



Well-Being of Political Activists and Organizational Empowerment in Turkey



Political Well-Being Working Group
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Contact

+90 546 905 25 19

https://politikadayilikhali.org/tr_tr/

Writer

Ali Yalçın Göymen

Interviewers

Evin Işık, Melis Berk, Nuray Kılıç

Editor

Gülnur Elçik



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We have made a research on the "Well-being of Activists in Turkey" in the scope of our study *Strengthening Political Well-Being in Turkey Through Queer Feminist Perspective*. We have structured our field work with the activists in the scope of our research, dividing it into two spheres. In the first part we made interviews in which we predominantly directed close-ended questions. And in the second part we made semi-structured interviews allowing us to make an in-depth analysis.

We met with 52 activists at ages ranging from 25 to 69. 45 of them defined themselves as woman, 6 as man and 1 as *non-binary*. The time period interviewed activists spent in social struggles ranged between 3 years to 20+ years. The reason causing them to get involved in the struggle they are involved also differs. Gender issues and feminist struggle is predominant among the issues they are involved in their activism.

In the framework of the study, we have used the concept "*iyilik hali*" as equivalent to the *well-being* concept in English in order to express the physical, mental and psychological strength of the activists and we intended to be in a position to look at whole social relations surrounding the activists from the perspective of well-being. In line with this purpose, we evaluated the empowerment of the organizations making social struggles possible and empowerment of the individuals who are active in these organizations in a common perspective of empowerment.

Measuring well-beings, education, health, activities people carried out in order to shape their lives including work, political participation and administration, social ties and relations, the relationship of citizens with the environment and security in both economic and physical terms were regarded as the main indicators of well-being. Besides justice (especially justice in income), the presence of institutions serving common well-being and a dignified life in which citizens are valued and respected were also evaluated among the components of well-being. Large part of the report on the research consists of parts where we evaluate the effects of the political and economic conditions on the activists, personal/organizational empowerment of the activists and the individual or collective solutions to the problems they come up with in relations in organizations. Besides other issues, we have included problems related to moralism and sexism in their specific contexts both

in the part where the political and economic influences are discussed and in the part where the well-being of activists and their inter-organizational relations are discussed.

Despite the negative atmosphere created in Turkey by polarization, we have observed that the activists thought that they were individually producing an effect for the struggle they are involved in. As we have shown in the study *Well-Being of Citizens in Turkey*, although political participation is low in Turkey, the activists have a high level of satisfaction and feeling that "they are making a change" and that "they are strong". The percentage of those among the activists who think that the social movement they are a member of is able to follow a policy which is at least partially influential for finding solutions to political problems in Turkey is also quite high. Therefore the activists are expressing that their social relations -including their relations with their family and their friends- have become stronger as a result of their activities. This shows that their activism has a positive effect on their well-being despite all external conditions and despite the problems expressed below concerning the organizations.

More than 80 percent of the activists that we have met are working, however the number of those who are able to work in a secure job is limited to half of them. We believe that this statistic is very important since it shows that almost half of the activists who are in a fragile position due to their political activities are under precarious working conditions. Again one third of the activists are having problems concerning their working periods due to their positions within the social struggle.

Moralism and sexism which are getting stronger and more widespread in social life along with the authorization are among the factors that put the most pressure on the well-being of the activists other than the political and economic conditions. We see that there are especially personal strategies used in order to cope with these issues. We have seen that options that lead to distancing from the society are preferred among prevalent personal responses such as continuing to be oneself, reading and avoiding dealing with sexist people. On the organisational level were listed influencing policy makers, workshops and studies carried out within associations in order to correct the language used.

In the second part of our study we have examined the personal well-being of activists more closely beyond political and economic contexts. Concerning the psychological problems the activists are facing, the most frequent were the problems pandemic caused and especially the feeling of loneliness they had to cope with in this period. We also learned that they had to struggle with

feelings such as anger and hopelessness, depression and pessimism very frequently. We saw that they were citing the year 2015 as a milestone concerning the intensification of negative feelings, in parallel with the recent history of Turkey and development of authorization, the effects of which we emphasize in this study. We reached the conclusion that seeing that their efforts for social change-transformation went all the way back to the beginning due to the policies and practices of the post-fascist regime is something that is worrying them.

When asked about their physical well-being, almost two thirds of the activists expressed that they were suffering from putting on or losing weight, dysmnnesia or unhealthy nutrition. When we talked about mental empowerment, the negative effects of the period of the pandemic stood out. We saw that following the political agenda and thus being subject to the results of the authorization did harm to the mental well-being of the activists. Again we saw that social media was the predominant means for receiving current news and that the social media had become an environment where the activists personally experienced reflections of polarization in politics.

The activists indicated that they often avoided the social media and that they considered different social media platforms separate. Even so, the fact that there are some moments in social media when common sense overscores and when people speak out against injustices all together makes these platforms an indispensable common area for the activists, despite all negative aspects.

After evaluating the well-being of activists under current conditions, we focused on the political arena. First we tried to understand the viewpoints on political parties. An overwhelming majority of the activists we met were thinking that the political parties were still significant institutions for solving the problems of the country but that they were not successful in fulfilling this function. When we consider that 30 percent of them are a member of a political party at the moment, this is striking in terms of showing that trust in current political parties is low. This ratio is higher than the 13,9 percent which we found in our study *Well-Being of Citizens in Turkey* for the general ratio of citizens who are members of a political party or association, but it is still a low ratio. This means that the activists have doubts about the role that the political parties can play for the solution of the problems of the country and that they have lost their hopes and expectations in these platforms. When we questioned the reasons for this with the activists we talked to, the mentioned causes are that political activity within political parties is compelling, that the political parties are outmoded and that they have a hierarchical structure.

We interpret that the well-being of activists is a combination of their individual well-being and the well-being of their organizations. Therefore we asked the activists questions about the well-being in the organizations. We asked if well-being itself was discussed within the organizations as a topic of discussion. The activists we talked to indicated that well-being was sometimes discussed within the organisations. Activists have commented that large part of such discussions were insufficient and not aiming at empowerment of organizations. Protecting well-being is being defined not as a collective/political issue within organized action, but as an individual situation that can be reached by disengaging from politics.

We could not come up with any information showing that such discussions were transforming problems into mechanisms that work for well-being in the organisation. Therefore we understand that the fact that issues related to well-being are coming up in a way in which it is not possible to postpone them is indicating that there is an urgent necessity regarding this issue.

There are other problems, besides not paying regard to well-being, concerning organisations. One of the first issues expressed was that the atmosphere of oppression and fear, created by authorization, had also extended to the members of the organisation itself. Inadequacy in confidence building, different perspectives for organizing among different generations and this becoming an area of conflict; the activities carried out in NGO's being work-oriented and distant to a reformist perspective; communication; insufficient financial and human resources were among the problems expressed.

We focused on task sharing as an important issue area. The activists we met reflected that there is no established method regarding task sharing in Turkey and that therefore the persons within an organization are having different experiences according to the personal characteristics of the executives. The activists who adopted a more radical approach said that we could not talk about a struggle if there is a [specific] person 'allocating' tasks or 'planning' the process. Besides many activists indicated that horizontal organization rhetoric was being used but that the practice was different. They said that hierarchy based on age and experience was very common. They indicated that there was discrimination against later comers and that the efforts of those who put in more work were not paid regard to. They also said that there are problems concerning volunteering and that rotational systems and short term appointments were necessary.

Only 8 of the 52 interviewed said that they came up with a problem related to moralism in the organizations they belonged. They usually indicated that they experienced this problem as masculine moralism, while some others said it could be based on the dominant nation, religion or religious sect or that there was a tendency to keep LGBTIQ+ individuals in the background. From the interviews we made, we reached the conclusion that moralism started by attaining domination and turned into mobbing by the superiors towards those subordinate. We observe that such functioning is making moralism something people are not able to talk about and thus the borders of moralism are becoming vague and the relations between comrades continue to be determined by generally accepted values.

We tried to understand what were the personal and organizational dealing ways for the problems identified above. We set out to comprehend if there were examples which brought these two levels together in a way so as to make both sides stronger. We observed that in fact many activists were searching for personal answers to collective problems. A frequent example is to try to spend more time with people similar to oneself. It was emphasized that spending time with similar people was strengthening; this is understandable taking into account the effects of polarization, intolerance, breaking of social links and compartmentation, but still it is worrisome. There were also activists who spoke about coping strategies within organizations. The activists who advocate this view also emphasize the significance of training within organizations. For instance the activists who worked in NGO's offered suggestions such as carrying the link with their workmates beyond work fellowship by way of some social activities.

Finally we tried to find out how the activists looked to the future. In this sense what we came across the most often, which also thrilled us, was hope. For the activists, hope is some principle that is still preserved, that in fact continues to exist independent from any concrete expectations. It brings along with it the feeling that there are still things that can be done, that one should not be beyond caring other people. This is in clear contradiction with the desperation, the exhaustion and the search for individualisation that we observed in many samples. So we have drawn the conclusion that this contradiction may constitute a starting point for re-germination under post-fascism conditions and for re-organizing the organisations in a way to vivify the well-being of the persons in physical, mental and psychological terms. In this sense, the fact that the activists envision being organized associating it with hope, despite all macro conditions and despite the criticism they have towards the functioning of organizations, is itself encouraging for the future,

for well-being, positive feelings such as solidarity, being/acting/learning together, getting stronger, not feeling alone, feeling oneself as serving a purpose, developing goals, being able to make a change, sharing and knowing that one is working for the benefit of society continue to be experienced thanks to such hope.