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Combatting violence against women in Turkey: structural obstacles

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the ‘social conflict’ theory to analyse the challenges to combatting violence against women in Turkey. It argues that these obstacles that are grounded in unequal social power relations are structured in the political landscape where decisions over who gets what are made. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP)’s ‘male biased’ political decisions such as withdrawing Turkey from the Council of Europe’s Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) reflect the current conditions of the balance of societal interests in the political order. Turkish women’s struggle for equality requires a shift in existing conditions of power in favour of pro-gender equality forces that would enable the representation of their preferences and interests in the political landscape, which is always tilted towards certain groups and their interests.

KEYWORDS
Violence against women; social conflict; gender relations; Turkish women’s movement; Istanbul Convention; Turkey

Introduction

Violence against women is a violation of human rights, rooted in historically unequal power relations between men and women and the systemic discrimination against women that pervades both the public and private spheres. The broad context from which it emerges includes disparities of power in the form of patriarchy, sociocultural norms and practices that perpetuate gender-based discrimination and economic inequalities. Its scope and prevalence reflect the degree and persistence of gender-based discrimination that women face, which is often compounded by other systems of domination. (United Nations, 2006)

Violence against women, as declared by the United Nations, is a severe and pervasive human rights violation that is rooted in historically contingent, material and non-material relations and structures of power. In Turkey, a nationwide survey conducted in 2014 reveals that four in ten women in Turkey experience physical and/or sexual violence at the hands of their spouses or intimate partners (Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies, 2014). The survey also finds that only one in ten women exposed to violence reports it to receive institutional help (Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies, 2014). Statistics collated by civil society organisations from media coverage of women’s murders provide an alarming picture of the scale of the problem over years. According to the tally kept by the advocacy group We Will Stop Femicides Platform,
at least 3,485 women were killed by men during the period between 2008 and 2020 (We Will Stop Femicide Platform, 2021).

Amidst lockdowns, restricted mobility, growing financial concerns and the burden of increased unpaid domestic work, women in Turkey (as in other parts of the world) have found themselves in a more vulnerable position during the current COVID-19 pandemic (UN Women Turkey, 2020). According to Turkish Federation of Women’s Association, cases of physical violence increased by 80% in March 2020 compared to the same period in the previous year (Güllü, 2020), although the Ministry of Interior Affairs announced a 7% decline in reported cases during the first two months of the lockdowns (Erdoğan, 2020). After almost every news coverage of brutally killed woman, women’s groups have decried ‘we don’t want to die’ on the streets and social media. In addition, they have repeatedly called on the government to effectively implement the relevant anti-gender-based violence laws including the Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women and Domestic Violence), which requires the state parties to prevent, protect and prosecute against all forms of gender-based violence. This landmark international treaty, signed with no reservation by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in the country’s industrial capital on 11 May 2011, has increasingly come under fire from religious communities over the past two years. Among its defenders was the pro-government Women and Democracy Association (KADEM), whose board includes Turkey’s President Tayyip Erdoğan’s youngest daughter. More importantly, an opinion poll conducted in July 2020 found that 64% of the Turkish people disapproved of the idea of withdrawing from the treaty (Euronews, 2020). The finding was in stark contrast to AKP deputy chair’s claim at the time that the public had an ‘expectation’ from the government to take the country out of this legal framework (Duvar, 2020).

Yet, in a midnight decree issued on 19 March 2021 Erdoğan announced the country’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. Amidst reports of declining popularity during an intensifying economic downturn, the AKP leader heeded the demands of the religious congregations known for their bloc votes. Some of these communities have reinforced their presence in different parts of the state bureaucracy and operated as influential actors in education, health care and other areas of business through lucrative procurement contracts awarded by government departments (Deutsche Welle, 2019; Saymaz, 2020).

In an attempt to further consolidate his support base within the conservative circles, Erdoğan also ousted the head of the Central Bank in a separate decree issued the same night. The dismissal of the Central Bank chief came following his decision to raise the interest rate, which was criticised in the pro-government daily Yeni Safak as an ‘operation’ that favoured foreign ‘hot money owners’ (Hangül, 2021). The critics of high interest rates quoted by the newspaper included the heads of two key conservative business chambers, MUSIAD (Independent Industrialists’ and Businessmen’s Association) and ASKON (Anatolian Lions Businessmen Association). The two organisations have been amongst the ardent supporters of the idea of pulling Turkey out of the Istanbul Convention on the grounds that it favours the LGBT community rather than the unity of the family. By replacing the Central Bank’s internationally praised, market-friendly governor (The Economist, for example, referred to him as ‘the brave banker of Ankara’, see The Economist, 2021) with a pro-low interest rate figure, Erdoğan responded to the demands of these state-
dependent capital groups for access to cheap loans. These two separate, but in fact inter-related, decrees are thus revealing in terms of what issues and interests are allowed and denied representation (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007) in the current political environment in Turkey.

Taking this relationship between social forces, gender relations and political outcomes as its starting point, this paper adopts a social conflict approach to critically examine the challenges to the elimination in Turkey of violence against women through institutional and policy measures. This approach, developed by Murdoch School of Political Economy researchers Hewison et al. (1993, p. 4) on the basis of the theorisation of the state as an ‘expression of power’, defines the state as an ‘amalgam of social, political, ideological, and economic elements organised in a particular manner’. This means that the state or its apparatus (which is constituted by the bureaucratic, institutional arms of the state through which power and resources are extracted and distributed) is never neutral (Hewison et al., 1993, p. 5). It is rather biased towards ‘strategic selectivity’, meaning its institutions, capacities and resources are more accessible to certain actors, including gender-based groups, (pursuing their particular agendas and strategies) than to others (Hameiri & Jones, 2020, citing Jessop, 2008).

Drawing upon this conceptual framework, the paper argues that the obstacles to the elimination of violence against women through institutional measures should be understood in connection with the underlying patterns of social struggles that are located in the political landscape, where authoritative decisions over who gets what and who does what are made. The AKP’s political decisions (such as the above-mentioned presidential decrees, which intersect class and gender biases) capture the current conditions of the balance of power within the ruling coalition of interests that underpins the existing political order. Its neo-liberal economic policies and patronage politics reinforce the hierarchical social relations of gender that protect the economic and political interests of some male elites. Following on from this point, the paper further suggests that Turkish women’s struggle for equality does not demand an autonomous state organisation (which is in effect not possible). Rather, it requires a shift in existing conditions of power and influence in favour of pro-gender equality forces that allows for the representation of their preferences in the state apparatus, which, as noted above, always tends to be biased towards certain societal interests.

The paper has three major parts. The first section provides a brief conceptual discussion of the relationship between social forces, gender constructions and the state. It then uses this conceptual framework to analyse the contestations between rival social forces in Turkey. The next section contextualises these struggles with respect to the Istanbul Convention. The concluding remarks are provided in the final section.

The conceptual perspective: social forces, gender constructions and the state

The state, according to social conflict theorists, cannot be viewed as neutral. Rather, the state is an ‘expression of power’, meaning it exists in the context of specific social relationships that shape the way in which its governing apparatus (such as the coercive, judicial and bureaucratic parts of the state) is organised and operates (Hewison et al., 1993). From this perspective, political outcomes such as policy interventions, which ‘directly and
indirectly influence the distribution of wealth, power and the structure of social relationships’ (Robison et al., 1993, p. 17), emerge from contestations among social forces with different interests, agendas and capabilities. Because of its central role in the distribution of power and resources, the state is constantly subject to struggles between coalitions of interests that seek to influence government decisions and policies in ways that will advance their preferred outcomes (Hameiri & Jones, 2017; Hewison et al., 1993; Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007; Jones, 2010). These struggles between competing coalitions of interests, involving various social forces (such as classes, class fractions, ethnic, religious and gendered groupings) and some parts of the state apparatus, can sometimes be violent (Hameiri & Jones, 2020; Jones, 2010). These contestations between rival forces delineate the structures of power that give rise to particular socio-political orders (Rodan et al., 2001).

The resultant social orders, which organise the practices of their participants, are stabilised and sustained through institutions and ideologies. While institutions provide the rules of access to and distribution of power, resources, rights and entitlements, ideologies naturalise existing power structures and relationships (Hameiri & Jones, 2017; Jones, 2010). They serve to define and justify the boundaries of who participates in (and who is excluded from) the making of decisions over who does what, who gets what, when and how (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007). After all, all political systems, as Schattschneider (1960) pointed out six decades ago, are structured around ‘bias’ and ‘scope of conflict’. This is to say that the exploitation of conflict through the representation of some choices (and marginalisation of others) is central to all forms of political organisation, and the outcome of any issue or controversy is determined by the ability and strategies of dominant and disadvantaged groups to restrict or expand the extension of their involvement in the process. While dominant or winning groups have an incentive to ‘privatise’ the conflict or narrow its scope (by appealing to ideas like individualism, free enterprise, privacy and localism), contestants seek ways to ‘socialise’ the conflict by forming coalitions and networks around commonly shared interests and ideas. Class is of course a key factor in shaping the pressure system, which carries an inherent pro-business, upper-class bias (Schattschneider, 1960).

This pattern of practices applies to the social organisation of gender relations, which constitutes an important dimension of upper classes’ efforts to maintain the existing balance of forces in the existing socio-political order. The ordering of gender relations is rooted in the intersecting structures of the division of labour, authority and emotional relationships between men and women, and definitions of femininity and masculinity (Maharaj, 1995, citing Connell, 1987). The state plays a key role in the construction of these gendered social processes and experiences. It determines individuals’ position in the gender order such as through designating their sex on birth certificates and preventing or specifying the rules for amending that determination (Connell, 2009). The state also exercises power and authority to give recognition to some groups, organisations and individuals, while denying the same to others (Connell, 2009). In addition, the state plays a key role in shaping gendered labour relations both in the market and the household that is crucial to capitalist development, as discussed below (Elias, 2020; Elias & Rai, 2019). For all these reasons, the state, where interests are structured, remains the main focus of action for many social actors seeking to navigate the gender order in the direction they prefer (Connell, 2009).
State policies and practices can thus be understood as the product of struggles that intersect class and gender inequalities. Developmental agendas such as export-oriented industrialisation policies are informed by gendered biases and assumptions (Elias, 2020). Women’s part-time employment, reliance on the reserve army of low-paid or barely-paid female labour and cuts in welfare benefits are particular cases in point (Maharaj, 1995, citing Connell, 1987; Elias, 2020). Moreover, women are often the hardest hit by economic recession, increasing unemployment, natural disasters or other crisis situations (Elias, 2020; Montreal Principles on Women’s Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 2004). For instance, women are usually the first to lose jobs in times of economic recession, become vulnerable to trafficking and violence, and bear the burden of economic austerity measures (such as cuts in childcare support) imposed by the state (Maharaj, 1995, citing Connell, 1987; Elias, 2020; Montreal Principles on Women’s Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 2004). These conditions of economic and political insecurity trigger ‘private and public backlash against women’s rights that may be expressed through violence and articulated in the form of defending cultures and traditions’ (Montreal Principles on Women’s Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 2004).

Moreover, concepts such as economic activity and development have an inherent ‘male bias’ (Elias, 2020, citing Elson, 1990). One of the concrete manifestations of this male bias is the continuous non-recognition of the socially reproductive work within the household in relation to economic activities in the ‘productive’ sector (Elias, 2020; Elias & Rai, 2019). Women’s unpaid reproductive labour denotes all kinds of activities involved in the production of life, including childbearing, housework and care-work women perform to sustain households and intimate relationships (such as cleaning, cooking, washing, gardening, helping elderly relatives with meeting their day-to-day needs) (Elias & Rai, 2019). The exclusion of domestic work from economic activity under capitalism has created labour hierarchies that serve to naturalise exploitative social relations and allow wage-workers to exercise power over the unwaged (Federici, 2019). According to a 2019 study by Oxfam, globally women would have earned almost US$ 11 trillion if they were paid minimum wage for the work do around the house and caring for relatives (Wezerek and Ghodsee, 2020). The non-recognition of socially reproductive labour increases women’s dependency on a male breadwinner, also increasing their vulnerability to multiple forms of violence (such as physical attacks, inadequate access to food and healthcare) and ‘depletion’ (Elias & Rai, 2019).

Gender orders, which reflect the organisation of social conflicts over the role of men and women in society, are dynamic (Elias, 2020). As noted earlier, any change in the status of conflict depends on the ability of challenging groups’ (such as women’s rights organisations) to enlarge its ‘scope’ by forming coalitions and networks with other social actors including some fragments of the state bureaucracy or factions within the ruling elites. These struggles may result in new policies, institutional rules or other formal gains that require changes in the social relations and structures of power. Yet, the implementation of these interventions depends on the capacities and strategies of other forces whose interests are differently affected by these newly introduced frameworks (Hameiri & Jones, 2020; Jayasuriya & Rosser, 2006). While some groups may embrace reforms, others may seek ways to undermine their implementation or initiate a new political process and create pressure to modify or annul them in accordance with their relative capabilities to deploy resources and generate public support. I will
elaborate on this point in the section further below addressing the social power dynamics of the contestations over the Istanbul Convention. This legally binding instrument, which requires the signatory states to take all necessary measures to eliminate violence against women, recognises the fact that this kind of violence is a ‘manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men, which have led to domination over, and discrimination against, women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women’ (Council of Europe, 2011). Because the state, its institutions, policies and capacities for action, as social conflict theorists rightly point out, are never neutral, I now would like to discuss the gender aspects of the ways in which unequal social relationships have been structured in the Turkish political context.

**Contextualising the struggle for equality in Turkey**

Contrary to the dominant narratives that Turkish women were granted their political and social rights by the modernising republican elites without any popular demand, in reality, they struggled for their rights. Turkish women actively participated in the war of liberation fought in 1919–1922. They enthusiastically sought, after the war, to found a women’s party even before Mustafa Kemal’s creation of the People’s Republican Party (CHP). Yet, they were denied political representation. This is not to discount the improvements in the status of women enabled through a series of reforms introduced by the republican elites. It is rather to point out that the reform initiatives were not motivated by a goal of redefining patriarchal gender roles and relationships in society.

Garnering women’s ideological support for the new regime (Toprak, 1981) was a key aspect of what Tekeli (1986) calls ‘state feminism’ to describe the republican elites’ approach to the ‘woman issue’. Introducing laws and policies to eliminate barriers to women’s entry into the workplace and public sphere, encouraging them to abandon their veil, attend universities and contribute to the socio-economic development of the nation constituted the key pillars of state feminism, which had no concern with their private lives as women (White, 2003). Hence, the reforms premised on a nationalist discourse resulted in women’s public emancipation with ‘substantial caveats’ (Eslen-Ziya & Korkut, 2010) rather than their liberation. This is because ‘Turkish women were treated as symbols and tools of modernization and Westernization, rather than equal partners of men’ (Arat, 1994, p. 72).6

It was only during the period following the 1980 coup that Turkish women’s movement experienced a transformation towards a more autonomous feminist movement. The new movement was marked by the proliferation of women’s associations and the transformation of their focus and engagement from charity to service delivery, policy advocacy and international networking (Kardam & Ertürk, 1999; Koyuncu & Özman, 2019). This growing activism, premised on the ‘private is the political’ slogan, began with small consciousness-raising activities on gender issues such as sexual freedom, sexual harassment, domestic violence and discrimination at the workplace (Coşar & Onbaşı, 2008; Tekeli, 2006). In addition to these public campaigns, the Turkish women’s rights organisations used international platforms and conventions (such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Types of Discrimination Against Women – CEDAW) to further expand the ‘scope of the conflict’ over gender relations. In response to the increasing pressure, the governing authorities repealed the discriminatory clauses in the civil and criminal laws (such as the
provision of a reduced sentence to rapists if the victim was a sex-worker) and established the Directorate-General on the Status and Problems of Women (KSGM) in 1990 (Coşar & Onbaşi, 2008; Kardam & Ertürk, 1999; Koyuncu & Özman, 2019). The KPGM provided an important avenue for women’s groups to collaborate with each other, interact with the state and participate in policy-making processes and its gender-mainstreaming projects received funding from a number of donor agencies (Kardam & Ertürk, 1999).

This activism influenced by the second wave of feminism in Western countries developed against the background of a neo-liberal economic transformation. During the previous import substitution era (1950-1980), the male breadwinner family structure was solidified as women (who had left their unpaid agricultural work in the countryside as a result of mechanisation in agriculture) had difficulty in integrating into the urban labour force (İlkkaracan, 2012). Many of these migrant women, who lacked the opportunities to improve their skills and education levels, became dependent housewives or employed in the ‘lowest paid, lowest prestige jobs’, mainly as irregular domestic servants for the middle class (Erman, 1998). Turkey’s export-based development strategy, adopted in the early-1980s, did not lead to a feminisation of manufacturing labour (İlkkaracan, 2012; Toksöz, 2016). The country’s export sector witnessed low private investment and low growth rates, and was thus unable to create enough jobs to absorb the surplus of the urban female labour (Dedeoğlu, 2012; İlkkaracan, 2012; Toksöz, 2016). In addition to these factors, the gendered division of labour at home and beyond, further constrained women’s mobility in the labour market and led them to seek employment in the informal sector. The increasing domestic demand in the non-tradable service sector led to a distinct feminisation and overall employment growth (İlkkaracan, 2012). Women who were working informally in this sector were usually better educated than women working in the export sector (İlkkaracan, 2012). Informal jobs in small-scale textile and food-processing companies were mainly filled by young and single women (İlkkaracan, 2012; Toksöz, 2016). What thus could be observed was the feminisation of the unemployed and the informal sector.

An important point to note in this context of the gendered effects of Turkey’s neo-liberal transformation is that the so-called ‘Anatolian tigers’ or ‘Green Capital’ – terms used to refer to the emerging conservative provincial business class in the 1990s – were one of the major supporters of the neo-liberal restructuring of the economy. Consisting of small and medium sized enterprises owned by conservative businessepeople or religious congregations, these companies took advantage of cheap labour and other opportunities of producing for export markets (Pamuk, 2008; Yavuz, 2003). These Islamic capitalists, operating in the low technology and labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, clothing, food processing, furniture and chemicals, formed their own business association, MUSIAD, in 1990 (Pamuk, 2008) with the objective of promoting the interests of the ‘provincial bourgeoisie’ against the ‘Istanbul bourgeoisie of TUSIAD’ favoured by the political elites (Yavuz, 2003). Most of its members supported Necmettin Erbakan’s Islamist Welfare Party (RP) in the political arena.

The unexpected success in the 1994 local elections of RP, (which included winning the mayoral races in metropolitan Istanbul and Ankara), was in large part thanks to the effective activism of its local party networks in the squatter districts in urban centres. By recruiting a large number of female volunteers who carried out door-to-door visits in their neighbourhoods, women played a crucial role in the party’s clientelist strategy.
of attracting the votes of conservative, poor women in cities. Sibel Eraslan, then head of the Istanbul branch of the ‘ladies commission’ of the WP (described in the media as ‘The Refah Party [Welfare Party] woman who carried Tayyip [Erdoğan] to the Mayoralty’ (Arat, 2005, p. 66)), claimed in an interview that they ‘reached out to 200,000 women per month’ (Özcan, 2019, p. 132). Although women tirelessly worked to mobilise votes for the party, they were not given positions in the central party structure or nominated for parliament in the 1995 general elections. When Eraslan and members of her team sought public office, they were accused of behaving like ‘feminists’ and replaced immediately by another group of women (Arat, 2005).

The constitutional court’s closure of the RP in 1998 and its successor Virtue Party (FP) in 2001 led to a power struggle within the Turkish Islamist political movement. The AKP, which was born out of this rift, came to power in November 2002. The party’s electoral victory, according to Önis (2006), arose from its successful formation of a ‘cross-class’ coalition which brought together the urban poor and beneficiaries of neo-liberal globalisation. The latter involved the flourishing ‘devout bourgeoisie’ that was seeking greater wealth and benefits through economic integration with the EU (Gumuscu & Sert, 2009). Another constituent element of this coalition was the ‘liberal intellectuals’ who provided the AKP with the much-needed ideational and moral support to allay the sceptics’ fears of the Islamisation of the state and society. The support of these influential scholars and journalists, most of whom came from a leftist background, was crucial for the construction of the image of the AKP as a liberal, reformist actor committed to democratising Turkey (Ersoy & Üstüner, 2016; Karaveli, 2008).

This alliance between the AKP and liberals was enabled by the European Union (EU) accession process, which was utilised by the party officials as a mechanism for generating international support to secure their presence in the country’s contested political landscape. The reforms adopted in 2003–5 introduced significant changes to the composition and operation of some key state institutions (such as the National Security Council, the Higher Education Board, and the Radio and Television Higher Council, among others), where the military was represented in a position of authority. While these reforms did not meet overt resistance from the military, the AKP faced a series of challenges during the second half of its first term, when EU accession talks came to a stalemate shortly after being launched. With a view to neutralising the party’s opponents and securing power, the AKP formed an alliance with the Gülen community, which had already established a strong presence in state institutions and in intellectual and business life; Erdoğan’s own religious congregation (İskenderpaşa) was ‘too small’ to fill the country’s large bureaucracy (Cornell, 2018). While Kemalist officers, bureaucrats, academics, and journalists were purged through controversial court cases between 2008 and 2010 (and replaced by Gülenists), the 2010 referendum brought significant changes to the structure, function, and selection process of the higher judiciary bodies, such as the constitutional court, supreme court, and the supreme board of the judges and prosecutors (Balancar, 2019; Cornell, 2015). Intensifying rivalries between the AKP and the Gülenists over control of the state apparatus led to a fierce power struggle between the two culminating in a failed coup attempt in July 2016. With the April 2017 referendum, Turkey’s regime had been transformed into an ‘executive presidency a la Turca’, with Erdoğan exercising near unlimited powers.

With reportedly over five million members, the women’s branches of the party deserve a special mention in understanding Erdoğan’s successful mobilisation of electoral
support. The Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK) shows that women constitute half of the country's population of 83 million, but their employment rate stands at 29.4% (Turkish Statistics Institute, 2020), the lowest among the OECD countries. By recruiting volunteers into its networks to carry out a variety of activities for women and by women (such as home visits, information seminars, and the provision of social services and goods), the women’s branches effectively use the labour surplus of millions of urban homemakers (Ilkkaracan, 2012). According to a poll, 51% of homemakers voted for the AKP in the 2018 general elections (KONDA, 2018). Another poll suggests that women constituted 55% of the AKP’s electorate (Türkiye, 2015). In addition to the AKP’s abolition of the headscarf ban in universities and public offices, which gives conservative women a sense of empowerment, the women’s branches’ organisation of activities and recruitment of new women provides spaces for participation, training, and achievement. The government’s distribution of cash transfers for the care of disabled and elderly persons in low-income households (since 2007) constitutes another element that drives women to continuously support Erdoğan (Ilkkaracan, 2019). Yet, most of the recipients of these payments (which correspond to the minimum wage) have remained outside the social security system (Toksöz, 2016).

Instead of creating decent employment opportunities for women (i.e. full-time jobs with full social security coverage), the AKP’s neoliberaled labour policies (e.g. introduction of ‘flexible’ work options and micro-credits programmes) resulted in a number of women working part-time or informal jobs (Çavdar & Yaşar, 2019; Toksöz, 2016). These policies confine women to serving as cheap labour in the market, while at the same time strengthening the gender-based division of labour in a society where women are expected to look after the family (Toksöz, 2016). The AKP’s emphasis on the family has been a constituent element of this seemingly contradictory alliance between neoliberalism and Islamic conservativism (that differ in their approach to women’s rights) (Acar & Altunok, 2013; Coşar & Yeşenoglu, 2011; Çavdar & Yaşar, 2019). The government’s ‘strengthening the family’ discourse is closely related to the Turkish state’s reliance on the family to provide welfare services and absorb social risks – i.e. women assume the burden of unpaid reproductive tasks (such childcare and aged care) and act as ‘invisible’ providers of social security (Bozçağa, 2013; Dedeoğlu, 2012; Yılmaz, 2015). The low female labour participation reinforces this dynamic, which make many women dependent citizens, with growing vulnerability to poverty and social exclusion (Bozçağa, 2013; Dedeoğlu, 2012).

The government’s labour flexibilization policies (which satisfy the interests of business) and pronatalist stance (driven by religious and ethnic-nationalist motives and goals) have worsened the situation for Turkish women, in particular of working-class women: i.e. women are forced to remain in the reproductive realm, while the paid labour conditions for women have become more precarious (such as lower wages, a dramatically higher rate of working in the informal sector, higher risk of unemployment) (Arslan, 2021). As Arslan (2021) provides in her ethnographic analysis of the everyday experiences of female garment workers in Western Anatolian city of Izmir, the non-recognition of domestic work as actual work results in what Elias and Rai (2019) describe ‘depletion’: multiples harms experienced by women and communities such as physical exhaustion and feelings of deep regret and sorrow for not being able to take care of their children and missing their childhoods.
Last but not least, the AKP’s women’s branches provide candidates for the national parliament and local councils. However, these nominations are reserved for a select group of elite women who wait to be invited by a male politician or the president of the local women’s unit (Dreschselova, 2019). The majority of women in these networks are encouraged to work for ‘the sake of God’ without expectation of any material recognition (Çavdar & Yaşar, 2019).

**Contextualising the conflict over the Istanbul Convention**

The process leading to the AKP government’s support for drafting what would become the Istanbul Convention began with a femicide case. The case was brought to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) by Nahide Opuz from the south-eastern Anatolian city of Diyarbakir. Ms Opuz was beaten and threatened by her husband throughout their marriage and after their divorce, even though she filed numerous complaints with the police and the prosecutor’s office about his violent actions and requested state protection. He was prosecuted for stabbing Ms Opuz in 2001 but was released with fines shortly after. He shot her mother in 2002 when they were preparing to relocate to the western Anatolian city of Izmir. The perpetrator claimed that he committed the murder to protect his family’s ‘honour’, and was given a reduced jail term for his ‘good conduct’ during the hearings. On 9 June 2009, the ECHR convicted Turkey for failing to act with ‘due diligence’ to protect the applicant’s mother’s right to life and protect women from domestic violence. The landmark ruling documents a series of problems with the enforcement of existing laws in Turkey, such as police treatment of domestic violence as a private or family issue, and prosecuting authorities’ tendency to terminate proceedings in the event of a withdrawal of complaints by victims. The ECHR also notes that domestic violence is a matter of public interest that requires effective state action. The Court ruled that ‘the overall unresponsiveness of the judicial system and impunity enjoyed by the aggressors … indicated that there was insufficient commitment to take appropriate action to address domestic violence’ and ordered the Turkish government to pay €36,500 to the plaintiff. The ruling also noted that the domestic violence suffered by the applicant and her mother amounted to a ‘form of discrimination against women’ (European Court of Human Rights, Case of Opuz v. Turkey, 2009).

The judgment found different echoes in Turkey. While women’s groups voiced their expectations for a change in the way the state institutions address domestic violence (Seibert, 2009), Erdoğan claimed that it was ‘wrong to generalise an isolated incident to the whole of Turkey’ (Bianet, 2009a). Some female parliamentarians from the ruling party also joined him. Selma Aliye Kavaf, then state minister for women and family, and Güldal Akşit, then president of the parliamentary commission for equal opportunities for men and women, announced that they would appeal the decision because ‘the case was an isolated incident and the legal regulations in Turkey were sufficient’ (Bianet, 2009b).

Instead of seeking to appeal the ruling, the AKP government chose to support the Council of Europe in its efforts to produce a legally binding document on violence against women. The Opuz case had an accelerating effect on the drafting of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women...
and Domestic Violence, which originated as a ‘feminist legal project’ in the early-2000s (Acar & Popa, 2016).

As noted earlier, political outcomes, from the perspective of the social conflict approach, are shaped by struggles between social forces. These forces are involved in coalitions with other social forces including the fragments of the state apparatus in order to defend their interests. When we look at the Turkish domestic political context in search for the dynamics of the government’s shifting position, we see a political environment where the AKP was pre-occupied with dismantling the last remaining institutional underpinnings of the Kemalist state structure. (That would be achieved through the September 2010 constitutional referendum). The AKP was also in the process of launching the so-called ‘Kurdish Opening’ to peacefully solve the country’s long-standing ethnic conflict (even though it was motivated by the objective of regaining Kurdish votes lost to the pro-Kurdish party during the March 2009 local elections). This was the period of time when the liberal factions within the party were yet to be purged and feminist groups and other opponent forces were yet to be pushed to the margins of the political sphere because the availability of the support by diverse social groups was crucial for the AKP’s potentially highly costly interventions. The political setting, in other words, was relatively enabling for different groups, including feminist organisations, to voice their preferences and interact with other actors including factions within the AKP seeking ways to neutralise the effects of the Opuz case abroad. To be more specific, this was the time when KA.DER (The Association for Assisting and Training for Woman Candidates), Mor Çatı (Purple Roof Women’s Shelter Foundation), Women for Women’s Human Rights and other feminist organisations (which led the women’s struggle in the 1990s and successfully pressured for the elimination of the discriminatory clauses of the penal code in 2003–4) were still able to participate in government-organised events.

Yet, a domestic government’s adoption of internationally advocated institutional reforms and regulations does not necessarily mean their embracement of such reform agendas. For instance, while Turkey’s representative was contributing to the drafting of the world’s first legally binding treaty to combat violence against women in Strasbourg, Erdoğan was quoted, in July 2010, in the national media by stating: ‘I do not believe in the equality of men and women. I believe in equal opportunities. Men and women are different and complementary’ (quoted in Kandiyoti, 2011). Although his comments reportedly sent shock waves among women’s groups, neither Erdoğan nor other leading AKP officials have ever hidden their views about gender roles and relations. The party’s position on women’s roles, from the beginning, was based on a family-centric definition, and its approach to women’s rights was confined to the headscarf issue. The AKP’s 2002 election declaration defines women’s role as ‘bringing up the next generations and ensuring happiness in the family’ (Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011, p. 565). When the party came to power in November 2002, the Minister of Justice refused to meet with the Women’s Working Group on the Panel Code (WWGPC) for almost half a year (Ilkkaracan & Ercevik Amado, 2008). Upon his persistent refusal, the group sought to enlarge the ‘scope of the conflict’ over the legal underpinnings of gender inequality in the Turkish penal code. Their efforts included attracting more representatives from non-governmental organisations, intensifying their lobbying in the parliament, pursuing more systematic and targeted advocacy in the media and organising awareness-raising meetings and conferences throughout the country (Ilkkaracan & Ercevik Amado, 2008).
In October 2003, when the parliamentary process to amend the penal code (as part of the EU accession requirements) was underway, Erdoğan expressed his support for an AKP deputy’s proposal to criminalise adultery as a way to protect the unity of the family (Sachs, 2004). Amidst protests by women’s rights organisations, the proposed bill was dropped a year later, in September 2004, following the EU’s threat to defer much-awaited accession talks. Yet, upon his return from Brussels where he had announced the withdrawal of the bill, Erdoğan accused protesting women’s groups of betraying their ‘Turkish identity’:

There were even those who marched to Ankara, carrying placards [reading as “our bodies and sexuality belong to us”] that do not suit the Turkish woman. I cannot applaud behaviour that does not suit our moral values (ahlak) and traditions … A marginal group cannot represent the Turkish woman. (Ilkkaracan, 2007, p. 248)

The AKP leader and other party officials have only become blunter in their discourses following the party’s establishment of its presence as the dominant actor in the political arena during its third term in office (2011–5). Examples of the AKP’s openly declared anti-feminist stance include its transformation of the Ministry for Women and Family into the Ministry of Family and Social Policy (which frames women’s reproductive rights as ‘social policy’), marginalisation of feminist organisations from the political space and establishment of KADEM, attempts to prohibit abortion, discursive emphasis on motherhood as ‘the central career for women’, Erdoğan’s ‘advice’ to women to have at least three children, and his description of women who rejects motherhood and refrains from managing the household as being ‘incomplete’ (Akyüz & Sayan-Cengiz, 2016; Özcan, 2019).

The Council of Europe convention was signed by the AKP in Istanbul in May 2011 and ratified in November 2012 with no reservation. It requires ratifying governments to take measures to prevent gender-based violence, protect victims of violence, prosecute perpetrators, and pursue coordinated policies between government bodies involved in the implementation of relevant prevention, protection and prosecution measures. In accordance with these requirements, the Turkish government reformed the country’s domestic legislation. In March 2012, law no. 6284 was promulgated. This new law defines domestic violence as:

any physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence occurring in family or household or among the people who are considered as a family member whether the victim of violence and the perpetrator of violence live or do not live in the same house.

There is no doubt that the extending scope of rights gained by women and other gender groups through the Istanbul Convention created dissatisfaction within the conservative circles. These gains (such as the extension of protection to all victims of domestic violence regardless of whether they are married or not and whether partners are of the same or different sex) entail changes in the existing social relations and structures of productive and reproductive power that allow some individuals and groups to exercise control over other people and resources. Women’s and other gender groups’ exercise of the same status in the household, employment and politics may receive resistance from those who benefit from existing arrangements, which carry a variety of entitlements and privileges. Effective implementation of gender reforms and policy interventions, in other words, depends on the extent to which the existing conditions of the power
balance change in favour of pro-gender equality forces. Otherwise, there would be limited progress in terms of the exercise of the newly introduced rights.

The Istanbul Convention turned into a means of political blackmail used by some congregations following the June 2018 presidential elections, when the country’s already troubled economy began deteriorating. Escalating tensions with the Trump administration over the detention of an American pastor on charges of espionage and terrorism triggered a serious currency crisis shortly after the elections. The lira’s sharp decline in August 2018 was followed by rapidly rising inflation, increasing debt accumulation for companies, growing unemployment (especially among the youth), declining consumer demand, and slowing the country’s import-dependent economic growth (Akçay, 2021; Orhangazi & Yeldan, 2021). The construction sector, which has functioned as a mechanism for absorbing the labour surplus in cities, distributing rent to support the urban poor, and creating loyal business groups through lucrative contracts, became the hardest hit sector in the resulting recession (Akçay, 2021). The recovery of this sector that has been the main pillar of the AKP’s growth/stability framework underpins Erdoğan’s resistance to calls to raise the interest rates to curb inflation.

It was against this background of economic recession that Erdoğan was quoted, in June 2019, in the ultra-conservative media outlets as stating that the Istanbul Convention was ‘not a Nas [a chapter in Quran] and not a standard for us’ (Yeni Akit, 2020). Erdoğan’s comments followed the rerun of Istanbul’s mayoral election, which had resulted in a humiliating loss for the AKP.

The process leading to withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention reveals the mounting factional tensions and frictions within the AKP, while exposing the social dynamics of structured contestations in Turkish politics. One of the clearest examples of the AKP’s declining internal cohesion is the formation of two breakaway parties in September 2019 and March 2020. In addition to increasing competition over political opportunities (such as procurement contracts in transport, mining, healthcare, and education) selectively distributed by the AKP amidst deepening economic turmoil since 2018, intensifying rivalries between different religious communities struggling to fill the vacuum left by the purge of the Gülenists in business, the education sector, and the state bureaucracy (Balancar, 2019; Cornell, 2018) have shaped the organisation of conflict in the Turkish political context in recent years.

It would appear that the AKP’s declining popularity (prompted by a troubled economy that was further struck by the coronavirus outbreak) has increased the political leverage of these otherwise marginal, ultra-religious groups to force party leadership to act in ways that will advance their agendas and interests. As noted earlier, every political system has a ‘bias’ (which means some issues are allowed representation in politics, while others are excluded) and any change in the status of a conflict in favour of contestants depends on their ability to attract more participants and resources onto their side. This is precisely what the religious communities did in the process. By forming a large coalition with conservative opposition parties such as the Felicity Party (SP), Islamist intelligentsia and business groups, they undertook lobbying, public campaigns on television and social media and other actions to ‘socialise’ the conflict over the Istanbul Convention. Their strategy was based on a discourse that depicted the convention as a deliberate action to undermine the unity of the family, legitimise homosexuality and impose Western hegemony over society. For instance, in a report presented to Erdoğan in May 2020, Turkey
Thought Platform, an ultra-religious group consisting of journalists, academics and former AKP MPs, claimed that the convention ‘imposes an ideology that would result in the erasure of gender in male-female relations’ (Birgün, 2020). One of the authors of the report, a columnist in the Islamist Yeni Akit Daily, later referred to defenders of the convention, including the pro-government NGO KADEM, as ‘prostitutes’, and called on the Islamic bourgeoisie to support the withdrawal campaign:

Will our ‘Green Capital’ show loyalty to its cause and speak up against these prostitutes and their derivatives to the same degree as Koç, Sabancı and Eczacıbaşı (major business groups within TUSIAD)? Ready-made sellers, foods suppliers, financial enterprises, Turkey, speak up! What are you waiting for?

MUSIAD was one of the key actors in this anti-Istanbul Convention power bloc. In a press statement released in July 2020, the founder of the Islamic capitalist organisation called on the rival business association TUSIAD to respect and maintain the country’s ‘cultural values’ that recognise the ‘essential nature’ of women as mothers and nurturers, instead of embracing ‘Western values’ (Internethaber, 2020). As noted earlier, MUSIAD was founded in 1990 by the emerging provincial conservative capitalists who owed their wealth to the opportunities (such as cheap labour, tax incentives, export credits etc) created by the neo-liberal restructuring of the economy. Their support for the AKP played a crucial role for the latter’s rise to power and consolidation of its dominant position in the political arena. Some of these businesspeople even became lawmakers for the AKP, and some others significantly increased their wealth through public tenders including contracts from metropolitan municipal governments (Buğra & Savaşkan, 2014).

Set against this background, MUSIAD founder’s advocacy of a ‘culturally authentic’ role for Turkish women on the basis of their reproductive capacity and labour represents the efforts of a dominant class member to sustain their favourable position at a time when the devastating effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the country’s already fragile economy are being deeply felt. Crisis situations, as discussed in the previous section, hit women hard, and their increasing economic and political vulnerability provoke reactions to women’s rights that may be justified in terms of culture and traditions. The above-mentioned reductionist accounts of women’s roles reveal an attempt to use women to absorb the burden of a long-running economic downturn that has exacerbated during the pandemic. By confining women to the domestic sphere where they will continue to deliver unpaid reproductive work, these conservative businesses and their allies seek to ensure the supply of the cheap labour and other supportive services and resources they need for the resilience of their construction, textile and other ‘productive’ companies. It is thus fair to conclude that the opposition of these conservative groups to the Istanbul Convention was not because of the ‘foreignness’ of the concepts of gender or gender equality. Their resistance was rather informed by the material costs the elimination of certain discriminatory and exploitative practices (justified as customs or traditions) entails.

**Conclusion**

This article has argued that women’s exposure to different forms of violence and the challenges to eliminating them are linked to underlying patterns of social relationships that
are structured in the state. This argument is based on the social conflict theory, which views the state and its institutions as being non-neutral. Political developments, from this perspective, are the product of struggles between socio-political forces seeking to impose their preferences and interests on the state and its institutions. The resultant political outcomes such as policy decisions, in other words, reflect the underlying conditions of the balance of power in society.

The process leading to Erdoğan’s male-biased decision to take Turkey out of the Istanbul Convention demonstrates that gender relations constitute a key aspect of these power-based interplays between competing coalitions of interests. The Istanbul Convention represents the latest in gains made by women and other gender groups. It is the first legally binding international treaty that requires the state parties to combat gender-based violence through prevention, protection and punishment measures. These gains relating to the exercise of equal rights may be experienced as losses by some others. Effective implementation of changes introduced to state policies and practices depends on the underlying conditions of the power balance because the state is always subject to contestations between different groups seeking to impose their preferences and ideologies on its institutions. In the absence of accompanying shifts in the structures of power in favour of gender equality, illiberal outcomes may arise as experienced in the case of Turkey where the political landscape is biased towards anti-gender equality forces.

One of these social forces is the conservative capitalist classes that have been dominant as interest groups during the AKP rule. Had these economically powerful forces (operating in different sectors such as construction, mining, energy and media) not extended their support, the withdrawal controversy would have most likely been confined to the expression of a proposal by certain marginal ultra-religious communities. The idea of withdrawal was first expressed in the context of an emerging economic recession following the 2018 presidential elections and turned into an orchestrated campaign when the coronavirus pandemic deepened the country’s currency and debt crisis. The anti-Istanbul Convention bloc, consisting of religious communities, Islamist capitalists and intelligentsia, enlarged the scope of the controversy to an extent that denied any form of representation to women’s groups and other defenders of the treaty, including the pro-government KADEM. In doing so, they succeeded in steering the debate in their preferred direction and made use of the favourable political environment to elicit their desired outcome. Their lobbying, public campaign and other activities have revolved around a culturalist discourse that reduces the roles and identities of women to biological reproducers as mothers and nurturers. This emphasis on women’s reproductive functions has provided the basis of the efforts of these dominant interests to maintain the existing hierarchies in the social order that is organised in their favour.

Notes
2. Given the already low rate of reported cases and disruptions in the provision of protective and support services due to diversion of resources to essential services during the pandemic, the scale of domestic abuse faced by women and girls during lockdowns (and they have had
to stay with their abusers at home) is likely to be much larger than what the official figures suggest. Following the introduction of curfews and mobility restrictions, the Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSK) ruled on 30 March 2020 that court requests for protection measures, such as restraining orders, specified in the ‘Law No. 6284 to Protect Family and Prevent Violence Against Women’ should be processed in a way that would not pose a threat to the perpetrator’s health (Erem, 2020).

3. This slogan originated from the plea of a femicide victim in a video that circulated on social media in August 2019. The victim’s name was Emine Bulut. She was a 38-year-old informal care worker and stabbed by her ex-husband before their daughter in a small-town cafe. In the video filmed by eyewitnesses, she is heard screaming ‘I don’t want to die’, while her daughter begs her, in tears, not to die.


5. This argument draws on the point Jayasuriya and Rosser (2006) make in relation to the implementation of liberalisation reforms in the aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis in Southeast Asia.

6. Aside from the Kemalist version of state feminism, the Islamist and socialist approaches to the status of women prevented the development of an autonomous feminist movement in Turkey (Coşar & Onbaşi, 2008). Notwithstanding their differences over the character of the state, these three opposing ideologies were similar in that they all viewed women as a threat to public order, focused on women’s bodies as the battleground for political contestation and treated women as asexual beings (Müftüler-Bac, 1999). While Islamist discourses depicted women ‘as symbols of chastity and authenticity vis-à-vis Western immorality’ (Coşar & Onbaşi, 2008, p. 329), Turkish socialists preferred the term ‘bacı’ (sister) in their references to woman comrades as a way of eliminating the threat of sexuality (Müftüler-Bac, 1999).

7. TUSIAD (Association of Turkish Industrialists and Businesses) was founded by giant conglomerates in 1971.

8. This religious order was founded by the state-salaried preacher Fethullah Gülen in the 1960s with the objective of fighting against communism and raising a ‘golden generation’ of pious, hardworking, well-educated individuals with a strong sense of loyalty and discipline. Through establishing a large network of educational institutions, civil society organizations, media companies, businesses, trade associations and ‘colonising’ the state bureaucracy with the members of the so-called ‘golden generation’, Gülen’s followers sought to transform the secular foundations of the state from within (Gumuscu, 2016).

9. WWGPC was formed as an umbrella organisation in 2002. It was inspired by the women’s movement’s successful advocacy efforts for reforming Turkey’s civil code in 2001, which abolished the status of the husband as the head of the family. Involving representatives from women’s non-governmental organisations, law societies and universities from different regions of Turkey, the WWGPC campaigned for a holistic reform of the penal code (Ilkkaracan & Ercevik Amado, 2008).

10. According to World Bank data, five big Turkish construction companies, Limak, Kolin, Cengiz, Kalyon and the MNG, are among the world’s top ten most public tender winning companies over the period between 1990 and 2019. For details, see (World Bank, 2020).

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