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KESK women oral history project and the exhibition

We were, We are, We will be! - Struggling for gender equality in trade unions

This is a project about the collective history of KESK (The Confederation of Public Employees' Trade Unions) women. Its most important feature is that it was carried out collectively by the women who participated in it.

We started to share our idea with as many KESK women as possible. We began to organise the first consultation meetings.

With each consultation meeting we held the number of women participating in the oral history project increased. The women interviewed also became coordinators of the study. In the meetings we studied written sources such as the women's congress books and the lists of the participants in relevant congresses throughout the history of KESK to find all the names of women who participated. Our aim was to represent the diversity within KESK. So we also looked for women whose names were found in written sources and also for women whose names are not mentioned in any source, but who we knew to have been actively working in a KESK office or in another union's representative office countrywide.

The field work began. The women we interviewed embraced our project so much that they started to work with us, and conducted interviews with other women in the regions where they live. There was so much experience that women had gained during the past. It was so good for all women to talk about it.

Our oral history project was also an archival work. While we were reaching out to women all over Turkey and compiling their stories, we also started to collect materials related to union work in the regions, such as documents from private archives, or objects produced by women such as paintings, scarves and cockades. We've collected an incredible number of photos and lots of other material.

Sometimes we have a feeling of emptiness and sometimes a sense of meaninglessness. A long struggle process and the feeling that some things have to be done over and over again can be tiring and wearisome. Sometimes I have the feeling that we haven't reached anything at all! This oral history project has made all of us feel that it is not so. I hope and wish that all women and friends who visit this exhibition will feel the same. The exhibition shows that what has been done does not remain like writings on the water, it was not in vain, it has not

disappeared. This history is our personal history, our common history that we created by struggling together. There was tiring work and it was not in vain.

They are - already - saying “We were and we are!” and write the history together. When we listen to the life stories of KESK women, when we listen to the stories about their union struggles, we listen - at the same time - to the history of the union. This gives us the opportunity to rethink and reconstruct history. This is a radical, democratising intervention.

Finally, I want to add that this history is full of struggle. It is a history of sacrifice. This oral history project is not a romantic success story where all goes well. There are achievements: Women have changed their own lives. They interfered with the family environment in which they lived. They transformed their workplaces. They transformed the unions they were in. But it was at the same time a very tense and troublesome process within families, with the husbands, with the partners.

However, the women succeeded. And their success goes beyond that. The KESK struggle is a contribution to the trade union struggle tradition in Turkey. It is a contribution to the history of democratisation in Turkey. The participation of women in this history is a very serious and important contribution to this process. This should be noted.

I believe that this work will also have an impact on new generations.