

A Feminist Discussion on the “Human Rights Defender” Paradigm in Turkey

DURU YAVAN



A Feminist Discussion on the “Human Rights Defender” Paradigm in Turkey

DURU YAVAN

This report is written within the context of our “Defending Others, Liberating Themselves: WHRD’s experiences in Turkey” project that is being co-implemented with our partner ISHR (International Service for Human Rights) and supported by the German Foreign Office.

© Hafıza Merkezi e.V., November, 2021.
All rights reserved.

AUTHOR Duru Yavan
EDITORS Özgür Sevgi Göral, Özlem Kaya
TRANSLATOR Irazca Geray
PROOF-READER Liz Erçevik Amado
DESIGN Selin Estroti
COVER ILLUSTRATION Güneş Terkol
Worlbmon, sewing on fabric,
130x155cm, 2019

V.i.s.d.P.

Özlem Kaya Bergmann
c/o **HAFIZA MERKEZI e.V.**
Haus der Demokratie und
Menschenrechte
Greifswalder Str. 4
10405 Berlin

www.hm-berlin.org
info@hm-berlin.org

SUPPORTED BY

 Federal Foreign Office


Human Rights

CONTENTS

4	Introduction and Methodology
7	I. Introduction: Adding a Caveat of Gender to the “Human Rights Defender” Paradigm Which Has A Growing Sphere of Influence in Turkey
8	II. Analyzing the “Human Rights Defender” Paradigm from a Feminist Perspective
8	A. The Status of Women in the “Human Rights Defender” Paradigm: The Concept of “Woman Human Rights Defender”
10	B. Feminist Critiques: Efforts to Transform the Protection Regime for “Human Rights Defenders”
14	III. Pondering the Meaning of “Woman Human Rights Defender” Paradigm for the Women in Turkey
14	A. To Identify or Not to Identify Oneself As “Woman Human Rights Defender”: Reservations and Motivations
16	B. Moving Beyond Self Identification: Issues Brought to the Agenda by the Concept of “Woman Human Rights Defender”
17	1. The gendered aspect of the shrinking civic space: looking at the attacks, threats and rights violations against rights defenders through the gender perspective
21	2. The destructiveness of the attacks coming “from the inside”: a struggle carried out both within and outside
25	3. A life without a break: heavy workload, emotional exhaustion, and the overlooked need for self-care
27	IV. Conclusion: Haunting and Distancing Oneself from the Discourse of “Woman Human Rights Defender”, Criticizing and Transforming the Protection Regime

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

These three short reports, published in scope of Hafiza Merkezi Berlin's project **“Defending Others, Liberating Themselves: Women Human Rights Defenders' Experiences in Turkey”**, are the product of a long-term research aiming to analyze the gendered structure of civil society and the struggle for human rights in Turkey, and the gendered experiences of the actors in the field from a feminist perspective. The common concern of these three reports is to expose the latent gendered structure of this field, which is often defined as an undisputed “safe space”, and to depict the experiences of women, queer, and non-binary subjects in the sphere. By approaching this issue from different angles, these reports aim to make a modest contribution to the gendering of human rights and to the empowerment of women, queer, and non-binary civil society actors in Turkey.

The first report, **“Women and LGBTQI+ actors as lifelines of each other: relations, alliances, disjunctures in the field of human rights”**, draws on the experiences of the actors in the field to question the disjunctions between the feminist and LGBTQI+ movement and the human rights movement and to reflect on the reasons for this distance. The report firstly discusses the ways in which women and LGBTQI+ actors who participate in political movements, work in non-governmental organizations or who are part of other activist networks and struggles in Turkey are involved in these movements and institutions. Based on these different forms of involvement, the report traces the dynamics, tensions and relationships between the human rights movement and various political movements in Turkey. The aim here is to understand what kind of impact the changing sociopolitical conditions in the country has had on the disjunctures, interactions, and relationships between movements especially in wake of the shrinking of civic spaces after 2015, and how the actors involved in the feminist, LGBTQI+ and Kurdish women's movements have developed their organizational practices and advocacy and activism strategies in this period.

The second report, **“Defending Rights Between Institutions, Identities, and Subjectivities: A Gender Perspective on Civil Society”**, aims to reveal the gendered structure of civil society and the struggle for rights, and to determine how women are affected by these gendered patterns in the field of human rights in their everyday lives. Focusing on the actors daily experiences, the report reflects on the patterns and mechanisms through which gender-based inequalities and challenges are reproduced in the field of human rights in Turkey. In doing so, the report considers the everyday experiences of women in the context of the different organizational models in which they are involved. It thus tries to show how gender-based inequalities, discrimination, and challenges —especially when combined with other social and economic inequalities based on age, class, ethnicity, and education level— become manifest in women's daily, concrete, and real experiences, and how this shapes women's lives and the way they perceive and narrate themselves.

The final report, **“A Feminist Discussion on the “Human Rights Defender” Paradigm in Turkey”**, introduces a gender caveat to the “human rights defender” discourses and mechanisms that are increasingly influential in Turkey, thus hoping to contribute to the gendering of the field and, on this occasion, to make women's gendered experiences visible. In pursuit of this goal, the report first addresses feminist criticisms of the “human rights defender” paradigm, lending an ear to the long-standing feminist struggles for the gendering of “human rights defender” discourses and protection mechanisms in different geographies around the world. Subsequently, the report focuses on the concept of “women's human rights defender”, an achievement of the feminist struggle that has assumed different meanings over time to discuss what kind of debates this concept has enabled in Turkey; how it has provoked us to think about

the gendered structure of the field of human rights; what this concept means for actors of the field, and finally, whether this concept can be an empowering tool for women in the field.

For this research, we conducted semi-structured online interviews with 30 people from non-governmental organizations, the feminist movement, the Kurdish women's movement, LGBTQI+ institutions, and activist networks. In selecting our interviewees, we tried to create a diverse sample in terms of age, gender identity, sexual orientation, area of work, working style, and political or ethnic identity. Only two of our interviewees were working in the same institution, while the remaining 28 participants came from different institutions and networks in the field. With one third of the interviewees working as professionals in civil society organizations that receive funding, the remaining two thirds were involved in human rights or civil society organizations that mostly rely on voluntary support in carrying out their work or engaged in feminist or other political networks.

2015 was a turning point for Turkey, marking the beginning of a new period in which different forms of violence once again began to dominate political and daily life in the country. Meanwhile, on a global scale we have been going through an era in which authoritarian regimes and different types of racist and xenophobic movements are getting stronger, which makes defending rights, waging political struggles, and being an active subject in the public sphere more and more difficult. In other words, we carried out this research at a time when, as many individuals and institutions involved in the fields of civil society and the struggle for rights point out, civic space is shrinking. Developing the framework and the main questions of our research, we tried to take the impact of the present conditions into consideration. With increasing oppression and violence forcing everyone in civil society to withdraw into their shells, we wanted to understand how women experience this dynamic in their everyday, professional, and political lives. At the same time, however, to avoid putting our interviewees' personal safety at danger, we chose to preserve their anonymity and made sure that their identities are not revealed in any of the quotations included in the reports, even though the names of institutions are at times mentioned.

Finally, we consider it necessary to speak about the limitations of both the research process and the reports. For example, while creating our sample of interviewees in line with the above-mentioned criteria, we confined ourselves to the cities of Ankara, Istanbul and Diyarbakır. Our research therefore cannot sufficiently account for experiences that occur in other provinces. We also need to submit that our research is limited to interviews with people we already knew, albeit indirectly, as more or less public figures working on issues related to gender. We took care to include as many different movements and groups as possible in our sample, but we did not listen to our interviewees as spokespersons of their institutions. Therefore, we would like to point out that their narratives may not reflect the views of everyone in their respective fields. Bearing this in mind, we did our best to include the efforts and activities of our interviewees' institutions, networks, and movements in our reports.

In addition, since our research aims to uncover the gendered nature of civil society and human rights in Turkey and the experiences of female and non-binary actors in the field, we mainly focused on the experiences of cis and trans women. That said, we do touch upon the experiences of queer subjects and LGBTQI+ movement/rights organizations and use the terms "female", "non-binary", "queer" and "LGBTQI+" together in some places. There are several reasons for this: First, our effort to gender the field of human rights is not limited to problematizing the binary concept of gender but paying particular attention to the experiences of all those who are "shut out" because their ways of being do not conform to gender roles. Subverting the ways of relating to one another permitted within the binary system, we further try to comprehend the

overall gender dynamics governing the field. Therefore, our aim in using these terms together is certainly not to equate diverse experiences, but to include all those who are exposed to patriarchal and cis-heteronormative forms of inequality on a daily basis. Also, given that two of our interviewees defined themselves as non-binary, it would have been impossible for us to ignore their particular experiences in the field. Although we have only limited knowledge about the experiences of non-binary people in the field of human rights, we tried our best to discuss their experiences in our reports. Needless to say, these two interviews alone were not enough for us to present a comprehensive analysis of how the experiences of non-binary actors in the fields of rights advocacy and civil society differ from those of trans and cis women rights defenders. We might therefore say that our reports have a greater focus on the intersections between the experiences of non-binary people and cis and trans women rather than their specific experiences, given that the former too are affected by the social construction of womanhood, since a large part of our society perceives them as “women”.

We want to underline that this work, both the research and the writing, is the product of a thoroughly collective effort. We would like to thank everyone we interviewed for taking their time to share their thoughts and feelings with us in such hectic and pressing times. We also want to express our endless gratitude to Özlem Kaya and Özgür Sevgi Göral, who accompanied and supported us with their careful readings and thought-provoking comments and criticisms while we were writing these reports. We hope that the reports will contribute to opening and deepening debates on gender in the field of human rights in Turkey.

DURU YAVAN – GÜLİSTAN ZEREN – HANDE GÜLEN

I. INTRODUCTION: ADDING A CAVEAT OF GENDER TO THE “HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER” PARADIGM WHICH HAS A GROWING SPHERE OF INFLUENCE IN TURKEY

Human rights advocacy in Turkey has always been a difficult field of struggle and the actors of this field have been exposed to various forms of oppression and attacks all along. However, it is possible to attest that especially since 2015, as the Kurdish issue fell back into a spiral of violence and also due to the ensuing two years of State of Emergency rule, we have entered a period wherein the oppressions, threats, attacks and violations against rights defenders in Turkey have become more widespread, diversified, normalized and systematic. Such a sharp contraction of the field of civil society witnessed over the recent years and the ever-increasing violations against the actors of this field have compelled many rights organizations in Turkey to put up a struggle to counter specifically the threats targeting them. In this framework, to prevent the violations faced by persons and institutions engaged in rights advocacy in Turkey, numerous protection mechanisms have been created and solidarity networks were founded among rights-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Also, local and international campaigns were organized to end continuing violations and a number of projects were developed to increase the visibility of rights defenders at risk and to empower the rights-based NGOs whose space of movement has been curtailed.

These oppressive conditions in the civil society’s field of work triggered yet another change in the practices of rights-based NGOs: the actors in the field started to make more active use of the international and regional support and protection mechanisms to fend off the threats, attacks and violations that they are subjected to. This, in turn, led to a change in the discourse. It is possible to observe that all the aforementioned activities are built predominantly on the discourse of **“human rights defender/rights defender”**. Surely the term “human rights defender” is not an entirely new concept for the rights-based non-governmental organizations in Turkey. However, we can say that in recent years this concept has been employed ever more frequently and more readily co-opted; with each passing day, a larger number of people active on the ground (whether or not working directly on human rights) define themselves as “human rights defenders” and even if they do not identify themselves as such, they have started to have more recourse to the local, regional and international support and protection mechanisms established with the aim of protecting and supporting “human rights defenders”.

These developments demonstrate that at least a considerable part of the demands pertaining to the shrinking civic spaces in Turkey is presently built on the “human rights defender” discourse and are therefore shaped in the framework of Turkey’s obligation to protect the human rights defenders under its jurisdiction and create a safe and enabling environment for them to carry out their activities. It would appear that one way or another the manifold demands regarding this field will, albeit for different reasons and on different levels, continue to be expressed through the “human rights defender” discourse, at least for a while longer. Therefore, we think that it is at any rate a meaningful endeavor for the civil society of Turkey to lend an ear to the “human rights defender” discourse, and more importantly, to the criticisms regarding the protection regime shaped around this discourse. We feel it is also worthwhile to follow the efforts in different parts of the world to transform the regime for the protection of human rights defenders and at the same time contemplate the possibilities offered by this paradigm.

In this framework, the “human rights defender” discourse, which increasingly expands its sphere of influence in Turkey, and the growing number of activities conducted around this discourse lead to several problems along with a question pertaining to the position of women

(and non-binary subjects) on the ground with regards this discourse. When we analyze the activities carried out by the rights organizations in this area and the language they employ, we can confirm that at present women are the determining actors of this domain in Turkey, however, it is not yet possible to say that there is a concrete effort toward gendering the “human rights defender” discourse which has recently come into circulation in Turkey. In other words, we cannot say that the civil society in Turkey has sufficiently thought about the concepts that the protection regime for “human rights defenders” is based on, —such as “risk”, “threat”, “violation”, “protection”, “safety”—, and their implications for women and non-binary rights defenders.

In this context and with the conviction that we cannot afford to refrain from gendering any area we come in contact with, this short report focuses on the feminist critiques that question the status of women rights defenders within the “human rights defender” (HRD) paradigm. Based on these critical approaches, the report aims to briefly note the discussions around gendering the “human rights defender” discourse and the struggles across the globe to gender the protection regime for human rights defenders. Subsequently, based on the experiences of women and non-binary subjects in contact with the field of human rights that have been documented in course of this research, it hopes to advance a discussion on how the specific context of Turkey is affected by the concept of the “woman human rights defender” (WHRD), which has emerged as a response to these concerns, evolved over time and has taken on different meanings, and whether this term can contribute to the gendering of the “human rights defender” discourse in Turkey.

Surely, in this short report we do not intend to determine the extent to which the experiences we have documented during the research correspond to the concept of “**woman human rights defender**” or to cram these experiences under an umbrella term (WHRD) which, in fact, many people do not prefer to use to define themselves. Here, through the experiences that we have tried to understand by holding in-depth interviews, we aim to open to discussion how the concept of WHRD is perceived in light of the local dynamics; what it promises to the women interacting with the field of rights advocacy in Turkey; what it jeopardizes; and what it induces us to articulate. In other words, fully aware that this issue requires an extended, multifaceted discussion centered on the actors of the field, in this report we content ourselves with adding a caveat of gender to the “human rights defender” discourse and mechanisms that are gradually expanding their sphere of influence in Turkey and try to understand which avenues of discussion the term “woman human rights defender” opens and what it encourages us to think about.

II. ANALYZING THE “HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER” PARADIGM FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

A. The Status of Women in the “Human Rights Defender” Paradigm: The Concept of “Woman Human Rights Defender”

The issue of protection for the human rights defenders was brought to the agenda of the United Nations (UN) for the first time in the early 1980s by Western states and various international non-governmental organizations with the aim of criticizing the rights violations in Eastern

Bloc countries and supporting the dissidents in these states.¹ Following the end of the Cold War and after more than a decade of negotiations, discussions, and work at the UN Human Rights Commission, in 1998 the UN General Assembly adopted the “Declaration on the right and responsibility of individuals, groups and organs of society to promote and protect universally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms”. Thus, for the first time, the defense of human rights (against the states) was recognized as “a universal human right” in itself.

The rationale of the Declaration was to affirm that the human rights defenders assume an important role in the realization of principles such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and therefore the states must protect and support the human rights defenders. In this sense, the Declaration obligated the states to provide “safe and enabling” conditions for the rights defenders under their jurisdictions to conduct their activities free of oppression and assault threats and was indirectly tasking the relevant UN organs to monitor the execution of this obligation.² Therefore, it is possible to say that with this Declaration it was intended to establish an international protection regime aiming to protect the human rights defenders across the globe against the violations they encounter in the form of various assaults and threats and to enable the advocates to freely carry out their human rights defense activities.

Surely, over time, the “human rights defender” discourse surpassed the parameters of the UN human rights system. Moreover, it pervaded the everyday language replacing terms that were more commonly used until then such as “activist” or “watchdog” and started to be employed frequently by the media, government officials and NGOs in different geographies as well. Of course, this change did not remain merely on the level of discourse. Since the adoption of the Declaration to date, many actors outside the UN organs (for instance, regional institutions³ such as the European Union [EU], and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE], diplomatic missions⁴ and numerous NGOs notably international human rights associations) founded manifold protection mechanisms to protect, empower and support human rights defenders and began to provide them with increasingly varying forms of assistance. Therefore, it is possible to say that many actors inside and outside the UN have been shaping, transforming and expanding the sphere of influence of the support and protection mechanisms for human rights defenders that have evolved into a comprehensive protection regime with local, regional and international components. Thus, let us note that today when we say, “**protection regime for human rights defenders**”, we refer not only to UN mechanisms but to a rather comprehensive network of support and protection mechanisms that comprises various actors and mechanisms operating at the local, regional and international levels.

With the impact of the “Women’s rights are human rights” campaign that the feminists carried out at the UN level during the 1990s, in the reports and documents they released shortly after the publication of the Declaration, various UN organs started to emphasize that both “**women rights defenders and persons who, irrespective of their gender, defend women’s rights and gender equality**” might have a different experience compared to male defenders and

1 Petter Wille and Janika Spannagel, [“The history of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders: its genesis, drafting and adoption”](#), Universal Rights Group Geneva, 11 March 2019.

2 To this end, about two years after the adoption of the Declaration, in 2000, the UN Human Rights Commission established the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders (then called the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Human Rights Defenders). For details, see: [UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders](#).

3 EU, [“European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders”](#), 2004; OSCE, [“Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders”](#), 2014.

4 Canada: [Voices at Risk](#); the Netherlands: [Action plan for HRDs](#); Finland: [Finish Guidelines on HRDs](#); Norway: [Guide for the foreign service](#); Switzerland: 2019 revised [Swiss Guidelines on HRDs](#); United Kingdom: [UK support to HRDs](#); USA: [Fact sheet on HRDs](#).

therefore may require different mechanisms of support and protection.⁵ These actors, on the one hand, invited the states to protect “**women human rights defenders**” and respect and support their activities, and on the other, underlined that states have to incorporate a gender sensitive perspective into their policies in order to be able to create “a safe and enabling environment” for the human rights defenders under their jurisdiction to freely carry out their activities. Owing to the impact of all these feminist interventions, we can say that at the UN level, especially during the last decade, emphasis has been placed on the theme of “**women human rights defenders**” and the efforts toward gendering the human rights defender discourse and protection mechanisms have been accelerated.

B. Feminist Critiques: Efforts to Transform the Protection Regime for “Human Rights Defenders”

Since the Declaration’s adoption, legitimate criticisms concerning the “human rights defender” discourse as well as the construction and operation of the protection mechanisms also began to come to the fore. Naturally, foremost among them were the feminist critiques that questioned the status of women rights defenders in this paradigm. In this context we can say that feminists, on the one hand, criticized the discourse and mechanisms for “human rights defenders” and distanced themselves from the paradigm, and on the other, carried out a comprehensive and extended struggle to transform the protection regime created for “human rights defenders” so as to meet the needs of women rights defenders.⁶

Especially during the early years of its circulation, “human rights defenders” were described as “**individuals**” who “**heroically**” **stand up to non-Western authoritarian states** to defend human rights, carry out various actions *in the public sphere* to this end and **must be supported for the values they advocate and need protection due to the risks they “courageously” take.**⁷ Therefore, we can affirm that the support and protection mechanisms for human rights defenders, at least in the first phase, were also constructed upon such a description. Unfortunately, it is possible to say that similar portrayals of human rights defenders and similar approaches that idealize the protection regime are still used by many actors on the ground, including in Turkey.⁸ When we look at this depiction of the human rights defender through a feminist perspective, it is impossible not to notice that the “human rights defender” abstraction in fact has a historical and concrete content and the actor of the protection regime contains sexist and (post)colonial elements. Consequently, we can say that the feminist critiques of this traditional “human rights defender” discourse and its protection mechanisms are essentially about the way the concepts that shape the protection regime such as “risk”, “safety”, “protection”, “perpetrator” are defined implicitly **based on the experiences and needs of cis heterosexual men struggling against non-Western authoritarian regimes.**

Foremost feminist critique of the “human rights defender” paradigm concerns how the protection regime is built on the private-public sphere distinction inherent to the liberal human rights rationale and therefore **historically focuses on state-sponsored violations.**

5 UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, “[Human rights defenders: protecting the right to defender human rights. Fact sheet no. 29](#)”, 2004, p. 13; UN Human Rights Council, “[Resolution on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders](#)”, A/HRC/RES/13/13, 2010, pr. 5; UN General Assembly resolution titled “[Protecting Women Human Rights Defenders](#)” A/RES/68/181, December 2013; for the relevant documents of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, see: “[Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Margaret Sekaggya](#)”, A/HRC/16/44, 2010, pr 30. Also see: “[Situation of women human rights defenders: report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders](#)”, A/HRC/40/60, 2019.

6 See: [Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition](#).

7 Amie Lajoie, “Women Human Rights Defenders”, N. Reilly (ed.), *International Human Rights of Women, International Human Rights*, Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd. 2019, p. 216.

8 See: Amnesty International, “[Defend the Brave](#)”.

Because in fact this approach ignores the fact that while carrying out (or because they carry out) human rights defense activities, women are subjected to perhaps the most severe attacks at home *in the private sphere* by their family members, their immediate circle or the men they work or engage in activism with. Similarly, it also disregards the attacks against women perpetrated by private companies, the media, crime syndicates, paramilitary groups or the fundamentalist/religious extremist groups that regard women's rights defense activities as a threat to religion, honor and culture. This situation inevitably results in the deprivation of many women rights defenders on the ground from the proper support and protection they need to be able to carry out their work in safety. Therefore, the feminists in the field and the women's rights defenders have for many years been emphasizing that **the attacks perpetrated by nonstate actors should not be disregarded** in the documentation⁹ and investigation of the assaults against women rights defenders and in the operation of the protection mechanisms.¹⁰

This state-centered approach, at the same time, leads many support and protection mechanisms created for human rights defenders to be predominantly **focused on physical assaults** against defenders such as police violence, arbitrary arrest, detention and killing. This both renders invisible the psychological, emotional, digital, etc. forms of violence that women encounter due to their rights defense activities and also overlooks the structural factors, invisible assaults and elements of oppression that prevent the women in the field from engaging in rights defense or curtail their activities.¹¹ Therefore, women on the ground have long been struggling for the **concept of "safety"** regarding women rights defenders **to be addressed holistically**, that is, for it to be defined to incorporate the issues that are not traditionally considered among security concerns (but women deem vital to feel safe) such as the need for self-care,¹² mental wellbeing, welfare of family members, safe work spaces free of discrimination, heavy workload and digital security.¹³ They are striving to transform the protection and support mechanisms through this perspective (for instance, to provide therapy support or digital security training to defenders).¹⁴

We should add that this approach, while defining the state as the main perpetrator of the attacks, describes their victims as "individual" human rights defenders. The **illusion which holds that only the individual rights defenders are targeted by the attacks** may prevent the development of support and protection mechanisms pertaining to the attacks that the women in the field of human rights are **collectively** subjected to. Simultaneously, it renders invisible the attacks that target the women's immediate circles, colleagues, children or other family members in order to deter them from carrying out rights defense activities. Unfortunately, since the protection mechanisms are usually based on this individualistic perspective as well, the scope of the support and protection given to rights defenders is determined merely with a consideration of the individual's personal safety.¹⁵ However, the **adoption of such an individualistic approach in protection mechanisms** does not take into account the

9 For a study conducted on this subject, see: WHRDs International Coalition, "[Gendering Documentation: A Manual For and About Women Human Rights Defenders](#)", 2015.

10 FGHR & JASS (Just Associates), "[Security and Protection of Human Rights Defenders in the face of Non-State Actors Initial Reflection and Questions](#)", 2017.

11 Itzik Aharon, Antonia Brill, Philip Fonseca, Azin Alizadeh Vandchali, Nina Wendel, "[The Protection of Women Human Rights Defenders and their Collective Actions](#)", Universitätsverlag Potsdam, 2020, p.1.

12 Yara Sallam, "[Even the Finest of Warriors](#)", A New Project on Wellbeing and Self-Care for Feminist Activists, Stories of WHRDs from Egypt and Tunisia.

13 Inmaculada Barcia and Analia Penchaszadeh, "[Ten Insights to Strengthen Responses for Women Human Rights Defenders at Risk](#)", AWID, 2012, p. 4.

14 For detailed information, see: AWID, "[Our Right To Safety: Women Human Rights Defenders' Holistic Approach to Protection](#)", 2014. Also see: Jane Barry and Vahida Nainar, "[Insiste, Persiste, Resiste, Existe. Women Human Rights Defenders' Security Strategies](#)", Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation and Front Line Defenders, 2008.

15 Marusia Lopez and Alexa Bradley, "[Making Change Happen: Rethinking Protection, Power, and Movements](#)", JASS, August 2017, p. 15.

collective effects that an attack against a woman rights defender creates/may create on the other women in the field. Moreover, it causes the resources and energy expended on protection and support to be spent for the security of one single person.¹⁶ **And that one single person is usually one of the most visible, “heroized” defenders with the highest profile or the power of representation.** This also runs the risk of concealing the attacks encountered by the less visible or unsung rights defenders who are usually the ones in the background shouldering almost the entire burden and risks of the work. Furthermore, in certain situations this approach compels the women on the ground to conduct their activities in the open and make public the attacks and threats they have encountered in order to benefit from the support and protection mechanisms.

The adoption of this **heroic-individualistic** approach in determining the means of protection also leads to **an illusion wherein increasing the visibility of rights defenders is seen as the most effective tool of protection.** As a matter of fact, many regional institutions, diplomatic missions, and rights organizations working in this field aim to increase the visibility of defenders usually by organizing international campaigns, sending urgent action letters to state officials, issuing press statements condemning the attacks or giving awards to defenders at risk, and thus intend to provide security against attacks. These protection tools surely yield positive results in certain situations. However, most of the time, increasing the individual visibility of women rights defenders and “heroizing” the defenders not only fail to provide them with effective protection but also at times result in an escalation of attacks or compel the women to work in a more limited field in the long run.

Therefore, feminists emphasize the **necessity of adopting a collective rather than individualistic approach to protection**, and stress that instituting measures for the collective empowerment and long-term protection of an entire group and all women rights defenders on the ground rather than merely giving support to provide personal security to women inside an initiative/community/association may lead to more significant and effective results.¹⁷ In the provision of support and protection for defenders, women also underline the importance of considering **structural** factors that comprise the main reasons women rights defenders are at risk, such as the heteronormative patriarchal order; policies of impunity for gender-based attacks; militarism and the legitimation of male violence; misogyny; rise of fundamentalism and other forms of religious and nationalist extremism; contraction of civic space; globalization; and neo-liberal policies, and underscore that **a strategy should be adopted to eliminate or at least minimize the effects of these structural factors in the long run.**¹⁸

Even though there is (now) an increasing recognition of the unique forms and intensity of violence faced by women rights defenders as compared to men on the ground, **an intersectional gender perspective that takes into account the multiple identities (age, ethnicity, class, race, sexual orientation, sexual identity, etc.) of women is still far from being reflected in the identification of protection strategies.**¹⁹ Yet, if a woman rights defender is, for instance, young, lesbian, underprivileged, disabled, lives in the provinces or works in a conflict zone, she faces attacks of a more complicated and layered nature. Consequently, the support and protection she needs is different from that of another “human rights defender” or another “woman”. Therefore, the absence of an intersectional gender perspective prevents the

16 Ibid.

17 For detailed information on collective protection measures, see: Protection International and Communities are Human Rights Defenders, “[Collective Protection of Human Rights Defenders](#)”.

18 For an evaluation on how these structural factors affect the women rights defenders on the ground, see: APWLD, “[Claiming Rights, Claiming Justice: A Guidebook on Women Human Rights Defenders](#)”, pp. 23-28.

19 Marusia Lopez and Alexa Bradley, “[Making Change Happen: Rethinking Protection, Power, and Movements](#)”, JASS, August 2017, p. 11.

identification of the invisible and internalized effects of the complex forms of pressure, social exclusion and violence that women rights defenders are faced with and consequently weakens the measures of protection and support.²⁰ Thus, feminists assert the necessity of employing an *intersectional* perspective while identifying the strategies for protecting women rights defenders.²¹

Moreover, feminists underline that **the support and protection provided by international and regional institutions and non-governmental organizations alone are not sufficient to effectively address the violence that women face on the ground.**²² Therefore, they emphasize that the local solidarity networks created by women human rights defenders among themselves are crucial for the effective protection of women at risk in light of local dynamics and for quickly responding to the threats and attacks they face on the local level.²³ Such solidarity networks can connect women from diverse political movements and human rights organizations active in different fields and enable them to communicate common experiences, systematically document the threats and attacks they encounter and share their (financial, political, technical and cultural) resources in struggling against these attacks.²⁴

Finally, let us add that feminists also criticize the perspective which views women rights defenders as the “other” of men and **codifies the women on the ground as more “fragile” subjects “in need of protection”** because they “have a higher risk of facing (sexual) violence”, and therefore conceptualizes gender merely as a “disadvantage”, “vulnerability” or “cause for susceptibility to violence” in carrying out human rights work. Thus, feminists expect women rights defenders to be **portrayed not as a sub-category around victimhood but as subjects who have “demands” and a “transformative impact” in this field.** In this regard, they prefer to highlight their invisible contributions to the field rather than their vulnerabilities and to develop a perspective that focuses on the gendered experiences of the women on the ground rather than create a distinct identity category like “woman human rights defender”.²⁵

The impact of the feminist critiques on the protection regime developed for human rights defenders which we addressed in this section can be clearly observed in the changing approaches of the actors in the field. It is possible to say that this feminist struggle has been reciprocated with the term “**woman human rights defender**” at the UN level and in regional institutions, diplomatic missions and international non-governmental organizations working in this field. Therefore, although it still has deficiencies, contradictions and elements open to criticism, we can observe that the WHRD discourse has gradually become prevalent, the perspectives on the concepts of “risk”, “protection” and “security” have begun to change and the operation of the regime for the protection of HRDs as well as the protection strategies employed by the actors in the field are being modified. We can say that by this means the visibility of the women in the field has increased; the threats, attacks and violations they encounter due to their gender or the values they advocate for have been recognized; and women have easier access to protection and support mechanisms that have, to some extent, been gendered and tailored to their concrete needs.

20 Ibid.

21 For example, see: ISHR, “[Are Peace and Security Possible Without Women Human Rights Defenders? And Why this Question Matters to the United Nations Security Council](#)”, 2019.

22 See: Inmaculada Barcia and Analía Penchaszadeh, “[Ten Insights to Strengthen Responses for Women Human Rights Defenders at Risk](#)”, AWID, 2012, p. 7.

23 Ibid., p. 7.

24 Ibid.

25 APWLD, “[Claiming Rights, Claiming Justice: A Guidebook on Women Human Rights Defenders](#)”, p. 45.

III. PONDERING THE MEANING OF “WOMAN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER” PARADIGM FOR THE WOMEN IN TURKEY

A. To Identify or Not to Identify Oneself As “Woman Human Rights Defender”: Reservations and Motivations

We think it is significant in terms of the issues addressed in this report to discuss the motivations and reasons of the actors on the ground in Turkey for opting to use the term “woman human rights defender” for referring to themselves; what sort of reservations they have regarding this term; or why they refuse to use this term when referring to themselves. However, even though the term “woman human rights defender” has more or less been circulating in the field of human rights in Turkey for some time, **it is not very easy to make a sound assessment regarding the motivations and reservations of the women on the ground in using this term.** Our conclusion based on the interviews we held suggests that the subjects on the ground are not very familiar with the term “woman human rights defender”, at least not in the sense it is used in this report. Indeed, many of the people we have interviewed were unaware of the context that gave rise to the concept of “woman human rights defender” and the issues the term aimed to emphasize; thus, rather than discussing the question of whether we can gender this field through this term, they shared their opinions on whether or not they defined themselves as “human rights defenders”. Therefore, first of all, we must note that a large part of the reservations and motivations we will discuss in this section **actually pertains to the reservations and motivations concerning the use of the term “human rights defender” and not the term “woman human rights defender”.**

The reservations of the actors on the ground concerning the term “woman human rights defender” are manifold. For instance, many people we have interviewed expressed that they deemed the term “human rights defender” (and therefore the term “woman human rights defender”) as a **“Eurocentric”, “sterile” and “borrowed” concept.** Thus, first and foremost, we understand that talking within the liberal “universal” human rights system stemming from the UN creates political unease for many people we have spoken with. Quite a few people have stated that they refrain from defining themselves as “human rights defenders” **because they do not want to confine their political struggle to the human rights discourse.** Some said that they are **uncomfortable with the liberal human rights discourse’s practice of categorizing everyone and everything,** and that they refrain from defining themselves and their political struggle with the concepts created by the mighty due to this very practice which tries to contain the experiences of the people engaged in rights struggle and their political efforts by melting them under various umbrella concepts.

We can say that this concern is much more prevalent among feminists; for, **defining oneself as “human rights defender” (and thus WHRD) brings with it the risk of reducing the feminist movement and the struggle against patriarchy to the human rights struggle.** Moreover, based on our interviews, **it is our understanding that the first thing the term “woman human rights defender” in Turkish brings to mind is the concept of “women’s human rights”** which has been a subject of debate for many years, and therefore the term is understood as **“woman(s) human rights defender”.** Hence, the term “woman human rights defender” in Turkey raises the ongoing debate between the “women’s human rights” discourse and the feminist struggle rather than a discussion on gendering the “human rights defender”

discourse and its protection mechanisms as intended by this report.²⁶ It is not surprising that feminists distance themselves from this term given that the feminist movement in Turkey has never preferred to build its discourse through that of human rights and has based its course of struggle on revealing and exposing the patriarchy and changing women's lives rather than demanding rights from the state. That said, many feminists think that **despite all, the “human rights” and “human rights defender”** (and thus WHRD) **discourses cannot be completely abandoned.** Moreover, many of them agree that especially under the current oppressive circumstances in Turkey, no one has the luxury to completely abandon the human rights discourse and that this discourse and its mechanisms can be used as tools of empowerment to protect the subjects against the pressures and attacks on the ground and enable them to continue their activities.

Meanwhile, some of the people we have interviewed prefer not to use the term “human rights defender” (and thus WHRD) particularly due to its **human-centrism inherent to the liberal idea of human rights.** Since the traditional human rights theory views the “human” as the subject and the “nature” as the object, the protection of nature comes to the agenda merely within the framework of the human's right to a dignified life. Therefore, for an environmental activist, for instance, the “human rights defender” discourse can turn into an expression that reinforces the complicity between the exploitation of nature and the liberal-legal humanism, which is precisely what they are trying to expose, thus, justifiably they do not want to identify themselves with such a term.

Meanwhile, even though they know that the term “human rights defender” has a much broader definition in theory, some people we have interviewed said that **the human rights movement in Turkey historically speaks from a much narrower frame (prisons, severe human rights violations, torture, enforced disappearance, etc.)** and therefore the term “human rights defender” is presently used for a much narrower group and that is why they refrain from defining themselves as “human rights defenders” (and thus WHRDs).

Yet another concern about the term “human rights defender” (and thus WHRD) seems to be the **misgivings pertaining to the connotations the term has acquired** over the recent years. Some of the interviewees stated that over the past few years, human rights advocacy has increasingly become a **“rank of status to be achieved”** and started to be regarded as **“a prestigious job”** while the field of struggle turned into **“a human rights club whose only concern is one another”**. Apparently, many people are disturbed by the way the violations experienced while engaging in rights defense sometimes rise above the original rights violations and their victims which are the reason for the advocacy in the first place.

On the other hand, we can say that many people on the ground also have qualms about bearing the **political weight of the term “human rights defender”** and some **feel they “do not deserve”** to define themselves as a “human rights defender” (and thus WHRD). For instance, some of the interviewees (predominantly young women) felt that in order to be able to call themselves “human rights defenders”, “activists”, etc., they must first be active in the public sphere, become visible, take “risks” and even pay the “price” as a result of these risks, and because they think that they have not taken enough risks or paid the price to deserve these terms, they refrained from defining themselves as such.

Alternatively, some of the interviewees stated that in order to engage in politics on a shared ground, act together and reveal the common aspects of different actors, they inevitably assume

26 For this discussion, see: Hülya Osmanağaoğlu, “[İstanbul Sözleşmesi kampanyası: Kadın hakları savunuculuğu mu, feminizm mi?](#)”, [Campaign for the Istanbul Convention: Women's rights defense or feminism?], *Kadın Yeni Yaşam*, 1 July 2021.

certain identities (such as “woman”, “human rights defender” and, of course, “woman human rights defender”) **which do not always sit comfortably with them, or which they at least question.** Some emphasized that these concepts can be used strategically and that defining oneself as HRD/WHRD at one point in order to develop a common discourse does not mean that the person is always and only an HRD/WHRD; it was underlined that this term can be used as one of many hats that the women wear. We can attest that this strategic approach has been implemented by women in other parts of the world as well.²⁷

Yet another reason professed by those who prefer to identify themselves as WHRDs is **to emphasize and combat the specific obstacles curbing the activities of women rights defenders and the particular threats, attacks and violations they are subjected to.** Indeed, many of the interviewees stated that even though they do not prefer to define themselves as WHRDs, at times using this term is inevitable and necessary since this is the only way a woman who is a human rights defender can underline that they have a different experience from the cis men.

For those who identify themselves as HRD/WHRD, another motivation is to **benefit from the protection mechanisms and empowerment tools devised for “human rights defenders”/ “women human rights defenders”.**²⁸ It is possible to observe that even if they do not personally define themselves as such, many people utilize the assistances given to HRDs/WHRDs; some, for instance, receive therapy grants from international NGOs, while others participate in the empowerment programs and capacity building trainings created for women rights defenders. Therefore, we can say that many of the people we have interviewed do not, or will not, refrain from defining themselves as such, at least when they need to apply to international or regional human rights institutions.

B. Moving Beyond Self Identification: Issues Brought to the Agenda by the Concept of “Woman Human Rights Defender”

Along with the contradictions it contains, the opportunities it presents and the limits it draws, the “woman human rights defender” paradigm poses many questions about the sort of environment the women in the field of rights advocacy need in order to be able carry out their human rights activities freely and without facing any threats or attacks. Therefore, moving beyond the issue of whether the subjects on the ground in Turkey prefer to define themselves as “woman human rights defenders”, we think it is valuable in terms of the topics discussed in this report to ponder which avenues of discussion this term opens before us. For we think that this term encourages us to contemplate what the subjects in Turkey struggle against while carrying out (or to be able to carry out) their rights defense activities, what sort of coping mechanism they develop, what types of solidarity practices they use and essentially how all these experiences differ from that of cis men in the field.

27 See: Alda Facio, “[Activist, Feminist and a Woman Human Rights Defender!](#)”, JASS, 6 January 2017.

28 For a similar evaluation, see: JASS Mesoamerica, “[Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders Initiative \(Im-Defensoras\)](#)”.

1. The gendered aspect of the shrinking civic space: looking at the attacks, threats and rights violations against rights defenders through the gender perspective

a. Gender-based threats, attacks and rights violations

The rights defense activities that women (especially women with lesbian, bisexual, queer and trans experiences and non-binaries) carry out in the public sphere are usually seen as a resistance to the traditional roles imposed upon women and men in the family and society and are perceived as a threat to the heteronormative family structure and the patriarchal power balances of gender. Therefore, these people are specifically targeted by society and the authorities not only because they engage in rights defense but also **because they are women who engage in rights defense and are subjected to gender-based threats, attacks and violations**. Moreover, when these gender identities overlap with other oppressed and exploited identities (such as Kurdish, Armenian, Muslim, disabled, young, lesbian, queer and trans), the variety and intensity of the attacks also escalate in equal measure. These gender-based violations, which usually remain invisible and are consciously ignored and if noticed almost never brought to account, comprise manifold practices perpetrated sometimes by the state and sometimes by non-state actors in order to muffle the voices of the rights defenders, quell their struggles, and dishearten and ostracize them from the field.

For instance, in the interviews we conducted we have determined that the people we spoke with have been subjected to intense **sexist, homophobic, biphobic and transphobic smear campaigns**. It is understood that these smear campaigns run on social media or the media aligned with the government or sometimes by the politicians themselves **often employ gender-based stereotypes** with the aim of discrediting the women subjects active in the field. Many people we have spoken with stated that for instance by implying that they are in “improper relationships” or for fraternizing with men; drinking/smoking; or dressing “immodestly”, these smear campaigns have accused them of “immoral” conduct in public space; “indecent”; “not being a good enough Muslim”; “not being a good mother”, the interviewees added that they are constantly trying to be discredited through these categories.

During that period, as the lawyers following the case, we all experienced a lot of pressure. But for instance, I was the only one hassled by the media and all the news were about my gender, that is how I was targeted. They claimed for example that I was lovers with my client. There was such grotesque, horrible coverage during that period. But see, they did not do this to the male attorneys...²⁹

Moreover, many of the women and non-binary rights defenders we have interviewed stated that almost all the threats, insults and verbal assaults they received through the social media, print media or from third parties contained **sexist insults, sexual degradation and threat of sexual violence**. Furthermore, some of the interviewees said that these defamation practices based on gender stereotypes and especially the sexual degradation and/or sexist insults on social media are at times also **aimed at the person’s family members and immediate circle**, probably anticipating a deterrent effect; this has been noted as a situation that happens almost exclusively to women defenders. These harassments take place sometimes in the form of identifying the relatives of the person on social media and making them a target of the attacks and sometimes by reaching her male family members and denouncing her with the aim of disgracing the targeted rights defender also in the eyes of her relatives. Despite the fact that many interviewees said they have “become used to” such attacks, we can attest that

²⁹ Interview no. 12, 13.07.2021, online.

these attacks constitute **a serious threat to the security of subjects on the ground and their immediate circles, as well as their mental health and the continuity of their rights defense activities.** It is possible to say that many of them hide or sometimes completely close their social media accounts, withdraw from the field or at least censor themselves so as not to be exposed to these attacks. When faced with such attacks many people take legal steps for the identification and/or punishment of the perpetrators but most of these attempts do not yield any results. Anyhow, since most of these attacks are in a grey area, it is quite difficult to put a name on them or ensure any legal accountability by identifying the culprits. Therefore, we can attest that in face of such attacks many women in the field draw strength from the solidarity they have established among themselves and try to heal themselves by talking about the attacks with each other. Even though this solidarity is very valuable and empowering, unfortunately it seems it is insufficient to completely eradicate the consequences of these attacks.

Furthermore, a considerable number of people we have interviewed stated that they have been subjected to **a variety of gender-based rights violations by state officials such as the police and prison staff** whom they interact with for various reasons. Among these violations are threat of sexual violence under custody, strip search and being forced to undress, as well as acts of verbal and psychological violence such as insulting, belittling and derogatory behaviors. It is abundantly clear that for women it is far from easy to fight against these rights violations, since judicial attempts to this end usually do not yield any results. And especially when abuse experiences that entail sexual violence such as strip search are made public, rights defenders are affronted by both their immediate circles and state authorities as well as the people and organizations they work with. Therefore, unfortunately, many of them opt not to share these experiences at all.

Besides, a majority of the interviewees also said that especially young women are subjected to **discrimination, pressure and attacks** and at times are even **sexually harassed** by the people they deal with in public institutions, by the victims they give support to and by the residents of the neighborhoods where they work or live. Some of the women we have interviewed explained that sometimes in order to be able **to carry out their activities on the ground they “take care to cover up and partially rid themselves of the things that may be ascribed to their femininity”** and at times they delegate the field work to men or go to the field accompanied by a man so that the work can run smoothly and faster.

b. Threats, attacks and rights violations due to the advocated values and defended rights

Yet another conclusion we have drawn from the interviews suggests that feminists, LGBTQI+ and/or other queer activists, as well as persons, groups and communities defending rights in the field of women and LGBTQI+ rights, gender equality, and gender identity and sexual orientation based discrimination (including sexual rights, sexual and reproductive health and other issues pertaining to sexuality) are at times subjected to threats, attacks and rights violations particularly **due to the content of their work, the values they defend and the rights they are struggling to attain.**

Especially during recent years it is possible to observe that the political authority in Turkey has set out to build a new gender regime through its labor and body policies while the sexist, homophobic, misogynistic and profamily conservatist tendencies manifested both in the person of leaders and on the plane of masses have become quite widespread, affecting a transition, as it were, “from a gender-blind government to a government practice that actively implements

sexism”.³⁰ The misogynistic, homophobic, biphobic, transphobic and anti-gender discourses and practices that have been escalating in Turkey over the last few years create an environment wherein all women and LGBTQI+ living in Turkey, irrespective of whether they are in the field of rights defense or not, feel unsafe and are either constantly subjected to hate crimes or live with the fear of encountering such an attack any moment. Moreover, this relatively “new” government practice has also created an environment where feminists, LGBTQI+ and/or queer activists and the persons and communities defending rights in these arenas are targeted across the society and consistently made the “scapegoats” for the sake of the populist propaganda. Most of the people we have interviewed stated that due to this political climate in Turkey and the misogynist and homophobic government practice, they are **experiencing a severe loss of rights** in their field of struggle and are **obliged to adopt a defensive rather than proactive practice of struggle** unlike before while their demonstrations, activities and projects are being systematically and unlawfully obstructed by government officials and their associations are under constant risk of closure. Therefore, we can infer that they are spending a significant part of their time and energy on protecting themselves and their achievements and are striving to continue their activities in an environment besieged from all sides.

For instance, feminists, queer/LGBTQI+ activists or persons, groups and communities advocating for women and LGBTQI+ rights are trying to be systematically **discredited** and are subjected to **smear campaigns** in an ever-escalating manner in the recent period by community leaders, the media and faith-based groups. Many people we have interviewed said that due to their advocacy activities or political struggles in these fields they have been stigmatized by both the print media and through the social media as “slut”, “pervert”, “depraved”, “enemy of the family”, “infidel/blasphemer”, “blood sucker”, “foreign spy”, “terrorist”, “traitor”, and even “child molester”. Moreover, these hostile discourses are employed also by government officials and even public authorities working in national human rights institutions. Plus, these smear campaigns are followed by other threats and attacks perpetrated mostly by ultra-rightist and religious fundamentalist groups.

*Being subjected to hate speech every second of every day is itself a massive attack on its own! The other kind of attack happens once, you go to jail, you die or get injured, you survive. But this is a never-ending assault where you feel the threat on your life every day.*³¹

It is also possible to say that feminists, queer/LGBTQI+ activists or persons, groups and communities advocating for women and LGBTQI+ rights are subjected to intense **judicial harassment** due to their rights defense efforts. Sometimes the grounds for the judicial harassment can be a press statement that was issued or a news article that was shared. Other times, judicial harassment proceeds hand in hand with the violation of the right to peaceful protest because many of the arrests (followed by criminal proceedings) take place during the demonstrations banned by the government or right after these demonstrations. And sometimes smear campaigns pave the way for judicial harassment. Rather than taking legal action against those who organize the defamation campaigns or employ hate speech, judicial proceedings are started usually against the persons and organizations that condemn these discourses.³² This attitude both prevents the recognition and investigation of the actual crime and also creates an incentive environment for hate speech.

30 İnci Özkan Kerestecioğlu, “Türkiye’de Güncel Feminist Hareket İçindeki Ayrışmalar ve Tartışmalar”, Divergences and Debates within Contemporary Feminist Movement in Turkey”, Duvarları Yıkarak, Köprüleri Kurmak, Yeni Küresel Feminizmin Yükselişi ve İmkânları / Toppling Walls, Building Bridges: The Rise and Prospects of the New Global Feminism, 3-4 November 2017. Organized by: Heinrich Böll Stiftung Foundation Turkey Representation, p. 57.

31 Interview no. 3, 25.06.2021, online.

32 For instance, see: Solidarity Network for Human Rights Defenders, “LGBTI+’lara Karşı Nefret Söylemini Eleştiren Örgütlere Yönelik Hedef Gösterme ve Soruşturmalar Son Bulmalı”, [Targeting and Investigations of Organizations that Criticized Hate Speech against LGBTQI+ Must End], 30 April 2020.

Moreover, in the changing political climate of Turkey, many rights organizations working in these fields are having **difficulties accessing the monetary resources** they need to carry out their activities. For instance, the government's criminalization of receiving funds from foreign agencies and the establishment of government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) within the women's movement, which in turn use up most of the local resources, cause independent women's rights organizations to be hard put to find monetary resources. Far as we understand from the interviews, women and LGBTQI+ rights organizations can also be subjected to a much harsher auditing of their monetary incomes as compared to other rights organizations.

The **coping strategies** of feminists, LGBTQI+/queer activists, women and LGBTQI+ rights defenders against these threats, attacks and rights violations vary. Sometimes they develop a strategy of withdrawal by reducing their visibility, ignoring some attacks; sometimes they resort to self-censorship, or not enrolling more members to their organizations. In certain other situations, in order to prevent a single person or organization from being made target they establish alliances and solidarity networks, issue joint press statements and try to adopt a common stance in face of various developments. And sometimes they prefer to increase their visibility on purpose, and for instance, organize campaigns about rights defenders under arrest; contact regional or international institutions such as the OSCE, EU, UN, etc. regarding the attacks and rights violations; establish alliances with international human rights associations and act together; or apply to local, regional or international support and protection mechanisms.

c. Gendered experiences of threats, attacks and rights violations

Gender stereotypes and especially the misogynist and homophobic government practice that has become ever more dominant in Turkey over the recent period cause women (especially women with lesbian, bisexual, queer and trans experience and non-binaries) to experience the attacks, threats and rights violations they encounter **much more differently than cis male rights defenders**. For, the attacks that the actors on the ground face due to their rights defense activities cause the existing structural inequalities to intensify; the fragilities in the social, political and economic systems to become more evident, and the violations to be felt ever more deeply.

For instance, when the women and LGBTQI+ are subjected to threats and attacks they must cope with an incrementally increasing difficulty because various strong solidarity networks that men have, including family relationships, are not necessarily supportive of women. Based on our interviews we can say that most of the women and LGBTQI+ rights defenders in Turkey are **under more family pressure, as compared to cis men, to leave their field of activity and to be less visible**; and are even **condemned, rejected by their families and immediate circles or, at best, not supported by their families** because they defend rights.

We also see that the women and LGBTQI+ rights defenders must cope with other mostly overlooked or invisible eventualities of **smear campaigns** run by the media or through social media. For instance, sometimes a photograph used during these smear campaigns on which the faces of the people are discernable causes the experiences or sexual orientation/gender identity of non-binary and women rights defenders, which they had been hiding from their immediate circles, to be exposed without their consent, which in turn instigates violence against them from their immediate circles.

Similarly, based on the interviews we conducted we can assert that the **judicial harassment and incarceration experiences** of women and LGBTQI+ rights defenders are very different from that of cis hetero men. It is possible to say that most women and LGBTQI+ rights defenders are faced with severe backlash and violence from their families for having a criminal record and due to the stigmatization they encounter; they have much more difficulty in securing employment as compared to men, and most of them suffer from a heightened financial instability since they also lose the family support. We must add that some of them face the risk of losing custody of their children when sentenced and are anxious about who will take care of their children when incarcerated. Moreover, when they are judicially harassed or incarcerated, the women and LGBTQI+ on the ground suffer a particular discrimination based on gender-based stereotypes from the residents of their neighborhood or their colleagues as well.

I am a woman who lives alone. Once, the police came when I was not at home and left the notice with the neighbors. So, of course, the neighbors came calling over and over again, but I could not say that I was being charged with terrorism, I said "I am on trial for insulting the president". Because I know that if they find out I will have to move from that apartment (...). A man's neighbors cannot keep questioning him like that. I am experiencing this because I am a woman. They feel they have the right to call you to account because you live alone, because you are a woman living alone...³³

Finally, it is possible to say that especially **the threats of violence made on social media** also have a different impact on women and LGBTQI+ rights defenders. For, in an environment of ever-increasing and socially legitimized violence against women and LGBTQI+ where protection mechanisms do not work and perpetrators are not punished, it is impossible for women and LGBTQI+ to not take the threats of violence they receive seriously and be worried that they might in fact be carried out. Therefore, we must underline that the women and LGBTQI+ rights defenders and primarily those living alone, experience the threats of violence they receive much more differently than the cis hetero men and that these threats have much severer effects.

2. The destructiveness of the attacks coming "from the inside": a struggle carried out both within and outside

One of the most important conclusions we have drawn from the interviews suggests that in order to stay in the field and continue their rights defense activities, the women on the ground must put up a struggle "both within and outside".

When a woman and/or LGBTQI+ rights defender is carrying out their struggle, they must struggle against both the sexism within their own movement and the sexism of those attacking that movement and the actual problem at hand, the issue at the center of their rights defense... This is quite a layered field of struggle...³⁴

Many people we have spoken with stated that even though women usually comprise the majority in their political movements or rights organizations, **in practice they have no or limited access to decision making mechanisms** and especially in institutionalized associations, barring exceptions, the directors or representatives are predominantly male. Nevertheless, they said, a different picture is being deliberately painted for the sake of appearances, even though women do not have say in decision making mechanisms, **externally**

³³ Interview no. 30, 25.06.2021, online.

³⁴ Interview no. 5, 04.05.2021, online.

it is pretended as if they do, in a sense, women's presence in the movements or organizations is at times used as an "ornament", a "showcase" or an "advertising tool".

Let alone having access to decision making mechanisms, women rights defenders have to **put up a significant fight merely to make their voices heard and be heeded**. This problem encountered especially by young women may manifest in the constantly skeptical approach to women's ideas and the deliberate disregard for their suggestions which are at times not taken seriously, implicitly belittled or openly scorned. Most of the people we have interviewed stated that during their internal meetings they always experience processes dominated by men (especially men of repute in the field and over a certain age) and when young women share their ideas during these meetings they are always "reminded of their age and experience". Moreover, it is understood that while trying to make their own voices heard, women feel they must take care to not "hurt the men's egos", "tarnish their honor", or "disrespect their experience". Otherwise, women can be faced with the risk of being completely ostracized from the field. As far as we inferred from the interviews, women sometimes censor themselves or do not share their ideas because they are wary of being insulted or frozen out.

Many people we have spoken with noted that young women are predominantly assigned to secretarial tasks rather than skilled work, and that it is usually a group of friends who takes the lead in rights organizations or political movements and the women who join later or are outside this group for some reason or are relatively younger are never included in the work to the same extent. Similarly, we gather that the women who work in rights organizations or engage in political movements are **not let in on the "essential work"** but are usually **tasked with the "women dimension" of the essential work, or at least that is the "expectation" of the men they work with**.

For instance, a document gets finalized and they call you in the middle of the night saying, "Could you make this document gender sensitive?" (...) Without including me in that work from the start they expect me to make an addition on the issue of women at the last minute. (...) It is like, "Do not say anything about the essential issues, we are handling that part, you just explain the women dimension of the matter..."³⁵

Some of the people we interviewed said that all positions of influence in the field are occupied by men and therefore in order to prove themselves, **to assume the responsibility of the "essential" works or to be truly included in the work, that is, "to make room for themselves at that table", they have to combat a myriad of actors from all sides**. Moreover, many young women whom we have spoken with stated that while fighting "to make room for themselves at the table", they are **continuously working on pins and needles and feel that the men in the field are standing by to catch their smallest mistake any moment**; therefore, they double check everything and always think twice before saying anything which puts a rather heavy psychological burden on them. Some added that when they make a mistake or object to such behaviors, attitudes and politics, they encounter retaliation and are at times even ostracized from the organization. Evidently, even if women succeed in "making room for themselves at the table," **their labor and the input they make is more often than not rendered invisible as well**. Because, despite the very woman-intense labor in every step of the production, or even though women undertake the entire burden of the work in the background, their names can be omitted from the reports, they cannot participate in the press conferences, and the "heroes" of the successful works are somehow always introduced as men.

35 Interview no. 9, 29.05.2021, online.

For instance, if someone is going to be more visible that person is invariably a man. If you do not stick up for the effort you put in, no one gives you credit or says, “this friend here organized this, did that”. Moreover, when you try to vindicate your work, you are stigmatized as “the person who disrupts the internal balances of the group” or “the person who tries to take center stage” or you are seen as “the witch” or an “incomprehensible”, “difficult”, “capricious” woman.³⁶

Furthermore, the women and non-binaries on the ground can also be subjected to sexist, homophobic, transphobic attitudes, mobbing, sexual harassment, and violence by the actors of the field. In this context, many women whom we have interviewed stated that they have at times experienced **sexist attitudes and attacks** within their rights organizations and political movements. Evidently, the men in the field expect women to “act with more reserve and propriety” owing to the gravity of the subjects they work on, and according to some men, women putting on makeup while carrying out rights defense activities, looking “fancy”, or dressing “immodestly” is a show of “disrespect” to the struggle they are engaged in. It is seen that especially single or divorced women rights defenders are expected to “pay attention to their private lives” and for instance women with multiple partners or those with an active sexual life are frowned upon and made the subject of gossip in the human rights community.

I am a divorced woman. Therefore, I am constantly on pins and needles about my private life. Hanging out somewhere, having fun, even having a single beer can sometimes be a problem. But, for instance, the president of the bar association is a man, the director of the association is a man, and they are never talked about. They can do whatever they want, hang out and drink wherever they want with whomever they want anyhow they please... No one probes into their private life. But when it comes to you it is considered a misdemeanor because you are a woman...³⁷

It must be underlined that in addition to these sexist attitudes, especially the subjects on the ground also encounter **homophobic, biphobic and transphobic discourse and behaviors** at times verging on violence. Moreover, most of the time this is done implicitly, for instance, by facetiously labeling people which makes it harder to put a name on it. Therefore, we can say that the LGBTQI+ subjects on the ground usually do not feel comfortable in the human rights arena and inside the political movements, while some end up having to hide their identities those who are open are engaged in a constant battle against these prejudices and attacks coming from the inside.

Many interviewees also expressed that the women in the field (and especially young women) are subjected to more incidents of **mobbing** in the organizations they work or that mobbing is done through gender-based stereotypes or that women’s experience of mobbing is different from that of the men in the field.³⁸ Although it is not much voiced in the public sphere, we must add that women in the field of rights defense are heavily subjected to **sexual harassment** (at times even sexual assault). These attacks are perpetrated sometimes by their male counterparts or men from within the same human rights movement and sometimes by other rights defenders they collaborate with on the ground. Evidently, the women (especially young women new in the field) who are subjected to gender-based mobbing, psychological violence or

³⁶ Interview no. 6, 27.05.2021, online.

³⁷ Interview no. 1, 03.07.2021, online.

³⁸ Even though managers who engage in mobbing against women are usually men, surely, albeit rarely, women in the field (especially older, prestigious and well-known women or managers) can also be the perpetrator of these harassments. See: “[FilmMor Çalışanları: FilmMor’da Sömürü ve Şiddete Maruz Kaldık](#)”, [FilmMor Employees: We Have Been Subjected to Exploitation and Violence at FilmMor], *SanataTak*, 10 February 2021.

sexual harassment by their fellow activists try to survive these attacks sometimes by tuning them out, sometimes by feigning ignorance, and sometimes by acting like it did not happen, that is, mostly by remaining silent. At times women do not tell anyone about these assaults to refrain from harming their work or jeopardizing the struggle they are engaged in, or they keep silent to not damage the reputation of the institution/movement they are part of. Sometimes they keep silent because they do not have the energy to deal with this corrosive process and sometimes because they do not trust their organizations or know that even if they file a criminal complaint nothing will come out of the male-centered justice mechanisms. However, women generally keep silent because they know that if they talk, for instance, when they expose these people or demand the relevant mechanisms to be put to practice, they may encounter retaliations. The interviews we have conducted reveal that in most cases, the testimonies of the women who share the incident of mobbing or sexual harassment they have experienced are not trusted. Moreover, these women are discredited by the other actors in the field, including other women, and are accused of harming the struggle, of playing into the enemy's hands, or of "exaggerating" the situation, and as if the trauma they experienced were not enough, they are ostracized from the field. The situation is further aggravated especially when the perpetrator of the mobbing or sexual harassment is a "prominent", "prestigious", "successful" male rights defender because when women say that they have been subjected to mobbing or sexually harassed by these persons they know that the other actors in the field cannot afford to renounce these people and thus they will be left alone. Therefore, women struggle against the sexual harassment and gender-based mobbing perpetrated by the persons in the field usually by building "silent solidarity networks" and making "implicit disclosures". If a woman is being sexually harassed or subjected to mobbing, most of the time, she shares this experience at least with other women in her own network, warns them against the perpetrator and demands this person to be kept at a distance. Following the disclosures, albeit seldom, other actors may come together and make statements of solidarity and adopt a common front to stand by the woman who has exposed the perpetrator.³⁹

Even organizations that are relatively "reformed" concerning these issues (i.e., organizations where sexist or LGBTQI+ phobic behaviors, attitudes and attacks take place more infrequently or the relevant mechanisms function better) have reached that point through the struggle women have given in those structures by paying high prices. That is, **thinking about and reforming these issues emerges yet again as a workload undertaken by the women** who have to talk about it even though they are the aggravated party. Although many women describe the field they presently work and struggle in as a space that is "at last" sensitive toward these issues, they underline that it has been achieved owing to the successive talks, the battles fought, the policy documents they strived to get adopted and the protection mechanisms they themselves established at the end of a painful process. Moreover, most of them add that this is a perpetual struggle that never ends; they find themselves constantly explaining to the men in the field why something constitutes discrimination, sexism, etc. They note that the responsibility of these issues is always left with the women, therefore, they are the ones who labor over it in addition to the rights work they do, but again this labor is rendered invisible as well.

In the face of all these attacks and attitudes, women in the field usually **persevere by being in solidarity and sharing with one another**. For the women in the field, the existence of safe relationship networks wherein they can reveal their feelings; the presence of women in their circles with whom they can frankly share their experiences; and the support of other women they work with have quite an empowering impact. The aspiration to not leave the field of rights defense to men and the motivation to pave the way for the women in the field appear

39 See: "[Kadının Beyanına Ses Veriyoruz!](#)", [We are giving out sound for the women's testimony], 10 May 2021.

as important factors enabling the women to stay in the field despite everything. In any case, we must acknowledge that fighting against all these attacks “from the inside”, on top of the intense struggle they already carry out “outside”, being attacked by the persons and institutions with whom they thought they were bearing the brunt of this struggle is a **devastating, hurtful, corrosive, and exhausting experience**. As a matter of fact, sometimes these attacks can be more corrosive than the rights violations we assume would be much harder on the person such as judicial harassment, arbitrary arrest, etc. The fight women give “inside” can shake their confidence in rights defense, human rights institutions or political organizations, cause them to lose faith in the values they advocate for and at times even to leave the struggle.

This itself, that is, the struggle you give against the men working in the field of human rights puts a much greater emotional burden on you as compared to the human rights violation itself, greater than the struggle you undertake against the state or the secondary trauma that struggle begets in you... I had not felt I had to struggle against the state this much, not as much as I have had to struggle against the men around me...⁴⁰

3. A life without a break: heavy workload, emotional exhaustion, and the overlooked need for self-care

The majority of the women we interviewed who work professionally in a rights organization have a heavy workload, work almost 24/7 with rather limited resources, have their personal and professional lives tangled up and cannot find time to take a break and rest. Due to the heavy workload and scarce resources, many women who work in human rights organizations are used as “jack of all trades” doing several jobs simultaneously, for instance, while documenting rights violations on the ground and interviewing victims on one hand, on the other they answer phones in the office, organize panels and write the reports and apply for projects and funds.

Moreover, despite this pace of work, **the women working professionally in the field** cannot receive the monetary (and sometimes moral) compensation of their labor. Most of them have to take a second job or receive support from their families. **Feminists, women activists or women rights defenders who do not work professionally in human rights associations and sustain their lives in other ways or the persons who work professionally in this field but at the same time continue to engage in other rights struggles on a voluntary basis live under much more difficult circumstances**. This is because those working professionally, even if they cannot receive the full compensation of their labor, do ultimately receive a salary/payment or at least have social security. However, the volunteers usually do other jobs during workhours to make a living and spend the rest of their time, which they could have used for recuperation, engaging in rights defense activities. Moreover, they receive no monetary compensation for their efforts.

Furthermore, we should emphasize that due to gender roles, a significant part of the women rights defenders **bear a disproportionate burden of care for the home, elderly, children and the sick, in addition to their human rights work**. Based on our interviews we can say that these burdens cause some women to not be able to allocate as much time as they would like to rights defense activities while confining some to a life where they are constantly running around 24/7 without time for a breather.

Nevertheless, many women who complain about this pace and workload see this intense **level of work as an inevitable part of rights defense, of activism and of working in a human rights**

40 Interview no. 6, 27.05.2021, online.

organization. Most of them even think that “this is just how it is” with activism. And therefore, however hard the conditions might be, they accept the price they will pay from the very start and continue to stay in the field and carry out their rights defense activities. Based on our interviews, we can enumerate the reasons for this perspective as follows: they attribute a special importance to women’s labor in the field of rights defense; have an “emotional attachment” to their field of struggle and its actors while some even see their struggle as “a part of their existence”; feel a “responsibility” toward the work they do, the values they defend and the communities they work with. Almost none of the women we have interviewed, including those working professionally in human rights associations, see the work they do as “merely a job” and they think that this is how it should be. Therefore, if a work is unfinished, is found lacking, or if they were given more work than they could handle, they do not say, “my shift is over”, “I did what I could” and go home, they are not in the habit of asking for overtime for in fact working overtime either.

Even if that computer is shut down there is still something running in the background, an issue that keeps revolving in the mind which we cannot shut down. That is, most of us cannot make a very clear separation of work and personal life. It is as though I am walking around with a machine in the back of my head that I cannot cast away.⁴¹

We can say that over the recent years, as the rights organizations institutionalized; the younger generation entered the field of human rights; and the issues pertaining to the mental health of rights defenders started to be somewhat talked about, the **perspective of “committing/devoting oneself and entire being to the struggle” has relatively weakened as compared to the past.** Nevertheless, a significant part of women rights defenders still thinks that the people whose rights they are defending, the things they are trying to change, and the continuation of their advocacy activities are more important than their own problems, fatigue and right to respite, and they prioritize accordingly. Despite the heavy workload they undertake, many women feel they do not work enough or make enough effort and therefore think that they “do not deserve” to rest or take a vacation. For instance, a considerable number of the women we have interviewed said that they have not taken a vacation of more than two-three days in years and even if they go on vacation they cannot take their minds off work, for instance, when on vacation they are still worried something at work might go wrong or not be on time and thus spend their vacation working as well. Those who can make time to rest said that they feel “guilty” and “selfish” for doing so.

In addition to all this, women **usually have to put in double the effort** in order to survive in the human rights arena; to prove themselves by breaking the gender-based stereotypes of their male counterparts or the men they interact with during their work; to ensure the visibility of their efforts; and to preserve their place in that field. Also, based on our interviews, we can say that the women in the field have **assumed all the emotional burden** in matters such as the completion of the tasks, the smooth operation of the team, the resolution of problems among individuals, meeting deadlines, ironing out the kinks; in that sense, they end up working virtually two jobs. Moreover, we should add that this emotional workload borne by the women is **usually rendered invisible.** Many people we have interviewed stated that it is difficult to work with men, that their male counterparts usually do not take as much pains with the work at hand as the women, they almost always do a mere minimum of what they are required, do not do the follow-up or bear the responsibility, worry or stress of the work, and do not undertake especially the boring parts of the work, its fine details.

41 Interview no. 24, 06.06.2021, online.

Moreover, almost all the women who are trying to carry out their activities under these circumstances are **struggling with psychological problems such as depression, anxiety disorder and burnout syndrome**, most are using sedatives and receiving therapy support. Having said that, based on the interviews we held we should note that many women in the field refrain from talking about the psychological problems they experience due to their rights defense activities and the impact of the work on their mental health, and some even feel “ashamed” for being affected by the rights violations. The women in the field usually think that they do not have the right to be affected by these violations since it is the directly aggrieved ones who are personally experiencing these rights violations. Therefore, it is possible to observe that many women in the field do not entertain even the possibility that their mental health might be failing, they abstain from seeking the support they need as they consider their psychological problems insignificant and try to repress their negative emotions rather than share them. Surely this situation can in the long run lead to the aggravation of psychological disorders as well as the emergence of other health problems and essentially drag them into an emotional state where they can no longer carry out their rights defense activities. Nevertheless, we can easily say that especially the young women and feminists in the field are more conscious of mental health concerns and the need for self-care. In this sense, at least as compared to the past, it seems like a space has been opened up for rights defenders to talk about these issues in relative ease. Based on our interviews, we can even say that some rights organizations have also started to give support to their employees or volunteers on this subject while some women rights defenders receive therapy grants from international non-governmental organizations.

IV. CONCLUSION: HAUNTING AND DISTANCING ONESELF FROM THE DISCOURSE OF “WOMAN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER”, CRITICIZING AND TRANSFORMING THE PROTECTION REGIME

In this report we have tried to discuss what the term “woman human rights defender” means for the women (and non-binaries) interacting with the field of rights defense in Turkey and its potential of becoming a tool of empowerment for the women on the ground. However, it is clear that a significant part of feminists and women actors in the field of human rights in Turkey do not, with good reasons, define themselves as “human rights defenders” and/or “women human rights defenders” and even deliberately distance themselves from these terms. One might justifiably ask why then we felt the need to hold a discussion on the discourse of “woman human rights defender” and why we try to read the experiences of the women in the field through this term.

The first answer to these questions is as follows: One way or another the “human rights defender” discourse is a concept that is now in circulation in Turkey. We feel we have a responsibility to question whether women have a place in this discourse that has infiltrated our life, and if yes, then discuss what this means from a feminist perspective. Because as feminists we think that we cannot afford to stand back from gendering any area we are engaged with. Therefore, by virtue of this report, we want to add a caveat of gender to the discourse of “human rights defender” which is gradually expanding its sphere of influence in Turkey. In a sense, **we hope to haunt and proactively “occupy” this discourse** of “human rights defender” (and of “woman human rights defender”) before it engulfs women in the field of human rights in Turkey. Surely, the act of occupying this discourse **does not prevent us from “distancing” ourselves from it at the same time**. We think that these two acts should go hand in hand and hope that we have accomplished that in this report.

The second answer we can offer to these questions pertains to the protection and support mechanisms promised by the discourse, rather than the “human rights defender” discourse itself. We should bear in mind that this term does not consist merely of a discourse but has actually entered our life accompanied by a protection regime. It is important to not overlook this connection between the discourse and the protection regime, because **the protection and support provided to rights defenders in the framework of this protection regime has the “capacity” to enable the women on the ground to continue their struggles more freely, more safely and more actively.** And we do not have the luxury of forsaking the support and protection that this protection regime might provide the women particularly during the current period of ever escalating threats, attacks, and violations against rights defenders. **Because as much as they need the obliteration of the authoritarian, unequal and patriarchal order in the long run, women on the ground also need mechanisms that they can use right now to make their life easier and to protect themselves from the attacks.** Therefore, in order to empower the women on the ground, we cannot suffice with the mechanisms established to protect and support the rights defenders, but neither can we ignore the fact that these mechanisms have a vital importance for many women.

Unsurprisingly, these support and protection mechanisms, unless intervened, are devised based on the experiences and needs of the cis hetero men and implemented accordingly. This, in turn, prevents women rights defenders in Turkey who want to avail themselves of these protection regimes from receiving the protection and support they need or hinders them from accessing the relevant mechanisms as readily as men. Therefore, **we deem it important to think and learn about how the women in Turkey who need and want to benefit from these support and protection mechanisms can most effectively utilize the “capacity” of this protection regime, and to develop strategies to this end.** Moreover, we feel we have a responsibility of documenting this subject and producing knowledge on the issue. This is yet another objective for writing this report.

How, then, do we gather data, generate information and develop strategies on the subject? How can we determine the risks women are faced with on the ground in Turkey, the protection and support they need and the obstacles they encounter while trying to access that protection and support? How should we shape the support and protection mechanisms at hand so that they can provide a meaningful response to the needs of the women and the risks they face in the field of human rights in Turkey? In this report, precisely to find answers to these questions, **we strove to lend an ear to the ongoing criticisms of feminists and women rights defenders across the globe concerning the discourse of “human rights defender” as well as to their efforts to transform the protection regime by way of gendering it.** For a long time, feminists across the world have on one hand employed a critical approach to the “human rights defender” discourse and its protection mechanisms, and on the other, have been engaging in a serious struggle by using the term “woman human rights defender” to transform the protection regime so that it responds to the needs of women rights defenders. Despite its deficiencies, contradictions and aspects open to criticism, the **“woman human rights defender”** discourse and its protection mechanisms were ultimately an achievement of the feminist struggle. Owing to this feminist struggle, many women in different parts of the world have been able to access the support and protection they need and thus are able to continue to carry out their political struggles and rights defense activities.

As we explored these works of feminists from around the world on the “woman human rights defender” discourse and mechanisms and their practices of using the protection regime, we realized that these experiences offer us a rich literature and a very valuable toolkit. While criticizing the “woman human rights defender” paradigm, feminists have at the same time

used this paradigm as a strategic tool and developed a practice of thought and action regarding **what the women on the ground need to render their struggles “sustainable”**.⁴² We think that this practice poses us **a question on the “sustainability” of women’s political struggles and rights defense activities**: *“What are the obstacles preventing women from carrying out their political struggles and rights defense activities freely, in safety and good health and what do they need to eliminate these obstacles?”* We deem this a worthwhile question.

In fact, it was precisely this question feminists posed on “sustainability” that we have pursued in this study. By using the “woman human rights defender” paradigm, we have tried to analyze the reasons that cause/may cause the women engaged in political struggles or human rights advocacy in Turkey to be excluded from or leave the field. We strove to explore how despite these reasons they have managed to make room for themselves in this arena, to continue the struggle and to carry out their rights defense activities. Surely, we were aware that the issues we discussed in this report through the concept of “women human rights defenders” are not topics opened to discussion for the first time in Turkey. We were also cognizant of the fact that the support and protection they may receive from the protection regime for “human rights defenders” is not the only or the most effective way for women in Turkey to continue their political struggles or their rights defense activities. **Nevertheless, we concluded that the “woman human rights defender” paradigm is valuable to the extent that it enables us to see from a holistic perspective all these issues which adversely affect women’s rights defense activities, at times preventing them from carrying out these activities, and the tools of struggle against these issues.**

This holistic approach has enabled us to see and discuss the following as a whole: even though it has become our focus due to the ever-increasing pressures on the freedoms during the recent years, **state-sponsored violations are not the only obstacles** hindering women rights defenders in Turkey from carrying out their activities in safety. Women are simultaneously subjected to the attacks of their family members, immediate circles, faith-based groups and most importantly their fellow activists or their organizations. And at times these attacks may have much more severe consequences than state-sponsored violations or may constitute the principal obstacle barring women from carrying out their political activities. Similarly, the protection that women rights defenders in Turkey require does not consist merely of ensuring their physical security (as in preventing their arrest or securing their release); because **many of them, even if not physically attacked, experience psychological problems due to their constant state of being on guard** and thus the support they require most is for improving their mental wellbeing. Moreover, perhaps one of the most important considerations is to acknowledge that increasing the visibility of the women under attack or bringing to limelight the already well-known individuals by “heroizing” them is not the only way to empower and protect the women rights defenders in Turkey. This situation has reminded us that although until now this has been the predominant method of protection employed in response to the ever-increasing pressures in Turkey, instead of idealizing the individuals at risk as “human rights defenders” and highlighting their personal stories, **we need to contemplate collective politics through which the communities engaged in the rights struggle can be empowered together and the provided support and protection can benefit everyone in the field.**

Our effort to analyze the experiences of women on the ground in Turkey by using the “woman human rights defender” framework in this study does not mean that we try to encourage or convince the women to use this term. On the contrary, throughout the report we have taken special care to not cram the women’s experiences into a term that they do not prefer to identify

42 For the concept of “sustainability”, see: Jane Barry, Jelena Djordjevic, “What’s the Point of Revolution If We Can’t Dance?”, Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights, 2008.

themselves with. Rather, we intended to use the term “woman human rights defender” not within its own conceptual limitations but as “an open concept” with the ability to include and explain different experiences. Therefore, rather than asking the extent to which the experiences of women engaged in rights defense in Turkey can be explained through the concept of “woman human rights defender”, we have tried to tackle this concept as a tool or an “occasion”, as it were, to identify the experiences of women in the field of human rights in Turkey. Thus, we aimed to make a humble contribution to the gendering of the “human rights defender” discourse in Turkey.

We are aware that gendering this field requires an extended and multifaceted discussion and that the “woman human rights defender” concept is not the only means of discussing these issues. The conclusions we have drawn as a result of this research will surely be varied, shaped and transformed with the inclusion of the actors of the field whom we have not been able to reach. That is exactly what we would like to happen. With this report, we hope to have (for now) cast a mere stone into the water and that this stone will make a humble contribution to the ongoing discussions in this field.



www.hm-berlin.org

BERLİN **HAFİZA**
MERKEZİ