Challenges Facing Men in Questioning Masculinities: A Critique of Men's Organizing as Feminist Allies in Turkey

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Abstract:
Since 2008, a wave of men's groups as feminist allies has emerged in Turkey. Despite this promising stirring, these groups could not gain momentum and did not show continuity. Drawing on a content analysis of their texts and in-depth interviews with their participants, this paper traces the reasons behind their reduced impacts and life cycles. It identifies problematic group dynamics related to mobilizing around questioning masculinities and confronting privileges solely at an individual level. It discusses that men as feminist allies, both in local and global contexts, can create more resonant collective action by organizing around a specific issue of concern to gender equality and addressing institutional-level change.

Keywords: Men's allyship, gender equality, feminism, LGBTQ+, Turkey

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Erkeklerin Erkeklikleri Sorgularken Yüz Yüze Kaldıkları Zorluklar: Türkiye'de Feminist Müttefikler Olarak Erkek Örgütlenmelerinin Eleştirisi

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Öz:

2008'den bu yana, Türkiye'de feministlere müttefik olan bir erkek grupları dalgası oluştu. Umut vaadeden bu yeni oluşuma rağmen, bu gruplar pek mesafe kaydedemedi ve devamlılık sağlayamadı. Bu çalışma, bu grupların ürettikleri metinlerin ve grup üyeleri ile yapılan derinlemesine görüşmelerin içerik analizine dayanarak, zayıf etkilerinin ve kısa ömürlerinin ardındaki sebeplerin izini sürmektedir. Yalnızca bireysel düzeyde erkeklikleri sorgulamak üzere örgütlenme ve ayrıcalıklarla yüzleşme ile bağlantılı grup dinamiklerinin sorunlu olduğu tespitini yapmaktadır. Hem yerel hem de küresel bağlamlarda, feministlerle müttefik olan erkeklerin, belirli bir toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği meselesi etrafında örgütlenerek ve kurumsal düzeyde değişiklik üzerine eğilerek yankısı daha büyük kolektif bir hareket ortaya çıkarabileceğini tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Erkeklerin müttefikliği, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği, feminizm, LGBTQ+, Türkiye

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Introduction

Women's transformative critical voice against social systems that privilege men and oppress women can be traced back at least to 2500 years (S. M. Harris & Hughes, 2013). A subsidiary history of men's support for women's rights seems to go back centuries as well (Murphy, 2004). In the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries, for instance, Islamic scholars Ibn Rushd and Ibn 'Arabī advocated equal cognitive and spiritual capacities of women and men against the common interpretation of Islam of the time in which women were considered inferior to men (Ahmad, 1994; Shaikh, 2009). Men's mobilizing for gender equality, distinct from the gay rights movement, is a relatively new phenomenon (Connell, 2005a). The first examples of men's groups as feminist allies took place in the U.S. in the 1970s mostly as local consciousness raising groups and national meetings on men's issues (Gross, Smith, & Wallston, 1983; Messner, 1997). Participants were predominantly white, middle-class and college-educated. Today, diverse groups of men are organizing against gender-based violence and discrimination across the world (Connell, 2005a; Kaufman et al., 2014). However, the effects and sustainability of men's mobilization are in question (Gardiner, 2002; Messner, Greenberg, & Peretz, 2015) while conservative ideologies, intertwined with sexism and racism, globally gain strength and threaten gender equality (Evans, 2017; Inglehart & Norris, 2016).

Turkey is an exemplar of the socio-political atmosphere in which state's discriminatory discourse and policies increasingly confront advancement of gender equality. On the one hand, thanks to the feminist and LGBTQ+ struggles, there have been undeniable positive shifts in gender relations in this deeply patriarchal society (Aldıkaçtı Marshall, 2013; V. Yılmaz, 2013). On the other hand, under the ruling of the right wing and pro-Islamic party AKP (Justice and Development Party) since 2002, the Turkish state has resurrected the unequal gender framework by positioning women in family, explicitly claiming they are "not equal to

men" (Acar & Altunok, 2013; Çarkoğlu & Kalaycıoğlu, 2009) and executing a systematic governmental violence against LGBTQ+ individuals (Human Rights Watch, 2016; V. Yılmaz & Göçmen, 2016). In response, feminist and LGBTQ+ organizations have significantly become robust demanding legislative and social change against gender-based discrimination (Çetin, 2016; Negrón-Gonzales, 2016). The same period also witnessed a burgeoning of men's groups that took an anti-patriarchal, anti-(hetero)sexist, pro-feminist and pro-LGBTQ+ stance (Kepekçi, 2012). Through questioning men's gender performance and criticizing oppressive forms of masculinities, they strove to end men's violence, promote gender equity, and recognize men's different sexualities and trans men. Nevertheless, almost all these groups remained small in numbers and became inactive after a few years.

Building on critical studies on men and masculinities, this paper traces the reasons behind the reduced impacts and life cycles of men's groups as feminist allies in Turkey. The remainder of the paper is divided into five parts. First, I bring together a body of literature on the politics of and the concerns about men's pro-feminist organizing. I include the insights of scholar-activists of critical race studies into the framings of oppression and collective action for social change. Second, I provide context for feminist and LGBTQ+ mobilizations in Turkey in relation to the country's socio-political dynamics. The third part describes my research methods which combine a content analysis of the texts of men's groups and in-depth interviews with their participants. As an activist who volunteered in one of these groups as a workshop organizer (from 2011 to 2014), I integrate reflexive analysis of my insider position and the role of my experiences in conducting this research project. Part four is findings and discussion. After analyzing the groups' aims and activities, I identify the problems that are linked to focusing solely on self-centered change. I conclude by positing that men as feminist allies should consider mobilizing around specific issues of concern to gender equality and aiming to improve public policy, rather than questioning masculinities and confronting privileges solely at an individual level.

Men As "Allies"

Scholarly discussion on men and masculinities mostly frames men's continuing resistance to gender equality on two intertwining levels: individual and institutional (Whitehead & Barrett, 2001). Gender inequality is structural: heteronormativity, hierarchies and discrimination as the basis of gender order are systematically maintained through the regulations and violent implementations of institutions such as states, armies and schools (Bourdieu, 2001; Lorber, 2011). Men are "gatekeepers" as they play the role of local, national and global decision-makers in political and economic organizations while they simultaneously participate in everyday life with their gendered practices as family members, fathers, partners, peers, colleagues and so on levels (Kaufman, 2003). Unwilling to give up on their status and privileges, the majority of men still support, at least not actively oppose, gendered violence and discrimination (Connell, 2005a; Ridgeway, 2011). Therefore, men's engagement is considered crucial in ending gender-based violence and discrimination (Connell, 2003) both at the institutional and individual levels (Kaufman, 2003).

Feminist activists and scholars increasingly support the inclusion of men in feminism (Gardiner, 2002; White, 2008). According to Black feminist scholar bell hooks (2004), for example, men can learn to "let go the will to dominate" through "feminist thinking and practice" (p. xvii). Another Black feminist scholar-activist Patricia Hill Collins (1993) argues that the coalitions among the dominant and subordinate sides of the privilege are essential in undermining unequal power relations and creating social change. In parallel, gradually more men question their institutionalized power and privileges, recognize their responsibility in ending gender oppression and attempt to mobilize against gender inequality (Connell, 2005a; Flood, 2005; Holmgren & Hearn, 2009; Ricardo et al., 2014; Sancar, 2009). Mobilized men may pick different labels for themselves such as anti-sexist, anti-patriarchal, feminist, pro-feminist and/or feminist ally (Messner et al., 2015). For some scholars

and activists, men can only be "pro" for feminism since it depends on individual experiences of women as a political category (Flood, 1997), whereas some accept men as feminists when they "translate their [gender] awareness into positive actions" (White 2008).

On the other hand, there are feminists concerns and doubts cast on men's allyship. One of the critiques is that men in feminist spaces continue to enjoy male privilege (Macomber, 2015) while benefiting from disproportionate "praise and credit" for being an ally (Flood, 2005, p. 464)—which is also known as "the pedestal effect" (Messner et al., 2015). A lack of accountability mechanisms prevents men allies from not only realizing but also efficiently addressing their gendered power and privileges (Peretz, 2018). Consequently, gender scholars and activists warn that pro-feminist organizing may carry risk of becoming a new tool for men's empowerment by prioritizing men's shared interests, trivializing women's critique and providing new comfort zones for their participants (Flood, 2005; Meer, 2011; Messner et al., 2015).

Another concern addresses the effectiveness of consciousness raising activities that are considered as crucial means (and therefore frequently applied) in promoting men's engagement (Connell, 2003). One of the early analyses on men's pro-feminist organizing in the U.S. (Gross et al., 1983) argues that offering "to teach men how to give up positions of advantage in exchange for the long-range and intangible goals of a more humane" society has not been resonant enough to sustain men's groups (p. 78). Focusing heavily on self-centered change, moreover, may result in neglecting to understand and address structural dimensions of gender inequality. A report on global efforts of engaging men (Kaufman et al., 2014) underlines that increased gender consciousness among men does not guarantee social change toward gender equality whereas "legal reforms and shifts in social policy are critical for accelerating the pace of change and affecting permanent shifts in gender relations and gender norms" (p. 11). In a similar vein, research on men's pro-feminist organizing in South Africa (Peacock, Khumalob, & McNabd, 2006) suggests that awareness raising workshops and programs seem to contribute to positive shifts in men's perceptions.

However, work with men cannot become "truly transformational" without advocating institution-level transformations in a deeply patriarchal society, where laws and regulations continue to reinforce and maintain gender violence and inequalities (p. 79). That is why transnational alliances such as MenEngage underline the importance of policy advocacy (UNFPA, 2013).

Feminist movements also acknowledge that gendered experiences are not independent of race, class, sexual orientation and other social constructs; therefore, struggles for social justice should understand power relations with a more inclusive perspective (Collins & Bilge, 2016). This perspective, which became known as intersectionality, has disrupted organizing around the idea of women as a monolithic category and urged feminists to address the needs of women who are marginalized by race, class, sexualities and other social constructs (Crenshaw, 1991; A. P. Harris, 1990; Laperrière & Lépinard, 2016). Similarly, men as feminist allies should contextualize domination through intersecting power relations. Otherwise, they would fail to confront the complexities of gendered violence and discrimination that function in the subordination not only of women and LGBTQ+ individuals but also among men themselves (Connell, 2005b; hooks, 2000). For example, due to the white supremacist ideology in Scandinavia and Denmark, men who perform "gender-equality friendly masculinities" may continue to marginalize and oppress others based on their racial/ethnic, economic or citizenship/immigration status (Christensen & Jensen, 2014).

To further the questioning on shortcomings of men's allyship, we can draw a parallel between similar forms of ally activism (i.e. when members of dominant groups seek ways of supporting the oppressed and marginalized groups). Research on White people who organize as anti-racist allies shows that the prevailing ideology of the dominant group can be consciously or subconsciously maintained in the lives of allies (Hughey, 2012; Sullivan, 2014). Non- or anti-racist "good" people of a dominant (White) and privileged (middle) class may fail in promoting racial justice when they consider themselves being free of

racist practices and therefore different from the other whites (Sullivan, 2014). This is to say, the idea of being "good" (or, say, being "good men"—feminist allies) may create its own vicious cycle in promoting equality when it induces the allies to exclude themselves from questioning.

The National Context

The Turkish state continues to fail in executing policies to end gender-based discrimination and violence despite being both a signatory to CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) and an official candidate for European Union (whereas the accession criteria include gender equality). The single-party rule of AKP is blamed for its discriminatory implementations that restrict daily lives of women and LGBTQ+ people—e.g. sublimating heterosexual family as the core of the idealized society, attempting to re-criminalize abortion and publicly condemning and pathologizing homosexuality (Acar & Altunok, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2016). Feminist organizations have been progressively objecting, protesting and time to time successfully repulsing the growing state conservatism—as in the case of stopping the legislative attempt to re-criminalize abortion in 2012 (Negrón-Gonzales, 2016). LGBTQ+ organizing has been contesting heteronormative constitutional and social institutions (Çetin, 2016; SPoD, 2014). Notwithstanding, women's rights and freedoms are under increasing threat under the current "anti-feminist" AKP rule while Turkey's relationship with the EU is weakening (Nas, 2016). LGBTQ+ people, particularly trans individuals, continue to suffer from social discrimination and exclusion without any legal protection (V. Yılmaz & Göçmen, 2016).

Current feminism in Turkey, like the diversity of women's struggles in the world, cannot be framed as one monolithic movement. Starting from the 1980s, feminism in the globe changed its scope

substantially because of acknowledging the diversity in women's experiences. Women of color, indigenous women, lesbians, women from the third-world countries, working class women and many more otherized groups have contested Eurocentric and US-centric notions as well as feminist mobilizations based only on the experiences of white, middle-class, straight and secular women (Freedman, 2003). In parallel, a variety of women's groups in Turkey started to contribute to the struggles for social justice from their own ideological and experiential standpoint—such as Kemalist, Kurdish, anti-militarist and Islamist women (Binder & Richman, 2011). While Kemalist women's organizations continued to follow the ideology of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (the founder of the Republic) and defend women's rights from a secular and nationalist framework, "the Kurdish and Islamist feminists raised criticism against Turkish mainstream feminists for being ethno-centric and exclusionary of other identities" (Diner & Toktaş, 2010, p. 47). The Kurdish women's movement critiqued not only the discriminative and militarist practices in the Kemalist nation-building processes but also feudal structures in both Kurdish society and Kurdish nationalism (Açık, 2013). Islamist women contested marginalization of Muslim women in feminist struggles, fought for the right of wearing headscarf in public institutions and opposed patriarchal readings of Quran (Aldıkaçtı Marshall, 2005; Tuksal, 2001).

The scope of feminism has also expanded by LGBTQ+ struggles (Budak, 2018). LGBTQ+ organizing in Turkey, which dates to at least the 1970s, has significantly gained power in the 2000s (Baba, 2011; Çetin, 2016). Most feminist circles before the 1990s were neither inclusive nor openly supportive of lesbians, queers and trans women, who all introduced new inquiries on gender relations and sexuality (Cingöz & Gürsu, 2013; Özakın, 2012). Efforts towards diversity and inclusiveness in the feminist struggles are increasing; however, identity and ideological differences continue to negatively affect forming further coalitions against patriarchy. For example, there is an ongoing dispute on the issue of abortion between secular and Islamist women (Unal, 2019).

Some feminist groups still reject to recognize the activism of trans women and sex workers as part of women's struggles (Berghan, 2013).

Recent research on masculinities in Turkey also hints at potential problems in men's allyship with feminism: although men in the country increasingly question gender and try to renounce patriarchal norms, they mostly fail in putting their egalitarian ideas of gender into practice (Beşpınar, 2015; Bolak Boratav, Okman Fişek, & Eslen Ziya, 2017; Ozyegin, 2015; Sancar, 2009). Fathers who embrace feminist ideas emerge; however, they keep exhibiting homophobic/transphobic attitudes and essentializing women's childcare skills (Barutçu & Hıdır, 2016). Influenced by Kurdish women's activism, men in Kurdish political movement have become more supportive of gender equality discourse; but they struggle in internalizing feminist perspectives (Mermertaş, 2018). Despite the increased visibility of LGBTQ+ people and organizing (Biricik, 2014; Şeker, 2013), traditional notions of masculinity and femininity continue to shape gay men's perceptions of gender and sex (Bereket & Adam, 2006). Academia with its growing interest on masculinities (Akşit & Varışlı, 2014) is still considered a field that reproduces traditional gender relations (Altınoluk, 2017). In short, men's support for gender equality is growing, but it simultaneously remains in "rhetoric" (Sancar, 2009, p. 304).

Within this socio-political and historical context burgeoned and dissolved a few men's groups as feminist allies in 2008 onward. Their organizing is marginal and episodic compared to the long history and achievements of the feminist and LGBTQ+ struggles. Their importance and potential role in social change, however, can be questioned not only through the idea globally becoming prevalent that men's engagement is needed in achieving gender justice, but also through this national context—in which the current political power structures are increasingly supporting heteronormative male supremacy and trying to undo the social and legislative changes that have contributed to gender equality in a patriarchal society.

Methodology And Self-Reflexivity

The scope of this study comprises men's groups in Turkey that particularly aimed at questioning and confronting gender inequality. I located five groups: Voltrans, We Are Not Men (*Biz Erkek Değiliz*), Men Talk (*Erkek Muhabbeti*), Bothered Men / Men Against Patriarchy (*Rahatsız Erkekler / Ataerkiye Karşı Erkekler*) and T Club (*T Kulüp*), which is the only active initiative today. Although these groups did not necessarily identify themselves as "pro-feminist" or "feminist allies", I find these terms applicable and useful for analyzing men's collective efforts to develop a stand against gender inequality in dialogue with feminist mobilizations. Formed by transgender men, Voltrans and T Club intersect men's and transgender mobilizing for gender equality. The other three groups predominantly consisted of cisgender men. Although none of the groups is explicitly a heterosexual initiative, heterosexuality seems to be a common sexual orientation within the latter ones. All the initiatives were centered in Istanbul except T Club, which operates through a secret Facebook group having members from all over Turkey.

The findings and discussion are based on a content analysis and in-depth interviews. After receiving IRB approval, I sent an e-mail to the groups in February 2016 to recruit participants for a research project on problems and deficiencies of pro-feminist men's groups. Between February and April 2016, I interviewed eight activists, three of whom participated in more than one group. [1] Given that the actively engaged participants in these groups were rarely double digits when they were in operation, this number forms a significant sample in this small population. However, it inevitably limits the generalizability of the findings.

Every interview was conducted online and in Turkish, lasted between 90 minutes to three hours. I transcribed the recorded interviews and coded the transcripts under four main themes nesting in each other: individual/collective and discourse/practice. I used pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities. For the content

analysis, I coded the initiatives' press releases (about their mission and work) and blog posts published between 2008 and 2015. I primarily accessed these texts through the blogs of the initiatives, and for the cases when an initiative's blog or website was not accessible anymore, I utilized an anthology of the groups' texts (Gözcü, 2013). [2] While qualitative methodology is found appropriate and useful in studying groups that can be considered novel, combining at least two data collection methods may enrich data and enhance the validity of the results (Denzin, 1970; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Accordingly, I performed the content analysis not only for analyzing the groups' discourses and activities but also for triangulation in verifying the interview data.

Following the methodological discussions of feminist scholars on producing knowledge through reflexive dialogue (Alcoff, 1991; Naples, 2003), I aimed a dialogical process and shared the draft versions of the text with the interviewees to develop the ideas presented here. Four activists joined the dialogue. During this process, one of the activists accused me taking sides because I did not interview a particular person in his group, whom it has been claimed by several interviewees to play a key role in covering up attempts of the violence case discussed below. He withdrew from the study although I explained him that I was never approached by that person and I would interview that person if he was still interested. I heard back from neither of them. Their counter voice, unfortunately, does not figure in this analysis. While finalizing this study in November 2018, I re-approached T Club and conducted an additional interview via email with one of its activists. In the end, Men Talk was represented by four activists, Men Against Patriarchy by three, We Are Not Men and T Club each by two, and Voltrans by one.

My insider/outsider position as a researcher played a significant role throughout the study. I was mostly an "insider" as a cis-heterosexual man who volunteered in Men Talk for three years. [3] My first respondents were acquaintances who helped me reach more interviewees by passing along the recruitment email to other activists. I may have built better rapport with the activists with whom I previously

worked together. On the other hand, once a member of Men Talk and now conducting this project in an academic institution, I realized my "outsider" position inhibited me from recruiting more activists from the other groups. For instance, one activist rejected to be part of this study by arguing the uselessness of academic work in real life/activism. Another activist declined to participate stating that he was exhausted of being exposed to (cis-)academic scrutiny as a trans man.

The prominent Turkish feminist scholar Serpil Sancar (2009) argues that "manhood is a 'position of power' which holds the rights to speak over other positions, and by this means, which stays out of being questioned" (p. 16, *translation is mine*). Inviting men to reflect on their experiences in men's organizing and the reasons behind their groups' dissolvement resulted in talking about 'other men'. This, paradoxically, created a space that is critiqued in this article—a space that enables men to position themselves different/better than other men. I am solely responsible for creating this space: this methodological contradiction may be alleviated if I could bring more participants into the conversation. Bearing its limitations in mind, I hope this article would be interpreted as an attempt to *pursue the conversation* on the promises and shortcomings of men's mobilizing as feminist allies in Turkey.

Men's Pro-Feminist Organizing In Turkey

Influenced by feminist and LGBTQ+ struggles, men's questioning of masculinities started to be visible in the 1990s, mostly in socialist movements and anti-militarist struggles in Turkey. Selçuk, a 51 years-old, cis heterosexual man, who has partaken in the conscientious objection movement, indicates that they (anti-militarist men) were questioning gender in their meetings, but those discussions remained only as "heart-to-heart talks among friends" throughout the 1990s. One of the first men's groups that can be framed as feminist allies, We Are Not Men, was going to be founded in 2008 with the support of feminist

women. After the rape and murder of Italian feminist artist and peace activist Pippa Bacca, [4] a group of men who were anti-militarists, anarchists and LGBTQ+ activists prepared a demonstration to speak up against the atrocities that they were part of because of their gender. They soon apprehended and implemented the idea of men's organizing around questioning masculinities and struggling against men's violence. Feminist women played a direct role in the establishment of Men Talk too: the group was formed in 2012 by young male university students under a women's NGO named Social Development and Equality Policies Center. The activists from the other men's groups also acknowledge the guidance and the impact of women in their questioning and organizing processes as "feminist friends," "feminist educators," "partners" and "mothers who establish egalitarian relationships in the family".

İbrahim (54, cis, heterosexual man) talks about the pain and distress of having tried to "put on the identity of manhood." As he grew up, being made fun of by other kids "because he was not man enough or because he was like a girl" became his primary source of fear. Collapsing into an emotional "uncertainty", he inquired if he was not a man, if he was gay and what he was. (I suffered from similar uncertainty throughout my own adolescence, which was more than two decades later than his.) İbrahim states that collectively questioning the boundaries of manhood and attempting to emancipate from them corresponded to the realities in his life. Barış (30, cis, heterosexual man), correspondingly, points out a common characteristic of the participants of men's groups: being displeased with how manhood and gender inequality manifest in both their lives and society. Such discomforts and uncertainties together with a need of questioning gender prompted them to participate in men's pro-feminist mobilizing with a strong but ambiguous desire "to do something".

Table 1. Names, active years, main objectives and thematic emphases of the men's groups as feminist allies in Turkey

Name	Active Years	Main Objectives	Thematic Emphasis*
Voltrans Transmen Initiative	2007 - 2014	Acting in solidarity through the gender transition process; sharing experiences; "Investigating gendered norms of trans men and break them if need be"; Increasing the visibility and recognition of trans men.	Trans men; operation; therapy▲; body identity; transformation; feminism; (organized) struggles; (transgender) policies; LGBT.
We Are Not Men	2008 - 2011	Questioning masculinity and its borders; Searching for exit paths/ emancipating from masculinities; Speaking up/struggling against the atrocities that men are part of.	Women; murder; harassment; rape; violence; sex/uality; domination; honor; gay; homophobia.
Men Talk	2010 - 2015	Questioning masculinities, sharing experiences; Holding workshops to engaging male university students for gender equality, developing workshop methods; Documenting academic and activist work on engaging men nationwide.	Women; gender regime; violence; patriarchy; sex/uality; feminism; struggle; LGBTI; heterosexism; pornographyΩ.
Bothered Men *(after 2013):* Men against Patriarchy	2012 - 2014/2015	Creating "a network for men who are against patriarchal system"; Organizing men through questioning their social position; Sharing (gendered) experiences.	Women; masculine domination; abortion (ban); struggle; state patriarchy; (gender) role; heterosexism; sexism; masculine violence.
T Club: Transmasculine Culture Production Platform	2013 - still active	Creating a network for trans masculine people; Supporting trans masculine individuals to act with solidarity and share information.	LGBTI; rights; struggle; state; health▲; feminism; transphobia; education; information.

Source: Author.

* Most frequent themes in the texts of the groups (except "man," "masculinity" and "gender")

▲ Themes that only appear in the texts of trans men's groups

Ω Theme that does not appear in the other groups' texts

Table 1, created based on the content analysis, shows the active years, main objectives and thematic emphases of the groups. The table reveals distinct (and clearer) motives for mobilization such as "solidarity", "sharing information" and "networking" in trans men's organizing. Playing an important role in increasing visibility and recognition of trans men in both the LGBTQ+ movement and society, Voltrans and T Club aimed more at creating a support group/network for trans men and trans masculine people, than at questioning and confronting men's gendered power and privilege. In line with their aims, they mostly organized meetings to share information and experiences about the issues of rights, health and transition process for trans men. However, Kenan (30, trans, heterosexual man) remarks that trans men's groups in Turkey also met the participants' needs to question gender and masculinity while intending to provide a critique of male domination (see also Dutlu & Özgüner, 2014). Despite being less prominent in trans men's mobilizing, all the groups share two common objectives: (1) "interrogating" the self, masculinities and gendered norms, and (2) "speaking up" against gender inequality and men's complicity in it. Predominantly cis men's groups aimed to build a stance against men's overall silence when it comes to gender inequalities. The group participants tried to address their own complicity in gender-based violence. They voiced a desire to change themselves by undermining their own privileges and power.

Despite understanding gender inequality as systemic and articulating a holistic struggle against patriarchy, the groups (especially predominantly cisgender ones) formed their activities mostly, if not solely, around the idea of self-questioning. They primarily conducted workshops to discuss masculinities and raise awareness about gender issues. In these meetings, participants shared their personal experiences and scrutinized how their daily lives were intertwined with gendered power and privileges. In contrast to women's and LGBTQ+ organizing, the groups concentrated less on problematizing and raising voice against structural aspects of gender inequality. This is a significant finding considering the national and political dynamics in Turkey, where even

the already-adopted legislation and policies to promote gender equality are under state-level attack.

The Gap Between *Questioning* and *Challenging/Changing*

Bearing in mind the groups' short life spans, can concentrating on individual-level change prove to be politically meaningful and sustainable mobilizing practice for men as feminist allies? One of the limitations in this framework is that men's questioning of their gender performance does not necessarily correspond to their renouncing of gendered privileges and power position. The interviewees indicate that questioning masculinities together with other group members helped them clarify the social problems related to gender and change their gendered behavior. For instance, Devrim (28, cis, heterosexual man) became aware of his sexist attitudes especially regarding his lack of participation in domestic labor. Ahmet (26, cisgender, heterosexual man) made peace with his emotions and started to take other people's emotions seriously. However, resembling the discussion of the pedestal effect, the interviewees also address possible dangers of men's organizing if it functions as a tool of "comforting men's conscience" whereas the participation is exploited as "an indicator of being purified." Without intending to exclude themselves from the critique, the interviewees talk about the disparity between group participants' discourses and behaviors. They exemplify these disparities as micro-power disputes in organizing (such as taking space in discussion; or trying to form authority over other group members), manifestation of internalized sexism (such as using sexist swear words and disparaging feminist women) and reproduction of gendered violence (such as bullying and perpetrating sexual assault).

Occurrence of personal inconsistencies may be neither surprising nor unique to men's groups. Nevertheless, being a part of pro-feminist mobilizing is considered as a promise of a continuous confrontation with

one's gender performance. When ignored by other members, problematic performances of gender/masculinities contradict and undermine the groups' collective action. First, unaddressed inconsistencies between a participant's discourse and behavior can rupture another participant's confidence in the group, as well as men's pro-feminist organizing in general. For example, when Nihat (32, cis, non-heterosexual man) began to feel uncomfortable with "the density" of the heterosexual population in the group and the increasing heteronormative conversations, he shared his feelings and criticism with the group members. The group ignored to acknowledge Nihat's feelings. The person who was considered the group's leader dismissed Nihat's criticism because the (so-called) leader had homosexual experiences in which he was "even passive". [5] Nihat also claims that the group was unwilling to confront the gap between their public feminist stance and internalization of this stance; and this was an important reason why he left his group and became distant to men's allyship:

> There is this pro-feminist narrative outwardly. But beneath […] you can see the narration of men's rights… the narration of "we suffer too" and secretly "these feminists are being too much." […] One pal, for instance, [said] "What do the feminists do about the issue of harassment? They have done nothing. They actually do nothing but pretend to do something." As if he himself does something. Or, they say "these women seem to be very free women but when they turn 30, they begin their wedding plans, they look around to pick up a man and make kids; we know those feminists." Or, "we actually establish egalitarian relationships in many aspects, but we can suffer too, why can't those be spoken, they do not allow us." [They think] there is a feminist stick above our heads. Like, we always live with the fear of that stick although we are good men. I remember one pal saying, "I am afraid of feminists."

Similarly, Ahmet and Barış note the discomfort they felt in their groups due to a lack of internalization of feminist perspectives and the absence of accountability mechanisms. Ahmet states that some participants thought that they did not have to account to feminists (although they declared their respect to feminist groups). In reference to the discussions in Turkey on taking women's statements on violence as fundamentally credible, which is considered as an essential feminist principle against men's violence (see Yılmaz, 2015, note 16), Barış narrates the following:

> On the surface, there was not any problem, everyone seemed to act politically correct. [But] there were small incidents. [...] In a meeting in which we were discussing taking women's statements on violence as fundamentally credible, for instance, a participant said "yes, a woman's statement is fundamentally credible, but," [pointing at another participant] "I would not take it seriously if you were accused."

Transgender men's organizing too can be negatively affected by internalized sexism and problematic performances of masculinities. Kenan mentions his reservations in establishing an ongoing partnership with feminist groups because some participants of his transmasculine initiative are weak in questioning masculinities and patriarchy:

> "I mean there can be many things from arguing over a woman to [claiming] 'I am more man than you.' Internalized transphobia plays a role here. There is a rivalry [between the participants] which I can call as a masculine rivalry. See, how I can say...this can be related to possessing a man's appearance later in life. From [saying] my beard is bushier, to [saying], his [gender change] request was approved by the court whereas mine was rejected... There is this issue of violence turning on each other. [...] While this is the situation, although there are

> people among us who question masculinities, we cannot reach to a point to collaborate with feminist organizations."

Second, if left unaddressed, the reproduction of violent and discriminatory performances of gender causes a loss of legitimacy in the eyes of the public. One of the most dramatic examples is a case of violence against a woman in which Men Against Patriarchy was involved. I was first doubtful about addressing this issue in this article because I am acquainted with the woman as well as the men who took the side of the woman. However, as a person who defends the principle of taking women's statements on violence as fundamentally credible, I find it politically wrong to disregard this issue.

A participant of Men Against Patriarchy perpetrated violence against his female partner in various ways (detention, sexual assault, insult and threatening); subsequently, the woman exposed the man to the initiative with the help of another participant. The group failed both in criticizing the perpetrator and publicizing the woman's revelation. The texts published by the woman (which were later supported by a text of three men from Men Against Patriarchy) states that the perpetrator was defended by some other participants—or his situation was interpreted from a palliative perspective; moreover, the voice of the opposition in the group was suppressed. This whitewash disturbed some participants who became inactive or left the group. For Ahmet, the real reason behind the group's dissolution was that they did not handle the entire process appropriately and transparently. In other words, the group's sustainability was deeply shaken not because of one participant's behavior but due to the collective attempt to cover-up the violence perpetrated. Following the woman's online exposé, the statement published by Men Against Patriarchy contains an apology; however, it rejects the claims of cover-up. [6]

Another case of sexual harassment recounted by İbrahim gives credence to Ahmet's perspective: when a participant of We Are Not Men was accused of sexual harassment, the group neither ostracized the perpetrator nor overlooked the case. Rather, they considered tackling

this issue as part of their mobilizing's *reason d'être*. Taking the accusation seriously, they held meetings to question how they can improve self-criticism and accountability both individually and collectively. They tried to help the perpetrator face his agency and the consequences of his actions. The issue resulted in neither the group's dissolution nor losing public legitimacy. Selçuk thinks We Are Not Men dissolved later because of "micro-power disputes" as some members tried to create their own power domains to gain control over the group. The group neglected to address the emerge of these micro-power clashes that could be questioned in relation to masculinities and men's power position. Remained ignored, the disputes led to initial divisions and the group's dissolvement eventually.

These examples indicate that men's groups as feminist allies may become prone to dissolution when sustained efforts of self-criticism and self-reflexivity on gendered power wane in their framing of questioning masculinity. Men who organize against the prevailing gender order might believe that their actions are now free from reproducing gendered violence because they reject sexism in an organized manner. If the same belief is shared by most of the group, the group itself may turn into a space which creates a new type of man: one who allegedly questions masculinities but continues to reproduce unequal gendered structures—like the case of anti-racist White allies whose self-acknowledgement is inadequate to stop them to reproduce racism (Hughey, 2012; Sullivan, 2014).

Another potential problem of organizing largely around self-questioning is related to the fact that gender is not only an individual performance, but it is also an institutional phenomenon. As discussed above, previous research states that the changes in men's perceptions and practices remain limited, fragile and superficial without "public policies that reinforce gender equality" (Kaufman et al., 2014, p. 11). Consequently, gender activists argue that men's attempts of questioning gender and challenging dominance need to move "beyond the comfort of consciousness-raising and therapeutic models" (Messner et al. 2015, 41). Pro-feminist men's groups in Turkey rarely addressed gendered

governmental structures, laws, legislations and policies. This is not to say that the groups were unaware of the state's role in gender oppression or the link between individual practices/privileges and institutionalized gender inequality. I already stated that trans men's mobilizing particularly focused on rights and health issues of trans men. We Are Not Men criticized the collaboration between men's violence and institutions such as state, jurisdiction, education and political parties. Men Against Patriarchy was initially organized under the name 'Men Against the Abortion Ban' to protest AKP's efforts of banning abortion. However, other than preparing or participating in a few demonstrations, the groups omitted to speak (or even search ways to speak) against institutional and structural forms of gender inequality.

Based on his experiences in Men Talk, Devrim argues that organizing against the broad frame of patriarchy through questioning masculinities was unrealistic and distracting in terms of mobilizing. Their discursive attempt to touch upon as many subjects as possible related to masculine domination resulted in not having a focus and tangible goals as a group. This possibly hindered his group from yielding concrete results. Consequently, Devrim lost his motivation as an activist and became skeptical about the potentials of men's allyship. Considering the examples of well-known and long-running men's organizations such as White Ribbon Campaign [7] or the groups focused on fatherhood in Sweden (see Holmgren & Hearn, 2019), Devrim thinks that mobilizing around a specific issue and setting clearer aims would attract more men who are interested in the issue. This could foster sustainability and efficiency of men's organizing.

However, it is important to note that men's allyship in Turkey, unlike the organizations that Devrim exemplifies, was based on voluntariness. The groups produced work without receiving any funds from national or international organizations (except 'Men Talk,' which operated under a feminist NGO, and T 'Club,' which has considered to become an NGO). Some groups, such as We Are Not Men in which anarchists predominated, even politically rejected such collaborations. Nonetheless, İbrahim points out that organizing mostly around

questioning masculinities negatively impacted We Are Not Men as well. The group participants got stuck on gender-binary discussions, which eventually led to the loss of "the charm" that brought them together.

Finally, while questioning the self, the groups seem to have a lack of endeavor to take account of diverse men's experiences on gender and power. Barış complains of men's silence on the frequent deaths of blue-collar men due to so-called work accidents in Turkey. For example, 301 mineworkers were killed in Soma in 2014 (Pamuk, 2014). Although all the casualties were men, none of men's groups made a statement in this regard. Is their neglect related to the fact that the groups (excluding the trans men's initiatives) were formed mostly by, in Nihat's words, "middle class" participants who either had a bachelor's or a higher degree, or who were university students? The groups paid a little or no attention to many other social dynamics such as religious affiliation, ethnicity/race and disability. For example, although the groups comprised of participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds, they did not address the intersections of race and gender. Or, they did not discuss possible strategies and contradictions for Muslim men to be pro-feminist. According to the interviewees, the lack of connection with people from different social settings and movements for social justice may also have caused their groups' activities remained limited to the intelligentsia, followed by an introversion and dissolvement.

Conclusion

Feminist struggles in Turkey not only have raised a critical awareness of masculinities among men, but also encouraged them to organize against the prevailing gender order. At the end of the 2000s, men began to form groups that can be framed as feminist allies. They tried to question gender inequality and challenge their own privileges and power. In a society where heteronormative male supremacy is on the rise at the state level, the groups contributed to

getting the idea into circulation that men can be (pro)feminists and can struggle against patriarchy. However, their mobilizing lost its momentum only in a few years. [8]

This study argues that the groups, especially predominantly cis men's groups, mobilized around questioning masculinities and confronting privileges at an individual level; and this approach towards allyship seemed to be not enough to sustain the groups. The idea behind the groups' concentration on individual-level change seems that men's questioning of masculinities may help them acknowledge how they consciously or unconsciously enjoy gendered power and privileges. This recognition is hoped to be followed by actively facing, opposing and subverting men's own complicity in gendered violence and discrimination. However, there has been a gap between questioning masculinities and taking an active stance against the prevailing gender order. First, men's questioning of masculinities and confrontation with their privileges did not prevent them reproducing forms of gendered violence and discrimination. In line with the recent studies that argue men's increasing commitment to gender equality mostly remain unfulfilled in Turkey (Barutçu & Hıdır, 2016; Beşpınar, 2015; Mermertaş, 2018; Sancar, 2009), men's pro-feminist mobilizing in the country suffered from inconsistencies between their participants' discourses and behaviors, especially without accountability mechanisms in place. When left unaddressed, the inconsistencies posed a conspicuous threat to the groups' sustainability. Second, the groups largely neglected both to take account of interlocking structures of power and to tackle institutional-level problems that they organized against. Individually denouncing gendered power and oppression has been enough to neither disrupt institutional privileges that are available to men, nor to change the discriminatory laws and regulations that women and LGBTQ+ individuals suffer from (Kaufman et al., 2014; Peacock et al., 2006; UNFPA, 2013). This study, therefore, suggests that men's groups as feminist allies should consider integrating self-reflexivity, accountability, intersectional praxis and policy-related advocacy efforts in their mobilization. Rather than organizing around self-questioning with

potentially limited impact, they may focus on specific issues of concern to the groups they ally with and address institutional level changes, such as improvements in laws and regulations, to foster social change.

As a final note, I would like to acknowledge that this study is biased as it is rooted in my own belief in the importance of men's mobilizing in the struggles for egalitarian societies. My agenda includes contributing to the proliferation of men's groups as feminist allies while raising awareness on possible gaps between discourses and actions of group participants—including myself. The discussion is also restricted in generalizability as it draws on the perspectives of a small number of activists of diverse groups, almost all of which do not exist anymore. Despite its limitations, I hope this study will be part of a necessary dialogue for developing strategies for existing and future men's allyship, not only in Turkey but across the world.

Endnotes

[1] Their ages (at the time of the interview) range between 26 and 54 whereas their age of participating to a men's initiative for the first time varies between 22 and 48. The interviewees have minimum three years of experience in men's organizing.

[2] The following initiatives' blogs were accessible at the time of research: Voltrans (http://vol-trans.blogspot.com/), We Are Not Men (http://bizerkekdegilizinsiyatifi.blogspot.com/), and T Club (http://transsicko.blogspot.com/).

[3] After partaking in a five-day workshop of Men Talk in 2011 (when I was 25), which was aiming an awareness about gender inequalities among young male university students, I became a volunteer at the initiative until the group dissolved in 2014.

[4] Pippa Bacca appeared in a performance to promote "world peace" and "trust among humans." Wearing a bridal gown, she had the intention of hitchhiking from Milan to Jerusalem; however, she only made it as far as Turkey. See *Bianet*,

http://bianet.org/archives/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&q=pippa+bacca&sec=english (accessed April 1, 2019).

[5] In Turkish, there is common (and heteronormative) reference to homosexual male intercourse: the active participant *enters;* and the passive participant *receives*.

[6] See the woman's exposé and other texts (signed as "Woman"), https://buseferlikboyleolmasin.wordpress.com/, and the response of Men Against Patriarchy, dated October 3, 2015, http://ataerkiyekarsierkekler.blogspot.com/2015/10/ (accessed April 1, 2019). The texts are in Turkish only. Men Against Patriarchy deleted previous texts published on their blog and announced that they were inactive since the summer of 2014.

[7] The organization started in Canada in 1991 and has spread to the world. See their official website, http://www.whiteribbon.ca/ (accessed April 1, 2019).

[8] A social outrage emerged after the murder of a 19-year-old woman, Özgecan Aslan, in February 2015. Similar to the case of the Pippa Bacca murder, some men collectively published statements and organized several protests across the country condemning men's violence. At least two separate groups of men held meetings in Istanbul to discuss if they could form new initiatives. None of these attempts, however, transformed into a new men's group. Some interviewees think that such organizing is not of public consequence in the current atmosphere of warfare and political oppression. Some of them find it surprising that no men's group is bursting out in this very atmosphere. However, their shared opinion is that, in parallel to struggles for gender equality in the world, new men's groups will emerge in Turkey eventually.

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