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Women's Organisations' Role in (Re)Constructing the Narratives in Femicide Cases: Şule Çet's Case

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Abstract: In 2020, men in Turkey murdered 300 women, and 171 women were found suspiciously dead. The dominant narrative around suspicious death cases involves a faulty assumption that women are prone to committing suicide. Women's organisations and cause lawyers unite against all kinds of violence to challenge this dominant narrative, which grants impunity to perpetrators. Drawing on resource mobilisation theory, this article investigates how women's organisations become involved in femicide and suspicious death cases to articulate counter-narratives and advance women's access to justice. It focuses on Şule Çet's case, which raised intense public reactions due to the lack of procedural fairness at the investigation stage. It relies on semi-structured interviews with Şule's lawyer and the members of the We Will Stop Femicide Platform (Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu) and the Gelincik Centre (Gelincik Merkezi) to illustrate how women's organisations made Şule's story visible and countered the dominant narrative surrounding suspicious death cases. The findings illustrate that women's organisations' ongoing struggle to encourage courts to hear women's stories demands co-operation between different social and legal mechanisms. It includes a combination of several strategies, such as following femicide cases and forming public opinion through social media. The article concludes by arguing that women's organisations' use of counter-narratives transforms femicide cases from being only a statistic to a public cause, contributing to women's struggle in accessing justice.

Keywords: access to justice; Gelincik Centre (Gelincik Merkezi); femicide; social media; We Will Stop Femicide Platform (Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu); women's organisations



Citation: Caltekin, Demet Asli. 2022. Women's Organisations' Role in (Re)Constructing the Narratives in Femicide Cases: Şule Çet's Case. *Laws* 11: 12. <https://doi.org/10.3390/laws11010012>

Received: 11 October 2021
Accepted: 29 January 2022
Published: 7 February 2022

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1. Introduction

In 2004, Güldünya Tören gave birth after rape. Shortly afterwards, her brothers shot her in the middle of the street. She was immediately admitted to the hospital. Twelve hours later, the brothers followed her to the hospital and shot her in the head. In 2015, Mutlu Kaya attended a TV talent music show, about which she received several death threats. One day, her boyfriend fired a bullet from outside into her house and shot her in the head. She recovered from coma, but her voice never did; she could no longer sing, for she could only utter limited words. Mutlu's sister, Dilek, gave a public speech on behalf of her speechless sister, saying: "We will be on the streets . . . to end the violence against women. To end rape. To end sexual harassment." Dilek expressed her anger towards all kinds of violence against women and femicide, not knowing that her so-called boyfriend would murder her five years later. In 2019, when Emine Bulut's ex-husband stabbed her to death in front of her daughter, she was only able to say: "I do not want to die." Furthermore, it was 29 May 2018 when Şule Çet, a university student, was thrown out of a plaza's 20th floor on her birthday by her ex-employer, who claimed that Şule committed suicide.

Femicide did not start with Güldünya's story, nor did it end with Emine's. In 2020, in Turkey, men murdered 300 women, and 171 women were found suspiciously dead. The dominant narrative around suspicious death cases involves a faulty assumption that women are prone to committing suicide. Women's organisations and cause lawyers unite against all kinds of violence to challenge this dominant narrative, which grants impunity

to perpetrators. Studying their effort in offering (counter)narratives is important. This importance derives from narratives' power to capture the voice of those who are excluded from the law-making process. They have an essential impact on investigating and likewise redressing human rights violations. In this sense, narratives forge the link between the law and the experiences of individuals seeking justice (Goodmark 2005, pp. 729–33). Narratives become even more critical in femicide cases. As argued by Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, women's struggle to end femicide involves encountering the system, which "constantly blocked their search for ways out of their dilemma." This exclusion makes it necessary to hear these women's voices (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2003, p. 602). Further, the unequal power relations between the law-making mechanisms and women who challenge the legal system require women "collectively confronting and challenging dominant ideologies and narratives" (emphasis is mine) (Grabe and Dutt 2015, p. 91).

An evolving body of research has examined women's experiences with the legal system and identified their success in putting pressure on lawmakers to amend the legal system (Marshall 2009; Acar and Altunok 2013). These studies mainly focus on the historical development of women's struggle to change Turkey's social and legal structure (Tekeli 2010; Arat 1998; Kandiyoti 2010). Yet, women's intervention in the judicial system has received little attention in the literature¹. This article, therefore, examines women's organisations' role in countering the dominant narrative surrounding femicide cases, with a particular focus on Şule Çet's case, which raised intense public reactions due to the lack of procedural fairness at the investigation stage. It asks the following questions: How do women's organisations follow femicide cases in Turkey? What strategies do they employ to ensure that a feminist perspective is articulated inside the courtroom in cases of femicide? In other words, how do they mobilise their cause and maximise the resources available to them? These questions are important, as they highlight a social movement's organisational and internal structures and its strategies (Somerville 1997).

The remainder of this article first examines the domestic law on femicide and how women experience and resist the current legal framework in Turkey. The aim is to illustrate why women follow femicide and suspicious death cases. Then, it investigates how and why women's organisations follow femicide cases, focusing on their involvement in Şule's case.

2. Theoretical Concerns: Resource Mobilisation Theory and the Role of Social Media in Countering Dominant Narratives

Charles Tilly defines a social movement as something that "embodies contentious interaction; it involves mutual claim-making between challengers and powerholders" (Tilly 1993, p. 7). Highlighting the main characteristics of a social movement, such as its efforts in gaining public support, creating a shared identity, and widening the resources available to them, Tilly further indicates that "all qualify as social movements to the extent that they make sustained claims on powerholders in the name of an interested population, but their styles, strategies, and outcomes differ enormously" (Tilly 1993, p. 18). This article, then, asks how do women's organisations in Turkey (i) challenge the legal system and the mentality of the judiciary in the name of femicide victims and (ii) mobilise their causes? It draws on the resource mobilisation theory, a theory that highlights the non-negligible impact of available resources not only on the emergence of a social movement (Sen and Avci 2016) but also on the sustainability and the success of a social movement. As the literature on resource mobilisation indicates, "the availability of organisational venues, expertise, time, financial assets, and elite sponsorship are central to the likelihood of mobilisation" (Tuğal 2009, p. 427). The focus on the availability of resources helps us better understand the organisational and internal structures of a social movement and its strategies (Somerville 1997). The resource mobilisation theory also indicates that "some individuals in a society have certain grievances, they may be able to mobilise necessary resources to do something to alleviate those grievances" (Sen and Avci 2016, p. 125). In sum, it directs one's attention

¹ See (Bozkurt 2019), a recently conducted Master thesis.

to the question of how activists mobilise their cause and maximise the resources available to them. It also allows us to understand how the members of a specific social movement gain public support and earn their empathy.

Social media have become an important tool used by cause lawyers and activists to give voice to previously excluded voices. The speediness of the dissemination of knowledge is considered as one of the significant impacts of technology on society, as it provides activists with an opportunity to reach wider segments of society cost-effectively and promptly, therefore allowing them to raise consciousness (Steinberg 2016). Beyond its role in sharing information with the public and bringing society's attention to the matter, social media have become a medium in which women gain public visibility. Women use social media not only to invite the public to raise their voices and join the protests but also to call on policymakers to take necessary steps. In that sense, social media are considered a bridge, forging the link between women's organisations and policymakers (Loiseau and Keiko 2015). Through social media, women create their own space, a space of justice that may console marginalised communities. They paint their personal experiences within a broader frame of power relations. By sharing their own experiences, they bring the broader gendered aspects into the spotlight. In this manner, social media serve as a tool of consciousness-raising (Fileborn 2016).

Social media allow individuals to become involved in virtual activism by sharing simple and powerful hashtags, clicking on the "like" button, or changing profile pictures to gain society's attention. In doing so, individuals can easily perceive themselves as part of more extensive social discussions (Steinberg 2016). The role of social media in women's movements becomes more visible when it generates offline (face-to-face) protests. Some scholars focus on the fact that initiating protests through social media is costless and quick. They argue that social media have the potential to "aggregate people's individual actions into broader collective actions without requiring participants to be copresent in time and space" (see Earl and Kimport 2011, p. 10). Others argue that social media cannot be reduced to a technological and costless tool that is used to share events' time and date. Social media are "crucial emotional conduits through which organisers have condensed individual sentiments of indignation, anger, pride and a sense of shared victimhood and transformed them into political passions driving the process of mobilisation" (Gerbaudo 2012, p. 14). Social media promote emotional solidarity among participants. They are also used to construct a "sense of commonality", which is one of the essential elements of mobilising individuals coming from a different background (Gerbaudo 2012). Social media, specifically hashtag campaigns, provide a counter mechanism against victim-blaming narratives in media and empower women to be the ones telling their own stories—stories that influence collective action. The power of hashtags in re-telling stories of women and provoking street demonstrations is then undeniable (Clark 2016).

3. Methodological Concerns

The article draws on semi-structured interviews and adopts a purposive sampling method to identify potential participants. In purposive sampling, the purpose is to find specifically those who could "provide the best information to achieve the objectives of [the] study" (Kumar 2011, p. 207). Therefore, the aim was only to contact those who actively followed Şule Çet's case: (i) Şule Çet's lawyer; (ii) the head of the Gelincik Centre; (iii) a volunteer lawyer from the Gelincik Centre; (iv) the representative of the Platform; (v) a single member of the Platform, who followed the whole process of Şule Çet's trials. The Gelincik Centre and the Platform were chosen because they are the most dedicated women's organisations that actively follow femicide and all kinds of violence against women cases. The interviews were conducted in April and May 2020 over Zoom and lasted between forty minutes to an hour. The analysis of interviews was sent to the interviewees for approval to increase the validity of the results.

4. Domestic Law on Femicide and Local Endeavour to Challenge the System in Turkey

Dianna Russel defines femicide as “the killing of females by males because they are female” (Russell 2008, p. 26). The term femicide was introduced in 1976 as part of the struggle aiming to achieve a change in the socio-cultural atmosphere, which tolerates and, hence, reinforces violence against women. It is believed that this social change would eventually eliminate violence against women and intentional gender-based killings. The term femicide helps us to distinguish between homicide and violent killings of women to move from a gender-neutral understanding of crime towards a gender-sensitive approach. This approach provides the tool to challenge the phenomenon that has been kept invisible (Corradi et al. 2016). However, femicide has not been punished under the Turkish domestic legal system. There is no distinction between femicide and homicide. Indeed, the lack of explicit legal protection of women against femicide is not the only concern. The Turkish Criminal Law gives rise to the application of unjust provocation under Article 29, which grants sentence reduction to “any person who commits an offence in a state of anger or severe distress caused by an unjust act.” The judges are also equipped with an even more wide discretion power under Article 62, which provides the judges with discretion to reduce the sentence by 1/6 after evaluating the “background, social relations, the behaviour of the offender after the commission of the offence and during the trial period, and the potential effects of the penalty on the future of the offender.”

The defence strategies in femicide cases also raised intense criticism amongst feminists in Turkey, as perpetrators and defence lawyers tend to construct their defence by blaming the victims and relying on gender stereotypes, such as the idea that women are emotional and weak and, as a result, suicidal. The courts do not always maintain the balance between the right to defence and the ethical responsibilities of defence lawyers². Such an attitude has led women to unite against all kinds of violence against women, e.g., they founded the We Will Stop Femicide Platform (the Platform) to follow femicide cases, intervene in decision-making processes, and campaign against unethical defence strategies. The Platform is the most active and dedicated women’s organisation working against femicide in Turkey. Its main aim is “to stop femicide, to protect women against violence, [. . .] and to keep women alive.” To achieve these purposes, the Platform organises a range of activities³. Following femicide cases and using social media to raise awareness are the Platform’s most applied strategies. The Platform is also the most visible women’s organisation using social media (Selfiye 2018). Its members are actively engaged on Twitter to communicate their struggle (Besikci and Kuzucanli 2019), calling women to be part of a collective action (Alikilic and Bas 2019), such as they were in Şule Çet’s case.

The mistrust in justice did not only evoke lay people’s reactions. Lawyers also started to unite. Due to the increase in violence against women and children, the Ankara Bar Association founded the Gelincik Project in 2011. The project consists of 221 voluntary lawyers who have received special training on all kinds of violence against women, children, and LGBTQI members⁴. One of the purposes of the project, as a social responsibility, is to

² For a detailed examination of ethical responsibilities of defence lawyers, see (Craig 2014).

³ On their website, the activities of the Platform are explained as follows: “Joins court cases via its representatives and lawyers next to the women who are exposed to different forms of violence [...] Embraces its deceased sisters; fights for justice hand in hand with their families; pursues femicide cases; provides legal assistance; creates public opinion by drawing attention to femicide in the court houses [. . .] It fights for the solution of the legal problems regarding the violence against women, puts up a struggle to attain legal gains in favor of women and actively participates in the legislation processes. The Platform actively participated in the making of the ‘Law for Protection of Family and Prevention of Violence Against Women No 6282’. For a while now, it has been struggling for the inclusion of the term ‘femicide’ in the Turkish Penal Code, its penalisation by ‘aggravated life imprisonment’, and the annulment of continuing abatements. The Platform has a legislative proposal submitted to The Grand National Assembly of Turkey on 25 November 2013. *It contributes to the justice by revealing the truth about the ‘doubtful death’ cases treated as ‘suicides’ and closed.* It encourages the local courts and The Court of Appeals to make precedential decisions in the cases about women’s protection, sexual assault and femicide. Thus, it contributes to the formation of a relevant jurisprudence in all these ways”. See: <http://www.kadincinayetlerinidururacagiz.net/for-english> (accessed on 28 January 2022).

⁴ For their Turkish website, see: <http://www.gelincikprojesi.org.tr/> (accessed on 28 January 2022).

eliminate violence against women and provide legal assistance to those who experience violence. As part of the Gelincik project, volunteer lawyers engage in a variety of strategies. For example, they follow cases about violence against women all over Turkey and show solidarity with the victims by being present in the courtrooms. They create a public opinion against femicide by attending TV and radio programmes (Incesu 2015). Even though these lawyers are based in Ankara, they also provide emergency support to women all over Turkey through 24/7 hotlines. In co-operation with various institutions, particularly municipalities, volunteer lawyers organise seminars to share information with women about their rights under the 6284 Law to Protect Family and Prevent Violence against Woman. They aim to guide women to available protection mechanisms, participate in the legislation process, and inform the governmental institution about necessary changes. Their struggle to end violence against women neither starts nor ends in the courts.

5. A Historical Analysis: Why Do Women Follow Femicide Cases?

Women's struggle to challenge patriarchy enshrined in law dates to 1985 when educated and middle-class women campaigned against the 1926 Turkish Civil Law. The Civil Law was initially adopted to meet women's demands for equality and uplift women's positions. Nevertheless, it still contained discriminatory provisions. For that reason, women criticised, for example, the husband's recognition as the head of the house, which positioned women at the bottom of the hierarchy established between married couples. They also raised their voices against "virginity" tests (Tekeli 2010). It was in 1987 when women took to the streets, for the first time, as a reaction to a divorce case involving a pregnant woman who was not allowed to obtain a divorce by the court. The number of women on the street was small, yet these women managed to plant the seeds of curiosity in the public's mind. Two years later, when the defence asked for a sentence reduction because the victim of rape was a prostitute, women became aware that not only the Civil Law but also the Penal Code had discriminatory provisions (Tekeli 2010).

Women's movement and their involvement in the legal process gained even more momentum when Turkey was officially recognised as a candidate for European Union (EU) membership in 1999. The candidacy process resulted in adopting "arguably the most progressive legislation for women since the Kemalist reforms of the 1920s and the 1930s" (Kandiyoti 2010, p. 174). Women were aware of the external pressure on Turkey. By organising street protests and reaching the media to raise awareness, they also exercised some internal pressure on lawmakers to amend the legal system. As indicated by Gül Aldıkaçtı Marshall (2009, p. 367), "feminists strategically used the [EU] membership process to pressure the lawmakers to amend the Codes, with considerable success." For example, in 2004, the new Penal Code was adopted, which imposed heavy penalties for honour killings, criminalised marital rape, banned "virginity" tests, and abolished the provision granting rapists sentence reduction if they marry the victim (Acar and Altunok 2013; Kandiyoti 2010).

However, the EU membership process did not last long, and its impacts on lawmakers began to wane since the early 2010s. Women responded to such a decline in lawmakers' tendency to reform the legal system by shifting their strategies. Women who used to resort to traditional ways to implement changes in the law found themselves using social media to promptly reach women from different geographies and ask more women to join the street protests (Eslen-Ziya 2013). Aware that legal reforms are not enough to ensure women's access to justice, they have also become more involved in decision-making processes in diverse ways. For instance, third-party intervention in femicide cases has become one of the strategies developed by women as part of their struggle with patriarchy.

According to Article 237 of the Turkish Criminal Procedure Code, "the victim, real person and legal entities, who have been damaged by the crime [. . .] are entitled to intervene in the public prosecution." In Turkey, cause lawyers and women's organisations, claiming that "they have an interest in the outcome", aim to use third-party interventions to present evidence and influence the decision-making process. Third-party intervention is

a legal tool that opens the legal arena to feminist concerns and provides women with an opportunity to impact the judiciary. Femicide and violence against women cases are some of the cases in which such an intervention becomes essential. This is because, no matter how progressive the legal reforms are, judicial interpretations of such legal reforms remain vulnerable to patriarchy. As an ongoing struggle, challenging the gendered nature of law continues even after achieving legal reforms and takes the form of monitoring the judicial interpretation of these legal reforms (see [Samuels 2005](#)). However, Turkish domestic courts mainly refuse the women's organisations' requests to intervene as a third party. In that case, since they are unable to present evidence and provide their expertise to the courts officially, women's organisations use social media to raise their voices and present their evidence to the public. As public support is one of the essential elements of achieving the cause, social media have become a critical tool in the hands of cause lawyers to exchange information with the public to raise awareness ([Basil 2019](#)). As it appears, women's intervention in the legal system is not new; it is one that evolves in view of their communities' political, cultural, and legal structures.

6. Following Şule's Case

6.1. *The Story of Şule Çet: 29 May 2018, Ankara, Turkey*

Şule Çet, a university student, worked in a pub in Ankara, Turkey. The pub had shut down due to economic difficulties, and she consequently lost her job. She sought the help of Çağatay Aksu, her previous employer, in finding a new job. On 29 May 2018, Çağatay invited her to a restaurant, where he planned to meet his other friends, Berk Akand and Mustafa Aydın. Şule was hesitant to go. "Çağatay is hitting on me, particularly when he is drunk", she told her housemate, Lilia, whom she calls abla (sister). Yet, she wanted to find a new job and claim her unpaid salary. So, she decided to go. When she left the house to meet him, she asked Lilia to call her fifteen minutes later to tell her that there is an emergency in the house, so that she could make it an excuse to leave. During her stay, Şule and Lilia wanted to keep in touch. Şule was constantly corresponding with her housemate via text messages.

It was after midnight when Mustafa had left. Çağatay and Berk decided to spend the rest of the night at their office on the 20th floor at Yelken Plaza. They invited Şule as well. She went but did not feel safe. Things did not feel right either to Şule or to Lilia. Lilia called Şule several times (at 00.34, 00.54, and 01.04). Şule also kept messaging Lilia.

- 01.47 (Şule): "F . . . ck, he does not let me leave" ("S . . . keyim ya, bırakmıyor artık").
- 02.31 (Lilia): "Write to me, I am worried. I can come and pick you".
- No response from Şule until 2.45, when she said: "Analog". Lilia did not get what Şule said⁵, but Şule tried to explain that he had anal sex with her by force.
- 03.03 (Şule): "He messed me up, messed me up, f . . . ck, I wish I did not come" ("Ağzıma sığıcı ağzıma s...dim keşke gelmeseydim ya").

This was her last message. Şule's text messages shed some light on what happened at Yelken Plaza. After 03.03, she stopped texting, and at 03.50, the building's security staff heard a loud noise. It was her "falling" from the building. What happened within these 47 min (from 03.03 to 03.50) that she was not responding to text messages was a matter of dispute. Yet, the prosecutor wanted to close Şule's case, as she believed that Şule committed suicide.

6.2. *The Distorted Version of Şule's Story*

Çağatay's version of the story is distorted; it conflicts with the material facts of forensic science. His narrative of the night seeks impunity by reaffirming and relying on gender stereotypes. It reflects the dominant narratives on suspicious death: women are weak and keen to commit suicide. For instance, according to their defence attorneys, the PSA

⁵ It is believed that the message was autocorrected. She wanted to write "Anal oldu" in Turkish and it was autocorrected to "Analog".

was found because of Şule's prior sexual intercourse with her boyfriend. The defence attorneys also asserted several claims: Şule had psychological problems, did not have a job and money, and had lost her mother; therefore, she committed suicide. To support this argument, Çağatay claimed: "I saw Şule leaning out of the window. I ran, I grabbed her leg, but I could not manage to prevent her from committing suicide." According to the experts, it was not possible, physically speaking, to keep leaning out of the window because the window was 105 cm, and she was only 152 cm tall. It would not be possible for Çağatay to see her in such a position and run from the door to the window. She would not remain in the same position. She would fall immediately. Most importantly, from the pictures taken by the crime scene investigators and the videos recorded by the accused before the incident, it is seen that there was a coffee table with backgammon on it right in front of the window. When Çağatay was asked about how the backgammon stayed over the table, if he jumped over it to save Şule and hold her legs, he consistently stated: "The table stayed the way it is, and the backgammon did not fall because I jumped over the table to save Şule. There was enough space between the window and the coffee table." According to the experts:

The space between the window and the coffee table was not wide enough to accommodate Çağatay or allow him to try to save Şule as he claimed⁶. There is an inconsistency here. If this was the case, it would mean that he reorganised the scene of the accident. Of course, it is you who will judge, but given forensic science, the accident did not occur the way Çağatay tells us.

If she committed suicide, another expert claims, she would either need to step on the coffee table (since the table was right in front of the window) and jump or hold the window and jump. However, there were no fingerprints over neither the window nor the table. Another forensic evidence falsifies Çağatay's story: Şule had hyoid bone fractures, and statistically, 5% of hyoid bone fractures in the neck are due to falling from a height and 95% from choking. Similarly, the academic staff of the Psychology Department of Gazi University did not find any concrete evidence of suicide: Şule had lost her mother ten years previously, and her father regularly sent her money. She lost her job, but she was not so desperate that she would commit suicide.

6.3. *The Construction of a Counter-Narrative by Women's Organisations: How Women's Organisations Follow Femicide and Suspicious Death Cases?*

6.3.1. They Aim to Encourage the Court to Hear Counter-Narratives

The gendered nature of legal structures and lack of attention given to women's legal claims were common points raised by the interviewees. They intervene because they believe that gender inequalities and stereotypes place an extra burden on women seeking justice. For instance, Mizgin, a member of The Platform, was very clear about the reasons why they interfere:

If there was an effective investigation, we would not need to intervene or campaign. Police did not collect the evidence properly, and [some of them] remained in the bin. Such an impassivity . . . We will keep reminding them about their job every time they do not fulfil their job's requirements.

From Mizgin's statement, one can observe that the attitude of the police and prosecutor during the prosecution stage evoked the consciences of women, who aim to bring about social change in gender norms. They follow femicide cases to bring the courts' attention to women's stories and consequently consider their claims more carefully. One criticism surrounding women's organisations' engagement with counter-narratives is that they put pressure on the court. Such criticism overlooks that mis-convictions occur when the investigators rely on faulty assumptions and collect the evidence in a way that "confirms" these assumptions (Fludernik 2014, p. 92). It also underestimates the impacts of material

⁶ Experts tried to put a shoe between the window and the table to see if there was enough space to accommodate Şule or Çağatay. Unfortunately, the shoe they brought (Şule's size) did not fit there.

evidence on truth-finding. Hearing the counter-narrative does not mean that legal mechanisms, particularly the courts, simply rely on the narratives to which they are exposed. As illustrated by Peter Brooks (2006, p. 2), “there are moments when the law notes that a story has been mis-told, or not told according to the rules (of evidence, for instance), or doesn’t make sense as told.” Şule’s case is a clear example of these moments. It illustrates that the narratives take on their meaning when they are supported by material evidence.

Women’s organisations follow femicide cases to encourage the courts to adopt a women perspective and “ask the woman question”—an attempt to reveal the (unnoticed) gender implications of the legal system (Bartlett 2012, p. 406)—and to fully understand the experiences of those who face injustice due to seemingly neutral legal thinking (Bartlett 1990, p. 887). “Asking the woman question” is an empirical investigation into the question of whether the law-making process is shaped by gender bias (Levit and Verchick 2016, p. 42). However, the attempts to bring a women perspective into the courts invite criticism, which is mainly built on the principles of “fairness and impartiality”: A judgement needs to be fair and impartial, and a feminist judgement carries the risk of undermining these fundamental principles (Hunter 2008, p. 24). Fidan, the General Secretary of The Platform, without being asked, mentions that:

One can question “if this [women’s interference] is real justice”. I cannot agree with such criticism as gender inequalities are so deep and are integrated into judicial decisions⁷. There are so many femicide cases involving unsolved questions. The investigation needs to be done in a manner that eliminates any suspicion for both sides, not only for women.

Indeed, Fidan indirectly responds to criticism that “feminism is somehow unfairly self-interested” (Smith 2010, p. 291). Her focus on both sides’ right to request an effective investigation shows that the purpose of a feminist judgement is to promote justice rather than privilege women over men (Smith 2010, p. 291). Fidan goes on to say:

When we found the “The Platform”, we had to respond to questions, such as ‘why do you call it women’s rights? Is not it human rights? Or why do you call it femicide? Are not men killed as well?’ This is an attempt to neutralise the problem. But we cannot pretend as if we are equal (EşitMiŞİZ gibi). Just like we work on providing the voiceless women with a ground to raise their voice in society or just like we demand equal representation in the parliament, we must work on inequalities within the judicial system too. It is so sad, but we must interfere.

As it seems, women challenge the arguments based on the idea that the law is neutral. Law cannot be fully understood without a reference to power relations and the dominant political discourse. The universal principles are shaped by the prevailing masculine power relations (Smith 2010, p. 291), which exclude women from the law-making process and the construction of legal mechanisms and institutions (Fineman 1994, p. 351). Therefore, adopting a women perspective is an attempt to interpret the seemingly neutral law from a feminist perspective.

6.3.2. They Stimulate Public Engagement and Construct Counter-Narratives through Social Media

The impact of social media on constructing a counter-narrative was one of the common themes that emerged from the interviews. During the interviews, the interviewees recognised the role of social media in bringing injustice into the spotlight, balancing the

⁷ For example, Umur criticised the dilemma of whether Şule committed suicide or was murdered. He believes that if the victim was a man, this dilemma would not occur. He states: “In Şule’s case, the victim was a woman. They [prosecutor and police,] initially focused on the possibility of suicide. If the victim was a man, would they consider this possibility? To me, No. It is either suicide or murder. A clear-cut”.

unequal power relations, and mobilising support for their cause⁸. This is hardly surprising. Social media disseminate information about the date and the logistics of demonstrations and, most importantly, shape the way people mobilise their causes and create a sense of solidarity and an emotional bond between participants to keep the struggle alive (Gerbaudo 2012). For example, Umur, Şule's lawyer, stated that:

The prosecutor only focused on the possibility of suicide. All the evidence was collected with such incentive. Çağatay and Berk were not arrested, not until we, in total 50–60 people, gathered in front of Yelken plaza to give a public speech. On Friday night, women's organisations—Women's Assemblies, The Platform, and some initiatives from Middle East Technical University—created hashtags. We gathered on Saturday around 2–3 p.m. Çağatay and Berk were taken into custody at around 4–5 p.m. after our public statement. They were previously taken into custody twice. Yet, each time, they were released. This time, they were arrested even though nothing new was added to their file. The only difference was that Şule's case was on social media. People were bursting out: 'There is injustice here'.

Umur's statement reminds us that the decision-making and judicial process constitutes one of the areas affected by technological developments, more specifically by the steep rise in using social media, and that some legal reforms are the result of successful social movements and media campaigns (Steinberg 2016).

The public demonstration is not peculiar to Şule's case. One of the tactics of women's organisations is to organise demonstrations in the areas where women were murdered. They leave a pink clove there "to keep these women's memories alive and continue their struggle from where they left it", Mizgin says. In doing so, these women's organisations become involved "in setting the scene, and constructing an emotional space within which collective action can unfold" (Gerbaudo 2012, p. 5). That is why the narratives behind Şule's case, as with other femicide cases, were: "You will not walk alone", "You are not alone", "We're not staying silent", and "We are the voice of Şule." These narratives mirror the aim of the feminist movement to challenge the silence and loneliness of women in the face of male-dominated power relations in Turkey. In parallel to this aim, social media are used as a critical tool to collect emotional narratives that bind people together and encourage participation in public spaces via directing individuals to specific events (Gerbaudo 2012). In these public spaces, the misconceptions behind femicide cases (particularly suspicious death cases) are challenged with a very simple but effective counter-narrative: "Murder, not suicide." While emphasising that the male-dominated system aims to cover up the crimes committed by men, this simple narrative is also a call for justice. Consequently, they chanted both in front of the Courtroom and from their social media accounts that "We want justice for Şule", "We want justice for all women", and "Not male justice, Real justice." As seen, the (counter)narratives of Şule's case were simple yet powerful. They had a single basic demand: justice, and they had a single tactic: solidarity with women.

Surprisingly, Mizgin's memory of the demonstration is so vivid. "Even though the weather was so hot, when we got there, it suddenly started raining heavily", she says before going into details about how they organised the demonstration:

Şule's friends launched a campaign on Twitter. They reached us on social media. Her friends and we [the Platform] felt the urge to follow her case. In a couple of hours, her case started to spread rapidly on social media. It was Friday when we decided to organise a demonstration. I remember it very clearly because it was Saturday when we met in front of Yelken Plaza. Even though it was Saturday, they [Çağatay and Berk] were arrested.

⁸ Except Fidan. Fidan stated several times that "we cannot limit our struggle to social media". Her focus remained on the structure of the Platform rather than on the use of social media itself.

Şule's friends' quick reaction reveals that online activism can be initiated even by a small number of participants (Earl and Kimport 2011). Technology provides activists with an opportunity to promptly reach broader segments of society, at no or little cost, to raise awareness (Steinberg 2016). In Şule's case, the demonstration was an immediate reaction of women: on Friday, Mizgin, as a Gazi University graduate, received tons of messages from the students of Gazi University, where Şule was studying her undergrad. These students wanted to be part of the struggle. On Saturday, when Mizgin arrived at the demonstration, she was surprised to see that not only women from the Platform were present, but also other women were waiting in front of Yelken Plaza: "I am a member of the Platform for a long time [since 2016] . . . There were so many people I did not know, never met before." This comes as no surprise, as "digital media [is] providing access to a visible platform and wide audiences without necessitating membership within a formal organisation" (Clark 2016). Şule's case also revealed that social media enable women's organisations to connect with diverse women immediately "as events are unfolding" (Obar et al. 2011, p. 20). They enable the previously "disengaged users to join political and social causes, increasing the likelihood of being further mobilised both online and offline" (Valenzuela 2013, p. 922).

As illustrated by Stacey B. Steinberg (2016, p. 425), "community building also offers an avenue for social movements to change the status quo [. . .] social movements can also effectuate change by working within existing systems." In parallel with these observations, one can argue that social media in Şule's case brought women and lawyers together and encouraged different occupational groups to be part of the struggle. For instance, campaigns and hashtags brought Şule's case to the attention of forensic experts. Umur says:

People, who had not even seen each other before, gathered for Şule. Social media brought us together. For example, I received an invitation from Hakan Kar [a professor at Mersin University, Forensic Department]: He volunteered to work on Şule's case and prepared a forensic report. His report was one of the critical reports that made a difference in Şule's case.

Umur also highlights the ways the defence lawyers brought, or attempted to bring, evidence to the Court, which illustrates very well the unequal power relations between Şule's lawyers and the defence lawyers:

They reached Şule's transcripts, her bank statements, or even her health reports from 2016. These documents cannot be provided to third parties. They did have access to her private life. They were powerful. From the letter they sent to each other, it was also clear that they even succeeded in reaching the key people to represent them in printed media. Later, the media started using this language: 'Holding alcohol bottles, Şule Çet is entering the plaza at 24.00'⁹. Yet, the question before the Court was not Şule's private life or what she was doing there after midnight. The question was whether she was murdered and sexually harassed.

Umur believes that women's organisations' engagement with counter-narratives brought the matter to the public's attention and balanced these unequal power relations. In other words, it put society's support on the other side of the scale. One can claim that Şule's narrative constructed resistance. Hearing the counter-narratives of women's organisations, in contrast to the perpetrators, many members of society became more aware of women's struggle in accessing justice. Hence, they wanted to be part of it. Society supported women's organisations to "hijack the media" by re-telling Şule's story and "rerouting of news media discourse away from victims' behaviour and toward the actions of perpetrators" (Clark 2016, p. 795). Aslı, a cause lawyer and the head of the Gelincik Centre, shares the same view. For her, social media's impact on revealing such inequality was one of the reasons why Şule's case turned into a social cause:

⁹ I could not find an exact expression in the news. Yet, the fact that she had alcohol was highlighted in the news. For an analysis of "sexist rhetoric used in the news", see (Şahin and Birincioglu 2020).

When this imbalance was brought into light by Şule’s lawyers and women’s organisations through social media, the injustice became so obvious to ignore, Şule’s case started to evoke society’s conscience. There were several attempts to spoil the evidence. Bias and stereotypes were at play. They [the defence] had the power in their hand . . . All these touched society’s feelings. And women’s solidarity won against this power.

Aslı’s statement clearly indicates that women’s narratives educate members of society on issues of which they were ignorant so that they start questioning their own bias. Aslı also observes the increase in the general public’s participation in protests and the evolving progress of femicide cases within the twenty-five years of her lawyering experience. She could see the differences between society’s attitudes towards femicide in the past and now:

Society’s intervention in femicide cases, unlike twenty-five years ago, has become more apparent, particularly after Özgecan Aslan’s¹⁰ case. Society learnt a lot from cases such as Özgecan Aslan, Emine Bulut, and Şule Çet. When a femicide case is on social media, it takes a very different dimension. It becomes a social cause. It urges society to do something against femicide: to become part of the struggle.

Aslı’s referral to the impact of these cases on society illustrates two crucial points. First, it shows how the use of social media “altered the manner in which individuals show support” and provided an effective “mechanism for implementing political and social change” (Steinberg 2016, p. 419). Second, it demonstrates the importance of using law and courts as a site of struggle “to increase people’s sense of personal and political power” (Weizman 2016, p. 63). In other words, the main point here is to turn the individual’s case into a public matter. Fidan similarly touched on this issue:

No matter how unique the case is, it is a part of a bigger picture. It is a societal problem [. . .] When we are informed about a femicide case, the first step is to form a public opinion and make everybody aware of the problem. By following these cases and raising public opinion, we aim to turn the society’s gaze into the current case so that the practitioners of law approach the matter meticulously (just as they are supposed to do).

Fidan’s statement illustrates that one of their main aims is to make each femicide case a social cause. By obtaining wider public attention, women’s organisations aim to raise a significant point: “the personal is political.” They direct women’s attention to “the collective social dimension of their own individual problems.” This also reveals one of the main aims of feminist intervention: to bring together diverse women who experience violence and show that their own experiences are not isolated cases (Wehbi 1999, p. 177).

6.3.3. They Co-Operate and Show Solidarity

From the 20th floor! . . . You look at the height of the building . . . You just feel emotionally up and down. A woman was killed. The accused were released. No effective investigation was launched. What happened was so sad. It aroused our anger.

(Zoom interview with Mizgin, May 2020)

During the interview, Mizgin felt emotional several times, her voice trembled, and her eyes darkened. Her emotional engagement with Şule’s case shows how she could not even think otherwise but be there. Highlighting Mizgin’s emotional engagement is important because emotions play a crucial role in mobilising individuals and creating a sense of togetherness among them (Gerbaudo 2012). In Şule’s case, procedural injustice

¹⁰ The interviewees kept referring to two femicide cases: Özgecan Aslan’s and Emine Bulut’s. In Ozgecan Aslan’s case, the perpetrator, Suphi Altındöken, “drove Aslan to the woods after all the other passengers had got off the bus and then tried to rape her. The young woman fought back using pepper spray, but Altındöken then bludgeoned and stabbed her to death, before being helped to dispose of her body. The remains were found by police and the three men were arrested”. See, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/04/three-men-life-sentence-murder-student-turkey-ozgecan-aslan> (accessed on 28 January 2022).

evoked the public's conscience. It brought them together to ask for a social change, which can be achieved when the social movement members operate both at the legal and social levels. In other words, public support and empathy constitute a complementary feature of the legal struggle (Steinberg 2016), which will more likely succeed when "legal strategies [are used] in conjunction with other forms of collective action" (Levitsky 2006, p. 147). The question here is how could members of a particular social movement (nonlegal) co-operate with legal organisations or lawyers and vice versa? Umur exemplifies the co-operation between cause lawyers and women's organisations:

When we gathered for a public demonstration, they [women's organisations] told me that the current prosecutor also closed Esin teacher's case as suicide even though it was a femicide case in Siirt [a city in Southeast Turkey]. This information was so precious. I was the lawyer of Şule, but they were the ones who knew about Esin teacher's story.

Women's organisations brought information of which Umur, as a lawyer, was not aware. This information led Umur to question the prosecutor's attitude more carefully. As a result, he requested the replacement of the prosecutor for transparency. This collaboration between women's organisations and Şule's lawyer shaped the course of the struggle. Such interaction also illustrates very well Sandra R. Levitsky's point:

[The] familiarity with law, legal venues, and the discourse of rights are potentially useful resources for a range of social movement activities, including public education, protest activity, lobbying, and consciousness raising [. . .] But, importantly, interactions with nonlegal organisations could also serve as information conduits for legal advocacy groups.

(Levitsky 2006, p. 147)

Women's struggle requires various social groups that complement one another and have a reciprocal relationship. Feminists become involved, for example, through third-party interventions. Yet, integrating a women perspective into the legal system, particularly into the language and decisions of the courts, also requires co-operation between feminists, academics, and lawyers (Samuels 2005). Regarding such co-operation, when I asked Umur if he had thought whether things would have been different without the support of the women's organisations, he said that "it would have been difficult . . . It was a tough task. We would not be able to handle it without co-operation. Each of us contributed differently: Diverse organisations prepared reports, lawyers from different Bar Associations supported us, NGO's and women's organisations were also there for Şule." While Umur stated that it would have been more difficult for him to pursue the case without the co-operation of women's organisations, this was not stated aloud in Fidan's case. During the interview, Fidan was more concerned about highlighting the independent structure of the Platform rather than the contribution of lawyers to their struggle. She responded to the same question by making a passing comment about the co-operation with Şule's lawyer, Umur: "Of course, different elements of the struggle were connected. We were in touch with Umur about Şule's case. His endeavour to make her case visible without eliminating women, the main subjects of the matter, was so precious." Then, she continued:

These kinds of cases could not be left to lawyers alone. The relationship we established with our legal committee in the organisation involves brainstorming, in which diverse women holding different majors bring their perspectives and experiences to the table. Not only lawyers have a say on this. All of us come up with different ideas as we see things differently from where we stand. For example, one of our psychologist friends mentioned psychological autopsy. We are currently working on it. In short, we work collectively. Every idea is given careful consideration.

While Fidan believes that the matter cannot be left to lawyers alone, Aslı thinks that "an unlimited intervention of women's organisations is not acceptable; there are things that the judges are legally required to do. Sometimes women's organisations might not understand

these procedures. We need to find a middle ground.” Fidan’s and Aslı’s statements remind us that the co-operation between cause lawyers and women’s organisations is necessary to build common ground. Women’s access to justice is not a one-sided struggle.

During the interview, Seda, one of the volunteer lawyers of the Centre, also focused on how volunteer lawyers of the Gelincik Centre were often involved in collaborative work with different mechanisms. She highlighted that they organise workshops for those who work in women’s shelters and police. The participants of these workshops, sometimes with family law judges and prosecutors, are involved in brainstorming to understand the disconnection between theory and practice. They share the results of the workshops with the police force. Seda believes that the tendency to “tell the victims of domestic violence to go back home and make peace with their abusive partners” decreased due to such co-operation between different institutions.

7. The Court’s Decision: Şule Did Not Commit Suicide

“Şule wanted to build a life. She rented a new house; she even painted the whole house by herself. She had dreams”.

(Lilian’s testimony)

The Court considered all the evidence, particularly the expert’s reports, and held that Şule did not commit suicide. She was thrown out of the window. Çağatay was found guilty of premeditated murder under Article 82 (h) of the Turkish Criminal Code¹¹ and Berk guilty of murder as an aider. The Court also found Çağatay guilty of sexual assault under Article 102(2)¹² and Berk guilty of this assault as an aider under Article 39/1-2 of the Turkish Criminal Code. Yet, the Court reduced their sentence by applying Article 62 of the Turkish Criminal Code. The Court’s decision is open to criticism as it applied Article 62, even though the perpetrators did not show any good behaviour during trials¹³. Applying Article 62 has raised concerns amongst feminists and activists, as it is vague and gives wide discretion power to judges. Yet, the decision was still welcomed by women’s organisations and cause lawyers. For instance, Fidan considers Şule’s case

as a symbolic case, illustrating how a young woman experiences violence in the modern world and how masculinity and power are used to justify such violence against women or even whitewash femicide. Şule’s case, like Esin Güneş’s case, is a cornerstone of femicide cases: it is both familiar and, at the same time, reveals a new way of looking at suspicious death cases.

Şule’s story is familiar—because femicide and violence against women are increasing—and different—because suspicious death cases wrongly have been classified as suicide. However, the Court’s approach was different in Şule’s case. Instead of simply relying on the defence’s claims that Şule had psychological problems and committed suicide, the Court shifted focus from Şule’s lifestyle towards the actions of Çağatay and Berk. Similarly, for Mizgin, the Court’s decision was a clear response to those who think they have the right to question women’s lifestyles or choices. It was an indication that “women can be where/when they want; they can drink and wear what they want. No one can hurt them and get away with it by relying on gender stereotypes.”

Fidan and Seda highlighted the link between such a positive response of the Court and women’s intervention in the case. Seda, for instance, focused on how women’s

¹¹ Article 81(1) of Turkish Criminal Code rules that “Any person who intentionally kills another shall be sentenced to life imprisonment”. Article 82 Turkish Criminal Code entitled “Qualified Cases” states that “If the act of intentional killing is committed: a) [. . .] h) In order to conceal an offence, destroy evidence, facilitate the commission of another offence or prevent apprehension [. . .] the offender shall be sentenced to aggravated life imprisonment”.

¹² Article 102(2) of Turkish Criminal Code entitled “Offences against Sexual Integrity: “Sexual Assault” rules that “where the act is committed by means of inserting an organ, or other object, into the body, the offender shall be punished with a term of imprisonment no less than twelve years”.

¹³ For example, “at one hearing, Aksu reportedly told Çet’s father: “If only you’d looked after your daughter”. See <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sule-cet> (accessed on 28 January 2022).

participation as observers had an essential impact on the way the Court approached the claims: “Knowing that the case has been followed by women organisations and cause lawyers, put pressure on the court members. I can say that the hearings were held with more care.” In addition, Fidan illustrated how they turned society’s attention into the case, which eliminated the risk of dismissal of charges. As a result of their involvement, the Court, unlike the first prosecutor’s attitude, responded to the concerns of women’s organisations and cause lawyers, giving Şule’s case a more significant consideration. The Court was willing to hear what her family and friends, along with women’s organisations, wanted to say on behalf of Şule and all victims of femicide. Women’s organisations’ main contribution to Şule’s cases is the disclosure of the unfairness at different levels. Mainly using social media, they revealed how the perpetrators spoiled the evidence and investigators collected the evidence with the intension of finding out how she “committed suicide”, while the prosecutor wanted to close her case as suicide.

8. Conclusions

This article examined how a feminist perspective can be brought to femicide cases in Turkey by looking at the interventions of women’s organisations in the decision-making process in Şule Çet’s case. Drawing on the intervention of the Gelincik Centre and the Platform to Şule Çet’s case, the article examined how cause lawyers and women’s organisations co-operated and employed different strategies, namely following femicide cases as observers and using social media. Studying women’s organisations’ engagement with constructing counter-narratives in femicide cases is crucial because, first of all, “storytelling serves to convey meanings excluded or marginalised by mainstream legal thinking and rhetoric” (cited in [Fludernik 2014](#), p. 89). Further, “law is saturated with stories. People tell their stories to lawyers; lawyers re-tell their clients’ stories to courts; legislators develop regulation to respond to their constituents’ stories of injustice or inequality” ([Wolff 2014](#), p. 3). Yet, in femicide cases, femicide victims need third parties to tell their stories on their behalf. In this sense, women’s organisations become the voice of the femicide “victims” by following their cases and making their stories public. Another reason to study their effort is that even though an explicit recognition of femicide as a crime under the domestic legal system sets an excellent example for society, legal reforms alone would not be sufficient to eliminate femicide and violence against women. What matters is how such laws are applied in real life ([Dawson 2016](#)). For this reason, judicial attitudes towards femicide have become increasingly important, and Şule’s case illustrated very well how women and cause lawyers intervene to (re)shape these attitudes. It revealed that (i) women’s access to justice is a constant and ongoing struggle entailing co-operation between different social and legal mechanisms, and (ii) women’s organisations and cause lawyers co-operate to end violence against women. They not only provide legal assistance to the victims and actively follow their cases but also aim to form a public opinion against all kinds of violence and femicide. In this context, they mobilise their causes, mainly using social media, giving voice to previously excluded voices and turning each femicide case into a social cause.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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