

The Changing Role of Civil Society in Gender Sensitive Local Services

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Collaboration with civil society offers numerous opportunities for local governments to render local services more sensitive to gender equality. Considering that local governments need a multi-stakeholder interaction in policy development and decision-making processes and that they have the responsibility to ensure civil society participation, it can be said that there are numerous opportunities for civil society organizations (CSOs) as well in this regard. However, most of the time, CSOs may need to make these opportunities visible to local governments and take the initiative in these processes by proactively guiding local governments. In this brief, we will discuss how CSOs can create such opportunities and fields of collaboration especially in gender sensitive service development, and present some existing examples to that end.

Considering that the most important contribution that civil society can make for rendering local services more sensitive to gender equality is participation and that local governments need improvement in establishing or consolidating these participation mechanisms, this study outlines what functions they can undertake for CSOs. These functions are defined as key functions. In this evaluation note, some concrete suggestions will be listed for the CSOs especially working in the field of gender equality to undertake these key functions.

Key functions

A. Providing expertise and information

1. Providing up-to-date field information

A local government institution has the responsibility to deliver local services to everyone living within the scope of its service area and to ensure that everyone can fairly benefit from these services. Yet, in order for them to do this, local governments need extensive information about the community to be rendered service and expertise as to how to make efficient use of that information. In Turkey, local government institutions vary greatly in terms of the size of the population they render service and therefore in terms of their number of staff. So they utilize different sources for accessing up-to-date field information.

Although in local governments, especially in those institutions which achieved a certain degree of institutionalization, it is possible to speak of the existence of gradually specializing personnel cadres, accessing up-to-date information about all groups living within the scope of a particular municipality and their needs requires constant interaction with those groups. For example, only a LGBTI+ organization working in the very field can provide information about the discrimination that LGBTI+ children are subjected to or only an immigrant women's organization may shed light on the needs of immigrant women who are living in Turkey for work. For this reason, up-to-date field information that CSOs will provide from their local work field proves highly valuable for local governments. And if this information is collected in a systematic and regular way that allows comparison of different time periods and is reported/transferred to the relevant units of local government institutions, then it is more likely for these institutions to evaluate the information at hand so as to make policies on this basis. For the CSOs aspiring to collaborate with local governments it is critical to render the information in their hands visible and if possible, to convey this information, that is, to actively guide this process by providing the contribution of other organizations working in the same field and by proactively knocking on the doors of local governments without waiting to be invited.

2. Consolidating the institutional capacity of local governments

Another area where CSOs can provide expertise and information is the one regarding the institutional capacity of local governments. In this particular, CSOs especially struggling for gender equality have a high level of awareness and expertise. This expertise in gender equality is also an important resource for local governments. According to Article 41 of the Municipal Law, a strategic plan and performance program should be prepared by the municipalities with a population more than 50,000.¹

Although there is no specific reference to gender equality in the Municipal Law, according to the Circular No. 2010/14 of the Prime Ministry published in the Official Gazette dated 25th May 2010, local governments are prescribed to adopt a gender equality approach in the strategic plans, performance programs and activity reports they will prepare, and to include in these texts statistical data and scientific research and the subventions to be used for these.

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develop gender equality sensitive services, local government institutions primarily need to increase their employees' awareness on this issue. Starting from the very need, CSOs working in the field of gender equality can offer their expertise in the trainings needed by local government institutions. However, local governments may have various reservations about collaborating with CSOs on this issue. In order to remove those reservations, it may be beneficial for the CSOs aspiring to collaborate with municipalities on the training of their personnel to go to those people in a decision-making position in the municipality with a "trial" training proposal at hand.

A good example of civil society's actively contributing to the development of the institutional capacity of local governments in the production of gender-sensitive services is the Human Rights Education Program for Women (HREP), which has been implemented by Women for Women's Human Rights - New Solutions (WWHR) since 1995. HREP has been implemented mainly in collaboration with municipalities and women's organizations since 2012. Trainer candidates who want to implement the program are selected among applications coming from existing or potential program-partner institutions. Participants who complete the 13-day trainers training receive support from WWHR after the training in various ways such as the provision of the publications and materials they will use during the group work and supportive communication and supervision visits. After the training they become a part of the Women's Human Rights Action Network (WHRAN). Currently implemented in accordance with protocol in collaboration with 16 municipalities, this program offers an enormous opportunity for the partner municipalities to consolidate their institutional capacity.

Municipal staff participating in the trainers training program take active responsibility to improve the local conditions for women, regardless of their roles and positions, and approach problems from a women's perspective.³ Viewed from this angle, although improving the institutional capacities of local government institutions on gender equality, which are deemed program partners is not the primary purpose of WWHR, we may well say that this collaboration has still a very positive transformative effect on the institutions by gradually increasing the number of municipal staff who are HREP trainers.

Collaborations that CSOs will develop with local governments so as to consolidate their institutional capacity on gender equality will not be limited to municipal staff in the long run. If healthy and sustainable collaborations are formed in time, local governments can work with civil society for awareness-raising and catch-up activities on gender equality, which are intended for the groups they render service to.

3. Providing guidance for improving the quality of local services

The expertise and know how of civil society can be consulted to increase the quality of local services by making them more gender sensitive. It is possible to carry out this collaboration in areas where the service areas of local governments intersect with the work fields of civil society. It is again important in this regard that the collaboration is established with the initiative of the civil society, that is, with the civil society guiding the local government institutions. As one of the service areas where local governments and civil society intersect, Women's Counseling Centers can be a good example in this respect. CSOs working on the very field can make a critical contribution to the better functioning of women's counseling centers serving within the scope of the service area of municipalities and to the increase of quality of the service provided in these centers. In this sense, contributions can be made both in relation to the training and supervision of the counseling centers employees and the physical conditions and functioning of the centers. Another option for the civil society and local government institutions to work more systematically on the issue may be to develop a common model for women's counseling centers. Women's organizations in general and organizations working in the field of violence in particular may organize in themselves on the issue so as to turn this into a project in collaboration with the experts and managers of local administrations.

"CEİD İzler" (CEİD Monitors) Project which is a continuation of "Enhancement of Participatory Democracy in Turkey: Gender Equality Monitoring Project (Phase I)" initiated by Association for Monitoring Gender Equality (CEİD) can be cited as a good example of how civil society can provide expertise and information by taking a proactive role for gender sensitive services.

One of the aims of this project is to monitor the policy making, implementation and monitoring processes of local governments from a gender equality perspective, and to improve the gender-sensitive and rights-based monitoring capacities of local governments -especially of their equality units- by providing them necessary trainings, information, materials and documents. One important pillar of the collaboration with municipalities is the Local Equality Monitoring Platforms (LEMP), which were established in the first phase of the project and include trade unions, trade associations, civil society organizations working in the field of gender equality and relevant units of universities. Since the project has not been completed yet, there is no comprehensive information about the outputs of it. Nevertheless, it is obvious that ensuring local governments meet regularly with other actors (i.e. CSOs, relevant units of universities and relevant academicians) working in the field of gender equality through YEİPs will itself create a transformative effect. The fact that YEİPs established in the first phase of the project in the provinces of İzmir and Trabzon have already become active actors in the gender equality studies carried out at the city level is an important result revealing the impact of this project on the city. This project carried out by CEİD is a very good example of how civil society can assume the key function of “providing expertise and knowledge” in both providing up-to-date field information for local governments, enhancing their institutional capacities and enabling them to receive guidance for gender-sensitive local services by way of a platform.

Another current and good example of cooperation developed through provision of expertise and information is the collaboration between Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IBB) and the Mother Child Education Foundation (AÇEV). Within the scope of “YUVAMIZ İstanbul” (Our Home İstanbul Kindergarten) Project implemented by Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, the municipality has collaborated with AÇEV, a CSO known for its expertise in preschool education, the municipal staff has been provided vocational development trainings, and the service quality has consequently increased. Besides, in the centers opened within this scope, the collaboration has been sustained with different supports such as parent support programs conducted by AÇEV with the purpose of providing guidance for parents. In addition to its well-known expertise in preschool education, the fact that AÇEV has regularly sent information notes to Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality about the fields it has been working on in recent years plays a certain role in the formation of this effective collaboration.

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B. Creating a source of legitimacy in local government decisions

Local governments are administratively and financially autonomous public institutions providing common local public services to communities within their administrative zone, the decision-making bodies of which are determined by free election.⁴ Although their decision-making bodies are determined by free elections, there can frequently be legitimacy problems in the decisions taken by local administrations. In municipalities, the decision-making body is the municipal council, and municipal councils are theoretically assumed to represent communities and community members living within the municipality's administrative boundaries. However, because of the fact that candidacy for council membership is not determined by pre-election, that the candidates for municipal council membership are often not well known by those electing them and that for the most part council members categorically enter into an either supportive or oppositional relation with the elected mayor, it is disputable how functionally councilors represent those who elected them in the council. For this very reason, the structure having the executive responsibility in the municipality (mayor and the senior staff) may need to announce the voices of the groups that cannot be represented functionally in the municipal council through the CSOs representing them (via reports, documents and data provided). Thus, it may become easier to consolidate the participation and therefore the legitimacy of the decisions to be taken at local level.

An important condition for the contribution of civil society to increase the legitimacy of decisions to be taken at local level is to ensure the representation of all civil society organizations which exist within the work field of local governments and make the needs of different segments of society visible. By playing a proactive role about this matter as well, civil society can create local platforms/initiatives that will unite all relevant stakeholders around a specific problem area, and bring forward common proposals to local governments for the problem area around which they are organized. For example, the more local women's organizations a local women's platform focusing on the problems of women living in a city incorporate in its structure, the more it will have a say about all women living in that city. By organizing in this way in itself and making local urban needs visible, civil society can constitute an extraordinary source of legitimacy for the local governments in the decisions they make.

C. Contributing to the monitoring and reporting of local services

While using the public resources they have, local governments are constantly supposed to strike a balance between internal and external expenditures. In order to produce quality services, it is necessary for them to primarily work in this particular and allocate resources within the institution. And yet, since the primary motivation of the administrations is to be “re-elected,” they may give priority to the services/activities that they suppose will lead them to this goal in the shortest way during their term of office. Hence, in-house and long-term capacity building endeavours may not always be prioritized by administrators. However, providing quality service also requires a constant process monitoring and evaluation. A monitoring and evaluation study on how sensitive local services are to gender equality can only be conducted by the experts of the subject. Much like the function of expertise and information provision, monitoring and even reporting of local services from a gender perspective is also a function that can be undertaken by civil society. In order to carry out this function properly, CSOs can take initiative collectively and proactively in a way to reflect the diversity of civil society organizations. Monitoring of local services in this way will be an important step both for the institutions to overcome their capacity problems in this regard and for the establishment of civil participation.

C. Ensuring more efficient use of local resources

1. Helping local governments optimize their resources

It can be said that collaboration with civil society especially in the development of gender sensitive local services provides many opportunities for local governments to utilize resources more efficiently. These opportunities can be summarized as follows:

- Implementation of in-service trainings and vocational development trainings especially on gender issues with the support of civil society contributes to the more economical use of both financial and human resources.
- Local governments need effective participation mechanisms in order to produce gender equality sensitive local services. Although the establishment and operation of these mechanisms may cause certain costs at the beginning, policies and services to be developed through the data obtained via an effective participation mechanism will certainly save resources in the long term. Dead projects, additional costs paid because of wrong decisions and corruption can be efficiently prevented in institutions by adopting this kind of decision making mechanism. Collaboration with civil society is also possible in regard to the designing, operating and monitoring of participation mechanisms. By this means, local governments can both veritably put participation into practice and save a substantial amount of costs.

2. Facilitating local governments' access to external resources

Coalitions and platforms that will be formed through the cooperation of local governments with civil society will also create strong associations for domestic and international grant programs opened in the field of democratization of local governments. For the enhancement of democracy at the local level, the European Union, Embassies and Development Agencies offer various funding opportunities. Cooperation between local governments and civil society can make the applications for funds stronger, thereby making access to these funds easier. As for the programs opened directly for civil society, local governments may also indirectly benefit from these funds as partners or associates. Projects to be designed and initiated by civil society for the enhancement of democracy at the local level may also enable local governments to be consolidated with external resources and to make more effective use of their own resources.

City Labs as an innovative model of participation

CSOs could possibly undertake the above-mentioned key functions in the development of gender sensitive policies and services through the participatory processes designed and implemented at the local level. The "Citizen Participation Ladder"⁵ which includes the categories of participation is defined in a way ranging from one-sided information where participation is at the lowest level to the common decision-making of citizens with local governments where participation is at the highest level. Simplified by the Council of Europe especially for CSOs, the participation ladder is summarized as information, consultation, dialogue and cooperation in line with the categories where participation ranges from the lowest to the highest level. Cooperation is defined as active participation in or collaborative relationship with the local government, in which civil society plays an active role and is involved in policy-making pursuant to the key functions mentioned above. In this model, the role and importance of CSOs in proposing alternative policies and in shaping policy dialogue is recognized. Being an innovative model that provides opportunities for CSOs to collaborate with local governments so as to increase their governmental capacities, City Laboratories- (City Labs) can be considered as a suggestion for a participatory and experimental method.

The city labs, which we encounter more frequently with its different implementations recently, is a participation method via which urban problems can be addressed and local services can be tested and developed together with real users in a real life environment. It makes use of a broad participants base that brings together people, networks and organizations with different backgrounds, expertise and working styles, especially in urban design and planning processes.

One of the distinctive features of this model is its being evaluated and discussed in the light of users' experiences and creative ideas, without being limited to fixed ideas or biased solutions. It is characterized by the development and exploration of innovative solutions in line with the principles of equality and transparency with the collective approach of experts from different fields. Positioned as a mediator between the local government and the civil society, the city labs bring both together so as to offer them the opportunity to learn, explore, develop and finally to define and adopt common goals together.

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For example, to evaluate the accessibility of existing green spaces to the residents of that district on a neighbourhood scale, to make the invisible and unknown experiences of different groups visible, to reveal the impediments arising from the design and ultimately to develop a more inclusive and gender sensitive planning and service mentality may be possible with a city lab to be established under the leadership of CSOs. CSOs can benefit from the city lab experience in order to provide expertise and information and especially to access up-to-date field information, which are listed among the key functions above, as well as to understand the experiences of the real users they represent, to create data on the basis of these experiences and to reflect this data to the decision-making processes of local governments.

To mention a study constituting an original example of democratic participation and city lab, in 2005 a group of Catalan women from Barcelona initiated a study with the demand of a feminist transformation and more equality in urban planning by focusing on everyday life experiences. A group of architects, sociologists and urban planners who came together to rethink and design public spaces from a gender perspective have set up a cooperative called [Col·lectiu Punt 6](#), launching an initiative exemplifying the very city lab experience we have just mentioned. Aiming primarily at creating egalitarian, inclusive and non-exclusive spaces, the team performs analyses on the daily mobility, situation, density, usage and needs of a particular space, neighborhood or commerce space such as a house, school, work place, etc. Conducting multidisciplinary analyses and evaluations regarding the security perception in urban spaces from social, physical and functional aspects and from a gender equality perspective, the most fundamental element for the team is participation. For them, the real expertise regarding those places belongs to the users living there. Mobilizing the processes of participation from the bottom up, the team gives ear to the communities and groups living in different parts of the city in order to determine their specific uses, needs and demands. They try to ensure the active participation of such groups as women, children and the older persons that are often excluded from the decision-making processes regarding their own environment. The basic method they use is collective exploration walks. Most of these urban walks focus

on issues of security and accessibility in neighborhood streets. By determining areas where women feel and do not feel safe, can access and cannot access to, they aim to identify what the reasons are and how public space design and management can improve everyday life. Participants are asked to take photographs during these walks to document their opinions and impressions, then these are shared and evaluated together, exhibitions are organized, community maps are produced and consequently design guides are created. The team aims to create awareness by sharing this knowledge as well as discovering and learning together. Taking into account different experiences of using public spaces such as neighborhoods, squares, streets, playgrounds and school walkways, they develop new designs and proposals that are inclusive and egalitarian, and collaborate with local governments to that end. For instance, they prepare detailed reports for local government units to improve urban security from a gender perspective. The gender equality awareness of both local government representatives and city-dwellers can be raised through similar participatory methods or explorations.

As we can see in this exciting example, the innovative initiatives conducted by civil society play a leading role in social transformation through the development of gender equality sensitive urban planning and local services. Active participation processes mobilized by civil society to re-discover and announce the information of the local provide a valuable data source and cooperation opportunity that local governments cannot ignore. Knowledge of the daily life experiences of the different vulnerable groups living in the city and how they utilize local services is a prerequisite for a better quality and inclusive services. The connection that CSOs establish between the demands of the groups they represent and local services will support data-based decision-making processes in cooperation with local governments via data collection, data analysis and research to be conducted in this direction. Consequently, by performing the above-mentioned key functions, CSOs can make a considerable contribution to the structural transformation of local governments and to the rendering of local services gender sensitive. Constructive collaborations to be established between CSOs and local governments, these two common actors of social transformation, will create unprecedented opportunities for enhancing local democracy and ensuring gender equality as the most fundamental principle of it.

Subsequent to the 2019 local elections, the local governments and their actions have started to be monitored more closely by the public in Turkey. It can be said that the fact that more attention has been focused on local governments has both increased their motivation to “make a difference” and led them to further turn towards reforms that will increase the quality of local services. This existent motivation in Turkey offers a more fertile ground for CSOs to play a more leading and active role in the ecosystem of local governments today. Civil society that can turn this opportunity into models of collaboration which will transform local governments and therefore local services will not only enhance local democracy but also serve social transformation in this wise.

Notes

- 1 Article 41 of the Municipal Law No. 5393 dated 3rd July 2005: “The mayor presents the development plan and if any, the strategic plan in accordance with the regional plan within six months from the local administrations general elections, and prepares the annual performance program before the beginning of the relevant year to present it to the municipal council.”
- 2 Prime Ministry Circular No. 2010/14 on Increasing Women’s Employment and Promotion of Equality in Opportunities, published in the Official Gazette dated 25th May 2010:
<https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2010/05/20100525-12.htm>
- 3 <https://www.kadinininsanhaklari.org/kihep-nedir/>
- 4 Article 2 of the Law no 2972 on the elections of local administrations, of neighborhood mukhtars and of the board of aldermen, dated 18th January 1984: “Local administrations elections are held in accordance with the principles of free, equal, secret balloting; single-stage, general voting and open counting and listing, under judicial administration and control.”
- 5 Containing the most widely known categories of participation, “Citizen Participation Ladder” was first

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