

**The Feminization of pro-Kurdish Party Politics in Turkey:  
The Role of Women Activists**

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## **Abstract**

This study offers a case study of women's political participation and representation in pro-Kurdish politics in Turkey since 1990s. Kurdish women have been double oppressed in Turkey due to both their ethnic identity and gender identity. They have been mobilized by the Kurdish national movement for the Kurdish national cause and joined both Kurdish armed and political struggles from the early 1990s. From the foundation of the first pro-Kurdish political party, the People's Labour Party [*Halkın Emek Partisi- HEP*] in 1990, Kurdish women have actively been involved in pro-Kurdish party politics. However, the pro-Kurdish party failed in promoting egalitarian gender values, policies and supporting women's inclusion in decision-making until the end of 1990s except the election of the first Kurdish woman deputy, Leyla Zana in 1991. Women's participation and representation in pro-Kurdish party politics have significantly advanced numerically since 1990s. In contrast to the general picture of women's underrepresentation in Turkey's politics, the proportion of Kurdish women representatives has been increasing in representation bodies. Therefore, this research aims to examine the Kurdish case through conducting an intensive field research in order to explain the reasons and factors behind these developments.

This research is an empirical case study, primarily based on qualitative analysis of face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews of female political activists and participant observations held during field research. On the basis of empirical data gathered from field research and an analysis of pro-Kurdish party characteristics, its gender policies and female political activists' roles in representation bodies, this study argues that the pro-Kurdish politics has gradually

been feminizing which refers to an increase in women's both descriptive and substantive representation since the beginning of 2000s. The changes and developments in terms of women's representation in pro-Kurdish politics are framed as a process of feminization; which can simply be defined as a process for women to be included in political decision-making both in numbers and ideas for representing women's interests. In this regard, this thesis searches for answers for two essential questions: how has the pro-Kurdish party politics been feminized and what difference has been made in pro-Kurdish politics since women are increasingly taking part in decision-making processes. Thus, this study assesses whether descriptive representation links to women's substantive representation in pro-Kurdish politics.

The examination of Kurdish women's representation based on the *feminizing politics* approach does not only theoretically contribute to broaden the scope of *feminizing politics* but it also broadens the scope of the concepts of descriptive and substantive representation included in this approach. In this respect, this thesis will demonstrate that the analysis of the Kurdish women case in the context of feminizing politics presents several insights about the women's political representation and put forth how political parties and actors strategically interact in changing women's political representation.

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