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Anti-feminism in Turkey: a critical political economy perspective

Hülagü, Funda

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Anti-feminism in Turkey: a critical political economy perspective

Zusammenfassung

Antifeminismus in der Türkei: eine kritische politisch-ökonomische Perspektive

Dieser Beitrag skizziert die gegenwärtige Instrumentalisierung des Antifeminismus durch den türkischen Staat. Obwohl die Regierungspartei AKP immer wieder auf antifeministische Bezüge zurückgegriffen hat, ist der Abbau von Maßnahmen zur Gleichstellung von Männern und Frauen ein neuartiges Phänomen. Dieser Beitrag stellt aus einer feministisch-kritischen Perspektive der politischen Ökonomie die Zusammenhänge zwischen der sich vertiefenden sozialen Krise der Türkei und dem Aufstieg des Antifeminismus dar. Es wird festgestellt, dass Antifeminismus als alternatives staatliches Projekt genutzt wird, das darauf abzielt, die sogenannte patriarchale Dividende zu erhöhen und gleichzeitig Zeit zum Krisenmanagement zu gewinnen. Der Beitrag untersucht Argumentationsstrategien, die, angeführt von bestimmten islamistischen Zeitungen in der Türkei, von organisierten antifeministischen Aktivist*innen instrumentalisiert werden. Ob das antifeministische Bestreben des Staates seine Ziele erreichen wird, ist höchst zweifelhaft, da sich starker Widerstand der Frauen gegen die gewaltsame „Hausfrauisierung“ in der Türkei regt.

Schlüsselwörter

Kapitalistischer Staat, Soziale Reproduktion, Krise, Antifeminismus, Patriarchat, Türkei

Summary

This paper tries to outline the recent operationalisation of anti-feminism by the state in Turkey. Although the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey has always recurred to anti-feminist references, the undoing of pro-gender equality steps taken by the same ruling party is a recent phenomenon. This paper suggests a feminist critical political economy perspective to present the actual links between Turkey's deepening social crisis and the rise of anti-feminism. It concludes that anti-feminism operates as an alternative state project, aiming to upgrade the patriarchal dividend while trying to buy time for crisis management. To discuss these arguments, the article sheds light on the specific argumentation strategies instrumentalised by the anti-feminist campaigners organised under the leadership of certain Islamist newspapers in Turkey. Whether the anti-feminist state project will reach its aims is highly dubious as women's resistance to and feminist dissent against the violent housewifisation processes in Turkey are powerful.

Keywords

capitalist state, social reproduction, crisis, anti-feminism, patriarchy, Turkey

1 Introduction

Since the late 1990s, Turkey's official women's rights policy has been to follow the benchmarks set by international organisations such as the United Nations (UN) without any substantial reservation. This adjustment to the global gender regime con-

tinued during the first decade of the Justice and Development Party (henceforth, AKP) rule in Turkey.¹ Women's rights organisations coalesced with the state and pushed the AKP governments to make necessary legal changes to improve gender equality at the national level. During this early decade, though, certain discourses of president Erdoğan and of AKP notables created serious doubts on their sincerity. In one of the democratic opening meetings attended by several representatives from Turkish women's organisations Erdoğan declared that he does not believe in equality of men and women. On several occasions, he openly targeted feminists describing them as "marginal" figures who are foreign to their "native culture". Along the years, Erdoğan further escalated his anti-feminist discourse. On 8 March 2019, he accused the feminist night march demonstrators of being disrespectful of Islam.

This moral panic about feminism has also signified a policy change that became evident when in February 2019, the Higher Education Council of Turkey (YÖK) annulled the Gender Equality Stance in the Universities Document, a project introduced by the same Council in 2015. Yekta Saraç, Head of the Higher Education Council, argued that they had to cancel it as the project was "not suitable to their social values" and that it was "not well-received by the society". This decision was made just after the dissemination of a public campaign organised by certain mass media groups, which are also known to be in favour of the Islamisation of Turkey's civil code. The spokespersons of this ongoing anti-feminist propaganda argue that the state policies forged to promote gender equality in Turkey are counterproductive as they harm the principle of 'gender justice' by way of criminalising men.² The campaigners basically build a populist discourse that posits men as victims of "feminazis" (Arslan 2018b, 2018c). Many conservative women's organisations, who argue for the principle of gender complementarity instead of gender equality, have not been exempt from the campaign's attacks.

The new anti-feminist policy agenda, which undoes pro-gender equality measures under the pressure of these intensified and systematised attacks against feminists and women's rights activists, needs to be explained. Why has anti-feminism become a growing marker of the AKP regime's gender policies? Why exactly does this anti-feminist policy turn take place now?

The established literature on the AKP's gender policies has so far exposed different patriarchal characteristics of the incumbent regime. Many studies have portrayed the co-constitutive relation of neoliberalism and neoconservatism in Turkey that has created a very intrusive "politics of intimate", where full-blown marketization combined with family-centred state policies have deepened gender-based inequalities (Acar/Altunok 2013). Other studies have underlined the new patriarchy rooted in the autocratic figure of president Erdoğan, who has systematically criminalised women's growing call for self-ownership (Altunok 2016; Kurtuluş Korkman 2016). Recent studies have also un-

1 By global gender regime, this article refers to the institutionalisation of women's rights as human rights approach within global governance since the very first declaration of the UN Decade for Women in 1975 and the persistent advocacy of this perspective by various international organisations in different national settings.

2 These campaigns are also anti-genderist and the use of hate speech against the LGBTI community is pervasive. Conceiving gender as a social construct creates a great fury among the campaigners. On the recent rise of anti-genderism in Turkey, see Özkazanç (2019).

derlined the reverse impact of the “religio-conservative gender climate” prompted by the ruling power on the internalisation of progressive changes done in the legal field concerning gender equality (Ayata/Doğangün 2017).

Nonetheless, the internal contradictions of the ruling bloc in Turkey regarding the question of gender – *whether/when* to follow the liberal principles of the global gender regime, or to propose an alternative gender equality narrative accompanied with a religious-driven moral discourse and/or to refuse all gender equality measures – have been relatively underplayed in those political regime analyses. In short, the self-driven integrity and effectiveness of the neoliberal-cum-neoconservative political rationality in policy making is taken for granted most of the time. Another line of feminist studies has been accentuating the contradictions and displaying the limits and vulnerabilities of the state and society project endorsed by the AKP government. Buğra and Yakut-Çakar (2010) underline the “trade-offs” the AKP must make while trying to reconcile its patriarchal conservative gender outlook with the pressing economic needs for an increased female labour force participation. Kandiyoti argues that the escalating populist attacks of the power holders – which she conceptualises as “the politics of masculinist restoration” (Kandiyoti 2016: 109f.) – against young women (and also young men) who do not conform to the patriarchal/paternalist norms should be seen as the expression of a systemic crisis in Turkey’s gender order. This study aims at complementing these discussions by focusing on the latest wave of organised anti-feminism in Turkey with the help of a critical political economy approach.

The recent operationalisation of anti-feminism by the Turkish state can be made sense within the context of the political economic transformations that the country has undergone since the 2001 economic crisis. The AKP came to power in 2002 promising to improve the living conditions of poor masses both physically and morally. To do so, the Party has benefited from the global expansion of financialization since the 2000s, though this trend started to reach its limits in the mid-2010s (Bedirhanoğlu 2019). As of early 2010s, the worsening conditions of everyday subsistence – in close relation to the drain of global financial inflows – has instigated a new round of social problems which have evolved into a state crisis in the aftermath of the 2018 Turkish lira crisis. The recent operationalisation of the anti-feminist campaigns is both indicative and constitutive of a state crisis in Turkey, where the reproduction of the society has become more and more difficult and a new state project or host ideology that could deal with the sharpening socio-economic contradictions is lacking.

Under the severing crisis of financialised capitalism in Turkey, the contradiction between the specific neoliberal social contract endorsed by the state under the AKP and the patriarchal gender contract that the state relies on to secure the reproduction of everyday life deepens, creating cracks in the rationale of both contracts and deepening the legitimisation deficit of the state. Following Hay (1999) who argues that the crises of capitalism are moments in which new state projects are promoted to serve to the reproduction of ruling blocs, anti-feminism can also be defined as integral to the making of a new state project in Turkey. Moreover, these crises force a change in “the gender selectivity” (Jessop 2004) of the capitalist state, meaning that the state architecture becomes more receptive to some hegemony projects – read here as gender regime proposals. Anti-feminism is one such proposal whose receptibility by the

ruling power augments as the crisis intensifies and threatens the resilience of the incumbent regime.³

The following section gives a short overview of the feminist political economy approach endorsed in this study. Section 2 focuses on the political economic contradictions of the patriarchal gender contract the AKP tries to force onto women. Section 3 introduces three still running anti-feminist campaigns showing that they are designed to redeem the crisis of crisis management in Turkey by upgrading the *patriarchal dividend* (Connell 2009)⁴ and thereby aspire to secure men's collusion to the existing socio-economic order.

2 On the Inner Contradiction(s) of Capitalist States in the MENA Region

Social reproduction has been one of the essential concepts proposed by Marxist feminists to understand the sources of women's oppression in capitalism (Vogel 1983/2013; Weeks 2007; Ferguson 2016). Over time, the concept has expanded to appreciate in a wider sense how the organisation and reproduction of the structures of everyday life – intergenerational/biological reproduction; reproduction of labour power; care work and associated subsistence needs, and also popular culture including aspirations for a better life – are interdependent with the capital accumulation processes, and hence re-configured after the driving logic of profit-making (Bakker 2007). It is argued that the defining characteristic of the relation between these two, namely between profit-based commodity production and subsistence-based reproduction of everyday life, is inherently contradictory (Fraser 2017).

The political rationality that governs states in capitalist settings has been mediating this basic contradiction by generating sustainable social contracts. To recap, these contracts have two basic interrelated aims: (1) to reproduce people, who are prone to subsistence crises under the severe discipline of capital, and (2) to provide the capitalist market with a profitable/stable business environment (Picchio 1992). The concrete scope and nature of these social contracts predictably change through time and space. That is also why, to reconcile these hard-to-achieve aims, states have historically relied on different forms of social reproduction (Fraser 2017).

3 An alternative proposal is the gender complementarity project pursued and advocated by conservative women's organisations. Their project tries to subdue women's domestic labour through the ideology of gender complementarity, according to which women are biologically destined to do care work. This proposal aims at furthering women's status via the Islamist narrative of gender justice, according to which men are required to protect and take care of women.

4 Connell defines patriarchal dividend as "the advantage to men as a group from maintaining an unequal gender order" (Connell 2009: 142). The benefits range from money income to access to institutional power. The dividend, I would maintain, can be extended to certain groups of women under certain conditions – especially in cases where conservative political regimes are also supported by a non-negligible number of women, as in the case of AKP's Turkey. However, in this paper I am narrowing down the debate about the patriarchal privilege(s) to the case of men as a group, temporarily setting aside the intersectional particularities.

Maintaining and/or redefining a patriarchal gender contract – based on a hierarchical, urban-based sexual division of labour between male breadwinner and female homemaker, where men have direct access to and control over the means of reproduction (Moghadam 2000) – has been one such social reproduction strategy. However, as many terms of the patriarchal contract also signify real threats to the very subsistence of women who do not confirm to the standards of the imposed hierarchical gender order, adopting patriarchal contract as a generic social reproduction mechanism lead to an inner contradiction for the patriarchal capitalist state: to make life with the help of free domestic labour of women, who in turn should be made live and/or protected. The patriarchal gender contract adopted by the capitalist states contains in itself a *potential but not always actual* challenge to the driving social contracts that capitalist states endorse. As Caffentzis argues “[t]he conflict between *the needs of capitalist production* and *the demands of those whose work is centred* in the arena of *social reproduction* of labour power” (Caffentzis 1999: 167, italics added by F. H.) is a potential source of crisis for the capitalist state.

In the Middle Eastern and North African regions, this potentiality denotes a double challenge for neoliberal states because of the social and political functions the *housewifisation of women*⁵ undertakes. Firstly, women’s invisible domestic labour lessens the reproductive/welfare burden of the neoliberal states. Secondly, eliminating masses of women from labour market competition enables the state elites to recruit allies from the male petit bourgeoisie for their political regimes – this has indeed been a historical legacy of the regional state formation processes (Cole 1981). Housewifisation in this double sense has been a structural and a political element of the capitalist social formations in the MENA region to this day, including Turkey.⁶

To secure the continuation of housewifisation, governments try to sustain ‘patriarchal protection’ via different means (Hunnicut 2009). These include the promise of physical protection (from alleged or real threats such as sexual harassment and rape); the promise of status protection (from a loss of the status as a ‘dignified woman’) and economic protection (from hardships that emanate because of divorce and/or loss of spouses). However, the weakening of patriarchal protection systems, as identified in the increasing numbers of femicides and violence against women in the Global South, destabilises the patriarchal gender contracts and hence also the origins of the effective state rule.

5 Housewifisation in this paper does not only mean relegating women to the role of a housewife but also appropriating their means and resources that could otherwise make them independent from patriarchal control. Mies (1986 [1998]) argues that housewifisation refers to a process whereby the appropriation of women’s domestic labour (paid or unpaid) especially deepens during the internationalisation of the capital in the late capitalist countries. In that regard, housewifisation could be conceived as one of the forms of labour unfreedom akin to capitalism organised as a geographically uneven global system.

6 In its *Women in Statistics* 2018 report, the Turkish Statistical Institute states the rate of employment among women above the age of 15 as 28.9 percent while it is 65.6 percent for men. Compared with some selected group of countries in the region (Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iraq), Turkey displays lower than average levels of female labour force participation and a much more persistent pattern of housewifisation affecting successive generations of women (World Bank 2009; Memiş/Öneş/Kızılırmak 2011).

3 Forced Housewifisation of Women in AKP's Turkey

In Turkey, the gender order transformation during transition to neoliberalism was less abrupt compared to many other countries in the Global South. The 1980s and 1990s did not challenge the male breadwinner model as much as in some other Southern contexts. The relatively high standard of wages during the 1990s and the 'growth without employment' in Turkey implied a quasi-stable gender order (İlkkaracan 2012; Toksöz 2012). Still, the 2001 economic crisis, after which and due to which AKP came to power in Turkey, necessitated the government to deal with the deepening poverty problem, including the feminisation of poverty with different state or civil society sponsored social remuneration mechanisms (Buğra/Yakut-Çakar 2010). Meanwhile, the party apparatus attracted many middle-class and upper-middle-class women who were not employed in paid work by providing them with multiple clientelist networks (Ayata/Tütüncü 2008). Again, many full-time employed middle-class women who were not necessarily affiliated with the AKP benefited from cheap migrant female labour, growing financialization, and/or market opportunities in care services to lessen their chores.

Throughout this early decade, the AKP also opted for modernising the patriarchal gender contract. By the early 2000s, women's organisations put a lot of pressure on the government to change the criminal justice system in Turkey in favour of women. The state positively responded to this mobilization as the late 1990s and early 2000s were a period of pervasive gender-based violence in Turkey. During these years, suicides of young females, 'honour crimes' and killings of dissident women activists became more visible and more inadmissible for the young female public increasingly receptive to a feminist consciousness. As the AKP came to power with a mission to rehabilitate the state in Turkey, to make women live was a basic necessary condition for legitimization reasons as well. In fact, Erdoğan declared by that time that the state would have zero tolerance regarding any kind of threat to human livelihood including violence against women and state-led torture cases. Therefore, adapting some basic requirements of the global gender regime in the field of women's rights also facilitated the state to proceed with its agenda of neoliberal transformation – large-scale privatisations, marketization of education and health, commodification of care services – in a smoother way (Coşar/Yeğenoğlu 2011). What is more, the ruling power conceived these women-friendly changes as a way of strengthening the institution of family, and thus also the social reproduction functions the institution of family fulfils in Turkish capitalism.

During this early era, working-class women were mostly kept outside the inner circles of the party (Doğan 2016) and were deliberately ignored by the state. The neoliberal Labour Law, enacted by the AKP government in 2003, did not incorporate home workers, paid domestic workers and those who were working as temporary or casual workers, most of whom are women in Turkey (Dedeoğlu 2012: 220). The precarious jobs have led women to easily opt for becoming housewives when they seized the opportunity during the finance-led economic growth era (İlkkaracan 2012). It is no secret that women who want to participate in paid work are also enclosed by patriarchal gender norms. Many women feel the necessity to get permission from their husbands when they want to work. According to a study conducted among unemployed women, two thirds of them say that they would not work if they failed to convince their husbands (in Toksöz 2012: 113).

The 2008–2009 global financial crisis led to an expansion in female unemployment in urban contexts and an increase in total and unpaid work time for women (Toksöz 2012; Kaya Bahçe/Memiş 2013). The AKP started to boost its promise of patriarchal protection as a way of re-convincing at least certain women into the merits of housewifisation. In 2010, Article 10 of the Constitution was amended to classify women in the same group with children, elderly, and disabled persons as in need of social assistance. In 2011, Turkey became the first country to sign the Council of Europe’s Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, known also as Istanbul Convention which includes detailed public policy recommendations against all forms of gender-based violence. In line with the spirit of this Convention, in 2012, Turkey adopted the “Law 6284 to Protect Family and Prevent Violence against Women”.

However, these and other similar entitlements have not facilitated the state in Turkey to secure the smooth functioning of the patriarchal gender contract. This is because a young generation of women has become more politicised and determined to struggle against the reigning gender order in Turkey.⁷ Young women are forced to become “housewives” not only by the political Islamist power but also because of the limited and discriminatory structure of the labour market in Turkey. Gender equality in the field of educational attainment is close to parity in Turkey. However, in the field of economic participation and opportunity, the indicators point to less than half of the parity (World Economic Forum 2020). Even this gap can be considered as emblematic of the contradictory tendencies in Turkey’s neoliberal contract. Social reproduction includes not only basic needs for subsistence that should be met but also unmet and/or outlawed individual needs about self-realisation, including sexuality (Hennessey 2006). Indeed, the contradictory potential of the field of social reproduction stems from the fact that it leads women to struggle “for a different quality of experience” (Weeks 2007: 247). Women’s growing resistance to forced housewifisation encapsulates a perspective of a “potential self” (Weeks 2007: 248) that cannot be fulfilled within the confines of the existing neoliberal social contract. The encounter of a veiled woman with president Erdoğan is very illustrative in that regard. Erdoğan, once immensely proud of initiating projects for the inclusion of more women in the labour market, rebuffed the woman who wanted to voice her complaint. The woman said that she cannot find any paid job despite holding two university diplomas. Erdoğan replied: “Don’t you have a husband? Doesn’t he work?” (Erdoğan’dan iş bulamadığını söyleyen kadına 2019, translation F. H.).

In Turkey, the increase in the rate of new employment opportunities is far lower than the increase in the rate of the young population who participate in the labour force (Toksöz 2012: 110). Besides, the existence of an expanded cheap young male labour force leads the capitalists to opt less for female labour – which is protected by labour law regulations on marriage and maternity leave (Buğra/Çakar 2010). When asked about the increasing rate of unemployment in Turkey, Erdoğan stated that this is mainly caused by an increase in the participation of women in the labour force (Erdoğan’a göre sorun 2019). According to Toksöz (2012), excluding women from the active labour force with the help of patriarchal control mechanisms helps the Turkish government to attenuate the rate of unemployment.

7 Studies showed that more than half of the Gezi protesters in Turkey were women (KONDA 2014).

The latest developments show that despite the disheartening working conditions, women's choice to stay at home when they seize the opportunity is no longer the rule. According to a recent study conducted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in Turkey, 87 percent of women want to participate in paid work and yet, nine out of ten women (which in total makes eleven million women) must stay at home due to the literally non-existence of public day care services (Kızıltan 2019). The notion that paid employment provides emancipation is strong among many women in Turkey and the younger generations possess an even more tenacious belief in the correlation between paid work and independence.

4 Managing the Crisis through Anti-Feminism? Three Campaigns

The crisis of social reproduction in Turkey does not only emanate from the demands of women who reject the terms of the patriarchal gender contract enforced by the state. This challenge from below takes place amidst a more encompassing social crisis of livelihood. The rise in cases of femicide, cases of family-wide murder-suicides and the toll of occupational deaths are signalling the total failure of the social contract.

Turkish state institutions do not release any regular data about femicide cases. However, the statistics compiled by NGOs show a steady rise in the number of women killed in Turkey, in total about a 75 percent increase of those killed by a male relative or partner from 2013 to 2017. At least 474 women were murdered in Turkey in 2019, according to the *We Will Stop Femicide Platform*. The platform reveals that 134 of the women were killed by their husbands and the main crime scene was women's residences in 292 of the cases. 27 were killed under the pretext of economic reasons and 114 because they wanted a divorce or refused to return to their partners or rejected proposals for relationships (Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız 2019). Notwithstanding the bureaucratic efforts for boosting patriarchal protection, the state apparatus fails to prevent violence against women. It is therefore not surprising to hear Erdoğan arguing that the biggest threat to the future of the state and society in the Muslim geography is violence against women, "which disrupts the familial unity" (Aile ve Çalışma Bakanlığı 2019, translation F. H.).

It is also true that the harm emanating from the social reproduction crisis in Turkey is severely affecting families. Recent cases of murder-suicide deaths of three families severely alarmed the government. These middle-class/lower middle-class families were trapped in the prison of household debt. The breadwinners of the families – two male and one female – decided to murder their entire close kin and then committed suicide, leaving behind notes about or obvious signs of indebtedness (Bellut 2019). Consequently, the state imposed a broadcast ban on cases of suicide.

The crisis of social reproduction is no less pervasive for the male population in Turkey. The rates of workplace accidents and occupational deaths are astonishingly high. In 2012, 878 workers were victims of occupational deaths, while in 2018 it was 1872 (Aktar 2019). Most of these accidents happened in the male worker dominated construction sector, the backbone of the regime's political economy. The working class has been

put under severe political pressure since the failed putsch attempt on 15 July 2016. The state bans on labour strikes and protests became unprecedented in the recent historiography of Turkey. This process has further eliminated guarantees that prevent workers from being laid off for trade union membership.

This cumulative social crisis is seized as a moment of opportunity by the more orthodox Islamist groups within the ruling bloc to raise their attack against women contenders and to bring forward their anti-feminist project. Islamist newspapers such as *Akit*, *Milli Gazete* and *Yeni Şafak* have rallied support from their audience and recently spurred organised anti-feminism. Islamist media have always enforced the gender-centred polarisation process in Turkey, e.g., by popularising functional dichotomies such as secular vs. pious women (Gümüş/Dural 2012; Kandiyoti 2016; Özkazanç 2019). But it is only recently that a nebulous form of counter-movement has occurred, which brought together a group of men and women, the majority of which from petit bourgeois backgrounds, who believe their real or imagined vulnerabilities to be caused by the state in Turkey, which supposedly embraces feminist ideals.⁸ Organised under the name of *National Will Platform*, these groups lobby president Erdoğan and ask for legislative support to compensate for their personal or collective diminution caused by the so-called feminist state. These groups have until now rallied around two concrete issues: the campaign for the recognition of “Early Marriages” and the campaign against “Alimony Payments”. They found support from within the state, especially among local but also supreme court judges and rallied private universities around their cause. The pioneers of this organisation, who represent some vested interests like religious sects, focus their efforts on making the state undo Law 6284.

Under the pressure of the two interconnected aspects of the social crisis in Turkey – crises of the patriarchal gender contract and of the neoliberal social contract/livelihood – the state apparatus has become more responsive to the demands of the anti-feminist Islamists who have started to pressurise the state with a discourse shaped after the populist imaginary of ‘poor modest men’ vs. ‘unjustly enriched and masculinised women’.⁹ The supposedly autonomous public authority, the *Human Rights and Equality Institution of Turkey (TİHEK)*, has started to support these groups’ calls for the “restoration of gender justice” (Günalay 2018, translation F. H.). According to the Institution, “the number of male homicide victims exceed[s] the numbers of female victims”, but “the plight of men is underrated” (TİHEK Başkanı Süleyman Aslan 2019, translation F. H.). As argued by Hay (1999), crisis is a moment of decisive intervention during which those who govern the state identify the main contradictions – the accuracy of this identification is not granted. Hay (1999) also adds that the systemic failure is identified only through the prism of politics and ideas. Indeed, it is perceived only through mediation, not as it is.

8 This discourse built on accusing the state in Turkey with being ‘feminist’ and/or with giving concessions to ‘feminist forces’ is quite common among the different constituents of the anti-feminist movement in Turkey. For a more detailed exposition of the political sociological characteristics of this counter-movement, see Hülögü (2020).

9 For a salient semiotic example of this discourse, one can also see among others the cartoons published by the monthly Comics magazine *Misvak*, which systematically parodies and/or demonizes women’s emancipation demands by misogynist drawings. This poor men vs. enriched women duality are also used by certain Turkish-Islamist lawyers who advise “proletarian men” to not give the fight for male supremacy over “their wives” (Bergen 2020).

The political power in Turkey currently tends to identify the social-cum-state crisis through an anti-feminist lens which also offers itself as a political strategy to upgrade the patriarchal dividend. In other words, some elements of the ruling bloc in Turkey propose to the state to face the crisis by buying-in the support of male breadwinners, by upgrading the masculine privilege through undoing the pro-gender equality steps.

4.1 The Campaign against Law 6284

The campaign against Law 6284 basically aims at disembarassing the state and the ruling party from the ‘burden of male violence’. Women’s organisations and feminists have raised their voices against the augmenting femicide cases in Turkey. Their main argument is that the chief reason behind the increasing rate of murders is the state’s failure and lack of will power to fulfil its duties emanating from the ratified Istanbul Convention and Law 6284.

In opposition to women’s rights advocates, the campaigners against Law 6284 see the Law as the main reason for the rise of male violence. To demonstrate how men are aggrieved and victimised by the Law, it is argued that the number of women killed by their husbands has augmented in the post-2012 period because the introduction of the Law by 2012 has left “no choice to men but to become frustrated” (6284 Yuva Yıkıyor 2017, translation F. H.). It is claimed that the judicial preventive cautionary measures taken in accordance with this new Law cause benign men to become furious and vengeful. These premises are further built on dramatic formulations such as: “Men become angrier because they are moved from their home and vicinity” (Arslan 2018a: o. S., translation F. H.). According to the campaigners, men “who are torn apart from their children” retaliate and kill their wives (Bu Kanunlar Cinnete Davet 2017, translation F. H.).

The Law is argued to be supported by “enemies of the family” – which according to the campaigners include women’s organisations such as *Purple Roof* (Mor Çatı), the most acclaimed organisation for women’s shelters in Turkey (Sadece Aileler Değil 2019, translation F. H.). It is further added that these “enemies of the family” are not native; they are funded by foreign forces, “by Brussel” (Ak Parti Harekete Geçti 2019, translation F. H.). It is speculated that women’s organisations accrue financial benefits from the application of Law 6284. In their hateful and counter-factual narrative, campaigners make a call to the general populace, to “us”. “We” are invited not to “let the enemies of family” win and not to be “deterred by the enemies of family” (Arslan 2018d: o. S., translation F. H.). It is speculated that “two out of three newly married women kick their husbands out of home after filing police-complaints about them” (Saçıklaralı 2018: o. S., translation F. H.). Feminists are accused of “teaching women how to lie” and how to treacherously use the principle of “women’s testimony is fundamental” (Karahasanoğlu 2019: o. S., translation F. H.). As a result, people are invited to act on behalf of “the [male] victims who cannot make their voice heard as much as the voice of rich feminist organisations is heard” (Arslan 2018d, translation F. H.).

As Hay argues, in crisis moments, ruling blocs opt for simplifying ideologies “that must find and construct points of resonance with a multitude of individuated experiences of state economic failure” (Hay 1999: 333). Although its success is way beyond being secured, it appears that anti-feminism is pushed to become such an ideology

in order to tighten ranks among men, so that the “tendential unity of the state” (Hay 1999: 310) could be potentially re-achieved. Turkey’s chief ombudsman Şeref Malkoç declared that “female killings have become a *national security* issue”, but he also added that “the numbers augment *despite* the introduction of Istanbul Convention” (İstanbul Sözleşmesine Rağmen 2019, translation and italics added by F. H.). His speech hinted both at the feeling of insecurity and emergency amidst the statecraft regarding this gendered social crisis working against the ruling power but also at the fallibility of the Istanbul Convention as an effective instrument – hence he also prepared the ground for the justification of a likely state withdrawal from the Convention.¹⁰

4.2 Campaigns for “Early Marriages” and against “Alimony Payments”

The latest report on *Sexism in Education* prepared by Turkey’s left-leaning *Education and Science Workers’ Union* (Eğitim-Sen) demonstrates that in 2017 more than 20 000 girls aged 16–17 entered a (formal) marriage. This accounts for approximately five per cent of the total marriages in this year alone and the rate of marriage for the same age group of poor girls is two-fold. The actual numbers of child marriages are estimated to be far higher as many child marriages take place in the form of religious marriages without official state authorisation.

However, although being still remarkably high compared to the OECD averages, the statistics show that the general trend in child marriages has significantly turned downwards for the last ten years in Turkey (Şahin 2019). Therefore, waging anti-feminism over ‘early marriages’ shows that rather than re-sealing the institution of child marriage as a subsistence mechanism, an essential purpose of the campaign is to under-criminalise men who marry underage children.

The seeds of this campaign were planted in 2016, when conservative governmental figures proposed a penal code change to adjust the age of consent to sexual relations from 15 to 12. Under the proposal put forward, men convicted of sex with an underage girl would be pardoned if they married their victim and if the act were committed without “force, threat or any other restriction on consent” (Çocuk İstismarcısına Evlilik Affi 2016, translation F. H.). Following massive women’s protests, the amendment was withdrawn for review. However, the government reintroduced this proposal as of late 2019 by tapping on the public campaign for “Early Marriages”.

The campaign’s main premise is that early marriages are stigmatised as ‘child marriage’ because of the feminist mindset. It is argued that “those anti-family feminists who normally advocate flirting for those who are only 13 years old” (Mağdurların Gözü Mecliste 2019, translation F. H.) are against matrimony. According to the campaigners, the main victims are “those youngsters whose only fault is to ask for an official marriage instead of flirting” (Mağdurların Gözü Mecliste 2019, translation F. H.). The existing legal measures, accordingly, jeopardise many young couples’ right to start a family be-

10 Although at the time of reviewing this essay, during early November 2020, there has been no formal withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention (yet), the Supreme Council of Judges and Prosecutors in Turkey has stopped actively endorsing the implementation of the protective measures advised in the Law 6284 by March 2020, under the pretext of COVID-19 pandemic crisis (HSK Kararının Kadınlar için Ağır Sonuçları Olur 2020).

cause men are accused of rape and sentenced to imprisonment. It is proposed that there should be a new law regulating amnesty to people who are accused of marrying before the age of 18.¹¹

The campaigners underline that there are “thousands of families” who suffer from the existing criminal code. They propagate that “the fathers are in jail” and “the mothers have to raise their children alone” (Mağdurların Gözü Mecliste 2019, translation F. H.). However, the number of “male victims” who are jailed is not properly declared by the government – figures pronounced by the state officials at different occasions differ from a couple of hundreds to 10 000. Given the fallaciousness of this case of injustice, it is possible to argue that the real target of the campaign is, like it is in the case of Law 6284, to justify the privilege accorded to men in classical patriarchal settings and secure the latter’s collusion to the existing socio-economic (dis)order.

The “Campaign against Alimony Payments” is built around the main premise that “men are unjustly condemned to pay alimonies forever once they get divorced” (Arslan 2018b, translation F. H.). It is assumed that “divorced women avoid a second marriage in order to be able to receive alimony payments and divorced men fail to start a new family due to the financial burden caused by alimony payments” (Arslan 2018b, translation F. H.). It is argued that “this financial burden causes men to get angry, leading them to kill their ex-wives and commit suicides” (Mağdurlar Konuştu 2017, translation F. H.).

The campaign contradicts the very findings of a recent state-led research on the causes of divorces in Turkey. According to this research carried out by the Ministry of Family in Turkey, the essential problem about the alimony payments is the lack of a bureaucratic control mechanism, which would keep track of them being paid or not. Most of the time, alimony payments, which are mostly assigned for child maintenance, are not even paid by the divorced husbands (Akçabay 2019). Despite this, in public campaigns there are references to some alleged experts who are quoted to say: “Women prefer their rights to alimony, equitable division of property and other recompenses much better than a marriage and a husband” (Günalay 2018, translation F. H.). Men are portrayed as victims of unsatisfied/conspicuous consumption-driven women who act under the influence of feminism. Widows who receive alimony payments are portrayed as unjustly enriched women whose class status unfairly augments. Research, however, proves that alimony payments, even if paid, do not really constitute a bulk for divorced men. Therefore, it would not be false to derive from these findings that by way of freeing men from their liabilities, the campaign tries to secure the patriarchal licenses of men and turn them into loyal clients of the existing regime.

11 The legal age of marriage in Turkey is 17 and can be lowered to 16 with judiciary consent. Therefore, the campaigners utilise false information to augment the populist impact of their arguments. In 2019 alone, the Family Courts permitted 11 446 children below the age of 16 to marry and the actual grounds behind these judiciary decisions need further scrutiny (Ünker 2020). The possible impact of the related campaign also needs to be researched.

5 Conclusion

Anti-feminism has always been a phenomenon in Turkey. It has constituted a core component of hate speech practices of radical Islamist, nationalist, and conservative circles. Various Islamist newspapers have evolved anti-feminism into an organised movement. The fact that this state project proposal – but not others – has become so influential in policy making is however closely related with the deepening crisis of social reproduction. In other words, it is the main contention of this study that there are not only functional/voluntarist but also structural reasons behind the recent operationalisation of anti-feminism in Turkey.

On the one hand, Turkish capitalism fails to incorporate young women. The neo-liberal social contract leans on a limited number of employment opportunities, which further decrease during crisis times. On the other hand, women are forced to housewifisation and the patriarchal protection accorded to them by the state in return does not even function, as seen in the increasing numbers of femicides. Moreover, the crisis of neoliberalism further engenders a general crisis of livelihood, affecting the entire working class. This complex crisis of social reproduction, incited both from below and above, makes the ruling power more open to the anti-feminist state project, which is itself a gender regime proposal.

The most crucial component of the anti-feminist campaigns is, though, the upgrading of the patriarchal dividend as a crisis management strategy. And yet, this anti-feminist project is itself very contradictory because whereas the impairment of the patriarchal gender contract grows and securing the collusion of women to the existing socio-economic order becomes more difficult, the state chooses to side with misogynist groups. This looks like being short of an effective social contract in the long run. The state in crisis buys time in Turkey.

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