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DANGEROUS MASCULINITIES AND FEMININITIES: AN ANALYSIS OF  
NARRATIVES AROUND GENDER-BASED HOMICIDES IN TURKEY



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Dangerous Masculinities and Femininities: An Analysis of Narratives Around Gender-Based Homicides in Turkey

Tehlikeli Erkeklik ve Kadınlıklar: Türkiye'de Toplumsal Cinsiyete Dayalı Cinayet Anlatılarının Bir Çözümlemesi

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## DANGEROUS MASCULINITIES AND FEMININITIES: AN ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVES AROUND GENDER-BASED HOMICIDES IN TURKEY

### Abstract

Data collected by independent organizations indicate a consistent increase in the femicide rates in Turkey. When multiple cases are analyzed, it is possible to draw a connection between the political, social, and legal narratives around different incidents and see similar patterns repeating such as denigrating female sexuality, blaming the victims, using provocation defense in court, etc. This paper attempts to understand these structures that repeat by tracing them in five main femicides that were committed roughly in the last ten years, namely in the cases of Aylin Sözer, Şule Çet, Pınar Gültekin, Münevver Karabulut, and Özgecan Arslan. In this way, it indicates that these incidents are not unique, but they take roots in the same social problem that victimizes all gender identities. The political, social, and legal narratives around femicide and other gender-based homicide cases occasionally referred to were collected from random online news sources that are available to the public. Examination of these narratives reveals that they share similar idealized stock characters, statements, themes, and motifs. Therefore, a literary analysis is used to expose the common roots of these elements and better understand this systemic problem. This thesis finds and demonstrates that these reiterating patterns in the cases are heavily affected by the norms of sexuality, which promote an unequal gender order and therefore become dangerous for everyone.

*Keywords:* gender-based violence, femicide, narrative, victim blaming, hegemonic masculinity

## TEHLİKELİ ERKEKLİK VE KADINLIKLAR: TÜRKİYE'DE TOPLUMSAL CİNSİYETE DAYALI CİNAYET ANLATILARININ BİR ÇÖZÜMLEMESİ

### Özet

Bağımsız kuruluşlar tarafından toplanan veriler, Türkiye'de kadın cinayetlerinde istikrarlı bir artışa işaret ediyor. Birden fazla vaka incelendiğinde, farklı olaylar etrafında dönen siyasi, sosyal ve hukuki anlatılar arasında bağlantı kurmak ve kadın cinselliğini aşağılama, mağdurları suçlama, mahkemede haksız tahrik indiriminden yararlanma gibi benzer kalıpların tekrar ettiğini görmek mümkün. Bu makale, kabaca son on yılda işlenen beş ana kadın cinayetinde, yani Aylin Sözer, Şule Çet, Pınar Gültekin, Münevver Karabulut ve Özgecan Arslan vakalarında tekrar eden bu yapıları anlamaya çalışmaktadır. Böylece bu olayların münferit olmadığını, tüm cinsiyet kimliklerini mağdur eden toplumsal bir sorunda kök saldıklarını ortaya çıkarır. Ana kadın cinayeti vakaları ve atıfta bulunulan diğer toplumsal cinsiyet temelli cinayet vakaları hakkındaki siyasi, sosyal ve yasal anlatılar insanların kolayca erişebileceği rastgele çevrimiçi haber kaynaklarından toplanmıştır. Bu anlatıların çözümlemesi, anlatıların idealize edilmiş stok karakterleri, ifadeleri, temaları ve motifleri paylaştıklarını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu nedenle, bu unsurların ortak kökenlerini ortaya çıkarmak ve bu sistemik sorunu daha iyi anlamak için edebi bir analizden yararlanılmıştır. Bu tez, bu vakalarda yinelenen kalıpların, eşit olmayan bir toplumsal cinsiyet düzenini teşvik eden ve bu nedenle herkes için tehlikeli hale gelen cinsellik normlarından büyük ölçüde etkilendiğini bulur ve gösterir.

*Anahtar Kelimeler:* cinsiyet temelli şiddet, kadın cinayeti, anlatı, mağdur suçlayıcılık, hegemonik erkeklik

## INTRODUCTION

July 21 started as a regular workday for me in the ‘new normal’ to which we were trying to adapt during a global pandemic in 2020. I remember having coffee, chatting about how weird our lives got, and taking photos with my colleagues before our prep school classes started. I don’t think I will ever forget how heavy I suddenly felt when I checked Instagram and saw that Pınar Gültekin’s dead body was found in the woods. I knew she had been lost as some feminist groups I followed on different social media had already started talking about her. My friends got worried when they saw me, and I told them what happened. Googling her name and reading the news in detail made everything worse because we were three women in the room, all around the same age, reading about a femicide for the millionth time at that point in our lives. We all remembered other femicides from years ago that were equally atrocious such as Münevver Karabulut’s and Özgecan Arslan’s when we found out that Pınar’s body was burned, put in a barrel, and buried underground. When I joined dozens of other people protesting at Beşiktaş after work that day, I came across some of my friends who found themselves at the same spot feeling the same grief, desperation, and rage I did. It was only a couple of months ago that I wrote a term paper on Şule Çet’s murder, and there I was listening to her father condemning the murder of another young woman.

I obviously did not sit down and start writing this paper right away, but that day made me realize that I had things to say on the increasing femicide rates as a 25-year-old cis woman who grew up with news and incidents of harassment, assault, and violence against women and queer people in Turkey. The paper you are about to read deals with the dangerous foundations of these attacks that are directed towards particular gender identities in the context of Turkey. My purpose is to examine the political, social, and legal narratives surrounding such incidents and expose the patterns that repeat and, therefore, facilitate a criminal activity. I mainly argue that these

narratives reiterate archetypal gender performances in a way that has become dangerous for women and queer people in Turkey.

I broadly attempt to examine the effects of different codes of physical and emotional attraction that form sex/gender identities and expressions on the understanding and judgment of criminal activity. This connection between sexuality and gender inequality became clear to me at a very young age when sexual harassment and violence felt like real threats in my life because I started to feel threatened when I was recognized as a sexual(ized) being in public. The people in my family have always advised me to be a chaste, modest, and well-behaved girl, and those recommendations also turned into limitations when I got older. They have always told (and sometimes forced) me to keep my guard up against men and stay away from getting intimate with them as much as possible. However, I quickly understood with lived experience that I would be catcalled, stalked, and harassed even if I did everything that they asked me to do. That is the reason why I wanted to discuss the recurring and hypocritical statements that come up in almost all gender-based homicide cases such as “What was she doing there at night?”, “Well, she was a prostitute anyway.”, “Was she drinking?”, “Why would a young woman like her go to a man’s apartment?”, “Oh, but she was wearing a mini skirt.”, etc. These comments are not only unfair, but they also provide the means for victim blaming in public and the legal arena that rests on idealized gender performances. They reiterate and strengthen the existing unequal gender order and makes it an immediate threat for many people.

As I believe such statements are not new to anyone in Turkey, I intended to better understand the structures that repeat in gender-based homicide cases and, in turn, make these remarks reappear in almost every new incident. A closer look at them immediately reveals certain profiles for the victims and the perpetrators. In other words, although the cases and the actors change, the narratives of gender-based homicides seem to have similar characters. The repetition of the statements that blame the victims

in almost all gender-based homicide cases also proves that there are common themes among the cases. As a result, I have come to the understanding that the stories that emerge in these cases can be subjected to a literary analysis because they have characterizations, plotlines, themes, and motifs. This type of an approach would also be effective in the investigation of the shared features of similar incidents and prove that they are not unique but systemic.

With this literary perspective, I started from how victimization occurs in femicide cases in court. My main goal was to problematize the expectation of a perfect victim when a woman or a queer person is killed. The first chapter discusses how this “perfection” is defined differently for women as opposed to men in the political and cultural discourse by creating stock characters that serve as the ideal forms of manhood and womanhood. I particularly focused on how sexuality defines them as I have found the concept as one of the building blocks of these characters. To put it in simpler terms, the chapter traces how the understandings of sexuality characterize the ideal man and woman in Turkey and create a gender order. In this context, I demonstrate by analyzing existing feminist literature and the prevalent political discourses that this idealization can be traced in a timeline that starts from the foundation of the republic and comes to the neoliberal-neoconservative Turkey today. In this timeline, the most ideal form of being a woman has been politically and socially constructed as a modest mother despite the differences in the function of this character in the political discourse of different periods. Examining how gender identities are categorized and regulated by the state since the foundation of the republic, I also identify *other* categories of womanhood, which are dispraised and unapproved of. As for the ideal masculinities, on the other hand, same concepts and practices also formulate a hegemonic identity. I find that heterosexuality and publicly acclaimed features of traditional masculinity such as toughness, bravery, strength, etc. has been prominent features of this hegemonic masculinity in Turkey. Although other characteristics can also be parts of these ideal

characters, I chose to focus on the ones that inform the analysis of the cases in my discussion.

These characterizations and the hierarchies they create are significant because in the following chapter, I argue that the legal system depends on them to judge on gender-based homicide cases. I pick five violent femicide cases roughly from the last decade (between 2009 and 2020) which have thematic parallels in order to uncover their narratives. I often refer to other gender-based homicide incidents in the same period without analyzing their narratives in detail simply to further exemplify a recurrent image or symbol. All these cases, however, yield to narratives that revolve around sexuality, and female sexuality, in particular, is denigrated to justify the violent and hateful attacks in these narratives. I believe it is urgent to elaborate on these narratives and the means for justification of gender-based homicides that took place in the last decade due to the increase in the number of the cases in this period<sup>1</sup>.

The reasons behind this increase have been on the agenda of independent feminist organizations such as We Will Stop Femicides Platform (*Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu*), and they have argued that the local and international laws that target gender-based violence have not been properly enforced in the country<sup>2</sup>. Public campaigns organized in the last 4-5 years for the active implementation of the Istanbul Convention, for instance, have not only increased the visibility of the issue, but they have also demonstrated an ongoing struggle to end femicides. As I explain in detail in the first chapter, the government has recently responded to these efforts by withdrawing from the convention on the account that it does not comply with the values of the Turkish society. Therefore, it is crucial to tackle how these values relate to gender-based violence today, which I attempt to understand by focusing on the gender-based homicide narratives in this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> See Table 1 in the last chapter.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://kadincinayetlerinidurduracagiz.net/for-english>

What I understand from the notion of a narrative in the context of this argument is the story that common people hear from TV, newspapers, social media, etc. when a gender-based homicide is committed. To be more clear, I concentrate on the public information that everyone can access about and around these cases. I analyze the incidents, statements of the murderers, and the trials in the way they appear in mainstream news sources. I do not make a claim about how different news sources contextualize and report gender-based homicides. In other words, I do not have a representative sample of news sources as I do not analyze the sources themselves. However, the newspapers from which I take the narratives such as *Sabah*, *Hürriyet*, *Bianet*, *Sözcü*, etc. are all online and popular. Therefore, I take the details of the cases from random online and mainstream newspapers and try to see narratives in them in the way they appear to the public.

What my study adds to the existing narratives on the news is the analyses that uncover their social and cultural aspects and expose their dangerous similarities. I argue that certain stock characters are constantly used in the legal and public arena to minimize the responsibility and guilt of the perpetrators while blaming the victims. The vilification of the victims in femicide cases, for example, is mostly achieved by using the hierarchy of womanhood that is already defined by sexuality. Most statements we hear in these narratives blame the victims by creating an image of a promiscuous woman and trying to argue that they therefore deserve the criminal behavior. In other words, the image of “a prostitute” works as a reference for unfavorable social categories of womanhood to put the victims at a disadvantage before the public. As research proves that this reverse-victimization has worked for a long time in the form of provocation defense, good conduct abatement, etc. in the legal arena, the perpetrators seem to use it as a strategy to try to minimize their punishment in the trials.

The last chapter focuses on one prevalent theme and one motif that explains it in gender-based homicide cases by contextualizing the most common reason for

femicides. Data collected by independent organizations such as We Will Stop Femicides Platform and the Monument Counter show that when women make decisions regarding their own lives, it is used as the most common excuse to kill them. Most of the specific excuses are also related to their intimate relationships with partners or relatives, but their personal agency in these relationships is disregarded. In addition, the increase in the number of femicide cases indicate that women do not stop making their own decisions, but they are being punished more for it. As an extension of the discussion that is spread out on most of my arguments, I claim that the lack of women's personal agency is a recurrent theme in femicides, and women's persistent demand for their autonomy is getting increasingly more threatening for the stability of masculinities.

Furthermore, the neglect of women's individuality is almost always supported by victim blaming as the privilege of individuality is granted to the perpetrators only. To rephrase it, I finally uncover how the concept of victim blaming works to demonstrate that it is easily achieved by victimization of women. This victimization depends solely on the perspective that victims share responsibility with the offenders due to their identities and lives although their lives are personal and unrelated to the occurrence of a criminal activity. Therefore, it is possible to see that categorization and ranking of femininities and masculinities has a direct link with the disproportionate victimization of the identities that are not placed on the highest ranks. In this case, the practice of victim blaming that rests on these categorizations can be claimed to be dangerous for most people as most people do not qualify for the ideal masculinities and femininities.

Throughout my discussion, I use the term gender-based homicide to refer to the homicides that are committed on account of a victim's gender identity. I choose this phrase on purpose to emphasize that this type of criminal activity has victims from various gender identities. Although the cases on which I choose to concentrate qualify

for the term femicide, which broadly means the killing of women because they are women (World Health Organization, 2012), my discussions acknowledge that people who do not necessarily identify as women can also be the victims of the same type of violence. In some other cases to which I occasionally refer, the same type of violence targets gay and trans identities, too. Moreover, my claims on gender-based homicides do not put the notion of gender in opposition to an essential concept of sex, either. In their introduction to *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (1993) challenges the theories that previously argued for a sex/gender distinction. Describing the social construction of gender, they claim that there is no way to distinguish the natural or essential character of sex from its social character by stating that

If gender consists of the social meanings that sex assumes, then sex does not accrue social meanings as additive properties but, rather, is replaced by the social meanings it takes on; sex is relinquished in the course of that assumption, and gender emerges, not as a term in a continued relationship of opposition to sex, but as the term which absorbs and displaces "sex," the mark of its full substantiation into gender or what, from a materialist point of view, might constitute a full desubstantiation. (5)

Here, Butler introduces a new categorization for the two terms where they appear at the same time and coexist. As the natural/biological/essential characteristics that are attributed to sexes (chromosomes, genitalia, etc.) are not free from their social signification, it is impossible to talk about an ideal/essential sex that precedes and ultimately stands in opposition to the cultural/social gender. In other words, gender is not the cultural inscription on given and stable sexes; sex is already socially signified. Therefore, the notion of gender can be claimed to subsume sex, as well. In this case, the discussions around gender-based homicides should recognize that any gender identity, including the ones that do not follow the sex/gender binary, can be a victim of this crime.

In fact, the binary assumption of sex (i.e., male and female) leads to discrimination against trans, intersex, and non-binary identities and becomes one of the motivations of gender-based homicides. As I try to exemplify in the third chapter with the media representation of the murders of trans women, these incidents have roots in the same hostility we see in femicides. Yet, the arguments for essentialism make them appear as different and even less significant. In gender-based homicide cases, violence is triggered by gendered cultural assumptions and categorizations, and murderers see the victims through the lenses of power hierarchies created and maintained by them. Essentialism or the belief in an essential concept of sex reproduces these hierarchies because the power dynamic starts from the cultural signification of different sexes. Adding to Butler's interpretation of sex, Emi Koyama (2003) emphasizes how much essentialism can hurt feminist causes in "The Transfeminist Manifesto". Koyama warns us against resorting to essentialism and excluding the identities that do not conform to the binary sex division because they will, in turn, strengthen cultural constructions that victimize people.

Taking everything into account, I use the term gender as an umbrella term which includes all different combinations of one's gender identity, physical and sexual orientation, gender expression, and sex assigned at birth<sup>3</sup>. In addition, I borrow the word *gender-based* from the concept of gender-based violence which can be defined as the violence directed towards particular genders<sup>4</sup>. Gender-based homicides, in this case, are homicides that are committed out of hate and discrimination against most gender identities. I avoid naming which gender identities, in particular, are affected by this crime because the identities of the targets of patriarchy and subjects of feminism

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<sup>3</sup> See a detailed explanation for each different component here:  
<https://transstudent.org/gender/>

<sup>4</sup> See Russo & Pirlott (2006) for different conceptualizations.

is a topic of ongoing discussions<sup>5</sup>. In other words, as gender and sexuality are both understood as spectrums, there is no one word that represents all identities that are under my category, which makes it impossible for me to group them as the targets of gender-based violence. Inclusivity and naming the recipients of this inequality, violence, and crime is extremely important, and limits of our linguistic capacity is constantly expanding, but it also means that a claim for full inclusivity is not realistic yet (or ever). In addition, my data is not broad enough to exemplify all different homicides that can fall under the category of gender-based homicides.

However, I do not claim to include and talk about all different types of gender-based homicides when I use the phrase to talk about some examples of it. What I discuss instead is the gender order and the gendered political and legal institutions that assign some genders as victims and make some others offenders. In this case, I believe that the target of the gender-based homicides is everyone who falls victim to this order and its institutions. Instead of making a hierarchy of victimization among different genders and picking one to talk about, I use the term gender-based homicide to focus on the gender of victimization, not genders of the individual victims.

On the whole, this paper aims to tackle a serious social problem that is gender-based homicides in Turkey by concentrating on the common patterns that appear in individual cases. The recognition of the roots of this problem and the different ways it harms people might be one of the initial steps to take on the way to solve it. As I show that these roots have been growing for decades, it takes more than one step to undo it. In addition, recent events in this context like the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and the public reaction to it are indicators that the controversy around how to address this problem remains a topic of discussion in the country.

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<sup>5</sup> The terms *womxn* in English and *kadın+* in Turkish are some of the suggested concepts whose inclusivity is still being discussed today. It can also be noted that the LGBTQIA+ acronym has many variations, as well.

## 1. STOCK CHARACTERS

The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms defines ‘character’ as “the fictional representation of a person, which is likely to change, both as a presence in literature and as an object of critical attention, much as it changes in society” (Childs & Fowler, 2006, p.23) and adds that it may be the most mimetic term in the critical vocabulary. The mimetic relationship of the characters with ‘real’ people is described as a one-sided imitation in the context of a literary work; therefore, the analysis of the characters focuses on creating a detailed image of who the characters are on the reader’s mind by studying them as elements existing in the context of a plot and in specific settings to understand their motivations, personalities, feelings, and actions. In this section, I will attempt to see both sides of this mimetic relationship not because I think ‘real people’ imitate literary texts<sup>6</sup>, but because I claim that the idealization of certain ‘types’ of individualities creates imaginary stock characters<sup>7</sup>, which end up harming ‘other’ people who cannot live up to them. I will particularly elaborate on the creation of gendered stock characters in Turkey to understand the increasing incidents of gender-based homicides in Turkey.

I will not use gender performances of the particular actors of the cases as a source of my analysis because to me, who they are as people are obscured in the homicide narratives because of the character tropes in which they end up. More precisely, I believe that the incidents of gender-based homicides have become such encounters where gendered performances of masculinity and femininity play a more

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<sup>6</sup> See *anti-mimesis* (Wilde, O., 2017; Adams & Shaw, 1971)

<sup>7</sup> Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines ‘stock character’ as follows: “A stereotyped character easily recognized by readers or audiences from recurrent appearances in literary or folk tradition, usually within a specific genre such as comedy or fairy tale. Common examples include the absent-minded professor, the country bumpkin, the damsel in distress, the old miser, the whore with a heart of gold, the bragging soldier, the villain of melodrama, the wicked stepmother, the jealous husband, and the soubrette.” (Baldick, 2015)

significant role than that of the actual people. Where these people stand in the gender hegemony and the power relation (or tension) in-between is what makes them murderers and victims because the criminal act is regarded as the punishment for the transgression of accepted or ideal gender performances<sup>8</sup>. In line with this, I will later argue that the problematic construction of the ideal forms of femininities and masculinities in Turkey constitutes gendered stock characters that are reiterated and legitimized by the legal and political systems and thus become deadly for women and the LGBTQIA+ people in the country today.

In this section, I will approach these masculine and feminine ideals as stock characters in literature as I believe gender hierarchy benefits from the existence of these stock, and in this case ideal, characters to define what is acceptable and not acceptable, and these characters change and adapt to different periods to ensure the hegemony of the ideals. Feminist literature in Turkey has already problematized some fundamental problems about these characterizations one of the most important which is sexuality and how it forms the character of the ideal citizen. Therefore, I will particularly look at how the characters of ideal men and women have been defined through sexuality since the foundation of modern Turkey to understand the stock characters in gender-based homicide cases.

### **1.1 Construction of the Ideal Woman**

First of all, the meanings and constructions of sexuality in Turkey is the center of the discussion in this section because it is the constant around which womanhood has always been defined in the country. At the beginning of the 20th century and before

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<sup>8</sup> There's no one study to cover the motivations of all gender-based homicides, but femicides everywhere are found to be motivated by sexual or behavioral transgressions. See World Health Organization (2012).

the foundation of the republic, most Ottoman women were responsible for “the well-being of the Ottoman-man” and bearing children (Sirman, 1989). To put it in simpler terms, most women in the Ottoman Empire were prominently identified as mothers and caretakers. Although some educated Ottoman women and men started to speak out for women’s right to education and their poor economic condition with the modernization attempts in the late Ottoman period, they did not seem to question the values like motherhood. (Sirman, 1989; Sancar, 2012). On the contrary, women’s role as mothers was even considered as the key to progress in the middle of the previous century by Young Ottomans, who were a group of young intellectuals, traveled to and interacted with the West and their ideals, as they had the power to educate new generations (Parla, 2001, p.71).

Kandiyoti points out that “the formal emancipation of women” was accomplished with the Republican reforms that took place after the Turkish National Movement and the wars of independence that followed the fall of the empire (1987, p.320). Leading intellectuals of this early modernization period, who were mostly men, recognized the socially backward condition of women as an important obstacle before the construction of this new modern nation-state. Different groups pointed at different reasons as the roots of this condition such as religion, social circumstances, and custom, but they mostly agreed on the need for social transformation and equality to solve it (Sancar, 2012). In this context, the issue of the emancipation of women was addressed “early, explicitly, and extensively” in Turkey with radical reforms such as the adoption of the Turkish Civil Code of 1926, women’s enfranchisement in 1930 (local) and 1934 (national), etc (Kandiyoti, 1987).

However, the new image of the modern Turkish woman did not provide equal citizenship to women because it still rested heavily on motherhood. Sancar defines the Turkish understanding of modernization as a process in which “men were responsible for the foundation of the modern nation-state, whereas women were in charge of the

foundation of modern families and homes” (2012, p.197). In a way, the new Republic allowed and encouraged women to participate in the construction of the new state, but they were given primarily different roles than men. In this context, it is crucial to understand how the duty of motherhood, therefore, constrained “the experience and expression of a distinctive female sexuality” (Parla, 2001, p.73) because the ideal Turkish woman was responsible for defining her sexual being and acts in patriotic service to her country. In this case, what we understand from sexuality as an individual characteristic today was veiled under the notion of patriotic motherhood in the definition of the ideal womanhood during the establishment of Turkish modernization. As a result, the image of an asexual woman was idealized (Parla, 2001; Sancar 2012; Sirman 1989).

In addition to motherhood, values like chastity, virtue, and virginity were also emphasized in the image of the new Turkish woman. The emancipation included a change in the appearance of her, but it did not fully liberate her because her respectability was still ensured with absolute control over her sexuality. Parla claims that women even had to overemphasize their chastity and virtue as the veil was no longer mandatory (2001, p.74-75). In other words, the change in women’s clothing did not release them from the burden of the implications and tensions of their former dress code because women maintained the same traditional ideals of chastity, virtue, and honor in order to participate in the public space comfortably. In a way, they had to prove to themselves and the people around them that they were still “good/pure/virtuous women”. Although none of these ideal values were introduced with the Republican reforms, they remained uncontested in this dramatic social change, and motherhood and chastity were consolidated as the most important features of the ideal Turkish woman.

These features indeed were (and still are) attributed to the ideal Turkish woman, but it is also important to notice that they did not belong to women themselves. In other

words, women could not lay claim to roles like motherhood, chastity, and even virginity because all these terms were defined through their communities such as the family and the nation. For instance, the ideal woman was expected to have children both for her family and for her nation, so the decision was never solely hers. She also had to be docile and well-behaved for her family, or she would bring shame to that family and violate its honor (Kandiyoti, 1987). Virginity was also the ideal woman's responsibility to her family. Until 2004, it was a duty to the state, as well, because the security forces were entitled to ask for virginity examinations when they deemed necessary<sup>9</sup>. In this sense, it is significant to emphasize that the women's liberation movement in the new republic controlled sexuality, and it was not until the 1980s that feminist women started to challenge the ideals of chastity, modesty, and virginity explicitly with campaigns such as "Purple Needle" and "Our Bodies Belong to Us"<sup>10</sup>. As a result of these strong feminist organizations and as a part of Turkey's EU candidacy, the early 2000s witnessed great accomplishments in terms of women's bodily autonomy<sup>11</sup>, but Ahıska (2016) emphasizes that they mostly stayed "on paper" later. In other words, despite the legal regulations that were achieved as a result of women's groups' struggle, they have not been actively implemented in the legal arena and on the state level since. Yeğenoğlu and Coşar (2012) also argue that even those regulations fell short of "involving a substantial interference to gender-based inequality", and the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* / Justice and Development Party) government failed to respond to many other demands coming from the women's movement (pp.182-183).

Zengin summarizes the modern concepts around female sexuality in Turkey and explains that women are still put into one of the three categories that Jones'

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<sup>9</sup> These examinations now require the consent of the women unless it is requested by the court as a part of their investigation (Parla, 2001; Acar & Altunok 2013).

<sup>10</sup> See Parla (2001) and *filmör kadın kooperatifi* (2018).

<sup>11</sup> Changes in the new penal code of 2005. See Özyeğin (2015) and Altınay & Arat (2007).

previously suggested: virgin, mother, or whore. While self-sacrificing mothers, married women, and girls occupy the respectable places in the hierarchy, naughty women, prostitutes, and unmarried women are pushed to the lowest stratum (Zengin, 2011, p.73). In other words, sexuality plays a crucial role in the distinction between different “types” of women in Turkey. These types can easily turn into labels as the Turkish language enables them. In this context, for instance, Özyeğin claims that “a non-virgin unmarried woman has no place in the societal classification” by reminding us of the difference between the words *girl* and *woman* in Turkish (2015, p.47). Unmarried women are referred to as girls (*kız*) because it is considered that their hymen is intact. The word also comes with all the social significations that virginity has historically carried such as purity, goodness, virtue, etc. A girl only becomes a woman when she gets married, and her sexual being can only start and end with a husband. In this sense, female sexuality should not be visible outside of the private space of the home. As Zengin also puts it, Turkish women are expected to “leave their sexuality at home” when they are leaving, and any attempt to violate this code quickly results in labels such as *easy* and *bad* (2011, p.73) for women.

Sexuality continues to be the key determinant of the narrative of ideal womanhood in the country, but it has different motivations for the governing political discourse that is in power since 2002. Acar and Altunok define this discourse of the AKP government as a combination of neoliberalism and neoconservatism and show how they create the ‘politics of intimate’ in Turkey (2012). Their study summarizes how the politics of intimate in Turkey emphasizes the family at the cost of rights-based gender equality. This particular (and ongoing) political discourse is important to illustrate as it continues to characterize ideal femininity through purity, chastity, and motherhood. For instance, in November 2016, President Erdogan explicitly stated his definition of womanhood and said "No matter how successful a woman is, a woman who denies her motherhood, who gives up on looking after the home is incomplete, is

only half, is at risk of losing her uniqueness" (Tüysüz, 2016).<sup>12</sup> He previously stated in 2014 that it is against nature and creation to think of women and men as equals and noted that motherhood is the highest status which cannot be understood by feminists as they do not accept motherhood.<sup>13</sup> As recent as March 8, 2021, he claimed that a woman is a mother first and that they are not going to be fooled by those who present women as individuals without a root and a soul while they are mothers, sisters, wives, daughters, and thus humans ("8 Mart'ta Konuşan Erdoğan: Kadın En Başta Annedir," 2021).<sup>14</sup> All these remarks indicate that the failed ideal of equal citizenship for women at the foundation of Turkey is not even on the political agenda of the country anymore. It is now clearly stated that women cannot be treated as individuals who are equal to men as they are mothers, wives, etc. first.

The significance of motherhood is particularly emphasized in other remarks about abortion and family planning. For instance, in 2012, then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said "I see abortion as murder... There is no difference between killing the child in the mother's womb and killing her after the birth" and "Each abortion is a new Uludere" which he refers to a mass killing of 34 villagers by the Turkish Armed Forces (Ahmadi, 2012). These anti-abortion narratives were repeated for a while by other political figures such as Melih Gökçek, then-mayor of Ankara, who stated a woman who considers abortion should kill herself and not let the child face the consequences of her mistake (Letsch, 2012). Although the practice of abortion is still legal in Turkey, it is strictly discouraged and practically hindered by the government. Medical reports and news published in 2014 and 2015 prove that abortion has become a lot more difficult to obtain (MacFarlane et al., 2016, p.63). It is also important to add that the main opposition parties then (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi —Republican People's

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<sup>12</sup> You can also see a video of the speech on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sreUi-ahVdw>

<sup>13</sup> See the full video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDFRTv-tlms>

<sup>14</sup> Watch the full speech here: <https://youtu.be/0MviAa0bvy8>

Party and Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi—Nationalist Movement Party) did not build strong counterarguments concerning the fundamental issues of freedom or autonomy, either. Rather, they treated abortion as a need for a victimized woman who could either be raped or financially unstable to get an abortion (Karabağlı, 2012; “Devlet Bahçeli’den Kürtaj Yorumu,” 2012).

This emphasis on motherhood and reproduction is dangerous in terms of gender equality because it denies women’s individualism and reinforces the idea of one ideal womanhood. Acar and Altunok highlight that the socio-cultural climate created in the last decade melts away a system of rights-based gender equality in the country as it prioritizes the patriarchal family structure over the individual (2012). In other words, desirable womanhood is constructed through women’s role in the family as a mother and a caregiver, which becomes more important than women as individual subjects. In such an environment, “other” women become less worthy, powerful, and important for the state. When talking about the ‘othering’ of women and sexual minorities today, Kandiyoti (2016) makes a striking comparison of two different incidents including women, and how different ‘types’ of women are treated by the president in these incidents. She mentions the alleged attack on a veiled woman during Gezi protests, which was challenged later, as an incident that enraged the president because one of ‘our sisters’ got hurt by the protesters. However, when another woman was beaten by the police during a protest, the president intended to refer to the survivor in a public meeting and said, “I don’t know whether she was a woman or a girl”. Kandiyoti explains:

Casting aspersions on her virginity, he left his listeners in no doubt that he thought her to be of small virtue, as would be expected from her unseemly, unfeminine behaviour. The message could not be clearer: only the deserving (our sisters) are worthy of protection, the rest, and especially those with the

audacity to break the norms of modesty and protest in public, put themselves in jeopardy. (p. 106)

It is clear in Kandiyoti's analysis that sexuality is actively being used as a tool to divide women into different groups. Glorification of motherhood serves that purpose effectively by creating an ideal and excluding anyone who does not conform to it. "Other" women, therefore, cannot get their equal share of rights especially in their encounters with the state organs.

"The norms of modesty" that Kandiyoti refers to are nothing but the norms of chastity and purity that I previously mentioned. These norms are defined by women's sexual (sometimes only potentially) behavior and strengthen the narrative of the ideal Turkish woman today. I have explained earlier that virginity and sexual activity are the key to define modesty, chastity, purity, etc. Scalco's (2016) study starts a conversation by touching upon the understanding of virginity and female sexuality in Turkey. The article begins with the regional definition of virginity that is closely linked to the articulation of the notion of marriageability because it sets the first flow of blood on the first sexual intercourse on a nuptial night as a cultural ideal. Other traditional practices like the display of the bedsheet after the nuptial night can also be given as a supporting example to the article. This tradition presupposes the absence of penetrative sexual intercourse on the side of the bride, which should be publicly known and approved. The groom's family needs to prove that their bride was and now is worthy of marriage because her hymen was intact before the nuptial night. Moreover, the same article offers fieldwork in Istanbul on pre-marital sexuality and reproductive health. It takes a quick look at the virginity examinations which were legally practiced until 2004 in Turkey and concludes that the notion of virginity and its significance remain unchanged. It is still connected to marriageability, marriage, and family as a constitution. In this sense, the study points out that an unmarried woman is not

recognized as a sexual being by examining the experiences of sexually active women living in Istanbul.

Özyeğin's study (2015) also renders an extensive narrative of the educated young people's understanding of sex and shows how some young women associate their first penetrative sexual encounter with their responsibilities to their parents, particularly to their mothers. Özyeğin's field study includes interviews with people who were born in the 80s in Turkey and who studied at Boğaziçi University, my alma mater, at the time. When I started dating in college, a decade later than the participants in this study, my mom started questioning me about my sex life. She got enraged at the fact that I had one and asked me how I could do it to *them* and whether I had ever considered what it could do to *them*. What she meant was that I owed my virginity to my parents, and I betrayed them by being careless about their values. She was particularly upset as she thought she had failed to teach me right and threatened me by saying that my dad would die of a heart attack if he ever found out. According to her, it was her duty to make sure that I had no sex life before marriage because the opposite would bring shame to our family, especially to my father. My mother also implied so many times that she was devastated now that I was one of the "other" women. Going back to the three types of women to which Zengin refers, I got an update on my category: I was clearly not a mother, nor a virgin; therefore, I was a whore. She never openly named what she thought I was, but she tried to vilify promiscuity at great length. As I heard similar stories from many of my friends in college, I can easily relate to the perception of those young women in Özyeğin's study and say that female sexuality is still controlled in the families through the notions of honor and shame.

What these studies reveal can also be exemplified in some political statements that praise chastity and modesty, one of the most important of which is by the former Deputy PM Bülent Arınç. Speaking during a meeting in 2014, Arınç said:

Chastity ... is an ornament for both women and men. [She] will have chasteness. Man will have it, too. He will not be a womanizer. He will be bound to his wife. He will love his children. [The woman] ... will not laugh in public. She will not be inviting in her attitudes and will protect her chasteness.” (“Women Should Not Laugh in Public, Turkish Deputy PM Says,” 2014)

In these couple of sentences, Arınç briefly summarizes essential characteristics of the ideal women and men. According to his statement, a woman’s chastity lies in her public image, which is sexual. She must be mindful of this sexual image to be chaste; otherwise, her attitudes might be interpreted as inviting. It is important for a woman to “protect her chasteness” because this is mainly about how women protect the honor of their families. Özyeğin (2015) explains how women’s chastity is a code of honor<sup>15</sup> and adds: “Women thus carry the burden of safeguarding group identity and group honor. The female body symbolizes the social boundaries of cultural identities, and virginity ultimately represents the demarcation between in-group and out-group mores” (50). In this sense, the chastity narrative, too, erases women’s subjective identity through sexuality. Just as it is the case in the praise of motherhood, notions like modesty, chastity, and virginity reject women’s agency over their own sexuality by defining and prioritizing its social aspects. Therefore, different groups are created for women, and they are ranked in an order of importance.

Clearly, these ideals do not necessarily define or designate how all women live and behave in Turkey. It is important to understand that the idealization of certain characters does not explain the behavior of people, but it defines a bigger discourse that

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<sup>15</sup> It is crucial to remember that the concept of ‘honor’ has many different uses and conceptualizations. Sirman (2014) explains that “we need to understand honour as something that is done as opposed to something that is. In other words, honour does not refer to a rule that is applied but a concept that has many uses” (p.4). That’s why she argues that honor is “a root paradigm that allows a doing, that is, a performative act, can be and is used to change and/or give a particular direction to existing social relations” (p.5). See Sirman (2014) for an overview of different accounts.

categorizes and segregates people according to gendered values. Here, the line we can trace along different periods is that of the same values that are consistently highlighted. These values, I claim, are mostly constructed around the concepts of motherhood, chastity, and modesty for the character of the ideal woman.

## **1.2 Ideal Men and Hegemonic Masculinity in Turkey**

This gender order does not only create different and unequal categories for womanhood, but it ranks all different gender identities in an order of power and importance. Although a part of this structure can be understood by resorting to the concept of patriarchy and its various definitions (Millett, 1969; Mitchell, 1974; Eisenstein, 1979; Beechey, 1979), relatively recent critical studies on masculinities offer helpful notions to make better sense of how all gender identities are associated in a hierarchy, one of the most important of which is the concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’.

Hegemonic masculinity was initially conceptualized as “a founding paradigm” in the 1980s by Connell who also explained how the concept legitimized gender inequality (Günay-Erkol, 2018). Connell and Messerschmidt later described this initial definition as “the pattern of practice (things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue” (2005, p.832) in a new article. The initial framework of hegemonic masculinity suggests that some actions define an ideal of dominant masculinity, and they maintain men’s dominance over women. The later article particularly emphasizes that it is more accurate to put emphasis on relationality and gender hierarchy instead of arguing for the global dominance of men over women. In this context, it suggests that new research should pay more attention to “the practices of women and the historical interplay of femininities and masculinities” (p.848). It also proposes that hegemonic masculinities

can be studied at the local, regional, and global levels in order to recognize the importance of different cultures. Yet, hegemonic masculinity at the regional or national level can still be singular despite local differences because local models usually overlap (p.850). Following Connell's framework, it is possible to study how an ideal form of masculinity is constructed at the society-wide level in relation to that of femininity despite the coexistence of abundant and conflicting roles of masculinity in Turkey (Günay-Erkol 2018).

Although there are other defining features, I would like to understand the construction of the ideal and hegemonic masculinity in terms of the relationship between sexuality and individuality in Turkey to make sense of the "interplay of femininities and masculinities" (Connell, 2005, p.848). Critical masculinity studies have previously shown that the founders of the republic set the ideal for manhood in the foundation of Turkey, and the features that the military represented defined the ideal Turkish man as a soldier (Sancar, 2012; Açiksöz, 2017). Recent studies, on the other hand, assert that the powerful image of the military started to fade away after the 2000s (Özbay, 2013), and it got seriously damaged after the coup attempt of 2016 (Açiksöz, 2017). Today's gender hegemony and hegemonic masculinity are claimed to be mostly influenced by the neoliberal economic and political discourse starting from the early 2000s (Özbay 2010, 2011, 2013; Kandiyoti 2016). Although changing political discourse affects certain features of hegemonic masculinity, the emphasis on its performance can be claimed to stay the same by looking at the traditional displays of masculinity. Günay-Erkol expresses that the critical masculinity studies in Turkey began to emphasize the performativity of masculinity at the beginning of the 2000s which defines masculinity as a principle that needs to be proved to others (Atay, 2004) (2018, p.23). Kandiyoti, too, previously drew attention to the 'acquirement' of masculinity (1987) which results in a need to earn the title and prove it repeatedly.

This need for constant verification stands in striking contrast with the definition of ideal femininity because the ideal for masculinity is an active individual agent. I have already stated that the different ‘types’ of women are defined through motherhood, chastity, and virginity, all of which ignore women’s agency over these features. In this sense, when women challenge the moral code, it is not their own femininity that is mainly at stake; it might be their ‘honor’ which is ultimately not their own but their families’. When it comes to the ideal men, however, gendered action by engaged actors to prove their masculinity becomes a necessity. This necessity underlies the various public displays of gaining or regaining masculinity as a value, such as male circumcision and soldier send-off ceremonies, marriage and reproduction, and even the broadcast of gender-based violence, and it is mainly threatened by LGBTQIA+ visibility and homosexuality.

To illustrate one of the ceremonies, male circumcision is a religious and cultural practice, and it is widely celebrated as the first step towards manhood and male adulthood in Turkey. In the celebration ceremony, the circumcised child wears a special costume with a crown and scepter, and some other symbols of power can also be included like the Turkish flag. Taşıtman and Toksoy’s study (2015) on the circumcision ceremonies in Turkey underlines how different masculinity discourses are blended in the ritual. It states that manhood is an essential ideal on which Turkey was founded, which indicated strength, courage, and audacity. As the ceremony is a rite of passage from childhood to manhood, the circumcised child is framed as being tried with pain to prove these ideal characteristics. Taşıtman and Toksoy note that “The masculine words which form these virtues are uttered to the male child repeatedly during the circumcision feast” (p. 168). As a result, the child acquires manhood which also comes with its social significance.

In accordance with this study, these ceremonies can be contextualized as one of the earliest and most intense means to teach boys the various connotations of ideal

manhood in the country. These connotations include courage, resilience, independence, and endurance to pain, all of which are assumed to belong to the world of grown-up men. In this sense, it has always been particularly interesting for me to process that all these attributions to masculinity are made due to tissue removal from a penis of a child. I cannot help but compare this ceremony with periods and the virginity myth.

I immediately compare the circumcision rituals with the first time I had my period for three reasons. First, people who have periods are told that they become “young girls” (*genç kız*) with their first period in Turkey, so it is considered as the transition from childhood to adolescence. In this case, younger boys can become strong, brave, and manly men (*erkek adam*) with the circumcision, but girls do not become women because of the signification of the two words (*kız-kadın*) to which I referred earlier. It is not only that becoming or being a woman is not associated with these positive attributes, the transition to womanhood in the language is also signified by marriage and sex with men. It is almost as if both subjectivities were defined through male genitalia, but individuality is granted only to the one who has it. Second, I’ve been comparing the two incidents since I was a kid because my mom threw me a party when I got my first period as she saw the parallel between the two incidents and found this sexist discrimination unfair. Third, most people who get periods possibly deal with cramps and other issues that make them uncomfortable every month of most of their lives, but characteristics like strength, resilience, and endurance are rarely attributed to them because of it. On the contrary, they are usually shamed and discouraged from talking about their periods.

Furthermore, it is also comparable to virginity because women are subjected to punishment (social and sometimes physical) when a tissue on their body stretches or tears the first time they have penetrative sex if they are unmarried. In the simplest terms, the narratives around female genitalia and sexuality told to girls are far from having empowering connotations like the ones that surround children who are

circumcised, and the inequity becomes evident with such comparisons. Besides, the implication of the beginning of a strong individuality that is intended to come with the public celebration of circumcision and manhood is not granted to girls at any point in their lives, and there's no celebration of/for womanhood in Turkish culture. The closest and most celebrated events could be weddings and childbirth, which, I have shown, have not necessarily signified individuality.

In addition to being unfair to the children who are not celebrated for their genitalia, this early performance of masculinity teaches circumcised kids how to be “a proper man” in Turkey. The values for which they are celebrated in the ceremony make up most of what they are later held accountable for. In this case, most kids that are born with a penis in Turkey learn through the circumcision ceremony and usually until the age of 12 (Sev'er 2012, p.78; Taşıtman & Toksoy, 2015, p.163) that they become strong, brave, and resilient. Secondly, they also publicly acquire these values with an audience, so they recognize at an early age that their masculinity should be observable and controllable as a part of their public performance. Third, all that they learn is immediately attached to their sexuality as their circumcised sexual organs open the doors to the ideal form of manhood. In this way, the ceremony connects the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity to sexuality with a crucial emphasis on public performance.

On top of all that, we must remember that hegemonic masculinity is a normative ideal, and only a minority of men can actually enact it. In this sense, it is important to understand that hegemonic masculinity does not define actions of a particular gender identity because it is not exclusive to certain bodies. Instead, the term refers to a conceptual standard set for men which creates a hierarchy to dominate everyone. Therefore, anyone except the small minority that potentially fits the ideal can be subjugated by hegemonic masculinity. In this sense, the comparisons I made can also

include various other sexual identities as the ideal defines all the other masculinities and femininities in relation to itself in order to secure its place in the gender hierarchy.

Although the notion of hegemonic masculinity is flexible and does not refer to an ahistorical essence that can be applied to all cultures, scholars draw attention to the fact that heterosexuality is the one thing that is usually essential to the concept (Connell, 1992; Özbay, 2013; Eslen Ziya, 2016). In the article where Özbay goes after hegemonic masculinity in Turkey, he emphasizes that the gender order in Connell's framework allows all masculinities to become hegemonic under proper circumstances, except for homosexual men. The hierarchy depends so strongly on the hegemony of heterosexuality, it almost automatically leaves homosexual men out of it. Özbay's article (2013) asserts the following:

Heterosexuality, as a political structure that creates gender identity, is more robust than any other categorical power structures that shape and differentiate plural masculinities (including race) and has a higher potential for hegemony, normativity, and rule-setting than any of them. (p. 201)

Then, it would not be wrong to conclude that homosexual men are the ultimate 'other' that hegemonic masculinity creates, which yields to different intersections in Turkey where the emphasis on the heterosexual family is of utmost importance. The emphasis the president himself puts on the family has recently gone so far that he coined the term "famiarchal" to define the social structure of the Turkish nation ("Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Ailenin Temeline Dinamit Koyan Hiçbir Düzenleme Meşru Değildir," 2020), which does not only characterize and limit femininities. As a continuation of the narrative of motherhood and reproduction, the foundation of this structure assigns the heterosexual family as an ideal. The ideal man is pictured as someone who is married to a woman and who has children. It is a picture of a family man, and it is encouraged as an extension of the same family politics that encourages women to bear three kids and avoid birth control ("Turkey's Erdogan Says Women

Who Reject Motherhood ‘Incomplete,’” 2016). In a way, when heterosexual families are praised, promoted, and idealized at this level, it already defines heterosexual men as the best agent to embody and perform masculinity.

Recent studies on and about homosexual men in Turkey indicate that homophobia and sexual prejudice is widely internalized, and it sets the standard for hegemonic masculinity. For instance, a recent study on young boys’ experience with gymnastics in Turkey enables us to see how parents assign gender to sports (Kavasoglu and Alakurt, 2021). Heterosexual families in the study whose kids do gymnastics do not consider the activity as unsuitable to them as kids, but they don’t believe their kids can grow up to be elite gymnasts, either. Instead, they express interest for their kids to be engaged in traditionally masculine sports like soccer. Furthermore, wearing tights in gymnastics and ballet is regarded as feminine; therefore, it is avoided either by the kids or the parents. Parents also express that their concerns are in line with the gender stereotypes in the country by which they mainly refer to homophobia. Therefore, the study makes it clear that certain physical activities and clothes which are considered feminine can be dangerous as they can make their kids look less masculine. In this way, masculinity is not only strictly defined through what it is not, but it also needs to be constantly visible in actions and clothing. This strict binary lays the foundations of homophobia and sexual prejudice, and it defines the ideal man as the opposite of the ideal woman.

This pattern of anti-effeminacy also appears in another study that interviews gay men in Turkey (Eslen Ziya & Koç, 2016). Almost all participants are found to define masculinity with heterosexual norms and express a strong aversion to effeminate behavior of other gay men. Some of them also openly state that they consider femininity as inadequacy and effeminacy of men improper. In other words, gay men who participated in this study internalized a sexual prejudice towards other gay men who do not display enough masculine features. The core of the problem here seems to

be with the visibility of effeminate or non-heterosexual features and behavior because Hocaoglu has found that gay men in his research think it is possible to live as homosexual men as long as you are closeted (Boratav, 2006). In other words, if they seem and act like heterosexual men in public, they are not considered 'less of a man'. This adds another layer to my previous discussion on the acquisition of masculinity because according to the participants of this study, the ideal masculinity performance is not threatened by homosexuality in and of itself. It is the 'inappropriate' (effeminate and/or non-heterosexual) public gender performance that is disturbing. Therefore, constant public approval of heterosexual masculinity seems to guarantee the ideal masculinity performance.

On the other hand, the visibility of non-heterosexual gender performances and their symbols become a threat for hegemonic masculinity for the same reason. Recent incidents like Turkey's withdrawal from Istanbul Convention and the reactions to Boğaziçi Resistance are the most recent examples of how disruptive and threatening the visibility of other identities can be for the dominant politics of heterosexual family. Women's rights activists and different feminist associations have been organizing campaigns in the last years to protest the recent peak in femicides which are argued to be motivated by the lack of effective law enforcement<sup>16</sup>. They argued that Istanbul Convention, a European Council treaty to combat gender-based violence and homicides, has been disregarded in court in homicide cases although Turkey was legally bound by it. They demanded the implementation of the convention and law number 6284, in particular. When gender-based violence and homicides kept rising, the protests got a wider audience, and it also made the protesters more visible. As gender-based violence and homicides target women and LGBTQIA+ people alike, people from all sexual orientations and gender identities protested them.

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<sup>16</sup> See <http://kadincinayetlerinidurduracagiz.net/for-english>

However, the visibility of queer activists and people was interpreted as “an attack to normalize homosexuality”, and Turkey withdrew from the convention with a presidential decree issued at night. According to the statement published by the Directorate of Communications, the convention, which “originally intended to promote women’s rights, was hijacked by a group of people attempting to normalize homosexuality – which is incompatible with Türkiye’s social and family values.” (*Statement Regarding Türkiye’s Withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention*, 2021). In other words, the convention is claimed to have been designed to protect women only, but it is now realized that it protects everyone including LGBTQIA+ people, which conflicts with Turkey’s intentions. This statement is a clear indication of how gender identities are defined and ranked in the country today. Homosexuality is openly declared to be inappropriate by the government in the context of a convention that combats gender-based violence because it was designed to protect all victims of this type of violence. Therefore, gender-based violence is limited to violence against women, and the LGBTQIA+ community was condemned.

In the same weeks, pride flags were criminalized in Boğaziçi protests. Protests at Boğaziçi University started after the appointment of a new rector, who is neither elected nor known by the constituents of the institution, by the President with another decree at night. Boğaziçi academics, alumni, and students have been protesting since February 2021 (BIA News Desk, 2021). During the protests, many students have been detained because they carried the LGBTQIA+ flags (Korkmaz, 2021b), which has no legal grounds. The new Boğaziçi University administration also launched a disciplinary investigation into a student who opened an LGBTQIA+ flag at the main gate of the school (Tar, 2021). The LGBTQIA+ Studies Club (BULGBTI+) was closed as one of the first things after the appointment, and the club room was attacked afterwards (Korkmaz, 2021a). In these examples, the symbols of different gender and sexual identities are clearly regarded as dangerous by the police forces and the school

administration. None of the people carrying the flags were arrested or got fined as there was no real criminal activity, but these incidents happened around the same time with the withdrawal from Istanbul Convention. Both cases are motivated by the same attitude that openly denounces and criminalizes LGBTQIA+ community.

It is no coincidence that homosexuality is the ultimate ‘other’ of hegemonic masculinity and the visibility and existence of the LGBTQIA+ community is ostracized in the country today. If the ideal man should consistently display different representations of heterosexual masculinity to secure its hegemony, the recognition of nonnormative masculinity performances becomes a challenge. The fact that this challenge is interpreted as “incompatible with Turkey’s family values” also proves that the hegemony is mainly built upon the heterosexual family. Then, the family is a key determinant of the ideal masculinities and femininities alike. In this context, Coşar and Yeğenoğlu (2011) explain how family institution is utilized by the neoliberal and neoconservative thought as the moral pillar of society in the world. For instance, the authors note that in the US and UK, which are the models of Turkey’s interpretation of the neoliberal system, feminists were attacked and held responsible for the corruption of the nuclear family. Their claims were matched with the “rights-based policies of the social/welfare state [which were] regarded as the castration of the male head of the household” (p.560). In other words, the denigration of the rights-based policies and thoughts can be considered as a pattern that repeats in neoliberal systems. The same study also categorizes the ruling political party’s (AKP- *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* / Justice and Development Party) gender policy as “neoliberal-conservative patriarchy”. In this case, pitting the feminist discourse and the LGBTQIA+ community against the family in the last years in Turkey can be interpreted as a local variation of a global discourse.

The most recent example of this face-off took place when President Erdoğan, who previously expressed there was no such thing as LGBT, has said “Let's not worry

about what lesbians, mesbians say. Let's look at our mothers. The pillar of the family is the mother” (Kaos GL, 2021) and therefore implied a tension in-between. Positioning motherhood against lesbianism resonates with the hierarchy of ideal womanhood, repeats the same pattern of ideal women (a virtuous mother) versus “other” women, and excludes the LGBTQIA+ community from the ideal family portrait. Therefore, the narrative of the heterosexual family sets the ideal for all genders, and it casts most of them aside.

The categorization and ostracization of “other” forms of masculinities and femininities also fits into the populist narrative of “us” vs. “them”. Yabancı (2016) explains that the populist discourse that is followed by many political actors in the world depends on the rejection of alternative identities that do not conform to the dominant identity of the electoral majority. These alternative or other identities are demonized as divisive. In this sense, populism is anti-plural, too, as the dominance of the electoral majority is framed as people’s sovereignty. In the case of Turkey, the author states that the anti-establishment claims of the AKP was what their populism depended on at first. After 2010, however, it was replaced by “the tradition of a Turkish-Islamic synthesis” (p. 599). In this case, this constructed antagonism between the alternative gender performances and “our mothers”, “our values”, or “our family” serves for AKP’s populism as these concepts like motherhood and family are defined and legitimized within that synthesis. In other words, the demonization of nonideal femininities and masculinities also frames them as outsiders and therefore not legitimate, rights-bearing, or equal citizens.

How masculinities and femininities are defined and ranked in Turkey informs this paper because it designates the dynamics of ideal victimhood in the femicide cases that I will discuss in the following section. In this section, I focused on the impact of the understanding of sexuality and how it shapes the gendered characterization of womanhood and manhood to discuss that it shapes both ideals with different

implications. For ideal femininity, this character can be roughly framed with the emphasis on motherhood and chastity. I will further argue that this frame seems to be evoked in public femicide cases to legitimize and rank different categories of womanhood, which has dictated the legal processes in such cases. On the other hand, heterosexuality and public demonstration of masculinity are the values that are prominent for the ideal masculinity in relation to sexuality. Attempts and failures to follow these ideals motivates the narratives of the gender-based homicide cases I will elaborate on next.



## 2. SUMMARY & ANALYSIS OF THE CASES

In the previous discussion on the stock masculine and feminine characters, I particularly addressed how they are constructed by sexuality because its implications seem to be definitive in the gender-based homicides cases I will analyze in this section. I am going to focus on three recent femicide cases in comparison to two older cases in which the interplay of ideal femininities and masculinities come to surface either in the statements in court or in the public reactions and designate the severity of the punishment. To this end, I will discuss the femicides of Aylin Sözer, Şule Çet, and Pınar Gültekin in relation to that of Özgecan Arslan and Münevver Karabulut to argue that the judicial proceedings lead to consolidation of these ideal characters of femininities and masculinities by depending on them for judgement. In addition, all cases are signified with extreme violence, so the comparison of the relatively more recent cases with older ones also reveals that brutality in femicides that became a serious concern after Karabulut and Arslan's cases remains a crucial aspect today. Therefore, I will demonstrate the relationship between some types of masculinities and femininities and violence to argue that the practice of creating and reiterating these ideals is dangerous.

Following the same literary perspective, I will particularly analyze the narratives of and on these homicide cases. These narratives are created by mainstream and online sources of information such as newspapers, news bulletins, and social media. These sources do not reveal all the reports, documents, or testimonials that are included in the legal processes; therefore, I do not offer a discourse analyses on how original legal texts or news articles construct these character ideals. In other words, I do not claim to analyze the articles that appear in these sources themselves. What I am interested in instead is to understand the narratives around these cases from the perspective of the public as this perspective makes up the audience to whom the offenders are talking. To be more clear, I argue that the perpetrators know that public

reaction has a decisive role in public cases like femicides, so they use these character tropes to make a good impression of themselves and vilify the victims. That has been proved to be an effective strategy as none of the incidents has witnesses and legal investigations mainly cover the statements of the criminals and evidence from the crime scenes. That is why the statements of the criminals are designed very similarly to a fictional text in favor of them, and the trials become a performance ground for the ideal masculinities and dangerous/bad/wicked femininities.

One of the most popular ways the murderers have used to manipulate the femicide narratives is to use provocation defense. Müftüler-Baç and Müftüler (2020) explain that existing legal texts in use today are appropriate for sentencing the criminals in femicide cases in Turkey. Yet how judges interpret the evidence is heavily influenced by social norms, and they have the option to reduce the sentences of the murderers using open ended clauses like provocation defense (*haksız tahrik savunması*). Unjust provocation is defined in Turkish Penal Code Article No.29 as a condition that reduces the sentence if the crime is committed in a state of severe distress caused by an unjust act of the victim<sup>17</sup>. According to Müftüler-Baç and Müftüler's article, in gender-based violence cases, this article is used as a defense by the murderers, and it depends on the assertion that the victim's behavior prior to the incident led the perpetrator to commit the crime. What constitutes provocation is not exactly defined, and the study proves that the Criminal Courts and Courts of Cassation, which are the main legal arenas trying femicide cases, subjectively interpret the victims' behavior by resorting to social norms for proper or ideal female behavior. In other words, how the existing laws are implemented in femicides is affected by the representation of ideal gender roles.

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<sup>17</sup> [https://www.legislationline.org/download/id/6453/file/Turkey\\_CC\\_2004\\_am2016\\_en.pdf](https://www.legislationline.org/download/id/6453/file/Turkey_CC_2004_am2016_en.pdf)  
p.10

The study illustrates multiple cases in which provocation defense was used in a way to question and criticize the victim's womanhood. Faults found and interpreted as provocation differ greatly, which include leaving the house and going somewhere without permission, noncompliance with the husband's requests, cheating, not cooking food, etc. Therefore, it is pointed out that provocation defense rests on the feelings of "despair, grief, and anger" in men because of these initial acts (p.8). If the courts decree that the victim woman acted outside of the cultural norms of femininity and upset the defendant, they accept the provocation defense as an extenuating circumstance in the crime.

The application of provocation defense and other subjective and gendered legal practices such as good conduct deduction in sentences and lack of rigorous investigations in gender-based homicide cases allow male justice (*erkek adalet*) to replace real justice (*gerçek adalet*), which has been protested by feminist organizations in Turkey<sup>18</sup>. That is why the perpetrators aim for a discourse that would help the public sympathize with them instead of the victim. Public opinion in such public cases also has great importance in terms of the pressure it puts on the judges; therefore, public images of the sides of such cases are carefully composed. In these circumstances, the defendants are given room to play with the roles of ideal manhood and womanhood in their statements. As it might allow them to receive lenient sentences, they include details that would create an image of a wicked, loose, unstable, and troubled woman as opposed to a favorable, decent, innocent, and masculine man. These details and categorizations rest on the stock characters discussed in the previous chapter.

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<sup>18</sup> See different news articles and protests in which the motto is used (*Erkek adalet değil gerçek adalet istiyoruz*) <https://www.ihd.org.tr/erkek-adalet-degil-gercek-adalet-istiyoruz/>, <https://indigodergisi.com/2020/11/adalet-istiyoruz-erkek-adalet-degil-gercek-adalet/>, <https://www.birgun.net/haber/erkek-adalet-degil-gercek-adalet-290660>, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/melis-alphan/erkek-adalet-degil-gercek-adalet-istiyoruz-40782510>

## 2.1 Aylin Sözer's Case and the Image of a Wicked and Mad Woman

One of the most recent examples of these character representations can be observed in the case of a university professor, Aylin Sözer, who was murdered in December 2020. When the case first appeared, it was reported in the mainstream news sources that Sözer was killed by her boyfriend, Kemal Ayyıldız, who is a married man and whom she met on social media. The murderer stated that they were together for ten years, and they casually met on the day of the murder. When he was asked to give a statement about how the incident took place, he claimed that Sözer got enraged when he told her he was going to spend New Year's with his children. Finding out that he was not going to be with her, she attempted to attack him with a knife. The murderer defended himself, killed her, and burned the body. However, a couple of days later, people who knew Sözer spoke up through social media, and their claims were completely different from the way the murderer reported it. They explained that Sözer met the murderer for the first time when she contacted him, a carpenter, to have a new bookcase. They asserted that the murderer probably killed Aylin Sözer because she refused to pay the excessive amount of money he asked for the piece of furniture. It was also found out that the murderer tried to steal Sözer's jewelry, and he attempted to transact a huge amount of money from her account to his (*Aylin Sözer: İstanbul Maltepe'de Öldürülen Akademisyenin Katil Zanlısı Kemal Ayyıldız Tutuklandı*, 2020; *Aylin Sözer Cinayetinde Son Dakika: Baba Ayhan Sözer'den "İlişki" Açıklaması*, 2021; F. Zengin, 2020). The case has not concluded yet, but the differences between the two scenarios are intriguing in terms of the characters and the relationship it portrays.

The construction of the murderer's statement in Sözer's case is interesting because all the details help create a scenario where power relations publicly justify the murderer's masculinity over the victim's femininity. First of all, the victim is an

unmarried woman, and the perpetrator is a married man. In terms of the power dynamics that are cultivated by gendered ideals and the heterosexual family, the murderer can already be claimed to have a more favorable position in the gender hierarchy. More importantly, the defendant reports that he has been dating the victim for years as opposed to the plaintiff that states no such connection exists. This difference in the statements show that the acquaintance of the victim and the perpetrator is important for the messages they are going to give to the public and judges.

I suggest that the image that is being presented in the murderer's statement invokes the *femme fatale* (or fatal woman) archetype of Western arts and literature. Roughly, this figure represents a mysterious and dangerous woman who can trick, manipulate, and seduce men, and she is as old as Eve or Lilith (Hanson & O'Rawe, 2010)<sup>19</sup>. One of the most common traits of the *femme fatale* figure is her enigmatic sexual allure. This character appears in the arts and literature of many countries, and in Turkey, it can be claimed to take the shape of the women who refuse to conform to the chastity and modesty ideal of womanhood that I explained in the previous chapter. These "types" of women are most prominently represented in *Yeşilçam*, cinema of Turkey, as the bad/wicked women (*kötü kadın*) figures. The wicked women of *Yeşilçam* are characterized as women who are assertive, have high self-esteem, and have casual sex, as opposed to the innocent/good women who are loyal, self-sacrificing, chaste, and even asexual (Paça Cengiz 2020; Kaymal 2020). Although *Yeşilçam* movies were more popular between the 50s and 70s, they still stream on TV and continue to be a part of the culture.

In this case, this is the same opposition between the characterization of the ideal vs. other women I previously discussed, and it also connects to the *femme fatale* figure

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<sup>19</sup> Hanson and O'Rawe (2010) also state that it only became a type in Western literature and art in the late 19th century.

with its special emphasis on sexuality. To be more clear, what is common between this figure and the wicked women of *Yesilçam* is that they represent and vilify women who have agency over their sexuality. They both code a woman who can decide on their sexual activity as bad and dangerous. In a murder case like Aylin Sözer's in Turkey, claiming that the victim, who is a single woman, potentially is sexually active might be a reason for the public and the judge to think less of her. Moreover, it is important that the murderer's statement frames this relationship of possibly sexual nature between a married man and an unmarried woman. Because of the attributions to the family and categories of womanhood, it becomes more likely to blame a woman for seducing a married man than blaming the man who is cheating in the public eye. This is how the categories of ideal womanhood and manhood in Turkey are further consolidated with references to fictional female stock characters in the murderer's statement. In this way, this constructed narrative attempts to shift the focus and blame on the victim by resorting to the ideals of femininity in the hope of justifying criminal behavior. Therefore, these details can be claimed to be added in order to create an image through which the victim appears dangerous, and her behavior appears provocative so that the murderer can seem less guilty.

The second detail in the murderer's statement is that the victim gets very angry, loses her temper, and attacks him, which is an allusion to another female archetype that is the hysterical or mad woman. The image of an uncontrollable and unstable woman can be traced back to ancient texts. Gilman et al. (1993) explains that these character traits have long been believed to be caused by uterus, and "a misogynistic sexual stigma" appeared in many literary works especially in the 19th century. In ancient times, hysterical behavior was considered to be caused by the womb. In later centuries, a shift in the source of this behavior slightly changed and moved from the body to the mind. In other words, what was previously considered as a physiological condition started to appear as a psychological one. Although the actual source of this condition

changed through time, the assumption of an essential connection between sex/gender and certain roles and behavior did not. Therefore, it would simply be naive to leave this long history of assumptions out of the murderer's accusation in this case. As a way to argue for his innocence, the murderer chooses to affiliate the victim with a historically famous sexist assumption and creates this image of a hysterical woman. When the woman's condition seems problematic, and the story raises as many questions for the victim as for the murderer, the murderer can hope that his self-defense argument seems more reliable to the judges and the public.

It is possible to assert that the murderer's statement does not only play with sexist social definitions of the victim's femininity, but it also makes use of traditional roles of masculinity as a way to create a familiar public character for himself. While having a relationship with a married man is considered a shame for the victim, having a family with kids helps the criminal's image due to the importance given to the heterosexual family. The previous chapter discussed how family politics constrain a rights-based system of rights. In this context, this role of a family man implies stability, reliability, security, and public approval in the country. Bolak Boratav, Okman Fişek, and Eslen Ziya's research on Turkish masculinities (2017) proves that being a good family man/father is the main feature of masculinity that is being taught to young men in Turkish families (p.254). The study also shows how masculinity is learned in the family through interactions with the immediate family members. Therefore, being a good family man brings ideal masculinity for the murderer while the victim upsets the norms of ideal womanhood. Furthermore, the statement of the murderer includes a detail that puts him in a place where he prefers his kids and family over the victim, and this particular detail is referred to as what led to conflict. In this case, the murderer draws a portrait in which he is the head of the family and an affectionate father who wants to spend time with his children, whereas the victim appears as the antagonist that tries to stop him.

The building blocks of the story like the fact that he is acting outside of this publicly acclaimed bond of marriage by cheating and that he committed a terrible murder become less significant for a number of reasons. First, he is regarded as more favorable in the society in comparison to a single woman due to the associations that come with his roles as a man, a husband, and a father, which basically is his privilege. Second, being sexually active outside of marriage is allowed, normalized, and sometimes encouraged for men in Turkey. Sancar (2012) discusses how prostitution is legitimized on the grounds that sexual activity is men's physical need (p.268). Third, when his privilege and profile make the power balance work in his favor, his allegations for self-defense become more convincing. Therefore, the murderer uses all these symbols and images in order to speak to his target audience and benefit from the existing system of unequal gender relations. He and his lawyers know that the judges in court would think less of the victim if she's having an affair with a married man, if she lets him into her apartment, if she has lost her temper, etc. They would also think better of him if he has an established life with a marriage and kids and wants to prioritize them over his affair. In this way, the murderer can even get away with the crime if he also dresses up nicely and acts in a decent way in court.

## **2.2 Şule Çet's Case and the Question of Personal Agency**

Keeping these patterns in mind, the second femicide I will talk about is of a young woman's, Şule Çet, whose case is not only important due to how the murderers create their statements, but it also exemplifies women's lack of agency over their sexuality. Şule Çet was a student at Gazi University. She was also working part-time in a company, but she had been laid off on the day of murder. One of her managers, Çağatay Aksu, later invited her to his office to talk. Çet met Çağatay Aksu and his friend Berk Akand that night, and her body was found dead on the street the next

morning. Although the initial evidence indicated signs of sexual harassment, the case was first identified as a “fall.” The murderers initially reported the incident as a suicide. The main suspects with whom Şule Çet was that night were not arrested. It was only after a year that Çet’s friends asked for help on Twitter by using the name of Şule Çet’s brother. As so many people reacted to it, the details of the case and the judicial process also became public. One and a half years later and with the help of a big public campaign, the police investigation ended. In the end, it was proved that the victim was raped and thrown out of the window from the 20th floor, and the case concluded. Şule Çet’s case was notable because it was reopened and the defendants were sentenced to heavy punishments thanks to feminist campaigns on social media platforms, mainly on Twitter<sup>20</sup>.

In the previous section, I argued that women’s liberation in Turkey has not included their sexuality. Women’s agency over their own bodies has not been recognized since the foundation of the republic. When I compared the two different rites of passage into adulthood for girls and boys, I also noted that adulthood and personal agency seem to be granted to men only and with public ceremonies. I chose Şule Çet’s case particularly because the defendants and their lawyer attempted to make moral allegations about Şule Çet multiple times during the trials to create a wicked woman out of her. What these allegations prove instead is that the victim’s agency is denied, and she is questioned and blamed over and over again because of that.

For instance, during the second trial of the case, one of the murderers told Şule Çet’s father that he should have taken better care of his daughter (Alan, 2019), which has implications on multiple layers. To begin, one of the first few details of the incident was that the victim met her boss and his friend in their office in the evening. A scandalous forensic report in the case file also stated that if a woman agreed to drink

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<sup>20</sup>See <https://twitter.com/suleicinadalet>

with two men in a hidden corner (referring to the office room), it can be interpreted as her having consented to sexual intercourse<sup>21</sup>. The murderer's statement, therefore, might have questioned the victim's intentions in meeting with them that evening. Although he denied any sort of sexual intimacy and the allegations of rape, he still wanted to imply that the victim was open to such an intercourse, which should be a shame for an unmarried woman. Furthermore, the murderer built his statement on the assumption that Şule's father should have been responsible for her actions, and this came as an attack on the father of the victim. Therefore, the statement actually reads that if he took better care of her daughter, she would not end up drinking together and having sex with men.

In this case, the murderer's sentence is problematic in terms of how it designates ideal men and women at the same time. First of all, the murderer claims that he had no sexual intercourse with the victim, but he tries to despise her and her father by implying that the victim was open or willing to it because she was a sexually active unmarried woman. Considering the categories of womanhood discussed in the previous chapter, what he insinuates is not consent but promiscuity. Besides, sexual consent requires a performative speech act rather than a state of mind. Therefore, it cannot be something the victim thought of but something she did (Archard, 1997). In this sense, intentions and other actions than saying yes to something is not consent. However, the murderer frames his statement in a way that considers the two notions equal as he ignores the victim's capacity to give open consent and resorts to intentions rather than statements. It is significant because the main principle of sexual consent is bodily autonomy, which signifies the agency to decide what to do with your own body (Popova, 2019, p. 13-14). Therefore, when he assumes that victim's possible promiscuity implies consent

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<sup>21</sup> See the report here: <https://twitter.com/suleicinadalet/status/1089801374433533954?s=20>  
Also note that the forensic expert was suspended from work for six months after this.

but not her statements, he does not only try to categorize the victim as someone who leads a profligate life, but he also denies her personal autonomy and agency.

When I showed how virginity, chastity, and modesty constitute the building blocks of ideal womanhood in Turkey, the difference between a girl and a woman and between circumcision ceremonies and periods were striking. I mentioned that while a boy's transition to adulthood is signified with a test of his manhood, womanhood can only be gained by marital penetrative sex. My main goal in that discussion was to point out that women could not claim for individuality because their transition depended on their sexual activity that can only start with marriage. So, if an adult woman cannot possess her personal agency over her body until she gets married, who does? The murderer's attack on the father illustrates that the men in the family to whom women are closely related such as fathers, brothers, uncles, etc. are mainly responsible for the sexuality of unmarried women. In other words, he assumes that women's sexuality and therefore individuality passes from the men in the family to a husband, which is in line with my earlier point on how nonconforming sexual behavior of women dishonor her family. It can also be exemplified with how honor killings are committed in Turkey. Fathers and other close male relatives have a right to punish women who deviate from the norms of sexual honor for women. Husbands also assume the task after marriage (Sev'er & Yurdakul, 2001).

Bolak Boratav et. al.'s research (2017) on Turkish masculinities has a section on love, marriage, and sexuality, which has striking examples in this regard. In that section, a sample of Turkish men interpret active sexuality before marriage as something that would end up bad for the women (p.216). One of the participants admits being sexually active before his marriage and adds that he felt terrible afterwards because he thought of his sister doing the same with her boyfriend. He states how uncomfortable that idea makes him feel *as a father* and *as a brother* (p.217). The reason why he feels uncomfortable as a father and a brother is because he assumes that the

sexuality of a daughter and a sister is supposed to be something that fathers and brothers should worry about. It is their duty until it finally passes on to a husband.

Moreover, another research by Demren (2008) on the subjectivity of Turkish men reveals the different accounts of men in a coffee house (*kıraathane*), which is a male homosocial space, in Ankara. In one of the interviews, a middle-aged participant proudly explains how he restricts and controls his wife's life as it is necessary to protect *his* honor (p.81). He expresses that his wife cannot go anywhere without his knowledge, and that she must stay put unless he allows otherwise. Furthermore, if someone says something bad about *his* woman, this is a just reason for murder. This participant simply defines his wife as a property that he possesses. It is also important to consider that this property is not an external object because it also constructs and maintains his masculine identity. Therefore, women do not only lack personal agency, but they are also responsible for the constitution of the identities of men to whom they are related. Therefore, it is important to highlight that sexual activity of women is expected to be supervised by the men in the family. That is why Şule Çet's decision to meet the murderers could be turned into an attack on her father. The defendant implied that he could not fulfill what he thought was the father's duty.

How common the idea of possession of women's sexuality can also be observed in Turkish swear words. For instance, using mothers and sisters is the most common way to insult men in Turkey. Instead of attacking the person directly, these words and phrases aim to intimidate them by posing a threat for their mothers, sisters, and sometimes wives. This can also be exemplified with the rest of the same participant's statement in the previous study. The participant continues to explain how insulted he feels when someone swears at him by mentioning his wife. He says it is also a reason for murder if someone says, "You should take care of the woman below/beneath you first" (p.82). In this example, this hypothetical person who aims to attack the participant uses his wife to insult him. Secondly, both the attacker and the

participant share the belief that the participant should be responsible for his wife's actions. If she behaves in a way they do not approve of, it should mainly be on the husband. Third, there are layers of power hierarchies in the phrase "the woman below/beneath you" by putting a pun on the meaning of beneath/below. The original sentence of the participant has the word *alt* which might correspond to these two words in English. The word might be referring to a social hierarchy where women, as the property of men, have a lower social status. It might also be a reference to a sexual context where beneath signifies being at the bottom position, which implies passivity.

In this case, the person who is attacking the participant aims to mock his inability to sustain his sexual and social power over his wife. What he should do to protect his honor is to handle, manipulate, imprison, and manage her wife better. This is exactly the reason why one of the defendants told Sule's father that he should have taken better care of his daughter. He expressed that it should be hurtful for him if his daughter hung out and had sex with men.

Therefore, the murderer's attack on Şule Çet's father has considerable cultural significance in terms of how it uses gender norms as a statement in court. He denies the victim's agency over her sexuality, but he also claims that she is promiscuous in order to vilify her. In this way, an unfavorable "type" of woman is created in the hope of her becoming less deserving of equal treatment. He also questions the victim's father's "manhood" by taking his possession of the women to whom he is related as a measure. In other words, the father's manhood is tested over how much he controls his daughter as it is his duty.

Turkey is not a stranger to such statements about women and men at all, but Şule Çet's online twitter campaign trials indicate that a strong challenge to them has also become visible recently. The defendant's attack on Çet's father immediately brings the statements of then Chief Police Constable Celalettin Cerrah regarding the murder of another young woman, Münevver Karabulut. When she was murdered in

2009, he said the exact same thing to Karabulut's parents (*Münevver Karabulut Cinayeti Medyada Nasıl Yer Aldı?*, 2009), as she was dating her murderer at the time and met him in his house at the day of her murder. The two young women were vilified in a similar way due to their personal choices of meeting men they knew, and they were intended to be put into the category of "loose" women during their trials due to reasons such as prior sexual or romantic involvements and alcohol consumption. Okray notes on the analysis of the tweets about Şule Çet's case, Twitter users saw the parallel between Şule's case and Münevver's case and protested these attempts (2020). Therefore, although such misogynistic comments in femicide cases have not died out in the last ten years, Şule Çet's Twitter campaign can be claimed to confirm the existence of a serious objection in the late 2010s.

On the other hand, studies that focus on the public reaction and media coverage of femicides note that the creation of the opposite profile is also possible in these cases, and the perpetrators are easily sentenced to the most severe punishments then. To be more clear, murders of women who fit into the character of the ideal woman are "more likely to create social distress leading to a heavy punishment for the perpetrators" (Müftüler-Baç & Müftüler, 2020). A famous example for such incidents is the Özgecan Arslan case. Özgecan Arslan was a young university student who was killed by a mini-bus driver in 2015 when she was going back home as she resisted rape (*Turkey Trial over Murder of Student Ozgecan Who "Resisted Rape" 2015*). Nothing she did could be used to apply provocation defense, and she represented the 'honorable' woman (Müftüler-Baç & Müftüler, 2020) because she was a virgin and did not know the perpetrator before. Therefore, her case created huge public outrage, and she was coded as the 'innocent victim' (Kandiyoti, 2016). Gürses' comparative analysis on the media coverage of the cases of Özgecan Arslan and Münevver Karabulut (2017) indicates that the language and images chosen for the two cases are also different. For instance, while Özgecan Arslan is represented with two ordinary photographs in the news articles,

Münevver's articles contain a variety of photos in which she hugs or dances with the murderer or wears bikinis. Tunç's earlier study on three controversial criminal cases (2010) also draws attention to this choice of irrelevant images in the news articles in three different newspapers about Münevver Karabulut (p.656). Gürses (2017) also notes that when the victim's family filed a claim for compensation, the amount of money was also covered in the news as the victim's worth or cost (p.561). In short, the media treated Münevver's case like a material for tabloid articles and highlighted her sexuality and relationships along with the gruesome murder. This was particularly because of her romantic history with the perpetrator, which frames her as promiscuous.

This brings Zengin's point on the ways violence rests on the notion of honor in Turkey (2011). As I have briefly mentioned before, she explains that honor (*namus*) is the founding element of the sex/gender system in the country, and the concept refers to the compliance with the roles of ideal masculinity and femininity in this particular context<sup>22</sup> (p.99). These roles are mostly regulated in relation to people's sexual behavior, which, in turn, designate proper and improper sexualities. In this sense, she notes that the filter for good and bad women could be anything that reminds people of the image of a prostitute. In other words, any type of clothing, behavior, or gesture that is associated with that of a prostitute makes women "loose" (*hafif*) or promiscuous. Furthermore, these women are deemed punishable by the society because it is believed that they deserve the punishment by affording to be perceived as a prostitute.

In addition to this being an extension of victim blaming, it also normalizes and justifies different types of violence these women face. This explains the access that the media assumed it had over Münevver Karabulut's body when they were publishing her photos kissing the perpetrator in the past or posing in bikinis. Zengin (2011) explains that men's access to the bodies of prostitutes also extends to the bodies of women

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<sup>22</sup> Also see Sev'er & Yurdakul's article (2001) for different translations and interpretations of the word 'honor' in Turkish.

whose personal conduct calls prostitution to mind. This notion of ‘availability’ of women is in line with a definition Turkish Language Association currently (*Türk Dil Kurumu* or shortly, *TDK*) has. TDK defines the second meaning of the adjective ‘available’ in Turkish (*müsait*) as a woman who is ready to flirt and can flirt easily. It also categorizes the word as colloquial, not slang; therefore, it does not have a note on any possible controversy around it. Putting the discussion on whether or how to include discriminatory or hateful expressions aside, the existence of such a definition only for women in Turkish supports the association Zengin makes, leaving the limits of this availability unclear.

Zengin adds that these limits can be stretched as far as including verbal and physical abuse, and I believe the moralism and misogyny we have observed in all these femicide cases are also a result of the same filter. To be more clear, the characterization of acceptable femininity depends heavily on its opposition to the image of the prostitute. The implications of the promiscuity of the victims in the statements of the murderers, government officials, and the media is nothing but a reference to this image. Here, the prostitute does not necessarily refer to a sex worker, but it is a character, a villain, that signifies only a woman who owns her sexuality and chooses to keep it accessible to men. What remains the same for both sides of the opposition, however, is the neglect of personal agency and sexual consent. In other words, the prostitute is the perfect antithesis of the chaste married ideal woman; however, prior or active sexual activity with whatever purpose does not guarantee consent in any moment. It is the assumption of full access to the female body that is problematic in both images, whether to stop or enable sexual behavior.

### 2.3 Pınar Gültekin's Case and the Image of 'the Prostitute'

This seems to be ignored by Pınar Gültekin's murderer, Cemal Metin Avcı, who makes new allegations in each trial and has recently claimed Pınar Gültekin was a sex worker<sup>23</sup> (*Pınar Gültekin'in Avukatı: Cinayeti Meşrulaştırıp, Haksız Tahrik İndiriminden Faydalanmak İçin Hayal Ürünü İddialar Ortaya Atıyor*, 2021). The defendant committed a brutal murder and later tried to get rid of the evidence meticulously. However, his statements contain different accusations against the victim to plead provocation as his defense. First of all, the murderer is another married man who has also claimed to have been involved with the victim. His first statement reads that the victim got out of control and attacked him with a knife. According to Pınar Gültekin's lawyer, no knife was found at the crime scene, and the scars he claimed to have gotten from her attack were proven to be caused by something else. In a way, the images of the *femme fatale* and mad/hysterical women which we have also seen in Aylin Sözer's case are invoked in another femicide case, and there is no evidence to make these figures real. Furthermore, the murderer later stated that the victim blackmailed him using his porn video with another man when she found out he was married. Yet, the video, too, is yet to be found. Lastly, the defendant refused to have been in a relationship with the victim and asserted that Pınar Gültekin was a sex worker. Considering that these are unrelated to how brutally and carefully the crime was committed, the perpetrator seems to look for grounds for provocation defense.

All these statements are almost a summary of the statements I have previously discussed in relation to the previous two cases. In Pınar Gültekin's case, too, the victim is presented to the court and the public as an unmarried promiscuous woman who seduced, threatened, and attacked the perpetrator. This time, the representation is not

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<sup>23</sup> He used the word 'escort'.

even implied but explicitly stated by the murderer. It is also supported by an Instagram account which was created right after the case got public to advocate for the murderer (*Pınar Gültekin'in Katili Cemal Metin Avcı'yı Savunmak İçin Açılan Hesaba Suç Duyurusu*, 2020). The account posted a story to say Avcı is a husband and a father, and he was played by the victim who threatened him to say that she would talk to his wife about their relationship. It also added that it was obvious what “kind” of a woman the victim was if she agreed to meet the murderer in his house. A criminal complaint was filed on the account, but it was interesting in terms of how it repeated similar accusatorial statements that we have seen playing with the ideal masculinities and femininities in multiple cases in this paper. Pınar Gültekin’s case is very recent and still open, so the court has not reached a verdict yet. Whatever the sentence is, the attempt to create an image of the promiscuous, bad, and dangerous woman is clear considering how common it is to turn to such narratives in femicide cases.

As the legal system in Turkey has allowed the offenders of gender-based homicides to take advantage of subjective elements in law and public opinion, the accounts of the murderers have these common allegations I illustrated in this section against the victims, particularly about their sexuality. All five women in discussion here were framed either as promiscuous/wicked or pure/innocent mainly by the media and the defendants. In all cases, the image of the ideal woman is contrasted with the image of the prostitute in the hope of lenient punishments. None of these images were immediately linked to the criminal activity, but they still had a place in the statements and the newspapers. The appropriate question that I have started seeing more and more on social media like Twitter and Instagram as a response to such allegations is “So, what?”. People seem to have come to realize how dangerous these categories are for everyone with the increasing femicide rates and emphasize that these categories should not matter because they should not exist, especially before law.

### 3. THEMES & MOTIFS

#### 3.1 Theme: Masculinities Threatened by Women's Decisions

As the official data on femicides and other forms of gender-based homicides is not regularly shared with the public either by the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry for Family and Social Policies, or General Directorate of Security, We Will Stop Femicides Platform (*Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu*) has been collecting and publishing data on femicides in Turkey on a monthly and yearly basis<sup>24</sup>. The numbers have been collected by the platform using the news coverage and interpersonal connections since 2008. The platform also shares its data with anitsayac.com which is a website that creates a monument counter (*anıt sayacı*) to commemorate the lives that are lost to gender-based violence by recording each case with names and details about the murders<sup>25</sup>. Although these two sources have different numbers, they both indicate that the annual numbers have been increasing in the last twelve years, as seen in Table 1.

**Table 1**

***Number of Femicides in Turkey, 2008-2020***

Year	Annual Reports of We Will Stop Femicides Platform	The Monument Counter
2008	80	66
2009	109	125
2010	180	203

<sup>24</sup> <http://kadincinayetlerinidurduracagiz.net/kategori/veriler>. Other platforms like Bianet also have separate records to track femicides.

<sup>25</sup> <http://anitsayac.com/>

Also see: <https://memorializeturkey.com/en/memorial/the-monument-counter-a-digital-memorial-for-women-killed-by-violence/>

2011	121	130
2012	210	145
2013	237	231
2014	294	290
2015	303	293
2016	328	289
2017	409	350
2018	440	404
2019	474	421
2020	300	409

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Source: <http://kadincinayetlerininidurduracagiz.net/kategori/veriler> (accessed May 12, 2021) and <http://anitsayac.com/> (accessed May 12, 2021)

The data that We Will Stop Femicides Platform shares also indicates important details about how each incident happened. For instance, they investigate and share where, how, and with which excuses women are murdered along with information about the deceased. Their data reveals that the most common reason that is known to be used as an excuse for murder is women making decisions about their own lives (*kendi hayatına dair karar alma*). Although the earlier reports indicate each reason separately, the annual reports that they publish since 2019 exclusively categorize all the excuses such as wanting to get a divorce, breaking up from partners, and rejecting men's romantic or sexual advances as women's decisions about their lives. The emphasis that is drawn to this particular excuse is also important for my discussion because it reveals that the most common pretext for femicides is women's personal agency. I will interpret this, denying women's agency, as a theme or a central idea that recurs in femicide cases to discuss its implications for men and women in contemporary Turkey.

For a subject matter to be a theme, the quantity of its recurrence is not enough. The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms notes that “We apprehend the theme by inference – it is the rationale of the [recurrent] images and symbols, not their quantity” (2006, p.239). Although it makes sense to consider a repeating action or idea as thematic, we fully understand it only in relation to its reasons, effects, and significance. In this case, the high percentage of femicides committed due to women’s desire to make decisions about their lives are only meaningful as a theme with its context.

This context is discussed in the previous two chapters. The section on the gendered stock characters in Turkey explained lack of women’s personal agency in terms of sexuality. An important point to take out from that discussion is that the ideal woman is signified with her passivity in important decisions about her life. Her sexual activity, personal conduct, marriage, and reproduction are not her own; they are directed on micro and macro levels, and women’s disobedience is punishable on these levels, as well. In addition, in the section where I analyzed the cases, I argued that this typification and vilification of women is a common strategy used by murderers, and it is supported by the media and public in many cases. This strategy works by tracking and denigrating some individual characteristics of the victims or casting aspersions on them to put them in a category of wicked and mostly promiscuous women. The norms around female sexuality, in particular, provides the murderers with the ground to play on the most, and they either imply or express that the victims were “already” prostitutes. Resting on the definitions of ideal womanhood in the country, they predict that women who attempt to act outside of these norms will not receive equal treatment either in public or in court.

On top of all case-specific observations, Babül (2015) explains the conceptual base of this prediction and claims that women and children in Turkey are not considered as right-bearing citizens but as subjects who are grateful for their protectors that are state officials. This understanding automatically positions women and children as

helpless and innocent victims appreciative of their benevolent protectors. We know from the previous discussions that this positioning only designates an ideal and does not apply to all women and children. Although sympathy is for the benefit of the victims in some cases such as Özgecan Arslan's, the underlying principle behind these positions leaves out the people who do not fit into the category of ideal victims. Another way of putting it is that the hierarchy of ideal womanhood that is mostly created through sexuality works against the unideal women, making them the opposite of the image of the innocent victim. It is also what the murderers rest on while creating their statements in the femicide cases I discussed. Babül's argument, in this case, exposes another reason why and how this hierarchy works in the legal arena.

This argument can also be regarded as an addition to Kandiyoti's (2016) comparison of two different images of women in the President's statements that I mentioned earlier. The content and the tone of the speech on what happened to 'one of our sisters' was clearly different from the statement about another woman who was 'either a woman or a girl'. The way that the top state official differentiated two women in a similar position using sexuality as a tool for humiliation plainly illustrated how the hierarchy of womanhood is legitimized. In this context, Babül (2015) further asserts that the protection that the state offers to its innocent subjects is a 'masculinist protection' as it follows the logic of the figure of a man who faces danger and harm to protect women (p.126). However, the statements of the murderers in the femicide cases, media representations, and the different remarks of the state officials prove that if the victim woman is not considered as a *damsel in distress*<sup>26</sup>, the masculinist protection might fail to provide her with equal rights.

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<sup>26</sup> The term refers to a literary archetype. These characters are usually young, innocent, and virgin women, and they are in trouble, waiting for men to save them. Female leads in fairy tales such as Snow White and Sleeping Beauty qualify for a damsel in distress.

In this context, homicide cases of trans women and the way they are represented in the media should be mentioned as another extension of this inequality among the right-bearing citizens. A report published by Hrant Dink Foundation in 2017 titled *Discriminatory Discourse in News Stories on Murders of Transgender Women* discusses how gender-based homicides are reported on newspapers when the victim is a trans woman (Demiryakan & Ensari, 2017). The report uses the annual media monitoring reports published by Kaos Gay and Lesbian Cultural Studies and Solidarity Association (Kaos GL) and documents the form, content, and the language of different news articles that mention the murders of trans women from 2013 to 2016. By providing different examples, it shows the violation of the victims' privacy and constant deadnaming and misgendering in most articles.

What is also notable and directly related to my argument is that the vilification in these femicides is achieved particularly with a direct connection between the victim's identity and a profession. The report indicates that most articles use trans identities interchangeably with sex work (p.11). In other words, they do not use transgender as an identity but confuse it with an occupation. Furthermore, as sex work is considered improper, being trans is also translated as being immoral in the news. Therefore, the representation evokes the same negative image of the prostitute that is created in the other femicide cases I examined. However, the image of the prostitute here is not only morally condemned, but it is also criminalized. Sex work is associated with theft and unrest in some articles, and the murders are almost justified as if it was expected for a sex worker to be a victim of this crime (p.15). By denigrating sex work and affiliating it with a particular gender identity, victims' agencies are taken away, erased, and replaced with the negative image of the prostitute. As a result, they immediately stray away from the category of helpless and innocent victims who are under the protection of the state.

These gendered stock characters that murderers and the media use in femicide cases are significant in the way they strike a contrast with the manner murderers are portrayed and perceived. Gazioğlu states that the approach to femicide cases in Turkey in 2010s is to ignore the gender relations at play or to blame the victim for her actions and behavior (2013, p.91). Gürses' study on the news coverage of the murder cases of Karabulut and Arslan also reveals that the newspapers tried to present the Karabulut's murder as a singular incident, and they marginalized the murderer instead of addressing a social problem (2017). Hrant Dink Foundation's report on the murders of trans women also support the fact that the incidents are represented as unique cases, and the news articles mostly focus on the victim rather than the murderer and a social problem (Demiryakan & Ensari, 2017). Lastly and more recently, a member of the current parliament, expressed that it is wrong to focus on femicides as men are also murdered in greater numbers in Turkey (*AK Partili Nergis'den Kadın Cinayetleri Değerlendirmesi: Erkek Ölümleri 12 Kat Fazla*, 2021). She later reflected on the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and noted that we should also keep in mind that women are guilty, too, for raising the perpetrators that commit the femicides (*AKP'li Hülya Atçı Nergis: Kadına Şiddette Kadınların Hiç Mi Payı Yok?*, 2021). These explanations also indicate the common tendency to put the victims under the spotlight in gender-based homicides instead of tackling a serious social problem that consistently results in hate crimes.

From another point of view, it is also possible to see how criminal men have been further individualized as opposed to women who are persistently pushed into the categories of womanhood in femicide cases. Despite the increasing visibility of femicides today, the existence of a social problem has not been recognized by political authorities. In addition to the remarks of the parliament member, the current Minister of the Internal Affairs has recently questioned where these violence cases came from despite records of increasing femicide cases collected and published by feminist

organizations. He also framed violence against women as a shame, instead of recognizing this serious crime with a gender order in its background (*Bakan Soylu Erkeklerle Seslendi: Kendinize Gelin. . . Böyle Bir Ayıp Olur Mu? | Video*, 2020). Such statements imply that the incidents are rare, singular, and surprising although there is evidence collected by multiple independent sources that alarmingly prove systemic violence. In this sense, the difference in treatment of men and women in murder cases can be claimed to follow the difference in the right to personal agency in the same context. While women are murdered due to claiming personal autonomy, men are provided with the privilege of individuality and agency even in the contexts where they are guilty of a gender-based homicide. In this case, the two sides of such incidents cannot be claimed to be received in the same way in court and in public. This repeating negligence alone indicates an unequal distribution of power between the victims and the criminals in the cases and a problem with the social order.

As for this problem, scholars interpret this increase in gender-based violence and crime as indicative of the need for change in the gender order. Connell (2005, p.12) refers to violence as a way to sustain dominance in a social order depending on the domination of men. It might be helpful to consider that all five femicide cases mentioned here were extremely brutal. Victims of these cases were either decapitated, thrown out of a window, cut into pieces, or burned, and they all happened in the last 12 years. Kandiyoti talks about a masculinity crisis that results in these increasingly violent femicide cases in Turkey (2016). During a podcast interview, she also points at a change in the form of violence as an indicator of this crisis<sup>27</sup>. Kandiyoti states that women used to be subjected to violence in their immediate circles only, such as in their family, neighborhoods, and relationships, but they are also targeted by men they do not know now.

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<sup>27</sup> See Özkazanç (2020).

According to the reports of We Will Stop Femicide Platform, women are still being murdered mostly by their partners and at home (*2020 Report of We Will End Femicide Platform*, 2021). However, the examples of incidents in which women get attacked and killed by strangers are also in rise. For instance, in two of the femicide cases mentioned in this paper, namely Aylin Sözer's and Özgecan Arslan's, the murderers are random people who brutally killed these women<sup>28</sup>. In another incident last year, 20-year-old Ceren Özdemir has been killed by a random murderer who targeted and killed her simply because she was a woman (*Ceren Özdemir Cinayeti Ile Ilgili Neler Biliniyor?*, 2019). The incident of a man kicking a woman because she was wearing shorts in a minibus in 2017 (Smith, 2017) and another recent example of a man battering a woman for minutes because he thought she was someone else (*Bursa'da Genç Kıza Muştalı Saldırı*, 2021) can also be added to the list.

Kandiyoti interprets this change and increase in violence not as another extension of the old patriarchal social structure, but as a reaction to it and a threat to its security. She asserts that “The recourse to violence (or the condoning of violence) points not to the routine functioning of patriarchy or the resurgence of traditionalism, but to its threatened demise at a point when notions of female subordination are no longer securely hegemonic” (2016, p.109-110). Connell (2005) also agrees with the idea that violence can signify the imperfection of the gender order. Drawing a parallel from Habermas' crisis tendencies, she refers to violence as an indicator of a crisis in the gender order. While Kandiyoti refers to this as a crisis in masculinity, Connell departs from Kandiyoti conceptually and argues that a crisis can only occur within a system, so we can only talk about a “crisis of a gender order as a whole” (p.13). Yet, they both interpret their crises as a symbol of a demand for change. Therefore, it is also

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<sup>28</sup> Aylin Sözer's case has not concluded yet.

possible to see this new type of heightened violence as an attempt to restore a gender order that is no longer stable.

To analyze the anticipation of change in the gender order, it is important to understand the dynamics of the structure that are ineffective, and in the context of Turkey, scholars speak of the breakdown of the old *patriarchal bargain*. When she was writing about the operation of patriarchy in the late 1980s, Kandiyoti introduced the notion of a *patriarchal bargain* which refers to the strategies that women develop to cope with the patriarchal systems (1988). In other words, it refers to the ways that women find and use to benefit from a structure that subordinates them to men. Her analysis was not exclusive to Turkey, but she detailed the form the bargain took in the country. For instance, she claimed that in countries like Turkey where classic patriarchy was found “subordination to men is offset by the control older women attain over younger women” mostly through their married sons (p.279). Under classical patriarchy, she asserted, women move from their father’s households to their husbands’ households as “dispossessed” individuals who can create themselves a place only by giving birth to a son. As their place in the family is only secured through their sons, older women try to suppress the romantic love between the young couple to stay as a priority to their sons in exchange of the hardships they previously experienced as young brides.

However, Kandiyoti also detected that classic patriarchy started to break down with the impact of then-new capital market, which had different implications for men and women. Younger men were able to leave their fathers’ households; therefore, their wives could also escape the control of their mothers-in-law (p.282). However, this change also meant that women who were stuck in this generation of transition were devoid of exerting power on their daughters-in-law although they paid their parts of the earlier patriarchal bargain and endured the oppression. Therefore, Kandiyoti asserted, many women might continue to ask for “protection in exchange for submissiveness and

propriety” (p.283). The emphasis on modesty with or without the veil, for instance, can be interpreted as a message that women send to say that they are still worthy of protection.

The demand for protection from the side of women fits them into Babul’s frame where they are regarded as helpless and grateful subjects that are protected by the state rather than naturally right-bearing citizens. In other words, Kandiyoti’s analysis in the households provides insights for how Babul’s positioning works at the state level because it indicates that many women benefit from a certain role and image in a smaller unit. In a more recent article, Kandiyoti (2016) exemplifies the social services and benefits women of popular classes made use of as a result of their party allegiance although these services were funded by the taxpayers. In this example, certain groups of women offer their help and allegiance to a political community to benefit from the services they already deserve as citizens. Although the operation of the patriarchal bargain at the state level is yet to be studied, the term is helpful to understand one of the ways the gender order used to be stabilized with the help of women.

However, today when this bargain is not functioning anymore, Kandiyoti suggests that an effort for a *masculinist restoration* steps in to reproduce the patriarchy (2016, p.109). Özkazanç (2013), who also follows Kandiyoti’s framework, expresses that the breakdown of the patriarchal bargain essentially results from the dysfunction of the gender roles that are traditionally attributed to men and women. To be more specific, she claims that it is caused by a decrease in the need for the traditionally masculine roles such as being the breadwinner and the protector as well as a women’s search for more space and power (p.241). Considering the data on femicides which shows that increasing incidents of violence most commonly occur when women make decisions about their own lives, one of the threats to the stability of the bargain and the existing gender order in Turkey can be women’s insistence on their personal agency. My earlier discussion on the femicide cases has already proven that women’s sexuality

is particularly coded as a ground that is owned by men, and murderers attempt to benefit from that in court. Therefore, in the instances where their dominion over women's sexual identity and behavior is jeopardized, a masculinist restoration might be claimed to come into play in the form of more frequent and intense violence.

I suggest that broadcasting of gender-based violence can be considered as a part of the masculinist restoration considering the overly performative aspect of the ideal masculinity. I have previously pointed out that public ceremonies of the acquirement and restoration of masculinity is an important part of its stability, which I exemplified with the circumcision ceremony and its significance. The understanding that masculinity and its powerful connotations such as bravery, strength, endurance, etc. should be publicly acclaimed underlies the need for its establishment and security in the public eye. In the case where masculinity needs to be restored, public broadcasting of gender-based violence can be chosen by some perpetrators to fulfill that purpose. One of the most notable examples of this is the case of Aleyna Çakır. Shortly after Aleyna Çakır was found dead in her apartment, a video of Ümitcan Uygun beating her was shared on Instagram (*Aleyna Çakır Olayında Son Gelişmeler. . . Ümitcan Uygun'un DNA'sı Olduğu Ortaya Çıktı*, 2021). The video belonged to an earlier time period than the day of the murder, but it explicitly shows the victim lying still on the ground. Therefore, although the case is still open, Uygun is the main suspect of the death of Aleyna Çakır.

The idea of documenting and sharing gender-based violence is new and problematic, and it has repeated in other cases following Aleyna Çakır's. A short while later, for instance, another man named Gökhan Özbolat, who is claimed to be friends with Ümitcan Uygun, went live on Instagram to broadcast the moments he was battering a woman (*Canlı Yayında Kadına Şiddet! Gökhan Özbolat'ın Tutuklanması İçin Kampanya*, 2021). The video shows that there are other people in the room witnessing the violence, and the audience watching the live streaming is seen to be

casually commenting on the incident. Live stream and the existence of live audience proves that violence is normalized. In another recent example, a man named Fırat Kaya posted a picture on his own Instagram account where he seriously beat another man on the grounds that he was gay ("*Eşcinsel*" Dedi Öldüresiye Dövdü, 2021). The picture shows the survivor covered in blood, and the perpetrator is holding a knife on the survivor's throat. The reason why I am describing the details in these pictures and videos is to be able to say that *this* is the content that the criminals are publicly sharing. In other words, I intend to show how extreme violence against women and queer people is attempted to be normalized by the criminals today.

I believe that the idea behind the publicization of gender-based violence can be contextualized as an endeavor to prove or reacquire an insecure masculinity. As violence is used as a way to maintain masculine dominance as Connell claims, it is an important part of the effort for a masculinist restoration. Moreover, considering that masculinity is often secured by public affirmation in the country, recent examples of this performative violence can be understood as another extension of the same attempt to restore masculinity. Following Connell and Kandiyoti, it might also be considered as an indication of a need for change in an earlier balance in the gender order.

In the final analysis, the data on femicides and my discussion on the murders of trans women indicate that women's lack of agency is a recurrent theme in the femicide narratives. This theme constitutes the motivation for criminal activities; therefore, it is deadly for women. As the most common excuse for femicides prove that women do not stop from asking for personal agency, this also becomes a threat to the masculinity that is secured with the subordination of women. The instability of masculinity, in turn, results in intense violence against women and queer people and its public broadcast. However, any attempt for a masculinist restoration also proves a crisis in the gender order, which might also be an opportunity to change the order significantly.

### 3.2 Motif: Victim Blaming

When I was doing research on the case of Aleyna Çakır, the news about Gökhan Özbolat and his video were just out. The video in which he battered a woman on the floor was already uploaded on YouTube and made available to public<sup>29</sup>. Following the link, I watched the video and saw the comments below. The content was uploaded couple hours ago, and the comment section was full of people who stated that this was how Turkish women asked to be treated, women always fell for men who treated them badly, women knew that this was how they were going to be treated, some women just deserve to be treated like that, and more. In other words, I have witnessed in real time that the first public reaction to documented male violence against a woman was to blame the woman. Although the criminal activity has a clear perpetrator and a victim, the blame has been shifted towards the side of the victim.

The femicide cases I picked and analyzed also showed a pattern of typification of victims to blame them. The discussion on that chapter demonstrated how legal and political discourses and media coverage repeats and strengthens a hierarchy among different gender performances. The aim, or sometimes just the outcome, of this hierarchy and vilification in gender-based homicide cases is to shift the focus on the victims and to blame them for the offense. In addition, in the context of the gender-based homicides I discussed, I presented the lack of victim's agency as a theme and discussed how it threatened the offenders' masculinity. In literary texts, themes can be explained by motifs that are "recurrent local features" in narratives (Childs and Fowler, 2016, p.239). Although it might sound contradictory at first sight, I will interpret this

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<sup>29</sup> The video can no longer be accessed on May 22, I have a screen-recording of an overview of the comment section: [https://www.icloud.com/iclouddrive/0u9W-MLiEy0nO3K-FFAm9Z-Sg#Screen\\_Recording\\_2021-03-09\\_at\\_9.32.32\\_PM](https://www.icloud.com/iclouddrive/0u9W-MLiEy0nO3K-FFAm9Z-Sg#Screen_Recording_2021-03-09_at_9.32.32_PM)

frequent practice of victim blaming as a motif that informs the theme in the gender-based homicide cases.

It might come off as paradoxical to say that victim blaming is an extension of the lack of agency due to the responsibility that the victims bear, but the way victim blaming works in gender-based homicide cases prove to support this theme. First of all, victim blaming aims to put the responsibility, partially or fully, on the victim of a criminal behavior. Eigenberg and Garland (2008) explain that earlier victimologists such as von Hentig, Mendelsohn, and Schafer tried to understand the victim's role in the criminal behavior and criminal activity, and their work conceptually enabled the notion of shared responsibility between the victim and the offender. According to this perspective, victimization depended on reciprocal action, and victims were active participants of the criminalization process. When the concept of victim precipitation was first coined later, it borrowed from this earlier literature on victimology and focused on victim precipitated homicides. Although these studies contextualized victim precipitation as the victim's prior attempt to commit a crime, a subsequent research by Amir (1971) dramatically changed the original conceptualization when adapting it to cases of rape. The author regarded rape to be victim precipitated if the offender's interpretation of the event identified the victim as blameworthy. In other words, the study prioritized the perpetrator's understanding of victim's behavior over their actual acts.

Eigenberg and Garland (2008) assert that the generalizations in Amir's work were later criticized, but other issues also emerge whenever victimology focuses on shared or mutual responsibility. For instance, subsequent victimization theories, such as lifestyle and routine activities theory, highlight that some situations and contexts carry levels of risk for victimization. In this case, the focus of the criminal activity slowly moves from the criminal behavior to other conditions that "enables" them, and the responsibility of it is taken away from the perpetrator. Authors point out that

This theoretical perspective assumes that people can reduce their risk of victimization by taking less risks such as staying home at night, refraining from public places (especially “dangerous ones”), and staying away from violent situations. It is problematic to assume that one can predict these things, but it also fails to sufficiently account for a variety of victimization experiences especially interpersonal violence. For example, women might avoid date rape and domestic violence if they never engaged in intimate relationships; however, this is not a realistic approach to crime prevention. Furthermore, it implies that victims who engage in “risky” lifestyles are somehow to blame for their victimization. (p.27)

In other words, putting the responsibility on the victim to avoid being a target of crime is unrealistic because it assumes that criminal behavior is always rational, criminals are recognizable, and victims can always choose to stay away from crime. However, we know from the data of *We Will Stop Femicides Platform*, for instance, that most femicides are committed by partners with whom the victims live (*2020 Report of We Will Stop Femicides Platform*, 2021). Therefore, this type of criminal activity is neither predictable nor easily escapable. In addition, we also know from Müftüler-Baç and Müftüler’s article (2020) that the excuses offenders use to kill their partners and interpret as provocation rarely indicate initiation of violence by the victim. Instead, we know that the provocation defense depends heavily on traditional gender roles and expectations. Lastly, the examples of random people attacking women they did not previously know, like it is the case in Ceren Özdemir’s murder, clearly demonstrate that irrational, unpredictable, and unescapable hate crimes exist.

Scholars draw attention to this shift of responsibility in the cases of gender-based violence in Turkey. Sancar (2012), for instance, explains how rape was constructed as a threat from which women should stay away in the 50s. She argues that media and the public discourse framed the criminal activity as a warning against

women instead of focusing on the criminal activity itself and the criminals. Similarly, Ahıska (2016) argues that the way violence against women is represented in the media and the campaigns against it is problematic because it threatens women with violence. She states that the cases of violence against women become emblematic, and vulnerability appears as characteristic of women. She gives the example of a project sponsored by the Ministry of Family and Social Policy named *Eight Women Eight Lives*, which includes celebrities recreating murdered women at the time of their death. Ahıska further explains that

The celebrities were shown saying, “It could have been me!” Interestingly, the campaign was later popularized in the media, and that sentence was transformed into “It could have been you!” In the public spots on tv, the images were animated and accompanied by the slogan “Awake before death arrives!” (p.222)

In other words, the representation of gender-based violence against women in this campaign addresses the victims and intimidates them instead of potential offenders. This also means that potential victims share the responsibility with the perpetrators if they fail to avoid the crime. However, the concept of shared responsibility is problematic because it assumes the existence of totally innocent and fully responsible victims, which are almost impossible to find. As Eigenberg and Garland (2008) put it, most victims potentially could have done more to avoid victimization, so an innocent victim is not an achievable ideal. In fact, even in the case of Özgecan Arslan, in which the victim was mostly framed as pure and innocent in media and in public, victim blaming did not stop. Müftüler-Baç and Müftüler (2020) remind us that some critics argued in Arslan’s case that the victim provoked the attack by traveling alone at night and wearing a miniskirt (p.10). Therefore, the idea of avoidance from victimization is not sensible because it simply does not accord with the ordinary flow of life. At the other end of the spectrum, likewise, fully responsible

victims cannot exist, either, because they can only be the actual offenders, which would destroy “the intellectual integrity of the continuum of victim responsibility” (Eigenberg and Garland, 2008, p.30). In other words, if a victim is fully responsible for a criminal activity, it would only mean that they are an offender, not a victim. Therefore, this type of victim is also theoretically impossible to exist.

Although victim precipitation or victim blaming does not yield practical explanations and solutions for criminal activity, all gender-based homicide narratives I examined in this paper somehow depend on it in legal cases that seek for justice. In Aylin Sözer’s case, for instance, the perpetrator evoked stereotypical female character tropes such as *femme fatale* and the hysterical woman to argue that the victim’s behavior led to the criminal event. In the same case and in the cases of Şule Çet, Pınar Gültekin, Münevver Karabulut, and the trans women I briefly talked about, the narratives around their cases that were created by the media and offenders resorted to an image of a prostitute who was already deserving the crime to share its responsibility. Therefore, victimization in these cases evolved into the construction of “culturally legitimate victims” who are deficient, deviant, and deserving of crime (Eigenberg and Garland, 2008). In other words, victim blaming only served to link legitimate victimhood to certain “types” of people, and these people were asked to avoid the crime as a prevention method. Cliché recommendations for women to avoid sexual assault and violence and public reactions that suggest segregating women and from men in the public domain can be considered as other examples where the responsibility of the possible criminal action is put on the victims.

Then it is easy to see how this cultural legitimization can be cultivated by the hierarchy of ideal masculinities and femininities. There is a direct link between the gender order that favors some “types” of people over others and the victimization of those “others”. When gender-based homicides are not recognized as criminal activities that are unjustly legitimized by stereotypical idealization narratives, people who are

culturally categorized as bad or wicked are disproportionately victimized. In other words, they do not only live with greater risk of getting attacked and murdered because of how their gender identity is categorized, they also bear the responsibility to stay away from it. Moreover, when they actually fall victims to such crimes, they must be to blame as they have failed to avoid victimization. In this case, they deserve what happen to them, and they should share responsibility with the perpetrators. This reasoning, in short, creates a dangerous social and legal system for most people as ideal gender performances are rarely achievable by anyone. Therefore, most people are asked to protect themselves from gender-based violence due to their gender identity and expression instead of preventing the real criminal behavior and action.

Victim blaming, therefore, works as a motif in the way that it rests on stock characters rather than individuals. While it gives responsibility to the victims, it does not attribute any agency to them. When women and queer people are asked to protect themselves from assault, for example, the real demand is for them to put themselves in the category of the innocent victim. If anything, their personal agency is even more limited as they would need to alter their non-violent and unharmed behavior, expressions, and actions. As I stated in before, however, preventive measures that the victims can take are endless, so they can never keep the criminal activity from happening. In this case, it clearly makes more sense to ask for a change in the criminal behavior of the perpetrators, and it is only possible with a change in the gendered idealization patterns that encourage them.

## CONCLUSION

My decision to start working on gender-based homicides resulted from an urgency I felt to do something about the dramatic increase in the femicide rates in Turkey. At the time that I started writing, which was around February 2021, feminist organizations such as We Will Stop Femicides Platform, The Women's Platform for Equality (*Eşik*), etc. were organizing campaigns and events for the active implementation of the Istanbul Convention. About a month later, the President announced that Turkey withdrew from the convention despite the increase in the cases and strong public reaction. Therefore, any work that deals with the social problem of femicides and gender-based homicides is relevant today more than ever. My study, in particular, draws a line of connection among individual cases and indicate the features that they have in common. This connection does not only tie them to each other and the present, but it also proves that a whole social system that has been built for decades drives them.

The profiles of the stock characters that I traced in the first chapter, for instance, have been shaped by political and social purposes for years, and their construction has been heavily influenced by the norms of sexuality. They have served different purposes in different periods, but they explain how the sides of gender-based homicides cases are characterized today. I argue this characterization to be dangerous as it designates the ideal and undesirable categories of gender identities. In a way, it establishes a hegemony of the ideals according to how the gendered stock characters of ideal men and women are defined in terms of sexuality. A review of some feminist literature and an analysis of today's dominant political discourses demonstrate that ideal womanhood is defined around the notions of motherhood, chastity, and modesty. Idealization of this character classifies other femininities in a system that eventually harms them as exemplified in the femicide cases.

It is important to acknowledge that this harm targets individuals according to what “type” of a woman they are in these cases because the categories of womanhood are built on women’s lack of individuality to begin with. As a part of the same discussion, I identify in this chapter that the way ideal womanhood was founded in the history of the country has never fully recognized them as equal individuals because of sexuality. Because of the responsibilities women have been given by the state and their families to be mothers, for instance, motherhood have never belonged to them. The obligation to act modestly has also been enforced and supervised by the same institutions. In short, in the way that womanhood was constructed in the earlier years of the country, it was always for their communities that women were chaste mothers or not. When we come closer to today, we see that similar attributions are made to the character of the ideal woman, but they serve the neoliberal, neoconservative, and populist politics of the government. What that signifies in relation to criminal activities such as femicides is that taking women’s agency away and grouping them according to their sexuality makes them more vulnerable. When women are not entitled for equal rights as individuals, they are treated according to the worth that is culturally assigned to their category of womanhood, which is exemplified in the real femicide cases in the following chapter.

The absence of individuality for women stands in opposition to the profile of the ideal man as masculinity needs an active performer to prove it to the public. Before I move on to the discussion on Turkey in particular, I analyze how ideal and hegemonic masculinity is created and how it sets the standard for other masculinities and femininities to live up to in this section. A brief examination of the concept of hegemonic masculinity reveals that its function is to dominate “others” because its standards are achievable to only few men. In this case, the gender order it creates depends on the domination of a small number of men. The type of masculinity that is the most favorable in relation to sexuality in Turkey is embodied in heterosexual men.

The politics of the family that ranks womanhood also creates the image of the family man, or a heterosexual married man, to put at the top of the hierarchy. In addition, masculine-coded behavior patterns such as virility, bravery, resilience, etc. also meets the eye with a cultural emphasis on their public demonstration. By studying circumcision ceremonies, extremely common rites of passage for men in Turkey, I draw attention to the importance of public approval of masculinity and its characteristics. This emphasis on performance lays the foundation of a later claim that I make about the recent trend of broadcasting male violence against women. All things considered, I conclude that the ideal man should be someone in a heterosexual marriage, and he should establish, secure, and prove his masculine traits to the public.

Lastly, I question how hegemonic masculinity ranks other gender identities and erases LGBTQIA+ people. The process of withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and reactions to the increased LGBTQIA+ visibility by the state forces are evident of an endeavor to disregard the sexualities and gender identities that do not comply with the idealized narrative of the heterosexual family. Queer identities are openly positioned against the ideal unit of family and framed as threatening to its stability in the political stance of the ruling party as an extension of the combination of neoconservative, populist, and neoliberal stance of the ruling party. As the politics of the family is one of the foundations of the existing gender order that this combination informs, LGBTQIA+ people do not only occupy the lowest degrees in the hierarchy, but they are also coded as dangerous and bad. This proves that any gender identity that fails to meet the ideal roles of masculinities and femininities are ultimately classified as less worthy.

This classification of worthiness becomes a real danger in gender-based homicide cases as the legal system in Turkey allows it to be turned into excuses by the murderers. Although the penal laws dictate heavy punishment for the criminals in such cases, research show that these laws by have been implemented by the judges in a way

that sympathizes with the perpetrator. Unjust provocation, for instance, is one of the popular strategies to which the perpetrators resort as a part of their defenses. Therefore, it is very common to see the offenders trying to make their cases on how the victims provoked them to commit the crime. An extensive discussion in the second chapter analyzes the narratives of five different femicide cases in which the narratives are attempted to be manipulated by the murderers. To this end, I make use of the public narratives that are informed by mainstream news sources to interpret the cases because I intend to understand the relationship between gendered narratives and their public audience. However, a discourse analysis on the case files might also reveal interesting details about the common legal discourse and give an objective perspective about the handling of the cases by the perpetrators, lawyers, and judges in Turkey.

The cases of Aylin Sözer, Şule Çet, Özgecan Arslan, Münevver Karabulut, and Pınar Gültekin all demonstrate a similar narrative pattern which revolves around the norms of sexuality and how it affects the characterization of the relevant parties. Sexuality is used against the victims in all cases as female sexuality is shamed and limited to the boundaries of the family politics. In Aylin Sözer's case, for instance, the murderer portrays the victim as a promiscuous and mad woman. He also introduces himself as a family man, which creates a great power imbalance in favor of the murderer due to the gender hierarchy and the hegemony of the married heterosexual men. Similarly, in Şule Çet's murder, moral allegations targeting the victim's sexual behavior are made and used as an attack on the victim and her father. In this context, Şule Çet's case exemplify women's lack of autonomy over their sexuality in the best way because the allegations start from there, take away the victim's agency, and assign it to her father. Overall, however, the victim's sexuality is used as a weapon to turn her into the character of a wicked woman.

Vilification of promiscuity takes its roots from the characterization of the image of the prostitute. This image defines an immoral woman who is and should be punished

as she deserves it by choosing to be promiscuous. Aylin Sözer's and Şule Çet's cases prove that the criminals hope that the victims get this punishment. However, the same image also works as a reference point to achieve ideal victimhood in the murder case of Özgecan Arslan. Although it helps the murderer get the severe punishment he deserves, it does so by supporting a social discourse that seriously harms other people. This becomes obvious with a comparison between Münevver Karabulut's and Özgecan Arslan's cases. Studies that examine the reception of the two similarly violent cases by the public and the media indicate that the image of the prostitute victimizes Münevver while evoking feelings of pity for Özgecan Arslan.

In the last case on which I elaborate in this chapter, Pınar Gültekin's, the murderer makes a reference to the image of the prostitute in the most explicit way. After repeating the other tools that we know being used in other cases, the murderer claims the victim to be a sex worker in one of the trials. Although the victim's occupation is not related to any of the details about the criminal activity, the fact that the offender brings that up can only be interpreted as yet another attempt to vilify and criminalize promiscuity.

The last chapter deals with how exactly this victimization happens and what central idea it fosters. Independent studies clearly show that women are murdered when they make their own decisions in life, and the homicide cases in discussion here proves that they are punished for these decisions even after they pass away. This never-ending denial of the rights women have as people, therefore, is a central topic that consistently comes up in femicide narratives. As women are not regarded as right-bearing individuals, their values and rights are appraised according to misogynistic categorizations. In femicide cases, they can either be innocent victims or wicked women mostly according to their personal life and choices. I argue that this is harmful by exemplifying how the murders of cis and trans women are attempted to be trivialized by media and political figures. As an extension of the same process, we also see that

murderer men are individualized, and the crimes they systemically and repeatedly perpetrate are regarded as unique instances. Therefore, the unequal distribution of the right for personal autonomy can be claimed to be a key idea that repeats in gender-based homicide cases.

I argue that this idea is established with the victim-blaming motif in these cases. Victim blaming depends on the perspective that criminal activity can be prevented by the potential victims. In other words, the responsibility of avoiding the crime should be on the targets of that crime. Previous research demonstrates that sexual harassment and violence against women in Turkey have been framed in this way to put the victims under the spotlight and intimidate them. The femicide cases in discussion here also prove that victim blaming is a tool that is repeatedly used in the legal arena. However, this practice is problematic because studies show that criminal behavior is not always rational, predictable, and avertible. Victim blaming, therefore, only works for the further victimization of the targets of gender-based homicides by strengthening the discourses that already work against them. Moreover, victim blaming also silences the victims and discourages them to take action when they fall victims to gender-based assaults or violence. A student organization of which I am also a part, Boğaziçi Women's Rights Solidarity (*Boğaziçi Kadın+ Hakları Dayanışması*)<sup>30</sup>, for instance, has been actively working to give a platform mainly to sexual assault survivors to share their experience and feel heard. It was founded roughly a year ago by women and queer people who felt lonely because of the depressive atmosphere caused by the increasing femicide rates and the debates around Istanbul Convention at the time. It started as a group of few people but quickly turned into a platform for the sexual harassment survivors as the safe space enabled them to finally talk. Since the members of the solidarity exposed one of the professors as guilty of sexual harassment of multiple

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<sup>30</sup> See an online news article about the organization: <https://www.birgun.net/haber/bir-mucadele-deneyimi-bogazici-universitesi-kadin-dayanismasi-328035>

people, the organization have defended the rights of the survivors who normally face constant victim blaming and more trauma when they speak up. Although the solidarity only functions in a small community of students and alumni, it has raised great awareness and educated them by actively engaging with them on the social media platforms they share. At the same time, they have also educated themselves and the survivors as they collectively find the vocabulary to deal with their trauma.

The struggle against victim blaming is not unique to Turkey, and women everywhere seem to look for and find alternatives to speak up and fight against it. *Me Too Movement*, which caught a global wave, for instance, showed that women working in Hollywood film industry have not shared their stories of sexual harassment for years. When actress Alyssa Milano invited the survivors to join her thread and tweet “me too” in 2017<sup>31</sup>, so many Hollywood actresses joined the movement and exposed the sexual harassment stories in the industry along with the offenders like Harvey Weinstein. The movement quickly gained international recognition and broke the silence that was instilled on women by the risk of victim blaming. In this case, victim blaming is a motif that can be traced beyond its local context here, and there is growing awareness among women and the queer community to fight it.

What my discussion finally shows is that there is an ongoing feminist struggle for a rights-based citizenship for women and queer people in Turkey. The presence and visibility of these people is not avoidable despite the attempts in the current political discourse. Especially at this point where the public awareness is increasingly high about femicides, the struggle that has been going on to finally solve this social problem is not a reversible process. With that in mind, I have attempted to offer my viewpoint on the reasons and the outcomes of the issue to contribute to this struggle. I sincerely

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<sup>31</sup> You can see the tweet here:  
[https://twitter.com/Alyssa\\_Milano/status/919659438700670976?s=20](https://twitter.com/Alyssa_Milano/status/919659438700670976?s=20)

hope that the call for change is taken by enough number of people and no new names appear on the monument counter anymore.



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