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# Global migrations of the discourse of “gender ideology” and moral panics: transnational fundamentalism from the Vatican to Turkey

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## Abstract

This article looks at the gender regime of the governing Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi; AKP) in Turkey through the double lenses of “gender ideology” and moral panics. It traces the itinerary along which “gender ideology” as a reactionary discourse has traveled through a landscape stretching from the Vatican to Turkey. This trajectory places the AKP’s gender perspective and policies within a larger right-wing populist rhetoric of transnational fundamentalism which claims gender is an ideology. The “gender ideology” discourse of the AKP is maintained through a constant sense of crisis which reveals itself in moments of moral panics. The article specifically takes the period of 2019–2020 where such a moment of moral panic was heightened and examines this specific period through an analysis of public speeches of political figures, newspaper articles, and other published materials on the issue. The article shows how this fundamentalist discourse of “gender ideology” and its concomitant strategy of moral panics built an oppressive political environment for women and LGBTI+ people in Turkey and paved the road to the country’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021.

**Keywords:** gender ideology; moral panics; women’s rights; LGBTI+

## Introduction

On July 13, 2020, a tweet with a caricature depicting Prophet Mohammed and his wife Aisha riding a camel was posted on Twitter, with a hashtag announcing “Islam = Paedophilia.” The tweet was posted by a user called “Türkiye LGBTİ Birliği” (LGBTI Union of Turkey – @lgbtiorg). Although the owner of the account was not verified as an LGBTI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex +) organization, the tweet ignited an immense reaction both from the Turkish government and the public at large. A group of lawyers appealed to the İstanbul Prosecutors Office with a criminal complaint about the tweet, and also made a public announcement:

Recently, as can be observed in the media, LGBTI organizations all over the world try to legitimize child abuse and pedophilia. These organizations assert their pervert views aggressively to ruin the society, and target both social

morality and sacred values. The issue of “Sexual Abuse of Children” is constantly violated by LGBTI and its related organizations, and this situation constitutes an open and immediate danger for public safety, and actions and precautions must be taken to prevent it (Kiran 2020).

Furthermore, following the tweet, thousands of reactions appeared in different spaces of social media platforms condemning LGBTI+s; for example, on Twitter some headlines attracted massive support such as #LGBTDernekleriKapatılsın (LGBT associations must be shut down), #LGBTSapikliginaDurDe (Say no to LGBT perversion), and #LGBTfaaliyetleriYasaklansın (LGBT activities must be forbidden). This crusade on LGBTI+ organizations and people was followed by another attack from a front mobilized by the media on the İstanbul Convention (the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence) which was signed by Turkey in 2011. The attack on the İstanbul Convention revolved around two main claims: that it leads to de-sexualization of society by means of negating biologically determined sexes; and that it also creates a fertile ground for the recognition and promotion of LGBTI+ people.

Although both the assault on LGBTI+ people and the İstanbul Convention intensified in July 2020, the warpath had been cleared much earlier. For example, a significant momentum revealing the perspective of the Turkish government came in 2010 when then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared that “women and men can never be equal. Woman is woman, man is man. Can they be equal? They complement each other” (Habertürk 2010). Until then, the official discourse regarding gender issues had not digressed from the acceptance of the constitutional equality of men and women. However, the emphasis on family intensified, and family values and morals began to be more frequently vocalized by the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi; AKP). The last decade and a half has seen a gradual escalation of the construction of an anti-gender discourse, intensification of pro-family policies, and increasing rage against LGBTI+ people in Turkey. The rampage over issues like gender equality, adultery, homosexuality, and pedophilia, and the destruction of religious, moral, and traditional values of Turkish society were fueled by government authorities and conservative media and was instrumentalized to create a moral panic. This article examines the increasing regulation of gender relations through two notions: the “gender ideology” discourse and the concept of moral panics, by contextualizing the AKP’s gender regime within the global rise of anti-gender movements. It displays how this gender regime is fortified through an anti-gender attack that appears as a moral crusade in conservative media, in speeches by AKP cadres and in documents.

Arat (2022) defines the AKP’s transformation towards authoritarianism as democratic backsliding whereby it instrumentalized the gender issue and women’s rights to meet the needs of different stages of this authoritarian transformation. In its initial years of rule between 2002 and 2007, the AKP fortified its power with promises of a larger democratic space, a sound rule of law, and more emphasis on a civilian regime against the military’s pervasive influence over politics of the previous periods. On gender issues, the government made amendments to the Penal Code for the protection of women against sexual and domestic violence, and added a clause to the constitution on the responsibility of the state for securing gender equality. These

reforms were functional for promoting the legitimacy and credibility of the government on the part of the secular segments of society, especially the civilian and military bureaucracy, and were considered as proof that the AKP was not a threat to the secular regime despite its Islamic roots (Arat 2022, 921). Recognition by the international community, especially the European Union (EU), with which accession negotiations started in 2004, was also fortified by these reforms. After 2007 these democratic promises started to give way to a growing authoritarian political structure in a neoliberal economic terrain. The liberal reforms of the AKP's first term were utilized to secure the ground for an increasingly authoritarian regime in its subsequent terms. The ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2011 can be considered within this fold. The 2007 referendum which brought changes to the constitution, especially the direct election of the president by the people, the 2010 referendum which solidified the AKP's rule, Gezi Park mass protests, and the 2014 and 2018 presidential elections consolidating Erdoğan's authority were the major milestones shaping the authoritarian topography (Bechev 2014; Castaldo 2018; Çalışkan 2018; Esen and Gumuscu 2018; Türkmen-Derrişođlu 2011). Especially after the Gezi Park protests, the more authoritarian the AKP became, the more liberal and democratic segments of society pulled back their support. Thus, the AKP became more dependent upon support from conservative nationalists and traditional Islamist communities to maintain its power (Kütük-Kuriş 2022). Not only neglect of the reforms but also reactionary legal and political changes were implemented such as the recognition of religious marriages before civil marriages, and finally the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021. In this period, the state's public presence through religion and nationalism, and attachment to patriarchy, family values, and morality increased (Acar and Altunok 2013; Coşar and Yeğenođlu 2011; Çıtak and Tür 2008; Kaya 2015; Yazar 2020).

The gender regime which emerged as a result of this democratic backsliding towards authoritarianism reveals itself in an escalation of the regulation of gender relations. This article examines this intensifying regulation of gender relations especially as it pertains to LGBTI+ people by relying on two notions: the "gender ideology" discourse and the concept of moral panics. These two terms may help get a better understanding of the current situation in Turkey by including a consideration of the strategies of the far right at a global level in the analysis. As has been pointed out, the "new global far-right" is characterized by a multiple and interconnected form across time and space (Miller-Idriss 2020a), and there is a critical need for studies that examine intersections between the far right, gender and sexual essentialism, homophobia, and support for misogyny (Miller-Idriss 2020b). Incited by such a need, this article aims to demystify the jargon of authenticity of the AKP, such as its rhetoric on "*yerli and milli*" (native and national) politics, by displaying the shared ideological points and common vocabulary between its discourse on gender relations and the global "gender ideology" discourse. The "gender ideology" discourse based upon the rhetoric of religiously sanctioned natural sexual order of different but complementary sexes connects right-wing secular movements and Christian fundamentalism in the West to the Islamist jargon of the AKP. I also argue in this article that this "gender ideology" discourse is constantly fed during moments of moral panics and crisis.

In order to discuss my arguments, I rely on a survey of the conservative press and websites in Turkey as well as an analysis of speeches by the AKP's leading cadres during the 2019–2020 period. Below, I first discuss the conceptualization of moral panics, and then describe the emergence and spread of the discourse of “gender ideology” and show how it has become a common strategy utilized by authoritarian populist regimes and far-right movements. Next, I analyze how the “gender ideology” discourse instrumentalizes moral panics as a strategy to foster anti-genderism in Turkey.

### Moral panics

Cohen (1972) conceptualized a moral panic in terms of an episode where a person, a condition, or a group of people is constructed in stereotypical fashion by the mass media, presented as a threat to societal values and interests, and attended to by social, legal, and political control. Following Cohen (1972), Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2011, 21) emphasized that moral panics involve disproportionate and exaggerated reactions generated by putative threats to a moral universe.

Others place moral panics in a broader perspective of moral regulation, which is founded upon moralizing discourses, practices, or techniques to regulate social groups and practices considered as potentially harmful (Hunt 2011, 55). It is a regime of social discipline where a variety of organized and less formal attempts within or beyond the state encourage people to act on their own to align themselves with prevailing social norms (Hier 2019, 882). While moral regulation manages the self through techniques of normalization over extended time periods, moral panics are characterized by the intensification of regulatory activities that attend to perceived breakdowns in the moral regulation of everyday life. For Hunt (2011) and Hier (2019), moral panic episodes should be placed within larger moral regulatory frameworks and the ruptures that lead to those episodes should be pinpointed. Panics operate reactively rather than proactively to isolate, control, and ultimately induce modes of correction in groups who are perceived to transgress social norms through a dialectical process of security (Hier 2019).

Moral panics can emerge from spontaneous grassroots events led by local anxieties or can be consciously engineered for political gain as in the case of Hitler's burning of the Reichstag in 1933 (Garland 2008, 13). A moral panic defines a group of people as deviants, and a moral crusade is launched against them. “Deviant groups” can thus be declared as inferior and stripped of their fundamental rights and freedoms. Butler, without using the concept of moral panics, refers to this act of right-stripping as a significant mark of fascism and a form of fascist rebranding: “Such strategies ... intensify the vulnerability of the very communities falsely held responsible for the precarious state of the world” (Butler 2024, 54–55).

Gender has been one of the primary targets of moral panic campaigns. Cohen (1972) had studied panics over sexual expression and sexuality as a sub-type of moral panics. Contending that panics over sexuality and gender have gained a different momentum in recent years, Cole and Moore (2020, 276) argue that the apparently greater access of women to economic and other resources:

has destabilized normative gender hierarchies [which] has in turn provoked panics that both reflect and reinforce affective investments in provider masculinity—the ideal that men control the acquisition and distribution of resources, including the resources women provide through sex, care and domestic labor.

Increasing public visibility of women and emphasis on human and women’s rights challenge established norms and structures of patriarchal society, which has resulted in gender panics mobilizing “. . . anxieties not only about shifting masculinities but also about changing distribution of power in social life” (Cole and Moore 2020, 276). This definition of gender panics is also echoed in Kandiyoti’s (2013) description of the “masculinist restoration project.” She defines this backlash as a new phenomenon, because “patriarchy-as-usual is no longer secure, and requires higher levels of coercion and deployment of more varied ideological state apparatuses to ensure its production” (Kandiyoti 2013). Moral panics in the form of gender panics can be considered as a tool to boost masculinist restoration projects. For Kandiyoti, as in the cases of Turkey or some Arab countries, the process of Islamization can be considered as an attempt to restore the patriarchal masculinist hegemony. Below, I display how gender panics and masculinist restoration projects appear to have animated the recent rise of right-wing populisms.

### The “gender ideology” discourse

The “gender ideology” discourse began to appear in the 1990s as a fabrication of the Vatican as a reaction to the demands of the feminist and LGBTI+ movements and the agenda of international human rights platforms (Morán Faúndes 2019, 403). The United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 had alarmed the Vatican. These international conferences promoted gender equality, centrality of reproductive rights, and women’s empowerment, which were perceived by the Vatican as the internationalization of feminist claims about the social construction of the “natural” sexual order (Garbagnoli 2016, 189). The Vatican launched an anti-gender campaign through appropriating and reversing the conceptual vocabulary of feminism. Since religious conservatism perceives ideology as a false and deceptive interpretation and perception of the world versus a supposedly true and objective reality based in religion, defining gender as ideology aimed to deprive it of its value and credibility as a concept.

The “gender ideology” discourse’s claim is that women and men have their own function and place within a natural order, which are written on their “sexuated” bodies (Garbagnoli 2016, 190). The “gender ideology” advocated by feminists and LGBTI+ people, the claim goes, aims to destroy this harmonious sexual order of difference and complementarity. According to the Vatican’s “gender ideology” discourse, women and men are not equal as revealed in their anatomical differences, but they are equal in dignity. In 1995, Pope John Paul II defined this new enterprise as the “new feminism” founded upon difference, complementarity, and equality in dignity (Garbagnoli 2016, 190). Contrary to the destructive bad feminism of the

feminist and LGBTI+ movements, it is claimed that this new feminism enthrones women with their real and genuine value and dignity.

Before he was named as pope, Cardinal Ratzinger (2004) declared that concept of gender was the result of the excessive exercise of liberty that would destroy what is essential to being human that is divinely ordained by God. His successor, Pope Francis, despite his seemingly progressive image, continued the attack on gender by likening the destructive power of gender to nuclear war (Butler 2024, 40).

During the 2010s, right-wing populist movements in Europe discovered the discourse of “gender ideology” as a fertile strategic ground to resist and protest the EU’s demands for consolidation of gender equality and LGBTI+ rights. The growing strength of these movements became apparent in the public space following developments such as the inclusion of sex education in school curricula, and the push for same-sex marriage. In response, groups such as the La Manif Pour Tous in France (“Protest for All,” a grassroots movement composed of different religious and secular conservative groups) began to declare themselves as against gender equality, reproductive rights, and LGBTI+ rights, and incorporated the gender ideology discourse into their anti-elitist populist discourse. They claimed that their fundamental struggle is to defend the established norms of society against the de-sexualization project pursued by the feminists and the LGBTI+ movement (La Manif Pour Tous 2013). This French movement was copied and multiplied in different European countries such as Italy, Germany, and Austria, and new members of the EU such as Poland, Croatia, and Slovenia (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017, 16), and also integrated into neo-conservative activism in Latin American countries (Morán Faúndes 2019, 403), turning it into a global phenomenon.

For Judith Butler, this global character of the “gender ideology” discourse and the transnational crusade on gender should be considered as a part of a “larger restoration project that seeks to shore up authoritarian regimes as rightful forms of paternalism” (Butler 2024, 15). In a world of high rates of poverty, forced migration, climate change, and epidemics, people’s lives are precarious, and these are legitimate reasons to fear. Yet, this climate of fear also presents a fertile ground for right-wing ideologies. Gender, gender theory, women’s rights, feminism, and the LGBTI+ movement are targeted as the grounds for such fears. Butler (2024, 5) emphasizes that a broad range of fears that contradict each other are gathered in order to pinpoint gender as a threat against everything. For Butler, gender appears as a kind of phantasm that absorbs all these fears and anxieties, and in return incites political passions through alliances of different political and social actors whereby “gender ideology” appears as the common enemy.

Despite its Christian, particularly Catholic, roots, the commonalities between “gender ideology” as expressed initially by the Christian right in Europe and the gender discourse of the AKP embellished by Islamic references are striking. The “gender ideology” discourse produced by the Catholic Church claims that feminism, homosexuality, and the Islamic invasion of Europe are the major perils for Western civilization (Corredor 2019, 629). It is interesting therefore to see that a political power with Islamist aspirations utilizes the same medley of arguments and discourses, of course, replacing the Islamic threat with the Western menace.

## Agents and grounds of the gender ideology discourse in Turkey

Within the expanding borders of the anti-gender crusade, the “different and complementary” discourse was adopted *verbatim et literatim* by AKP when the gender ideology discourse gained momentum in Europe during the 2010s. The term *fitrat* (nature or natural disposition in Arabic) defining the different and complementary character of men and women was a key concept. Following Erdoğan’s statement that declared “men and women can never be equal, but they complement each other,” the conjoined twins of “different and complementary” overflowed the political and cultural flanks of the conservative front. In 2014, at the International Women and Justice Summit organized by the Women and Democracy Foundation (Kadın ve Demokrasi Vakfı; KADEM) a civil society organization (CSO) close to the government, Erdoğan reiterated his views on *fitrat*:

What women need is not equality, but rather equity, in other words, justice. You cannot place women and men into equal positions. Their creation, nature and very constitution are different. . . . Therefore, we must adopt the concept of equity rather than equality, in other words, justice, as our most important criterion, the most important point of reference. Our religion, Islam, puts women in a special position. What is this special position? Motherhood. Motherhood is unique to women (Erdoğan 2014).

Erdoğan’s claim is that men and women cannot be equal due to their very nature. The defining parameters of women’s place in society are motherhood (Çavdar 2010) and family. Justice instead of equality means that everyone knows his/her rights and duties in this world and acts to fulfil them (Martı 2019). These rights and duties are pre-ordained by Islam, and they also fit into the natural biological order.

During the 2010s, the government adopted pro-family policies and intensified its discursive reiterations on family values and the natural differences between men and women in conferences and international summits organized by CSOs and governmental bodies. In this regard, KADEM functions as the factory of discursive production on gender on behalf of the government. It organized three “International Women and Justice Summits” in 2014, 2016, and 2018, and six “Gender Justice Congresses” between 2015 and 2020. The focus of these conclaves was the concept of justice. This way, a new “official feminism” was defined by the catchphrase of “gender justice” (Gümrukçüoğlu 2019). The central argument tediously repeated in all these meetings and the publications of KADEM was the assertion of justice as providing men and women with their place in the natural order defined by religion and tradition. Liberties and freedoms do not have any significance in this lexicon, since they imply the acceptance of a space for struggles and demands to change the norms and moral values guarded by the AKP regime. During the discussions about the withdrawal of Turkey from the İstanbul Convention, KADEM supported the Convention. Some writers assert that this support and the attacks against KADEM from the conservative Islamist power block due to its support proves that KADEM cannot be evaluated as a part of the anti-gender block (Kütük-Kuriş 2022). Such claims miss some points regarding the composition of the “gender ideology” discourse; first, it does not have an iron-clad discursive check list. KADEM, in this regard, always defended the



complementarity interpretation of sexual roles. Second, as I have already noted, anti-gender discourse is not a homogeneous and coherent discourse. The support of KADEM for the İstanbul Convention does not preclude it being an institution of the masculinist restoration project of the AKP, because KADEM's main thrust was on preventing domestic violence which was at least discursively acceptable for the government; however, issues about LGBTI+ people and rights and freedoms were largely ignored in line with anti-gender politics. KADEM's support for the Convention eventually faded away, and it stood firm at the side of the government.

The realization of justice through securing the different but complementary dispositions of men and women, especially with the help of a traditional family structure, has been endlessly repeated by this anti-gender campaign in various media such as books, television (TV) programs, newspapers, and social media (Aydın Yılmaz 2014; Görmez 2020; Kaplan 2019a; Kaplan 2020a; Karaman 2020; Köse 2020; Yıldırım 2019a; Yıldırım 2019b). Referring to Ferree's (2003) term of "discursive opportunity structures" which signifies an extensive increase in framing certain ideas in public debates and media, Cindoğlu and Unal (2017, 42) argue that the considerable surge of these discursive opportunity structures in Turkish media and public discourses aim to perpetuate conservative gender values and reinforce the authoritarian character of the AKP's rule. The democratic backsliding towards authoritarianism was fortified through this discursive arena.

### **The discursive framework and vocabulary of anti-genderism: the "hidden agenda" and its victims**

Right-wing populist ideology presents gender as an ideology with sinister aims and a hidden agenda to corrupt young generations and destroy the moral foundations of society and fundamental values of the nation under the guise of human rights and freedoms and claims for equality. The İstanbul Convention, for example, was named as a "Trojan horse" sent by the EU by anti-gender writers in Poland (Graff and Korolczuk 2017). This section of the paper discusses how right-wing political movements in various European countries construct a "hidden agenda" around the discourse of "gender ideology," and then focuses on how the "hidden agenda" trope appears in Turkey with a twist.

Defining gender as ideology with reference to a natural order provides anti-gender movements with a supposedly "neutral" position in defending the social order. Thus, "gender ideology" can be juxtaposed with other ideologies, such as Fascism, Nazism, or Communism. Any social or political demand challenging the existing order thus can be labeled as "foreign" or as a "threat" against social unity. In some cases, the so-called authoritarian character of "gender ideology" is imbued with anti-EU rhetoric (Mayer and Sauer 2017). Especially in member countries, anti-EU sentiments have been integrated into these right-wing anti-gender movements' populist characteristics. The political elite versus the real people dichotomy is very much in line with the discourse of the anti-gender movements' claims that they represent the core values of morality, the family, and the innocence of children (Grzebalska and Pető 2017) and authentic pillars of European society against the alienated and distant elites with their appetite for power related to the foreign global networks. Within this "us-versus-them" motif mirroring the "genuine people versus corrupt elite" of the



populist jargon (Mudde 2004; Taguieff 1997), the anti-gender right-wing front found its enemy in feminist and LGBTI+ movements. The feminist and LGBTI+ movements are thus defined as foreign and constructed ideologies smuggled into society by the elites.

Perintfalvi (2016, 48) points out that, through the use of gender ideology, “gender becomes a synonym for the promotion of homosexuality, free choice of sex and sexual orientation, the elimination of the sexes, sexualizing children and the ‘culture of death’,” a label denigrating feminist demands for reproductive rights. According to Perintfalvi (2016), the discourse of gender ideology cannot be considered simply as a classical conservative backlash against women’s and LGBTI+ people’s demands for equality, but is a larger and deeper threat against the entire political consensus based on the importance of human rights formed following World War II. This is a sign of a new kind of fundamentalism which is not only anti-gender and anti-LGBTI+, but also anti-liberal, anti-leftist, and anti-democratic (Perintfalvi 2016, 47–49; Stein 2023). In this larger front of reactionary politics in which neoliberalism, neo-conservatism, and populism strategically form an alliance, anti-gender discourse appears as a “symbolic glue” (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017, 13), sticking together and vocalizing all the different elements of anti-democratic political vocabulary.

This fundamentalist attack, different from the older forms of reactionary politics, usurps the discursive vocabulary and strategy of the “enemy.” For instance, it adroitly inverts the issue of victimization on its head and claims that the silent majorities became hostages at the hands of cunning sexual minorities and decadent feminists. Democracy and human rights are also annexed to fortify this image of victimization and to blame the enemy as totalitarian. “Gender ideology” is presented as a conspiracy supported by the wicked elite to destroy the family and the nation by means of feminization of men, masculinization of women, de-sexualization of the binary sexual roles, or oversexualization of bodies, legitimization of harassment of children, and promotion of a hedonistic culture. The real victims of “gender ideology” are presented as women as mothers and men as fathers whose respectable roles are depreciated, as well as children, especially boys, who are feminized through the education system. “Gender ideology” destabilizes male identity by making them helpless and weak, and by robbing them of their masculine bravery and competitiveness (Mayer and Sauer 2017, 33–34). Thus, expressing anti-feminism and homophobia appear as democratic rights.

The use of the gender ideology discourse as a banner of right-wing movements became particularly apparent in Eastern European countries after 2012. In Poland, “gender ideology” became a central issue in each election campaign and the Istanbul Convention was depicted as a foreign-imposed threat to the traditional family and national identity. The EU was presented as the cultural colonizer corrupting the Polish family and imposing a “homo conspiracy” with demands for gender equality (Perintfalvi 2016). The “gender ideology” discourse in Western Europe and in countries like Poland and Hungary rises upon a discourse of anti-elitism, but with a difference. The populism of anti-gender movements like the *La Manif Pour Tous* in France takes the cadre of the French political system as the elite that helps “gender ideology” construct its vicious hegemony. However, in Poland and Hungary, where authoritarian populist governments are already in power, anti-genderism defines the

corrupt elites not within their own political systems but as agents of the Western European elites.

### The components of the “gender ideology” discourse in Turkey

The AKP’s road to power was very much paved by its strong reference to an anti-elitist discourse presenting itself as the *vox populi* against the old traditional elite composed of the military and its secular–Republican allies (Somer 2019). The AKP has successfully produced new enemies in the later years of its rule to maintain the “us-versus-them” dichotomy. For example, after consolidating its power in the 2010s whereby the old elite, i.e. the military and judiciary, were integrated into the AKP’s state structure, academics, intellectuals, and journalists who were not aligned with the government became the new targets of the regime. Similar to Poland and Hungary, Western powers and some vague actors were also imagined as a part of a plot against Turkey (Aytaç and Elçi 2019, 99). Feminists and LGBTI+ people came in handy to uphold an anti-elitist discourse, since they were depicted as the foreign elements which are instigated by the West to corrupt the fundamental values and essential structures of Turkish society.

Feminist demands such as gender equality and eradication of violence against women in all its forms were labeled as a conspiracy plotted by Western civilization to destroy the Turkish family and culture. The vocabulary and strategies of the “gender ideology” discourse employed by European far-right movements are echoed in the fight of the Turkish government against feminism. Polish and Hungarian anti-genderism which attack Western European political institutions, especially the EU, for destroying traditional Christian values of society, have striking resemblances to the Turkish case. Unal (2021, 78) argues that in the Turkish context, anti-gender actors vernacularize the anti-gender rhetoric through anti-Western and pro-Islamist framings.

The main argument of the anti-gender front in Turkey is that religious rules and national and traditional values already give utmost importance to women; all the evils destroying this holy and natural sexual order come from the outside, namely, Western civilization. In 2018, President Erdoğan delineated this point clearly:

In the origins of our culture, there is no gender discrimination . . . Behind the great debates about human rights, women’s rights, children’s rights and even animal rights in western countries there lie immense pains, violations and abuses. When the fracture is sharp, then the debates organized and the steps taken are equally great. Thank God, you cannot find such fractures in our history. Neither our faith nor our culture allows this (Erdoğan 2018).

The cardinal point in his words is that gender equity is already there in Islamic Turkish culture; the only responsibility of the government is to restore and protect it. The notion of human rights is alien to Turkish society because it originated from the tumultuous history of Western civilization. This discourse connecting gender equality claims and human rights to an alien socio-historical terrain has been constantly vocalized in several daily newspapers, especially in *Yeni Şafak*, an Islamist pro-government newspaper.

During the 2010s, a discourse on the “hidden agenda” of “gender ideology” emerged and turned into a fundamental axis for creating a new “us versus them.” However, here, as an indispensable part of the traditional Islamist discourse, the other alien is not just conceived as the West or its civilization but the whole idea of modernity. Particularly, two columnists, both with academic backgrounds, Yusuf Kaplan and Ergün Yıldırım, are the standard-bearers in the war against gender equality:

Family has a soul in this country. In fact, it had once! Family collapsed in the West; the whole society collapsed there. Life lost its soul, turned into a desert; the human has become extinct, as well . . . The human forms, social and cultural forms which built the Western societies but also led to their own demise, are being forced upon Turkey through odd conventions . . . The point that the Western modernity brought whole humanity is the creation of a sub-human form without the ability to think, to sense, a slave of consumption, speed, hedonism and temptation! We do not need to adopt anything from the West regarding human, family and social forms: The only thing we want from them is to stay out of our way! . . . There is no human in the West! Actually, there are no women there. Women are the slaves of consumption, consumer items of capitalism . . . Enforcing wicked secular–hedonist–sub-human form upon this country will lead to destruction of the society and the family in this country (Kaplan 2019b).

In this discursive scheme, the West, Western civilization, modernity, capitalism, human rights, gender, and even postmodernism are freely used in a jumble of concepts. Butler emphasizes the incoherent, inconsistent, and contradictory characteristic of the arguments used by the “gender ideology” discourse, saying “[t]hey assemble and launch incendiary claims in order to defeat what they see as ‘gender ideology’ or ‘gender studies’ by any rhetorical means necessary” (Butler 2024, 27). As mentioned earlier, this lack of consistency provides the anti-gender movement with strength because it can gather up diverse fears and anxieties in its arsenal (Butler 2024). Likewise in Turkey, for example, Yıldırım uses modernity, modernism, post-modernism, the West, or capitalism interchangeably denoting the same vague alien evil:

First, Women Studies, then Gender Studies came out. Especially, gender is quite fashionable nowadays. What kind of perspective does this concept have? Without asking this question, we should not imitate the model enforced upon us by the EU . . . Gender explains the world through male and female gender identities, and beyond this, it investigates sexual crises (deviances) such as gays, lesbians, homosexuals and bisexuals. With this dimension, gender studies embrace the relativism of postmodern cultural crisis and nihilist identity . . . The gender perspective with its nihilist and culturalist view, negates the biological reality . . . Rejection of this biological reality turns into an oppressive cultural tyranny . . . Gender is turning into a discourse revolving around equality of men and women, women’s rights, prevention of violence

against women. This is not a scientific study but an ideology and discourse (Yıldırım 2019c).

The Vatican's "gender ideology" glossary and that of right-wing movements in Europe are perfectly echoed in these sentences: gender is an ideology rejecting the natural biological sexual differences, and it has an agenda hidden behind the discourse of human rights and equality to destroy the Turkish family and society. This hidden agenda, in the Turkish case, is described as the long-standing plan of the modernity imposed by the West to ravage Turkish society. All the feminists, and other gender activists, are labeled as the local agents of this foreign plot. In this way, a very solid enemy is produced to sustain a "us-versus-them" dichotomy of the anti-elitist element of the populist politics of the regime.

"Gender ideology" is claimed to operate as an instrument of self-victimization as well. One of the discursive strategies of the AKP government has been the constant reference to victimhood since its establishment (Guiler 2021; Yılmaz 2017). This discourse was employed to underline its position as the representative of the majority which is claimed to be hostage at the hands of the elitist secular minority. Even though the basis of the legitimacy of the AKP's power is continually reminded to be the support of the majority, the discourse of victimization has never expired from the AKP's discourse. As a striking example, Yıldırım introduced a new concept to define feminism in Turkish: *avradizm* (Yıldırım 2019d; Yıldırım 2019e). *Avrat* as a word with Arabic origin denotes a rather pejorative term for woman in Turkish, since it is usually used in idioms defining women as the property of men. Thus, this act of labeling feminism as *avradizm* insinuates that the feminist women are lowly women in contrast to the *hanım* as mostly preferred by Islamists to connote virtuous, decent women. For Yıldırım, *avradizm* (gender ideology/feminism) is much worse than a meteorite hitting Earth, because it produces not only physical damage but a complete cultural and moral devastation, a meteorite crash being a trope quite similar to Pope Francis's likening of "gender ideology" to a nuclear war. This is a cultural invasion, and the Turkish people are under attack (Yıldırım 2019e). A minority of sexual deviants is imposing their values on the majority (Yıldırım 2019d). Another columnist defines feminism and the LGBTI+ movement as fascism: "Expressing Islamic rules is labeled as 'hate crime.' That means we do not even have the freedom of faith" (Korkmaz 2020), a confusing claim in a country ruled for two decades by a political party with Islamist aspirations. Saliently, the discourse of the oppression of the majority by the cunning and evil minority is still sound and healthy. This portrayal of self-victimization took a huge leap since 2020. The attacks on the feminists and the LGBTI+ movement have been escalated by means of a set of strategic tools composed of self-victimization, the "hidden agenda" of the feminist-homosexual conspiracy, and destruction of traditional and national values, turning it into a moral crusade.

### **Moral panics as a component of the "gender ideology" discourse**

The "us-versus-them" dichotomy found a fertile ground to flourish in this moral crusade to thrust populist politics and "gender ideology" discourse into political agendas. For a moral crusade, as Becker (1973) states, a moral entrepreneur is needed as a rule enforcer. The moral entrepreneur as

crusader is fervent and righteous, and often self-righteous . . . The harm needs to be discovered and pointed out. People must be made to feel that something ought to be done about it. Someone must call the public's attention to these matters.

Along similar lines, Butler (2024, 6) says that “[c]irculating the phantasm of ‘gender’ is also one way for existing powers . . . to frighten people to come back into their ranks, to accept censorship, to externalize their fear and hatred onto vulnerable communities.”

The framing of deviant actors by political elites and the media is particularly important in defining moments of moral panic. In this regard, it is significant to demonstrate how the Turkish media framed reports about LGBTI+ people and feminists, and how they established the agenda for public discourse, political response, and calls for moral regulation.

On the first Friday of the month of Ramadan in 2020, on April 24, the President of Religious Affairs Ali Erbaş addressed people in Ankara in his Friday sermon:

People! Islam accepts adultery as one of the greatest *harams* (interdictions). It curses the people of Lot, homosexuality. What is the wisdom of this? The wisdom here is that it brings diseases and degenerates the generation. Hundreds of thousands of people each year are exposed to the HIV virus caused by this great *haram*. Let's come and fight together to protect people from this kind of evil (bianet 2020).

This speech targeting people living outside the family institution, LGBTI+ people, and people living with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) unleashed reactions from human rights organizations, feminist and LGBTI+ organizations, bar associations, and other progressive groups. However, these reactions were reciprocated by a massive backlash from government institutions, some trade unions, pro-government media, and Islamist CSOs in the form of attacks on LGBTI+ people. Hate speech against LGBTI+ people was not unprecedented. LGBTI+ identity was very much considered as non-existent or something too marginal to take into consideration previously. The nascent LGBTI+ movement's visibility in public space reached a peak with pride marches in Taksim Square and İstiklal Street in the heart of İstanbul during the 2000s. These marches which gathered thousands of people and attracted national and international attention (BBC News-Türkçe 2014) were the result of the LGBTI+ movement's efforts and struggle since the 1990s, and of the relatively free political space created during the heyday of the rapprochement between the AKP and the EU. However, starting in 2015, the Governor of İstanbul banned the pride march on the pretext of concerns for the safety of citizens and for public order (T.C. İstanbul Valiliği 2016). The unleashing of the AKP's populist authoritarianism since the mid-2010s has resulted, among other things, in the suppression of LGBTI+ activism. Especially after the coup attempt on July 15, 2016, the oppression of the LGBTI+ movement increasingly intensified. In 2017, conferences, exhibitions, workshops, film screening, etc. about LGBTI+ people by any kind of institution and organization were prohibited until a further notice due to concerns of religious and “racial” sensibilities, public safety, morality, and protection

of human rights (BBC News-Türkçe 2017). Political repression of dissident voices successively expanded its scope to include academics, civil society activists, journalists, and LGBTI+ people. Onslaughts on feminists and the LGBTI+ movement, in this context, gained momentum with the total rejection of the concept of gender equality and the Istanbul Convention.

Erbaş's sermon opened up a new level in this momentum and transformed it into a moral crusade. When human rights organizations and the Ankara Bar Association filed criminal complaints against Erbaş for hate speech, the government and the media blamed the human rights organizations and the Bar Association as fascists who violate and defame the beliefs and values of the Turkish people. A statement by Ömer Çelik, the AKP spokesperson, exemplifies this perspective:

Mr. Ali Erbaş expressed Islamic values; the fascist statement of the Ankara Bar Association about it is a complete impudence. One of the most arrogant and vulgar form of fascism can be seen in the statement of the Bar. Expression of beliefs is a natural right. The fascist mentality of the Ankara Bar Association tries to deprive Mr. Erbaş of his most fundamental right (Sabah 2020a).

Twitter was flooded with tweets with the hashtag “#AliErbaşyalnızdegildir” (Ali Erbaş is not alone). İbrahim Kalın, the presidential spokesperson and special advisor to Erdoğan also wrote under this hashtag: “Those who defame the divine provisions of Allah who created time and space are doomed both in this world and the other. Ali Erbaş who uttered the divine provision is not alone” (Deutsche Welle Türkçe 2020). Many pro-government CSOs, platforms, and trade unions expressed their support for Erbaş, indicating that sodomy/homosexuality (*lutilik*) is a great sin forbidden by Islam, so expressing this utmost reality is the natural right of every person in the country. These statements claimed that denying the use of such a right is itself a crime and totalitarian attempt to silence the majority, and that the target of these blasphemous attacks is not the Presidency of Religious Affairs but Islam itself (Işık and Kiran 2020; Kaya 2020; Sabah 2020b). This construction of social trepidation and alarm inaugurated a new form of panic in society agitated by the fear of the loss of morality, and religious and traditional values.

The increased sense of risk, anxiety, and moral insecurities are tuned into a process of othering. As Jack D. Douglas (1970, 4) once pointed out, “an age of saints will also necessarily be an age of satans and demons, and vice versa.” Thus, the AKP's moralistic campaign fueled the media's rhetorical devices to separate “good and virtuous” heterosexual citizens from “evil” homosexuals. Homophobia and anti-feminism are often utilized to gain political capital in homophobic countries (Tettyey 2016, 94). This desire to pump the populist discourse as a component of political capital was proliferated by the media's fervent attempts both in the printed press and social media platforms.

In April 2020, social media platforms were full of a rumor that a character in an upcoming Turkish production Netflix series called “Aşk101” (Love101) would be gay with the name of Osman (Haber Vakti 2020). Thereafter, a campaign with the hashtag “#netflixadamol” (Netflix, be a man/ behave!) became a trending topic on Twitter and turned into a lynching campaign on social media pointing out that Osman was one of the first four caliphs of Islam. It was considered as an insult on Islam and provoked ire

among the public. The president of the Radio and Television Supreme Council (Radyo ve Televizyon Üst Kurulu; RTÜK), the supervisory agency of the state over radio and TV broadcasting, stated on the TV show that “We cannot tolerate shows that can affect negatively the physical and psychological development of our children and youth. As RTÜK, we are determined not to let any kind of broadcast that can disturb our society” (Kaos GL 2020b). When the TV series was finally aired on Netflix, there was no gay character. Later, both the AKP’s spokesperson, Mahir Ünal, and RTÜK stated that they had censored the TV show, and they would not let the LGBTI+ movement turn into a political and cultural entity threatening social morality (Kaos GL 2020a). Through these developments, LGBTI+ people were framed by different media spaces as threats to public safety, morality, and values, and then the government acted upon this sensitivity through policing, regulating, and suppressing dissent.

The moral crusade continued throughout the months of April and May 2020 in the mass media by establishing a direct connection between LGBTI+ people and the İstanbul Convention. The same rhetoric in Erbaş’s speech continued to be used: the rules of Islam are not negotiable, cannot be challenged, and they are also embedded in the very heart of Turkish society. Thus, any act violating these rules constitutes a threat to the fundamental pillars of the social order, and must be condemned and suppressed; and such a suppression is not a violation, but a right. The crusaders also adopted slogans of the LGBTI+ community such as “Shout out! Gays exist!” which was reversed into “Shout out! Homosexuality is a sin!” (Kaplan 2020b). The strategy of victimization was also used by using the term “the despotism of homosexuals” and the dictatorship of “gender ideology”:

Worshippers of sexual instincts call their actions human rights. They present their sexual deviance under the cloak of human rights. A complete gender despotism! An arse despotism! . . . Human can be human with his morality. However, they define human being with his instincts and his libido . . . The İstanbul Convention is an insult to İstanbul. It is a disgrace for Mehmet the Conqueror’s İstanbul, for Islam’s İstanbul. It became a pretext for the ones who blame Allah and the believers. It turned into a text justifying the destruction of family. It became the refuge of the mentality reducing freedom into instinct. It became the flag of perversion, shamelessness and denial of sexes (Yıldırım 2020).

These onslaughts went on relentlessly until another peak when the LGBTI+ pride month came in June 2020. Due to the bans on public events and organizations, the LGBTI+ movement celebrated Pride on social media platforms. This visibility faced another counterattack both from the conventional and social media channels as “a dark project” supported by alien powers to destroy the country; and it was likened to the coup attempt in 2016 (Kılıçarslan 2020). This media crusade was also echoed in the highest level of the state, after a cabinet meeting when President Erdoğan predicated that:

Some people are again attacking our national and moral values insidiously. They aim to normalize the perversions cursed throughout human history and



want to poison young minds. People who support such marginal movements that are against our beliefs and culture are a part of such a perversion in our eyes (AHaber 2020).

In July 2020 the caricature depicting the Prophet and his wife mentioned in the opening paragraph of this article appeared. The moral crusade was heightened through fueling fears and anxieties about the future of the family, children, and national values.

The unfolding of these events shows that the “gender ideology” discourse of the AKP regime founded on the rhetoric of a religiously ordained natural sexual order of different but complementary sexes, turned into and disseminated as a moral panic episode, has been useful and might be used again for the protection of the AKP regime. As Kandiyoti (2016, 111) points out, “the AKP legitimizes its rule through a heightened sense of crisis.” However, it is also indicative that in spite of all the efforts and mobilizations, this gender regime based on “gender ideology” discourse cannot be thoroughly secured, and episodes of anxiety and crisis are produced to fortify it. This sense of crisis, as in the year 2020, can take the form of a moral panic which includes LGBTI+ people in addition to women who do not accept the existing gender regime of the AKP government. Although moral panic episodes can erupt and fade away within time, they cannot be seen as temporary manifestations of social anxieties. They leave their traces in the societal psyche by forming deeply embedded structural imprints in the cultural and social vocabulary and conduct.

## Conclusion

When the AKP came to power in 2002, the feminist movement was a vibrant force. The progressive women’s struggle took women’s rights outside of the confines of state feminism’s parameters defined by the early Republican elite. During its first term in power, the AKP appeared as responsive to the demands of the feminist movement, such as improving the legal protection of women against violence. As Arat (2022) points out, this openness towards women’s issues was an instrument to consolidate the position of the party when the secular political and military elites were still sound and strong. Outside of this elite circle, the progressive democratic segments of society also constituted an important point of leverage in the electoral process, and the influence of the EU was still an important drive within society. Thus, the AKP instrumentalized women’s rights to gain credibility and legitimation by proving that it was not a threat to the secular character of the Turkish Republic. However, after a decade of consolidation, the AKP did not have to rely on support from the civil and military elite or progressive segments of society any longer. Especially the Gezi Park protests in 2013 and the coup attempt in 2016 paved the way for the increasing authoritarianism of the regime. The more authoritarian the regime became, the more it lost the support of democratic forces, and the more it became dependent on the support of the more conservative Islamist communities. Women’s rights, women’s liberation, and the LGBTI+ movement became some of the foremost targets of this authoritarianism.

The AKP’s assault on feminist and LGBTI+ movements can be considered both as an attempt to destroy the gains of the feminist movement throughout the Republican

history as well as a swiping off of the concessions it gave during its first term in power. However, the need for support from Islamist communities was not the only factor in shaping the anti-gender regime of the AKP. The increasing visibility of women in economic and social life, and the demands for rights and freedoms by the feminist and LGBTI+ movements incited fears and anxieties about the loss of patriarchal structures and values, which were then transformed into a moral crusade to redress this loss in the form of a masculinist restoration project.

The “gender ideology” discourse and moral panics as its concomitant strategy can be illuminating to demonstrate the AKP’s gender regime strategies within this increasingly authoritarian period. The “gender ideology” discourse is especially significant to reveal how the AKP’s gender policies and discursive regime share important commonalities with the “gender ideology” discourse in Europe. Despite the AKP’s fundamental references to the national and moral values particularly demarcated by Islamic premises, the undeniable common points shared by the “gender ideology” discourse propagated by the Vatican during the mid-1990s present a quite striking picture about the transnational characteristic of anti-gender right-wing politics. In spite of national particularities, the “gender ideology” discourse is a transnational phenomenon with its emphasis on the naturalness of the sexual order based on two sexes, women’s and men’s biologically and religiously ordained roles as different but complementary, with its references to traditional family structure and values, self-victimization on the grounds of the oppression of the majority by a pervert minority, and a deep sense of conspiracy plotted by a network of alien powers. All these points are shared by right-wing movements or authoritarian populist regimes. The common vocabulary and strategies cannot be considered as a desire for going back to the past or reinstatement of traditional societies; they are rather novel forms of mobilization against the demands of the feminist and LGBTI+ movements for gender equality. This shared discourse and migrating repertoire of strategies across borders evoke a new form of global fundamentalism specifically against gender equality and also against the whole democratic structure and human rights. Some scholars describe the anti-gender politics in Turkey as different from the “gender ideology” discourse and politics in Europe. For example, Alev Özkazanç (2020) claims that the “gender ideology” discourse in Europe is characterized by a mass movement originating from grassroots civil society. However, in Turkey, according to Özkazanç, the anti-gender discourse is very much limited to certain issues instigated at the governmental level, and it does not constitute a large front of the anti-gender right-wing movement. As I tried to display throughout this article, the “gender ideology” discourse cannot be characterized by a certain list of adjectives. It is rather configured as an empty signifier, as Butler (2024) emphasizes, which contains diverse and even contradictory discourses and policies; some of them are voiced and implemented by grassroots movements supported by the church or secular organizations, some by governmental institutions. However, the result is always the oppression of vulnerable segments of society, pathologization and criminalization of certain groups, and the loss of fundamental rights and freedoms.

The “gender ideology” discourse employed by the AKP to suppress the gender movements for more than ten years is part of its efforts to eradicate all dissent in society to sustain an authoritarian political system within a neoliberal economic structure. The division of society as “us versus them” was a cardinal feature of this

form of governance, and the “gender ideology” discourse was quite convenient to maintain such a division. This dichotomic strategy is fed by a constant sense of crisis and anxiety within society, because the discourse of “gender ideology” as a form of moral regulation needs a continuous spotting and framing of the evil other lurking within Turkish society. However, this constant sense of anxiety has to be heightened in some episodes by creating a moral panic situation to oppress the visibility of some identities all together such as the LGBTI+ by means of a frontal attack from the political power, media, and other conservative sections of society. Some consider this moral panic episode as experienced in 2020 as an agenda-shifting strategy of the AKP to move the public attention from real politics such as an ailing economy and trouble in foreign policy. This description of real politics implies that gender issues are not real issues, or have secondary importance. However, even if agenda-shifting was one of the concerns of the AKP in a period that included the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis, this gender-related moral panic will leave its imprint in Turkish society by aggravating anti-gender attitudes, and escalating and justifying the violence against women and the LGBTI+.

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