From a communitarian to an individualistic feminist citizenship: Understanding acts of citizenship in Turkey and Tunisia from modernist legacy

Abstract: This study aims to contribute to the debates of women and citizenship rights in Turkey and Tunisia by aiming to understand how the autonomous feminist movements in both countries influenced the gendered citizenship regimes starting from 1980s. Through such analysis, this paper will explore the reasons why Turkey and Tunisia’s gendered citizenship regimes and women’s movements’ trajectories show striking similarities even though the two countries have rather different experiences with democratization, modernization and economic development which are typically seen as enablers of full citizenship rights. It will argue that the legacy of modernization and post-modernism understood and practiced in its specificity in both countries have direct consequences on the way they set their agenda’s and the way in which different groups mobilize. More so, this broader context defines the circumstances, spaces and the possibilities of strategies available to women. The research is based on primary and secondary literature as well as semi-structured interviews with forty-five grassroots and civil society activists gathered by the author in Turkey and Tunisia during January-May 2017.

In Turkey, every 8th of March for the past fifteen years, women’s organizations, activists, students, young women and LGBT individuals gather in big squares around the country for what they call ‘night marches’ which signify a reclaiming of the public spaces after dark where women are ‘expected’ to be at home, or out with a male companion. Despite the fact that the government takes a hostile stand against these walks, by sometimes declaring a ban on the event or by placing heavy police control over gatherings, tens of thousands of women increasingly join these walks to declare ownership over the public spaces. Not only they put forward a feminist agenda, they also engage in other political issues, like campaigning for ‘no’ prior to the constitutional referendum held in April 2017.

Similarly, in August 2012 when Tunisian National Constituent Assembly was discussing the draft law based on the principle of ‘women’s complementarity to men’, thousands of women protested on social media and on the streets to declare that “women are citizens just like men, and they should not be defined based on men.” (Al-Monitor, 2017) Consequently, many Tunisian women's associations took to the streets of Tunis on August 8th to ask for the final withdrawal of the article. They affirmed that they would continue to mobilize as long as the constitution did not guarantee the objectives of the revolution: freedom, dignity, equality and
social justice (Boitiaux, 2017). This was only one example of numerous protests that women held after the 2011 revolution as increasingly conservative government suggested reversal of women’s rights in the country.

Although it might look like there is a sustained coalition among different women, these movements in both countries is divided between ideologies, claims and different understandings of being a ‘woman’. As such, questions such as who actually owns these ‘acts’ and which women can make their voices heard become inevitable. Who is being represented in these spaces? Are there other groups whose demands remain invisible or inaudible? How is this public space shared within different groups of women?

For example, during the night walks of 8th of March which is an indispensable moment of studying feminism in Turkey, it is usually the new generation of women’s platforms that organize the events with an antigovernment stance and not so much the Islamist and Kemalist women. These women have created a separate political space in which to mobilize outside of formal politics. In Tunisia, 59 female MPs of the Islamist Ennahda party out of 217 voted against gender equality in the Tunisian constitution while thousands of secular women from the older and newer generation of organizations were protesting. Comparing these two acts of resistance reveals important similarities and clues about the women’s movements in Turkey and Tunisia and how to approach citizenship and gender in the Middle East context.

As both events occupy spaces of symbolic importance, these create new ways of women to be political through creative protests. At the same time, they also construct their own exclusions and dilemmas. They face similar tensions between questions of volunteerism and professionalism, secularism and conservatism, between older and younger generations. While some of these are challenges facing the women’s movement globally, some of the dynamics are particular to Tunisia and Turkey.

Comparable cleavages exist within the collective of politically active women: a secular/feminist movement representing different generations and ways of organizing which holds a progressive agenda in terms of women’s rights, an Islamic feminist movement whose strategy is to reinterpret Islamic texts to claim gender equality within religion, and an Islamist conservative movement organically linked to the mainstream Islamist party which does not argue for gender equality but for complementarity. It has been traditionally argued that these women, especially the ones that adhere to a feminist theory and practice, do not represent the society in its entirety, and that issues of gender equality does not have an electoral base in these societies. However, the acts performed by these groups calling for a more pluralistic understanding of citizenship presents us with another reality. It is the complex net of political agendas and interests that prevent these demands to translate into positive outcomes and create an environment in which women’s rights become more and more precarious (Kandiyoti, 2012).

In “Citizenship in Flux: Figure of the Activist Citizen”, Isin argues that “thinking about citizenship through acts means to implicitly accept that to be a citizen is to make claims to justice: to break habitus and act in a way that disrupts already defined orders, practices and statuses” (Isin, 2009: 384). This is unexpected because the modern figure of the citizen can no
longer be understood as having ‘singular loyalty, identity and belonging’ (Isin, 2009: 368). The creativity of these actions, such as framing issues, demonstrating, protesting, holding forums, negotiating with opposing views through lobbying, comes from the power that these acts “constitute a political subject without prior authorization” (Isin and Sawards, 2013; 33). Accordingly, it is important to contextualize the conditions under which these acts of resistance collectively take place and demand a new form of feminist citizenship and whether or not they disrupt the written scripts while adapting a more inclusive or progressive agenda.

In terms of the trajectories of the movements in two societies, we observe that women began mobilizing during the pre-independence period and were excluded from politics in nation-building phases following the emancipatory reforms enacted by their modernizing founding fathers Habib Bourguiba and Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. More contemporary movements were motivated by a reaction to this paternalistic legacy in emancipating women in their societies. Finally, both movements have moved onto a post-Bourguibist and post-Kemalist phase where they were also influenced by poststructuralist and postmodernist paradigms. Then how should we understand should the similarities in trajectories and dilemmas of the women’s movements and their relationship with the state and each other in Turkey and Tunisia given the differences in experience with democracy, and links with international institutions and political and economic development?

The legacy of modernization reforms by the founding fathers and their particular version of secularism gave rise to a new form of feminist citizenship which began questioning the representation of women as ‘liberated by the republic’. The contemporary movements’ intellectual foundations, main dynamics and problematics are caused by this legacy. In addition to this debate, this paper argues that the ideological legacy of modernization and postmodernism paradigms have had direct consequences on the agenda, practices, claims and the way in which different groups enact their ‘acts of citizenship’ (Isin and Nielsen, 2008). This legacy also explains the limits and the current dilemmas of the movement in which post-Kemalist and post-Bourguibist paradigms.

To understand the limits and dilemmas of acts of citizenship by women’s movements in both countries, this study takes acts collectively starting from the 1980s which approximately corresponds to the period when an autonomous feminist movement was born in both countries. Instead of focusing on individual acts, this study takes them collectively to analyze the different interactions between actors and the power differentials in the political space they occupy and the boundaries of this space. In order to do so, the study uses primary and secondary literature as well as semi-structured interviews with forty-five grassroots and civil society activists and expert women gathered by the author in Turkey and Tunisia during January-May 2017.

1. Acts of Citizenship: New Vocabulary for an Old Concept

This study benefits from a perspective that expanding the meaning of citizenship from a legal institution to include it as a performative act (Isin and Nyers, 2014:1). Through an emphasis on citizenship as a performed act rather than just a legal status, we can understand how those who
do not conventionally hold the equal citizenship status act as citizens, as well as how citizenship as a process is constructed through acts in non-democratic and non-European contexts.

Contemporary scholarship on citizenship can be seen as a three-dimensional field. The concept of citizenship; signifying at its core ‘full membership to a national community’, comprehends civil, political and social rights and responsibilities, i.e. a bundle of rights, as well as set of practices which enable the exercise of these rights (Turner, 1990). The practice of citizenship focuses on a set of ‘universalistic rights enacted into law and implemented for all citizens’ (Janoski, 1998). While the contemporary meanings of citizenship have been stretched rather far that it might have lost its analytical capability (Werbner and Yuval-Davis, 2005; Nyers, 2004), the notion of ‘full citizenship’ nevertheless captures what is at the heart of most resistance movements in the MENA today as citizenship as a status and rights is being challenged by social movements. The intervention of external forces on citizenship has proven that citizenship is also a dynamic process as well as a status and a practice.

The understanding of citizenship as a ‘status’ and ‘rights’ was further expanded to incorporate citizenship not just as a ‘status’ but also as a ‘set of practices’ (Turner, 1990). This was significant in the sense that citizenship not only included ‘rights’ but also political and social struggles and instances of claim- making based upon identity and group difference. With the rise of the new social movements in 1980’s a scholarly debate emerged on how to redefine claims of social justice by incorporating the recognition of cultural differences under the broader understanding of social justice. Different social movements emerged such as women, gays, and racial and ethnic minorities, that have challenged the ‘universal’ citizenship and ‘equality’ on paper before the law and demanded a corrective to laws, which marginalized and oppressed them demanding forms of differentiated and divided citizenry (Yuval-Davis, 1999).

Still expanding the Marshallian paradigm of citizenship, a new debate at its core underlined the ‘right to make rights’, opposed to having the ‘status’ of rights in a passive and receptive manner. It was the debate between Mann (1987) and Turner (1990, 1993) which problematized the earlier assumptions that citizenship rights originated from the ruling class strategies, but its substance was also shaped by social movements which resulted in a reconceptualization of citizenship, as ‘the right to claim rights’ (Isin and Wood 1999). It was recognized eventually that social groups “engage in claiming, expanding or losing rights” (Isin and Turner, 2002:4).

Being politically active meant practicing substantive citizenship, in which “the emphasis was less on legal rules and more on norms, practices, meanings and identities.” (Isin and Turner, 2002:4). Coined under the general frame of ‘active vs. passive’ citizen, two traditions of citizenship, liberal and participatory republican, was synthesized under the rubric of ‘active citizenship’; defining the citizen not as the “passive holder of rights, but also actively engaging with political welfare institutions as both individuals and groups” (Lister, 2003:6). In this way, the idea of individual and group ‘agency’ and ‘activism’ became central to the understanding of citizenship. A type of ‘good citizen’ emerged, defined as one that was aware of its rights and obligations and regularly practiced citizenship through political activities.

The concept of ‘acts of citizenship’ refers to those acts which transform the strategies and the
modes of being political by creating new activist citizens. It essentially differentiates between the ‘active’ citizen and the regular ‘practices’ of citizenship from the ‘activist’ citizen who creates new modes of citizenship practice from the margins (Isin and Nielsen, 2008). Unlike the ‘active citizenship’ which signifies the difference between the passive and active citizenship, ‘acts of citizenship’ framework focuses on how political subjectivities are created through innovative and creative ‘acts’ which are a posteriori interpreted as ‘making rights claims’, and which create a rupture in the way we understand and practice citizenship.

“Rights (civil, political, social, sexual, cultural, ecological), sites (bodies, courts, borders, networks, media), scales (cities, empires, nations, states, federations, leagues), actors (citizens, subjects, abjects) and acts (voting, volunteering, blogging, protesting, resisting and organizing) are the elements that constitute a body politic. The sites and scales are not mutually exclusive but overlapping and connected. So when investigating an act it is appropriate always to consider the overlapping and connected aspects of sites and scales through which various actions actualize acts.” (Isin and Nielsen, 2008:372)

With this approach, the concept of political agency was introduced to the studies of citizenship. Not only the idea of political agency was important, it was also important to distinguish the nature of this political agency. The focus shifted from the question of “Who is the citizen” to “What makes the citizen?” (Isin, 2009: 383). This opened the way for understanding how the autonomous women’s movements have influenced the ways of being a citizen. Admittedly, the Marshallian conception of citizenship has been expanded on multiple fronts for its shortcomings such as creating the allusion of a ‘universally equal status of members’ in a society, carrying a white Western male bias, its liberal bias entrenching the social inequalities by creating the allusion of equality and further enabling the workings of a capitalist system (Moghadam, 2003). As citizenship has never been applied universally to everyone in any given polity (Isin and Wood, 1999), Marshall’s citizenship was expanded to address the new political struggles; one of which was put forward by feminist theorists (Lister, 2003). In particular, the assumption that citizenship assumes the qualities of a ‘European white male’, and their incomplete inclusion to full citizenship constituted the main framework of feminist theory’s contribution to citizenship (Lister, 2007). Instead of looking reductively at women in the Middle East through the lenses of ‘victims of patriarchy’ and labelling them as secondary citizens living under an oppressive regime and masculine culture lacking equal rights, this approach enables us to detect the strategies as well as the dilemmas and challenges through which women of the Middle East enact citizenship. It helps us perceive citizenship through a gendered approach outside the legal and institutional formations such as family law and religious texts, but instead through mobilization and negotiation on the ground (Andrijasevic, 2013).

2. GENDER AND CITIZENSHIP IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The debates on gender and citizenship within the Middle East region has uncovered the conceptual conundrums between the postcolonial nation-states giving the role of universal citizen status, but limiting civil rights of women in personal status codes that are usually *shari’a*
influenced to varying degrees. The debate also lights the way of how the nation-building and state consolidation of the post-independence states burdened women as the bearers of national authenticity. (Kandiyoti 2001:52). Earlier works targeting women and citizenship in the Middle East were associated with movements of national independence and modernization during the post-colonial era where women were crucial instruments in social reform. While women have been an integral part of these national and anti-colonial struggles, after independence they have been marginalized from ‘public space’ which is most commonly referred to as the ‘gender paradox’ in feminist literature (Mohanty, 1991; Jayawardena 1986). The ‘woman question’ with this line of research established a long-lasting heritage for gender studies in the region; not only those who were necessarily colonized but also including post-imperial societies, drawing parallels in the histories of Turkey, Egypt, Iran and Tunisia among others (Kandiyoti, 1996:8).

As shown by Third World feminists, the democratic citizenship’s stress on ‘rationality, individuality and rule of law’ has been majorly in conflict with nationalisms which appealed to ‘communal solidarities and primordial sentiments of soil and blood’ (Yuval-Davis, 1999).

Post-colonial studies have also been instrumental in problematizing the universalist assumptions of women’s citizenship. Most commonly, they recognized how the Middle Eastern regimes in power have occasionally paid lip service to women’s issues in the name of modernization and nation building in order to legitimize their oppressive rules. Others have argued that in the course of history that secular regimes of the Middle East, such as in Iraq, Egypt and Tunisia, have utilized women and gender equality as part of their political discourse to attract more support when challenged by conservative and religious movements. In return, women had been ‘bargaining with patriarchy’ in order to devise coping mechanisms under oppression (Kandiyoti, 1988).

In addition to studying the contradictions of how women have obtained the status of citizenship during national independence and how during the post-colonial period these rights have had limited practice due to cooptative strategies of opportunistic regimes, it also demonstrated how women were active in particular outside the field of former politics. Under the framework of increased activism from the civil society and social movements, studies showed how autonomous movements have influenced women’s rights during the pre-independence and contemporary periods. At the same time, as a result of the developments in Eastern Europe in the 1990s, it was assumed that civil society signified a space, which was distinct from the state, checking and balancing it in the name of a more democratic, inclusive and progressive regime. This theoretical argument had serious ideological and policy-oriented outcomes, which resulted in the increase of funds available for civil society actors around the world from Western regimes and international organizations interested in the promotion of democracy. Women’s organizations have also been inflicted by this global policy change (Kandiyoti, 1996).

Yet, a problem with this agenda was that it assumed that civil society was able to represent all kinds of particularity. Further studies showed that attention should be avoid the assumptions of the causal links between women’s organizations, and civil society actors in general, and their potential for expanding citizenship rights and engaging in emancipative citizenship practices especially in the Middle Eastern context where citizenship did not emerge as a result of class
struggle but was handed down in the post-colonial context (Langohr, 2004; Altan-Olcay and Icduygu 2012).

3. COMPARING GENDER REGIMES IN TURKEY AND TUNISIA

With its problematic relationship with democracy, political liberalization since 1950s, economic liberalization and linkage to global capital and markets since 1980s, and a series of EU-accession reforms, Turkey is situated in a rather different geostrategic and macropolitical context than Tunisia. Tunisia on the other hand has a smaller sized economy and a less developed economy, albeit with some links to the EU, has no membership prospect and its successive regimes were highly authoritarian until the ousting of Ben Ali in 2011. Not only their macropolitical contexts are rather different, historical political developments in both countries are also different. In contrast to Turkey, Tunisia is an Arabic country with historical links to both Maghreb region and its former colonizer France. Turkey on the other hand has never been colonized and situates itself historically in the south-eastern Europe rather than in the Middle East, constituting a bridge between Europe and Asia.

What is however common and merits a comparison in both contexts is the gendered nature of nation building and modernization periods. Existing literature in post-colonial studies revealed the instrumentalization of women as sources of legitimacy by colonial governments and the nationalizing elite (Chatterjee, 1990; Mani, 1990 cited in Altan-Olcay, 2009), while uncovering the ways in which these processes drew the boundaries of new national identities around ‘the women’s question’ (Yuval-Davis, 1997). In addition, Altan-Olcay argues that the gendered nature of the modernization and state formation period of the new Turkish republic allows us to explore further into the similarities between colonial and nationalizing projects (2009:166).

The role of attributed to the ‘culturally appropriate and modern woman’ was instrumental in the Turkish republican elite’s embracing of the Western model of secularism and distancing itself from the Islamic Ottoman legacy (Kandiyoti, 1996). Discursive analyses in post-colonial literature, including that of the new Turkish republic, reveal how “women were culturally constructed to justify efforts of Westernization and to curb the threat of excessive westernization” (Altan-Olcay 2009:183). While making the ‘appropriate’ republican woman, nationalist discourses also created ‘moral others’ of who could and could not be included in such image. Subsequently the vibrant Turkish women’s movement emerged in the late Ottoman and the pre-republican period was curbed after civil reforms which ‘handed down’ civil rights to women in Turkey as early as 1926 such as the ban on polygamy, imposition of a minimum age for marriage, as well as granting women equality in certain other areas (Arat, 1994). These developments resulted in Turkish women’s as ideal; as ‘the most emancipated’ in the Muslim world. As such, the ‘woman question’ was ‘resolved’ early on during state building by the political elite. However, it was only a small group of women whose conditions have been improved as a result of the republican reforms (Ilkkaracan and Ilkkaracan 1998) and these were seen as a ‘republican duty’ rather than expansion of rights (Kadioglu, 1994).

In parallel to the Turkish narrative, the Tunisian women’s movement emerged from a similar background. During the anti-colonial struggle from France, women’s organizations have been
subsumed under the rule of the country’s nationalist leader Habib Bourgiba (Gilman 2007). Before the writing of the constitution, Bourgiba created the family law in 1956, (Code de Statut Personnel – CSP), in the same manner of the Turkish 1926 civil law, which created a rupture with the Islamic law (Charrad, 2001). These reforms included similar improvements to women’s citizenship status, including the abolishment of polygamy, creating a secular judicial procedure for divorce, requiring marriage to be based on the consent of both parties, and granting women equal rights to education and participation in the work force. Similar to the culturally appropriate ideal of the modest Turkish woman, Tunisian reforms left some sharia-based discourses intact in order to not provoke their conservative society. Again, like the limitations faced by the pre-republican Turkish feminist movement, Bourgiba’s political rule constrained most civil society organizations, including women’s organizations.

In both countries, this early feminist movement of the independence periods were followed by a co-optation of women’s movements under the state machinery and had to operate through what is defined in the literature by now as ‘state-feminism’ (Moghadam, 2007; Al Ali, 2003). Subsequently, women’s movements were almost absent from the political sphere until 1980’s except for charity work. During 1960s and 1970s, most women’s organizations served as loyal regime representatives. Their policies were determined largely by the priorities set by the existing regimes, such as education, development and welfare (Hatem, 1993, Moghadam, 1993).

Starting with the UN Decade for Women (1976-85) and the Women in Development paradigm, the feminist ideology spread into the developing world. The second wave feminism expanded internationally, during a time which was followed by structural changes which played a major influencing role on women’s mobilization. One of these changes was the demographic changes and the reaching of a ‘critical mass’ of better educated, politically conscious women with increasing participation in the labor force around the world. The second structural influence on women’s movement, and more broadly to social movements around the globe was the persisting economic crises in developing economies which were followed by structural adjustment programs and the decline of the welfare state, the feminization of poverty and the consequently the rise of Islamic fundamentalism (Moghadam, 2005:86).

With the global feminist movements, women’s movement began developing an independent stature from the state mechanisms after 1980s in both Turkey and Tunisia (as in other contexts around the globe. ‘New social movements’ starting from 1980’s composed of previously marginalized groups, such as women, religious and ethnic based social cleavages provided the basis for new movements. Particularly important was the role of the international context, the United Nations Decade for Women which has been encouraging the flourishment of an independent feminist civil society (Hatem, 1993). This was a time when women’s movement emerged with a feminist discourse for the first time, despite its shortcomings of including only certain classes. As such for example Turkey saw in early 1980s the emergence of a feminist/secular movement making demands against sexual harassment and domestic violence. As a result of the mobilizations in 1980s, institutionalization of the movement in 1990s, the women’s movement in Turkey has been able to achieve major reforms in penal and civil codes
in early 2000s.

The exclusionary nature of the initial movement resulted in long term cleavages; the Kemalist/feminist, radical/socialist feminists. In response to the veiling ban, the Islamist women also mobilized starting from 1990s. In addition to the broader Kurdish movement a Kurdish feminist movement also emerged challenging the Turkishness of the feminist movement (Fisher Onar and Paker, 2012). The formation of these ideological cleavages is interesting for reasons that while challenging the existing boundaries of what it means to be a woman citizen in Turkey, the acts of Turkish feminists have also created a new group of outsiders within the women’s movement itself. Having felt that they could not find recognition within the broader Turkish feminist movement, the Kurdish and Islamist feminists decided to reorganize separately.

Likewise, 1980’s brought structural openings for women’s movements in Tunisia. For instance, in 1987, Tunisia saw a regime change with the peaceful outing of its president of three decades, Habib Bourgiba, to be replaced by Zine al Abidin Ben Ali. This was a time where Islamism emerged as a political force, rather than a mere cultural phenomenon (Charrad, 1997). Shortly after the regime change, Club Tahar Haddad, a women’s consciousness raising group formed in 1970’s transformed in to a more institutional establishment; the Association Tunisienne des Femmes Democrates (ATFD) in 1989. The emergence of women’s independent organizations was coupled by structural changes which affected women’s agency; such as increases in women’s literacy and education and labor force participation. In 1992-1993, the new government made reforms on the 1956 CSP to expand women’s rights. These reforms redefined the conditions for the transmission of Tunisian citizenship. Under this context, the competition of power between the secular center of Ben Ali and the political Islam, forced the government to expand women’s rights. As such for the first time in Tunisian history, women’s agency began obtaining desired results in policy (Charrad, 2007).

After the 2011 revolution in Tunisia, the civil society opened up to new political actors in which Islamist women’s organizations and new generation of women’s NGO’s were established. With the post-revolutionary constitution, women in Tunisia gained further advances in terms of achieving an equal status under the constitution, the guarantee of the state to eradicate all forms of violence against women, and the requirement of gender parity in all assemblies (Shalaby, 2016) despite different schisms within the political arena and among politically active women. The divisions within the movement and the intricate relationship they have with the state and with each other provides an additional perspective into how cross cutting cleavages and power inequalities within a movement shape the nature and strategies of acts of citizenship.

4. FROM A COMMUNITARIAN TO A INDIVIDUALISTIC CITIZENSHIP

With new practices of feminist activism emerging, it is easier to claim today that women’s movement, being led by an increasingly autonomous feminist group, is constructing a new form of individualist citizenship through its actions that is in direct contrast with the more republican models of belonging to grand political projects. This ideological shift has direct the outcomes of women’s movements and their orientation, ways of working and strategies, agendas,
networks and modes of functioning and ultimately its own power hierarchies within. Focusing on the actions of the different groups within the movement, it becomes possible then to draw a link between the grand ideologies and ways of resisting.

It has been argued that the limits of Turkish feminist citizenship arose from the assumption that women were citizens prior to being individuals (Kadioglu, 1994). The movements were divided into different identity groups which showed a commitment to larger grand social and political projects such as state-feminism (maintaining loyalty to republican and modernist ideals set by Kemalism and Bourguibism), Socialism or Islamism. Even though these ideological schisms are still maintained within the overall movement, a new form of feminist practice has gained momentum since 2000s, in parallel to what is referred to as the ‘third wave’ of feminism. The field research conducted with representatives of the movement belonging to different groups and generations for this research reveal that there is a new form of feminism that is on the rise in both countries which shows a disinterest in such grand political projects and aims to include plural identities and orientations.

4.1 A postmodernist legacy and its consequences

The new form of citizenship owes its existence to the autonomous feminist movement which was formed organically in the 1980s in both countries and which was built on the need for a reinterpretation of the grand narratives on which women’s rights were based. In the case of Turkey, the ‘post-Kemalists’, signifying a coalition of academics, intellectuals and civil society actors from the liberal left, Kurdish movement, the feminist movement or political Islam gained a hegemonic status in the 1990s and 2000s (Ayturk, 2015). During the second half of the 1990s, Kemalism became an object of critique detached from its historical continuum. It represented an anti-statist, anti-modernist and anti-grandnarrativist critique to Kemalism which did not fulfil its promise of equality to all sections of the society (Koc, 2015). Post-Kemalist theory suggested that Turkey’s current political problems stemmed from the policies enforced during the early republic. The feminist movement was not detached from this paradigm shift. Coupled with other anti-foundational theories such as postmodern theory, postcolonialism and poststructuralism, this new wave ideology also shaped the feminist movement over the past couple decades. This had limiting consequences on the movement.

“During the period especially after 2000 onwards, certain women were hesitant to criticise the increasing Islamism and remained passive in developing new arguments against the politicization of religion. This was caused primarily by a mentality which feared being associated with Kemalism, in addition to the influence of postmodernism which philosophically and theoretically causes us to question what we know”. (Interview with an autonomous socialist-feminist, 4 February 2017)

While the marriage between feminism and postmodernism was not welcomed by everyone, at the same time it caused a certain exclusion of constituents of women’s movements who still show an allegiance to the founding principles of the republic, and are attached to a more ‘communitarian’ versions of feminist citizenship that places more stress over duties and obligations rather than rights. These women were part of the earlier generations after
independence and have been the first ones to be included as citizens despite the shortcomings of this gendered citizenship, are ideologically close to secular and Kemalist politics and generally have an urban and well-educated background with access to transnational networks.

At the opposite end of those who endorse a communitarian citizenship were Islamist women in the movement whose main feminist references consisted of an Islamic interpretation focusing on the importance of family, community and duties towards others, rather than the universal values and treaties adopted by other feminists. However at the risk of appearing Kemalist, despite having an individualist orientation, the feminist movement has refrained from developing a critical stance against the communitarian claims of these women as well as the Islamist party in power who coopted the claims against the veiling ban voiced by Islamist women. Their attachment to postmodernist orientation and strong anti-Kemalist position restrained them from approaching critically to the risks of rising Islamism on women’s rights.

While the exclusion of Kemalist and modernist women from the larger picture might have been caused by both an unwillingness to commit to a postmodern orientation by these women themselves, it can also be claimed that the Kurdish issue towards which the new movement is largely sympathetic via its adoption of a discourse of ‘peace’ and demanding justice and resolution for the ongoing conflict in the south-eastern Turkey, remains a differentiating cleavage between different groups. A professor with expertise on gender issues and a secular orientation stated in her interview that,

“Speaking of the feminist movement, I am not sure whether they can leave internal politics aside. It is associating itself more and more with the Kurdish movement. This doesn’t mean I am against Kurdish politicians but it means that it becomes exclusionary. This fragmentation is not a good sign.” (Face to face interview, 22 February 2017, Ankara).

The modernist women in Tunisia on the other hand, have a more hierarchical and central position within the movement, compared to their counterparts in Turkey. While the number of new women’s rights associations has increased significantly after the revolution, this did not mean the displacement of the old establishments such as ATFD or AFTURD. Although it is true that UNFT, the women’s organization that could be said to be the closest to the ancien regime, has been going through a lot of operational difficulties and is no longer active as it used to be after the revolution, ATFD as an organization and women who have been formerly been a member, or within the same circle with ATFD members, is still the leading movement in Tunisia. This is because ATFD always kept its autonomy towards the regime, while UNFT was the vanguard association of Tunisian state-feminism.

After the revolution ATFD gained an even more stable position as their operations were no longer supervised, they could spread their activities to rural areas by establishing offices outside of Grand Tunis, and that they are now an invited party to the decision and policy-making circles within the government since they are the most credible and established institution in the domain of women’s rights.
“Our opinions are now being solicited by the government and other policy makers working on women’s rights issues due to our expertise and credible position which extends over several decades now. This was something that could never have happened before the revolution.” (An executive member of ATFD, 19 April 2017, Tunis)

The effects of postmodernist legacy on the movement are however visible after the revolution in Tunisia. Not having a central role in the overall women’s movement, some new generation groups pose a critique towards the central status quo of the old establishments. While it seems difficult for the new generation feminists to have access to decision making positions within the old establishments, they also see themselves as more progressive than the older generation.

“The problem with the old establishment is despite the fact that we admire their work and their contributions in the past, it seems impossible for them to accept new people into their circles. They are very closed, especially to young people. We have different values than them when it comes to a gender fluid position, the rights of the LGBT individuals and sexual freedoms. They just cannot understand us” (Interview with a young renowned blogger and gender equality activist, 6 May 2017, Tunis)

The hierarchical position of the old establishment in Tunisia and the relatively smaller influence of the postmodernist legacy on the movement has caused a very large rift between seculars and Islamist women. The mistrust between Islamist associations and secular ones was mentioned in almost every interview. In contrast to Turkish feminist who have managed to form coalitions with Islamic feminists, Tunisian movement remains very sharply divided between conservative and modernist women.

As they choose to trespass these boundaries, the new wave feminists do not place much significance on such religious and cultural differences. They embrace a post-Islamist stance in which a person’s religiosity is not a relevant matter and they can ally with other groups with different identities and act together with them in fighting for other issues of social justice which they see more pressing. Many of the new associations that were established in Tunisia after the revolution stated that they have an ‘apolitical’ stance, meaning that they preferred not to take a position with respect to cultural differences in order to attract and represent a larger portion of the society. They do not see Ennahda and the rising Islamism as the biggest threat in front of women, they prioritize other problems such as economic and social problems, unemployment, lack of good governance and democracy and respect for human rights. This was similar to the position held by new wave feminists in Turkey. However while these feminists have become the most visible players in Turkey, in Tunisia older generation of modernist women are still more dominant.

4.2 Organization and activities and sustainability

Differences between waves and generations of feminists in terms of ideology and In Turkey and in Tunisia the new generation of feminists unite under more flexible structures such as issue-based platforms and networks. This is not only due to operational difficulties of maintaining an NGO but also a deliberate choice. They seem to refuse to accept existing
political camps and social polarization between the seculars and Islamists, between modernists and conservatives, between nationalists and pro-Kurdish circles. Tired of existing long term divisive issues such as veiling, they feel the need to go beyond political cleavages which also exist in the larger political sphere in Turkey. In the relatively polarized context of post-revolutionary Tunisia and the rise of fundamentalist forces whose discourse increasingly calls for violence against women, we also see several attempts to form coalitions of feminist associations, which aim to overcome the cleavages and to undertake strategic action. An example is the Coalition for Women in Tunisia, the first legal network, which brings together fifteen founding associations (Mahfoudh and Mahfoudh, 2014). These networks enable coalitions between organizations which share similar values and goals. However this renders them more fragile.

The departure from these divisive issues does not necessarily mean that they remain ‘apolitical’. This is a more action based approach to doing feminist politics than the typical NGO model. Due to the limitations of the NGO model and due to the presence of irreconcilable political cleavages within the movement, women build more and more issue based coalitions and sustains these coalitions through networks. These issues range from fighting against violence against women, to calling for peace in the south-eastern Turkey or voting ‘no’ in the 2017 constitutional referendum in Turkey to anti-corruption demonstrations and political assassinations in Tunisia. As one can see, the agenda of protests are not only limited to feminist issues in its typical sense, but they take a broader view of social justice that aim to include all marginalized and silenced groups. These networks take to the streets for a more street activist form of citizenship, making their demands heard to the public through the means of protests and mobilizations. In circumstances where mobilizing and protesting becomes surveyed, controlled and most of the time intervened by the police forces, the right to make protests become a political action itself. It shows a more anarchist and detached form of political action compared to conventional means of political participation in civil society through lobbying, advocacy and project-base activism.

However, the emphasis on street politics is drawing some critique from the more experienced members of the movement. Not only they contend that street protests as a means of political action is difficult to sustain, they also consider engaging with the state and including mainstream political actors is crucial in order to build a relationship with them and exert influence on them.

“With the crowd comes a certain romanticism, and divisions of opinion. ‘Let’s win our sisters over for our no campaign’ was one of the opinions, but I found the ideas on how to do this extremely romantic detached from past experiences. I think it is a waste of time when they think it was them who started the women’s movement. Young women think it is more important to be on the street. We on the contrary especially speaking of Ka-der, we choose lobbying, desk work, academic production and we are criticized because we engage with the state. I think these are complementary tactics. But young women do not chose to do desk work which then causes the movement to be weak.”  
(Former president of Ka-der, 2 February 2017 Istanbul)
It is also true that it is difficult to maintain a sustained momentum of pressure through only street protests. Activists get weary and demotivated and sometimes too tired to put their bodies to the fore as a form of political action. Many of the interviewees in Tunisia for example have commented on how often they used to go out for protesting a few years ago and how impossible it was to keep up the momentum.

Even though there were many new associations established in Tunisia after the revolution, some have become obsolete due to operational difficulties. While on paper there are numerous associations working on the issue of women’s rights in Tunisia, many of them are largely constrained by funding and other administrative issues. Receiving funds from international donors remains crucial for these organizations since there are not many other alternatives for available funds. International donors in return demand certain assets as guarantees and look for credible projects in their own terms. One association which I was not able to reach during the fieldtrip because their address and phone numbers were no longer responsive, posted this statement on their Facebook page on March 2015,

“And to say that an association must present financial guarantees of nearly 200,000 dollars to be awarded a project! Donors demand a dowry and strangle emerging associations!” (Facebook page of Egalité et Parité, posted on 21 March 2015, accessed on 20.04.2017)

However, other new associations such as Ligue Tunisienne des Electrices (LET) which works on increasing political representation of women in local and general elections and Association Beity, which works on providing shelter and complementary services to homeless women, were established after the revolution by modernist feminists and have a solid operational basis. They are rather active in their own domains and have functioning offices with their own professional staff. Their directors are women have a similar background with femmes démocrates as French-speaking, urban and well-educated.

The more flexible and new forms of organizing for activist women presents its opportunities as well as its challenges. On the one hand, coalitions and networks make it easier to respond quickly to crisis situations like when women feel there is an imminent attack on their rights, like the ban on abortion bill in Turkey in 2011 or when the Salafists in Tunisia harassed students and university teachers for their alleged activities against Islam. However, as commented by the interviewees that it also makes it difficult to make progress without changes in laws which usually happens through constant pressure, lobbying, consciousness raising and advocacy campaigns. However passing laws under conservative governments have been extremely difficult and required further strategizing.

Facing the increasing threat on women’s rights in both countries which have been on the rise during the past several years by fundamentalists, the passing of laws one of the primary items on the women’s rights groups agenda in Tunisia is the call for legislative reforms in order to achieve full compliance with the new 2014 Constitution which stipulates gender equality and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In this regard, the question came up of whether to rewrite the entire CSP or reform it partially.
On this issue, the president of the new umbrella organization Coalition Pour les Femmes de Tunisie stated:

“The majority of the current parliament is not progressive. We risk, with this rewriting, to have no CSP at all, and furthermore it would be catastrophic to question major problems such as the right to abortion. It was a polemic between us and the ‘femmes democratrices’. A lot of people agreed with us, we invited women from provincial regions who were concerned about very important issues, inheritance, economic equality, and so on. But it is not a question of rewriting the CSP entirely which has been working so far.” (Interview by A. Mahdaoui with Ayda Ben Chaaben, Coalition Pour les Femmes de Tunisie, 8 March 2017, accessed 20 April 2017)

Turkish women advocating for the rewriting of its own civil code in 2001 had similar concerns and faced many objections from all different political parties represented in the parliament (Arat, 2010). For example, in lobbying for the passing of the protection order in 1998, when an Islamist party was in the coalition, women used the argument of Malaysia, a sharia ruled country, having a protection law:

“We could even deal with religious arguments because Malaysia passed a protection order. Welfare party understood when we proposed a translated law on protection of women from Malaysia.” (Phone interview, representative of Women for Women’s Human Rights, 2 January 2017).

Without sustained pressure and concrete legal results, women’s rights in these countries remain precarious. These tactics enable women to maneuver within a very narrow space in which their legitimacy is criticized by non-feminists and conservatives alike. The following section will touch upon more of these critiques.

4.3 Questions of identity and culture, various responses

Questions of authenticity and local culture was one of the themes that was frequently mentioned in the interviews. In Tunisia, while most of the informants believed that women’s rights have not reached the rural areas of the country and that urban and rural women have different priorities, there were different opinions on how to reach popular masses and speak to women from all walks of life. The feminist women were criticized various angles; for not being able to get all women to participate in the movement, supposedly for being ‘elitist’, for engaging in ‘useless activities’ such as round tables and conferences whereas ‘women had more urgent needs such as proper shelter and food’, and therefore for not being able to represent ‘real women’. Other critiques consisted of for not including the youth, and for relying too much on the Western feminist experience and not being ‘Tunisian enough’. Some of these critiques came from outside of the movement and some were internal and some were voiced by both. Most of these critiques existed since the beginning of the movement.

These critiques demonstrate that there is a perception of what it is to be a feminist in a Muslim majority country and how it is different than being a ‘normal woman’. This put activist women on the defense for an identity they did not see politically relevant and was being made
increasingly relevant by the upsurge of Islamism since the 1970s. The response to this critique in Tunisia usually took the form of “We are all Muslims and Arabs and we are proud Tunisians.” This response suggests that there is a culture of religiosity and nationalism accepted and normalized to a certain extent by activist women claiming an authenticity and legitimization, delegitimizing positions outside of religious references. A similar response exists in Kemalist and even some ‘radical’ feminist circles in Turkey. With respect to the discussions of abortion being against Islam, Pinar Ilkkaracan, a famous women’s rights activist in Turkey stated on an interview that;

“I am a devout person and I know that all these things are not closely related to Islam. Islam is not a misogynistic religion. In this debate, politics is being done through the female body. Women have been victimized because the headscarf issue was politicized and now politics, now this is done through abortion.” (Interview by Celik, 2012, Aksam newspaper)

In this regard, a common comment that came up in Turkey interviews was that “We are not Sweden, we are Turkey”, referring to an ideal of a democratic and equal Western society with no problems of cultural recognition or economic difficulties. These women underline a necessity to vernacularize the universal norms that feminist movement adheres. A similar critique was made by the representative of KAMER, the largest feminist association predominantly active in the eastern and south-eastern Turkey where a patriarchal culture is more tangible. The representative from KAMER commented on the fact that feminists in the western parts of the country adhere to international values and promote this ‘foreign’ agenda and if they followed the same strategy it would not be possible for them to reach so many women in so many different areas:

“We adjust our behavior to the local culture and we have to do this. Imagine I preached my daughter the values that the western feminists advocate, such as sexual and bodily rights, they would kill my daughter in an instant here. We have to think globally but act locally. For example, we opened a women-only park in Siverek. Some feminists are against this but we think that it is important to be pro-woman. Before the women-only park, women were not able to even go out of their houses in Siverek. Now they can, and that is a pro-woman result.” (KAMER representative, face-to-face interview, Istanbul, 1 April 2017)

This critique was also highlighted by Islamic feminists in both countries. Despite there is no consensus on what exactly Islamic feminism refers to, Islamic feminists in Turkey are conservative women who mobilized initially against the veiling ban in the 1990s while in Tunisia they are secular and modernist women who reinterpret Islamic sources from a feminist perspective. As some commentators have noted, the more religious a society is and the more repression they face from Islamic law, the stronger, dynamic and secular their Islamic feminist movement is. This can be exemplified in the cases of Turkey where Islamic feminism is rather weak and dispersed after the relative resolution of veiling ban in public institutions such as universities, hospitals and courts. In Tunisia where the laws are secular but there are still traces of sharia, Islamic feminism has a stronger presence. Nevertheless, they have a common critique
against feminists that they refused to fight against Islamists with their own weapons.

A prominent women’s rights activist and an independent member of the parliament in Tunisia responded to these critiques of being ‘unauthentic’ from an offensive position instead of the typical defensive move:

“They criticize us for being elitist and not being able to represent all women. Nobody can claim though that they have a solution for all women’s problems. Call me an elite all you want, I am at least doing something about these issues, and what have you done? Instead of blaming themselves for not doing anything for women’s rights, they find the audacity to criticize us. This is an instrumentalization and manipulation of women’s rights for their own political purposes”. (Face-to-face interview, 1 May 2017, Tunis)

The fight for legitimacy of feminist women in these countries is not an easy one especially when coupled with a history of antagonistic relationship with the west. Even though postcolonial studies were successful in showing how Western interests of democracy promotion did in fact effect the emergence of the women’s movement, it also gave an excuse for regressive forces in the society to try to delegitimize and overlook the activities and struggles of these secular women in their own context.

5. Conclusion

This paper has focused on the different dilemmas within women’s movement in Turkey and in Tunisia from a citizenship as a performative act perspective. It took the acts of citizenship collectively in order to compare and contrast the activities of different groups. Although the comparison reveals that there is a new moment in feminism with the emerging third wave, these divisions and different positions within the movement are not fixed. These different positions with respect to ideology, values and strategies however are not clear cut lines and they can even exist in different combinations within the same individual.

Nevertheless, there are some patterns emerge looking from a macro perspective. The dominant orientation in Turkish feminism today comes from a post-modernist practice which marks a rejection of the communitarian versions of feminist citizenship with links to grand political projects such as Kemalism, modernism, Socialism or Islamism, and they advocate a more individualistic understanding of feminist citizenship focusing on bodily and sexual rights from a gender fluid perspective. This caused the Islamic/Secular divide within the movement to narrow down as each group managed to come under coalitions recently. It also caused a prioritization of ad hoc activist street politics rather than long term strategies through engaging with the state to pass reforms and policies. Finally it causes tensions between individualistic vs. communitarian cultural norms of practicing feminist citizenship.

In Tunisia on the other hand, where the modernist women have a more central and dominant focus, we see that the Islamist/secularist divide is very wide and sharp. In terms of acts of citizenship, while a lot of street politics did occur during the revolution, it was replaced by long term strategies of lobbying and passing reforms with certain risks of working with a conservative parliament. Finally, women working under the modernist framework still adhere
to grand narratives of nationalism and Islam as their Arabo-muslim identity still carries a lot of weight in how they identify themselves.

As a consequence, this broader framework is shaping the acts of resistance enacted by these groups. More experienced activists stress the importance sustained lobbying and engaging with the state for seeing solid gains in laws. This is perhaps easier on their part because they have access to certain institutions and people and have more experience in long term strategizing. Newer generations prefer street action and ad hoc mobilizing through flexible networks stressing their own individuality and inclusiveness towards all different identities. This is perhaps again preferable from their part because of their youthful and creative energy in addition to how they are marginalized from decision-making positions within established NGOs. Despite the fact that both can be considered complementary tactics, different cleavages within the movement can take a defensive position towards what is right for the movement.

For conclusion, comparing Turkey and Tunisia’s women’s movements’ and how they enact feminist citizenship shows the link between dominant theoretical frameworks and citizenship. The legacy of modernization and post-modernism understood and practiced in its specificity in both countries have direct consequences on the way these women set their agenda’s and the way in which different groups mobilize. More so, this broader context defines the circumstances, spaces and the possibilities of strategies available to women.
6. REFERENCES


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