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Book Review: *Organized Muslim Women in Turkey: An Intersectional Approach to Building Women's Coalitions*¹

Reviewed by Shruti Das² and Ranjit Mandal³

Organized Muslim Women in Turkey, authored by Ayşe Dursun, provides a comprehensive overview of the socio-political landscape in Turkey, particularly focusing on the role of organized Muslim women. The organized Muslim women discussed in the book do not share uniform ideological or organizational properties but converge on the common ground of linking gendered issues and religion. The book comprises seven chapters revolving around the Muslim women's movement, with a specific emphasis on the headscarf movement, and the subsequent evolution of their engagement in Turkish politics. It provides a rich contextual foundation for understanding the intricate intersections of religion, politics, and women's rights. Additionally, it offers a critical examination of coalition-building efforts among women's movements, taking into account the shifting political landscape and the diverse nature of contemporary patriarchy in Turkey.

The introductory chapter navigates through debates on the symbolism of the headscarf, exploring whether it signifies religious and patriarchal oppression or an expression of personal identity and freedom. It also explores the post-coup political landscape, emphasizing the ideological shift from Kemalism to a conservative-religious approach. This shift marked a departure from the strictly secularist stance, acknowledging Islam as part of the national identity. The ensuing years saw the ebb and flow of headscarf bans, contributing to political tensions and activism among affected women. The narrative extends into the AKP (*Adaletve Kalkınma Partisi*) era, highlighting the party's efforts to present itself as a conservative democratic force while engaging with organizations of civil society. This chapter sets the stage for the main focus of the book: the exploration of coalition-building between organized Muslim women and secular women's movement actors against the backdrop of evolving patriarchal arrangements and political dynamics.

In chapter two, Dursun explores the historical context that shaped women's movements in Turkey, especially against the backdrop of significant political and institutional transformations during the last four decades. The pivotal shift occurred in 1980 when the military seized power, implementing economic liberalization and fostering a new bourgeoisie. Neoliberal restructuring replaced the statist policies of the Kemalist elite, providing an ideological opening for Islamism to emerge as a competing ideology. Second-wave feminism emerged amid these changes and led to a focus on publications, demonstrations, campaigns, and petitions against gender-based discrimination. Despite contributing to the re-democratization of the post-coup era, feminist ideas faced opposition from Kemalists, the political left, and Islamists. This ideological shift, coupled with Turkey's neoliberal transition, fostered a consensus between religion and modernist capitalism. The state actively promoted a moderate version of Islam, influencing education curricula, supporting religious institutions, and funding conservative foundations. During this period, the struggle over the headscarf intensified with legal and constitutional battles reflecting

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societal debates. Despite resistance against headscarf bans, Islamist women exhibited an ambivalent relationship with the state and individual rights. Thus, the rise of political Islam and the headscarf predicament became crucial components in shaping the sociopolitical milieu of women's organizations in Turkey. The 1990s witnessed a surge in the number of women-focused NGOs, partly fueled by foreign funding through the EU accession process. While this brought institutional and financial benefits, it also shifted feminism towards less confrontational, project-oriented approaches. Identity politics gained traction as marginalized groups, influenced by global movements, challenged mainstream narratives. Islamism, Kurdish activism, and LGBTQ+ advocacy presented alternative solutions to traditional feminist ideas of women's problems in Turkey. The feminist movement itself experienced internal tension, notably between radical and Kemalist feminists. While both groups championed secularism, they differed in their approaches to solving women's issues. Kemalist feminists believed in resolving problems within the framework provided by the founding fathers, while feminists argued for substantive equality beyond formal measures. The political landscape also witnessed the consolidation of Islamist parties in the 1990s, with the Welfare Party under Necmettin Erbakan gaining significant support, especially from women. However, this period also saw political turmoil, with Erbakan's resignation from office in 1997 and subsequent legal actions against pro-Islamic entities, including the banning of the Welfare Party. The AKP, emerging in the aftermath of a 2002 economic crisis, presented itself as a conservative Democrat party, distancing itself from its Islamist roots. It pursued neoliberal economic policies and displayed a blend of reformism and conservatism. During its early years, women's movements seized the political opportunity and successfully advocated for legal reforms, particularly amending the Penal Code. However, the AKP's approach to women's rights took a conservative turn, emphasizing pronatalist discourses and displaying a decline in gender equality. The government's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021 signaled a conservative shift, marginalizing autonomous women's movements and witnessing the rise of conservative women's groups aligned with neoliberalism.

Dursun, herein, highlights the shift from Republican patriarchy (1923–1980), characterized by state-monopolized women's issues and a selective granting of social and political rights, to liberal patriarchy (1980–2000), coinciding with economic liberalization and privatization of traditional gender roles. Her focus then turns to the neoliberal-conservative patriarchy that emerged in the 2000s, resulting from the fusion of neoliberalism and religious conservatism. This paradigm centers on prescribing the domestic sphere as women's primary locus, reinforcing traditional gender roles, and encouraging women's involvement in familial care through cash-for-care schemes. Furthermore, she introduces the concept of "personalistic, religious patriarchy," adorned with Islamism, as a recent development (43). This form of patriarchy employs backlash and political authoritarianism to co-opt and marginalize feminist agendas and activism. She contends that in New Turkey, marked by an intensified patriarchal gender order and ongoing de-democratization, women's movements are compelled to adopt new strategies and resources to navigate the evolving conditions of their oppression.

In chapter three, Dursun introduces an analytical framework for examining the coalition-building capacities of Muslim women in Turkey within the context of evolving gender relations and patriarchal structures. She discusses the interconnectedness of patriarchy with other forms of oppression such as patriarchy, racism, and class exploitation, noting their impact on women's experiences, identities, politics, and relationships. She also adopts Sylvia Walby's six structures to scrutinize patriarchy, stressing the necessity of an intersectional reevaluation to grasp the intricacies of social relationships (69). Dursun acknowledges the complexity of the relationship

between women's movements and patriarchy, understanding that women may challenge, reinforce, or bargain with patriarchal structures based on various factors. Coalition building within women's movements is described with a focus on its importance and challenges. The factors influencing coalition formation, such as shared ideology and political opportunities, are highlighted, and intersectionality is introduced as a crucial framework for understanding the complexities of power relations and oppression. Dursun argues that an intersectional approach fosters inclusivity and representation within women's movements, while cautioning against potential hindrances like "counter-intersectionality" (79). She outlines a methodological framework for studying women's movements and coalitions, particularly focusing on organized Muslim women in Turkey, using a multi-level intersectional analysis and qualitative research methods. Inspired by the work of Gabriele Winker and Nina Degele, she suggests a three-level analysis for her study: micro, meso, and macro. The micro level looks at individual and group experiences with structural and intersectional inequality, shaping their identities and political views. The macro level examines stabilized structures and relations of inequality that affect all individuals and groups. The meso level focuses on social movements and coalitions as an intermediary arena for processing intersectional experiences. The study uses qualitative research, specifically semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 28 organized Muslim women in Turkey, conducted between March 2013 and July 2016. The interviews cover various topics related to gender equality, women's rights, and other social and political issues. Dursun acknowledges the challenges of qualitative research, such as potential biases in the sample and the need to navigate the complex political atmosphere in Turkey during the research period.

Dursun reviews the experiences of Muslim women within the context of religious-conservative and secularist patriarchies in chapter four. She delves into various social institutions such as family, marriage, neighborhood, schools, work, and political parties, highlighting the gender inequalities prevalent in these settings. The narratives of Muslim women reflect the complex interplay between gender, religion, ethnicity, class, and education in shaping their identities and political positions. The recognition of neoliberal influences adds depth to the analysis, urging a holistic understanding of the forces shaping Muslim women's experiences. She draws on interviews to provide insights into the complex ways in which education shapes the experiences of Muslim women, influencing their understanding of gender issues, political engagement, and economic independence, while also acknowledging the existence of class-based disparities within this context. The interviews highlight how the historical context into which women are born shapes their encounters with issues like headscarf bans. Different generations faced these bans in diverse contexts, influencing their perspectives. Dursun critically brings out the evolving meanings attached to the Islamic headscarf, from being a political symbol in earlier decades to a diverse and individualized expression today. She further examines the experiences of Muslim women in Turkey concerning the headscarf, addressing changes in societal attitudes, the impact of bans on education and employment, and the intersectionality of identity. The psychological impact of these bans is also explored, with some women expressing feelings of trauma and the ban being described as "schizophrenic" (120). The narratives also underscore the role of class and education in shaping experiences of inequality and privilege, particularly in the context of the headscarf ban. Class and educational attainment patterns continue to influence these experiences, with upper-class women often able to evade the ban by pursuing academic degrees abroad. Thus, Ayşe Dursun provides an examination of the multiple dimensions of inequality and privilege in the lives of Muslim women, emphasizing the need to consider intersecting categories and historical configurations to understand their experiences fully.

In chapter five, she examines the political evolution of Muslim women, tracing changes in their political engagement, organizational affiliations, and the diverse issues they address. She discusses the organizational forms and grounds for collective mobilization among Muslim women in Turkey. She focuses on the impact of these organizational forms on recruitment, state interaction, and coalition-building with other movement organizations. The Constitution of the Republic of Turkey grants the right to form associations with various organizations and foundations though some Muslim women prefer informal organizing for greater political autonomy. However, Dursun emphasizes the implications of conservative Muslim women's engagement in family, education, and charity politics within the broader neoliberal-conservative framework, contributing to the political marginalization of feminist Muslim women. Conservative Muslim women pursue gender justice through community-based, non-institutional approaches aligned with neoliberalism, aiming to depoliticize structural inequalities. In contrast, feminist Muslim women advocate for gender equality, demanding institutional measures against violence and resisting practices perpetuating power differentials. Dursun shows challenges in cooperation due to this ideological divide, accentuated by uneven distribution of resources by the government favoring conservative groups. This created competitions and rivalries within the civil society landscape. However, the consolidation of AKP's rule and the lifting of headscarf bans signify the end of the iconic headscarf movement and a shift in Muslim women's relationship with the state from contentious to congenial.

Dursun, in the penultimate chapter, describes the dynamics of coalitions between Muslim women and other secular women's movements in Turkey, examining factors that shape their capacity and willingness to collaborate. She reveals that many Muslim women, particularly those with feminist or pro-feminist orientations, engage in border-crossing practices, affiliating with various organizations and groups simultaneously. Young feminist Muslim women, in particular, are depicted as active members of diverse platforms, such as the Islamic and anti-capitalist Labor and Justice Platform, challenging issues beyond gender equality, including the Kurdish problem and ecological concerns. In contrast, the practices of conservative Muslim women show their limited mobility within the conservative women's movement and their reluctance to engage with secular feminists, socialists, and Kurds. Thus, Dursun notes differences between feminist and conservative Muslim women in terms of mobility and coalition building, with some conservative women responsive to political opportunities but less likely to engage in cross-movement collaborations.

In chapter seven, the concluding chapter of the book, Dursun summarizes her key research findings and proposes new avenues for future research. She critically navigates the political landscape of women's movements in Turkey, unraveling the intricate interplay between shifting gender dynamics and evolving power structures. By emphasizing the simultaneous consideration of continuities and changes in social relations and power dynamics, the analysis sheds light on how women's experiences of intersectional inequality shape their political engagements and coalition-building efforts. Dursun, thus, investigates the challenges and potential of building women's solidarities and coalitions, showcasing insights gained from the study's historical and contextual analysis. The importance of studying "awkward movements" (205) and broadening the definition of women's movements to include various perspectives is emphasized, offering valuable implications for social movement research. The chapter concludes by addressing the evolving political landscape in Turkey and its implications for women's movements, highlighting both challenges and new possibilities.

In Ayşe Dursun's *Organized Muslim Women in Turkey*, a comprehensive exploration of the socio-political terrain unfolds, emphasizing the multifaceted experiences and challenges faced by Muslim women in navigating the evolving patriarchal landscape of Turkey. Through a detailed examination of intersectional inequality, the book sheds light on the complex dynamics within feminist and conservative movements, revealing the intricate threads of autonomy, privilege, and resistance. This book not only unravels the historical nuances of Turkey's political transformation but also serves as a compelling call to reevaluate the intricate intersections of gender, religion, and politics within the broader spectrum of women's movements globally. In essence, the book advocates for a holistic approach to understanding women's movements, one that considers historical context, societal nuances, and institutional frameworks, offering valuable insights into the complex dynamics of power, political alignments, and the enduring strength of women's coalitions amidst evolving challenges. Readers and researchers with an interest in the intricate dynamics of women's experiences, political engagements, and coalition-building in the evolving sociopolitical landscape of Turkey will find this book to be a valuable and insightful exploration of intersectionality and gender relations.