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# Women workers' education at the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions: excavating histories of transnational collaboration with the ICFTU

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (Türk-İş) and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) from the 1960s until the 1990s with a focus on the transnational collaboration of activists who organised educational activities for women workers and trade unionists to empower them as rights-seeking political subjects and strengthen their position within the trade union movement. Demonstrating how women's trade union education evolved within the framework of local politics as well as global processes such as the Cold War and the emergence of a UN-led gender equality regime, it argues that global inequalities, geopolitical differences, and Türk-İş leaders' ambivalent attitude towards women's status in the trade union movement led to a loose, sporadic relationship between local activists and those from the west. At the same time, it was often these activists' sustained efforts towards collaboration and the circulation of their agendas that pressured Türk-İş to invest in women's empowerment in trade unions. Utilising archival and trade union sources as well as oral history interviews, the article integrates the work of women labour activists in feminist labour historiography, offering a more comprehensive understanding of trade unions' gender politics in Turkey and globally.

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## Introduction

Marginalised in gender and labour histories for decades, women workers and their struggles in Turkey have received increasing scholarly attention since the 2010s. Addressing various locales, sectors, and time periods, a growing number of researchers have contributed to the emerging field of feminist labour history (Akgöz, 2021; Balsoy, 2009; Kocabiçak, 2016; Makal & Toksöz, 2012; Satı, 2021). Despite the rising popularity of the subject, however, most of the available analyses are disconnected from key developments in the global histories of gender and labour struggles. This article connects local and global developments by studying the instances of transnational collaboration between the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (*Türkiye İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu*, Türk-İş, est. 1952), one of the most significant labour organisations in Turkey in the second half of the twentieth century, and its relations with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU, est. 1949). Focusing on the period from the 1960s, when the education of women workers became an agenda item in trade union activism in Turkey, until the 1990s, when feminism surfaced as a new dynamic impacting a declining trade union

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movement, it excavates the history of activists who, as members of national and international trade unions, organised educational activities for women workers and trade unionists to empower them as rights-seeking political subjects and strengthen their position within the trade union movement.

The theme of women's international and transnational organising around gendered labour education has featured in recent contributions in feminist labour history (Boris, 2019; Cobble, 2021; Laot, 2015; Richards, 2018). These contributions show how, throughout the twentieth century, women labour activists 'transformed themselves and the global trade union movement through education' (Cobble, 2016, p. 153). They strived for a kind of transnational collaboration that acknowledged global inequalities and the agency of women in the developing world – a kind of collaboration which reflects, as Yvette Richards argues, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's vision of a 'noncolonizing feminist solidarity across borders' (Richards, 2011, p. 417). Building on this emerging scholarship, this article aims to identify the milestones in the development of gendered labour education and establish the impact of transnational collaboration in national agenda-setting in the Turkish context. Demonstrating how women's trade union education evolved within the framework of local politics as well as global processes such as the Cold War and the emergence of a UN-led 'gender equality regime' (Kardam, 2005), it argues that global inequalities, geopolitical differences, and Türk-İş leaders' ambivalent attitude towards women's status in the trade union movement led to a loose, sporadic relationship between local activists and those from the west. At the same time, it was often these activists' sustained efforts towards collaboration and the circulation of their agendas that pressured Türk-İş to invest in women's empowerment within trade unions. Findings presented in this article are a constructive corrective to the previous work by feminist researchers of gender and labour who in the 1990s argued that trade union leaders in Turkey adopted a gender agenda only due to the pressure they received from international labour organisations, without any mobilisation from below (Toksöz & Saylan, 1998, p. 299; see also Koray, 1993; Toksöz & Erdoğan, 1998). That argument reflected the criticism directed to trade union men by trade union women of the time, but it was not informed by activists' struggles around women's education prior to the 1990s that had been an important dynamic of women's empowerment in trade unions. By taking a long-term perspective on women's trade union education, this article illustrates that it is possible to trace the continuity of women's labour activism over time and undo the erasure of their struggles from gender and labour history.

The article starts with a brief background on the post-World War II context of women's education in Türk-İş and the ICFTU. The three sections that follow roughly correspond to one decade each, from the 1960s to the 1980s. The final section offers an overview of the early 1990s and a reflection on the politics of remembering women's labour struggles. The research that informs this article utilises primary sources collected from various national and international libraries and archives, as well as oral history interviews with trade union activists who were involved in women workers' education at Türk-İş in various time periods between the 1960s and the 1990s. When diverse sources are brought together, it becomes clear that the women-oriented educational activities Türk-İş co-organised with the ICFTU are just the tip of the iceberg in terms of recovering women's transnational labour activism in feminist labour history. Both Türk-İş and the ICFTU often acted in concert with (and financially relied on) other international actors such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United States Agency for International Development (AID), and the Asian-American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI). An analysis of how non-union international actors impacted women workers' education at Türk-İş and the many educational activities organised by national unions affiliated with Türk-İş in collaboration with the International Trade Secretariats (ITSS) affiliated with the ICFTU lie outside the scope of this article. The discussion provided here thus constitutes only an entry point for a much larger history of activism and policies around the improvement of women's positions in terms of gainful employment and the trade union movement.

## Women as a special category of workers

The education of women workers in Turkey began back in the nineteenth century with vocational and skills training for women in lower socioeconomic classes (Bilir, 2021; Özkazanç et al., 2018), but until the mid-twentieth century, little had been done for women by trade unions. Throughout the twentieth century, women's participation in industrial production remained consistently low. Their gainful employment, mostly in manufacturing, was often home-based and in small-scale, informal businesses (see, e.g. Makal & Toksöz, 2012; Quataert & Zürcher, 1995). This was one obstacle to women's mobilisation into formal workers' organisations. Moreover, trade unions, historically dominated by men, had been uninterested in organising women's work and including women in decision-making processes (Urhan, 2014, pp. 12–13). Following the foundation of the Republic of Turkey (1923), women participated in trade unions relatively more actively (Kosova, 2011). Yet, in the early republican period, workers' self-organising was restricted by the 1936 Labour Law, which prohibited strikes and lockouts, and by the 1938 Associations Law, which prohibited any kind of class-based organisation. After Turkey's transition to a multi-party regime in 1946, amendments in the Associations Law liberalised workers' organising. Between 1950 and 1960, when the Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti*) was in government, industrialisation and a wave of migration from rural to urban areas increased the number of wage workers substantially. Many unions appeared in the postwar years, and union membership increased by six-fold, but unionised workers still comprised a very small portion of all workers (Akin, 2010, p. 170). With the spread of print media in the 1950s, workers' and union gazettes appeared nationwide, propagating the populist rhetoric of the era that combined an emphasis on labour rights with an anti-communist stance (Akin, 2010, p. 172). In a Cold War context where Turkey's alignment with the west defined the parameters of its labour movement, various unions and regional union confederations came together in 1952 and established Türk-İş, the first national confederation of workers' unions (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 1998; Öztürk, 2017).

In the postwar period, women workers' education expanded and internationalised, as this became an agenda item for international trade unions and global governance organisations such as the ILO, UNESCO, the OECD, the ICFTU, the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), and the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions (IFCTU). Thanks to the sustained efforts of the women in the ICFTU Women's Committee, the ICFTU became the best organised and most dedicated to women's education out of the three major international trade union organisations (Laot, 2015, p. 72). Following a summer school for women workers in 1953 in La Brévière, France, the Women's Committee was jointly created by the ICFTU and the International Trade Secretariats (ITSs) in 1957 with the official name 'Consultative Committee for Women Workers' Questions'. Since its initial meetings, the Women's Committee gave priority to women workers' education in its agenda. Members of the Committee came from advanced capitalist ('western') countries. The ICFTU was established in 1949 by trade unions of those countries after a Cold War split within the WFTU (Carew, 2000; Gordon, 2000). From the 1950s onwards it became the principal trade union partner of the ILO (Boris, 2019, p. 155). In the 1960s, both organisations' agendas were shaped by the first UN Development Decade (1961–1970) (Carew, 2000, pp. 279–280). This was one significant dynamic behind the interest of the Women's Committee in educating and organising women workers of non-western, developing countries. Another was the Cold War competition between the ICFTU and the WFTU over organising (women) workers in the developing world (Harisch, 2023, p. 356).

The ICFTU's educational activities for women workers started in Latin America and Africa in the early 1960s and later expanded to Asia and the Middle East. In the 1960s, the Women's Committee had an increasing number of corresponding members from developing countries. Corresponding members had limited means of attending the Committee meetings that were organised once or twice a year (Harisch, 2023, p. 363), but they reported to the Committee the problems and developments in their countries regarding women workers. By contrast, western members of the Committee travelled extensively, produced research and travel reports as well as policy proposals with both direct and indirect implications for the education of women workers in developing

countries, and engaged in educational work in the places they visited (Richards, 2011). Their activities contributed to a paradigm where women in developing countries became placed into what Eileen Boris calls a 'category within a category', a particular group among women workers defined by their 'difference from the hegemonic western norm' (Boris, 2019, p. 91). At the same time, the Women's Committee had a restricted budget, and its work ultimately depended on the decisions of the ICFTU Executive Committee, which more often than not refused the Women's Committee's aspiration to expand to the non-western world and to allocate resources for women's education in developing countries (Harisch, 2023, p. 350).

In 1953, at its second general assembly, Türk-İş adopted a resolution to affiliate with the ICFTU, but the ruling Democrat Party, wary of the political consequences of international trade union relations at home, did not authorise Türk-İş's decision (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 1998). Yet, relations between Türk-İş and the ICFTU informally grew (Öztürk, 2017, p. 33). At the ICFTU summer school for women workers in 1953 in La Brévière, two women from Türk-İş, Meral Sonbay and Mevhibe Öksüzcü, represented Turkey (ICFTU, 1953). Discussions and decisions made during this summer school shaped the ICFTU's future work regarding working women (Cobble, 2021, p. 317). Through the participation of the two women, these discussions and decisions entered Türk-İş's radar and contributed to its understanding of women as a special category of workers. Yet, it was only in the 1960s that more concrete steps were taken in Türk-İş targeting women's education. The Democrat Party rule ended with a military coup in 1960, and the 1961 Constitution that marked Turkey's return to civilian rule opened a new era for workers' organising. Wage workers from diverse sectors and different parts of the country mobilized for the right to unionise and strike. In 1963, the coalition government led by the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*) issued a new Union Law and a Collective Bargaining, Strike, and Lockout Law that legalised strikes. By the 1960s, technological, demographic, and economic developments had resulted in women's greater inclusion in gainful work (Kazgan, 1981, p. 134). Combined with the new liberties regarding workers' organising, women's participation in trade unions increased and 'women workers' became an agenda item for trade unions in Turkey.

### Travelling agendas and early encounters between activists

In 1960, the cabinet formed under the military regime approved Türk-İş's affiliation with the ICFTU. Throughout the 1960s, Türk-İş leaders developed formal relations with the ICFTU as well as the AID (est. 1961) and the OECD (est. 1961). These organisations provided Türk-İş with financial and informational support in developing educational programs for workers, part of which focused on avoiding communist influence over labour politics. As relations with the ICFTU, the OECD, the AID, and also the ILO stimulated Türk-İş's interest in organising women workers, Türk-İş leaders mobilised these relations to include women workers in the educational programs they developed. Published first in 1963, the Türk-İş Journal (*Türk-İş Dergisi*) reported regularly on developments regarding women workers in Turkey and internationally and paid special attention to women workers' education.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Marcelle Dehareng facilitated the collaboration between Türk-İş and the ICFTU on women's education. Dehareng was a member of the Belgian Confederation of Trade Unions and the secretary of the ICFTU's Women's Committee for nearly three decades, beginning in 1957 (Laot, 2015, p. 84). Together with other women such as Esther Peterson (United States), Sigrid Ekendahl (Sweden), and Maria Weber (West Germany), they were the architects of the ICFTU's policies for women workers, including educational programs (Richards, 2011, pp. 419–420). In 1963, a few months after the Second ICFTU Conference on Women Workers' Problems, which took place in Vienna, Dehareng attended an educational seminar for women trade unionists in İzmir co-organised by Türk-İş and the OECD, where she lectured on the problems facing women workers and their role in the 'free' trade union movement. After the seminar, she held meetings with women trade unionists in Ankara, the capital of Turkey and the

site of the Türk-İş headquarters (Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 1964; Tulatz, 1963). Following Dehareng's visit, Türk-İş sent Kutay Aksel, a union officer, as an observer to the next meeting of the Women's Committee in May 1964 to learn more about its work (ICFTU Women's Committee, 1964a). Some months after this meeting, the Educational Board of Türk-İş included women workers' education as one of the five principles that informed its educational program for 1965. A series of seminars was planned with an aim 'to provide them [women] with the possibility of embracing the principles of trade unionism and thereby to facilitate the development of women union representatives and organisers, especially in the tobacco, distillery, textile, and war industries' (Türk-İş, 1964, p. 31). In late 1964, the ICFTU Women's Committee reported that '[s]ince the last meeting of the committee ... the Turkish Trade Union Federation ... informed the ICFTU of their desire to set up their own women's committee, and have asked it for advice. The Secretary of the Committee [Marcelle Dehareng] has had discussions with the responsible officers of [Türk-İş] ... and has sent them documentation' (ICFTU Women's Committee, 1964b). Türk-İş's readiness to establish a women's committee was an expression of the inspiration it drew from its collaboration with the ICFTU on women workers' education. Yet, due to Türk-İş's inconsistent engagement in women workers' issues, the idea to establish a gender-specific structure in the confederation would materialise only in the early 1980s.

Although the observer Türk-İş sent to the Women's Committee meeting in 1964 was a man, a woman research officer was assigned as responsible for communicating with the Committee and relaying its work to the Turkish audience. Gül Neşe Kutlu started working at Türk-İş in 1963 as a research expert and soon became head of the research department. She did not have any responsibility over education, but since she was a woman and had the necessary linguistic (English) skills, she functioned as an informal gender officer at Türk-İş and participated in activities targeting women workers organised in international cooperation (G. N. Erel, personal communication, 5 May 2022). News from the meetings and conferences of the ICFTU Women's Committee published in the Türk-İş Journal was often followed by articles by Kutlu on women workers' rights and social status in Turkey. These articles demonstrated how activist agendas at the local level resonated with those at the international level. For example, after the adoption of the ICFTU Charter of Rights of Working Women in 1965, Kutlu published a series of articles, focusing each month on a different aspect of women workers' issues. In line with the importance the Women's Committee gave to education, Kutlu's articles emphasised the need for vocational, literacy, technical, and trade union training for women. In these articles, Kutlu not only demanded in the name of women workers legal frameworks that would guarantee equal opportunity in access to education but also criticised the patriarchal attitudes women faced in family environments that hindered their possibilities for vocational training and left them disadvantaged (i.e. unskilled) in paid employment (e.g. Kutlu, 1966). Her articles synthesised the demands formulated by the ICFTU Women's Committee with local issues and became part of the women-oriented educational efforts in Türk-İş.

In the second half of the 1960s, the collaboration between Türk-İş and the ICFTU on women's education grew. This was also a time when the ICFTU Women's Committee reported an overall increase in women's participation in trade union courses worldwide (ICFTU Women's Committee, 1966). In 1965, another member of the Committee, Elisabeth Ostermeier (West Germany), attended two seminars in Istanbul organised by Türk-İş and the OECD. In her report on the meeting, '[i]n spite of the language difficulties ... [Ostermeier] stressed the remarkable interest of the participants in everything to do with trade unionism and politics' (Eaton, 1965; ICFTU Women's Committee, 1965). In 1966, Türk-İş president Seyfi Demirsoy nominated Gül Neşe Erel (formerly Kutlu; her surname changed upon getting married) to become a corresponding member of the Women's Committee (Tunç, 1966). Once Erel became a formal correspondent, news and information items about the education of women workers in Turkey appeared in the Committee documents next to those from other developing countries (ICFTU Women's Committee, 1967). In 1968, Dehareng went on a mission to the Middle East and visited Turkey, Iran, Lebanon, and Tunisia (ICFTU Women's Committee, 1968). The mission took place prior to the Third ICFTU Conference on Women Workers' Problems, held in



Düsseldorf, Germany, and one of its aims was probably to recruit women trade unionists from developing countries to participate in the conference. Petronella Tegelaar (Netherlands), another member of the Women's Committee, joined Dehareng in Turkey. During their visit, Dehareng and Tegelaar spoke to Türk-İş leaders and communicated to women trade unionists at Türk-İş the recent work of the Committee and the broader developments concerning women workers on the international scale (Türk-İş, 1968).

Erel's membership as a correspondent in the Women's Committee had enabled a mutual flow of information between women labour activists in Türk-İş and the ICFTU. But this was only a temporary and precarious mutuality. Workers' education in Türk-İş had gained momentum in the second half of the 1960s, and the number of educational activities had reached a 'record high' in 1966 (Türk-İş, 1966, p. 15). Women's education comprised a tiny portion of these activities, but this was enough for Türk-İş to receive a prize by the Turkish Women's Union (*Türk Kadınlar Birliği*), a major women's organisation, in return for its contribution to women's rights (Türk-İş, 1967, p. 33). However, for Türk-İş these were rocky years, during which the implementation of its agendas, including those concerning women workers, was jeopardised. The 1961 Constitution mentioned above had opened a new era for left politics by authorising class-based organising. In 1967, some left-leaning Türk-İş unionists who were in close relationship with the socialist Turkish Worker's Party (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi*, est. 1961) established as a rival organisation the Confederation of Revolutionary Workers' Unions of Turkey (*Türkiye Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu*, DİSK). This led to a huge turmoil in Türk-İş and impeded Erel's involvement in the work of the ICFTU Women's Committee (G. N. Erel, personal communication, 5 May 2022). Despite the invitation by Dehareng and the availability of funds from the ICFTU, Erel did not participate in the Düsseldorf conference (Dehareng, 1968; Demirsoy, 1968). From 1970, the Türk-İş Journal stopped reporting on the work of the Women's Committee. In 1971, Dehareng sent a letter to Türk-İş stating that she hadn't heard from Erel for some time and asking if Erel would still continue her role as a correspondent (Dehareng, 1971). The answer was yes (Dehareng, 1972), but 1972 was the last year in which Erel appeared in the committee's list of corresponding members (ICFTU Women's Committee, 1972).

### Formulating demands as 'women workers'

The crisis in the Turkish trade union movement deepened in the early 1970s. With the military memorandum in 1971, Turkey entered a period of right-left polarisation that culminated in a military coup in 1980 (for a summary of the main events of this period see İletişim Yayınları, 1988, pp. 2134–2383). Yet, this was also a time when women's movements flourished globally and both 'feminist' and 'developing world' perspectives on women's issues came to be represented and discussed at the UN level (Antrobus, 2004, p. 43). On the occasion of the UN's designation of 1975 as International Women's Year (IWY), the ICFTU mobilised to demand more rights for women workers. It updated the 1965 Charter of Rights of Working Women with recommendations that aimed for the creation of women's committees and increasing women's representation in trade unions (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2000, p. 481). Mobilisation around the IWY and the emergence of a UN-led global gender equality regime also sparked an interest among women's organisations and left-wing political formations in Turkey (Çağatay, 2017; Çınar, 2023). Trade unions with a high number of women members, for example in the textile industry, started to articulate 'a new language in which they addressed several issues of women workers' that reflected both a transformation in their gender politics and a Cold War-influenced competition between rival unions over workers' representation (Satı, 2021, p. 88).

Türk-İş leaders were not immune to these influences; by the mid-1970s, they problematised women's lagging trade union participation and representation with reference to the IWY, and the confederation showed greater commitment to organising and empowering women as a special category of workers. For example, at a seminar organised by the Mining Workers' Union of Turkey (*Türkiye Maden İşçileri Sendikası*, Maden-İş) in Zonguldak, Maden-İş vice president Sadullah Emre argued that the world needed many more IWYs because the UN

conventions on issues such as equal pay, night work, and political rights were not fully implemented. Similarly, in Turkey, women's rights were advanced, but they commonly remained only on paper (Türk-İş, 1978, p. 12). Addressing women workers, Adem Gedik, the Maden-İş director of education, said: 'Do not leave your job and union when you get married and have children. Seek ways to [remain] active in your union' (Türk-İş, 1978, pp. 12–13). At another seminar organised by the Tobacco, Distillery, Food, and Complimentary Industries Workers' Union of Turkey (*Türkiye Tütün Müskirat Gıda ve Yardımcı İşçileri Sendikası*, Tekgıda-İş), Tekgıda-İş president İbrahim Denizcier advised women who get married to convince their husbands to allow them to continue their union work (Türk-İş, 1979a, p. 13). Such statements by union leaders took women's double shift for granted and held them responsible for making time for a third shift, which is union work. However, these same statements also acknowledged housework and care work as well as the resistance of husbands as obstacles to increasing women's participation and representation in trade unions. This was a novelty in Türk-İş, and it signified the politicisation of gender relations in the private sphere as a barrier to women's participation in public life.

Türk-İş adopted the decision to take more decisive steps towards mobilising women workers at its eleventh Executive Meeting, in April 1979 (Türk-İş, 1979b, p. 362). One of these steps was a women's seminar that took place in Çeşme, İzmir, in July 1979 (hereafter, the Çeşme seminar). The four-day event was part of a series of international educational seminars co-organised by Türk-İş and the ICFTU. It brought together union educators and women labour activists and resulted in the formulation of demands by women that shaped the gender politics of Türk-İş in the ensuing years. Dehareng was once again among the educators (Özdemir, 1979). At the seminar, she gave participants a detailed account of the work of the ICFTU Women's Committee from the 1950s until then. Paying special attention to the role of education in the integration of women into trade unions, she urged for the national and local unions to build on the foundations that were laid by the trade union movement at the international level to meet the ambitions of 'women workers aspiring to dignity and social justice as equal partners to men in society'. This task, she emphasised, belonged also to 'the individual woman who must not shy away from her responsibility as a union member' (Dehareng, (presumed). (ca.1979)). By putting emphasis on the international mobilisation around gender equality, Dehareng's talk aimed to motivate seminar participants to draw strength from it and be more adamant in pursuing trade union politics.

With Dehareng's guidance, the 70 women labour activists, most of them workplace representatives in various industries, divided into small groups to discuss specific topics such as social rights, health-related issues, and union- and workplace-related problems. This method of dividing into small groups and formulating demands without the participation of the educator was one of the recommendations made in the 'Täljöviken Report: A Programme of Action,' prepared in 1977 at the ICFTU Women's Committee meeting in Täljöviken, Sweden, and accepted at the ICFTU's seventieth Executive Board meeting, to facilitate women's active participation in trade unions (Türk-İş, 1979c, p. 63). By the end of the 1970s, travelling agendas in women workers' education included concrete methods to empower women within trade unions to increase the possibility of the implementation of their demands. As Dehareng later reported to the Women's Committee, the aim of the group work was, among other things, to 'identify the main problems encountered by women in their sectors' and to draft 'a programme which could be adopted by the national confederation in order to solve these problems' (ICFTU Women's Committee, 1979). To this end, following the Çeşme seminar, some of the trade union women who attended the seminar gathered in Ankara and prepared a final report based on the minutes taken during the small group discussions. This report included a comprehensive set of demands raised by the seminar participants to improve women's work conditions and labour rights and enable their involvement in decision-making processes in trade unions. The demands included, for example, the inclusion of trade union education in collective agreements, a decrease in weekly work hours, a 12-week maternity leave with no wage reduction, the instruction of workers in family planning, the application of the equal pay principle, and the opening of childcare facilities in



workplaces and working-class neighbourhoods (Türk-İş, 1979c, pp. 169–177). Importantly, the report called for the immediate establishment of a women's bureau in Türk-İş that would resemble the ICFTU's Women's Committee to which prospective women's bureaus of Türk-İş member unions would report (Türk-İş, 1979c, p. 176).

### Expanding women's education to the shopfloor and nationwide

The military coup in 1980 and the subsequent three-year junta regime transformed the trade union movement by bringing about the near elimination of left-wing movements from the formal political field (Bedirhanoğlu & Yalman, 2009). Throughout the 1980s, Türk-İş member unions recruited workers who were previously organised under left-leaning unions affiliated with DİSK (Toksöz & Sayılan, 1998, pp. 297–298). Amidst the turmoil in the trade union movement, in December 1980, the decision was made to establish a women's bureau under Türk-İş (Türk-İş, 1981a, p. 18). However, the international collaborator to assist Türk-İş in establishing the Bureau was an actor other than the ICFTU. It was the Asian-American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI, est. 1968), a member institute of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO, est. 1955), that was, like the ICFTU, involved in developing educational programs for workers at Türk-İş. In the late 1970s, AAFLI collaborated with Türk-İş member unions in organising women's seminars (e.g. Türk-İş, 1979a). It was also involved in a longer-term educational program for women with the Textile, Knitting, and Clothing Industry Workers' Union of Turkey (*Türkiye Tekstil, Örne ve Giyim Sanayi İşçileri Sendikası*, Teksif) in collaboration with the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (IGLWU) (AAFLI, 1976a, 1976b, 1977, 1978; see also Satı, p. 2021, p. 97). Running this program was the African American labour organiser Maida Springer-Kemp. Springer-Kemp was not a member of the ICFTU Women's Committee but earlier, in the 1960s, she had participated in its meetings representing the AFL-CIO (Cobble, 2021, p. 352). She then worked as a labour educator in various locales, mostly across Africa but also, for example, in Indonesia (Richards, 2004). Upon Türk-İş's decision to take concrete steps towards mobilising women workers in 1979, Türk-İş president Denizcier (formerly president of Tekgıda-İş, see above) approached George Meany, the AFL-CIO president, and asked for funding to establish a women's bureau. Approving Denizcier's request for funding, Meany asked Springer-Kemp to assist Türk-İş with the establishment of such a bureau (Türk-İş, 1981a), pp. 18–21). Together with Kaya Özdemir, the Türk-İş secretary for education, Springer-Kemp interviewed candidates to work in the bureau. Leyla Tuncer, previously an officer at the Health Workers' Union of Turkey (*Türkiye Sağlık İşçileri Sendikası*, Sağlık-İş), became the first director of the Türk-İş Women Workers' Bureau (R. Akdoğan, personal correspondence, 26 April 2022).

The Türk-İş Women Workers' Bureau received financial support from AAFLI for its activities until 1992. A proper discussion of the contested Türk-İş-AAFLI relations and how they impacted women workers' education at Türk-İş is beyond the scope of this article, but it is necessary to note that Türk-İş leaders did not see any conflict between the ICFTU and AAFLI when it came to women's education. In 1981, Türk-İş informed the ICFTU of the opening of the Women's Bureau and asked for the ICFTU to share information about and experiences from different countries' women's bureaus (Özdemir, 1981). However, shortly after this request, Türk-İş was expelled from the ICFTU because the Türk-İş president Sadık Şide was appointed as the Minister of Labour by the junta regime (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 1998). This made direct communication between the Bureau and the ICFTU Women's Committee impossible. Yet, during the 1980s, the ICFTU's educational principles on women workers continued shaping gender politics at Türk-İş. Reflecting the collective demands formulated at the 1979 Çeşme seminar, the Women Workers' Bureau defined its mission as: 'the active participation of women in trade unions, enabling women's use of their union and labour rights effectively, developing solutions to problems from below, and providing women with necessary education in the fields of organization, communication, and health' (Türk-İş, 1981b, p. 17). Moreover, Rahime Akdoğan, who became first a specialist and then the director of the Bureau, was a participant at the Çeşme seminar and one of the authors of its final report mentioned above. Back when she was

a workplace representative of the Union of Sales Assistants and Office Workers of Turkey (*Türkiye Tezgâhtarlar ve Büro İşçileri Sendikası*, Tez-Büro-İş), she had met Dehareng and was interviewed by Springer-Kemp for her position at the Bureau (R. Akdoğan, personal correspondence, 26 April 2022).

As the Women Workers' Bureau organised seminars nationwide, Akdoğan inspected workplaces and talked to women workers during and after seminars. The seminars comprised topics on trade unionism and gendered labour rights as well as family planning, nutrition, and women's health. They brought together a wide range of union leaders, bureaucrats, and researchers to educate women workers, sometimes including feminist scholars such as Nermin Abadan-Unat, Çiğdem Kağıtçıbaşı, and Şirin Tekeli. Through these seminars the knowledge women labour activists produced locally and transnationally expanded to the shopfloor level and reached thousands of women workers and labour activists in Türk-İş member unions (Türk-İş, 1990b). Inspired by her experience at the 1979 Çeşme seminar, Akdoğan kept the method of small group discussions to help women workers identify their problems and what should be done to alleviate them (R. Akdoğan, personal correspondence, 26 April 2022). In a few years' time the Bureau had garnered information that revealed the multi-layered obstacle to women's empowerment in trade unions and constructed a complex picture of women workers' issues in Turkey. At the conference 'Women Workers' Problems' co-organised by Türk-İş and AAFLI in Izmir in March 1985, Akdoğan presented their findings as to the differentiation of women workers' problems based on sectoral and regional differences and stated the need both for empowering women in trade unions, and for creating additional legal measures to ensure that employers do not violate women workers' rights (Türk-İş, 1985, p. 15). During her time in office, Akdoğan also regularly spoke to journalists and wrote for the Türk-İş Journal. In one of her articles, she posed the question, 'Why are there only men in the union administrations?', and noted that union activities rarely took place at the shopfloor level and were often scheduled outside work hours, which made women's participation unlikely due to their family responsibilities. Besides their family responsibilities, Akdoğan stated, women were oppressed by their husbands and other men in their families to not join union activities (Akdoğan, 1981, p. 37). These findings were perhaps not dramatically different from the problematisations of women's status in trade unions by men unionists in the 1970s, but this time they were being voiced more bluntly, publicly, and collectively by women themselves, and reached a much broader audience than before.

Although formal relations between Türk-İş and the ICFTU were paused in the early 1980s, there was another means of connection available to women labour activists. Türk-İş was expelled from the ICFTU, but national unions affiliated with Türk-İş could still continue their collaboration with the ITSs. Between 1980 and 1984, the Forest, Land, Agriculture, and Agricultural Industry Workers' Union of Turkey (*Türkiye Orman, Topraksu, Tarım ve Tarım Sanayi İşçileri Sendikası*, Tarım-İş) ran projects on women workers with the International Federation of Plantation, Agricultural and Allied Workers (IFPAAW) and the ILO (IFPAAW, 1981). Elisabeth Goodson of the IFPAAW participated in these projects as an educator. She was also a member of the ICFTU Women's Committee representing the IFPAAW. Visiting Turkey several times as a lecturer, Goodson developed a warm relationship with Akdoğan (E. Goodson, personal correspondence, 19 July 2022). By May 1983, Sadık Şide had resigned from his post as Türk-İş president, and the confederation had reaffiliated with the ICFTU. In December 1983, Goodson devised a letter to Dehareng. Part of the letter read as follows.

If it were possible, it would make a very positive impact to invite her [Akdoğan] to one of the meetings of the ICFTU Women's Committee during the coming year. She has worked in almost total isolation in programmes funded by AAFLI and has expressed her own interest in making contacts with women trade unionists from European countries. I suggested that the problems affecting women workers in Turkey would be more closely related to conditions in Europe and developing countries rather than using the U.S.A. as a model for expanding women's programmes in Turkey. (Goodson, 1983)

Since Türk-İş had resumed affiliation with the ICFTU, involving Akdoğan in the work of the Women's Committee was indeed an option. Several months later Akdoğan received an invitation to attend the Fourth ICFTU World Women's Conference, to be held in Madrid in April 1985. The only participant

from the Middle East (ICFTU Women's Committee, 1985), she presented the work of the Türk-İş Women Worker's Bureau. This became a turning point for reinstating the Türk-İş-ICFTU collaboration on educating trade union women in the ensuing years.

On 20–21 March 1989, the Türk-İş Women Worker's Bureau organised the first nationwide gathering of trade union women in Turkey. Three hundred women from various Türk-İş member unions attended the First Congress of Working Women (*Çalışan Kadınlar Birinci Kurultayı*), which took place in Istanbul. Listing the many problems women workers experienced in the workplace, participants expressed the need for going beyond the seminars organised at the confederation level and for unions affiliated with Türk-İş to form their own women's commissions to start discussing women's industry-specific problems. The final declaration of the congress highlighted working women's persistent problems such as unequal pay, long working hours, and the lack of access to social security and childcare support. It called for the state and employers to apply ILO conventions as well as UN mechanisms for gender equality (Türk-İş, 1989, pp. 20–28). Thanks to the resumed relationship between the ICFTU and Türk-İş, the ICFTU Women's Committee member Lois Stewart was present at the congress and took note of the demands raised by women workers. Yet, this congress was also when Akdoğan decided to leave the Women Workers' Bureau. She had tense relations with Mustafa Başoğlu, the new Türk-İş secretary for education, who did not give her the floor to speak at the congress. Akdoğan read this as a sign of lack of acknowledgement of her many years of hard work and did not want to continue working under Başoğlu's office (R. Akdoğan, personal correspondence, 27 May 2022). With Akdoğan's departure, a chapter closed in the history of women workers' education at Türk-İş. In the next decade, that chapter would be remembered by women labour activists as part of the 'dark times' of Türk-İş where the confederation was under the influence of AAFLI. During the Cold War years, AAFLI was the labour organisation that implemented US foreign policy and capital interests in Asia and the Middle East (Önder, 2016, p. 142). In later years, AAFLI's alleged role as an agent of the CIA operating in Turkey became a popular view among researchers of the trade union movement (see, e.g. Güngör, 2011) and overshadowed the role of local labour activists who struggled to shape Türk-İş's gender politics to serve the needs of women workers and trade unionists.

### **Politics of remembering women's labour activism**

AAFLI's support for women workers' education at Türk-İş continued until 1992. Meanwhile, in 1989, Türk-İş applied to the ICFTU and received funding for running a project to establish women's commissions under national unions affiliated to Türk-İş – a demand that was raised at the First Congress of Working Women the same year. The two-year project involved national- and regional-level meetings aimed at the formation of such commissions, and the costs of the meetings would be funded mostly by the ICFTU (Türk-İş, 1990a, pp. 66–69). Unlike the previous decade, where the Women Workers' Bureau provided women with knowledge, this project brought together women workers to formulate the agendas that would then be pursued by women's commissions in their respective unions. The implementation of the project was supervised by Elsa Ramos of the ICFTU Women's Committee. Ramos's partner at Türk-İş was Nilüfer Gököz, who was a secretary at the Women Workers' Bureau while Akdoğan was director. Once she took over the role of director, Gököz became actively involved in educating women workers and delivering information to them about the current work of the ICFTU Women's Committee. By the end of 1992, women's commissions in member unions were still not established, but the project was deemed successful by the ICFTU. Türk-İş then applied for and received another two years of ICFTU funding and continued collaborating with the Women's Committee in women's education until the mid 1990s (Meral, 1993). From 1993 to 1996, Seyhan Erdoğan, an advisor at the Road, Building, and Construction Workers' Union of Turkey (*Türkiye Yol-Yapı-İnşaat İşçileri Sendikası*, Yol-İş), acted as the director of the Women Worker's Bureau at Türk-İş. During her term in office, 10 national unions affiliated with Türk-İş established their women's commissions (Meral, 1993).

In the 1990s, transnational collaboration between Türk-İş and the ICFTU on women workers' education gained new ground. At Türk-İş, women labour activists were greater in number and better organised. They collaborated with an emerging group of feminist researchers in understanding and eliminating the obstacles to women's empowerment in trade unions and saw transnational collaboration as an important means to achieve this goal (Koray, 1993; Toksöz, 1994; Toksöz & Erdoğan, 1998). On the ICFTU side too, there was a new generation of feminists active in the Women's Committee (Cobble, 2021, p. 381). The Committee's composition had changed, as activists from developing countries could now be titular, not just corresponding, members. Thanks to this change, Gököz (1989–1991), Sibel Bekaroğlu (1992) and Erdoğan (1993–1996) represented Türk-İş at the ICFTU Women's Committee meetings, respectively. Türk-İş-affiliated activists attended the fifth ICFTU World Women's Conference, in Ottawa (1991), as well as the sixth conference, held in the Hague (1994) (Türk-İş, 1991, 1994a). Within the framework of the above-mentioned projects, members of the Committee such as Elsa Ramos (Philippines) and Adrian Taylor (New Zealand) visited Turkey several times to participate in educational activities (Türk-İş, 1992, 1994b). As a result of the increased interaction between Türk-İş and ICFTU women, their agendas became synchronised. Last updated in 1985, the ICFTU Charter of Rights of Working Women was translated to Turkish and distributed widely among trade union women and beyond. The end of the Cold War, the rise of the UN-led global gender equality regime, and the surge in globalisation and neoliberal economic policies impacted the issues covered in educational seminars for women. At Türk-İş, compared to the educational programs of the previous decade, the topics of family planning, nutrition, and women's health were replaced by those around privatisation, outsourcing, and precarisation (whereas the topics of trade unionism and gendered labour rights remained) (Türk-İş, 1994b). The application of not only the policies of the ICFTU and the ILO but also UN mechanisms such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) became a core demand emerging from the seminars.

At the same time, local activists who drew on the ICFTU's gender policies in shaping Türk-İş's educational programs for women did not remember, or perhaps did not even know about, the prior work of the ICFTU Women's Committee in Turkey and the long-term collaboration between Türk-İş and the ICFTU. The dynamic of this politics of not remembering past instances of women's labour activism lies in the ambivalent attitude of men trade union leaders towards women's empowerment in trade unions, which also fated the educational programs targeting women to be inconsistent. The institutionalisation of gender politics at Türk-İş has been slow and unsystematic, as leaders of the confederation subscribed to but did not prioritise the goal of women's equal participation and representation in trade unions. In the 1960s and 1970s, no officer was formally responsible for women workers' questions at Türk-İş. In the latter decade, against the background of the UN-led global gender equality agenda, women labour activists pushed forward their demand from below for a gender-specific structure at Türk-İş. Still, it was ultimately the decision of an all-men Türk-İş leadership to establish this structure and determine its financial and organisational parameters. In the 1980s, the Women Workers' Bureau was able to expand women's trade union education to the shopfloor level thanks to the support it received from Türk-İş presidents who had backgrounds in women-intensive industries such as food manufacturing (İbrahim Denizcier, 1979–1982) and textiles (Şevket Yılmaz, 1982–1992) and were familiar with and sensitive to women workers' problems (E. Kocaoğlu, personal correspondence, 23 May 2022). Yet, the same leaders refrained from establishing a democratic procedure where the head of the Bureau would be elected at the general assembly by trade union members instead of being appointed by the trade union administration (R. Akdoğan, personal correspondence, 26 April 2022). A similarly ambivalent attitude marked Türk-İş's gender politics in the 1990s. Despite the renewed and enthusiastic collaboration between Türk-İş and the ICFTU on women's education in the early 1990s, by the end of the decade the Women Workers' Bureau as well as many of the newly established gender-specific structures in Türk-İş member unions became redundant. One of the reasons for this was, as feminist researchers of the time argued, that educational programs for women were not assessed by trade unions based on their efficiency and

improved according to the needs of the woman workers they addressed (Toksöz & Sayılan, 1998, pp. 297; 302).

The inconsistent investment of Türk-İş leadership in women's empowerment had two significant consequences for the politics of remembering women's labour activism. First, it led to the scarcity of archival records on women's labour struggles. Reflecting on the exclusion of the work of African women in labour scholarship on gender issues, Richards argues that the paucity of the written sources on women's struggles is 'a direct result of the marginalization of their activism' (2011, p. 417). This view also applies to the Turkish case. For example, in the 1980s, Akdoğan submitted written reports to AAFLI after each educational seminar she organised. When she left Türk-İş, she left copies of these reports, together with clippings from local newspapers that covered the seminars, with the organisation (R. Akdoğan, personal correspondence, 27 May 2022). For those workers who could not join the seminars, the Women Workers' Bureau published bulletins that informed the reader about the work of the Bureau and also contained articles on home economics, nutrition, and family and child health (Türk-İş, 1983, p. 150). Today, these sources are not accessible in the Türk-İş library, nor they are available in the US archives that hold AAFLI-related documents.

Second, the slow and unsystematic institutionalisation of gender politics resulted in loose, sporadic relations between women labour activists and geared their memory towards forgetting these relations. For Erel, who functioned as an informal gender officer at Türk-İş in the 1960s, for example, the name Dehareng 'rings a bell', but transnational collaboration over women's education comprises a less significant part of her overall memory of the years she spent working at Türk-İş (G. N. Erel, personal communication, 5 May 2022). Likewise, by the time the Çeşme seminar took place in 1979, Dehareng was no longer in touch with Erel, her earlier contact at Türk-İş. Dehareng's previous visits to Turkey and earlier relations with women labour activists or problems specific to women workers in Turkey were not part of her speech at the seminar (Dehareng, (presumed). (ca.1979)). The lack of sustained communication between local and international levels of activism hindered the transfer of knowledge and experience of the past struggles and transnational collaboration from one generation to another. Nevertheless, at other times, activists reached out to each other to resume the lost communication, as in the case of Goodson's intervention to connect the Türk-İş Women Workers' Bureau with the ICFTU Women's Committee. It is the scattered efforts of activists who deliberately worked to remain in touch with each other that we find in the archives and that helps us to reconstruct the long-term history of transnational collaboration over women's trade union education.

## Conclusion

Education has been key for including women in labour struggles and improving their position and representation in trade unions. This article took the Türk-İş-ICFTU collaboration on trade union women's education as an entry point to understand the role different women labour activists played in shaping gender politics in trade unions transnationally. When, in the 1990s, feminist researchers criticised trade union leaders for not being keen on empowering women and paying lip service to the international labour and global governance organisations, their judgement was grounded in the experience of women labour activists whose readiness to participate in trade union politics was curtailed by the exclusionary approach of union administrations. By tracing the long-term history of transnational connections and collaboration in trade union women's education, however, a new and nuanced meaning can be given to interpretations that are taken for granted in national histories. Drawing on archival and trade union sources as well as oral history interviews, the article has shown that not only the developments on women's education in Türk-İş were considerably interwoven with those in the ICFTU and its Women's Committee but also that women labour activists played a greater role in the making of this interwovenness than previously understood. As a result of the unequal global power relations and Turkey's positioning in the category of 'developing countries', agendas travelled unidirectionally from the international to the national level, but this does not mean that Türk-İş leaders or local women labour

activists simply copied the agendas produced at the international level. On the contrary, shifts in local politics strongly impacted the formation, implementation, and outcome of educational programs in the Turkish context. Yet, transnational influence and exchange between women labour activists enabled and facilitated the slow and unsystematic transformation and institutionalisation of gender politics in Türk-İş. Despite the loose, sporadic relationship between local activists and those from the west, learning about and from activists' struggles elsewhere encouraged those in Turkey to voice their demands with more confidence and determination, and women drew strength from belonging to a transnational network in their strive towards greater participation and representation in trade union politics.

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