersim renamed Tunceli, was placed under military rule, and began to be administered from Elazığ, its neighboring province, until it became a province again in 1946. Violent conflict with the national state continues to define the collective memory of the inhabitants. This memory contributes to forces of irreverence against the state, with several armed militant groups, including the PKK, having strong roots in the province.³

The neighboring Elazığ is a foil to Tunceli (www.Elazig.gov.tr; www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elaz%20%C4%9F#Ekonomi). It is an economically developed center in Eastern Anatolia with abundant natural resources in minerals and agricultural land. The Keban Dam on Euphrates which began its operation in 1975 contributed to the diversification of Elazığ economy based on industry, farming and trade. The majority of the population is Sunni Muslim, religious, nationalist and conservative. In the city streets most women walk with their headscarves. There is a small Alevi district in the city center, but it is more like a ghetto. In the general elections, both the nationalist and the religious vote in Elazığ have always been higher than their average in Turkey. As such, the Kurdish populated pro-PKK Tunceli and the conservative pious Elazığ are hostile neighbors with different worldviews who blame one another for their problems.

KAMER in Tunceli and Elazığ

KAMER became active in Tunceli and Elazığ in 2005. Cigdem,⁴ an experienced veteran with Sunni Arab origins, was responsible for initiating the KAMER workshops and

opening the centers in these two provinces. Even though she was very respectful of local sensitivities and careful to cultivate responsive contacts through personal acquaintances, Tunceli was a difficult region to develop a cosmopolitan feminism that could override the preoccupation of its Alevi Kurdish population with the Kurdish issue. PKK that was carrying on a guerilla war against the state had a strong hold and many sympathizers in the province. Tunceli had one of the few female mayors in the country and she was from DEHAP the Kurdish party sympathetic to PKK. Under the circumstances KAMER's call for unconditional nonviolence or an autonomous universal feminist discourse did not resonate well. People of Tunceli were deeply engaged with violence against the state and prioritized the issue. KAMER's autonomy meant collaboration with the state rather than fighting on the side of PKK and feminism was a luxury in a context where Alevi women who did not have the orthodox Sunni religious constraints on them, like being subservient to husbands, already felt strong.

Moreover, locally there was already a women's association, Ana Fatma, that the DEHAP mayor had helped establish. Even though not very active, it was the neighborhood organization that nurtured conservative Kurdish Alevi identities and cultivated the local suspicion against the state for its violence against Kurds and Alevis. Local women resented those from their ranks who began attending KAMER which was seen as a rival to Ana Fatma. They distrusted a group of women coming from the Kurdish populated Diyarbakir and identifying themselves as autonomous feminists rather than PKK supporters. Some of the women who began attending KAMER meetings told us that Ana Fatma members discouraged them from attending KAMER, claiming that one had to choose which side to belong. Cigdem kept on inviting Ana Fatma to KAMER, to no avail.

March 8 celebrations were another challenge. KAMER did not want to participate in the walk organized by the women's platform in the city because they expected pro-PKK slogans and protests of the imprisonment of the PKK leader Öcalan which could result in police intervention given the politicized atmosphere in Tunceli. KAMER felt that, in this process, its independent stance would be jeopardized. It did not want to be identified as a PKK partisan because PKK endorsed violence even though in Tunceli it would make KAMER more popular. KAMER women decided to take the risk of being labeled an "apolitical" association, "one which collaborated with the state" and stood firm on their position on non-participation.

The question of KAMER's autonomy was tested not only with regard to Ana Fatma or the politically more radical women who supported PKK but within the KAMER workshops as well. As Cigdem explained:

"it is very very difficult to work with women who have been organized politically, particularly on the left. They are so used to resorting to violence in response to violence since childhood. They do understand what we mean when we say we are against violence of any type but they do say 'yes I am against violence, ours is not violence, it is legitimate self-defense. They should not persecute us, they should not banish us, they should not suppress us, well then we wont do it.' Of course that is not how it works. We explain that we should break this cycle and elaborate how there is no

legitimate violence and how violence breeds violence and how we should transform this violence through our discourse and develop a new discourse. I try to channel this discussion to a positive endeavor for the future."

Despite these challenges, KAMER was able to take root in Tunceli. Cigdem was persuasive in introducing the human rights based feminist discourse that rejected violence, regardless of where it comes from. In a group discussion we had with women who had attended the KAMER workshops, these Tunceli women told us how their relationships with their children changed, and how they stopped beating their children. They began communicating with their husbands, and questioning the effectiveness of violence in pursuing their goals. In 2007, KAMER was conducting workshops even in remote Tunceli districts like Mazgirt and Pertek, and women sought help via the Emergency Help Line. Because many women worked outside the house, KAMER also recognized the need working mothers have for childcare and initiated a successful Child Care Center in the province.

In Elazig, the dynamics of initiating KAMER workshops with a non-violent women's rights as human rights perspective was different. While KAMER's claim to be an independent or autonomous organization was an accost to Kurdish nationalism in Tunceli, it was an accost to Turkish nationalism in Elazig. The Turkish nationalist Elazig suspected the Kurdish Diyarbakir based KAMER, despite the latter's claim to autonomy. Anyone from Diyarbakir was stigmatized as anti-Turk and pro-PKK which in turn was a threat to be contained. However, in due time, KAMER's independent stance and human rights discourse enabled her to reach Elazig as well as Tunceli both hostile to one another as well as to KAMER and transform them.

In Elazig, Cigdem, who organized Tunceli, initiated an awareness raising "group work" with the help of old friends she had. Most of the women who attended the first small workshop did so without their husband's permission. Some said that they were attending a religious discussion group, others gave the pretext of visiting close relatives. In the first workshop, many women were headscarved housewives. While group discussions in Tunceli quickly turned towards state violence and women's experiences of state violence, in Elazig they moved towards religious subjects. Problems women experienced and the nature of domestic violence were also different in Elazig. Many women had marital problems, some were beaten, yet others had to tolerate extra-marital affairs. KAMER empowered these women and helped them overcome their marital problems by leading them to become aware of their rights as women. A local psychiatrist who was treating a woman in depression enlisted with KAMER, after he observed how the group helped his patient recover from the extra marital affair of her husband.

When KAMER came to Elazig, it had to prove, before anything else, that it was an independent organization, which meant no links to PKK. Women of Elazig deeply suspected KAMER. During the workshops, when violence was discussed and women divulged their own experiences of violence, the workshop facilitator introduced relaxation techniques. After one such meeting, Cigdem suggested that women close their eyes, or better still, lie on the floor with closed eyes. Some women winked and looked up, because they could not totally trust Cigdem, but still silence reigned. The mother in law in

whose house the workshop convened before KAMER acquired its own place was frightened and could not refrain herself from looking through the key hole to see if the women inside were alive. She called her daughter-in-law to step outside the room to advise her not to close her eyes. "It is the organization or something (referring to PKK as a terrorist organization) they could harm or drug you", she insisted. She would not trust the Kurdish women from Diyarbakir who she assumed were on the enemy camp. Over time, women of Elazig narrated this story with embarrassment and as a yard stick of how far they had moved in their relationships with the women from Diyarbakir.

Sibel was one of these women for whom KAMER's discourse was transformative. Before she came to KAMER, she had prejudices against Christians and was scared of Armenians. After the workshops, she began questioning herself and why she felt what she did. As a Muslim, even the idea of going to a church was disturbing for her. After the awareness sessions on discrimination, she decided to visit a church by herself. There was a service which she watched and enjoyed. At that moment, she felt that she was regenerating herself. In a short span, the KAMER experience had ignited a personal transformation.

With this expanded world view, Sibel worked hard to institutionalize KAMER in Elazig despite widespread claims among her own friends that it was a PKK tool. In 2006, March 8 was celebrated in Elazig with a so called Purple Bazaar. All our interviewees from Elazig, including Sibel prided themselves with Purple Bazaar. Women from all the provinces in which KAMER worked came to this Bazaar to exhibit and sell their handcrafts, regional delicacies and dresses. Women with different religions, customs, and ethnicities intermingled, staying in the same hotel, eating the same food, and sharing experiences. The Kurdish Alevi women from Tunceli realized women from Elazig were not the nationalist reactionaries that they thought, and women from Elazig realized Kurdish women from Tunceli were not the frightening enemy that aimed to obliterate them. Both had been initiated into a cosmopolitan feminist discourse which helped them sympathize with one another. Sibel proudly told us how she had her picture taken in a regional dress from Şırnak, a Kurdish province with a history of guerilla warfare. After the Purple Bazaar, she maintained, many things changed. Local people began seeing KAMER differently, and accepted it as a group of women upholding women's rights rather than as a Trojan horse from the enemy camp. It was recognized that KAMER did not push women to divorce their husbands or go to bars as alleged by some local opponents and that KAMER meant to help women protect their rights. In a year, 24 workshops had been conducted in Elazig, including five in the districts. Sibel could collaborate with the municipality, the governor, the Chamber of Commerce and the Social Services to expand KAMER's activities.

After her successful experience in Elazig KAMER, Sibel was equipped to take on the difficult task of becoming a group facilitator in Tunceli. She transcended the Elazig-Tunceli confrontation by communicating with the women from Tunceli. When she first arrived in Tunceli, she openly declared herself as a Sunni woman and acknowledged that Tunceli was an Alevi province. Soon enough Tunceli women accepted Sibel, and respected her fasting during Ramadan—a Sunni but not Alevi practice. KAMER women in Tunceli knew that Sibel did not approve of PKK, but they collaborated in discovering the

implications of a cosmopolitan feminism which looked critically on all types of violence that inequalities bred.

In short, KAMER was not only able to establish itself in the two polarized neighboring provinces of Elazig and Tunceli, but was also able to nurture direct links between them. The Alevi Kurdish women of Tunceli first had to overcome their prejudices against KAMER as an "autonomous" feminist organization from Diyarbakir, only to confront later a much deeper prejudice which they nourished against their nationalist Sunni neighbors in Elazig. Elazig mirrored Tunceli. The nationalist Sunni women of Elazig had to overcome resistance against both the "autonomous" KAMER as well as the Alevi Kurdish women of Tunceli. Confronted with rising ethnic tensions, the Turkish-Sunni and Kurdish-Alevi women of KAMER from these two provinces were able to articulate a feminist ethics of non-violence, which was put into practice simultaneously in the home and outside. By organizing public events such as the Purple Bazaar, they were also assuming agency in transforming the ethnicized and masculinized public spaces of these towns, communicating through the cosmopolitan language of human rights feminism. This was a language of the right to difference and equality to men. In this discourse, all types of violence, including gender based violence, was an encroachment on basic human rights.

Tunceli and Elazig are only two of the 23 provinces where KAMER has a grassroots presence. In many of these provinces, the towns themselves are sites of multilayered ethnic, religious or sectarian divides. In most cities, KAMER is the only women's organization and often the only autonomous civil society organization. In almost all cases, KAMER remains the only civil society organization where ethnic, religious or sectarian groups actively work together in a non-hierarchical structure.

Conclusion

KAMER, equipped with an unadulterated feminist language which heralded the autonomy of the individual and equality of women to men was able to cultivate cosmopolitan values by persuasively "talking to strangers" and making others "talk to strangers", as Danielle S. Allen suggests. Through this language of human rights, women could transcend local ethnic strife and the layered gendered violence perpetrated in the local vernacular. KAMER was able to introduce both the Kurdish nationalist Alevi women of Tunceli as well as the Turkish nationalist orthodox Sunni women of Elazig to a cosmopolitan feminist discourse through its awareness workshops. Women of Tunceli and Elazig who were assumed to have irreconcilable differences could then talk to one another overcoming intersectionally shaped ethnic, religious and gendered violence in their lives.

At the grassroots level, through the faith KAMER women had in the power of a rights based feminist discourse, cosmopolitan in spirit and substance, and the patience they had in sharing their faith with other women, it was possible to introduce the language of human rights, even in a context of nationalist conflict and long-standing religious and ethnic prejudices that nurture militarized ethnic nationalisms. The cultivation of this cosmopolitan awareness helped generate feminist solidarity and empower women to stop the domestic violence in their lives. The KAMER example shows that in a

globally linked world which can expose the weaknesses of nationalist modernization projects and the promotion of ethnic violence taking place in defensive reaction to the homogenizing potential of dominant nationalisms, there can also be grassroots forces empowered by global structures and discourses. These can lead to the renouncement of violence, empowerment of women, and redefinition of masculinized public spaces, transforming relations of gendered citizenship. Thus, globalization can help generate ethnic strife on the one hand, and feminist ethics and cosmopolitan norms and practices of nonviolence on the other. Women victimized in ethnic strife and violated in their multiple roles resort, with creative border-crossings across gender, ethnicity, religion, class, and political ideology, to the opportunities of the globalized context to stop the violence in their lives.

Can KAMER's success be further institutionalized against the test of time? Can the role that the KAMER group leaders or facilitators presently assume, traveling long distances as they do and spending long hours with women who seek their company, continue to be carried out? Can the in-group supervisions and egalitarian democratic relationship that define the KAMER culture stand the test of time? Can KAMER withstand the ethnic nationalist challenges coming from Kurdish as well as Turkish groups and continue to undermine both? It is difficult to generalize about and from the KAMER experience, because it took place in a unique context. However, the case shows that even in the most challenging circumstances, cosmopolitan norms can be cultivated with self-reflective hard work, crossing boundaries and resisting the "gendered continuum of violence" (Cockburn, 2004) in a heavily militarized and polarized locality.

Endnotes

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² The project had a quantitative as well as a qualitative part. In the qualitative part of this larger project we interviewed about 150 women from 50 different women's organizations in 27 different cities. Among those we studied, KAMER was the most successful organization that struggled to end violence particularly domestic violence against women using a cosmopolitan feminist discourse.

³ Unlike many other Turkish towns and cities, the main square in Tunceli does not have an Atatürk statue; instead it has a human rights statue symbolized by a young woman with huge powerful hands rising up towards the sky, situated on a site where a Kurdish woman militant initiated the first suicide bombing in Turkey's history in 1996. In the main municipality building, a native American saying reads something to the effect, "The dead do not die, the white man has to be wary of the dead."

⁴ We changed all names to insure anonymity.

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