

## Gender and sexuality in the authoritarian discursive strategies of ‘New Turkey’

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/ejw](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/ejw)**Dilek Cindoglu**

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### Abstract

In the last decade, discourse on sexuality has proliferated more than ever in the political realm in Turkey. The discursive utilization of women's bodies and sexualities has appeared as the main tool to consolidate a conservative gender regime and the heterosexual family with children is promoted as the basic unit to reinforce hegemonic moral values and norms. This article aims to disentangle the intricate patchwork in the Justice and Development Party's (JDP) gender politics, which is geared towards ensuring pervasive control of women's bodies and sexualities. Within this framework, this article investigates the proliferation of the discourse on women's bodies and sexualities in Turkish politics by delving into the constitutive factors of the JDP's hegemonic gender politics and examining the narrative lines in recent public debates on women's sexualities.

### Keywords

Discourse, gender, public sphere, Turkey, women's sexualities

### Introduction

Since the outset of modernization attempts at the turn of the twentieth century, women's bodies and sexualities have always been discursively utilized in modern Turkey with the aim to claim spiritual and moral authenticity in the social, cultural and political spheres (Durakbaşa, 1998; Kadioğlu, 1998). The contours of the spiritual and moral realm and

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the strict boundaries pertaining to the private/public spheres are mapped out and maintained through ubiquitous dichotomies that are applied to women's bodies and their sexualities: namely 'veiled versus unveiled', 'chaste, modest, decent versus sexually assertive'. Such political discourses utilizing women's bodies and sexualities as the marker of authenticity also characterize the JDP (Justice and Development Party) rule in 'New Turkey'.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the gender politics of the current political moment differs from earlier political periods in terms of its composition being marked by a peculiar amalgam of different narrative lines. This article suggests that the contemporary anti-feminist political moment in Turkey operates along the interweavings of pro-Islamism, neoliberalism, authoritarianism and conservatism, which generates a complex patchwork of regulatory narratives on women's sexualities. This sui generis patchwork of gender politics composed of multiple axes of ideological frameworks and regulatory discourses reinforces the grip of patriarchal gender politics under the contemporary JDP rule. The initial stages of the JDP rule was characterized by a new modality of pro-Islamist politics and had generated a democratization impetus for Turkey that could ensure the dissolution of the military tutelage and the expansion of discursive space for the articulation of different ethnic and religious identities (Dağı, 2008; İnsel, 2003; Keyman, 2007). However, the authoritarian turn away from democratization in the JDP rule in the aftermath of the 2011 general elections made clear that the 'New Turkey' bears a striking resemblance to the 'Old Turkey' with respect to its intolerance for oppositional views and the freedom of speech (Esen and Gumuscu, 2016; Öniş, 2015; Taş, 2015). Against this background, this article aims to explicate how this turn towards authoritarianism has affected political discourses on women's bodies and sexualities in contemporary Turkey.

In the last decade, discourse on sexuality has proliferated in an unprecedented way in the political realm in Turkey (Acar and Altunok, 2013; Cindoğlu and Unal, 2015; Coşar and Yeğenoğlu, 2011). In particular, the discursive utilization of women's bodies and sexualities has appeared as the main tool to consolidate the conservative gender regime (Altunok, 2016; Korkman, 2015; Unal and Cindoğlu, 2013). The heterosexual family with children is promoted as the basic unit to reinforce hegemonic moral values and norms. Not only the ruling pro-Islamist party, i.e. the JDP, but political actors with different positions on the political spectrum have contributed to the consolidation of the conservative gender regime in Turkey (Akyuz, 2012; Cindoglu and Unal, 2015; Unal and Cindoglu, 2013). Yet, considering that the JDP has been in power over a decade now, it is critical to disentangle the constitutive factors of the intricate patchwork that characterizes JDP's gender politics.

The post-2011 period in Turkey has witnessed many heated political contestations over women's bodies and sexualities. The debates that were sparked by over (1) co-ed student housing versus single sex student housing, (2) the sacking of a female presenter due to her 'sexually titillating' clothing, (3) women laughing out loud in public, (4) the 'negative' effects of a TV series on young people's morality and (5) the 'we can find you a match' discourse articulated by the former Prime Minister Davutoğlu, all clearly exemplify how political discourses infiltrate the intimate spheres of people's lives with the aim to ensure the comprehensive regulation of women's morality and sexualities. In these debates, the political actors in contemporary Turkey take up women's morality and sexualities as an arena for consolidation of conservative values. One can safely suggest

that the examples above are not single speech acts but draw on a similar set of discursive opportunity structures. They are discursive statements that share identical motives and are products of the same discursive regime. The apparent proliferation of anti-feminist, conservative discourses on women's bodies and sexualities points out the rising efficacy and forcefulness of discursive opportunity structures that ensure the maintenance of the patriarchal gender regime. It is possible to suggest that in the contemporary era, the discursive regulation of women's bodies and sexualities has increased to such an extent that it has become a major discursive tool to perpetuate the hegemonic character of the current political rule in Turkey.

The JDP's 'politics of the intimate' mainly relies on the neoliberal-conservative regulation of three main policy areas, namely reproduction, sexuality and family (Acar and Altunok, 2013). Considering that this neoliberal-conservative alliance underlying the JDP's gender politics has resulted in significant loss of ground with respect to gender equality and women's position in society, it is important to identify its trajectory. Situating neoliberal-conservative gender discourses in time may allow us to see that the rise of authoritarianism in the post-2011 era has further intensified the efficacy and forcefulness of JDP's gender discourses that call for the moral regulation of women's sexualities, reproductive rights and their position in the familial realm. Hence, one of the key objectives of this article is to portray how rising authoritarianism in contemporary Turkey further feeds the neoliberal-conservative regulation of women's lives.

In this frame, it is critical to ask the following questions: What constitutive factors and power configurations pave the way for the proliferation of conservative public discourses on women's bodies and sexualities in contemporary Turkey? In what ways has the JDP's turn towards authoritarianism in the post-2011 period affected its gender politics? How does the intertwining of authoritarianism and the neoliberal-conservative alliance further reinforce the proliferation of patriarchal gender discourses in the political arena under the JDP? In the light of these questions, this article portrays contemporary discourses on women's sexualities and bodies in contemporary Turkey against the background of a complex combination of authoritarianism and the rise of neoliberal-conservative values.

## **The authoritarian political culture and women's bodies and sexualities in the age of neoliberalism**

The JDP stands out among other Islamist political party experiences in Turkey not only with respect to its astonishing electoral appeal but also in terms of its *sui generis* blending of nationalism, conservatism and neoliberalism and its moderate stance, pro-EU vision and reconciliatory, dialogic understanding of conservative democracy that characterized the initial stages of the party's rule<sup>2</sup> (Bozkurt, 2013; Çavdar, 2006; Coşar and Özman, 2004; Dağı, 2005; Hale and Özbudun, 2010). Yet, these promising aspects of the JDP rule began to drift towards centralization and authoritarianism, especially in the post-2011 period (Öniş, 2013; Özbudun, 2014).

The JDP's major electoral success since 2002 has generated a dominant party system resulting in uncontested rule with excessive concentration of power and lack of an adequate system of checks and balances (Müftüler-Baç and Keyman, 2012). Pointing out the

lack of tolerance for opposition in the current regime, Öniş (2013) maintains that the military tutelage that marked political life in the pre-JDP period has now turned into a civilian tutelage that excludes any prospect of political pluralism. Restriction of discursive space for articulating oppositional discourses and excessive control over the press hinders freedom of expression and marginalizes especially the secular, western-oriented segments of society. In contrast to its early reformist character, the JDP today monopolizes power through attempting to repress any kind of opposition, which has led to excessive polarization and an overwhelming sentiment of resentment in certain segments of society.

This authoritarian turn in the current JDP rule is also accompanied by a rising conservatism in social, cultural and political realms. A pervasive discourse promoting Islamic values and a conservative lifestyle has infiltrated public debates and reshaped the discursive configuration of various life domains ranging from women's reproductive rights to school curricula and textbooks. The party's approach to gender issues can be seen as a litmus test through which this large-scale conservatism crystallizes. In the JDP's conservative politics, being a woman is first and foremost defined within the familial sphere through traditional gender codes (Çitak and Tür, 2008; Coşar and Yeğenoğlu, 2011). Women are rendered subservient to the unity of family and the familial roles assigned to them as mothers and wives.

The JDP's policy initiatives and declarations about women in the post-2011 period clearly show the decline in the party's reformist impetus and the rise of an assertive position in reinforcing conservative gender norms and values. The recent anti-abortion policy initiative, restrictions imposed on C-sections as a part of pronatalist policies, JDP parliamentarians' patriarchal declarations reproducing traditional gender roles and the increasing emphasis on family, family unity and women's familial roles constitute a particular gender regime which resonates with the JDP's authoritarian turn and its project of reinforcing conservative values on the broadest scale possible.

Ferree (2003) notes that a change in the governing rules of discourse may increase the efficacy and forcefulness of certain ideas and reveal parts that have been hidden or less visible before. She defines the expansion of the discursive space using the term 'discursive opportunity structures', which connotes a considerable increase in standing and framing of certain ideas in public debates as well as in the media forum. Considering that discursive opportunity structures perpetuating conservative gender values have multiplied under the current JDP rule, it can be seen that the party's MPs' patriarchal speech acts in the public sphere expand the neoliberal-conservative field of discursivity and further reinforce the authoritarian character of the JDP rule. This, in return, secures a broad discursive space where the durability and effectiveness of the conservative gender regime is ensured.

## **The neoliberal-conservative alliance and the politics of gender**

An overarching neoliberal logic characterizing social, political and economic structures appears as the chief modality of governance in the contemporary era (Brown, 2006; Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism as a mentality of government places individuals into a web of power relations through internalizing its authority over citizens with different

techniques of subjectivity and subjection. Putting a particular emphasis on the idea of choice and individual freedom, the neoliberal logic requires the subjects to be self-managing, enterprising individuals (Rose, 1992). On the other hand, when neoliberalism and conservatism converge, the result is a patchwork where conservative frames of reference outweigh the emphasis on choice and individual freedom and utilize this emphasis for further conservatism of social and political life.

The neoliberal restructuring of the state in economic, social, political and cultural spheres has been a key component of the JDP's rule in contemporary Turkey (Atasoy, 2009; Coşar and Yücesan-Özdemir, 2012). Each and every sphere of life – including but not limited to, media (Akser and Baybars-Hawk, 2012), social security (Bugra and Candas, 2011; Coşar and Yeğenoğlu, 2009), urban planning (Akçalı and Korkut, 2015), education (İnal and Akkaymak, 2012) and gender politics (Acar and Altunok, 2013; Korkman, 2015) – has been restructured in line with the neoliberal patchwork that is characteristic of the JDP's rule. What distinguishes the neoliberal order under the JDP is the appropriation of political Islam in line with the necessities of the neoliberal restructuring process and vice versa (Moudouros, 2014). In this sense, conservative norms and values, religious sensitivities and the neoliberal market rationality have been blended in the same pot under the JDP. An intricate interplay is at stake between the constitutive elements of this neoliberal order, which results in a dynamic, unstable narrative line where none of the constitutive elements is the dominant theme (Yalman, 2012). As a result, the interweavings of neoliberal, conservative, authoritarian and pro-Islamist elements reinforce the neoliberal restructuring of every sphere of life in contemporary Turkey.

The convergence of neoliberalism and conservatism under the JDP has led to quite critical implications for the realm of gender relations. The politics of family as one of the main pillars of this convergence has turned out to be a powerful discursive tool to reinforce traditional gender roles (Korkman, 2015; Korkut and Eslen-Ziya, 2011; Yılmaz, 2015). Attributing sacredness to the unity of family, the JDP discourses and policies rely on a conservative politics of family that attempts to stimulate a strong commitment among citizens to the moral and political importance of the family ideal. A particular understanding of ethnicity, sexual orientation and lifestyle accompanies JDP's pronatalist politics in contemporary Turkey. Accordingly, the party promotes the reproduction of heterosexual, Turkish, married couples with conservative lifestyles, while leaving other ethnicities, sexual orientations and cohabitation practices outside (Baba, 2011; Erten, 2015).

The idea of family in the JDP discourse is not only utilized as a regulative principle in the social and political imagination but also used as a strong political metaphor that applies the paternalistic familial logic to the political realm, which highly resonates with the early Turkish Republican family saga where citizens are seen as family members and politicians as heads of household. This, in return, results in the reproduction of the patriarchal character of the household in the political realm. On different occasions, former Prime Minister Erdoğan utilized this metaphor of family in order to make reference to the solidarity and common fate of the nation.<sup>3</sup>

In line with the central role attributed to the notion of family in the social and political imagination, various policy attempts have been made by the JDP to take measures to

prevent the disintegration of the family. Recently, the Ministry of Family and Social Policies initiated a project called 'Being a Family', which provides certain advantages to families in various policy areas ranging from health and housing to postal services.<sup>4</sup> The Ministry's decision to grant loans to newly weds and its announcement that the debts of university students will be written off if they get married are also part of the same pro-family vision. Moreover, the Ministry recently tweeted images depicting people who live alone as black headless silhouettes (*Radikal*, 2014). The adults depicted in this image wander aimlessly, carrying their heads in plastic bags. When the campaign was publicized on Twitter with the caption saying 'those who consume get consumed', it caused an uproar in social media.

As a part of this pronatalist policy vision, President Erdoğan frequently stresses the need for a young population in his speeches and advises married couples to have at least three children. Erdoğan's statements imply that the economic success of the country is one of the main motives driving his pronatalist arguments. For Erdoğan, the future population of the country will definitely affect the competitiveness of the country in the international economic market:

One or two children mean bankruptcy. Three children mean we are not improving but not receding either. At least three children are necessary in each family, because our population risks aging. (*Hürriyet Daily News*, 2013a)

On the other hand, Erdoğan's stress on the economic success of the country closely aligns with the neoliberal ethics of individual self-sufficiency and a conservative family ideal based on heteropatriarchal norms. Korkman (2015) states that Erdoğan's rhetorical use of the spiritual concept of 'blessing' is key to the JDP's blending of neoliberalism and conservatism. For Korkman (2015: 336), Erdoğan's statement that 'children are blessings' mitigates between the contradictory aspects of neoliberal and conservative ideologies, thereby attempting to achieve coherence in the JDP's pronatalist narrative characterized by multiple themes and contradictory narrative lines. Accordingly, the contradictions between the recommendation to have many children and the neoliberal ethic of the individual and self-governance are resolved through a spiritual reference to 'blessing' that will follow childbirth and provide families with increased resources (Korkman, 2015).

In short, Erdoğan's pronatalist vision clearly points out how the neoliberal market economy perspective finds resonance in the conservative family ideal, while the conservative stress on family provides a useful discursive ground to promote neoliberal aims. The interconnectedness of pronatalism, the neoliberal economic vision and the conservative family ideal in the JDP's gender ideology implies a complex patchwork in which shifts of focus in rhetorical strategies mitigate between the contradictory aspects of the JDP's pronatalist narratives and contribute to the party's hegemony. It is this complex patchwork that makes the JDP's pronatalist goals different from previous pronatalist projects in modern Turkey.<sup>5</sup>

This intricate patchwork operates hand in hand with a form of biopolitics that derives its momentum from the symbiotic relationship between the neoliberal-conservative agenda and the regulation of women's bodies and sexualities. The neoliberal-conservative

governmentality governs women's bodies through an odd concern with their health, sexuality and reproduction. As a result, it shapes the contours and the substance of women's embodiment. What follows this agenda is the proliferation of schemes of surveillance over women's bodies and sexualities (Korkman, 2015; Sümer and Eslen-Ziya, 2015; Unal and Cindoglu, 2013). The anti-abortion policy initiative in 2012, which attempted to regulate women's reproductive rights in line with pronatalist political aims, is an emblematic example that has clearly disclosed the harmful effects of the neoliberal-conservative alliance on women's autonomous life choices (Unal and Cindoglu, 2013).

The strong emphasis on family also goes hand in hand with the recent neoliberal restructuring of the social security system, which has further increased women's familial responsibilities over elderly and/or child care (Cosar and Yeğenoğlu, 2009, 2012). The limited scope of the social security system in Turkey, marked by a synthesis of neoliberalism, Islamic notions of solidarity and a strong emphasis on familialism, identifies the household as the main provider of social security. Moreover, it positions women as primary figures who are supposed to provide care for the household and ensure the continuity of the 'familial security system'. It is obvious that the gendered inequalities underlying the current social security system, together with the discursive reproduction of women's roles as wives and mothers, render women even more vulnerable vis-a-vis the public and private faces of patriarchy in Turkey.

In this sense, the strong stress on family operates not only as an ideological tool to perpetuate the conservative values of Islamic lifestyles in contemporary Turkey but it also plays an important role in alleviating the destructive effects of the neoliberal restructuring of the economy. Regarding this, Yazıcı (2012) maintains that the JDP's ideological promotion of the slogan 'strong family, strong society' mainly operates to conceal the government's attempts to shift social care from state to familial sources.

The discussion so far has shown that the neoliberal-conservative alliance in JDP politics plays a highly critical role in contributing to the perpetuation of the hegemonic character of the JDP rule. As the JDP's hegemony becomes more entrenched, the party has drifted towards an authoritarian stance, which, in return, leads to a more assertive discourse promoting neoliberal and conservative values. This 'vicious' cycle constantly reproduces traditional gender roles in contemporary Turkey, defining women's position in society through familial roles.

### **Major political debates and contestations around women's bodies and sexualities: 2011–2015**

As noted above, the post-2011 period signifies a turning point in the JDP rule, where the party started to display authoritarian features in an overt manner. Its third term in office in the aftermath of the 2011 general elections was marked by electoral hegemony and concentration of political power. In this period, the party's social engineering moved towards a large-scale conservatism, generating alarming consequences for women's autonomous life choices. The discussion below portrays some of the main political contestations over women's bodies and sexualities in the post-2011 period in Turkey. These examples clearly reveal that the JDP's rising authoritarianism, together with the neoliberal-conservative narrative line in the party discourses, regards

women's bodies and sexualities as a discursive ground to be utilized for perpetuating the party's hegemony.

One of the striking examples of how authoritarian and conservative political discourses in Turkey serve the consolidation of the patriarchal gender regime in Turkey is Erdoğan's recent vow to crack down on mixed-gender student accommodation. After the JDP meeting on 3 November 2013 in Kızılcabamam district, Ankara, it was revealed that Erdoğan aims to outlaw co-ed dormitories at state universities and control off-campus housing shared by male and female students through introducing certain legal measures. Upon the proliferation of public debate about co-ed student housing, Erdoğan made the following remark:

This [co-ed student housing] is against our conservative, democratic character ... We witnessed this in the province of Denizli. The insufficiency of dormitories causes problems. Male and female university students are living in the same accommodation. This is not being checked. (*Hürriyet Daily News*, 2013b)

Moreover, Erdoğan stressed that it is the duty of the state to protect the youth from dubious acts:

Nobody knows what takes places in those houses [where male and female students live together]. All kinds of dubious things may happen [in those houses] ... Then, parents cry out, saying, 'Where is the state?' These steps are being taken in order to show that the state is there. As a conservative, democratic government, we need to intervene. (*Today's Zaman*, 2013)

As the debate expanded in the media, other party officials also made declarations arguing for the introduction of certain measures to ensure control over co-ed student housing. To legitimize their position, they declared that co-ed housing is not in line with conservative norms and values of society. Like Erdoğan, JDP officials denied that the party's decision to control mixed-gender student accommodation is an intervention into citizens' private lives. Rather, they framed it as a primary duty of the state as well as the JDP. Ex-Deputy PM Bekir Bozdağ suggested that the Constitution grants the government the right to take measures to prevent co-ed student housing:

Taking measures to protect youth cannot be regarded as intervention into lifestyles. Rather, it is a duty that stems from the Constitution. (*Radikal*, 2013a)

Then Interior Minister Muammer Güler raised another point, arguing that many of the co-ed student apartments conceal terrorist and other illegal activities such as prostitution. Through Güler's statement the debate about mixed-gender student accommodation suddenly became a topic framed as a 'fight against terrorism'. To ensure rental checks, the Ministry of Interior asked local authorities to monitor daily rental flats and unregistered hotel-like accommodation facilities. The framing of the issue as a 'fight against dubious acts such as terrorism or prostitution' and the reminder that it is a duty of the government to protect the youth are all indirect messages that attempt to justify the vow to crack down on co-ed student housing. The most overt declaration that really discloses the

motivation behind this debate was expressed by Mehmet Yüksel, an MP from the JDP: ‘Some people force our young girls to prostitution. We cannot ignore that our women, our girls are so easily victimized’ (*Hürriyet*, 2013a).

Other MPs from the party such as Şamil Tayyar, Egemen Bağış, then Minister for European Union, and Fatma Şahin, then Minister for Family and Social Policies, have also made statements in favour of maintaining conservative norms and values in society. Tayyar commented that mixed-gender student housing is an imposition from the West that not only JDP voters but all parents from different backgrounds in Turkey are strictly against (*Hürriyet*, 2013b). In a similar vein, Bağış declared that Turkey has its own sensitivities and can enforce regulations in line with these sensitivities as all countries do (*Radikal*, 2013b). On the other hand, Şahin stated that ‘we have values to preserve; these are our family values’ (*Hürriyet*, 2013c).

As seen from the quotations above, despite a few voices of dissent,<sup>6</sup> the conservative party ideology clearly reproduces repressive sexual codes and leads to a highly regulatory gender regime. It is obvious that the authoritarian turn in the JDP’s political stance in the post-2011 era has reinforced the assertive and self-confident tone in the party’s gender discourses aiming for ubiquitous control over women’s sexualities.

Control over women’s sexualities and subjectivities also appears in the form of control over their attire that has always been at the very core of political projects in modern Turkey. In the early years of the Republic, women were expected to dress in line with a certain code of dress that would reflect the spirit of the Republican ideology (Çinar, 2005). In addition, veiled women’s enduring struggles for autonomy and freedom to wear clothing of their own choosing is another striking example clearly designating the regulatory discourses and policies applying to women’s bodies. The hegemonic mindset that attempts to control women’s clothing appears in different disguises in contemporary Turkey. One of the instances where this mindset has come to light is the recent debate on a female TV presenter’s clothing.

Without mentioning a name, then JDP spokesperson Hüseyin Çelik had criticized a female TV presenter for her décolleté dress by making the following statement: ‘We don’t intervene against anyone, but this is too much. It is unacceptable’ (*Hürriyet Daily News*, 2013c). Following Çelik’s statement, the TV presenter in question, Güzde Kansu, was fired over her low cut dress. The production company denied the connection between Çelik’s criticisms and their decision to fire Kansu. For his part, Çelik declared that he had never mentioned a name; it was the media who had made the connection. He also stated that it was his right to freely express his opinions. Both the media and political actors reacted to Çelik’s remarks, criticizing him for conducting politics over women’s bodies. Then NAP (Nationalist Action Party) Deputy Chairman Semih Yalçın declared that ‘this approach can only be seen in despotic governments’. On the other hand, the RPP (Republican People’s Party) MPs Candan Yüceer and Aylın Nazlıaka reminded the government that rather than women’s low cut dresses, women’s illiteracy, poverty and violence against women are unacceptable (*Hürriyet*, 2013d). In addition, women politicians from the JDP, Nimet Baş and Fatma Bostan Ünsal, denounced Çelik’s statements, saying that politics should not intervene in women’s attire.<sup>7</sup> Criticisms of Çelik’s statement can also be seen in various newspaper columns.<sup>8</sup>

It is possible to say that Çelik's remarks were received quite critically by various influential figures in the public sphere. Yet, one should keep in mind that discursive attempts to control women's bodies and sexualities are always part of a broader conservative discursive regime. Such attempts are continuously reproduced, depending on discursive opportunity structures. In this sense, by means of discursive opportunity structures, certain discourses that used to remain unnoticed may become highly visible in another discursive regime. Making use of the opportunity structures in the new discursive regime, certain speakers can articulate certain ideas more audibly or effectively. One could suggest that in the contemporary era in which an anti-feminist, conservative gender discourse is on the rise in what government officials say and debate in Turkey, the discursive opportunity structures allow certain actors to articulate their patriarchal standpoint in a more overt manner. As a result, what we see in the mass media forum is that such discourses are featured extensively, have gained wide circulation in the public sphere and are thus quite influential in shaping the trajectory of public debates on gender issues.

Another example displaying the infiltration of the JDP's conservative gender discourses into the most intimate spheres of life is the then Deputy PM's provocative statement on women's chastity and moral disorder. During an Eid El-Fitr meeting on 28 July 2014, Bülent Arınç complained about moral corruption in Turkey and suggested that women's trespassing of norms is a concerning component of the current moral decline. Although Arınç referred to chastity as a moral requirement for both men and women, in his speech he clearly situated men's and women's sexual selves hierarchically vis-a-vis each other, identifying women as the party 'culpable' for the current 'moral decline' and highlighting them as a target. His provocative statement in question is below:

Chastity is so important ... It is an ornament for both women and men. [She] will have chasteness. Man will have it, too ... He will be bound to his wife. He will love his children. [The woman] will know what is haram (i.e. sinful, forbidden) and not haram. She will not laugh in public. She will not be inviting in her attitudes and will protect her chasteness ... Where are our girls, who slightly blush, lower their heads and turn their eyes away when we look at their face, becoming the symbol of chastity? (*Hürriyet Daily News*, 2014a)

Arınç's remarks gave way to a social media protest with thousands of women posting smiling selfies under the Turkish hashtag 'kahkaha' (haha) and 'diren kahkaha' (resist haha). Moreover, many influential figures in the public sphere heavily criticized Arınç for his misogynist remarks. For example, Pervin Buldan, MP from the People's Democratic Party (HDP), stated 'from now on, we will respond to all statements by Arınç by laughing' (*Hürriyet Daily News*, 2014a). On the other hand, a women's NGO, 'We Will Stop Women's Murders Platform', filed a criminal complaint against Arınç with charges including hate and discrimination, causing insult, as well as inciting hate and enmity (*Hürriyet Daily News*, 2014b). It is significant that many critical voices have emerged in the public sphere, challenging Arınç's statement on women's morality and chastity. However, the fact that an influential figure like a Deputy PM can articulate such an overtly misogynist public declaration is very informative about the entrenched character of the contemporary patriarchal gender regime in Turkey.

The concern about the moral decline in society among JDP circles also appears in JDP MPs critique of contemporary TV series in Turkey. Commenting that TV series present bad role models for young people, some JDP MPs regard them as a threat to the moral integrity of society. For example, then Deputy PM Bülent Arınç expressed his uneasiness with the youth series that narrate college students' love affairs:

I personally feel there is mischief in the efforts to show the excitement, affection and love of youth with such bad role models ... Rest assured that all those who watch these series dress like this in their schools. They try to use the same expressions. They try to satisfy their love with daily whims. (*Hürriyet Daily News*, 2013d)

He adds that the excessive coverage of sexuality in such TV programmes triggers early sexual awakenings even among children. Another MP from the JDP, Şamil Tayyar, echoes this argument, suggesting that youth-oriented TV series contradict the notion of family and morality in Turkish society. He regards such series as a conscious attack designed to harm authentic family values and norms in Turkey:

To give an example ... The TV series called *Kavak Yelleri* (Poplar Winds) ... It tells the story of a group of young people who stay in the same house and fall in love with each other. There are also bed scenes ... This TV series and other similar series promote a particular lifestyle that is becoming increasingly widespread in big cities ... Our traditions and norms cannot tolerate this. (*Hürriyet*, 2013b)

Finally, the former PM Davutoğlu's recent remarks can be cited here as another emblematic instance of the regulatory attempts in the recent years of the JDP rule to infiltrate the most intimate spheres of individuals' lives. During a rally in the southeastern province of Şanlıurfa, he stated the following:

You have a job, a salary and a home. Now it is time for a spouse. We [JDP] want people of this land to be bountiful. We want you to procreate. First, seek the help of your parents to find a spouse. God willing, this will work out. If your parents cannot find you a decent person to marry, come to us and we will find you a spouse. (*Hürriyet*, 2015)

Davutoğlu's promise to match-make, which basically aimed to increase electoral appeal in the then pending 2015 general elections, generated an uproar among the public. Faced with criticisms, Davutoğlu justified his remarks by suggesting redefining the role of the state in such a way as to grant the state the authorization to intervene into intimate lives:

Those who detach politics from humanistic concerns misinterpreted my remarks. There is no obstacle for me to engage in such humanistic dialogues. We [JDP] believe that one has to do politics in such a way as to tone down its rigorous character. (*Cumhuriyet*, 2015)

The conservative character of the JDP's gender politics, marked by regulatory state mechanisms controlling the private sphere, clearly crystallizes in this pronatalist, family-centred narrative urging the youth to marry at an early age. In this conservative ideology, the ubiquitous state control over the private sphere, presented as a 'humanitarian dialogue

with people' in Davutoğlu's remarks, appears as a key policy area in the JDP's gender politics that feeds into the discourse of 'strong family' and cultural authenticity.

In a nutshell, the statements above bring into the open the JDP's aspirations to claim cultural authenticity by perpetuating conservative values on family, morality and gender relations. The party's reference to traditional notions of family and cultural authenticity obviously serves its objective to put forward its conservative political stance in the moral and spiritual realm. The proliferation of discourse on family and sexuality in JDP politics symbolizes women's chastity as the marker of cultural authenticity. The authoritarian turn and the neoliberal conservative alliance in this 'New Turkey' under the JDP rule defines women's position in society primarily in terms of their familial roles and urges marriage at an early age with the aim to ensure control over women's sexualities.<sup>9</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Neoliberalism as the main mode of governmentality in the contemporary era has developed hand in hand with biopolitics. The relationship between neoliberal subject formation and the body can be clearly observed in the proliferation of neoliberal rationalities that encourage subjects to assume particular forms of embodiment. Forms of embodiment encouraged by the complex relationship between neoliberalism and biopolitics do not apply to bodies in generic terms but are highly gendered. State control of bodies carried out through biodiscipline fuses with the patriarchal control of bodies, further exacerbating the regulation of women's embodiment and sexualities. On the other hand, when the neoliberal regulation of women's bodies and sexualities merge with conservatism and authoritarianism, the result is the ubiquitous proliferation of schemes of surveillance governing women's embodiment. To expose the peculiar character of biopolitical discourses in the social and political landscape in contemporary Turkey, this study undertook an analysis of the public debates on women's bodies and sexualities in the post-2011 period.

In modern Turkey, the contours of the spiritual and moral realm and the strict boundaries pertaining to the private/public spheres have always been mapped out through ubiquitous dichotomies regarding women's bodies and their sexualities. Such political discourses utilizing women's bodies and sexualities as the marker of authenticity also characterize the JDP rule in contemporary Turkey. The unique character of the JDP's patriarchal discourses stems from a complex combination of authoritarianism, pro-Islamism, proliferation of neoliberal and conservative values and the ubiquitous preoccupation with biopolitics. Through various policy initiatives and public statements, the JDP attempts to regulate women's bodies and sexualities and reinforce schemes of self-surveillance and self-regulation. The JDP's preoccupation with women's bodies and sexualities clearly crystallizes in the public debates discussed in this article. We suggest that the proliferation of public discourses on women's bodies and sexualities under the current JDP rule stems from a vicious circle. While the neoliberal-conservative approach to gender relations and increasing authoritarianism exacerbate the gendered regulation of embodiment, the expansion of discourses on women's bodies and sexualities reproduces the neoliberal, conservative, pro-Islamist agenda and its authoritarian character, thereby

feeding and securing the patriarchal rule in ‘new’ Turkey. This sui generis ‘patchwork’ of gender politics, composed of multiple axes of ideological frameworks and regulatory discourses, reinforces the grip of patriarchal gender politics in contemporary Turkey through intervening into each and every sphere of life. Thus, it would not be far-fetched to state that the reinforcement of patriarchal gender politics in the post-2011 JDP period, secured by the interwoven elements of neoliberalism, conservatism, authoritarianism and pro-Islamicism, is unprecedented in modern Turkey.

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### Notes

1. ‘New Turkey’ is a slogan utilized by the JDP to imply that the social and political order under the party’s rule is maintained by a new set of norms and values and the JDP rule represents a break with the ultra secularist traditions of the past.
2. Bayat’s term ‘post-Islamism’ could be helpful to understand the JDP’s reform impetus in the initial stages of its rule. See Bayat (2013).
3. For example, in a public speech he stated: ‘East is ours, so is West. Turk is ours, so is Kurd ... As 76 million people, we are together. Together we are a big family. We are Turkey.’ ‘Erdoğan: Bedelini ağır öderler’, *Star Gazete*, at: <http://haber.stargazete.com/politika/erdogan-bedelini-agir-oderler/haber-813477#ixzz2oV8XkQwc>
4. See [www.aile.gov.tr/tr/24264/Aile-Olmak-Projesinin-tanitimi-yapildi](http://www.aile.gov.tr/tr/24264/Aile-Olmak-Projesinin-tanitimi-yapildi)
5. For a detailed study on pronatalist political projects in modern Turkey before the neoliberal times, please see Gürsoy (1996) and Akşit (2010).
6. JDP MPs who are critical of Erdoğan’s student housing move articulate their criticisms mostly on the basis of the inviolability of the private realm. See [www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ruling-party-deputies-also-question-erdogans-motives-behind-student-house-move-.aspx?imageID=238&nid=57503](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ruling-party-deputies-also-question-erdogans-motives-behind-student-house-move-.aspx?imageID=238&nid=57503)
7. See <http://t24.com.tr/haber/akpnin-2-kadin-siyasetcisinden-huseyin-celikin-dekolte-tepki-sine-cevap,241852>
8. See Oral Çalışlar, ‘Gözde Kansu’ya Özür Borcu’, *Radikal*, 15 October 2013; at: [www.radikal.com.tr/yazarlar/oral\\_calislar/gozde\\_kansuya\\_ozur\\_borcu-1155717](http://www.radikal.com.tr/yazarlar/oral_calislar/gozde_kansuya_ozur_borcu-1155717). Also see Müge İplikçi, ‘Dekolte ve İfade Özgürlüğü’, *Vatan*, 15 October 2013.
9. Erdoğan’s recent public statement clearly exposes the importance attributed to marriage in the definition of ideal womanhood: ‘Don’t postpone the issue of marriage. Take action if you find what you are destined for. Don’t be too selective. Then you may have to leave the flower garden empty handed.’ See [www.bianet.org/bianet/toplumsal-cinsiyet/157312-erdogan-dan-kadin-ogrencilere-cok-secici-olmayin-evlenin](http://www.bianet.org/bianet/toplumsal-cinsiyet/157312-erdogan-dan-kadin-ogrencilere-cok-secici-olmayin-evlenin)

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