We are here
We are half the city we live in

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No matter which measure of residential settlement one takes, women constitute around half the population everywhere in Turkey. Especially with regards urban areas with a smaller spatial scale, there is almost unanimous agreement that space-oriented policies concern women directly. It is important to keep these circumstances in mind in order to strengthen the political presence of women at the local level, and to pursue local policies with a woman-centered approach.

We can think of women's political participation and participation in decision-making processes at the local level along two lines. First are the channels created by local politics, and second, the mechanisms whereby concrete and practical decisions about the city are made. Regarding those mechanisms where local politics takes place and spreads, political parties, non-governmental organizations and mass organizations come to the forefront. As for urban decision-making, municipalities, local public bodies and – when active – citizen assemblies prove the most effective. It is through these mechanisms that we can conceptualize and discuss issues such as women's presence, the state of women's representation in numerical terms, and the impact of the existence of women on urban processes and contents.

Nevertheless, this article will focus mainly on women's experiences and positioning within local politics and decision-making bodies, their efforts to become subjects and the contradictions they face against local dynamics and processes. It is based on the experiences gained and observations made in local everyday politics and politics in general, as well as the experiences passed on by women with different political backgrounds.

Three forces shape and determine Turkey's local politics and decision-making mechanisms. The triumvirate of financial power, regionalism and patronage affect deeply the relationships within political parties. In transforming the urban political reason and language into rural reason and language, it deepens the masculine make-up of local politics.

We can conceive of these three things as a trivet fed by and reproducing, by their very nature, male domination. While serving as gatekeepers controlling the access of individual women to the political scene, they make it nearly impossible for feminist politics and women as political subjects to create their own character, reason and language. Hence, the battle for existence between those who make a political claim, yet do not have access to financial power provided by personal wealth, feudal organizations sustained by regionalism or political patrons that protect all networks.

A woman who wishes to take part in local politics on the street, in the hall or on a chair faces series of enquiries which are fed by certain gender codes that regulate perceptions of roles, during her candidacy and even as a potential candidate. The women's wings of political parties expect women who are candidates to constituencies larger than neighborhoods such as district committees, provincial chairmanship, council membership and governorship to prove their merit continuously. While in many cases of both men and women candidates it is women's education, occupation, financial capability, ability for self-expression and personal savings that are inspected, men are not placed under any scrutiny.

It becomes even more difficult for women who wish to play an active role in politics and are married, or have care responsibilities towards children or the elderly. As the fiction of gender roles equates domestic and care responsibilities directly with women, the judgment that women cannot fulfill any political responsibilities spreads rapidly. The idea that domestic responsibilities are women's primary duty anchored in minds, the belief that women subjects cannot fulfill the daily routines, requirements and rituals of local politics or administrative processes becomes fact.

A series of 'information' with claims that women cannot handle the pressures of working energetically in local politics where temporal and spatial limitations do not exist, respond to local problems, attend late-night meetings, work weekends or outside in harsh weather conditions, travel for work, be a problem-solver, and will gladly rid themselves of their responsibilities are spread via gossip, re-questioning and discrediting women before their career even set on foot.

It is without doubt that the daily routine and workflow of local politics and institutions are not compatible with women's gender roles, and it is for this reason that many women stay out of politics or cannot shoulder administrative duties. As such, we can speak of a particular utilization of time and space with regards local politics and the way in which decision-making mechanisms work, and a male-dominated mechanism in the management of rules and routines. Details, from the choice of place and time for meetings to the language deemed acceptable all reflect the world of masculinity.

Nevertheless, we can say that over the years, women's organizations have achieved in securing a relative level of women's representation in politics. At present, the absence of women in decision-making and representation mechanisms is, in the lightest terms, 'shameful' on the part of political parties, leaders and managers. This achievement, though at times just for show, secures women's participation in governance mechanisms and a certain level of representation. In particular, women's wings, women's councils or quotas in political parties and decision-making bodies ensure the transition from non-existence to presence.

A negative consequence of the failure to further this achievement and confining women's representation to discussions about quotas is that women have conceded that their chances are limited in kind and reserve. The idea that women's representation is limited to quotas or proportions is thus turning political competition into a race between women, which is observed in daily politics in the form of negative propaganda by women, against women, speculations about female nature and getting in the way of each other's success.

We observe an upward trend in women's visibility in municipalities, citizen assemblies and public institutions. Yet, although there is a proliferation in the number of urban policies with a claim to empowering women, we also observe disarray in the concrete, definitive, strategic aspects and the implementation of woman-friendly urban policies.

Training programs and courses that help women improve their skills and qualifications, legal and psychological assistance, sporting events and the like are increasing at the local level. However, there is much less work being done in areas with investment value or a potential for institutional transformation, such as women's shelters, care services, equality units, gender-sensitive performance programs and budgeting and the provision of equality training for staff.

What to do?

Nomination processes

One suggestion is that political parties revise the representation processes in their by-law in order to rid local politics of the effects rural culture, which strengthens the grip of male domination on local politics. Aside from the implementation of quotas, candidacy and candidacy selection processes must be redefined in order to increase women's representation in the rungs of political parties and dismantle the masculinity of politics.

From the moment of potential candidacy to becoming a candidate, the entire process towards local (and even general) political representation is adversely affected by the three aforementioned factors. Should political parties adopt selection mechanisms that use different criteria and positively discriminate in favor of women on top of existing selection processes based on delegations, central appointment, appointment through commissions and caucuses for positions with representational and governmental qualities, we can safely assume that there will be more women and more women who are confident in being themselves in politics and decision-making positions.

Leaving defense and decreasing competition among women

Though the representation of women, who constitute half of where we live, in governance and decision-making positions is still very low, there are platforms, if sometimes for show, where women lead and participate in decision-making processes. The effects of good examples and models that come out of these platforms must be more deeply examined and debated. Taking women's representation and presence out of their display and putting them up for discussion in terms of the concrete effects of women's views and approaches to governmental and political processes will discharge women of the burden of proving and defending themselves. Once the contributions of women's presence and efforts to urban vision and transformation are analyzed, and women's point of view on the city revealed, biases against women's leadership skills will be eroded, and competition amongst women will change, at least in direction and quality.

Encouraging women-friendly cities and municipalities

Standardizing the women-friendly and gender-sensitive policies of municipalities, citizen assemblies and local public institutions will contribute significantly to women's presence and rights at the local level.

With the help of party committees or the relevant central governmental organizations such as the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, the definition, indicators and policies of women-friendly cities must be elaborated. Local initiatives and projects that attain or strive to attain the goal of women-friendly cities must be supported financially through the central budget. Moreover, alongside their rights- and demand-based work in politics and bureaucracy, women's organizations and the women's movement must encourage and recognize those political and bureaucratic initiatives that make a difference in gender policies. Finally, media's support must be attracted in order to publicly showcase 'good examples'. Annual 'good example' events must be organized as spaces for sharing and disseminating local experiences at the national level.

More courage

Women's courage and motivation are the utmost factors that sustain women's presence in politics. Despite the aforementioned challenges, as they encounter stories of success and struggle, women grow more persistent in their presence and claims. Women are encouraged by the supportive and motivating words of their party leaders, and use them as supporting arguments to strengthen women's position in the party. Women's courage and motivation increase every day with each positive step at the central level and with the psychological support they lend each other.

If political leaders have claims to societal transformation, they should listen to history, which says that only those political goals that place women in the center have a social correlate.

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