Working-Class Women, Gender, and Union Politics in Turkey, 1965–1980*

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Abstract
This paper focuses on the ideology and discourses of Tekstil Işçileri Sendikası (the Textile Workers’ Union, Tekstil) in Turkey to highlight some of the specific visions of the organized labor for an emancipatory gender politics during the 1970s. This history of intersection between gender and working-class organizing has been overlooked by the Left scholarship on the one hand and liberal feminist scholarship on the other. This paper addresses this gap in the literature by highlighting gender and class concurrently throughout the history of the transformation of gender politics in labor organizations. The history of the simultaneous development of gender-related policies in Tekstil/DISK and TEKSIF Türk-İş reveals an unexplored aspect of the contentious dynamic between rival labor organizations. Between 1975–1980, the politics of gender became another pillar in trade union competition. Following the transnational influences in this transformation, this paper highlights a forgotten period of labor organizing and locates it within the history of labor and women’s movements at the national and global scale.

The period between the mid-1930s and the early 1980s has been characterized as feminism’s perceived silence in the feminist historiography of Turkey. Feminist scholars largely interpreted this interlude between first-wave feminism (which emerged during the late Ottoman and continued during the Early Republican period) and second-wave feminism (which emerged in the 1980s) as a period where women’s voices were subsumed under the gender politics of the state and the agenda of the Left.

The “instrumental” and patriarchal approach of socialist associations toward women and their organizations, and women’s supposed lack of autonomy, especially when they were organized in mixed-gender associations led scholars to exclude and marginalize women’s movements from the 1960s and 1970s. Recent feminist scholarship has challenged this broadly accepted classification of women’s history in Turkey and highlighted the multiplicity of women’s activism during this period. Scholars have studied socialist and Kemalist women’s activism, identified transnational connections founded by women, discussed the achievements of organized women, and emphasized the connections and continuities between waves. However, working-class women’s organizing in labor unions has remained unexplored in feminist as well as labor historiography.
Following the Second World War and until the military coup in 1980, labor movements and trade unions gained significant momentum in Turkey. Women’s low levels of labor force participation, their lower levels of unionization, and the lack of women’s representation in decision-making bodies of labor unions led scholars to assume that women did not develop a work identity and that they did not make contributions to the strength of labor activism. Furthermore, scholars have pointed out that the masculinist approach of trade union officials, the unions’ disinterest in women’s issues, and their failure to develop effective policies for women contributed to women’s subordination in Turkey. However, the specific ways in which unions formulated their gender politics regarding working women’s issues, and the transformations within them, were rarely addressed.

This paper puts socialist Tekstil İşçileri Sendikası at the center of analysis to highlight the transformation of the gender politics of labor unions and working-class women’s labor activism. Despite the challenges of finding women’s voices, a detailed examination of Tekstil’s journal provides some insights into women worker’s labor activism, albeit limited. Despite the lack of representation in the union’s decision-making bodies, working-class women were engaged with union activism on the shop floor.

Tekstil’s documents, combined with the history of other labor and socialist organizations, particularly Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu (the Confederation of Revolutionary Labor Unions, DISK), Türkiye İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu (the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions, Türk-İş), Türkiye Tekstil,Örme ve Giyim Sanayi İşçleri Sendikası (the Textile, Knitting, and Clothing Workers’ Union of Turkey, TEKSIF), and Ilerici Kadınlar Derneği (the Progressive Women’s Association, İKD), point to a specific moment in which issues pertaining to women workers’ problems came to the fore of labor union politics. Against the assertion that it was only after the 1980s that gender became a widespread concern for labor unions in Turkey, I argue that the politically contentious atmosphere of the late 1970s generated a momentum in which the “woman’s question” entered the agenda of trade unions. The simultaneous appearance of women-specific programs and campaigns in Tekstil and its main rival TEKSIF as well as their affiliated confederations, DISK and Türk-İş, respectively highlights an understudied aspect of trade union competition of the 1970s.

Inspired and influenced by the flourishing global women’s movement and its repercussions in international institutions, labor unions in Turkey developed a new language in which they addressed several issues of women workers in the late 1970s. This new language that was attentive to women’s specific issues, provided labor unions a new means of competition for representing workers and strengthened their claims for legitimacy. In the context of militant and politicized labor movements, a specific and concrete demand of working women for childcare centers came to the forefront of labor activism. In this paper, I explain the transformation of Tekstil’s gender politics and locate it within a broader context of women’s and labor history in Turkey.
The politicization of labor movements: 1960–1980

Beginning and ending with coup d’êts, Turkish history was marked by social mobilization and political turmoil between 1960 and 1980. Drawing inspiration from student movements in Europe and the United States, socialist groups in Turkey espoused principles of anti-imperialism and embraced “Third World-centric sentiments.” By the 1970s, the Left gained a hegemonic influence, discernible in mainstream politics, popular culture, and everyday practices. Despite the military coup in 1971 and subsequent repressive regime, the Left continued to grow, albeit in a fragmented fashion. Divided along various ideological fractions, socialist groups organized in universities, factories, and gece-kon dus (shantytowns). The radical political activism of socialist associations mobilized its far-right ultranationalist opposition. The political violence between the Left and far-right, which resembled a “civil war,” became increasingly widespread by the mid-1970s and resulted in a massive death toll.

Over the span of two decades, surging labor movements constituted another pillar of radicalization and politicization in Turkey. The early formation of working-class consciousness during the 1940s and 1950s was solidified with a collective subjectivity formed by workers’ collective experiences and actions. Not only did the number of trade unions and union membership significantly increase, but also labor militancy, such as wildcat strikes, factory occupations, and large protests with the participation of thousands of workers became increasingly commonplace throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The Turkish state frequently attempted to repress workers’ mobilization with violence. During this period of radical labor organization, there were many instances of workers getting killed, wounded, or arrested by security forces and fired from their jobs.

The labor movements of the late 1960s and 1970s were marked by fierce competition between Türk-İş and DISK. Türk-İş was founded in 1952, in the context of a prevailing Cold War ideology as a part of the 1947 Marshall Aid Plan to “give structure to the mêlée of Turkish workers” against Communist inclinations. Thus, its foundation heavily relied on the influence and assistance of US institutions, such as the United States Agency of International Development (USAID), the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). Following the core principles of US labor unionism, Türk-İş espoused a strategy of “business unionism” that sought economic gain over political reform. In general, Türk-İş maintained positive relationships with the state, avoided militant unionism, advocated the harmony of class interests, and embraced “anti-communist” politics. In 1964, Türk-İş adopted the principle of partilerüstü politika (politics of above parties, PAP) to crystallize its nonpartisan position, yet it continued to have “clientelist” relations with various political parties. Starting with the 1960s, militant labor activism of rank-and-file members who had significant discontent with the economic and political system, combined with rising socialist movements and competition...
for working-class votes, forged a more politicized and radical labor movement. The competing views concerning the ways in which unionism should be pursued generated substantial strife within Türk-İş and eventually motivated several splits from Türk-İş.

Amidst the unionism of Türk-İş, Türkiye İşçi Partisi (Turkish Workers’ Party, TIP) was founded by twelve unionists in 1961 and gained fifteen seats in the parliament, indicating a major difference from American unionism. During the mid-1960s, Türk-İş refused to support several strikes that broke out in factories represented by Türk-İş, which prompted severe conflict. In 1967, DISK was founded by unions that broke away from Türk-İş. Embracing a radical and explicitly political agenda, DISK challenged the prevailing style of unionism pursued by Türk-İş, including its connections to the US institutions and its axiom of PAP.

From its foundation, DISK constituted a radical alternative to Türk-İş and it vigorously challenged “the state’s interpretation of legitimate behavior for workers and unions.” Founded with fifty thousand members in 1967, DISK increased its membership to six hundred thousand by 1975. DISK did not limit its activities with “bread and butter issues” and openly supported parties that it thought would best serve the interests of the working class. The parties supported by DISK leadership changed during the 1960s and 1970s, but their orientation remained on the left of the political spectrum.

The strength and influence of the organized labor became an important element in the political rivalry. Besides DISK and Türk-İş, several other confederations were founded with varying political affiliations. Although their sphere of influence was limited, the foundation of these confederations indicates the rising importance of the organized labor for the political parties and further politicization of trade unions. As Kaleağası Blind argues during the 1970s “it seemed as though each political party had its own union and labor constituency.” Milliyetçi İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu (the Nationalist Confederation of Labor Unions, MISK) was founded in 1970, following the ideology of the far-right Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (the Nationalist Movement Party, MHP). Hak İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu (the Confederation of Righteous Trade Unions, Hak-Iş) was founded in 1976 and affiliated with Milli Selamet Partisi (Islamist National Salvation Party, MSP).

Parallel to the rivalry of DISK and Türk-İş, the competition was also fierce in the textile sector because Tekstil and TEKSIF were both vying for organizing factory workers. Founded in 1951, TEKSIF was affiliated with Türk-İş and it was the largest labor union representing workers employed in the textile sector. When Tekstil was founded by unionists who broke away from TEKSIF in 1963, it situated itself as a rival to TEKSIF and Türk-İş. After Tekstil joined DISK in 1975, this competition was deepened, eventually spreading to gender politics. All in all, during the 1960s and 1970s, Turkey witnessed contentious politics that colored social and labor movements. It was in this context that gender politics became another pillar of policy for rival labor organizations.
Gender Politics of Worker's Organizations in the Early 1970s

Beginning with the 1950s, Turkey, similar to many other nation-states in the Global South, implemented a series of economic policies under the import-substitute industrialization (ISI) model. The ISI model introduced a series of measures to protect a domestic manufacturing bourgeoisie from international competition and aimed to create a domestic market. Resembling post-war Keynesianism in the United States, state regulation was at the heart of such an economic model. With the petty commodity production in the rural economy dissolving, migration from rural to urban areas accelerated. Women with rural origins lost their working status, as they left agricultural production and moved to the cities. The ISI model did not create a lot of job opportunities for these women, hence leaving a minuscule number of jobs. Among scholars of industrialization and female labor, there was an agreement that industrialization worldwide was “a process which marginalized women, in the sense of excluding women from industrial employment.” This view changed with the transition from ISI to export-led industrialization, which transformed the dynamics for women’s labor force participation with a feminization of labor trend. However, Turkey still remained isolated from this global trend with continuing low labor force participation for women.

Amidst this marginalization, the textile industry was unique in terms of employing an exceptionally high number of women workers during the 1970s. In a sector like the textile industry where women’s presence was salient, it was imperative for trade unions to organize women workers to increase membership. Yet, Tekstil was largely indifferent toward women workers, which produced “a gender-specific outcome,” evident in the union’s class-based politics. In Tekstil, a gender-neutral dynamic was dominant in their official discourse, especially before 1975, even if in practice this gender neutrality remained symbolic at best. The details of this politicization can best be explained by utilizing Tekstil’s journal.

Tekstil’s approach to women workers and disinvestment in women’s issues was closely related to its class-based socialist politics. Throughout the 1970s, the term “woman’s question” was quite popular among the leftist and socialist groups across the world, including Turkey. Inspired by a Marxist view, these groups had long championed class struggle and postponed the woman question for the aftermath of the socialist revolution, which was yet to come. In the meantime, women were expected to fight against capitalist exploitation, shoulder to shoulder with their male comrades.

In Turkey, the internal group dynamics did not reflect the egalitarian outlook of socialist associations. One possible source of the unequal treatment of women was the polarization between the Left and far-right, which was “created as a mirror image of the Turkish left.” On either side of the political spectrum, women’s position “was ambiguous and surrounded by taboos.” By the second half of the 1970s, clashes between the radical Left and far-right groups escalated, as street-level violence became a daily occurrence. The
widespread practice of violence reinforced a sexual division of labor within socialist organizations. Women were excluded from specific tasks that were deemed dangerous and, in cases when women participated in such activities, men were supposed to protect them. Such arrangements enhanced the perceived differences between men and women, and men were considered to be more courageous and more revolutionary. Thus, traditional gender roles were reinforced, as revolutionary masculinity aligned itself with hegemonic masculinity. Whereas women were able to “prove their worth” only when they became more masculine.

Tekstil, which situated itself in the Left, pursued a similar approach toward women and in many respects embraced a masculine pattern that was prevalent in the Left. On the one hand, Tekstil pursued a supposedly gender-neutral strategy and developed working-class politics. On the other hand, Tekstil’s leaders perceived an essential difference between male and female workers in terms of their abilities to organize, struggle, and develop a working-class consciousness. Some feminist scholars have called these accusations “the conventional wisdom” that women are more difficult to organize, less militant, or less active in unions. In Tekstil, the union’s male leaders, as well as members frequently complained about the difficulties of organizing women and about women’s disinterest in the journal and the political topos of the union.

In April 1976, Tekstil published one of the very first articles regarding the “woman question.” The title of the article was “Women! Protest the second-class status” and it outlined the “material historical facts” behind the problem and also implied that feminism was a bourgeois movement that diminished the power of left-wing politics by dividing the working class. For instance, it suggested that “to blur the fact that women should look at the socio-political context for their problems, capitalists lead women in the wrong way in which they struggle against patriarchy. So that they can use half of the society, that otherwise would be struggling against them.”

In the same article, while emphasizing the importance of the collective struggle, Tekstil was calling women into the unions and (leftist) organizations: “There is no difference between women and men in this struggle.”

Other times, the journal’s view of women was expressed in explicitly misogynistic terms. For instance, in the same article, women were viewed as special targets of advertisers and, thus, capitalism. Rather than considering women as fellow workers on the shop floor or unwaged workers at home, the article emphasized their role as consumers. According to Tekstil, the capitalist class deceived women through media to prevent them from realizing their “real problems” and made “women the prime consumers of the consumption society by selling them products like lipstick, powder, fashion, and mini/long length skirts.” This article indicates the construction of a male proletarian identity by the union in the context of a strong, male breadwinner model, where women are relegated to the role of consumers that do not produce any value. Similarly, women’s alleged inability or unwillingness to think or understand the world around them was a prevailing theme in the union’s discourse and came to the fore in various discussions concerning women workers.
The leadership of Tekstil and the larger confederation DISK often posited women members as less militant and connected their supposed lack of participation to their disinterest in social and political issues. In Tekstil, the union’s male leaders as well as male members frequently complained about the difficulties of organizing women and about women’s lack of interest in the journal and the politics of the union. For instance, Erol Yalcin, who was a board member, explicitly stated in 1972 that “it is important to pay attention to the differences among the masses in terms of their ability to learn. For instance, in the sectors where children and women constitute the majority, it is much harder to teach them to be united [as a class].”

A similar frustration toward women workers was common among Tekstil members. Workers themselves, both male and female, adopted a similar discourse. For example, when the union officials of the press team visited the Ayaz Barburi factory in which almost all workers were women, the (male) shop steward complained that “our young girls and women workers do not have any interest in the union’s journal.” In DISK’s journal, while calling workers to attend May Day rallies, this time a female shop steward claimed that women workers often did not attend such significant days.

The union’s journal was not consistent in their subordination of women’s roles and positions in the labor movement. In fact, there were moments where it gave a place to women’s voices by publishing interviews with women workers, letters and poems written by female members, and photos of women workers in picket lines, meetings, and seminars. Women workers had a strong visual presence in the journal. The cheerful, militant, and celebratory representation of women workers through photos published in Tekstil is of particular importance in terms of revealing women’s active involvement in union life and the labor struggle. The editors and union officials often used the gender-neutral word işçi (worker), which may lead readers to assume the workers to be male. Yet the photos of women published in the journal help us to differentiate the workers and they prove the existence of women’s activism in the union.

Another evidence of women’s engagement with unions can be found in the journal’s brief coverage of local or general congresses of Tekstil. These reports demonstrate that women workers utilized congresses as a mechanism to express their views, articulate their concerns, and influence the union’s policies. In these congresses, women took the floor to share their discontent with their economic status, such as the high cost of living, poor quality of workplace foods, and insufficient health-care services provided by the Turkish social security system. Asking for further benefits at the workplace and more advanced rights from the state, women attempted to improve their economic status. The journal Tekstil rarely reported complaints about union officials and policies. One remarkable exception was following the General Congress in 1971. Tekstil reported that a female member named Müşerref Ersoy asked the union’s members and leaders to respect women’s rights and to be attentive to the problems women workers experienced. The journal does not give us the full account of Müşerref’s criticism, nor does it help us to reconstruct her
experiences at the workplace or in the union. It is plausible that there was similar discontent with union officials and policies among women workers, but they rarely found a place in the journal. In other words, the representation of unionist women in the journal often neatly fit into the union’s agenda and women’s voices were amplified when they aligned with the unions’ politics. This does not necessarily mean that women workers had no conflict with the union. Rather, it can be argued that the union’s journal has significant limitations for finding women’s voices. This limitation is the result of the union leadership’s active role in the journal’s editorial board and the ways in which Tekstil leadership situated itself vis-à-vis the rank-and-file.

Tekstil positioned itself with the mission to “help” the Turkish working class to develop class consciousness. As a result, there were instances in which the editorial board ignored worker’s criticisms and did not actively represent worker’s interests and issues. For instance, in a column called “From the journal to workers,” the editors of the journal addressed critiques from workers several times. Workers had complained that the articles published in the journal were too long and difficult to understand, and demanded a change in the content of the journal. However, the editors thought that such comments were “wrong” and insisted that publishing long articles and teaching workers what they saw as important were the only ways to emancipate the working class, which revealed the union’s self-proclaimed role as the “mentor” of workers. Overall, the union leadership showed little interest in overcoming the hierarchy between themselves and workers and rather formed a paternalistic relationship with workers. Thus, it is difficult to point out workers’ own voices (male or female) based on the journal’s content, especially in contexts where they had a conflict with the union’s official position or when they challenged the union’s leadership.

In this vein, before 1975, the conventional wisdom regarding women’s inferior position and the documents revealing women’s active participation co-existed within the same issues of the journal. From its founding in 1965 until 1975, Tekstil did not develop a broader gender perspective regarding the female members of the union or women workers. Rather, the union leadership primarily aimed at organizing and mobilizing workers along class lines by promising higher wages, better working conditions, and more social benefits.


After 1975, both DISK and Tekstil started to reformulate their approach toward women workers and their gender politics, and address some of the problems that women workers were experiencing at the workplace. This novel interest of the organized labor in women’s issues had several interrelated sources.

The global rise of women’s movements during the 1970s and the subsequent incorporation of gender politics in international organizations positively affected the socialist unions’ perspective of gender in Turkey. For instance, in 1975 DISK held its fifth General Assembly in which commitment to gender
equality and opening of childcare centers at workplaces were passed as its first resolutions. Discussing the resolution regarding women workers, DISK mentioned several international resolutions, such as the UN World Conference on Women and the announcement of 1975 as the International Women’s Year, the Equal Remuneration Convention of the ILO, and the resolutions of the International Federation of Chemical and General Workers’ Unions (ICF). The recognition of these various resolutions by DISK indicates the influence of the international politics of gender in working-class organizations in the late 1970s.

Another repercussion of the global politics of gender on working-class organizations of the Left was the influence of the Soviet gender ideology. When Tekstil joined DISK in 1975, the pro-Soviet TKP secured several significant roles and positions within DISK and increased its influence. During this process, DISK idealized the gender politics of Socialist countries and praised Socialist women for their fight for equality. For instance, in an article published in 1975, DISK claims that the “woman question” was completely solved in the state-socialist countries, as women reached full equality in every aspect of life. The same article highly praises the Soviet Union, as well as Soviet women for their achievements regarding gender equality. They add, “in the Soviet Union, no working woman experiences any problems for being a woman. This is not just about the principles of socialism. Rather, in international meetings, [Soviet] women frequently talk about the rights they have gained thanks to their own struggles.” Inspired by this idealized image of the Soviet women, some socialist unions embraced a vision that carried a remarkable resemblance to early Bolshevik projects in terms of easing women’s domestic burdens through transferring some of their tasks to the public sphere.

Beginning in the 1920s, with a concern for the well-being of future generations, the Soviet regime promoted and implemented a series of protective labor legislation for women workers, such as maternity benefits and the protection of the rights of pregnant women and nursing mothers. However, there was resistance to implementing these extensive provisions on the part of employers, and occasionally by women themselves, especially in the context of female unemployment. Therefore, in some cases, it was the women who did not want to utilize those benefits due to a fear of losing their jobs. It was true that the collectivization of childcare in the Soviet regime had great importance in lessening women’s domestic burdens. Yet, the motives behind these reforms as well as the effects of such welfare policies were more complex than what the unionists in Turkey envisioned. Despite a large number of childcare centers and men taking more responsibility in childbearing, women remained the primary caregivers and, to a large extent, continued to do the housework.

The unquestioned adaptation of the Soviet gender politics by DISK was doomed to fail, as there were significant structural differences between the two contexts, such as the role of female employment. The gender politics of DISK partially recognized the dual burden on women workers in Turkey and suggested the communization of certain tasks, exclusively performed by women. To this end, DISK suggested the foundation of affordable laundries.
and restaurants (possibly with state subsidies) that working classes could take advantage of. Yet, none of these policies were implemented. The primary issue was not women’s unwillingness to fight for those rights but, rather, the lack of demand for women’s labor force in the Turkish economy during the 1960s and 1970s. This is unlike the Soviet economy, which suffered from a chronic labor shortage.

The late 1970s also witnessed a growing number of women organizing in socialist associations in Turkey, which became salient in transforming the gender politics of trade unions. The 1970s were marked by the strength of the women’s movements worldwide and the globalization of women’s issues through the United Nations’ declaration of the United Nations Decade for Women. Socialist women from the Eastern Bloc and Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF) were particularly influential for the UN declaration of 1975 as the International Women’s Year.66 The WIDF, a huge “left feminist” organization, was founded in 1945, and pursued its political activism during the Cold War.67 As the largest women’s international organization in the post-1945 period, WIDF was “a global ‘coalition of women of the anti-Fascist, pro-Communist left’ . . . and [it] espoused four principles: anti-fascism, lasting peace, women’s rights, and better conditions for children.”68

Founded in 1975, İKD was a socialist women’s organization in Turkey and a member of the WIDF. İKD pursued similar interests as the WIDF from its inception until its demise in 1980 by the military regime. The idea of founding a women’s organization was initiated by Türkiye Komünist Partisi (the Turkish Communist party, TKP) in 1974. Initially founded in 1920, TKP started to re-organize in Turkey by the late 1970s. The foundation of İKD aimed to expand the scope of TKP’s influence; this was a political strategy that mirrored many other communist parties in the world. According to its founding members, however, İKD was autonomous in its decision-making and included a much broader range of membership in terms of political orientation.69

İKD worked hard to organize working-class women and provided means to women workers for raising their demands with unions, employers, and the state. İKD attributed great importance to cooperation with democratic organizations, including trade unions and specifically DISK. By collaborating with DISK, İKD aimed to improve women’s economic status, advance women’s labor rights, and expand their roles in unions.70 By 1976, İKD brought a series of concrete suggestions to the unions, collaborated with DISK for a campaign, and pushed unions to develop women-specific policies. İKD suggested trade unions organize seminars and literacy courses for their women workers, demanded women representation in leadership positions, and asked for the establishment of autonomous women’s branches within trade unions. As far as women’s working conditions were concerned, İKD addressed well-known demands,71 such as having daycare centers and nursing rooms in the factories and workplaces, equal wages for equal work, and protection of women’s and children’s health through collective agreements.72
In 1976, DISK and IKD collaborated in co-publishing *The Handbook of Women Workers as Mothers and Laborers*. The handbook aimed to teach women workers their existing rights, so that women could better protect themselves from the violation of their rights by the employers, and to mobilize women workers with new demands for more advanced rights.\(^73\)

IKD was adamant in their belief that women’s emancipation would be achieved through women’s participation in social production. Hence, women’s childcare responsibilities were considered to be the biggest obstacle for women’s emancipation.\(^74\) One of the most important campaigns of IKD was in 1976 for opening childcare centers in the workplaces.\(^75\) According to the IKD documents, within the scope of the campaign, more than fifty-eight thousand signatures were collected from different cities in Turkey, demanding free childcare centers in factories and workplaces.\(^76\)

In the scope of the campaign for childcare centers, the IKD members sent letters to trade unions in which they asked for the support of unions and asked union officials to put pressure on employers to establish free childcare centers.\(^77\) As a result of this campaign, DISK took the issues of childcare centers and nursing rooms into a few collective agreements and one local government in Istanbul opened a childcare facility.\(^78\) Therefore, IKD helped trade unions to reformulate their gender politics and working-class women showed a significant interest in IKD’s campaign for childcare centers.

Although it remained largely aspirational, the formulation of gender politics within labor unions became another pillar in the competition to organize and represent workers during the period of labor mobilization and contentious politics. The archival records of Tekstil’s main rival TEKSIF point out the rise of a similar interest in women’s issues from 1975 onward as well. The contentious dynamic between DISK and Türk-İş; and Tekstil and TEKSIF, combined with the increasing importance of gender equality discourse in international labor organizations, generated momentum for the development of a new discourse recognizing women workers’ gender-specific issues in labor unions with competing views. In other words, the recognition of a need for gender politics in labor unions was not limited to socialist trade unions.

Sponsored by the Asian American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI)\(^79\) and Türk-İş, TEKSIF organized a series of regional and national conferences titled “Problems of Women Workers in the Turkish Textile Industry” between 1975 and 1980, sent a group of unionist women from TEKSIF to the United States for a month-long education program, and brought in the African American trade union activist Maida Springer Kemp to Turkey to assist TEKSIF in working toward establishing a woman’s committee. Springer Kemp was the first Black woman who represented AFL-CIO abroad, and she was also involved in women’s activism in the United States.\(^80\) Springer Kemp traveled around Turkey, visited factories and unions, had meetings with local labor leaders, and sent out a questionnaire to twenty-five thousand women to determine the needs and demands of women workers. With the close monitoring of the AAFLI and mentoring by Springer Kemp, a national Woman’s Bureau
was founded in Türk-Iş and announced with a conference organized on May 25, 1980. Springer Kemp’s papers include similar references to international gender politics promoted by the ILO and the UN for institutionalizing gender policies in TEKSI and Türk-Iş. Furthermore, the issues that came to the fore in Türk-Iş documents were also similar to, though more extensive than, many issues raised by DISK, Tekstil, and IKD. Most notably, Türk-Iş’s report on women workers in 1980 asserted that childcare centers at workplaces were among the most urgent needs of women workers. Considering the strong anti-Communist position of the AFL-CIO, the competition between Socialist Tekstil/ DISK and anti-Communist TEKSI/Türk-Iş over introducing women’s labor rights to the labor union agenda could be a local manifestation of global antagonisms. As Richards points out, it is plausible that global labor organizations also acted synchronically in developing gender-related policies to have an advantage in the Cold War struggles.

All in all, from 1975 onward, labor unions in Turkey started to show an increasing interest in the diverse issues of women workers that were, to some extent, shaped by unions’ interactions with international organizations of the working class. Most notably the lack of childcare centers for women workers was identified as a significant problem. Despite discussing issues pertaining to women workers’ problems and taking gender into their union agendas, neither TEKSI/ Türk-Iş nor Tekstil/ DISK showed tangible efforts to change women workers’ material conditions and expand their influence in unions. In this way, the position of trade unions remained largely aspirational.

In Tekstil and DISK, the Soviet model as the hegemonic discourse for women’s struggles combined with the low demand for women’s labor rendered efforts for addressing women’s concerns ineffective and contributed to erasing the deeper concerns of unionist women who were in fact quite active and militant about their needs. I mentioned some of those representations of women early in section two of this paper. In the next part, I will discuss the ways in which working-class women organized in Tekstil articulated their needs and demands around motherhood and engaged with the IKD’s campaign for childcare centers. This campaign provides some limited insights into a significant aspect of socialist gender politics aiming to emancipate women through participation in social production.

Women as Mothers and Workers

Feminist research has established that motherhood is constructed in diverse ways in different contexts. Since the nineteenth century, gender and specifically the focus on motherhood has been crucial for the state-making project. In an array of contexts, constructed as the “mothers of the nation,” (some) women were critical for the nation-state as the bearers of culture; these women were responsible for raising proper citizens for the state. In a similar vein, the Kemalist nation-building project in the early-twentieth century...
constructed a hegemonic femininity centered around motherhood. Within this project, being married and having children were defined as “a national duty for women.”

The practice, performance, and experience of motherhood cannot be considered independently from the institution of motherhood. In some contexts, women define their experiences or understanding of motherhood in terms compatible with the hegemonic discourse. In others, social movements deploy the same ideals to make claims on the state or to legitimize their cause. During the second half of the 1970s, working-class organizations of the Left revived the Turkish state’s gender discourse to legitimize their demands and to represent women workers in a more acceptable and appealing fashion. During the period between 1950 and 1980, “non-participation in production starts to be an indicator of status among women.” In other words, being an “urban housewife” or “the mistress of one’s own home” became an ideal, especially for migrant women with rural origins. Coinciding with the period of import substitute industrialization and rural-urban migration, this was a period of housewifization for women in Turkey. The working-class organizations’ revival of the motherhood discourse was related to this broader trend that rendered the majority of women’s labor at the workplaces redundant and forced them to stay at home. For a minority of women workers which housewifization was not possible, working-class organizations attempted to combine their roles as mothers and workers.

Tekstil, DISK, and IKD all believed that women’s responsibilities as mothers were important in terms of women’s contribution to society. The handbook published by DISK and IKD, for instance, suggested that “to get pregnant is not a crime, but a positive social contribution. Motherhood should not be punished by employers through low wages. It should be supported.” In Tekstil’s journal, the leader of the union Rıza Güven made the same emphasis on the protection of motherhood. He stated that “we have to understand this problem considering the necessity of raising all working women’s children as good citizens for the society.” In other words, socialist working-class organizations considered women’s roles as “mothers” crucial and they deployed a gender discourse centered around motherhood to legitimize specific demands from the state and employers.

At the beginning of 1977, a woman’s column called “Tekstil Kadın” (“Tekstil Woman”) began to appear in the journal. However, the column was only published in three issues, and then it disappeared. “Tekstil Kadın” aimed to reveal women’s activism and the problems women experienced as “mothers and workers.” Related to Tekstil’s support for childcare centers, in the issues of Tekstil published in March and April 1977, Tekstil’s press team asked women workers about who was taking care of their children while they were at work. The women’s answers were published without their names and the only information given was the name of the factories at which they were employed. Since the journal had been prepared and published in Istanbul, women workers who were interviewed were from different factories located
in Istanbul. Women workers’ responses to this question revealed various strategies used by women workers in the absence of childcare facilities being provided to them. Despite the limited number of interviews, it is still possible to catch a glimpse of the working women’s engagement with the campaign, as well as the ways in which women employed different strategies to deal with the problem.

When we look at those answers, sending children to the countryside to live with their grandparents emerges as the most common strategy undertaken by women. Working women’s continuing relationships with their (or their husbands’) parents who lived in the countryside proved useful for women in terms of solving their childcare problems. Transferring some of the childcare responsibilities to the countryside is compatible with the history of urbanization and proletarianization in Turkey. A significant portion of workers who migrated to urban areas did not end their relationship with the countryside because they usually continued to own a small piece of land rented or left to other family members, through which they gained additional income or other kinds of payments. In this vein, industrialization in Turkey followed a semi-proletarianization pattern that was common in many other peripheral and semi-peripheral regions of the world. The semi-proletarianization thesis, which became popular during the 1970s and 1980s, was based on the experience of industrialization in Latin America and Africa. In these contexts, including Turkey, working-class households often combined wages from industrial employment and nonwage income from their ties to the rural areas, which functioned as wage subsidies and put downward pressure on wages. Consistent with this trend, leaving children in the countryside in the care of grandparents became quite widespread in the context of ongoing urban-rural relationships. In addition, grandparental childcare is commonplace in many contexts where childcare is not free or not predominantly available. In contexts where family ties are strong and the welfare state is not, informal childcare practices often become commonplace. The welfare-providing role of the family becomes even more crucial in the context of migration, whether it is rural-urban or international.

For working-class women, grandmothers becoming the primary caretaker was not an ideal solution. If grandparents lived in the village, it meant that women workers could see their children rarely during their visits to the village for the holidays. In the case of grandmothers residing in the cities, the care of the children was often part-time. During the interviews, women expressed the guilt and longing stemming from being so far away from their children and mentioned the campaign for childcare centers as a viable solution to their problems. For instance, a woman from Ören Bayan factory stated that:

I leave my child to my mother who lives in Hendek [a small town in Sakarya]. It has been very difficult for me. I always wonder if he is sick. I see him only during holidays. They have talked about nursery rooms. It should happen soon; our longing should end
For women who kept their children in the city, they had to resort to different alternatives. Some working women paid other women for these services (including their relatives) and went through economic hardship. Women stated that they paid around seven hundred Turkish lira to their families for childcare. Considering the minimum wage was around eighteen hundred Turkish lira in 1977, women paid a quite significant amount of money for such childcare services. For single mothers, the burden was much more severe as a woman worker from Avrupa Çorap factory stated:

I am a widow. I have three children. I pay 750 lira and get them taken care of. My wage does not cover anything. Now my only hope is to have a nursery room in the factory. I don’t want this for myself only, but for all women workers.

These interviews also revealed that some women used a combination of different strategies to deal with childcare problems. It is also worthwhile to consider two women who stated that they shared childcare responsibilities with their husbands due to their different shifts at the same factory. It would be very fruitful to know how common it was to have such an arrangement among working-class households, and if we could consider it as an equal division of labor at home. In March 1977, a woman worker from İleri Mensucat factory answered the question in Tekstil as such:

One of my children is in the village with my mother-in-law, and the other is here with me. My husband and I work in different shifts in the same factory. So, when I go to work and until my husband comes home, she stays alone at home. I have a neighbor who takes care of children for fifty lira per month. But we can’t afford it. So, I leave my one and half-year-old daughter to God, when I am at work.

Another woman stated that her older child took care of the younger child. She was from Santral Dikiş factory and she said that:

I have two children. One of them is ten years old, the other is two. The older one goes to school. Until noon, she takes care of the young one. Until I come home, the young one is alone. I always think about them. I worry that something bad can happen to them.

Women often expressed their feelings about leaving their children alone at home without any guardian with sadness, worry, and guilt. Even in situations where women paid for childcare services, they still expressed concerns about their children’s well-being. Working women drew attention to insufficient care and delayed development of children and possible accidents in the absence of alternative choices to make. The union’s journal gave new meaning to working women’s practices and performance of motherhood, aligned with their representation of working women as “good mothers.” Emphasizing the negative effects of the absence of childcare centers on children’s well-being,
the union developed a language through which to take women worker’s demands for childcare as a social necessity not just in the factories and other workplaces but for the society as a whole. By labeling motherhood as a social responsibility, one that led to the raising of good citizens in society, women’s struggles to have good working conditions with childcare was aligned with the broader interests of the state and society. This discourse represented the continuation of the union’s paternalistic approach toward women workers who were imagined as in need of their employers, the trade unions, society, and the state.

In developing a “good mother” discourse, socialist worker’s organizations neglected a very crucial feminist intervention popularized during the 1970s: the recognition of reproductive work as a form of unwaged labor. The international campaign for “wages for housework” (1972) drew attention to women’s domestic burdens such as housework, childcare, and emotional labor as a form of work that is undervalued, unrecognized, and unwaged, despite having critical importance for the capital. We observe that alternative solutions for childcare manifested in Tekstil, as expressed exclusively by women. Neither union officials nor women workers questioned, for instance, the division of labor at home and so-called fatherly duties. Rather, childcare was considered solely as a women’s issue.

The socialist working-class organizations of the 1970s transformed their gender politics from a (supposedly) gender-neutral class-based analysis to a new interest in women’s issues and women’s specific roles as mothers and workers. On the one hand, this new interest in women’s issues provided new opportunities for women workers whose specific issues came to the forefront of class-based politics for the first time. On the other hand, the deployment of a gender discourse centered around motherhood limited the radical potential of women’s struggles by constructing women’s subjectivity as mothers and as factory workers, disregarding how motherhood itself was a form of reproductive labor and how the demands on women of these two forms of labor conflicted with one another.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this paper, I discussed the gender politics of the working-class organizations and women’s position in trade unions during the 1970s. Only after 1975, with the combined effects of the globalization of gender politics, the Soviet influence, and the IKD’s efforts, were working-class women’s issues were taken into the agenda of rival labor unions. Even though I mostly focused on Tekstil and DISK, the transformation of the labor union’s approach toward women workers was not limited to socialist organizations. Rather, the novel interest in gender politics simultaneously emerged in rival unions. While Tekstil and DISK were influenced by the Soviet gender regime and socialist gender politics, TEKSIF and Türk-Iş received significant assistance from US labor organizations for developing women-related policies. This synchronism between rival trade unions at the national level seems indicative of a trend
that is parallel with the global antagonisms of the Cold War and its influence on international labor organizations.

The new gender politics of labor unions remained largely aspirational and failed to bring viable solutions to working women’s problems and demands, such as the critical issue of childcare. The examination of Tekstil’s journal provides some insight into working-class women’s labor activism. Even though the journal has significant limitations in terms of finding women’s voices, it is still possible to see women’s engagement with union politics.

In the context of the campaign for childcare centers at workplaces, Tekstil defined women workers as mothers and within the family unit. In other words, trade unions contributed to women’s subordination in the workplace. While providing a political arena for working-class women’s work-related demands, socialist labor organizations acted upon a discourse of good motherhood, which limited the liberating potential of the movement. Despite advocating for childcare centers, the working-class organizations missed the chance to politicize women’s domestic responsibilities.

The explicit gender focus in labor movements ended abruptly in socialist organizations with the military coup in 1980. The second-wave feminist movement in Turkey, which emerged during the 1980s, rejected the class-based politics that had been at the center of leftist movements, opting instead to focus on gender at the expense of the class. In effect, working-class women and their concerns were largely forgotten in Turkey until the second half of the 2000s. This paper has recuperated this history of intersection between gender and working-class organizing during the 1970s, that has fallen through the cracks of the Left’s scholarship on the one hand and liberal feminist work on the other.

NOTES

* Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
1. I am grateful to Susan Zimmermann, Mahua Sarkar, Ana Maria Candela, and anonymous reviewers for their insightful and critical remarks on earlier drafts of this article.
5. The US feminist historiography also presumed that following women’s suffrage in 1920, feminist movements disappeared until they re-emerged during the 1970s. This idea of a five-decades long retreat has been debunked as scholars expanded their definition of feminism to include the struggles of working-class women and women of color in labor and civil rights movements. See Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon, and Astrid Henry, *Feminism unfinished: A short, surprising history of American women’s movements* (New York, 2014); Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, 2004).


24. Ibid., 90–92.


30. For a review of the ISI in Latin America, for example, see Werner Baer, “Import Substitution and Industrialization in Latin America: Experiences and Interpretations,” *Latin American Research Review* 7 (1972): 95–122.


34. Ibid., 173–174.


36. The 51 percent of women in the manufacturing industry were employed in textile, clothing, and leather industries by 1980. See Ecevit, “Shop Floor Control,” 58.

37. Cobble points out that “formal barriers [regarding membership policies] fell in the early twentieth century, but many unions remained skeptical or at best indifferent to the organization of women.” See Dorothy Sue Cobble, “Introduction: Remaking Unions for the New Majority,” in *Women and Unions: Forging a Partnership*, edited by Dorothy Sue Cobble (New York, 1993), 5.

39. Addressed to rank-and-file textile workers and distributed for free, Tekstil was a monthly journal, published 110 issues between 1968 and 1979. Tekstil aimed to be an instrument to mobilize workers and to promote union policies.

40. For the origins and development of socialist construction of “bourgeois feminism” and “woman question” since the nineteenth century, see Marilyn J. Boxer, “Rethinking the socialist construction and international career of the concept ‘Bourgeois feminism,’” The American Historical Review 112 (2007): 131–158. The socialist organizations in Turkey developed a classical Marxist approach toward women with reference to the writings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Woman and Socialism by August Bebel and Woman and Communism edited by Jean Freville 1970s were also popular and contributed to politicization of gender issues in the Left. See Adak, “Yetmişli Yıllarda Kadın,” 613.


45. Ibid.


49. Ibid., 22.

50. Ibid., 22.

51. Ibid., 22.


57. The union frequently used the term “Turkish” to describe the workers in Turkey. In other words, it did not recognize the potential ethnic differences within the working-class.

58. Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (no. 100).


62. Ibid., 38.


68. Ibid., 548.


71. In the Global North, similar demands were raised during the 1960s.


75. It is interesting to note that by the time the IKD raised the campaign for childcare centers during the 1970s, Turkish Labor Code had already compelled employers to establish nursing rooms and childcare centers for almost four decades. For example, see “Gebe veya emzikli kadınların çalışma koşullarında emzirme odaları ve çocuk yurttan (kres) hakkında tüzük,” The Ministry of Labor, *Resmi Gazete*, August 11, 1973, 4–7. https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/arsiv/14622.pdf However, these laws were not put into practice by employers.

76. “İkres İmza Kampanyanın Sonuçları,” in *İlerici Kadınlar Derneği*, 374–375.


88. Ibid., 102.
90. DIŞK, Ana ve emekçi, 8.
92. Keyder, State and Class, 159.
99. Though women’s wages might be a little bit higher based on seniority or their skills.
101. Ibid.
103. Ibid.