

GENDER POLITICS AND GONGOS IN TURKEY

The ruling party in Turkey has been increasing its conservative tone in issues related to women. The party supports “government-organized NGOs” (GONGOs) to construct and disseminate its conservative discourse. KADEM is one such GONGO that carries out this task. It works on the construction of an anti-feminist discourse that calls for the replacement of “gender equality” with “gender justice.” Feminists in Turkey have been quite successful in pressuring the state, negotiating with it, and achieving desired outcomes throughout the 1990s and 2000s. However, in an environment of creeping authoritarianism, where it is hard for independent media and civil society to survive, feminists face obstacles in counteracting the government’s attempts that co-opt the field of civil society and open up a space for its conservative gender discourse.

Çağla Diner*



TURKISH POLICY
QUARTERLY

Winter 2018

* Çağla Diner is an Assistant Professor at Kadir Has University in Istanbul, Turkey.

The leaders of the Turkish state have always had a specific image for the ideal Turkish woman, who is in essence a mother and a wife. This image is embraced by all segments of Turkish society. Groups that would be expected to have different values, beliefs, and lifestyles have converged on the idea of this image with only marginal and symbolic differences. Aside from views on the issue of a woman's need to wear a headscarf, it does not matter much whether one is secular or religious, has an urban or rural background, high or low socio-economic status, or high level of education or lack thereof.

The ideal of equality between men and women, which was seemingly embraced by Turkish modernization in the early Republican era, never became a reality. In fact, Turkish modernization made sure that women's presence in the public space never went beyond a symbolic visibility or transformed into political participation.¹ Nor did it lead to participation in the labor force.² Despite the low status and profile of women in Turkish public space and their essential role as mothers and wives in society, AKP leaders have been trying to reemphasize and re-inscribe the image of the Turkish woman as a wife and mother, one who is more than willing to fulfill her domestic responsibilities through self-sacrifice without regard to her individuality. This is observed by many scholars over the past 10 years.³

GONGOs and the AKP

How do AKP leaders re-inscribe this image? An important tool is media and public speeches. Discursive governance is a technology used by political authorities to inculcate ideas to the collective rationality of the public. This technology relies on narratives, leitmotifs, and strategic metaphors that circulate in the media and shape public perceptions in line with the world view of political authorities.⁴

There are numerous examples in which AKP leaders talk about the need for women to bear more children, encourage marriage at a young age, emphasize the necessity to restrict abortion, comment on the inappropriate proximity of youth to sex, and

¹ Serpil Sancar, "Otoriter Türk Modernleşmesinin Cinsiyet Rejimi" [Gender Governance of the Authoritarian Turkish Modernization] *Doğu-Batı*, Vol. 7, No. 29 (2004).

² According to the TUIK Household Labor force Survey 2016, the employment rate for women between ages 15 and 64 is 31.2 percent, <https://biruni.tuik.gov.tr/medas/?kn=72&locale=tr>

³ Simten Coşar and Metin Yeğenoğlu, "New Grounds for Patriarchy in Turkey? Gender Policy in the Age of AKP," *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (2011), pp. 555-73; Ayşe Güneş-Ayata and Gökten Doğançün, "Gender Politics of the AKP: Restoration of a Religio-conservative Gender Climate," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 6 (2017), pp. 610-27; Dilek Cindoglu and Didem Unal, "Gender and sexuality in the authoritarian discursive strategies of 'New Turkey'," *European Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2017), pp. 39-54.

⁴ Umut Korkut and Hande Eslen-Ziya, "The Discursive Governance of Population Politics: The Evolution of a Pro-Birth Regime in Turkey," *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (2016), p. 556.

call on women to behave and dress modestly, etc.⁵ These speeches are not only made by the party leaders but also by leaders of religious sects, university professors who are predominantly from the faculty of theology, and civil society leaders.

One of the most important conduits that AKP leaders use to create and disseminate a discourse on gender in line with their religious and conservative worldview is civil society organizations. The two most prominent of these organizations are the Woman and Democracy Association (*Kadın ve Demokrasi Derneği*, KADEM) and the Youth and Education Service Foundation (*Türkiye Gençlik ve Eğitime Hizmet Vakfı*, TÜRGEV).⁶ These civil society organizations fit into the definition of what scholars call Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organizations (GONGOs). They are “civil society” organizations in name; however, they are not independent and do not contribute to the expansion of the civil sphere and democratization. On the contrary, they work to foster the state’s agenda and disseminate its views and ideology. They are either established by women from within the state apparatus or strictly controlled by the state.⁷

“AKP leaders have been trying to reemphasize and re-inscribe the image of the Turkish woman as a wife and mother.”

A quick search immediately reveals the proximity between these two GONGOs and the state. Representatives from the government as high as the president himself frequently attend GONGOs’ anniversary celebrations, event openings, or conferences. In return, members of these GONGOs attend international summits and conferences

⁵ “Arınç: ‘Kadın sokakta kakhaha atmayacak,’” [Women Should Not Laugh out Loud in the Street] *Cumhuriyet*, 28 July 2014; *T24 Internet Daily* 2017; “Erdoğan: Nikâhlanın, evlenin, çoğalın; Türkiye’deki terör örgütü üyelerinin en az 15 çocuğu var!” [Erdoğan: Get Married and Reproduce; Members of Terrorist Organizations in Turkey have at least 15 Children] *T24*, 10 November 2017, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/erdogan-nikahlanin-evlenin-cogalin-turkiyedeki-teror-orgutu-uyelerinin-en-az-15-cocugu-var,487409>; “Her kürtaj bir Uludere’dir,” [Every Abortion Resembles Uludere] *Milliyet*, 28 May 2012, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/her-kurtaj-bir-uludere-dir-siyaset-1546038/>

⁶ TÜRGEV is established in 1996 with the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Mayor of Istanbul at the time. The foundation establishes and runs dormitories for young women, both in secondary and tertiary education. It declares that aside from providing secure place for young female students its mission is to contribute to their moral, spiritual, ethical, intellectual and scholarly development. For that purpose, the foundation organizes workshops and seminars on education. Until 2012, it only had dormitories in Istanbul, afterwards, it started to operate in other parts of the county as well. Together with the Ensar Foundation, TÜRGEV established a similar foundation, named TURKEN, to support Turkish students and academics abroad in North America and Britain. Aside from providing student housing, the objective of the foundation is to provide cultural, social and educational opportunities and experiences for Muslim students. In 2015, thanks to its experience in the education sector, TÜRGEV established Ibn-i Haldun University, which accepted students for the first time in 2017. Esra Albayrak, the daughter of the President Erdoğan serves in the board of directors of both TÜRGEV and TURKEN. Bilal Erdoğan, the President’s son also used to serve in the board of directors of TÜRGEV until 2017.

⁷ Jessica Leigh Doyle, “State control of civil society organizations: the case of Turkey,” *Democratization*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2017), pp. 244-264.

along with state bureaucrats and politicians. These GONGOs also work closely with the government in various projects funded by different ministries. In contrast, for the past five or so years, independent civil society organizations – which generally are opposed to the AKP’s stance on gender – have been drawing attention to their worsening relationship with the government as the AKP has been denying access to policy processes and refusing project findings in favor of GONGOs. Independent women’s organizations also complain about being subjected to bureaucratic ordeals such as heavy auditing.⁸ Additionally, a new phenomenon that independent women’s civil society organizations have been experiencing is exclusion from representing Turkey alongside the state in international platforms such as the annual meetings of the UN’s Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).⁹

KADEM: AKP’s GONGO for Policymaking on Women’s Issues

The subject of GONGOs in Turkey is deserving of further, detailed research. However, this article will only briefly focus on KADEM as the most prominent example. KADEM was specifically established to create and disseminate the AKP’s conservative discourse on gender. For effective, discursive governance, the political authority needs influential and effective narratives, leitmotifs, and metaphors, and KADEM fills this role. In fact, during the opening ceremony of KADEM in 2013, it was clearly stated that the objective of the association is to carry out this task: “to cultivate a consciousness of traditional values and their practice in real life among the Turkish women.”¹⁰ In the same opening ceremony, the honorary member of the association, daughter of renowned Turkish writer and sociologist Cemil Meriç, Ümit Meriç, stated that their objective is to create platforms where the state and society can debate and discuss women’s issues.¹¹

The most important theme that KADEM works on is the necessity to abandon the concept of equality between men and women and instead adopt the concept of “gender justice.” Since its establishment in 2013, the association organizes a Gender Justice Congress every year to commemorate International Women’s Day, March 8th. The Fourth International Gender Justice Congress will be held in March 2018, and the theme of the congress is divorce. Last year, the theme of the Third Gender Justice Congress was women and the family; and as stated in the final

⁸ Doyle (2017); Selen Lermioğlu Yılmaz, “Yerelden Küresele Kadınlar Direniyor!” [Women Resistance from the Local to the Global Level] *Kadınlarla Mor Bulten*, Vol. 24, (July 2015), pp. 16-17.

⁹ Yasemin Öz, “Pekin +20’de küresel düzeyde kadın hakları” [Women Rights on a Global Level in Beijing +20] *Heinrich Böll Stiftung Turkey Website*, 8 May 2015, <https://tr.boell.org/tr/2015/05/08/pekin-20de-kuresel-duzeyde-kadin-haklari>

¹⁰ KADEM, “Birinci Olağan Genel Kurul Toplantısı,” [First Plenary Assembly Meeting of KADEM] 1 June 2013, <http://kadem.org.tr/kadem-i-olagan-genel-kurul-ve-tanitim-toplantisi/>

¹¹ KADEM (2013).

declaration of the Congress, the focus was on the problems that women and the institution of family face. Since the first congress held in 2015, every year these Gender Justice Congresses have hosted government officials such as the Governor of Istanbul, the Minister of Family and Social Policy and/or the Minister of Justice, and President Erdoğan's wife, Emine Erdoğan. The President's daughter Sümeyye Erdoğan is one of the founders of KADEM and works as the vice president of the association. Similarly, the International Woman and Justice Summit in 2014 and 2016 – organized by KADEM in cooperation with the Ministry of Family and Social Policy – hosted Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the opening ceremonies of both of these events. These summits are held around November 25 to commemorate the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. In the opening ceremonies of both of these events, President Erdoğan congratulated KADEM for having a novel perspective on women's issues and distinguishing itself unequivocally from other women's civil society organizations with its alternative ideas and discourse. In addition to these large events, KADEM organizes seminars and "discourse workshops," which often match the narratives, leitmotifs, and metaphors to be used by the AKP in its discursive governance strategy.

“The most important theme that KADEM works on is the necessity to abandon the concept of equality between men and women and instead adopt the concept of ‘gender justice.’”

Gender Equality versus “Gender Justice”

What is this gender justice that KADEM and the AKP leaders are so keen to work on and discuss? In her TPQ article “A New Momentum: Gender Justice in the Women's Movement,” Sare Aydın Yılmaz, the president of KADEM, argues that feminism “created a homogenous image of women, thus ignoring the differences among them” as she claims that “classical egalitarian feminism” had detrimental effects on women's rights in Turkey.¹² Yılmaz asserts that abandoning the concept of gender equality and adopting gender justice will enable us to recognize the differences among women as well as the differences among men and women. In that case, she argues, politicians will be able to formulate policies that take these differences into consideration and ensure that the outcomes of these policies will create a just order – one that values the rights and integrity of all women and men. Another argument Yılmaz puts forward is that women's fundamental problems still prevail despite decades of

¹² Sare Aydın Yılmaz, “A New Momentum: Gender Justice in the Women's Movement,” Turkish Policy Quarterly, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Winter 2015), p. 108-9.

including gender equality as a principle in all governmental plans and programs.

There are two problems with Yılmaz's reasoning. The first is that feminism, whether one calls it third-wave feminism or post-feminism, already questions the issue of differences and different needs among women. It is indeed necessary to take into account the differences among women in formulating policies, but it really does not matter whether these differences are taken into account by referring to a concept called "gender justice" or "gender equality." Feminists are well aware of the fact that equality does not mean sameness. The second problem with her reasoning is that the reason women's problems and oppression prevails is not because women use the word equality rather than justice, but because it is extraordinarily difficult to change the patriarchal mentality and oppressive structures rooted in modern capitalist societies and institutions. These cannot change by substituting one word with another. They can only change with the actions of men and women. It is certain that all the feminists in the world would embrace the concept of "gender justice" in one day if it were so easy to change the thousand-year-old structures and problems by changing one word.

In short, what Yılmaz does is to create a straw man (or woman) of feminism and the concept of "gender equality" and then attack it. Yılmaz may have a theoretical weakness, but it is not only she that works for the fortification and dissemination of the concept of gender justice. There is the whole association of KADEM and the ruling AKP that have invested in this endeavor, too. Why? Because it is possible to legitimize the division of labor within the family and in society if one emphasizes the natural differences between men and women. Whereas the concept of "gender equality" may hide the natural differences the concept of "gender justice" emphasizes them, and stresses that these differences cannot and should not change. Such an acceptance prepares the ground on which one can re-inscribe the essential role of women in society and family as mothers and wives. That is probably why President Erdoğan refers to the concept *fitrat* (nasality) to draw attention to the unchangeable features of men and women. What can such an emphasis on the unchangeable natural differences between men and women serve? It can only serve to legitimize the traditional division of labor in the family, that women should be the caregivers of the family members and men should be their protectors and breadwinners. Through the legitimization of the traditional division of the labor in the family, President Erdoğan and KADEM tries to keep the essence of patriarchy intact.

In the same article, Yılmaz talks about the need to pay attention to the differences among the customs and traditions of Western and Eastern societies and argues for the necessity for Eastern societies to create their own version of feminism. Why is

there need for a different feminism for Eastern societies? Because in most of these societies, the customs and traditions that have kept the traditional division of labor in the family are stronger when compared with Western societies. By arguing for a need to come up with a feminism that is more suitable for the fabric of Eastern societies, Yılmaz reveals her intention to prevent the weakening of the customs and traditions that may change the traditional division of labor in the family. This seems to be the reason why KADEM emphasizes in its vision statement that it aims to “conserve the authentic core values of the Turkish woman.”¹³ This is the reason why KADEM and the party invest in the criticism of feminism and the adoption of the concept of gender justice in favor of gender equality.

“Through the legitimization of the traditional division of the labor in the family, President Erdogan and KADEM tries to keep the essence of patriarchy intact.”

Are Feminists Enemies of the Government?

The AKP and KADEM’s recent attempts to construct a new gender discourse, one that rejects feminism and gender equality to conserve the core values of Turkish women and their practices, is puzzling when we consider that Turkish women have always embraced their roles as mothers and wives, a role assigned to them by the Republican leaders.¹⁴ If we would look at the values of Turkish society today, the trend is towards religiosity and conservatism rather than liberalism or Western modernization.¹⁵ If we look at population growth and birth rates, it seems like Turkish youth are still getting married and bearing children.¹⁶ Then, why does the party feel the need to identify feminism and gender equality as “problems?”

This has to do with the increasing authoritarian trends in Turkey and around the world. The current political and intellectual environment does not tolerate any opposition or dissident voices. Such intolerance is not only a characteristic of the government but also of the intellectuals and the media close to the government.¹⁷ In

¹³ About KADEM (in Turkish), <http://kadem.org.tr/kadem-hakkinda/>

¹⁴ Sancar (2004).

¹⁵ Ali Çarıkoğlu and Binnaz Toprak, *Religion, Society and Politics in a Changing Turkey* (TESEV Publications, 2007); Ali Çarıkoğlu and Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, *The Rising Tide of Conservatism in Turkey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Binnaz Toprak, *Being Different in Turkey: Religion, Conservatism and Otherization* (Research Report on Neighborhood Pressure, 2009) *Açık Toplum Vakfı*, http://www.aciktoplumvakfi.org.tr/pdf/tr_farkli_olmak.pdf.

¹⁶ Korkut and Eslen-Ziya (2016), p. 556.

¹⁷ Yüksel Taskin, “Hegemonizing Conservative Democracy and the Problems of Democratization in Turkey: Conservatism Without Democrats?” *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2013), pp. 292–310.

such an environment, feminists in Turkey alarm politicians and opinion leaders. Feminists have managed to organize and form platforms to work together on various issues concerning women's rights in spite of their different views on religion, Islam, secularism, democracy, and the Kurdish movement. Thanks to their ability to organize and work together, feminists in Turkey have been successful in pressuring and negotiating with the state to achieve joint goals throughout the 1990s and 2000s.¹⁸ Turkish women as a whole may lead quite conservative lives as mothers and wives with values embracing traditional gender relations, but somehow feminists in Turkey are quite different. They demand change, work hard for it, and overcome the obstacles that prevent them.

In Turkey's highly controlled domestic environment, it is difficult for independent media and civil society to survive. Therefore, it is not easy for feminist activists to counteract AKP's attempts that co-opt civil society and open up a space for its conservative gender discourse. As many women's organizations acknowledge, the only thing they can try to do in this environment is to resist the government's regressive policies on women's rights and prevent the significant backsliding of the previous decades' positive developments.

¹⁸ A few examples: in 2001, the Turkish Civil Code was amended to achieve gender equality in family units on issues such as equal decision-making power, division of property after the end of marriage, and women's right to work without husbands' permission. Over 100 women's CSOs worked together during this reform process. A campaign to amend the Penal Code soon followed, which aimed to regulate sexuality and punished the violator because of his crime against society or the family as opposed to the violence committed against the specific victim. The new Penal Code, put into effect in 2005 after a three-year campaign led by women's CSOs, is based on a new philosophy that does not regulate sexuality but aims to protect sexual integrity. In this regard, references to concepts such as chastity, honor, indecent behavior were deleted, provisions discriminating between married-unmarried, virgin-non virgin women or granting sentence reductions to rapists in case they marry the victim were removed.