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Intersectionality and feminist/queer student activism in authoritarian Turkey

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ABSTRACT



This article explores the emergent intersectional framework and forms of activism among feminist/queer university students against government policies that attack participatory democracy, citizenship rights, and spaces of freedom and solidarity in Turkey. An increasing number of student activists find it difficult to engage and mobilize around single-issue politics; instead, they tend to define social justice in its most comprehensive terms, build associations across diverse forms of disempowerment and struggle, and identify themselves with multi-issue politics and intersectional activism. Their youth, political, and feminist/queer subjectivity enables our 41 respondents to cultivate a predisposition toward intersectional understandings. The conscious, reflexive, and staunch agency of student activists can be productively understood through the intersectional lens of their collective refusal and struggles against the governmentality of the nation-state. Our findings show that the intersectional framework is employed by the respondents in two ways: (1) to internalize intersectional tenets and engage in intersectional activism, and (2) to dissociate themselves from the mainstreamed and professionalized aspects of that activism. This article unravels the variety and complexity around the concept, sheds light on the challenges that face feminist/queer student activists in contemporary Turkey, and considers how they respond by engaging intersectionality in multiple ways.

KEYWORDS Intersectionality; authoritarianism; feminism; queer; activism

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Introduction

Esma studies journalism in Izmir, Turkey. She was taken into custody in January 2016 while participating in anti-government protests. When she was detained, her friends started an online campaign to raise awareness of her situation and create public pressure for her immediate release. Esma's Twitter bio reads "untamable horse, feminist killjoy" in English and continues with the word "journalist" in three languages: Kurdish, Turkish, and English.

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Contributing to the campaign for her freedom, one of her friends described her on Twitter as a “socialist-feminist, LGBTQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer] activist, animal rights advocate, and a woman who devotes her youth to struggle.” She ends her message with their shared commitment to fighting against power: “Your oppression cannot stop women like us. We are and will be here! Our friendship, songs, poems, creativeness, struggle, and belief will beat your imperiousness!”

This article is about the emergent intersectional framework and forms of activism among feminist and queer university students in Turkey, as exemplified by Esma and her friends. This feminist/queer, youth, and political subjectivity has emerged in contemporary Turkey because successive Islamist, authoritarian, and neoliberal AKP (Justice and Development Party) governments have attacked participatory democracy, citizenship rights, and spaces of freedom and solidarity. The university students with whom we talked feel these attacks and the constant politicization and polarization of social and cultural life. Their bodies and identities are compartmentalized, manipulated, and constrained, while their affective and citizenship capacities are challenged by all-encompassing and overriding political and governmental forces. The respondents’ youth, political, and feminist/queer subjectivity is shaped in this environment, enabling them to cultivate a predisposition toward intersectional understandings. The self-reflexive and passionate student activists’ agency can be interpreted through the intersectional lens of their resistance to multiple forms of oppression and their collective attempts to subvert the governmentality of the nation-state. In this context, they become *muhlif* (politically opposed, critical, dissident) in relation to the neoliberal, Islamist, and authoritarian state discourses and practices. Like Esma and her friends, student activists channel their *muhlif* positionality into a politically vigilant feminist/queer subjectivity and grassroots activism.

We argue that the enactment of feminist/queer political subjectivity and activism indicates and alludes to an intersectional framework. The well-established, rigidly segmented political ideologies or doctrinaire programs such as socialism or liberalism cannot account for the forms of self-identification and political expression and the public agendas that we encountered. Instead, the respondents establish their priorities according to multiple points of reference in an overlapping fashion. These reference points encompass struggles against all forms of socio-cultural discrimination, anti-austerity agendas, universal human rights, principles of social equity, and human and animal emancipation from exploitation, subjugation, and violence. Student activists’ political opposition is shaped by their rejection of monolithic state discourses and their predisposition toward understanding social issues in an intersectional and counterintuitive manner outside official (state) interpretive frameworks.

Some of the feminist/queer students with whom we talked think and act through intersectional precepts while dissociating themselves from intersectionality's more institutionalized forms to secure a standpoint that is radical and independent of both governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Hence, the intersectional framework is mainly employed in two ways. The first is about internalizing and "doing" intersectionality. It concerns the conditions of a democratic and inclusive struggle for social justice against divisive (party) politics and the formation of alliances against the neoliberalizing actions of the nation-state. Student activists build on these ideas, reshape their imaginations, morals, purposes, and sense of righteousness (that they are doing the right thing), and formulate the contours of an emergent "intersectional activism." Second, politically active students tend to dissociate themselves from conflicts around the prevailing approaches to intersectional activism among the members of some feminist/queer organizations. They become disenchanted with the corporate environments of professionalized social movements, the persistent negative values and prejudices (such as sexism and homophobia) in some activist formations, and the deradicalizing "NGOization" of grassroots activism; hence, they unthink, or undo, the hegemonic and mainstreamed aspects of intersectionality.

We observe that, among student activists, intersectionality could be used as an acknowledgment or a departure, a celebration or an awakening, a call to action or a remonstrance. This article highlights the benefits of (1) analyzing the collective forms of refusal and resistance that allow activists to forge new subjectivities and (2) further engagement with the conditions that, in Butler's words, "make life livable" (Ahmed 2016, 490) from politically active students' point of view. We propose an understanding that neither condemns nor celebrates the different meanings and usages of intersectionality but instead tries to unravel the variety and complexity around the concept, which has "the potential to elucidate both the troubles and the triumphs of social justice struggles and, ideally, move the agenda forward" (Howe 2013, 169).

In this sense, our findings point to the significance of the notion of interaction in settings where intersectional precepts are put to use and bodies with different identities encounter each other and exchange ideas. These embodied and dialogical contexts reveal specific forms of disappointment and dynamics of "failing" to do intersectional activism when the intersecting identities in question are in intimate interaction. As Özyegin and Lutz (2008, 1) underline, "whether intersections assume interaction or not is critical for the ways in which intersectional identity or belonging is asserted, rejected, or remains muted." The case of student activism on gender and sexual rights in Turkey provides insights that enable us to better comprehend the broader trends and possibilities of success and failure across collective intersectional endeavors against authoritarianism, neoconservatism, and social exclusion in other parts of the world.

After reviewing the body of research on intersectionality and intersectional activism, we provide background information on Turkey and a brief explanation of our methodology. The article is then divided into two sections that outline our findings. In the first, we discuss the conditions that make the use of intersectionality necessary and enabling, while, in the second, we show the respondents' questioning of the concept and its institutional applications.

Framing intersectional activism

Intersectionality has been at the core of feminist theory and politics and has stimulated feminist/queer inquiry in many disciplines (McCall 2005). The intersectionality paradigm has also generated a great deal of discussion regarding exactly how it should be defined and where and how it should be studied. Conceptualized to illustrate the multidimensionality of marginalized subjects' experiences and the interlocking mechanisms of social inequality (Collins and Bilge 2016; Crenshaw 1989, 139), intersectionality has emerged as a reinvigorating trend offering "a new *raison d'être* for doing feminist theory and analysis" (Davis 2008, 72). Intersectionality places emphasis on "the simultaneity of oppression and the need to move beyond simple, additive models" (Simien 2007, 265) as contemporary feminism "rejects grand narratives ... with a dynamic and welcoming politics of coalition" (Snyder 2008, 176). The "intersectional project" (Nash 2008) has been exalted and promoted by an array of anti-neoliberal and anti-globalization struggles worldwide. Furthermore, subjects within a wide range of different social and political movements – including but not limited to feminist/queer organizations – have incorporated its principles and acted within the discursive repertoires of "multi-issue politics and activism" (Ward 2008). In the words of Collins and Bilge (2016, 30),

[w]orking for social justice is not a requirement for intersectionality. Yet people who are engaged in using intersectionality as an analytic tool and people who see social justice as central rather than as peripheral to their lives are often one and the same.

Feminist/queer youth activists in Turkey substantiate this thesis; most are engaged in grassroots movements for the sake of equality and social justice, and intersectionality offers them a relevant and significant theoretical and practical framework. Crenshaw (2011, 232) contributes to the debate on intersectionality by focusing on the concept's trajectory, defining it not as a totalizing grand theory but rather as "an analytical, a heuristic or hermeneutic tool – one designed to amplify and highlight specific problems." Our study exemplifies her point that "those who have effectively deployed it have sought to adapt it to certain problems while

challenging the disciplinary or rhetorical parameters that would otherwise render such projects unspeakable, unknowable, or unmanageable" (Crenshaw 2011, 231). Our findings illustrate Crenshaw's formulation of the intersectional paradigm as a heuristic tool for research and political settings and contribute nuance and elaboration to existing debates.

The concept of "educated hope," which refers to "thinking beyond the narrative of what stands for the world today by seeing it as not enough" (Duggan and Munoz 2009, 278–279), underscores the cultivation of awareness about what is possible as well as the affective and contemplative dimensions of activism (Dave 2012). Questioning the existing social circumstances, feeling the need for change, engendering hope that such change might be achieved, and executing possibilities for action constitute the very foundations of social movements (Goodwin and Jasper 2014; Nash 2004). In the Global South, the emphasis shifts to expanding democratic spaces and individual freedom, as in the case of the interventions of gender and sexual rights activists that "have grown out of a political and intellectual commitment to human rights, identity politics, and global discourses with the quotidian realities of sexuality" (Howe 2013, 3). At this nexus, which links personal biographies with social tensions, the activist subjects of social justice, gender equality, and sexual rights are produced within transnational feminist/queer politics and social movements.

Research on women's, feminist, and queer movements in the Middle East has underlined the uneasy relations between feminist/queer politics, the power of dictatorships and authoritarian states, globalization, and growing Indigenous, nationalistic, religious, and sectarian sensitivities and divisions (Gheyntanchi and Moghadam 2014; Kandiyoti 1996; Özyegin 2015; Tadros 2016). In the midst of this complex entanglement, the emergence of youth feminist/queer activism in the region, in conjunction with other forms of dissidence and political opposition, is relatively understudied. This article contributes to the existing literature on youth feminist/queer grassroots movements with a focus on their shifting values and priorities, and expands the research scope by discussing the significance of the emergent intersectional activism framework.

Our findings show that university students in Turkey have become increasingly politicized and mobilized. However, rather than focusing on a single, isolated, and centralized form of inequality, injustice, or struggle, they have adopted a more holistic approach to social equality, justice, and peace regarding each and every possible field of social life. Delineating this perspective requires an intersectional approach because its emphasis on intricate power relations highlights an "intersectional agency," as Huijg (2012, 4) claims. Therefore, anyone who becomes a social actor in specific historical conditions develops a capacity to move from inaction to action (Huijg 2012) to generate an intersectional agency and oppose the multilayered

and overlapping structures of power. Intersectional activism emerges out of a combination of historical agency and the desire to challenge forms of global inequality and injustice that transpire simultaneously (Ferree 2018). The formation of an intersectional feminist/queer activist subjectivity necessitates the development of a critical consciousness and identity. However, it also involves transformative aspirations and the political means to change the world into a place where gender equality and inclusive sexual politics – alongside other forms of respect, justice, diversity, and peace – prevail (Doetsch-Kidder 2012; Hancock 2016).

In various parts of the Global South, intersectional activism and multi-identity politics take different paths than in the Global North as “the relationship among capitalism, westernization, and emergent queer subjectivities are complex” (Lind 2010, 3). They produce divergent outcomes and in some cases, as De la Dehesa (2010, 5) points out, “a transformation in activists’ goals and tactics entailing a greater prioritization of state-directed efforts and a narrowing of their agendas from transforming broader relations of power in society and gaining social acceptance to an emphasis on legally enforced tolerance.” However, an intersectional understanding, though mainstreamed to a certain extent (especially in Western academia and activist networks), has been reinterpreted and reconstructed. Davis (2008, 67) elucidates the uncertainty, even among the keenest audiences and practitioners, about what the concept exactly means or “how it should or could be used in their own fields of inquiry.”

The tendency to destabilize gender/sexual identities in the light of post-modern and poststructuralist approaches is echoed in the increasingly powerful challenges against uncontested, fixed, and monolithic identities, as well as their foundationally intersectional presence, in contemporary social theory and activism: “The main practical effect of this movement [has been] to assert a multiplicity of sexual and gender identities and sometimes an unbounded ‘fluidity’ of gender/sexuality” (Messerschmidt et al. 2018, 5). In this sense, scholars criticize intersectionality because the concept can seem like a continuation and expansion of fixed and unchanging identity categories (see Cooper 2018, 396; Puar 2007, 212); it is depoliticized, its “critical potential for social justice-oriented change” is lost, and hence it is “undone” by some academic feminisms (Bilge 2013). However, many versions of intersectionality have been developed to include dynamic identity categories, which are “fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power” (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, 11) as well as the interlocking mechanisms to which these categories are subjected. Davis (2008, 71) notes that intersectionality in this sense could indeed account for the fluidity and malleability of identity categories through its focus “on dynamic processes and the deconstruction of normalizing and homogenizing categories.”

These uncertainties and questions over the meanings and usage of intersectionality, and over the benefits of incorporating it into social movements, resonate with the narratives of feminist/queer student activists in Turkey. Our findings demonstrate that intersectional activism is an ongoing and open process. Grassroots members strategically formulate and develop the changing meanings and shifting priorities of intersectional activism through their active and reflexive engagement.

Turkey in the late 2010s

Turkey has had a strong feminist and women's movement since the late 1980s. Women came together to form feminist groups and organized the first public protest that took place after the coup d'état of 1980. They established women's shelters and institutions for gender research and, most importantly, mainstreamed feminist questions about and challenges to masculine domination (Bora 2011; Sirman 1989). They paved the way for gender reform in political structures and the transformation of the legal system into a more gender-neutral and less sexist entity (Arat and Pamuk 2019; Diner and Toktas 2010; Sancar 2011). LGBTQ associations emerged in the 1990s and have since been striving against despotism, making sexual disenfranchisement visible and steering the public discourse in a less homophobic, heterosexist, and violent direction that would embrace the rights of sexual minorities (Özbay and Öktem 2021; Savcı 2021).

Most of our respondents expressed their admiration for and appreciation of the feminist/queer activists of previous generations. However, they tended to dissociate themselves from these because they saw existing organizations as focusing exclusively on their singular causes (women's rights and LGBTQ rights), ignoring differences among women and queers, and hence not being intersectional. They also saw them as "tame" by virtue of concentrating too much on legal change and negotiations with the state, being dependent on the state and transnational funds to realize projects, and focusing on past achievements and memories. Instead, our interlocutors yearned for a more holistic, radical, diverse, anti-capitalist, future-oriented, and intersectional activism with novel styles of communication and self-presentation.

In the past decade, Turkey has moved from being an optimistic Western-oriented democracy to an authoritarian, oppressive, and increasingly insular regime (Arat and Pamuk 2019; Donmez and Enneli 2011; Öktem and Akkoyunlu 2017). Our interlocutors' subjectivities, voices, and efforts to create a more just society and (in their words) their "courage," "commitment," and "persistence" have become more visible, public, and contested in this context. In this period, national politics has also encroached into and colonized social and cultural domains. Being a feminist/queer activist as a student or being critical of the official state policy in any form and taking

part in opposition and insurgent organizations has become more dangerous under the authoritarian regime. There were some 2,570 imprisoned students in 2018 (BIA News Desk 2018), and this further complicates and exacerbates this adverse political *mise-en-scène* and inhibits action.

After starting negotiations for European Union membership, implementing neoliberal redevelopment schemes, and achieving high economic growth in line with the International Monetary Fund's prescriptions throughout the 2000s (Önis and Senses 2009; Özbay et al. 2016), Turkey had reached a more hopeful "structure of feeling" (Williams 1961) in terms of its potential for further democratization and expansion of minority rights – especially after the Gezi Park protests of 2013 (Gürcan and Peker 2015). Preparations for a more inclusive, participatory, and democratic constitution were on the table for the future of a nation-state whose history has been marked by systematic misrecognition, exclusion, discrimination, and violence (Arat and Pamuk 2019; Bozdoğan and Kasaba 1997; Donmez and Enneli 2011). In the 2010s, Islamist and neoconservative discourses continued to aim to subjugate women's bodies and non-heterosexual sexualities and confine intimacy in everyday life (Acar and Altunok 2013; Turam 2008). However, despite these discourses, feminist/queer activists and NGOs were enthusiastic and optimistic about contributing to the new constitution and making their agendas for gender equality and sexual citizenship public, especially after their energizing presence at the Gezi Park protests (Gürcan and Peker 2015; Özbay and Öktem 2021).

However, historical developments with grave socio-political consequences started to take place in 2015. Two general elections in quick succession in the summer months and rapidly escalating violence marked that year. The following year was worse for democratic institutions, cultures, and actors; the government's persecution of scholars who signed a peace declaration (Vatansever 2020) and numerous journalists reporting against state-sanctioned narratives intensified after a failed coup attempt and the two-year-long state of emergency that followed (Altınordu 2017). Student activists began to experience tremendous difficulties in gathering, expressing their political opinions, and engaging with activism in this setting in which all possibilities of protest were shut down and all criticism silenced. University administrations, which have been appointed by President Erdogan since 2016 and supervised by a national Council of Higher Education (YÖK) since 1981, intervened in student activities and enforced bans. In other words, the consolidating state institutions shaped and governed university administrations and the social and physical spaces within campuses through ideological, political, and partisan interventions – including, in the most extreme cases, the closure of 16 universities after 2016.

At that point, the debates about a new constitution became obsolete and irrelevant. The state's priorities shifted toward securitizing measures, and the

optimistic discussions on gender equality and sexual rights vanished alongside other ethnic and racially based democratic demands. The state's leaning toward a form of neoliberal, populist authoritarianism (Arat and Pamuk 2019) multiplied the number of vulnerable groups and increased the interrelation between them, while single-issue identity politics largely turned into a non-essential luxury in the eyes of activist youth. Meanwhile, President Erdogan declared that he was against gender equality and put forward his peculiar redefinition of "gender justice," which positions women and men differently based on their "natural" and "God-given" distinctions and their assumed complementarity (Kandiyoti and Emanet 2017). By exalting this notion of gender justice, successive AKP governments have rendered feminist/queer activists who support equality and inclusivity irrelevant and anti-state.

Feminist/queer social movements were not alone in their experience of otherization by the state. The late 2010s represent a period in Turkey's recent history in which multiple forms of identity politics were undermined, rejected, and frequently marked (in our respondents' words) as "unpatriotic," "backstabbing," and "treasonous"; democratic channels were shut down. A state-directed, traditionalist, and religious authority was reasserted over individual rights and collective cultural expressions. The young people who became feminist/queer activists in the late 2010s encountered and had to deal with this restricting and delimiting political and cultural environment. They defined their endeavors against a strengthened and visible state and worked to create a space for their aspirations, stories, and struggles in an unwelcoming, if not suffocating, historical moment.

Methodology

This article draws largely on in-depth interviews with youth feminist/queer activists as well as representations of their collective activities on online platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. To account for the heterogeneity of youth movements in Turkey – from revolutionary and leftist groups to the radical Islamist and ultra-nationalist youth organizations – we observed and documented the online activities of feminist/queer student clubs at universities in four cities (Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, and Antalya) in Turkey in 2016. We conducted interviews with university students who carry out feminist/queer activism in the greater Istanbul region, where we both reside and work, and then traveled to Ankara, Izmir, and Antalya in 2017 and 2018. Other than Istanbul, these three cities had the most active feminist/queer youth activism scene.

In total, we conducted 41 interviews. These were with 15 feminist students (all identified as women), 15 queer students (four identified as women, ten as men, and one as genderqueer/non-binary), and 11 feminist/queer students

(four identified as women, three as men, and four as genderqueer/non-binary). We conducted 27 interviews in Istanbul, seven in Ankara, five in Izmir, and two in Antalya. All of the interviews were semi-structured, tape recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized. We combined the techniques of snowball sampling (to reach out to participants) and maximum-variation sampling (to introduce variety among respondents, particularly in Istanbul) (Palys 2008).

The interviewees are not representative of the totality of the feminist/queer grassroots movements in Turkey, nor even of student activists who adopt intersectional tenets (which may include some members of Kurdish political groups or environmental activists). Rather, they provide an intimate glimpse of the expansion of feminist/queer university activism toward incorporating intersectional principles and of the transformation of activists into *muhafif* subjects in line with their emergent political engagement; this engagement has evolved from a focus on single-issue movements to a concern with more comprehensive problems regarding inclusivity and social justice by utilizing intersectional frameworks.

Our interlocutors were from Turkish and Kurdish ethnic backgrounds, from diverse classes and with various gender and sexual identifications, and all able-bodied. In terms of religion, one participant was Christian, one was Jewish, one was Buddhist, ten were atheist, three were deist, and the rest were Muslim, from Sunni and Alevi sects. None of the Muslim interviewees described themselves as pious or practicing; in their words, they were all only “officially” or “culturally” Muslim (the religious identity appears on their state-issued formal identity cards), but “irreligious” or “secular” in terms of self-definition, self-presentation, and lifestyle.

During the study, we aimed to document the respondents’ shared affect, gatherings, and activities, their views on the possibility of a new constitution and the human rights agenda in the country, and their dialogue among themselves as members of diverse youth grassroots movements. Our basic curiosity was about whether there was a unified program, discourse, or means of mobilizing among feminist/queer student activists and, if so, how intersectional activism could speak to larger centers of power and authority in Turkey.

We had great difficulty recruiting interviewees during the country’s historical crisis immediately after the failed coup d’état in 2016 and the state of emergency from 2016 to 2018, during which all democratic collective rights were put on hold. Given this challenging state of affairs, we could not visit cities in the eastern parts of Turkey (Adana, Mersin, Diyarbakir, and Trabzon) as we had planned. Also, despite our best efforts, we were unable to connect with any feminist/queer student activists who were also self-identified religious and practicing Muslims.

Doing intersectional activism

There are many reasons why feminist/queer student activists in Turkey tend to adopt principles of intersectional activism. These include their frustration with the increasingly authoritarian neoliberal state, their reconfiguration of who they are, and the ways in which they see the world as a result of social experiences and interactions with others. Together, these factors condition and enable student activists to expand their views and embrace diversity within forms of intersectional activism for social justice.

Almost all of our respondents underlined that it is relatively easier in Turkey to “do politics” and engage in macro issues related to the state when one is affiliated with one of the “legitimate” political parties and expresses views and demands through the discourses that these organizations shape, justify, and circulate on a national scale (Özbay and Soybakis 2020). However, the feminist/queer student activists whom we interviewed did not believe in the authenticity or effectiveness of the legitimacy and “intelligibility” (Butler 1990) provided by these “outdated” and “ossified” political traditions, discourses, and leaders. On the contrary, they viewed the political parties and actors in the national field of politics as trivializing and/or silencing the issues that they prioritize. Thus, dealing with what they described as more “real,” “down-to-earth,” “human-centered,” and “everyday” experiences outside the discursive space of formal politics becomes difficult. One of the explanations for this perceived difficulty concerns the efforts of the state to contain the critical approaches of the youth. As Oya (22, feminist) argued,

the state does not want us to develop opposition through everyday life or our bodies. [It says] “If you want to be an opponent, go and participate in the main opposition party, CHP.” Because, in this way, it defines the boundaries of our ideas and lives. It does not let us form and change ourselves. [It] wants us to play in the sand and not to explore the rest of the park.

Most of the young people with whom we talked maintained that social justice activism is a space created outside the authority of the state that must have as its purpose the transformation of the state, which means disturbing, destabilizing, and threatening its power over citizens’ lives. Oya added that “sincere” feminism can only become possible when subjects can define their dissidence and position on their own terms and do not have to use the state’s designated categorizations:

What we should do is to speak exactly in the language that [the state] does not want us to speak. A real feminist opposition should put forward personal issues, relationships, and [what appears to be] insignificant. Only then can we take over the power of the state in terms of determining our lives. We should not be the kind of opponents it desires us to be.

This disavowal of the symbolic power and violence of the state over the activists' imagination and subjectivity is interwoven with a predisposition for intersectional activism. The official discourse tends to delimit and compartmentalize specific groups' interests and public advocacy, warning activists that "it is not their business" and encouraging them to associate with what the state deems to be legitimate; their refusal and counter-insistence, by contrast, produce an activist subjectivity concerned with all forms of oppression and injustice (whether intelligible to the state or not). For example, Cagri (19, feminist/queer) noted:

People say "If you are a feminist, why do you care for Kurds' or Romas' rights? Or animal rights?" This is the state's way of seeing things. I say "No, I am what I am. A feminist, queer, minority person, who fights for everything I find wrong and unjust." I do not mind if the state or society is unhappy about this; they must accept people like me and deal with our collective efforts if this is a free country, as they claim.

Turkey has been gradually neoliberalizing since the 1980s (Önis and Senses 2009; Özbay et al. 2016), and several interviewees cited neoliberalism in explaining the complicated social inequalities that they witness and feel the need to rebel against. While some talked about neoliberalism in more intellectual terms as an "order" or a "system" that "financializes," "materializes," and "commodifies" everything, others preferred to outline it in more vivid ways, stating that, for example, neoliberalism "corrupts everything," or "privatizes lives." Almost all linked the capacities of the state to the process of neoliberalization. Sevtap (23, feminist) mentioned that neoliberalism "is a mood in which people are happy with rampant capitalism when they don't have any complaint about market policies," and Murat (21, queer) noted:

Some friends say "The [socialist] revolution is cooking; it is close." Honestly, I do not think so. No such revolution can take place in [a] Muslim society. But we must confront the reality of neoliberalism. I mean not only the results of neoliberalism but also the ideology behind it ... Our lives are under occupation. Our health, families, homes, [and] freedom.

Most of our interviewees expressed their grave concern and anger about the co-constituting trends of authoritarianism and neoliberalism at both the local (their university and city) and the national levels. They argued that these levels produce and facilitate each other by discouraging resistance. Cemile (22, feminist) exemplified this point:

The way the university administration treats us [the protesting students] looks like the company that operates a gold mine and subordinates the villagers, and these two look like how the government tries to restrict us. It's the same logic. We fight against a power that is everywhere, and it never wants us to come together and help each other. When we, as a group of ecofeminist women,

went to help the villagers in their resistance against the Canadian mining company, the police hated us and called us “terrorists” and “bitches.” The village women told the gendarme to go away, and that we were their daughters, not terrorists. They [the state officials] don’t want to see us forming solidarity with the ones who need help.

It has become very difficult, though not entirely impossible, to be a student activist in Turkey, especially in the field of feminist/queer rights. For example, according to Kerem (19, queer), their student union is prevented from being visible and functioning:

We can’t obtain permission for the activities we want to organize. The president’s office cancels the events at the last minute even when they have given us permission in advance ... We can at least come together and socialize, for now. But no political activity is allowed.

What Nalan (21, feminist) said supports both Kerem’s and Cemile’s points. She recounted that hers is a more liberal college, and the administration is generally supportive. However, she added, even she and other feminist/queer activists there have difficulties: “We wanted to co-organize a feminist sexuality workshop with the [women’s studies] club and the dean requested us not to even ask for permission and not to organize this event. They say Ankara [the state] puts pressure on them.”

In terms of risks and consequences, undertaking traditional social or “in-person” activism involving “real people” is challenging in the current circumstances. Therefore, some respondents argued that instead they should be present and visible online through social media accounts and hashtag campaigns, such as the one organized for Esmâ by her friends, mentioned at the beginning of this article. Some student clubs and associations have very high numbers of followers on social media, and their posts attract high levels of interaction, which is beneficial for their politics of visibility. However, other respondents disagreed with the enthusiasm for this kind of “social media-only” activism. For example, Mahmut (23, pro-feminist/queer) stated: “[W]e just satisfy ourselves by posting angry stories on Facebook or Twitter. Nothing actually happens. As if the world will be illuminated by our posts.” Oya made a similar point:

By tweeting, you can only let the government know what you think. As if they do not already know. Thousands of police officers watch the internet to catch the *muhalfıs*. Some people are investigated or detained just because they share something on social media. If it is inevitable that I will encounter the police as a result of my actions, I would rather do something in the real world instead of just tweeting.

Though there are many student activists with strongly pessimistic views and feelings of frustration and exhaustion, we nevertheless spoke with many young people who are motivated by the hope and aspiration for

social transformation to pursue various strands of activism and create new social spaces in which collectivities can be formed. The tenets of intersectionality inspire and encourage them to be active in more than one field, club, or association, sometimes also outside the campus. One particular group of student activists was on the more optimistic side. They identified social change as not necessarily occurring in the formal political domain or in the face of the state, but through interactions between different people in everyday social life. Sinan, a 25-year-old graduate student in design who identified himself as a “kind of queer” and “semi-activist,” belonged to this group. He underlined the need for new social directions and novel concepts:

Last week, I was at a wedding ceremony as an out queer man, from the groom’s side. There was also a gay couple. What surprised me was the fact that most straight men were content with the gay men around them. Is this not a homophobic country anymore? What happened to men, especially younger men, so now they are more open to queers in their families or among their close friends? ...Something’s changing, especially with the younger generation, and I believe this undertow will wipe out the old regimes of oppression.

Sinan’s observations and expectations are seemingly in accord with most of our respondents’ elaborations on how, among their cohort and younger generations, one’s conscience and self-worth are constructed on the basis of justice, respect, and diversity. A great number of activists claimed that feminism today is at an equal distance from and related to all social struggles, and it is a larger project than simply solving “women’s problems.” Zeyda (22, feminist/queer) stated:

I am Kurdish with a Kurd, Roma with a gypsy. I am feminist, queer, working class, black. I am an anti-violence, anti-capitalist, anti-state person. Forms and names can change. This form of oppression, that form of violence, or exclusion. This is my ethics for living. This makes me a feminist. No abstractions or idealizations. I refer to real people with multiple qualities they possess. Kurdish and queer; leftist and poor. Peace activist and vegetarian. This is my understanding of being an anti-state, intersectional feminist in Turkey.

Some students develop activist and intersectional agencies through their intimate pasts. For example, Burak (20, queer) stated:

My best friend at high school was Alevi. After I learned this, I developed a sensitivity to the issue of religious minorities because I loved my friend, and she was so vulnerable. I think this triggered how I feel today. This is the way I learned to be a human.

Despite coming from a privileged background, Burak cultivated an intersectional awareness that matches that of other student activists, including Nilufer, a 22-year-old political science student:

While I was growing up, there was male violence in our family. My brother and I challenged my father and made him stop when we were both teenagers ... I believe this has changed me and made me who I am today. When I see cruelty or suffering, my mother's crying image comes before my eyes, and I feel this huge energy and anger inside me. I have channeled it into activism for the victims. I am a feminist/queer person, but you can find me fighting for animal rights or the environment, or against xenophobia and nationalism.

Even though many of our respondents said that their conviction and commitment to the intersectional framework is sincere and deep rooted, this does not stop them from instrumentalizing intersectionality and framing it in more pragmatic ways when necessary. They claimed that they are more accepted, strengthened, and "mainstreamed" in public when they adopt intersectional approaches that emphasize the fight against inequality and struggles for social and environmental justice. Groups that would normally disregard their arguments, treat them with prejudice, or disagree with the points that they make gradually become more open and interested because of the discursive inclusivity and collective actions that they come to represent as well as the range of alliances that they seem keen to construct. Cemile gave an example of acceptance by both the leftist student movement and Kurdish political activists:

A couple of years ago, it was challenging for us [feminist/queer activists] to communicate with the leftists and the Kurds. They did not think we were suitable for a serious conversation. They would have said "Women are our sisters but faggots can stay away from us." As we insisted on underlining intersectionality and the entangled nature of our struggles, and the idea of democratic coalitions, they started to understand us better and see what we mean. Now, for example, they respect us more and protect us when the right-wing, racist thugs are around to intimidate us. We also join the Labor Day demonstrations together without experiencing any problems. Especially after the Gezi protests, they started to see that our struggles are interlinked.

Questioning intersectionality

Though forms of intersectional thinking and activism were prevalent among our interlocutors, they also mentioned hesitations, contestations, and problematizations in the incorporation of the concept – the sorts of failures that Özyegin and Lutz (2008) argue arise when intersectionality is exercised in interactional settings. Alongside a multitude of criticisms and discussions, student activists in Turkey are also struggling with the implications of the concept of intersectionality in their own social and physical spaces, even though it occupies a hegemonic position in feminist theory and identity politics.

Several respondents elucidated the complications and difficulties that they experience in institutionalized settings of social justice activism as a result of

the persistence of negative opinions about and attitudes toward feminist/queer social movements. However, most underlined the deradicalizing, depoliticizing, and assimilating effects of internalizing an intersectional approach, as they felt that this framework may erase the transformative impact of the singular struggles of the women's or queer movements. In other words, the intersectional language presently inserted into the discourse by established activist institutions may alienate campus activists and leave them with a feeling of dissatisfaction and resignation.

Some respondents challenged the rigidly defined identity categories that an intersectional project would be expected to presume and scaffold. For instance, after elaborating their Albanian-Turkish, bisexual, and deist identities, Zumre (24, feminist/queer) further complicated their positionality, which led them to question the roots of intersectionality:

I am mostly into older people. So how many identities [do I have]? You can call me bisexual, but is there a term for [those of] us who are into older people regardless of sex? This is an important aspect of who I am, but you do not even see this from the outside. So I do not really know how identity [categories] can sufficiently explain who I am. In this era, such a strong emphasis on identity categories seems old fashioned to me. I don't think we need intersectionality; what we need is to get rid of useless identities.

Tired of the segmentation and divisiveness within activism, some of our interviewees redirected their energies toward theory and research. Selin (24, feminist) was a representative of this group. A feminist campus activist, she worked for NGOs helping women, children, and immigrants. However, these did not entirely satisfy her intersectional expectations:

Activism, as we do it in Turkey, is highly compartmentalized. Only "women's rights" – whatever this might mean – or "empowering immigrants" aren't enough. Everybody, everything should be freed ... I don't think we can bring different activist branches together. So I've decided to pursue a PhD instead of doing activism.

Mert (24, pro-feminist/queer) followed a similar path to Selin. They were associated with a student club, in which they tried to carve out a "gay" space for sexual minority students to come together with straight allies in a safe environment:

I realized that struggles are linked. A gay person shares something with a Kurdish person, with a feminist socialist, or the [working] classes ... After a while, we became too ambitious; our goals were too big for the club. So we left it and started this research cooperative. Here, we are free from the oppressive university administration and its reactionary reflexes. One week we invite an expert on racism, the next we organize a workshop on veganism. Here, we have more space to see the connections.

Though a great many respondents expressed their belief in a version of intersectional activism and defined themselves and their collective efforts

for social justice in consciously and carefully selected intersectional terms, issues come to light as these activists attempt to “do” intersectionality.

The most frequent theme that came up during the interviews was that of “old traditions” about the persistent forms of domination. These may include patriarchal, cis-normative, and heterosexist understandings of being an activist or a political person, which change slowly despite people declaring otherwise in good faith. Mert continued to talk about their experiences in the student club:

The language was so masculine, and the setting was so heteronormative, that I couldn't take it anymore. They weren't bad people, not explicitly homophobic. No one said a single bad word to me. But you know, you feel that they were just straight guys. When you aren't there, they could make a joke about gays, or two of them could talk about girls in a sexist way. They can better understand the Kurdish issue or the class conflict, but in terms of gender/sexuality, straight men need more than abstract concepts or flirting with intersectional trends.

This conclusion drove Mert to recognize that adopting intersectional thinking, or activism, was not a solution to all social problems. Accordingly, groups with pressing issues should forge their own path and take responsibility for determining their own framework, language, and repertoires of action instead of “wasting time” trying to re-educate people and make them work in a coalition with intersectional lenses. Deniz (26, feminist) criticized feminism for erasing differences among women and among men, and intersectionality for its tendency to fetishize difference. She expanded Mert's critique of the indifference of heterosexual and cis-gender people when it comes to supporting radical feminist/queer politics:

If you are poor, transvestite [*sic*], sex worker, Kurdish, migrant, then you're the queen of intersectionality. Only your story is valuable; everybody is here to listen. People are willing to hear the most eccentric stories ... I don't believe that heterosexual people can honestly criticize the institution of heterosexism ... Intersectionality is real only if it comes from radical people and not from the ordinary [wannabe] intellectuals. Not from those who are insidiously investing in their bourgeois, conformist futures.

By contrast, some of our interlocutors thought that intersectional activists for social justice, who are not coming from a critical feminist/queer pedagogy, tend to disapprove of, marginalize, and discriminate against them. Contrary to popular wisdom, they argued that a form of activism related to the principles of intersectionality cannot be as inclusive and diverse as it is represented and proselytized as being. They claimed that intersectional activism has its own symbolic and moral boundaries, hierarchies, and normativities that most members, haunted by the “old traditions,” unwittingly reproduce and only occasionally verbalize.

Another aspect that concerned students is the problematization of ongoing professionalization and the “NGOization” (Alvarez 2009; Lang 1997) of feminist/queer movements. Our respondents thought that “intersectional labels” could help certain activists in their attempt to climb the organizational hierarchies when they become professional, full-time activists in the future, as Deniz noted. However, such a reoriented activism gradually mutates, as they put it, into a full-time occupation demanding networking, career building, project developing, and fundraising alongside the cultivation of proper selves and ways of self-presentation in institutional settings. Aylin (23, feminist) elaborated:

Most young activists are investing in themselves [and] building their careers. They plan to work for NGOs or international institutions. For example, they prepare themselves for fundraising. Wear a suit, or a skirt, a pair of Babette shoes, and attend a party at the Swedish Consulate with fake smiles. When I first got involved with feminists on campus, I was not expecting this at all ... There is also a presumption that you should be open to all social issues, be inclusive. Of course, that’s great. But people are doing this because they understand that it is better for their careers. She does not care about feminists or lesbians or women who were beaten by their husbands. She just pretends. So this is the rule of the game now.

Bora (20, queer) studies in a small city where there are limited opportunities to gain social and financial capital. He stated that the emergent NGOization of intersectional activism is pervasive:

Like professionals, we search for support and money from Istanbul, Ankara, and from abroad. When I say “Let’s set up a table on campus to inform students that we are here or make a demonstration,” no one is interested. Activism is passé, the NGO ethos is what matters.

Like Bora, several respondents argued that when people are not informed by and engaged in single-issue politics (or an organized struggle) in an entirely committed way, their endeavor turns out to be not activism – however intersectional it may potentially be – but a “performance” or “lifestyle choice,” a collection of “right” behaviors and “correct” attitudes exhibited in front of the appropriate audiences. They did not think that this could be sustainable in the future as people may change their predispositions in different social situations. This risk is heightened by the increasing professionalization and career-making dynamics of activism through NGOs, and the tenets of intersectionality are instrumentalized in this process.

Conclusion

Meral (23), a feminist volunteer and student of educational sciences, succinctly explained the connection between the global and the local in intersectional thinking:

I'm disturbed by the government's politics of destruction of everything, everywhere. Women are killed by men, children get raped at religious institutions, animals are tortured. The government doesn't do anything ... I'm young, but I already feel tired of struggling on every front. So when you ask about intersectionality, as a feminist, I know it's fashionable to talk about it. Here, we must be intersectional because we defend our lives and the world against a massive destructive force. Here, any individual with a conscience – regardless of whether they are an activist or a feminist – is thinking intersectionally.

Like Meral, increasing numbers of student activists find it difficult to engage themselves and mobilize around single-issue politics. Instead, they tend to define social justice in its most expansive terms, form associations that simultaneously cover diverse oppressions and struggles, and identify themselves with multi-issue politics and intersectional activism. In opposition to the overriding neoliberal, authoritarian state policies that are implemented systematically against individual rights, social spaces, and collective freedoms in Turkey, feminist/queer rights student activists construct a *muhafif* subjectivity that is open to intersectional precepts as well as being positioned against the ubiquitous manifestations of state oppression. Though the intersectional framework is seemingly more satisfactory and enabling for most, some student activists are troubled as they attempt to navigate career building and world making within the activist milieus and apply intersectional principles in their own grassroots movements.

Turkey's recent authoritarian turn has become the focus of increased scholarly attention. What universities in Turkey have been through in the last decade has also come into the international spotlight (Kandiyoti and Emanet 2017; Vatansever 2020). Less attention has been paid to how resistance to this authoritarian revival is developing. This article has taken the literature on Turkey's authoritarian turn in a new direction by considering the emergence of intersectional activism among university students. We have unpacked how feminist/queer university students reinterpret intersectionality and the transformations in activist habitus and practices in this specific context. The particular socio-political conditions shape how these youth activists imagine and utilize intersectionality. Therefore, the causes, forms, and justifications of the emergent intersectional activism – like the uncertainties and disappointments that we mentioned – unfold through the necessities and contingencies in activists' immediate local environments in line with global intellectual and organizational trends.

In Turkey, it has recently become increasingly hard to discuss and critically engage with human rights and democratic citizenship discourses. Bodily rights, gender equality, and sexual diversity have turned into social taboos that are almost impossible to verbalize (Nuhrat 2022; Özbay and Öktem 2021). University administrations have also adopted a hostile attitude

toward oppositional students and their associations. Despite these developments, most of our respondents sensed an air of change and positive affect and expressed faith in an anti-discriminatory and non-violent future, not necessarily because of a foreseeable legal reform and shift in official policy. Instead, their observations and embodied experiences in social life and the impact of organized social movements make them feel hopeful. Some told us that “social change will happen despite the state.”

As Davis (2008, 72) notes, “intersectionality suggests that there is still important work to be done, and – luckily for all of us – we are the ones to do it.” Our findings confirm her optimism and enthusiasm. They reveal that the emergent intersectional activism framework has great potential to increase the mainstreaming of feminist/queer politics and generate new intersectional political subjectivities regarding feminist/queer movements as well as other organized struggles for social justice. Collective struggles may be varied, diffuse, contradictory, and even at odds with the traditional and not-so-new composition of social movements. However, this new vision and ethics of being an activist reverberates far beyond Turkey’s currently undemocratic and oppressive setting, as new struggles and oppositional subjectivities emerge from the cracks in authoritarian systems across the world.

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