



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Changing Gender Politics in Turkey throughout the 2000s: A Feminist Analysis of Gender Policies Pursued by Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP*) Governments

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ABSTRACT

Founded as a conservative party combining neoliberalism and Islam in 2001, AKP has had an important role in shaping Turkey's social and political landscape since 2002. Having the majority of the parliament seats since then, the transformation of AKP is reflected in politics, including gender politics. Even though it was established as a conservative-democrat party, AKP has changed its political identity towards authoritarianism over time and Turkey accordingly witnessed a continuous gender regime transformation for better or worse throughout the 2000s. Therefore, in this article, I attempt to show how different periods of AKP have influenced and changed gender politics between the years 2002 and 2020.

KEYWORDS: Gender; Women's rights; AKP governments; Neoliberalism; Conservative politics

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1. Introduction

Established after splitting from the religio-political movement “National Vision”, named after Turkish politician Necmettin Erbakan’s 1975 manifesto (Atacan 2005), AKP was founded in 2001 and defined its identity as a conservative-democrat party. It pledged to follow liberal economic principles as a part of the Western world and demonstrated its respect for democratic values by claiming Turkey’s aim to join the European Union (EU) (Acar & Altunok 2013). After coming to power in November 2002, AKP declared its commitment to the Western political and economic system and explicitly rejected the traditional heritage of the National Vision movement, which explains the decline of the Muslim world as a result of the imitation of Western values (Carkoglu 2006). One of the main differences of AKP from its predecessors was its commitment to neoliberalism (Erturk 2016). Even though Turkey’s neoliberalism adventure started in the 1980s, AKP combined neoliberalism and Islam, exhibiting a new form of conservatism (Yarar 2018). Ideas of social hierarchy and authority are among the main tenets of conservatism, which, as a political ideology, promotes traditional institutions such as organized religion in the context of culture (Heywood 2012, p. 68). Using populist discourse since its first appearance in the political scene, AKP bases its conservative regime on populism.

According to Finchelstein, populism is a form of politics that develops in unequal democracies, where the inequality of income grows, and democratic representation loses its legitimacy (2019, p. 31). Nevertheless, the literature on populism confirms the difficulty of defining this term (Fassin 2018:18; Müller 2016). As a shadow of modern representative democracy, populism is not a codified doctrine, but it is a set of distinct claims (Müller 2016, p. 23). Most of these claims, such as anti-pluralism and suppressing the civil society (Müller 2016) will be seen as a part of AKP’s politics. Having a centralized organizational structure around a charismatic leader, AKP was able to develop political reflexes in line with the rapidly changing political conjuncture. In that case, Erdogan’s personal views became important in determining politics to follow in each field, including gender.

Since 2002, Turkey has experienced a series of changes regarding gender politics in various fields such as education, family, employment and male violence, as well as changes in the Constitution and Penal Code. In this article, I will question how these changes can be traced in shifts in AKP's political identity between 2002 and 2020. I begin with a brief presentation of the methodological and theoretical frameworks. Then, I discuss and analyze the changing gender politics during AKP rule over eighteen years (divided into 5 sub-periods in total). In conclusion, I summarize the main findings and provide an overall assessment of this period from a feminist perspective.

2. Methodological and Theoretical Frameworks

To understand the impact of the shifts in AKP's political identity on gender politics between 2002 and 2020, I will analyze this period in five chronological phases. This will allow us to see how the gender policies carried out by AKP during two decades have changed considering the same issues and will help us understand these gender politics' meanings in a historical dis/continuity. The five phases that I distinguish consist of social and political cleavages that occurred during AKP rule. Cleavage, as Zuckerman suggests, denotes a specific kind of division (Zuckerman 1975, p. 231). Here, I use cleavage as a social and political line that causes a change in the existing political attitude of the governments and in the ongoing political identity of AKP. I determined these cleavages and the shifts in AKP's political identity according to my analysis of the Turkish politics of the last two decades. I base them on the discourses, and political acts of Erdogan and the members of AKP governments diffused through the mass-media as well as the existing literature on Europeanization and feminist analysis of gender politics.

The first phase (November 2002 - August 2007) includes the 58th and 59th governments of Turkey. In this period, AKP defines itself as a conservative-democrat party, pursues a neoliberal program following the world market order and EU conditionality (*Hurriyet* 2003). The second phase (August 2007 - July 2011)

includes the 60th government. This period can be considered to be in continuity with the first phase (Yilmaz 2016). However, towards the end of this period, patriarchal values led by religious concerns in the party's preeminent actors' discourses started to stand out.

The third phase (July 2011 - November 2015) includes the 61st, 62nd, and 63rd governments. Even though this period starts with two important law-making processes against violence against women, patriarchal, conservative, and neoliberal values combined with religion become increasingly dominant in policy-making during this term. I admit that this is the most complicated and chaotic phase that AKP experienced throughout the 18 years. This period contains various social and political cleavages that caused several shifts in AKP's identity and gender politics. Among these cleavages, there are Solution Process (*CNN Turk* 2014) developed to resolve long-lasting Turkish-Kurdish conflict, Occupy Gezi Movement (*CNN Turk* 2013), AKP's loss of the majority of parliamentary seats as a result of the General Elections on June 7, 2015 (Balli 2015) and the end of the Solution Process (Tasci 2015).

The fourth phase (November 2015 – July 2018) includes the 64th and 65th governments. This period also consists of several political and military cleavages. In this period, AKP's rhetoric on nationalism combined with Islam shaped the political, social, and cultural landscape. As an ideological construction, nationalism is a political concept related to the emergence of the nation-state. According to Enloe (1990, p. 45), nationalism (as well as nationalist conflicts) is led by a masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation, and masculinized hope. In such a context, masculinity is seen as an important factor for political militancy; therefore, it produces a mechanism of male control over society (Waetjen 2001). Socially constructed notions of femininity and masculinity determine the political and social existence of men and women due to the gendering of nationalism. In this line, a new alliance has been built with the ultranationalist far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP) (Bila 2017) around conservative and patriarchal values. Weakened during the previous phase, AKP's old alliance with Gulenists, an Islamic movement

with political aspirations, has been brutally terminated as a result of the coup attempt by soldiers who were involved in the Gulen Movement (Yarar 2018, p. 43). Two years of State of Emergency followed this failed coup (*Hurriyet* 2016). In 2017, the regime changed from a parliamentary system to the *Turkish-type presidential system*⁷. And finally, the fifth phase (starting from July 2018) includes the 66th, the first presidential government, and the period that follows a two-year state of emergency.

Considering these social and political events, I will trace the changes in gender politics from an intersectional feminist approach. This approach provides a framework for understanding complex ways of thinking and treating various inequalities of gender, class, race and such, and how they intersect with each other (Crenshaw 1989). Researches that focus only on gender-based oppression marginalize the experiences of women and ignore their diversity regarding ethnicity and class. In this article, I consider class in a broader sense as the concept referring to a person's socio-economic status (Bereni et al. 2012). Here, this approach will be utilized to discover how the negligence of structural intersectionality, which refers to the inequalities stemming from the social and economic structure, and political intersectionality, which refers to the ambiguous position of women within more than one subordinated groups (Crenshaw 1991, pp. 1245 and 1251), in policy-making impacts the lives of women from different backgrounds negatively.

I will mainly focus on the changes in the Constitution, the Turkish Penal Code, and the changes of policies on family, employment, and education. To write this article, I analyzed 163 legal changes regarding gender policies during the eighteen years of AKP. The numbers of the documents analyzed are 47, 36, 26, 12 and 42, concerning the fields of family, in/equality, employment and social policies, education, and violence, respectively. I include news, reports of feminist organizations, statistics on women published by the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat), and the writings in feminist online magazines on these changes. Although I have scrutinized the discussions evoked around these changes by AKP

deputies and pro-AKP journalists as well as feminist organizations to provide a better understanding, I exclude a deepened discourse analysis as it is too broad for the scope of this article. Despite having examined significant data on LGBTI+ politics of AKP at discursive and legal levels, I cannot include it in this article for the same reason. As a final note on the scope of the article, I would like to clarify that the role of women's organizations and the feminist movement are mentioned when they are effective and directly related to the legal changes that I have examined. The analysis of the feminist movement in Turkey during the 2000s is beyond the scope of this article, and its efforts in Turkish politics deserve to be analyzed in another article.

This article offers a comprehensive analysis of Turkey's gender politics in the last two decades by analyzing the whole gender policies AKP governments pursued by exploring how those policies have been changed due to the shifts in AKP's party identity. While considering this article as a reference guide for researchers who work on gender politics of Turkey, I wanted to show how the political, economic and social factors influenced the shifts in AKP's identity and how these shifts influenced gender politics. Thus, this paper aims to go beyond presenting empirical evidence and has both a descriptive and interpretative goal. The literature on Turkey's gender politics focuses mainly on just one field at once. The literature gap is particularly large regarding the connections between the policies pursued in each field, such as employment, education, social policies, and such. When analyzed separately, it is hard to see the analogies between them. Seeking to fill this gap, this paper offers an analysis of changing policies in various fields and their consequences regarding gender politics. It also aims to provide a better understanding of how AKP pursues conflicting policies regarding gender in a single field from one time to another.

In this context, based on an intersectional approach, my theoretical groundings are in transnational feminist theory and its critique of neoliberalism. As a feminist paradigm, this theory focuses on how women from different nations, classes, ethnicities, and sexualities are affected by globalization and neoliberal

capitalism (Grewal & Kaplan 1994). For this article's scope, the importance of this theory derives from its role in understanding how neoliberal capitalism shapes the political, social, and economic oppression of women across the world, including Turkey, and how the structures of patriarchal and neoliberal capitalism influence the reconstruction of gender inequality. As Mohanty (2003) puts it, feminist criticism is needed to demystify neoliberal capitalism and to imagine social and economic justice. Both patriarchy, as a system of subordination, and neoliberal capitalism benefit from the unpaid labor of women (Acar-Savran 2003). According to Hartman (1992), patriarchy and capitalism can both reinforce each other or contradict. As a matter of fact, capitalism's tendency to include women in the wage labor market for having cheap labor, and the need of patriarchy for women's domestic labor, create contradictory dynamics, and sometimes one (and at another time the other) becomes dominant.

Neoliberalism is marked by market-based governance practices such as privatization, commodification, and the proliferation of difference (Mohanty 2015). Representing a governmentality method and an economic and social policy, neoliberalism regulates the whole dimensions of life like the market (Foucault et al. 2004). This market rationality is dispersed through political, social, and cultural spheres. In a neoliberal political context, the states create a new political culture, where citizens become individual entrepreneurs and burden the responsibility for their own self-care, access to a good level of education, health-care and social security. Combined with conservatism, neoliberal states confirm their presence in the political order by inscribing political and moral notions by discourses of nationalism, religiosity, culture, and tradition (Acar & Altunok 2013). In such a context, as a high stage of capitalism, the role of neoliberalism in the reconstruction of power relationships between genders seems significant. Since its emergence, capitalism has changed the role of women and men in everyday life, and now neoliberalism deepens gender roles by creating a new political, economic, and social order. In this context, women are instrumentalized for the justification of neoliberal

economic policies under the pretext of giving them more time to spend with their families in the guise of part-time work, thereby leaving them a secondary position in the labor market. Thusly, patriarchy and neoliberalism compromises and women become economically dependent on their husbands or families (Hartman 1992, p.155).

In this regard, it seems that the state's regulatory influence on gender relationships has become important. Nevertheless, that does not mean that gender relations are fixed; on the contrary, they are dynamic and multilayered power relationships. In this article, I consider gender as a social construction referring to the cultural, social, political, and economic distinction between social roles, which can change across time and space. Therefore, it is a relational process and can be modified by political actions (Bereni et al. 2012). Thus, as a concept, gender marks a break with the essentialist thought of difference, which divides the world into two antagonist categories as woman and man. Essentialism attributes fixed essences to women and men, and marks them as completely different in essence (Kelly et al. 2011). It identifies women generally with characteristics such as empathy, care, and nurturance, etc. and causes a belief that all women share those characteristics at all times. Thus, it implies a sort of impossibility of change and renders the differences among women invisible (Grosz 1995). As Simone de Beauvoir (1948) says: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". There is no essence of femininity or masculinity, but there is lifelong learning of the socially expected behaviors. According to Scott (1986), gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power. In almost all known patriarchal societies, this power relationship creates hierarchies regarding the distribution of economic and political resources (Héretier 1996).

In the context of Turkey, I consider the aforementioned power relationships in a neoliberal, conservative, and patriarchal context as both sociological and political questions. It is sociological because it is a question of understanding the concrete ways in which relations of domination are articulated. It is also political because it refers to the construction of political subjects and their

demands. As a set of beliefs, attitudes, and norms that legitimize male domination over women and the society and the key to maintain the societal patriarchy, patriarchal ideologies (Millet 1970) are embedded in social norms, laws, and policies and assure gender inequality. Now, I will attempt to show five different phases of AKP and its gender politics.

3. Changing Gender Politics

This article focuses on the national and international laws elaborated in the field of gender rather than anti-gender discourses of politicians, AKP elites, or adherents. Although there are various debates on the fields of employment, family, and education concerning gender issues, except for the 5th phase, I will handle them only if they are directly related to concrete changes in gender policies. If the elections, referendums, or other political upheavals in these periods do not directly affect gender policies concerning women's lives and rights, they will not be addressed.

3.1. Phase 1

The gender politics that AKP pursued in its first period was coherent with the EU accession process that had begun following the Helsinki Summit (Castle 2011). Since then, Turkey has experienced many domestic changes in many areas, including women's rights (Yılmaz 2016, p. 89) in accordance with EU accession requirements. The literature on the Europeanization of Turkey confirms that EU conditionality was one of the primary factors behind the changes (Yılmaz 2016). Here, it is worthy to note that the EU has been promoting gender equality since the 1990s through hard law and soft policy instruments, and candidate countries are required to respect this (Walby 2004). In such a context, gender equality stands as a changing policy area due to the changing significations attributed to gender and gender equality by policy-makers (Aybars et al. 2019). Here it is noteworthy to remind that gender equality is a contested concept (Verloo & Lombardo 2007). As

gender is related to the social roles given by the patriarchal society, neutral equality cannot be set out without considering the unequal nature of these roles (Uygur 2016). In this article, I use this term as a matter of achieving (expecting to achieve) political, social, and economic equality by transforming the unequal nature of gender roles in social and political spheres.

In this sense, the former government initiated domestic changes such as the amendment of Article 41 of the constitution made in 2001, which established equality between spouses, and the preparation of the new Civil Code (Yilmaz 2016). After coming to power, AKP showed its commitment to the ongoing relations with the EU concerning gender politics. The then State Minister Responsible for Women, Cubukcu, and the then Prime Minister Erdogan underlined the importance of the EU accession process for gender equality and resolving women's problems (Durukan 2006; *Hurriyet* 2006). However, explaining this period only by EU conditionality would be inadequate. As Toksoz (2016, p. 114) puts it, the demands of the rapidly strengthening feminist movement in post-1980 Turkey also had a huge impact on progressive gender politics of this period. This phase has witnessed several projects carried out for gender equality with EU and UN funds, along with the changes for gender mainstreaming in longstanding laws such as the Constitution and Turkish Penal Code.

Social Policies. Turkey Reproductive Health Program was launched in 2003. The project was financed by the EU. It does not only include subjects on safe motherhood and family planning, but also sexually transmitted diseases, and it addresses both married and single women (Ministry of Health 2004). Another amendment was about the Law on the Establishment, Duties and Trial Procedures of Family Courts. A remarkable article in the law was that family court judges were obliged to encourage the couples by getting help from experts, when necessary, to solve problems peacefully (Official Gazette 2003). While the first amendment mentioned above was a step forward for safe and healthy sexual freedom and women are not necessarily defined within the family, the second one prioritizes the family institution over individuals.

This shows that AKP has been prioritizing the family from the very beginning. Having a neoliberal agenda, it seems that AKP has envisaged the family as an institution like an ally to the state. Later, the family would have important duties as neoliberal policies were easing the burden of the state. Despite good progress towards gender equality, it is not possible to affirm that AKP was a gender-sensitive party. This becomes manifest when it comes to the neoliberal politics followed by AKP to the detriment of women since coming to power. Launched in 2003, Conditional Cash Transfer Program (Republic of Turkey & UNICEF 2003) envisaged a payment, which would be mainly used in education and health services, to the ‘mother’; as a result, a part of social security was shifted from the state to the family. A similar policy was seen in 2007. With an amendment, disabled care services were transferred from the state’s responsibility to family (Official Gazette 2007). With this change, caregivers in the family would be given emolument in return for their care-work, but they cannot benefit from social security as this money is considered as a social help instead of a real salary. Here, it is noteworthy to underline that most of the caregivers are women.

These policies address women as caregivers. This system is based on rewarding care-work and encouraging women to stay home. Cancian and Oliker (2000) describe these types of systems as support policies for caregiver citizens. In this system, caregivers are rewarded through public services and the aforementioned measures. While this system discourages women from participating in the labor force, it reinforces the specialization of men in waged-labor and specialization of women in unpaid care jobs, thus blocking the possibility of reaching real gender equality. According to Delphy, this system renders motherhood a profession, offering women the option to either have a low-paid job and burden double responsibility at home while working or be a full-time mother and depend on men (Acar-Savran 2003).

Regulations on Gender Equality and Violence against Women. Within the framework of the EU accession process, Article 10 of the Constitution, which

regulates the principle of equality before the law, was changed by underlining the fact that women and men have equal rights, and the state is obliged to ensure that this equality is implemented (*Hurriyet* 2004). The equality of sexes had already existed in the second and third constitutions (1961, 1982). But this was the first time that the Constitution gave the state the responsibility of ensuring this equality. In this period, the idea of equality was also reflected in the changes made in various fields, including the establishment of an advisory board including women's organizations in Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM) (Official Gazette 2005), the removal of sexist items from textbooks (Official Gazette 2004a), the regulations on women's rights, maternity and breast-feeding leaves (Official Gazette 2005). Thus, a series of progress has been made to overcome gender inequality.

Another important progress in women's rights seen in this period was the Turkish Penal Code (TCK) amendment. With a successful campaign and lobbying activities of women, 30 of the 35 articles proposed by TCK Women's Platform were included (*Bianet* 2003) in the new Penal Code, which came into force in April 2005 (Official Gazette 2004c). Thus, revolutionary steps have been taken to ensure the sexual and physical rights of women. Some of the additional important changes can be listed as follows (KIHYCD 2019): first of all, in the former Penal Code, the body and sexuality of the woman were considered to be a property of her husband, family, and society. Therefore, sexual crimes were defined as 'behaviors that harm social and family order and general morality'. With the new law, sexual crimes were defined as crimes against individuals, not against society, and regulated under the section of crimes against bodily integrity. Secondly, marital rape was defined as a crime. Thirdly, virginity checks started to also be considered as a crime. Lastly, the possibility of remission in case of honor crimes was withdrawn.

Several arrangements have also been realized to ensure gender equality in employment. One of the most important regulations in that field was regarding the working conditions, an important discussion topic among feminist legal theorists (Caglar-Gurgey 2014). In June 2004, menstruation leave was issued for five days in a month (Official Gazette 2004b). However, this right was taken back step by step

over time, and finally, the regulation was completely withdrawn in 2012 (Official Gazette 2012c).

In addition to these important improvements, various projects and campaigns were carried out to prevent violence against women and raise public awareness in combating violence (GDSW 2007). The Ministry of State Responsible for Women and Family and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (DIB) collaborated to raise awareness for the elimination of domestic violence by reaching 15 million men every week with Friday sermons. I argue that this cooperation was quite controversial. From 2007 onwards, this religious institution would intervene more and more in family issues (DIB 2010). Later, it would keep a record of the information of women who consult them and, moreover, through religious discourses, would try to prevent women from divorcing (*Cumhuriyet* 2013). Another important regulation on the prevention of violence has been in the field of women's shelters, which are especially important in ensuring the life safety of women and children who are exposed to violence. According to Municipality Law No. 5393 (2005), all the municipalities with more than fifty thousand inhabitants must open a women's shelter. Although this was a very significant step in terms of recognizing domestic violence as a political issue, the government was incapable of enforcing the law.

3.2. Phase 2

In this period, AKP's gender policies have remained quite close to its first period. While neoliberal policies have been pursued, important projects and researches (GDSW 2009) on gender equality and prevention of violence against women have been conducted (GDSW 2008) by the General Directorate on the Status of Women (GDSW) with the cooperation of NGOs and academics working on women. However, towards the end of this period, conservative and neoliberal policies have been deepened.

One of the important regulations of this period was regarding the headscarf ban, which was one of the most instrumentalized issues during AKP campaigns since 2002. With a series of changes between 2008 and 2010 (Official Gazette 2008a; *Hurriyet* 2010), which abolished the headscarf ban in universities, religious women and men have had equal chances of access to public resources. This change was presented as a democratic initiative for women to take their place in public space. But when considered within the context determined by neoliberalism and conservatism, the limits of democracy have been achieved fast (Yukselbaba 2013, p. 71). As Yukselbaba (2013, p. 71) affirms, when religious women attained their public visibility, the democratic initiatives of the government for women ended, and women were placed in a conservative context, in which women's primary role was accepted naturally as mother and wife (Cosar & Yegenoglu 2011, p. 565).

The neoliberal policies followed during this period caused an illusion of the visibility of women in the field of social policy (Ozates-Gelmez 2015). Deprived of social security and retirement rights, women providing care services for their relatives received modest financial support. Far from improving the rights of women, this regulation has deepened women's role as caregivers. In this period, neoliberal policies on women's employment started to accelerate. In this context, the Regulation on Private Employment Agencies (PEA) (Official Gazette 2008b) and National Employment Strategy prepared in 2011 proposed flexible work for women. Referring to part-time work, temporary work, working as an employee of PEA, when the temporary work ends, the worker would wait without receiving wages and would be deprived of social security until s/he is considered for a new job (Keig 2016). As a result, the field of employment was reorganized as flexible, deregulated, and precarious. With this new form of employment, it seems that women are expected to maintain their roles at home as it should be according to patriarchal ideology. The regulation of paternity-leave as 10 days in the public sector and 5 days in the private sector (*Haber Turk* 2020) shows that the improvements of women's rights were not effective when it comes to de facto inequalities and gender equality was far from being reached.

The egalitarian regulations in the Constitution and laws haven't been reflected in the real lives of women due to the conservative mentality of the government. Even the then prime minister Erdogan stated in a speech that he does not believe in the equality of women and men (*Haber Sol* 2010). Although the reforms continued selectively in this period, AKP's policies changed towards a de-Europeanization path (Yilmaz 2016). This coincides with the transition from an egalitarian discourse to a conservative one. The neoliberal policies have been accompanied by a rhetoric of the importance of family and the role of the women within the family that I will focus on while analyzing the following period. As Toksoz (2016, p. 117) remarks, the most concrete example of this shift is the establishment of the Ministry of Family and Social Policies (ASPB) in 2011 instead of the Ministry of State Responsible for Women and Family, removing “women” from the name.

3.3. Phase 3

I consider this period as the most complex and chaotic term of AKP governments regarding the party identity and the politics pursued in various fields. One of the important political issues of this period was the Solution Process, which officially started in April 2013 and became complicated in 2015. The tension between the HDP and Erdogan reached a peak when HDP (a popular party among citizens of Turkey of Kurdish origin) announced that the party was clearly against the presidential system proposed by Erdogan. After a successful rally, HDP entered parliament on June 7, 2015. Thus, for the first time since its first appearance on the political scene, AKP lost its majority in the parliament. It was largely due to the success of HDP. In such a complicated period, adopting a nationalist discourse, AKP allied with MHP and emphasized its nationalist references by using ‘one flag and one nation’ discourse (Yarar 2018:42) for the next general election, which was going to be held on November 1, 2015, as a result of the failure of the parties to form a government following the June 7, 2015 elections.

During this term, AKP left its discourses on democracy and clearly adopted conservative, patriarchal, and populist discourses by claiming that only AKP can represent the people (*Haber 7* 2014). As of this period, the party politics have become increasingly authoritarian (Yarar 2018). AKP presented itself as the defender of the Islamic and nationalist values and marked public and political opposition as Others. Here what constitutes the infrastructure that Islamic values are based on are the elements of the neoliberal economy such as deregulation and privatization (Yukselbaba 2013, p. 71). Claiming to adopt both Islamic and neoliberal worldview, family has an important place in AKP's authoritarian shift. Presented within the family, women became clearly disadvantaged in society, and they are expected to participate in public life within the boundaries of traditional gender roles.

Violence against Women. At the beginning of this period, cooperating with the women's organizations, the government provided significant support in the preparation of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (aka Istanbul Convention). When the convention was opened for signature in Istanbul, Turkey became its first signatory (KIHCD 2019, p. 10) and ratified it without any reservations in 2011. The preparation of this important document, with the impact of the conclusion of the *Opuz vs. Turkey* case (ECHR 2009), showed an evident commitment for developing existing policies conforming with international standards to combat violence against women (Acar & Altunok 2013, p. 17).

After the ratification of Istanbul Convention, a need for establishing a more effective law than Law No. 4320 on the Protection of the Family, which was failing to meet the standards of the Istanbul Convention, emerged. Therefore, Law No. 6284 on the Protection of Family and Prevention of Violence Against Women was prepared with the cooperation of the ASPB and women's organizations and ratified in 2012 (KIHCD 2019, p. 25). This cooperation was crucial for making a comprehensive and decent law by addressing women's real problems. This new law establishes protective and preventive measures for women and other family

members exposed to domestic violence, and it extends the legal definition of violence following the Istanbul Convention by including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence and the threats of such acts (KIHCD 2019, p. 26). Although all of these developments are crucial for preventing gender-based violence and empowering women, there are serious problems in their implementation.

Despite a significant number of regulations regarding shelters since the beginning of the decade, the number of shelters could not reach the desired level. Beyond this fact, a significant regression occurred with the amendment of the Municipality Law No. 5393. According to the amendment, all the municipalities with more than one hundred thousand inhabitants must open a women's shelter (Official Gazette 2012b). Since even the former law wasn't completely respected by municipalities, this regulation must be considered as a significant decline at the legal level.

Family and Social Policies. Starting from this period, the policies followed on women's issues located women within the familial sphere. Thereafter, women were no longer considered as political subjects concerning social, political, and economic issues (Kaya 2016). Most of the policies that limit women's existence within the family had a sexist nature conforming to patriarchal ideology and AKP's conservatism. The fact that women could only benefit from social aid due to their roles in the family was an important example of this. For example, according to the decision of the Fund Board for the Promotion of Social Assistance and Solidarity, widowed women would receive financial aid, but the aid would be cut if women live with men even if they are not married (*Milliyet* 2012). This shows that even after the death of their spouse, women have to continue to adhere to the traditional patriarchal family structure. Similarly, the costs faced by women who were burdened with the extra care of their relatives in exchange for social aids - as discussed in phase two - has also been seen in this period. According to the data of the ASPB (2013), the number of people benefiting from home care services has

increased 13 times since 2007. As a result, women spend more time at home, and they have neither time nor opportunity to have a waged job. Thus, they are destitute of social security and become dependent on their families.

Pronatalist policies, which were followed during this phase, would be decisive for women's conditions during the next phase. Even though pronatalist discourse was used by government officials in the previous phases, in this phase, pronatalist policies became the government's official policy concerning women (Dayi & Eylem 2018) as Erdogan asked women to give birth to at least three children (*Milliyet* 2013). In this period, discourses on women's sexuality have proliferated at an unprecedented level in the history of Turkey as a result of the rising authoritarian politics (Cindoglu & Unal 2017). Accordingly, the abortion right that women have had since 1983 (Kaya 2016, p. 51) was brought into the discussion by government members (*Memurlar.net* 2013; *Bianet* 2013). This abortion rhetoric is a point of failure of the conservative-democrat discourse and confirms that conservative politics cannot be consistent and empowering for women (Ertürk 2015). These discourses can be seen as a tool of biopolitics regarding the control of population, body, and sexuality. However, in patriarchal societies where women cannot have control over their own bodies and lives, and where women burden childbearing and care-work in extremely unequal conditions, abortion should be a natural right (Ozkazanc 2019, p. 255).

All these regulations show the direct relations between social policies and family. In the context of contemporary Turkey, as an ideological institution (Rosenfelt & Stacy 1987, p. 78) which raises future generations conforming to the dominant ideologies, the family is instrumentalized to reinforce traditional gender roles, to consolidate the patriarchal regime, and to intensify neoliberal capitalism. AKP contrastingly transformed the situation of the family and women with both the neoliberal policies it pursued in its first two periods and the conservative politics which prioritized the family afterward. While AKP undermines the family with its neoliberal policies, it tries to re-establish the patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti 1988) through conservatization (Ozkazanc 2019, p. 243).

Employment. AKP's neoliberal and conservative policies have added a new obstacle to the existing structural and cultural ones for equal employment opportunities. In this period, while working women were also defined as mothers, the government disburdened its task to open nurseries and transferred this duty to the private sector (Official Gazette 2013a). Concerning such a serious social issue, the state does not propose an egalitarian social policy, and employers do not want to fulfill its obligations (Keig 2013). These policies imply an impossibility for women to participate in the labor market. Statistics show that the employment rates of men and women aged 29-49 with a child under age 3 are dramatically different. While the employment rate of men varied between 89.2% and 90.4%, that of women varied between 27.4% and 24.3% between 2014 and 2018. As for families without children, the men's employment rate was still higher than the women's employment rate, which varies between 48.7% and 53.4% (TurkStat 2019). This shows that the unequal distribution of care-work is a serious obstacle for women's employment. Following these policies, it is naturalized that women give birth to many children, take care of them for long periods and work in flexible conditions to fulfill their responsibilities. As Cosar & Yegenoglu (2011) argue, the consolidation of the gendered division of labor, which considers women responsible for home and family, and the aim to provide the cheap labor required by the neoliberal economic system are behind these policies. The gendered division of labor, which explains the secondary position of women in the labor market, causes women's financial dependence on men, even if women have a waged-work (Hartmann 1992, p. 155). Thus, once again, the compromise of patriarchy and neoliberalism is achieved.

These policies cause the 'feminization of poverty'. The concept has been proposed by Pearce (1978) to draw attention to the economic deterioration of women between 1950-1970 in the U.S. despite the increase in their numbers in the workforce over time. In the 2010s, there is a similar tendency in Turkey. Women's participation in the workforce has increased from 14.6 (GDSW 2014) to 29.4

(Turkstat 2020) during AKP rule. The number of women who work in the informal sector and have flexible works also increased (Toksoz 2018) as well as their impoverishment due to insecure work conditions. Women are burdened by poverty, care-work, and the lack of decent jobs.

Education. One of the most important changes that marked this period regarding gender politics was the elaboration of the 4+4+4 Intermittent Compulsory Education System (Official Gazette 2012a). According to the law, 4 years of elementary education is followed by middle and high school education. For the second and third steps, students can choose to study at a general school or Imam Hatip school (religious vocational school), which was banned after the military memorandum in 1997 and has been reopened with this amendment. In this system, formal education after primary school is not obligatory, unlike the previous system; instead, students can have an open education. Having no scientific basis and some problems in practice, this system has caused serious controversies, especially regarding its possible negative effects on the schooling rate of girls, child labor, and 'child brides'. There had previously been a significant drop in numbers of 'child brides' and 'teenage mothers' as a result of 8-year compulsory schooling (Altinkurt & Aysel 2016, p. 27).

The Statistics of Ministry of National Education (MEB) (MEB 2014) shows that those risks in question have been concretized, and the proportion of women among those attending open education middle school and high school organized for people of all ages was declared as 63.4% and 44.8%, respectively. With a new regulation on secondary education, if school children get married, they were allowed to continue their education at an open secondary school (Official Gazette 2013b), whereas marriage had been a reason for exmatriculation before this regulation. Thus, MEB paved the way for early marriages, especially for minor girls, who are neither mentally nor physically prepared for marriage. Here it is important to indicate that most deaths of young girls between 15-19 are caused by health problems associated with pregnancy and birth (Turkyilmaz & Cavlin 2014). According to MEB, 97.4% of children who cannot continue to formal education

due to early marriage were schoolgirls (Turkyilmaz & Cavlin 2014). These regulations constitute important obstacles for women's emancipation from early ages. When approached from an intersectional perspective, they also create the particular ways that women experience poverty. As a result, mostly daughters of lower-income/lower-class families suffer from this change. I will continue to reveal the political meaning of this regression in contemporary sociopolitical conditions in Phase 4.

3.4. Phase 4

The gender policies of this period were shaped by the political and military upheavals. In 2015 and 2016, Turkey had a chaotic political and social atmosphere because of the coup attempt staged by Gulenist soldiers. Following the failed coup, Turkey declared a state of emergency on July 20, 2016 and pursued rigid politics in each field. Under the two years of the state of emergency, a great regression was seen regarding gender politics. After the end of the Solution Process, especially in eastern regions densely populated with Turkish citizens of Kurdish origin, several women's organizations, shelters, and solidarity centers closed down (Kivilcim 2018, p. 93). As a result, in these regions, women became deprived of the possibility of organized solidarity as well as security against violence.

The policies followed after the failed coup can be used to discover patriarchal policies against women in Turkey in favor of reconsolidation of patriarchy, masculine privilege, and neoliberalism. During the state of emergency, conservative gender policies revised male privileges concerning the new needs of neoliberal capitalism and continued to accelerate at a national level as it was seen in the fields of employment and education.

Employment. During this period, AKP's neoliberal policies, which encourage women to give birth and fulfill their traditional roles at home, continued to fragilize conditions of women's employment. The results of the TurkStat (2015) Time Using Survey shows that women spent more time at home and less time at work

compared to men. This means that women work more part-time and flexibly in the labor market as a result of the previous employment politics.

In 2016, a new law regarding temporary employment through PEA was brought to the agenda with a discourse of flexicurity for women. Thus, women were offered two months, four months, and six months of part-time work for the first, second, and third child, respectively, after maternity leave. Part-time work was also envisaged for each child for five years. Thus, traditional gender norms were reinforced and women's roles as caregivers were officially approved. In such a condition, women risked losing their right to retirement as well as their opportunity to find decent work (Keig 2016).

According to Toksoz (2017), the main aim of these policies was to increase the fertility rate. However, under the current socio-economic conditions, and without egalitarian gender policies, it is possible only for the upper-middle-class conservative families (Ozkazanc 2019, p. 22). In such a context, AKP's conservative, patriarchal, and neoliberal ideologies prevent women from being secured in the labor market and having equal responsibilities at home as men. The precarious works offered to lower class women do not give them any opportunities to be economically and socially independent.

Education. The regression in the field of education regarding gender equality can be traced in policies pursued in the previous phase. According to MEB's statistics (2016) while the number of public schools decreased, the number of private schools increased remarkably. This data is significant to show the effect of neoliberalization on education. The number of Imam Hatip High Schools, all of which are public schools, also increased. Thus, lower-income families' children cannot make a choice and if they cannot succeed to attend a prestigious high school or find a vacancy to enroll at a general public high school, they are obliged to attend an Imam Hatip High School, which cannot offer a good level of education in global standards (Ayata 2018). Thus, inequality between children starts at a very early age.

In this context, it is not surprising that according to UNICEF report on equality of opportunities among children, Turkey is ranked last among 41 OECD

countries (Eğitim-Sen 2018). MEB's statistics (2016) also showed that the number of students studying in open high schools increased by 63% with the new education system. Most of these children are likely to be victims of early marriages as a result of the changes elaborated in the previous phase. According to a report by Girls Not Brides (2018) Turkey has the highest rate of forced child marriages in Europe.

3.5. Phase 5

This period consists mainly of the post-state-of-emergency period and is marked by the shift from the parliamentary system to a presidential system, where the president of the republic is also the head of the government. In this period, Erdogan became stronger and less controllable with a weaker civil society and opposition as well as weaker separation of powers. During this period, the regression of women's rights in Turkey was seriously criticized in GREVIO (Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women) report (2018).

The emphasis on family was increased both in discourses and in policies. As it is seen in the 2019 Annual Presidency Program (Presidency of Turkish Republic, 2018.), the section of Family and Law mainly focused on strengthening the family and reducing divorce. Besides, the alimony system was brought into question and the state did not take women's organizations as interlocutors in such a social and political context. However, alimony is important regarding the unpaid labor of women during marriage. As argued by Delphy, divorce reveals how men appropriate the labor of women during the marriage and the alimony, which is received mostly by women, is a sort of confession of this confiscation (Acar-Savran 2003). Under the given conditions of Turkey, discussions on the abolition of the right to alimony can be considered as a tool to prevent women from divorcing. The anti-alimony groups have intensely been lobbying since 2018 (Seker 2018) and they are accepted as the principal interlocutors of this subject. This shows that gender inequality is deepening by the state's approval. If this change materializes, women with low (or no) income, who have been excluded from equal opportunities for

education and employment and who burden the care-work will get stuck in unhappy marriages.

I think here the main concern should be answering the following question: Why do women need alimony at the end of a marriage? According to ungendered law, the partner who gets poorer after divorce has the right to alimony (KIHCD 2019, p. 16). So why is it mostly women who get poorer? If there is a real need for change considering alimony, before anything else, the government must show a political determination to eliminate the structural and political inequalities, which fix women in disadvantaged social and economic positions. Otherwise, women will be exposed to economic violence through law. These anti-alimony demands must be considered with the oppositions against Law No. 6284 and the Istanbul Convention. These oppositions aim to leave women without any legal protection against all forms of violence and discrimination in the name of family integrity.

Two other negative events of this period were realized during the Covid-19 pandemic. Under the conditions of curfew and social isolation, the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors suspended Law No. 6284 by making it impracticable due to the pandemic (*Evrensel* 2020). Subsequently, with the amendment on the law on the execution of sentences, the authors of violence against women (among many others) were released from prisons (*Hurriyet* 2020). Although the government affirms that the crimes against women are out of the scope of the amendment, this discourse does not reflect the truth since there is no such article in the Penal Code. Although the crimes against sexual and bodily integrity such as rape, harassment and child abuse are excluded from the amendment, the majority of violence against women derived from crimes such as blackmail, threats, injuries, assaults, insults, violation of immunity of domicile are not. However, this negative change may conduct women's organizations to propose a new article on crimes against women in the Penal Code.

4. *In lieu of Conclusion*

In this article, as a feminist scholar, I aimed to shed light on Turkey's gender politics throughout the 2000s by examining the legal changes that affect women's conditions and provide a reference guide for researchers working on the gender politics of Turkey. I tried to fill the gap in the existing literature by providing an overview of the impact of AKP's changing political identities on changing gender policies followed in various fields in the last two decades. This chronological analysis is not only important to see the change of political attitude in time but also to understand the existence of similar democratic reforms or similar patriarchal, neoliberal, and conservative tendencies in each field.

In the first two phases, AKP followed a policy that adopted the EU's warnings during the accession process and made progress on a significant number of subjects to reach gender equality. Women's organizations' efforts also had an important role in this progress. But starting from the third phase, AKP has cut off dialogue with women's organizations and started to follow policies that suit better its conservative and neoliberal identities, which it combines with Islam. Nonetheless, despite having a rhetoric traceable in Islam, AKP leaders never affirm it explicitly (Acar & Altunok 2013). According to Acar & Altunok (2013, p. 15) this shows that instrumentalizing the basis of morals for its arguments, AKP conforms to a readily identifiable parameter of conservatism and prioritizes economic issues due to neoliberal politics.

In its third phase, the shift of gender politics was concretized by the establishment of the ASPB. The importance given to the family was not new in the history of Turkey in determining the political sphere and reconstructing the society. However, it was particularly functional and essential for AKP for several reasons. Weakened due to the neoliberal policies followed by AKP, the state's social security services are largely compensated by family. All emancipatory discussions on issues such as abortion, homosexuality, sexuality have been seen as challenges to the patriarchal family structure (Acar & Altunok 2013, p. 20). While making women

invisible in the political sphere, the policies pursued fixed women into traditional gender roles in this patriarchal institution. As Delphy (1998) puts it, patriarchy establishes the domination of the “father” over the members of the family, and women experience and learn the forms of oppression in the family before experiencing them anywhere else. It seems that the politics that deepen gender inequality were mainly reconstructed in phase three. However, I must emphasize that to understand these politics and women’s social positions, the role of the neoliberal political economy must be considered.

In addition to care-work that is burdened by women due to neoliberal policies, the gendered division of labor models the forms of work and employment and, reciprocally, flexibilization of work can reinforce the stereotypical forms of gender relations (Kergoat 2000, p. 42). Therefore, women’s employment policies followed for almost two decades can be considered as a result of the overlap of AKP’s idiosyncratic conservatism and the need of capitalism for the flexibility of women’s labor. For this reason, the policies on the flexibilization of women’s employment were propagated by a conservative discourse on gender norms. This shows that women’s employment is not systematically positive if integrated into the labor market in precarious, insecure, unequal conditions.

The existing gender regime in Turkey reinforces the idea that most of the inequalities between genders are natural and inevitable (Sancar 2016, p. 305). This falls with Erdogan, who argued that women and men are different in nature (*BBC* 2014). Conforming this view, education was an important issue in AKP’s political agenda for diffusing its official ideology throughout society. Schoolgirls remained disadvantaged, and the policies followed in this field constitute an obstacle for women’s emancipation. Although AKP followed some policies for women’s rights and to prevent violence against women, they remained extremely weak as a result of implementation problems and conservative discourses. This shows that any politics that does not envisage women’s economic, social, political, and cultural empowerment continues to suppress women. Far from empowering women, it seems that there occurs an antifeminist backlash since phase three. Similar to what

has been discussed by Faludi (1991), it has been set off by the growing possibility of women's achievement of real and concrete equality. Women know that without ensuring full equality, the problems in their lives will remain unsolved.

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