

Article

“Are You God? Damn Your Family!”: The Islam–Gender Nexus in Right-Wing Populism and the New Generation of Muslim Feminist Activism in Turkey

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Abstract: This article examines young Muslim women’s dissident mentalities, practices, and subjectivities that confront the epistemological conditions whereby right-wing populist (RWP) gender politics operates in Turkey. Relying on frame theory in social movement research and the Foucauldian approach to resistance, dissent, and protest, it explores Muslim feminist critique of RWP gender discourse mainly with a focus on the following issues: (i.) Instrumentalization of the headscarf, (ii.) familialist policies, and (iii.) violence against women and the Istanbul Convention (the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence). As a result, it demonstrates that young Muslim women’s dissident mentalities and subjectivities generate a new “political project”, i.e., a set of new meanings and social goals directed at bringing about social change, which comes into being through the act of resistance against RWP gender grammar and carves out new forms of knowledge reclaiming the Islam–gender nexus for a progressive feminist agenda.

Keywords: Muslim feminist activism; right-wing populism; familialism; counter-discourse; Turkey



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1. Introduction

In the recent era, there has been a worldwide resurgence of right-wing populist (RWP) movements and nationalist, racist, and anti-feminist agendas that increasingly politicize gender and sexuality to mark national and civilizational boundaries (Dietze and Roth 2020; Graff and Korolczuk 2018; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). These reactionary forces function in conjunction with the politicization of culture and religion, mainly Islam, to reinforce the populist trope of self–other confrontation. Idealized gender norms in RWP politics operate in tandem with the hegemonic struggles to frame Islam as a fault line to mark national, cultural, and civilizational boundaries and to reproduce the national belonging through secular-pious and East-West divides (Farris 2017). In such political contexts where RWP agendas increasingly politicize Islam and gender to enact a particular understanding of self–other relations in and across national borders, Muslim women’s “critical pious agency” gains prominence in contesting the exclusionary processes of this racializing and civilizationist political discourse (Rinaldo 2014; van Es 2016; Unal 2019).

In the Turkish context, RWP actors of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP (JDP)) utilize Islamically accentuated discourses to preserve the so-called authentic culture against the allegedly destructive effects of Western norms and values and attack gender egalitarian norms through a patriarchal, authoritarian policy vision. Especially in the last decade, the AKP has consolidated its authoritarian power through new electoral victories and established a gender regime increasingly dominated by a familialist, anti-gender, and anti-feminist policy vision (Acar and Altunok 2013; Esen and Gumuscu 2016; Güneş-Ayata and Doğangün 2017; Kandiyoti 2016; Tansel 2018). Against this background, this article examines young Muslim women’s dissident mentalities, practices, and subjectivities that confront the epistemological conditions whereby RWP gender politics operates in contemporary Turkey. It particularly scrutinizes the discourses, collective action frames, and repertoires of contention utilized by Muslim women in Turkey born in the late 1980s or

early 1990s who are active in recently founded feminist organizations and digital platforms, such as *Havle* and *Reçel blog*. It foregrounds attention to the frames and the interpretive schemata in their Muslim feminist critique that contests the intertwined tropes of gender and Islam strategically utilized by the AKP rule as a useful rhetorical toolkit to reinforce the conservative gender regime. Relying on frame theory in social movement research and the Foucauldian approach to resistance, dissent, and protest (Benford and Snow 2000; Foucault 2000; Lilja and Vinthagen 2014; Lilja 2021), the article explores Muslim feminist critique of AKP's RWP gender discourse mainly with a focus on the following issues: (i.) Instrumentalization of the headscarf, (ii.) familialist policies, and (iii.) violence against women and the Istanbul Convention (the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence). As a result, it demonstrates that young Muslim women's dissident mentalities and subjectivities in contemporary Turkey generate a new "political project", i.e., a set of new meanings and social goals directed at bringing about social change (Walby 2011), which comes into being through the act of resistance against AKP's gender grammar and carves out new forms of knowledge reclaiming the Islam–gender nexus for a progressive feminist agenda.

2. Gender and Islam in RWP Politics in Turkey

Recent feminist studies highlight that RWP politics constructing and targeting "ideal" citizens and "others" is strikingly gendered (Dietze and Roth 2020; Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Verloo and Paternotte 2018). Framing recent cultural and demographic changes as threats to the national culture and belonging, RWP agendas are preoccupied with the biological, social, and cultural reproduction of the nation and regard family as a site of governmentality, in the Foucauldian sense, to construct and normalize idealized femininities and masculinities (Fangen and Lichtenberg 2021; Grzebalska and Petö 2018). They regard women as biological producers, cultural embodiments of collectivities, and as carriers of collective honor and enact national bordering attempts in line with this familialist reproductive logic (Yuval-Davis 1993; Bachetta and Power 2002).

It is also striking to note that the gender grammar of RWP agendas is deeply intertwined with the politicization of Islam constructing self–other antagonisms both in the national context and in civilizational terms (Brubaker 2017). Accordingly, Islam emerges as a "master frame" in RWP agendas used to distinguish the "good" people either through anti-Islam discourses (in RWP nationalisms drawing on Christian heritage) or pro-Islamist political stance (in Muslim-majority RWP contexts) and marks civilizational boundaries constructed through East–West and secular–pious binaries.

In the Turkish context, scholars have increasingly pointed out AKP's close affiliation with RWP politics in terms of ideology, discourse, and political style (Yabancı 2016; Yavuz and Öztürk 2020). Recent studies also highlight the centrality of gender in AKP's RWP politics and decipher how it acts as "symbolic glue" in bringing together the party's "thin" ideological core (Cindoglu and Unal 2017; Korkman 2016; Yazar 2020). However, except for a few studies (Arat 2010; Adak 2021; Mutluer 2019), the Islam–gender nexus in AKP's politics has been relatively less explored.

AKP's populist construction of the "good" people against the secular elite has for a long time relied upon the framing of Islam as a powerful category of identity and belonging and a unifying force that can mobilize Muslim masses through a narrative of victimhood, stressing the right violations that religiously observant Muslims experienced under ultra-secular policies in modern Turkey (Yabancı 2020; Yilmaz 2017). As the party has consolidated its rule, especially in the post-2011 period, and Muslim piety ceased to be a source of this victimhood narrative, resentful subject formation of Turkish Islamist identity that casts pious Muslims as victims of ultra-secular policies is elevated to a new level where populist antagonisms transgress the "secular versus pious" dichotomy and operationalize an "us versus them" mentality to vilify the opponents of the political regime (Tokdoğan 2020). During this time, Islam became a religious populist policy tool that provides not only a source for mobilization and an overarching belonging for the definition

of the “good” people, but also a moral vision and a strategic rhetorical toolkit to legitimize the nationalist-conservative policy perspective in AKP’s RWP agenda. This Islamically accentuated moral vision is strategically operationalized both at the discursive level and the policy level to govern and regulate women’s bodies and social roles. In this sense, Islam functions both as a core ideology and as a strategic toolkit that organizes the party’s basic aims, interests, and values and informs and normalizes its policy choices.

AKP actors’ simultaneous utilization of religious and gendered tropes and language stands at the center of the party’s hegemonic attempts to cultivate “yerli ve milli” (local and national) values. The party’s construction and reproduction of culturally authentic, national values unfolds through its rhetoric of “sacred familialism” that regards the family as the main site of biological, national, and cultural reproduction. This new model of family is expected to serve as a social solidarity network in a neoliberal order where the provision of social welfare services, such as education, health care, and social security, are increasingly privatized and the care work in the familial sphere, such as the care of the children, the elderly, and the disabled, is primarily assigned to women (Akkan 2018; Atalay 2019). This vision of family based on hegemonic gender roles is promoted not only on the grounds of providing shelter against the destabilizing effects of neoliberalism but it is also deemed crucial under the pretense of protecting the so-called national moral order against a broad spectrum of feminist principles and socio-political reforms understood as the “Trojan horses” of Western powers (Unal 2021b).

In this narrative ecology, the feminist principle of gender equality is replaced with the Islamic idea of *fitrat* (disposition), which refers to human beings’ biological and divinely ordained nature according to the Islamic thought. Accordingly, gender equality is defined as the “constitutive outside”, i.e., the category of difference that the AKP relates to in antagonistic terms and is replaced with the “complementarity of genders” based on *fitrat* and traditional gender norms. This new terminology fused with the Islamic worldview presents Islam as a just religion that is attentive to human beings’ “true” selves and superior to the liberal equality politics of “gender ideology” (Koyuncu and Özman 2019). Familial unity, familial care, and motherhood are praised through Islamic references (Adak 2021; Kocamaner 2019).

In recent years, AKP’s anti-feminist and religio-conservative discourses are further fueled by a securitization discourse and “politics of fear” that targets feminist principles and LGBT rights as security threats to the public order. This securitization discourse aims to annul the recent feminist acquisitions in the legal sphere in the name of protecting the family against the detrimental influences of “alien” ideologies, namely the “gender ideology” (Özkazanç 2019, 2020). The recent public debate on the Istanbul Convention, a comprehensive international agreement with a monitoring mechanism that requires states to address violence against women as a form of gender-based violence and to take anti-violence measures, is emblematic of the ways in which the party utilizes the Islam–gender nexus to tap into social fears and anxieties related to the reproduction of “traditional” family (Altan-Olcay and Oder 2021). AKP attempts to justify Turkey’s recent withdrawal from the Convention with the argument that the principles of equality and non-discrimination on the grounds of gender and sexual orientation guaranteed through the feminist terminology of the Convention undermine family values, promote and legitimize homosexuality and thus are incompatible with the so-called authentic moral fabric in Turkey.

However, this backlash politics reversing the existing egalitarian legal framework does not mean that the political closures in the gender regime consume all meaning-making processes around gender. Forging new types of affective and intersectional solidarity among women and proposing alternative imaginaries for a feminist-inspired social justice vision (Çelik and Göker 2021; Dinçer 2020; Simga and Goker 2017), feminist activists reject the party’s attempts to establish a “narrative monoculture” where feminist imaginaries are eliminated altogether (Foroughi et al. 2019). In what follows, the article discusses the ways in which young Muslim women’s dissident mentalities, practices, and subjectivities

pose a significant challenge to the hegemonic terms of the anti-feminist and anti-gender governmentality under the new gender regime.

3. Muslim Women's Feminist Activism

Since its inception in the public sphere in the mid-1990s, the Muslim women's movement in Turkey has always been heterogeneous, with different actors, multiple agendas, and a wide spectrum of views on the method and scope of women's rights activism (Aksoy 2015; Coşar and Onbaşı 2008; Özcan 2019; Unal 2021a; Yılmaz 2016). Historicizing this movement can help us expose different actors, positions, and commitments that inscribe, reinforce, and transform its formation and trajectory.

In line with the upsurge of the Islamist revivalist movement in the 1980s, well-educated, urban, professional Muslim women started to become more visible in the public sphere, articulating their discontent with the ultra-Kemalist reflexes of society and the headscarf bans at public universities. Their increasing public visibility paved the way for the emergence of a new generation of Muslim women intellectuals in the 1990s who published articles, research books, and novels and actively engaged in gender debates, criticizing misogynist discourses both in Islamist and secular circles. Some of them had already attempted to interact with the burgeoning secular feminist movement in the late 1980s but were not accepted by the leading figures in the movement on the grounds that Islam and feminism are antithetical to each other (Unal 2015). Their interest in reconciling Islam and feminism has become prolific over time, proliferating in many fields, including literature, politics, theology, and gender equality activism. In parallel with the rapid rise of Islamist politics in the post-1990 era, Muslim women's increasing political demands in party politics have significantly contributed to the circulation of Muslim feminist discourses in the public sphere. Muslim women intellectuals with a commitment to feminist ideals assumed critical roles in the women's branches of Islamist parties to mobilize pious women, yet despite their critical success, they were excluded from party cadres (Arat 2016).

In 1995, pro-feminist/feminist Muslim women gathered under the roof of Capital Women's Platform (Başkent Kadın Platformu-BKP), a women's organization founded in Ankara. Since its foundation, BKP has been a prominent actor in the women's movement and played a significant role in redefining feminist ideas on the Islamic-secular axis (Aldıkaçtı-Marshall 2005; Coşar and Onbaşı 2008). It significantly differs from the orthodox segments of the Muslim women's movement in that it is committed to advancing women's status in society beyond charity work and a mere focus on family. In this sense, BKP's "reformist" stance aims to reconcile Islam and progressive feminist precepts and confront gendered power hierarchies (Aldıkaçtı-Marshall 2005). However, one should note that BKP is a very heterogeneous organization with members who display different levels of commitment to feminism and feminist identity. It encompasses a wide spectrum of arguments, positions, and discourses revealing different paths of negotiating feminism, Islam, and feminist self-identification. It is also true that not all BKP members take a critical position vis-à-vis the recent rise of authoritarianism and distance themselves from the misogynist, authoritarian rule. However, BKP's feminist activists declare a firm commitment to the principle of gender equality and challenge AKPs' gender equity model built on the Islamic idea of complementarity of genders (BBC 2018).

In parallel with the crackdown on civil society and feminist activism in the last decade, AKP has adopted a new governmental strategy of establishing GONGOs (government-organized non-governmental actors), such as KADEM (Women's Democracy Association), to be instrumentalized in reinforcing the gender complementarity policy agenda (Coşar and Özkan-Kerestecioglu 2017; Koyuncu and Özman 2019). Reformist segments of Muslim women's activism have come to distinguish their collective identity by a "narrative of departure" from the collective identity of GONGO's by stressing the autonomous character of their activist agenda. However, in some cases, this might not necessarily suggest a politics of defiance and an anti-AKP stance. The example of BKP is quite illustrative here. The dissonance between feminist and non-feminist BKP members' positions has

become more visible, especially in the post-2011 period. BKP members who self-identify as feminists not only took a critical stance vis-à-vis misogynist governmental discourses and policies in this period, but also articulated a bold critique of AKP's authoritarianism (BBC 2018). Nevertheless, others who are partly critical of the political regime but still are supportive of its permanence have faced the "obedience/defiance" cleavage in their self-identification, which led them to inertia (Berrin Sönmez, personal interview, August 2019). As a result, unresolvable tensions surfaced between BKP's feminist members and conservative activists, and the collective identity cultivated in BKP circles through rigorous resource mobilization in the last decades has become destabilized. Moreover, BKP came under great pressure from anti-feminist, anti-gender circles that regard Muslim feminism as a threat to AKP's familialist policy vision. As a result, the organization annulled its associational entity in May 2019 and closed its office in Ankara.

The destabilizing effects of the current political rule on critical pious subject formation can also be traced in the fragmentations, contradictions, and ambiguities in the self-positionings of Muslim women public intellectuals who became visible in the public sphere in the 1990s and have played important roles in shaping public debates through gender-conscious lenses. Increased risks and vulnerabilities associated with feminist self-identification in the recent era have led to a dramatic destabilization of their previous feminist/pro-feminist positions. Some reformist Muslim women public figures adopted a cautious and moderate stance in their commitment to feminist ideals and opted for culturally resonant frames when engaging with gender debates, while others developed organic ties with the AKP in the last decade and became close allies of the current political regime (Özcan 2019; Unal 2021a).

The foundation of Havle in 2018 by young Muslim feminists should be situated against this background, where the polarizing political atmosphere in the country has led to instabilities in critical pious subject formation. In the context of rising authoritarianism in the post-2011 period, the "obedience/defiance" cleavage has gained importance in reformist Muslim women's self-positioning vis-à-vis the current political rule. It emerged as a litmus test pointing out a wide array of subject positions either aligning with AKP's gender policy vision despite reformist views on gender issues or opposing and contesting it through dissident mentalities. Within this frame, Havle responds to the inertia among the reformist Muslim women from the previous generation who fail to critically distance themselves from the authoritarian elements of political Islam. It takes inspiration from the burgeoning activism of the new generation of Muslim feminist women who are active in recently initiated platforms, such as Reçel Blog, "Muslims Initiative Against Violence Against Women", and "Women in Mosques" (Alyanak 2019; Goker 2019; Nas 2021). This new generation of Muslim feminist women born in the late 1980s and early 1990s creates a new space in the feminist movement by responding to contemporary feminist emergencies through Muslim feminist lenses and drawing on new collective action frames, goals, tactics, and organizational structure.

Moreover, coalitions, dialogue, and the need to ensure an inclusive collaboration among Muslim and secular feminists appear to be significant deliberative issues that young Muslim feminists under consideration prioritize in their narratives. Issues such as child abuse, violence against women, and women's autonomy regarding sartorial choices, provide a common ground for secular and Muslim feminists to reach overlapping collective action frames. This commitment to collaborative action manifested itself in feminist protests in 2017, when women rallied for the right to wear both miniskirts and headscarves, chanting slogans such as "don't meddle with my headscarf, don't meddle with my shorts" (Unal 2019). Moreover, in the context of the recent debates on the Istanbul Convention, Muslim feminist activists have formed intersectional solidarity with feminist activists from different religious, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds on platforms such as EŞİK (Eşitlik için Kadın Platformu (Women's Platform for Equality)), i.e., a platform mobilized in 2020 as strong opposition to the rising anti-feminism and anti-genderism (ESİK (Women's Platform for Equality Website) 2021). Their firm commitment to collaborative collective ac-

tion points out that systemic attacks on gender equality need to be confronted through intersectional activism.

In a nutshell, young Muslim feminists' critique of the previous generation's inertia in responding to the rise of authoritarianism and their transversal, intersectional understanding of feminist activism distinguishes them from the influential movements that emerged in the mid-1990s. Thus, they cannot be regarded as a "generational spillover" or a "spin-off" movement transmitting early risers' ideas into the next generation but rather represent a new political generation enabled by the changing political context, opportunity structures, forms of protest, tactics, collective action frames, and collective identity (Whittier 2004). In what follows, the discussion shall demonstrate how the "obedience/defiance" cleavage marks Reçel Blog and Havle's collective action frames and map out the ways in which young Muslim feminists perform dissent against the gender backlash of AKP's RWP agendas.

4. Methodology

This article examines young Muslim feminists' collective action frames, i.e., meaning-making processes geared towards mobilizing grievances and responding to the feminist emergencies in the current political landscape (Benford and Snow 2000). It particularly deals with agency and contention at the level of reality construction and explores the ways in which young Muslim women's new interpretive frames differ from the existing ones and expand and contest them. The analysis aims to map out the issues that provoke intense mobilization and motivation for collective action among young Muslim women and sheds light on the dynamics of the macro-political context where their collective identities as Muslim feminists emerge through the act of resistance. It focuses on a new generation of Muslim women born in the late 1980s and early 1990s who, unlike the former generation of Muslim women activists, did not have to establish organic ties with the resurgence of political Islam. The discussion analyzes dissident discourses and mentalities mobilized at *Havle*, the first Muslim feminist women's organization in Turkey founded in 2018 and *Reçel blog*, a Muslim blog site where many issues ranging from abortion to marriage, motherhood, and divorce can be debated through gender-conscious lenses.

Havle was founded in Istanbul by young, self-identified Muslim feminist activists who were frustrated by the rising gender backlash in contemporary Turkey, the exclusionary power structures inherent in the secular women's movement and the inertia in the reformist Muslim women's movement to respond to the gender backlash. As the first Muslim feminist women's organization in Turkey, it plays a prominent role in mobilizing Muslim feminist dissent into collective action and opens space for intersectional feminist politics where women's different positionalities in terms of religion, age, class, and ethnicity can be acknowledged. Havle members conduct research and carry out advocacy activities mainly with a focus on Islamic feminism, the localization of feminism, gender hierarchies, and gendered violence (Havle 2021a, 2021b). They draw on the legacies of previous Muslim women organizations but aim to expand their activism through a transformative Muslim feminist politics that aims to (1) reclaim Muslim feminist knowledge production through localization of feminist solutions, (2) contest the strategic use of Muslim women's identities and bodies for political purposes and confront the instrumentalization of Islam for legitimizing misogynist agendas, and (3) enact intersectional solidarity shifting the focus from pre-defined identity categories to embodied experiences and women's diverse needs and demands (Sivil Sayfalar 2019; Taz 2019).

On the other hand, Reçel blog was founded in 2014 by a group of Muslim women who aimed to create an open digital space for debating Muslim women's gendered experiences on a wide range of topics. The editors, writers, and anonymous contributors of this virtual space adopt feminist lenses rendering the everyday political and utilizing humorous, sarcastic, and fierce styles attracting a wide base of readers, and triggering heated discussions at the intersection of Islam and gender. Moreover, this deliberative online space crystallizes the potential of contemporary media practices for young Muslim

women's creative interventions and tactics of resistance, calling into question the fixity of identity categories (Goker 2019). Both Reçel blog and Havle as activist platforms point out the intensification of collective activity among young Muslim women who, reject organic links to Islamist politics conflating Muslim women's attires, sexualities, and identities to antagonistic political struggles and oppose the government's misogynist gender grammar.

The data collection consists of a critical discourse analysis of Reçel blog, Havle website, and Twitter account with a focus on three issues: (i.) Instrumentalization of headscarf, (ii.) familialist policies, and (iii.) violence against women and the Istanbul Convention. Havle members and Reçel blog editors' public speeches, interviews, and articles on Islam and feminist activism, as well as research reports recently published by Havle on underage marriages and violence against women, are also included in the analysis. Moreover, these data are supported by five semi-structured, individual interviews conducted with Havle and BKP members in the summer of 2019. In what follows, the discussion sheds light on the ways in which the interpretive schemata in young Muslim women's contentious activities, i.e., street protests, public campaigns, consciousness raising groups, Muslim feminist blogging, online networks, fieldworks, and research reports, can disrupt the nexus of gender and Islam in AKP's RWP national boundary-making and familialist policy vision and reclaim it for a transformative Muslim feminist politics.

5. Discussion

Whittier (2004) argues that a new political generation forms when the changing political context catalyzes a new worldview in the cohort coming of age. Accordingly, each generation is shaped by different socio-political contexts in which they have come of age and become politicized. This generational perspective is useful to understand how the changing contextual dynamics mark the frames, discourses, collective identity, goals, tactics, and organizational structure of the new political generation in a social movement (Meyer and Whittier 1994). However, linear generationism as the story of past and present social movements is limited in the sense that it binds us into a rigid and over-determined time with strictly defined and homogenous subject positions and overlooks ideological affinities and solidarity across generations (Hemmings 2011). Thus, the discussion here acknowledges the changing contextual dynamics across generations and the fact that they significantly shape Muslim women's understandings of dissent but also notes that it is not the generational differences per se but rather the "obedience/resistance" cleavage that explains the heterogeneity in reformist Muslim women's movement today.

A major factor that distinguishes the new cohort of Muslim feminist activism in contemporary Turkey from the previous generation of reformist Muslim women is the new cycle of protests and collective action frames. As Whittier (2004) argues, activists define their collective identities and action frames with reference to what other collective actors have done. The new cohort of Muslim feminists distinguishes their collective identity by a narrative of departure from the collective identity of early risers, stressing the autonomous character of their activist agenda and their ideological stance. They particularly reflect on their self-positioning vis-à-vis Capital Women's Platform (BKP) activists, and express their discontent with BKP's inertia to respond to AKP's conservative gender politics. Rumeysa, one of the founders of Havle and Reçel blog, states:

"We have always admired Women's Capital Platform (BKP) but last year, in a conference titled 'Can Muslim Piety and Feminism Coexist' organized by Reçel blog, we were quite disappointed by the remarks of some BKP members... We criticize them for their docile position vis-a-vis the current political regime. They usually tell us that we are young and passionate, and in time, we will come to understand them. Yet, we are critical of the government not because we are young and passionate but because we believe that this is the right thing to do. No matter who is in power, we believe that we need to be critical of a political landscape sustained by patriarchal discourses and policies." (personal interview, August 2019)

This remark points out that it is not the generational differences per se but rather the defiance/obedience cleavage that really distinguishes the new cohort of Muslim feminism from the early risers. The obedience/defiance cleavage can be best explained with a focus on activists' views on contentious politics and their approach to culturally resonant/radical frames. Ferree (2003) argues that social actors might make use of "culturally resonant" and "radical" collective action frames, depending on their goals. While "culturally resonant" frames tend to resonate with hegemonic discourses and aim for change within the limits of the political horizon offered by governing discourses, "radical" frames aim to restructure hegemonic ideas. The discussion below aims to demonstrate how Muslim feminist politics of defiance opting for "radical" collective action frames rejects the terms of governmentality that attempts to regulate women's subjectivities, sexualities, and bodies in contemporary Turkey.

6. "Not My Story!", "We Are Not Your Veiled Sisters!"

In the last decade, young Muslim women have increasingly mobilized around critical rhetoric that seeks to unmask and demystify the symbolic order reproducing the image of "ideal" Muslim women and the paternalistic guardianship of Islamist politics over Muslim women's autonomous choices. This critique, as seen below, advances a compelling point of view that calls for an alternative politics that does not conflate Muslim women's identities and sartorial choices to the secular/pious dichotomy in the antagonistic political discourses. A major frame that young Muslim women use to contest AKP's paternalistic guardianship is the discourse of "we are not your veiled sisters". This is a form of expression used to directly address AKP officials' speech acts that claim monopoly over the political will to lift the headscarf bans that have limited veiled women's equal participation in the public sphere since the 1980s.

Scholars note that AKP's strategic appropriation of Islamic veiling in discourse and policy enacts the "masculinist protection model of patriarchy" that renders women docile and submissive in return for male protection (Aslan Akman 2013; Unal 2015; Young 2003). This masculinist protection model is reproduced through various discursive strategies, including the "victimhood narrative" that renders resentments regarding past violations of rights static and utilizes them for fueling hatred. The expression of "my veiled sister" and/or our "veiled sisters" frequently used by AKP officials is a good example of how AKP appropriates the victimhood narrative for reinforcing the masculinist protection model. On different occasions, President Erdogan and other AKP officials have used the expression of "my veiled sister" and/or "our veiled sisters" to put the blame on the ultra-secularist elites and anti-AKP actors for ripping Muslim women of their right to veil and inciting hatred and even physical violence and vigilantism attacking their bodily integrity. A recent public debate where this rhetoric crystallized was the narrative of "Kabataş incident". According to this narrative, during the Gezi protests, i.e., nation-wide protests in the summer of 2013 against the authoritarian turn of the AKP rule, a violent group of men attacked a veiled woman, the daughter-in-law of one of the AKP mayors, in Kabataş district, ripping of her veil and violating her bodily integrity (Orucoglu 2015). This alleged incident has been frequently utilized by AKP actors and the pro-AKP media as the epitome of the longstanding anti-headscarf mentality in Turkey. In a series of mass political rallies in 2013 launched to respond to the Gezi protests, Erdogan reiterated this narrative of victimhood: "They dragged my covered sister on the streets near my office and attacked her and her child" (Orucoglu 2015). Although the allegations regarding the so-called Kabataş incident blur the boundaries between truth and untruth and could not be verified up to this date, the incident remains an affective part of AKP's populist victimhood narrative.

Muslim feminist frame of "we are not your veiled sisters" rejects the symbolic politics that is built around the definition of Muslim women's veiling as a political statement about Muslim distinction and Muslim vulnerability vis-à-vis ultra-secular actors. Feyza, an anonymous writer on Reçel blog, unpacks the construction of the identity of "veiled woman" in AKP discourses in an article titled "Not My Story" where she suggests that

AKPs narrative on Islamic veiling is far from understanding Muslim women's needs, demands, and desires in the current era ([Reçel blog 2015c](#)). For Feyza, the party takes credit for lifting the headscarf bans in the public sector in the post-2008 era and regards this "normalization" of headscarf as an opportunity to make Muslim women dependent on the fate and the trajectory of the party rule.

Feyza argues that this opportunistic logic hijacks the issue of headscarf to frame Muslim vulnerability as a frozen and perpetual fact of pious lives and invests headscarf with an activist disposition serving Islamist political ends:

"Headscarf bans have turned the women who adjust their attire according to religious norms into 'veiled women' . . . You may ask whether the ruling party did not lift the headscarf bans. Yet, it did. Yet, it continued to strategically make an issue of the headscarf bans in each election period to consolidate its power . . . The most evident and painful example of this [the strategic utilization of Islamic headscarf] has happened during the Gezi protests. An incident of violence that has never happened [Kabatas incident] has been fictionalized and turned into a smear campaign against the opponents of the political rule who took to the streets, especially the Muslim opposition. This lie was operationalized to serve the power of the political rule at the expense of veiled women . . . AKP wants us to always carry this essentialist identity of a veiled woman who is stuck in the past and reduced to its memories." ([Reçel blog 2015c](#))

Feyza concludes that the so-called normalization of headscarf in the last decade might seem to be emancipatory for veiled women at first glance as it granted them equal access to the public sphere, yet the governmentality of headscarf at the expense of women's autonomous agencies has not ended in this period. According to Feyza, the representation of veiled women's identity has changed from a "deviant" other in an ultra-secular public setting to the image of "ideal" veiled Muslim woman under the Islamist political rule that carries the political baggage of Muslim distinction.

The fact that there are many other articles on Reçel blog that use the frames of "not my story" and "we are not your veiled sisters" makes these frames central to young Muslim women's critique of AKP's hijacking of headscarf ([Reçel blog 2015a](#), [2015b](#)). These frames also stand at the center of Havle's Muslim feminist discourses. Rûmeysa states:

"We are not those sisters that the ruling government calls our veiled sisters [başörtülü bacılarımız]. Feminism propels one not to be anybody's sister". ([Taz 2019](#))

This can be seen as a form of "talking back" ([Bracke 2011](#)), i.e., a form of rejecting the terms of governmentality that aims to interpellate Muslim women's identity to create the image of "ideal" Muslim woman as the carrier of populist antagonisms. This "talking back" denies any organic links with AKP's narrative of Muslim victimhood and disassociates itself from the burden of sharing a common fate and destiny with the party. It builds on a "counter-discourse" that subverts the categories and vocabularies of the dominant discourse and undermines the force of normalization ([Lilja 2021](#)). Moreover, it is not limited to the contestation of Islamist politicians' paternalistic guardianship over Muslim women's identities at a particular political moment but signifies a broader form of "counter-discourse" that produces new subjectivities, narratives, and expressions of resistance that can inaugurate novel truths and norms on the Islam-gender nexus.

This form of critique is new in Muslim women's activism in Turkey. The previous generation oriented their demands towards "normalization", i.e., the lifting of headscarf bans, the increased public status of veiled women, and the accommodation of Muslim women in political decision-making processes. The "No Veiled Deputy, No Vote" campaign in 2011 emblemizes this previous critique and its demand for normalization ([Unal 2015](#)). During the 2011 election period, Muslim women organized this influential campaign where they raised veiled women's demands to be elected to the parliament, protested AKP's long-lasting reluctance to lift the headscarf bans, and asked the party to nominate

headscarf-wearing candidates. AKP's disdainful approach to the campaign labeling it as an "improper" bargain demonstrated that Muslim women's demands for the normalization of headscarf will remain politically ineffective unless they also put into question the party's paternalistic attitude and guardianship over Islamic veiling that strategically plans when, how, and where to grant veiled women their right to "normalization". What we see in the new cohort of Muslim feminist activism is the cultivation of new lenses that goes beyond the idea of normalization and disassociates headscarf from political Islamist representational politics that undergirds the dominant secular/pious dichotomies.

7. Disrupting the "Family in Crisis" Narrative

Recent studies on the discursive elements of RWP agendas highlight that RWP national imaginaries about social crisis are always ideological constructs that entail a vision to be pursued in line with pre-defined political goals aiming to reproduce and sustain power (Krzyżanowski 2020; Wodak 2015). This construction of crisis mostly operates through an alarmist tone that effectively legitimizes and normalizes the political actions geared towards controlling the present. AKP's construction of moral panic around family unity and its threat perception vilifying the "gender ideology" allegedly introducing gay marriage and third sex are among such ideological constructs invented for the party's religio-conservative political motives.

In the last decade, AKP's sacred familialism defining the role of women as devoted care providers has become increasingly preoccupied with possible threats against the biological, cultural, and symbolic reproduction of the family and the nation (Akkan 2018; Atalay 2019). It relies on feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear connected to the familialist imaginaries of populist politics and generates moral panic around fertility rates, increasing divorce rates and the perceived detrimental effects of allegedly "alien" feminist principles and LGBTQ lifestyles. This rhetoric stresses that the protection of family against these threats lies in the protection of the so-called culturally authentic moral fabric.

Recently rising Muslim feminist activism targets this familialist policy vision, its culturalist argument, and its strategic utilization of the Islam–gender nexus through various strategies. Muslim feminists demystify the culturalist origins of AKP's crisis narrative by deconstructing its argumentum ad populum, i.e., argumentation suggesting that a proposition is true because many people believe it. They demonstrate that AKP's "reality construction" and its rhetoric of cultural authenticity reinforcing religio-conservative familialist imaginaries are detached from lay people's beliefs, imaginations, and practices, and their approach to family and religion. As a result, they point out that the party's familialism does not serve the people's demands and interests, as it claims, but only contributes to AKP's populist project of hegemony.

In 2016, AKP proposed a controversial motion that paved the way for men guilty of sexual abuse of children to avoid persecution if they marry the victim (Hurriyet Daily News 2016). The reasoning behind this motion was that family unity is dismantled in cases where the sexual abuse of children is committed "without force or threat" (Arat 2021). Party officials argued that underage marriage is a common cultural practice, and thus, the legal framework must be attuned accordingly to be able to distinguish between "will" and "force":

"Couple [who marry underage] might have their own children, but the father has to go to jail, and the children are left alone. We have determined that there are currently 3000 families in such situation. The victimization of those 3000 families will be eliminated for just one time with this motion... This is not an amnesty for rape." (Hurriyet Daily News 2016)

Religious scholars have also joined the public debate with fatwas legitimizing underage marriage from the perspective of Islamic tradition. In 2018, Diyanet (Directorate of Religious Affairs) posted an online statement suggesting that whoever reached adolescence, which begins at the age of 12 for boys and 9 for girls under the Islamic law, had the right to

marry (Cumhuriyet 2018). Upon rising public uproar, Diyanet had to make a follow-up remark, stressing biological maturity, consent, and free will in marriage.

Utilizing the hashtag #TecavüzMeşrulaştırılmaz (Rape cannot be legitimized), an anonymous writer on Reçel blog, Betül Ö. opposes this controversial motion and stresses that it would only give way to the legitimization of sexual violence (Reçel blog 2016). Noting the alarming rates of sexual violence as a social endemic in Turkey, she contests AKP's argument that the existing legal framework causes the disintegration of families in case of "consensual" underage marriage. Her "counter-discourse" points out that AKP's controversial motion decriminalizes rape, manufactures girls' consent in case of sexual abuse, and puts girls' lives at risk.

Havle's recent research project on underage marriages can also be cited as a vivid example of this critique. In 2021, Havle published a research report based on extensive fieldwork on lay people's perceptions of underage marriage and the effects of religious interpretations on them (Havle 2021b). Drawing on questionnaires and in-depth interviews conducted between 2019 and 2020, the report states that the majority of informants are against the practice of early marriage and do not think that religion can provide a legitimate basis for this practice. It concludes that people articulate distrust towards religious scholars' fatwa and politicians' religious interpretations legitimizing underage marriage and rely on their own interpretations that provide leeway for embracing the legal age of 18 for marriage. In press statements, media interviews, and on social media, Havle members frequently refer to this research report to contest AKP's framing of underage marriage as an Islamically-accentuated, common cultural practice. They underline that AKP's policy initiative on legalizing underage marriage does not represent "demands from below" but rather fabricates a religio-conservative agenda:

"Contrary to general assumptions, the Justice and Development Party's electoral base does not comply with everything that the government decrees, neither about alimony law, underage marriages nor the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention . . ." (Kılınç 2020)

Arguing that there are no fixed boundaries for Islamic lifestyles or unifying Islamic culture, Havle activists point out that such fixations are not natural demarcations, but they are geared towards achieving retrograde political objectives. In doing so, they deconstruct the fixation of religio-conservative gender practices as static elements of an allegedly homogenous authentic culture and foreground attention to embodied experiences rather than abstract debates and constructed identities (Keleş 2021b). Shifting the focus from essentialist meta-narratives to lived experiences, they define the contextuality and intersectionality of lived experience and grounded knowledge as the basis of feminist dissent. Moreover, they claim a position of authority as Muslim feminists to produce subversive truths about what is right according to Islam:

"Our own representation dismantles the stance of speaking up for 'all' Muslims and the idea that there can be one stance that represents us all. We also argue that the notion of family structure that is defended by the government is not the one that would be contended or endorsed by Islam." (Kılınç 2020)

8. Demystifying AKP's Logical Fallacies

A major frame that young Muslim feminists use in their contestation of AKP's crisis-driven imaginary about family unity is to reject the logical validity of AKP's "family in crisis" narrative because of its unacceptable premises. According to Rümeyşa, AKP's strategic framing securitizing gender politics through the anti-gender threat perception implies a "false equivalence", i.e., a logical fallacy making wrong connections between different phenomena (Euronews 2021). She stresses that it is not the so-called gender ideology that leads to the dismay of the family institution, but it is violence against women and the lack of the political will to implement feminist-inspired protective legal frameworks against it that destroy the family unity.

Especially since 2019, AKP has attempted to vilify the “gender ideology” of the Istanbul Convention through various discursive mechanisms (Unal 2021b): (1) The juxtaposition of the East-West and the “culture talk” suggesting that “gender ideology is not in our culture”, (2) categorical resentment and hatred towards political opponents-feminists, LGBT subjects, and (3) positive self-representation in gender policy-making celebrating “culturally authentic” values, virtues and success while minimizing, blurring, or rejecting failures. The result is the reinforcement of the anti-gender framing and the depoliticization of violence against women that rejects gender-based understandings of violence and chooses to normalize it as a “tolerable” problem in modern societies across the East and the West.

Both Reçel blog writers and Havle activists underline that violence against women is deeply political and urge the government to restore and implement the Istanbul Convention to effectively deal with the structural gendered underpinnings of femicides (Euronews 2021; Reçel blog 2021a). They oppose the culturalist framings that naturalize the protection of family as an essential core in the struggle against violence against women and reject the connections that the AKP constructs between security issues and the so-called gender ideology as well as between the Istanbul Convention and the alleged dismay of the family unity.

Stress on the struggle against gendered violence and the discourse of “if there is violence, there is no family” can also be found in GONGO’s speech acts and activism (Kadem 2019), but what distinguishes young Muslim feminists’ collective action frames is the audacity to go beyond the problematization of violence against women in the familial sphere and to engage in the critique of the romanticized notion of family as a “safe haven”. Problematization of conservative discourses on motherhood, marriage, child-rearing, and gendered division of labor in the private sphere are among the key debates that recent Reçel blog posts cover through social and political analysis, self-narration, autobiographical writing, and reviews of recent books on the topic (Reçel blog 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). These feminist discussions regard AKP’s religio-conservative sacred familialism as a nodal point in the party’s recent political attempts that reshuffle the gender regime through various power acts such as the recent initiative for early marriages, anti-alimony initiative, and the anti-gender discourse on violence against women.

In a similar vein, Havle activists contest AKP’s sacred familialism through “radical” action frames. The 2019 Feminist Night Walk organized on the 8th of March International Women’s Day was a significant political moment where Havle activists carried a feminist banner saying “Are You God? Damn with Your Family” to oppose AKP’s recent proliferation of familialist discourse and policy. In the aftermath of the 2019 Feminist Night Walk, they attracted criticism, especially from traditionalists in the Islamic circles, and were targeted in the aggressive public discourse and on social media. One can argue that their “controversial” banner saying “Are You God? Damn with Your Family” directly targets the party’s strategic utilization of Islam in familialist policies and epitomizes the gist of young Muslim feminists’ critique of AKP’s familialist governmentality.

A Foucauldian framework can be useful here to stress the mutually reliant and co-constitutive aspects of resistance and power. The Foucauldian theory of resistance draws attention to the idea that dissent comes into being through the contestation of the forms of government to which subjects are exposed (Foucault 2000; Lilja and Vinthagen 2014). Young Muslim women under question here enact dissent and activism to expose the cracks of the disciplining power under the AKP rule and aim to destabilize the hegemonic narratives of misogynist governmentality by demanding new epistemological conditions. They reappropriate the gender-Islam nexus for a feminist-inspired politics by claiming authority to provide alternative imaginaries on family, gender, culture, and religion. This can be seen as what Lilja (2021) calls “constructive resistance”, i.e., a form of resistance that does not only oppose what is considered undesirable or wrong but also cultivates alternative knowledge, subjectivities, and a novel form of politics.

9. Muslim Feminist Activism beyond the Search for “Real” Islam

One of the major tools that young Muslim women utilize to deconstruct AKP’s strategic appropriation of the nexus of Islam and gender is Muslim feminist hermeneutics, i.e., a methodological device to reread the Quran and the Islamic tradition through feminist lenses and subvert the male authority embedded in the traditional Muslim hermeneutic tradition (Hidayatullah 2009). Discussions on Muslim feminist hermeneutic methodologies are common in Reçel blog posts that deal with the coexistence of Islam and feminism, women’s religious leadership, and their autonomous choices on Islamic veiling (Reçel blog 2017, 2019a, 2019b). Drawing on a liberal modernist Islamic discourse, these blog posts underline that Islam accords equal rights to men and women. Some of these posts uncover and discuss “herstory” of Islam with references to exemplary female figures in Islamic history who are known for their boldness and wisdom (Reçel blog 2021b). This critical position identifies a historical gender consciousness and social justice embedded in the tradition of Islam and claims power over knowledge production and meaning-making. As a result, it generates a significant contentious feminist ground and inaugurates a counter-discourse to target wider and more macro level discursive and policy strategies of AKP’s gender politics.

In a blog post titled “Alimony Debates and Reconsidering Fiqh”, Burcu K., an anonymous writer, critically engages with the government’s recent discourses in favor of annulling women’s right to alimony in case of divorce. Utilizing the Muslim feminist interpretive method, she approaches “Islam as discourse” to deconstruct patriarchal interpretations of the Qur’an and ahistorical Islamic jurisprudence that draw on men’s interpretative authorities and ignore women’s lived experiences (Asad 1996):

“What we call Islam is an entity that we regard as if it is composed of static, frozen, normative rules and rigid laws of jurisprudence . . . In this understanding, fiqh becomes an authority that we could never question and any attempt to question it is dismissed as the denial of God . . . Thus, fiqh is, first and foremost, an interpretation that is historically and contextually constructed . . . What we need is to read Quranic verses in relation to time and place and interpret them contextually. If a married woman has never worked outside of home and has spent years on the reproduction of the household, then under conditions of poverty following divorce, she should have access to unlimited alimony. This is what is “just” according to Islam. This is what real Islam is about.” (Reçel blog 2019a)

Feminist studies note that in the current era, the distinction between patriarchal interpretations of Islam and “real Islam” understood as an essentially gender-equal religion that empowers women is quite widespread among young, well-educated, professional Muslim women both in Muslim majority and Muslim minority contexts (van Es 2016; Liebmman and Galal 2020). However, the rhetoric of “real Islam” in the remark above is different than the tactic of distinguishing an essentially good religion from patriarchal culture. It is not used with the aim to “set right the facts about Islam” but rather aims to point out the discursivity and historicity of Islam, the linkage between knowledge appropriation and transformations of religious authority, and the urgent need to prioritize feminist production and dissemination of religious knowledge against misogynist interpreters of Islam.

The search for gender-equal Islam in Turkey is not specific to the new generation of Muslim women born in the late 1980s and 1990s. Muslim women public intellectuals and scholars who became increasingly visible in the public sphere in the post-1980 period have also engaged in Muslim feminist hermeneutics and searched for alternative feminist/pro-feminist readings of Islam. Hidayet Sefkatli Tuksal, an influential Muslim public intellectual and scholar self-identifying as feminist, earned her doctoral degree in 1998 with a dissertation titled “Kadın Karşıtı Söylemin İslam Geleneğindeki İzdeşümü” (The Trajectory of the Misogynist Discourse in the Islamic Tradition) and has taken a leading role in the foundation and activism of BKP. Many other Muslim women public intellectuals from the previous generation, such as Cihan Aktaş, Nazife Şişman, and Yıldız Ramazanoğlu, have

used the method of Muslim feminist hermeneutics in their scholarly works and newspaper columns and have intervened in patriarchal readings of Islam by arguing for an “essentially good” Islam that empowers women. However, young Muslim feminists argue that some of these interventions do not necessarily originate from a feminist analysis drawing attention to systemic gender inequalities and have been mostly limited to reinterpreting the Quran to expose its “real message” (Keleş 2021a).

Within this frame, what is distinguishing about the new wave of Muslim feminist activism is that it celebrates Muslim feminist hermeneutics but does not believe that feminist hermeneutic strategies alone can provide an effective response to the discursive conditions under which women’s identities, bodies, and sexualities are governed in the current political climate. Shifting the attention to the feminist analysis of interlocking power structures of Islam, gender, and politics, Zehra underlines that Muslim feminist interventions into male-dominated fiqh cannot eliminate the broader patriarchal power dynamics embedded in family, culture, and politics (Keleş 2021b). She argues for a transformative Muslim feminist politics that goes beyond Muslim feminist hermeneutics and contests the terms of interpellation that sustain the dominant script in contemporary gender politics:

“If what really matters is not to juxtapose norms, discourses and “real Islam” but rather to reclaim our lives, should not we talk less about fiqh and more about womanhood experiences? ... Focusing primarily not on religious interpretations but on constituting power dynamics that reproduce them can lead to transformative Muslim politics ... The fact that Havle avoids defining a “real” Islam and instead chooses to point out the constitutive aspects of patriarchy is a good example of this form of politics.” (Keleş 2021b)

10. Conclusions

In contemporary Turkey, feminist movements constitute a very powerful force of resistance against the gender backlash of right-wing populist politics. This article has examined young Muslim feminists’ counter-discursive actions that intervene in the solidification of the hegemonic modes of AKP’s religio-conservative gender regime and its backlash politics. These counter-discourses demystify AKP’s attempts to normalize “sacred familialism” and propose an alternative imaginary that contests “ideal” gender norms reproduced in conjunction with the political attempts that frame the Islam–gender nexus as a fault line to mark national, cultural, and civilizational boundaries.

In the last decade, new political demands, concerns, and motivations have arisen among young Muslim women regarding issues, such as women’s attire and headscarf, family discourse and policy, and violence against women. Their motivations to act are inspired by an interpretive repertoire that refuses to adopt an identity imposed by the political goals of Islamist politics and configures novel deliberative styles, targets, organizational forms, and strategies. This article has demonstrated that the new generation of Muslim feminist activism and its feminist repertoires of actions (street protests, activism on online platforms, and research projects) draw on collective action frames that expose the cracks of AKP’s simultaneous politicization of gender and Islam and reclaims this Islam–gender nexus for progressive politics. This Muslim feminist political project is based on activist interventions directed towards multiple goals: (1) Disrupting the normalization of Islamist politicians’ paternalistic guardianship over Muslim women’s identities, (2) confronting AKP’s framing of the family as the core of the so-called culturally authentic Islamic values and opposing its vilification of “the gender ideology” as a threat to family, and (3) claiming the authority to intervene into the misogynist interpretations of the Islamic tradition and stressing the urgent need to prioritize feminist production and dissemination of religious knowledge.

In a nutshell, young Muslim women’s “radical” collective action frames studied here are deeply embedded in the tactical choice to reject the limits of the political horizon offered to them by governing discourses in the current era. Subverting AKP’s RWP appropriation of the Islam–gender nexus, they generate a new Muslim feminist political project that shifts the focus from pre-defined, abstract identity categories to women’s divergent and

embodied positions and vernacularizes feminist knowledge by stressing the contextuality and intersectionality of lived experiences.

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