



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

**Space, Place and Visibility Islamistic Women in Turkey**  
Raudvere, C.

**Citation**

Raudvere, C. (2001). Space, Place and Visibility Islamistic Women in Turkey. *Isim Newsletter*, 7(1), 30-30. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17486>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)  
License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)  
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17486>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Turkey

CATHARINA RAUDVERE

**When the resurgence of Islam in Turkey is debated, Islamic women's appearance and visibility in public life often forms one of the core topics on the agenda. Discussions all too often end with a fixed assertion about the presence of 'covered' women. But how are place and space claimed in women's religious activism?**

The platforms established during the last decade have had a considerable impact on social practice as well as on theology and ritual performance.<sup>1</sup> In most cases, women's interest groups established in the post-1983 period function as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and it is these that have had such an impact on social practice in Turkey.

The veritable explosion of NGO activism over the last ten years has caused some confusion in public discourse as regards women's interest groups' relations with the state. This became apparent during the preparations for the UN Habitat conference held in Istanbul in June 1996, when groups representing very different concerns and strategies in policy making cooperated and discovered – what sociologists had pointed at before – the similar conditions under which they were acting. The legislation for foundations with non-commercial cultural or social activities and the consequences of the liberal changes in economic policies have left extensive amounts of private money available to the NGOs. Through their mere presence in civil life, these groups, with their various agendas, have been an open political challenge outside the traditional party system.<sup>2</sup> Thousands of groups are registered as active and have played a determining role in the formulation of political arguments. The changes during the Özal regime and thereafter brought about spheres of social autonomies and initiatives of a kind that had never been seen before in the Turkish republic.<sup>3</sup>

Compared to the situation for female religious activists in Turkey some 10 or 15 years ago, the activities are not only larger in scale but also considerably more visible and public. They are also undoubtedly part of global events. The situation reveals more than one paradox. On one hand, in contemporary Turkey there are more possible choices of religious life than ever: an apparent individualization with emphasis on personal preferences exists at least in the major cities. In poor areas too, though often viewed with a

# Space, Place and Visibility Islamic Women in Turkey

biased gaze as culturally homogeneous, there are options for variety in religious life. Different Muslim associations compete with various theological and ideological programmes for attention and support. On the other hand, not everything that comes after high modernity is pluralism: what the highly visible religious groups teach today is often quite authoritarian, more or less radical, Islamic universalism. Women within the Islamic movement are empowered – from the perspective of their local community – but they seldom claim formal power at any institutional level.

## 'Covered NGOs'

Most religious NGOs in contemporary Turkey are constructed as pious foundations, *vakıflar*. A distinct feature in the new situation is comprised by the many women in charge of foundation activities. The increasing number of 'covered NGOs', *çarşafli NGO*, as one Turkish journalist has named them,<sup>4</sup> run by Islamic women, concentrate their activities on small-scale community work, often far away from the eyes of the general public. The women offer basic religious education programmes and elementary social welfare such as food supplies, clothing, school grants, legal advice, etc. They execute voluntary work at all levels of society and if not in direct political power, they seek to influence local society. An apparent process of formalization of religious activism has taken place, i.e. a transformation from private to public. For covered women, the establishment of a *vakıf* is often the only way of taking part in local political discussions. Few of the active women go public, and those who do often attain an iconic status as well-known authors, journalists or television personalities on the reli-

gious stations. The women must stand firm when in the focus of debates, such as the situation was for Merve Kavacı when she entered the assembly hall of the Parliament in Ankara wearing her headscarf.

## Women's NGOs and access to public space

Women's grassroots activities and voluntary work are too often explained as determined by their sex and their poverty rather than as the result of conscious choices. The activities are neither informal nor occasional and the importance of the organization as such can not be overestimated. The strength comes from the members' ability to establish long-lasting loyalties outside the family in combination with the specific legal status of a foundation. The fact that the *vakıf's* legal and economic status is regulated cannot solely be interpreted in terms of control since the legislation also protects the activities from local criticism.

Through the *vakıflar*, the less well-known women gain not only stability and structure to their activities, but also local public recognition and opportunities to address wider audiences. This change has meant a shift from meetings in family houses or apartments according to very traditional patterns to conquests of spaces such as university campuses and modern media. Nilüfer Göle has noted the Islamic groups' 'attempts to reappropriate control over the orientation of the cultural model problematizing the relations of domination in spheres of lifestyle and knowledge.'<sup>5</sup> For women's forms of assembly, these changes are apparent and have raised questions about access to urban space. Increasingly larger parts of the city have become accessible to covered women, and women have begun to move over great distances to be able to reach the groups of their choices. More significantly, a *vakıf*, as a relatively stable economic organization, provides opportunities for women to establish rooms of their own. Mono-gendered space is an indisputable condition for prayer meetings as well as social welfare work. With rooms that protect moral values such as decency and purity, the leading women can present the message of their groups without fear of criticism from male family members of their prospective supporters. They can speak with authority and claim legitimacy when invited to activities and balance their urge to contribute to local society while manifesting absolute recognition of the rules of proper behaviour.

## Combating master narratives

A shift in focus of interest can be noted in the academic discussions about Islam in contemporary Turkey. Elite Muslim women have been interested, since long ago, in local discourse and practice – an interest now taken up by academicians. The women's groups are not easily defined in conventional socio-political categories as they mobilize over and above class bound-

aries; they are far from being hailed by the Islamist party; and their agenda embraces both radical and traditionalistic issues.

The small independent Muslim groups represent, in general, a heterogeneous counter discourse between the combating master narratives in Turkey: state Kemalism and the conventional interpretation of Islam as formulated by the Directorate for Religious Affairs. Both of these hegemonic discourses seem to have difficulties in offering relevant images of history and in depicting recognizable visions of life. In the wake of this failure, new arenas and platforms have opened for interpretation of theology and faith. Consequently, women's religious activism at a local level is provocative – even if it is not intended to be – since it challenges the establishment, be it the representatives of the secular state or local religious authorities. ◀

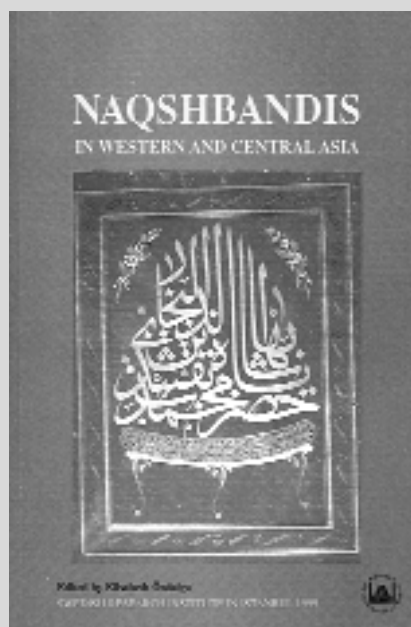
## Notes

1. The author's fieldwork in Istanbul consisted of following a small and independent group of Muslim women in Istanbul over some years during the 1990s, and serves as the basis for the author's forthcoming monograph: *Under My Sisters' Protection: Sufism and Zikir in Contemporary Istanbul*.
2. Toprak, Binnaz (1996). 'Civil Society in Turkey', in: A.R. Norton (ed.), *Civil Society in the Middle East*, vol. 2, Leiden: Brill, pp. 87-117. Cf. White, Jenny B., 'Civic Culture and Islam in urban Turkey' in: Dawn Chatty and Annika Rabo (eds.), *Organizing Women: Formal and Informal Women's Groups in the Middle East*, Oxford: Berg, pp. 143-154.
3. Shankland, David (1999), *Islam and Society in Turkey*, Huntingdon: The Eothen Press.
4. Ulusoy, Aslı (1996), 'Haldun Hoca'nın çarşafli, NGO's', *Aktüel* (275/96), pp. 20-27.
5. Göle, Nilüfer (1996), 'Authoritarian Secularism and Islamist Politics. The Case of Turkey', in: A.R. Norton (ed.), *Civil Society in the Middle East*, vol. 2., Leiden: Brill, p. 41.

Catharina Raudvere is associate professor at the Department of History of Religions, Lund University, Sweden.

E-mail: catharina.raudvere@teol.lu.se

## RECTIFICATION



On page 35 of the *ISIM Newsletter 6*, a book presentation by Elisabeth Özdalga was published. The full title of the publication was not mentioned in the main text. The following is the title as it should have been published:

Elisabeth Özdalga (ed.) (1999), *Naqshbandis in Western and Central Asia: Change and Continuity*, Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul.

Distributed by: Curzon Press  
15 The Quadrant  
Richmond Surrey, TW9 1BP  
United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 20 8948 4660  
Fax: +44 20 8332 6735  
E-mail: publish@curzonpress.co.uk  
URL: www.curzonpress.co.uk