

BENİM BEDENİM BENİM KARARARIM (MY BODY MY DECISION) AND KÜRTAJ YASAKLANAMAZ (ABORTION CANNOT BE BANNED)

CASE ANALYSIS



TÜSEV
Türkiye Üçüncü Sektör Vakfı
Third Sector Foundation of Turkey

The closing speech of the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on May 25, 2012 at the International Conference of Parliamentarians opened the way to restarting the debate on abortion ban. In his May 26, 2012 speech at the AKP Women's Branch 3rd Ordinary Congress, Erdogan repeated his messages on the issues of cesarean section and abortion.¹

Following these two speeches, a reaction occurred in the public opinion, and campaigns were organized against the banning or limitation of abortion by various CSOs, especially organizations that represent the women's movement in Turkey. As part of the Civil Society Monitoring Report 2012 two campaigns are analyzed. Firstly, the *Kürtaj Yasaklanamaz (Abortion Cannot Be Banned) Campaign* which involves an online petition, and was supported by various countries including Turkey is analyzed. Secondly, the *Benim Bedenim Benim Kararım (My Body My Decision)* campaign that was widely supported in the social media where individuals have shared their reactions against the draft law, along with their pictures are analyzed due to the fact that they are among the most influential campaigns in this context.

The Benim Bedenim Benim Kararım campaign operated by a media organization has provided the opportunity to present reactions with striking visuals thanks to the participation of individuals. *Kürtaj Yasaklanamaz* campaign that received a substantial amount of individual and institutional support through the online petition is important in the way that it was born out of the women's movement, and gained international support.

THE HISTORY OF THE CAMPAIGN

Benim Bedenim Benim Kararım Campaign



Following the first day after the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's "Uludere and Abortion" statements on May 25th, several readers have reached Bianet² on the phone and said that they would support a campaign that would be concentrated on this issue. Due to its independent nature as a media institution, Bianet has never conducted a campaign before, but after this huge demand from its employees and its readers, it decided to organize a campaign.

Within the few days that followed the statement of the Prime Minister, the Bianet team and the volunteers have organized a meeting regarding the issue, and exchanged ideas, and made a research on the similar

¹ <http://kurtajyasaklanamaz.com/>

² Bianet, the Independent Communication Network (BİA), is a continuous project that has been conducted since 1997 at the center of the IPS Communication Foundation's efforts, on four basic activity areas –editorial desk, legal support unit, educational programs, program development center- with the purpose of empowering "independent media". For more information on Bianet, please visit www.bianet.org.

authorities. According to the campaign team, the goal of the *Benim Bedenim Benim Kararım* campaign was to show the power of reaction via a platform that was established against Prime Minister Erdogan's Uludere and abortion statements. The Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan have targeted the *Benim Bedenim Benim Kararım* campaign at a live TV show on ATV on June 6, 2012 and said that, "there is propaganda without a religious basis. The body does not belong to you. Of course, this approach varies religiously and culturally. At this point, our faith and our traditions simply oppose this." He expressed his reaction against the campaign by stating that, "According to our constitution, the right to life starts at the moment of conception. Considering this, it is unreasonable to get up and say, 'this body is mine'. First of all we have to defend the right to life, this is our duty. The other choice is disrespectful of the law."⁵

Kürtaj Yasaklanamaz campaign, on the other hand, has followed an advocacy strategy, towards mostly on Prime Minister and the government, in order to stop the government's initiative of banning or limiting access to abortion. Additionally, the campaign targeted dissemination of information about recent developments by and the visibility of the support statements from abroad. The executors of the *Kürtaj Yasaklanamaz* campaign have informed the international organizations such as the European Commission, the European Council, and the United Nations, as well as women's organizations and coalitions in various countries, universities and academics who are working in the area of women's rights on the situation and their demands, and asked them to share

their reaction against the government's initiative on banning abortion. Thanks to the coordinated activities of the *Kürtaj Yasaklanamaz* campaign, and various groups from the women's movement, European Council, World Health Organization, Amnesty International Organization, and United States have made statements regarding the issue.⁶

Kürtaj Yasaklanamaz campaign emphasized making the *de facto* practice of abortion impossible, aside from the banning of abortion initiative. It succeeded in attracting the public opinion and media's attention towards the rejections of abortion demands at public hospitals in various cities, court decision requests for pregnancies as a result of rape, and the damage to the women's and the babies' health due to enforcement of normal delivery.

According to the campaign team of the *Kürtaj Yasaklanamaz* campaign, another success of the campaign was to attract the attention of public and the media on the difficulties experienced in practice within the scope of the Pregnancy Monitoring Program (GEBLİZ), initiated as part of the family practice services by the Ministry of Health. This new practice, which requires those who request a pregnancy test at private laboratories to share their personal and contact information, is considered "useful for desired pregnancies according to the experts. However it pushes the boundaries of privacy in cases of undesired pregnancies."⁷ After attracting the attention on the topic within the scope of the campaign, the Ministry of Health has ensured that patients receive information confidentiality option.

⁵ Benim Bedenim Benim Kararım Diyen Kadınlara Kızdı. Milliyet. Access Date: June 7, 2012. <http://siyaset.milliyet.com.tr/-benim-bedenim-benim-kararim-diyen-kadinlara-kizdi/siyaset/siyasetdetay/07.06.2012/1550519/default.htm>

⁶ *The Limitation of Abortion is a Step Backwards*. BBC Turkish. Access Date: May 30, 2012. http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkce/haberler/2012/05/120531_un_abortion.shtml

⁷ *Mahremiyet Butonu*. Radikal. Access Date: June 22, 2012. <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalDetayV3&ArticleID=1091882&CategoryID=77>

Another issue that was overstressed by the *Kürtaj Yasaklanamaz* campaign has been the detention of women⁸ during and after the nation-wide demonstrations. During this period, a pop-up message window warning has been continuously made on the campaign's website, and a message denouncing the detention of peaceful demonstrators were rereleased via a press statement⁹.

Other than these aforementioned campaigns, other initiatives have simultaneously conducted advocacy activities employing different methods. For instance, in accordance with the call made by the Kürtaj Haktır Karar Kadın Platformu "Abortion is a Right, Righteous Women's Platform"¹⁰, simultaneous sit-in acts were conducted in 22 cities of Turkey in June 8th. The Platform has ensured the actualization of a march participated by thousands of women on June 17th from Pangalti to Taksim. The same platform declared "Virginity, Pregnancy, Abortion Cannot Be Blacklisted" on June 28th, and organized another march in Istanbul, from Galatasaray to Taksim. The Ankara Women's Platform has organized several marches and street protests starting on May 30th. The Righteous Women Platform has managed to ensure the concurrent publication of a reactionary statement in several newspapers.¹¹ These initiatives were executed with strong communication and in solidarity, and these initiatives by women's groups complemented each other.

WHAT WAS THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY?

The *Benim Bedenim Benim Kararım (My Body My Decision)* campaign was born out of a reaction without a preliminary preparation period. For the massiveness and visibility of the campaign, celebrities including artists, opinion leaders and other people who are known to be sensitive about women's rights were contacted. These people were e-mailed four samples of images that can be used in the campaign, along with an invitation text that simply describes the campaign. Immediately after the e-mails were sent, the images about the campaign started to appear on Twitter, and became viral, the indication of its success. The campaign that was initiated by Bianet has gained strength by becoming widespread in such a short time via the use of social media channels.

The creation of the website for the Kürtaj Yasaklanamaz (Abortion Cannot Be Banned) campaign, and the preparation and the e-mailing of the text that reflects the opinions and suggestions to groups that include more than 200 women's organizations have been completed in five days. Signatures supporting the campaign were collected for two weeks, and the collected signatures were sent to the representative of the government on June 19.

The initiative went through several debates during the designing of the petition campaign regarding the name of the campaign, the use of the right discourse, and conveyance of an effective message. Within the course of this process, the women's organizations have continued to stay in touch about the simultaneously conducted campaigns, and supported each other. During the campaign each group have progressed by using different communication methods and tools. Social media channels, petitions, and street protests/marches were frequently used by the women's movement towards

⁸ *Kürtaj Eylemine 28 Gözaltı*. Sabah. Access Date: June 1, 2012. <http://www.sabah.com.tr/Gundem/2012/06/01/kurtaj-eyleminde-28-gozalti>

⁹ The press statement made as part of the campaign can be accessed at <http://www.kadinininsanhaklari.org/kategori/haberler/33212/kurtaj-yasaklanamaz-kampanyasinda-toplanan-imzalar-hukumete-gonderildi>.

¹⁰ www.kurtajhaktir.com

¹¹ The statement text can be reached at <http://www.haklikadinplatformu.org/icerik/55-bedenimizi-hedef-alan-siyaseti-durdurun>.

hampering the government's initiative. The ability to reach more people regarding the activities conducted for the petition of the initiative, and the high number of supportive signatures was made possible due to the fact that feminist women who took part in the coordination of the campaign had strong ties to women's movement in Turkey and around the world. Feminist women involved in the campaign mobilized social media and their respective organizations, as well as their personal networks. The women that took part in the initiative have contacted several national and international organizations that they were a member of or those that were related to the issue, the unions, international news agencies, and academics personally, on the phone or through e-mail. At the same time, the course of the petition as well as the current debates on abortion has been shared with the followers via social media.

HOW WAS THE MEDIA REACHED?

In the course of the *Benim Bedenim Benim Kararım* campaign, a major support was received from the print media. Ayse Arman, one of the columnists of the Hurriyet Newspaper, has supported the campaign through writing an article on the campaign in her column and taking part in a photo shoot related to the campaign.¹² In the first day of the campaign, a great number of journalists have supported the campaign by sending pictures. According to Cicek Tahaoglu, the supervisor of the *Benim Bedenim Benim Kararım* campaign, the support provided by the columnists in the mainstream media, which rarely give place to news about civil society unless they are sensational stories, is an indication of a significant development.

Within the course of the *Kürtaj Yasaklanamaz*

campaign, even though there was a team of volunteers that contact the media, the coordinators of the campaign believed that the interest of the Turkish media towards the campaign was low. The press statement made on June 19th has brought this issue to the agenda as follows: "While the Turkish media surrendered to debating the issue generally on basis of religious arguments with the under intense pressure, they did not convey our actions and discourse sufficiently." The campaign team who took this situation into consideration has worked hard in order to inform the international media on the developments. People in the campaign team that managed the campaign accepted interview requests from national and international members of the media, and the necessary participations were ensured. The international news agencies with representatives in Turkey have also shown great interest to the issue, interview requests from these people were also responded by the group. As part of the communication activities, the campaign documents, particularly the press statements, were translated into at least one foreign language.¹³

As part of the process since the beginning, with her support to the actualization of the petition campaign and the Kürtaj Yasaklanamaz initiative, the member of the Equality Watch Group (ESITIZ), Gokcecicek Ayata, stated that the debates on the abortion law in the media are based on religious arguments, and discussions continued on the propounded data that centers around the decrease of population, and the women's rights, as well as the violations of rights that may occur in the event of banning abortion are generally excluded from the debates. This issue was also criticized by the campaign

¹² *The Prime Minister's Statement on Abortion*. TRT. Access Date: May 25, 2012. <http://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/basbakandan-kurtaj-aciklamasi-42244.html>

¹³ Certain relevant news can be reached at: <http://en.qantara.de/The-Government-Is-Trying-to-Intrude-in-Peoples-Private-Lives/19376c500/index.html>; http://womensnews.org/story/abortion/120716/turkish-women-blow-whistle-rights-crackdown#.U0b0_m-vFy0;

team that started the initiative during a press statement on June 19th.

HOW WAS THE PUBLIC OPINION REACHED?

A webpage was started in order to allow the uploading of images within the scope of the *Benim Bedenim Benim Kararım* campaign, however due to high demand, the website failed in terms of the expected performance. During that time, Bianet called out to volunteers for technical support to make the website effective. In the first days of the campaign, a serious amount of reader's support, especially on the technical aspect, had been received. Bianet team has mentioned that the campaign had a significant impact since it was developed and strengthened with the participation and support of individuals.

The news about the launching of the website of the *Kürtaj Yasaklanamaz* initiative have been shared with various groups that involve CSOs that work in different areas, primarily by communication groups participated by women's organizations and activists such as the Women's Congress, End to Violence Platform, TCK Women's Platform, women e-groups, Ka-Der, and equality mechanisms, as well as the networks of other mixed groups such as the Conscientious Objection for Peace Platform. Additionally, several face-to-face, phone and e-mail interviews were conducted with relevant national and international organizations, unions, international news agencies, and academics to raise awareness on the aim and role of the website.

WHO SUPPORTED IT?

While *Benim Bedenim Benim Kararım* campaign is one that raises awareness and assembles reactions on the Internet, the protest marches organized by the *Kürtaj*

Haktır Karar Kadınların Platformu (Abortion is a Right Righteous Women's Platform) that was made up with the call from Istanbul Feminist Collective carried the debates on the streets. Various campaigns on this issue have supported each other and allowed the reactions to be delivered in more than one approach or method. Both women and men supported the campaign.

Protests were organized in a total of 23 cities, especially in major cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, simultaneously with the petition campaign over the course of the *Kürtaj Yasaklanamaz* campaign. According to the women who were involved in the campaign, the simultaneous protests organized in various cities of Turkey such as Mus, Van, Sakarya, Mersin, and Bursa during this process indicate the magnitude of reaction that emerged out of the public opinion.

The translations of the website of *Kürtaj Yasaklanamaz* campaign, which is published in five languages, were done by the support of numerous volunteers. Thanks to the international connections of the women who were involved in the initiative and supported the campaign, the petition was simultaneously announced and received support in several countries of the world. The communication, forwarding, and support work conducted by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) through their website and communication networks have allowed women's organizations in different countries to be informed of the situation, and this seriously increased the international support. LGBT organizations have also provided substantial support to the campaign. Gokcecicek Ayata said that the support that was received for the campaign from CSOs abroad is larger compared to CSOs in Turkey. For instance, women in major European cities, such as London, organized street protests to declare their support for the campaign in

Turkey, and read the petition text in their own languages to repeat the demands in the text. Following the campaign, great attention was paid in sending thank you messages to all supporters.

HOW DID THE CAMPAIGN SUCCEED?

According to Çiçek Tahaoğlu, the campaign supervisor of *Benim Bedenim Benim Kararım*, the most important factor in the success of the campaign was the use of powerful images. People's use of their own pictures has created interpersonal interaction, and the fact that the messages sent with the images were defined by the participants made the campaign all the more interesting. Additionally, some participants have preferred writing their messages on their bodies (belly, arms, wrists, forehead, etc.) or the signs they hold in their hands which allowed the internalization of the campaign.

The age range of the participants is quite wide, and there have been catchy images of for instance three generations of women, or spouses posing together. As a result, the online and accessible nature of the campaign, the use of images, and the opportunity for the participants to internalize the campaign were the most important factors.

The fact that the campaign was organized by a media organization is also considered as a success factor. Although Bianet, compared to the mainstream media has limited number of followers, the fact that it is followed by a numerous number of journalists¹⁴ has helped increase the visibility of the campaign in the media. Gökçeçiçek Ayata highlights that the success of the petition campaign started by the *Kürtaj Yasaklanamaz* initiative is due to the fact that it was operated upon a text that was supported and could generally be

agreed upon by women's organizations. In this process, there was emphasis on the clarity and understandability of the text. According to Ayata, the existence of a team that has worked diligently since the beginning of the initiative in order to rapidly and effectively respond to the developments witnessed over the course of the campaign, and the support of the volunteers have contributed significantly to the cause.

According to the data retrieved from the website of *Kürtaj Yasaklanamaz*, 60,420 signatures have been collected within the scope of the campaign. In addition to the individual signatures, 680 institutions in Turkey, 372 of which are from the women's movement, have provided institutional support to the campaign through their signatures. 220 organizations from abroad have also given support to the campaign with their institutional signatures.¹⁵ According to Ayata, the total number of collected signatures indicates a crucial number in terms of the support that was shown to the campaign. However, taking into account that Turkey's population is around 70 million, the number of signatures collected is not considered sufficient. In addition to this, it is indicated that the support that was given to the institutional signatures section by CSOs and unions other than women's organizations was lower than expected, and that the causes of this issue must be analyzed separately.

The collected signatures as part of the campaign were sent to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, President Abdullah Gul, the Minister of Health Recep Akdag, and the Minister of Family and Social Policies Fatma Sahin. Following the delivery of signatures, no feedback has been received from the official authorities. On the other hand, as a result of

¹⁴ According to a survey conducted by Bianet, 15% of its readers are journalists.

¹⁵ The abovementioned information was retrieved in 12/3/3012 at <http://kurtajyasaklanamaz.com/>.

all of these campaigns, and the concurrent advocacy, various government representatives have stated by the end of June that they backed down from shortening the legal period of 10 weeks, and allowing abortion only in cases where the woman is under medical risk.¹⁶

Abortion procedures until the 10th week had been legalized with the 1983 law in Turkey. However the debate on the issue was restarted unexpectedly with the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan bringing it to the agenda in May 2012. It is still unclear how the process will end where the social reaction was expressed through street protests, and petition campaigns. According to the news dated July 18, 2012, the featured clauses of the “Draft Law on Reproduction Health” being prepared by the Ministry of Health are as follows¹⁷:

- “The medical personnel will be given the right to resignation in the event of optional abortion,
- Medication used for optional miscarriage will be regulated,
- Abortion will be legal until the 10th week. After the 10th week, those that impose conscious miscarriage will be sentenced to 3 years of imprisonment
- Regarding pregnancy due to rape, for people under the age of 15 “it will be based on the court’s decision” “due to the possible conflict between the minor’s interests and the request for a guardian’s permission.”

As seen above, the content of the draft law that contains controversial clauses regarding the sexual and reproductive rights of women

is still unknown. Women’s organizations anticipate the implementation of the mentioned restrictions¹⁸, and the reawakening of the debates on this issue in the following year.

¹⁶ *Kürtaj için Düzenleme Yapılmayacak*. CNN Turk. Access Date: June 21, 2012 <http://www.cnntrk.com/2012/guncel/06/21/kurtaj.icin.duzenleme.yapilmayacak/665934.0/index.html>

¹⁷ *Kürtaj Yasasının Ayrıntıları Belli Oldu..* Internet News. Access Date: July 18, 2012 <http://www.internethaber.com/kurtaj-yasasi-kurtj-tasarisi-recep-akdag-ensest-iliskiler-siniri-ertesigun-hapi-443748h.htm>

¹⁸ *İşte Türkiye’nin Kürtaj Haritası*. Haberturk. Access Date: July 6, 2012. <http://www.haberturk.com/saglik/haber/756723-iste-turkiyenin-kurtaj-haritasi>