

# Caring Piously: New Institutionalisation of Childcare Services in Turkey

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*In Turkey, Early Childcare and Education (ECCE) policy has never been prioritised in the social policy agenda and was even further pushed back with the welfare state's weakening role in the 2000s. The private sector, inaccessible for many, particularly low-income households, has tried to fill the significant gap in the supply side of these services. Municipalities and the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PoRA) have also recently become new actors in the provision of low-cost 'care services'. This article compares the quality of these services by examining the number of students served, regulations, infrastructure, curricula, cost, and staff. Although neoliberalism has had an impact on welfare regimes in the European Union (EU) context, more established welfare and gender equality regimes have modified those impacts, resulting in a new institutionalisation, based on non-institutionalisation, of childcare services in Turkey's national policy frame.*

**Keywords:** ECCE policy, childcare actors, childcare services, institutionalisation of childcare.

## Introduction

The neoliberal turn in economic policy has led to significant transformations in welfare states since the 1980s. New institutional arrangements in the provision of Early Childcare and Education (ECCE) services are part of such transformations. New institutionalisation of childcare services includes the introduction of incentives and regulations for non-state actors and public-private partnerships in providing such services; delegation of service delivery to local administrations; professionalisation of non-institutional care services through certificate programmes; and cost distribution of care between the state, the market, and families (Olsson, 1994; Jenson and Sineau, 2003a, 2003b). The provision of these services is mainly shaped within the framework of two variables: existing welfare and gender equality regimes (Daly and Lewis, 2000; Jenson and Sineau, 2003a; Walby, 2004).<sup>1</sup> The welfare regime determines the role and responsibility of public/state institutions in the formulation and implementation of ECCE services and policies. The gender equality regime, on the other hand, largely establishes the relationship between childcare and women's employment (Walby, 2004; 2020) in a given country. The two variables then determine the division of ECCE responsibility between the state, the market, and the family as well as the forms of ECCE service provisions. In Turkey, ECCE policy has never been at the top of the social policy agenda and was further pushed back with the welfare

state's weakening role in the 2000s. Turkey's welfare and gender equality regimes have traditionally rested upon women's primary role as domestic care providers, evidenced in women's low labour force participation in urban areas. However, since the early 2000s, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has started to burden women with additional caring roles supported through a cash-for-care scheme in which women have become informal workers for the government. The recent economic downturn has also forced more women to seek work in the large informal sector. Therefore, the new care regime in Turkey is being transformed by a neo-paternalist approach, which not only keeps women fully engaged in caring roles but also expects them to fill the gap in institutional care services for children and the elderly, even in times of high demand for social care services (Dedeoğlu, 2022). ECCE services delivered by the public sector struggle to respond to increasing demands (WB, 2015; Gültekin Karakaş and Özcanlı Baran, 2021) and mainly cover five-year-old children in public preschool classes. The private sector, inaccessible and unavailable for many, particularly low-income households, has been trying to fill the recent emerging gap in childcare services, but it only serves middle-class families. In recent years, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PoRA)<sup>2</sup> has also become a new actor in the provision of low-cost 'care services' in meeting childcare needs of low-income families. An increasing number of PoRA Qur'an courses have been offering education for four-to-six-year-old children at local levels.

This article explores how a new institutionalisation, a form of sharing between public and private sectors, of childcare services emerged in Turkey as 'non-institutionalisation' of the existing ECCE institutional structure, unleashed under the auspices of the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and the Ministry of Family and Social Services (MoFSS) and diverted to a religious organisation, PoRA. We use the term 'non-institutionalisation' as a context-specific form of new institutionalisation of ECCE services in Turkey. Our analysis shows that new institutionalisation may mean not only the withdrawal of public services but also erosion of the roles of formal state organisations. It also overlaps with AKP's conservative efforts in reaching and supporting low-income families living in the outskirts of urban areas, as well as enforcing neo-paternalist care in which women's caring roles are recognised and supported by the government. Caring piously through PoRA Qur'an courses is also a sign of recognition of increasing demand for childcare services from low-income families where women's unpaid care labour and underpaid labour is in high demand for other family-based care work – elderly and disabled care – and informal work (Dedeoğlu, 2022). This framework has shaped our research process, informed the methodological design and influenced the selection of data-collection instruments.

Our research fills the gap on studies on ECCE policy, especially PoRA's policy. We use an interpretivist approach, a qualitative policy analysis methodology that includes interviews and document analysis. We analysed all available/related official policy documents associated with PoRA and interviews to determine the possibility of institutional collaborations of ECCE services to support women's employment. The interviews were conducted with ECCE actors<sup>3</sup> and fourteen women with children aged zero to six years in low-income households supplying ECCE services. We combined interviews with statistics, strategy documents, training programmes, reports, and news published on PoRA's website. Our study reveals some of the reasons or causes for PoRA's decision to adopt ECCE policy.

## **The neoliberal turn, care supply gap and new institutionalisation**

Neoliberalism transformed social welfare policies in many contexts, resulting in the flexibilisation of ECCE services and the emergence of a supply gap in public and institutional childcare services. With the rise of female employment in those contexts, demand for affordable and accessible childcare services increased (Fagnani and Math, 2011; Brilli *et al.*, 2014). The supply gap, mostly viewed as a care crisis, in ECCE services required new institutional arrangements. The tendency has been to share the public responsibility with various actors through a new type of institutionalisation (Jenson and Sineau, 2003a).

New institutionalisation of care services is shaped in context-specific settings by two major frameworks – namely, the existing welfare and gender equality regimes. In countries where these regimes are well established with concerns for social and economic rights, social inclusion, and gender equality, childcare services are understood as a right and motivation to work (Siim, 2000; Meyers and Gornick, 2003; Bettio and Plantenga, 2004; Pfau-Effinger, 2005; EBRD, 2019). These states either deliver these services through state institutions, supported financially by local institutions, or incentivise private sector providers. In countries where gender equality and welfare regimes are weak, new institutional arrangements have led to the adoption of policies and incentives that promote private sector expansion and semi- or non-institutional delivery of care services. Another tendency has been the delegation of care work to families (Janta, 2014). In Italy, Greece, Hungary and Spain, since state involvement in care service provision for children from birth to three years old is quite limited, resorting to private services or relying on family members for support are viable alternatives for parents (Jappens and van Bavel, 2012).

As Figure 1 shows, in the emergent form of this new institutionalisation in a specific setting, existing gender equality and welfare regimes interact, determining not only the ways families, the state, and the market share responsibility, but also the forms of control exerted over service providers. Countries that are ‘liberal regimes’ have significantly relied on the private sector for ECCE services. In these contexts, public control over service content and quality may or may not be present. In countries with weaker welfare and gender equality regimes, ECCE is seen as ‘care work’ under the responsibility of families, particularly with women as the leading caretakers (Buğra, 2012; Dedeoğlu, 2013; Ecevit, 2015; Moreno, 2015). Since reliance on families and non-institutional care services are the major determinants of this formation type, the state rarely controls the content of care services.

New institutionalisation of care policies reflects the transformation of the gender equality regime from domestic to public forms of patriarchy. According to Walby (1990), the strategy of women’s exclusion under private patriarchy was transformed to one of women’s segregation and subordination in the public sphere. The transformation in the domain of socialisation of domestic labour and care may be filtered through distinctive national social policies, and differences in political and cultural attitudes towards social problems in a specific setting. As Ilona Ostner and Jane Lewis (1995) observe:

The diversity of breadwinner and care regimes within the EU ... means that even where EU action succeeds, the implementation may take a different shape from country to country. On the national level, gender regimes operate as gatekeepers, favouring policies compatible with culturally transmitted assumptions and tenets about gender roles (192–3).

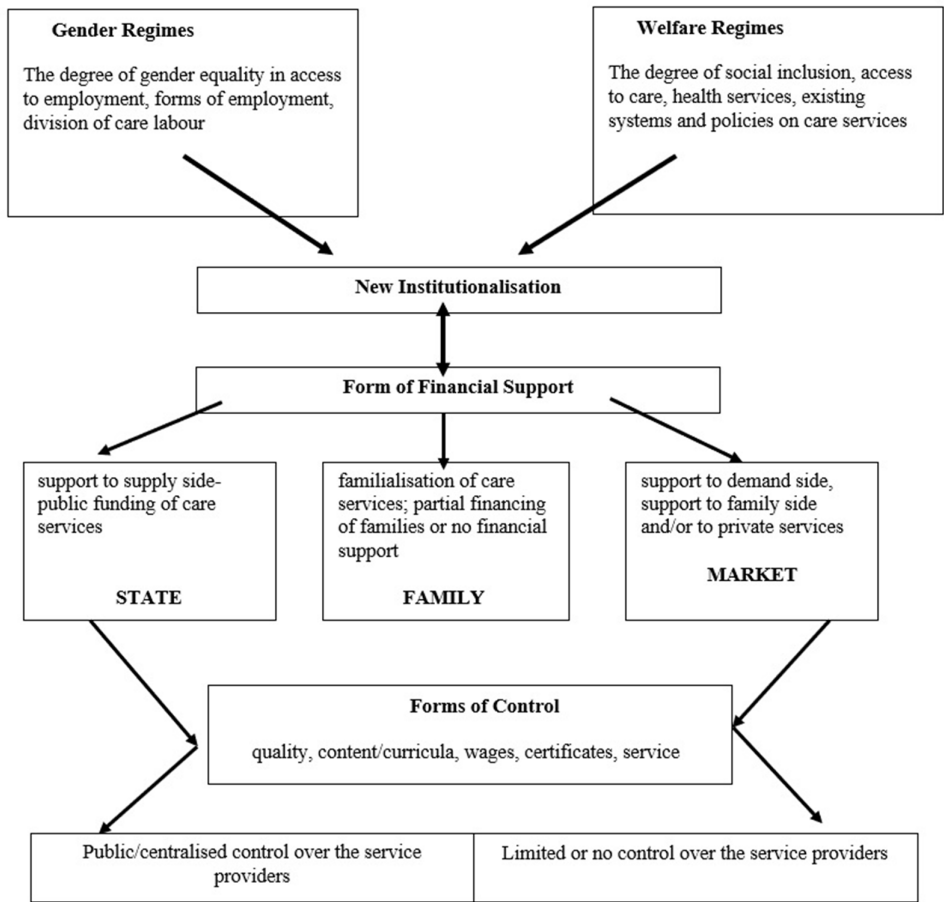


Figure 1. New Institutionalisation  
Source: Jenson and Sineau (2003a)

Therefore, countries adopt different choices of new institutionalisation of care services to reflect their gender and welfare mix.

As shown in Figure 1, the latest institutionalisation of childcare services in Turkey presents an interesting case where neoliberal policies with a conservative government have been on the agenda for almost two decades. As Babacan (2021) shows, AKP's political Islam had a neoliberal face in the economic realm but its conservative policies also extended to cover the realm of reproduction, in which care practices take a lion's share. Turkey's care policy is an area where we can analyse how the new institutionalisation of care services is a way for the AKP government to bridge the supply gap in childcare (WB, 2015) by implementing conservative policies that have led to the growth of non-institutionalisation care services. This has reflected the AKP's desire to raise a pious generation and keep women within traditional domestic roles in a neo-paternalist care regime. Therefore, the provision of childcare services has not fully led to transformations in Turkey's gender equality regime but has confined women to unpaid/paid care and informal work.

## **Welfare, gender and institutional childcare services in the ‘neo-paternalist care regime’**

Turkey’s neo-paternalist care regime has largely relied on women’s unpaid work as the main provider of welfare and care but also their support to fill the institutional care void by preserving Islamist conservative values. The AKP government has worked on building an alliance between conservative AKP policies and poor women, which has been based on the perpetuation of the trade-off between welfare assistance directed to women and women’s electoral support for the party. Many different welfare aid programmes have been directed to poor families, with many benefits designed specifically for women. Women of lower classes with a rural background practice a new sense of citizenship, termed by Kandiyoti as ‘citizenship through entitlements’, that gives them access to cash transfers through their womanly domestic duties (Kandiyoti, 2010).

Within the framework of AKP’s welfare and gender equality regimes, provisions of care services have been built on the concepts of ‘mission’ and ‘restoration’, frequently voiced by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan before and after the presidential elections. The government, in the last decade, has particularly focused on family policies, defining women within the confines of the familial domain and as major actors of reproduction, familial production and care provision (Acar and Altunok, 2013; Ecevit, 2015). This emphasis is reflected in the low level of female labour force participation, 34 per cent in 2019, the lowest among OECD countries, and of female employment rate, 29 per cent. Almost 42 per cent of all employed women work in informal jobs with no social security and protection, and unpaid family work in rural areas is the main form of women’s employment. Nearly 70 per cent of all economically active women between the ages of fifteen and sixty-five are registered as housewives and as inactive (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu (TÜİK), 2019).

Turkey has been in decline in terms of welfare state policies and gender equality in the last twenty years (Dedeoğlu and Elveren, 2012; Koray and Çelik, 2015; Buğra, 2016). The dominant view that holds women responsible for domestic work and childcare is widespread, not only among men in families but also among employers. According to a study based on interviews with 212 employers in four Industrial Production Zones, 59 per cent of employers think that women should take care of their children themselves (Dedeoğlu and Şahankaya, 2016). Another study illustrates that women are discriminated against in recruitment based on questions about marriage and having children (Toksöz and Kardam, 2004). Findings of the Family Structure Survey show that 86 per cent of children up to age five are cared for by their mothers, 8.7 per cent by their parents or grandparents, 1.5 per cent by caregivers and only 2.8 per cent by institutional ECCE programmes (TurkStat, 2017). A combination of neoliberalism and conservatism actively supports women’s domestic care activities and informal employment.

While women are usually confined to unpaid and informal jobs in the labour market, they are pictured to be solely responsible for domestic care activities. Women’s care responsibilities in the private sphere have also turned into a policy response by the AKP government; a cash-for-care scheme was introduced to support women to care for elderly and/or sick family members in 2016. The scheme covers almost 700,000 women as carers. Some recently adopted policies, such as ‘granny salaries’ or ‘caregiver/nanny incentives’, value women’s unpaid care work but also confirm the familial approach and

our argument that public funding is used for the promotion of traditional gender roles and prevents the development of institutional and quality services.<sup>4</sup>

The institutional structure of ECCE services is highly complicated and heavily bureaucratic, with limited services offered to children under five. MoNE, the biggest public service provider in the country, offers care services to three-to-six-year-old children; however, the majority of service recipients have been five-year-old children in preschool classes (Dedeoğlu *et al.*, 2021). MoFSS, another regulatory organisation, does not provide ECCE services directly but acts as a coordinating institution, responsible for opening and supervising private day-care centres for children aged six and under. Private sector services remain limited due to their high prices. All in all, as of 2019, the number of children enrolled in preschool institutions is 3,335,269, meaning that only 37 per cent of children in the birth-to-six age group, most of whom are five-year-olds, benefit from care services (MoNE, 2019). Municipal services have been revitalised in recent years, but a legal vacuum persists in which many local governments are facing difficulties in running nursery services for their constituencies. In 2007, the Constitutional Court annulled their authority to open and operate day-care centres with the justification that ECCE services should be coordinated and operated at the central level.

Since the Turkish government does not have a policy of funding civil initiatives, its capacity to build sustainable, affordable and accessible care has been limited. A recent development within this structure has been the emergence of PoRA Qur'an courses for preschool children as a new agent in the provision of ECCE services (Göçmen, 2011). The number of children enrolled in ECCE centres opened by PoRA in the 2018–19 academic year is 94,817, greater than the number of children enrolled in private ECCE centres. This new actor has started to fill the supply gap in meeting the care-service needs of low-income households, for PoRA meets the conditions of affordability and accessibility (WB, 2015) and is, therefore, preferred by families. Service fees are lower than other options (0–160 TRY); the care centres are generally located in neighbourhoods, closer to family homes; and classes are available for children under five.

Limited public childcare provisions have generated a supply gap the central government has to effectively deal with especially for low-income families, which also have been the AKP's electoral base. The government's response has been unprecedented support of Qur'an courses operated in local neighbourhoods by PoRA and some religious sects. There are even attempts to establish structural relations between MoNE preschool education and PoRA courses for four-to-six-year-olds, and meetings have been held with MoNE staff and relevant academics to consider Qur'an courses from preschool compulsory education (PoRA, 2021). This relationship has enabled the pursuit of a religious teaching curriculum enmeshed with care for preschool children.

### **Caring piously: Qur'an courses for four-to-six-year-old children**

PoRA is not qualified as an ECCE service provider, but ongoing debates suggest it is a growing actor in the field. Since Qur'an courses target four-to-six-year-old children, instructional content and its impact on children's social, cognitive and behavioural skills should be discussed from a pedagogical perspective.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, although Qur'an education offered by mosques is not a new practice in Turkey, since 2013 it has taken a new form and become more widespread. PoRA initiated a pilot 'Qur'an Course Teaching Program' for four-to-six-year-old children in the 2013–14 academic year in ten cities. The



Table 1 Number of students enrolled in the 4-6 age group Qur'an course

	Number of courses	Number of students
2013-2014	201	4,723
2014-2015	554	15,265
2015-2016	2,053	55,347
2016-2017	2,980	87,790
2017-2018	3,640	130,982
2018-2019 <sup>1</sup>	–	131,026

Source. Aybey, 2017: 2140.

Notes.<sup>1</sup>For 2018–2019 data, see Birgün (2020).

following year, the institution extended the programme with a mission of ensuring that all segments of society could benefit from religious education.

PoRA occasionally publishes on its website the number of its course centres for the four-to-six age group and number of students. A study on PoRA Qur'an courses states that between 2013 and 2019, 425,133 children in that age group attended the Qur'an courses and the number of centres and students enrolled had increased exponentially each year (Table 1). Expansion is an institutional objective. In its 2019–23 Strategic Plan, 131,026 children were enrolled in Qur'an courses in the four-to-six age group in 2018 and the targeted number for 2023 is 1.17 million (PoRA, 2019).

PoRA's strong budgetary growth is another indicator of its increasing influence on education and care services. The state budgets allocated to MoNE and PoRA have changed significantly over the years. The budget allocated to MoNE for education investments decreased from 17.18 per cent in 2002 to 8.36 per cent in 2018 and 4.65 per cent in 2020.<sup>6</sup> The budget allocated to PoRA, by contrast, was 11.52 million TRY in 2018, almost twice MoNE's budget (Eğitim-Sen, 2018). Considering PoRA's budgetary growth and its plan of expanding its educational activities, it is possible that the government prefers PoRA over MoNE for the coordination and delivery of religion-based educational services.

When opening day-care centres, several criteria related to the location, building and equipment, as specified in MoFSS and MoNE regulations, must be met in Turkey. For example, regulations stipulate that ECCE centres shall be established in one-storey or multi-storey buildings or on the ground floor of an apartment. The centre should be in a quiet area, away from noise, traffic hazards and air pollution, and it should be physically accessible. Play infrastructure, such as toys and equipment, is required. Centres must have a garden with at least 2 m<sup>2</sup> of green space, 2 m<sup>2</sup> of indoor floor space, 6 m<sup>3</sup> of air space per child and one toilet and one sink per ten children. For the birth-to-three age group, the building should include a breastfeeding, crawling and baby changing and diaper unit, and a separate sleeping room and playroom. The rooms must have plenty of daylight and fresh air (MoFSS, 2015).

However, the Qur'an courses are to follow PoRA's, not MoNE and MoFSS's, infrastructure requirements. Building materials should be wooden and natural, doorways should be suitable for children and room doors used by children need to be opened from the inside. The buildings cannot have balconies, but if they do, they should be kept closed at all times. Electrical cords should be hidden, and safe electrical sockets should be

present but out of children's reach (at least 1.5 meters high). A garden area of at least 2.5 m<sup>2</sup> per student is required. Classrooms should not be in the basement and should have soft and non-slippery flooring with at least 2 m<sup>2</sup> of space per student (PoRA, 2019). A study conducted with Qur'an course instructors in Izmir states that some courses do not have gardens, some buildings do not meet the specified criteria and some classrooms fall short of health and safety standards for children. The facilities required for day-care centres, such as separate rooms for sleeping, eating and resting or toilets, are missing; safety measures are not taken (Yağcı, 2018).

Employment of qualified personnel is important to ECCE services. In fact, staff represents the largest cost item in operating ECCE centres. MoNE and MoFSS regulations set standards for the number and required qualifications of personnel in accredited ECCE centres.<sup>7</sup> In centres with more than 100 children, a vice-principal is required. The principal and vice-principal must have completed at least a four-year university degree or hold a two-year university degree with an additional minimum two-year work experience in public or private preschool education. MoNE also requires that teachers and support staff, serving different age groups, have necessary and relevant qualifications.<sup>8</sup> While nurseries are subject to MoFSS regulations in staff employment, Qur'an courses operate within PoRA's regulative framework. Accordingly, the tutors need to be knowledgeable about early childhood cognitive, social, language and psycho-motor development and self-care skills (PoRA, 2018a). Tutors are required to complete in-service training and acquire certificates upon completion of the 'Activities and Education for Children Ages 4-6 Program,' coordinated by the Directorate for the General of Education Services and the MoNE Directorate General of Lifelong Learning. In cases of insufficient staff, it is possible to employ graduates of relevant departments in ECCE or people with certificates in the field of child development and education with an additional qualification of being a Qur'an course instructor (Hocaoğlu, 2019). Despite these regulations, problems in implementation are often reported. A study illustrates that Qur'an course instructors for ages four-to-six have asserted that in many cases tutors teaching adults were assigned to that group with no consideration of necessary qualifications. Instructors also have stated that the process of recruitment at Qur'an centres does not take into account the necessary qualifications for educating that age group (Yağcı, 2018).

All private and public day-cares are bound by relevant MoFSS regulations, stating that it is the MoNE educational programme that should be adopted in the provision of care services (Art. 4/o). According to MoNE, the duration of the academic year in ECCE should not be less than 180 days (Art. 5). The daily educational programme should consist of six activity sessions (fifty minutes each). The number of children in a group should not be fewer than ten or more than twenty (Art 6/b). ECCE centres may continue their care services during the summer months if working parents demand such an extension and if the number of applications reaches the required minimum number (ten children) to form a group (Art. 6/c). But for the Qur'an courses, PoRA determines the content of early child religious education for ages four-to-six. PoRA states that in the formulation of the programme new approaches and principles in 'early child education' and 'program development' were adopted (PoRA, 2018a). Such a statement openly declares that the religious education programme includes an early childcare component. Since the Qur'an course centres offer an education programme of twenty-four hours per week corresponding to approximately five hours of attendance per day per child, the content and quality of the care service becomes crucial. The Qur'an courses consist of four consecutive sessions,



which last up to twenty-four weeks (180 days) and can continue in summer months when there is demand (PoRA, 2018a). Lack of staff becomes more apparent during the summer and an issue of complaint: as one parent stated on a website, 'There is not enough efficiency in the Summer Qur'an courses because there are few teachers' (Şikayetvar, 2016).

One of the most important aspects of limited accessibility to childcare services is related to lack of affordability: the high cost of private nurseries and no nationwide financial support for low-income families. In 2019, the Mother-Child Education Foundation (MCEF) assessed the cost of day-care service per child as 2,168 TRY, higher than the average monthly minimum wage (2,020 TRY) in the same year (MCEF, 2019). Research has shown that only 17 per cent of children of families in the lowest 10 per cent income group can benefit from institutional ECCE services (WB, 2015). Public funding of the supply side has been limited, so has the support of the demand side through incentives to the private sector to lower fees or expand their operations. The main reason that PoRA services are more attractive for low-income families is cost-effectiveness. This is the result of public funding to cover personnel and other related costs. The Provincial MoNE Fee Commission sets the fee tariff to be paid by families for costs related to stationery, general cleaning, nutrition and other services offered at Qur'an courses. In 2018 in İstanbul, the minimum rate is set at zero TRY, meaning courses can be free. The fee of the course with no meal service at the centre costs ninety-five TRY and the maximum rate for the service with a meal can be 160 TRY (PoRA, 2018b). Prices may vary from region to region, but in all cases the fee for five hours is quite low, lower than other care services offered by municipalities or private nurseries. Qur'an courses have thus become advantageous for low-income families.

PoRA (2018a) also claimed that the programme was designed to contribute to the pedagogical development of children in this age group, indicating that it has a care aspect as well. In fact, the website of the Ümraniye Muftiate in İstanbul lists the Qur'an courses offered by the institution with the title of 'Kindergartens for ages 4-6' (PoRA, 2020). PoRA also offers families a flexible schedule, enabling them to arrange course time of up to five hours per day. Such an option makes these courses an attractive alternative to private day-care centres for low-income and dual-earner households. In a field study conducted in 2019, in interviews, women textile workers in Bağcılar (a district of textile workshops) expressed that they send their children to Qur'an courses in their neighbourhoods because it is convenient when they are at work (Dedeoğlu *et al.*, 2021). For lower-class women, Qur'an courses have become instrumental for their chance of employment.

All in all, although the number of Qur'an courses has increased dramatically throughout the country, no third-party or authority inspection is required, and it is not possible to monitor compliance with the standards and staff regulations in the operation of these courses.

### **Non-institutionalisation of childcare services**

The government's formal ECCE services are limited to MoNE preschool classes, which are designed to prepare children for primary school and have no care aspect as part of the education.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, legal legislative restrictions, which blocked the flourishing of local and neighbourhood-based care services, were placed on municipality nursery centres. These two aspects of national childcare policy have covertly given PoRA more

leverage in opening Qur'an courses for four-to-six-year-old children. This development is mostly managed by the non-institutionalisation of care services under AKP rule where childcare services are left to oblivion with no standard regulation and inspection. The growing demand for care is met not through expanding public care services or local services of municipalities but through making PoRA Qur'an courses more widely available in low-income neighbourhoods.

The non-institutionalisation of childcare services is also a signifier of changes in women's roles in the 2000s. The AKP government has glorified women as mothers and wives with little or no support for women's employment and with extended support for women abiding by these roles. For example, an extensive cash-for-care system has been in place for women caring for elderly and disabled family members. In recent years, there has been more demand for women's informal work and labour in the domestic sphere and informal economic activities in a deteriorating economic environment, generating more demand for childcare services from low-income households. Low-cost and easily accessible PoRA Qur'an courses for four-to-six-year-olds established in almost every neighbourhood have become an attractive option of care for women with burdensome caring duties and work in unregistered economic activities. The remedy for increasing care demand has put children under the care of religious organisations.

The widespread use of PoRA courses as a new form of ECCE services has also been a signal of a new gendered care and welfare regime in Turkey. In this neo-paternalist regime women's unpaid domestic care services for the first time have been rewarded with regular monthly payments and recognised as a societal service (Dedeoğlu, 2022). This alliance between the conservative policies of the AKP government and poor women is based on the perpetuation of the ideal model of pious Sunni Muslim women. AKP's call for women to support the party and its conservative societal imagination is based on the trade-off between the welfare assistance directed to women and women's electoral support that ends up enforcing the neo-paternalist care regime. This regime perpetuates women's domestic care activities while rewarding them with the cash-for-care scheme in which women become informal workers for the government. This not only keeps women fully engaged in caring roles but also burdens them to fill the gap in institutional care services for children and the elderly, even in times of high demand for social care services (Dedeoğlu, 2022). PoRA Qur'an courses are a sign of recognition of increasing demand for childcare services from low-income families where women's unpaid care labour and underpaid labour is in high demand for other family-based care (i.e. elderly and disabled care) and informal work.'

PoRA care services have elevated low-income women's care burden as they can devote more time for the care of other family members or informal income-generating activities. Childcare burdens influence women's total work time, status of employment and earning levels. In Turkey in 2018, the pay gap between women with young children and non-mothers, the 'motherhood penalty' (ILO, 2020), was 11 per cent (Esping-Andersen, 2005). Generally, women with small children are employed in informal jobs, such as home-based piecework, or in small workshops in Turkey. While gender inequality debates note the equality-enhancing potential of ECCE services (Michel and Mahon, 2002), this is mostly determined by the quality and standards offered by specific ECCE actors. In this regard, the standard, formal municipal ECCE centres, offered with low price but with limited outreach in the children's own district and with flexibility for parents, may be reached mostly by middle-class families; these centres have potential for increasing

women's work in decent and formal employment. PoRA Qur'an courses, on the other hand, target a different class of women and have no standard and inspection for tutors, physical conditions and staff. So, women from low-income households can only reach PoRA services that are offered free from time-to-time in a nearby mosque in their neighbourhood. Increasing reliance on Qur'an courses has been a way of raising a pious generation long desired by the AKP government.

## **Conclusion**

ECCE services are important for several reasons. The underlying rationale of ECCE policies and services and the arrangements of in-service provision exposes states' understanding and treatment of children's rights, gender equality, social inclusion or investment in human capital. From a welfare regime perspective, access to quality institutional ECCE service is a fundamental child's right. From a gender equality perspective, ECCE is important to ensure women's participation in the economy, as well as social and political life, and to maintain work-life balance. Even from a liberal/economic perspective, ECCE is crucial as it denotes investment in the human capital of a country. The transformation of states in the neoliberal era has been criticised, for it led to drawbacks in social rights in many contexts. ECCE has been one of the affected policy areas, albeit a limited one, in contexts where welfare and gender equality concerns are present. New institutional arrangements vary in line with these concerns and states' policy preferences with regard to service providers, recipients and service contents.

ECCE policies and services are formulated within the framework of neoliberalism and conservatism in Turkey. An existing and growing supply gap in public services is shared between the private sector and the family. In the absence of governmental incentives, institutional private services remain limited and inaccessible particularly to low-income households. The government's conservative approach has been evidenced through its discourse and policies promoting familialism and women as caregivers. The rise of PoRA Qur'an courses as affordable and available ECCE services in recent years deserves attention for the possibility of a new institutionalisation of childcare services in Turkey. PoRA locates itself as a critical actor in ECCE services with its current outreach and capacity to extend Qur'an courses for children between the ages of four and six. PoRA Qur'an courses, with greater financial support and autonomy in their operations, do not have to meet ECCE service standards. The overt governmental preference of PoRA over municipalities and civil initiatives, we argue, is the result of a conservative approach, which ignores the underlying norms of ECCE services – namely, children's rights, gender equality, social inclusion or investment in human capital. Furthermore, Qur'an courses have helped the AKP government to meet the increasing care demand coming from low-income families, which are also the AKP government's electoral base. The public care supply gap has effectively been bypassed by the government's unprecedented support of Qur'an courses operated in local neighbourhoods by PoRA and some religious sects.

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## Notes

1 In Turkey's welfare regime, links between institutional services and the social benefits of citizens are weak. The role of informal institutions in welfare provision is quite central, and families, religious organisations and women's unpaid work are insurance of informal institutions. The welfare regime, also marked by the policies of AKP (Justice and Development Party), is a combination of neoliberalism and the Islamic approach since 2002. This form of welfare regime has served to reinforce women's caregiving position. The gender equality regime, on the other hand, has a dualistic structure. Gender equality in legal texts is well secured, but women are mostly homebound with domestic responsibilities. In this article, the neo-paternalistic care regime is considered a new approach that is the synthesis of both welfare and gender equality regimes.

2 PoRA is an official state institution under the presidency. PoRA, whose budget is allocated by the Ministry of Treasury and Finance, employs 104,814 civil servants in different parts of the country and offers 19,503 Qur'an courses.

3 We conducted interviews with representatives of twelve municipalities, eight employers, nine unions, three workers' confederations, one employers' confederation, MoNE, MoFSS, PoRA, and eight UN and civil society organisations, the main actors of ECCE services in Turkey.

4 An example is the social security contribution to families receiving home care services from the Turkish Social Security Institution, funded by the EU (Dedeoğlu *et al.*, 2021). However, such implementations have encouraged unregistered women's labour in the care sector to be visible. They also have limited beneficiary capacity.

5 For many years, it was a tradition and common practice for families to enrol their children in formal or informal religious education. These Qur'an courses have been offered generally by mosques during the summer, usually as two-hour courses for young children (Karaer, 2015).

6 The 4.65 per cent corresponds to an amount of 5,830 billion TRY; however, a significant portion of this amount (83 per cent) is spent on fixed costs (staff and social security premiums).

7 There are some similarities and differences in MoFSS and MoNE requirements. MoNE standards, however, are more clearly defined.

8 MoFSS requires the group coordinator to have a two-year or four-year university degree in social services, psychology, child development and education, preschool education or psychological counselling from the Girls Vocational Education High School or to be a nurse (for children two and under). Caregivers should have a high school degree and certificate in child development and education/childcare.

9 MoNE's preschool classes include mostly children who are five years old by the start of their first grade. Even though these classes are largely administered through the compulsory education system, it is not compulsory to attend them. Depending on available classrooms and personnel, courses can be full-day or half-day, but most are half-day. Therefore, these courses do not meet the care needs of families and do not enable women to have access to full-time employment.

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