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“If women stop, the world stops”: forging transnational solidarities with the International Women’s Strike

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ABSTRACT

Having roots in women’s struggles in different world regions, the International Women’s Strike (IWS) has, since 2017, generated a global wave of feminist mobilization against attacks on gender equality and sexual rights, neoliberalism’s multiple crises, and authoritarian, fundamentalist, and neo-nationalist politics. This article discusses the IWS from the perspective of transnational solidarities, with a focus on its manifestation in Turkey. First, differentiating between supra-political and left-leaning currents in transnational feminist politics, I outline the guiding principles of the IWS campaign as an acknowledgment of the systemic dynamics of gender oppression, a broad definition of women’s labor, and an intersectional understanding of solidarity. Second, drawing on field-based and digital ethnography, participatory action research, and interviews with activists from the coalition Women Are Strong Together, I discuss how the IWS principles overlapped with political dynamics and conflicts of interest between different women’s groups, hindering the possibility of a women’s strike in Turkey. The article demonstrates the tensions and transformations occurring at the intersection of the supra- and sub-national levels in feminist politics and contributes to the understanding of how different currents in transnational feminism dovetail with different imaginations and practices of solidarity.

öz

Dünyanın farklı yerlerindeki kadın hareketlerinin etkileşiminden doğan Uluslararası Kadın Grevi (UKG), 2017 yılından beri toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği ve cinsel haklara yönelik saldırılara, neoliberalizmin çoklu krizine ve otoriter, köktenci ve milliyetçi politikalara karşı küresel düzeyde bir feminizm dalgası üretti. Bu makale UKG’yi uluslararası dayanışmalar perspektifinden ele alıyor ve Türkiye’deki tezahürüne odaklanıyor. İlkın, uluslararası feminist politikada siyaset-üstü ve sol-tandanslı iki ana akımı ayrıştırıp, UKG kampanyasının üç temel ilkesini, toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı ezilmenin sistemik dinamiklerinin tanınması, kadın emeğinin geniş bir biçimde tanımlanması ve kişiselsel bir

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dayanışma anlayışı olarak sıralayacağım. Ardından dijital etnografi, etnografik alan ve katılımcı eylem araştırması ve Kadınlar Birlikte Güçlü koalisyon grubunun üyeleriyle yaptığım görüşmelerden yola çıkarak, UKG'nin temel prensiplerinin Türkiye'de bir kadın grevi örgütlenmesinin önüne geçen, farklı kadın grupları arasındaki siyasi dinamikler ve çıkar çatışmalarıyla ne şekilde örtüştüğünü tartışacağım. Bu katkı, feminist politikada ulusaltı ve ulusüstü düzeylerin kesişiminde ne gibi gerilimler ve dönüşümlerin oluştuğunu ve uluslararası feminizmin farklı akımlarının ne tür farklı dayanışma tahayyüllerine ve pratiklerine tekabül ettiğini ortaya koyuyor.

KEYWORDS International Women's Strike; intersectional solidarity; transnational feminism; Turkey; Women Are Strong Together

ANAHTAR KELİMELE Uluslararası Kadın Grevi; kesişimsel dayanışma; uluslararası feminizm; Türkiye; Kadınlar Birlikte Güçlü

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Introduction

At the current stage of patriarchal capitalism, transnational solidarities appear at the top of the feminist agenda. Across the Global North and Global South, women mobilize in the face of attacks on gender equality and sexual rights, neoliberalism's multiple crises, environmental destruction, global migration flows, and the rise of authoritarian, fundamentalist, and neo-nationalist politics. Organized from below without the mediation of (international) non-governmental organizations ((I)NGOs), state structures, or global governance institutions, campaigns such as #MeToo, Ni Una Menos, and Las Tesis have popularized transnational feminism in an unprecedented way while simultaneously triggering many tensions as well as transformations in activist communities (Alcalde and Villa 2022; Littler and Rottenberg 2021). This article focuses on one such campaign, the International Women's Strike (IWS), and its manifestation in Turkey to demonstrate the entanglement of transnational processes and local dynamics in feminist politics.

Initiated by women from different parts of the world, including Poland, Argentina, and the United States (US), the IWS was launched in March 2017 in more than 40 countries. Since then, it has involved a range of protest actions, from mass labor stoppages to the issuing of manifestos and solidarity statements (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser 2019; Gago 2020; Halberstam and Nyong'o 2018; Littler and Rottenberg 2021; McGlazer 2018). In 2017 and 2018, activists in Turkey from the coalition group Women Are Strong Together (Kadınlar Birlikte Güçlü, KBG) organized social media events and street actions, adding their voice to the IWS and emphasizing transnational solidarities and an intersectional take on feminist politics. In 2019, debates on organizing a women's strike led to the formation of the Women* Strike! Initiative (Kadınlar*

Greve! İnsiyatifi, KGI). However, the great enthusiasm around the IWS was tempered by the marginalized status of feminist and labor movements and the conflicting preferences and demands of different groups of women.

Through a discussion of the Turkish experience, I demonstrate the tensions and transformations happening at the intersection of the supra- and sub-national levels in feminist politics. My aim is to contribute to a growing body of research that is informed by normative theorizations of transnational feminism and concerned with concrete solidarity practices and how they reproduce or subvert imperialist, nationalist, and assimilationist projects (Anderl 2020; Çağatay, Liinson, and Sasunkevich 2022; de Jong 2017; Dufour, Masson, and Caouette 2010; Littler and Rottenberg 2021; Martinsson and Mulinari 2018; Roy 2016; Salem 2017; Wiedlack, Shoshanova, and Godovannaya 2019). I do this by exploring how different currents in transnational feminism dovetail with different imaginations and practices of solidarity.

The article has four sections. In the first, I draw on critical reflections that differentiate between *normative* and *descriptive* meanings of the term “transnational feminism” (Conway 2017; Maiguashca 2016; Mendoza 2002; Patil 2011). Building on this differentiation, I then identify two currents in transnational feminist politics – *supra-political* and *left leaning* – and situate the IWS in the latter. In the second section, I present the Turkish research context and set out my methodology. The third section focuses on how the IWS redefines the notion of a strike from a feminist perspective and introduces its three guiding principles – namely, (1) an acknowledgment of the systemic dynamics of oppression that lead to the deterioration of women’s lives globally, (2) a broad definition of labor that highlights the value of women’s work in all spheres of life, and (3) an intersectional understanding of solidarity. Finally, I turn to the (im)possibilities and dilemmas of organizing a strike in Turkey and how transnational influence and exchange can challenge and transform the conditions of feminist mobilization in local contexts. The last two sections draw on a field-based and online ethnography of feminist initiatives, websites, and email groups in Turkey and globally, through which activists engage in discussions and action around the IWS. In addition, I rely on participatory action research (PAR) and interviews with activists who mobilized for the IWS in Turkey.

Transnational feminisms and solidarities: locating the other current

Increased connectivity and coordinated action between feminists in different parts of the world has popularized transnational feminist engagement in various struggles around gender and social justice, including those located in academia. In recent years, the term “transnational feminism” has appeared on the agendas and in the discourses of local activists and a myriad of academic syllabi, seminars, conferences, and publications. In most of these

instances, transnational feminism is celebrated as a perspective and practice that attends to the multiple systems of oppression shaping gender struggles today, enabling the possibility of building “solidarity across differences” (Mohanty 2003, 239). Without critical reflection on what the term implies, however, transnational feminism faces the risk of being depoliticized and becoming a mere buzzword.

Drawing on her long-term research on the World March of Women, Conway (2017, 205) identifies a conceptual divide in the scholarship between transnational feminism understood, on the one hand, as “a normative discourse involving a particular analytic and methodological approach in feminist knowledge production and, on the other, as an empirical referent to feminist cross-border organising.” Similar ambiguities between theorizations and practices of transnational feminism have been noted by other researchers. Mendoza (2002), for example, questions the gap between transnational feminist theories committed to postcolonial, intersectional, and transversal politics and the concrete outcomes of transnational feminist practices. Drawing attention to the ambiguity in normative understandings of transnational feminism, Maignashca (2016) argues for using it as a descriptive term for empirical studies on cross-border feminist cooperation. Yet, focusing on transnational feminism in sociology, Patil (2011, 540) notes that the multiplicity and complexity of the subject have often gone unacknowledged even in empirical research, “contributing to a sometimes confusing conversation where assumptions about key concepts, causality, and processes remain unclear.”

Following the lead of scholars who differentiate between normative and descriptive meanings of “transnational feminism,” in this article, I am interested in the relationship between different currents in transnational feminist politics and the imaginations and practices of solidarity that they animate. As a *normative* term, transnational feminism emerged from the 1970s onwards as a challenge to ideas around “global sisterhood” (Morgan 1984) based on undifferentiated understandings of women’s issues and demands. Foregrounding women’s disparate interests based on racial, class, ethnic, and geographic differences, Black, postcolonial, and left feminists documented how the assumption of women’s shared oppression reproduced existing global and social inequalities, arguing that women did not need to eradicate differences to build solidarity against oppression (Crenshaw 1991; Davis 1983; hooks 2015; Lugones 2003; Mohanty 1984, 2003). This vision of solidarity across difference emphasized the need to draw on political and historical analysis to move beyond identity politics and develop a universal understanding of solidarity (Dean 1996; Mohanty 2003).

In the 1990s and 2000s, normative theorizations of transnational feminism tackled the United Nations (UN)-led global “gender equality regime” (Kardam 2005, 16) and the shortcomings of universalistic gender-only agendas promoted by (I)NGOs across the Global North and Global South. Arguing that

the exclusion of working-class, rural, and minority women from transnational alliances perpetuated capitalism, imperialism, and unequal relations of power, these contributions pointed to the “complicities between liberal cosmopolitan articulations of solidarity and the global structures of domination they claim to resist” (Dhawan 2013, 144; see also Alexander and Mohanty 1997; Spivak 1996; Wilson 2015).

Yet, as Conway (2017) rightly points out, the empirical scholarship on transnational feminist politics that uses transnational feminism as a *descriptive* term does not necessarily draw on these normative theorizations of solidarity. In the very rich, diverse, and interdisciplinary literature on transnational feminist politics, researchers who study transnational feminist networks (TFNs) have mostly focused on the practical dilemmas that activists face as they engage with states, global governance institutions, and processes of NGOization. This has come at the expense of downplaying the power differential and conflict among feminisms arising from class divisions and postcolonial and neocolonial realities (Antrobus 2004; Basu 1995; Ferree and Tripp 2006; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Moghadam 2005; Thayer 2009; Walsh 2016). For example, Moghadam (2005, 9) argues that from the 1990s onwards, TFNs “bridged the North–South divide among women activists and transcended the earlier political and ideological differences through the adoption of a broader feminist agenda” that comprised gender equality and sexual rights in the context of neoliberalism and globalization.

At the same time, there is a growing body of research that is informed by normative theorizations and concerned with concrete solidarity practices with an emphasis on the ways in which they reproduce or subvert imperialist, nationalist, and assimilationist projects and inequalities at different levels to provide situated, relational, and historically based accounts of feminist politics (Anderl 2020; Çağatay, Liinason, and Sasunkevich 2022; Dufour, Masson, and Caouette 2010; de Jong 2017; Littler and Rottenberg 2021; Martinsson and Mulinari 2018; Roy 2016; Salem 2017; Wiedlack, Shoshanova, and Godovannaya 2019). Similarly rich and interdisciplinary, this body of research pays closer attention to the “daily activist work” (Dufour, Masson, and Caouette 2010, 9) involved in solidarity building and the dynamics that underlie contention and conflict among activists, such as class inequalities and economic barriers, cultural and political diversity, and physical distance. In the fields of gender and politics, development studies, and political sociology, new conceptualizations of solidarity as hands-on (Rai 2018), care-full (Emejulu 2018), active (Einwohner et al. 2019), and intersectional (Tormos 2017) have emerged based on activists’ everyday efforts to confront power and dismantle privilege. Similarly, historical and ethnographic accounts of solidarity practices draw attention to the role of failure, mistakes, conflict, disappointment, and frustration as indispensable to building solidarity across difference (Salem 2017; Wiedlack, Shoshanova, and Godovannaya 2019).

Inspired by and aiming to contribute to this emerging body of research, I believe that it is necessary to distinguish between two main currents within transnational feminist politics that are identified but not systematically conceptualized in the scholarship despite the acknowledgment of the complex terrain of transnational feminism that simultaneously includes TFNs, (I)NGOs, social and grassroots movements, and individual activists. The “messy mix of social forces” (Maignashca 2016, 111) involved in this terrain can be broadly categorized into *supra-political* and *left-leaning* currents, which Phillips and Cole (2009, 187) call “UN orbit feminism” and “another world feminism,” respectively.¹ These two currents are by no means mutually exclusive, but while the organizational forms (such as TFNs), political strategies (such as campaigns), and even agendas (such as neoliberalism) of these currents might overlap, the actors participating in them and their solidarity-building efforts can be profoundly different.

The first current is largely located at the nexus between the state, civil society, and global governance institutions, where feminists address and pressure intergovernmental bodies such as the UN and the European Union (EU) to introduce mechanisms that promote gender equality and sexual rights (Antrobus 2004; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Meyer and Prügl 1999; Moghadam 2005). Equipped with a knowledge of legal processes and the “language of rights” (Molyneux and Razavi 2002, 12), the actors in this current are mostly urban, professional, highly educated women belonging to the globalized middle classes (Polson 2011). Regardless of their political orientations, their strategy is to downplay the otherwise irreconcilable differences between different groups of women to form a unified, supra-political front in gender politics, except for the Global North–Global South divide, which is acknowledged from a developmental perspective.

Receiving relatively little attention in feminist scholarship, the second current of transnational feminism is less interested in policymaking and lobbying and has as its primary concern grassroots activism, mass mobilization, and social change from below. Conway’s research on the World March of Women – an initiative that has brought together several thousands of women’s organizations from all around the world for over two decades – provides an outstanding example of this “other” current in transnational feminism that is “grounded in the organisations and lived realities of poor, rural and working-class women” (Conway 2017, 214). Women participating in the initiative are critical of the first current’s preference for gender-first or gender-only agendas, institutional orientation toward global governance, and privileging the agency of expert women (Conway 2017). Alliances in the second current are formed between feminists, women’s movements, and a variety of social justice struggles as a strategic decision by feminists – not to be confused with the cooptation or abeyance of feminism (Phillips and Cole 2009, 188; see also Eschle and Maignashca

2010). Genealogically speaking, it is possible to trace the roots of this current of women's involvement to communist, anti-imperialist, and decolonial struggles (de Haan 2010; Jayawardena 1986).

Today, whereas the first current is commonly understood as part of the transnational public sphere (Moghadam 2005), the second belongs to the transnational counter-public sphere (Dhawan 2013). According to world-systems researchers, developments in the last decades such as declining US hegemony, the end of the Cold War, and changes in inter-state institutions have expanded the scope and reach of counter-hegemonic and anti-systemic struggles that have "limited and strategic engagement with the inter-state system" (Smith et al. 2018, 372). As the regulative power of the UN-led global gender-equality regime declines in the context of neoliberalism's crises, anti-gender mobilizations, and the triumph of authoritarian, fundamentalist, and neo-nationalist politics, the center of balance in transnational feminist politics is shifting from the first to the second current. What are the implications of this shift in terms of popular imaginations and practices of solidarity? In the following sections, I refer back to this question as I focus on the characteristics of the IWS and its local manifestation in Turkey.

Research context and methodology

This article is an outcome of my ongoing research on the changing forms, agendas, and strategies of gender equality struggles in Turkey from historical and transnational perspectives. In power since 2002, the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) first combined significant improvements in gender equality legislation with neoliberalization of the economy, which deepened class divisions among women (Alnıaçık et al. 2017). In the 2010s, gender equality ceased to inform policymaking and was replaced with the notion of gender justice and the attribution of complementary natures to men and women as ordained by God (Akkan 2018; Kandiyoti 2016). Feminist and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex (LGBTI+) activists were labeled as immoral and non-national, excluded from decision-making processes, and marginalized in the field of politics. In recent years, increased state, police, and organized group violence toward feminist and LGBTI+ activists has been coupled with popular anti-gender mobilizations, culminating in 2021 in Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention (Özkazanç 2020). At the same time, the 2010s saw a greater expansion of feminist mobilization than ever before. Radicalized by the prevalence of gender-based violence and the brutal murders of women, as well as the AKP's attacks on gender equality and sexual rights, many women, especially from the younger generation, took up gender politics, including in the realm of counter-hegemonic and anti-systemic struggles. As feminism became "side-streamed" (Alvarez 2014, 289) into various struggles for social justice, its

agendas, organizational forms, and political strategies multiplied (Çağatay, Liinason, and Sasunkevich 2022).

To trace these developments, I have been following the coalition group KBG since its launch in Istanbul in 2017. This group brought together activists with diverse “political belongings” (Yuval-Davis 2011, 12) to build solidarity and address gender-based violence, the increasing weight of institutionalized Sunni Islam in shaping gender relations, heterosexism, neoliberalism, and Turkish nationalism. Women belonging to feminist, left-socialist, and pro-Kurdish movements were the most active core members of KBG. Yet, through its numerous online and offline gatherings, protests, and campaigns, KBG was also a broad network for women in anarchist, Alevi, Muslim feminist, LB+ and trans, social democratic, and left Kemalist movements, as well as various kinds of organizations such as local women’s platforms, women’s shelters, NGOs, labor unions, and political parties. The network comprised women of different ages and from different class and educational backgrounds. In the 2018–2019 period, the slogan “Women Are Strong Together” became popular nationwide and was widely used in feminist and queer struggles in Turkey as KBG’s organizational structure spread to several other cities in the country.

Established with explicit reference to current global feminist mobilization, KBG offered a notable example of how transnational solidarities influence, challenge, and transform local politics through its active engagement with campaigns such as #MeToo, Ni Una Menos, and Las Tesis, alongside the IWS. Until the 2010s, transnational alliances were formed predominantly through (I)NGO women who had the linguistic skills and access to capital to travel abroad and “represent” Turkey before the rest of the world. Located in the supra-political current of transnational feminist politics, these alliances often offered unidirectional forms of solidarity where “more liberated” Western feminists supported their Turkish counterparts in strengthening their hand vis-à-vis the state and political institutions. Feminists who had an affinity with the left-leaning current also participated in transnational alliances. For instance, the journal *Pazartesi* promoted the Global Women’s Strike organized in 2000 by Salma James, calling for women in Turkey to join the strike. In 2015, the World March of Women took place in Nusaybin, Mardin, and Diyarbakır, Kurdish-majority towns in southeast Turkey. Yet, on the whole, with the exception of Kurdish women, left-leaning feminists’ engagements remained sporadic, unstructured, and based on individual rather than institutional initiative.

In the 2010s, social media and digital technologies made it much easier for feminists to follow, connect, and associate with supra- and sub-national struggles. Within KBG and its constituent organizations, activists translated popular slogans such as “Ni Una Menos” into Turkish (“Bir Kişi Daha Eksilmeyeceğiz”), established ties with feminists in Poland, Spain, Argentina,

Chile, and Switzerland, and organized solidarity campaigns with the White Wednesdays movement in Iran and Kurdish women who took part in the Rojava revolution. In return, feminist mobilizations in Turkey were regularly covered by foreign media outlets and followed on social media by feminists elsewhere. This gave KBG activists a real sense of participating in transnational feminist politics. They often drew legitimacy from belonging to a global movement when making claims in their local context.

I closely observed these processes as I conducted PAR, field and digital ethnography, and interviews with activists associated with KBG. Between 2017 and 2019, the IWS action was organized by individuals and organizations who were part of KBG. In 2020, a small group within KBG organized the IWS action separately as the KGİ. Between October 2018 and March 2020, I co-organized and participated in most of the IWS action in KBG and the KGİ. In 2020–2021, I attended online transnational gatherings that sought coordinated action around the IWS, within and across different continents. The material that I analyze in this article comes from websites and email groups where activists engaged in discussions and action around the IWS in Turkish, English, and Spanish. I also draw on interviews conducted in Istanbul, Ankara, Diyarbakır (Amed), Izmir, Bodrum, Mersin, Adana, and Antakya. Embracing feminist PAR, in these interviews, I discussed with fellow activists the (im)possibilities of organizing a women's strike in Turkey as well as the findings of my research (Mojab 2009; Reid and Gillberg 2014). Despite extensive documentation of cross-border solidarity practices at multiple levels, across both the Global North and Global South and urban, rural, and provincial areas (Dufour, Masson, and Caouette 2010; Lock Swarr and Nagar 2010; Roy 2016), much research on transnational feminist politics focuses on international collaboration and the impact of the global on the national (Alcalde and Villa 2022; Basu 1995; Ferree and Tripp 2006; Kaplan, Alarcon, and Moallem 1999; Moghadam 2005). By contrast, in this article, I rely on methodological transnationalism to capture influence, exchange, and coordinated action at local, national, regional, and global levels simultaneously (Khagram and Levitt 2008). In this way, I demonstrate the tensions and transformations happening at the intersection of the supra- and sub-national levels in feminist politics and how "those who do not or cannot cross borders, may nonetheless participate in global politics" (Sassen 2010, 2).

Redefining the strike: IWS guiding principles

Several events built up to the IWS. On October 3, 2016, Polish women went on a one-day strike (Czarny Protest) against further restrictions on the right to abortion. Drawing inspiration from this event, the Argentinian feminist group Ni Una Menos organized a strike against femicide on October 19, 2016. The slogan "Ni Una Menos" was then adopted by thousands who

organized similar mass protests against gender-based violence in many Latin American, Caribbean, and South European countries. Later that month, Polish women's effort to connect "with movements from other countries to organize a joint action in the future" resulted in a call for an international strike by women from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Mexico, Peru, Poland, Russia, and South Korea (*Dziewuchy Berlin* nd). In January 2017, the Women's March in Washington against Donald Trump's sexist, racist, anti-immigrant politics involved millions of women in the US and worldwide. Contact between IWS and Women's March organizers led to a call for a strike in the US "for a feminism for the 99%" (Davis et al. 2017).

The IWS grew out of these various efforts and took place on March 8, 2017, in more than 40 countries, generating a global wave of feminist mobilization against all forms of gender-based violence and discrimination perpetuated by neoliberalism and the rise of authoritarian, fundamentalist, and neo-nationalist politics. Since then, women from an increasing number of countries have organized events around the IWS in various ways, as IWS events have become more singular and less coordinated, signaling the "localization of the global" (Basu 2000). In 2019, alongside general strikes held by major unions in Argentina, Italy, and Spain, unions in France, Belgium, and Greece participated in the March 8 strike for the first time. Swiss women have, since 2019, gone on strike on June 14. In other countries, specific groups of workers have gone on strike, such as sex workers in Britain or hotel housekeepers in Iceland (Featherstone 2019). In 2020, feminist organizations and grassroots activists in the Asia Pacific region initiated the Women's Global Strike campaign, now joined by individuals and organizations across continents (WGS nd). Persisting through the COVID-19 pandemic, the IWS continues "accumulating forces, combining temporalities, and building a program" (Cavallero and Gago 2020).

From a historical perspective, the IWS builds on the many strikes that women have organized in different forms and following diverse agendas. The 1961 Women's Strike for Peace mobilized 50,000 women in the US for a one-day strike against nuclear weapons. Another 50,000 women marched in 1970 at the Women's Strike for Equality in New York, demanding universal access to abortion, free childcare, and equal opportunity in the workplace. Sex strikes took place in Colombia (1997), Liberia (2003), Kenya (2009), the Philippines (2011), and Togo (2012) against armed and gang violence and corruption. In 1975, 90 percent of women demanded full equality on Iceland's Women's Day Off (*Kvennafrídagurinn*); their slogan, "When Women Stop, Everything Stops," reemerged in 2016 at the Czarny Protest, organized by Polish women. In the German-speaking world, half a million women workers went on a strike for equal wages in Switzerland in 1991. Another million were on strike in Germany on March 8, 1994. Since 1972, the international Wages for Housework campaign has called for a general strike and

politicized women's unpaid domestic labor across Italy and the US (Bracke 2013). In 2000, Salma James, a co-founder of the Wages for Housework campaign, initiated the Global Women's Strike campaign for the recognition and remuneration of all forms of care work performed by women. Since the 2000s, the *Precarias a la Deriva* (Precarious Women Adrift) collective in Spain has articulated the idea of a strike in relation to precarity and care work.² To these, one must add the myriad strikes, sit-ins, go-slows, boycotts, and demonstrations performed by women workers against oppressive labor and gender relations in the workplace.

The novelty of the IWS comes from its attempt to synchronize different forms of strikes globally by redefining the strike as a feminist action. Yet, it does so in a bottom-up fashion, via online and offline local, (trans)national, and regional assemblies instead of a central coordination committee. Feminists are major constituents of the strike in many contexts but not necessarily its vanguard; many IWS organizers are feminist and non-feminist women organized in mixed-gender political parties, labor unions, and initiatives with anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and green agendas. Like the World March of Women, the IWS acknowledges "the diversity of women's priorities, discourses, and modes of activism – including their varied positionalities with respect to 'feminism'" (Conway 2017, 214). In so doing, it reflects the shift that Conway (2018) identifies in transnational feminist politics from intramovement to inter-movement alliances and sits squarely in the left-leaning current of transnational feminism. An overall examination of strike calls and solidarity statements points to three principles that guide the campaign despite context- and location-based differences: (1) an acknowledgment of the systemic dynamics of oppression that lead to the deterioration of women's lives globally, (2) a broad definition of labor that highlights the value of women's work in all spheres of life, and (3) an intersectional understanding of solidarity.³ A brief sketch of each principle follows.

First, the IWS recognizes the systemic dynamics and contradictions of twenty-first-century patriarchal capitalism. Strike calls and solidarity statements problematize institutional and social processes of gender oppression, (cis-) heterosexism, racism, ableism, imperialism, neoliberalism, and extractivism that shape – and degrade – women's lives. Mass mobilizations of women across the Global North and Global South are understood as responses to violence against women and marginalized populations, austerity and financial debt, the destruction of the environment, and women's mounting responsibility in social reproduction (Ambrosch, Grammel, and Steiner 2019). Emphasizing the similarity of social antagonisms and power dynamics in diverse locales, the IWS constructs women as a collective political subject that cuts across borders. The composition of this collective subject is spelled out differently in each context, highlighting, for example, Indigenous women, queer women, or sex workers, but the idea is to create the broadest

possible platform for “all women,” however defined, to express their issues and demands.

From an anti-systemic point of view, the IWS is also critical of (I)NGO feminists who uncritically align themselves with global governance agendas. It denounces “hegemonic,” “lean-in,” “glass-ceiling,” “neoliberal,” and “market” feminisms for enabling the liberation of the few at the expense of the majority. By contrast, organizers associate themselves with popular feminisms (in Latin America; see Gago 2020) or cast themselves simply as “ordinary women” (in Poland; see Ramme and Snochowska-Gonzalez 2020). At the same time, theoretical formulations of the systemic dynamics of oppression vary for different groups and in different locales. The two prevailing approaches are (1) social reproduction feminism that develops a unitary theory where gender, sexual, and racial oppression operate in the last instance in the service of class exploitation (see for example Arruzza 2016; Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser 2019; Bhattacharya 2017), and (2) the perspective of multiple, interlocking systems of inequality that differentiate between capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism/racism and recognize their historically specific articulations (see for example Collins 1998; Gago 2020; Walby 2009). Though less prominent, socialist feminist perspectives that take gender and class as two systems of exploitation on equal footing are also present in these formulations (see for example Acar-Savran 2020; Delphy 2016; Hartmann 1979).

The second principle guiding the IWS is a broad definition of labor that includes all forms of women’s work, paid and unpaid, based on an analysis of how gendered labor structures all spheres of life and not just the labor market. The concept of work has to be reconfigured because “the prevailing one is clearly insufficient to encompass women’s experience” (Peniche 2019, 9). Strike texts refer to the gender pay gap, low-paid and insecure jobs for women, and the feminization of poverty, as well as devalued and invisible domestic and care work in its unpaid form, and as performed by migrant and racialized women in its paid form (EAST 2021). Strike actions address multiple spheres of life, including – as in the case of Spain, Portugal, and a number of states in the US – production, reproduction, consumption, and education. Variations of the slogan “When Women Stop, Everything Stops” (originally used in Iceland in 1975) are widely adopted in each country. According to *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser 2019), which is seen by many as a guidebook for left feminist mobilization, a broadened definition of labor reframes the strike in three ways. The feminist strike goes beyond workplace-related actions such as boycott, work stoppage, and demonstrations; it addresses both the so-called private issues of housework, care work, sex, and smiles and those of mobbing and sexual harassment in the workplace (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser 2019, 6–8).

The different formulations of the systemic dynamics of women's oppression can be identified here. For those who adhere to the social reproduction approach, the purpose of broadening the definition of labor is "a theoretical restatement of the working class as a revolutionary subject" through the inclusion of women while prioritizing the workplace as the locus of struggle (Varela 2019, 399). The multiple-systems-of-inequality view differs from social reproduction feminism in that it enables, to quote Verónica Gago from *Ni Una Menos* in Argentina,

a mapping of the heterogeneity of labour in a feminist register, valuing and making visible precarious, informal, domestic, and migrant forms of work *not as supplementary or as subsidiary to waged labour*, but as fundamental to current forms of exploitation and value extraction. (Gago 2018, 663, emphasis added)

Both social reproduction feminism and the multiple-systems-of inequality approach, however, omit from their theorizations "the collective agency of men in establishing and reproducing the system of gender-based exploitation from which they benefit" (Kocabicak 2022, 813). Writing from a dual-systems perspective, Acar-Savran (2020) criticizes this omission for directing attention away from the family and making patriarchal relations invisible. She argues that, in fact, "feminist strikes to a large extent go beyond the framework of social reproduction feminism in that they target, alongside capitalism, the specific dynamics of patriarchy and practices of men" (Acar-Savran 2020).

Finally, the third guiding principle is implicated in the IWS's founding slogan, "Solidarity Is Our Weapon!" (Strajk Kobiet 2016). Commonly used by counter-hegemonic and anti-systemic struggles around the world, this slogan takes on new meaning with the highlighting of its intersectional quality. Intersectional solidarity is defined as "an ongoing process of creating ties and coalitions across social group differences by negotiating power asymmetries" (Tormos 2017, 712). Mirroring this definition, IWS texts emphasize the need for understanding physical and imagined borders between women as manifestations of the entanglement of gender with sexual discrimination, racism, classism, ableism, colonialism, and imperialism.

From a transnational perspective, there are at least three ways in which intersectional solidarity is formulated by IWS activists: (1) in terms of a coalition of women with different political belongings within national contexts; (2) in terms of linking local struggles to those at the global level by pointing out the similarities between different locales; and (3) in terms of linking sub-national struggles to each other by redefining the strike so as to include those actions that do not neatly fit in the contours of a labor strike.

For example, the Women's Strike Assembly in the United Kingdom (UK) define their action as a strike "for solidarity between women – women of

colour, indigenous, working class, disabled, migrant, Muslim, lesbian, queer and trans women ... *against a system of power that keep us isolated and divided from one another*" (UK WSA nd, emphasis added). Activists in Argentina refer to housewives, trade unionists, Indigenous women, Black and African women, homeless girls, jailed women, and upper-class women who, with their different, historically specific demands, come together "to break down patriarchy from below" (NUM 2019). Similarly, detailing the different ways in which women and queer people are discriminated against, oppressed, and exploited in Germany, Frauen*streik organizers declare that they too would like to join the movement that is "spreading across the world, from Poland to Argentina, from New York to Hong Kong, from Spain to Nigeria to Australia" (Frauen*streik 2019). The #OneFallsWeAllFall manifesto, issued by a collective of feminist groups in Romania against gender-based violence and femicide, declares affinity with

the broader intersectional feminist movement Ni Una Menos, and with the other similar initiatives in Europe, Latin America, the US and beyond, who are fighting for women's rights regardless of color, ethnicity, nationality or sexual orientation. (CUCT 2019)

"The question of organization," argue activists from Non Una Di Meno in Italy,

cannot be solved by simply networking different national realities. Even at times when local uprisings do not directly communicate with other organizations, ... every single feminist strike is part of a transnational movement against structures of oppression and exploitation that are also increasingly transnational. (NUDM 2019)

This perspective defines the feminist strike as a transnational movement where seemingly unrelated struggles and demands are linked to each other. It thus enables dialogue and solidarity between locations where mass strikes are possible thanks to their endorsement by labor unions (such as Spain) and those contexts where such strikes are impossible because women workers are unorganized, women's labor activism is marginalized, or anti-strike laws prevail. Activists in Turkey framed their participation in the IWS through this perspective. The discrepancy between the perspectives on women's oppression observed in the previous two guiding principles did not necessarily feature in activists' concrete formulations of intersectional solidarity. Yet, as the account below shows, activists engaged in many tough, and sometimes inconclusive, conversations when developing these formulations.

(Im)possibilities of a feminist strike: tensions and transformations in Turkey

Great enthusiasm around the IWS in Turkey found expression in the many texts written in and translated into Turkish, interviews with strike organizers

from different countries, visual material circulating on social media, and public and private meetings where activists discussed the possibilities of organizing a strike. Yet, this enthusiasm was tempered by obstacles pertaining to the marginalized status of feminist and labor movements and the conflicting preferences and demands of different groups of women. Notwithstanding the strong and highly visible feminist mobilization in Turkey, the type of mobilization that IWS activists imagined cultivating did not match the political conditions in which they operated.

Between 2017 and 2019, IWS events were organized by KBG; the 2017 IWS action was the newly founded KBG's first nationwide event. KBG adopted four ways of "adding voice" to the IWS: (1) using the IWS logo in social media profiles, (2) wearing a black and purple ribbon on March 8, (3) saluting the IWS in March 8 events and demonstrations, and (4) circulating IWS-oriented visual material on social media. In response to KBG's call, groups of activists in more than 40 locations in Turkey organized street action and social media events where they read KBG's solidarity statement declaring affinity with the IWS, whose notion of solidarity served as "an anchor in an increasingly polarizing world" (KBG 2017). After 2017, several organizations and individuals participating in KBG continued to entertain the idea of organizing a mass women's strike in Turkey, often by using social media and digital outlets to circulate IWS calls, news, photographs, and videos from around the world, as well as translated pieces about women's strikes from historical and global perspectives. Most of the organizations were linked to political parties and other mixed-gender organizations and active on a national scale. Women from these organizations participated in "women's platforms" in various cities in Turkey; these are networks similar to KBG that sought solidarity and joint strategizing with women belonging to different struggles. By 2018, as the slogan "Women Are Strong Together" gained nationwide popularity, some of these women's platforms considered the possibility of renaming themselves KBG, extending the Istanbul-based coalition into a national one. Enthused by this possibility, KBG activists in Istanbul set out to organize a nationwide women's gathering.

Between January 5 and 6, 2019, the Turkey Women's Gathering in Istanbul brought together nearly 1,000 women from all seven regions of Turkey. In terms of the diversity of attendees, this was a historic event for the left-leaning current in feminism. During the plenary, organizers of the gathering highlighted the struggles

from Argentina to Iran, Iceland to the US, and Poland to Spain, where women halted life for their freedom, bodily autonomy, labor rights, and identities ... [which proved that] through the strength we draw from solidarity, we can move mountains. (field notes, January 5, 2019)

During the plenary, activists representing women's platforms in other cities also expressed their interest in organizing a women's strike to address the

issues of gender-based violence, poverty, war, and environmental destruction. However, neither during the gathering nor in the follow-up meetings was KBG able to reach a consensus on how to realize this vision.

On March 8, 2019, KBG again framed its engagement with the IWS as “adding voice,” though this time activists, in addition to issuing a solidarity statement, disseminated flyers, banners, and stickers in several cities and on social media with the slogan “When Women Stop, the World Stops.” In May 2019, those who organized the IWS action formed a separate “strike commission” under KBG, which, after several meetings, evolved into the KGİ. Launched in October 2019 by activists in KBG’s strike commission, the KGİ spent some months discussing how to reach out to potential participants in the strike (such as labor unions, political parties, and universities, alongside women’s organizations), establishing local strike commissions around the country and ties with IWS organizers abroad. In 2020–2021, KGİ members were indeed in touch with IWS activists in other countries, but with the COVID-19 pandemic and Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, they failed to maintain the women’s strike as a priority on their agenda.

My analysis is that the three principles that guide the IWS overlapped with political dynamics and conflicts of interest between different women’s groups that hindered the possibility of a mass women’s strike in Turkey. In the remainder of this section, I elaborate on these dynamics and conflicts and speculate on the transformations that they generated for local feminist politics and transnational solidarities.

Tensions around broadening the definition of labor

In response to the IWS, four positions crystallized in the Turkish context: (1) viewing the strike events as “women’s struggles in realms where they run up against men” and thus as expanding the struggle against patriarchy (Barin 2018); (2) using the strike as an opportunity to link women’s struggles in different locales within one framework; (3) instrumentalizing the IWS to recruit more women for socialist and labor struggles (Kolgazi 2019); and (4) rejecting the idea of a women’s strike as detaching an important working-class tool from its context by diluting its meaning, if not emptying it of its meaning altogether (Alikoç and Karaca 2019).

The considerable differences between these positions were due to the different weight that activists attributed to patriarchy vis-à-vis capitalism, resulting in different visions of how one should address patriarchal capitalism. The first three positions correlate with the perspectives of dual systems of oppression, multiple systems of oppression, and social reproduction feminism, respectively. It is not possible to neatly categorize women participating in the IWS discussions into these four positions, but, broadly speaking,

Positions 1 and 2 included women who identified as feminists, including socialist and Kurdish feminists. They were organized in independent, women-only groups and in autonomous women's structures with organic ties to mixed-gender political parties, formations, and labor unions. Women who occupied Positions 3 and 4 were left socialists who did not identify as feminists. They were mostly organized in semi-autonomous women's structures with organic ties to mixed-gender political parties, formations, and labor unions. Women who had ties with mixed-gender organizations were influenced by the "Feminism for the 99%" grassroots movement emerging in the US context and Latin American feminisms that politicized the manifestation of sexual, political, and economic violence on women's bodies. Feminists in independent, women-only groups criticized the "Feminism for the 99%" approach for omitting the uniqueness of male violence, reducing women to their worker identity (as in the slogan "#TrabajadorasSomos-Todas"), and designating liberal feminism as the main enemy. Instead, they celebrated the IWS for being open to articulating, for the first time, women's concrete realities in a way that revealed the mediation of patriarchy by racism, capitalism, institutions, and the state and allowed women to bridge their experiences (Acar-Savran 2019).

At the Turkey Women's Gathering in 2019, women representing all of these positions were present. Those who supported the idea of a women's strike were aware that women's labor force participation in Turkey hovered around 30 percent, with most women working in part-time, insecure, informal jobs and in non-unionized sectors. Labor unions lacked political leverage and were in any case disinterested in organizing women (Urhan 2014). A strike in the form of a labor stoppage would have negligible impact unless labor was redefined by giving center stage to women's work in all spheres of life. Some women, however, opposed this redefinition. Most of them belonged to the Labor Party (Emek Partisi, EMEP), a Marxist-Leninist organization, and they argued that the working class was politically weak and could not afford to organize a strike. EMEP women were against women's separate organizing, but they took part in women's platforms in various cities, including KBG, as representatives of their party. In relation to the IWS, their view was that feminists were appropriating an important working-class tool for a cause that would have no positive impact on the material conditions of working women. They recognized the value of women's care labor, but argued that a strike was meaningful when organized collectively against an employer but not individually against a male partner. With this objection, EMEP women withdrew first from discussions around the IWS and later from the KBG coalition altogether. In women's platforms in several other cities, their resistance to the IWS's and the KBG's efforts to synchronize local agendas resulted in a loss of enthusiasm for organizing a nationwide women's strike.

Tensions around building intersectional solidarity

In contrast to the supra-political current in transnational feminist politics, where differences between women are minimized to establish “women” as a social group with common interests, the left-leaning current “respects the autonomy of local groups, while negotiating their differences in the construction of a collective identity, a political vision and a capacity to organise and intervene on a global scale” (Conway 2017, 214). KBG was such an example in that it recognized and rested on the autonomy and self-organizing of its constituents – which is why it was called *Women Are Strong Together*. In line with and inspired by the IWS, KBG pursued an inclusive, comprehensive agenda as an expression of intersectional solidarity. The core group of activists, who over time also became friends, collaborated effectively despite many moments of unease arising from conflicting political views.

However, inclusive agendas were easier to maintain than inclusive organizing on the ground. In concrete situations, polarization along the lines of nationalism, ethnicity, and religion obstructed KBG’s work of coalition building across identity and political belongings and hindered cross-class alliances. KBG activists found it difficult to recruit religious women to their movement. Muslim feminists supported KBG’s politics but did not become active members of the coalition. Despite the hard work and logistical support of Kurdish feminists in KBG, many women avoided supporting the criminalized agendas of peace and Kurdish people’s political autonomy. As a result, KBG failed to develop a firm stance against nationalism and racism in relation to Kurds and the war in Syria. The topic of sexuality was formally included in KBG’s agenda, but LGBTI+ issues were often addressed in an “add-and-stir” manner without explicitly addressing cis-heterosexism as immanent to gender-based oppression. Like Muslim feminists, LB+ and trans women supported KBG’s work from a distance.

Differences between women’s problems in urban, rural, and provincial areas were an additional obstacle. Despite persistent efforts to expand the coalition across the country, issues perceived to be significant outside metropolitan areas, such as the problems of seasonal agricultural workers in the south and southeast or struggles against gold mines in the west and hydroelectric dams in the northeast, remained less incorporated into KBG’s politics than urban issues. As Filigrana (2020, 634) puts it in her analysis of the relationship between anti-racist and pro-migrant urban feminists and Moroccan seasonal agricultural workers in Spain, “social stratification in everyday life [was] translated into a lack of political alliances.” All in all, KBG activists admitted that women united more easily around gender-only agendas. It was often a challenge to mobilize all women against neoliberalism, racism, nationalism, or environmental destruction. Many activists expressed the difficulty that they experienced, for example, in linking issues of violence

and body politics to labor issues in their efforts to redefine the strike in the Turkish context. In practice, intersectional solidarity remained as more “an affirmation of diversity than as a critical analytic” (Conway 2017, 214).

Transformations in local feminist politics

Conflicts and confrontations between KBG activists about whether and how to organize a women’s strike opened up many questions on the status of feminism in Turkey. Following the Turkey Women’s Gathering in 2019, EMEP women, in their media engagement, targeted the idea of solidarity across differences as a “majoritarian imposition” by feminists and, in reality, a failure to accommodate differences in views (Ekmekeci ve Gül 2019). Feminism appeared to create an “unbridgeable gap” (Hemmings 2012, 153) in the women’s movement. However, at the same time, as Salem (2017, 259) argues, self-reflexivity and productive use of difference become a possibility exactly “when mistakes are made, limits are pushed, lines are crossed, and feelings are hurt.”

When the KGI was born out of KBG later that year, the activists who formed the initiative made a firm decision not to let the feminism question be divisive. In all of its internal and public correspondence, the KGI used the term “women’s strike/feminist strike,” indicating their recognition of the different ways in which women might approach the idea of a strike. Rather than viewing the strike as an end in itself, the KGI aimed to raise consciousness and demands from below and forge mobilization by discussing the strike. Indeed, for many women who mobilized around the IWS, the most notable contribution of the campaign in the Turkish context could simply be that it opened up the idea of a women’s strike for discussion. This discussion was about understanding what it means for women with diverse realities and experiences to strike and what it takes to build solidarity across irreconcilable differences (Barın 2018). Conflict, frustration, disappointment, and failure were as essential features of this discussion as agreement, affinity, and harmony (Wiedlack, Shoshanova, and Godovannaya 2019). During the transnational IWS gatherings that activists from Turkey organized and/or attended, as well as from the written accounts on IWS mobilization, it became clear that disagreement and tension were integral to building intersectional solidarity toward redefining the strike (see also Conway 2021; Kaufer 2019). This motivated activists in Turkey to talk about their “unbridgeable gaps” in a constructive manner. Moreover, when the parties involved have solidarity across difference as their “normative horizon” (Anderl 2020, 1), moments of failure do not necessarily hinder long-term commitments to coalition building (see also Einwohner et al. 2019). For example, EMEP women worked together with organizations participating in KBG in another coalition recently established to defend the Istanbul Convention, Women’s Platform for Equality (Eşitlik İçin Kadın Platformu, EŞİK).

Ultimately, issues around which activists experience tension are also manifestations of transformation in those areas. Until the 2010s, it was common for feminists to face exclusion and marginalization by many left-socialist movements that saw feminism as a Western import, as a separatist, men-hating movement, or as one that is co-opted by neoliberalism, detached from people's "real" problem (that is, class). In the 2010s, this attitude changed thanks to the increasing number of left-leaning women involved in mixed-gender political parties, formations, and labor unions who simultaneously identified as feminists or simply as socialist feminists. Having access to different sections of society through their organizations in small towns, rural areas, and disadvantaged neighborhoods, these women popularized feminist politics vertically and horizontally, something that feminists in women-only organizations have been unable to do. Sustained collaboration between feminists in women-only and mixed-gender organizations, as well as between feminists and non-feminists, transformed the meaning of feminism for those who perceived it as irrelevant to their local struggles and deconstructed the binary understanding of feminist and counter-hegemonic or anti-systemic politics in Turkey. Transnational solidarities fostered by campaigns such as the IWS were remarkably influential in this process.

Conclusion

In the 2010s, attacks on gender equality and sexual rights, neoliberalism's multiple crises, and authoritarian, fundamentalist, and neo-nationalist politics, together with increased connectivity, influence, and exchange between activists, opened up a new chapter in transnational feminism and solidarities. This article has focused on the IWS as an example of how global campaigns can impact gender equality struggles in local contexts and the painstaking work of building solidarity across difference. Through a discussion of the Turkish experience with the IWS, I have illustrated the tensions and transformations that emerge at the intersection of supra- and sub-national levels in feminist politics and contributed to the understanding of how different currents in transnational feminism dovetail with different imaginations and practices of solidarity. My analysis suggests that more research on the so-far understudied, left-leaning current in transnational feminism has the potential to explore the experiences of coalition building among marginalized groups who set out to address multiple challenges to gender equality without reimposing universalistic gender-only agendas in feminist politics. This would expand feminist knowledge on the ways in which current and historically rooted, concrete solidarity practices can challenge and subvert imperialist, nationalist, and assimilationist projects and global inequalities.

Notes

1. Following DuBois' (1991) definition of left feminism, I understand the left-leaning current in transnational feminism as one that comprises women participating in democratic movements for social change as individuals or in women-only and mixed-gender organizations. Left feminists are one but not the only or main strain in this current.
2. Thank you to Ľubica Kobová for pointing this out.
3. See for example Paro Internacional de Mujeres – Latinoamérica: <https://www.facebook.com/PIMLatam/> (transnational/Latin America); Transform! Europe: <https://www.transform-network.net/> (transnational); Frauen*streik: <https://frauenstreik.org/> (Germany); Transnational Social Strike: <https://www.transnational-strike.info/> (transnational); Women's Strike: <https://womenstrike.org.uk/> (UK); Women's Strike: <https://www.facebook.com/womenstrikeus/> (US); Kadınlar* Greve! İnsiyatifi: <https://www.facebook.com/pg/KadinlarGreve/about/> (Turkey); <https://globalwomenstrike.net/> (transnational); Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt: <https://www.cadtm.org/Morocco?lang=en> (Morocco); Schweizerischer Gewerkschaftsbund (SGB) Frauenkommission: <https://www.14juni.ch/> (Switzerland).

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