The Rising Tide of Populism and Women’s Authoritarian Inclusion in Turkey under the Justice and Development Party Governance

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1. Introduction

The ambivalent relationship between populism and political inclusion of the hitherto marginalized sectors has been a prevalent theme in the scholarly analysis of new and old populisms especially in semi-democratic regimes. The analysis in this paper adopts a political definition of populism as a governance strategy embodying distinct mobilization patterns and discursive appeals. It attempts to delineate the relationship between the populist political strategies and gender equality policies by looking at the dynamics of the instrumentalization of equality issues and the imposition of ‘gender ideologies’ to perpetuate existing patriarchal power relations.\(^1\) Populist leaders’ mass mobilization strategies almost always entailed the invention of new rhetoric and the design of reformist agendas and policies targeting women. This paper inquires into aspects of gendered dynamics of populism in the context of Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) governance since 2002. More specifically, it looks at the gender dimensions of its populist strategy which became more visible after 2010 and which corresponded to the increasing authoritarianism of the political regime.

As elsewhere, gender and populism interacted in complex ways in the Turkish case; the AKP emerged as a globalizing, moderate and liberal-oriented reformist party by successfully appealing to a frustrated electorate following an economic crisis. Women have played significant roles in the party’s electoral and political ascendancy as members, activists and voters. The AKP’s pro-people discourse projected an image of inclusion for women as well. During the EU-led reform process, the government passed important legislative and constitutional reforms to promote gender equality and to expand women’s citizenship rights. This paper focuses on the contradictory aspects of its gender discourse and the implications of its gender populism which controls women’s inclusion in institutional politics and employment. Hence, the major axes of analysis are the AKP discourse and policy

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\(^1\) I am using the term ‘gender ideology’ in the sense used by Duerst-Lahti (2008, 182) referring to ‘structured beliefs and ideas about ways power should be arranged according to social constructs associated with sexed bodies’. 
towards women’s political recruitment and their integration into the labour market. It analyzes the discursive themes, institutional bastions, leadership appals and implementation paradoxes underlying its gender populism. The AKP’s gender policies have so far been studied through the lenses of conservative party politics, transformation of Islamism, Europeanization and neo-liberalism. However, the threads of its populism cross-cutting these dynamics from a gender perspective has not been addressed. The major research questions are, ‘How does the AKP frame its discourse on women’s inclusion and equal rights in the realm of women’s political representation?’; ‘To that extent it allows an autonomous existence for women’, ‘how it justifies its ambivalent approach to positive discrimination measures in politics?’; and ‘what role its strategy towards work-family harmonization plays in its gender agenda?’ Theoretically, the paper aims at contributing to the analyses of gender policies in inclusionary-populist regimes under de-democratization dynamics. Empirically, the research is based on a qualitative analysis of the public declarations, speeches, and published interviews of the male and female AKP politicians and of the party documents and publications as well as critical coverage of its policies and discourses from the feminist civil society.

2. Problematizing populism from a Gender perspective: Mobilizing Women and Instrumentalizing Equality Issues

Studies of populism denoting political movements, parties and political projects across a variety of contextual differences tend to take analytically distinct approaches which, for a long time, side-stepped its gendered aspects. The high tide of populism analyses of the 1970s and the 1980s in political science did not correspond to the rise of gendered analytical lenses in the social sciences. Hence, the implications of reformist political projects of male populist rulers which expanded women’s social and political citizenship rights were mostly covered under gender-neutral terms and concerns. Nevertheless, under both classical populist and neo-populist governance, women’s inclusion in the polity and progress in gender equality were compromised by patriarchal institutions and discourses. More recent research dealing specifically on the gendered aspects of the past and contemporary populisms (especially on Latin America’s neo-populist experiments) started to look at the
mechanisms through which male leaders were able to appeal to women and their consequences for women’s political integration and empowerment prospects.²

From the perspective of a political definition which considers populism as a political strategy, populism refers to ‘a specific way of competing for and exercising power’(Weyland, 2001:11). Scholars who underline the ideology and the strategy aspect of populism seem to agree on a core feature of populism; its anti-establishment orientation. Just like in the definitions of populism as strategy or mobilization project (Barr,2009, Hawkins, 2009, Weyland, 2001) in Mudde’s analysis (2004: 543), the populist message ‘considers society as ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite. In the pseudo-democratic message of the populists, politics should be an expression of the general will of the people’. This pro-people appeal of populism is anti-pluralist, since people’s sovereignty is taken to refer to electoral majorities (Canovan, 1999). Yet, this eclectic nature of the populist strategy and its discursive articulation embodies an ‘illiberal vision of democracy’.

In so far as the communication or discursive aspect of populism evokes the centrality of leadership, populism defined as a strategy and an ideology/discourse complement each other. From the days of the classical populist era to those of neo-populist phase of Latin America and the late 20th century European experiences of extreme right-wing parties, the populist discourse is expressed by male personalistic leaders most of whom emerged as outsiders to the established political systems. The distinctive discursive pattern epitomized by ‘the top-down, personalistic, and paternalistic ‘leadership appeals through anti-elite discourses and unmediated direct linkages with the people captures the essence of both old and new populisms (Roberts, 1995:88).

The above mentioned political aspects of populism has significant implications for gender relations and the reconstruction of dominant gender norms. Populist leadership appeals and discursive strategies went hand in hand with special efforts to mobilize and recruit female voters and supporters (Kampwirth,2010: 1-8). Women were often approached as citizens along with men by promoting their political and social rights and often by catering to their

² Still, research directly and exclusively focusing on the gendered dimensions and impact of populism remains limited; gender issues are usually covered under the analysis of women’s citizenship and activism in (semi-) authoritarian regimes. As examples of gender and populism research in the Latin American context, see, among others: Kampwirth, 2010, Rousseau, 2006, and Zabaleta,1997.
economic needs as mothers. However, the gendered discourses of the populists went beyond putting together a distinct constituency; often, the populist message—embracing a ‘thin ideology’—offered a general vision and perspective for the consumption of the society impacting on gender relations (Zabaleta, 1997). The status-quo orientation and inward-looking features of populist governance is best epitomized by its familial and pronatal emphasis endorsed for collectivist ends. For example, today’s right-wing populist parties in Denmark, Norway and Austria instrumentalized gender equality to mark the distinctiveness of European values from those of patriarchal Muslim values as they articulated anti-immigrant stances (Lange and Mügge, 2015: 2-20). At the same time, their programs upheld the traditional nuclear family as the ‘fundamental pillar of society’ and the primacy of women’s mothering roles (Meret and Siim, 2013:87). It is also important to underline the significance of the masculine images in the anti-elite and the pro-people message of the populist discourse of powerful male leaders capable of protecting, rewarding and sanctioning of the members of the nation. In Latin America, the gendered nature of populist leadership was evident in the projection of ‘archetypical masculine imagery’ as heroes or fathers (often aided by female populists such as Eva Peron) and in the idealization of images and models of femininity.

According to Panizza (2005, 24), populism ‘blurs the public-private dividing line and brings into the political realm both individual and collective desires that had previously no place in public life’. In fact, central to the populist discourse to promote women’s inclusion is the continuity between women’s public and private roles within patriarchy. ‘Maternalist ideology’ was an integral part of the discursive appeal of the early populist rulers such as Peron, Vargas and Cardenas. In Argentina for example, both the Peronist appeal to women as wives and mothers and the support to promote women’s political activism only rhetorically ‘erased the border between the public and the private’ (Grammatico, 2010:129; Zabaleta, 1997). In Venezuela, the discourse of ‘revolutionary motherhood’ under Chavez was effectively used to mobilize women at the communal level (Fernandes, 2007:102).

Nevertheless, the anti-establishment rhetoric, familialism upholding traditional gender roles and nationalist reflexes also means paradoxical stances for the populists who often combine modernist discourses and traditionalist approaches. This was the case, for example, during
Cardenas populism in Mexico in the 1930s where women’s equal rights were promoted within the framework of a modernist project while ‘honoring traditional cultural practices’ (Olcott, 2010 24-45). In Bolivia, the ‘return to indigenous values’ meant bolsering traditional gender roles. The gender dimension of populist governance relate to its inherent proclivity to preserve existing asymmetrical gender relations by transforming women’s engagement with the state. Thus, research on the legacy of early Latin American populist administrations on the state promotion of gender equality and on the feminist struggles emphasize the mixed record of populist rule for women’s empowerment. The new generation of populist leaders created new channels for community-level organizations for women and they extended material benefits through social programs (Rousseau, 2006) The flipside of these inclusive policies, however, was that women were made dependent on the state, party or the leader as clients in need of protection. (Kampwirth, 12)

Highlighting the gendered aspects of populist strategy and discourse calls for contextualizing its leadership and discursive dimensions. This seems particularly important for demonstrating the janus-faced nature of populism for democracy with respect to its inclusionary and exclusionary aspects at the same time. It can thus be hypothesized that the empowerment message at the core of populist projects especially in periods of democratic retreat is likely to work through gendered messages and policies targeting women, which ultimately reproduces patriarchal gender regimes in many domains. Furthermore, the instrumentalization of gender equality in the policy process is likely to result in the inclusion of women as citizens through a controlled process in the new configurations of power.

3. The AKP Case: Populist political strategies under the retreat from democracy

By the time Turkey’s major centre-right parties were in ideological and organizational decline towards the late 1990s, the pro-Islamic Islamic Welfare Party (RP), which employed a populist rhetoric of the ‘the just order’ succeeded in being responsive to the socioeconomic grievances of the rural and urban poor (Gülalp, 2001). The RP was closed in January 1998 after an indirect intervention of the military which considered it as a threat to the secular fundamentals of the Republic. In this process, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (the then mayor of Istanbul) was sentenced briefly for imprisonment for inciting people to hatred on the basis of religious appeals. In 2001, he proceeded to establish his own party with the reformists by breaking with the old-guard.
It was largely the economic crisis of 2001 and the voters’ alienation from the existing parties which paved the way for the electoral victory of Erdogan’s AKParti (literally means: pure, white party) in 2002 only a year after its establishment. The AKP embraced a non-ideological conception of politics as service to ‘the nation’ by bringing together a heterogenous coalition of ‘moderate Islamists, nationalists, and even a certain segment of the former centre-left’ (Özbudun, 2006). On the basis of a moderate and pragmatic approach for its democratization policies especially during its first term, scholars claimed that the neoliberal, globalist, conservative and moderate represented ‘a breach in the authoritarian state-centered view’ (Insel, 2003: 295). In this period, a thinly-veiled populist discourse was also employed by emphasizing its anti-establishment stance (Yetkin, 2010). The AKP’s political identity was projected under a new identity, the ‘conservative democracy’ pitting its party’s pro-people stance against the top-down ‘social engineering projects’ of the secular establishment (Akdoğan 2004 p. 26).

The majority of the existing studies on the AKP populism characterize the present era as a case of neo-populism focusing on the socio-economic policies of the governments. The AKP’s ‘targeted poverty programs and election-time spending, as well as attacks on privilidged sectors and the succesfully management of inflation’ constituted the backbone of its successive electoral victories (Tuğal, 2012). Its poverty alleviation policies in the context of neoliberalism is considered as the pillar of a project of consolidating the power of the hegemonic classes (Yıldırım, 2009). The AKP’s conservative-neoliberal populism has worked through clientelistic relations at the local level through private charity, formal and informal networks relying on the AKP controlled municipalities, local party branches and Islamic communities. Similar to the conditional cash transfer policies in some Latin American countries such as Mexico (PRONASOL), Brazil (Bolsa Família), Honduras, Chile Nicaragua, which reestablished clientelistic linkages under neoliberalism, such formalized conditional cash transfers to certain segments of the population contributed to the popularity of the party among the urban poor (Buğra and Keyder, 2006).

As a case of right-wing populism the AKP’s governance style and discourses were comparable to the other/left-wing versions of neo-populisms in Latin America (Öniş and Aytaç, 2014).

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3 In the AKP program, the objective of this new identity was a ‘Democratic Republic’, http://www.akparti.org.tr/english/akparti/parti-programme.

4 “İşte AKP’nin Sosyal Yardım Gerçekçi” (Here is the Social Assatance Reality of the AKP) http://www.radical.com.tr/politika/işte-ak-partinin-sosyal-yardim-gerçegi-1260849.
The analysis in this paper shares the contentions of those scholars who argued that the broadly-based and heterogenous support base of the AKP and its long-term populist appeal necessiates a political approach to its populist project (Yabancı, 2016: p. 600). The referendum process of September 2010 clearly demonstrated the drift to the authoritarian version of populism in Turkey as the government aimed at securing the control of the judiciary. The post-2010 era also ushered in the increasing dose of Islamic content of the ‘nation’ rhetoric and a cultural polarization discourse. It was argued that the category of the AKP’s ‘others’ was expanded to include other groups which were left categorically out of this Islamic-nationalist framework such as the Alevis, secular Kurdish movement and the leftist sectors (Taskın, 2014). Its conservative and Islamic worldview led to the spread of feelings of exclusion by socially marginalized identities such as women, liberals, Alevis etc. (Toprak, 2008).

Throughout its successive electoral victories, the AKP’s discourse glorifying the ballot-box majorities as the will of the nation is used to conceal disdain for the check and balance system of parliamentarism conventionally controlled by the secular sectors. The referendum campaigns of 2007, 2010 and 2017 relied on Erdogan’s personal appeal to his supporters on the basis of this national will rhetoric and the use of state resources at the grassroot level for mass mobilization (Selçuk, 2016:577). During subsequent episodes of societal challenges to the AKP rule, Erdogan the plebiscitary notions of democracy were effectively employed. 5

The strength of President Erdogan’s charismatic leadership was attributed by the party ideologues to his ‘transformative leadership with a vision’ based on intense emotional ties with the followers. (Akdogan, 2017: 107.) The anti-establishment orientation in the discourse of the AKP aroused a strong ‘sense of victimhood’ in the hands of the Kemalist elites and the secular Western world (Yılmaz, 2017: 6). Effective use of visual media especially television, manipulation through the AKP cadres, and direct and unmediated contact with the representatives of influential groups on certain occasions (artists, journalists, women’ associations, families of the matrys, university rectors, and elected community heads) were used to complement the populist message and appeal. Pro-

5 Cases in point were ‘Respect to the National Will Rallies’ after the Gezi resistance of 2013, and the Democracy Rallies following the failed coup attempt of 15 July 2016.
governmental organizations coopted by the government “expanded the reach of populist antagonism between the people versus the elites” (Yabanci, 2016: 592).6

Especially following the March 2014 municipal elections under the unchallenged leadership authority within the AKP, a more visible authoritarian populist governance accelerated the Turkish political systems drift into competitive authoritarianism (Özbudun, 2015; Yıldızcan and Özpınar, 2013). This process also corresponded to the rise of a more conservative gender discourse which had already started to permeate the education system and bureaucracy (Arat, 2010).

4. Major Strands of AKP’s Gender Populism: Compromising Women’s Inclusion in the Public Sphere

Several surveys done on and before the presidential election day (August 10, 2014) underlined a significant gender gap in the AKP leader Erdoğan’s political appeal and support.7 This is a reflection of an observable tendency for women to vote for the AKP over the years, which can be partly explained by the general trend of Turkish women’s conservatism. A macho image reflected in Erdogan’s body language, his protest style and rhetoric to women added to his popularity among his supporters. As a charismatic and authoritative leader, Erdoğan’s image of a father and family men bolstered feelings of identification and emotional ties. This personalist populist orientation has also been very significant in the public discourses of female party politicians, ministers who always gave credit to his leadership in the progressive gender reform agenda.

Research indicated that the AKP’s support among women largely came from housewives,8 and educational attainment negatively correlated with the women’s support for the party (Fidrmuch and Börke-Tunal, 2016). It can be contended that the greater tendency of the lower-SES groups to vote for the AKP (as opposed to for example center-left CHP), prevailing patriarchal values in the Turkish society, the AKP’s strategic mobilization effort to activate and organize women supporters at the grassroots level, and the social assistance policies which benefited women from the urban poor contributes to a women’s conduciveness to

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6 Such as TÜRGEV, KADEM, Memursen, Hak-İŞ; Eğitim Bir- Sen.
8 ODARK Research Group Survey (carried out in 26 provinces), 2006; http://www.memurlar.net/haber/51376/
support the AKP more than men. After 2012, the new Ministry of Family and Social Policy (replacing the State Ministry in Charge of Women and the Family) supervised regular cash transfers to over 3 million families, besides the municipal aid with foodstuff, heating and health services largely through private charity.\(^9\) Cash social transfers from the Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundation and the introduction of the Conditional Cash Program in 2003 was beneficial particularly lower -SES women (Fougner and Kurtoglu, 152).

During the EU-led democratization reform process, starting with the Criminal Law amendments (2004) which recognized women’s personal integrity and opened the way for the endorsement of severe punishment for perpetrators of violence against women, gender equality was integrated into the legislative structure. Turkey’s vibrant NGO activism within the women’s movement played an important role in following up the government’s reform agenda (Aldikaçtı-Marshall, 2009). The constitutional changes of 2004 and 2010 confirmed the state commitment to gender equality and extended constitutional guarantees for positive discrimination for women.\(^10\) The domestic Violence Legislation (1998) was amended in 2003 and in 2011 substantially to take stronger precautions for violence and to protect women victims. With Labour Law amendments (2003) the government also proceeded to expand women’s social rights to promote a favorable legal framework to promote women’s paid employment. These legislative changes were also supported with determined efforts to gender-mainstream the judicial system through the training of the judges and with new nation-wide campaigns to bridge the gap in male-female children’s schooling.

In the discourses of party officials’ speeches on gender equality issues, the progressive record of the AKP in the legal reforms was often referred to as ‘a silent revolution’.\(^11\) At the same time, Erdoğan called on women to actively struggle for their rights (Akdoğan, 2017 228). Meanwhile, the International women’s Day messages issued by every single provincial and sub-provincial heads of the AKP WomenBranches (WB) uphold a liberal notion of ‘equal opportunities’. This notion is justified by an essentialist approach to genders referring to

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\(^10\) By adding the following sentence to Article 10: ‘measures taken for this purpose (i.e. ensuring that men and women have equal rights in practice) shall not be interpreted as contrary to the principle of equality.’ [http://www.posta.com.tr/ak-partili-ve kilden-başörtü-ve-kadin-vekil-cikisi-haber-316579](http://www.posta.com.tr/ak-partili-ve-kilden-başörtü-ve-kadin-vekil-cikisi-haber-316579); 1December, 2015 .
Islam’s peaceful and egalitarian message upholding equality for women. The religious justification is tied to women’s mothering roles by claiming that Islam had conferred on women the highest status in the society as mothers. In most of these messages, women’s centrality in the family as carriers of ‘national and moral values of the nation’ were emphasized. Women’s social, political and economic participation was also framed with regards to national development objectives, rather than women’s equal citizenship rights with men (Akdogan, 228). In the AKP discourses, appeals to women’s heroism as mothers also take a prominent place; women’s sacrificing nature and mother’s sufferings for their children were also praised as courage and sacrifices for the nation. This ‘heroic mother’ rhetoric in a nationalist appeals is used to justify legal reforms and the social policies targeting women. As Erdoğan once lamented, ‘ ....no man can fully understand the feeling of sorrow in the hearts of mother of my country, mothers who have lost their children in terrorism... Just as their pain in their hearts is great, so is their courage and heroism ...’.

It was claimed by the AKP politicians that the feminist perspectives promoting gender equality went against the natural differences between men and women. In fact, in Erdogan’s view, a gender- balance or gender- complementarity perspective would be necessary. He claimed that equality between men and women would amount to an antagonistic relationship creating rivalry between the sexes. This would also conflict with the Turkish culture which associated women with ‘kindness and elegance’. In his address on the occasion of the International Women Day in 2007, Erdogan equated discrimination against women by racism stating that discrimination, violence, sexual abuse were could only be overcome through a mentality transformation and culture change. The equality of opportunity discourse found its institutional expression in 2009 during the establishment of the parliamentary commision of Equality of Opportunity between Women and Men.

15 quoted in Akdogan, 2017, p. 230
(KEFEK), as male deputies of the government hijacked the women MPs efforts to establish it as the equality commission in the original bill.\(^{17}\)

This familial approach endorsed and voiced by male and female party figures underlined motherhood as women’s major domain in life, indeed as ‘a career on its own’.\(^{18}\) It was back in the summer of July 2010 when the then PM for the first time publicly declared that ‘he did not believe in the equality between and women’ in his address to the representatives of women’s organizations at a high profile meeting in Istanbul. Erdoğan claimed that gender equality was in conflict with women’s nature and that ‘men and women indeed complemented each other’.\(^{19}\) This declaration was a dramatic and frustrating experience for the feminist women present at that meeting. After 2010, Erdoğan reiterated this discourse which underpinned his hostility towards feminism on other occasions, such as at a 2014 conference of KADEM (Association for Women and Democracy - directly sponsored by the government and led by Erdoğan’s youngest sister.\(^{20}\) In his speech at the First International Women and Family Summit (2014) held by the Minister of Family and Social Services and KADEM, Erdoğan contended that, ‘what counted is women’s equality in terms of justice... you cannot make women work in the areas of men, just like it was the communist systems...’. In the same speech, he also referred to mothers as sacred; and blamed feminists for ‘not accepting women’s mothering roles.’\(^{21}\) This opposition to equality was justified with the claims that women had become vulnerable to ‘all kinds of exploitation’ in the West under ‘the pretext of equality’. This approach to gender equality was also embraced by the AKP Women Branches (WB); for example, the chair of the WB in Istanbul claimed that it was necessary to save women from a major injustice based on the equity discourses since ‘women and men were complemented each other’.\(^{22}\)

Particularly since 2013 leading pro-government women’s organization which endorsed the government’s views on women and the gender reforms (such as KADEM and other local-

\(^{17}\) [https://www.bianet.org/bianet/113013-mart-karsilaması. 9 March.2008](https://www.bianet.org/bianet/113013-mart-karsilaması. 9 March.2008)

\(^{18}\) [https://www.birgin.net/haber/akp-zihniyetin-n-kadina-bakisi-12-yilda-kim-ne-dedi-830511.html. 18 June 2017. The Minister of Health declared in his visit to a hospital to see the first baby of the new year that women ought not to consider careers other than motherhood.](https://www.birgin.net/haber/akp-zihniyetin-n-kadina-bakisi-12-yilda-kim-ne-dedi-830511.html. 18 June 2017. The Minister of Health declared in his visit to a hospital to see the first baby of the new year that women ought not to consider careers other than motherhood.)

\(^{19}\) Vatan d-Daily, 18 July, 2010.

\(^{20}\) Quoted in: [https://bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/184207-erdoğan-uc-bes-psikopatin-yanalisi-ne-bizi-ne-inancimizi-temsil-eder. 5 March 2017](https://bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/184207-erdoğan-uc-bes-psikopatin-yanalisi-ne-bizi-ne-inancimizi-temsil-eder. 5 March 2017)


level organizations) have been popularizing a new gender approach to sidestep feminist organizations on equality issues. Through the substitution of ‘gender justice’ for equality to de-legitimize feminism, women’s difference argument is turned upside down to endorse women’s primary roles as mothers and wives. In the gender justice argument, which essentializes the feminine identity, ‘women and men are not equal but equivalent’(‘of equal value’) evoking Islamic notion of gender complementarity. Feminist organizations are accused of elitism, and the Republican secular equality policies are criticized for imposing a Westernized identity for women ignoring the under-problems of privileged and pious women (Yabancı, 606).

The traditional conservative parties of Turkey always embraced familialism, a politico-ideological approach which glorified the family as the basis of the Turkish society. What is specific about the AKP period is that the familial ideology has been intensified and transformed for its social policy reforms (Yazıcı, 116). In the conservative democratic identity of the AKP the family constitute the major context of its women’s rights platform. The AKP Program of 2003 underlined the significance of the strong family for ‘social solidarity, societal pace and happiness’ (Akparti 2003; 17). A strong family sturcture was important for raising new generations, for the caring and the rehabilitatitton of the handicaped and the elderly. The degeneration of the traditional family structure through dissolution of the families due to divorce and the spread of nuclear families were seen as a threat to the social function of the family. Various programs of the Minister of Family and Social Services (such as the family education program, pro-marriage programs, the activities and projects of ASAGEM (General Directorate of Family and Social Research Affiliated with the Ministry), the Diyanet (The Directorate of Religious Affairs) and pro-governmental women’s organizations were concerned above all with the strengthening of the heterosexual family defined as a social security institution and protecting it from outside disruptions (Coşar and Yegenoglu 2011, 11). The establishment of the KAGEM and the establishment in 2003 Family Guidance Offices at the local preachers’ offices were entrusted with the task of raising

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23 KADEM was established on 8 March 2013; as of 2017 it has branhces in seventeen provinces.
26 A parliamentary commission of inquiry into diivorses was also established.
27 KAGEM ( the Center for Women and the Family) affiliated with the Diyanet Foundation.
women’s awareness of religious dictates on family matters. In these centers, women preachers emphasized family values with reference to religious dictates by, for example, advising women to remain at home instead of taking up paid employment. Other platforms for women’s socialization are the Women’s Education and Cultural centres, the Family Centres and Information Houses led by AKP–municipalities. Most of the Women’s Centers are active in the lower SES neighbourhoods and they offer women opportunities of training through courses, seminars, movie screening sessions, counseling by women. These centers are often the only available channels for socialization for these women in the absence of women’s rights associations and social work experts alternatives.

The pro-family stand of the governments also went in hand with calls for women to have big families to bear at least three children. Disapproval of increasing C-sections deliveries at hospitals and Erdogan’s anti-abortion stance led public hospitals to adopt to restrict cesarean deliveries and abortions. The abortion polemic was deeply resented by many feminists for turning women into culprits and for preventing a thorough discussion of the issue. The anti-abortion stand was framed in the context of a nationalist discourse claiming that, ‘... this is a plan to eradicate this nation from the world stage. We should not pay any credit to these tricks to prevent the reproduction of this nation... we need a young and dynamic population’

Finally, the headscarf issue’s significance from the perspective of gender populism under the AKP period cannot be underestimated. The AKP’s pro-people discourse to challenge the secular education policies and its identity as a conservative party were highly relevant for its the defense of the pious women’s access to the public sphere. With the AKP rule, the headscarved women became more visible in the party. The AKP’s initial low-profile strategy of struggling against the ban was projected as an emancipatory agenda for the oppressed; in this context the headscarved women’s victimization was highlighted. The headscarf bans

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28 İrşad ve Dini Rehberlik Offices (in Turkish) in 69 provinces and 141 provinces also offered practical guidelines as to how to deal with certain problems such as domestic violence. 
30 Ibid; ‘Family Centres become a Model’ Milliyet Daily, 23 February 2012.
31 ‘Erdogan Wanted At least Three Children’ Milliyet Daily, 14. July 2009. Other polices include the social security coverage extended for test tube baby procedures, and cash payments for the newborns.
32 ‘There is not Abortion in Uludere but child corps’ Radikal Daily, 6 June 201.
were lifted in a gradual way in 2013 (a few years later after an unsuccessful attempt at a constitutional amendment) after the government felt more secure in power through the credit it gained during the democratization reforms in the EU process. By that time, societal consensus was already achieved for the necessary support on lifting the bans. Nevertheless, the endorsement of the right to headscarf in the universities and in the public was taken up on an antagonistic discursive platform to underscore the oppression of pious women. As Erdoğan put it in 2012:

‘The opposition always mentioned women’s rights,... but they always made the women and the girls of this country suffer. They urged girls to be educated, but they turned them away from the university gates. They mentioned democracy and freedoms, but they defended prohibitions. They oppressed women, ... but no one can now turn my lady sisters away from the university gates. From now on, fascist pressures ceased to exist in this country.’

This discourse of ‘we versus them’ held that thanks to the AKP policies an important basis of gender-based discrimination was finally overcome. Towards the general elections in 2015, the Minister of Education claimed that the most important step taken by the AKP government towards gender equality was the elimination of the headscarf ban the universities. He stated that with the elimination of the bans for headscarved women to work in the public sector and to study at university they ‘opened their ways for those (women)who wanted to express their womanly identity, their sacred sexual identity as they wished it,...’ The then PM Davutoğlu also declared that headscarf bans used to be the symbol of discrimination against women in Turkey. It is clear that this approach disregards other gender-oppressive identities and ideologies beside political projects (secular/religious). The dominant discourses on this issue also demonstrates that the AKP’s gendered discourses to project an emancipatory agenda was based on the creation of binaries dividing women as covered and uncovered.

35 “Genders were Equalized with the Headscerf”, Cumhuriyet, 22. May 2015.
36 Address to the Meeting of Working Women UKADER, 22 October, 2015.
During the AKP period, the promotion of women’s political participation constituted an important aspect of the party’s gender equality discourses and programmatic objectives. Erdoğan has always been aware of the importance of the support of party women in his personal political career. It was, indeed, during his previous political experience leading to his election as Istanbul’s metropolitan city mayor in 1994 that he first invented the women’s vote and their political labour as a critical mobilization factors in the electoral contest (Arat, 2005, White, 2002). As Erdogan put it in 2014:

“When I was getting prepared for the municipal elections of 1994, I was always encouraging my lady sisters for politics. They never let me alone in that election. They went from door to door. Throughout the thirteen years of my party chairmanship and premiership, I struggled for women’s presence in political life.”  

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After the AKP was established, both covered and uncovered women were invited to the party as founding members. Thirteen of its sixty-four of its founding members were women. There were always women vice-chairs (currently 4 out of 16 including the WB chair) and chairs of the parliamentary group in the AKP but they were always a minority. At present, nine out of fifty members of the Central Decision-Making Executive Council and three out of fifteen members of the Central executive Committee are women. No women ever held the position of provincial head of the party in its eighty-one provincial organizations. Women’s descriptive representation, i.e. numerical presence of women in proportion to that of men in the Turkish Parliament significantly increased during the AKP period over the years in stark contrast to the pre-2002 period characterized a dramatic legislative female. Between 2002 and 2015 the percentage of women MPs in the TBMM increased from 4 to 15 percent; yet, none of the parties introduced electoral gender quotas or reserved seats. The AKP always took the credit for improving the presence of women among parliamentary elites, and yet, in terms of the ratios for its own recruitment of women compared to the number of MPs it gained in total over the years, its record of nominating women and getting them elected has not been well

ahead of other parties which gained parliamentary representation. After the local elections of 2014, five women mayors (out of the total 30 women elected at the provincial and sub-provincial level) were elected from the AKP list.

As of the November 2015 parliamentary elections, AKP’s women legislators constituted up only 11 per cent of the MPs in its parliamentary group, making it the second lowest female representation after the MHP. The number of the AKP members increased from 258 in June 2015 elections to 317 in November, but the number of women elected from the party lists decreased from 40 to 35. Like most of the major Turkish parties, the AKP’s nomination process is dominated by the central party organization, hence male leadership ultimately has the upper hand in the selection process. Research into women’s recruitment within the local organizations of the AKP demonstrated that women along with the youth and the Alevi minority were still treated as tokens as representatives of the politically marginalized sectors (Uysal and Toprak, 2010 34-35). Perhaps as indicative of this situation, most of the local women party administrators rose in politics through their social capital and/or the political influence and connection of their families rather than in grassroots political struggles. 39

Under the AKP period, its WBs have been the major platforms and institutional channels for women’s politicization organized in 81 provinces, 892 subprovinces and 169 localities below the subprovince level. In 8 March 2012 PM Erdoğan claimed that the AKP possessed the only highly-organized women’s political organization in all of the provinces of Turkey.40 Members of the AKP WBs and its officials at all levels as well as voluntary activists played key roles in electoral mobilization by using informal networks of relationships such as kinship and neighborhood to connect with other women. This was similar to the strategy of the Welfare Party which also organized the most active women’s organization in party politics in Turkey (Çıtak and Tür,2008). The WB branches enjoy some degree of autonomy within the party organization from the community level to the WB at the central party headquarters. Doğan’s fieldwork on the AKP’s community level participation found that some of the WB members worked for the party out of a personal devotion to the AKP and to the leader. For most of the female officials activism in the WBs meant the accumulation of a cultural-political capital

39 Most of these women came through central appointment (Doğan)
40 “Erdogandan tüm dünyaya mesaj”. Samanyolu Haber, 8 Mart 2012 .The AKP boasted having almost four million women members (most of whom in the WBs) far exceeding other parties
through the local networks—albeit within the confines their spouses has drawn for them (Doğan:228, 235)

WBs became important in facilitating women’s descriptive representation and promoting their election as deputies and also provide a voice for women within the party’s male-dominated administrative structure. The WBs has a say in the finalization of the shortlists, and women AKP politicians underlined the signnificance of a ‘de facto’ quota implemented by party leader Erdoğan. Nevertheless, research also indicates that ultimately only those women who were personally supported by Erdoğan and/or suggested by his wife Emine Erdoğan were more likely to be selected for the electable places in the candidate shortlists (Şahin-Mencütek, 93).

For most of the AKP women politicians, personal loyalty to Erdoğan has been very important, and even those arduous women who represent their constituencies with strong local ties acknowledge the support of males in their families in their political careers. It can be contended that even for those few women who outstand with their incumbency and pro-women profiles, party ideology always overshadowed their stance towards gender issues. Usually these women MPs oten underlined their mother identity, and they attributed womes marginal existence in political life to the womens domestic roles, differential socialization and their lack of interest politics (Cansun,187-205).

For the AKP female politicians women’s entry into politics meant the feminization of the parliament which indicated the pro-people stand of the AKP. It was often stated that women could make their voice heard through women MPs. These MPs never challenged women’s double burden at home and at work; most of them stated that as mothers and wives, ‘they have to catch up with everthing...’ In the 8 March Declarations of the WB heads --as in the commemoration of 5 December, the women’s right’s day in Turkey -- one often hears the identificaiton of women with sacrifice and the emphasis on ‘women foremost as the pillar of

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41 This point about a de facto quota was mentioned by some AKP female founding members during my previous interviews with them for my research on the AKP’s gender policies in 2012 in Istanbul and Ankara.
42 As in the case of Fatma Şahin, one of AKP’s leading female politicians who served as an MP, head of the WBs, as cabinet minister and recently as a mayor; http://www.milliyet.com.tr/fatma-sahin-siyasete-ilk-atildigi-donemlerde-gaziantep-yerelhaber-1443667/
the family and then of society". AKP’s women MPs refrain from references to patriarchy and traditional gender roles to account for women’s subordinate position in the Turkish society. On the contrary, it is claimed that in Turkey women held power within the family in the managing of household decisions. Women politician’s public statements always credited Erdogan leadership for progress in women’s rights and gender equality reforms under the AKP period.

The individualist rhetoric of the AKP politicians is also striking calling for women to make their own way into the high office through hard work and struggle. In March 2007 at a meeting on women in local administrations, PM Erdogan expressed his objection to the electoral quotas on the ground that ‘what counted was meritocracy rather than submitting women to the will of men’. Erdoğan declared that introducing electoral quotas for women would be ‘an injustice’ by giving privilged to some women because women ‘are powerful enough to achieve representation at any level of politics without the need for privilidge’. In 2008 in another speech on a meeting on women in local governments, Erdogan stated that ‘a democracy without women was deficient’ and declared that ‘we are for competition on this too. I consider the quota as a disrespect for our women.’

The parliamentary elections of 2007 was significant for the pressure of women on all political parties from the civil society organizations for increasing the number of women candidates. In this period a total of thirty two womens NGOs declared a list of the changes that they demanded to made on the constitution, electoral legislation and the political parties legislation and demanded 30 per cent quotas for women on the nominations. On a particular instance, Erdoğan objected to the question of the chair of KA-DER on quotas (the Association for the Support of Women Candidates) by stating that he was personally not supportive of the quota for equality and stated that not all countries were implementing electoral quotas. Turkey’s leading NGOs – TÜSAID, KADER ve KAGIDER always pressured the government to implement positive discrimination in local and national level electoral process and they

5. December, 2016
47 Erdoğan’s Address to the AkParti Women in Local Administrations Meeting, 27 March 2007.
49 Vatan Daily, 2 October 2007
underlined that most of the women candidates on the party shortlists were on unelectable positions. Later on, In 2010 when KA-DER chair mentioned the recommendation decision of the European council on gender quotas for member states, Erdoğan replied that the decision was not binding for them. Equality for them meant equality of opportunity because women were not the equal of men.

Towards the 2012 elections, prominent figures from the business and women’s organizations across the secular and conservative divide came together in the *Haklı Kadın Platformu* to put pressure on the parliament for gender equality. This Platform underlined the prevailing problem of women’s underrepresentation in the parliament. In this period, the female MPs did not support the electoral quotas; most could not become assertive on such feminist issues due to concerns about re-election (Sahin-Mencutek, 96). AKP’s female ministers always emphasized women’s mothering roles as the most important position for women. They credited the implementation of an ‘indirect’ quota by the leader in the sense of setting a certain target for women’s numerical representation. However, in contrast to Peru and Morales for example, Erdoğan never promoted women into leadership positions. He preferred instead to rely on the female populists on the lower echelons who remained highly dependent on the party.

Following the elimination of the headscarf bans in the public sector employment and in universities, covered women’s access to political office upon election was made possible with a change in the internal code of the parliament in 2013. Both male and female AKP politicians hailed the election of covered women deputies in the June 2015 elections as a milestone event in women’s political rights. However, behind these rhetorical references one should mention the symbolic importance of the headscarf in the parliament. This was evident in the AKP male politician’s condemning of the headscarved women’s campaign, ‘No Vote Without a Covered Candidate’ which publicly challenged the male leadership’ reluctance to nominate a headscarved woman in 2012.

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50 “Yalcındağ: Positive Discrimination is Necessary” *Radikal* 13.06.2002
51 Vatan Daily, 18 July 2010.
During the recent referendum campaign of 2017 on the constitutional amendments to introduce a presidential system in Turkey, in response to a question what the new system in particular would bring to women in terms of political representation, President Erdoğan employed a rhetoric which credited the AKP’s role in increasing women’s representation, and endorsed the need for further political integration of women since “only women could articulate women’s problems”  

However, the adverse stand against electoral and party quotas for women continued to be dominate the discourses. PM Yıldırım also reiterated the individualist and liberal opposition to quota by claiming that gender quotas could be considered in those countries of lower democratic development, and claimed that although he was ‘personally in favor of opening for women new spaces for political contestation, quota was a sort of “protectionism and as such, an impediment for progress” .

4.2. Where does the approach of the reconciliation of work with family fit into the AKP’s gender populism?

In 2008, the Women Entrepreneurs Association of Turkey (KAGİDER) and the Association of Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen (TÜSİAD) released a report, entitled Gender Inequality in Turkey: Problems, Priorities and Suggestions for Solutions. Referring to the government’s objective of EU membership, this report called for genuine commitment and policies beyond rhetoric to solve the problem of declining female employment. During the AKP years, female labour force participation increased from 23 per cent in 2005 to 32.5 per cent in 2016 which indicated relative improvement over the years --albeit remaining significantly below the EU average of 62 per cent. However, this increase disguised the prevailing high rates of women’s unemployment in those sectors outside of agriculture (Tokgöz, 2016). According to official statistics, in 2016 women’s employment reached 28 per cent (as opposed to 65 perc cent of male employment); yet, 44 percent of the women in paid employment were deprived of any social security rights. Worse still, as of September 2016, unemployment rate among young women reached 33 per cent. Although neoliberal

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54 Televised interview NTV, 4 April 2017.
58 Ibid.
59 The overall female unemployment rate was 14 per cent; https://www.evrensel.net/haber/301183/akpnin-2016-yili-kadin-istihdami-politikasi, 25 December 2016
policies have been instrumental in opening greater space for women’s labor force participation, it accelerated the process of turning women into subordinate laborers with flexible working conditions suited to their domestic roles (Coşar and Yeğenoglu, 2011).

The EU accession process in Turkey led to several important reforms to promote gender equality in paid employment (Dedeoğlu, 2012:131). The new Labour Law in 2003 prohibited sex-based discrimination in employment relations including lawful dismissal of women on the ground of pregnancy. It incorporated explicit reference to ‘sexual harassment’ as a valid ground to invalidate a labour contract and to claim compensation, and it extended paid maternity leave from 12 to 16 weeks. Female workers with an infant below the age of one year was granted daily nursing leave of 1.5 hours. A related by-law (2004) stipulated that workplaces employing 100 to 150 female workers should establish daycare facilities for small children. To deal with gender-based work segregation, the prohibition for women to work night shifts in the industrial sector was abolished, and women were allowed to work in arduous and hazardous work. The Prime Ministry circular of 2004 urged to ensure gender equality in the recruitment of civil servants. However, these legal reforms did not constitute a comprehensive and integrated strategy (Toksöz, 2007).

Until the post-1999 EU process, access to the health care system and the pension system was designed for the males who are in the formal labor market and for their families (Dedeoğlu, 2012, 130). The post-2007 social security and health system reforms aimed at the gender-neutralization of welfare benefits; but from a gender perspective they made women vulnerable unless they had an independent status in the labour market (Coşar and Yeğenoğlu, 2009). Feminists argued that the AKP government discouraged female employment by increasing the retirement age for women.

Besides the transformation of the new welfare system along neoliberal premises, further reforms were passed aiming at promoting gender equality. For example, the new employment package of 2008 subsidized social security contributions of newly hired women. Civil Service Law was amended to extend the duration of unpaid maternity leave from one to two years, and an up-to-two year unpaid paternity leave was introduced for the father (Fougner and Kurtoğlu, 151). In 2010, the implementation of these measures focused on flexible work arrangements along with increasing the supply of women’s

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60 with an addition to the Unemployment Insurance law
qualified labour force and promoting entrepreneurship prospects through training. In 2010, with a circular of the Prime Ministry, the government’s ‘equal opportunities’ emphasis on work life referred to gender mainstreaming in employment policy citing a 35 per cent female labour force participation as a target for the year 2023. Despite these formal commitments, the report of the EC Commission noted that the positive discrimination amendment of 2010 in the Constitution was ‘yet to produce its results (Commission 2011: 31). While in the early 2000s progressive legislative changes in the Labor law and the Civil Servants legislation reflected the EU leverage to transpose the relevant EU directives, the women’s NGOs always pressed for measures to decrease women’s domestic burden in particular childcare by criticizing the government’s formal equality approach.

The post-2007 loss of the momentum in the EU accession process and the lack of political will to implement equality reforms also corresponded to a notable shift in the discourse of the government from equality to woman’s significance as the primary caregiver. As explained, a renewed emphasis on the family’s social significance summed up under the slogan of ‘strong family, strong society’ was already regarded indispensible to revitalize the family’s welfare functions to meet the needs of the children, the elderly and the disabled (Kaya, 2015 ‘Yazıcı, 2012:115.). In the context of the post-2001 economic crisis, increasing divorce rates as well the rise in urban poverty all decapacitated the family’s traditional welfare functions (Yılmaz, 2015). Hence, the new social policy paradigm shifting social care away from the state to the family through the transformation of the social security system came to be coordinated by the ministries of finance, family and social policy, labour and social security, and health. The pro-governmental NGOs such as KADEM and UKADER also gained visibility to endorse the family-centred policy with their conferences and projects.

The liberal-conservative discourse and governance under the AKP period was characterized by a tension from an emphasis on ‘individualism in the marketplace and the preservation of communal traits of the Turkish society’, a tension similar to the ‘individualist emphasis’ of the populist platform of the Western European right-wing populist parties regarding the gender equality (Meret and Siim, 2013: 86-88). This is reflected in the public appeals of the AKP politicians and ministers to working women. In 2013 the Minister of Economy Ali Babacan stated that the pro-women policy of government aimed at enabling working
women to have more children and to integrate them into the work force. Likewise, the Minister of Family and Social Services Ayşenur Islam stated in 2014 that just like the case in the USA, Turkish women could postpone their careers until after they raised their children. Then, during the Meeting on Working Women organized by KADEM and UKADER Prime Minister Davutoğlu echoed the same massage by referring to the new measures and incentives for women (such as the recognition of maternal leave period for female civil servants’ work record, municipal administrations’ obligation to open creches and daycare facilities, the provision of low-interest credits for women entreprenurs). According to Davutoğlu, all these measures were necessary in order to prevent for women a trade-off between work and their mothering roles. More recently, in her message for the International Women’s Day the Minister of Family and Social Policies Fatma Betül Sayan Kaya stated that the objective of the Program of the Protection of the Family and the Dynamic Population was the strengthening of the institution of the family and to develop measures for easing the strain on women faced with a choice between the family and work and to strengthen them within the family.

In this context, the discourse on ‘work - family harmonization’ became a new concept and policy tool since 2008 in the AKP governments’ general objectives of integrating women into the labour force. As in the case of Western Europe, a prospective threat to the social security system due to stagnation in population growth in Turkey constitutes the underlying reason behind the emphasis on the reconciliation of work and family in all plans, projects and programs (Süral, 2015). However, although within the EU this has been a strategy to ‘address remaining gaps in entitlement to family –related leave, notably paternity leave and carers’ leave’ with reference to the principle of equal treatment between men and women and the recognition of the structural nature of gender inequality (Equinet, 2013: 5), the AKP government’s work-family harmonization approach stands out as a specific policy to perpetuate women’s dependent position in both the public and the private sphere (Tougner and Kurtoğlu, 157). Turkish policy makers realized that reconciliation would largely work through flexible work arrangements, parental leave and expanded care services. In the

government’s 10th Development Plan for the period of 2014-2018 (which set 31 per cent as the target for women’s employment ratio), the significance of women’s public participation was framed in terms of the need for protecting and improving the status of the family. The Plan and the National Strategy for Employment (2014-2023) underlined the importance of flexible work conditions (part-time work, temporary work, distant work, home-based work, etc) as a ‘miracle solutions’ for the promotion of women’s employment. Since these types of work were deemed as suitable for the reconciliation of work and family life, this new strategy is based on the premise that women should take place in the work market without ignoring their domestic responsibilities at home (Tokgöz, 2016). Ultimately this would mean the deepening of gender inequalities in the private sphere, and hindering their access to qualified full-time jobs (Ulutaş, 2015; Gün, 2016) thereby leading to the domestication of increasing numbers of women. Therefore, feminist NGOs challenged the family-work harmonization campaign for prioritising women’s domestic labor ‘at the interaction of its conservatism and the needs of the capital’ by promoting female labour’s flexibility in the labour market.65

The AKP’s Election Manifesto for the 1 November 2015 Parliamentary elections also mentioned the reconciliation of work and family by referring to the new measures including extending maternity leave, quality child support and creche subsidies at the work place; early retirement opportunities, reduction in income tax for women workers, more flexible working conditions in the public sector including the possibility of part-time work for new mothers.66 It was declared that these new measures for the promotion of a family and child-friendly cultural and social environment were aiming at both increasing the fertility rate of working women and their employment rate (Yılmaz, 381). Given the inadequacy of publicly-funded child care facilities in Turkey (Demirdirek and Şener, 2014:35), to what extent these two objectives may be realized at the same time remains unclear. The manifesto clearly indicated that the development objective of the government was to strengthen the family as an institution for the new generation.67

66 AKP. 1 November 2015 General Election Manifesto.p. 90
67 Ibid. 77.
These measures which also included the introduction of maternity payment and a project of ‘grandmother payment’ launched during the presidential elections of 2014 were presented by the AKP as positive discrimination for women. However, as Buğra rightly contended, the debates of low levels of female employment in Turkey has been taking place in an ideological context basing women’s public participation on women’s difference (Bugra, 2014:150-151). This need not be unique to Turkey, but both ‘the labor market dynamics and the character of the social policy environment’ in the Turkish context confirm the view that women’s proper place is in fact the home (Buğra, 161). Endorsing part time, insecure, irregular and low paying jobs on a permanent basis for women would, in practice, mean the reconciliation of patriarchal dynamics with women’s right to employment. Moreover, measures implemented to protect women as mothers in the context of the reconciliation strategy such as extended pregnancy and maternal leave carry the real danger of threatening the employers due to increase in the cost of female labor to them. (Süral, 2015).

Considering the dilemmas of the work-family balance and the consolidation of patriarchal gender relations without genuine policy commitment to transform women’s subordinate roles in both public and private sphere, the Turkish case is comparable to other emerging illiberal regimes. A case in point is Hungary where conservative family standards have been turning gender mainstreaing into ‘family mainstreaming’, and the EU-initiated norms such as the reconciliation of work and family work through the ideal of ‘the heteronormative family’. As in Hungary, in Turkey too, populism’s discursive and policy platforms of gender equality tend to isolate the issue from much deep-running problems of the wage gap, poverty, sexual harassment and domestic violence.

5. Conclusions

The Turkish case under the AKP period is significant for gender populism analyses in terms of its inclusionary strategies for women and its discursive mobilization of the masses over an equality agenda due to various contextual factors, such as the ongoing Europeanization.

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68 https://www.evrensel.net/haber/301183/akpnin-2016-yili,-‘Kadin-istihdami-politikasi’
process, the significance of a vocal women’s movement, and the party’s programmatic objectives for the projection of a reformist and moderate identity. Nevertheless, the gender populism of the AKP era produced a complicated track record for gender equality under progressive policies and a prevailing liberal equal-rights (or equality opportunity) outlook on gender issues which could be reconciled with its conservative worldview on women’s public and private roles. Initially, the party refrained from polarizing discourses especially over the secular-Islamic divide; hence it followed a low-profile strategy on the headscarf question. It then became apparent that the lifting of the headscarf restrictions for pious women was important for the instrumentalization of (gender) equality. The victim rhetoric in the populist defense of pious women’s rights ultimately meant dividing the women constituency along cultural identities. Following the 2010 constitutional amendments which opened the door to affirmative action for women, the AKP took credit in its discourses for realizing a de facto positive discrimination for women. However, party politicians always expressed their objection to electoral quotas. Its pro-women discourse on women’s political recruitment also suffered from an uneasy combination of individualism (underlying its equal opportunity approach for genders) and collectivism.

The discursive and ideological basis of the new face of patriarchy in this period has been the glorification of women’s domestic roles, on the one hand, and also the necessity of promoting women’s entrance into paid employment at the same time. The AKP’s transformative family policies which is a constitutive element of its conservative–liberal populism works through both the discursive terrain and institutional channels which mobilize new social policy instruments to bolster the family’s regulative function over the society and the individual. Erdoğan’s personal appeals to women on reproduction, on birth control and abortion politics as well as the discourses of male and female party politicians prioritize women’s mothering roles and differences which ultimately turned the feminist equality arguments on its head. The reproduction of motherhood ideology also takes place on a collectivist nationalist platform employing a defensive discourse against the conspiratorial Western forces. In this context, the approach of the reconciliation of work with family life, adopted from the EU social agenda aiming at overcoming gender inequalities in social political and economic life, has become another discursive and policy tool in its gender
populism to integrate women in a subordinated status into the labour market without compromising her domestic roles.

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