

# Existing by Mobilising: Commemorating the 1980s Feminist Movement in Turkey

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The main purpose of this article is to approach the first actions of the feminist movement in Turkey in the 1980s in general, without attempting to go in detail into the internal debates of each of the groups that made up the initial core of the feminist action in Turkey. To begin, we should briefly set out a historical contextualisation to explain the socio-political climate of the period. This climate was characterised by the progressive rise of authoritarianism and the strength of the social and political movements, which led to the emergence of the women's movement in the 1980s.

## Political and Social Context of the Country in the 1960s and 1990s. Turkey: The Country of Coups

The Dutch historian Erik Jan Zürcher in his book *Turkey: A Modern History* analyses the modern history of Turkey and divides it into three periods. Zürcher focuses on the period between the 1950s and 1990s and entitles it “A Troubled Democracy”. These decades saw, on the one hand, the development of democratic pluralism and growth of mass movements and, on the other, a succession of military coups in

1960, 1971 and 1980 (Zürcher, 2004: 4). The political expert Hikmet Özdemir (1997) defines the period that began with the parliamentary elections of 1950 as a “multiparty period”.<sup>1</sup> Like many other historians, he adds that the term “pluralism”, used to define the politics played out in Turkey from 1946,<sup>2</sup> does not have the meaning normally attributed to it in political science. According to Özdemir, the main political parties of the 1960s and 1970s did not internalise either the democratic principles or the principles of conservative liberalism (Özdemir, 1997: 191). Similarly, in accordance

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1. The single party period of Turkey ranged from the formation of the Republic in 1923 to 1945, when several political parties were permitted.

2. 1946 was also a decisive year from the purely economic perspective. From 1946, the closed economy based on the balance of foreign markets, which had Turkish state protection, began to gradually open up. In this period, the state began to yield in its economic interventionism, imports began to grow significantly and the trade balance deficit began to be chronic (Boratav, 1997: 311).

with the political expert and social scientist Tanil Bora, the Democratic Party (DP)<sup>3</sup> during its mandate in the 1950s chose to build an authoritarian regime, which went against the enthusiastic defence of liberal rhetoric it expressed when in opposition between 1946 and 1950.

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After the removal of the DP government with the 1960 coup, the military coup leaders ordered the preparation of a new “more liberal”<sup>4</sup> constitution, compared with the Magna Carta of 1215. With the 1961 constitution a new stage<sup>5</sup> began, characterised, on the one hand, by greater tolerance of political activity compared to previous times, which affected both the left and right (Zürcher, 2004: 246), and, on the other, by a greater legitimacy of military intervention in the political life of the country. In this same vein, Özdemir believes that the 1960 military coup was not only a break with multiparty politics but also

an opening to future coups d'état and military regimes as hegemonic instruments, instead of promoting democratic mechanisms in times of crisis (Özdemir, 1997:201).

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In terms of economic policy, the period before 1962 has qualitatively distinct characteristics compared with the period before and those following the Republic. In the 1960s, the political elites tried to build a national economy based on state planning, but they did not take long to establish in Turkey the same consumer rules applicable in more advanced

3. The Democratic Party [*Demokrat Parti*] was founded on 7 January 1946, when the foundation of political parties was legalised.

4. The characteristics of the 1961 constitution that define it as a more liberal constitution are the following: counteract the National Assembly through other institutions; create a senate as a second legislative chamber; for an independent constitutional court, and guarantee the total autonomy of the judicial power, the universities and the media. Moreover, through the 1971 constitution, the military won a notable space of power with the establishment of the National Security Council [*Millî Güvenlik Kurulu*].

5. Zürcher (2014) defines this period as that of the Second Turkish Republic (1960-80).



View of Ankara (IEMed Collection).

capitalist societies.<sup>6</sup> The growing demand for merchandise and productive assets meant that the economy depended on imports while the stagnation of exports continued. Consequently, between 1962 and 1976, the country's economy was increasingly more dependent on foreign credit in order to maintain a high and steady growth rate (Boratav, 1997: 326-327). Moreover, the industrial proletariat also grew in this period along with the consolidation of trade unions, the workers' movement and stu-

dent and left-wing movements.<sup>7</sup> According to the Marxist economist Sungur Savran (2010), two events marked this period. On the one hand, the industrial bourgeoisie became the prevailing force of the political elites because of the accumulation of industrial capital and, on the other, the working class for the first time entered the political scene en masse. According to Savran, it would be impossible to understand the history of the years between the 1960s and 1990s in Turkey without bear-

6. Faced with the growing demand for long-lasting consumer goods such as fridges, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, white goods in general and cars, an industry within the country was created with the help of foreign capital investment. Thus, the production process continued to depend on technology and the basic inputs that came from abroad (Boratav, 1997: 327). Moreover, it is worth pointing out that the growing use of long-lasting consumer goods notably reduced – and still does – the time women spend on housework. This may seem an insignificant detail but the objective conditions were and are very clear. As women free themselves from housework, they have more time for other activities, such as resting, reading, writing and participating in feminist activism.

7. We should note that the political elites, despite seeming permissive in terms of the growth of the left-wing mobilisation, were in fact firmly committed to the anticommunist principles (Bora, 2017: 547).

ing in mind these two events (Savran, 2010: 184). In this scenario in which the factions of social antagonism became highly visible and influential in parliamentary politics, political parties did not manage to reach an agreement to form a government until the middle of the decade. The 1965 elections were repeated and the Justice Party (AP),<sup>8</sup> the heir to the abolished the DP, had an absolute majority (52.9%). These results show that the AP managed to win the votes of DP followers.

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The second half of the 1960s was very eventful at a political level. New political actors appeared,<sup>9</sup> there were many internal power conflicts within the governing party and the most right-wing sectors split and founded another political party. The discourse of the People's Republican Party (CHP) shifted to the left and there was also a fragmentation of the faction more to the right. Moreover, the last years of the 1970s were very fruitful

in relation to the debates of the left-wing parties and sectors. In 1969 the last elections before the 1971 memorandum were held, with quite low participation. The AP maintained the parliamentary majority, despite the great discontent of its members, mainly landowners and small traders. The new government of Demirel was incapable of controlling the social upheaval.<sup>10</sup>

Under these circumstances, on 12 March 1971, the Head of the General Staff handed the Prime Minister a memorandum requesting the formation of a strong and credible government to end the "anarchy" and undertake reforms in keeping with Atatürk's ideology (Zürcher, 2004: 258; Ahmad, 1993: 148). While Prime Minister Demirel and other leaders of the different political parties denounced any military interference in politics, the military coup leaders sought a prime minister acceptable to the Assembly that would provide them with effective political control. In contrast to the immediate assessment of some left-wing sectors, the 1971 memorandum had been made by fundamentalist military leaders whose main concern was the communist threat. Despite the formation of the new government<sup>11</sup> and the constitutional changes in favour of the status quo, the context of violence did not stop. There were many confrontations between groups of left-wing and right-wing students and some of them ended with death. The state of

8. The liberal conservative Justice Party [*Adalet Partisi*] was founded 1961. Four years later, Süleyman Demirel became the party's leader.

9. In the late 1960s, the first party belonging to political Islam, the National Order Party [*Millî Nizam Partisi*, MNP] was founded, led by Necmettin Erbakan. The MNP was organised by former militants that came from the political Islam movement Milli Görüş. The party currently governing Turkey, the AKP, belongs to the same political movement.

10. On 15 and 16 June 1970 Turkey saw one of the biggest marches of its history by the working class. The Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions [*Türkiye Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu*, DISK] protested forcefully against the AP government's new legislation that restricted the right to collective negotiation, right to strike and lock-out. Protests broke out in which over 75,000 workers participated. The Council of Ministers declared a state of emergency for 60 days due to the difficulty of controlling the protests.

11. The new government made a series of crucial changes. The National Security Council (MGK) gained even more power with these reforms of the constitution. From 1971, the MGK could give binding advice not requested by the government. The State Security Courts [*Devlet Güvenlik Mahkemeleri*, DGM] were also created.

emergency that began on 28 April 1971 was extended every two months for two years; many attempts to strike by workers from the industrial sector were violently prevented by the policy; almost 5,000 people were arrested, including many writers, journalists, university professors, the main members of the Workers' Party of Turkey (TIP) and renowned trade unionists. There were generalised reports of torture both in prisons and police stations (Zürcher, 2004: 259). This witch hunt, which began just after the 1971 memorandum, clearly showed the sectors targeted by state terrorism (Özdemir, 1997: 228, 232; Kongar, 1998: 174). The 1973 elections took place under these circumstances.

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In January 1974 the government was formed with the surprising coalition between the CHP and the National Salvation Party (MSP).<sup>12</sup> The period between 1973 and 1980 was characterised, at a parliamentary political level, by very weak coalition governments. From 1973 to the 1980 coup, in less than seven years, there were seven different governments, and none was capable of taking effective measures at a time when society was immersed in permanent violence and a growing economic crisis.<sup>13</sup> In the late 1970s, the country's economy was very vulnerable because of industry's

dependence on imports and an almost permanent deficit. With the oil crisis, the price of energy rocketed and the irresponsible financial policies of the governments fuelled inflation (Zürcher, 2004: 267; Ahmad, 1993: 176). Moreover, the confrontations between right-wing and left-wing groups intensified, the violence of the right-wing groups targeted the Alevî community and groups of political Islam became increasingly visible. Amidst this situation, the Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK) was founded in 1978, with the objective of constructing a Kurdish and socialist state in south-eastern Turkey.

The 12 September 1980 coup marked the start of the Third Republic. The communiqué of General Kenan Evren informed Turkey about the new military intervention and its reasons: "to safeguard the unity of the country and the nation and the rights and liberties of the people, ensuring the life, ownership, happiness and prosperity of the people, guaranteeing the supremacy of law and order"; in other words, re-establishing the state's authority.

It is very difficult to summarise all the events after the 1980 coup. It immediately dissolved the parliament, cancelled the immunity of deputies, abolished all political parties, closed the newspapers and cancelled the activities of two radical trade union confederations. The leaders of the political parties and many journalists were arrested and all the mayors were dismissed. In one year, 12,600 people were arrested (Zürcher, 2004: 279). Some of the members of left-wing groups that were not immediately arrested tried to leave the country and began a new life in exile, mainly in Europe.

12. The National Salvation Party [*Millî Selamet Partisi*, MSP], the successor of the National Order Party, derived from the political Islam movement *Millî Görüş*, had 11.80% of the votes. The MSP advocated the economic and social order shaped according to religious principles and had a discourse based on criticism of imperialism and the expansion of capitalism.

13. During this period, the military regime could only lower the salaries, halt the increase in prices, make constitutional changes and attack the socialists and the leaders of youth movements and trade unions. Nevertheless, the workers' and youth movements remained active. From 1973, the progressive movements revived, which showed that the main dynamic of the post-1960 period was the opposition of the masses and the consolidation of the workers' movement (Savran, 2010: 196-197).

Torture was widespread and regularly applied.<sup>14</sup> The trials were held before military courts and under martial law. In November 1981, the Higher Education Law was passed, whose objective was to “de-politicise” the universities by expelling academics and studies in favour of the centre-left (Ahmad, 1993: 185). On 17 July 1982 a commission prepared the first draft of a new constitution, which cancelled almost all the rights and freedoms included in the 1960 constitution. The new constitution concentrated power in the hands of the government, limited the freedom of the press and the freedom of trade unions and proposed the prohibition of political strikes and solidarity strikes. On 17 November 1982 a referendum was held to approve the new constitution. Participation was obligatory and the new constitution was approved by 91.4% of the votes.<sup>15</sup>

## The 1980s Feminist Movement in Turkey<sup>16</sup>

The feminist movement in Turkey emerged during the arduous circumstances following the 1980 coup, with a background replete with yearning, indignation and hope. Most women that formed part of the different feminist movements that emerged in the 1980s were intellectuals who had previously been members of left-wing organisations. The feminist movement was criticised for several reasons.

In the first place, it was accused of being an Eylülüst<sup>17</sup> movement and feminists were seen as opportunists who benefited from the political vacuum that emerged after the 12 September coup.

“We were incredulous people who did not support the socialists, who betrayed socialism, who abandoned the revolutionary duty, who deserved to be called whores” (Handan Koç, 2011: 285).

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Secondly, feminism was criticised for being a middle-class movement, because the women who led the movement came from urban areas, were second generation and had higher education studies. They were criticised for discovering feminism through the West and seeing their lives through its prism (Aksu Bora, 2011: 17). Thirdly, feminism was rejected by the groups that called themselves socialist for being a liberal and reformist movement. In short, it can be argued that these criticisms are related to and based on the same conventionalist rejection, which refused to acknowledge the revolutionary identity of the feminist movement and its necessary emergence among women who had

14. The military prison of Diyarbakır was one of the places where torture was applied systematically. The authorities arrested and put in prison thousands of members and followers of the different Kurdish groups. At least 4,000 members of Kurdish organisations were sent to the military prison of Diyarbakır. According to the reports of the Turkish General Staff [*Genelkurmay Başkanlığı*], at least 53 prisoners died there between 1980 and 1984. It is estimated that hundreds of people arrested ended up crippled (Orhan, 2016: 112, 198).

15. Only the regions of the southeast of the country, where Kurds live, voted in relatively high percentages against the approval of the new constitution (Zürcher, 2004: 281).

16. In the period before the 1980s, left-wing women mobilised through associations such as the Association of Progressive Women, founded in 1975, the Association of Women of Ankara or the Association of Revolutionary Women. These organisations did not call themselves feminist, despite their power to organise as women’s associations.

17. *Eylül* is a Turkish word that means September and *Eylülüst* is an example of lexicalisation that would mean those who benefit from *Eylül*, in reference to the 12 September 1980 coup.



Feminist protest in Ankara, 1987 (Özgür Günes Öztürk).

been politically ignored, both in left-wing organisations and society as a whole.

According to different sources, the women's movement in the 1980s was started on the initiative of women such as Şirin Tekeli, Gülnur Savran and Stella Ovidia, who began to meet as an awareness-raising and translation group from May 1981,<sup>18</sup> under the aegis of the YAZKO cooperative.<sup>19</sup> These three women were organised in the trade union TÜMAS.<sup>20</sup> "The nets of our common destiny began to be women in TÜMAS. There we became aware of our secondary position and the sexual division of work that existed in our beloved organisation, which we thought was the most democratic and egalitarian of all the mass organisations" (Gülnur Acar Savran, 2018).

Despite the disagreements that ended with their separation from the YAZKO cooperative, they managed to organise the first "Conference on Women's Problems", held from 20 to 23 April 1982, which gave feminism a platform for the first time. The organisers, including Tomris Uyar, Zeynep Karabey, Oya Çiftçi, Şule Torun and Şirin Tekeli, invited Gisèle Halimi, a feminist lawyer from Tunisia and pro-human rights activist. "In fact, the director of YAZKO wanted to invite Simone de Beauvoir to Turkey, but we thought that we had to be more modest [...]. Halimi was a feminist from the developing world; inviting her could invalidate the accusation they made against us for copying things from the West" (Şirin Tekeli, 1989).

18. Due to the state of emergency, women met at night in the house of a woman of the group.

19. YAZKO [*Sınırlı Sorumlu Yazar ve Çevirmenler Yayın Üretim Kooperatifi*] is the first Turkish cooperative of writers and translators, founded on 22 April 1980.

20. TÜMAS was the trade union of doctoral candidate researchers [*Tüm Asistanlar Sendikası*].

After this conference, the feminism debate in Turkey experienced major growth. The translation group formed by these women began to translate the writings and books of feminists into Turkish. From that moment, the magazine *Somut*, produced by the YAZKO cooperative, dedicated its fourth page to the publication of feminist articles, which were published from 4 February to 5 August 1983. On the fourth page, women wrote about gender-based violence, the right to abortion, discrimination, feminism, and so on: “What youths experienced during the Gezi resistance was the fourth page for us; this outlet had the same function for us. It began with incredible strength because we could share the uncertainty, anger and revolt over being the second sex” (Stella Ovadia, 2013).

*Somut* was the magazine most read by women in this period thanks to the articles published on its fourth page. Women followed the thread of the debates initiated in these articles and different awareness-raising groups were created. The main pillar of the meetings of these groups was based on the argument that “everything that is personal is political.” During the initial stages in the awareness-raising groups, women shared their experiences but later debates focused on different feminist works. As Timisi and Ağduk (2002) explain in their article on the 1980s feminist movement, in Ankara, the hierarchical and organisational issues were the key topics for the awareness-raising groups. As these groups grew, problems emerged due to the complaints from some women, including the youngest, those who joined the group later or others who had no experience as members of left-wing organisations (Timisi and Ağduk, 2002: 15-19). “These newcomers felt less competent, weaker and more naïve compared with

the women who joined first, which created a beginner-veteran stratification. This bothered us and we have always tried to resolve it” (Interview with Yıldız Ecevit in 2000, quoted in Timisi and Ağduk, 2002: 19).

Moreover, women who began to publish on the fourth page of *Somut* formed, in March 1984, the Circle of Women [*Kadın Çevresi*], after realising that this outlet was no longer enough<sup>21</sup> and it was time to build their own structures. In the same period the YAZKO board of directors changed and feminists had problems again with the new board, formed by people from the orthodox left. Finally, they left *Somut* after the publication of a letter in the magazine (Interview with Şirin Tekeli on the website 5 Harfliler, 30 June 2016).

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The final period in *Somut* did not involve any weakening of the organisation of the feminist movement. The core of the Istanbul feminist group had grown and in 1984 they decided to establish a publishing house to release books on feminism. This is how the Circle of Women Publishing House was founded, which along with researching feminist theory and translating books, from 1986 began to organise campaigns that gradually turned feminism into a mass movement. On 7 March 1986, feminists organised a campaign to collect signatures calling for the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

21. Stella Ovadia, in her article “Fitting on one page”, published on the fourth page of *Somut* on 15 April 1983, asked: “Why be restricted to one page?” This article was reprinted in *Osmanoğlu* (2015: 138).



The UN signed in favour of the implementation of the CEDAW in 1979 and Turkey did so in 1985. Feminists launched a campaign to call for amendments to the constitution, the laws and their implementation in accordance with the Convention and had the support of women journalists such as Zeynep Oral and Meral Tamer. During the preparation of the campaign the Association of Women Against Discrimination was founded, in which they actively participated. The document prepared by the organising committee reached many women and, at the end of the campaign, they had collected four thousand signatures. The petitions were submitted to parliament on 8 March 1987.

The march against gender-based violence [*Dayağa Karşı Yürüyüş*] of 17 May 1987 was the most important demonstration and with the largest repercussion after the 1980 coup. The march began at Yoğurtçu Park in Istanbul and had the participation of 2,500 women.<sup>22</sup> Women organised it as a result of the ruling of a judge against the petition for divorce from a woman who suffered gender-based violence. The fight against gender-based violence was not limited to this march but continued through the campaign. In 1988 the book *Shout, Everyone Is Listening* [*Bağır Herkes Duysun*] was published, featuring the experiences of women who had been abused. According to Mine Koçak (2007), this book is important because it shows that the campaign was fruitful, and can be seen as an example of collective awareness for many women.

Moreover, a group of women<sup>23</sup> who formed part of the Women's Circle decided to develop and publish a feminist magazine. According to

Handan Koç (2013), *Feminist*, published from March 1987 to March 1990, was the result of the debate on the idea of the publication of a feminist manifesto that finally ended with the decision to publish it. *Feminist* was the first Turkish publication whose title featured the word and, undoubtedly, it occupies a very important space in the collective memory of the country's feminists. *Kaktüs* and *Pazartesi* were feminist magazines published later. The magazine *Socialista Feminista Kaktüs* was considered in its time different from the other publications linked to equality feminism and radical feminism. It advocated the idea that sexism was not just an ideological issue but was rooted in capitalist social relations and called for a radical transformation to eliminate it.

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Moreover, in Ankara, from 1987, feminists began to organise meetings in the Association of Architects of Ankara while continuing with their meetings every Thursday on the premises they had rented. This group was later called the Perşembe Group and published the fortnightly magazine *Yeter*, of which twelve issues were published. Feminists such as Aksu Bora, İnci Kerestecioğlu, Nükhet Sirman and Aynur Demirdirek formed part of the Perşembe Group.

Meanwhile, the feminist groups continued to organise campaigns, demonstrations and collective actions. Among the most important

22. The feminist activist Filiz Kerestecioğlu wrote and composed the song entitled *There are women* [*Kadınlar vardır*] for the 17 May 1987 march. Her song became unforgettable and one of the mottos of the 1980s feminist movement. At present, Kerestecioğlu is a deputy for the People's Democratic Party (HDP).

23. Handan Koç was the owner and editor-in-chief of the magazine *Feminist*. Its contributors included women such as Ayşe Düzka, Handan Koç, Gül Özlen, Figan Erozan, Minu, Defne, Filiz K., Serpil and Stella Ovadia.

actions we can mention is the Kariye Street Festival, also known as the Women's Festival, on 4 October 1987; the First Feminist Congress held in Ankara on 11 and 12 February 1989, also known as the feminist weekend, or the Purple Needle [*Mor iğne Kampanyası*] campaign against sexual harassment on 2nd November 1989 and the march of 8 March 1989.

Thanks to the campaign of the same name, the expression "purple needle" today evokes the fight against sexual harassment and the slogan "Our body belongs to us". The decision to organise a campaign against sexual harassment was made during the first Feminist Congress held on 11 and 12 February 1989. The campaign began in Ankara on 14 October 1989 and in Istanbul on 2 November 1989, with the protest of the feminist activist Filiz Karakuş on the Kadıköy-Karaköy ferry. Karakuş began her protest selling a purple needle to women and inviting them to nail it on the aggressor when they were sexually harassed. In 1990 the Mor Çatı Foundation for physically, psychologically and/or sexually abused women was created, which must be considered one of the most important milestones of the campaigns against gender-based violence and sexual harassment.

The first Feminist Congress was one of the most important actions of the 1980s feminist movement. The Perşembe Group based in Ankara took the initiative and invited all the feminists in the country to debate feminism from within. The main objective of the Congress was to discuss the future of the feminist movement and define the common demands of women that want to practise feminist in

Turkey (Timisi and Ağduk, 2002: 28). The Congress was attended by different organisations, magazines, groups and feminist women from Istanbul and Ankara. Based on the debates,<sup>24</sup> the participating feminists wrote the Declaration of Women's Liberation, published in the feminist magazines *Kaktüs* and *Feminist* in March 1989.

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The Women's Assembly, held in Istanbul on 19 May 1989, can be considered the last collective action of the 1980s feminist movement. Although the initial idea emerged from a delegation of women from the Association of Human Rights of Istanbul [*İnsan Hakları Derneği*], a commission was constituted formed by feminist groups and women to prepare the assembly. From the beginning, there were discrepancies between feminist women and women who were members of left-wing organisations. The controversies between these two groups worsened during the three days of the congress. Given this situation, feminists left the assembly and the statement released at the end of it revealed the internal division; while feminist women called for a fully independent fight when dealing with the issue of women, the other group advocated a type of joint fight, in which women's and working class freedom were united.<sup>25</sup> The conflicts that emerged during the assembly show that the left-wing

24. The Congress mainly discussed issues related to women's politics, gender relations, feminist identity, feminist theory, proposals for future actions, feminist organisation, and solidarity and communication (Timisi and Ağduk, 2002: 28).

25. Although the assembly further revealed these conflicts, it was a very important collective experience. On the one hand, it highlighted the needs of the feminist struggle and was decisive when taking sides with respect to the practicalities of this struggle. On the other, in the assembly seventy papers were presented on the situation of Kurdish women. In this article, we have not explained the organisation of Kurdish women because in the 1980s it was not possible to speak of the existence of an independent movement or a feminist movement of Kurdish women.

organisation did not change their posture of rejection for a decade.

## Conclusions

The 1980s feminist movement emerged and quickly developed in a period in which the military regime pursued and oppressed all the left-wing and progressive groups. From its appearance and for one decade, at no time did it stop confronting most left-wing sectors, which criticised it for being a bourgeois and reformist movement. Turkey, a country of coups and states of emergency, applied conservative and very repressive policies, which also determined the practices of the left-wing sectors that fought against the state as these practices were also violent and conservative. This fact led left-wing sectors opposing the existing system to confront feminism, which did not only dream of a socialist oasis. In a country in which repression and militarism shaped social relations so deeply, 1980s feminism, with its determination and perseverance, left an incalculable legacy in terms of the struggle of feminism.

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