



Turkey: "We aren't mourning, we're rebelling!"

Svenja Spunck, GAM Infomail 800, Berlin, February 16, 2015 Fri, 20/02/2015 - 14:46

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The corpse of the young Kurdish Alevi, Özgecan Aslan, was found last Wednesday, February 11, in a river in Mersin, a city in southeastern Turkey. She had been first stabbed to death and then burned because she tried to defend herself against a rapist. The main culprit has vanished, but some men from his family, who were also involved in the crime, have already confessed. They have a background among the Turkish fascists, the Grey Wolves. On Facebook they reported watching a Turkish series whose plot begins with the rape of a young woman.

Increase in violence against women

Özgecan was on her way home, sat at the back of a minibus, when the driver attacked her. Because of her ethnic background, she was, as an individual, socially disadvantaged but hers is not an isolated case and we have to address the issue of the frequency of brutal violence against women in Turkey. Since the AKP government came into office, in 2002, this has increased rapidly; by 2009, the number of registered cases had increased by 1,400 percent!

The Justice and Development Party, AKP, is a conservative Islamist party. Its policies against equality between men and women, against non-Muslims and against ethnic minorities, have been enforced with authoritarian methods but it has strong support in the heavily religious and economically-backward rural population. At the very beginning of his political career, the former mayor of Istanbul and current Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, declared "Democracy is just the train on which we travel until we reach our goal. The mosques are our barracks, the minarets our bayonets, the domes our helmets and the faithful our soldiers."

The rhetoric has got ever sharper since his party came into government. Since then, rising unemployment has been blamed on women seeking paid work. Instead, it is said, they should stay at home, where there is enough to do looking after the house and bringing up children. According to Erdogan, every woman should have at least three children and pregnant women should not leave the house. For him, too much equality would harm the cohesion of the family and violence against women has not increased, that is just a wrong perception.

Thus, not only women, but also the debate about their oppression, should be banished from public life. In a new legislative programme, penalties for violence against women have been reduced, while at a general level the widespread introduction of the death penalty is proposed.

Resistance stirs

After Özgecan's death, thousands of women in many cities took to the streets, with the slogan "We aren't mourning, we're rebelling!". This is the right approach. Of course, the event itself is so unbelievably awful that anyone should be saddened by it, but compassion alone will not help the many women who continue to suffer from such violence.

Rather, the current anger and mobilisation should be the starting point for a strong women's movement that fights against their structural oppression. In Turkey, where the family continues to play a very important role, the right of women to organise politically is the first major hurdle that must be overcome. In the trade unions, for example, the proportion of women is very low, many men do not understand why they should organise together with women, especially not when these supposedly compete with them for jobs. We have to counter this reactionary consciousness that hides behind a "tradition" that should not be questioned!

A new women's movement should be understood from the outset as part of the labour movement, as a working class women's movement. The current struggles of the unions do provide a starting point for joint action but it is clear that such a movement must address chauvinism, sexism and reactionary ideas and behaviour not only in society at large, but also among workers themselves.

That is why it is fundamentally important that women can meet each other, talk about their oppression and learn to defend themselves. Özgecan tried to defend herself with pepper spray, but she was alone and had no chance. Especially in rural areas, it is important that women create self-defence organisations.

The recent demonstrations have repeatedly emphasised that the government itself must take the blame for increasing violence against women, the fact that offenders are not convicted and that it appears as normal that women are humiliated and oppressed.

The increase in violence against women and the reactionary attacks from the government and the extreme right are also a response to a change in the society, which is also reflected in the protests. Women are being drawn into production, into economic life. Although this often goes hand in hand with a dual burden and over-exploitation, it also undermines their traditional role in the patriarchal family.

The slogan "We're not mourning, we're rebelling!" expresses the fact that many women no longer to accept their roles as servants and oppressed victims. This can be the foundation stone for the emergence of a new working class women's movement.

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