Troubled Discourses among University Students: A Student-driven Gender Project in Turkey

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* Due to confidentiality concerns, identifying factors of individuals have been removed and pseudonyms used throughout the article.
Introduction

How do university students in Turkey involved in social responsibility projects that address gender issues conceptualize the challenges in their community? How do they interact, create, and address issues of gender equality in a course specifically designed to foster social responsibility and social justice?

The modest rise in the number of courses at Turkish universities that can be loosely defined as social responsibility courses form the basis for student-led approaches toward issues of social injustice, encouraging students to take active roles in civil society [and deal] with various problems (Çetindamar & Hopkins, 2008, p. 405). Understanding students' perceptions toward concepts of human rights and social justice within a gender project at Sabancı University's Civics Involvement Project (CIP) courses can shed light on the concerns of the university students at private institutions in Turkey today. Such an understanding can help give a context for educators and students who want to better co-create social justice both inside and outside the classroom. This article is part of a larger study of the perceptions of academic communities toward concepts such as human rights, citizenship and social responsibility, which aims to help us understand how people in these courses think about their roles in both Turkish and global society.

This paper will be divided into five sections. First, an overview of the Civic Involvement Project in general and the Toplumsal Cinsiyet (Gender) Project in particular will be provided. Second, a summary of the literature on gender equality and education in Turkey will be given, drawing on Turkish and international feminist and post-structuralist scholarship. A brief description of the research design will follow. Fourth, the article will delve into the concerns and tensions articulated by the research participants. Finally, I will conclude with an examination of the avenues for future research in the area of student-led gender projects.

The Civic Involvement Project at Sabancı University

Sabancı University in İstanbul was founded in 1996 as one of the first private institutions (called foundation
universities) of higher education in Turkey. The mission of the university is to

- develop competent and confident individuals, enriched with the ability to reflect critically and independently, as well as a strong sense of social responsibility. (Cetindamar & Hopkins, 2008, p. 405)

Within the higher education community in Turkey, Sabancı University in particular stands out as a leader in introducing compulsory courses in social responsibility in keeping with this mission. Thus, the first academic year at Sabancı University (1999-2000) included the establishment of the Civics Involvement Project (CIP). This mandatory two-semester course for undergraduate students aims to enhance students' understandings of participatory citizenship and engage students in peer-led projects concerning human rights, the environment, and gender equality, among others. The program is designed to give students an understanding that every individual not only can, but also has a responsibility to contribute positively to society” (Sabancı University, 2005). In addition to the mandatory CIP course, the university offers optional CIP projects outside of Istanbul during summer and winter breaks, which are open to students from any university. The Project Members travel to primary schools in disadvantaged, often rural areas of Turkey to conduct one- to two-week projects covering an array of issues such as children’s rights, human rights, the environment, gender equality and cultural heritage workshops.

The educators and students involved in CIP fall into five categories. The CIP Staff, which coordinates, manages and assists the students in their projects, consists of one Manager, four CIP Officers, one CIP Consultant and one Administrative Affairs Officer. In addition, there are four types of students: Project Team Members, Volunteers, Supervisors and Advisors. First, the Project Team Members are students often in their preparation or first year at Sabancı.¹ These students are required to take CIP as a core course. The second

¹ As Sabancı University is an English-medium university, prospective students must pass an English entrance exam; otherwise, they spend a preparation year of intensive English classes in order to raise their language ability to the appropriate level for their department.
type of students is CIP Volunteers, many of whom have already completed their mandatory CIP project and want to continue to participate in a non-supervisory capacity as Project Team Members. Volunteers can also be non-Sabancı University students who want to be involved in the optional CIP field projects. Third, there are Supervisors, students who have already completed their mandatory CIP project and want the opportunity to take more of a leadership role in the project. If their applications are successful, their duties will include facilitating communication between the CIP office and the Team Members, organizing meetings, guiding decision-making processes regarding workshop topics, and gathering necessary materials. Finally, Advisors, who are generally advanced students, have voluntarily applied to act as Advisors to Project Supervisors and have previous experience as Supervisors themselves. They give input to the Supervisors about effective strategies for leadership or learning challenges. Although the CIP Office does provide some training from outside NGOs and counselors, the primary transmission method is peer-led and experiential; thus, in spite of a loose supervisory structure (see Figure 1-1), the emphasis is on collaboration and student agency, with the permanent CIP Staff of educators serving in a facilitative capacity.

Despite its status as a required course, CIP does allow some flexibility as to which project is chosen and how the project is carried out. Students form project teams, which might focus on, for example, human rights or environmental issues, and draw on a variety of local knowledge and literature. They design and implement a project, which must contribute to society, usually in disadvantaged areas near the university.

![Figure 1-1. CIP Supervisory Structure at Sabancı University.](source: [Adapted from Cetindamar & Hopkins 2008, p. 406])
In addition to its own student body, CIP is also being incorporated into 18 more universities through the efforts of the Sabancı CIP staff with varying degrees of success (Cetindamar & Hopkins, 2008). Interest in the project around the Turkish educational community has increased to the point that talks are taking place regarding CIP implementation at other Turkish universities.

Toplumsal Cinsiyet (Gender) is a project component of the mandatory Civic Involvement Projects (CIP) course at Sabancı University which aims to investigate and discuss aspects of gender within their group. There are two sections of the project, Toplumsal Cinsiyet Projesi I and Toplumsal Cinsiyet Projesi II, with a total project team membership of 30, of which 22 are men and 8 are women. The goals of the project are threefold. First, the project aims to educate university students participating in this project about gender issues not only in Turkey in general but also in their own lives. The second aim is to educate the whole student body at Sabancı University on the issues and impacts of gender by organizing workshops and other campus-wide activities. Finally, the third goal is to go beyond the campus. Thus, the target population starts with themselves and aims to slowly expand to their immediate environment and beyond.

The two Supervisors and the Advisor meet weekly to plan the curriculum, based on their previous experience with the project. Both project Supervisors had previously been Project Members in the 2009-2010 academic year, and the current Advisor had been their own Supervisor the year before. Thus, in addition to drawing on materials such as current newspaper articles and printed literature such as F. Helvacıoğlu’s Ders Kitaplarında Cinsiyetçilik [Sexism in Textbooks] (1996), the project leaders draw on shared collective knowledge and experience to co-create the curriculum with their Team Members, who are free to, and during observed meetings a core few of whom often did, contribute their own ideas about what the gender project should entail and what topics should be addressed.

In the Fall Semester 2010, the two sections met weekly together in a single classroom. The activities during this time were mainly discussion-based, aiming to engage the critical thinking skills of the university students, in order to fulfill the first stated goal of the project. These discussions were led by the two project Supervisors and students, and covered a variety of related topics. Topics included discussions
and analyses of newspaper articles regarding incidents of rape, gender-related violence, transvestism and homosexuality. Other activities included Supervisor-led analyses of gender stereotypes evident in commercials and comics, as well as the perpetuation of such stereotypes in Turkish primary school textbooks. In the time allotted for the research, the Supervisors and Project Members of Toplumsal Cinsiyet were focused on the first project goal of educating themselves. An avenue of future research would be to observe the continuation of the project in pursuit of its other goals.

**Literature Review**

In order to sift through the data gathered in this study, I review critical moments in Turkish history and draw on relevant theoretical scholarship within a gender framework that will help to meaningfully interpret the intricacies of university students’ perceptions toward gender and LGBT issues in the Toplumsal Cinsiyet project. Scholars both in Turkey and from abroad can help to illuminate the development of women’s rights and LGBT rights in a country where West and East have co-existed for centuries (Kardam, 2005).

Reforms regarding gender equality in Turkey are often considered to have started during the time of the Ottoman Empire, particularly in the Tanzimat era of 1839-1876, when a push for women’s education was initiated (Gündüz, 2004). Significant changes in how women were treated accelerated rapidly after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent creation of the Turkish Republic, when, as part of the driving force for modernization embodied by the Republic’s founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, initiatives for gender equality were advanced. Within the broader Kemalist ideology of modernization stressing secularism, nationalism and militarism, these gender equality initiatives included the banning of polygamy and of the veil, as well as the legislation of universal suffrage. The Kemalist idea of the modern woman was an unveiled, professional woman in Western dress, exemplified best by Atatürk’s own adopted daughter, Sabiha Gökçen, who became the world’s first female fighter pilot (White, 2003). With this period’s multitude of reforms both related to women’s rights and beyond came further challenges, due to the unequal impacts of these reforms across the country. Gündüz (2004) summarizes the subsequent development of
the women’s movement as one predominantly restricted to the incremental extension of this Kemalist ideology of modernization and the modern woman, which focused almost exclusively on rights-based legislation such as the right to vote and the right to divorce. Gündüz points out that the modernization movement regarded the women as problems to be solved with the codification of certain rights and failed, along with the emerging women’s movements, to address the structural violence of a deeply patriarchal society or the intersections of class and ethnicity.

The early 1990s saw increasing changes in gender issues as Turkish society started to move out from the shadow of the repressive 1980 military coup, which de-politicized civil society. In 1993, Women for Women’s Human Rights, then called New Ways, was founded. This powerful NGO contributed significantly to legislation both locally and internationally that promoted women’s human rights. In the same year, Tansu Ciller became Turkey’s first female Prime Minister and, like Gökçen, served as a powerful, if controversial, symbol of the modern Turkish woman. Other important changes in gender equality included the 1998 Law on the Protection of the Family, which legislated further protections for women and children and provided channels for their immediate removal from spheres of violence. Gündüz’s study on women’s movements suggests that despite such legislation, protests and criticism of State policies continue because the State, while seeing itself as a leader in gender equality, contributes to the maintenance of inequality, discrimination and injustice through judiciary policies which afford judges the power to decrease the legal sentencing recommendation for murder in cases of honor killings, as well as the continuance of a system of unequal pay (2004).

With every piece of legislation achieved by local and international reform initiatives, scholarship demonstrates that legislation is not enough. Levin (2007) sees a patriarchal Turkish culture as highly resistant to changes increasing gender equality and protections for women. Although such claims of cultural resistance to gender equality are common, scholars like Kardam (2005) and Ertürk (2006) consistently argue against a simplistic understanding of the situation. Ertürk (2006) diminishes the importance of culture in the struggle for women’s liberation, understanding it rather as a political problem by tracing the role of women in Turkish society from
the 1920s to the present and analyzing public representation of women within competing paradigms. Problematizing the issue further, Kardam (2005) argues for a shifting, fluid system of interacting dualisms that embody a system of values conducive or otherwise to gender equality. She rejects the notion of the West as associated with modernity, human rights, and the secular versus the Islamic world as oppressive and intolerant. Her conclusion is that a false dichotomy of Islamic-secular prevents open dialogue and creates a fixed barrier where the reality is much more fluid. Showing instead that both head-scarved women, the symbol of the Islamic world, and modern secular women borrow and learn from each other, Kardam demonstrates the need for an understanding of women's issues that respects not only women's heterogeneity but also the fluid borders and boundaries that they navigate.

Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, scholarship on gender and LGBT issues in Turkey and in Turkish education has expanded rapidly. Studies on honor killings, virginity examinations, and violence against women (Parla, 2001; Rodriguez, 2009) expose the discrimination many women in Turkey, including young girls and women at schools, continue to suffer. Boys too who do not conform to expected modes of behavior become marginalized, and prevailing attitudes toward lesbians and gays at the university level are predominantly negative (Gelbal & Dyan, 2006). Analyses of textbooks expose deeply patriarchal attitudes of men as strong, active and militaristic and women as passive and helpless (Çayır, 2007; Altınay, 2004; Esen, 2007; Helvacıoğlu, 1996) in a machista, hyper-heterosexual culture. These depictions, which are perpetuated through the education system, impact how men and women are socialized to interact with each other. Esen (2007) explores how, despite initiatives in curriculum reform, the textbooks, and thus the schools, contribute to the perpetuation of sexism and homophobia. She pushes instead for schools [as] living spaces where individuals are empowered in order to reach the ideal of just and equal society (13). The majority of this literature focuses on the content that students receive at the primary and secondary levels (Rankin, B., & Aytaç, 2006; Esen, 2007; Helvacıoğlu, 1996). However, students do not absorb social norms just through textbooks, but also through interaction with each other and their instructors.

It is not only gender norms that are transmitted through school textbooks, but national and ethnic stereotypes as well
(Altınay, 2004). Turkey’s largest ethnic minority are the Kurds, whose portrayal in school textbooks is transformed, according to Altınay, into a non-minority--rather Turks of a different nature. At the same time, her book also uncovers systematic perceptions of Kurds as “uncivilized” by many educated Turks, a finding shared by Saraçoğlu’s 2010 study of how the middle class views Kurdish migrants, which largely uncovered systematic prejudices against Kurds as disruptive forces who, among other preconceptions, unfairly siphon off benefits.

Both Altınay and Saraçoğlu provide a spectrum of historical perspectives on Kurdish-Turkish relations since the founding of the Republic. These relations have been punctuated by the creation of a new national identity, one that determinedly ignored the existence of all other Muslim elements (the Kurds, the Cerkes, the Laz) as distinct ethnic groups. Articulate theories of total denial of their distinct identities would soon follow” (Altınay, 2004, p. 19). Since the late 1970s, violence between the Kurdish-nationalist PKK and the Turkish military has increased and ravaged the Southeast. Following a 1980 military coup, a law was enacted in 1983 that formalized the prohibition of languages other than Turkish as the mother tongue and in education. With the rise to power of the AK Party and its pro-EU stance, minority rights for the Kurds have begun to be slowly won. The ban on Kurdish-medium education was abolished in 2002, which allowed for private language schools. In 2004, the first Kurdish-language school was established (MRGI, 2007), but closed four months later because the government had provided no funding. Education and job opportunities are sporadic at best, and many Kurds migrate west for financial and personal gain (Saraçoğlu, 2010). It is within this complex historical and educational context that this study is situated.

Research Design

This article is part of a larger study on the Civic Involvement Project course that aims to investigate how students and educators perceive of core human rights and citizenship concepts, as per the goal of the course. The argument is put forth that this peer-led project-based course does not just raise awareness but also creates a need for critical thinking and analysis and fosters a respect for
human rights and participatory democracy. Exploring the participants' perceptions of these core concepts of CIP is vital to understanding the challenges facing education for human rights. During the course of the research, the CIP students in general (and, naturally, the Toplumsal Cinsiyet students in particular) continuously raised gender issues, leading to the data forming the basis for this article.

The study took place from September 2010 to January 2011, including voluntary projects in Summer 2010 and Winter 2011 during breaks. One-hundred and fifty questionnaires were administered, which gauged perceptions of human rights and citizenship using an imaginary island scenario based on Lidija Koulouh-Westin’s 2004 study and conducted 50 interviews, which explored these perceptions in-depth in order to gain a picture of how university students think about human rights and citizenship. Seven academic year projects and two voluntary projects were observed. Two of the academic year projects, offered during the 2010 Fall semester of the mandatory CIP course, were the Toplumsal Cinsiyet projects, which are the focus of this article. Out of the 150 total completed questionnaires for the study, 23 were completed by Toplumsal Cinsiyet Project Members and Supervisor. Six Toplumsal Cinsiyet students participated in the interviews. Finally, I observed this project of 30 students every Monday during the Fall Semester. The observational and interview data reveal university students' concerns with gender issues in Turkey when discussing human rights.

**Summary of Results**

In the course of my research on perceptions of human rights and citizenship, my observations of the two Toplumsal Cinsiyet projects unearthed a series of gendered discourses that I wish to examine in the following sections. These discourses centered around the following challenges in their community: the problematic and troubled gender relations when coupled with different ethnic identities, the inability or unwillingness of the State to protect women from violence, and the ability of projects like these to effect change regarding gender and LGBT issues in the community.

In many cases, these discourses were echoed in other, non-gender related projects, which suggests a shared
perception of gender issues in Turkey by these university students. In an interview at the start of the semester, Elif, a student in the Toplumsal Cinsiyet Projesi, expressed surprise at the composition of the two sections. In previous years, she explained, the team had been primarily made up of women and had been smaller and more intimate. This year, the Supervisors had agreed to open two sections and both were filled to the maximum capacity with a combined total of 30, of which only eight total were women. Elif shared with me that many of the young men freely admitted that they had chosen the project because it met on campus and was thus more convenient. This information suggested that the team might show a more diverse range of attitudes toward or understandings of gender issues than those whose members joined specifically because of interest in the topic.

Although these are preliminary findings based on observations, interviews and questionnaires, this analysis hopes to offer a taste of how these university students in Turkey involved in gender projects conceptualize the challenges in their community as well as how they interact and address issues of gender-related discrimination.

The Intersection of Ethnic Identity and Gender

Kurdish women have more babies than us [Turks]. In 10 years, there will be more Kurds than Turks. (Uğur, Team Member)

During the observations of the project and interviews with the Supervisors and Team Members, the intersection between ethnic identity and gender repeated itself and revealed itself in complex ways. As Kardam's (2005) shifting dualism model suggests, binaries such as an Islamic-Western, Kurdish-Turkish or East-West may superficially help one to understand the perceptions of gender and ethnic identity held by many Turkish university students. However, these binaries coupled with attributed characteristics such as the “benefits-scrounging” Kurds (Saraçoğlu, 2010) or “modern, educated” Turks are deeply problematic and not sufficient in explaining how individuals in the Toplumsal Cinsiyet more fluidly understand issues of gender equality both broadly and in relation to human rights.
The above quote, which came early in the academic year during a regular Monday evening project meeting, was made by a male Team Member named Uğur during an overall discussion of newspaper articles selected for their relevant topics. The speaker clearly assumed that everyone in the classroom was one of us: a Turk, enlightened, educated and practicing planned parenthood. The Kurds, on the other hand, were constructed not simply as the Other, but specifically as a fertile female Other. Thus, the woman's fertile body is the locus of the population panic expressed by Uğur. This panic, however, is not restricted to men in CIP or even to the Toplumsal Cinsiyet project. Esra, a member of the Human Rights project, made a remarkably similar statement in conversation with the researcher when she said, The women [in the Southeast] want to have too many children. Esra's remark, perhaps unintentionally, implies that the women in the Southeast have control over their bodies and their fertilities, while Uğur's states that they simply have more babies as a fact, something immutable written within the body of the Kurdish woman. Thus, the performance of their ascribed biological destiny is deeply tied to their ethnicity and not merely to their gender. The comments by Esra and Uğur demonstrate the attitudes of some of these university students toward what Kurds, and particularly Kurdish women, represent to them: an intentional population creep on the part of an undesirable portion of the population. While Saraçoğlu’s 2010 study explored the negative stereotypes of Kurds (such as benefits-scroungers), these speakers did not suggest those specific traits; rather what they expressed was the idea of a threatening, growing Kurdish population.

A Kurdish-Turkish dualism, however, does not adequately account for another shift between perceptions of gender within the scope of this discussion. As Kardam (2005) discussed the myth of Islamic-Western dualism and replaced it with more fluid dualities, here too can another dualism, an East-West dualism, be superimposed on the Kurdish-Turkish for the extension of the division between us and them. This is complicated by the fact that the eastern part of Turkey has a large but not exclusively Kurdish population. Elif explained in her interview that she was originally from the East and migrated as a child to the West, and she meaningfully pointed out to me that this was important by saying emphatically, You know? The East-West situation,
without identifying explicitly as Turkish or Kurdish. She continued by explaining that her father, having grown up in the East,

has been brought up by their culture [which includes all the most important issues for gender, like] violence, tore [traditions], namus [honor], [the] whole kind of laws in Eastern Turkey, the unwritten laws of the family and the culture.

She linked the idea of the problematic gender issues of clans and tribes exclusively with the East and further separated herself from them by stressing the word **their** when discussing the culture. She expressed pride in her father for overcoming his Eastern upbringing by saying, **When you judge him by his standards, he has developed himself a lot.** Often encoded in this discussion of the East was the possible indirect reference to Kurds as well as perceptions of relations between women and men in the East. These relationships are understood, as seen in the comments of the students above, to exist within a separate patriarchal, tribal culture based on traditions where the head of the tribe will tell you what to do (Elif). This is a culture that is almost foreign to the way other people, who can think more modern (Mert), operate, people like the **us** implied by Uğur, Esra, Mert and Elif. The duality of East-West engulfs that of specific ethnic identities when discussing gender issues but remains a problematic paradigm for deeper understanding.

**Namus, the State and Human Rights**

Kardam’s dualisms (or binaries) can be used to approach the relationship between the State and human rights in Turkey as well, especially when examining the discourse of these students and their perceptions of the problems women specifically face. This dualism is best understood as regarding the role the State should take in contrast to the perceived reality. A major theme running through the interviews was the idea that the State was intended to play a significant role in protecting human rights, but in reality was often negligent or engaged in perpetuating the violations. This Perpetrator-Protector dualism was often
rooted in the historical and cultural specificity of the Turkish context.

The participants in the interviews often identified honor killings (*namus cinayeti*) as one of the major issues. *Namus*, loosely translated as *honor*, is explained by Ayşe Parla (2001) as “a woman’s purity [and] an icon of family honor” (77). This understanding was echoed by several of the interview participants, including Sedef of the *Toplumsal Cinsiyet* project, who stated,

> it has to do with a girl is virgin until she is married or not, and that’s what makes *namus* … well, men’s *namus* is their sister’s or their mother’s or their wife’s virginity [it’s] cleanliness, cleaning … according to Turkish culture.

Sedef went on to talk about how this concept was not her idea but rather an idea in Turkish culture and antithetical to human rights. Sedef, a student who has worked on gender issues for two years, represents someone who is deeply disillusioned with the promise of human rights to guarantee social justice locally, despite her committed involvement in women’s human rights. She sees as well in her own culture, unlike the speakers of dualism above, that merely the existence of human rights cannot help those victimized by concepts like *namus* that she associates immediately with honor killings and rape. Her frankness in the discussion with the researcher became obvious when she lowered her voice, despite the privacy of the interview room, to explain how the State would not protect people and was often the perpetrator of violent crimes.

> In the 1980s, my father and mother were, like, communists [when the military coup happened] one of her [my mother’s] friends, she was raped, and another was tortured [by the State] human rights doesn’t exist.

Elif echoed this disillusionment with the State as protector and instead perceived the State as a frequent perpetrator of violence, as did Project Members Mert and Ecesu. Elif, when talking about the persistent
harassment she experiences as a woman in public in Turkey, explains that she, along with Turkish women in general, learned to

shut down and ignore it if you do not reply, or take him to the police because the police will also do the same. He will ask you what happened, and you would say he has verbally abused you. He will say there is nothing they can do. This has happened to me many times. The police does not offer me safety.

Elif is explaining that when reporting harassment, the police are either unwilling or unable to protect and, in fact, sometimes continue the harassment. As Kardam (2005) points out, all the gender-sensitive laws in the world will not help if the judges, the police and the court system are guided by a different set of norms” (30.) Mert also expressed his concern over the fact that the State, through its school system, perpetuates a culture of violence when he explained that teachers and students both engage in physical violence in public schools. Mert, who during primary school transferred from public to private and back to public school again, remarked on the fact that the school cultures differed radically between the private and public spheres.

And you know, in Turkey, in the public schools, the teacher normally beat them. Yeah, mostly. But in private school, no matter what they do, they won’t hit you. When we learned that, it was much more comfortable for me.

Mert also shared an experience from an earlier CIP project he had participated in that underscores the violence he associates with the public (State) school system. Mert had previously been a Member of a CIP project that worked with schoolchildren in lower socioeconomic areas of Istanbul. At his State school, he witnessed a student draw a knife on one of the other Volunteers. The teacher’s response was to beat the student. Mert’s perception of the public school system is one of violence and insecurity. Again, this perception is not just confined to members of the Toplumsal Cinsiyet project. Zeynep, a Sabancı University student who
volunteered in a CIP summer project, echoed this idea of the public schools operating within violent parameters, reporting that a discussion of rape among school students in a rural village involved the suggestion by the children that the victim, who was a student, should be suspended from school. The idea that the school, a public institution, should punish a rape victim was linked closely with the ideas of *namus*, and underlines the realization not just by Toplumsal Cinsiyet members but by Sabancı students overall that women live in an unprotected and even State-perpetrated condition of violence in Turkey. In Turkey, a man who has killed his sister in an honor killing can be given a reduced sentence if a judge accepts this tradition (Gündüz, 2004), thus ensuring that the State becomes complicit in gender-related violence.

Ecesu, a quiet, serious student majoring in Cultural Studies, also discussed this lack of security and protection in terms of violence against women, when she said,

If a women commits adultery or even if she doesn t cheat but leaves that impression, she gets beaten even if she tries to get help from women’s organizations ... nobody takes care of her. Her husband takes her back home. The women comes home and she is murdered.

Ecesu is expressing the concern that the woman, a victim of an honor killing, has no protection, neither from the State nor from organizations specifically created to help her because Turkey is a country which has abused this right so much. All these students are expressing a sense of betrayal--that while human rights should be supported and strengthened by the State, the reality is tragically different.

**What Else Can We Do? Co-creating a Gender Project**

When discussing the goal of the Toplumsal Cinsiyet project as understood by its members, utilizing a series of shifting dualisms of internally- and externally-focused social change can help to unpack the perspectives Turkish students bring to understanding the project s goal. The goal of Toplumsal Cinsiyet is, according to Sedef, to make sure that the Team Members know what gender means and understand its implications, and then make sure the whole campus
knows … in terms of how effective it will be, I don’t know.” Despite Sedef’s disillusionment with human rights and her uncertainty about the efficacy of her project, her behavior in leading discussions in the Toplumsal Cinsiyet project suggests a commitment to fostering critical discussion and raising awareness on topics of gender discrimination and homophobia. Other Team Members interviewed verbalized how they saw the purpose and effectiveness of the project regarding gender and LGBT issues in different ways, including a realization that the goal dictates that the project focus on its members first and conflicting opinions on how effective this can be.

Ecesu gave her opinion on the project by saying, “It’s [Toplumsal Cinsiyet] a brave project. We have to believe in we can change. What else can we do?” A first year student who had previously volunteered with Greenpeace, this project was Ecesu’s first experience with CIP. In place of the us-them mentality of Uğur and Esra, where the problem lay with the Other women, Ecesu saw change as starting with the Team Members individually. Thus, Ecesu’s concern over violence against women (such as honor killings) and homophobia in Turkey were not only externalized to problems that other people have, but were her problems as well. Mert, another Team Member in his first year, concurred, sharing that despite his expectation that Toplumsal Cinsiyet would have a broader impact perhaps even collaborating with LGBT organizations—he soon realized that the project had to transform its goal

into just making ourselves aware of some things and breaking our prejudices [in the project] we are working with what kind of people … that’s why the first week we started to talk about how we first have to break our prejudices.

Ecesu saw this first semester of the Toplumsal Cinsiyet project as something active, not passive, in that it tried to change people’s (our) attitudes. Instead of associating negative traits such as intolerance with a specific them, she observed the spaces for change within the us. She saw Toplumsal Cinsiyet as an effective project with room for growth. In contrast, Davut, when asked what the project was about,
complained, ‘We haven’t done anything yet.’ He felt that the project needed to take a more active role to achieve real change. His frustration was apparent as he directly thereafter brought up an incident a few days earlier in which the police had beaten student protestors. Implicit was the idea that Toplumsal Cinsiyet should be out there dealing with real-world issues rather than engaging in the inactive, passive discussions of the project as it was currently being realized. Despite his impatience with the project, he thought that overall the CIP course was a positive experience and recognized the revised goal of educating themselves as critical. One member of the project, he reported, had proudly claimed to have beaten a gay man who had followed too closely behind him on a public street. The shocked silence I observed in this lesson was indicative of the realization that the individuals in the project were a truly diverse group who ‘didn’t all think the same’ (Davut).

Mert chose the project specifically because he was interested in LGBT issues, having many friends who were gay and often complained about having to be silent.

I wanted a place where I could really talk about this [homophobia]--these things. I can’t talk about them with my [straight] friends [My gay friends] told me that they weren’t really able to talk about their daily issues with many people. They said, ‘We are lucky that we find someone like you.’

Like his friends, Mert was expressing a need for a safe place to talk about these issues. For him the opportunity to discuss these topics was rare, had to be created, and, in contrast to Davut, served an important purpose in and of itself. Mert thought the project was effective and successful in this way because he did feel secure enough to talk about his ideas. He expressed reservations, however, about how effective the project could be beyond this. Despite his enjoyment of the project and its discussions, he concluded the interview with the following comments:

Well I don’t think they are changing people’s ideas. People who are open-minded are just getting together. People who are macho are
still macho... they were macho in high school and they are macho in university. They will be macho for the rest of their life. But people who can think about the--who can think more modern are just getting together.

In the words of Ecesu, Sedef, Davut and Mert a discourse of change can be traced, on the one hand focusing on external change: the intolerant and uneducated Other alongside the protest on the street. On the other hand, another, parallel discourse of change is also present. It’s one that focuses on the Us, the internal; less ambitious, perhaps, more modest, but nevertheless a necessary point of departure, acknowledged by these students in the face of their frustration. This dualism of internal and external change was built primarily within a classroom space, a space that contains a wide range of perspectives on these topics, yet nevertheless allows a freedom of speech not often seen outside of it. In contrast to the general understanding of the protestors, women and gays (and Project Members themselves) as vulnerable, many of these students were empowered by this project’s creation of a place for open and free discussion. The creation of this secure space for discussions about LGBT and gender issues is an irreplaceable part of a successful project. The realization of the limits and possibilities of the project help these students to continue creating the project together by forging safe spaces and by educating themselves.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the troubled and shifting discourses that emerged during a study of social responsibility projects at Sabancı University in Turkey illuminate the concerns of these university students regarding gender, especially within but not exclusive to the conversations of students enrolled in a gender project. These discourses focused on perceptions of gender and ethnicity, State action or inaction regarding gender-related violence, and the possibility of social change.

Perceptions of gender and ethnicity remain a problematic theme throughout study of the students in this gender project. In spite of this, many students still struggle with what they know about the world, namely stereotypes and the ever-present Otherization and dualism...
that mark their discourse. This manifests primarily in perceptions of gender within a Kurdish-Turkish and an East-West dualism. In both cases, the unknown or unfamiliar ethnicity or region is seen as backward, primitive, tribal, traditional, and a threat to the modern Western Turkish lifestyle. This understanding is described particularly in terms of the Kurdish or Eastern woman’s fertility, as overpopulation is expressed as a growing danger. Although both Kurdish and Eastern women are talked about in similar terms and there is reason to believe the two identities are closely linked in the minds of students, it is important to note that they do not operate as direct substitutes. Rather, the students understand them in similar ways: as Others who trouble them greatly, creating a high degree of discomfort. Even those with connections to the East see advancement primarily in leaving behind its associated negative characteristics. These dualisms remain problematic as they do not fully explain how students navigate the intersection of ethnicity and gender, but do start to draw a much richer picture.

Beyond the perceptions of the relationship between gender and ethnicity lies the troubled discourse regarding the State, human rights, and the cultural concept of namus, or sexual honor. Among these students, the State is seen as a betrayer of trust, as violent and violator, either directly or through representatives such as educational institutions, the judicial system, or the police. Within a generally violent context of school, street, and home, vulnerable individuals such as women and children are seen to be those most grossly victimized by the State, which perpetrates or fails to prevent violence especially (though not solely) against women. Despite the advancements in Turkish law regarding domestic violence and women’s rights, these students see a brutal gap between law and reality that impacts even themselves.

Finally, the students’ troubled discourses reflected concerns regarding the ability of projects like these to effect social change in their community. These discourses demonstrated a conflict between the ambitious overarching goal of effecting broad social change and a more realistic understanding of the necessity of starting small by confronting personal biases and prejudices, exposing a dualism of external and internal change. This is an inversion of the idea of the
Other as receptacle of negative qualities, reflected back on students using a reflexive, introspective method. In the end, it was in the unexpected, unplanned creation of a safe space to discuss gender- and LGBT-related social issues that this project met the initially unexpressed needs of many of the students.

**Further Research**

The overall goal of the Civic Involvement Projects (CIP) course is to create a more aware, more socially responsible university student body. The Toplumsal Cinsiyet project component of CIP is an example of a student-led initiative that has created a space in which aspects of gender may be discussed and analyzed in order to understand the role society plays in shaping gender inequality and gendered violence. Topics have included gender roles, LGBT issues, women and ethnic minorities in Turkey, and the transfer of gender expectations through media and education. Because the Team Members raise the topics, the topics generally have more relevance to their lives than those found in traditional courses. Many students have lively debates in the classroom, often expressing extreme positions, while others sit quietly listening. Despite continuing discrimination and inequalities faced by women and sexual minorities, the project and its members demonstrate a deeper complexity in the Turkish reality as understood by these university students. Further research can only expand the scope of this article. While the focus of this paper is on how students talk about the gender issues that form the core of the project, an understanding of both CIP in general and its specific projects would be enriched by following the project throughout the entire academic year. Furthermore, CIP’s popularity in the media and imitations by other universities and even high schools suggest that a need exists for academic social responsibility initiatives. A national analysis of these courses at university and high school levels can gauge the pervasiveness of this movement and the congruity of the Toplumsal Cinsiyet members experiences with those of students at different levels of education across the country.
 Works Cited


