The attitude of women civil societies towards bio-power discourses in Turkey: Applied research in Mersin

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Abstract

The aim of this study is searching the attitude of women civil societies towards bio-power discourses of ten years government in Turkey on the axises of “independence from the state, free to declare its own opinion, conflict/ compromise with the state”. In the study, refer to bio-power analyses, it is presupposed that the body is instrumentalized as an object of power via the woman. Throughout this instrumentalization process, the woman body is discussed not as an object the individual possesses but as a social instrument by which the power manages to construct its own social politics. While the women civil societies are being evaluated, development of civil society in a non-western country has been taken into the account. Whether they have the power of changing society independently of government and creating awareness in society is analyzed. Mediterranean Entrepreneur Project Institution (AGIP), Independent Women Institution (BKD) and White Tulip Women, Education-Culture- Solidarity Institution is chosen for applied research. These institutions are active in Mersin, and they represent three different aspects. Depth interviews are done with the board members and members of the institutions, and the relation between women civil societies and the government is analysed by the dichotomy of conflict/compromise. These interviews are analyzed with content analysis methodology.

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Keywords: Biopower, civil society, women civil society organisations

1. Introduction

That discourses on woman body have been developed by current government in recent years in Turkey is one of the most important subjects of women studies. These discourses provide clear references to relationship between power and government and they enable us to recognize the government’s aim to shape women’s life according to an obvious point of view. As the government’s discourses about abortion, population, marriage and give birth are clearly related with bio-power cores, the character of women civil societies’ reaction against them shows dynamics of relationship between government and women civil societies. Deep interviews with member of women civil societies provide us to evaluate meanings and results of the discourses.

2. Bio power and Woman Body

The power notion is assumed as a single, major and macro fact. However by analyzing power notion Foucault tries to find the relationship between subjects and power. According to him the power is not an absolute thing at all: “It is everywhere not because it covers everything but as it is coming from everywhere and as it is reproduced in
each relationship between one point and the other one. The power is a name which is given to a complex strategic manner in a certain society, it is not a stable thing, it has role of direct producer.” (Foucault, 2010:72). This new approach to the power analysis gives an opportunity to reconsider the role of individuals in power relations. While Foucault is arguing on power and body, he develops the term *bio politic* to point out changing of the object of the policy. With this change the power notion gives its place to a new one named *governmentality*. In this new axis, government is the one which has the power, and the government can use the power for its own economic, politic benefits. “… The aims of government in their attempts to control populations and the social sciences in their investigation and research about the population as a whole and of the body in particular are refined.” (Mills, 2003:83). Although population and the control of the body are handled together, and the body is not identified according to sex, the woman body is used as a tool by bio politic tactics of the governments.

In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault deeply analyzes that how the power arranges sexuality by using discourses on body in order to control the sexual practices for its own benefit. He focuses on four main discourses on which the power constructs itself: (1) a hysterization of women’s body; (2) a pedagogization of children sex; (3) a socialization of procreative behaviour; (4) a psychiatrization of perverse pleasure (Foucault, 2010:79-80).

In *hysterization of women’s body* process, woman body is analyzed as a sexual overwhelmed body. This body is integrated into applied healthcare field with affect of pathology, and inserted into the family space where women have biologic-moral responsibility for children (Foucault, 2010:79-80). Woman body is responsible for welfare and morality of the society and she has to give birth regularly. “Hysterization of women’s sexuality and normalization of heterosexuality are elements of the government strategies seeking to combat the nation’s alleged descent into moral decay.” (Nedesan, 2008:113).

A *socialization of procreative behaviour* reflects the birth-control practices of the governments in liberal regimes. They take the population under control in order to arrange economy. “... An economic socialization via all the incitements and restrictions, the ‘social’ and fiscal measures brought to bear on the fertility of couples: a political socialization achieved through the ‘responsibilization’ of couples with regard to the social body as a whole... and a medical socialization carried out by attributing a pathogenic value-for the individual and the species- to birth-control practices.” (Foucault, 2010: 80).

### 3. Bio politic Discourses of The Current Government In Turkey

The government of AKP which identifies itself as a conservative democratic political party has been governing the state apparatuses for ten years. In these years education system, healthcare and justice policy are shaped by the government’s own ideology and discourses. The ten years Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan frequently has mentioned the population growth and the problem of aging of the population. From the perspective of the government, national welfare and international development in economy are associated with the population growth. The quota below is parallel with socialization of procreative behaviour:

“In our time, the most affluent countries have great problems about development and welfare because of low population growth and increasing of old age population. As government we take important lessons from the problems of developed countries and we get necessary providences. In this point, to accelerate the population growth, protect the young and productive population, and bring up healthy generations are so essential in line with our targets.” (Haber7, 2012).

As the woman body is identified with hysteria, the government takes it into the family notion. Woman body and motherhood are identical:

“As long as the family and the nation exist then the state exists. As long as the family exists, the healthy generations and the goodness will exist. We see all kind of harassments towards the family as being done directly against the humankind. In no way we tolerate it. We respect the notion that the position which sublimes the woman is motherhood; paradise lies under the feet of the Mother” (Milliyet, 2013).
Government’s another important bio political discourse is on abortion. In International Parliamentary Conference 2012 on Programme of Action of International Conference on Population and Development, The Prime Minister declares that as a government they are strictly against the abortion:

“According to me the abortion is a murder. Nobody must have permission right for it. Either you kill the fetus or you kill the baby after it is born... There is no difference.” (Ntvmsnbc, 2012).

All these discussions on woman body and population indicate that bio politics discourses in Turkey have three dimensions; development, social-moral responsibility, and conservativeness. The first is constructed by the discourses on population growth and control of the population. The other is identified with the family and motherhood. The third dimension is related with the restriction of abortion, and the main point is that woman body is the object of all these processes.

4. Civil Society in Turkey

The conditions which are necessary for occurrence of civil society exist in democratic liberal governments. Since liberalism is a regime focuses on diversity, differences, and pluralism, in liberal government a strong civil society can restrict the will of administrators who have the power of governing, and it prevents them from turning into tyrants (Aslan, 2010:202). In other words, civil society has the power of changing repressive governmental policies.

In Turkey, Modernization process is accepted as a transition from Ottoman Empire to Republic, and it has got different aspects from the western modernization. Republic of Turkey has not been experienced natural social changes as Enlightenment or Industrial Revolution. It constructs modernism not by grassroots mobility but by governing elites. These differences make civil society develop in country’s own socio-political aspects. The bourgeoisie is not occurred naturally as a threat on the way of feudalism like in the west, and in building of civil society, the absence of the bourgeoisie as a main actor has strengthened central state notion. This circumstance causes deficiencies in development of democracy. As Biber also mentions in his article “… in a social structure where the bourgeoisie does not occur, some institutions special to civil society organization and providing the mediation between individual and state are not occurred naturally.” (2009:37). However, after the bourgeoisie comes out with Republic; the central state notion does not disappear since the bourgeoisie has been produced by the state and it has not got independent interests. Consequently, Turkish bourgeoisie becomes late in construction of its own field opposite to the state, and because of this delay the development of civil society has a contradiction and instability. Moreover, military cops which were experienced after the foundation of Republic also prevented development of civil society, and only after 1980s some groups begin to realize the importance of civil society for a democracy.

5. Evaluation of Findings

5.1. About Institutions

Mediterranean Entrepreneur Project Institution (AGIP): The missions of the institution founded in 2011 are training women to make them gain a place in business world, and encourage them to be an entrepreneur. Target group of the institution is identified as the women who want to turn an idea into business and who want to found a job. They only work in Mersin. The institution submits 10-12 proposals of projects. Bee Training which is supported by EU is their present activity. They also help women individually.

Independent Woman Institution (BKD): The missions of the institution are changing women's second place in society; support women who are victims of violence, and producing policies on violence against women. Target group is the women who need help and solidarity. BKD gives permanent psychological and juridical support, and they direct women who want job. They attend international assemblies on women; they hold consciousness raising
meetings for disadvantaged groups, and they repress the state while the policies on women are being produced. The members are working on an EU support project whose name is "For a Strong Women Initiative in Local"

White Tulip Hanım*, Education-Culture-Solidarity Institution (BLHD): The missions of the institution are helping female university students; carrying out activities concertedly, and awakening housewives. The target groups are female university students and housewives. The activities of institution focus on short-term projects as courses, kermes, panels, seminars, tours and picnics. Some previous activities are family seminar named "To the Sycamore from The Core", seminar on obesity; an international panel named" Women and Violence"; Spring Festival; Communication Education in Family for Hanımlar and Awareness Education for Fathers. The institution does not have any activity at present.

5.2. Relationship with the Government and Opposing Parties

Members of AGIP defend that there must not be any political activities in the institution since women who work there have different political views. Besides there is no clear negative attitudes towards the government, the members use positive statements as collaboration with the government and supporting it in some cases. While the members are evaluating opposing parties they again indicate that since the women who work there have different political views they separate institution’s activities and policy from each other. The members of BKD express that they are politically independent and they do not have any similarity with the government and opposing parties. Lastly, the members of BLHD do not make any comment on their relationship with the government and opposing parties, and they accurately separate the policy and institution’s activities from each other.

5.3. Attitude of Institutions towards Discourses of the Government on Women

Positive Attitudes: The members of BLHD find works of Family and Social Policies Ministry on women and violence benevolent. The other two institutions do not have any positive view on this question.

Negative Attitudes: The members of AGIP indicate that only the couples can decide whether they have a child or not; only the woman can decide for abortion; there are conflicts in government’s discourses on women, in one hand they want participation of women in economy but on the other hand they encourage women for giving birth; if the government is against violence, it must support this idea judicially. According to members of BKD the government imposes its policies to the society. The government does not approach women as an individual and citizen, and sees women as an object of population policy. The members indicate that although the government do something for women, in reality they want to prison women in house and family; the discourses of government involve conservativeness, and they try to strength devoted mother figure. In general the members find the government’s discourses patriarchal. The members of BLHD do not answer this question and again express that they are not interested in policy.

5.4. Institutions’ Approach to Women’s Body

The members of the three institutions generally express that the woman body belongs only the woman herself and only she can decide anything on her body. However, some members of BLHD indicate that body is consigned to human and we must use blessings of God for benefit of our body; women are innately in low status, and everybody is free in dressing.

6. Conclusion

The current government which has got governmental instruments sees woman as a main actor of the family and population policies. Sublime woman as a mother; described her role in the family; promote her giving birth and
abortion are discourses of the government, and they are match with “hysterization of women’s body” and “a socialization of procreative behaviour”. These strategies ignore women as individuals.

The attitudes of women civil societies in Turkey towards bio power discourses have important effects on changing society and creating awareness. The women civil societies manage to stand out against state and government since civil society notion is historically give this mission to them.

Different results are obtained when the attitudes of women civil societies in Mersin towards the power are evaluated in bio power context. For instance, AGİP has positive indirect relationship with the government. On the other hand, members find government’s discourses on women are conflictive and they do not support them but there is not any activity in the institution on this spot. With its non political attitude, BLHD keeps itself away from the policy which is one of the most important field for changing the society. However to consider mothers, housewives and female university students who will bring up next generations as target group, is match up with “hysterization of women’s body” discourse which describe women in family context and make them responsible for children’s moral and physical evolvement. Since this attitude is parallel to government’s discourses, activities of the institution strength compromising points with the power. BKD is the only women civil society which is directly in conflict with the government. Moreover, the institution’s activities are in the same direction as this conflict. Since all these discourses show conflict with the government, as a civil society the institution stand out against state/power/government.

Implications of women civil society on woman body shows conflict and compromising with discourses of the government. Nearly all of the members of AGİP emphasizes that the woman body only belongs to the woman herself. Members of BKD also express parallel views to AGİP on woman body but BKD uses a political language. Lastly, about woman body, members of BLHD’s expression are parallel to government’s point of view which accepts abortion as a sin, and so, the institution indirectly supports government’s discourses on woman body.

In the light of these evaluations, it can be said that except BKD, members of the two other institutions segregate civil society activities and the policy; they do not develop any discourses on women against the government which sees woman as a main actor of the bio politic strategies. Although some members are in conflict with these strategies theoretically, they do not do anything in practice. Moreover the members emphasize that their activities do not involve political aims. In this present case, the institutions are far away from the main mission of civil society which is the power of changing society by producing policies against the government.

Women civil societies can freely express their opinion independent from the government and their activities develop women status in the society however they cannot defend the woman body as an object which belongs only to individual against the government’s bio politic discourses. One of the most important reasons of this manner is some defects in historical development of civil society notion in Turkey. The government’s “central and monolithic” approach to events and its notion of “the state do whatever the society need” weakens effect of women civil societies also. They are affected by the civil society notion which develops in Turkey’s internal dynamics.

References