

Festival Arena

Episode # 13

**Curated and hosted by Esra A. Aysun, Head of
Arts Turkey, British Council**

Monday 14.00, 11.05- 26.11. 2020

@ 95.0 Açık Radyo

Festival Stories on Festival Arena

From May 11 to October 26, every other Monday at 14.00, we hosted brief conversations on gender equality with two professionals from the creative industries and civil society which were aired on Festival Arena at Açık Radio. Festival Arena was created at an extraordinary time when Global Gender Inequality Report had declared that we needed at least 100 years to achieve gender equality with appalling headlines becoming an everyday phenomenon.

The very reason why this arena is called the Festival Arena is the Women of the World Festival¹, which will be organized in Istanbul in 2021 by the British Council in collaboration with the WOW Foundation. We were able to introduce the inclusivity of the WOW festivals for the first time on Festival Arena by giving voice to 24 women professionals of diverse backgrounds engaging them in lively debates about gender equality.

The main aim of Festival Arena was to share the opinions of creative professionals on gender equality with a wider audience and to try and accentuate the significant role culture and arts play in this struggle. That was the reason why we launched the radio show with Ceren Yartan, researcher and editor, and İlkay Baliç, Director Communications of ARTER to focus on women power in culture and arts. The first talks were aired at a time when we had to face the fact that the pandemic would confine us to our homes for a rather long period of time forcing us to reconsider all our daily routines and practices. This was also the time when we started questioning the cliché, 'we are all in the same boat'.

Of course, we have from time to time also discussed the already existing challenges of the creative sector becoming even more challenging due to the pandemic. 'Majority of its workforce being women and holding a progressive banner with its critical perspective and creative ethos, it made sense to discuss the issue of gender through the lens of labour movement in culture and arts'. Generally speaking, culture and arts are egalitarian sectors, free from prejudices against women; nevertheless, we pointed to the inequalities in recruitment, promotion, career development that women and queer professionals are subjected to in this fragile structure. We highlighted the fact that most women working in this sector are perceived as women of affluence, who work for pleasure rather than to make ends meet and that their struggle for equal rights have been silenced. However, we also agreed that the days when we silently stood up to these challenges were over and that from now on, we would be on the demanding side, the ones that fight for equal rights and for more visibility of our professional identity.

On the next episode, which focused on power balances in the sector, we talked about Politics, Leadership and Power with Asena Günal, WOW İstanbul Advisory Board Member and Gülseren Onanç, the Founding Director of SES Equality and Solidarity Association. We underlined the fact that the leaders who managed the pandemic most successfully were all women leaders. Gülseren Onanç offered a term, commander-type leadership, which stands for the type of domination that conservative, authoritarian and powerful men in particular try to maintain over nature, women, people with different sexual orientations, refugees and all kinds of diversity. We discussed whether emerging women leaders were able to topple this domination down. We

¹ <https://www.britishcouncil.org.tr/programmes/arts/wow-istanbul/acik-radio-programme/equality-health>

expressed our pride in the distinctive policies and practices of empathetic and inclusive leaders such as Merkel and Arden. Moreover, Asena reminded us all that women's representation in politics just for the sake of being women alone did not create political equality. Regardless, we were emboldened by women leaders who implemented pandemic-related policies most effectively. As for Turkey, we celebrated the fact that it was the women leaders in civil society who paved the way for a strong women's movement and that this movement and women's organizations have sustained themselves evolving into different forms and across different generations.

Regardless of the main theme of each episodes on Festival Arena, all the participants emphasized the burden that household chores put on women. Festival Arena frequently underlined the fact that while homes became a shelter for some of us against the pandemic, they at the same time turned into a centre and source of violence for many. In Deniz Kandiyotti's impressive words, 'The pandemic disrupted the illusion of the modern woman'² Under conditions of confinement, professional women had to take up all sorts of responsibilities such as education of the children, taking care of the elderly, handling domestic chores unquestioningly; all those responsibilities they had formerly shared with or delegated to other women. Facing this truth has undoubtedly marked the beginning of a new era.

Home has also become the spatial symbol of inequalities in the division of labour between genders during the pandemic, an issue which we elaborated on with Ülker Uncu, WOW Istanbul Advisory Board Member and BGST Organisation (Bogazici Performance Arts) Director as well as Zeynep Aydemir Koyuncu, Program Specialist at UN Women. It was shattering to hear that around the world, men spend an average of 4 years of their life on unremunerated house chores and care services whereas this figure is 10 years for women. We were overwhelmed by the soaring frequency of domestic violence during the pandemic but were able to take a sigh of hearing about the methods to remedy it. Zeynep consoled us talking about UN Women's 'The Safety Framework', to explain how women who are subjected to violence can protect themselves and their children if they have any; she also mentioned the sound recordings for illiterate or visually impaired women for the same purpose. When we watched the theatre play 'Her Güne bir Vaka' (A Case for Each Day) by the BGST that depicts stories of 7 different women on YouTube, instead of live on stage, we felt relieved and grateful to see that confinement could not really confine creativity behind walls.

The most dynamic episode was when we hosted Melis Abacıoğlu, the founder of Kızlar Sahada (Girls on the Pitch) and Sevecen Tunç, Trabzonspor Corporate Communication and Cultural Affairs Manager. These two women, who grew up with sports at the centre of their lives, presented us a different perspective about football. Melis explained to us her project, Kızlar Sahada, which aims at debunking gender-based prejudices that claim girls and women are incapable of playing football. Similarly, we were struck by Sevecen's words, who define herself as Homo Ludens, a human who plays: 'We keep saying that the world of sports legitimizes patriarchal structure. When we look at the individual components that make up this world, what do we see? Physical strength, endurance, competition, fighting as Melis said and ambition...

² <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/gundem/2020/04/30/deniz-kandiyoti-salgin-modern-kadinin-yasadigi-illuzyonu-yikti-gecti>

These are also the components that make up hegemonic masculinity. That is exactly why girls' or women's participation in sports is essential for it disrupts this hegemonic structure, this hegemonic order. Therefore, I fully agree with Melis. Precisely because sports tears down this structure, women have to be at the heart of it.' (Festival Arena, Episode 4, June 22, 2020.)

The most colourful episode was undoubtedly the one about queer creativity in the city. Performance artist Kübra Uzun and editor and writer Seçil Epik, both of whom are LGBTIQ+ activists, expounded on the LGBTIQ+ movement which extended from the civil rights movement in Turkey alongside feminist movement during the last three decades. We were moved by the astounding creativity of the virtual Pride, which had been prohibited for 5 years already and which had to take place online due to Covid-19 this year. It was priceless to see the Youtube-banned Pride event, Genetically Modified Tomato Awards, be carried on Zoom and to watch all LGBTIQ+ individuals mark themselves on an online map saying 'We are here' despite not being able to march physically.

Having touched upon the debates surrounding 'sexual orientation and gender identity' as defined in the Istanbul Convention with Seçil and Kübra, we decided to hand the microphone over to two lawyers to discuss 'Feminist Law and Justice'. We hosted Attorney İpek Bozkurt, WOW Istanbul Advisory Board Member and representative of We Will Stop Femicides Platform, and Attorney Selin Nakipoğlu. We discussed the blow that a fragmented bar system would deal on women's rights movement, the Article 6284 which was suspended first thing after the pandemic outbreak, the Turkish Penal Code Article 103, the proposal to pardon child abuses, and debates surrounding the Istanbul Convention. It was both sublime and encouraging to listen to these two women's fearless struggle to protect women's 'right to life' and prevent gender-related femicides.

Festival Arena tried to cover less visible and less popular topics as well. We discussed the right to 'equal access' with our guests from Ankara, Dr. Beyza Ünal, clinical psychologist and activist for people with disabilities and Ezgi Yalınalp, Director of the Accessible Films Festival. There is indeed a lot yet to be done in Turkey to improve accessibility for all individuals; Accessible Films Festival is one such avenue through which social equality can be mainstreamed in culture and arts and diverse forms of discrimination be unveiled. Beyza's remarks were striking: 'Women with disabilities experience the same problems as other women but far worse, simply because they have disabilities. And women with disabilities experience the same problems as other people with disabilities but far worse, simply because they are women' (Festival Arena, Episode 7, August 3, 2020.)

During the episode, we took stock of the pandemic's effects on us. We discussed Social Entrepreneurship, an area where fifty-five per cent of leaders in Turkey is women with Öznur Akçin, Secretary General of Yenidenbiz and WOW İstanbul Advisory Board Member, and Rümeyşa Çamdereli, Research Director at YADA Foundation. We found out that women were almost twice more likely to lose their jobs than men due to the pandemic. Our guests pointed to the need to mobilise incentives for women entrepreneurs in a more sustainable and flexible manner to meet each woman's demands rather than merely on a project-basis. Let us give the final word to Rümeyşa: 'Women have always managed to turn the tide during such challenging times. Women's movements have always succeeded to sustain themselves and survive in one way or another under conditions of war or other catastrophes. I hope we will weather this storm

as well and head for a future where we will successfully implement more wholistic entrepreneurship and employment policies.’ (Festival Arena, Episode 8, August 17, 2020.)

For our episode on equality in health, we invited Associate Professor Ayşecan Terzioğlu and Dr. Özge Akbulut, both of whom are faculty members at Sabancı University. Özge is also the founder of Surgitate, a company which has contributed to early diagnosis of breast cancer with the breast models they fabricate using nanotechnology. I was surprised when she had said ‘I can accept to be your guest on the show only if I am allowed to use the word ‘breast’, but her justification was intriguing: people hesitate to call breast cancer for what it is and call it ‘chest cancer’ instead. She shared mind-blowing anecdotes about her breast models being found obscene and banned in social media. I received astonishing responses when I asked my guests about the impact of the pandemic on their future plans. Özge told us about the project to translate their works on breast-conserving surgery into an online training module. Ayşecan on the other hand mentioned the ‘the boat metaphor’ and remarked that some of us in this boat are enjoying the sea view on the deck while others are working in the boiler room; some of us get to sleep in the kitchen while others in first class cabins. She then added that her future work will involve the intersection of diseases such as Covid-19 with political, economic and social inequalities and discrimination.

It should not come as a surprise that the next section of our talk following the footsteps of these two distinguished academics was dedicated to education. We discussed new learning models through the lens of gender equality with Melek Pulatkonak, the Founder of TurkishWIN and Ceyda Karadaş, Purple Certificate Programme Director at Gender and Women’s Studies Centre of Excellence at Sabancı University. Ceyda told us that the Purple Certificate Programme, which was launched in 2007 and is supported by the Sabancı Foundation, aims at making gender a topical issue at high school classrooms, where it is not in the curriculum. I think the most astounding of all was hearing about the project’s role in establishing solidarity and mentorship programmes with the teachers who were cast out simply because they raised the issue of gender in the classroom. Learning that a teacher communicates with three thousand students throughout his or her career makes one realize the potential of change they carry. Melek told us another story of solidarity, Bin Yaprak and TurkishWIN, a global circle of sisterhood. Did you know that as many as 70% of women have to respond to the question of ‘Where are you headed’ when they are going out? It was encouraging to find out about the digital platforms and the role of the networks they create in changing lives. Just like Tülin, a social entrepreneur in Aydın, whose life changed after she participated in a live show on Bin Yaprak.

The most creative episode bears the same name as the title of the 9th Culture Policies report that IKSŞ (Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts) has been drafting: ‘Culture and Arts for a Sustainable Planet’. We lent an ear to Özlem Ece, WOW Istanbul Advisory Board Member and IKSŞ Culture Policies Director, and Dr Hande Paker of Bahçeşehir University. We will have to wait a little longer to read the full report on the relationship between culture, arts, creativity and environmental sustainability but it was inspiring to see our guests’ ambition to enhance the visibility of culture and arts in transforming practices that lead to climate change.

On our final episode, we discussed Gender Equality Activism in Arts with the artist Eda Gecikmez and Gizem Bayiksel, Film and Video Programmes Manager at Pera Museum. Eda

and Gizem gave details about the collective movements they supported such as Kırmızı Kart (The Red Card) and SusmaBitsin (BreakYourSilence) and explained how much feminist movement empowered them. This solidarity strengthened their struggle against all kinds of discrimination and abuse, not just gender-based, which we believe is the most remarkable achievement.

We are aware of the deliberate effort in Turkey to confine individual liberties of women within the boundaries of the family especially through debates surrounding gender, and unfortunately this is evolving into a conservative culture policy. However, we do know that against every step backwards, plenty of civil society collectives take tens of steps forwards regardless of their differences. Many more divergent voices tune in today; they put their heads together and find solutions together. There is no doubt that as long as we join forces, our struggle shall prevail. The encounters and dialogues through Festival Arena made us feel this power and they will continue in 2021 thanks to WOW Festival Istanbul. Therefore, this is not a farewell. Let us finish with the motto that we repeated at the end of every episode: Istanbul Convention Saves Lives!