

INTERVIEW

# **Turkey : A society where women are targets - An interview with members of Muslims Opposed to Violence Against Women**

Thursday 10 March 2016, by [Correspondent\(s\)](#) (Date first published: 8 March 2016).

**On March 6, International Women's Day protests in Turkey were met with violent repression, with Turkish police shoving protesters and then firing rubber bullets to disperse a crowd of hundreds of women in central Istanbul. Protesters had gathered despite a ban on the march by the governor of Istanbul, who had cited the pretext of "security concerns."**

The protesters were trying to draw attention to the dismal state of women's rights in the country. As NBC News recently noted, "The government frequently faces criticism for its handling of women's issues, including the failure to stem high rates of violence and low female participation in the workforce." Since 2008, nearly 1,500 Turkish women have been killed by men. In 2015, 290 women were killed in Turkey by men, whether fathers, brothers, partners or perfect strangers. Since the February 2015 murder of Özgecan Aslan—a university student who was killed as she resisted an attempted rape—a movement has erupted in Turkey to address the widespread problem of violence against women. Hundreds of protests have been organized across the country, and many grassroots initiatives have started to form, led principally by Muslim women.

In an interview published at Marksist.org, Nebyie Ari, Betül Demir and Bahar Kiliç of the group Muslims Opposed to Violence Against Women spoke with Revolutionary Socialist Workers Party members Meltem Oral and Yıldız Önen about the campaign and the issue of violence against women. Here, we print an edited translation by Tom Gagné.

**WHAT INITIATIVES are you pursuing and what type of pressures are you facing? How do you evaluate sexism and the status of women in society, and what do you see as the root of the problem?**

Nebiye: The full name of our group is Muslims Opposed to Violence Against Women [KŞKM, by its initials in Turkish]. I was part of the first meeting's delegation.

Every November 25, the group was putting together demonstrations involving dance. At first, I thought this was kind of silly, but then thought to myself, "At least they are doing something." We were also getting tired of our sisters being subjected to violence. We talked together with our friends and we created an e-mail group.

Violence is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. This is the framework we tried to create when we were encountering difficulties. When we met together in Istanbul, we established this initiative.

**Betül:** Our lives were already at stake because we were women. The first forum we organized was

called “Harassment, Rape and Violence Concerning Islamic Men.”

A great deal is spoken of by men about the role of women in the family, and that Islam has reminded every woman of its place in the family. So we organized a second forum called “Men and the Family.” In doing this, we were able to talk about the role of men within the family, as well as addressing more comprehensively the idea of the family. But because of the difficulty in finding a speaker to talk about masculinity, much of the conversation revolved around women. We could only really talk about fatherhood.

**Nebiye:** Later, we put together a workshop for a Friday religious sermon. Our main purpose in creating this workshop was to put front and center the issue of violence against women on a much wider scale. We wanted to reach out to men, and we wanted to say something to them. Thinking we were able to get in contact with the greatest number of men during Friday prayers, we spoke with the office of the mufti together about the sermon that we wrote.

**Betül:** As we were preparing for the Violence Against Women initiative, we posted a video of this sermon to social media. Thinking that it wouldn’t spread on social media, we set up a stand in front of the Üsküdar Mihrimah Mosque. One day, we delivered our sermon to over 750 men. Women also visited our booth and we were greeted very warmly. Right now, our sermon is being shared from our social media presence and our blog.

Then we started a campaign called “Shelter” for a law requiring all municipalities in Istanbul to open up women’s shelters. Likewise, for the existing shelters’ conditions—which are inadequate—to improve. We wanted to draw attention to this issue, and we prepared a statement that explained the need for more shelters.

Later, we set up a booth, and some men responded, telling us that we’re trying to destroy the family. We also saw things like women together with their husbands trying to come by our booth, only to have the women retreat from fear of their husbands. And we felt again the importance of the work we’re doing.

**WOMEN’S ORGANIZATIONS that talk about violence generally appeal to women. You are addressing men as the principal problem. Have you seen any positive results from this?**

Nebiye: For us, it’s not the older generation, but our generation, and we can speak to the younger men. At least they can start by saying, “I don’t know if this is sexist, but...”

This is really important. They are sometimes afraid to come to our meetings, but then also from some of them, we’ll hear them say things like “I’m a feminist.” There are also ones who have sense enough to say things like, “Don’t hide that you’re feminists.”

**Betül:** After the Family and Men Forum and the Friday sermon actions, we thought to ourselves, “Are we being too active?” So we turned our attention to some theoretical studies and we started to study Islamic sources.

When we looked at the emergence of violence, we noticed that it focused on issues such as stoning, the administration of women and the imamate, marriage and divorce. So we did some research on these topics. We also debated briefly the fragility of human nature and women. We researched the status of women during the time of the Prophet Muhammed.

Historically, we know that sexism has existed since the beginning of civilization. We saw that in the beginning, this type of sexism wasn’t necessarily intrinsic to Islam, and that sexist views existed in varying degrees. For example, Abdullah bin Umar’s first decrees: “In the time of the Prophet

Muhammed, we behaved well towards women because we were afraid of a revelation concerning us. After Muhammed, we behaved as we wanted towards women.” This tells us that there was a setback after Muhammed.

## **WHAT ARE the causes of violence against women? How do we prevent it?**

**Betül:** It’s necessary for women to get stronger. We did that with the “Shelter” campaign. More shelters can empower women. It’s very important for women who have no place to go or who are no longer welcome in their families. It’s even important for women coming from a better financial situation. Self-preservation above everything else.

**Nebiye:** Man sees himself as the center; he wants to dominate everything himself. For example, he won’t reconcile with a woman who wants to divorce him. Instead of talking to a woman, he expresses himself with violence. Because he’s a man, he doesn’t need to convince her, women must obey men.

All of this is related to the perception of masculinity, and we need to change it. Masculinity shouldn’t shape oppression like this. We don’t accept this as women. But sometimes men represent themselves as the “lordship” and they want us to obey them. They won’t diplomatically accept women who think differently. In general, we need to change this type of masculinity. We are trying to change this type of masculinity with reference to the Islamic community and tradition. And we can both become equals in reference to this history.

There’s also the type of speech from our political leaders. [Turkish President] Tayyip Erdoğan and others, for example, have been making targets out of women. Such rhetoric is being reflected in the streets. Women have become targets.

**Betül:** They define morality only in terms of women; this is sexist.

**Nebiye:** They’re provoking harassment with stuff like this. And we’ve made a campaign countering it...War is also fueling this type of violence in society. We have to say that war is contributing to this violence. Our children are growing up with this rhetoric around war and violence, and then it becomes violence against women.

**Betül:** The most effective way to stop violence today is to impose and apply some type of punishment. In fact an appropriate law can be used to punish, but won’t necessarily be implemented. Because police, lawyers and judges are all like minded in their sexism, men can go unpunished by using various reductions in sentences for criminals and so on.

**Bahar Kiliç:** Gender education is taught in municipal schools, but men don’t take it very seriously. I once attended a training session in Van, and it was a disaster. Should we jail violent men as a means to an end? Should we encourage self-defense? Is this also feeding a cycle of violence? I don’t know.

**Betül:** We must work for the right of self-defense for women who kill their husbands after suffering systematic violence. A court in Germany has ruled that the right of self-defense is justified in this regard. The right to self-defense in response to women subjected to violence must enter the legal system. We have to fight for it.

**Nebiye:** We had a letter writing campaign to Yasemin Çakal, who is an example of this situation. She’s on trial for killing her husband and she could face a life sentence, while many men are getting less of a sentence in such cases. There are hearings in February and we hope that there’s a ruling of self-defense and for her release.

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\* Socialist Worker (USA). March 10, 2016:

<http://socialistworker.org/2016/03/10/a-society-where-women-are-targets>

\* Translated by Tom Gagné.