

Civil Society and Political Participation in Turkey

Amargi association and its involment for Women, Transgenders and all minorities

Saturday 14 July 2012, by [Amargi](#), [Sevil Budak](#)

With the collapse of socialistic regimes and the recent domination of Western democratic models, after the military intervention of 1980, the concept of civil society began to be viewed in Turkey as a tool for eradicating statist totalitarianism and promoting democratization. Many civil society organizations were then established to provide protection from authoritarian statism or to eliminate statist pressures. Despite the presence of more than sixty-thousand civil society organizations and the “democratic” political bodies in favour of “civil society”, the country still faces democratization problems.

Through a series of interviews Turquie Européenne will introduce the different actors of the civil society in Turkey through their values, their activities but also the faced difficulties.

TE : Amargi is known as a feminist association defending the rights of all minorities. The philosophy and aims of the Association are reflected in the meaning of the word AMARGİ itself which means “Return to Mother” but also “Freedom” in Sumerian. To what extend is Amargi different from other feminist NGO in Turkey? And who can join the association?

Amargi : First of all, in Amargi Woman Solidarity Association we try to change the patriarchal system and don't want to have financial or other kind of support from those we criticise.

In Amargi, we are not just focusing on one topic, one idea of feminist movement or specific social movements. A lot of different feminist views can come together within our association but we explicitly refuse militarist, sexist, homophobic, hierarchic, nationalist ideas that are contrary to our values. Fundamentally Amargi is open to every woman and transgender and to some events or discussions, like feminist discussions, men are also invited.

We obviously implement positive discrimination regarding Amargi's membership to address current discrimination and persecution towards women.

TE : What are your main actions and fields of activities to help women, minorities and to achieve your long term goals and mission?

Amargi : Amargi's mission is to defend women's and LGBT's rights in order to build a world without violence and discrimination. Amargi members are also from different religions, ethnicities, sexual orientation and social classes. Because we believe that diversity is our richness, we strive to all live together in peace and defend the rights of all minorities.

For those reasons we attend frequently platforms and committees dealing with violation of rights and sexual violence. For instance, Amargi takes part in the national “Campaign Against Women Crimes” while amongst others trying to follow cases of women murders and rapes. By this way we want to impose pressure upon the judges and demand justice for these cases. The Association also try to call the public's attention and to raise its awareness on Women Crimes. In the same way, End Violence Platforms are regularly held to discuss on law draft that could help protecting families and eliminating violence against Women.

TE : Briefly described, Amargi is an open structure defending women and minorities right and equality through a multidisciplinary approach without hierarchy, against nationalism and militarism. Who is behind

Amargi and what are the core motivations of the team and the volunteers?

Amargi : As mentioned, Amargi is open to every women and transgender. The Association is an organization independent of government and political parties because it doesn't want to resemble the system it is so critical of. It has also no leader and hold everyone responsible. That means no one decides for anyone and the missions are implemented in work groups. Organizational meetings where the structure of Amargi is discussed and where the decisions are made through consensus take place every two weeks. The flat organisation within Amargi enables us to avoid ambiguity between members.

TE : Amargi is independent of government and political parties and tries to create alternatives to the dominating patriarchy and power relation. In this framework how does the association finance its activities? What kind of support do you have to finance and organize your activities?

Amargi : As you said Amargi is an independent association and get donations and grants from supporting individuals and foundations. Furthermore, Amargi members pay dues that help the organisation to be more sustainable and to carry out continuously its activities.

TE : Regarding your experience within the association which additional support would you need to have more impact and be more efficient in your goals and mission? In other words what are the difficulties you are facing within Amargi? How could this difficulties been overcome?

Amargi : Although Amargi has 50-60 members, only 25 of them are really active because the other members are student or working. We need to follow regularly some meetings and platforms but sometimes we cannot attend all the events because of the lack of time. Of course we have some financial issues. For example before we moved to our new office, Amargi had a feminist bookstore and cafe but as we could not run it we had unfortunately to close it. If we solve our financial problems rapidly we will open this bookstore again.

TE : Can you give us some examples of major projects and events?

Amargi : There will be a constitution change in Turkey. As Amargi and from a feminist point of view we wanted to be a part of the constitution change discussions. We made several meetings to build a feminist constitution draft together with Amargi members. We wrote our own draft and sent it to the Parliament at the end of 2011 to highlight our opinions and suggestions.

Then Istanbul Feminist Kolektif is a platform of all feminist organizations in Istanbul and Amargi also belongs to it. This platform makes periodic meetings on its campaigns. For two years for example IFK campaigns on woman murders.

Besides there was a recent change on the Law on Protection of Family and Elimination of Violence against Woman. Before this amendment, a group of feminist lawyers including a lawyer from Amargi made a meeting with the concerned minister to present their propositions and comments on the amendment.

Another action - 21 women from different cities including 3 from Amargi went to Roboski in Uludere district, a village where Amargi is acting. Uludere district in one of the southern cities of Turkey, Şırnak where 34 civilians including 19 children were killed on December 29th, 2011 by the military forces of the state. After the incident, public authorities told that the villagers doing border trade were shot 'accidentally' because they were thought to be 'terrorists'. Due to the presence of evidences that are images recorded at the time of the incident showing that it wasn't an 'operational mistake' the investigation still continues.

On the 23rd of October, 2011 there was in Van an earthquake with a magnitude of 7.2. This earthquake cost many people their life and left a lot of inhabitants homeless because of the damage or destruction of numerous buildings. It became quickly clear that after the earthquake reorganization works weren't responding to the general needs of the public and thus inadequate. For this reason, many non-governmental organizations from different fields started operating in the area to meet basic needs or provide psycho-social support. Though the political and social conditions of the area weren't favorable, the support continued. In this framework, Women NGO's also started organizing themselves to provide

trauma treatment and respond to the needs of women. Especially after the natural disaster women's responsibilities in organizing social life significantly increase all the more since the region has a patriarchal system. For all those reasons, a group of feminists from the Istanbul Feminist Collective – the common Istanbul feminist groups platform – willing to work on this issue formed a communication network called *vanpurplesolidarity* to coordinate the actions that would be carried out in region. As one of the organizations within the Istanbul Feminist Collective, Amargi was an active contributor of the *vanpurplesolidarity* network.

Another recent event, the Transborder Feminist Encounters, was organized by Amargi and held on the 26-27th of May, 2012. As an international meeting, the encounters aimed to bring together the knowledge and the various experiences of people living in different parts of the world. As we wanted to enable a sharing of feminist knowledge across borders and boundaries we can qualify the Transborder Feminist Encounters as a feminist solidarity meeting.

Since two years, Amargi invites also feminist to discuss on specific topics. At the beginning of each discussion academicians, writers or activists always presents the topic and then start the debates. Last year Amargi even published the book *Feminist Discussions 1* that compiles the discussions of the previous year. That is how we are trying to contribute to the feminist.

TE : What are the main challenges for women, minorities and overall freedom in Turkey for the last 10 years? What does it mean in Turkey today to be feminist and to fight for minorities right? What would be the place of Amargi in these challenges?

Amargi : We can say that in Turkey all kind of freedoms, especially freedom of press and speech regress. Every day at least one journalist, one intellectual, one writer and one academician are arbitrary arrested because of their thoughts. In addition to this every day 3 women are murdered by their husbands, fathers, brothers or partners because of jealousy, violence consequences and honour crimes.

As I said before Amargi follow these kinds of freedom cases and press statements with attention.

To contribute to the activities of Amargi and make a donation please contact the association : istanbul@amargi.org.tr or +90 212 251 01 54.