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Women's Political Representation
and Women's Branches in Turkey:
Untangling a Complex Relationship

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Abstract

All major political parties in Turkey have established women's branches. The ruling Justice and Development Party even takes pride in its women's branches being the largest women's organization in the world. The working paper examines the intricate link between the status of these women's organizations and women's political representation. Are these auxiliary structures conducive of women's political ascension? The analysis shows that party-specific lenses are necessary in order to answer this question. The paper proceeds in three steps: first it examines the legal status of women's branches across parties, then it looks into the selection process of women's branches president, and lastly, it explores the branches' role during the candidate selection process.

Keywords

Gender in politics, Women's branches, Female political representation, Political parties, Contemporary Turkey, Kurdish politics

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Introduction: Diverse panorama of women's political representation

In Turkey, women account for 17.45% of national legislators (TBMM 2018), for 2.89% of mayors and for 10.72% of municipal councillors (Kadın Koalisyonu 2014). Even though Turkey granted political rights to women in the first half of 1930s¹ (before many European countries), women's representation remained so low that it was more fitting to talk about their "absence" from politics rather than underrepresentation (Tekeli 1982; Çitçi 2001). In the subsequent decades, women's presence in electoral politics has experienced some fluctuations and a rather slow increase (KA-DER 2017)². This paper considers the role that political parties play in enabling women's access to representative offices but it should be noted from the onset that it is by no means the complete picture. One can for instance look at an office not formally subjected to party competition: the *muhtar* (elected neighbourhood representative) to understand that the dynamics of exclusion go beyond the wrongdoings of political actors. *Muhtars* are officially non-partisan agents and still women account for only 1.3% of *muhtars* in Turkey (Muhtarlar Konfederasyonu 2015)³. Women's social status, gender roles and stereotypes, difficulties with accessing leadership positions but also poverty rates and levels of domestic violence all contribute to explain women's political underrepresentation. Parties thus render explicit gendered inequalities transcending the social order⁴.

In the absence of legislative gender-based quota, political parties appear as veritable gatekeepers to electoral politics. The space they accord to female candidates heralds the low numbers of women accessing an electoral office. In Turkey's 2018 legislative election, women accounted for 20.57% of all candidates (Kadın Koalisyonu 2018, 1): such a proportion made it clear from the onset that women would remain underrepresented also in the new Parliament. However, behind this overall percentage lies a rather diverse political landscape: women accounted for 21% of candidates of the President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's conservative-Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) and for 18.28% of party's elected deputies. AKP's coalition partner, the nationalist conservative Nationalist Action party (MHP, Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi) nominated 13.16% of women out of which 8% were elected. The MHP's offshoot and ideological twin, the Good Party (İyi Parti) included 26.33% of women on its lists to see 7.5% of them entering the Parliament. The centrist-Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP, Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi) nominated 22.83% of women and got elected 12.5% of them. The leftist, pro-Kurdish oriented Democratic Peoples' Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP) set itself apart with 37.83% of female candidates and with 38.81% of women among its deputies, thus confirming its outstanding commitment to gender equal representation (Kadın Koalisyonu 2018; TBMM 2018). Since in Turkey the existence of women's branches constitutes the rule, the significant differences in women's representation among parties beg the question of the influence that women's branches can exercise in the candidate selection procedure.

1 Women got the right to be elected and to elect their representatives to municipalities in 1930, to the office of *muhtar* in 1933 and to the Parliament in 1934.

2 The growth has been more pronounced since the year 2000 on both, national and local, levels.

3 *Muhtars* are elected representatives of urban neighbourhoods and villages who officially have no political affiliation. For more about women *muhtars*, see Senem 2015.

4 Contextualizing women's political underrepresentation as stemming from the social inequalities doesn't mean that the parties shouldn't be held accountable for not transforming the gender-discriminatory social order.

Women's branches are party structures with exclusively female membership. They are tasked with increasing the numbers of female members of a political party. They also play crucial role in political mobilisation, especially during electoral campaign – they do the most significant portion of the door-to-door visits. Both of these activities aim at the same end: to secure party's electoral success (Achin and Lévêque 2006; Petitfils 2013, 386). Beyond that, they can also instigate intra-party reform and demand quota implementation (Lovenduski 1997, 202). But the role of women's branches in determining the levels of women's political representation is far from clear.

Women's branches are not exclusive to Turkey. In some countries (such as Bangladesh) the establishment of women's branches was made compulsory (Basu 2005, 16), while in others they are completely absent (such as in France). Childs and Kittilson have shown that women's branches exist in a half of 106 parties in 17 states in Europe. They tend to be present in larger and established parties, but are equally distributed among the right and left wing parties. Using an original data set of 196 political parties in 79 countries in Latin America, MENA region, Africa and Asia, Cowell-Meyers and Patrick have shown that women's branches are even more spread in these regions than in Europe – they exist in 72% of political parties across the ideological spectrum (Cowell-Meyers and Patrick 2017, 6). While the "European sample" shows no clear evidence that women's branches marginalize women from power centres within parties (Childs and Kittilson 2016, 4), Cowell-Meyers and Patrick's research points towards the fact that women's branches are significantly and positively related to the existence of intra-party quota (Cowell-Meyers and Patrick 2017, 8–9).

The vast majority of political parties in Turkey have founded women's branches (Çadır 2011, 60)⁵. In Turkey as well, women's branches aren't an exclusive feature of the right or of the left. Notably though, the recently created and woman-chaired İyi Parti (2017) has made the choice of not establishing women's branches and considers having "resolved" the women's underrepresentation by introducing a 25% female quota on its electoral lists (Yeniçağ 2017). By putting into question the *raison d'être* of women's branches, İyi Parti's decision renders the study of existing women's branches even more timely.

If political parties represent a gateway to electoral politics, then women's branches can represent a gateway into politics specifically for women. The gender-segregation that is the underlining logic of the branches may actually enable women's access to public space: the research focusing on numerous Islamic states indicates that women's participation in politics occurs almost entirely through women's branches (Clark and Schwedler 2003). In the Turkish context, Yeşim Arat has shown that the women's branches of the conservative Islamic Refah Parti opened the public space to Islamic women (Arat 1999). Women's organizations can also contribute to the professionalization of female politicians or act as influencers of the intra-party decision-making processes. According to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, autonomous, active and publicly-visible gender-equality organizations within parties are vital to ensure women's democratic representation (OSCE 2014, 53). But in reality, the mere existence of women's branches may not be enough in promoting women's representation. Orbiting as satellites around the party's main power structure (*ana kademe*), women's branches may even increase the risk of women's exclusion from politics or to enclose them in their traditional roles.

Are women's branches places of confinement or do they contribute to boost women's political careers? The working paper addresses this dilemma in the context of contemporary Turkey. It evaluates the place that women's branches occupy in political party's

5 Out of the 27 parties in Turkey listed by Mustafa Çadır, 21 have established women's branches.

hierarchy, first based on the texts, then based on the practice. Finally, the paper considers the opportunities and constraints related to the branches' impact on women's access to electoral politics. Four parties constitute the core of the analysis (the hitherto mentioned AKP, CHP, MHP, HDP). The others are not considered due to the lack of parliamentary or local representation or because they haven't created women's branches (such as the İyi Parti). Throughout the demonstration, a party-sensitive perspective is adopted because it entangles developments inside parties. It also helps to underline the – often disregarded – actual diversity of partisan institution in Turkey.

By inquiring into women's branches status and role, this paper contributes to the feminist neo-institutionalist scholarship about candidate selection mechanisms within political parties (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010; Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016) as well as to the political sociology concerned with the gendered dynamics of institutional change (Dulong 2010; Verge 2015). In studies about women's underrepresentation, women's branches are often disregarded. Beside some exceptions, researchers focusing on women's numerical representation in politics mostly scrutinize the effects of electoral quota (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005). This is also the case for Turkey-focused works, with only few exceptions (Arat 1999; Çadır 2011; Hızlı 2016; Aymé 2017). This contribution is an attempt to partially close this gap.

The paper is a result of my doctoral field work which started with the 2014 municipal election. Party statutes, programs, internal guidelines and electoral manifestos are among the main textual sources for the following assessment. Occasional media appearances of the prominent women's branches representatives constitute another valuable source of information. But above all, this paper builds on a set of 200 semi-directive interviews which I conducted with politically active women coming from the four main political parties in the cities of Izmir, Trabzon and Diyarbakır. While the majority of my interviewees hold the elective office in the local council after 2014, I also had the possibility to meet women's branches national and local representatives. In evaluating the status of women's branches, interviews with women not having any ties with the branch appeared as informative as those with branch's members. For the purpose of protecting the privacy of my interviewees, their names have been changed.

Auxiliaries by Law: The secondary status of women's branches

The 1960 Turkish Constitution represented a decisive push for the creation of women's branches: for the first time, parties were explicitly allowed to form such entities and the first party to create women's branches was the CHP (Kumaş 1999, 11). Women's branches were rather short-lived as they were abolished on the aftermath of the 12 September 1980 military coup. They reopened following two legislative changes in 1995 and 1999. Turkey's Law on political parties is reputed for its inflexibility and to a large extent, can be "blamed" for the similarities of women's branches legal status within the parties (2820 Siyasi Partiler Kanunu 1983). However, a closer look reveals some non-negligible variations.

Cross-partisan similarities in branches' status

Three of the studied political forces classify women's branches as auxiliaries to the main party organization. Such an institutional arrangement points towards significant cross-

-partisan similarities. The CHP's internal regulation of women's branches states in its first article that "'Women's branches' are created as a 'side branch' in order to gather female members who share party's political principles, values and understanding of political life. They are meant to work jointly with the general party direction as well as the provincial and district organizations and even in villages." (CHP 2015, 167). In the AKP's by-laws, women's branches are also listed under the category of "side entities"⁶ (AKP 2016, 70). Finally, the article 15 of the Nationalist Action Party's by-laws states that "women's branches and youth branches can be established by the decision of the party's advisory board in provinces, districts and villages while having the headquarters in Ankara." (MHP 2009, 34).

If in all three parties women's branches have a secondary status, the concrete arrangements differ from party to party and even within one party over time. The CHP is a good example of this. When the women's branches were first created in the 1960s, two of women's representatives used to take part in the party assembly (*parti meclisi*). This number was reduced to one in 1976 (Tekeli 1982, 273). Upon the establishment of CHP women's branches in the mid-1990s, the terms and conditions were not the same as in the pre-1980 era. The representative of women's branches didn't have the right to vote in the meetings and she was often marginalized by the appointment of a "vice-president responsible of women" within the party direction. The latter often acted as a rival of the branches' president. In 2012, the CHP stopped designating the "women's vice-president" and the head of women's branches became the sole voice of organized women in the party assembly. But she has still not been granted the right to vote in the party decisions.

Unlike in the CHP, the AKP women's branches president takes part in the executive meetings of the main party organization (article 67d) (AKP 2015) where she also enjoys the right to vote, even though a formal vote is rarely practiced. Thus, the AKP women's branch presidents are better off in terms of their intra-party standing than their CHP counterparts. Finally, the MHP women's president, who formally doesn't bare the title of president but of a coordinator, doesn't have an institutional mechanism to influence party executive decisions. Still, the MHP directive on women's branches displays a series of original provisions which merit being underlined. Only MHP tasks its branches with educating women about the importance of being a Turk, with preventing the division of the country and with following activities of other parties' women's branches (MHP, n.d.). Quite originally also, it allows membership of women who are not themselves members of the MHP⁷. Finally, it lists the "things not to do" (*yapılmayacak işler*), according to which, the representative can't give speeches without consent of her superior (MHP, n.d.). This list of proscribed activities can be read as an expression of willingness to confine the initiative of the branches.

Women's assemblies: the HDP's special case

The position of women's assemblies within the pro-Kurdish parties is in strike opposition with the situation in the three above-mentioned parties. The pro-Kurdish parties that currently operate in Turkish political arena are the Democratic Peoples' Party (HDP) and its local coalition partner the Party of Democratic Regions (*Demokratik Bölgeler Partisi*, DBP). Since 2005, the pro-Kurdish parties abandoned the organizational structure of women's branches and introduced women's assemblies (*kadın meclisleri*). These were granted equal status with the main party organization. They are thus not auxiliaries. This organizational shift is to be understood not only as stemming from women's mobilisation

⁶ In Turkish, these side entities are called "*yan kuruluşlar*".

⁷ The case of the MHP is unique in the Turkish context, but in Europe, the Women's Forum of the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (SDWF) also allows female non-party members to join.

efforts but also as a result of the ideological evolution of the Kurdish movement in Turkey which adopted the assembly as its preferred organisational form. Practically, this equal footing allowed women to cultivate a strict division between the two, which had practical consequences with regards to candidate selection mechanisms. In the pro-Kurdish parties, local women's branches are situated within a double hierarchy: horizontally, they are subjects to the mixed local party direction, and vertically, they appear as inferior to the national women's assembly. The power struggle takes place at the intersection of this double hierarchy. Women's presidents constantly negotiate between the local male party president and their superiors within the women's assembly.

Auxiliaries in Processes: The designation of the president of women's branches

After having noted the relative homogeneity of women's branches status, the selection procedures of women's branches presidents reveal great heterogeneity of concrete arrangements and practices. This heterogeneity is revealing about the importance of practice analysis complementing any textual assessment (Ayan Musil 2011). In addition, the nominations of the leaders of women's branches are revealing about the processes that take place within the parties and are indicative of the levels of men's interference. First, I look into the procedure within the pro-Kurdish HDP and DBP. In the majority of comparative works on Turkish politics, these parties are often the last ones to be analysed which helps authors to underline their differences with the rest of the political spectrum. Instead of positioning these parties as counterweight to the general picture, they can actually constitute a benchmark for Turkey's politics⁸.

Within the pro-Kurdish parties, women's assembly determines its representatives through series of consultations which culminate in a congress. The mixed party unit (composed of men and at least 40% of women in leadership positions) has no formal say in the nomination process. The separation and independence of women's assembly with regards to the rest of the party takes concrete form in this procedure. It has a practical function, that of limiting men's interference in the selection of female representatives. The nomination is the hands of women, but the DBP's by-laws are more ambiguous with regards to the revocation of the head of women's assembly: on the one hand, the article 34 of the DBP by-laws specifies that local women's assembly representative can only be revoked by its hierarchically superior women's representative. On the other hand, according to the article 68, women's assemblies are accountable to the local party unit and thus subjected to the decisions of the mixed party unit (DBP 2008). This subjectivation potentially hampers their independence. The concrete power relations between the mixed local unit and women's assembly stem from the strength of the Kurdish women's movement locally. If women are well organized, the mixed party unit has little say in assembly's decisions. Diyarbakır's central districts represent such a case because the Kurdish women's movement is historically very well rooted in the city. But in Izmir, the HDP has less solid party organization and women's assembly suffers from the weakness of the Kurdish women's movement in the region.

8 By reversing this logic, I wish to point towards the significance of the classification itself.

Even though women from pro-Kurdish parties conduct local consultations, the decision about the future women's leader is generally announced to the women's assembly and the process behind the closed door has not been elucidated by my interviewees. The head of women's assembly is indeed selected by her peers (other women), but in a process which remains non transparent. In this regard, the CHP features strikingly different picture. Since 2012, it organizes bi-annual congress of its women's branches (CHP 2018). These congresses are systematically invested by two or more candidates and their outcome is often not known in advance. However, the balance sheet of CHP's women congresses needs some nuance. If eight women's congresses were held between 1962 and 1980 (Kumaş 1999), after the branches' reestablishment in the 1990s, no congress was held between 1996 and 2003 (Gökoğlu, n.d.). Moreover, between 2007 and 2010, CHP didn't even have a women's branches president nationally. Thus, women's congresses in the party are still a rather recent endeavour.

On the local level, the CHP women's branches appear as the least centralized among the four parties. Provincial congresses systematically feature more candidates than one and their outcome doesn't appear as guaranteed in advance (Gerçek İzmir 2018). While this makes the CHP women's branches spaces of political competition, it is also a source of frustration for participants as frequent voting issues arise during the congress. Losing team also regularly distance itself from the winner which means that congress fuels (at least temporarily) women's exits from politics. Within the branches, any men's interference in women's selection process is openly denounced. Several of my interviewees publicly confronted local party leaders supposedly backing "their" candidates at the head of women's branch. This defence mechanism shows a shared consciousness that certain independence of women's branches is needed. Women leaders are reluctant to relinquish their control of the nomination procedure even when it comes to fill in a provisionally vacant seat. Concretely, in İzmir, after a district women's branch leader resigned, the male president of the local party unit designed the successor himself. This was a violation of intra-party rules as this prerogative belongs to the hierarchically superior women's branch. In order to avoid setting up an undesirable precedent, the provisional women's president was revoked and replaced by a person designated by the women's branch headquarters (Drechselová 2018).

The AKP also organizes women's congresses but they are radically different in nature from those of the CHP. It would be more accurate to talk about "confirmation" rather than election. AKP's headquarters pressures both the local party units and the women's branches to present only one candidate in each congress, in order to have "one candidate and a common list" (tek aday, ortak liste). Such an arrangement allows the party to organize congresses that are not confrontational and do not tarnish party's reputation in the media. My interviews in Trabzon revealed that women's branch Ankara headquarters often picks the next local branch president and nominates her to the office prior to the congress. By doing so, the headquarters assumes determining role in the selection procedure and transforms the congress to a purely consecrating one. The same dynamic is in place between the provincial and district levels of the AKP women's branches. In this sense, women's branches appear as part of an overarching centralizing effort within the party which is not particular to women's organizations. The control over congress is not the only "weapon" of the national headquarters, it also uses a set of negative (revocation) as well as positive (intra-party awards) incentives to command its local party units. The centralizing tendency is meant at overcoming the information imbalance from with Ankara suffers with regards to local configurations. Local politicians often use this imbalance to their advantage while trying to manipulate both intra-party and electoral candidate selection. Thus, as happened to be the case in İzmir during my research, the male head of the AKP's provincial organization has a major say in whom the women's branch president will

be. Even though the national party headquarters has a right to pick between three names provided by the provincial unit, the candidate favoured by the provincial leader is often selected (Drechselová 2018).

The MHP, unlike the other three parties, doesn't organize women's congresses. Given the fact that the MHP itself seldom holds congresses and had only two presidents since its creation in 1969, the absence of women's branch congresses is rather fitting. The nominated women's coordinators appear to spend comparable or longer time in office than in other parties: academic Şennur Şenel was nominated in 2010 and her successor, pharmacist Nevin Taşlıçay in 2015 (Eczacı Dergisi 2015). On local level, the length of mandates is even more impressive: in Izmir, the one of the former heads of women's branch had been in office for nine years. Indeed, one could say that women's coordinators are at least indirectly elected as they are often recruited among female members of the elected local party's direction. But according to this logic, the MHP women's coordinators are elected by both male and female electors which means that men are more closely associated to the process of women's nomination than in other parties. Having the women's coordinator appointed from the same list as the head of local unit interconnects even further her political fate with that of the local party boss. Not only can the local chief revoke her (MHP, n.d., 15), in some instances, she resigns after he leaves office (Ayan Musil 2011, 139). MHP women are far from denouncing men's interference in the designation of their local branch coordinators. My interviews both in Izmir and Trabzon showed that district women's representative is selected in close collaboration between provincial women's coordinator and the chief of local party unit. One of the heads of women's branches even stated that she relies heavily on the choice of the district party leader because he will be the one working with the district women's coordinator. Finally, even though women's branches – due to their auxiliary status – seem a bit far from the heart of political developments, the MHP women's branches were not spared from intra-party frictions that resulted in party's split and the establishment of the Good Party (*Iyi Parti*) in 2017. In the process of taming the intra-party opposition, several local women's branches were closed down or had their leadership revoked by the women's branches national coordinator (Yeni Çağ Gazetesi 2016).

As this section intended to show, the intra-party processes of the selection of women's branches leaders display significant differences among parties. The mechanisms of selection as well as levels of men's interference differ. On the one hand, within the pro-Kurdish parties, the benefit of separation of the women's assembly is the exclusion of the mixed party unit from the procedure which guarantees that women's leader is selected by women. However, this process remains non-transparent as the name approved by women's congress appears often as premeditated behind the closed door. On the other hand, the CHP features conflictual congresses on which the scandal-avid local media thrive, but their winners are often generated through *ad hoc* alliances and are not known in advance. The congresses within the party are still a recent phenomenon (taking place since 2012) but appear as the most decentralized selection procedure with little interference by the national headquarters. In the HDP and the CHP, men's interference is openly denounced and seen as illegitimate. Conversely, within the AKP and the MHP, male local party leaders are closely associated to the selection of women's branch leaders. They send three names to Ankara and their favoured candidate gets often picked. For the MHP, that is about it, while in the AKP, single-list congresses are latter organized to "confirm" the women's branch for the new term.

Paradoxical Auxiliaries: Places of confinement or political career boosters?

Lastly, this section looks into the role that women's branches have in the candidate selection processes and whether membership in these structures is an asset or a liability for female politicians. All women branches have in particular the task of increasing their party's electoral preferences by mobilizing women. They differ from one another by their membership size and the volume of their daily activities. The AKP often underlines that its women's branches with more than 4.5 million members are the largest women's organization in the world (Selva Çam 2018). They oversee the redistribution of considerable public and private funding. Because they hold crucial knowledge about the socio-political structure of every neighbourhood, they also do the vast majority of party's home visits (for more see Aymé 2017). Their door-to-door visits reach such proportions that it wouldn't be exaggerated to consider that they conduct a never-ending electoral campaign. Nevertheless, looking at the levels of women's representation in municipalities and national parliament, women do not seem to be "rewarded" for their work. By their size, the AKP women's branches don't have an equal in other political parties. However, the underlining logic appears similar: women's contribution to electoral campaign is taken for granted but women are expected not to ask for mandates. In this context, what role the branches have in introducing women to electoral politics? The question, once again, begs a party-specific answer.

The co-chairing system

The pro-Kurdish political parties have progressively put in place a 40% electoral quota and, in 2005, a co-chairing system (eşbaşkanlık). It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the process of introducing these institutional mechanisms or to give a glimpse of tremendous difficulties that women faced while pushing for these changes (for most recent assessment see Kışanak 2018). Nonetheless, as a result of these arrangements, within the pro-Kurdish parties, the number of seats to be filled by women is much larger than in other parties. Female candidates are selected by the members of women's assembly separated from the selection of male candidates who are designated by a mixed electoral committee (which includes 40% of women). Within the women's assembly though, a smaller circle of women appears to have a decisive say in the female candidate nominations: the case in point is the electoral committee of the Free Women's Movement (Tevgera Jinên Azad, TJA). Part of the Kurdish movement in Turkey, TJA is a platform which unites a variety of members from politicians to civil society actors. As the most influential element of the party women's assembly, it conducts local consultations prior to elections and elaborates the list of possible candidates especially in the south-east region. However, women's assemblies are not completely free in their choice of candidates. In Diyarbakır's rural districts in 2014, a woman could become municipal councillor in exchange of her tribe's support for the party. Strategic concerns dictated the inclusion of some candidates and it was effectively handy for the party selectors to include women who allowed them to "tick multiple boxes": woman, member of religious minority, member of an influential tribe. Nevertheless, this logic is similar in other political parties where women often stand for multiple identity markers and it can also be observed – at least to some extent – for men (Joppien 2017).

In a nutshell, the candidate selection process in the pro-Kurdish parties displays two characteristics: women choose women, but the procedure is very centralized. The centralization can be understood in the specific context of the 2014 local election as part

and parcel of the introduction of the co-chairing system to the municipalities. Women accessing the co-mayoral office were to be pioneers of this new arrangement and thus the TJA mostly nominated “reliable” activists with long political experience and solid ideological background. This happened at the expense of local consultations which could have generated candidates less publicly known but better rooted locally. Out of the 102 municipal halls won by the DBP, 96 were chaired jointly by a female co-mayor and a male co-mayor (Kışanak 2018, 46). The TJA pushed for the application of the co-chairing even though it was illegal at the level of the mayoral office. After all, the co-chairing in municipalities could have been legally recognized latter as was co-presidency for political parties (CNN Türk 2014)⁹. However, the co-mayoral system was not accepted by the state and the co-mayors were prosecuted. In the years following the 2014 local election, the co-mayorship system was dismantled by state forces and a big part of co-mayors were still in prison by the end of 2018.

The limited impact of women's branches on candidate selection

In opposition with the pro-Kurdish political parties, women's branches in the AKP, CHP and MHP lack institutional mechanisms that would ensure their control over the selection of candidates. If they get consulted about female names to put on the list, they rarely have an impact on the number of women who get included. The CHP's case is very illustrative of women's branches secondary status in this matter: specifically under Kemal Kılıçda-roğlu's presidency, being the president of women's branches, be it on national or local level, became a disqualifying factor in one's political ambitions. It is telling that the majority of municipal councillors whom I interviewed in Izmir and in Trabzon didn't previously hold any position of responsibility within the women's branch. Instead of the auxiliary branch, these politicians made their way to the municipal council by the main party organization. Interestingly enough, the CHP is also the only party in which women's organizations other than women's branch exist: “Women's Platform” (Kadın Platformu) was in place in Izmir between 2009 and 2014. It was tasked with finding ways to get women from different professional sectors involved in party politics. Thus, in the CHP, women are clearly not “confined” to women's branches as shows the fact that the CHP had five women at top of its provincial party units in 2015. But the downfall of this reality is that CHP women's branches cannot be considered as stepping stones into higher politics.

The AKP, on the contrary, relies heavily on its women's branches in recruiting female candidates. It has been an informal rule that the local women's branch president is offered a seat in the municipal council. In the Trabzon province, two former women's branch presidents became deputies (the last one in June 2018 general election). In this sense, AKP women's branch is a royal way into electoral politics. However, given the small number of seats granted to women in the municipal councils by the party, women's branch president is often the only woman who gets elected (this was systematically the case in Trabzon in the 2014 municipal election). From this point of view, women's branch offers a systematic access into politics but this access is limited to a single woman.

From the standpoint of individual women's careers, involvement in the AKP's women's branch bears crucial potential of ascension. However, the access to “eligible position” (the seat at the district or provincial women's branches direction) is mainly granted to those belonging to local elite. These women get invited directly into the direction by a male politician or by the women's branch president. This selective character of the candidate designation means that only a small minority of the 4.5 million women's branch members can qualify for a representative office. If the AKP's customary rule of reserving every third seat to a woman was applied, it could increase the power of women's branches in the

⁹ After 9 years of informal practice, the co-chairing was legalized for the political parties in Turkey. Since then a variety of labour unions and associations have also adopted this model.

selection procedure because their presidents would be most likely consulted about the concrete names. However, currently, in the absence of electoral quota, let alone equal representation in the party, the automatic inclusion of women's branch president on the list seems to block the access for other potential candidates. From the party's perspective, this still appears as a kind of reward for the women's branches contribution to the AKP's electoral success.

Finally, with the absence of women's quota or an institutionalized mechanism of female inclusion into electoral politics, the MHP is also the party which is the least studied from the gendered perspective (with the notable exception of Tokdoğan 2015). The impact of women's branches on female political representation is thus dependent on local configuration and ad hoc efforts of individuals. In 2014, MHP women's branch president successfully pressured for the inclusion of two female candidates to the municipal hall in Trabzon. This shows that women's networks, access to local leadership and leadership's responsiveness to women's demand can influence the numbers of women elected. However, in the absence of an institutionalized mechanism, the role that MHP women's branches play in the candidate selection process remains aleatory.

Conclusion: Participation without Representation?

This paper was concerned with the ambiguous status of the women's branches of political parties. Research from all over the world pointed towards this ambiguity while at the same time demonstrating the need for country-specific approach. Thus, in Pakistan, women's branches were described as lacking any significant decision-making power and having no autonomy (Sahi 2015). Similarly, in Ghana, women's branches are said to be constrained by the loyalty to their parties lacking any clear feminist consciousness (Gletsu 2012, ii). In other countries, women's branches appear as a part of their parties' women-friendly measures, positively correlated with quotas and higher levels of women's numerical representation (Cowell-Meyers and Patrick 2017, 10). Turkey shows that country-specific approach needs to be deepened so see emerge the differences among political parties. The auxiliary status of women's branches in three of the main political parties (AKP, CHP, MHP) appears as a major feature of their intra-party status. It helps to explain not only the ineffectiveness of branches' demands pertaining to women's representation but also the relative lack of organized action going in this direction, with the notable exception of the pro-Kurdish parties.

The separate analysis of each of the main political parties in Turkey suggested that the prerogatives and intra-party standing of women's branches and their presidents do not follow a clear ideological divide. Thus, the centre-left CHP women's branch doesn't enjoy a better standing than the branch of the right-wing conservative AKP. Even though the CHP has a 33% quota, its women's branches are excluded from the decision-making processes and only recently regained the right to select their own leadership. Women in the CHP progress in politics through alternative pathways and tend to avoid the involvement within the women's branch which is rarely a stepping stone into higher politics. In the AKP, women's branches are close to being an exclusive entry point into local (but not necessarily national) politics. Their president enjoys better standing than its CHP homologue – she can vote in the party meetings. But she is often the only woman who gets included on the local electoral list. Even though women's branch offers rather limited access to higher spheres of politics, becoming the branch president is still a high stake

achievement within the AKP. The MHP women's coordinator is not elected and her time in office is often linked to that of the local unit leader. With the absence of positive action measures in the MHP, the individual and sporadic efforts of local female politicians as well as the willingness of the local party leader prove to be decisive in determining the number of women on the party electoral lists.

Within the HDP, women's assembly is a powerful structure, separated from the main party organization but situated on an equal footing with it. Such a status is original in the Turkish context. Crucially, women's assembly also has a major say in filling the female co-chairing and quota-seats. The status of women's assemblies, positive action measures, party's program and size and structure of its female membership appear all to be constitutive of this gender-sensitive configuration within the pro-Kurdish parties. Women's branches are one of the ingredients in the "whole package" and their role and standing help to give sense to women's inclusion into political representation. Since 2016, the revocations and incarcerations of pro-Kurdish politicians, especially co-mayors, had for effective outcome the decrease of the average women's local political representation in Turkey.

The analysis of women's branches reveals great diversity of political institutions in Turkey and underlines the need for a party-specific approach. The status of women's branches is also telling about the career opportunities for women and is thus an important explanatory element of women's political underrepresentation. However, the picture is indeed more complicated than an institutional comparison. Future research should expand in two directions: firstly, deepening local analysis. Local configurations reveal to what extent party provisions are respected or on the contrary disregarded with some elements still needed to be elucidated (for instance, the budget of women's branches remained obscure in all of the studied cases). Secondly, the research should enlarge its scope towards informal politics and actors – also female – who influence politics without being officially involved within the parties. The case of Izmir and Trabzon both pointed to the fact that wives of elected officials may have more than a symbolic representative role but can also participate in a political agenda-setting. Finally, this paper also makes the case for gender mainstreaming in political science: the study of women's branches reveals important insights about the functioning of political parties and provides elements to understand the whole political system in Turkey.

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