

STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY RELATION IN TÜRKİYE: THE CASE OF
WOMEN CSOS

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WOMEN CSOS**

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ABSTRACT

STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY RELATION IN TÜRKİYE: THE CASE OF WOMEN CSOS

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This thesis examines the role of women’s civil society organizations (CSOs) in Türkiye within the context of legal constraints, political challenges and advocacy strategies. Using a qualitative approach, the research incorporates case studies and feminist theoretical frameworks to analyze how women’s CSOs engage with the state and broader governance structures. The central research question guiding this thesis is: How do women’s CSOs in Türkiye navigate political, legal and institutional constraints to sustain their advocacy efforts and influence policy?

The thesis identifies four key themes: the contested definitions of civil society, state-CSO relations, the effectiveness of women’s CSOs in restrictive political environments and the impact of globalization on feminist activism. Findings reveal that while Türkiye’s semi-authoritarian political climate imposes significant restrictions on women’s advocacy organizations—through legal barriers, bureaucratic oversight and financial constraints—CSOs employ strategic alliances, transnational networks and digital activism to navigate these challenges. The research further demonstrates that international partnerships, though instrumental in sustaining

advocacy efforts, introduce tensions related to donor dependency and allegations of foreign influence.

By bridging empirical analysis with feminist theory, this thesis contributes to broader discussions on gendered governance, the resilience of civil society under authoritarian pressures and the evolving role of digital spaces in feminist activism. The research has both academic and practical implications, offering insights for policymakers, activists and international organizations working to strengthen civic spaces and gender equality advocacy in restrictive environments.

Keywords: women's civil society organizations (CSOs), gender-sensitive policymaking, state-civil society relations, advocacy strategies, participatory governance

ÖZ

TÜRKİYE'DE DEVLET VE SİVİL TOPLUM İLİŞKİSİ: KADIN ÖRGÜTLERİ ÖRNEĞİ

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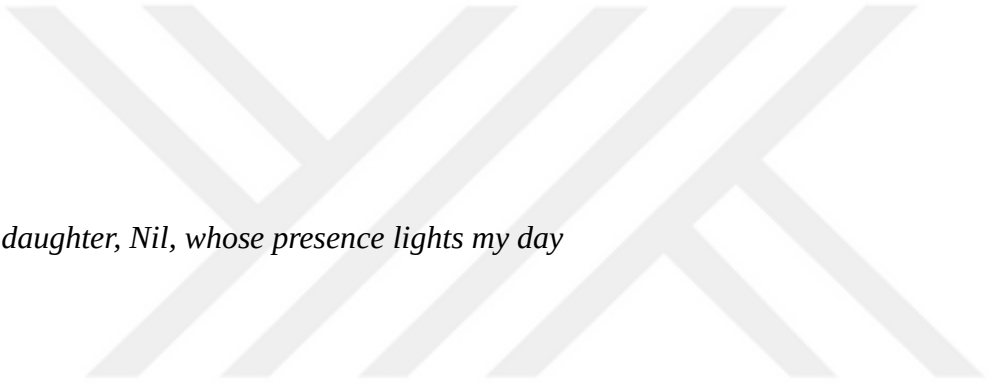
Bu tez, Türkiye’deki kadın sivil toplum kuruluşlarının (STK) yasal kısıtlamalar, siyasi zorluklar ve savunuculuk stratejileri bağlamındaki rolünü incelemektedir. Nitel bir yaklaşım benimseyen araştırma, kadın STK’larının devletle ve daha geniş yönetim yapılarıyla olan ilişkilerini analiz etmek için vaka çalışmaları ve feminist kuramsal çerçevelerden yararlanmaktadır. Tezin temel araştırma sorusu şudur: Kadın STK’ları, savunuculuk faaliyetlerini sürdürebilmek ve politikalar üzerinde etkili olabilmek için Türkiye’deki siyasi, yasal ve kurumsal kısıtlamaları nasıl aşmaktadır?

Tez, sivil toplumun tartışmalı tanımları, devlet-STK ilişkileri, baskıcı siyasi ortamlarda kadın STK’larının etkinliği ve küreselleşmenin feminist aktivizm üzerindeki etkisi ana temalarını ortaya koymaktadır. Bulgular, Türkiye’nin yarı-otoriter siyasi ortamının kadın savunuculuk örgütleri üzerinde ciddi sınırlamalar getirdiğini, yasal engeller, bürokratik denetim ve mali kısıtlamalar yoluyla, ancak kadın STK’larının bu zorlukları stratejik ittifaklar, ulusötesi ağlar ve dijital aktivizm yoluyla aşabildiklerini ortaya koymaktadır. Araştırma ayrıca uluslararası ortaklıkların savunuculuk faaliyetlerinin sürdürülmesinde önemli bir rol oynadığını, ancak bu

ilişkilerin dışa bağımlılık ve yabancı etki ithamları gibi bazı gerilimleri de beraberinde getirdiğini göstermektedir.

Bu tez, ampirik analiz ile feminist teoriyi birleştirerek toplumsal cinsiyet temelli yönetim, otoriter baskı altında sivil toplumun dayanıklılığı ve dijital alanların feminist aktivizmdeki evrilen rolü üzerine yürütülen tartışmalara katkı sunmaktadır. Araştırma, akademik olduğu kadar pratik düzeyde de önemli çıkarımlar barındırmakta; daralan sivil alanları güçlendirmeye ve toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği savunuculuğunu desteklemeye çalışan politika yapıcılar, aktivistler ve uluslararası kuruluşlar için yol gösterici içgörüler sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: kadın sivil toplum kuruluşu, toplumsal cinsiyete duyarlı politika yapımı, devlet-sivil toplum ilişkileri, savunuculuk stratejileri, katılımcı yönetim.



to my daughter, Nil, whose presence lights my day

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between women's civil society organizations (CSOs) and the state is a defining factor in shaping gender-focused social policy. Women's CSOs play a crucial role to advocate gender equality, influence legislative reforms and contribute to democratic governance by amplifying the voices of marginalized groups. These organizations serve as essential actors in the policy-making process, bridging the gap between state institutions and society to ensure that gender considerations are integrated into national agendas. However, their ability to shape social policy is often constrained by bureaucratic hurdles, financial dependencies, legal restrictions and power asymmetries (Kayalı, 2023). These constraints hinder the effectiveness of CSOs in lobbying for meaningful legislative changes and implementing initiatives that benefit women and other marginalized communities.

In Türkiye, the relationship between the state and women's CSOs has evolved amid shifting political landscapes, European Union (EU) integration efforts and the adoption of New Public Administration (NPA) principles. The early 2000s saw progressive legal reforms, including amendments to the Civil Code (2001) and Penal Code (2004), which strengthened women's rights and encouraged state-CSO collaboration (Paker et al., 2013). However, as EU accession efforts waned, the government increasingly favored state-aligned CSOs, limiting independent feminist groups' influence on policymaking (Arat, 2022). While NPA principles initially expanded CSO involvement in public service delivery, particularly in gender-based violence prevention and women's economic empowerment (Sönmez, 2021), heightened state oversight has since reduced their autonomy, reflecting a broader crackdown on civil society (Coşar & Özkan-Kerestecioğlu, 2016). Türkiye's hybrid governance structure, which combines democratic institutions with increasing

centralization of power, further complicates the role of women's CSOs in policy development, particularly in areas such as gender-based violence prevention, women's economic empowerment and social protection policies. Although the government has occasionally collaborated with CSOs on gender policies, it has also imposed restrictive measures that limit their operational freedom, especially when their advocacy challenges state narratives (Köseoğlu, 2023). Women's CSOs function as intermediaries between the state and society, facilitating participatory governance and pushing for gender-sensitive policymaking. They contribute to raising awareness, conducting research and providing services that directly impact women's lives. However, the nature of this relationship is deeply influenced by the political climate and the legal frameworks regulating civil society activities. Historically, Turkish governments have exhibited varying degrees of openness toward women's CSOs, with periods of collaboration spread with regulatory crackdowns and restrictions on feminist activism (Köseoğlu, 2023). The legal and institutional environment in Türkiye has imposed several challenges on these organizations, including restrictions on foreign funding, limitations on public demonstrations and increased state oversight of their operations. Such measures impact their ability to engage in independent advocacy, ultimately limiting their effectiveness in shaping gender-related social policy (Alınacı et al., 2017).

Although collaboration between women's CSOs and the government can enhance participatory policymaking, state co-optation and control methods often hinder their independence. The EU accession process has played a significant role in shaping the interactions between the state and women's CSOs in Türkiye. On one hand, international norms encourage participatory governance and provide external support to women's organizations, allowing them to enhance their capacity and influence (Kayalı, 2023). On the other hand, domestic political shifts have led to increased restrictions on civic engagement, particularly targeting organizations addressing sensitive issues such as domestic violence, reproductive rights and workplace discrimination (Köseoğlu, 2023). This dual reality complicates the efforts of women's CSOs, as they must navigate a landscape where support from international entities can simultaneously provide empowerment and invite government scrutiny.

A critical aspect of CSO-government relations in Türkiye is the financial dependency of women's organizations on state funding and international donors (Paker et al., 2013). While external funding enables them to operate with some autonomy, it has also been a source of tension, as authorities often view internationally funded organizations with suspicion—especially those advocating for feminist legal reforms and political representation (Kayalı, 2023). Moreover, state-controlled financial resources can be used to co-opt women's CSOs, aligning their work with government priorities rather than fostering truly independent advocacy (Almaçık et al., 2017). The reliance on donor funding presents a paradox: while it provides financial sustainability, it also subjects organizations to changing political dynamics and donor-driven agendas, which may not always align with grassroots feminist priorities (Coşar & Özkan-Kerestecioğlu, 2016).

The digital landscape has also transformed how women's CSOs engage with the government, enabling them to leverage digital activism to mobilize support, raise awareness and influence policy despite restrictive political environments. Women's rights organizations in Türkiye have increasingly utilized digital tools to counter state-imposed barriers, allowing them to reach a broader audience and advocate for gender justice (Kayalı, 2023). Online campaigns have played a pivotal role in drawing attention to gender-based violence, discriminatory policies and women's rights violations. However, the government has also implemented digital regulations to monitor and control online feminist activism, restricting these organizations' ability to operate freely in the digital sphere. This digital suppression has led to increased self-censorship among activists and CSOs, limiting the reach and impact of their advocacy efforts.

Despite a growing body of literature on civil society and governance, research on how women's CSO-state relations specifically affect gender policy formulation in Türkiye remains limited. Scholars such as Englehart (2005), Walzer (1995) and Scholte (2004) have explored the broader role of CSOs in governance, yet few studies provide an in-depth analysis of their influence on sector-specific gender policies in Türkiye. This thesis seeks to address this gap by analyzing the factors shaping state-women's CSO interactions and their impact on policymaking in key

areas such as gender-based violence, women's economic participation and legal protections against discrimination. By focusing on the intersection of governance, gender advocacy and civil society, this thesis aims to contribute to the discourse on participatory democracy and the role of non-state actors in shaping social policy through analyzing the perceptions of women's organizations about the state actors.

By thoroughly examining the relationship between the Turkish government and women's CSOs, this thesis aims to offer insights into the broader implications for gender-sensitive social policy development and implementation. Understanding the evolving dynamics of state-CSO interactions is essential for policymakers, scholars and civil society practitioners seeking to enhance participatory governance and strengthen the role of women's organizations in policymaking. As global and domestic pressures continue to shape civil society engagement, this thesis provides a critical lens through which to assess the opportunities and challenges faced by women's CSOs in Türkiye's policy landscape.

The research question of this thesis is how women's CSOs in Türkiye navigate political, legal, and institutional constraints to sustain their advocacy efforts and influence policy. To explore this question, the thesis examines several issues, including the historical path of women's CSOs in Türkiye and how shifting political contexts have shaped their roles in advancing gender equality, legal reforms, and women's rights. It also analyzes how the core activities of these organizations influence their interactions with government agencies, particularly how such interactions vary across different institutional and political settings. Additionally, the research explores how women's CSOs engage with political parties, other civil society actors, and international organizations, highlighting the role of networks and alliances in sustaining advocacy. Finally, the thesis assesses the impact of international actors on the sustainability, legitimacy, and strategic direction of feminist organizations in Türkiye, especially in the context of domestic political constraints. In addition to an extensive literature review and theoretical discussion, the thesis incorporates empirical data gathered through semi-structured interviews with representatives of women's CSOs operating in various fields, including gender-based violence prevention, women's economic empowerment, and legal advocacy.

These interviews are designed to capture the lived experiences, strategic responses, and institutional perceptions of CSO actors as they engage with the state. By combining insights from existing scholarship with original qualitative data, the thesis offers a solid and multidimensional analysis of how women's CSOs function as agents of policy influence in Türkiye's evolving political landscape. This thesis is structured to establish the relevance and contextual background of the thesis with the introduction chapter, introducing the core research question on how women's CSOs engage with the state to influence gender-sensitive social policy in Türkiye. The following chapter develops the theoretical framework, drawing on models of state–CSO engagement—such as collaboration, integration, and contention—and critically reviews the existing literature on legal barriers, financial dependencies, and international influences affecting women's CSOs. It also identifies key gaps and contradictions in the field. The third chapter on Methodology presents the research methodology, situating this thesis within qualitative traditions and justifying the use of semi-structured interviews while reflecting on the strengths and limitations of past approaches. The fourth chapter analyzes the empirical findings focusing on the experiences, strategies, and constraints faced by women's CSOs. In the conclusion chapter synthesizes the findings with the related literature and theory, offering insight into the evolving role of women's CSOs in shaping gender-focused public policy in Türkiye.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

The thesis of civil society-state relations has employed diverse methodological approaches, each offering unique insights while presenting certain limitations. Broadly, these methods can be categorized into two primary strands: qualitative case studies and political theory frameworks. This section provides a critical review of these methodologies, highlighting their strengths and constraints in analyzing civil society dynamics.

A significant body of research on civil society and governance relies on qualitative case study methodologies, which provide an in-depth exploration of the interactions between CSOs and the state. Unlike quantitative approaches that focus on numerical data and broad generalizations, qualitative case studies enable scholars to capture the complexities, nuances and evolving dynamics of civil society engagement within specific socio-political contexts. Researchers such as Waardenburg (2020) and Englehart (2005) have utilized this approach to analyze advocacy strategies, informal governance mechanisms and resistance dynamics in various national and regional settings. These studies provide rich, contextualized insights into how CSOs navigate challenges such as political repression, legal constraints and shifting donor priorities while also leveraging opportunities for social change and policy influence.

To investigate the intricate relationships between CSOs and governance structures, qualitative case studies employ several methodological tools. One of the primary techniques is conducting in-depth interviews with CSO leaders, government officials and policy stakeholders. These interviews provide valuable insights into the perceptions, motivations and strategic approaches adopted by different actors in civil society. By engaging directly with individuals involved in advocacy and governance,

researchers can uncover the underlying power dynamics that shape civil society's role in policy formulation, implementation and resistance.

Another critical methodological tool is document analysis, which involves examining legal frameworks, policy reports, advocacy materials and media coverage. This method helps scholars assess institutional structures, regulatory challenges and the broader legal and political environment within which CSOs operate. By scrutinizing government policies, funding mechanisms and organizational reports, researchers can track changes over time and evaluate the effectiveness of civil society initiatives.

Ethnographic fieldwork is also widely used in qualitative case study research, allowing scholars to capture the lived experiences of activists, community organizers and marginalized groups as they interact with governance structures. Through participant observation, researchers gain firsthand knowledge of the challenges and strategies employed by CSOs, particularly in contexts where state repression or legal ambiguities impact their work. Ethnographic studies provide a bottom-up perspective, shedding light on grassroots mobilization efforts, informal networks of support and the everyday realities of advocacy work in restrictive environments (Almaçık et al., 2017).

One of the key strengths of qualitative case study research is its ability to provide contextual depth. By immersing themselves in specific socio-political environments, researchers can develop a nuanced understanding of governance and advocacy dynamics, particularly in authoritarian or hybrid regimes where formal institutional mechanisms may not fully capture the complexities of power relations (Waardenburg, 2020). Unlike standardized surveys or statistical analyses, qualitative studies allow for the examination of lived experiences, local histories and culturally embedded advocacy strategies that shape civil society's effectiveness.

Additionally, qualitative case studies are particularly well-suited for exploring informal networks and governance mechanisms. Many CSOs, especially those operating in politically sensitive or repressive environments, function within semi-regulated or underground spaces. Traditional quantitative indicators may fail to

capture these hidden mechanisms of civil society engagement, whereas qualitative research can uncover the intricate ways in which organizations navigate legal restrictions, form alliances and sustain advocacy efforts despite challenges. Through qualitative inquiry, scholars can document the resilience, adaptability and creative strategies of civil society actors that might otherwise remain invisible in more rigidly structured research approaches.

Another potential drawback of qualitative case study research is the risk of researcher bias. Since qualitative methods rely heavily on interpretation and subjective analysis, findings may be influenced by the researcher's positionality, background and access to data or key information. The selection of respondents, framing of questions and interpretation of qualitative data can introduce unintentional biases, which may shape the overall conclusions of the thesis. Moreover, in politically sensitive environments, researchers may face difficulties in gaining access to reliable sources, as respondents might be hesitant to share candid perspectives due to fears of government surveillance or political retaliation.

Despite these challenges, qualitative case studies remain an invaluable methodological approach for examining the complex and evolving interactions between civil society and the state. By providing rich, in-depth analyses of advocacy efforts, legal constraints and informal governance mechanisms, these studies contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of civil society's role in shaping policy and governance (Ergun, 2010). Particularly in environments characterized by political repression, shifting donor priorities and restrictive legal frameworks, qualitative case studies offer a crucial lens through which researchers can document the resilience, agency and strategic adaptations of CSOs. As civil society continues to evolve in response to global and domestic pressures, qualitative research will remain essential in capturing the lived realities of activists and organizations striving for social change.

Given the methodological gaps identified in existing studies on women's CSOs in Türkiye, this research adopts a qualitative approach to analyze the intricate relationship between women's advocacy groups and the state. Through in-depth case

studies and thematic analysis, the thesis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how women's CSOs operate within political and institutional constraints. The use of multiple research techniques enhances the thesis's analytical depth, validity and applicability, ensuring a well-rounded examination of the evolving dynamics between women's CSOs and state institutions in Türkiye.

This research incorporates qualitative case studies of key women's CSOs operating in Türkiye, particularly those engaged in human rights advocacy, gender equality and legal reform. These case studies offer rich, context-dependent insights into the challenges and strategies women's organizations employ while navigating restrictive legal and political environments. By conducting in-depth interviews with feminist activists, policymakers and gender rights advocates, this thesis captures the lived experiences of those working within women's CSOs, shedding light on informal governance structures, patterns of state control and the resilience of gender advocacy movements.

To complement these qualitative insights, this research examines funding sources and policy influence of women's CSOs through document analysis, interviews and discourse analysis. By exploring financial sustainability, donor relationships and government scrutiny, the thesis sheds light on the broader structural constraints affecting the effectiveness of women's advocacy groups. This dual-layered approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the resilience and autonomy of women's CSOs in Türkiye, making it possible to identify key trends in their ability to influence policy and sustain activism despite institutional barriers.

The research relied on semi-structured interviews with representatives of women's CSOs in Türkiye to examine their engagement with government institutions, other CSOs, and international actors. The interview process followed a purposive sampling strategy shaped by both professional familiarity and access constraints. Over the past 15 years, I have worked within intergovernmental organizations, gaining experience in financial oversight and donor reporting, I was already acquainted with the landscape of women's CSOs in Türkiye. This familiarity provided an initial outreach,

which began with a list of organizations shared by a colleague. I contacted these organizations through direct phone calls, followed by emails that explained the scope and purpose of the study. The interviews took place between January 2025 and February 2025. Below is the table of respondents that provides an overview of the CSOs and their representatives who participated in the study. Throughout the text, these respondents are referred to by their assigned letters (A–J) to contextualize and analyze their perspectives and experiences.

Table 1. Data through semi-structured interviews with respondents from women CSOs

TABLE OF RESPONDENTS					
ID of CSO	Role of respondent in CSO	Organization Type	Profile of the respondent	Focus Area of CSO	Established in
Respondent A	Founder	National	Architect	Education, Women's Economic Empowerment, Combatting Violence Against Women, Gender Equality, Health, Sustainable Environment	since 1951
Respondent B	Volunteer (2 years' experience)	National	Social Worker	Combatting Violence Against Women	since 1993
Respondent C	Volunteer (10 years' experience)	National	Lawyer	Combatting Violence Against Women	since 1993
Respondent D	Founder	National	Activist	Combatting Violence Against Women	since 2001
Respondent E	Director	National		Women rights, Gender Based Violence, gender equality, LGBTIQ+ rights, feminist training, advocacy and solidarity networks.	since 1993
Respondent F	Member	National		Feminist research and advocacy on gender equality, Gender Based Violence, discrimination against women and LGBTIQ+ individuals; raising awareness and sharing knowledge to combat patriarchy.	since 2017
Respondent G	Member and administrative manager	Local	School Teacher	gender based discrimination, gender equality, protection, social cohesion	since 2015
Respondent H	Founder	National	Former civil servant	Women's Rights	Since 90s
Respondent I	Founder	National	Social Worker	gender awareness, combating discrimination, and promoting women's empowerment, liberation, and participation in decision-making and economic life	Since 90s
Respondent J	Founder	National	Activist	gender equality, feminism, political participation, local politics, and access to justice	Since 90s

While several government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) initially agreed to participate via written confirmation, they declined reminders and were ultimately excluded from the final sampling process. This limitation resulted in an absence of perspectives from more state-aligned CSOs and is acknowledged as a factor that may shape the generalizability of the findings. Respondent I elaborates on their thoughts on state-aligned CSOs, “It’s somewhat more aligned with public institutions’ expectations—they do this, of course, to build bridges and ultimately enable change and transformation. But at times, this also hinders the actual work that needs to be done. That’s why I would describe some organizations as entities that try to work “more moderately, more in alignment” with public institutions. GONGOs, or government-organized NGOs, aside, we can say that independent civil society organizations are institutions that freely engage with public authorities and public policy—discussing what is done and what is left undone—both to support and to raise awareness.”

Respondent J narrates the perspective of the state on independent and state-aligned CSOs, “You might feel free—no one’s interfering, you’re coming home at whatever hour of the night, you’re wearing mini skirts, doing whatever you want. But the moment you try to be with someone your family would never approve of—or, I don’t know, I’m making this up—say you decide you want to go to a nightclub, or hang out with the revolutionaries in your neighborhood, that’s when you hit the boundaries and realize your will isn’t as free as it seemed. It’s a bit like that here, too. I mean, they initially supported the Istanbul Convention. I remember a few of their early statements. When did it start to become a serious issue, a point of conflict—a red line? It depended on what they were trying to challenge. That’s when they became the “bad girls” of the neighborhood. But still, they’re the neighborhood’s girls—still “our girls,” you know? That’s the tension, and I think it helps to read it from that angle. Of course, this isn’t an excuse or a claim of innocence, like I said earlier—it’s neither about guilt nor innocence. But the reaction that comes from me isn’t the same as the reaction that would come from someone within their own circle.”

All interviews were conducted online due to logistical considerations and the geographical spread of respondents. Participants occupied a range of roles within

their organizations, including founding members, directors, program officers, and volunteers, allowing for a diverse set of insights. The semi-structured format provided flexibility to explore organizational specifics while maintaining a consistent thematic structure across interviews.

The interviews began by profiling each organization, focusing on how the CSO was established and what activities it pursued to date. Respondents were asked to share the story of their organization's founding and describe its main areas of work, providing insights into its mission, operational structure, and the evolution of its engagement strategies. This helped situate each organization within the broader civil society ecosystem in Türkiye.

The web of relationships surrounding each CSO was explored through a series of questions targeting institutional and cross-sectoral engagement. Respondents were asked which government agencies they worked with and how they would evaluate these relationships. They were also prompted to identify the areas where they felt the need for government support, and to describe the kind of relationship they would ideally wish to have with public institutions. In addition, the interviews addressed the regulatory environment, with participants sharing their views on what kinds of legal or policy frameworks should govern the field of civil society and how they believe the relationship between government and CSOs should be structured in an ideal scenario. These exchanges revealed both cooperative and contentious aspects of state–civil society dynamics, as well as varying expectations of institutional roles.

To map out inter-CSO dynamics and transnational linkages, participants were asked to assess their relationships with other CSOs, political parties, and international organizations. Specific questions included how they evaluate their relationships with other civil society actors and political parties, and what kind of interactions they have had with international organizations. Respondents reflected on the contributions of international partnerships, as well as the positive and negative effects such engagements had on their organizational autonomy, visibility, and capacity.

Through this approach, the interviews yielded both narrative accounts and evaluative reflections, which helped to identify patterns in strategic behavior, coalition-building,

institutional navigation, and the perceived impact of political and international actors on organizational sustainability. The collected data enabled the analysis of how women's CSOs in Türkiye negotiate power and opportunity within a constrained civic space and how these negotiations are shaped by both domestic and international factors.

A major challenge in this research women's CSOs and state relations is the tension between capturing context-specific nuances and ensuring that findings are generalizable beyond individual case studies. Women's civil society activism in Türkiye operates within a distinctive historical, political and cultural framework, shaped by patriarchal legal structures, geopolitical considerations and shifting state policies on gender equality. While large-scale studies often overlook context-specific dynamics, a purely qualitative analysis requires careful attention to ensure that its findings speak to broader issues in civil society governance and gender advocacy.

One of the key considerations in methodology selection is balancing depth with breadth. This thesis prioritizes qualitative research for its ability to capture the complexities of gender-based activism, providing detailed, context-sensitive insights into the lived experiences of women's advocacy organizations. To address these challenges, this thesis adopts a triangulated methodology that incorporates multiple data sources to ensure empirical rigor and minimize research bias.

Firstly, semi-structured interviews with representatives from women's CSOs, policymakers and advocacy experts provide firsthand perspectives on the evolving challenges facing gender advocacy in Türkiye. These interviews facilitate an understanding of the informal negotiations, compromises and strategies employed by women's organizations to sustain their activism within an increasingly restrictive space.

Secondly, archival research and document analysis of gender-related legal frameworks, state policies and donor reports enable this thesis to trace the historical evolution of women's CSO-state relations. This analysis highlights key legislative

shifts, policy gaps and external influences that have shaped the landscape of women's civil society activism.

Lastly, the researcher's gender and professional background in intergovernmental organizations engaged in gender-focused policy and programming may have influenced the research process in several ways. While no formal affiliation existed with the women's CSOs interviewed, prior exposure to institutional frameworks and donor practices provided contextual familiarity with the themes explored. This background facilitated informed questioning and, in some cases, eased communication with respondents working within similarly structured environments. At the same time, it is acknowledged that participants' perceptions of the researcher's professional orientation may have shaped how certain topics—such as donor dependency, state relations, or advocacy strategies—were discussed. Efforts were made to minimize bias through reflexive documentation, consistent interview techniques, and careful triangulation of perspectives across diverse organizational profiles.

This research employs qualitative content analysis to examine financial sustainability, donor influence and public perceptions of women's CSOs. This ensures that the thesis's findings are supported by rich, contextual evidence, offering a nuanced understanding of how women's organizations influence policy and mobilize resources.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL REVIEW OF STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS IN TÜRKİYE

This chapter aims to critically examine the intricate relationship between the Turkish government and women's CSOs and its impact on the formulation and implementation of social policy recommendations in Türkiye. By examining the dynamics of state-CSO interactions, this thesis seeks to explain the structural, political and institutional factors that either facilitate or hinder effective collaboration in the realm of social policymaking. The review provides an in-depth exploration of the constraints and opportunities present within this relationship, assessing how women's CSOs influence policy outcomes and the extent to which government policies enable or restrict their participation.

The primary objective of this literature review is to analyze the evolving landscape of women's civil society engagement in Türkiye's social policy development. It seeks to understand the mechanisms through which these CSOs operate, the challenges they encounter and their capacity to drive meaningful policy changes despite political and legal constraints. Furthermore, it aims to highlight the implications of these dynamics for the broader governance framework and democratic processes in Türkiye. By identifying key patterns and offering comparative insights, this review aspires to contribute to the ongoing discourse on state-CSO relations and provide recommendations for fostering a more collaborative and transparent policymaking environment.

The interaction between the Turkish government and women's CSOs is shaped by a combination of legal, financial and political factors that influence the scope and effectiveness of their engagement in social policymaking. These dynamics have evolved significantly in recent years, particularly under the Justice and Development

Party (AKP) administration, which has simultaneously expanded and constrained the role of CSOs in governance.

3.1. Structural and Analytical Factors in CSO Policymaking

One of the most significant factors shaping state-CSO relations is the legal and bureaucratic framework governing civil society activities. Türkiye's legal environment has seen increasing restrictions on CSOs, particularly those advocating for women's rights and gender equality. Recent developments indicate a rise in regulatory measures that challenge the autonomy and efficacy of these organizations. For instance, the Turkish government has intensified examination of civil society groups, imposing financial and administrative burdens that hinder their operations. Investigations into prominent business group officials following their criticism of governmental actions exemplify the precarious balance CSOs must maintain to avoid legal repercussions (Çalı, 2022; Doyle, 2017; Yabancı, 2022). These constraints limit women's CSOs' ability to participate in policymaking and create an atmosphere of caution, where organizations may engage in self-censorship to avoid government reprisals.

Another critical factor affecting women's CSOs' role in social policy development is financial dependency (Ergun, 2010). Many such organizations in Türkiye rely heavily on external funding sources, particularly from international organizations such as the European Union (EU). EU funding has been instrumental in sustaining rights-based advocacy groups, especially those addressing politically sensitive issues like gender equality, women's empowerment and protection against gender-based violence. For the 2014–2020 period, the EU allocated €1.58 billion of its €4.45 billion pre-accession funds to Türkiye for democracy, governance and rule of law initiatives (Werz & Hoffman, 2017). While such financial support enhances women's CSOs' capacity to advocate for policy changes, it also introduces vulnerabilities. Dependence on international donors can make these organizations susceptible to external political pressures and influence their priorities, sometimes leading to misalignment with local needs and government objectives. The Turkish government

has at times portrayed internationally funded CSOs as foreign agents, further complicating their legitimacy and effectiveness within the domestic policy arena.

Political alignments and institutional trust also play a crucial role in shaping state-CSO relations. Under the AKP government, civil society has expanded in size and diversity, yet this growth has been accompanied by increased state efforts to co-opt and regulate CSO activities (Heper & Yıldırım, 2011). The government has encouraged the emergence of pro-government CSOs, which are granted greater access to policymaking circles, while independent and opposition-affiliated organizations—particularly those advocating for women's rights—face restrictions. This selective engagement diminishes the inclusivity of the policymaking process and undermines the potential for diverse perspectives to be incorporated into social policy frameworks. Additionally, trust between women's CSOs and state institutions is often strained, particularly when policies are perceived as being driven by political motives rather than genuine social welfare concerns.

Türkiye's aspiration for EU membership has been a significant external factor influencing CSO participation in social policymaking. Efforts to align with EU standards have led to enhanced legal recognition and protection of civil society, thereby promoting a more conducive environment for women's CSO operations (Arat, 2022). However, reliance on international funding and partnerships can also render CSOs susceptible to external political pressures and may necessitate alignment with donor priorities, which might not always coincide with local needs.

This review concentrates on women's CSO engagement within Türkiye's social policy landscape, emphasizing critical sectors such as education, healthcare and gender equality. These areas have historically witnessed substantial involvement from women's CSOs in advocacy and service provision. For example, women's organizations have been instrumental in addressing educational disparities for girls, enhancing healthcare access for women and promoting gender equality initiatives. The analysis excludes broader civil society activities unrelated to policymaking, such as grassroots cultural initiatives or informal community associations operating outside the governance framework. Additionally, CSOs functioning primarily as

service providers without engaging in advocacy or policy influence are beyond the scope of this thesis.

By delineating these parameters, this literature review aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between the Turkish government and women's CSOs. It seeks to uncover how this relationship shapes social policy development and implementation, offering insights that could inform future strategies for fostering a more collaborative and effective policymaking environment in Türkiye.

Despite Türkiye's formal commitments to participatory governance, significant barriers continue to hinder meaningful engagement between CSOs and the state. This gap is particularly pronounced for women's CSOs, which encounter unique structural and political challenges in advocating for gender-responsive policies. Existing studies frequently examine these constraints in isolation rather than as interconnected structural challenges that collectively limit CSO effectiveness (Kayalı, 2023; Köseoğlu, 2023). A nuanced understanding of these dynamics is essential, as fragmented analyses obscure the complex interplay between state control, CSO autonomy and advocacy strategies.

While Türkiye's EU accession process has led to regulatory reforms aimed at enhancing civic participation, the extent to which these external pressures mitigate or reinforce state control over women's CSOs remains underexplored. The existing literature primarily focuses on legal and institutional frameworks for CSO engagement but provides limited insight into informal mechanisms, such as political patronage, selective co-optation and strategic repression, through which the government regulates civic space (Köseoğlu, 2023). Furthermore, regulatory shifts, often framed as democratic progress, may instead serve to legitimize increased state oversight rather than fostering genuine civic participation (Alnıaçık et al., 2017). The implications of these mechanisms are particularly evident in Türkiye's evolving political landscape, where state-CSO interactions fluctuate based on government priorities and political alignment (Savaş & Çakır, 2024).

A critical research gap lies in the limited attention given to how women's CSOs navigate these constraints, particularly through alternative advocacy strategies such as transnational partnerships, digital activism and informal negotiation channels with policymakers (Kayalı, 2023). In authoritarian-learning contexts, women's rights organizations often develop adaptive strategies that allow them to maintain operational capacity while avoiding direct confrontation with the state. Digital activism, for example, has emerged as a crucial tool for mobilization and awareness, yet its efficacy in influencing policy remains underexplored. Studies on digital activism within Türkiye largely focus on individual movements rather than the broader implications for the sustainability and long-term impact of women's CSOs (Kayalı, 2023; Savaş & Çakır, 2024).

One important gender specific constraint is the financial dependencies that also play a crucial role in shaping women CSOs' autonomy. Many of these organizations rely on international funding, which exposes them to scrutiny and regulatory restrictions from the state. Government narratives frequently frame foreign-funded organizations as external agents with political agendas, leading to stigmatization and additional bureaucratic hurdles (Ergun, 2010). Despite these constraints, some women's CSOs engage in strategic coalition-building with international organizations to enhance their credibility and leverage external diplomatic pressures for policy influence (Zihnioğlu, 2013). However, research has yet to fully address the long-term sustainability of these approaches and the risks associated with dependence on external actors, particularly in a climate of growing nationalism and skepticism toward international interventions (Savaş & Çakır, 2024).

Additionally, women's CSOs advocating for marginalized groups, such as survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) and displaced women, face distinct challenges in engaging with the state. Research indicates that these organizations often experience heightened scrutiny, reflecting broader political sensitivities surrounding gender and social justice policies (Kayalı, 2023). The intersection of gender advocacy, feminist activism and state-CSO relations remains an understudied area, particularly regarding how women's organizations balance their commitments to gender equality with the necessity of maintaining access to policy forums (Almıçık et al., 2017).

Many of these organizations struggle to secure institutional recognition or policy traction, as their advocacy efforts often conflict with the government's conservative stance on gender roles and family structures (Savaş & Çakır, 2024).

Another major gap in the literature concerns the impact of shrinking civic space on women's CSOs' ability to shape social policies. While some research highlights the broader restrictions imposed on civil society under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), there is insufficient analysis of how these measures disproportionately affect women's CSOs, particularly those advocating for reproductive rights, gender equality and anti-discrimination policies. Many organizations have had to shift their focus from direct policy engagement to grassroots mobilization, yet there is limited research on how this strategic adaptation affects long-term policy influence (Kayalı, 2023; Köseoğlu, 2023).

By synthesizing current academic discourse, this literature review aims to bridge the research gaps in the field, offering a more holistic understanding of the structural and political factors that define women's CSO participation in Türkiye's social policy landscape (Doyle, 2018; Özdemir & Keysan, 2020). Future research should explore the evolving nature of state-CSO relations in the context of gender advocacy, particularly considering Türkiye's shifting geopolitical positioning and internal political developments (Bahçecik & Turhan, 2022; Yabancı, 2019). Identifying sustainable advocacy models and understanding the resilience of women's CSOs under restrictive conditions will be critical in enhancing their role in policymaking and ensuring that gender perspectives remain central to Türkiye's social policy agenda (UN Women, 2021)

To analyze the theoretical framework, it should be noted that Policy Network Theory, as proposed by Rhodes (1997), asserts that policymaking is shaped by complex formal and informal networks of actors, including government agencies, CSOs and international institutions. This theory is particularly relevant in the context of women's CSOs in Türkiye, where informal political ties and patronage networks significantly influence which organizations gain access to policymakers. Government-affiliated foundations and organizations often enjoy privileged

engagement in the policymaking process, benefiting from close relationships with state institutions. In contrast, independent feminist organizations and women's rights CSOs that challenge dominant gender norms frequently encounter restrictions, limiting their ability to participate in decision-making processes.

The selective inclusion of women's CSOs in policymaking structures reflects broader power imbalances within Türkiye's policy landscape, where access and influence are often dictated by political alignment rather than value or expertise. Feminist and gender-focused organizations advocating for policies that address gender-based violence, reproductive rights, or equal political participation are often marginalized due to their perceived opposition to state-endorsed gender roles. Consequently, these organizations must rely on transnational networks, digital activism and grassroots mobilization to avoid institutional barriers. Policy Network Theory provides a valuable lens for understanding why certain women's CSOs succeed in shaping policy while others are systematically excluded, highlighting the intersection of governance, political affiliation and gendered civil society engagement.

Public Choice Theory (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962) posits that policymakers, rather than acting solely in the public interest, are driven by self-interest, prioritizing decisions that enhance their political survival. This perspective is particularly useful in analyzing government interactions with women's CSOs, revealing patterns of strategic integration, selective repression and electoral incentives. Governments often support women's organizations that align with their political agendas, leveraging them as instruments for policy implementation rather than recognizing them as independent entities advocating for gender justice. For instance, government-backed women's organizations tend to focus on family-centered policies rather than feminist-driven reforms that challenge patriarchal norms.

Conversely, women's CSOs that push for gender equality, reproductive rights and protections against gender-based violence frequently encounter regulatory and financial barriers designed to suppress their influence. This dynamic is worsened during election periods, when political actors strategically engage with women's organizations to gain legitimacy and mobilize female voters, only to withdraw

support once electoral objectives are achieved. As a result, women's CSOs must navigate shifting political landscapes, balancing advocacy with survival in an environment where state engagement is often conditional and instrumental rather than driven by genuine commitments to gender equality. This fluctuating relationship stresses how policymakers use CSOs to maintain power rather than fostering meaningful partnerships for social progress.

Despite these constraints, international influences have occasionally created openings for women's organizations to challenge restrictive policies (Zihnioğlu, 2013). EU funding, along with advocacy from global feminist networks, has provided some organizations with financial and institutional support, enabling them to push for legal reforms and gender-sensitive policies (Ergun, 2010). However, these international linkages are often met with state resistance, as governments retaliate by imposing further legal and financial restrictions on organizations receiving foreign funding. Consequently, while transnational actors can play a role in strengthening feminist civil society, their involvement also introduces risks that women's CSOs must carefully navigate.

Overall, the neo-institutional perspective hits the enduring impact of institutional structures and historical trajectories on women's CSOs in Türkiye. While external influences may provide opportunities for change, deeply embedded legal and normative constraints continue to pose significant challenges to independent feminist activism and advocacy.

3.2. Historical Trajectories of Civil Society in Türkiye

CSOs in Türkiye have played a pivotal role in advocating for social change, particularly in the realm of women's rights and gender equality. Their historical path has been shaped by the interplay of political reforms, state policies and socio-economic shifts. The evolution of CSOs in Türkiye reflects broader global trends in civil society development, wherein state structures, international influences and grassroots activism converge to shape advocacy efforts (Somer & Glöpker-Kesebir, 2015).

Throughout Türkiye's modern history, CSOs have emerged as key actors in promoting democratic participation, policy reform and social justice. However, their ability to operate freely has often depended on the prevailing political climate. During periods of political openness, CSOs have contributed significantly to legislative advancements and societal awareness on gender equality and women's empowerment. Conversely, in more restrictive political environments, civil society actors have faced challenges such as legal constraints, limited funding opportunities and state-imposed restrictions on freedom of association and expression (Ergun, 2010; Keyman & Gümüşçü, 2014).

The relationship between CSOs and the government has fluctuated between collaboration and contention, mirroring the broader political landscape in Türkiye. While successive governments have, at times, recognized the role of civil society in fostering social development and aligning Türkiye with international human rights norms, periods of political centralization and authoritarian tendencies have led to increased scrutiny and suppression of independent activism. This dynamic has created an ever-changing environment where CSOs must navigate shifting regulatory frameworks, public perceptions and external pressures from international organizations (Ergun, 2010).

Understanding the historical path of CSOs in Türkiye requires an appreciation of these complex interactions, as well as the resilience of civil society actors who continue to push for gender equality, human rights and broader social reforms despite ongoing challenges.

The origins of CSOs in Türkiye can be traced back to the late Ottoman period when philanthropic organizations provided social services in the absence of a formal welfare state. These organizations primarily consisted of religious and charitable foundations, known as waqfs, which played a central role in education, healthcare and poverty alleviation. However, these organizations operated under strict state control, limiting their ability to influence policy or engage in political advocacy (Şahin & Akboğa, 2019). The late Ottoman period also saw the emergence of early women's movements, which were often tied to elite circles and focused on educational and social reforms for women (Toprak, 1992).

The establishment of the Republic in 1923 marked a significant shift in the structure and regulation of civil society. The new government, under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, prioritized a centralized and state-led modernization project, leading to the strict regulation of civil society activities. The Republican People's Party (CHP) exercised significant control over public and private institutions, limiting the autonomy of CSOs and channeling their activities to align with state ideology (Keyman & Gümüşçü, 2014).

Women's organizations that emerged during this period were often integrated into the state's modernization agenda, advocating for gender reforms but operating within the parameters set by the government (Ergun, 2010). State feminism played a crucial role in shaping the early path of women's CSOs, as legal reforms granted women access to education, suffrage and limited professional opportunities. However, these reforms were implemented in a top-down manner, with little room for grassroots feminist activism (Durakbaşı, 1988).

During the early Republican era, the government promoted gender equality as part of its modernization strategy, yet independent feminist movements remained constrained. Women's CSOs, such as the Turkish Women's Union (Türk Kadınlar Birliği), were instrumental in advocating for women's rights, including legal and political reforms. However, the government's reluctance to allow independent activism became evident when the Turkish Women's Union was dissolved in 1935, shortly after women secured the right to vote and run for office (Şahin & Akboğa, 2019). This move reflected the state's preference for controlled participation rather than autonomous civil society engagement.

The mid-20th century saw important shifts in Türkiye's political landscape, particularly following the adoption of the 1961 Constitution, which introduced more democratic freedoms. This period saw an increase in the number of CSOs, including labor unions and women's groups, advocating for broader political and social rights (Göle, 1997). However, political instability and growing ideological polarization in the 1970s led to significant restrictions on CSOs, with the government increasingly viewing them as political threats.

The 1980 military coup marked a major setback for civil society, as the military government dissolved many organizations and imposed strict legal barriers on their activities. The 1982 Constitution introduced severe limitations on the formation and operation of associations, reducing the space for activism (White, 2003). Despite these challenges, human rights and feminist movements began to re-emerge in the late 1980s, challenging the state's restrictive policies and advocating for greater democratic freedoms (Arat, 1994).

The 1990s witnessed a resurgence of women's rights organizations, with a new wave of feminist activism pushing for legal reforms, including amendments to the penal and civil codes. This period also saw increased engagement with international organizations, particularly in the context of Türkiye's European Union accession process, which encouraged the expansion of gender-focused civil society initiatives (Kandiyoti, 1991). These developments laid the groundwork for the continued evolution of CSOs in Türkiye, shaping their role in advocating for gender equality and human rights.

The transition to a multi-party system in 1950 marked a significant political shift in Türkiye, bringing hopes for a more pluralistic and participatory civil society. However, the expansion of CSOs remained constrained by political instability, ideological polarization and recurring military interventions (reference needed here). The newly established democratic framework allowed for a more diverse political landscape, but civil society activism, particularly in areas concerning gender and human rights, continued to be regulated by the state. While some CSOs, such as professional associations and labor unions, gained prominence, women's organizations remained largely marginalized within the broader civil society landscape (Toksöz & Ünlütürk-Ulutaş, 2012).

The military coups of 1960 and 1971 had profound implications for CSOs. The 1961 Constitution, introduced following the 1960 coup, initially expanded freedom for associations and trade unions, leading to a brief period of increased activism. Women's organizations, student movements and leftist groups began to organize more openly, advocating for social justice and equal rights (Arat, 1994). However,

the political unrest of the late 1960s and early 1970s, coupled with growing ideological conflicts between leftist and right-wing groups, led to heightened state surveillance and repression of civil society actors. The military coup of 1971 resulted in the closure of several organizations, mass arrests of activists and tighter legal restrictions on political expression and assembly (White, 2003).

The most severe blow to CSOs came with the 1980 military coup, which imposed some of the most rigid restrictions on civil society in Türkiye's history. The military government dissolved many organizations, banned political activism and introduced the 1982 Constitution, which placed strict limitations on freedom of association (Kandiyoti, 1991). Trade unions, human rights organizations and feminist movements faced severe repression, with many activists either imprisoned or forced into exile (Göle, 1997). The state's authoritarian grip during this period sought to depoliticize society and eliminate opposition voices, leading to the near-total suppression of independent CSOs.

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process, created new opportunities for CSOs advocating for human rights, gender equality and democracy (Boztaş, 2019). Global feminist movements also influenced women's organizations in Türkiye, leading to the rise of independent feminist activism challenging patriarchal state policies. This period witnessed a significant increase in advocacy for gender-sensitive policies, particularly in areas such as domestic violence, labor rights and political representation (Arat, 2000).

Women's CSOs became particularly active in addressing issues of legal discrimination, domestic violence and economic participation. Organizations such as the Women's Solidarity Foundation (Kadın Dayanışma Vakfı) and the Mor Çatı Women's Shelter Foundation (Mor Çatı Kadın Sığınağı Vakfı), founded in the late 1980s and early 1990s, provided crucial support services for women affected by violence while advocating for legal reforms (Tekeli, 1998). The growing influence of transnational feminist networks also facilitated collaborations between Turkish women's organizations and international advocacy groups, strengthening their capacity to influence public policy (Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011).

The revival of civil society during this period laid the groundwork for further advancements in gender equality and human rights advocacy in the 21st century. Women's organizations played a crucial role in pushing for legislative changes, including amendments to the Turkish Civil Code and Penal Code in the early 2000s that expanded women's legal rights (Kandiyoti, 2002). These efforts marked a turning point in the role of CSOs, demonstrating their resilience in overcoming state-imposed restrictions and their growing influence in shaping Türkiye's legal and social frameworks.

The 2000s marked a transformative period for CSOs in Türkiye, particularly in the context of the country's bid for European Union (EU) membership. As part of the EU accession process, Türkiye was required to adopt significant legal and institutional reforms to align with the Copenhagen Criteria, which emphasized democracy, human rights and the rule of law. These changes created an unprecedented opportunity for civil society to expand its influence in governance and policymaking. Women's CSOs played an active role in shaping gender-related legislative reforms, advocating

for greater protections against gender-based violence and discrimination (Boztaş, 2019).

The reform on association law enabled organizations to operate more freely, receive funding from international sources and participate more actively in policy discussions (Kalaycıoğlu, 2015). As a result, women's organizations contributed to landmark legislative changes, including amendments to the Turkish Civil Code (2001) and the Turkish Penal Code (2004), which introduced stronger legal protections for women's rights and criminalized various forms of gender-based violence, such as marital rape and honor killings (Keyman, 2010).

As discussed previously, Türkiye's EU accession process initially created important opportunities for women's CSOs through financial and institutional support. However, interview findings reveal that the rollback of EU-aligned reforms and increased scrutiny of foreign-funded organizations have since constrained the operational autonomy of feminist groups, particularly those critical of the government's gender policies (Ergun, 2010).

However, despite the early momentum, the progress achieved during the EU-oriented reform period was not entirely linear. While initial reforms expanded civic space, the relationship between the government and CSOs remained complex, characterized by alternating periods of openness and restriction. By the late 2010s, concerns over government control of civil society resurfaced as the political landscape shifted. The slowing of Türkiye's EU accession process, coupled with the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) increasing consolidation of power, led to a rollback of many democratic reforms that had initially strengthened CSO engagement (Hale & Özbudun, 2009).

A turning point came with the introduction of regulatory measures that heightened government oversight of CSOs, particularly those receiving foreign funding. The Law on the Prevention of the Financing of the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (Law No. 7262), enacted in 2020, imposed strict financial reporting and auditing requirements on NGOs, allowing the government to freeze assets and

replace leadership under broad national security justifications (Turan, 2019). These measures disproportionately affected women's organizations, many of which depended on international grants to sustain their operations. The increased scrutiny of advocacy groups critical of state policies further restricted the ability of women's CSOs to influence social policy and legislative reforms.

Another challenge faced by CSOs was the government's increasing preference for working with pro-state women's organizations that aligned with conservative gender policies. Groups advocating for traditional family structures, rather than feminist agendas, were granted financial and political support, effectively sidelining independent organizations pushing for gender equality and women's rights (Kaya, 2020). This shift not only limited the reach of progressive women's organizations but also created an environment where feminist advocacy was portrayed as contrary to national interests, further deepening the polarization between the state and civil society actors.

Despite these setbacks, women's CSOs and human rights organizations have continued to play a crucial role in shaping public discourse and advocating for legal reforms. Many organizations have adapted to the changing political climate by strengthening their digital presence, engaging in strategic litigation and building international alliances to maintain pressure on the Turkish government regarding gender equality commitments. Even as state restrictions tighten, feminist organizations persist in their efforts to hold policymakers accountable, ensure the implementation of gender-sensitive laws and advocate for democratic governance (Şentürk, 2014).

Yet the EU accession process once provided a critical window for women's CSOs to advance gender equality through legal reforms and advocacy. However, as EU momentum declined and domestic authoritarianism deepened, the space for independent civil society engagement has narrowed, limiting the long-term impact of these earlier gains.

Despite their critical role in advancing gender equality, women's CSOs in Türkiye face persistent challenges, particularly in the last decade. The increasing

centralization of state power, particularly under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), has led to heightened state scrutiny, restrictive legal frameworks and shrinking civic space for independent organizations (Boztaş, 2019). Government policies have imposed bureaucratic and financial hurdles, such as rigid registration requirements and restrictions on foreign funding, which have severely constrained the operational capacities of women's CSOs (Gözübüyük Tamer, 2010). These challenges are part of a broader trend of democratic backsliding, where civil society actors advocating for human rights and gender equality are increasingly targeted by state authorities.

One of the most significant barriers faced by women's CSOs is the legal and regulatory environment that limits their autonomy and financial sustainability. Legislative measures, such as the Law on the Prevention of the Financing of the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (Law No. 7262), have placed heavy restrictions on non-governmental organizations (NGOs), enabling the government to freeze assets, replace leadership and conduct invasive inspections under the pretext of preventing terrorism financing (House, 2021). This law disproportionately affects women's organizations, many of which rely on international grants and partnerships for funding. The increasing difficulty in accessing financial resources has forced several grassroots feminist organizations to downsize or cease operations entirely, limiting the reach of gender advocacy efforts.

Additionally, political polarization has further complicated state-CSO relations, with organizations advocating for gender equality often being labeled as oppositional actors (Şentürk, 2014). Feminist and women's rights groups are frequently accused of undermining "traditional family values" and promoting foreign ideologies that contradict national interests (Arat, 2022). The AKP government has positioned itself as a defender of conservative social norms, often aligning with nationalist and Islamist factions that view gender equality as a Western-imposed agenda. As a result, women's organizations face not only legal and financial obstacles but also ideological resistance from state officials and pro-government media, which routinely discredit feminist activism.

The withdrawal of Türkiye from the Istanbul Convention in 2021 marked a turning point in state-CSO relations, further straining interactions between the government and women's advocacy groups. The Istanbul Convention, a Council of Europe treaty designed to combat gender-based violence, was seen by many women's CSOs as a critical framework for holding the government accountable for protecting women's rights. The decision to withdraw, justified by the government as a move to protect "family values" and national sovereignty, was widely condemned by feminist organizations, human rights groups and international bodies (Acar & Altunok, 2013). Women's CSOs viewed this as a significant setback for gender-based violence prevention, reinforcing concerns that the government was moving away from international gender equality standards.

In response to the withdrawal, women's organizations mobilized protests, launched awareness campaigns and engaged in legal challenges to pressure the government into reinstating the convention (Arat, 2022). However, these efforts were met with increasing state repression, including police crackdowns on demonstrations, legal threats against activists and media restrictions that limited their ability to communicate their message effectively. The diminishing space for public advocacy has made it more difficult for CSOs to influence social policy, as policymakers are less inclined to engage with independent feminist voices.

Furthermore, the government has increasingly favored pro-state women's organizations, which align with conservative gender policies and reinforce traditional family structures (Kaya, 2020). These government-affiliated groups receive state funding and policy influence, creating an uneven playing field where independent feminist organizations struggle to compete for visibility and resources. The state's preference for working with such organizations weakens the impact of women's CSOs that advocate for progressive gender policies and hinders meaningful engagement in policymaking processes.

Despite these challenges, women's CSOs in Türkiye continue to fight for gender equality through alternative channels, including international advocacy, digital activism and grassroots mobilization. However, the combination of legal restrictions,

political polarization and reduced state cooperation significantly limits their ability to influence social policy at the national level. The evolving relationship between the state and women's organizations highlights the broader struggle for civil society's role in shaping democratic governance and gender rights in Türkiye.

In response to these challenges, women's CSOs in Türkiye have adopted various strategies to sustain their advocacy efforts and influence social policy despite increasing state restrictions. One key approach has been the strategic use of international partnerships and digital platforms to avoid domestic limitations. By collaborating with transnational feminist networks and global human rights organizations, Turkish women's CSOs have found alternative avenues for amplifying their voices and pressuring the government through international advocacy mechanisms (Şentürk, 2014). For example, organizations have engaged with bodies such as the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and the European Court of Human Rights to highlight gender-related issues and push for policy changes that align with international human rights standards (Acar & Altunok, 2013).

Additionally, informal networking and grassroots mobilization have played a crucial role in sustaining advocacy efforts. Many CSOs have shifted towards decentralized and community-based organizing to mitigate the risk of state intervention. This has included forming alliances with local women's groups, unions and academic institutions to create a broader support network (Şahin & Akboğa, 2019). Through grassroots activism, women's CSOs have been able to engage directly with affected communities, fostering solidarity and ensuring that gender equality remains a priority at the societal level, even when formal institutional channels are constrained.

Moreover, digital activism has emerged as a powerful tool for women's organizations to maintain visibility and public engagement. Social media campaigns, online petitions and virtual conferences have allowed CSOs to mobilize public opinion and hold the government accountable for its gender policies. Movements such as "#İstanbulSözleşmesiBizim" (Istanbul Convention is Ours) have demonstrated the

ability of digital platforms to sustain feminist activism and influence public discourse on gender-based violence (Arat, 2022).

Despite state-imposed limitations, women's CSOs have also engaged in strategic litigation and legal advocacy as a means of challenging restrictive policies and defending women's rights. By working with pro-bono legal experts and human rights lawyers, these organizations have pursued court cases aimed at reinforcing gender equality protections and overturning discriminatory policies (Arat, 2022).

Ultimately, the resilience of women's CSOs in Türkiye reflects their adaptability and commitment to gender justice. By leveraging international networks, grassroots organizing, digital activism and legal advocacy, these organizations continue to influence policy debates and push for reforms despite political and legal constraints.

The evolution of CSOs in Türkiye reflects a complex and often precarious relationship between the state and independent activism. Over time, this dynamic has been shaped by shifts in political ideology, governance structures and international influences, leading to an environment in which CSOs must constantly adapt to evolving legal and political landscapes (Keyman & Gümüşçü, 2014). Periods of political openness such as Türkiye's European Union (EU) accession process have facilitated an expansion of civil society space, strengthening advocacy and participatory governance (Kalaycıoğlu, 2015). However, periods of political centralization and authoritarian governance have often reversed these gains, tightening state control over advocacy efforts and imposing legal and financial constraints on CSO operations (Hale & Özbudun, 2009).

Among the various branches of civil society, women's CSOs have played a particularly crucial role in advocating for gender-sensitive policies, legal reforms and public awareness on issues such as gender-based violence, workplace discrimination and political representation (Acar & Altunok, 2013). These organizations have been instrumental in shaping legislative changes, including reforms to the Turkish Civil Code, Penal Code and labor laws, as well as in Türkiye's former engagement with international frameworks like the Istanbul Convention (Şentürk, 2014). However, the

effectiveness of women's CSOs remains heavily dependent on the broader political climate in periods of democratic participation, these organizations have achieved significant progress, yet in times of state control and repression, their influence has been reduced through funding restrictions, legal obstacles and administrative barriers (Ergun, 2010).

The historical and contemporary context of government-CSO relations is crucial for evaluating how social policies evolve in Türkiye. The ability of civil society to contribute to policy formulation and advocacy directly impacts women's rights, human rights and broader democratic governance (Boztaş, 2019). Examining these interactions reveals the constant tension between state power and grassroots activism, demonstrating how shifts in government attitudes shape the success or suppression of civil society movements (Gözübüyük Tamer, 2010). As Türkiye continues to navigate its political path, the resilience and adaptability of CSOs especially women's organizations will be a key determinant in the future of gender equality, civil liberties and democratic consolidation (Somer & Glöpker-Kesebir, 2015).

Given the challenges and fluctuations in the civil society space, international institutions, policymakers and advocacy networks must remain actively engaged in supporting Turkish CSOs. External funding, cross-border collaborations and diplomatic engagement can serve as counterweights to state-imposed restrictions and ensure that democratic voices remain active in Türkiye (Turan, 2019). Additionally, domestic civil society actors should explore innovative advocacy strategies, including digital activism, grassroots mobilization and legal challenges, to sustain their work despite government-imposed constraints (Şahin & Akboğa, 2019).

Ultimately, the future of CSOs in Türkiye and particularly women's organizations will depend on a delicate balance between state control, civic resistance and international advocacy. While political uncertainties persist, the enduring activism of these organizations underlines their determination to advance gender equality, protect human rights and challenge structural inequalities, even in the face of adversity (Acar & Altunok, 2013). The resilience of women's CSOs in Türkiye serves as a testament

to their critical role in shaping social policies and fostering a more equitable and democratic society.

3.3. Historical Development of Women's Movements in Türkiye

Women's CSOs play a crucial role in advocating for gender equality, promoting legal reforms and shaping social policies. These organizations serve as key actors in democratic governance, holding states accountable for implementing gender-sensitive policies and addressing structural inequalities (Kandiyoti, 1987; Moghadam, 2013). In Türkiye, the relationship between women's CSOs and the government has been shaped by historical legacies, political ideologies and shifting legal frameworks. This dynamic interaction determines the extent to which women's organizations influence policy changes, particularly in areas such as gender-based violence, labor rights and political representation (Arat, 2008; Diner & Toktaş, 2010).

The historical path of women's CSOs in Türkiye has been marked by periods of both suppression and expansion. During the early Republican period (1923–1980s), civil society remained largely constrained under a highly centralized state that sought to impose a secular and nationalist identity. Women's organizations that operated during this period were either state-affiliated or restricted from pursuing independent feminist agendas (Çakır, 2007). The authoritarian nature of governance limited the space for grassroots activism, reinforcing a top-down approach to gender reforms that aligned with state ideology rather than addressing the diverse needs of women (White, 2003).

Following the 1980s, Türkiye witnessed a transformation in its civil society landscape, particularly in the context of neoliberal economic reforms and aspirations for European Union (EU) membership. The post-1980 coup period led to a resurgence of feminist activism, with women's organizations advocating for legal reforms, awareness campaigns and social policy interventions addressing issues such as domestic violence and workplace discrimination (Tekeli, 1998). This shift was further reinforced by Türkiye's engagement with international organizations,

including the United Nations (UN) and the EU, which pressured the state to adopt gender-sensitive policies in alignment with global human rights standards (Toksöz & Ünlütürk-Ulutaş, 2012). Despite these developments, state oversight and bureaucratic barriers remained significant challenges, particularly for organizations that sought to advance feminist and human rights-centered agendas (Göksel, 2013).

The rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002 introduced a new era of state-CSO relations, characterized by both expansion and restriction. On the one hand, the government supported women's organizations that aligned with its conservative and family-oriented policies, promoting maternal and familial roles over feminist activism (Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011). On the other hand, independent feminist organizations faced increasing bureaucratic scrutiny, funding constraints and legal restrictions that limited their ability to challenge state policies (Acar & Altunok, 2013). Legislative changes, such as the reconfiguration of civil society laws, have further restricted the operational space of feminist groups, reflecting the state's selective engagement with women's organizations based on ideological alignment (Ertan, 2021).

Given this complex historical and political context, the relationship between women's CSOs and the state in Türkiye remains a critical factor in shaping gender policies. While women's organizations continue to play an essential role in advocating for gender equality, their ability to influence policy is often dependent on broader political and legal conditions. This paper examines the evolving role of women's CSOs in Türkiye, analyzing the interplay between state policies, civil society activism and international gender equality frameworks. By tracing the historical transformations and contemporary challenges, this thesis highlights the ongoing struggle of feminist organizations in navigating state power, legal constraints and shifting political landscapes to advance gender justice in Türkiye.

The development of women's organizations in Türkiye is deeply weaved with the country's broader socio-political transformations, from the early Republican period to contemporary civil society dynamics. The evolution of these organizations has been shaped by state policies, ideological shifts and international influences,

particularly in relation to European Union (EU) accession efforts and global feminist movements. Women's CSOs have navigated periods of both state support and suppression, reflecting Türkiye's fluctuating political climate.

Following the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's modernization project prioritized legal reforms aimed at transforming Turkish society into a secular, Western-oriented nation. Women's rights became a key aspect of this state-led modernization, leading to significant legal advancements, such as the granting of suffrage in 1934 and the adoption of the Swiss Civil Code in 1926, which granted women legal rights in marriage and divorce (Arat, 1994). However, these reforms were largely top-down and controlled by the state, with little room for independent feminist activism (White, 2003). Women's organizations of this period, such as the Turkish Women's Union (Türk Kadınlar Birliği), operated under the direct oversight of the government and were expected to align with the state's nationalist and secularist vision rather than challenge patriarchal structures (Çakır, 2007).

By the mid-20th century, the authoritarian political climate and strict regulations on CSOs limited the space for independent women's activism. The state maintained tight control over civil society, ensuring that gender reforms were dictated by the government rather than through grassroots advocacy (Tekeli, 1998). As a result, while legal changes provided formal equality for women, they did not necessarily translate into substantive gender justice and independent women's activism remained largely constrained during this era (Diner & Toktaş, 2010).

The 1980 military coup marked a turning point for Türkiye's political and civil society landscape. The subsequent military regime severely restricted political activities and CSOs, suspending many existing associations. However, the post-coup period also witnessed the emergence of a new wave of feminist activism that sought to operate independently of both the state and political parties (Tekeli, 1998). Unlike earlier women's organizations, which had been closely tied to state-led reforms, these new feminist groups emerged from grassroots activism and were deeply influenced

by global feminist movements advocating for bodily autonomy, legal protections against gender-based violence and workplace equality (Kandiyoti, 1987).

One of the defining moments of this period was the campaign against domestic violence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Women's groups, such as Mor Çatı (Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation), played a crucial role in bringing issues of domestic violence and sexual harassment into public discourse, challenging the patriarchal norms embedded in legal and institutional structures (Göksel, 2013). These organizations utilized grassroots mobilization strategies, including protests, media campaigns and legal advocacy, to push for the implementation of shelters for women survivors of domestic abuse and for legislative changes to address gender-based violence (Toksöz & Ünlütürk-Ulutaş, 2012).

Türkiye's candidacy for European Union (EU) membership, which gained momentum in the late 1990s and early 2000s, significantly influenced the relationship between women's organizations and the state. The EU's emphasis on human rights and gender equality created an opportunity for feminist organizations to push for legal reforms that aligned with international standards (Ertan, 2021). During this period, Türkiye introduced significant legislative changes, including reforms to the Penal Code and Civil Code, aimed at strengthening protections against gender-based violence and promoting women's rights in family law (Dedeoğlu, 2017).

The 2004 Penal Code reforms, which eliminated patriarchal provisions that had previously legitimized honor killings and marital rape, were largely the result of pressure from women's organizations working in coalition with international human rights bodies (Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011). The EU accession process also facilitated the expansion of funding opportunities for women's CSOs, enabling them to establish stronger networks, conduct research and engage in advocacy at both national and international levels (Göksel, 2024). However, despite these legal advancements, the effectiveness of policy implementation remained a key challenge, as patriarchal attitudes persisted within law enforcement and the judiciary (Arat, 2008).

While the early 2000s provided an opening for women's activism, the political climate shifted in the 2010s, particularly under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Although the AKP initially embraced EU-driven legal reforms, its later policies reflected an increasing emphasis on conservative and pro-family ideologies, often marginalizing independent feminist organizations (Acar & Altunok, 2013). The government prioritized state-aligned women's organizations that promoted traditional family values, while feminist groups advocating for gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights faced growing restrictions (Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011).

The withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021 marked a significant setback for gender rights in Türkiye, reflecting the state's shifting stance on women's rights and its distancing from international gender equality frameworks (Ertan, 2021). Women's CSOs that opposed the withdrawal faced increased bureaucratic hurdles, legal restrictions and, in some cases, state-led intimidation. Despite these challenges, feminist organizations have continued to mobilize, leveraging digital activism, international solidarity and grassroots protests to resist the rollback of women's rights (Arat, 2022).

The historical path of women's organizations in Türkiye reflects the broader struggles of civil society in navigating state control, legal constraints and ideological shifts. From the early Republican period's state-led reforms to the grassroots feminist movements of the post-1980s and the EU-driven legal advancements of the early 2000s, women's CSOs have played a crucial role in shaping gender policies. However, their influence has been dependent on the political climate, with more progressive periods allowing for collaboration and conservative eras restricting activism. As Türkiye continues to grapple with democratic backsliding and gender rights challenges, women's organizations remain at the forefront of resistance, advocating for legal protections, social awareness and policy reforms despite increasing state repression.

3.4. Advocacy and Engagement Strategies

Women's CSOs in Türkiye play a crucial role in shaping social policy by bridging the gap between grassroots activism and institutional policymaking. These organizations

operate within a dynamic and often challenging political environment, where their ability to influence policy is shaped by a range of factors, including governmental responsiveness, international frameworks and public discourse on gender equality. Over the years, women's CSOs have employed multiple strategies, such as advocacy, research, service provision and coalition-building, to push for gender-sensitive policy changes.

One of the primary functions of women's CSOs is advocacy, which involves raising awareness about gender inequalities and lobbying for legal reforms. Women's organizations work to influence policymakers by presenting data-driven research, organizing campaigns and engaging in public discourse (Uslu & Doğanyılmaz Duman, 2024). For instance, the Havle Women's Association, which focuses on the intersection of gender and religious identity, has actively mobilized efforts to advocate for women's rights within conservative communities. Through its work, it has demonstrated how women's CSOs contribute to the formation of collective identity awareness and challenge traditional norms that restrict women's rights (Uslu & Doğanyılmaz Duman, 2024).

Advocacy by women's CSOs is often linked to international frameworks, particularly Türkiye's engagements with global gender equality standards such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the now-withdrawn Istanbul Convention. CSOs have used these frameworks to hold the government accountable for gender-related commitments and push for legal reforms addressing issues like domestic violence, workplace discrimination and equal political representation (Kandiyoti, 2022).

Beyond advocacy, women's CSOs in Türkiye have played a significant role in service provision, particularly in areas where government efforts have been insufficient. Many organizations operate shelters for survivors of gender-based violence, provide legal assistance and offer economic empowerment programs (Çaha, 1996). These services are critical in a country where domestic violence remains a persistent issue and access to state support can be limited due to bureaucratic hurdles or political resistance.

Women's organizations also function as informal social safety nets, particularly in times of economic crises or political instability. During Türkiye's recent economic downturn, CSOs have provided essential resources to marginalized women, including vocational training, financial literacy programs and small business support initiatives (Almıçık et al., 2017). These interventions not only address immediate economic hardships but also contribute to long-term empowerment by increasing women's participation in the labor force.

The effectiveness of women's CSOs in shaping social policy is heavily dependent on their ability to engage with government actors while maintaining independence. Historically, the relationship between CSOs and the Turkish government has been fluid, fluctuating between collaboration and restriction based on the prevailing political climate (Keysan, 2016). During periods of progressive governance, such as when Türkiye pursued European Union (EU) accession, women's CSOs found more opportunities to collaborate with state institutions and influence policymaking. However, in more conservative political periods, the government has tended to view independent women's organizations with suspicion, limiting their operational space through legal and bureaucratic constraints (Kandiyoti, 2022).

Recent legislative measures have further complicated the landscape for women's CSOs. The adoption of laws that increase government oversight of NGOs has led to concerns about state interference in civil society activities. Some organizations have faced funding restrictions or targeted scrutiny, making it more difficult for them to operate effectively (Uslu & Doğanılmaz Duman, 2024). Nonetheless, despite these obstacles, many women's CSOs continue to employ creative resistance strategies, such as forming coalitions, leveraging digital activism and seeking international partnerships to sustain their influence in social policy formation.

Women's CSOs in Türkiye are key actors in the formulation of gender-sensitive social policies. Through advocacy, service provision and engagement with policymakers, these organizations play a crucial role in addressing gender disparities and promoting women's rights. However, their effectiveness is often shaped by the broader political environment, with shifting government attitudes influencing the

extent of their participation in policy discussions. Despite challenges such as government restrictions and funding limitations, women's CSOs continue to exert influence through grassroots mobilization and international collaborations, ensuring that gender equality remains a critical issue in Türkiye's policy landscape.

A key factor in determining the influence of women's CSOs on social policy is the degree of state co-optation. Some organizations operate within government-sponsored platforms, which can facilitate dialogue but also limit their ability to challenge state policies critically. Conversely, more autonomous CSOs often face exclusion from official decision-making processes but maintain their ability to advocate independently.

Women's CSOs play a crucial role in influencing social policy by advocating for gender equality, promoting women's rights and addressing systemic issues affecting women's participation in public life. The nature of their relationship with the government significantly determines the extent to which their recommendations are incorporated into social policy.

The engagement between the government and CSOs, particularly women's CSOs, plays a pivotal role in shaping social policy in Türkiye. The extent to which CSOs can influence policymaking is largely dependent on the government's willingness to engage with them, as well as the broader political and institutional climate. While women's organizations serve as key actors in advocating gender-sensitive policies, their effectiveness is often dependent on governmental responsiveness, which has fluctuated over time. The varying degrees of government-CSO engagement can be categorized into three models: inclusionary engagement, selective engagement and exclusionary approaches (Keysan, 2016).

According to Keysan (2016), the relationship between the government and women's organizations in Türkiye has undergone significant shifts, reflecting broader political and ideological trends.

There are three different approaches, first the inclusionary engagement, the government actively involves women's CSOs in policymaking processes, providing

platforms for dialogue, consultation and collaboration. This approach was most visible during Türkiye's European Union (EU) accession process in the early 2000s, where compliance with EU gender equality standards necessitated engagement with civil society. During this period, women's CSOs successfully lobbied for reforms in labor laws, domestic violence legislation and gender-sensitive policies in education and employment (Kandiyoti, 2022).

Second the selective engagement, the government selectively collaborates with women's organizations that align with its ideological stance while marginalizing those that advocate for more radical feminist perspectives or challenge state policies. This selective engagement has been increasingly evident in Türkiye's recent political landscape, where pro-government women's organizations receive financial and institutional support, while independent feminist groups face funding restrictions and administrative obstacles (Keysan, 2016).

Lastly, an exclusionary approach, the government perceives women's CSOs as adversarial and actively restricts their access to policymaking channels. This may involve legislative constraints, bureaucratic hurdles and even criminalization of feminist activism. In such contexts, CSOs must resort to alternative strategies, such as international advocacy, social media activism and coalition-building, to advance their policy agendas (Uslu & Doğanyılmaz Duman, 2024).

The transition from an inclusionary to a selective or exclusionary model significantly affects the impact of women's CSOs on social policy formation. When CSOs are engaged in institutional policymaking, their recommendations are more likely to translate into legislative changes. However, in exclusionary settings, women's organizations rely on external pressure mechanisms, such as strategic litigation and leveraging international human rights treaties, to challenge regressive policies.

Government's responsiveness to CSO input is often conditional, with access to policymaking spaces being granted selectively. While some women's organizations gain influence through strategic partnerships, others face exclusion, particularly those advocating for issues that conflict with the state's ideological stance, such as

LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive justice, or gender-based violence policies that challenge conservative family values. This selective engagement limits the diversity of perspectives incorporated into social policy and raises concerns about the government's genuine commitment to gender equality.

The fluctuating relationship between the government and women's organizations in Türkiye reflects broader shifts in governance and civil society regulation. Under governments that align with gender mainstreaming and international human rights frameworks, CSOs have greater opportunities to shape policy. However, in more authoritarian political climates, advocacy spaces shrink, leading to increased restrictions on feminist organizations (Kandiyoti, 2022).

Uslu and Doğanyılmaz Duman (2024) highlight how organizations like the Havle Women's Association navigate these constraints by employing alternative advocacy strategies. These include engaging in international legal mechanisms such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), forming coalitions with transnational feminist movements and using digital platforms to mobilize public opinion. Such tactics have proven effective in sustaining gender equality efforts, even in restrictive political environments.

The role of women's CSOs in social policy formation in Türkiye is deeply influenced by the level of government engagement. While inclusionary models have historically allowed for productive collaboration between CSOs and policymakers, selective and exclusionary approaches have posed significant challenges. The political landscape determines the extent to which women's organizations can shape policy, with periods of government openness leading to tangible reforms and restrictive environments necessitating alternative advocacy strategies. Despite challenges such as legal restrictions and funding cuts, Turkish women's CSOs continue to play a crucial role in advocating for gender-sensitive policies, leveraging both national and international platforms to advance their agendas.

Women's CSOs in Türkiye play a crucial role in policy advocacy, particularly in advancing gender equality, combating gender-based violence and promoting

women's rights. Despite facing significant challenges, these organizations continue to navigate political and institutional constraints by leveraging digital activism, transnational networking and strategic litigation. Partnerships with international bodies such as the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) have provided additional avenues to pressure the government for gender-sensitive reforms. However, the political climate, bureaucratic hurdles and ideological divisions within the women's movement continue to shape the extent to which CSOs influence policy.

Governmental restrictions pose a significant barrier to the effectiveness of women's CSOs in Türkiye. Policies that categorize certain CSOs as 'foreign agents' or oppositional actors restrict their access to funding, limit their operations and weaken their legitimacy in the policy arena (Keysan, 2016). Independent women's organizations that critique government policies often face bureaucratic hurdles such as rigid registration requirements, state-imposed audits and regulatory changes that create an unstable operating environment (Uslu & Doğanyılmaz Duman, 2024). This suppression reduces their ability to advocate for progressive policies, particularly those related to gender-based violence, reproductive rights and labor protections.

Another key challenge is the absence of institutionalized mechanisms for CSO participation in policymaking. While Türkiye has advisory bodies dedicated to gender issues, their influence remains minimal due to weak enforcement mechanisms and limited political will (Kandiyoti, 2022). Government advisory councils on gender often lack autonomy and primarily include organizations aligned with state ideology, sidelining more independent or feminist groups (Almaçık et al., 2017). This exclusion prevents diverse perspectives from shaping gender-related policies, leading to government-centric approaches rather than holistic, evidence-based solutions.

Financial sustainability is a major challenge for women's CSOs in Türkiye as well. Many organizations rely on international funding sources, making them vulnerable to state accusations of foreign interference (Kandiyoti, 2022). Restrictive laws governing CSO activities further complicate financial independence. The government's increased control over foreign-funded organizations has led to funding cuts, forcing many independent women's organizations to operate with limited

resources (Alnıaçık et al., 2017). Without adequate financial support, their capacity to conduct research, run awareness campaigns and engage in policy dialogues is significantly diminished.

The relationship between the government and women's CSOs directly influences the formulation and implementation of social policies in Türkiye. When the government actively collaborates with CSOs, policies related to gender equality, domestic violence prevention and women's economic participation tend to be more comprehensive and aligned with international standards (Keysan, 2016). However, when this relationship is adversarial, policies often reflect state-centric priorities, sidelining the demands of independent women's organizations.

A notable example is Türkiye's stance on the Istanbul Convention, a landmark treaty designed to combat violence against women. Women's CSOs played a critical role in advocating for Türkiye's ratification of the treaty in 2011, leveraging international pressure and domestic activism (Uslu & Doğanılmaz Duman, 2024). However, in 2021, the government withdrew from the convention, citing concerns about its impact on traditional family values. This decision faced strong opposition from independent women's organizations, yet their limited access to governmental decision-making structures made it difficult to reverse the withdrawal (Kandiyoti, 2022). The withdrawal exemplifies the growing constraints on CSO influence in social policy and highlights the broader struggle for gender equality in restrictive political environments.

Despite these challenges, women's CSOs in Türkiye continue to find innovative ways to influence policy and advocate for gender-sensitive reforms. Several key opportunities have emerged. The rise of digital activism has transformed advocacy efforts, providing women's CSOs with platforms to amplify their voices, engage broader audiences and hold the government accountable (Keysan, 2016). Social media campaigns have played a crucial role in raising awareness of gender-based violence, mobilizing protests and pressuring policymakers to act. Hashtag movements such as #KadınCinayetleriPolitiktir (Femicide is Political) have gained

traction, drawing national and international attention to gender-based violence issues (Uslu & Doğanyılmaz Duman, 2024).

Collaborations between domestic women's organizations and international bodies such as the EU, UN and global feminist networks have strengthened advocacy efforts (Alınışık et al., 2017). By engaging in transnational networking, Turkish CSOs can exert external pressure on the government to comply with international human rights standards. The EU accession process, for instance, previously incentivized gender equality reforms in Türkiye, demonstrating the potential of international partnerships in advancing women's rights (Kandiyoti, 2016).

Strategic litigation has become an effective tool for women's CSOs to challenge discriminatory laws and government actions. By leveraging national and international legal frameworks, CSOs have been able to contest policies that undermine women's rights. Filing cases with international human rights bodies, such as the European Court of Human Rights, has pressured the Turkish government to address gender-related issues (Keysan, 2016).

Women's CSOs in Türkiye continue to play a vital role in advocating for gender equality despite facing significant political, institutional and financial challenges. Government restrictions, bureaucratic resistance and ideological divisions within the women's movement hinder their effectiveness. However, opportunities such as digital activism, transnational networking and strategic litigation provide alternative avenues for influence. While the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention marked a setback for women's rights advocacy, ongoing activism and international partnerships suggest that women's CSOs will remain critical actors in shaping social policy in Türkiye. To enhance their impact, stronger coalition-building efforts, sustained financial independence and continued engagement with international mechanisms are necessary.

The institutionalization of women's CSOs in Türkiye has led to both opportunities and constraints in shaping policy influence. The professionalization of these organizations has enabled greater engagement with legislative and policy

frameworks, as capacity-building initiatives have strengthened their ability to advocate for gender-sensitive reforms (Savaş & Çakır, 2024). For instance, well-established women's rights groups in Türkiye have been instrumental in securing amendments to the Civil Code and Penal Code, which have enhanced legal protections for women. However, this institutionalization has also resulted in challenges, particularly in terms of bureaucratization, which can depoliticize activism and reduce grassroots mobilization. As these organizations become increasingly project-based and reliant on donor funding, their ability to drive transformative change diminishes, as advocacy priorities may shift to align with the interests of funding entities rather than grassroots needs.

A critical factor influencing the effectiveness of women's CSOs in Türkiye is their relationship with the government. While strategic engagement with state institutions can facilitate policy influence, selective inclusion and political constraints continue to limit the transformative potential of these organizations. Nega and Milofsky (2011) discuss how certain pro-government CSOs receive preferential treatment, enabling them to access decision-making circles, whereas independent or critical organizations face significant bureaucratic and legal hurdles. This selective engagement restricts the diversity of perspectives considered in policy formulation, often favoring state-aligned narratives over feminist and progressive gender policies.

The historical path of government-CSO relations in Türkiye further illustrates how shifting political landscapes impact gender advocacy. During the 2000s, the European Union (EU) accession process encouraged democratic reforms, expanding civil society participation (Savaş & Çakır, 2024). However, the 2010s witnessed an increase in state control over civil society, narrowing participatory avenues for independent women's organizations. The growing securitization of civic spaces has limited the ability of these organizations to advocate effectively, often forcing them to operate within restrictive frameworks imposed by the state.

One of the major challenges facing women's CSOs is the instrumentalization of their work by state-affiliated institutions. The Ministry of Family and Social Services often acts as a gatekeeper to policy recommendations, filtering out proposals that

challenge patriarchal norms or advocate for structural gender reforms (Savaş & Çakır, 2024). This governmental control over policy discourse not only restricts the autonomy of women's CSOs but also creates an environment where gender advocacy becomes subordinated to state interests. Additionally, financial dependence on international donors' places CSOs in a precarious position, as state-imposed regulations on foreign-funded initiatives further limit their operational scope.

3.5. Key themes in the discussion of state-civil society organizations

The literature on women's CSOs and governance in semi-authoritarian contexts like Türkiye can be grouped under four major themes. These themes structure a comprehensive review of existing debates, theoretical positions, and empirical insights relevant to understanding the evolving role of women's rights organizations.

The first key theme concerns the contested definitions of civil society. Different theoretical perspectives—from liberal democratic to feminist and postcolonial critiques—shape understandings of women's CSOs within governance structures. While some scholars emphasize civil society as an autonomous sphere countering state power, feminist analyses highlight the gendered nature of civic engagement and the historical exclusion of women's voices. Additionally, critiques of elite capture and co-optation dramatize the unique challenges women's CSOs face, including patriarchal norms, social conservatism and the marginalization of gender issues. These debates stress the importance of contextualizing women's CSOs within their specific historical, political and cultural landscapes.

The second theme explores state-CSO relations, demonstrating that the relationship between women's organizations and the state is highly dependent on the political regime. In democratic settings, women's CSOs contribute to gender-responsive policymaking and legal reforms, but in semi-authoritarian contexts like Türkiye, they often face restrictions, repression and co-optation. Regulatory frameworks—such as restrictive NGO laws, bureaucratic hurdles and funding constraints—significantly affect the autonomy and effectiveness of these organizations. Moreover, the state may selectively support or suppress feminist organizations, favoring groups that

align with state-sanctioned gender ideologies while marginalizing those advocating for gender equality.

The third theme examines the factors influencing the effectiveness of women's CSOs, particularly in restrictive political environments. The literature identifies four key determinants: (1) regulatory constraints, (2) financial sustainability, (3) inter-CSO collaboration and (4) engagement with political actors. Legal restrictions often limit operational space, while financial dependency on international donors, though essential, exposes organizations to accusations of foreign influence. Fragmentation among women's organizations weakens collective advocacy, making them more vulnerable to state repression. Engagement with political actors, while crucial for policy influence, also raises concerns about co-optation and political instrumentalization.

The fourth and final theme addresses the impact of globalization on women's CSOs and governance. Transnational feminist networks, international funding mechanisms and digital activism have reshaped advocacy strategies and enhanced organizational resilience. Global feminist movements provide platforms for advocacy, capacity-building and legal protections, yet concerns about local ownership and dependency on external actors persist. Digital activism has become a crucial tool for resistance, enabling women's CSOs to avoid state controls, mobilize support beyond national borders and amplify their advocacy. However, governments have responded with digital repression, including internet censorship, cyber-surveillance and legal crackdowns on online feminist activism, complicating digital advocacy efforts.

While existing literature has explored various aspects of civil society-state relations, it remains insufficient in addressing how women's CSOs in restrictive political environments adapt and sustain their advocacy efforts. One significant gap is the limited focus on how women's CSOs navigate state-imposed restrictions through digital advocacy and international partnerships. As governments increasingly employ legal constraints, bureaucratic barriers and direct repression to limit feminist activism, women's organizations have had to develop innovative survival strategies. However, scholarly analyses have yet to fully capture how digital tools and global

networks have reshaped women's rights activism, particularly in semi-authoritarian contexts like Türkiye.

Additionally, previous research has not sufficiently explored the intricate relationships between women's CSOs and key political stakeholders, including government agencies, political parties and international organizations. While existing studies acknowledge that these relationships impact the effectiveness of feminist activism and political engagement, there remains a lack of in-depth empirical research on the specific mechanisms through which women's CSOs negotiate, collaborate, or resist state control. This thesis seeks to address this gap by providing a detailed examination of how women's organizations engage with political institutions, maneuver within regulatory frameworks and respond to shifting political climates. Furthermore, the thesis highlights the role of transnational actors, including international donors, intergovernmental organizations and diplomatic interventions, in shaping the sustainability, legitimacy and strategic direction of women's CSOs.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the key findings from semi-structured interviews with representatives of women-led CSOs in Türkiye. The data collected offers insights into their advocacy strategies, relationships with the state, and experiences related to navigating political and legal constraints. To sum up the findings, it is important to restate the broader context in which these organizations operate. The relationship between women's CSOs and the government in Türkiye is a crucial determinant of how social policies are formulated and implemented. While women's organizations have made significant contributions to gender equality advocacy, their influence remains dependent on political climates and institutional openness to civil society engagement. Strengthening this relationship through strategic partnerships, capacity development and policy dialogue will be essential in ensuring that social policies become more responsive to women's needs in Türkiye. By overcoming bureaucratic constraints and fostering a more inclusive policy-making environment, women's CSOs can play a transformative role in shaping gender-sensitive social policies that uphold women's rights and broader societal equality.

Despite numerous structural and political challenges, women's CSOs in Türkiye have adopted various strategies to navigate restrictive environments and influence social policy. One of the most prominent approaches is digital advocacy, where feminist organizations utilize social media platforms to amplify their voices, mobilize public support and challenge dominant government narratives. Through targeted online campaigns, petitions and digital storytelling, these organizations raise awareness on pressing gender issues, engage international audiences and apply pressure on policymakers despite state-imposed media restrictions.

Another critical strategy is grassroots organizing, which allows women's CSOs to implement community-based solutions at the local level, often avoiding national restrictions. By working directly with women experiencing gender-based violence or economic hardship, these organizations foster civic engagement and encourage bottom-up approaches to policy change. Grassroots initiatives focus on providing shelter, legal aid, education and advocacy within local networks, ensuring that gender issues remain addressed even when national-level lobbying proves challenging.

Additionally, transnational partnerships have emerged as a crucial survival mechanism for feminist CSOs operating under restrictive political conditions. Many organizations establish collaborations with international donors, advocacy groups and multilateral institutions to secure funding, technical expertise and global solidarity. These external alliances not only provide financial sustainability but also offer protection against government suppression by drawing international attention to the work of local women's organizations. However, reliance on foreign funding can sometimes lead to increased scrutiny and accusations of external interference, further complicating their operations.

Despite these adaptive strategies, women's CSOs in Türkiye continue to face significant constraints, including restrictive legal frameworks, limited access to funding, state surveillance and bureaucratic hurdles that hinder their ability to operate effectively. Gendered resistance remains particularly acute, as feminist organizations contend with state-imposed restrictions alongside cultural and political opposition that undermines their efforts. In a socio-political climate where traditional gender roles are reinforced through policy and rhetoric, CSOs advocating for women's rights, LGBTQ+ inclusion and gender-based violence prevention are often met with hostility from conservative groups and policymakers. Women activists frequently experience threats, harassment and social stigma, making it difficult to sustain advocacy efforts.

Despite these constraints, women's CSOs in Türkiye continue to demonstrate resilience and adaptability in their efforts to influence social policy. By leveraging digital platforms, building grassroots networks and forging international partnerships,

they persist in their advocacy, often working within informal spaces to navigate restrictive environments (Coşar & Özkan-Kerestecioğlu, 2016). However, the long-term sustainability of their work depends on broader legal and political reforms that create a more enabling environment for civil society engagement (Paker et al., 2013). Until such changes occur, women's CSOs will remain at the forefront of social advocacy, pushing against systemic barriers to ensure that gender-related issues remain central in policy discussions (Arat, 2022).

A strong theoretical foundation must be supported by empirical evidence to understand the influence of women's CSOs on social policy in Türkiye. These organizations have played a central role in advancing gender-based legislation, most notably with the passage of Law No. 6284, which was introduced in 2012 after sustained feminist advocacy (Kaya, 2020). Despite setbacks like the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, CSOs continue to resist through legal, digital, and international advocacy (Alınışık et al., 2017). Nevertheless, their persistence underscores the essential role of an independent civil society in advancing gender equality in Türkiye.

Women's CSOs in Türkiye operate within a diverse and evolving landscape, shaped by their historical development, advocacy focus and engagement strategies. Some organizations emerged decades ago during pivotal moments in feminist activism, while others have formed more recently in response to contemporary gender-related challenges. Respondent B states "Our women's counseling work has continued uninterrupted. We organized home and neighborhood meetings—both in the past and currently—to ensure this work reaches different communities. These gatherings aim to bring together women from various backgrounds to discuss shared experiences around violence: what it is, how it affects us psychologically, how we cope, what our rights are, and where to seek support. Rather than a top-down educational approach, these sessions are designed as spaces for mutual experience-sharing. We talk about legal rights, support mechanisms, and relevant institutions in a collaborative setting. Alongside this, we also try to engage in advocacy efforts."

These organizations vary in structure, ranging from grassroots collectives to well-established institutions with national and international recognition. Their core

activities include direct service provision (such as legal aid, psychological support and shelters for survivors of domestic violence), research and advocacy, capacity-building for women and policy monitoring, particularly regarding Türkiye's adherence to international gender equality commitments (Acar & Altunok, 2013). As respondent E puts it, "The feminist movement in Türkiye, which gained momentum in the 1980s through street activism, grassroots initiatives, and informal organizing, began transforming into more institutionalized structures in the 1990s—such as Mor Çatı and Women for Women's Human Rights. Our association was also established during that period and became one of the early organizations where discussions around project-based work emerged. It was among the first to operate through projects, implementing activities in exchange for funding and managing resources tied to specific financial support."

4.1. The Web of State–CSO Relations

Despite their contributions, women's CSOs navigate a complex and often precarious relationship with the government. While some organizations have fostered productive collaborations with policymakers, others face bureaucratic hurdles, limited funding and political resistance that hinder their influence. Interviews with CSO representatives reveal a spectrum of experiences: some describe successful engagement with local officials, while others highlight challenges such as prolonged approval processes, restricted access to decision-making spaces and growing scrutiny of their activities.

As respondent F underlines "We are an organization focused on gender equality, but we're currently operating in an environment marked by strong anti-gender sentiment. Many of our members are dismissed academics or individuals affected by emergency decrees, so there's naturally a significant distance between us and the current state structure. Given the increasing state control over civil society—trustee appointments, dismissals, and especially the latest law—you've probably followed that, too. We take extra care in all audits and procedures to avoid any vulnerabilities. We over-document everything and follow all protocols rigorously—not just because it's the right thing to do, but because we anticipate a potentially hostile stance toward us. So,

in any setting where we might encounter the state, we stay extremely cautious—almost on edge.”

The government’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention sparked significant mobilization by feminist CSOs. Their digital and legal responses remain a critical case study in resisting regressive gender policy (Arat, 2022). This decision not only represented a setback for gender equality efforts but also deepened tensions between independent women’s organizations and the state, further restricting their influence in policymaking.

In response, women’s CSOs mobilized through protests, awareness campaigns and legal challenges, pressing for the reinstatement of the convention and broader protections for women’s rights. However, these efforts have increasingly been met with state repression, including restrictions on public demonstrations, legal intimidation of activists and media censorship, which have constrained their advocacy capacity (Şentürk, 2014). As the civic space narrows, feminist organizations have had to adapt, shifting their focus toward international partnerships, digital activism and decentralized grassroots organizing to sustain their advocacy.

An emerging challenge for women’s CSOs is the rise of government-aligned women’s organizations that promote conservative gender policies and receive state funding (Kaya, 2020). These pro-government groups have gained influence in shaping national gender discourse, often sidelining independent feminist organizations advocating for progressive reforms. This has created an uneven civic landscape, where state-backed organizations enjoy policy influence while critical feminist groups face resource constraints and political marginalization.

Financial sustainability remains a critical concern, as many CSOs rely on external funding from international donors to sustain their operations. While these funding streams provide essential support, they also introduce challenges, as government authorities often perceive internationally funded CSOs as external agents rather than domestic stakeholders in gender policy advocacy (Ergun, 2010). Balancing financial

independence with advocacy effectiveness remains a key strategic concern for many organizations.

Looking forward, women's CSOs in Türkiye emphasize the need for more institutionalized engagement mechanisms with the government, ensuring that their policy recommendations are not only heard but meaningfully integrated into legislative and programmatic frameworks. Strengthening solidarity within civil society is also seen as a crucial step toward enhancing collective advocacy power. By addressing funding disparities, bridging ideological divides and fostering genuine collaboration, these organizations can work toward a more unified and resilient civil society movement for gender justice (Şahin & Akboğa, 2019).

While the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention presents significant challenges, the resilience of women's CSOs highlights their enduring role in shaping public discourse and advocating for legal protections. Despite heightened state control, these organizations persist in their struggle, illustrating the ongoing contestation over civil society's role in democratic governance and gender equality in Türkiye.

The respondents represent a diverse range of professional backgrounds and advocacy roles, in the women's CSOs that are primarily within the fields of human rights, gender equality and civil society engagement. Their work spans across various sectors, including international organizations, women's CSOs, academia and political activism. By mapping their areas of expertise and the networks they navigate, this section aims to highlight the interconnected nature of advocacy efforts and the strategic decisions that shape their engagements.

The respondents occupy key roles in Women CSOs dedicated to gender equality, focusing on policy influence, legal reforms and grassroots mobilization. Others are affiliated with international organizations, serving as intermediaries for funding, technical expertise and global advocacy initiatives. Additionally, they operate within academic institutions, contributing research that informs policy and advocacy strategies. A smaller subset is engaged in direct political activism, working with political parties to integrate gender perspectives into legislative processes.

This variation in professional backgrounds influences the strategies respondents employ in advancing their causes. For instance, Women CSO representatives often emphasize community engagement and localized advocacy, whereas those in international organizations navigate bureaucratic frameworks to shape high-level policy discussions. The cross-sectoral nature of their work stresses the complexity of advocacy in restrictive environments and the importance of multi-stakeholder collaborations.

4.2. Engagement with International and Regional Actors

Engagement with international organizations, fellow CSOs and political parties is a critical component of advocacy, policy influence and grassroots mobilization. However, these relationships are shaped by historical interactions, structural constraints and ideological considerations. While international partnerships can provide valuable resources and advocacy support, they also pose challenges such as bureaucratic inefficiencies, conditional funding and the risk of external agendas influencing local priorities. This section explores how respondents from the different sectors of women's CSOs strategically navigate these relationships, the benefits they derive and the challenges they encounter.

The engagement between women's CSOs and international organizations is a complex and evolving relationship influenced by political alignments, funding dependencies and strategic priorities. International agencies often serve as key partners, providing essential financial support, advocacy platforms and technical assistance. However, these partnerships are frequently characterized by a transactional nature rather than deep collaboration, leaving grassroots organizations to navigate a delicate balance between leveraging international resources and maintaining their autonomy. This section explores key insights from respondents on the challenges and opportunities inherent in these relationships.

One of the most pressing concerns raised by respondents is the extent to which grassroots voices truly influence global policy decisions. While participation in international forums offers visibility and institutional credibility, many activists

remain skeptical about whether their advocacy efforts lead to substantive changes in global governance.

Respondent C reflected: “To what extent do we influence global policies? No matter how much activist spirit we have, changing things on that scale is difficult. However, I believe we have more influence at the local level through relationships.”

This perspective underlines a common frustration among grassroots activists who recognize that, despite their presence at high-level policy discussions, decision-making power often rests in the hands of state actors, multilateral organizations and influential donors. The bureaucratic and hierarchical nature of international policy spaces can limit the degree to which grassroots organizations shape global decisions. Furthermore, international institutions may engage grassroots organizations primarily for representation rather than for substantive policy input. Respondent D states “The support we receive significantly contributes to the institutionalization of our organizational capacity. However, we also made a conscious effort to avoid becoming overly bureaucratic in the process. We worked hard to create a form of institutionalization that fits our own approach. Beyond that, these agencies have played a major role in helping us understand and internalize international jargon, terminology, policies, priorities, and global targets—what is emphasized, what is left behind. There’s a mutual learning process: we learn from them, and they learn from us. We’ve seen that they value and listen to the field experience we bring from civil society, especially when it comes with an activist spirit and the kind of political arguments and ideas that can open up new perspectives. Still, it’s important to note that the institutions we’re talking about—including UN agencies—are, at the end of the day, considered state institutions.”

Many activists see local and regional advocacy as a more effective avenue for change. By focusing on influencing national policies, legal reforms and community-level initiatives, grassroots organizations can generate tangible results that, in turn, may inform international policy discussions. Building strong networks within their own governments and communities allows activists to drive meaningful change where it is most immediately impactful.

Another significant challenge identified is the dependency of grassroots organizations on international funding, which often shapes their agendas and limits their autonomy. Respondent C highlighted this concern:

“Unfortunately, these organizations are often seen primarily as funding sources, which leads to a transactional relationship. Moving beyond a purely economic exchange requires effort from both local and international NGOs.”

Many grassroots organizations rely heavily on international donors for operational sustainability, yet this financial dependency can create constraints. Funding priorities set by international agencies do not always align with the immediate needs of local communities, leading CSOs to adjust their focus to secure necessary resources. This can divert attention from grassroots-driven initiatives in favor of donor-driven projects.

Additionally, short-term funding cycles often lead to uncertainty and instability, forcing CSOs to spend significant time on grant applications rather than long-term program development. Respondents emphasized that fostering more sustainable and equitable funding relationships requires both local organizations and international donors to move beyond a transactional model. Instead of being seen merely as recipients of aid, grassroots organizations should be viewed as strategic partners with valuable local expertise and lived experiences that contribute to the success of global gender initiatives.

In response to these challenges, some CSOs prioritize regional partnerships over broad international affiliations. This shift allows for collaborations that offer tangible benefits, including knowledge-sharing, cross-border advocacy and technical support. Respondent B pointed out:

“Regional partnerships provide us with a sense of shared purpose and collective strength. When we collaborate with organizations that understand our local context, we can create more impactful programs that do not rely solely on international funding.”

Regional coalitions enable grassroots organizations to advocate for policy changes on a larger scale while remaining rooted in their local realities. By working within their

regional networks, CSOs can amplify their voices, share best practices and mobilize resources in a way that strengthens their collective influence. Such partnerships also provide an alternative to over-reliance on international institutions, empowering organizations to take ownership of their advocacy work without external pressures dictating their agendas.

The complex relationship between international organizations and grassroots movements is a notable issue. While international partnerships provide crucial financial resources, technical expertise and advocacy platforms, they also pose risks of dependency and misalignment with local priorities.

Respondent D explained: “International funding keeps many of our initiatives alive, but sometimes it comes with conditions that don’t fully align with our community’s needs. We must be strategic about what partnerships we accept.”

This perspective emphasizes the challenges of donor-driven advocacy. Some international agencies prioritize issues based on global funding trends rather than local realities, forcing CSOs to adjust their programming to secure funding rather than addressing the most pressing community concerns. This can create a disconnect between grassroots advocacy and international development agendas, potentially diluting the effectiveness of local movements.

The relationship between women’s CSOs and international organizations remains an essential yet challenging aspect of advocacy and development work. While global platforms offer visibility and financial support, grassroots activists continue to struggle with limitations in policymaking influence, funding dependencies and transactional partnerships. Respondent E is hopeless “However, from that day to where we are now, just as anti-gender ideology has been increasingly adopted by many rising right-wing movements and governments, it’s important to remember that these institutions—like the United Nations—are intergovernmental organizations, meaning they are made up of governments themselves. As the global right has risen, and because there hasn’t been a proper strategy or plan within the UN to counter this backlash, these institutions have become vulnerable to infiltration by family groups,

male-dominated groups, and anti-gender activists. As a result, they have become increasingly influenced by these actors. Today, with the continued rise of the right wing, the UN has significantly lost its former influence and weight—it no longer holds the authority it once did.”

Still, by strategically engaging with local and regional networks, focusing on sustainable funding models and advocating for more inclusive decision-making structures, grassroots organizations can strengthen their role in both national and global gender equality movements.

Ultimately, achieving a more equitable and collaborative international engagement model requires a shift from tokenistic participation to genuine partnership, ensuring that grassroots voices are not only heard but also integrated into policy decisions that shape the future of gender justice worldwide.

4.3. Inter-CSO Collaboration and Fragmentation

Collaboration among CSOs is a cornerstone of effective advocacy, particularly in advancing women’s rights and gender equality. By working together, CSOs can amplify marginalized voices, pool resources and exert greater influence on policy reforms. However, despite the evident benefits of coalition-building, these collaborations are often fraught with challenges. The nature of inter-CSO relationships varies significantly, with some partnerships flourishing due to shared values and mutual interests, while others face tensions stemming from competition for limited resources, ideological differences and donor-driven agendas.

For women’s rights organizations, fostering strategic alliances with like-minded CSOs is critical to advancing collective goals. However, the dependency on international funding and the presence of more conservative organizations—often backed by powerful institutions—complicate these relationships. This section explores key feedback from respondents, shedding light on the complexities of CSO collaborations and offering strategies for navigating these challenges.

One key theme that emerged from the interviews was the significance of developing organic and reciprocal partnerships rather than forming relationships dictated solely by financial dependencies. Several respondents expressed concerns that many collaborations are transactional in nature, revolving around securing grants rather than a genuine commitment to shared advocacy objectives.

Respondent D articulated this sentiment, stating: “A more organic and reciprocal relationship can be established. It is possible to go beyond simply tracking financial transactions.”

This perspective highlights the need for CSOs to move beyond fund-driven partnerships and cultivate relationships rooted in shared values, trust and long-term goals. Rather than viewing alliances as mere funding mechanisms, organizations can achieve more substantial impact by emphasizing knowledge-sharing, capacity-building and joint advocacy efforts.

To achieve this, respondents suggested that CSOs focus on establishing networks that prioritize shared advocacy goals over short-term financial incentives, creating spaces for joint learning and skill-building to strengthen collective expertise and developing long-term collaborations that do not dissolve once funding cycles end. By fostering partnerships based on trust and mutual commitment, CSOs can enhance their credibility and effectiveness while reducing dependency on external donors. Respondent C underlines “Honestly, the foundation doesn’t really have much communication with mixed organizations or those working in other fields, like environmental organizations, for example. It’s somewhat confined to its own area. I’m not sure if “confined” is the right word, but the circumstances kind of require it. They already have limited people and resources, so they can barely manage their own work as it is. But I would have liked to see more interaction with different fields—both to explain our own work and to learn about what’s happening in areas like child rights, the environment, culture, arts, and so on. There’s a lot of work being done across various sectors. In that sense, I would say the foundation’s outreach is a bit weak, but again, that’s largely due to the conditions they are working under.”

Despite the benefits of collaboration, competition for financial resources often strains relationships between CSOs. Many organizations rely on similar donor pools, leading to tensions that undermine collective advocacy efforts. Some respondents noted that funding structures tend to favor larger, well-established CSOs, leaving smaller grassroots organizations struggling to secure financial support. This dynamic not only fuels competition but also exacerbates power imbalances within the civil society sector.

Additionally, many donors impose strict thematic and operational guidelines, requiring CSOs to tailor their programs to fit pre-existing funding priorities rather than addressing the most pressing issues in their communities. As a result, organizations may find themselves shifting their focus to align with donor expectations rather than grassroots needs.

Respondent E expressed frustration with this reality, stating: “Sometimes, we must reshape our work to fit donor interests, even if it means sidelining urgent community needs. This affects the authenticity of our advocacy.”

To mitigate these challenges, respondents recommended the following strategies: encouraging more flexible and equitable funding mechanisms that allow grassroots organizations to access resources without unnecessary bureaucratic constraints, forming coalitions to apply for larger grants, ensuring that smaller CSOs benefit from funding while contributing to collective efforts and engaging in dialogue with funding agencies to emphasize the importance of context-specific, locally driven solutions rather than rigid top-down mandates. By shifting the focus away from competition and toward collaborative resource-sharing, CSOs can work together more effectively to achieve their advocacy objectives.

Another major challenge discussed by respondents is the ideological divide within civil society, particularly between women’s rights CSOs and conservative organizations. While women’s rights groups advocate for gender equality and progressive policy reforms, conservative CSOs often oppose these efforts, aligning themselves with government-backed policies that reinforce patriarchal norms.

This divide is especially pronounced when it comes to issues such as reproductive rights, gender-based violence legislation and LGBTQ+ inclusivity. Conservative CSOs, due to their alignment with political and religious institutions, frequently receive institutional backing, placing women's rights organizations at a disadvantage in terms of influence and funding. Respondent J highlighted how this divide fragments the advocacy landscape, making coalition-building difficult: "Conservative organizations have the backing of governments and institutions, which limits our ability to push gender equality forward. It creates a difficult environment for progressive advocacy."

To address these ideological tensions, respondents proposed several strategies: forming strategic partnerships with progressive actors in different sectors, such as academia, media and international organizations, to counteract the influence of conservative groups; reducing dependence on government-linked funding and instead seeking support from international feminist funds and private foundations that align with gender equality goals; and conducting grassroots awareness campaigns to educate communities on gender issues, ensuring that advocacy efforts are not solely dependent on elite policy circles. By proactively addressing these challenges, women's rights CSOs can navigate ideological opposition while continuing to push for meaningful policy change.

Given the challenges discussed above, respondents emphasized the need for stronger coalition-building mechanisms to ensure that civil society remains an effective force for change. Key recommendations included: Pooling Resources and Expertise – CSOs can maximize their impact by sharing financial and human resources, as well as coordinating research and advocacy initiatives. This approach helps to mitigate funding-related competition while ensuring that advocacy efforts are comprehensive and well-informed, promoting Decentralized and Participatory Leadership - Avoiding hierarchical structures within coalitions can encourage more inclusive decision-making, ensuring that smaller organizations have a voice in advocacy strategies, collective Policy Advocacy – CSOs can strengthen their influence by jointly advocating for legislative and policy reforms, presenting a united front to policymakers. By consolidating efforts, organizations can exert greater pressure on

governments and international institutions and strengthening Capacity-Building Initiatives – Investing in training programs for CSO leaders and activists on effective advocacy, grant-writing and policy engagement can empower organizations to operate more independently and sustainably

The relationships among CSOs are complex, shaped by both opportunities and obstacles. While collaboration is essential for advancing gender equality, it is often hindered by competition for resources, donor-driven priorities and ideological divisions. By fostering organic and reciprocal partnerships, advocating for decentralized funding models and countering the influence of conservative organizations, women's rights CSOs can enhance their collective impact. Through intentional coalition-building and strategic advocacy, civil society can remain a powerful force for gender justice, ensuring that grassroots voices continue to shape policies and drive meaningful social change.

4.4. Dynamics of Political Engagement and Legal Advocacy

Engagement with political parties is a strategic yet complex terrain for CSOs advocating for gender equality. Political affiliation can open doors for policy influence, but it also presents risks of co-optation and instrumentalization. Many women's CSOs must carefully navigate partisan dynamics to maintain their independence while pushing for legislative and policy reforms. Some organizations choose to work directly with political actors to advance gender-responsive policies, while others adopt a more cautious stance, wary of political entanglement and the potential for their advocacy to be exploited for political gains. This balancing act requires deliberate strategies to ensure that engagement with political parties remains productive rather than compromising. Respondent J sums it up “Sometimes you have to step in—because the state isn't there, doesn't act in time, or even stands in the way. But stepping in during emergencies is not the same as permanently taking on what should be the state's job. Feeding the poor, ensuring women can work—those are public responsibilities. If you keep doing them without a political stance, they become your job instead of the state's. That's where the line between being political and becoming depoliticized gets blurry. Then there's a difference between just saying

“Sure, we’ll do whatever the state asks” versus saying “We’re here to work with you, on our terms, in partnership.” Those are not the same thing. But the issue isn’t just this kind of closeness either—sometimes civil society keeps such a distance that it turns into complete detachment: “I don’t deal with the state.” But I’m not the state. And I’m not trying to become one either.”

One of the critical concerns raised by respondents is the declining effectiveness of international human rights mechanisms in influencing national policies. Traditionally, organizations advocating for gender equality have relied on international institutions—such as the United Nations human rights bodies—to hold governments accountable. However, several respondents expressed frustration with the limited impact of these mechanisms in recent years.

Respondent H articulated this challenge: “At this point, submitting reports to international committees has little effect. Governments issue standardized responses with no meaningful follow-up. The recommendations provided by these bodies are often ignored.”

This statement reflects a growing skepticism about the ability of global human rights frameworks to drive real change at the national level. Many CSOs dedicate significant time and resources to compiling shadow reports and engaging in international review processes, only to find that governments offer generic responses without implementing meaningful reforms. The lack of enforcement mechanisms for these recommendations weakens the credibility of international human rights institutions, leaving grassroots organizations seeking alternative avenues for advocacy.

Respondent E elaborates on this skepticism, “Especially when it comes to the issue of diplomacy in this field—working with countries, for example through country offices—the state provides office space, approves the program, allows the organization to operate, allocates resources, etc. For that organization to function there, the state must give permission and provide a location. When that’s the case, naturally it becomes a matter of negotiating and cooperating with the state. So in

such a context, even a UN organization can't really speak out, even if there's a major human rights or women's rights crisis going on. So honestly, when we look at it from the perspective of country offices, they don't have much of an impact. Their influence might be limited to things like resource distribution, facilitating participation in international processes, reporting the local situation to headquarters or to the international system—that's what they can do.

As for international human rights mechanisms, these intergovernmental organizations—take CEDAW, for instance, or think of the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention—when you look at all that, I personally think these institutions have now lost their function. We've clearly moved from a global period when we experienced some form of democracy, or at least a time when human rights were defended, to a system where everyone is left to their own fate, and states basically do whatever they want and implement whatever policy they choose.”

Given the limitations of international mechanisms, many women's CSOs are reorienting their strategies toward strengthening domestic legal frameworks and institutional reforms. Instead of relying solely on external pressure, organizations are investing in building relationships with policymakers, legal experts and other stakeholders at the national level. This approach involves: drafting and lobbying for gender-responsive legislation – Engaging directly with lawmakers to ensure that gender equality is embedded in legal frameworks and backed by enforcement mechanisms, forging alliances with policymakers and reformists – Identifying and collaborating with political actors who are genuinely committed to gender equality, regardless of their party affiliation and mobilizing public pressure for accountability – Utilizing grassroots activism, media campaigns and social movements to demand government action on gender policies.

By focusing on domestic legal mechanisms, CSOs can create tangible and enforceable changes that are less dependent on the often-ineffectual recommendations of international bodies.

Engagement with political parties presents another layer of complexity for women's CSOs. Political partnerships can provide access to decision-making spaces, facilitate

policy influence and strengthen advocacy efforts. However, they also pose risks of co-optation, where CSOs may be used as political tools rather than genuine stakeholders in policy formulation.

Respondent E shared their dilemma: “Working with political leaders can be productive, but we have to be careful not to be seen as partisan. Once you align too closely with one party, you risk alienating others and losing credibility.”

This highlights the delicate balance that organizations must strike when engaging with political actors. To mitigate risks, many CSOs adopt the following strategies maintaining nonpartisan advocacy – Engaging with politicians across party lines rather than aligning with a single political entity, building cross-party coalitions – Encouraging bipartisan support for gender equality initiatives to ensure sustainability beyond political cycles and setting clear boundaries – Ensuring that collaborations with political parties are based on policy commitments rather than electoral interests.

Respondents emphasized the importance of strategic and sustainable engagement, prioritizing partnerships that align with grassroots priorities and long-term advocacy goals. Respondent E on sustainable engagement, “That area—what’s often called lobbying—is generally left unattended. In fact, Women for Women’s Human Rights has done quite a bit of lobbying. The word “lobbying” tends to have a negative connotation, even among feminists, but it really shouldn’t—because what else can you do? Take one of the political parties, for example: within the party, there are plenty of people who hold patriarchal views. There are also many women MPs who are completely uninformed about women’s issues. And at the same time, this is the party we most often collaborate with through municipalities, and it’s also the one we potentially have the most influence over. So, you constantly need to “feed” them information. To be frank, there’s a real state of ignorance that they are just not informed or capable on these topics. So, what we refer to as lobbying, or perhaps “dialogue,” really needs to happen constantly, especially around women’s issues. It’s a space that cannot be left empty. But I don’t think there’s enough effort from either side. Women’s organizations need to knock on more doors, and political parties shouldn’t be functioning without us—but unfortunately, that’s not how it works.”

When assessing women's CSOs relationship with government agencies, it is essential to acknowledge the evolving dynamics of collaboration, the persistent challenges faced and the critical areas of advocacy that shape their engagement. This relationship is influenced by shifting political landscapes, bureaucratic complexities and the varying degrees of institutional willingness to cooperate. While partnerships with government agencies have led to meaningful policy developments and program implementations, they have also presented obstacles that require continuous negotiation and strategic advocacy. Understanding these dynamics allows for a critical evaluation of the effectiveness of government partnerships, identification of gaps in cooperation and exploration of opportunities for more impactful engagement in advancing gender equality and human rights.

Respondent I from a women's CSO reflected on the organization's past and evolving interactions with government agencies: "Our organization has historically worked alongside government agencies in various capacities. For example, the Women's Human Rights Education Program initially operated in collaboration with the Ministry of State and the Social Services and Child Protection Agency. However, when community centers were closed and the Ministry of Women and State was dissolved, our protocol was suspended, forcing us to shift our focus to working with municipalities. This transition highlighted both the necessity and challenges of governmental cooperation."

This testimony indicates the fluid nature of CSO-government partnerships and how political and administrative restructuring can abruptly alter the landscape of collaboration. While government agencies offer institutional backing and legitimacy, their volatility manifested in policy shifts, departmental closures and changing leadership proposes significant challenges for sustained engagement. The participant's experience illustrates the need for adaptive strategies, as CSOs must frequently recalibrate their approaches to maintain influence and operational continuity within evolving governance structures. By shifting their focus to municipalities, the organization demonstrated resilience and strategic flexibility, ensuring that their advocacy efforts remained effective even amid institutional upheavals.

Another critical aspect of women's CSOs engagement with government agencies is their role in shaping legal reforms. Respondent J puts it "When we look at such a relationship specifically in the context of women's organizations, we're talking about a diverse field with many different approaches—so it's not just about the relationship of a single organization. Because of this multiplicity, there are also a wide range of perspectives. Some groups prefer to avoid engagement altogether, some advocate for keeping a significant distance, and others maintain very close ties, sometimes struggling to define the boundaries of that closeness. What do I mean by this? Well, if we consider this from the perspective of the women's organizations I'm part of, many of the goals we aim to achieve—such as implementing regulations that ensure equality, establishing legal frameworks and mechanisms, eliminating various forms of violations, and ensuring that state interventions promote or protect equality—are things that can realistically only be achieved through engagement with various state institutions." Advocacy efforts aimed at influencing legislation are often long-term and require persistent lobbying, legal expertise and coalition-building. While CSOs frequently encounter resistance from political institutions, successful collaborations have demonstrated that sustained engagement can result in transformative policy changes.

Respondent E emphasized the impact of such advocacy efforts, stating: "We have been involved in national legal reforms, including contributions to the reform of the Civil Code, the Turkish Penal Code and the creation of Law No. 6284. These collaborations demonstrate that, while challenging, engagement with government agencies can yield significant policy advancements."

This testimony highlights the pivotal role of CSOs in shaping legal frameworks that protect and empower women. The respondents' organization has actively participated in legislative reforms, underscoring the effectiveness of persistent advocacy in achieving legal and policy milestones. The Civil Code and the Turkish Penal Code reforms reflect broader structural changes that directly impact women's rights, addressing issues such as property rights, family law and protections against gender-based violence. Meanwhile, Law No. 6284, which provides legal protection for

survivors of domestic violence, is a direct outcome of feminist activism and CSO engagement with policymakers.

Despite these achievements, the advocacy process remains fraught with challenges, including political resistance, bureaucratic inertia and the risk of policy backsliding. Legislative gains require continued vigilance to ensure proper implementation and to prevent the erosion of hard-won rights. Moreover, effective legal advocacy often hinges on a CSO's ability to build alliances across sectors, including legal professionals, academics, media and international bodies that can apply external pressure. This respondent's experience marks that, while engagement with government agencies is complex and sometimes adversarial, it remains an indispensable tool in advancing gender equality and legal protections.

A key challenge in the relationship between women's CSOs and government agencies lies in the tension between independent activism and bureaucratic governance. While CSOs often provide critical, on-the-ground insights that reflect the lived realities of marginalized communities, government institutions operate within rigid administrative frameworks that may hinder swift and effective responses to social crises. The intersection of these two approaches can lead to both constructive collaborations and friction, particularly in times of crisis when rapid intervention is required.

From a different perspective, Respondent J expressed: "Government partnerships can be complex. While CSOs offer an independent and critical perspective on fieldwork, government agencies often operate with bureaucratic constraints that limit flexibility. In crisis situations, such as the aftermath of the earthquake, we observed a lack of coordination, resulting in inefficiencies. Our role as observers allows us to assess what is truly needed on the ground."

This indicates the fundamental differences in operational models between CSOs and government agencies. While CSOs are often agile, adaptable and community-driven, government entities must navigate layers of bureaucracy, hierarchical decision-making and procedural requirements that can delay responses. This becomes

particularly evident in crisis situations, such as natural disasters, where timely and well-coordinated interventions are essential. The respondent highlights a critical issue: the lack of coordination in disaster response. When governmental agencies fail to effectively collaborate with CSOs, gaps emerge in addressing urgent needs, leading to inefficiencies and misallocation of resources. CSOs, with their direct engagement in affected communities, are well-positioned to identify immediate priorities—such as emergency shelter, healthcare and legal aid for vulnerable groups, including women and children. However, without a structured mechanism for government-CSO coordination, these insights often remain underutilized. Moreover, the role of CSOs as observers is crucial in ensuring accountability and evidence-based policy recommendations. By documenting systemic failures and identifying gaps in service delivery, CSOs can advocate for long-term reforms that improve institutional preparedness for future crises. Their ability to function as external monitors helps bridge the disconnect between policy design and on-the-ground realities. While bureaucratic constraints within government agencies present challenges, they also highlight an opportunity for more strategic engagement. Strengthening formal mechanisms for government-CSO collaboration—such as joint task forces, crisis response frameworks and institutionalized consultation processes—can help mitigate inefficiencies. Furthermore, fostering a culture of mutual trust and recognizing CSOs as equal stakeholders rather than merely auxiliary actors can lead to more effective policy implementation and crisis management. Ultimately, this respondent's perspective reflects a broader issue in governance: the need for synergy between state mechanisms and civil society. To maximize impact, government agencies must leverage the expertise and adaptability of CSOs while ensuring that institutional constraints do not obstruct meaningful cooperation. In doing so, both entities can work towards a more responsive, inclusive and accountable governance model that better serves society, particularly in times of crisis.

One of the defining features of women's CSOs is their ability to step in where government institutions fall short, particularly in providing essential services to vulnerable populations. In sectors like employment and migration, CSOs often act as intermediaries, ensuring that marginalized groups—such as women, refugees and

migrants—receive adequate support in navigating bureaucratic systems and accessing opportunities. While collaboration with government agencies can enhance the reach and effectiveness of these efforts, sustaining these partnerships requires ongoing advocacy, negotiation and resource mobilization.

Similarly, Respondent I, working in employment and migration initiatives stated:

"We have engaged with government institutions, sometimes filling gaps left by public services. For instance, in the employment sector, we acted as intermediaries to provide consultation services akin to those offered by İŞKUR. However, maintaining these partnerships requires continuous effort, especially in policy production and advocacy."

This perspective highlights the dual role of CSOs, both as service providers and as policy advocates. In many cases, public institutions, such as İŞKUR, may lack the capacity to adequately address the employment needs of marginalized groups. Whether due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, funding limitations, or restrictive eligibility criteria, these gaps in service provision create a vacuum that CSOs step in to fill. By offering consultation services, employment training and networking opportunities, CSOs help bridge this divide, ensuring that individuals who may otherwise be excluded from government programs receive necessary support. However, as the respondent notes, maintaining these partnerships is an ongoing challenge. Unlike government agencies, which operate within fixed institutional frameworks, CSOs must continuously advocate for their role, seek external funding and engage in policy negotiations to sustain their initiatives. This highlights the precarious nature of CSO-government collaborations—while they can be impactful, they often require constant effort to remain effective. One of the critical aspects of this dynamic is policy engagement. CSOs not only address immediate service gaps but also play a vital role in shaping long-term policies that improve institutional frameworks. Their advocacy efforts can lead to more inclusive employment policies, gender-sensitive labor reforms and better protections for migrant workers. However, influencing policy requires persistent lobbying, coalition-building and strategic engagement with policymakers—efforts that demand significant time and resources. Moreover, the reliance on CSOs to supplement government services raises an

important question about the state's responsibility in service provision. While CSOs play a crucial role in supporting underserved populations, their work should not be seen as a substitute for robust public policies. Instead, sustainable government-CSO partnerships should focus on institutionalizing successful CSO-led initiatives, integrating them into national frameworks and ensuring that marginalized communities receive consistent and state-backed support. This respondent's experience reflects both the opportunities and challenges inherent in CSO-government collaborations. While CSOs have proven to be effective in filling gaps in employment and migration services, sustaining these partnerships requires continuous advocacy, strategic engagement and long-term policy influence. Strengthening these collaborations through formalized agreements, joint policy-making initiatives and increased government recognition of CSO contributions can enhance the overall effectiveness of service delivery, ultimately leading to more inclusive and equitable employment systems.

The relationship between women's CSOs and government agencies is not uniform—it varies based on the nature of the organization's work, the specific government institution involved and the broader political environment. While CSOs can successfully collaborate with government bodies on initiatives that align with national policies, their advocacy efforts sometimes encounter resistance due to bureaucratic constraints, political hesitations, or differing priorities. This variability emphasizes the complexities of engagement, where CSOs must navigate both productive partnerships and institutional roadblocks to advance their mission.

Respondent G expressed: "Our interaction with government agencies varies significantly depending on the scope of our work and the specific institution involved. For instance, while we have successfully collaborated on certain projects, there are also instances where our advocacy efforts are met with resistance or bureaucracy."

This perspective sheds light on yet another dual nature of CSO-government relationships. On the one hand, there are instances where partnerships yield tangible results—such as the development of gender-sensitive policies, capacity-building

programs and resource-sharing initiatives. These collaborations often arise in areas where government agencies acknowledge the expertise and grassroots reach of CSOs, allowing for constructive engagement. However, on the other hand, CSOs frequently face obstacles when advocating for structural reforms or policy changes that challenge existing power dynamics. Bureaucracy, slow administrative processes and political reluctance can hinder efforts to push for more progressive gender policies. Resistance may manifest in various forms, including delayed approvals, lack of access to decision-makers, or the outright dismissal of CSO recommendations. In some cases, government agencies may perceive CSOs as adversarial rather than as partners, particularly when advocacy efforts call for accountability or legal reforms that disrupt entrenched systems. Another key factor influencing these interactions is the institutional culture of government bodies. Some ministries or departments may be more open to collaboration due to leadership priorities, international commitments, or donor-driven incentives. Others, however, may operate in ways that limit civil society engagement, either due to rigid bureaucratic hierarchies or reluctance to engage with independent voices. This uneven landscape requires CSOs to adapt their strategies, leveraging partnerships where possible while persistently advocating for change in more challenging spaces. To navigate these challenges, CSOs often employ a combination of direct engagement and strategic advocacy. Direct engagement includes participating in government-led working groups, providing expert consultations and contributing to policy drafts. Meanwhile, strategic advocacy involves coalition-building, media campaigns and leveraging international human rights frameworks to put pressure on national institutions. This dual approach allows CSOs to balance cooperation with government agencies while maintaining their role as independent watchdogs for gender equality and human rights. This respondent's insights highlight the need for CSOs to remain flexible yet persistent in their interactions with government institutions. While successful collaborations demonstrate the potential for impactful change, bureaucratic resistance requires CSOs to continuously refine their advocacy strategies. By fostering multi-stakeholder dialogues, strengthening institutional alliances and maintaining a long-term vision, CSOs can work toward overcoming systemic barriers and ensuring that gender equality remains a priority in policy development and implementation.

Women's CSOs working in gender equality and feminist activism often seek to engage public institutions to advance their advocacy efforts. However, the level of institutional commitment varies significantly, influenced by political will, bureaucratic structures and the sensitivity of the issues being addressed. While some entities demonstrate openness to collaboration, others require sustained pressure before committing to meaningful engagement. This inconsistency poses a challenge for CSOs striving to implement impactful programs, particularly in areas such as combating gender-based violence and sexual violence.

Respondent E working in gender equality and feminist activism described their efforts to engage with public institutions, stating: "Through our project on combating sexual violence, we have engaged with public institutions, yet the extent of their commitment remains inconsistent. Some universities have been open to cooperation, but governmental agencies often require persistent engagement before yielding any tangible support."

This statement indicates the reality that while certain institutions, such as universities, may recognize the importance of feminist initiatives and be willing to collaborate, governmental agencies often present additional challenges. One of the primary reasons for this discrepancy is the differing levels of institutional autonomy. Universities, particularly those with gender studies departments or progressive leadership, may be more responsiveness to working with feminist organizations. They may view such collaborations as part of their academic and social responsibility, providing a more conducive environment for initiatives like sexual violence prevention programs, awareness campaigns and policy research. Conversely, governmental agencies operate within a bureaucratic framework that often slows down decision-making and prioritization. Public institutions may be constrained by hierarchical structures, political considerations, or a lack of dedicated resources for gender-focused initiatives. CSOs engaging with these agencies frequently face obstacles such as prolonged approval processes, shifting leadership priorities, or institutional reluctance to address sensitive topics like sexual violence, particularly when doing so requires policy changes or systemic reform. To navigate these challenges, CSOs must employ persistence and adaptability in their

engagement strategies. This can include forming alliances with sympathetic policymakers, leveraging legal and policy frameworks to push for institutional accountability and using public advocacy to increase pressure on government agencies. Additionally, showcasing successful collaborations—such as those with universities—can serve as a model to encourage other institutions to engage in similar partnership. This respondent's experience highlights the uneven landscape of institutional engagement in gender equality advocacy. While certain public institutions may provide opportunities for progress, others require sustained efforts to overcome inertia. For CSOs working in feminist activism, maintaining long-term advocacy strategies, building strong networks and continuously pushing for institutional accountability remain essential to achieving lasting change in the fight against gender-based violence and sexual violence.

Women's CSOs addressing violence against women play a crucial role in bridging the gap between survivors and policy-making institutions. Their work extends beyond direct support to survivors; they also strive to influence policy decisions that shape the broader structural response to gender-based violence. Advocacy is a key tool in their efforts, as it allows them to bring attention to systemic gaps, push for legislative reforms and hold government agencies accountable. However, despite these efforts, CSOs often encounter institutional resistance, political challenges and bureaucratic inertia, which hinder the impact of their advocacy.

Respondent C focused on addressing violence against women emphasized the critical role of advocacy in their work: "Advocacy is at the heart of our efforts. We do not only provide legal, social and psychological support to women, but we also work on influencing policy decisions. For example, we continuously highlight the insufficiency of women's shelters to the authorities. However, while we try to speak to the state through the experiences of women, there are structural and political barriers that limit our influence. Government responsiveness is not always at the level we would hope for."

Evidently, the duality in the role that many women's rights organizations take on is clear: providing immediate, life-saving assistance to survivors while simultaneously

working to create systemic change. The need for more women's shelters is a recurring issue in many countries, as safe housing is one of the most critical resources for women escaping abusive situations. Despite CSOs persistently raising this issue, responses from government authorities often fall short, either due to limited resources, lack of political will, or competing policy priorities. One major challenge in advocacy efforts is the structural rigidity of government institutions. Policy changes require navigating multiple levels of bureaucracy, gaining approval from different governmental bodies and often facing political resistance, particularly in conservative or patriarchal contexts. Additionally, governments may prioritize other areas of social policy, sidelining gender-based violence as a secondary concern rather than an urgent crisis. Political barriers further complicate engagement. Advocacy on violence against women is inherently political, as it challenges existing power structures and demands accountability from state institutions. Governments may be reluctant to acknowledge systemic failures, fearing political repercussions or resistance from influential groups that oppose feminist policies. In such cases, CSOs must employ strategic advocacy methods, such as coalition-building, public campaigns and international pressure, to keep gender-based violence high on the policy agenda. Despite these challenges, the role of advocacy remains indispensable. CSOs must continue leveraging survivor testimonies, legal frameworks and data-driven evidence to push for tangible reforms. Advocacy not only influences government action but also raises public awareness, shaping societal attitudes towards violence against women. By persistently engaging policymakers, mobilizing public support and forming strategic alliances, these organizations can enhance their influence and drive meaningful change. While government responsiveness may not always meet expectations, sustained advocacy efforts remain crucial in challenging institutional resistance and ensuring that policies addressing violence against women are effectively implemented. The ongoing work of these organizations highlights the importance of perseverance, strategic engagement and the unwavering commitment to protecting women's rights.

The dedication to improving the status of women and girls as played by women's CSOs often engages with government agencies to enhance educational opportunities, economic empowerment and institutional capacity-building. Their work spans a

broad spectrum, from advocating for policy changes to implementing grassroots initiatives that directly impact communities. However, the level of engagement with government institutions is not uniform, as it largely depends on local political contexts, institutional openness and the priorities of different public offices. While collaboration can lead to meaningful progress, it is often influenced by varying degrees of political will and bureaucratic complexities.

Respondent A working to improve the status of women and girls described a mixed experience in their engagement with government agencies: "We work towards improving the status of women and girls and have engaged with various public institutions. Our involvement in educational initiatives, scholarships and administrative capacity-building sometimes aligns with governmental priorities. However, since each branch of our organization operates independently, the level of collaboration with government agencies depends on local dynamics and political will."

From this both the opportunities and challenges that arise in partnerships between CSOs and government institutions. On one hand, when CSO objectives align with governmental priorities, collaboration can lead to significant advancements. For example, initiatives focused on education and scholarships for girls often gain government support, as they contribute to national development goals. Similarly, capacity-building efforts within public institutions help strengthen administrative efficiency, making it a mutually beneficial area of cooperation. The decentralized nature of many CSOs introduces complexities in government partnerships. When each branch operates independently, the level of engagement varies based on regional leadership, local government structures and the prevailing political climate. In some areas, government officials may be responsiveness to collaboration, while in others, bureaucratic obstacles, resistance to feminist policies, or political instability may hinder effective engagement. This unevenness requires CSOs to adopt adaptive strategies, ensuring that they tailor their advocacy and partnership approaches to the specific context of each region. Political will remains a determining factor in how responsiveness government agencies are to civil society initiatives. In some cases, local governments may be more progressive and open to collaboration, while others

may view CSOs with skepticism, particularly if they perceive feminist activism as a challenge to traditional societal norms. This dynamic forces organizations to navigate complex relationships, balancing advocacy with diplomacy to maintain constructive engagement. Despite these challenges, CSOs play a crucial role in bridging gaps between the government and marginalized communities. By providing essential services, advocating for systemic change and offering expertise in gender-focused initiatives, they contribute to shaping policies and programs that enhance the status of women and girls. To maximize their impact, these organizations must continue leveraging strategic partnerships, fostering dialogue with key stakeholders and remaining adaptable to shifting political landscapes. While government collaboration presents both opportunities and limitations, sustained engagement, persistence and a tailored approach to local contexts can help CSOs overcome barriers and drive meaningful progress in advancing gender equality.

4.5. Challenges and Strategic Responses

The findings reveal a multifaceted relationship with government agencies—one marked by both productive collaborations and significant structural and political challenges. While these organizations recognize the necessity of engaging with state institutions to advance gender equality and women's rights, they also face bureaucratic hurdles, inconsistent governmental commitment and shifting political landscapes that impact the effectiveness of their work.

A recurring theme in the discussions is the inconsistency in government responsiveness. While some ministries and public institutions have been open to collaboration, many CSOs expressed frustration with the lack of sustained engagement. As one participant noted, efforts to combat sexual violence have required persistent advocacy, with government agencies often reluctant to take decisive action without continued pressure. This reflects a broader challenge in civil society-state relations, where cooperation is often conditional on political will rather than a structured, institutionalized commitment to gender equality. The dissolution of key ministries and restructuring of government institutions have created obstacles for CSOs that previously worked closely with these bodies. The closure of community

centers and the dissolution of the Ministry of Women and State forced many organizations to redirect their efforts to municipalities, highlighting the fragility of institutional partnerships. The shift from national to local governance structures has presented both opportunities and challenges, with some municipalities proving to be more responsive than others. However, this transition has also fragmented advocacy efforts, making it more difficult to push for nationwide policy reforms. The role of CSOs as intermediaries between the state and the communities they serve was another critical point raised. In areas such as employment and migration, CSOs have often stepped in to fill service gaps left by government agencies, providing consultation services and direct support where public institutions have fallen short. This demonstrates the essential role of women's organizations in bridging the gap between policy and implementation, ensuring that vulnerable populations receive the support they need. However, it also affirms the risk of the state relying on CSOs to shoulder responsibilities that should be part of a well-functioning public service system. In crisis situations, such as the aftermath of the earthquake, the limitations of government-CSO collaboration became particularly evident. The lack of coordination between state institutions and civil society led to inefficiencies in the response, further illustrating how bureaucratic constraints and limited flexibility within government agencies can hinder timely and effective action. CSOs play a crucial role in assessing needs on the ground and advocating for necessary interventions, yet their input is not always integrated into government decision-making processes. Despite these challenges, CSOs continue to engage with government institutions in various capacities. Many organizations emphasized that advocacy remains a core strategy, whether through direct policy engagement, reporting, or public campaigns. Some organizations have successfully influenced legal reforms, including contributions to the Turkish Penal Code and Law No. 6284, demonstrating that persistent engagement with the state can lead to meaningful policy advancements. Even when legislative gains are achieved, implementation remains a challenge, with many organizations highlighting structural and political barriers that limit their ability to hold the state accountable. The findings highlight the diverse approaches taken by different CSOs depending on their area of focus, size and level of institutionalization. While some organizations engage with the government on legal and policy reforms, others focus on grassroots activism,

community support, or service provision. This diversity is both a strength and a challenge—on one hand, it allows for a broad spectrum of advocacy efforts, but on the other, it can make unified action more difficult when facing government resistance. The relationship between women's CSOs and government agencies in Türkiye remains an evolving and complex. While there have been successes in legal reforms, service provision and advocacy efforts, persistent barriers highlight the need for more institutionalized and meaningful cooperation.

The persistent efforts of women's CSOs highlight their unwavering dedication to advancing gender equality despite facing significant political, structural and bureaucratic obstacles. These organizations play a crucial role in driving systemic change, not only by engaging with government agencies but also by independently advocating for policies that promote women's rights. While government partnerships can facilitate large-scale reforms, independent activism remains essential in ensuring that institutions remain accountable, responsive and committed to gender equity. The voices of the women's organizations interviewed demonstrate their resilience and commitment to gender equality, even in the face of political and bureaucratic challenges. Respondent D put it: "We must continue advocating for structural changes and reminding authorities of their obligations. Whether through reports, campaigns, or policy recommendations, our goal is to ensure that gender equality remains a priority."

This statement points out the necessity of sustained advocacy to push for lasting institutional and legislative changes. Women's organizations are not only service providers but also watchdogs that challenge state institutions to uphold their commitments to gender justice. Their work—ranging from publishing reports on gender disparities to launching nationwide campaigns—ensures that gender equality remains an integral part of national discourse. The participant's emphasis on advocacy through reports, campaigns and policy recommendations highlights the multi-faceted approach that CSOs employ. Reports provide evidence-based insights into the systemic barriers women face, offering data that policymakers cannot easily ignore. Campaigns mobilize public awareness, fostering societal support that pressures governments into action. Policy recommendations serve as blueprints for

legal and institutional reforms, providing concrete solutions to gender-based injustices. From these interviews, it is clear that while government engagement is necessary for systemic change, independent civil society efforts remain essential in holding institutions accountable, pushing for progressive policies and ensuring that women's rights remain at the forefront of the national agenda. Government collaboration alone is not enough; without the persistent push from civil society, commitments to gender equality may remain mere rhetoric rather than actionable policies. Women's CSOs serve as both partners and challengers to government institutions—collaborating with them when possible but also applying pressure when necessary. Their ability to navigate these dual roles is critical in ensuring that gender equality is not sidelined amid shifting political priorities. Moving forward, these organizations must continue leveraging their collective power, fostering strategic alliances and utilizing innovative advocacy techniques to maintain momentum in the fight for women's rights. The resilience and strategic persistence of women's organizations remain key in transforming policy commitments into tangible improvements in the lives of women and girls. Their work is a testament to the power of civil society in shaping more just and equitable societies.

Women's CSOs navigate a complex landscape of collaboration and competition when engaging with one another. While solidarity remains a key principle, practical realities such as funding constraints, ideological differences and institutional priorities shape the nature of these relationships. Many CSO representatives highlight the importance of collective action in advancing gender equality, yet they also acknowledge tensions that arise due to limited resources and differing strategic approaches.

Women's CSOs operate in a landscape where collective advocacy is both a necessity and a challenge. On the one hand, collaboration strengthens their impact, allowing them to pool resources, amplify their voices and exert greater influence on policy decisions. On the other hand, the competitive nature of funding, visibility and political positioning makes it difficult for organizations to sustain long-term partnerships without underlying tensions.

Collaboration is particularly crucial when confronting systemic barriers to gender equality. Many CSOs recognize that policy change, legislative reform and large-scale social transformation require a unified front. Forming coalitions allows organizations to leverage each other's strengths—some may have strong legal expertise, others deep grassroots connections and others well-established international networks. Together, they create a more formidable force capable of influencing decision-makers at local, national and international levels.

Respondents noted that joint campaigns and advocacy initiatives are especially effective in moments of political resistance. When governments attempt to roll back gender rights, CSOs mobilize en masse, organizing protests, issuing collective statements and lobbying policymakers. These high-stakes moments often foster a sense of solidarity, as organizations recognize that their goals are aligned and that a fragmented movement is less effective.

However, the necessity of collaboration does not erase the reality of competition. Women's CSOs largely rely on donor funding to sustain their work and securing financial support is a constant struggle. Donors often prioritize projects with the greatest reach or measurable impact, creating an environment where organizations must distinguish themselves to attract funding. This competition can sometimes strain relationships between CSOs, as they navigate the fine line between partnership and self-preservation.

Respondent G candidly acknowledged this tension, stating: "We work together, when necessary, especially when there is a big advocacy push, but at the end of the day, everyone is also looking out for their own sustainability. You cannot pretend that is not a factor."

This statement encapsulates the pragmatic reality of inter-CSO dynamics. While organizations may share overarching goals, they also have institutional responsibilities—to maintain their staff, meet donor expectations and ensure their long-term survival. In some cases, this leads to selective collaboration, where organizations join forces only when the benefits outweigh the risks of diluting their

own identity or diverting resources from their core mission. Respondent C explains “Of course, we tend to have more contact with women’s organizations and LGBTI organizations. The reason is that we work in the same or similar fields and come together around similar policies. At the same time, we also closely follow the activities and resources of organizations working on migration, for example. We try to establish contacts with them as well. Sometimes we collaborate with certain women’s organizations on joint projects. As I mentioned in the first question, depending on the national agenda, we might organize joint petition campaigns and similar initiatives. So I would say that maintaining relationships with other civil society organizations is a necessity—because we learn from each other what we’re experiencing and how we’re responding. That’s why the congress is a good context for this. Above all, it’s important to stay informed about what women’s organizations are doing. The congress is composed of 30 women’s organizations, and these 30 organizations, especially, have a tighter dialogue and communication with one another—even though they’re based in very different cities.”

Another layer of complexity arises from the hierarchical structures within the advocacy space. Larger, internationally recognized CSOs often wield greater influence, securing more funding and enjoying stronger relationships with policymakers and global institutions. Smaller, grassroots organizations—despite their deep local knowledge and direct engagement with affected communities—may struggle to gain the same level of access and visibility.

This power imbalance can lead to resentment, particularly when high-profile CSOs take the lead in advocacy efforts, while smaller organizations do the groundwork but receive little recognition. Respondent E noted, “We do the mobilization, we provide the case studies, we even draft sections of the reports, but when it comes to final presentations or recognition, it’s the bigger names that get called.”

This perception of inequity can make collaboration feel extractive rather than reciprocal. To address this, some organizations advocate for more equitable partnership models, where decision-making power, funding distribution and credit are shared fairly among coalition members.

Despite the challenges, women's CSOs acknowledge that collaboration remains essential for progress. Many respondents expressed a desire for more sustainable and transparent partnerships—ones that go beyond short-term advocacy pushes and instead foster long-term movement-building.

Potential solutions include: diversifying funding sources to reduce reliance on a few competitive donors, developing mutual capacity-building initiatives so that smaller organizations benefit from the expertise and networks of larger CSOs and establishing clear agreements on roles, responsibilities and visibility in joint campaigns to ensure fair recognition.

The duality of collaboration and competition is an inherent feature of the CSO landscape. Organizations must continuously navigate this tension, finding ways to work together while safeguarding their own sustainability. By fostering equitable partnerships and prioritizing movement-building over individual gain, women's CSOs can strengthen their collective impact without compromising their autonomy.

Funding plays a vital role in shaping the relationships between women's CSOs, influencing both collaboration and competition. While financial resources are necessary to sustain operations and expand advocacy efforts, the ways in which funding is distributed often create disparities between organizations. Many grassroots CSOs find themselves at a disadvantage, struggling to access direct funding and instead relying on larger, more established organizations that serve as intermediaries. This dynamic can foster tensions within the movement, impacting both the effectiveness and sustainability of gender advocacy initiatives.

A recurring theme among respondents is the perception that donor agencies prioritize well-known, internationally connected organizations over smaller, community-based ones. These larger CSOs typically have more experience navigating donor requirements, a record of securing grants and the institutional capacity to manage complex funding agreements. As a result, they often receive direct funding, while smaller organizations must depend on them for sub-grants or partnership opportunities.

Respondent J described this frustration: “Smaller organizations often find themselves doing the groundwork while the bigger CSOs get the credit. It’s frustrating because the real impact happens at the grassroots level, but we are rarely the ones in the rooms where funding decisions are made.”

This imbalance means that while grassroots organizations are often the ones implementing projects, engaging directly with communities and collecting crucial data, they remain on the periphery when it comes to strategic decision-making and financial allocation. This can create a sense of disempowerment, where local CSOs feel like service providers rather than equal partners in the advocacy ecosystem.

Another challenge is the role of larger CSOs as intermediaries between donors and smaller organizations. While this arrangement is often justified as a means of ensuring financial accountability and streamlining project management, it also places significant control in the hands of larger CSOs. They determine which smaller organizations receive funding, under what conditions and with what level of oversight. This can lead to conditional funding, where grassroots organizations must align their programs with the priorities of the larger CSO rather than their own community needs, limited financial autonomy, as smaller organizations receive only a fraction of the funding while administrative costs and overhead are absorbed by the intermediary organization. Recognition disparities, where the visibility and credit for successful projects primarily benefit the larger CSOs rather than the grassroots actors driving the work.

Respondent E highlighted how this system affects their work: “We are often brought in as implementing partners, but we have little say in how projects are designed. The priorities are set before we even enter the conversation.”

This raises concerns about the effectiveness of interventions, as initiatives designed without substantial grassroots input may fail to fully address community needs.

In addition to shaping CSO relationships, donor funding also influences advocacy strategies. Many respondents noted that funding priorities fluctuate based on

international trends, which can force organizations to shift focus in order to remain financially viable.

For instance, if donors prioritize gender-based violence one year and economic empowerment the next, organizations must adapt their messaging and project proposals accordingly. While this flexibility can be beneficial, it also means that long-term, systemic work is sometimes sidelined in favor of short-term projects that align with current funding trends.

Respondent D elaborated on this challenge, “Sometimes it feels like we are chasing funding rather than staying true to our core mission. We must package our work in a way that fits donor priorities, even if that’s not what the community needs most at the time.”

This funding-driven approach can lead to fragmented efforts, where CSOs shift focus based on financial incentives rather than sustained advocacy goals. It also increases dependency on external donors, making it difficult for organizations to establish long-term, self-sustaining initiatives.

To address these disparities, respondents emphasized the need for more equitable funding models that prioritize direct support for grassroots organizations. Potential solutions include: flexible funding mechanisms that allow organizations to define their own priorities rather than strictly adhering to donor agendas, increased direct funding for grassroots CSOs, reducing reliance on intermediary organizations, stronger accountability for larger CSOs, ensuring that funding distribution is transparent and that implementing partners receive fair recognition and compensation, and capacity-building programs that help smaller organizations develop the skills needed to access direct funding, including grant writing and financial management training. By addressing these structural imbalances, donors and international partners can foster a more inclusive and effective women’s movement—one where funding decisions reflect the realities of grassroots work and all CSOs, regardless of size, can contribute meaningfully to gender advocacy efforts.

Women's CSOs are united by a common commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment, but their approaches to achieving these goals often vary widely. These differences stem from ideological perspectives, strategic priorities and the broader socio-political environments in which they operate. While diversity in methods can enhance the movement's adaptability and reach, it can also lead to tensions and divisions that complicate collective advocacy efforts.

One of the most prominent sources of divergence among women's CSOs is their ideological stance on feminism and empowerment. Some organizations embrace a radical feminist approach, challenging patriarchal structures through direct activism, policy reform and legal challenges. Others adopt a more conservative or incremental strategy, focusing on engaging existing institutions to bring about gradual change.

As Respondent C noted: "Not all women's organizations speak the same language when it comes to feminism, empowerment, or policy approaches. Some are more radical, some more conservative and that affects how we work together."

This ideological diversity means that while all organizations aim to advance gender equality, their methods and messaging may not always align. For instance legal and policy-oriented organizations prioritize legislative reforms, engaging with policymakers to push for gender-responsive laws and institutional changes. They often work closely with governments, international organizations and donors, grassroots and community-based CSOs focus on direct service provision, education and local advocacy, emphasizing cultural shifts and economic empowerment at the community level activist and advocacy groups engage in protests, awareness campaigns and public mobilization, using social movements and media to challenge gender-based injustice and faith-based and state-aligned organizations advocate for gender equality within religious and cultural frameworks, promoting women's rights while maintaining respect for traditional values. While each of these approaches contributes to the broader goal of gender equality, the differences in ideology and strategy can sometimes lead to tension, particularly when organizations must decide on joint advocacy efforts, funding priorities, or public messaging.

Due to these ideological and strategic differences, forming coalitions can be challenging. Some organizations prefer to collaborate only with like-minded CSOs, which can lead to fragmentation within the movement. This division weakens collective bargaining power and advocacy efforts, particularly when addressing national or international policy reforms. For example, in debates over reproductive rights, some CSOs advocate for the full legalization of abortion, while others support only limited access within restrictive conditions. Similarly, in economic empowerment initiatives, some organizations prioritize capitalist market inclusion, while others advocate for systemic changes to labor structures. These differing stances can hinder unified messaging, particularly when engaging with policymakers who look for cohesive policy recommendations.

Respondent A shared their experience navigating these differences: “When we advocate for gender justice, we assume we all have the same priorities, but some organizations focus on legal reforms, others on service provision and others on activism. It’s not always easy to find common ground.”

These competing priorities can slow down decision-making in coalitions and, in some cases, prevent collaboration altogether. For instance, organizations with radical approaches may view government engagement as ineffective or even counterproductive, whereas others see it as an essential avenue for change. This divergence makes it difficult to create long-term, sustainable partnerships across the movement.

External influences, particularly donor priorities, further exacerbate these ideological and strategic differences. Funding agencies often have specific areas of focus, such as gender-based violence, economic empowerment, or political representation. As a result, CSOs may shift their priorities to align with funding opportunities rather than staying true to their core advocacy strategies.

Respondent E highlighted this challenge: “Donors fund specific issues and sometimes that means organizations adjust their approach to fit those priorities rather than staying true to their original mission.”

This creates an environment where some organizations become more flexible in their strategic positioning to secure funding, while others resist such shifts to maintain ideological integrity. The result is a landscape where collaboration is often shaped not just by shared values but also by financial incentives and constraints.

Despite ongoing challenges, many CSOs recognize the importance of strategic unity and are striving to adopt more inclusive and flexible approaches to collaboration. One effective method has been the formation of issue-based coalitions, where organizations work together on specific policy goals that they all support—such as legislation on gender-based violence or promoting workplace equality—without needing to agree on every broader issue.

Another approach involves developing flexible advocacy frameworks that allow organizations to contribute according to their own strengths and areas of expertise, while still respecting their core principles. Regional and sectoral coordination has also proven valuable, with networks bringing together organizations from different fields—such as legal, economic, and social sectors—to create strategies that complement rather than compete with one another.

Finally, promoting internal dialogue and mediation among CSOs with differing perspectives has helped to build trust and foster a more cohesive movement. Through open discussions, organizations can bridge ideological gaps and strengthen their collective efforts toward shared goals. As Respondent B emphasized: “We don’t always agree, but we must recognize that we are stronger together. If we can find ways to complement each other’s work rather than compete, we will have a much greater impact.”

By acknowledging and addressing ideological and strategic divergences, women’s CSOs can strengthen their collective power, ensuring that gender advocacy remains effective and sustainable in the face of political, economic and social challenges.

Despite the challenges of competition for funding, ideological differences and structural inequalities within the civil society landscape, women’s CSOs recognize

the urgent need for stronger, more equitable partnerships. The consensus among respondents is that without intentional efforts to foster sustainability and fairness in collaboration, the gender justice movement risks fragmentation and diminished impact.

Respondents highlighted that while competition for resources is a reality, it does not have to be the defining feature of inter-CSO relationships. Instead, they advocate for a shift toward a more cooperative model—one that prioritizes shared objectives over individual organizational gains.

As Respondent F put it: “If we really want to advance gender equality, we need to move beyond the competition for funding and think about how to build a more sustainable movement. That means sharing resources, sharing knowledge and making sure that no one is left behind.”

From this it is evident that the growing recognition that individual organizational success must be linked to the broader success of the movement. Rather than seeing each other as competitors, CSOs should view themselves as allies in a common struggle, pooling resources and expertise to maximize impact.

One of the most pressing concerns is the unequal distribution of funding, where larger, more established CSOs often receive the bulk of donor support while smaller, grassroots organizations struggle to secure financial sustainability. Many respondents called for funding structures that prioritize inclusivity and equitable resource distribution.

Another key theme that emerged from the data is the need for stronger mentorship structures between well-established CSOs and emerging or grassroots organizations. Many respondents stressed that knowledge-sharing should be a fundamental part of inter-CSO partnerships.

Respondent B noted: “We don’t need just financial support; we need guidance. Smaller organizations could benefit from the expertise of larger ones, but that only happens if we create intentional spaces for mentorship and learning.”

Mentorship could take various forms, including; technical support: established organizations providing training on grant writing, monitoring and evaluation and advocacy strategies, joint Advocacy Initiatives: larger and smaller organizations co-developing campaigns, ensuring that grassroots voices inform high-level advocacy. Leadership development: investing in emerging leaders within smaller CSOs to ensure continuity and innovation within the movement. By fostering a culture of mentorship, women's CSOs can ensure that new voices continue to emerge, preventing stagnation and sustaining advocacy momentum across generations.

One of the most significant critiques of existing partnerships is their short-term, project-based nature, often dictated by donor funding cycles. Respondents emphasized the need to shift towards long-term, trust-based relationships that prioritize movement-building over transactional engagements.

Respondent C reflected on this issue: "Right now, a lot of our partnerships are dictated by projects. Once the project ends, so does the partnership. We need to start thinking beyond projects and towards movement-building."

Thus, while inter-CSO relationships are marked by competition and funding disparities, there is also a strong desire for change. Women's CSOs recognize that sustainable, equitable partnerships are essential to advancing gender justice and ensuring the longevity of their advocacy efforts. By addressing funding imbalances, fostering mentorship and shifting toward long-term collaboration, CSOs can build a movement that is not only effective but also deeply rooted in solidarity and mutual support. As the gender justice movement continues to evolve, the emphasis must be on strengthening internal relationships, ensuring that all organizations big or small can thrive and contribute to lasting social change.

Women's CSOs operate in a delicate and often precarious relationship with governments. While the state is a critical actor in advancing gender equality through policy, legislation and institutional support, many respondents expressed frustration over the inconsistent and sometimes obstructive role that governments play in their advocacy efforts. This section explores the multifaceted dynamics between women's

CSOs and government institutions, highlighting the tensions, opportunities and strategies these organizations employ to navigate state engagement.

Many CSOs recognize that government engagement is essential for achieving large-scale, systemic change in gender equality. Legislative reforms, the implementation of gender policies and the allocation of public resources for women's programs all require government buy-in. However, respondents frequently expressed concerns over the state's commitment to meaningful change.

As respondent G put it: "The government will smile in public, nod at our reports and say they support gender equality, but when it comes to actual implementation, the political will is just not there. You can't rely on them to act unless there is enough pressure."

This sentiment reflects a widespread perception that while governments often adopt progressive rhetoric on gender issues especially in response to international scrutiny implementation remains slow, inconsistent, or superficial. Many CSOs feel that they must constantly push and monitor government actions to ensure that commitments translate into tangible outcomes.

Engagement with the government takes multiple forms, ranging from direct collaboration on policy initiatives to more adversarial relationships where CSOs act as watchdogs, holding the state accountable. Some organizations work closely with government ministries, contributing expertise, research and advocacy support to shape gender policies. Others remain wary of such engagement, fearing co-optation or political interference.

Respondent D highlighted this dilemma: "There is always a risk when working too closely with the government. You get invited to policy discussions, they consult you on reports, but at the end of the day, are they really listening? Or are they just using us to check a box?"

This concern is particularly pronounced in environments where governments have a history of suppressing dissent. Some activists worry that too much proximity to state

institutions can dilute their independence and weaken their ability to challenge power structures. Conversely, other CSOs argue that refusing to engage with the government altogether limits their ability to influence policy. The challenge lies in striking a balance engaging strategically without compromising autonomy.

Respondents identified several key obstacles that hinder effective government-CSO collaboration such as bureaucratic red tape and delays. Many CSOs find themselves stuck in bureaucratic processes that slow down gender equality initiatives. Approval processes for funding, program implementation and policy changes can take months or even years, reducing the impact of advocacy efforts. Respondent J said "You can sit in endless meetings with ministry officials, submit proposals and still get no response. Everything is 'under review' indefinitely."

This feedback reflects widespread frustration among women's CSOs, who often find their work obstructed by excessive administrative hurdles. While government engagement is crucial for policy change and resource allocation, the slow and opaque nature of bureaucratic processes weakens the effectiveness of advocacy efforts. Prolonged delays not only waste valuable time and resources but also hinder urgent interventions for women in need. As a result, many organizations are forced to navigate complex approval systems while simultaneously seeking alternative strategies to sustain their work and drive meaningful change.

Another obstacle is tokenism in consultation processes. Some CSOs feel that government-led stakeholder engagements are performative rather than substantive. While they may be invited to provide input on policies, their recommendations are often ignored in the final drafts.

Respondent I puts it as "They consult us when they need legitimacy, but when it comes to the final decisions, it's all politics. Our input is rarely reflected in the policies that get passed."

Evidently, some CSOs express frustration over what they perceive as performative consultation processes, where their participation is sought primarily to give the

illusion of inclusivity rather than to genuinely incorporate their expertise. While governments invite them to stakeholder meetings, the final policy outcomes often fail to reflect their recommendations. This leads to a sense of disillusionment, as organizations invest time and resources in engagements that do not yield meaningful change. Some CSOs believe these consultations serve more as a political strategy to appease international donors and civil society rather than a genuine effort to develop impactful gender policies.

These obstacles include funding dependencies and political influence. In some cases, government funding for women's organizations comes with political strings attached. Some CSOs fear that accepting state funding compromises their ability to criticize government policies openly. "If you take government money, you have to play by their rules. That means toning down your advocacy, avoiding certain topics and being careful about what you say publicly." This concern highlights the precarious balance that many CSOs must navigate when engaging with government funding. While state support can provide financial stability and expand program reach, it often comes at the cost of reduced independence. Organizations that rely heavily on government grants may find themselves pressured to align with official narratives, dilute their advocacy messages, or avoid addressing politically sensitive issues. This creates a dilemma—whether to accept funding and risk compromising their mission or remain financially independent but struggle with sustainability. As a result, many CSOs seek alternative funding sources, such as private donors and international grants, to maintain their autonomy while continuing to push for gender justice.

Lastly an obstacle is the resistance from political and religious groups. Gender equality initiatives often face pushback from conservative political and religious groups, some of which have strong government influence. These forces can pressure governments to roll back or stall progress on women's rights. Respondent D stated "We have seen gender policies watered down or completely blocked because certain politicians or religious leaders claim they 'go against cultural values.' It's a constant battle."

This resistance highlights the intersection between gender advocacy and deeply entrenched societal norms. Political and religious groups often frame gender equality

efforts as threats to tradition, family structures, or national identity, making it difficult for CSOs to push for progressive reforms. When these groups have strong government ties, they can exert significant influence over policy decisions, leading to diluted or stalled gender initiatives. As a result, CSOs must navigate complex cultural and political landscapes, often balancing advocacy with strategic diplomacy to prevent outright backlash while still advancing their goals.

Despite ongoing challenges, women's civil society organizations (CSOs) continue to develop innovative strategies to navigate government interactions while maintaining their advocacy efforts. Respondents highlighted several effective approaches that not only enhance organizational resilience but also promote gender justice more broadly.

One key area of focus is financial strategy. Respondents emphasized the importance of encouraging donors to move away from short-term, project-based grants and instead offer core funding, which enables long-term planning and organizational sustainability. They also advocated for consortium-based grant applications, where larger CSOs partner with smaller ones to ensure equitable resource distribution and strengthen grassroots reach. Moreover, respondents called for greater transparency in sub-granting processes, so that intermediary organizations do not monopolize decision-making or reduce smaller CSOs to mere implementers. In parallel, financial literacy and capacity building were identified as crucial tools to empower grassroots organizations to independently access and manage funding, reducing their dependency on larger actors and addressing structural funding imbalances.

A second strategy involves targeted engagement with reform-minded policymakers. Rather than treating the government as a uniform, resistant body, many CSOs focus on identifying progressive individuals within state institutions who are genuinely committed to gender justice. As one respondent put it, "There are people within the system who genuinely want to push for change. The key is finding them, building trust, and working together to get things done." By cultivating relationships with these allies, CSOs can overcome bureaucratic hurdles more effectively and build sustainable partnerships that advance gender-responsive policy agendas from within.

Public mobilization and media advocacy also play a central role in CSO strategies. Organizations often turn to social media campaigns, grassroots organizing, and strategic media engagement to generate public pressure and hold authorities accountable. “When we see that the government is stalling, we take the issue to the people. Public pressure forces them to respond,” noted one respondent. Through these means, CSOs raise awareness, create a sense of urgency, and ensure that gender equality remains a political priority—even in the face of government inaction.

At the international level, many CSOs leverage global human rights mechanisms, such as CEDAW, to exert pressure on national governments. By reporting violations or policy gaps to UN bodies and international watchdogs, organizations use international accountability frameworks to prompt domestic change. “Governments care about their international image. When we report to UN bodies, it creates pressure for them to comply,” one respondent explained. Although the impact may not be immediate, this strategy plays a vital role in drawing attention to national shortcomings and compelling states to uphold their international obligations.

Finally, legal advocacy and strategic litigation remain essential tools for many women’s organizations. When governments neglect their responsibilities or resist change, CSOs often turn to the courts to demand action. Legal action is used to challenge discriminatory laws, enforce existing regulations, and set legal precedents that support women’s rights. In this way, the legal system becomes both a site of resistance and a vehicle for structural transformation.

These strategies reflect a multi-layered, adaptive approach to advocacy, combining local engagement, financial reform, legal action, and international pressure to sustain the push for gender justice.

Respondent C emphasized this approach: “If the government refuses to act, we take them to court. The law is a powerful tool for forcing accountability.”

Through legal advocacy, CSOs have successfully overturned restrictive policies, secured justice for marginalized women and pressured governments into action.

However, while litigation can lead to systemic change, it is often a lengthy and costly process, requiring substantial legal expertise and resources. Despite these challenges, many organizations view legal action as a necessary mechanism to safeguard progress and prevent state inaction from undermining gender equality efforts.

To decentralize advocacy efforts. While national government engagement is critical, many CSOs also focus on local government structures, where policy implementation often takes place. Strengthening relationships with regional officials can yield more immediate results.

Respondent G stated "Sometimes, working at the county or municipal level gets things done faster than waiting for national government action." This localized approach allows CSOs to bypass some of the bureaucratic hurdles that often slow progress at the national level. By engaging directly with county or municipal officials, organizations can influence policy implementation in a more practical and immediate way. Many respondents noted that local governments tend to be more accessible, responsive and willing to collaborate on gender equality initiatives, especially when there is visible community support. Additionally, regional officials often have a clearer understanding of local needs and challenges, making them valuable allies in driving change from the ground up. However, some CSOs caution that local engagement is not without its challenges, as power dynamics, resource limitations and political interests can still affect the success of advocacy efforts.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This thesis underlines the complex and often adversarial relationship between the Turkish government and women's CSOs, illustrating how structural limitations and political dynamics shape gender advocacy in Türkiye. The exclusionary nature of policymaking, reinforced by a state apparatus that prioritizes centralized control, limits the ability of independent women's organizations to contribute to social policy. Despite their expertise and deep engagement with issues such as gender-based violence, labor rights and reproductive health, these organizations are systematically marginalized in formal decision-making processes. The government's preference for pro-state organizations and bureaucratic gatekeeping mechanisms creates an environment where gender justice efforts are either co-opted or outright dismissed, leading to policy stagnation in key areas affecting women's rights. By employing a multi-theoretical framework incorporating policy network theory and public choice theory this thesis provides a comprehensive understanding of the institutional constraints, power struggles and policy networks that define the operating environment of women's CSOs. Policy network theory reveals how exclusionary governance structures limit these organizations' access to policymaking spaces, while public choice theory exposes how state actors prioritize political and economic interests over inclusive social policy reforms. These intersecting theoretical lenses illuminate not only the structural barriers that hinder women's CSOs but also how they strategize, adapt and persist despite these constraints. More importantly, this thesis highlights the resilience and adaptability of women's CSOs operating in restrictive civic spaces. Faced with state-imposed limitations, these organizations have developed alternative mechanisms of influence, including international advocacy, grassroots mobilization and strategic litigation. By leveraging transnational feminist networks and international human rights frameworks, they

challenge exclusionary policies and push for accountability in gender-related policymaking. The findings of this thesis point to the urgent need for a more inclusive and structurally responsive policy environment in Türkiye—one that recognizes the legitimacy of feminist perspectives in shaping gender-sensitive social policy. Strengthening institutional platforms that allow for meaningful participation by independent women’s CSOs, particularly through the integration of feminist knowledge and lived experience, is critical. In addition, international partnerships remain a vital source of both material support and political leverage for these organizations. However, the sustainability of such collaborations depends on their ability to align with local priorities while resisting donor-driven conditionalities. A more transparent and collaborative engagement framework between the government and civil society would help ensure that diverse voices, including critical feminist actors, are not only consulted but heard in shaping equitable and inclusive legislation. The current climate of selective engagement and ideological gatekeeping restricts the autonomy of women’s CSOs and undermines the broader promise of participatory governance. Despite these constraints, women’s CSOs have demonstrated notable adaptability. Through strategic use of digital platforms, international advocacy channels, and informal grassroots networks, many have managed to sustain their work despite tightening political controls. These strategies have been especially vital for organizations representing marginalized communities, whose access to policymaking spaces is often obstructed. Still, the long-term impact of these efforts will hinge on their integration with offline mobilization, legal engagement, and sustained coalition-building. The resilience of women’s CSOs under these conditions must be matched with structural reforms that reduce bureaucratic burdens, protect freedom of association, and address the stigmatization of foreign-funded organizations. Without such changes, there is a real risk that feminist advocacy will become increasingly fragmented and reactive, rather than strategically positioned to shape lasting and transformative policy change. Their ability to navigate political hostility and institutional resistance demonstrates the crucial role of civil society in sustaining gender justice movements, even in adversarial contexts. This dynamic interaction between state repression and feminist resistance not only shapes the path of gender policy in Türkiye but also provides

broader insights into the evolving role of women's CSOs in policy reform under restrictive governance structures.

The hierarchical and patriarchal structure of the Turkish government systematically marginalizes independent women's organizations, restricting their influence in shaping policies on critical issues such as gender based violence, labor rights and reproductive health. These exclusions are not incidental but rather reflect a broader political strategy that prioritizes state-controlled institutions and government-aligned organizations while sidelining independent civil society actors. As a result, feminist organizations, despite their technical expertise and deep-rooted commitment to gender equality, often find themselves operating outside formal decision-making structures, forced to engage in indirect forms of advocacy. This exclusion has not rendered them powerless. Instead, women's organizations in Türkiye have developed sophisticated resistance strategies that challenge institutional constraints and carve out spaces for influence. Through coalition-building, transnational advocacy and strategic litigation, they have managed to exert pressure on policymakers and shape public discourse on gender justice. Their ability to mobilize grassroots support, leverage international human rights frameworks and utilize digital activism further amplifies their voices in a restrictive political landscape. This thesis indicates how these organizations, despite their exclusion from formal governance structures, continue to assert their presence through innovative resistance tactics. Their resilience highlights the importance of alternative policymaking channels, such as engaging with international bodies, leveraging social movements and utilizing strategic communications to counteract state-imposed limitations.

Understanding the exclusionary dynamics of Türkiye's policymaking landscape through the lens of policy network theory also sheds light on broader global trends where authoritarian-leaning governments employ similar tactics to suppress feminist movements. Comparative analyses with other restrictive political contexts could provide deeper insights into the effectiveness of various advocacy strategies employed by women's organizations. Future research should explore how alternative governance mechanisms, such as shadow lobbying, feminist foreign policy frameworks and intersectional coalition-building, can further empower women's

organizations to navigate exclusionary political environments. Ultimately, their persistence in resisting structural barriers reinforces the indispensable role of feminist activism in advancing democratic governance and human rights.

This thesis contributes to the broader discourse on civil society and state relations, illustrating both the persistent challenges and the unwavering resilience of women's CSOs in Türkiye. Their struggle for inclusion in policymaking articulates the need for a more open and participatory governance framework that recognizes and values their role in shaping gender policy. As these organizations persist in their fight for equality, their strategies of resistance and adaptation offer critical lessons for gender advocates operating in similarly restrictive political environments. From this thesis, it is clear how restrictive regulations on civil society, particularly laws that impose limits on foreign funding or require heightened bureaucratic oversight, are justified under the guise of national security. Governments frequently argue that foreign-funded organizations pose a risk to national sovereignty, potentially serving external agendas that undermine domestic stability. In practice, such measures function as mechanisms of control, disproportionately targeting independent feminist organizations that critique state policies and challenge dominant gender norms. By restricting funding sources and increasing administrative hurdles, states effectively reduce the ability of women's rights groups to operate freely and advocate for progressive change. This thesis also highlights the strategic co-optation of conservative women's organizations groups that align with the state's ideological stance on gender roles. By offering financial support, political visibility and institutional backing to these organizations, governments create an illusion of engagement with civil society while simultaneously marginalizing more radical feminist voices. These conservative groups, often promoting traditional family values and opposing gender mainstreaming policies, serve as government allies in reinforcing existing patriarchal structures. This process demonstrates how states can manipulate civil society to maintain control over gender discourse, using CSOs selectively to consolidate power rather than to foster genuine gender inclusivity.

My analysis contributes to broader discussions on state-civil society relations by exposing the power struggles inherent in gender policy advocacy. While feminist

organizations seek to advance gender justice, they often find themselves operating in a hostile environment where state intervention reduces their influence. This dynamic weighs the complex and often adversarial relationship between progressive gender activists and political elites, revealing the deep entanglement of gender advocacy with political interests. Laws such as the Law on Associations and the Law on Foundations impose bureaucratic requirements that disproportionately affect independent women's rights organizations. These legal barriers include rigid registration processes, financial reporting requirements and administrative approvals for receiving foreign grants, all of which make it difficult for feminist CSOs to function without state interference. These regulations serve as institutional constraints that maintain state dominance over the civic sector, reinforcing an authoritarian approach to gender activism. Despite these constraints, the thesis finds that women's CSOs engage in institutional work to challenge these limitations. Feminist organizations employ a range of strategic resistance mechanisms, including legal advocacy plays a crucial role in this fight, as organizations utilize national and international legal frameworks to contest state-imposed constraints in court. By filing strategic lawsuits, appealing to human rights bodies and leveraging legal precedents, they challenge discriminatory policies and push for reforms that uphold gender equality. In addition to legal efforts, public campaigns serve as a powerful tool for mobilizing grassroots support and raising awareness. Women's CSOs engage in protests, media campaigns and community outreach to counter government narratives and advocate for policy changes. By using both traditional and digital media platforms, they amplify their message, engage a broader audience and sustain momentum for gender justice initiatives. International lobbying is essential in exerting external pressure on governments that suppress women's rights. Organizations collaborate with global institutions such as the United Nations, the European Union and transnational feminist networks to highlight human rights violations and push for diplomatic interventions. By engaging with international policymakers, they secure support, funding and global advocacy that strengthens their position in domestic struggles. Together, these strategies form a comprehensive approach to advancing gender equality, even in politically restrictive environments. These persistent efforts illustrate that, while authoritarian constraints limit civil society, feminist organizations remain resilient and adaptive. Their ability to reshape

the civic landscape demonstrates the dynamic nature of institutional change, challenging deterministic views that suggest institutions are immovable once established. This thesis thus extends debates on institutional transformation by showing how gender activists navigate restrictive environments, innovate within legal frameworks and push for reforms even in repressive contexts.

By highlighting both the challenges and the agency of women's rights organizations, the thesis marks the critical role of civil society in advancing gender justice despite systemic barriers. The Mobilization of Conservative Civil Society report repeats how restrictive civic spaces and financial limitations deeply affect the operational capacity of women's CSOs. These challenges are particularly acute in contexts where government policies, legal frameworks and societal norms create an inhospitable environment for feminist advocacy. Restrictive civic spaces refer to the deliberate shrinking of avenues for civil society participation through legal, bureaucratic and financial constraints. Governments may impose rigid NGO regulations, increase surveillance, or restrict foreign funding to limit the autonomy of women's organizations.

Financial constraints worsen these challenges, as donor-driven funding models often dictate the priorities of CSOs, forcing them to align their agendas with external expectations rather than grassroots needs. The report points out that collaboration between CSOs can be a strategic response to these barriers, allowing organizations to share resources, amplify advocacy efforts and navigate bureaucratic hurdles. However, competition for limited funding often weakens coalition-building efforts, leading to fragmented movements rather than unified resistance. This is particularly evident in Türkiye, where state-controlled funding mechanisms favor conservative women's organizations that align with government ideology while excluding feminist groups that challenge patriarchal structures. This thesis reinforces the need to move beyond transactional partnerships where organizations come together for short-term projects based on financial incentives to long-term, trust-based collaborations. Sustainable coalition-building can create a more resilient advocacy ecosystem, capable of withstanding political suppression and financial precarity. By fostering trust and solidarity among feminist groups, women's CSOs can enhance their

collective bargaining power and push for gender-sensitive policy reforms more effectively. Despite these systemic obstacles, women's CSOs in Türkiye have demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability by employing diverse strategies to continue their advocacy. One such approach is grassroots mobilization, which involves organizing local communities, conducting awareness campaigns and empowering women at the community level. These efforts are crucial in countering the narrative promoted by conservative state-supported organizations, ensuring that feminist perspectives remain part of public discourse. Another key strategy is strategic litigation, where women's organizations leverage legal frameworks both national and international to challenge discriminatory policies and seek justice for gender-based violations. Despite increasing legal restrictions, CSOs continue to push for legal accountability through domestic courts and international human rights mechanisms. Transnational networking has allowed women's CSOs in Türkiye to gain support from global feminist movements, international human rights organizations and foreign diplomatic missions. By connecting with global advocacy networks, these organizations access alternative funding sources, share best practices and exert international pressure on the Turkish government to uphold gender equality commitments. Digital activism has emerged as an indispensable tool for resistance, particularly in the face of shrinking physical spaces for protest and increasing state surveillance of feminist movements. The widespread use of social media platforms has allowed women's CSOs to bypass traditional barriers to advocacy, enabling them to mobilize support rapidly, share real-time updates on policy developments and engage with diverse audiences both nationally and globally. Unlike conventional activism, which often relies on physical presence and large-scale demonstrations, digital activism allows for continuous engagement, strategic dissemination of information and the amplification of feminist narratives despite government restrictions. One of the most striking examples of digital activism's impact in Türkiye was the feminist response to the government's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention a landmark treaty designed to combat violence against women. As outlined previously, digital activism emerged as a key mode of resistance in response to the Istanbul Convention withdrawal, highlighting CSOs' ability to adapt and sustain gender advocacy under political pressure. Beyond raising awareness, digital activism facilitated legal challenges against the withdrawal, demonstrating how

online advocacy can translate into concrete political action. The sustained resistance of women's CSOs through digital platforms maintains their ability to shape public discourse and maintain advocacy momentum even in restrictive environments. However, for digital activism to remain an effective tool for long-term policy influence, several key strategies must be prioritized. First, securing independent and sustainable funding streams is crucial to reducing reliance on state-controlled or donor-driven financing, which often comes with restrictive conditions. Developing feminist philanthropic networks, launching crowdfunding initiatives and establishing income-generating social enterprises aligned with feminist values can help ensure financial autonomy. Second, strengthening collaborative networks is essential to counteract state-imposed limitations. Women's CSOs should continue forging alliances beyond the civil society sector, working closely with academia, independent media and private industry to create multi-sectoral support systems for their advocacy efforts. By institutionalizing these networks and integrating digital strategies into long-term policy engagement, feminist organizations can further solidify their role as influential actors in shaping social policy and advancing gender justice.

Establishing formalized coalitions can significantly enhance the resilience and effectiveness of women's CSOs, particularly in politically restrictive environments. When feminist organizations operate independently, they are more vulnerable to state repression, including legal restrictions, funding cuts and public discreditation. However, collective action through coalitions not only provides strength in numbers but also disperses risk, making it more challenging for governments to single out and suppress individual organizations. By uniting under a shared agenda, coalitions can coordinate advocacy efforts more efficiently, pool resources and present a unified front when engaging with policymakers and the public. Moreover, such coalitions can function as critical intermediaries between grassroots activism and formal political processes, ensuring that demands for gender justice are effectively channeled into actionable policy recommendations. Beyond domestic coalition-building, reinforcing international partnerships is essential for strengthening feminist movements and increasing their influence in policymaking. Restrictive governments often attempt to delegitimize women's CSOs by labeling them as foreign-influenced

or anti-nationalist. However, strategic engagement with international bodies such as UN Women, the European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe can provide both legitimacy and institutional backing to these organizations. International partnerships offer multiple benefits, including access to technical expertise, financial resources and diplomatic pressure mechanisms that can hold governments accountable for regressive policies. For instance, UN treaty bodies and EU accession requirements often mandate gender-sensitive policies and leveraging these frameworks can help local feminist movements exert external pressure on national governments. Participation in global networks allows women's CSOs to share best practices, learn from successful advocacy models in other countries and collaborate on transnational feminist campaigns. To translate advocacy into tangible policy change, institutionalized mechanisms for engagement with policymakers must be developed. Many governments, particularly in restrictive political contexts, deliberately exclude feminist organizations from formal decision-making spaces, forcing them to rely on indirect influence strategies. To counteract this, structured dialogue platforms, advisory councils and legally mandated consultation processes should be established to ensure that gender-sensitive recommendations are integrated into legislative and policy frameworks. One effective approach is the creation of gender policy roundtables, where women's CSOs, government representatives and international stakeholders regularly convene to discuss policy reforms. Another strategy is advocating for quota systems in policymaking bodies, ensuring that feminist perspectives are not only heard but also actively considered in legislative processes. Institutionalizing these engagement mechanisms can help shift feminist advocacy from reactive resistance to proactive policy influence, embedding gender justice as a fundamental pillar of governance and social policy development.

Women's CSOs must advocate formal consultation processes, parliamentary committees on gender issues and public-private partnerships that prioritize women's rights. While state-imposed limitations persist, the unwavering perseverance of women's CSOs serves as a powerful testament to civil society's role in promoting democratic governance, human rights and gender justice in Türkiye. Their continued efforts highlight the importance of maintaining an active civil society, even in politically repressive environments. This thesis makes a significant contribution to

the broader discourse on civil society and policymaking by reaffirming the indispensable role of women's organizations in advancing gender equality, even in politically restrictive environments. Despite structural and ideological barriers, these organizations persist as key actors in advocating gender justice, demonstrating resilience through their ability to resist, adapt and mobilize. The findings of this thesis affirm the ongoing struggle for women's rights in Türkiye, reflecting a global trend where feminist movements increasingly contend with conservative political forces seeking to undermine gender justice initiatives. In this context, sustained advocacy, strategic coalitions and innovative approaches become critical in countering the suppression of feminist activism. Moreover, the thesis highlights the potential of emerging technologies to transform the landscape of women's CSOs. Integrating artificial intelligence (AI) for policy analysis, blockchain for secure and transparent funding and big data analytics for tracking gender-based violence trends can significantly enhance advocacy efforts and resource distribution.

Future research should explore the practical applications of these technologies in feminist organizing and policy engagement. Ultimately, the continued engagement of women's CSOs in policy reform and advocacy ensures that gender equality remains central to democratic governance and human rights. Despite political repression and financial constraints, their unwavering commitment to gender justice catalyzes long-term societal transformation, reinforcing the necessity of their presence in shaping more equitable and inclusive societies.

Legal and institutional reforms aimed at reducing bureaucratic barriers and amending restrictive laws disproportionately affecting women's organizations would strengthen their autonomy and sustainability. Multi-stakeholder collaboration—encouraging dialogue between government agencies, women's CSOs and international organizations—could foster more inclusive policymaking processes, particularly on gender equality and women's economic empowerment. Leveraging digital platforms for feminist activism may offer alternative advocacy avenues, bypassing state-imposed restrictions on physical civic spaces.

To conclude, resilience of women's CSOs in navigating restrictive environments, strengthens gender-focused participatory governance at the society level. Despite

facing political, legal, and financial barriers, these organizations continue to advocate for inclusive policy change and social justice. Their strategic adaptability not only sustains feminist activism but also lays the groundwork for a more equitable and democratic public sphere.



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APPENDICES

A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please tell me about the story of how your CSO was established.
2. What are your activities so far?
3. Which government agencies you work with?
4. How would you evaluate your relationship with government agencies?
5. Which areas do you feel you need government's help/support?
6. What kind of a relationship you would desire with government agencies?
7. Which regulations should be in place for civil society field?
8. How should the relationship between government and civil society should be?
9. What are the positive sides of the relationship?
10. How would you evaluate your relationship with other CSOs?
11. How would you evaluate your relationship with political parties?
12. How would you evaluate your relationship with international organizations?
13. What is the contribution of the relationship?
14. What are the positive and negative effects international organizations' involvement on CSOs?

B. APPROVAL OF THE METU HUMAN SUBJECTS ETHICS COMMITTEE



C. TURKISH SUMMARY / TRKE ZET

Bu tez, kadın sivil toplum kuruluşları (STK) ile devlet arasındaki ilişkinin Türkiye’de toplumsal cinsiyete duyarlı sosyal politikaların şekillenmesindeki belirleyici rolünü ele almaktadır. Kadın STK’ları, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliğini savunmak, yasal düzenleme süreçlerini etkilemek ve dezavantajlı grupların sesini duyurarak demokratik yönetişime katkıda bulunmak açısından kritik aktörlerdir. Ancak bu kuruluşların politika yapım süreçlerindeki etkisi, bürokratik engeller, mali bağımlılıklar, yasal kısıtlamalar ve iktidar asimetrileri nedeniyle sıklıkla sınırlanmaktadır.

Türkiye’de, devlet ve kadın STK’ları arasındaki ilişki, özellikle Avrupa Birliği (AB) uyum süreci ve Yeni Kamu Yönetimi ilkelerinin benimsenmesiyle dönüşüm geçirmiştir. 2000’li yılların başında medeni ve ceza kanunlarındaki reformlarla kadın hakları güçlendirilmiş ve devlet-STK işbirliği teşvik edilmiştir. Ancak AB sürecinin ivme kaybetmesiyle birlikte hükümet, bağımsız örgütler yerine devlet yanlısı STK’ları tercih etmeye başlamış; bu da politika yapım süreçlerinde bağımsız kadın örgütlerinin etkisini sınırlandırmıştır. Devletin zaman zaman kadın STK’larıyla işbirliğine gitmesine rağmen, özellikle devlet politikalarını eleştiren kuruluşlara yönelik kısıtlayıcı tedbirler alınmış ve bu durum kadın STK’larının hareket alanını daraltmıştır.

Kadın STK’ları tarihsel olarak devletle toplum arasında köprü işlevi görmüş, katılımcı yönetişimi destekleyici roller üstlenmiştir. Ancak bu ilişki, siyasal iklim ve sivil toplumu düzenleyen yasal çerçeve tarafından biçimlenmektedir. Yabancı fonlara erişimin kısıtlanması, gösteri özgürlüğüne yönelik sınırlamalar ve artan bürokratik denetim, bağımsız savunuculuğu zorlaştırmakta ve kadın STK’larının toplumsal cinsiyete duyarlı sosyal politikaları etkileme kapasitesini sınırlamaktadır. Devlet-STK ilişkilerinde mali bağımlılık da önemli bir faktördür. Ulusal ve uluslararası fonlara olan bağımlılık, bu kuruluşların özerkliğini zaman zaman zayıflatmakta,

özellikle feminist hukuki reformları savunan örgütler “yabancı etkisi” ithamlarına maruz kalmaktadır.

Dijital aktivizm, kadın STK’larının devletle olan ilişkilerini yeniden tanımlamalarına imkân tanımıştır. Çevrimiçi kampanyalar ve dijital platformlar aracılığıyla toplumsal farkındalık yaratılmış, ancak bu mecralar da devletin dijital denetim mekanizmaları nedeniyle baskı altına alınmıştır.

Mevcut literatür, genel olarak sivil toplum ve yönetim ilişkisini incelemekle birlikte, Türkiye’de kadın STK’larının toplumsal cinsiyet politikaları üzerindeki etkisine dair derinlemesine analizler sınırlıdır. Bu tez, kadın STK’larının devletle olan etkileşimlerinin hangi faktörlerle şekillendiğini ve bu etkileşimlerin cinsiyet temelli politika yapımı üzerindeki etkilerini irdelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Kadınların ekonomik katılımı, toplumsal cinsiyet temelli şiddetle mücadele ve ayrımcılığa karşı hukuki koruma gibi alanlara odaklanarak yönetim, toplumsal cinsiyet savunuculuğu ve sivil toplum kesişiminde bir katkı sunmayı hedeflemektedir.

Tezin temel araştırma sorusu, “Kadın STK’ları Türkiye’de siyasi, hukuki ve kurumsal kısıtlamalarla nasıl baş ederek savunuculuk faaliyetlerini sürdürebilmekte ve politika üzerinde etkili olabilmektedir?” biçiminde belirlenmiştir. Bu bağlamda, kadın STK’larının tarihsel gelişimi, siyasi bağlamın etkisi, kurumlar arası etkileşimler ve uluslararası aktörlerle kurulan ilişkiler detaylı olarak incelenmiştir. Tez, feminist alanlarda çalışan STK temsilcileriyle yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelere dayanan nitel verilere yer vererek, kadın STK’larının stratejik tepkilerini ve kurumsal algılarını analiz etmektedir.

Tez, giriş bölümünün ardından literatür taramasıyla teorik çerçeveyi ortaya koymakta; özellikle devlet-STK ilişkisine dair işbirliği, araçsallaştırma ve çatışma modellerini ele almaktadır. Metodoloji bölümü, nitel yöntem tercihinin gerekçesini sunarken, bulgular bölümü saha verilerine dayanarak kadın STK’larının deneyimlerini ve karşılaştıkları zorlukları detaylandırmaktadır. Sonuç bölümü ise bulguları literatürle sentezleyerek, Türkiye’de kadın STK’larının toplumsal cinsiyete duyarlı politika yapım süreçlerindeki değişen rolüne dair çıkarımlar sunmaktadır.

Türkiye’de kadın sivil toplum kuruluşları (STK) ile devlet arasındaki ilişkilerin sosyal politika yapım sürecine etkisi çok boyutlu biçimde ele alınmaktadır. Literatür, kadın STK’larının toplumsal cinsiyete duyarlı politikalar üzerindeki etkisini şekillendiren yasal, mali, siyasal ve kurumsal koşulları incelemektedir.

Türkiye’deki kadın STK’ları, özellikle 2010 sonrası döneminde artan denetim ve kısıtlamalarla karşı karşıya kalmış, bağımsız örgütlerin alanı daraltılmıştır. Devlet, ideolojik olarak uyumlu gördüğü kadın örgütlerine kaynak ve görünürlük sağlarken, feminist perspektifle çalışan STK’lar dışlanmış ya da itibarsızlaştırılmıştır. Bu durum, sosyal politika yapım süreçlerinde katılımcılık ilkesini zayıflatmaktadır.

Kadın STK’larının mali açıdan büyük ölçüde uluslararası fonlara bağımlı olması, hem bir fırsat hem de kırılganlık kaynağıdır. AB’nin öncülüğünde sağlanan fonlar, bu kuruluşların kapasite geliştirme ve savunuculuk faaliyetlerini sürdürmelerini sağlamış; ancak bu durum devletin “yabancı etkisi” söylemini güçlendirmiştir. Özellikle dış kaynaklı STK’lar, hükümet tarafından sıklıkla ulusal değerlere tehdit olarak konumlandırılmıştır.

Kadın STK’larının devletle ilişkilerinde üç temel model öne çıkmaktadır: dahil edici, seçici ve dışlayıcı yaklaşımlar. AB süreci boyunca daha fazla işbirliğine dayalı bir ilişki söz konusu iken, son dönemde devletin yalnızca kendi ideolojisine yakın STK’larla çalışmayı tercih ettiği seçici modele geçilmiştir. Dışlayıcı modelde ise devlet, feminist örgütleri tehdit olarak görerek politika yapım süreçlerinden tamamen dışlamaktadır.

Kadın STK’larının etkinliği, yalnızca devletin tutumuna değil; aynı zamanda örgütlerin kendi stratejilerine, dijital mecralarda varlık göstermelerine ve uluslararası aktörlerle kurdukları ittifaklara bağlıdır. Dijital aktivizm ve stratejik dava süreçleri, doğrudan etkileşim kurulamadığında kadın örgütlerinin görünürlük kazanmasına olanak tanımaktadır. “#İstanbulSözleşmesiYaşatır” gibi kampanyalar, bu direnişin simgelerinden biri olmuştur.

Teorik çerçeve açısından, üç ana yaklaşım ele alınmaktadır:

- Politika Ağı Teorisi, devlet dışı aktörlerin karar alma süreçlerindeki yerini açıklarken, siyasi bağlantıları olan STK'ların ayrıcalıklı konumuna dikkat çeker.
- Kamu Tercihi Teorisi, politika yapıcılarının kamu yararı yerine siyasi çıkarlar doğrultusunda hareket ettiğini varsayarak, devletin yalnızca kendisine yakın örgütleri desteklemesini anlamlandırır.
- Yeni Kurumsalcılık, hem yasal düzenlemelerin hem de tarihsel olarak kökleşmiş toplumsal normların kadın STK'larının hareket alanını nasıl sınırlandırdığını gösterir. Türkiye'deki mevcut yasal düzenlemeler ve tarihsel ataerkil kurumsal yapı, kadın örgütlerinin bağımsız hareket etmesini zorlaştırmaktadır.

Bu kapsamda, tarihsel perspektifte, Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e uzanan süreçte kadın örgütlerinin gelişimi izlenmiştir. Erken Cumhuriyet döneminde kadın hakları, modernleşme projesinin bir parçası olarak yukarıdan aşağıya reformlarla tanımlanmış, ancak bağımsız kadın hareketlerine izin verilmemiştir. 1980 sonrası dönemde ise, feminist örgütler tabana dayalı, bağımsız hareketler olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Mor Çatı gibi yapılar, kadına yönelik şiddetle mücadelede öncü roller üstlenmiş, yasal değişikliklerde etkili olmuştur.

2000'li yıllarda AB sürecinin ivme kazandırdığı yasal reformlar kadın STK'larının etkisini artırmış, ancak sonrasında yaşanan gelişmeler ile birlikte bu kazanımlar ciddi biçimde zayıflamıştır. 2021 yılında Türkiye'nin İstanbul Sözleşmesi'nden çekilmesi, kadın hareketi açısından önemli bir kırılma noktası olmuş, bu karar geniş kapsamlı dijital ve ulusal tepkiye neden olmuştur.

Mevcut literatür, kadın STK'larının sosyal politika üzerindeki etkisini analiz ederken bazı önemli boşluklar barındırmaktadır. Özellikle dijital aktivizm, uluslararası ağlarla işbirliği ve devletle dolaylı müzakere kanalları gibi alternatif stratejilere yeterince odaklanılmamıştır. Ayrıca, kadın STK'larının devletle olan ilişkilerinde karşılaştıkları yapısal eşitsizliklerin birbirleriyle nasıl kesiştiği (yasal engeller, mali bağımlılık, ideolojik dışlanma vb.) çoğunlukla parçalı şekilde ele alınmıştır.

Bu tez, söz konusu boşlukları doldurmayı, kadın STK'larının nasıl stratejiler geliştirerek devletle etkileşim kurduğunu ve bu süreçlerin cinsiyet eşitliği odaklı sosyal politikaları nasıl etkilediğini bütüncül biçimde analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca, kadın sivil toplum kuruluşları (STK) ile devlet arasındaki ilişkileri analiz etmek için kullanılan yöntemleri ve bu tez kapsamında benimsenen araştırma yaklaşımını ele almaktadır. Çalışma, nitel araştırma yöntemleri ile politika teorilerinden yararlanarak karma bir metodolojik yapı oluşturmuştur.

Sivil toplum araştırmalarında yaygın olarak kullanılan nitel vaka analizi, belirli bağlamlarda devlet-STK etkileşimlerini derinlemesine inceleme olanağı sunar. Sayısal genellemelere dayanan yöntemlerin aksine, nitel çalışmalar STK'ların siyasi baskılar, hukuki kısıtlamalar ve fon bağımlılığı gibi zorlukları nasıl aştığını, aynı zamanda değişim yaratma stratejilerini nasıl geliştirdiklerini anlamaya olanak sağlar. Derinlemesine görüşmeler, belge analizi ve etnografik gözlem bu yöntemlerin başlıca araçları arasında yer alır.

Katılımcı gözlem ve görüşmeler, sivil toplumun gündelik pratikleri, direnç mekanizmaları ve kurumsal ilişki ağlarını görünür kılarken; belge analizi, yasal düzenlemelerin ve fonlama yapılarının zaman içindeki dönüşümünü izlemeyi sağlar. Nitel vaka analizinin avantajı, özellikle otoriter rejimlerdeki resmi olmayan yönetim pratiklerini ortaya koyabilmesidir. Ancak sınırlı genellenebilirlik ve araştırmacı öznelliği gibi dezavantajları da beraberinde getirir.

Politika teorisi ise çalışmanın kavramsal çerçevesini sağlar. Sivil toplumun yönetimdeki rolüne ilişkin normatif değerlendirmeler, demokrasi, hesap verebilirlik ve toplumsal dayanışma kavramları etrafında şekillenir. Katılımcı demokrasi, tabandan hareket ve çok aktörlü yönetim gibi kavramlar, feminist STK'ların dönüştürücü potansiyelini vurgular. Ancak bu teorik yaklaşımlar, zaman zaman pratik politika önerilerine dönüşmekte yetersiz kalabilir ve gerçek dünya karmaşıklığını göz ardı edebilir.

Bu çalışmada benimsenen yöntemsel tasarım, Türkiye'de kadın STK'larının siyasi ve kurumsal kısıtlamalar altındaki hareket alanlarını anlamak amacıyla nitel bir

yaklaşımı temel alır. Çalışma kapsamında insan hakları, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği ve hukuki reform alanlarında faaliyet gösteren kadın STK'ları ile derinlemesine görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Katılımcıların örgüt içindeki konumları, kurucu, yönetici, program sorumlusu, gönüllü gibi çeşitlilik göstermektedir.

Araştırmacının mesleki konumu sayesinde bu alana dair ön bilgiye sahip olması, örneklem seçiminde etkili olmuş; ilk temaslar doğrudan telefonla ve ardından açıklayıcı e-postalar yoluyla kurulmuştur. Bazı devlet yanlısı STK'lar başlangıçta katılım sağlayacağını bildirmiş ancak görüşme sürecinde iletişimi kesmiş, bu da örneklem kısıtlı olmasına neden olmuştur.

Görüşmelerin ilk bölümü, STK'ların kuruluş hikâyeleri, misyonları ve temel faaliyet alanlarına odaklanmış; böylece her bir örgütün Türkiye'deki sivil toplum ekosistemindeki yeri belirlenmiştir. İkinci bölüm, devlet kurumlarıyla ilişkiler, karşılaşılan yasal düzenlemeler ve ideal devlet-STK ilişkisinin nasıl olması gerektiği gibi konulara ayrılmıştır. Üçüncü bölümde ise diğer STK'lar, siyasi partiler ve uluslararası kuruluşlarla kurulan ilişkiler değerlendirilmiştir.

Bu yöntemsel yaklaşım sayesinde kadın STK'larının nasıl ağlar kurduğu, stratejik koalisyonlar oluşturduğu, devletle dolaylı ya da doğrudan nasıl ilişki kurduğu anlaşılmış; bu etkileşimlerin siyasi iklim ve uluslararası baskılardan nasıl etkilendiği analiz edilmiştir.

Bu tezin temel yöntemsel zorluklarından biri, bağlamsal derinlikle genellenebilirlik arasında bir denge kurmaktır. Türkiye'deki kadın hareketi, özgün tarihsel ve siyasal koşullarda şekillenmiş olup, genellemeyi zorlaştıran dinamiklere sahiptir. Bu nedenle çalışma, veri üçlemesi (triangulation) yöntemi ile hem bağlamsal derinlik hem de geçerlilik sağlamayı amaçlamıştır.

Bu çerçevede, görüşmeler, kadın STK'larının devletle ilişkilerinde ne tür stratejiler geliştirdiklerini doğrudan anlamaya olanak sağlamıştır. Belge analizi ile yasa metinleri, fonlama raporları ve politika belgeleri üzerinden tarihsel eğilimler ve dış etkiler değerlendirilmiştir. Söylem analizi yoluyla ise kamu algısı, STK'ların fon

kaynaklarına ilişkin tartışmalar ve uluslararası ilişkilerin örgütsel özerklik üzerindeki etkisi incelenmiştir.

Sonuç olarak bu metodoloji bölümü, Türkiye’de kadın STK’larının siyasal baskılar karşısında nasıl direnç geliştirdiğini, hangi ağlar ve stratejiler aracılığıyla sosyal politika yapım süreçlerine müdahil olduğunu nitel yöntemlerle ortaya koymaktadır. Araştırmanın bulguları, feminist örgütlerin karşı karşıya kaldığı kısıtlamalara rağmen nasıl dayanışma, yaratıcı direniş ve kurumsal stratejiler geliştirdiğini göstermektedir.

Türkiye’de kadın örgütlerinin devletle ilişkilerine dair yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelerin bulgularını sunmaktadır. Kadın örgütleri, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği alanında önemli kazanımlar elde etmiş olsalar da, etkileri büyük ölçüde siyasal iklim ve kurumların sivil topluma açıklığına bağlıdır. Politika yapım sürecine etkili katılım için, stratejik ortaklıklar, kurumsal kapasite geliştirme ve politika diyalogunun güçlendirilmesi kritik önemdedir.

Kadın örgütleri çeşitli kısıtlayıcı koşullara rağmen dijital savunuculuk, yerel düzeyde taban örgütlenmesi ve uluslararası ortaklıklar gibi stratejilerle sosyal politikaları etkilemeye çalışmaktadır. Özellikle sosyal medya kampanyaları, çevrimiçi dilekçeler ve dijital hikâyeleştirme yoluyla kamuoyu yaratma ve politika yapıcıları etkileme çabaları öne çıkmaktadır. Ancak bu çabalar, devlet gözetimi, yasal engeller ve siyasi baskılarla sınırlanmakta, kadın hakları savunucuları sıklıkla tehdit, damgalama ve sosyal dışlanma gibi zorluklarla karşı karşıya kalmaktadır.

Buna karşın, örgütlerin dijital mecralar, uluslararası dayanışma ve yerel dayanışma ağları yoluyla geliştirdiği direnç ve uyum kapasitesi dikkat çekmektedir. Bu çabaların sürdürülebilirliği, daha kapsayıcı bir hukuki ve siyasal ortamın oluşturulmasına bağlıdır. Kadın örgütlerinin bazı alanlarda yasa yapım süreçlerine etkisi gözlemlenmektedir; örneğin 6284 sayılı Ailenin Korunması ve Kadına Karşı Şiddetin Önlenmesine Dair Kanun’un kabulü, kadın hareketinin etkili savunuculuğu sayesinde gerçekleşmiştir.

TÜSEV’in 2021 yılı raporuna göre, STK’ların yalnızca %8’i doğrudan karar alıcılarla temas kurabilmektedir. Öte yandan, %74’ü dış kaynaklara bağımlı olup bu durum devletin mali denetimine ve dış müdahale ithamlarına zemin hazırlamaktadır.

Bu bağlamda Türkiye örneği, sivil toplumun demokratikleşmeye hizmet edip etmediği yönündeki kuramsal tartışmalarla birebir örtüşmektedir. Bazı kadın örgütleri feminist politikaları destekleyerek toplumsal dönüşüme katkı sunarken, devletle daha yakın ilişki kuran bazı yapılar geleneksel cinsiyet rollerini yeniden üretmektedir. Böylece kadın örgütleri hem mevcut yapıları dönüştürme hem de pekiştirme potansiyeline sahip bir yapı olarak değerlendirilmelidir.

Özellikle son dönemde çıkarılan yasal düzenlemeler, 2020 tarihli 7262 sayılı yasa gibi, kadın örgütlerinin faaliyet alanını daraltmakta ve uluslararası fonlara erişimi zorlaştırmaktadır. Bu yasa, özellikle cinsiyet temelli şiddetle mücadele, üreme hakları ve feminist savunuculuk yapan örgütleri hedef almaktadır. Ancak İstanbul Sözleşmesi'nden çıkılması gibi gelişmelere karşı kitlesel dijital kampanyalar, uluslararası savunuculuk ve hukuki girişimlerle mücadele sürdürülmektedir.

Kadın örgütlerinin dayanıklılığı, afet gibi kriz dönemlerinde de kendini göstermektedir. Örneğin 2023 depremi sonrası, kadınların özel ihtiyaçlarını önceleyen yardım faaliyetleri kadın STK'larının liderliğinde gerçekleşmiştir. Buna karşın, devletin yardım faaliyetlerini merkezileştirme çabası, sivil toplumun hareket alanını daraltmıştır.

Kadın örgütlerinin etkinliği, hukuki koruma düzeyi, mali bağımsızlık ve kurumsal kapasite gibi faktörlerle doğrudan ilişkilidir. Devlet destekli örgütler mali açıdan avantajlı olsa da bağımsız hareket etme kapasiteleri sınırlıdır. Buna karşın, alternatif finans kaynakları ve dayanışma ağları aracılığıyla sürdürülebilirliği sağlamak isteyen örgütler de bulunmaktadır. Dijital aktivizm ve uluslararası iş birlikleri, bu örgütlerin seslerini duyurmasında hayati bir rol oynamaktadır.

Ancak hükümetin sosyal medya üzerindeki artan kontrolü, içerik kaldırma talepleri ve yeni çıkarılan dezenformasyon yasası gibi uygulamalar, dijital aktivizmi de baskı altına almaktadır. Bu nedenle kadın örgütlerinin dayanıklılığı, hem yerel bağlamda geliştirdikleri taktiklere hem de uluslararası destek mekanizmalarına bağlıdır.

Son olarak, kadın örgütlerinin küresel fon sağlayıcılar, AB ve Birleşmiş Milletler gibi kurumlarla ilişkileri; bir yandan dayanıklılıklarını artırırken, öte yandan devlet

nezdinde meşruiyet tartışmalarını beraberinde getirmektedir. Dış aktörlerin sağladığı kaynaklar hem fırsatlar yaratmakta hem de ulusal düzeyde siyasi baskıya maruz kalmalarına yol açmaktadır.

Türkiye’deki kadın örgütleri, devlet kurumlarıyla karmaşık, çoğu zaman da kırılğan bir ilişki yürütmektedir. Bazı kamu kurumlarıyla verimli iş birlikleri kurulsa da, birçok örgüt bürokratik engeller, siyasi çekinceler ve istikrarsız taahhütlerle karşı karşıya kalmaktadır. Görüşmeler, kadın örgütlerinin devletle hem yapıcı hem de eleştirel bir ilişki içinde olduğunu; zaman zaman ortak politika üretimi yaptıklarını, bazen de hükümeti hesap vermeye zorladıklarını ortaya koymaktadır. Kadın örgütlerinin devletle iş birliği, kimi zaman somut yasa değişiklikleriyle sonuçlanmakta, Türk Ceza Kanunu, 6284 Sayılı Kanun gibi, kimi zaman ise yalnızca katılımı sınırlı kalmakta, öneriler nihai politikalara yansımamaktadır.

Kadın örgütlerinin önemli bir bölümü, özellikle kriz zamanlarında (ör. deprem sonrası) kamusal hizmetlerin eksik kaldığı alanlarda devreye girerek, kadınlara doğrudan destek sağlamaktadır. Bununla birlikte, kamu kurumlarının katı yapıları, hızlı ve etkili müdahaleleri zorlaştırmakta, örgütlerin gözlemci ve aracı rolleri öne çıkmaktadır. Belediyelerle iş birliği, merkezi kurumlardan daha erişilebilir bulunmakta, fakat yerel siyasi ortam bu iş birliklerinin kalıcılığı üzerinde belirleyici olmaktadır.

Uluslararası mekanizmalar, özellikle insan hakları alanında bir kaldıraç işlevi görse de, görüşmeciler bu mekanizmaların etkisinin azaldığını ve devletlerin önerilere yanıt vermede isteksiz olduğunu vurgulamaktadır. Bu durum, örgütlerin dikkatini iç hukuka ve ulusal kurumsal reformlara yöneltmesine neden olmuştur. Stratejik dava süreçleri, mevzuat değişiklikleri için önemli bir araç olarak kullanılmaktadır. Bununla birlikte, uluslararası fonlara olan bağımlılık, hem örgütlerin gündemini şekillendirmekte hem de yerel ihtiyaçlardan uzaklaşılmasına neden olabilmektedir. Röportajlarda, daha sürdürülebilir, karşılıklı güvene dayalı ve kapsayıcı fonlama modellerine duyulan ihtiyaç sıkça dile getirilmiştir.

Kadın örgütleri arasındaki iş birliği, toplu savunuculuk açısından büyük önem taşımaktadır. Ancak fon kaynaklarına erişimdeki eşitsizlikler, ideolojik farklılıklar ve

kurumsal kapasite farkları, bu iş birliklerinin sürekliliğini zorlaştırmaktadır. Küçük ve yerel örgütler, çoğu zaman büyük STK'ların gölgesinde kalmakta, görünürlük ve karar alma süreçlerine sınırlı şekilde dahil edilmektedir. Röportajlarda, bu eşitsizlikleri gidermek için kapasite geliştirme, mentorluk ilişkileri, ortak kampanya tasarımları ve uzun vadeli iş birliği modelleri önerilmiştir. Kadın örgütleri, rekabetin yerine dayanışmayı öne çıkaran bir sivil toplum hareketi inşa etmenin gerekliliğine dikkat çekmektedir.

İdeolojik farklılıklar da ortak savunuculuk süreçlerini zorlaştıran bir diğer unsur olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Feminist, muhafazakâr, hizmet odaklı ya da hak temelli yaklaşımlar arasında zaman zaman gerilimler yaşanmakta; bu durum ortak dil ve strateji oluşturmayı zorlaştırmaktadır. Görüşmeciler, farklı örgütlerin kendi güçlü yönleriyle katkı sunabileceği esnek ve konu bazlı koalisyonlar önererek, bu çeşitliliğin bir avantaja dönüştürülebileceğini belirtmektedir.

Sonuç olarak, kadın örgütleri Türkiye'deki toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği mücadelesinde hem devletle hem birbirleriyle karmaşık ilişkiler içinde hareket etmektedir. Bu ilişkiler iş birliği, mücadele, uyum ve eleştiri gibi çok boyutlu dinamiklerle şekillenmektedir. Devletin söylem düzeyinde eşitlik taahhütleri sıklıkla uygulanabilirliğe dönüşmemekte, bu da örgütleri daha yaratıcı, dirençli ve stratejik savunuculuk yolları geliştirmeye yönlendirmektedir. Görüşmecilerin ifadeleri, kadın örgütlerinin değişen siyasi ortamlara rağmen hak temelli mücadeleyi sürdürmekteki kararlılığını ve kolektif etki yaratma arzularını açıkça ortaya koymaktadır.

Bu tez, Türkiye'de kadın örgütleri ile devlet arasındaki ilişkilerin çok katmanlı, çoğu zaman çatışmalı ve dışlayıcı bir karakter taşıdığını ortaya koymuştur. Kadın örgütleri, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği konusunda önemli bir bilgi birikimi ve alana hâkimiyet sunmalarına rağmen, merkeziyetçi ve hiyerarşik devlet yapısı tarafından karar alma süreçlerinden dışlanmaktadır. Kadına yönelik şiddet, emek hakları ve üreme sağlığı gibi konularda uzmanlaşmış bu örgütler, özellikle devletin muhafazakâr kadın örgütlerini destekleyen seçici yaklaşımı nedeniyle hem kaynaklara hem de karar mekanizmalarına erişimde ciddi sınırlamalar yaşamaktadır.

Kavramsal olarak bu araştırma, politika ağı teorisi, kamu tercihi teorisi ve yeni kurumsalcılık çerçevelerini bir araya getirerek kadın örgütlerinin faaliyet alanlarını belirleyen kurumsal, siyasi ve toplumsal yapıları açıklamaktadır. Politika ağı teorisi, örgütlerin resmi karar alma süreçlerinden nasıl dışlandığını gösterirken; kamu tercihi teorisi, devlet aktörlerinin siyasi ve ekonomik çıkarlarını sosyal politika hedeflerinin önünde tutma eğilimini gözler önüne sermektedir. Yeni kurumsalcılık ise devlet kurumlarındaki yerleşik ataerkil normların, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği taleplerine karşı yapısal direnç oluşturduğunu vurgulamaktadır.

Kadın örgütleri bu dışlayıcı yapılar karşısında tamamen edilgen kalmamaktadır. Aksine, uluslararası savunuculuk, taban örgütlenmesi ve stratejik dava süreçleri gibi çeşitli direnç mekanizmaları geliştirmektedirler. Dijital aktivizm, transnasyonal ağlarla iş birliği ve toplumsal farkındalık kampanyaları gibi araçlarla hem kamusal tartışmalarda yer almakta hem de politika yapıcılar üzerinde baskı oluşturmaktadırlar. Bu stratejik direniş, kadın örgütlerinin yalnızca devlet dışı aktörler olarak değil, aynı zamanda toplumsal dönüşümde etkin birer özne olduklarını göstermektedir.

Araştırma, Türkiye’de kadın örgütlerinin hem devletle ilişkilerinde hem de birbirleriyle olan etkileşimlerinde karşılaştıkları zorluklara rağmen gösterdikleri direnci ortaya koymakta; siyasi baskılar, fonlama eşitsizlikleri ve kurumsal kısıtlamalara karşı yaratıcı çözümler geliştirdiklerini göstermektedir. Özellikle fonlama konusundaki yapısal eşitsizlikler, küçük ve yerel kadın örgütlerinin görünürlüğünü azaltmakta ve büyük örgütlerin lehine asimetrik ilişkiler doğurmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, daha eşitlikçi, uzun vadeli ve güvene dayalı koalisyonlara olan ihtiyaç sıklıkla vurgulanmaktadır.

Yasal ve kurumsal kısıtlamalar, Dernekler Kanunu, Vakıflar Kanunu ve dış fonların denetimi gibi, feminist örgütlerin hareket alanını daraltmaktadır. Ancak bu durum, kadın örgütlerinin alternatif kanallar yaratmasını da beraberinde getirmiştir. Yerel yönetimlerle iş birlikleri, stratejik davalar, uluslararası raporlamalar ve toplumsal seferberlik kampanyaları bu bağlamda öne çıkan taktikler arasında yer almaktadır. Özellikle İstanbul Sözleşmesi’nden çekilme sürecinde dijital aktivizmin yarattığı

görünürlük ve mobilizasyon, kadın örgütlerinin teknolojiyi bir direniş aracı olarak nasıl etkili kullandığını göstermektedir.

Araştırmanın bulguları, yalnızca Türkiye bağlamı için değil, aynı zamanda dünyadaki benzer otoriterleşme eğilimlerine karşı feminist hareketlerin nasıl ayakta kalabileceği konusunda da önemli çıkarımlar sunmaktadır. Kadın örgütlerinin dayanışma, esneklik ve strateji üretme kapasitesi, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliğinin politik iktidarlara olan ilişkisini dönüştürme potansiyeline işaret etmektedir. Bu bağlamda, önerilen politika adımları arasında daha katılımcı karar alma yapılarının oluşturulması, kadın örgütlerinin kurumsal danışma mekanizmalarına dahil edilmesi, fonlama süreçlerinin şeffaflaştırılması ve dijital savunuculuğun uzun vadeli politika süreçlerine entegre edilmesi yer almaktadır.

Son olarak, kadın örgütlerinin hem ulusal düzeyde hem de uluslararası platformlarda güçlendirilmesi, Türkiye'deki toplumsal cinsiyet politikalarının demokratikleşmesi açısından kritik önem taşımaktadır. Bu çalışma, kadın örgütlerinin toplumsal cinsiyet adaleti mücadelesindeki vazgeçilmez rolünü vurgularken; aynı zamanda bu mücadelenin daha adil, eşitlikçi ve katılımcı bir toplum inşasına sunduğu katkıyı gözler önüne sermektedir.

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