Islamic Studies 61:4 (2022) pp. 385-406

Reading the Middle East through the Lens of Women's Press in Turkey: The Case of *Women's Voice* Monthly (1975-1980)

FAIKA ÇELİK[*]
ALIYE GAMZE SARITUNALI[**]

Abstract

The Progressive Women's Association (PWA), founded in 1975 under the auspices of the Turkish Communist Party (TCP) when second-wave feminism was on the rise in Europe, emerged as the largest and most significant women's organization in Turkey's recent history. However, the organization did not position itself within the feminist paradigm. Instead, it worked for women's causes without a feminist lineage. Thus, one of the principal questions of this study is how and to what extent the women's movement in Europe, particularly second-wave feminism, was reflected by the women who founded the PWA and mobilized thousands of women during its five-year existence before it was shut down following the military coup in 1980. By relying on the journal Kadınların Sesi (Women's Voice) published by the PWA, this study attempts to analyse how and to what extent women of the PWA followed and interpreted Middle East politics and specifically the condition of women in the Middle East. Previous studies on the PWA and its role in the history of the Turkish women's movement have focused on locating the PWA within the socio-political context of modern Turkish history in general, and Turkish women's history in particular. This study departs from the existing literature and unpacks how these women reflected upon the world in which they lived by focusing on what they wrote about the Middle East and women in the region.

Keywords

women, press, Turkey, progressive Women's Association, feminism.

Introduction

The second wave of the feminist movement, which emerged during the 1960s and lasted roughly two decades, refers to an active period shaped

[*] Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Manisa Celal Bayar University, Turkey.
[**] MA Student, Women's Studies, Manisa Celal Bayar University, Turkey.

https://doi.org/10.52541/isiri.v61i4.2580

by the intellectual development of women who had access to universities, criticized evolving socio-political systems, demanded gender equality, and insisted on solidarity among women. Although second-wave feminism was centred in the West, the issues addressed within the movement gradually spread throughout the world, with Turkey being no exception. Nevertheless, the impacts of second-wave feminism were not immediately felt in Turkey. Rather, they were experienced more than a decade later.

The Progressive Women's Association (PWA), founded during the period when second-wave feminism was on the rise in Europe, emerged as the largest and most significant women's organization established in Turkey's recent history. However, this organization, which was established in 1975 under the auspices of the Turkish Communist Party (TCP) and shut down following the military coup of 1980, did not position itself within the feminist paradigm. Instead, it was a large and broad-based women's organization that worked for women's causes but without a feminist lineage. Indeed, as argued by Keşoğlu, one of the pioneer writers on socialist women's organizations in Turkey in the 1970s, "The socialist women of the period tried to recruit women for (the) struggle without ever pronouncing feminism, or even without clearly expressing socialism."[1]

Thus, one of the principal questions of this study is how and to what extent the women's movement in Europe, particularly second-wave feminism, was reflected by the women who founded the PWA and mobilized thousands of women during its five-year existence. More significantly, this study attempts to analyse how and to what extent women of the PWA followed and interpreted Middle East politics and the condition of women in the Middle East. To address these questions, this article will focus on the journal *Kadınların Sesi* (*Women's Voice*) published by the PWA.[2] While we primarily focus on the journal itself, recent oral history interviews conducted with members of the PWA are also utilized to complement issues raised in the journal and to highlight issues omitted from the journal. Some of the questions addressed throughout the article include: How did the PWA women identify themselves? Why did the PWA

[1] Birsen Talay Keşoğlu, "1970'lerin En Kitlesel Kadın Örgütü: İlerici Kadınlar Derneği," *Kültür ve Siyasette Feminist Yaklaşımlar*, 12 (2010): 64.

[2] Within the scope of this research, all issues of the *Kadınların Sesi* (*Women's Voice*) published from 1975 to 1980, except the twenty-fourth issue dated August 1977, which is closed to the public, have been accessed from the online public archive of the Social History Research Foundation of Turkey (TÜSTAV) at https://www.tustav.org/sureli-yayinlar-arsivi/kadinlarin-sesi/.

distance itself from the various feminisms that emerged in Europe and North America? What issues raised within the discourse of second-wave feminism in the West were also discussed by the PWA, and which issues were silenced or completely left out of the journal? What were the reasons behind this silencing? More importantly, how did these women with a radical leftist lineage reflect upon what was happening in the Middle East in general and among Middle Eastern women in particular?

There have been several significant studies on the PWA and its role in the history of the Turkish women's movement.[3] However, these studies primarily located the PWA within the socio-political context of modern Turkish history in general and Turkish women's history in particular. Our study departs from the existing literature in that it unpacks the question of how these women reflected upon the world in which they lived by focusing on what they wrote about the Middle East in general and about women of the Middle East in particular.

Birth of the Progressive Women's Association (PWA)

By the end of the 1960s, diverse voices were raised in almost every corner of the world, particularly in the West. Among them was the anti-Vietnam War movement in the United States and student voices throughout Western Europe, especially in France and Germany, which sparked a variety of movements. By the 1970s, many former dictatorial regimes that had held power for years had collapsed: Franco fascism in Spain; Salazar fascism in Portugal; Colonels' Junta in Greece; and others. In Turkey, as in the rest of the world, the late 1960s and the 1970s were very active periods for political movements.[4] With military coups at both the beginning and

[3] Saadet Arıkan and İlerici Kadınlar Derneği, *Ve Hep Birlikte Koştuk* (İstanbul: Açı Yayıncılık, 1996); Emel Akal, *Kızıl Feministler: Bir sözlü tarih çalışması* (Istanbul: Türkiye Sosyal Tarih Araştırma Vakfı, 2003); Birsen Talay Keşoğlu, "Socialist Women's Organizations in Turkey 1975-1980" (PhD diss., Boğaziçi University, 2007); Muazzez Pervan and İlerici Kadınlar Derneği, *İlerici Kadınlar Derneği (1975-1980): Kırmızı Çatkılı Kadınlar'ın Tarihi* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2013); Özlem Akkaya, "1970'lerin İkinci Yarısında Türkiye'de Sosyalizm ve Kadın: Kadınların Sesi Dergisi Karikatürleri," *Egemia* 3 (2018): 66-112.

[4] As observed by Gümrükçü, although the 1970s politically mobilized different segments of Turkish society, there exists very limited scholarship on how these different segments coming from various ideological backgrounds were organized and become politically active. Selin Bengi Gümrükçü, "Reconstructing a Cycle of Protest: Protest and Politics in Turkey, 1971–1985" (PhD diss., University of Zurich, 2014). For the student movement of the period see Emin Alper, "Student Movement in Turkey from a Global Perspective, 1960–1971" (PhD diss., Boğaçizi University, 2009). For the labour movements of the

end of the decade, the 1970s in Turkey were marked by deep political and economic crises.[5] Though only two national elections were held (1973 and 1977), Turkey was governed by ten different coalitions from 1971 until the military coup of September 1980. The oil crisis of 1973–1974, Turkey's intervention in Cyprus in 1974, the foreign trade deficit, and scarce financial resources deepened economic crises and contributed to political instability. The youth unemployment rate increased dramatically, and internal migration and rapid urbanization created a challenging environment for not only the youth but also for the working-class communities living on the margins of the cities. As a result of these political, social, and economic changes, the 1970s appear as the years when the working class was strongly organized, student movements created a large area of influence in society, and peasants mobilized to defend their land and labour rights. Furthermore, the 1970s were characterized by political violence. Existing research demonstrates that more than 5,000 people were killed during street protests and violence from 1976 to 1980.[6] As demonstrated by Gümrükçü, while both the left and right-wing groups were very much part of the everyday political violence seen on the streets, the left emerged as heavily factionalized,[7] whereas the right was mainly represented by the youth who were part of the far-right organization called *Ülkü Ocakları* (Idealist Hearths).[8]

Despite various divisions within the left, the 1970s emerged as a period of expansion, popularity, and legitimation of the left.[9] During this period, the Turkish left was involved in various discussions of equality, social justice, and being the voice of subalterns. The 1970s are not thoroughly examined in modern Turkish historiography; nevertheless, existing research suggests that structural problems such as

---

period, see Brian Mello "Political Process and the Development of Labor Insurgency in Turkey, 1945–80," *Social Movement Studies* 6, no. 3 (2007): 207-25.

[5] Michael M. Gunter, "Political Instability in Turkey during the 1970s," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 9, no. 1 (1989): 63-77.

[6] Sabri Sayarı, "Political Violence and Terrorism in Turkey, 1976–80: A Retrospective Analysis," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 2 (2010): 198, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550903574438.

[7] The main axis of division within the left was the two main poles of the socialist world—the Soviet Union and China—with various factions in between.

[8] Selin Bengi Gümrükçü, "Ideology, Discourse, and Alliance Structures: Explaining Far-Right Political Violence in Turkey in the 1970s," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34 (2021): 1, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1895121.

[9] İlker Aytürk and Tanıl Bora, "Yetmişli Yıllarda Sağ-Sol Kutuplaşmasında Siyasi Düşünceler," in *Türkiye'nin 1970'li Yılları*, ed. Mete Kaan Kaynar (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2020), 308.

underdevelopment, foreign dependency, and inequality of opportunity were increasingly discussed among Turkish intelligentsia of the period, especially those situated on the left.[10] Indeed, the concepts of inequality and exploitation emerged as buzzwords in the political discourse of the period. Between 1960 and 1980, the labour movement in Turkey gained rapid upward momentum. While the number of unionized workers was only 300,000 in 1963, it reached about 2 million by the end of the 1970s.[11] In addition, 1977 was the year when both the number of workers participating in strikes and the number of working days lost to strikes were the highest.[12]

During the 1970s, women comprised a significant portion of these mass movements organized by various political spectrums of the Turkish political landscape, especially by the left.[13] Nevertheless, the "women's question" was not on the agenda of the Turkish left of the period. The reason behind this ignorance appears to be that the Turkish left did not consider the women's question as an independent question distinct from the class struggle. As noted by Keşoğlu, "the class-based approach of the left movement of the period simply amounted to ignoring the women's question entirely. To them, feminism was a deviant, bourgeois movement. Indeed, the term 'feminist' was used as a word to denigrate and insult."[14] For instance, in *Kadınların Sesi*, the PWA periodical, it is claimed that feminism means that women wear no bras.[15] Thus, while feminism was seen as a basis for social change in Europe during the 1970s, in Turkey it

[10] The 1970s is still regarded as one of the most unexplored periods in the history of modern Turkey. In this regard, see Ömer Turan, "Bu Sayıda . . . Alternatif Tahayüller, Devingenlik, Popülizm: 1970'ler İçin Bir Çerçeve Denemesi," *Toplum ve Bilim* 127, no. 2 (2013): 3-24. Recently, different aspects of the 1970s were explored in an edited volume published in Turkish. Mete Kaan Kaynar ed., *Türkiye'nin 1970'li Yılları* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2020). For a general overview of the period, see Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (London: Routledge, 1993); Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (Indiana: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017).

[11] Sungur Savran et al., "Halk İsyanının Sınıf Karakteri Üzerine Notlar," in *Marksizm ve Sınıflar: Dünyada ve Türkiye'de Sınıflar ve Mücadeleleri*, ed. Sungur Savran, Kurtar Tanyılmaz, and E. Ahmet Tonak (İstanbul: Yordam, 2015), 295.

[12] Anonymous, *Petrol-İş Yıllığı* (Ankara: Petrol-İş, 1988), 148.

[13] For the women's movement of the period, see Sevgi Adak, "Yetmisli Yıllarda Kadın Hareketi: Yeni Bir Feminizmin Ayak Sesleri," in *Türkiye'nin Yetmişli Yılları*, ed. Mete Kaan Kaynar (Istanbul: İletisim Yayınları, 2020), 609-29.

[14] Keşoğlu, "Socialist Women's Organizations in Turkey 1975-1980," 151.

[15] "Kadınlar Hakkında Yanlış Görüşler [Misconceptions About Women]," *Kadınların Sesi,* no. 1 (1975), 3.

was generally conceived as a bourgeois ideology that might be an obstacle to the revolution.

Given this antifeminist climate, it is surprising that the period gave rise to the Progressive Women's Association, one of the largest women's organizations in contemporary Turkish history. The PWA was officially established on June 3, 1975, and suspended from its activities by the Istanbul Martial Law Command on April 28, 1979. Within its almost four years of existence, the PWA organized 33 branches and 35 agencies, with a total of 15,000 members. The PWA's journal, *Kadınların Sesi* (*Women's Voice*), had a circulation of 30,000.[16] Both the primary materials from the time and the limited existing literature suggest that the foundation of the PWA was dependent on three interrelated factors: the internal dynamics of the Turkish left; international developments; and the initiative of Turkish women.

In the second half of the 1970s, the Turkish left was searching for ways to get women involved in the "class struggle" and began to focus on problems that were unique to women. The PWA was one of the first examples of this effort. It was founded with the support of *Türkiye Komünist Partisi* (TKP or Turkish Communist Party [TCP]), which attempted to establish a seemingly independent women's organization in 1974 aimed at gathering women from different left-wing camps under one roof. It has been suggested that "the TKP, because it was an illegal party, gave special weight to women's organization since it did not have the chance to form a widespread organization legally."[17] Furthermore, the TCP's emphasis on women's issues stems from its efforts to make a breakthrough in its policy and to construct a "pro-party" women's organization, similar to those of other communist parties across the world.[18]

Another factor affecting the establishment of the PWA was the United Nations' declaration of 1975 as International Women's Year, which heightened interest in women's issues in Turkey. Associations founded by elite women already existed in Turkey during this period.[19] Unlike those associations, which were primarily involved with charitable work, the PWA positioned itself as an association that prioritized the concerns of

[16] Arıkan and İlerici Kadınlar Derneği, *Ve Hep Birlikte Koştuk,* 11.

[17] Keşoğlu, "Socialist Women's Organizations in Turkey 1975-1980," 22.

[18] Arıkan and İlerici Kadınlar Derneği, *Ve Hep Birlikte Koştuk,* 15.

[19] On this, see Adak, "Yetmisli Yıllarda Kadın Hareketi;" Umut Azak and Henk De Smaele, "National and Transnational Dynamics of Women's Activism in Turkey in the 1950s and 1960s: The Story of the ICW Branch in Ankara," *Journal of Women's History* 28, no. 3 (2016): 41-65.

workers and working women and emphasized the challenges faced by the working class rather than the bourgeoisie. In this respect, as the organization's documents, a review of its activities, and oral testimonies of its members demonstrate, the PWA from its inception gave the utmost importance to developing international alliances and solidarity with women living in different parts of the world. It may be argued that the PWA's alliance with the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), one of the largest and most significant transnational women's organizations of the period,[20] constitutes one of the landmarks in the history of the PWA. Founded in post-war Paris in 1945 by women from 40 different nations, the WIDF, in the words of Francisca de Hanan, can be identified as "a progressive, 'left-feminist,' international umbrella organization with a focus on peace, women's rights, anti-colonialism, and anti-racism."[21] Existing research on the WIDF demonstrates that the organization had close ties to the communist world, and many of its prominent leaders were communists. Nevertheless, the organization and its affiliated organizations also included a sizeable number of progressive but non-communist women, and this situation persisted throughout its long history.[22] Due to its vocal opposition to the deployment of French troops to Vietnam and the distribution of a special report on American war crimes in Korea, the WIDF was forced to depart France and relocated its headquarters to East Berlin in 1951.[23] In the 1970s and 1980s, the organization was so powerful that it had members from more than 100 different countries and influenced significant UN initiatives including the 1975 UN International Women's Year, which served as the impetus for

[20] According to Francisca de Haan, the International Council of Women (ICW), the International Alliance of Women (IAW), and the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) were the three biggest international women's organizations of the post-1945 world. Francisca de Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organizations: The Case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)," *Women's History Review* 19, no. 4 (2010): 547-48.

[21] Haan, "The Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF): History, Main Agenda and Contributions (1945–1991)," in *Women and Social Movements (WASI) Online Archive*, ed. Thomas Dublin and Kathryn Kish Sklar (2012), 2, https://search .alexanderstreet.com/wasi.

[22] Scholarship on the WIDF's role in the global women's movement has been growing. For a recent analysis, see Yulia Gradskova, *The Women's International Democratic Federation, the Global South, and the Cold War: Defending the Rights of Women of the 'Whole World'?* (London: Routledge, 2020).

[23] Yulia Gradskova, "Women's International Democratic Federation, the 'Third World' and the Global Cold War from the late-1950s to the mid-1960s," *Women's History Review* 29, no. 2 (2020): 271.

extensive UN efforts to advance women's rights globally, and the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the most significant UN "women's treaty" to date.[24] Relationships between the PWA and the WIDF began when two PWA members attended the WIDF-organized International Women's Year conference in East Berlin in 1975. Our sources indicate that, after this date, WIDF publications were followed in a serious spirit by the PWA and became one of the significant sources of information for developments in the world and the global women's movement of the period.[25] Furthermore, the PWA participated in various campaigns and solidarity calls initiated by the WIDF. As we shall see later in the article in more detail, one example of these campaigns was the delivery of medication, milk powder, food, and clothing to Lebanese and Palestinian women who had been exposed to harsh Israeli attacks in January 1976.

Oral interviews conducted with women who actively participated in the founding era of the PWA have complicated the foundation narrative of the organization. According to these oral histories, collected in the edited volume *Ve Hep Birlikte Koştuk* [And We Run All Together], while most women who led the establishment of the PWA traced their founding story back to the TCP, several reported that the movement was unrelated to the TCP.[26] These women, though few, claimed that since there was no agenda regarding women's issues within the political parties of the time, including the TCP, they set out to establish an organization to consider women's issues. To achieve this aim, their argument goes, they began to build relationships with the women they knew from the Workers Party of Turkey (TIP) and other-left wing circles.[27] They said that the majority of the women they contacted were not associated with the TCP and were not members of any political parties or organizations. Rather, these women typically appeared to be leftist and working women with a consciousness of unionization.[28]

---

[24] Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms," 548.

[25] Arıkan and İlerici Kadınlar Derneği, *Ve Hep Birlikte Koştuk,* 247.

[26] Ibid., 15.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Akal, *Kızıl Feministler*, 132. Keşoglu lists the names and professions of the PWA founding members as follows: Beria Onger (lawyer); Nursel Üstün (engineer); Vahide Yılmaz (mechanic); Fatma Günel (mechanic); Zuhal Meriç (teacher); Seyda Talu (housewife); Dora Küçükyalçın (medical doctor); Zülal Kılıç (government clerk); Gönül Taylan (engineer); Saadet Sözel (overlock operator); Hamiyet Akkaya (office clerk); and Güner Dilsizoglu (mechanic). Keşoğlu, "Socialist Women's Organizations in Turkey 1975-1980," 184-85.

How Did the PWA Identify Itself?

Only two months after its establishment in June 1975, the PWA published the first issue of its journal, titled "*Women's Voice.*" The goals of the PWA were explained in the first issue of the journal as follows:

> The Progressive Women's Association was founded on June 3, 1975, in Istanbul, mostly by the efforts of working women. Congratulations to all working women, our children – the hope of our future, and all progressive, democratic, and patriotic forces! The Progressive Women's Association explains its aims and objectives to all women and our people as follows: Real equality should be ensured in education, employment, and promotion. Motherhood should be considered a social contribution. Equal pay for equal work should be established. Existing legal rights and equality should be implemented, and the articles degrading women in the constitution should be amended. Women should be vigilant defenders of peace, democracy, national independence, and social progress.[29]

What emerges from this statement is that the PWA agreed that most feminist demands were significant and vital. Nevertheless, in the same issue of the journal they distanced themselves from feminism by stating:

> This view argues that women are exploited by men and that women can get rid of their backwardness by fighting against men. Feminism was the view that first talked about women's rights and called women to actively struggle to gain these rights. However, today, women, who are misled by this view, which is especially common in developed capitalist countries, are struggling to use the same toilet as men in the name of women's rights, freedom and equality, not to wear a bra because it restricts freedom, and to behave like men.[30]

The PWA expressed itself as an organization of working women. According to them, the liberation of women could only be possible with the liberation of society. As noted in the introduction, the PWA was a women's organization supported by the TCP; its policies could not be separated from the party. Therefore, women in the Soviet Union, a country regarded as the "centre of the world socialist system," and the policies that it implemented about "women's emancipation," constituted

---

[29] "İlerici Kadinlar Derneği Kuruldu [The Progressive Women's Association Established]," *Kadınların Sesi,* 1 (1975): 1.

[30] Ibid., 3.

models for the PWA. In this respect, the level of women's education in socialist countries and their working conditions, particularly the number of childcare facilities available to them, were presented as examples to be emulated in the pages of *Women's Voice*, which was published to reach a wider audience. The next part of this article will focus on the journal.

Women's Voice (*Kadınların Sesi*)

The first issue of the PWA journal *Women's Voice* consisted of two pages and four leaves. The owner of the journal was Beria Önger, while Zuhal Meriç served as its editor-in-chief. The first issue of the journal, with the headline "Progressive Women's Association has Established," announced the news and aims of the organization, and 5000 copies were printed.[31] *Women's Voice* had a circulation of 12,000 in 1976, which climbed to 25,000 by 1978. This significant increase in circulation of *Women's Voice*, given that illiteracy among Turkish women was as high as 45% until 1980,[32] is considered a noteworthy success by scholars who study media history in Turkey.[33]

Women's Voice was published monthly continuously for five years starting from August 1975 until August 1980 and was the official publication organ of the PWA until May 1977. After this date, it became an independent publication, to allow the journal to continue publishing in the event of the closure of the PWA. Indeed, although the PWA was banned by martial law in 1979, the journal was able to continue publication until August 1980.[34] In its first year, an issue of the journal was only 4 pages in length. However, the number of pages gradually increased and, in its final year of publication, the average length of a journal issue was approximately 32 pages, a testament to its success. To increase the length of the journal, the editorial board of *Women's Voice* conducted ongoing campaigns called "*Abone Kampanyası,"* beginning in June 1977, which asked their readers to become subscribed members and also to circulate the journal in their networks to increase the number of subscriptions, because "women's issues cannot be covered in four pages."[35] In a notice printed in the 40th issue in 1978, the editorial board

---

[31] Arıkan and İlerici Kadınlar Derneği, *Ve Hep Birlikte Koştuk,* 123.

[32] TURKSTAT, *Gender Statistics 2013* (Ankara: Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, 2013), 61.

[33] Özlem Akkaya, "1970'lerin İkinci Yarısında Türkiye'de Sosyalizm ve Kadın: Kadınların Sesi Dergisi Karikatürleri," *Egemia*, 3 (2018): 66.

[34] Arıkan and İlerici Kadınlar Derneği, *Ve Hep Birlikte Koştuk,* 125-27.

[35] "Abone Kampanyamıza Katıl [Join Our Subscriber Campaign]," *Kadınların Sesi,* no. 23 (1977): 6.

announced that they had printed the journal with a new format and content as a result of the critiques and suggestions that they received from readers. They also encouraged readers to continue to mail in their opinions on which issues they wanted to see more coverage.[36] Up until the 22nd issue published in 1977, the journal was printed without a slogan. Yet, from the 22nd issue and in subsequent issues, the slogan reads as "Women's Voice [for] Equality, Social Progress and Peace (*Kadınların Sesi: Eşitlik, Toplumsal İlerleme ve Barış İçin*)."

The most outstanding feature of *Women's Voice* is that every stage of the journal's production was undertaken entirely by women – from finance to writing, printing, and circulation. The funding for the publication of the journal was made possible by the collective efforts of the women. These efforts include the sale of handmade clothing and home decorations made by women at the weekly neighbourhood bazaars, as well as cleaning labour union buildings in return for money. Furthermore, subscriptions seem to have helped finance the journal's production costs. Advertisements did not appear in *Women's Voice*. Almost all of the contents of the journal were published without signature. According to Akal,[37] the preference of the socialist movement of the period to emphasize the collective nature of labour instead of individual identity and skills was reflected in this editorial policy. It should also be noted that *Women's Voice* included anonymous opinion articles as well as national and international news. Equally important, *Women's Voice* was also gradually sold in different parts of Europe. Starting from its 18th issue, which was published in January 1978, subscription rates were set in other currencies in addition to the Turkish lira.

In terms of content, political developments occupied an important place in the journal. Also highlighted were social, economic and cultural problems faced by women from different walks of life, especially working women. In *Women's Voice*, the problems of bourgeoisie women were of no concern. According to Özkal,[38] the journal discussed many of the problems working-class women faced in the public space. For example, the PWA's demands, which included equal pay for equal work, a nursery in every workplace, a breastfeeding room in enterprises with more than 100 female employees, the right to retirement for women after twenty years of service, and the extension of women's maternity and breastfeeding

---

[36] "Abone Kampanyasını Yaygınlaştır! Abone Kampanyasına Katıl! [Expand the Subscriber Campaign! Join the Subscriber Campaign!]," *Kadınların Sesi,* no. 40 (1978): 23.

[37] Akal, *Kızıl Feministler*, 145.

[38] Saadet Özkal, "İlerici Kadınlar Derneği," *Amargi* (2005): 25.

leave were reflected in the journal. Furthermore, the journal outlined demands such as ease of obtaining employment and achieving promotion, as well as calls for increased representation of women in the management of labour unions and political parties. Significantly, women were called on to fight against the inflated cost of living, fascism, and the destruction of wars. For example, "Women, as wives and mothers, are the ones who feel the pain of wars the most deeply," was a theme highlighted in one issue. On yet another occasion, women were asked to march with empty pots to demonstrate against the inflated cost of living.

However, while all this was being said and done, there was no mention of men and patriarchy. The state and capitalism were blamed for the oppression of women, and hence demands were made against them. As in all left-wing organizations and publications of the period, the PWA and its main organ saw the adoption of socialism as the single viable solution to "the women's question" and did not engage with the oppression that women faced within the private space. For instance, in a 1996 interview with Saadet [Sözel], Gönül [Taylan] and Semra [Çarkçıoğlu], three prominent members of PWA, on the occasion of the publication of *And We Run Together*, these women made it clear that they were aware of the unequal share of household duties and childcare responsibilities between men and women of the period but abstained from questioning men in that regard. "The personal is the political," one of the most celebrated slogans of second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, was not adopted by these women. In other words, even though they were very attentive to problems faced by working-class women in the public space, these women did not politicize the private space or question the traditional dominance of the male within the family. Furthermore, discussions on women's reproductive autonomy and domestic violence, pressing issues that united feminists from various ideological backgrounds across Europe during the 1960s and 1970s, were rarely touched upon by Turkish women in public, including in *Women's Voice*. According to Saadet Özkal, one of the founding members of the PWA, "when a PWA woman was beaten by her husband, the husband was told that what he did was reprehensible, but only in private or at best, within the comrades' circle."[39]

Similarly, although the PWA supported the right to free abortion, it refrained from running a campaign on this issue. To PWA, free abortion should be provided by the state and the state should not interfere with how many children people give birth to. Therefore, they did not discuss

[39] Ibid., 25-26.

or promote the issue based on women's bodily autonomy, unlike most Western feminist organizations of the time. Instead, they framed abortion in relation to state responsibility. According to Zülal Kılıç, one of the reasons why PWA women did not turn the issue of abortion into a campaign was related to their concern that "women in the neighbourhoods . . . might get away from [the association] by being influenced by the propaganda of [the period] that 'communist women do not know [the significance of] family.'"[40] The PWA feared that the abortion issue would distance many women and that it might lose significant support by campaigning for abortion rights.

After 1977 there appears to be a shift in the content of the journal. The reason behind this shift can be explained by considering the political atmosphere of the period.[41] In 1977, the TCP decided to support the Republican People's Party (RPP) in the general elections in the framework of the "national democratic front (*ulusal demokratik cephe*)" strategy. From that point onward, reaching out to large masses became one of the objectives of the TCP, and other socialist organizations followed the party line, including the PWA. In line with this objective, the PWA appears to extend the scope of *Women's Voice*. Topics that were considered points of interest by most of the women of the period – food recipes, sewing-embroidery models, housekeeping, humorous articles, riddles, and television reviews – began to appear increasingly on the pages of the journal. Childcare was one of the main concerns of *Women's Voice* from its inception. Nevertheless, from 1978 onwards, there appeared a section devoted to children and childcare under the title of "Children's Voice."

Women's Voice also included cartoons in almost every issue. Most of the cartoons, especially in the first issues of the journal, appear to be unsigned. Nevertheless, as observed by Özlem Akkaya, especially in the last two years of the journal, the space allocated to unsigned cartoons decreased at the expense of cartoons drawn by famous male illustrators of the period such as Latif Demirci, İrfan Sayar, and Behiç Pek.[42] For Akkaya, featuring the works of male cartoonists, with more comedy and humour, correlates with the desire to increase circulation. What emerges from a close reading of these cartoons is that the category of women as represented in them is neither singular nor monolithic. First, women were depicted according to their position in the social labour process and class

[40] Akal, *Kızıl Feministler*, 207.

[41] For further analysis of the political atmosphere from 1977 to 1978, see Cüneyd Arcayürek, *Demokrasinin Sonbaharı 1977-1978* (Ankara: Bilgi Yayınevi, 1985).

[42] Akkaya, "1970'lerin İkinci Yarısında Türkiye'de Sosyalizm ve Kadın," 80.

identities such as bourgeois women, working women, peasant women, professional women, civil servant women and women as domestic labourers. Among these women, the "otherness" of bourgeois women was repeatedly singled out in the cartoons, in that while working-class women were coded as productive, bourgeois women were construed as grand consumers who do not participate in production. Secondly, when women were not represented by referencing their role in the production process, they were portrayed primarily through their consumer identities, motherhood and as peacebuilders. To Akkaya, who reads these cartoons very closely, these cartoons in *Women's Voice* provide us with an opportunity to trace the PWA's "reconciliation, negotiation and conflict with the prevailing gender ideology of the period."[43] While at times working women were represented as desperate and in need of "enlightenment" by their male comrades, at other times they were embodied as active participants in the social labour struggle and as political subjects shouting their anger at politicians with pans in their hands due to the high cost of living. Furthermore, in parallel with the national democratic front strategy closely followed and implemented by the TCP in the second half of the 1970s, especially in the process leading up to the 1977 general elections, *Women's Voice* also began to adopt rhetoric aimed at bringing women from different social segments together, including working women, under a common umbrella. In this context, "motherhood" emerged as the main political identity that could bring women together. In this context, as Akkaya observes, signs of a relatively conservative approach that naturalized women's domestic roles began to appear in the cartoons found in the journal. Nevertheless, as Akkaya argues, even within this discourse that underlines the traditionally accepted "female" values and practices, especially motherhood, women did appear as political agents that worked to transform the society in which they lived.[44]

One final element regarding the content of the journal is the coverage of international news items and articles. In 49 of the 61 issues of the journal, there are articles and news items which can be categorized as world news. We identified a total of 115 news items and articles in these 49 issues that included foreign coverage. While some of these news items and opinion pieces included the domestic political agenda of the country under focus, others were written to inform readers about the socio-economic conditions, political status, and struggles of women in that

[43] Ibid., 107-08.

[44] Ibid., 105-08.

particular country. The international news coverage in *Women's Voice* not only demonstrates how the women of PWA perceived and represented what was happening in the world in general and the world of women in particular but also how they positioned themselves within the bipolar international system of the period. The issues and themes covered within these international news items and opinion pieces include, but are not limited to: the repressions of fascist forms of government seen in different parts of the world; the effects of Western imperialism across the globe; the revolutionary struggles of the peoples of the world and especially women; and articles highlighting the calls for peace that were made by international organizations and countries of the world. The most important argument underlined in this international coverage is that the liberation of the oppressed countries and peoples under capitalism, imperialism, and fascism could be realized through the adoption of socialism. The socialist world in general, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in particular, was represented as a model to emulate, especially about the rights and opportunities enjoyed by working-class women in these countries.

Furthermore, the contours of the transnational alliances and solidarity that the women of the PWA developed since its inception can be determined through a close reading of the international news coverage in *Women's Voice*. It appears that women of PWA maintained a particularly strong connection with the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) and shared news of women in different countries that were allied with or members of the WIDF. As will be further illustrated below, the campaigns initiated by the WIDF were closely followed by the PWA. A detailed analysis of the international news coverage in *Women's Voice* is beyond the scope of the present study but could provide significant insights for future research. Therefore, this article attempts to understand how women of the PWA, particularly those contributing to *Women's Voice*, followed and interpreted Middle East politics, specifically the condition of women.

The Middle East as Represented in *Women's Voice*

In *Women's Voice*, the Middle East was represented as a battleground of imperialism and Zionism. The USA and Israel were held responsible for inflicting cruelty and violence against Palestinians and Lebanese

regardless of whether they are women, men, the elderly or children.[45] For instance, a September 1976 article titled *"Lebanon: Imperialism's New Battleground"* noted that the difficulties experienced by Palestine after the establishment of Israel made Arabs more aware of imperialism, exploitation, and racial discrimination, and of imperialist powers' attempts to set Arabs against one another to limit this awareness.[46] In an article published in April 1978 titled "Terror in the Middle East" readers were informed about the Israeli attack on South Lebanon that destroyed all of the tents in the encampment where Palestinian refugees lived. After highlighting the details of the attack, it was argued that imperialism could not bring about a new world order but could only survive through regional battles. Furthermore, the article noted that imperialist powers' attitudes toward peace and their beliefs regarding human rights were misguided. The Middle East was represented as a terrain in which we see the continuous presence of imperialism, particularly that of the United States. Following this remark, however, the writer emphasized that imperialism was on its way out as the peoples of the world now sought to construct an order based on the ideals of independence, peace, progress, and socialism.[47]

Solidarity with the Palestinian cause was always emphasized.[48] In news published in November 1979, we are informed that Yasser Arafat, then the head of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), visited Turkey on October 5 to attend the opening of the PLO's representative office in Ankara.[49] PWA Secretary-General Zülal Kılıç greeted this development with great enthusiasm, asserting that the PWA supported the ongoing struggle in Palestine and was always in solidarity with the Palestinian women.[50] This emphasis on solidarity with Palestinian people went beyond mere rhetoric, as evidenced by various PWA activities to demonstrate its support to Palestinians, including aid campaigns; joining the celebration of January 24 as the Day of Solidarity with the Arab

---

[45] "24 Ocak Emperyalizme ve Siyonizm'e Karşı Arap Halklarıyla Dayanışma Günü [January 24 is the Day of Solidarity with the Arab Peoples Against Imperialism and Zionism]," *Kadınların Sesi* no. 42 (1979): 23.

[46] "Emperyalizmin Yeni Savaş Alanı: Lübnan [Lebanon: Imperialism's New Battleground]," *Kadınların Sesi* no. 14 (1976): 5.

[47] "Ortadoğu'da Terör [Terror in the Middle East]," *Kadınların Sesi* no. 14 (1978): 5.

[48] "24 Ocak Emperyalizme ve Siyonizm'e Karşı Arap Halklarıyla Dayanışma Günü [January 24 is the Day of Solidarity with the Arab Peoples Against Imperialism and Zionism]," 23.

[49] "Filistin Kurtuluş Örgütü Türkiye'de Büro Açtı [Palestine Liberation Organization Opens Office in Turkey]," *Kadınların Sesi* no. 52 (1979), 5.

[50] Ibid.

Peoples against Imperialism and Zionism; and occasionally even communicating with the UN to stop violence against the Palestinians.[51] For instance, on August 20, 1976, the PWA sent a telegram to the UN to protest violence against all Palestinian and Lebanese women and children, particularly those in the Tel-Al-Zaatar refugee camp.[52]

Iran appears to be the most closely followed country in the journal. The very first article on Iran, published in June 1976, stated, "When one thinks about Iran, one thinks of oil, the lives of the Shah [Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, also known as Mohammad Reza Shah] and Queen Farah Diba, the secret police agency known as SAVAK, and imprisoned inmates who have been tortured in prisons for years."[53] We learn from the same article that Iran, which made US$20 billion per year from oil, did not offer adequate assistance for its people, because oil wealth was being utilized on military expenditure and weaponry instead of alleviating the misery and poverty of the Iranian people. In the articles and news items published in subsequent issues, political developments leading to the Iranian revolution were closely reported. In these articles, the Shah regime was characterized as oppressive and a puppet of US imperialism in the region, and the Iranian people's struggle against oppression and exploitation was highlighted. In an article published in January 1979, we learn that 3.5 million people marched against the Shah in Tehran on December 9 and 10, 1978.[54] *Women's Voice* not only analysed the mass demonstrations and protests of the Iranian people but also highlighted the different political factions fighting against the Shah regime who participated in the demonstrations.[55] According to *Women's Voice*, the Iranian revolutionary movement, encompassing all Iranians, was coordinated by three channels: The first of them, known as the religious faction, served to mobilize impoverished people in rural regions. The National Front, which was supported by small and medium-sized industrialists and followed the path of Mosaddegh,[56] represented the second political faction. Finally, the

---

[51] "24 Ocak Emperyalizme ve Siyonizm'e Karşı Arap Halklarıyla Dayanışma Günü [January 24 is the Day of Solidarity with the Arab Peoples Against Imperialism and Zionism]," 21.

[52] Ibid.

[53] "İran'da İlerici Kadınlar Mücadelelerini Sürdürüyor [Progressive Women in Iran Continue Their Struggle]," *Kadınların Sesi* no. 11 (1976): 4.

[54] "İran'da Milyonlar Tek Yumruk; Şah Gitsin Demokrasi Gelsin [Millions Are One Fist in Iran: Let the Shah Go, Let Democracy Come]," *Kadınların Sesi* no. 42 (1979): 20.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Mohammad Mosaddegh (1882–1967) was the Prime Minister of Iran from 1951 to 1953. His government was overthrown in the 1953 Iranian coup d'état, aided by the intelligence agencies of the United Kingdom and the United States. He was the founder

Iranian People's Party (TUDEH) was the third group that mobilized especially the working class during the revolutionary years. *Women's Voice* noted that these three political factions differed in terms of ideology, yet they unified to topple the Shah, the abolishment of the SAVAK, and the equitable distribution of wealth and personal rights and freedoms.[57] In news reports published during March 1979, we are informed that the Iranian revolution was successful because Iranians, men and women, young and old, set aside their differences of opinion and worked towards a common goal against imperialism and terrorism.[58] The journal's coverage of events in Iran and beyond indicates editorial interest in a broad range of activism and revolutionary struggle occurring outside Turkey. By covering these liberation struggles, the journal not only reflected an analysis of these events but most likely found them very inspirational as well. Furthermore, by highlighting these revolutionary struggles, they also probably wanted to demonstrate their transnational alliances and solidarity.

Reading Women of the Middle East Through the Lens of *Women's Voice*

The news items and articles on women of the Middle East demonstrate that the PWA was very active in developing international solidarity with the "progressive" women of the world, including in the Arab world. Our sources indicate that since its inception, the PWA not only worked closely with the WIDF in East Berlin but also followed its publication and campaign calls in a serious spirit. One of the examples of the aid campaigns initiated by the WIDF and supported by the PWA included the delivery of medication, milk powder, food, and clothing to Lebanese and Palestinian women who had been exposed to harsh Israeli attacks in January 1976.[59]

The socioeconomic and legal status of various Middle Eastern countries, particularly Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen were explored

---

of the National Front, which was supported by a broad spectrum of classes in Iran and mobilized a successful campaign for the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry. For more on Mosaddegh and the National Front, see Homa Katozian, *Musaddiq and the Struggle for Power in Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999); Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982).

[57] "İran'da Milyonlar Tek Yumruk: Şah Gitsin Demokrasi Gelsin [Millions Are One Fist in Iran: Let the Shah Go, Let Democracy Come]," 20.

[58] "İran'da Devrim Utkuya Ulaştı [Iran's Revolution Has Achieved Victory]," *Kadınların Sesi* no. 44 (1979): 10-11.

[59] "Yardım Kampanyası [Aid Campaign]," *Kadınların Sesi* no. 6 (1976): 3.

in the pages of *Women's Voice*. While discussing working conditions, education status, and marriage practices that defined the lives of women in different countries across the region, *Women's Voice* was always careful to highlight whether these countries (either in the past or in the present) had any democratic women's organization similar to their own and that of their sisters in East Berlin, underlining the significance of women's transnational networks. Among these organizations, "the Democratic Women's Organization of Iran"[60] and "the Democratic Women's Union of Afghanistan"[61] can be cited as examples. Furthermore, despite facing various challenges—such as poor access to education; health problems due to onerous working conditions; unequal wages; and customs and traditions that limit women's lives—the women of the Middle East were not objectified as powerless within the *Women's Voice* discourse. Their struggle for the democratization of their respective countries and their fight against imperialism are always highlighted. The best illustration of these themes can be seen in the news concerning the role of women in the Iranian Revolution.

In March 1979, in an article titled "Thousands of Salutations to Our Iranian Sisters,"[62] an Iranian female student studying in Turkey was interviewed as a conduit to explore the socio-economic, political and legal status of Iranian women. The interviewer focused particularly on how huge numbers of Iranian women joined in the demonstrations in Iran; what the chador (called "*çadur*") worn by the ladies participating in the rallies signified; and what Iranian women did throughout the revolutionary struggle. Insights that emerged from this interview included the fact that 74% of Iranian women were illiterate at the time; that the laws were very strict for women; that women could not work or travel without their husband's consent; and that they did not have equal inheritance rights. It also underscored that Iran had no legally constituted working-class women's organization. In response to another query concerning why women wore "chador" during the protests, it emerged that not all women in Iran wore chadors. Yet, during the revolution, the symbolic use of the chador was directed against the Shah and imperialism and was an attempt to demonstrate that all Iranian women were acting in concert, as a collective. The interview also highlighted an example of how

[60] "İranlı Bacılarımıza Bin Selam [Thousands of Salutations to Our Iranian Sisters]," *Kadınların Sesi* no 44 (1979): 11.

[61] "Afganistan Demokratik Kadınlar Birliği [The Democratic Women's Union of Afghanistan]," *Kadınların Sesi* no. 43 (1979): 8.

[62] "İranlı Bacılarımıza Bin Selam [Thousands of Salutations to Our Iranian Sisters]," 11.

the mothers, sisters, and wives of political prisoners in Tehran's jail carried out a demonstration in front of Tehran University to support their loved ones.

While emphasizing the resistance of women calling for democratization and liberation in their respective countries, women were not represented as having to fight alone. Indeed, repeatedly, the *Women's Voice* headlines read "women are fighting shoulder to shoulder with their men." For instance, in a news article, published in May 1977, the headline read: "Women in Our Neighbour Iraq Struggle for Social Liberation Shoulder to Shoulder with Their Men."[63] In this article, Iraq was posited as an exemplary country which had emancipated itself from imperialism by nationalizing oil and taking factories under state control. As such, by embracing a non-capitalist system, Iraq was portrayed as progressing towards socialism. Regarding the socio-economic status of women in Iraq, the article stated that Iraqi women organized themselves through the Iraqi Women's Union (*Irak Kadınlar Birligi*) which had 50,000 members. Together with the Iraqi government, these women were shown to be working towards improving women's literacy; their access to job opportunities; and providing nursing and childcare facilities for working women. In this regard, the Iraqi law requiring a factory to open a childcare facility if it employed more than fifty women was underlined as an exemplary move for women's emancipation. Finally, when discussing advancements in the status of women in Iraq, *Women's Voice* was careful to add that Middle Eastern women were fighting alongside their men to free themselves from imperialism and Zionism, as demonstrated in the Iraqi case.

This rhetoric that "women fight shoulder to shoulder with their men" actually reveals much about the PWA. As noted earlier, the PWA was a women's organization with no feminist lineage. Indeed, from the beginning, the women of the PWA were very careful to distance themselves from feminism. As a socialist women's organization, the PWA presented itself as more concerned with the problems of working-class women than women's issues in general. In the leftist milieu within which they emerged and developed, there was a strong belief that feminist ideals would divide the class struggle.

[63] "Komşumuz Irak'ta Kadınlar Toplumsal Kurtuluş Savaşımında Erkeğiyle Omuz Omuza [Women in Our Neighbour Iraq Struggle for Social Liberation Shoulder to Shoulder with Their Men]," *Kadınların Sesi* no. 22 (1977): 7.

Conclusion

Between 1975 and 1980, the PWA was the most pervasive women's organization in Turkey. It distanced itself from feminism, which was associated with the bourgeoisie and imperialism, and viewed these factors as divisive to the labour movement within the discourse of the Turkish left. Nevertheless, an analysis of the PWA's founding principles, its public declarations, and its journal *Women's Voice* demonstrates that the concerns and demands of the women who established the PWA and mobilized thousands of women overlap with what Western feminists were demanding during the same period. However, the PWA was silent on issues such as women's reproductive rights and domestic violence, issues which were considered divisive in Turkey. To mobilize thousands for working-class women's interests, the PWA created one of the most effective women's organizations of the period by employing discursive and practical strategies sensitive to the cultural context. Through their organizational skills, publications, campaigns, various forms of protests, and international solidarity, the women of the PWA laid the groundwork for the post-1980s feminist movement in Turkey.

In *Women's Voice*, the Middle East is represented as a battleground for imperialism and Zionism. Solidarity with Arab people and particularly with Palestinians was always emphasized. Also, it was argued that Arab people are not passive subjects of imperialist politics and are very much aware of the means of imperialist exploitation. Furthermore, regarding the women of the Middle East, without making overarching generalizations, the socio-economic and legal status of women living in different parts of the Arab Middle East (excluding Israel) was explored. Despite various challenges imposed on them by the political regimes and by dominant cultural values, women were not construed as passive members of their societies. Indeed, women's roles in advancing their societies as well as their own status were always celebrated. Yet within their struggle, women were not represented alone but instead construed as always working together with their men.

Where the news coverage on the Middle East in general and women of the Middle East, in particular, is concerned, *Women's Voice* appeared to be much more interested in covering the countries in which there was a great revolutionary upheaval (as in the case of Iran), where there was a move towards socialism (as in the case of Iraq and South Yemen), or countries that had progressive women's associations such as Iraq and Afghanistan that were either close contacts or members of the WIDF in East Berlin. Surprisingly, there was very little coverage of Egypt or

Egyptian women. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize, together with the Israeli President Menachem Begin, was criticized by *Women's Voice* because they were both "war advocates."[64] The reason behind this relative silence on Egyptian politics and the plight of Egyptian women during this period might have been Egypt's alignment with the West and Israel.

Finally, we do not know to what extent the coverage of current affairs in *Women's Voice* was accurate, as this would require sources beyond the scope of the present article. What is important is that the women of the PWA, despite relatively slow technology and a dearth of readily available information, were able to report and write about not only what was happening in their country, but around the world, including the Middle East. Furthermore, despite distancing themselves from feminism, they were able to reflect upon women's causes in Turkey and beyond.

* * *

[64] "24 Ocak Emperyalizme ve Siyonizm'e Karşı Arap Halklarıyla Dayanışma Günü [January 24 is the Day of Solidarity with the Arab Peoples Against Imperialism and Zionism]," 23.