

## **Feminism reloaded – Women travel to Istanbul**

Dagmar Schultz

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October 2009

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“Women’s movements in Turkey – Women as the motor of political development”. For the fourth time since 2006 women traveled from Germany to Istanbul to get to know women from various projects and organizations. The tours were organized by the lecturer and interpreter Arzu Altuğ, along with several public educational institutions. Together with the women of femtur/Mor Çatı, the foundation which runs a house for battered women, they arranged a program “which relates important information on human rights questions, on the position of women in society, on the history of the women’s movement and on questions of ethnic minorities.”

We heard presentations on the women’s movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and on women's rights at present. We visited the women’s library, the Women’s Academy and the Bookcafé “Amargi”, the Initiative of Feminist Filmmakers “Fillmor”, the Women’s Cultural Initiative FKÇ and the Socialist Feminist Collective SFK, and we met with the writer Nazmiye Güçlü, with a Kurdish activist, an Armenian activist and with representatives of the Initiative for Lesbians, Gay, Transvestites and Transsexuals “Lambda”. It was an incredibly stimulating experience guided with great competence and much charm by Arzu Altuğ and the women of Mor Çatı.

Mor Çatı (purple roof) was the first project which worked against violence against women. In 1987, when the country was still under the influence of the last military takeover from 1980, women reacted with a solidarity march after a judge had refused a woman’s request for a divorce with the argument “A woman needs a blow on her back and a baby in her belly.”

By 1990, a group of women finally created the foundation Mor Çatı to be able to offer battered women a refuge. In 1995 they opened the first house for battered women in Turkey. In 1998 they had to close the house after it had served 350 women and 230 children. A second house existed from 2005 until 2007. The city district administration in Beyoğlu was going to close it down, but this was avoided through massive protest. Then, however, the city administration handed it over to the Public Services Agency after which the women of Mor Çatı were no longer involved. In the meantime, there are seven houses in Istanbul run by the State.

In February 2009, Mor Çatı founded a new autonomous house. Women can receive legal advice and aid in looking for a place to live. In addition, Mor Çatı offers vocational counseling and gets women registered in continued education programs so as to support them in developing an independent life. Women do not receive any welfare payments for themselves or for their children. Mor Çatı works under great financial strain. They generate a bit of financial support from this organization of tours for women.

In the following report we focus on one important aspect: the situation of minorities. We begin with the portrait of Fatma Mefküre Budak, team member of Mor Çatı, which depicts the experiences of a left activist.

**“The women’s movement: a river with many side arms”**

*Slim, in blue jeans, her face surrounded by a mane of red-blond curls, Fatma greets us with shining eyes and an open smile. Since 1987 she has worked at and with Mor Çatı Until 2005 she was active in counseling and in the house for battered women more or less on a voluntary basis and supported herself with jobs in public relations. Since 2005 she has worked full-time as a paid team member. Daily work was not without dangers. Fatma reports: “During the campaign against violence, which resulted in 1998 in the passage of §4320 of the law for protection against violence, we supported women in their apartments, also stayed over night, i.e. we exposed ourselves to the same violence.”*

*Fatma grew up in a city as the daughter of academics and the youngest of four children. Her mother conceived of herself as a left historian. “At the age of 14, I decided – motivated by everything I had read – to become politically active and joined an illegal organization which had taken up contact with high school students. My parents did not want me to take any risks. Izmir is a liberal city. I wanted to move out quickly and got married early, at the age of 17 years. We were hoping to be active without any restraints. Everyone was upset because they thought I would risk my professional education with such an early marriage. I maintained and believed to be able to handle all of that. Before my marriage I had had an abortion – I wanted to have children only after the revolution. If you had connections and sufficient money you could receive an abortion. Then I became pregnant again and my husband wanted me to have the child, wanted to have a petit bourgeois family and reduce the political work.”*

*Fatma continued the marriage with great difficulties for one and a half years. Then she got a divorce, moved back to her family temporarily and looked for a job. “Until September 12 1980 (the date of the military takeover) I worked at high speed, fulfilled my motherly duties and was politically active. I was registered at the university, but as a mother released from studies.”*

*After the military takeover of 1980 Fatma was arrested and was incarcerated for more than four years in Bartın, one of the first institutions for political prisoners. There were a number of measures against political prisoners, such as psychology tests and religious lessons. Kemalism was of course also instructed. In the morning and in the evening the prisoners had to sing the national anthem. Fatma rebelled against these measures and as a result had to stay longer in prison. “Torture was art of it,” Fatma said. “I did not want to talk about torture, since others died on account of it and therefore what I had experienced seemed unimportant.” Fatma’s daughter was raised by her grandparents during this time: “I took care that my daughter did not visit me in prison. I wanted to protect her from a traumatic experience in case I would be attacked or humiliated in front of her. This was very difficult for me.”*

*When she was released from jail she took her child and went to Istanbul where she again joined her organization. For 12 years she was barred from university studies. She became a leader in her organization, but without any pay. The men received a salary, the women were expected to work and leave the money to the organization. “We women wanted to be like the men, we talked of the armed struggle – I had never thought about the position of women in*

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*the organization in any basic way. Through the encounter with feminists and their journals I gained so much insight.”*

*Fatma came to Mor Çatı in 1987, but she remained active in the left organization for another three years. In 1990 she got out: “The men wanted to use illegal structures for themselves – that drove me crazy. We women were the totally active ones and the target for the police. The guys reaped the benefits and at the same time oppressed the women. Nevertheless I felt miserable when I separated. I fell into a deep hole. You have to consider how long I had been active in the Leninist organization. I concluded a life in it. Until then I had grown up with the heroic epos of Kemalism. My focus had been the working class and the revolution. We saw each other as brothers and sisters in arms. I could not handle the feeling to have abandoned someone. Even though I missed this political way, in Mor Çatı, my feminist surroundings did help me a lot.”*

*Until 1988 Fatma lived semi-illegally because she did not want the police to be able to arrest her arbitrarily. In the course of a raid she was, however, arrested. The trial ended in her favor: “The charges against her were dropped. “I could officially register my place of living, and I immediately acquired cats.” Chicaneries however continued – she was not given a passport or she was asked to again hand in her passport to the authorities.*

*How does Fatma see the relation to lesbian women? “In consciousness raising groups bisexuality was addressed, but never lesbian love. We assumed that bisexuality included same-sex love. It was the transvestites and the transsexuals who paved the way for lesbians. In 1987, they spoke up during the campaign against violence, they participated in a rally for a human rights association. We as feminists dressed in purple, they in many colors. Lesbian women became more courageous then. As heterosexual women we had gone a long way, we had to question our sexuality. There were serious disputes. Today lesbian women also identify openly in women’s groups. For Mor Çatı it is no problem to work together with lesbians, because we all work on the problem of violence.”*

*And what is the condition for women of different ethnic backgrounds? “Not all women are organized by ethnicity. Aside from the Kurdish women’s movement they are oriented primarily in a feminist way and against violence. Kurdish women are integrated in the broad context of the Kurdish liberation movement. At the annual national meetings of the staff members of houses for battered women all ethnic groups are represented.” Fatma closes with the words: “We are in a way side branches of a river which act independently, but as soon as a topic emerges which concerns everyone, the branches merge together again to form one river.”*

“We want to live in peace with all ethnic groups. Music is one way to that goal. When we talked with women and did research on their songs we found that the songs explain the whole life cycle of women.” Ülker Uncu, musician and member of the Women’s Cultural Initiative FKC describes her work and shows a video, in which women are being interviewed, sing songs, and dance. “We talk with women about their lives and we use songs, e.g. songs about their work. Kurdish women tell how they make butter and what the war has done to them. They present this in a dance.”

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During the republican era only Turkish songs were collected. That is how many songs of different ethnic groups got lost. Education in the languages of Armenians, Kurds, Roma, Assyrians, Macedonians still is forbidden. After 1990 people began to collect songs. “We rediscovered songs that had been adapted to Turkish. Women from the various groups wrote down the texts of the original versions. On March 8, International Women's Day, we celebrate in Turkish, Armenian and Kurdish. There are Kurdish women in our group and we have good relations with Armenians and Roma women as well as with Assyrians who live outside of Turkey.”

Women of different ethnic groups also work together in other projects. The Kurdish organization “Rainbow”, which evolved from the DTP political party, has close contact with Mor Çatı through the counseling of battered women. “Lambda”, the organization of lesbians, gays, transvestites and transsexuals, brings together persons of many different backgrounds and has a platform in Istanbul, Izmir, Diyarbakir and Bursa which carries out joint actions against violence and for human rights.

The organization “Amargi”, women’s academy and book café, addresses women of various backgrounds with its workshops on literature, film, sexuality and with its journal “Amargi”. Amargi, as does Mor Çatı, maintains connections with Turkish and Kurdish women living in other countries. For example two Turkish women from Germany offered a workshop on sex work at Amargi, which became the theme for an edition of the journal. Esmeray, a transsexual Kurd, founded Amargi in 2001 together with 15 women who had had experiences with multiple identities. “We wanted an alternative academy – alternative to the university – which measures its value by the communication of give and take.” Although Esmeray did not really feel safe and at ease in socialist and feminist groups, she says: “Turkish feminists are more advanced than feminists in many parts of Europe. They allow for different identities. They don’t say: ‘Why don’t you go to your own ethnic or interest association.’ We share our views and act together.”

### **Portrait of Esmeray (by Claudia Lohrenscheit):**

*“When did you notice for the first time that you really were a woman?” This question Esmeray hears frequently, even though it should be: When did you first notice that you were a boy? - because she always felt like a girl.*

*Esmeray gives her talk in the rooms of the feminist-socialist collective in Beyoğlu, which is located very close to Amargi, the academy which she co-founded. Right in the beginning she apologizes: an emergency, a friend is undergoing surgery. That same evening a solidarity theater performance is planned to help finance the hospital bill. Nevertheless she tells us her story which combines in one person much of what we have heard up to now. Esmeray speaks of her multi-identity as woman, Kurd, poor, transsexual, feminist and dark-skinned.*

*Only at the age of nine years had she even understood that she was a boy “biologically”. She entered puberty early and noticed that she felt attracted to boys. But in the rigid sexual hierarchy of her village it was dangerous to fall in love with a boy and not conform to the norm. She did not know the concept of homosexuality, but she did know insults and hate words. That there are other words, which are not degrading, for what she*

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*was feeling, she learned only much later after moving to Istanbul and coming into contact with other persons who, like herself, lived against the norm.*

*At age 18 Esmeray decided to live in the outside world what she knew from the inside: She dressed and presented herself as a woman and appropriated for herself an old feminist motto: One is not born as a woman, but one is made into a woman! With this visible change it became difficult for her to find work. Her identity card still lists “male” as her sex with her old legal name that she no longer uses. Without other opportunities to support herself she became a sex worker, and in doing so stumbled over her own internalized values: “Am I dishonorable?” Having felt coerced into sex work she eventually left it. She survives today on sales of crochet goods and fast food, as well as from her artistic work. She became a member in several left organizations, but it is difficult to find a political home when the comrades make jokes, assign blame, and sexually harass etc.*

*Only in feminist organizations and with Lambda does she find the respect and the esteem she's been seeking. Here she can combine her own history with the struggle for the human rights of transsexual people. It is not a matter of special rights, but of the universal rights which are valid for all people independent of age, social background, skin color, handicaps etc. and independent of sex and sexual identity. Esmeray demands the freedom of self determination against the coercion of a normative gender order which is restricted to heterosexuality for the production of children, and which rejects all other life designs that do not correspond to this model. In the context of this resistance against the violence of the dual-gender system, she sees herself as part of the feminist movement.*

Cooperation between the various feminist groups also happens during national platforms in which women from diverse organizations come together for political campaigns. An example: The present campaign, challenging societal taboos for women, entitled: ‘We are nobody’s honor-our honor is our freedom’ brought hundreds of thousands of women into the streets on March 8, in the Kurdish region alone. But it is not only in the Kurdish areas that women are the ones to bring movement into socially rigid structures and contribute to change. In all of Turkey the cooperation of many women’s organizations is exemplary for overcoming nationalistic tendencies and in demonstrating that they can act in unison to achieve peace.

Since mid-April 2009 several hundred people of the DTP (Party of the Democratic Society), the DÖKH (Democratic Free Women’s Movement), and the KESK (umbrella organization of the union of civil service) were arrested, accused of membership in an illegal organization. A number of them, including many women, are still in jail. In reaction, women from all over Turkey met in Diyarbakir at the end of May with the slogan ‘We have something to say and we have the strength to realize a solution’ and formed a national women’s solidarity initiative for peace.” (see: <http://www.kurdmania.com/Forum-action-printpage-topic-4613.html>; transl. D.S.)

The majority of women who met with us seemed to have had experiences with state violence, be it in their collective historical biography, or personally, in the more recent past. These experiences influenced their work with women in the area of family violence.

Ayten Kordu, active in the organization “Rainbow”, reported that Kurdish women know their rights that were granted in the Violence Protection Law of 1998 (in Germany such a law was

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passed only in 2002!) and in the new Criminal Law of 2005 which reflected the policies advocated by women's organizations. Yet she said that it is difficult to convince women to press charges against their tormentor. Women find it difficult going to the police since the police often inflict violence against women themselves. (Here we can find parallels to the situation of African-American women.)

A further form of violence is the politics of forced assimilation. By now there exists a television station in the Kurdish language, even though controlled by the State. But there is no Kurdish instruction in schools. Ayten Kordu explains: "This means that the Kurdish language and culture disappear as school attendance increases for children. This again has a negative influence on the motivation of Kurdish families to submit to the requirement of compulsory education."

Expulsion and assimilation have decisively changed the formerly multicultural cityscape of Istanbul in several districts, especially in Beyoğlu. Neighborhoods, in which Jewish and Armenian citizens had lived, are Turkish today. European foreigners rent apartments in the old villas and drive up housing prices. The Jewish community is strongly reduced. According to Nükhet Sirman, professor of anthropology and herself Jewish, there are only 25,000 Jews left in Turkey: "The Jews stick their head into the sand. Those who stayed are the rich Jews, the others emigrated to Israel. From 1939 to 1945 Jews encountered oppression because the government imposed a property tax for all non-Muslims. People who could not pay this tax were interned in a concentration camp in Aşkale. I went there two years ago looking for traces from the past. My mother was appalled and said 'stay away from there'. Hearing the name Aşkale she immediately associated the property tax. I did not find any record there. On principle the Turkish government wants its misdeeds to be forgotten and therefore destroys the traces. A present-day example: the infamous prison in Diyarbakir, where the worst torture took place, is to be transformed into a school."

The Armenians may have suffered the worst. After the genocide and the expulsion of 1915, during which approximately one million people lost their lives (estimates range between 300,000 and 1.5 million people) massacres and pogroms continued against them, even into the 1950s. For example, on September 6 and 7, 1955 Turks pillaged stores of non-Muslims. This genocide still is a taboo topic – recently the journalist Hrant Dink paid with his life for demanding an admission from the government (he was shot dead on his way to work). The author Orhan Pamuk, who received the Nobel Prize for Literature, was accused of "offending Turkish national identity" on account of his critical remarks (the proceedings were quashed on January 22, 2006).

Today there are only about 65,000 Armenians in Turkey. Most of them live in Hatay, some in Ankara and in Istanbul. None live any longer in their ancestral region in Anatolia. Kayuş Çalikman, an Armenian woman who gives lessons in ceramics and works as an interpreter, says with an ironic undertone: "In the last five to six years Armenians have acquired an antique value." She continues: "If you take the land from a people they can no longer practice their crafts and trades. All of this results in the loss of culture. This is also the situation Armenians experience in Istanbul. The cultural knowledge cannot be transmitted any longer." One can observe this when walking through Istanbul: the churches are almost empty and the Armenian schools are closed down.

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Kayuş Çalikman addresses another aspect of the historical development: “My thesis is that a great number of people of Armenian heritage live in households in Anatolia. They were raised as Muslim Turks and do not know their background.” Evidently Armenian children and women were taken up or kidnapped by Turks and Kurds during the 1915 expulsion for the purpose of using them as laborers. They were then raised as Turks or Kurds. In this process rapes also took place. This is part of the painful history separating Armenians from Turks and apparently also from Kurds.

In May 1918 the Democratic Republic of Armenia was established. As a result of the Greek-Turkish war (1919-1922) in 1920 Armenia was divided between Turkey and the Soviet Russia. After the foundation of the USSR the Armenian SSR became part of the Transkaukasian Socialist Federation. When the USSR disintegrated, the state of Armenia became independent from the USSR. The Armenians in diaspora, now look toward the young state which for them signifies an emotional refuge similar to Israel for Jews.

Kayuş Çalikman: “There is no Armenian women’s movement in Turkey today. In 2001 Armenian women briefly organized around a women's historical journal, but this effort lasted for only two years. The founders are moving individually now. At this time, I am working with a group of women in Armenia against the illegal trade in women. Women are being lured across the Turkish border under the pretense that they will find honorable jobs.”

Another minority which experiences discrimination, as in most countries, are handicapped people. Nazmiye Güçlü shared with us the situation of handicapped people in a very personal way. Here is her portrait, taken from the notes of Claudia Lohrenscheit:

### **“Who does not create barrier-free conditions ignores our existence”**

The reading of Nazmiye Güçlü, everyone agreed, counts among the absolute culminations of our trip to Istanbul. We met her in a Café, because she cannot reach the second floor of the feminist-socialist collective where other lectures have taken place. She reads to us several of the short stories from her book **I Bought a Car and I Became a Woman**. Arzu Altuğ reads the German translation, which she had prepared.

Nazmiye Güçlü introduces the reading with some biographical data and right away addresses her central theme: “The view Turkish society has of cripples.”

*She grew up in a one-room apartment in a poor district of Istanbul together with her parents and three siblings. At the age of seven she started school, and this is when violence and humiliation became a daily experience both on the way to school, in school, and also then at home. “Five years of elementary school,” she says, “were complete torture. I did not understand why I was being marginalized, did not understand that I am handicapped, I knew that I am bright and should have understood.” This not-understanding, not-being-able-to-comprehend is the focus of her first story with which she describes her life journey that was marked by discrimination, violence and exclusion.*

*Yet at the same time it became very clear that Nazmiye Güçlü had her own resources that she used to rebel against the ignorance and mendacity of the non-handicapped. In the course of*

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*her studies for chemical engineering she acquired all ‘isms’ – feminism, socialism, anarchism etc. – everywhere she encountered the same mechanisms of marginalization. Everywhere she had to fight to be recognized. Through reading and through writing her own story, and other stories, she has learned a lot – above all that it is not her who is handicapped, but that society is hindering her and making her a cripple!*

*She says herself: “I would say today: Good that I am handicapped. This has taught me a lot. I do not experience my handicap in a negative way, but positively. Being crippled is, for me, simply one attribute among many others – being blond, being tall, being woman. I do not distinguish between them.”*

*This attitude is exemplified in her story ‘Thank you life’, which she read to us. The story evolved after she was interviewed on a television program called ‘Matters that are not talked about’. She received innumerable letters from people who expressed their gratitude that someone finally talked in public ‘about these things’ and gave voice to so much suffering. Homosexuals, diabetics, overweight persons etc. also called on her - everyone with the same message: they saw themselves reflected in Nazmiye’s experiences. Through her public speech about the ‘outcasts’ they became reconciled with themselves. It becomes obvious how important it is to go public, make yourself visible and overcome the shame which goes along with deviations from the norm: I am not un-normal! I have a right to be respected and recognized as any other person – and not despite who I am, but expressly because of it!*

*Nazmiye Güçlü sees the success of her work. Again and again women and men come to her to tell her that they have learned something from her; that they are more conscious of disability; that they have built a wheelchair ramp etc. This is gratifying, but she also states: “It is not enough for me! Who does not create barrier-free conditions ignores our existence.” And neither does it satisfy her when the victims of discrimination and violence lift their voice: “Why should always only the victims talk? I want those to talk who do the discriminating so that we know what we are facing!” Fortunately more and more people think as Nazmiye Güçlü. They have gotten together and jointly played a key role in developing the text for a Convention of the United Nations for the protection of the human rights of handicapped people. The Convention has been in force since 2008. The concepts and bases of human dignity, the freedom from barriers, and the inclusion (inclusion instead of exclusion) which Nazmiye so much emphasizes play a central role in it. Turkey joined the Convention on September 28, 2009. It is a milestone for the protection and promotion of the rights and the recognition of handicapped people as equal members of society.*

Generally our impression was that in Turkey women share an intense interest in joint actions and that a great number of women’s organizations work together creatively – something which is not an easy task considering the social, religious, cultural and political differences and the geographic conditions. We were especially impressed by the feminist identification: almost every woman who presented her organization to us called herself a feminist – refreshing and encouraging to us Germans who come from a country in which this concept of political identity by now is rather avoided or only used as “post-feminism”.

\*I would like to acknowledge the support I received in writing this report: Claudia Lohrscheit formulated the title and had the idea of creating portraits. She wrote the portraits of Esmeray and

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Nazmiye Güçlü. Arzu Altuğ made expert corrections and additions, Anne Thiemann edited the final version and Ika Hügel-Marshall and Fenna Paproth were involved in discussions about the content.

The report was published online in German by:

[NordWestbildung@vnb.de](mailto:NordWestbildung@vnb.de) (www.VNB-NordWestbildung.de)

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**Dr. Dagmar Schultz** was a professor at the Alice Salomon University of Applied Sciences (Social Work and Social Pedagogies) in Berlin. She was co-founder of the Feminist Women's Health Center Berlin and of Orlanda Women's Press, the publishing house which she directed until 2001.

Dagmar Schultz is the editor of the book *Macht und Sinnlichkeit. Texts by Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich* (Orlanda Verlag) and co-editor of *Showing Our Colors. Afro-German Women Speak Out* (University of Massachusetts Press). Email: [dagmar@dagmarschultz.com](mailto:dagmar@dagmarschultz.com)

**Dr. Claudia Lohrenscheit** has her degree in the educational sciences with the focus on education in human rights and intercultural communication. Since 2003 she has been directing the division of human rights education at the German Institute for Human Rights and has developed projects on children's rights, right to education, protection against discrimination, and sexual self-determination.

**Arzu Altuğ** was a pharmaceutical aide, social counselor, social worker, union secretary, expert adviser for migration and integration. Since 1998, she has worked in the area of intercultural affairs with the city government of Hannover.

**Anne Thiemann** works as educational expert at the German Institute for Human Rights in Berlin with the focus on rights of women and of lesbians, gays, bi-sexuals, transsexuals and intersexuals. Next to longtime work in a house of battered women she was active in the education of youths in the areas of gender and sexual identity.