

## Open Forum: Feminist+ solidarity

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## Open Forum: Feminist+ solidarity

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**Ayşe Gül Altınay**

Sabancı University, Turkey

**Andrea Pető**

Central European University, Austria

**Arlene Voski Avakian**

University of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA

**Oksana Dutchak**

Berliner Institut für empirische Integrations- und Migrationsforschung (BIM), Germany

**Cynthia Enloe**

Clark University, USA

**Mert Koçak**

Central European University, Austria

**María López Belloso**

University of Deusto, Spain

**madeleine kennedy-macfoy**

Education International, Belgium

On 23 March 2022, Sabancı University Gender and Women's Studies Center of Excellence (SU Gender) organized an international roundtable on feminist+ solidarity.<sup>1</sup> Ayşe Gül Altınay, in her opening remarks to the roundtable introduced feminist+ solidarity as follows:

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**Corresponding author:**

Ayşe Gül Altınay, Sabancı University, Tuzla, İstanbul, 34956, Turkey.

Email: [altinay@sabanciuniv.edu](mailto:altinay@sabanciuniv.edu)

*We take feminist+ solidarity to be a crucial and precious path for the future of not just politics but of life on this planet. The + is a reminder of the many other frameworks of analysis and action that have helped feminism grow: The anti-slavery, anti-colonial, anti-war, anti-capitalist, human rights, minority rights, economic justice and racial justice movements that have accompanied feminisms globally; the LGBTIQ+ movements that have deepened our understanding of the workings of gender and sexuality; and the ecological and climate justice movements that remind us of our interconnectedness not just with each other but with all species, with all life, to name a few.*

*The + is a reminder of how feminisms have been transformed by these other struggles towards an open-ended vision that serves all life. It's possible to view the + also as a reminder of our beautiful diversity as the subjects of feminism, of the intersectionality and interconnectedness that was always there, but not always acknowledged. As Dina Georgis reminds us 'there is always a better story than our better story' (Georgis, 2013: 26). The + is an invitation for opening ourselves up, personally and collectively, to a better story of feminism, one that is shaped by curiosity, openness, creativity and modesty.*

*In other words, feminist+ solidarity is an invitation to co-imagine an even better story of feminist solidarity.*

For this Open Forum, we built on this conversation initiated in Istanbul and asked five questions to six scholar-activists who have done inspiring academic and political work on feminist+ solidarity in very different, but deeply connected, contexts. Arlene Voski Avakian and Cynthia Enloe expanded on their contributions to the SU Gender roundtable,<sup>2</sup> and Oksana Dutchak, madeleine kennedy-macfoy, María López Belloso and Mert Koçak kindly accepted our invitation to join this virtual conversation from Ukraine, Belgium, Spain and Turkey.

## **What does 'feminist+ solidarity' mean for you? How do you see its place in contemporary (feminist) politics?**

**Cynthia Enloe:** I get uncomfortable with the term 'solidarity'; it sounds solid. In its lived reality, though, solidarity is not solid; it is always in motion. Those of us who yearn for a solid form of human solidarity will, I think, be constantly disappointed. Out of our disappointment, I'm afraid, some of us will become alienated and will drop out of the demanding processes that create and sustain solidarity.

Creating and then sustaining solidarity, I've slowly learnt, takes a deepening of awareness and a building of trust . . . Deepening one's awareness involves expanding our understanding into perhaps unfamiliar and uncomfortable areas. Building trust calls for lots of listening, lots of humility. Both are personal and collective efforts that take time and energy, time and energy which we may feel we can't afford.

Creating and sustaining a *feminist*-infused sort of social solidarity takes even more effort, even more energy. Furthermore, a feminist awareness one has developed may, over time, become dulled. Likewise, a feminist-informed mutual trust that one has worked hard to build may, under new stressful conditions, come unravelled.

So I would like to stress that solidarity is a *process*. It is an ongoing process. It takes *stamina*. I think feminist stamina is often under-appreciated. What kinds of awareness seem just too painful to absorb? How long do you hang in there with people who do not trust you? Who has not had this experience of trying to build trust and yet the people with whom you have been trying to build that trust are not coming to the point where they think they can rely on you. Then you start blaming them for their lack of trust in you.

Sometimes we may run out of steam, hit bottom in our finite store of stamina. At this point, we may give up, we may decide ‘this pursuit of solidarity isn’t worth the effort; let’s just narrow our alliance, shrink our collective activism’.

**Oksana Dutchak:** Feminist+ solidarity, in my opinion, should be based on several principles, which have been advocated for by feminist theory and political practice for decades. This solidarity should be based on the principle of supporting those who are weaker under the oppression or under the threat of oppression. Those are workers oppressed by capital, women oppressed by patriarchy, ethnic minorities oppressed by racialized orders and racist institutions, LGBTIQ+ people oppressed by heteronormative systems, people oppressed by imperialist domination and so on. Feminist+ solidarity should be based on the principle of materialist analysis. It should be built not on idealistic assumptions about the context and experience of oppression, but should focus on the needs of those to whom we channel our political and practical solidarity. Thus, feminist+ solidarity should be based on the principle of giving voice to the oppressed and listening to them. Only in such a way we can use feminist+ solidarity to provide the necessary and requested political and practical support. And finally, feminist+ solidarity must be based on the principle of caring. The idea of care is central to feminist theory and practice in different variations, behind which is the central motive of counteracting the utilitarian logic of patriarchal capitalist system. Here I mean that there should be a good will behind feminist+ solidarity – it must be practised with an internal motivation to provide real and requested support (either political or material) instead of (ab)using it to reach predominantly our own political goals or consolidate our own political identities. For example, one should not use Russian invasion in Ukraine just for the sake of strengthening one’s own argument in some national or regional discussion pro- or against North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but rather look at the context of NATO (in)action in the particular situation and build solidarity with the oppressed.

**María López Belloso:** My experience in feminism and academia is strongly conditioned by my background in development and decolonization studies. Having drawn from authors such as Naila Kabeer, Chandra Mohanty (2003) or María Lugones, my conception of feminist solidarity is linked to sharing and accompanying experiences lived by different and diverse women from a supportive position and sisterhood. I understand feminist solidarity both as the exercise of being able to listen to and understand diverse visions and experiences of oppression and by identifying common challenges. My perception of feminist solidarity connects to collective action and challenging the limitations of women’s gendered choices that prevent them from reaching their true potential. The vision of feminist solidarity is, therefore, directly related to empowerment as an essential political action to challenge male oppression (Kabeer, 2003). However, this empowerment must transcend individual empowerment, which is undoubtedly the starting point for social transformation, to achieve collective empowerment that translates into structural change and

agency. As Caroline Sweetman (2013) argues, feminist activism must therefore stress sisterhood and collective agency among women as a means of building on and amplifying the agency of individuals.

From this perspective, I experience, with great suffering and regret, the increasing fragmentation of the feminist movement, where solidarity is being replaced by rivalry and segmentation, where shared experiences and shared situated knowledges are being replaced by exclusive rivalries. Faced with this division of feminism, I believe that we must go back to the original solidarity of the movement, where pluralism and diversity strengthen us as political subjects instead of falling into the game of 'divide and rule' that benefits patriarchy and anti-gender discourses.

**madeleine kennedy-macfoy:** I first learned about feminist politics in the work of writers such as Audre Lorde (1984), bell hooks (1984), Hazel Carby (1997), and in the activism of Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, among others. As a result, my understanding of feminist politics was always already as a politics defined by a deep and action-oriented solidarity – locally and across borders – between differently located/situated/positioned women. I see this continuing in some contemporary feminist politics and activism, particularly as connections that may otherwise never have been made proliferate across the information superhighway.

Despite the obvious shortcomings, online and digital mobilization and activism among feminists located in different regions can and do have real world impact. Take, for example, the virtually organized 'Safe Hquse' initiative, through which queer activists were provided with emergency housing assistance, food and support in local contexts during the 2020 protests across Nigeria in response to state-sanctioned police violence (the #EndSARS movement) (see Nwabunnia, 2021). Or more famously, the way that the 'me too' movement founded by African-American activist Tarana Burke in 2006, became a global movement after actress Alyssa Milano called on her Twitter followers to use #MeToo and her Tweet went viral in 2017.

Feminist+ solidarity was central to such efforts, reflecting a willingness among feminists – especially younger feminists – to push boundaries and to create safe/brave online and offline spaces for dialogue, to strategize and to take collective action.

**Arlene Avakian:** 'Sisterhood is powerful' is a phrase that circulated widely in the United States and in many parts of the world in the 1970s. It was also the title of an anthology of essays edited by Robin Morgan (1970). Based on shared gender oppression along with a world view, and some would even argue a shared culture, the term assumes solidarity among women. However, all women did not share that solidarity at the time and we now know that assumption was based on the privilege bestowed on White women by the ideology and practice of White supremacy. My comment on solidarity will be within the context of the White supremacy as it developed over from first encounters of Europeans and the indigenous people on this side of the ocean, through the kidnapping and enslavement of Africans for 246 years, and the ongoing racism that underlies everything in this context.

The foundations of the United States are based in genocide ('free' land) and slavery (free labour). Profiting from this winning combination, the United States was the richest country in human history by the mid-19th century. We tend to think about slavery in the United States as something that happened in history which was rectified in 1865 by the

defeat by the South of the North. It is much more accurate to think of the anti-bellum United States as what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995: 18) terms a *slave society*. This distinction is crucial. The institutions in a slave society develop within the context of slavery, protect slavery and the class that benefitted from enslaving people. And in the United States, that included the overwhelming majority of the presidents before the Civil War. In a slave society, the constitution, as well as state and local laws, the banking system, the accounting system, the police, the taxation system, economic system, the institutions that continue to shape our lives more than 150 years later can only be understood in the context of a slave society. I would also argue that the particularly brutal form of capitalism in the United States emerged as a result of this slave society. And on some level, I think, we in the United States know that.

Sven Lindqvist begins his book *Exterminate all the Brutes: One Man's Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide* with this extraordinary paragraph: 'You already know enough. So do I. It is not knowledge we lack. What is missing is the courage to understand what we know and to draw conclusions' (Lindqvist, 1992:2).

We know that our country perpetrated a genocide on the indigenous people and that slavery was the basis of our economy beginning in 1619 and formally ending only 246 years and 16 generations of enslaved families later. We also know that Black people lived under slave-like conditions until the Civil Rights Movement forced the enactment of laws to grant citizenship rights to Black Americans close to 100 years after the 15th amendment granted Black men the right to vote. We know these facts, but we do not have the courage to recognize the impact of a slave society as the foundation of our society and all that entails.

My perspective on feminist solidarity for US women is shaped by the necessity of drawing the conclusions from US history and the history of colonialism. A general and widely used definition of solidarity is 'an awareness of shared interests, objectives, standards and sympathies creating a psychological sense of unity of groups or classes'.<sup>3</sup> But what does it take to first have an *awareness of shared interests*? And then to act on it.

How much awareness of shared interests and how much of our activism is based on an awareness that White supremacy threatens and has always threatened democracy? How much of our activism and scholarship is based on an awareness that we can share interests across race, class, sexuality and other social formations only if we put ourselves in our own social contexts and recognize how we are all diminished by a society that privileges some groups over others? Or for those of us who are doing explicitly anti-racist work, are we doing it for someone else? Are we allies or are we working for a more just world for ourselves and generations beyond us?

Our histories have shaped all of us and our societies. But those of us who are the beneficiaries of these brutal systems do not usually draw the conclusions that these systems create our institutions and in turn ourselves. We argue that gender and other social formations are constructions of our societies, but to actually be in solidarity we have to draw the conclusion that we are beneficiaries of systems of oppression and that we may be blinded to how we and our world are constructed by that privilege.

I begin with awareness because those of us who belong to advantaged groups have to work very hard to develop that awareness in the first place. It is easy to see that some

groups in a particular society do have the advantage of belonging to the groups that are in power, but turning that around to seeing – having an awareness – that we are advantaged on those axes takes work, a lot of it and it is ongoing – lifelong I would say. Our awareness also needs to recognize the ways in which the systems of oppression shape our societies to advantage us because we are still living with the institutions that were fundamentally shaped by a slave society.

Black and other women of colour in the United States have been making this point since at least the 19th century and probably earlier. Frances E.W. Harper is only one example of an activist, thinker, writer, who was making the case that race and class were as determinative in the lives of women as gender – sometimes on the same podia as White feminists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Yet the White feminists did not see shared interest with Harper or other Black feminists and suffragists who were more often than not kept out of White women's suffrage clubs because they were Black (Schuller, 2021).

Black and other women of colour continued to speak to White women's liberationists into the 20th and the 21st centuries. As early as the earliest women's studies programmes and women's liberation groups, women such as Frances Beale, the Cohambee River Collective, June Jordan,<sup>4</sup> and legions of others tried to show White women that we can share interests, objectives, standards and sympathies. Building on the work of these Black women, Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) theorized Black Women's structural position as defined by both gender and race and coined the term intersectionality in a powerful article published in the early 1990s. While intersectionality has become a buzz word, the fundamental insight it brings to analysis of Black women's *structural* position is often reduced to identity politics which is not at all what Crenshaw posited. The point of intersectional analysis about power is also sometimes obscured by White women (Nash, 2019).

What is needed for solidarity is coalition work, what Bernice Johnson Reagon (1983: 359) calls 'some of the most dangerous work you can do'. Reagon – a civil rights activist and musician since she was a student in Albany, Georgia in the 1960s – makes a distinction between home and coalition in a brilliant talk at the West Coast Women's Music Festival in 1981. Home, she argues, is a place with people like you, a nurturing space, a refuge, 'a space where you sift out what people are saying about you and decide within yourself and within your community who you would be if you were running society . . .' (Reagon, 1983: 359). It is a space from which you can enter into coalitions with other groups who may also have their home spaces. One of the things that makes coalition work so difficult, she posits, is that people conflate the two. They want the coalition to be their home. They consider successful coalitions those that make them comfortable, but she argues, the opposite is true. If a coalition is working, some people will feel uncomfortable or worse because to actually act on shared interests, we have to see – all of us – how our assumptions may deny the realities of the lives of other groups of women.

To recognize and be able to work with this discomfort is the work we have to do to actually be and act in solidarity. Yes, many Whites including many White women, marched with Black Lives Matter after George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery were brutally murdered but we have yet to see whether White supremacy will be *centred* along with other social formations. Whites will not be able to be in coalition or solidarity with Blacks and other people of colour unless they are able to centre White



supremacy in the society and in themselves. We need to know our history, to have the courage to draw the conclusions, and have our activism based in that knowledge.

**Mert Koçak:** For me, feminist+ solidarity stands for creating, sustaining or supporting physical and digital spaces that cultivate political, social, economic and, more importantly, emotional support for everybody who was overlooked, invisibilized or even attacked by neoliberal and neoconservative politics.

Valorization of individual economic productivity has been aligning with anti-gender, anti-LGBTI+, anti-migrant, anti-refugee and anti-minority rhetoric worldwide. This alliance deems many people undeserving of ‘national solidarity’ (healthcare, welfare) and ‘communal solidarity’ (support links among religious or ethnic groups). Migrants are welcomed as long as they can prove to be economically productive (high skill vs low skill migrants), or they reproduce cis-heteronormative kinship (family reunification laws and social policies for cis-heterosexual married couples). More importantly, the effects of the same alliance seep into social movements, including feminist and LGBTI+ ones, resulting in segments that call for differential inclusion, such as trans exclusionary radical feminism (TERF) or homonationalism (Puar, 2007) in LGBTI+ movements.

As a scholar of queer migration and a member of the LGBTI+ movement in Turkey, I have observed these homonationalist tendencies. During one of the panels in the 2016 Pride Week events, some people heatedly argued that ‘we (queer citizens) must first save ourselves before saving others (queer refugees)’. In other instances, a few workers of LGBTI+ nongovernmental organization (NGOs) voiced their concerns over using already limited resources on queer refugees instead of queer citizens. Queer refugees noted that they stopped going to events organized by LGBTI+ NGOs because they were subjected to racist remarks from the other participants. As queer refugees became more visible, a handful of queer citizens attempted to draw borders around queer spaces in Turkey to exclude ‘the non-citizens’. It seems like for these people, belonging to the Turkish nation-state became a way to demonstrate being deserving of solidarity.

However, it is crucial to say that these homonationalist discourses and practices have not established roots in the movement. Powerful voices have risen within the movement to counter homonationalist tendencies. They have fiercely argued against discriminatory remarks and taken crucial steps to open queer safe spaces for refugees. They have taken the necessary steps to establish elbow contact. ‘Tea and Talk’ – a group of Arabic-speaking queer refugees meeting every Sunday – used SPOD’s<sup>5</sup> office for their weekly meetings. HEVI LGBTI+<sup>6</sup> incorporated Arabic and Persian into its publications and establish close ties with the queer Iranian community in Yalova and organizing social events for them in the city.

Thus, I believe the + is a crucial reminder to be ever vigilant against this alliance of neoliberal and neoconservative politics.

## **Which feminist+ solidarity practices have inspired you the most?**

**Oksana Dutchak:** There are many feminist+ solidarity and practices, which inspire, but I would like to emphasize those that are currently the most actual for me and Ukrainian



women broadly – in the context of Russian imperialist aggression. With the beginning of full-scale Russian intervention in February 2022, we have seen the worst examples of international ‘solidarity’ – lacking all the principles, mentioned above – as well as the best ones. Among the best has been a large scale feminist+ mobilization in support of humanitarian and all the other needs of people in Ukraine and those who left the country, as well as mobilization in support of the cause and demands of Ukrainian activists. While the effort has been huge and diverse, trying to meet the huge and diverse needs of the people, here and there have been clear marks of feminist+ optics involved, which takes gender (and other) inequalities, as well as the needs and problems of particular unprivileged groups into account while providing support. There have been female hygienic products in humanitarian deliveries. There have been products for emergency contraception and psychological care for the victims of sexual crimes. There has been support of childcare for women who had to flee (e.g. the Feminist Workshop group in Lviv and different volunteer initiatives in various towns and countries), because without this support they have almost zero time to manage at the start. There has been all the informational and practical support to counter human trafficking. There has been all the international support to the collective voice of Ukrainian feminists, expressed in the ‘Right to Resist’ manifesto. In these and in many other cases you almost see the caring minds and hands of people with feminist focus, thinking of other women and giving them a hand, a shoulder to go through and to continue the struggle. And, yes, one of the most visible parts of the Russian anti-war resistance is the horizontal feminist network Feminist Anti-War Resistance. Composed of different feminist groups and activists, involving decentralized communication and coordination, this network has been organizing small protests, anti-war information campaigns, support for Russian men who don’t want to be sent to the war, support for political campaigning of the Ukrainian left, support for Ukrainian refugees in Russia and so on.

**madeleine kennedy-macfoy:** I’m most inspired by people who not only say they are feminists, but also strive to live that out in the way they engage with others in their daily lives. In my professional life, I’ve been inspired by the older, more experienced feminists who take the time to help younger, junior colleagues learn how to identify and navigate racist, ableist, heteronormative patriarchal structures in the workplace. Among my friends and family, I’m constantly inspired by young feminists who – in public places and in private interactions – refuse to be silenced or to remain silent and bravely speak up to name injustice wherever they encounter it.

**María López Belloso:** It is difficult for me to identify a single practice of solidarity, as there are many examples of sisterhood and solidarity that I find inspiring and that have nourished my feminist consciousness. These experiences are not only individual experiences of those close to me who initiated me into feminism, but above all collective experiences. However, I would like to highlight two specific experiences that have marked me personally at different levels.

In 2005, the Basque Support Network for the National Union of Sahrawi Women (NUSWS) was created as a network for Sahrawi and Basque women to meet and work together. The aim of the network was not only the exchange and personal empowerment between the two groups of women, but also the institutional reinforcement of the National Union of Sahrawi Women (UNMS), which since 1974 has been acting in favour of the

empowerment of women, the defence of their rights and the elimination of gender inequalities in Saharawi society. UNMS is an organization that represents all Sahrawi women, especially those living in the refugee camps in Tindouf (Algeria), where it carries out most of its activities. Without going into the details of its functioning, this Network established a kind of communicating vessels between areas of cooperation and equality and citizen participation: the Equality Councils and the Empowerment Schools, and made a clear feminist commitment that sought to detach itself from Western approaches to accompany a feminist process led by Muslim women (Chacón and López Belloso, 2011). This way of doing things, through accompaniment and the sharing of knowledge and experiences, has marked my understanding of feminist solidarity for social transformation.

From a more personal perspective, the feminist demonstration and strike of 8 March 2018<sup>7</sup> was a return to collective mobilization and grassroots struggle, to the political reclamation of feminism, with the particularity that it was the first time I did it in the company of my daughter. This feminist mobilization meant a revival of enthusiasm for the movement and reconnecting with the renewed feminist grassroots and agents.

**Arlene Avakian:** I have been a feminist for the last five decades, but I have also centred combatting White supremacy in my academic, political and personal life. My journey to recognize and overcome my Whiteness has been difficult, often lonely, but always deeply fulfilling as well. I was blessed with the enormous patience and generosity of colleagues and friends of colour, primarily Black people, who saw the possibility for change in me and nurtured it. I have also been involved in women's studies since its inception in the 1970s and found very few White colleagues to join me in the struggle to bring race into the centre of our scholarship and teaching. The solidarity I experienced then, was only with individuals not with groups.

In 2001, I became chair of the Women, Gender, Sexuality Department (WGSS) at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. At that time the faculty in our small department was mostly White and while our materials stated that intersectionality was central to our department's teaching and research, that commitment was often not borne out. My primary goal as department chair was to transform the department into one with a majority of the faculty being women of colour whose scholarship centred on women of colour. I had been convinced for a long time that our curriculum could not even understand let alone represent the lives of all women without centring women of colour and White supremacy. When we were approved for a hire, I insisted we hire someone with expertise in Black women's lives. At that time, there was not one Black woman whose work focussed on Black women among the roughly 1300 faculty members at the University.

I was eventually able to accomplish my goal of transforming the department primarily because of the many years I had worked closely on various conferences and other projects with faculty of colour at the University of Massachusetts as well as the other institutions in our consortium (Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke and Smith colleges). We were a group of faculty and staff working in solidarity to decentre Whiteness at our institutions. Without those relationships of trust that came out of those decades of work, I would not have had access to the networks I needed to make excellent hires. By the time I retired in 2011, my dream had become a reality and WGSS was perhaps the only Women's Studies department with this demographic.

My latest and my most fulfilling work of solidarity goes way beyond individuals. I have been a volunteer for the Movement Voter Project (MVP) since 2019. A young organization began only in 2016, MVP raises money to support grassroots organizations in communities of colour and among youth as well as providing whatever training and other support they need. The groups live in and are part of the communities they organize in, often having grown up there. They know their neighbours, they know the issues, and can engage people in making lasting changes in their communities. These groups were responsible for the progressive wins in 2018 and for the Democrats' winning back the Senate and the presidency in 2020. They are building an infrastructure for long term change. The ultimate aim is to build a progressive movement as well as win elections for progressive candidates.

MVP is not an explicitly feminist organization, though most of the groups they support organize around feminist issues, and many if not most of the people doing the work on the ground are women and identify as feminists. I am part of an MVP team in Massachusetts a very liberal state, the first state to legalize same sex marriage, many of us have struggled to find ways to make a difference in parts of the country that are not as liberal. We have made phone calls and written postcards for progressive candidates around the country, some of us have travelled to other states knocking on doors for these candidates, some of us send money to their campaigns, but we are not *from* there and our accents and the postmarks on our cards betray. With MVP's brilliant model, we can make a real difference by supporting the groups that are in their communities year-round, sometimes for decades.

Working with MVP is the first time in my long life of activism I have worked with a group that has an intersectional approach, centring White supremacy along with all other social formations. In my fifth decade of working for progressive change, I have finally found a highly effective and satisfying home.

**Mert Koçak:** For a long time now, I have been thinking deeply on the concept of '*dirsek teması*'.<sup>8</sup> The direct translation of the concept is 'elbow contact'. I have come across the concept *dirsek teması* at many events, conferences and social gatherings. Inspired by the physical contact – touching elbows – when standing close to others at protests, *dirsek teması* indicates a need to be near physically and learn to construct and share actual safe spaces for and with people coming from different SOGI positions,<sup>9</sup> ethnic backgrounds, economic statuses, ages and so on. *Dirsek teması* includes but goes beyond the discursive tools that would make intersectional politics of solidarity and resistance possible in Turkey. *Dirsek teması* calls for learning how to share physical spaces, and to make those spaces safe for everybody.

Mainstream mentions of *dirsek teması* in the LGBTI+ movement can be traced back to unprecedented enmeshment of various social groups during the protests and communal life at the Gezi Park Movement in 2013.<sup>10</sup> Within the physical space of Gezi Park and Taksim area,<sup>11</sup> actors in the LGBTI+ movement fostered political alliances with social groups with which they had little previous dialogue: soccer fans, nationalists, anti-capitalist Muslims, blue-collar workers, communists, Kurds, Armenians and so on (Birdal, 2015). The Istanbul Pride Walk in 2013 attracted around 100,000 people making it the biggest pride march in the history of Turkey (Atalay and Doan, 2019). The press release marking the start of the Pride Week noted that the LGBTI+ movement's '*dirsek teması*

has increased: We got closer to *çArşı*<sup>12</sup> and ate *kandil simidi*<sup>13</sup> with anti-capitalist Muslims'.<sup>14</sup>

The overarching theme of the Istanbul Pride Week events in 2014 was chosen as *temas* (contact) since the intimate political and physical encounters in the Gezi Park Movement were still fresh in everybody's minds. Pride Week had two consecutive panel discussions named *temas* and *dirsek teması*. Description of the panels said, 'While 20 years have passed since birth of the LGBTI movement (in Turkey) with the Gezi Resistance it has come into contact, more than ever before, with the subjects of social opposition varying from soccer fans to revolutionary Muslims'.<sup>15</sup> The panels aimed to reflect upon 'the experiences of establishing contacts with the subjects of social opposition both before and after Gezi; upon what these physical and discursive contacts mean; and upon how to move forward in the future'.<sup>16</sup> Thus, *dirsek teması* moves beyond discourses of toleration and liminal political representation as a minority group. It envisages the LGBTI+ movement occupying the same physical spaces alongside various social groups and establishing intersectional solidarity networks.

**Cynthia Enloe:** Feminist solidarity work should make you feel expanded, deepened and energized. Entering into a genuine, dynamic feminist solidarity effort isn't getting into a warm bath. It is finding yourself wondering, 'Oh, good grief, who am I in this group? What am I doing in this group?' There have been many occasions in Turkey that have made me feel this way – deepened, energized, trusted, trusting, stretched. Feminists in Turkey, who have lived under very stressful conditions in the past two decades, have been some of my chief 'stretchers'. On my first visit to Turkey, in 2003, Ayşe Gül (Altınay) decided that I needed a good feminist solidarity 'work-out'. I needed to step on the proverbial treadmill and get up to speed on the many strands of Turkish feminist activism then in motion. So we went on a trip to meet feminists in Diyarbakır, Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir. In each setting (not just a place on a map), I was stretched; I was deepened; I was broadened and I came away energized by the diverse women doing challenging feminist work there. As admirable as each group was though, how, I wondered, could they weave themselves into a sustainable movement, especially when faced with myriad daily pressures to shred their solidarity.

Diyarbakır was a tense and perilous place for so many people trying to live their lives there. Ayşe, who had worked hard to develop bonds of mutual trust with local Kurdish feminists in Diyarbakır, took me to a restaurant run by the women of KAMER, the independent Kurdish women's liberation anti-violence group. The women closed the restaurant one evening just so we could have dinner among ourselves. The women in KAMER started singing songs in Kurdish. I wanted to cry. I don't understand Kurdish, but it was so beautiful. This, I thought, is what solidarity feels like. What I now realize is that these women activists, who already were taking a risk to join an autonomous Kurdish women's group in Diyarbakır, in 2003, trusted Ayşe because she had invested time, listening and humility in building trust with them. Still, I am full of wonder: What kind of courageous trust does it take to sing recently banned songs weighted with such meaning for each woman singer in the company of a woman from quite another Turkish world and her newly introduced overseas friend?

Another moment that taught me the dynamic meaning of solidarity was more recent. I think it was 2019, December, when SU Gender created a conference held in downtown

Istanbul – in a former bank. I love their taking over a capitalist space and turning it into feminist space. The marbled bank teller windows are still there. I learnt that, beginning in 2019, feminist women from several Turkish universities had been fired for having signed a peace petition.

In the face of these firings, SU Gender created a serious academic conference, complete with papers and presentations. Among the people whom SU Gender invited to be the formal presenters were feminist researchers who had just lost their academic jobs. The SU Gender conference organizers reminded me of a lesson we all need to keep re-learning: We should never imagine that because somebody has lost their university letterhead, they have lost their intellectual value.

The message of feminist solidarity running through that 2019 conference was: To act in intellectual solidarity is to take seriously, share publicly and carefully consider the work of anybody who does thoughtful feminist research and analyses. In today's academic culture there is so much pressure on all of us to care about 'credentials', to reduce 'credentials' to mere institutional logos or to add fancy status words before or after our names. Those current inclinations, of course, shrink the possibilities for authentic solidarity. SU Gender's inclusively serious conference did the exact opposite. For me, being a small part of that was enormously energizing.

## **How does solidarity transform us – personally and collectively?**

**Oksana Dutchak:** Besides providing immediate political and material assistance, solidarity produces the invisible and essential fabric of political collectivity which may be long-lasting and reemerging. It gives us power – both external and internal – that individual and collective possibility to destroy, imagine and create. This fabric of political collectivity distributes the strengths and resources, which are inevitably uneven in the current (and maybe – any) world. And making some parts of the fabric stronger contribute to the overall strengths. Of course, there is no ideal process behind: it is built on support, dialogue and understanding, but it is also built on disagreement and inevitable splits. Feminist theory and practice is relatively well equipped with the lenses of listening, respecting and caring, but we all know their limits. However, individual internalization of these lenses, as well as collective agreement to take them practically and seriously, together with the knowledge about their limits, creates the transformative power of feminist+ solidarity.

**Cynthia Enloe:** Stamina. I think the lesson I have learnt . . . well, I'm still learning . . . is: Solidarity can be created and sustained only if one builds up one's feminist stamina. And modesty is crucial in cultivating a solidarity-building stamina. Modesty can energize you to listen longer and harder. This stamina-nourishing feminist modesty also can make you bold in your ambitions because that ambitious goal is justice for all. Furthermore, it can inspire you to take risks you otherwise would eschew precisely because you are not alone; you are acting in solidarity with others.

Feminist stamina is an antidote to cynicism. I try hard never to become cynical. I have come to see that every anti-feminist wishes I would succumb to cynicism. If those

autocrats, militarists and misogynists can drive me into cynicism, they can drain me of the stamina needed to pursue difficult, enriching, sustainable solidarities.

The opposite of being a cynic is not Pollyanna, an unrealistic optimist. No. The opposite of cynicism, I've come to think, is engagement. To stay engaged means staying a listener, a learner, thus to be constantly stretched. True, stretching takes energy and the ability to embrace discomfort. But that's what makes living as a feminist so enlivening. Feminism simultaneously calls for and enables stamina.

**madeleine kennedy-macfoy:** To be in solidarity with another person or a group of people, means that we make the effort to take their predicament seriously, to imagine ourselves in their shoes, and to decide on the *action* we can take to support them. Solidarity 'is a doing word' (Olufemi, 2020: 134). When we *act* in solidarity with others, we think beyond the self, recognize our bond with others and in doing so, strengthen the foundations on which we can build collective justice and freedom.

**María López Beloso:** As I mentioned earlier, feminist solidarity connects directly to personal empowerment but necessarily also to collective empowerment (power within). The personal transformations that are fostered by collective action and accompaniment and that help women transcend traditional culturally assigned social structures must result in collective empowerment that contributes to questioning and weakening the structures that sustain inequality. In this way, women develop the individual and collective agency that transforms us into political subjects.

**Arlene Avakian:** As the daughter and granddaughter of survivors and victims of the Armenian genocide, I never would have believed that solidarity with Turkish feminists would affect me as profoundly as it has over the last 13 years. In 2008, Ayşe Gül Altınay emailed me to invite me to speak at the Hrant Dink Memorial Workshop in Istanbul. Thinking the email must be a scam, I almost deleted it, but I eventually made the momentous decision to make the trip to Turkey, the land where my grandfather was killed and the rest of the family lost their homes. At that first conference in 2009, I realized how courageous the conference organizers were and I heard Fethiye Çetin talk about her Armenian grandmother. I was very moved, and over the next few years I became very close to both Ayşe and Fethiye. The three of us have been engaged in a book project based on a series of structured conversations around gender, race/ethnicity, class and sexuality. Our decision to work on this project came out of the deep connections each of us felt to each other based on a shared political vision. The space between us has been a space for sharing pain and mourning as well as joy; sharing personal/political journeys; and co-witnessing and co-resisting. While we may have experienced this space as a healing space, that was not our goal or even a desire. Ours is not a book of reconciliation but a discussion about these issues from our different positionalities, each one hopefully illuminating the other.

Through our work together, our comprehension of gender, race/ethnicity/class has deepened enormously. We understand both ourselves and our worlds in new ways by deep listening and honest sharing. Our conversations and the subsequent work on the book has been transformative in so many ways. I never would have thought that sharing with two Turkish women would have been so profound. I very rarely call something healing, but our work was truly that. Because of the encouragement of Ayşe and my partner Martha, I visited Kastemonu, the small city where my maternal family lived until



1915. They were 'lucky' because they were not marched into the desert by taken by cart. I will never know why they were not killed. Why were they fed and housed? But this good treatment did not extend to my 8-year-old uncle who the gendarmes wrested from my grandmother. With courage, cunning and luck she managed to get him back and with the help of a friend of my grandfather's also get the family back to Kastemonu.

Being in Kastemonu and walking the streets where my mother may have taken her first steps, going into a pastirma shop where my grandmother may have shopped, and having drinks in a hotel which was once a textile market where my grandfather may have sold his goods gave me a grounding that I did not previously have. And it was the result of a deep solidarity – a deep awareness of shared interests and shared politics that brought us together and took me to Kastemonu.

By engaging with each other across our differences, recognizing them rather than denying them, we can actually see each other, learn more about each other, learn who we want to become, and what kind of world we want to inhabit and leave to our children and grandchildren.

## **How, for you, does (or should) feminist+ solidarity work in knowledge production and scholarly practice?**

**madeleine kennedy-macfoy:** Within academia, I have been fortunate to know and work with feminist scholars who have been generous with their time and knowledge, offering me support and mentoring without me asking them to do so. To me, this is a powerful practice of feminist+ solidarity, and I know I have not been its only beneficiary. Not to say that feminist academics are perfect unicorns – we are flawed humans, just like everyone else! – but I have witnessed multiple examples of mentoring and support between and among feminist scholars. This kind of feminist+ solidarity is vital, especially at a time of ever increasing precarity in the higher education sector across different regions, not to mention the vicious global backlash against gender research and forces determined to roll back rights many of us thought were secure.

**María López Belloso:** From my point of view, the generation of knowledge from feminist solidarity must be open to listen to the voices of the different subjects and let these voices be the ones that set the agenda for research and knowledge development above the priorities defined by the big journals and research funding organizations. In addition to rethinking the issues on which to focus our collective action, feminist solidarity should also mark our way of making and producing knowledge. There is no doubt that our scientific production is strongly conditioned by the context of neoliberalism and academic capitalism, which pushes us towards patterns of scientific production far removed from priorities defined from the bottom up and which impose logics of functioning and production that are hardly compatible with sustaining life. Feminist academics should exercise our solidarity and collective action to strengthen the care of the thematic priorities relevant to feminism and our own self-care. This reconceptualization of scientific production should result in a democratization of scientific production and a valuing of our own contributions on the basis of mutual recognition rather than competition and rivalry.



**Arlene Avakian:** Solidarity with Black and other women of colour transformed me, transformed the way I think about the world, transformed the questions I want to answer in my scholarship. As I indicated earlier, the work of overcoming our social construction is long and hard. We have to uncover the assumptions we have from our social positionalities. I am enormously grateful for the amazing Black Studies scholarship from W.E.B. Dubois to the young scholars that are charting new territory and often reviving the work of older scholars. I am also enormously grateful to the many Black people who were generous enough to school me through mentorship and friendship. Whether we are engaged in actions, events, parties, sharing food, listening to music I am always learning. I have been changed and continue to change as a result of these encounters. As I said earlier, speaking as a White woman, I need to be in solidarity to keep me on track, to keep me from reverting into Whiteness. But as Bernice Johnson Reagon told us more than 40 years ago, this work is hard and dangerous, but it is also our salvation.

### **And how do you see the future of solidarity – as a concept and practice?**

**Oksana Dutchak:** I don't see the future without solidarity which would follow the principles of feminist+ solidarity. Literally – as the future of humanity, this future probably does not exist. And there may be little reasons for optimism in the face of environmental crises, constant military escalations, growing exploitation, inequalities and decades long stagnation or decline in progressive mobilizations across the globe. There is no strong and progressive project of a scale to inspire and unite people around the possible positive and just scenario for humanity. Of course, there have been many significant and important uniting ideas and mobilizations, but it looks like they don't have the capacities yet to counterbalance the many reactionary and dividing turns of the system. Here it would be good to remember, that solidarity is an instrument, but it is also an ideological principle in itself: it can transform, but it is also transformative; it aggregates collective power, but it also changes it qualitatively. So the future of solidarity is its accumulations, spreading and development – around and together with the multiplicity of uniting progressive projects and mobilization. Opposing the constructed and dominant principle of competitive individualism, the principle of collective solidarity is the only way through and out which is both about the future of solidarity and the future.

**María López Beloso:** Solidarity as a concept and as a way of doing should mark our roadmap in a context where feminism faces many challenges. We are at a time when the rise of the extreme right and anti-gender movements threatens many of the hard-won women's rights. In this context of threat and regression, we must join forces and support each other to ensure that we do not take a single step backwards in the protection of women's rights. This collective struggle must be guided by knowledge produced from a co-creation and collaboration of the feminist critical mass that informs and defines the agenda. For the concept and practice to be robust, it must include and reflect the realities of women around the world and provide evidence of the impact of human rights roll-backs on women. At a time when we are experiencing an intensification of the tension of war, women need to be agents of peace who empathize with and visualize the suffering that conflict brings.

**madeleine kennedy-macfoy:** I agree with Lola Olufemi's assertion that 'solidarity is one of the most important political tools we can use to maximise our success and make demands that cut across the structural barriers that seek to individualise our experiences' (Olufemi, 2020: 142). This is an understanding of solidarity that echoes a trade union approach, in which the collective power of workers forms the basis for challenging exploitative employment structures and practices. As both concept and practice, I think solidarity will need to be flexible and expansive, as local and global crises multiply and the planet itself is under threat. Without (feminist+) solidarity, I don't see how we can achieve the types of changes and transformations we so urgently need in the world.

**Arlene Avakian:** I will go back to the beginning. I believe that meaningful and ongoing solidarity, the solidarity that actually transforms the people engaged in it, can only happen if we have awareness of our own positionality and are involved in activism to change the effects of those social constructions on the material and psychic conditions of the lives of all women. People have to be invested in and have the courage to search the deepest recesses of themselves and their world to engage in the difficult work of solidarity.

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### Notes

1. See <https://sugender.sabanciuniv.edu/en/etkinlikler/feminist-solidarity-roundtable> for details (accessed 29 August 2022). The roundtable can be viewed from the YouTube page of SU Gender: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFaydZLQTFQ>
2. Cynthia Enloe and Arlene Voski Avakian have long histories of being in feminist+ solidarity with scholars and activists of Turkey, including with Ayşe Gül Altınay herself. They have visited Turkey in the most perilous times, facing great risk and witnessing painful historical moments of violence, loss and mourning. Since their remarks here were initially shaped in a conversation hosted by Ayşe Gül Altınay at SU Gender in Istanbul, this history of sharing solidarity spaces and moments figure strongly in their responses.
3. See Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solidarity> (accessed 29 August 2022)
4. Frances Beale, a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee activist, published *Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female as a pamphlet* which was later included in Toni Cade's (1970) groundbreaking edited book *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. The Combahee River Collective, a group of Black women who did not identify themselves beyond the name of their collective, wrote a statement outlining the intersections of race, class and gender (see Eisenstein, 1978). The poet, essayist and activist June Jordan presented her landmark essay, 'Report from the Bahamas' as the keynote address at the New England Women's Studies Association Conference in Salem, MA in 1982. It is published in *On Call: Political Essays* (Jordan, 1985).
5. SPOD is the Turkish acronym for Social Policies, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation Studies Association, an LGBTI+ organization established in 2011.

6. HEVI LGBTI+ is Kurdish acronym for Lesbain, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual Association for Rights, Equality and Existence, established in 2015.
7. The Spanish feminist movement was able to organize a full 24-hour women's strike on 8 March 2018 under the motto 'If we stop, the world stops' and aimed to show the role of women in every sector of productive and non-productive labour. According to the media the strike was successful and had a significant impact on the education system, health services, public administration and transportation (El País 9 de marzo de 2018; Publico 8 de marzo 2018).
8. Discussion on *dirsek teması* was first published on ArtsEverywhere.ca.
9. SOGI is an acronym for 'sexual orientation and gender identity'.
10. The movement started as a protest against the cutting of trees in Gezi Park and the urban development plans for the area. On 29 May 2013, the sit-in protest in the park was attacked by the police. The police brutality against the peaceful protesters drew widespread criticism all around Turkey. What started as a small sit-in protest soon turned into area-wide clash with the police as more and more people arrived in Taksim to land their support. From 1 to 15 June, the park was occupied by the protestors, criticizing neoliberal and neoconservative economic and cultural politics of the ruling government. On 15 June, the police attacked the park, burning the tents and forcing people out of the park. This made protests to disperse across Istanbul and Turkey. In various cities, people came together to protest, chanting 'Her Yer Taksim, Her Yer Direniş' (Everywhere Taksim, Everywhere Resistance). The political effects of the Gezi Park Movement are still deeply felt, since a group of civil society actors were arrested in 2017 on the grounds of 'being masterminds' behind the protests. Some of them are still behind bars to this day.
11. Taksim is located in a historical district of Istanbul. It has always been an important space for LGBTI+ activism in Turkey. In 1987, in a first-ever public protest, a group of LGBTI+ people went on a 10-day hunger strike in Gezi Park. It was the home of one of the first LGBTI+ organizations, Lambdaİstanbul which was founded in 1993. Istanbul Pride Walks take place in the Taksim area since 2004.
12. The most influential soccer fan group of Beşiktaş, the football club.
13. A pastry that is baked and distributed on the holy days of Islam.
14. <https://m.bianet.org/bianet/lgbti/147897-21-lgbt-onur-haftasi-basladi>
15. From my personal archive of pamphlets for Pride Week programmes.
16. From my personal archive of pamphlets for Pride Week programmes.

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