

IMECE: A women's self-empowerment practice in a shantytown of Istanbul

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This chapter aims to clarify and analyse the activities of a currently active women's organisation, İMECE – Women's Solidarity Cooperative – in Esenyurt, a peripheral district of İstanbul, which has a wide variety of internal immigrants from different regions in Turkey.¹ The attempt of İMECE to conduct co-learning activity on the basis of womanhood will be treated in a self-reflexive way within the context of the cultural, social and educational diversity of the Kurds, the Alevi, the Sunni conservative religious sects, the Roma and the Bulgarian immigrants of the post-1980s. These issues will be dealt with in a self-reflexive manner, as I am one of the founders of the initiative.

The first part of this essay consists of a short summary of the women's movement in Turkey and its relationship with education. In this part, I shall also try to situate the position of İMECE within the framework of women's empowerment and give some information about the history of the organisation and its perspective on the activities to be undertaken. All these points will be preceded by demographical data about Esenyurt, where the activities of the organisation take place. The second part focuses on the activities performed along with the previously stated perspective and how they are revised and shaped as a result of the obstacles encountered. Emphasis is put on the power relationship among women of different socio-economic and educational levels and different ethnic, religious and linguistic identities. Activities such as organising Turkish literacy courses for women from excluded ethnic groups, versus the principle of preserving the mother tongue, will be seen as a controversial factor. The final part relates the former educational activities to issues of women's educational needs. Moreover, the question of 'whose empowerment' will be debated. At the end of the essay, I shall try to make a brief evaluation of the whole process.

¹ I would like to express my special thanks to Fatma Gök, without whose support İMECE would not be as well known in academic circles as it is now.

Women's organisations in Turkey and a short 'herstory' of İMECE

Since the mid-1800s, there has been an active collection of women's organisations in İstanbul. The first attempts were influenced by the first-wave feminism of the 'West' and although there were some who declared their feminism as a viewpoint, they mainly focused on the social and economic organisations, which 'allowed women to participate' rather than 'working for' women (Tekeli 1994: 349-358). Nevertheless, this was quite a challenging practice for that time.

Later, after 1908 and the Second Constitutional period, women's associations oriented toward charity, education, culture and peace entered the scene. These associations and gatherings were relatively women-oriented women's organisations (Çakır 1996: 21). On the other hand, this period was significant because there were women's groups which were questioning women's status as mothers, wives and daughters in Ottoman society, thus trying to emphasise the need for education and work for women to gain freedom in the public sphere (Tekeli 1995: 11). This movement was then transformed into a kind of state feminism, which involved all these arguments in the context of the nation-building process of the new Republic after 1923. As Tekeli indicates, 'a corresponding loyalty and devotion to the new secular state was expected from women; once equal suffrage was achieved, the state claimed that "gender equality being a reality in Turkey" women did not need an organisation of their own, banning the Turkish Women's Association, which had formed a bridge between the old feminist movement and the new era' (Tekeli, 1995: 12). Long after the banning of the Turkish Women's Association in 1935, women's organisations continued to arise, but they tended to reflect the current dominant and opposition movements and did not have a specific and autonomous feminist standpoint for a long period until the 1980s. During the period after the abolition of the Turkish Women's Association, the issue of women was an arena of ideological struggle for both the ruling and the opposition sides. Not only the government was making use of the reform discourse to create 'emancipated' Turkish women, but also Islamists and the radical Left were using their own discourse of 'how to emancipate' women in the 'real' sense.

The 1970s were a period when left-wing ideological groups became effective in defining the political agenda of the country by bringing new concepts like economic development, imperialism, economic and social injustice, inequality and class exploitation into play (Tekeli 1995: 13). In these concepts, it was inevitable to consider women as a part of the issue, especially as there was an ideological discourse of 'the women question' in the Marxist agenda, which considers women to be oppressed but says nothing about women's special labour within the theory and generalises about women. However, this went no further than calling on women to fight against capitalism hand in hand with socialist men, as there was no debate or questioning of patriarchy. In such a context, it was pretty difficult for intellectual women – who were actively participating in these left-wing groups – to develop a discourse on women other than the Marxist agenda; especially when all these numerous groups were fighting with each other while sharing the same anti-feminist view. As Akal indicates, a significant characteristic of the period was that middle-class

women were conducting the active process, even at times when lower-class women had a high rate of participation as was the case during the İKD (İlerici Kadınlar Derneği – Progressive Women’s Association) period (Akal 2003: 125).

During the era after the 1980 military coup, a new autonomous women’s movement started reflecting the late influence of the second-wave feminism of the West. This era was also a period when the ideology of feminism had to struggle against the attacks of the dominant grand ideologies that claimed to have a general formula for both genders (Berktaş 1994: 18-27). Since all political activities and democratic rights were banned, post-1980 was also a period when ideologies suppressed by the dominant Marxist discourse found an opportunity to express themselves. Feminism was the most prominent among them, since Marxism was already handling the agenda of the ‘women’s problem’. Among the first attempts to show democratic opposition were by these women who identified themselves as feminists. These were all middle-class, highly educated and politically active women and, most important of all, they were doing something for ‘themselves’, not for ‘the others’, to be emancipated, because they had discovered their own suppression within the political movements that claimed to defend equality for all. This rise of the women’s movement was also in a period when the Left was badly defeated, and hence this feminist outbreak by the women who had formerly been active in the leftist movement was perceived as a betrayal. In this essay, the fact that the founder members of İMECE came from the leftist movement – three generations later than those of the first feminist movement of post-1980, however – should be taken into consideration when reading about the ‘herstory’ of İMECE in order to understand the process of those women a little more clearly.

In the 1980s, the main slogan was that no suppression that women encounter either in the public or in the private sphere is outside the political agenda, which was the core idea of second-wave feminism. All the demonstrations and political activities were carried out in parallel with this concept, and thus were sometimes looked down on as unimportant ‘womanish’ shows – not demonstrations. However, what they achieved was not so small. They gained public visibility and influenced many areas of life, regardless of the main ideologies. From then on, every word spoken in the public sphere had to say something to prove that the speaker was not disregarding women.

In the 1990s, the hot struggle *of* women and *on* women went into decline. The main characteristic of the 1990s was the emphasis on institutionalisation. In these years, two different approaches were on the agenda: small group feminism versus mild state feminism (Bora 2002: 114). Since the radical Left in Turkey was mainly dealing with the attacks coming from the state, they did not participate to any considerable extent on the issue.

The main work carried out in the cause of women was to undertake projects, receive funds and apply the projects to the target-group women. These activities are also called Project Feminism. As most of these activities were conducted by middle-class educated women on behalf of less qualified or ‘deprived’ women, in general they give a sense of ‘state feminism’ which is characterised as ‘emancipated women trying to emancipate *the other* women

who are in a sense inferior'. In many respects, Project Feminism has handicaps in an ideological sense. Nevertheless, the 1990s are significant in terms of the institutionalisation of the women's movement either autonomously or semi-autonomously, or in a controlled way within the state structure.

Kardam and Ecevit suggest that, apart from institutionalisation, the increase in the number of small groups and their being widespread all over the country, apart from the largest cities, is an important point to emphasise (Kardam and Ecevit 2002: 90). On the other hand, in the 1990s, with the organisational work of the Welfare Party, a kind of Islamist women's movement appeared. This was a movement which was rather inside out – though organised centrally by a political party – concerned with the suburbs of the big cities as compared with activities carried out incidentally as Project Feminism did. Nevertheless, both Project Feminism and the Islamist women's activities inherently exercised a kind of restriction on radical action when necessary. Nazik Işık indicates that this institutionalisation in the 1990s cannot be understood without taking into account the Fourth World Women's Conference and the United Nations summits (Işık 2002: 59), and that it should be considered as having a connection with the plans for integration into the European Union (Türkeş 2000: 47).

On the one hand, at the beginning of the 1990s, with the oppressive attitude of the state towards all democratic institutions, socialist women had been left without their classic means of organisations, which were mostly legal associations. On the other hand, they could not adapt themselves to the new forms of informal gatherings and had to deal with the 'more general' issues of struggle like resisting the anti-democratic oppression of the state, and engaging in their political identity.

To sum up the 1990s, one can argue that there had been a considerable level of institutionalisation but at the price of the militancy of the feminist movement of the 1980s, which led to the achievements of that movement being exploited by the patriarchal ideology in the context of globalisation, but also helped it to gain a great deal of publicity and public acceptance.

The founders of the İMECE were among the group of women coming from the leftist groups in the 1990s. We were actively engaged in the general political issues, but we were also considering the problems of being women in the social and political environment in which we actually participated. Almost all of us were university graduates and had a profession. Most of us came from lower-class families in contrast to the previously active feminist groups. Although we were from lower-class families, we had had the opportunity to have a good education at the well-known universities in İstanbul. This is something important to note about the structure of the initiator group. We discussed, argued and even fought with each other to identify problems, create approaches and propose policies. We struggled against each other to go beyond the classic Marxist borders of discussing an issue in a detached way as if we were not among the subjects of the problem. It was not an easy-going process, as we already had a ready-made procedure of perceiving and categorising things.

At the start, we were a group of 20-25 women, between the ages 21 and 35, and the process was so enlightening for us that we all felt ourselves to be in a kind of ritual that opened up our vision for understanding our own position. Thus,

we were a highly enthusiastic group that pulled everyone involved deep into the process. This was actually a consciousness-raising group, even though it was long afterward that we analysed this to be the case. Throughout the process, there was a great deal of opposition coming from the men in the political group we were engaged in. We were accused of being feminists, which was something that stimulated us to undertake a deeper investigation into what we were actually doing. In this respect, we created a curriculum concerned with many issues involving women both theoretically and practically. We arranged for some renowned feminist academic women from İstanbul and Bosphorus Universities to instruct us and guide our discussions, among them Fatma Gök (one of the contributors to this book), Şirin Tekeli, Nesrin Tura, Tülay Arın and Gülnur Savran. We undertook a long period of reading and discussion sessions on the philosophy, economics and politics of the issues. What we came up with was an emphasis on the patriarchal system and its core relations with the economic system. That the idea of women's unpaid labour had a critical relationship with the patriarchal system was the gist of our field of work, but it was interwoven with certain identities and ethnic, religious and linguistic diversities.

Within this process, we tried to understand the links between gender and class and many aspects of the women's problem, scanning a great deal of literature on women studies. We questioned our existence as women within an oppositional group. We tried to draw conclusions from our discussions and then decided to do something for ourselves together with the women in our society, not 'for the women in an inferior position in that society'. What we realised was that there was a strong tie between women in all strata of society regardless of their class. For this reason, we decided that doing something for ourselves made no sense without doing something together with the most disadvantaged groups of women, but it was extremely difficult to manage this without falling into the trap of engaging in certain hierarchical relations. The gist of our mentality could be summarised thus: *if one single woman in any place in the world still suffers from violence, or discrimination, or attacks based on her gender, then I am not secure or respected at all*. So we decided to combine our destiny virtually, as it was already combined metaphorically, with the destiny of lower-class women – people we were quite familiar with as we came from the same class. All these activities took place from 1997 to 2000.

Later on, we focused on women's paid and unpaid labour, and in view of our own labour we searched for a way to work on the issue in practice. Since most of us came from the slum quarters of the big cities, or the provinces, we decided to choose a place with which we were familiar. As a result, we decided to practise in Esenyurt, where some of us still had relatives and family members.

Esenyurt has collected a great variety of immigrants from different regions of Turkey especially in the 1990s. Most of the population consists of Kurds and Roma. However, there are immigrants from places that are normally known for collecting immigrants rather than exporting them, like Zonguldak, a coal-mining city; this is probably because of the privatisation going on in the country as a whole, leaving many people unemployed. Nevertheless, Esenyurt exists as a district of many colours, ethnicities and identities, where bottom-

class people from the poorest sections of society with the largest disadvantages in education, health, and legal facilities live. They are also the people who have recently migrated to the big cities because of the negative effects of neo-liberal impoverishing policies. They work in flexible, cheap labour piecework, or the service sector, and have poor basic living standards. Almost all the women are engaged in some kind of informal work to provide a living for the family, since their husbands are usually unemployed or temporarily employed. Many of the families have more than three children. The school drop-out rate is very high for both genders, as the boys see no future in having an education and the girls are usually taken out of school for economic and traditional reasons. Families with health security are very rare.

As indicated above, since some of us still have a real relationship with the region, we could be seen as organic intellectuals or organic activists (cf. Sernhede in this volume), because we have not experienced a feeling of alienation and being ‘help seekers versus help providers’. This place was actually our home – or a home-like environment for those of us coming from the provincial areas. We neither tried to do something for ‘the poor others’, nor saw ourselves as ‘emancipated’, since we were coming from the same class.

In 2001 we decided to set up a place for us women to realise ourselves together with the local women, to become familiar with the different parts of the district and get to know the women in the neighbourhood. As we had done a lot of reading and research, we decided to open a ‘women’s research centre’ in the middle of the ‘slum’. İMECE was thus established in 2001 with the name KADMER (Women’s Research and Solidarity Centre).² Centres used to be in the urban centres and that was why almost all of the women’s organisations of the 1990s had their offices in Taksim or some other central part of İstanbul and other cities. Ironically, our ‘centre’ was not in the *centre* but in the *periphery*. We certainly had our own plans, but we were well aware that these plans were simply in order to kick-start the engine and would immediately change with the initiative of the local women. Thus, it was not like a laboratory experiment, but the interaction with women in the neighbourhood determined what was to be done, and the process realised and fulfilled itself.

With the enlargement of solidarity activities and the participation of the local women, we decided to turn the organisation into a Women’s Solidarity Cooperative.³ This was a transformation inherent in its nature rather than a pre-planned decision. So in 2003 the organisation took the name ‘İMECE’, which is a word used for the traditional cooperation of peasants and refers to everyone working together collectively. With the help of three years of practical experience, there were more than 2,000 local women attending the opening street ceremony of the cooperative İMECE.

It may be illuminating to recount how the local women got to know us and how they started to participate in the process. The first comers were the relatives of

² Kadın Arastirmalari ve Dayanisma Merkezi (Womens’s Research and Solidarity Centre).

³ The term solidarity is used to define the activities that are decided collectively by the women in İMECE to meet the needs of the women without any reference to money or price regarding the service given. These activities are gender-conscious, and thus aim to contribute to the unity of women.

some of us, needless to say. Later arrivals were local women who came to KADMER to ask what 'this shop was selling'.⁴ After getting to know one another, we started to act together in solidarity in various areas according to our various professions, such as teaching girls English, helping children with their lessons, dealing with their health problems, giving advice on legal matters, etc. Later on, women started to gather at KADMER bringing their lacework, embroidery or knitting with them and chatting and sharing their grievances. Soon after that, local women started to call KADMER a 'women's coffee-house' as a joke, but this turned into the idea of an actual women's coffeehouse which was later given the name İMECE.⁵

İMECE then moved to a shelter in a public park, which we got permission from the municipality to use as a place for its activities. It was then given the name İMECE Women's Coffeehouse. Local women and ourselves – the new *we* – started to gather there and discuss our own agenda, most of which was about making a living for our families, the corruption of children in the neighbourhood, and fundamental human needs such as health, education and accommodation. Most of the local women were working informally as domestic servants, babysitters, embroiderers, house cleaners or piecework employees. Thus, they decided to do something cooperatively to earn their living. Making a living is the most important problem in places like Esenyurt, and it is bound up with the state of being a woman, which means that you have very little opportunity to venture into the public sphere of the struggle for employment. Moreover, most of the families live off the women's work, since most of the husbands in the area are either unemployed or partially and irregularly employed, or have become runaway husbands incapable of carrying the load on their shoulders. At this point the idea of establishing a women's cooperative came up. However, it was not particularly cheap to establish a cooperative, especially for local women who did not have a regular income. So we jointly decided to make money by working collectively. We knitted, baked, cooked, brought ornamental items from our homes to sell; and to collect money we organised a picnic with relatively expensive tickets and made all the necessary arrangements, from hiring the bus to cooking the food and preparing the drinks and planning the whole thing. In this way, we collected around US\$ 1,500, which was just about the amount we needed.

Among the activities carried out under the auspices of the cooperative are organising to obtain piecework from the factories around Esenyurt, organising house-cleaning work, vocational training of women in the textile sector with the 13 machines supplied by İstanbul University, teaching schoolgirls (mostly the junior high school and high school student teenage daughters of the local members of İMECE) and local girls'⁶ drama, sport, English and health education, as well as health check-ups for women and children, clothing solidarity, legal solidarity and many more.

⁴ These women, most of them of Kurdish origin, have only little knowledge of Turkish and were used to move mostly in the close neighbourhood.

⁵ In Turkey, only men have coffeehouses – *kahvehane* – where they gather and socialise in the public.

⁶ These are girls, mostly between the ages of 14 and 22, who have neither jobs nor go to school.

Under the roof of ÌMECE, we as women intend to unite, eliminate our disadvantages and create a new form of women's solidarity for self-empowerment.⁷ At ÌMECE, we also aim to work, absolutely voluntarily, to meet the children's and our own needs in the areas of education, health and legal matters. These are the areas and subjects that are decided by agreement at the Wednesday meetings of ÌMECE. ÌMECE was founded by and for women, and is collectively administered by women. As a matter of principle, no man is included either in the activities or in the Wednesday decision-making meetings.

All the volunteers including the local women and professional volunteers – that is, volunteers who have a profession or ability helpful for the benefit of all, like doctors, nurses, lawyers, teachers etc. – take part in the decision-making process equally.⁸ None of us has any privileges. Every action within the organisation is carried out through collective decision-making. Depending on the type of activity to be undertaken, volunteer teams are formed. These are flexible and they are autonomous. Unless they counteract the general principles on which the whole ÌMECE community has formed a consensus, they take their own decisions and report back to the larger all-inclusive Wednesday decision-making meetings. To open up the term 'volunteer', it may be useful to mention that everyone participates in the work needing to be done according to their own capacity and quality, provided that no single person exploits any of these capabilities as a means of feeling superior or inferior. For instance, for the literacy courses, there are local elementary-school teachers living in the same neighbourhood, or there are women hairdressers who intend to train the girls in the neighbourhood in their skills. Some housewives come to ÌMECE to look after the children of their neighbours, who have to work and have no place to leave their children. They do not think of this as a way of earning money, because the nature of the organisation is based on being 'paid' by another activity which meets a different need such as being taught literacy or being advised by a lawyer, etc.⁹ In addition, there is the volunteer work of cleaning up the premises of ÌMECE, regardless of what one's own profession is. None of them has more authority than the others, in principle. This principle not only exists in words, but is also sealed in practice; for instance, nobody had ever started to participate in cleaning activity unless they had seen the lawyer or the university teacher cleaning the toilets or washing the dishes in practice.

In terms of financial needs, it should be noted that there was no paid staff working for ÌMECE. ÌMECE has not applied for any grants, in order to be able to maintain its autonomy and independence against any possible control over its freedom of action. Thus, the term 'empowerment of women' is something

⁷ The term *empowerment* in the context of women is intended to define activities that raise the capability, accessibility and attainability of women to public facilities and civic rights. It also includes raising women's capability of self-expression and the power to change the male-oriented definitions in the public sphere according to the unique condition of women. Moreover, the word *empowerment* here has the meaning of women being equipped with the necessary facilities and power to take control of their own lives.

⁸ Volunteers is not a distinct category. Founders, professional volunteers, local women, and schoolgirls are all volunteers. So, when volunteers are mentioned, this should not be regarded as 'the giver/service-producer/participant aspect of us'.

⁹ On the issue of child-care, women from ÌMECE demanded the political right of a cheap kindergarten in every neighbourhood from the local municipality.

that has always been approached with suspicion. So, for three years until the end of 2004, İMECE did not attempt to apply for any funds deliberately. In 2005 a grant was accepted from the ‘Global Fund’ because it was a feminist institution, which supported women. Regardless of this funding, İMECE has been a totally self-governing and self-sufficient organisation, which needed further resources simply for the development of its own agenda.

Practices performed and problems encountered

İMECE has performed many activities so far, of which some have been successful and some are good lessons on what not to do. Activity areas that can give an idea about the organisation and its approach can be grouped into four main categories.

Consciousness-raising

As Freire indicates in Davis’s interview with him, an educational process can never be neutral (Davis 1980: 57). In this sense, the educational activity that we as the initial founder group undertook for ourselves was not, of course, for oppression but for our own liberation. However, our act of liberation led us to enlarge our field of activity as we realised that we would never be liberated unless we shared this certain form of knowledge with others and engaged in some kind of practice to broaden this process of learning, which then turned into co-learning, and not teaching the local women something.

In the process of educational solidarity, every solidarity action was, in fact, educational in the sense that we were learning to share our knowledge and experience. Again, as Freire says in the interview, just analysing the concrete world was not enough for liberation and thus we needed *praxis* (ibid.: 59). That was what we were doing. Regardless of where we were coming from or whether we were local or not, all of us as women were engaged in the activities, and we were functioning as liberating means for each other, because we were providing a field of praxis for one another.

For instance, mothers got organised at İMECE against corruption in the neighbourhood. As a peripheral district of İstanbul, Esenyurt is a place where social injustice and corruption take place together with a lack of access to the public facilities. Thus, drug rings are quite widespread in the area, and this activity is established among teenagers and children at puberty. As the main and sole caregivers of children, mothers in the neighbourhood dealt with protecting their children from this danger. At one of the recreational visits to İMECE, local women started to handle the issue, put it on the Wednesday meetings’ agenda, and drew up an action plan. Then together we created a schedule of shifts to confront a man who was known to have given children cigarettes and money from his car. Mothers caught this man giving children drugs and cigarettes, and forbade him to move around the neighbourhood.¹⁰

¹⁰ There is an interview with these children at the back of the book of translations of M.W. Apple’s articles *Neoliberalizm ve Eğitim Politikaları Üzerine Eleştirel Yazılar* (Critical Essays on???)

Both at the Wednesday discussions and at other gatherings, we discussed and analysed our position, what kind of neighbourhood we would like to live in, why certain tasks were on our shoulders as women and how we were sharing common problems, despite our educational differences. We discussed many issues in our lives, made concrete decisions and took concrete action together, some of which taught us that we needed to be more realistic. We discussed the hierarchy between the educated and the uneducated, brides and mother-in-laws, mothers and daughters, doctors and patients, teachers and parents and so on. This process can be called *conscientisation* in Freire's term (Bee 1980: 42), as we women of all kinds and diversities were acting, reacting, practising, learning by bumping up against the wall, making and sometimes changing decisions about the world, ourselves and each other, thus developing our critical consciousness.

Educational solidarity

Educational solidarity was the starting point when ÌMECE dived into praxis. Local women were eager to attend these activities both for themselves and for their daughters. Thus, solidarity activities on education were the core function of the organisation when it first started.

Be it on health or on law, any activity has somehow a form of educational quality. However, the initiation of the activities was originally about education in its barest form. For instance, there were many schoolgirls in the neighbourhood, and most of them experienced difficulty with most of their school subjects. As there were a number of educators, active teachers, it was not difficult to establish a solidarity organisation on behalf of these girls. For example, ÌMECE has been organising regular educational solidarities and has prepared 12 high-school girl students for the university entrance examinations and 10 secondary-school girls for the high-school exams. In addition, ÌMECE has taught 15 girls English. Since there were many volunteer English teachers, it was not difficult to provide the schoolgirls and young girl workers with language education in English, something they would not have been able to afford otherwise. Later on, the mothers of these girls asked for an English course of their own. At the start, the educational areas to be taught were decided by the initial founders taking note of their requests during conversations, but as soon as all the women started to attend the Wednesday decision-making meetings, these decisions began to be taken collectively.

Besides many school subjects, these girls were given other sorts of education such as in self-confidence, expressing their own ideas and standing behind their own arguments, cooperation in tasks, cooperation in leisure-time collective activities, and the importance and concrete results of gender solidarity in their own lives. Nevertheless, it should be stated clearly that the integration with the neighbourhood girls and their families would have taken dramatically longer than it did, if 'official' curriculum subjects such as mathematics, English and geography had not been taught for solidarity. In other words, a direct discourse of gender solidarity and empowerment of women would not have been a sympathetic issue to start with, and the organisation would have been exposed to some prejudice and exclusion, since

anything done for women together with other women tends to be perceived as a threat to the order of society.

The most problematic area of educational solidarity was the literacy solidarity, where İMECE faced the dilemma of teaching literacy in the dominant group's language to people from different oppressed ethnic groups. Local women desperately wanted to learn how to read and write because they felt very disadvantaged whenever they needed to do something outside the home. For example, as one of the women from İMECE reported, one day she had to go to the city centre of Bakırköy – one of the nearest developed urban centres – and asked a man at the bus stop if the bus in front of them went to Bakırköy. The man's reply was simple: 'It is simply written there in huge letters. Are you blind?' However, the woman's reply was even simpler: 'No, just illiterate', she said in her half-Turkish, half-Kurdish accent. For this reason, women wanted to learn literacy. Some of them knew little Turkish even in the spoken sense, or they had difficulty in empathising with the phonology of a language, which they were learning later in their lives and with no experience of literacy in their mother tongue either. This meant 'learning literacy in one's second language', which was quite illogical.

There were local primary-school teachers, living in Esenyurt, doing volunteer teaching of literacy. In fact, the issue was problematised by the women who volunteered to teach. When the problem was discussed at the Wednesday meetings, the ideas and the decision coming from the community were clear. They can be summarised as follows: *Whether ethical or not, we need to learn literacy in the Turkish language because public life has already been organised in it. Not learning literacy in Turkish just because it is the language of the dominant culture will only help us maintain our helpless and powerless situation. We should be aware of what it means, but we should learn it anyway.*

All through these educational solidarities, the hardest issue was to transform the 'receiver' versus 'provider' hierarchy. This problem was dealt with by the inclusion of 'the receivers' in shaping the curriculum; that is, the learners themselves decided what to learn, when to learn it and even sometimes how to learn when they felt that they had a hard time learning the subject taught in a certain manner and approach. For example, after the start of a literacy session, the approach of the teacher was an issue for discussion, since the teacher was treating the learners as if they had the same intellectual background as she had. The learners expressed their reaction in the decision-making meetings and demanded that the teacher understand their difference in background and their unique situation, which caused them to learn more slowly. They also reacted to the teacher disregarding this situation and behaving impatiently, thus pouring cold water on their hard-gained motivation. Then the problem was solved by another meeting with the teacher and those attending the literacy course.

Also carried out together with volunteer professionals, İMECE has educated 15 girls in drama and helped them perform a play at various places on March 8th days. Throughout the celebrations which were related to the women's problem, İMECE encouraged local women to speak out in public, which is something much more difficult and odd to do in this community than it is generally thought to be. In this respect, the girls' theatre group had the experience of

acting in front of a crowd of more than 1500-2000 people at their first stage experience, and the other women of speaking up about their ideas and wishes in a public place, an open park, with microphones. This is an important experience in a community where only male leader figures have a tradition of speaking in public.

On the other hand, these public-speaking experiences sometimes had their own handicaps such as women not speaking in their own voices but in the dominant patriarchal voice because of either the need for public acceptance or of imitating the male figures in the content of their speech. Nevertheless, this was not a big problem; it just happened to be one of our discussion topics in decision-making meetings. If it had been a perfect public-speaking experience, this would have been very strange.

Health solidarity

IMECE has been organising monthly health solidarity programmes with the participation of volunteer physicians and health-care professionals. At least 200 local women, whether or not from IMECE, take an active part in these programmes regularly. We share their experiences in confidence as part of the ongoing transaction of information, which contributes to eliminating the hierarchical basis from knowledge. There are many occasions when volunteer non-IMECE doctors have expressed their surprise at receiving such interesting and bold questions. This was because IMECE women were asking the doctor intimate personal questions about the information she was trying to convey, to find out whether what she was suggesting that women should do really worked in her own life. The women were not just sitting there to receive information, they were questioning how the knowledge worked in practice, which was extraordinary for a doctor who is used to maintaining the hierarchy when she has the word on her profession.

During these health-care sessions, many local men insisted on attending the programme to see whether or not their wives were being provoked against them. At first, they were allowed to observe the session from a distance, and then they decided to leave the women alone because they were doing something useful for women's health (and more importantly, something that did not threaten their behavioural norms as it had seemed).

At the beginning, some local women were uncomfortable sharing the same space with 'other' women who came from different ethnic and cultural origins, especially if they were Roma – an attitude which then was transformed into a positive one. Another problematic area was that they sometimes kept their feelings to themselves because they did not want to be the subject of their neighbours' gossip. Nevertheless, there has been quite a lot of progress, as now many women can share their problems even about domestic seduction by the male members of the family other than their husbands.

Among the plans of IMECE is to put forward a project for building up a monetary fund to provide health care for ourselves, which may later turn into other more useful forms of social security.

Employment solidarity

As stated earlier, many women in Esenyurt have to work to earn a living for their families. However, when taking this obligation into consideration, they prefer jobs that do not require them to leave their houses, because there is no one or no institution to look after their children. They therefore prefer working at home doing piecework which the surrounding factories distribute. Yet they work for an extremely small amount of money, and have no guarantee that they will be paid properly or on time.

In view of this situation, we carried out a project on piecework at İMECE, getting organised as women doing piecework under the protection of the cooperative. Most of us had been doing this type of work for a long time in the neighbourhood. These piecework activities started with parcelling up packed chewing gum for a factory. We worked very hard to accomplish our tasks, but had difficulty in getting our wages from the factory owner, which stimulated us to develop different common solidarity strategies to obtain our money. Thus, this activity was not a success in the usual sense but was a very effective *praxis* for us in terms of developing solidarity, acting as one body and defending our own labour rights.

Another important field of activity for İMECE is domestic work in the relatively wealthy region of the district, Bahçeşehir. In fact, one of the main goals underlying the idea of a women's cooperative had derived from the aim of getting together as women domestic workers, which soon lost its priority compared to piecework.

Later on, İMECE decided to carry out a project on house-cleaners (and planned an accompanying educational project including job training and other general civic education and city orientation) in cooperation with Marmara University Centre of Women's Labour and Employment. The cooperation with the university has not materialised but, after embarking on the issue, the women decided on various different areas for its practice at the Wednesday meetings and continued to carry on the activity for some time. In the meantime, certain prejudices came out about their ethnical identity and the preconceived characteristics of some groups of women were used as an excuse for excluding them from the community. This was especially the case when the activity started to prove financially profitable.

This work went on for a while, but then more emphasis was put on piecework. At this point the principle of transparency and openness was highlighted, the attitude itself having been an issue of discussion for a while. This was a period when the founder members had doubts about whether to intervene in the discussions as a determining factor or simply to monitor the discussion, as the tendency sometimes moved towards chauvinism. This was a critical issue between standing against power relationships based on the status and knowledge to determine the opinion of the community, and intervening against the tendency towards chauvinism.

The women have also accomplished the project of vocational training in operating textile machinery at İMECE in cooperation with the Women's Research Association at İstanbul University's Department of Women's Studies.

Within this project, more than 300 women received training in using industrial sewing machines, producing ready-to-wear clothes and accessories for the market, and earning some money.

This activity then turned into a campaign of ‘we demand employment, not political declarations’, as the local government and the municipality proved ignorant in the face of our public demands as women. We then added the demand for a kindergarten to the list, together with the demand for employment, as the two were tightly knit components of enabling women to work. So far we have organised public meetings and arranged for an interview with the municipality, and have arranged house visiting in the neighbourhood for consciousness-raising.

The mutual prejudices at the beginning of the activity as women coming from different ethnic origins were transformed into a basis of solidarity with the common goal of achieving an economic task. Nevertheless, it should be stated that it was hard work to ‘normalise’ the attendance of Roma women in all these economic activities.

An evaluation from the self-reflexive point of view: ripping out the paradigm of ‘providers versus receivers of help’

In conclusion, ÌMECE has been an example of a women’s solidarity process apart from the United Nations’ and the European Union’s functional ‘empowerment’ paradigm.¹¹ It also distinguishes itself from the classic overall view of Marxist organisations, with its ‘grand narrative’ of emancipating all humanity and regarding the women’s problem as a sub-branch of the issue, and directly opposing the idea of feminism. In fact, this is an attempt to apply the spirit of second-wave feminism to the needs of a 21st-century context and letting it contribute to the parallel conscientisation process of all the women involved, regardless of differences in education or ethnicity. The whole process included education at every stage, but this was a different kind of education, which was needed equally by both the formally educated and the not formally educated. We were informally educated by the process itself in practice. And no formal education I have ever received would compare with it.

The work done at ÌMECE applies the notion of the rights of women to the most disadvantaged groups of women, including ethnic minorities and excluded groups like Roma who are far from achieving the facilities and legal rights the feminist movement struggled for and won. ÌMECE does this by *not* ‘telling’ but actually by ‘practising’ for and with women – including us as the initial founders – for the solution of our problems. By doing this, ÌMECE intends to contribute to the advancement of women not as ‘receivers’ of rights and facilities but actual creators of the process as active ‘actresses’.

¹¹ After the ‘women’s empowerment’ discourse of the UN in the 1990s, the ‘project rush’ in the area of women’s problems arose. Many groups of urban women started to formulate projects to emancipate ‘the other’ women in difficulty. Many of these projects have been cut short after having received tempting funds. Many others preferred to sustain the income by going on writing the projects in close accordance with the funds given, and thus became governed by the donor fund itself.

İMECE was not a project pre-planned and tested; rather it was a kind of self-realisation of women who set out on self-discovery and consciousness-raising and ended up in the realm of *praxis*. İMECE may have started on the initiative of founder members like me, but even I myself had no idea of what it would evolve into. Thus, İMECE is a product of the women of Esenyurt and the initial founders who then created İMECE all together because they had the initiative about what to do, how to do it and why to do it all together as one entity.

Education, health and solidarity on legal matters and practices are all designed in such a manner that the mechanisms of oppressive hierarchy and domination would be eliminated. Every one of us who is involved has a struggle within ourselves to internalise the notion of women's solidarity replacing 'hierarchical power' with 'collective empowerment'.

It was very important for those of us who started İMECE to act outside the 'giver-receiver' paradigm, but the process itself has been very hard and challenging. The difficulties lie in two areas. First, it requires a lot of effort for an educated woman to draw back from acting as a 'giver'. There has been a wide collection of mistakes made and opportunities lost by falling into this trap. On the other hand, it was quite hard work to persuade local women and help them convert to being the *active subjects* of the process, whereas they were quite accustomed to the *receiver* role. Each side of this duality negatively affected the struggle of the other side. For example, the more local women failed at playing an active role, the more stimulated were the educated women in terms of acting as givers, which was against their understanding of freedom. There were concrete experiences when the local women seriously warned the educated ones to 'order' them what to do, because they were 'ignorant' people and therefore knew nothing.

Fortunately, soon after the beginning of the solidarity activities in health, education and law, local women started to participate in the decision-making process of the institution on every topic they felt was needed. All the important decisions have been taken at the regular Wednesday meetings of İMECE. Apart from 20 regularly participating local women, a lot more local women participate in the decision-making on critical issues, especially on education, health and employment. Decision-making meetings are open to all the local women and are well known throughout the area. There is no limitation on any woman participating, collaborating and taking part in the collectively prescribed schedule. The mentality problem involved in ripping out the dual 'giver-receiver' phenomenon has been softened by such a decision-making mechanism.

Throughout the process so far it has been clear to İMECE that very little can be managed in terms of the liberation of women unless the men and the children of the society are also considered. This is one of the handicaps of İMECE. Because the suppression of women has two sides, generating a new form of thinking and practice only for women is incomplete. One may claim that changing women would make a difference in society to some extent, yet it is clear that this does work to the contrary most of the time. Something should also be done for adult men and children to complete the missing parts of the puzzle. This is not just a matter of words but a very concrete experience for İMECE, as a lot of work was often prevented because of the exclusion of men.

There are also a lot of questions about how much further this work can go and what its limits are. Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that the limits we meet carry the potential to open up new horizons before us.

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