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# Chapter 3

## The Male Domination of Transnational Migrant Politics

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Over the past decade the attention for gender in migration studies has been rising slowly (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1999; Yuval-Davis, Anthias and Kofman, 2005; Donato, Gabaccia, Holdaway, Manalansan and Pessar, 2006; Schrover, Van der Leun, Lucassen, and Quispel 2008). Female migrants are no longer solely studied as passive followers of husbands and fathers, but as actors with agency of their own (Brettell, 2003: 153-196). Increasingly, the entire migration process is perceived as a gendered phenomenon (Donato et al., 2006: 6 citing several studies). Also in the subfield of studies on transnationalism, and more specifically its social dimension – think of transnational families, households and marriages – gender gradually becomes more integrated (Levitt, 2001; Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007: 137-139).

Gender, however, is also significant outside these typically ‘female’ spaces (Mahler, 1998: 82-87; Al-Ali, 2002; Vertovec, 2009: 64-66). Nevertheless, in most recent ‘state of the art’ and ‘taking stock’ special journal issues and edited volumes on migrant transnationalism and diaspora, full contributions or chapters on gender are absent (e.g. Fibbi and D’Amato, 2008; Khagram and Levitt, 2008; Martiniello and Lafleur, 2008; Pries, 2008; Ben-Rafael, Sternberg, Bokser Liwerant and Gorny, 2009; Vertovec, 2009; Bauböck and Faist, 2010). Equally, gender goes unnoticed in empirical studies on diaspora- and transnational migrant politics (Shain, 1999; Ögelman, 2003; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Sheffer, 2003; for an exception see Aliefendioğlu, 2004; Brand, 2006; Esman, 2009). Confirming this pattern, gender is not considered in general studies on migrants’ political participation and their organizational networks in the receiving country (Van Heelsun, 2002; Schrover and Vermeulen, 2005; Vermeulen, 2006; Yurdakul, 2009). This paper argues

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1 I thank Anja van Heelsun for making the database of Turkish organizations in the Netherlands available.

that there are good reasons to bring gender into the study of transnational migrant and diaspora politics. After a short literature review, I analyse how transnational and diaspora politics of Turks and Kurds in the Netherlands is gendered on an institutional level. I will conclude with suggestions for future research.

## Bringing gender into the study of transnational migrant politics

The fact that gender is systematically ignored in both the field of transnational migrant politics as well as studies on migrants' political participation is arguably because, in the words of Mahler and Pessar, 'gender operates so "naturally" that it may easily escape our awareness. To measure its effects we must first see gender operating.' (Mahler and Pessar, 2006: 29). This may be particularly true for transnational politics, given that we are used to formal politics which traditionally has been male-dominated (Reynolds, 1999).

There are good reasons to bring gender into the study of transnationalism, and in particular its political dimension, because gender par excellence constructs power relations (see Mahler, 2001: 609; Mahler and Pessar, 2001; Pessar and Mahler, 2003; Brettell, 2006; Donato, Gabaccia et al., 2006). Existing scholarship suggests that migrant men and women's involvement in social networks and transnationalism takes very different forms. Taking stock of the literature, Itzigsohn and Giorguli-Saucedo (2005: 896) find that '[m]en appear to be more committed to the maintenance of public and institutionalized transnational ties than women, while women appear more committed to participating in the life of the receiving country'. Related to the receiving country Menjívar (2000: 157-193) shows that Salvadoran women play an important role in *informal* networks consisting of friends and family (also see Hagan 1998). In the case of Congolese women Nell (2003) shows that such informal networks operate almost invisibly. Those informal women networks, however, are crucial for the community since they facilitate the formation of *formal* networks of migrant organizations which are predominately directed by men. In a similar vein Fouron and Glick Schiller found that '[r]ather than being part of an explicitly political activity, women may often engage in impassioned politics within the domain of domestic activities and family rites de passage, such as weddings, funerals, births, and graduations' (2001: 571).

Yet, it is the institutionalized and public nature of migrants' organizational and transnational ties exceeding the level of the private sphere and the individual that structures transnational politics (Mügge, 2010).

The degree of institutionalization thus is expected to determine the way gender structures transnational politics. The next section shows how this plays out for Turks and Kurds in the Netherlands.

## Turkish and Kurdish immigration and organisation in the Netherlands

Migrants from Turkey are the largest non-Western migrant group in the Netherlands (388.967 in 2011).<sup>2</sup> Significant migration from Turkey was concentrated between 1964 and 1974 when the Dutch and Turkish governments had a labour agreement (Akgündüz, 2008). Labour migration predominantly included Turkish men. Many labour migrants opted for a permanent stay in the Netherlands and their wives and children followed. As a consequence already in 1972 half of the Turkish migrants were women (Schapendonk-Maas, 2000: 26). A similar pattern is observed in Germany (Aliefendioğlu, 2004), and it still holds today. Kurds were underrepresented in the first wave of labour migration in the 1960s as recruitment mainly took place in western and central Turkey where few Kurds lived. This changed in the early 1970s when labour was increasingly recruited from eastern Turkey (Van Bruinessen, 1999). Many Kurds arrived in the Netherlands after the 1980 coup in Turkey (Baker, Vervloet and Gailly, 2002: 162-167). As Kurds are not registered on the basis of ethnicity, official numbers for the Netherlands do not exist. Their estimated number is between 50,000 and 100,000 (ROB, 2001; Moors, Van den Reek Vermeulen and Siesling, 2009).

Compared to other migrant groups in the Netherlands, migrants from Turkey are very well organized: they have at their disposal a high number of organizations which are connected in dense networks with a low number of isolated organisations (Fennema and Tillie 1999; Van Heelsum, Tillie et al. 1999). Also, their organizational structures are more stable than other groups (cf. Mügge, 2011). Many organisations established in the 1970s and 1980s still exist (Mügge, 2010).

Between 1998 and 1999 the Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies (IMES) of the University of Amsterdam found 1,125 organisations among Turks (including Kurds) of which only five per cent (61) focus on women. The names of the organisations, their addresses, and the names of their board members were acquired from the Dutch Chamber of Commerce. This information was available for 69 per cent (773) of Turkish organisations. Five per cent of those organisations (40 out of

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2 Statline, Central Bureau for Statistics, <http://statline.cbs.nl/statweb/>, accessed 11 May 2011.

773) are directed by women. The grand majority of those organisations specifically target women (see table 1).

Table 1 Female director and type of organisation

Type of organisation	Number
Women	35
Religious	2
Cultural	2
Unknown	1
Total	40

The IMES analysed Turkish organisational networks on the basis of the interlocking directorates of organisations, meaning organisations were connected when one person was on the administrative board of two or more organisations. None of the organisations directed by a woman have a central position in the overall of Turkish organisations (see figure 2 in Van Heelsum and Tillie: 20). The Turkish organisational network is thus almost completely male-dominated. That said, some organisations, such as the conservative Islamic Milli Görüş, organise activities specifically by and for women (for examples in Germany see Sökefeld, 2008). Mirroring the position of women in Islamist political movements, this work has largely remained informal (White, 2002).

Using the IMES network as a starting point I identified the key persons in migrant organizational networks who maintained institutionalized ties with political actors in Turkey or diaspora. Since administrative boards are seldom transnational in the sense that people from both the Netherlands and Turkey additional research to expand and update the IMES network was needed. New data was collected in the Netherlands and Turkey through interviews with organisational leaders and elites, through my own observations during activities, by reading newspaper articles, websites, organisations' brochures and reports, and secondary literature where available. The new national and transnational ties I found were based on structural or sporadic cooperation, advice, memberships (among organisations and individuals), and kinship. During the interviews I asked interviewees to provide me with the contact details of homeland organisations with which they maintain ties. This more qualitative approach only led to a very small increase of organisations in the national network directed by women. Similarly, the transnational ties maintained between migrant organisations in the Netherlands and collective actors in Turkey are also for the grand majority run by men.

Only two organisations directed by women in the overall network have been transnationally active in the past or in the period under study: the Turkish Women's Federation in the Netherlands (HTKB) and the International Free Women's Foundation (IFWF). The federation HTKB was founded in 1977 and united eight women organisations. Although the federation still exists, its transnational activities and ties have diminished over time. IFWF was founded in 2001 and in the period under study was well embedded in a sub-cluster of European Kurdish diaspora organizations and the pro-Kurdish based in Turkey. The transnational involvement of both organisations was responsive to the violence of the Turkish state against the left, Kurds, women or both and mirrored the struggle of the leftist feminist and Kurdish feminist movements in Turkey (for a full analysis see Mügge forthcoming).

## Conclusion

This paper has shown that Turkish and Kurdish women have been underrepresented in formal and institutionalized forms of migrant- and transnational politics between the late 1970s and 2005. The only two organisations involved in transnationalism directed by women were women organisations. Their transnational ties mirrored the ideologies and activities of the leftist women's movement in the 1980s and the Kurdish women's movement in the 1990s and 2000s. Women have certainly been present in mainstream migrant organisations and gradually enter boards of administration. Systematic research on migrant and transnational politics in both women and mainstream organisations of second generation women is needed. To what extent do they reproduce homeland gender hierarchies? Are their strategies similar to feminist movements in the receiving societies, the countries or origin of their or parents, or different altogether? And finally, what are the consequences for gender equality when institutionalised migrant politics and transnational politics are male dominated?

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