The causes and the consequences of the patriarchal state: Evidence from Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the case of Turkey and using qualitative and quantitative analyses, this paper challenges the ungendered accounts of the state and extends gender regime scholarship (1) by differentiating two major forms of the patriarchal state character, and (2) by investigating the significance of the multiple state agendas, (3) de-democratisation, and (4) cis-gender heterosexual family in upholding the patriarchal character of the state. By focusing on the case of Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, the paper shows that the patriarchal collective subject successfully adopts the racist state agenda - as exclusively Turkish and Sunni-Muslim. Furthermore, under the conditions in which the de-democratisation process has excluded women from public decision making, a particular group of elite men increases the influence of the patriarchal collective subject over the state. Meanwhile, the biological essentialist accounts of sex and gender divide the feminist struggle as well as weakening its capacity to reveal the significance of the cis-gender heterosexual family for state formation.

1. Introduction

As Walby and Shire (2022: 16) highlight, “[t]oo often, the macro level has been theorized as an ungendered political economy”. Dominant state theories fall into the same trap by tending to point to the dynamics of capitalist transformation or varieties of modernisation as the key determinants of state formation, thus obscuring the patriarchal (and racist) dimensions of the state.1 Theories on the varieties of gender regime offer a suitable framework for an alternative approach which avoids such limitations. Drawing on the case of Turkey and using qualitative and quantitative analyses, this paper extends state theories and contributes to gender regime scholarship by (1) conceptualizing changes within the patriarchal character of the state. It also investigates (2) the significance of the multiple state agendas and (3) the cis-gender heterosexual family, as well as assessing (4) how gendered patterns of de-democratisation shape the patriarchal state character. Gender regime scholarship considers the equal importance of gender, class and ethnicity based inequality regimes for social transformation.2 These scholars, furthermore, investigate the connections between gendered violence and the depth of democracy, feminist and anti-feminist political projects and the state. Here I draw on gender regime scholarship to theorise the causes and the consequences of the patriarchal state. However, I do so critically, recognising that while these approaches are useful, (1) the argument that each and every institutional domain (of economy, polity, civil society and violence) functions as a system needs to be revisited in order to provide a comprehensive account of the patriarchal character of the state. (2) Similarly, it is necessary to look again at the suggestion that disperses gender gaps occur in the family across those institutional domains or of the conceptualisation of the family as a fifth domain. (3) I also question the approach that associates the public gender regime with the state and the domestic gender regime with the family and (4) challenge the overemphasis on the role of the capitalist hegemons in shaping the trajectories of patriarchal transformation in the global South.

In this paper, I theorise social systems differently to Walby, and as such, distinguish my approach towards the role of the political projects and the institutional domains for social change. According to my conceptual framework, the reproduction of systems depends on the continuance of the patriarchal, capitalist and racist categories of mediation. At the same time, struggles over those mediating categories

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E.g., the Marxist (Jessop, 2002; Poulantzas, 1969) and the Weberian approaches (e.g., Moore, 1966; Tilly, 1990).

See (Walby, 2009, 2011, 2020b; Shire, 2023; Shire and Nemoto, 2020; Moghadam, 2020, 2023; Gottfried, 2023; Alonso et al., 2023; Lombardo and Alonso, 2020; Kocabicak, 2022a, b)
determine the trajectories of social change, including state formation and the development of the domains. While my account of the domains is limited to the locations that contain varying forms and degrees of social inequalities, I propose that the gender, class and race-ethnicity based dominant sections of society uphold a collective acting capacity which thereby imposes multiple agendas on the state.

Drawing on my conceptual framework, I further suggest that the cis-gender heterosexual family mediates the relations of patriarchal labour exploitation by controlling the social construction of bodies, sexuality, intimacy and human reproduction. Considering the family-mediated powers of the patriarchal system, I propose that the key function of the state is to uphold the gender-based division of labour within the family. However, this does not mean that the patriarchal state character remains uniform or unchanged. On the contrary, I differentiate the domestic and public patriarchal character of the state by analysing the state-led policy interventions in patriarchal labour relations.

Focusing on the case of Turkey, this paper assesses the extent to which the struggle over the family-mediated powers of patriarchal labour exploitation shapes state formation. Considering the interplay between the multiple state agendas, I investigate how far the patriarchal political actors adopt the racist state agenda to increase their political power. I also analyse whether the conditions, in which decolonisation has increased the gender gaps in public decision making, give rise to a powerful group of elite men. In addition, I investigate the dynamics which prevent the feminist struggle from acknowledging the significance of the cis-gender heterosexual family for state formation.

1.1. Note on methodology

The selection of Turkey enables a detailed assessment of the ways in which multiple state agendas shape the patriarchal state character. Despite the country’s relatively high level of manufacturing capacity, the majority of women’s labour in Turkey is confined to unpaid work in rural and urban households; share of women in total wages and salaried employment is 29% in 2020 (ILOSTAT, 2022). The country also ranks 130th out of 188 countries with regards to women’s access to parliamentary representation (UN Women, 2021). These strong patriarchal arrangements intertwine with a persistent aggression towards the non-Muslim and non-Turkish populations. The capitalist and racist agendas of the state are therefore interwoven with the patriarchal state agenda. The context of the recently established anti-democratic leadership of Turkey (since 2014–15) further enables an assessment of the various political actors that have gained power through de-democratisation.

By using qualitative and quantitative analyses in this paper, I investigate (1) how much the patriarchal character of the Turkish state has changed. In order to do so, I examine state interventions within the domains of economy, civil society and violence from the 2000s onwards. I further focus on Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention to assess the extent to which the struggle over the family-mediated powers of patriarchal labour exploitation shapes state formation. In doing so, I examine: (2) the ways men’s rights-based mobilisations utilise the racist state agenda; (3) how the gendered patterns of de-democratisation play a significant role in increasing the influence of the patriarchal actors over the state; and (4) the extent to which biological essentialist accounts of sex and gender weaken the capacity of feminist struggle to reveal the significance of the cis-gender heterosexual family for the patriarchal state character.

In terms of the quantitative data, I draw upon the publicly available databases of the Turkish statistics office, the World Bank, the United Nations and the OECD as well as utilising the evidence provided by the International Labour Organisation. Regarding the qualitative research, I analyse official texts derived from the archives of the Turkish state as well as examining the debate on the Istanbul Convention through social media posts, newspaper articles and press releases. My documentary analysis focuses on the laws and regulations and the annual progress reports prepared for the United Nations by the Turkish government. I assess public content on Facebook and Twitter by using a Google Chrome-based version of NCapture which is a plugin belonging to the software Nvivo. For Facebook, I run the queries for the terms of “İstanbul Sözleşmesi” (Istanbul Convention) and “Nafaka” (alimony) and for Twitter I use the following hashtags: #İstanbulSözleşmesi ( #İstanbulConventionasteryrech) and #Oneaile ( #Familyfirst).

The next section provides a detailed assessment of gender regime scholarship and outlines my theoretical framework (Section B). Section C provides data analysis of state interventions on the gender gaps within the institutional domains, followed by the case study of Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention (Section D). Section E highlights the contribution of my research to state theories and gender regime scholarship as well as reflecting on effective feminist strategies.

2. How to conceptualize the state?

Theories on varieties of gender regimes consider the equal importance of gender, class, and ethnicity based inequality regimes for social transformation. Subsequently, those scholars emphasise the role of diverse political projects in shaping the domain of polity, including state formation. Moreover, Walby (2009, 2023) underlines the significance of the depth of democracy and political representation for the regulation of violence, and at the same time, Alonso et al. (2023) suggest that the use and regulation of gendered violence sheds light on the negotiation between feminist and anti-feminist actors. Gender regime scholarship also examines changes within the character of the patriarchal state. In this regard, Moghadam (2003, 2020) argues that the neopatriarchal state uses conservative family law to reinforce the role of women as full-time homemakers. Walby (2009, 2011) differentiates between two key forms of patriarchal domination that shape the domains of economy, polity, civil society and violence: a predominance of gender-based exclusionary strategies that are associated with domestic forms of gender regime; and gender-based segregation and subordination that are linked to the neoliberal or social-democratic forms of public gender regimes. The framework provided by gender regime theories, therefore, enables a detailed investigation of the relationship between de-democratisation, violence and feminist and anti-feminist political projects, as well as allowing an assessment of the different forms of the patriarchal state.

While invaluable in providing a suitable framework to theorise the patriarchal state, I suggest that gender regime scholarship needs to consider the following conceptual alterations. Firstly, Walby (2009, 2023) conceptualises both the institutional domains and the regimes of inequality as systems and argues that each system takes all other systems as its environment. More importantly, according to her, systems are self-producing and thus do not require additional input for their reproduction (Walby, 2020b). However, as argued elsewhere (Kocabičak, 2022b), Walby’s analysis tends to treat natural and social systems in the same way which leads to confusion regarding those systems’ capacity for self-organisation and self-reproduction. Drawing on a distinction between social and natural systems, I argue that self-consciousness is a precondition for social systems but is absent in natural systems. As I will argue later, social systems are sustained by their distinctive categories of mediation and the struggle over the patriarchal, capitalist or racist categories of mediation determines the trajectories of social change. Such theorisation of systems, in turn, differentiates my approach

7 Here, I use the concept of the feminist struggle or feminist movement to refer to the struggle of women and LGBTQ+ members of society.

4 Gottfried, 2023; Alonso et al., 2023; Moghadam, 2020, 2023; Shire, 2023; Shire & Nemoto, 2020; Walby, 2009, 2011

5 For a detailed discussion on the significance of self-consciousness for social systems, see ( Chapter 8 in Kocabičak, 2022b).
towards the political projects and the institutional domains. Instead of reducing the role of the political collective subject to the projects that the civil society domain contains, I argue that the reproduction and the organisation of systems is not possible without self-consciousness and the collective acting capacity of the gender, class and race-ethnicity based dominant sections of society. Furthermore, I perceive the domains as analytical categories at a lower level of abstraction than that posited by Walby, and as the location for varying forms and degrees of gender, class, and ethnicity based inequalities.

Secondly, varieties of gender regime theories portray the role of patriarchal labour exploitation within the family as one of the multiple aspects of gender. While Walby (2020b) disperses the gendered practices traditionally associated with the family across four institutional domains, Shire and Nemoto (2020) and Moghadam (2020) find that the family has a central role in policy frameworks. Moghadam goes further, conceptualizing the family as a fifth domain. Building on her approach, Verloo (2022) emphasises the significance of the entanglement of gender inequality and sexual inequality and develops the concept of cathexis to indicate this fifth domain. While recognising the significance of the family and sexuality for varieties of gender regimes, I argue that the cis-gender heterosexual family mediates the relationship between male appropriators and female producers in all varieties of patriarchy. As it constitutes one of the most complex mediating categories of the patriarchal system, the patriarchal state character serves to uphold the gender-based division of labour within the cis-gender heterosexual family. Drawing on the case of Turkey, this paper assesses the significance of the struggle over the cis-gender heterosexual family in shaping state formation. It examines the ways in which the patriarchal collective subject maintains the complexity of family-mediated powers and investigates the barriers that prevent the feminist struggle from revealing the main functions of this family structure.

Thirdly, Moghadam (2020, 2023) perceives the private patriarchy of the family as the domestic gender regime and the public patriarchy of the state as the public gender regime. However, her conceptualisation obscures the role of the patriarchal collective subject in public patriarchy, and at the same time, curtails the significance of the state for the domestic forms of patriarchy. Here I engage with the initial framework developed by Walby but, drawing on my theory of systems, I focus on the patriarchal labour relations. Thus, I propose that where the (premodern or modern) domestic patriarchy is predominant, women’s labour is confined to unpaid work in rural or urban households, whereas the majority of women in (neoliberal or social-democratic) public patriarchy experience the double burden of paid and unpaid labour. In this paper, I investigate the extent to which the state-led policy framework sustains the hegemony of varieties of domestic patriarchy in Turkey.

Finally, drawing on the world-systems analysis, Walby (2009) and Moghadam (2023) examine the role of hegemons, particularly the US and the EU, in shaping varieties of gender regimes. Nevertheless, their accounts are restricted to the capitalist world-system, which hinder the assessment of patriarchal hegemons and their role in effecting social change. As Gottfried (2023) emphasises, it is important to analyse the relationship between inter-national and transnational processes. Such analysis, however, requires an acknowledgement of the equal significance of the patriarchal, capitalist or racist actors at the local, national and international scales. This paper explores how far the patriarchal actors in Turkey challenge the hegemons of the capitalist-world system by allying with other states.

2.1. Working on a new conceptual framework

Within my conceptual framework, systems are derived from the relations of labour exploitation, and their sustainability is contingent on complex categories of mediation. These mediating categories are diverse depending on the relations of gender, class or race-ethnicity based exploitation. According to my framework, the level of complexity of the mediating categories increases the power of a system over social transformation. The more complex the mediating categories are, the more influence the system in question has over other systems and the trajectories of social change. Therefore, the struggles to sustain the complexity of patriarchal, capitalist and racist categories of mediation and the struggles that aim to reveal such complexities determine all aspects of social transformation, including state formation and the development of the institutional domains.

Furthermore, I argue that the cis-gender heterosexual family constitutes one of the most complex mediating categories of patriarchal labour exploitation. The family-mediated powers of patriarchal exploitation include, but are not limited to, the social construction of bodies, sexuality, human reproduction as well as relations of love and kinship. Accordingly, I suggest that despite their differences, all the forms of the patriarchal state aim to uphold the gender-based division of labour within the cis-gender heterosexual family. However, the forms and degrees of the patriarchal state character vary and recognising such variation is crucial for developing effective feminist strategies. Conceptualizing two major forms of the patriarchal state on the basis of labour relations, I argue that the domestic patriarchal state confines the majority of women’s labour to household production (including care work), whereas the public patriarchal state utilizes various degrees of commodification and decommodification (of goods and services produced by women within the home) to sustain women’s double burden of paid and unpaid labour. While the former uses gender-based exclusionary strategies, the latter regulates gender-based segregation and subordination within the institutional domains.

In addition, I argue that the patriarchal, capitalist, and racist collective subjects establish a strong influence over the state which leads to an interplay between multiple state agendas. Nonetheless, I propose that these political collective subjects in the global South are comprised of some groups that are absent in the global North. Theories on the uneven and combined development emphasise that in the context of less-developed countries, both the capitalist and non-capitalist classes determine socio-economic transformation (Novack, 1957; Trotsky, 1980). Building on their approach, I have previously established that the patriarchal collective subject in Turkey is not limited to male heads of household, but also includes male small producers in rural and urban areas and, as such, gives rise to the premodern and modern forms of domestic patriarchy (Kocabıçak, 2020). In this article, I examine another group which increases the overall hegemony of the patriarchal collective subject. Engaging with the arguments about the significance of de-democratisation for gender regime change (Alonso et al., 2023; Patton & Verloo, 2021; Walby, 2023), I argue that the conditions in which de-democratisation increases the gender gaps in political representation and public decision making give rise to a particular group of elite men whose impact on state formation is much greater than the anti-gender movements or right-wing political actors found in the global North. In order to separate out this group who are characterised by their closeness to the ruling regime, I develop the concept of men-of-the-regime. Politicians, journalists, religious leaders, academics and extended family members of regime leaders can all be part of this group of powerful men.

Drawing on the case of Turkey, this paper provides a detailed assessment of the extent to which there is a shift from the domestic towards the public patriarchal character of the state by examining state interventions in the domains of the economy, civil society and violence.6 The predominance of state-led gender-based exclusionary strategies signals the domestic patriarchal state character, whereas gender-based segregation and subordination point to a shift towards the public patriarchal state. The paper further investigates the significance of the

6 Walby (2009) describes that the polity domain contains states, nations, organised religions, empires, hegemons and global political institutions. In my theoretical framework, the state reflects the struggles over the mediating categories of labour exploitation and thus determines the development of the institutional domains.
struggle over the key features and the functions of the cis-gender heterosexual family for the patriarchal character of the state. In order to do so, it focuses on country’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and assesses how far the racist state agenda – as exclusively Turkish and Sunni-Muslim – supports the patriarchal collective subject in increasing their influence over the state. As well as examining what difference the men-of-the-regime make, the paper explores the extent to which the biological essentialist accounts of sex and gender weaken the capacity of feminist struggle to reveal the family-mediated powers of patriarchal labour exploitation.

3. The overlapping patriarchal characters of the Turkish state

3.1. State interventions in the economy domain

Here I analyse whether the state’s policy interventions aim to increase all women’s access to paid employment or to confine the majority of women to unpaid work in rural and urban households. While the former signifies a clear shift towards a public patriarchal character of the state, the latter points to persistence in its domestic patriarchal character.

Since the 2000s, to a certain extent, the Turkish state appears to have removed the barriers to female paid employment as well as increasing public provisioning of childcare (provided by the market, the state, or combination of both). These state interventions seem effective. Evidence on pre-primary school enrolment (% gross) shows that between 2005 and 2017, the proportion of children (aged 3–5) enrolled in pre-primary education has increased from 10 % to 40 % (OECD.Stat, 2020; WDI, 2022). Nonetheless, women with advanced education appear to be the key beneficiaries of the current increase in the public provisioning of childcare. Evidence illustrated in Fig. 1 indicates that the labour force participation of women with advanced education has significantly increased following childbirth, on the other hand, women with basic or intermediate education have failed to return to the labour force following childbirth.

A closer look at the state’s public policy interventions shows that the state does not aim to increase all women’s access to paid employment. Firstly, the Turkish state draws heavily on commodification strategies which draw on market-led provisioning of childcare (through private nurseries and day care centres) accompanied by state-compensations. This, in turn, does not support women with basic or intermediate education who are more likely to receive lower wages.

Secondly, the Turkish state draws on a family-based unpaid care system for elderly and disabled people who have considerable difficulties in living independently. While the total capacity of state-owned and private care homes remains extremely insufficient (0.5 % of the elderly population and 0.2 % of the disabled population, calculated from Karakuş, 2018; TURKSTAT, 2016, 2020a), home-based care services are very limited. Instead of improving the public provisioning of care necessary for elderly and disabled, the introduction of state-driven conditional cash transfers (since 2005) implies that the state-led policies aim to sustain a family-based unpaid care system.

Thirdly, following the World Bank driven international policy, the state-led policy framework aims at “empower[ing] rural women in terms of their social and economic status and ensure that they are no longer unpaid family workers” (The Government of Turkey, 2019: 70). In order to achieve this goal, the Turkish state removed the legal discrimination against women in inheritance of agricultural land (in 2015) as well as supporting women’s cooperatives in agriculture (Kocabıcak, 2018). Those interventions are expected to initiate a shift in their position from unpaid family workers to own-account workers. However, from 2010 until 2019, the proportion of female unpaid family workers in agriculture has remained at the same level (76 % of total); and the share of women own-account workers in agriculture has decreased from 16 % to 11 % (ILOSTAT, 2020). Instead of increasing rural women’s access to higher level of education and non-agricultural paid employment, the state-led policies appear to confine rural women to unpaid work in family-based agricultural production.

The evidence that I have investigated thus far indicates that in order to regulate women’s double burden of paid and unpaid labour, the state-led policy framework draws on the commodification-based strategies for childcare provision. However, such strategies disadvantage women with...
a relatively lower level of education. Rather than increasing those women’s access to the public provisioning of childcare, the policy framework appears to confine their labour to unpaid work in rural and urban household production. Urban women with basic or intermediate education are encouraged to provide unpaid care for children, elderly and disabled members of society, and at the same time, rural women are kept as unpaid family workers in small-medium scale farms. Reviewing the evidence, therefore, suggests that policy interventions confine the majority of women’s labour to rural and urban household production.

3.2. The state’s involvement in civil society

In order to consider changes within the patriarchal state character, I analyse the key characteristics of state interventions in the civil society domain by focusing on (i) gender gaps in education, (ii) public decision making and political representation, and (iii) the state-led governance of reproduction and sexuality. The Turkish state has driven programmes to increase the schooling rate for girls but neglected gender gaps in educational attainment (% of total population 25+ years). Consequently, evidence on the ratio of female to male educational attainment (% of total population 25+ years) shows that gender inequality in intermediate and advanced education is higher than basic education (WDI, 2022).

Recent decades have, further, witnessed a modest but notable increase in proportion of seats held by women in the national parliament as well as women’s access to the decision making mechanisms of various social movements. Nonetheless, under the conditions of de-democratisation (since 2014–2015), the parliament has gradually lost its significance and social movements and civil society have been repressed. The emergence of an anti-democratic regime, therefore, run counter to an increase in women’s access to public decision making and political representation.

Women’s control over their reproductive abilities appears to have improved (between 1998 and 2018) with respect to (i) contraceptive prevalence rate and (ii) demand for family planning satisfied by modern methods. At the same time, (iii) the proportion of teenage mothers and (iv) adolescent fertility rate have both declined (calculated from WDI, 2022 and TURKSTAT, 2020b). However, this progress seems to be offset by a resurgence in the pronatalist policies (since 2010). Although the feminist movement has prevented further attacks, the state-led anti-abortion regulations have limited access to abortion in many ways. One such way is reducing the number of public hospitals which provide accessible abortion services. For example, at the time of writing only one public hospital has been left in Istanbul (KIH-YÇ, 2021). Abortion provided in private hospitals is accessible only to women with high levels of income.

Women’s control over their sexuality extends to their capacity for self-determination with respect to sexual orientation. The Turkish penal code (2004- current) has no mention of consensual same-sex sexual acts between adults meaning that neither criminalisation nor protection is in place. While same-sex marriage is not recognised, the right to change legal gender is acknowledged under particular conditions, including gender reassignment surgery and providing a mental health report. The legal framework reinforces certain constraints regarding same-sex relationships, and at the same time, the state-led attacks constitute a significant barrier to women’s control over their sexuality. Since 2017, LGBTQ+ events, demonstrations and festivals have been banned, and activists are charged with prison sentences (Cagatay et al., 2022).

To summarise, the de-democratisation process has increased gender gaps in public decision making and political representation, and at the same time, the state-driven homophbic, transphobic and pronatalist regulations have restricted women’s control over their sexuality, including reproductive abilities. These limitations have, furthermore, been associated with gender gaps in intermediate and advanced education. Therefore, it appears that state interventions in the domain of civil society draw on the gender-based exclusionary strategies, and as such, reveals strength of the domestic patriarchal character of the Turkish state.

3.3. State interference in violence

In this section, I assess whether the domestic patriarchal state character has shifted towards the public patriarchal character by examining how far the state-led policies and regulations have criminalised the gendered violence. Although the Turkish state has intervened to criminalize violence against women, the key characteristics of this intervention represent a contradiction. Reviewing the evidence suggests that state-led interventions in gendered violence are shaped in various ways to confine survivors within violent households. Firstly, the state has kept the capacity of shelters at a minimum level. Such limited and insufficient shelter capacity suggests that the state avoids providing viable alternatives to the male dominated family structure. Secondly, the parliamentary members of the ruling Party reveal that “they do not wish to increase the rate of divorce as an indirect and unintended result of trying to protect women against the violence of their husbands” (Akdogan et al., 2018: 404). Therefore, according to state officials, the family needs to be protected at all cost. Thirdly, the state has not paid sufficient attention to the preventative and protective measures to address femicides of single, separated or divorced women, and violence against LGBTQ+ members of society. For example, thus far, the state has not initiated any official survey to measure the level of femicides. At the same time, the application of the law on ‘unjust provocation’ has shortened prison sentences of male perpetrators. The state’s lack of intervention in femicides of single, separated, or divorced women and violence against LGBTQ+ people thereby sustains a cis-gender heterosexual family-focused approach as well as preventing alternative forms of intimacy.

The evidence that I have investigated thus far suggests that the Turkish state upholds both of its public and the domestic patriarchal characters. These characteristics can perhaps be found in many other states. However, the shift towards a public patriarchal state in Turkey has remained limited and its scale is insufficient to challenge the pre-dominance of the domestic patriarchal character. From the 2000s onwards, the state’s role in (1) confining women’s labour to rural and urban household production, (2) limiting women’s access to political representation, reproductive rights and sexuality, and (3) trapping women in the confines of the violent cis-gender heterosexual family has remained significant which points to the strength of Turkish state’s domestic patriarchal character.

What explains the resilience of the domestic patriarchal state character in Turkey? By focusing on the case of Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, I investigate the extent to which the struggle over the family-mediated powers of patriarchal labour exploitation shape state formation.

4. The gender wars: the case of Istanbul Convention

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, known as the Istanbul Convention, aims to prevent, prosecute and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence and to promote gender equality. Turkey was the first country to sign and ratify the treaty in 2011 but abruptly withdrew from the Convention in 2021. Some commentators explain this U-turn in state policy as being a political strategy to secure support from the male conservative electorate, especially during the years of economic and social crisis (Cerami, 2021). However, the polls conducted in July and August 2020 show that the majority of people, including voters of the leading Justice and Development Party, were against the country’s withdrawal from the convention (Konda, 2020). I argue that the withdrawal decision cannot be reduced to the leading party’s political strategies. Instead, I consider the significance of men-of-the-regime and propose that the patriarchal collective subject has been
successful in increasing their influence over the state by utilising the Turkish Sunni-Muslim racist state agenda. At the same time, I elaborate on the ways in which biological essentialist accounts of sex and gender have weakened women’s capacity to challenge the dynamics shaping the patriarchal state character.

4.1. Adoption of the racist state agenda

My assessment of the men’s rights-based mobilisations against women’s rights signals that their struggle has two stages. Initially, between the early 2010s and 2018, they organised against the legal regulations prohibiting child marriage (defined as those under 18 years of age), securing alimony, and regulating custody of children. By establishing various discussion groups on social media, running disinformation campaigns and organising street protests, those groups of men claimed that they were the victims of the regulations. They demanded amnesty for husbands who married a child, cancellation of alimony and argued against what they called ‘one-sided custody of children’. During this time period, Law No. 6284 which was enacted in relation to the Convention was also scrutinised in defence of the unity of the Turkish Muslim family.

Although these early demands were supported by some groups of elite men close to the ruling regime, women’s struggle successfully prevented the initial patriarchal mobilisations from initiating policy changes. However, since 2019 these groups of men have increasingly utilised the Turkish Sunni-Muslim racist agenda to achieve their goals. My analysis of their press releases and social media posts supports the original findings of Elmas et al. (2021). Their exploration of Facebook posts and Google trends found that the focus and narrative of social media campaigns led by the men’s rights organisations changed. Although there was no mention of the Istanbul Convention before 2019, these groups have since shifted their focus, claiming the Convention has been imposed by Western powers and aims to destroy the Turkish family and societal values by promoting queerness and homosexuality. The groups have also renamed themselves to reflect this strategic shift, for example, ‘The Platform of Divorced People’ became ‘The Platform to fight against the Istanbul Convention and Law No 6284’. At the same time, the de-democratisation process has increasingly excluded women from public decision making and political representation.

4.2. The significance of the men-of-the-regime

Under the conditions of intensifying anti-democratic ruling since 2014–15, the gender gaps in public decision making have given rise to a close-knit powerful group of men who play a crucial role in influencing the legal framework and welfare policy. The power of this group of men is such that they cannot be positioned as only a pawn acting to serve the ruling regime. On the contrary, their negotiations with the government and societal values by promoting queerness and homosexuality. The groups have also renamed themselves to reflect this strategic shift, for example, ‘The Platform of Divorced People’ became ‘The Platform to fight against the Istanbul Convention and Law No 6284’. At the same time, the de-democratisation process has increasingly excluded women from public decision making and political representation.

In the second half of 2019, the commentators and journalists holding important positions within the influential newspapers and TV programmes suddenly declared that they had found ‘the problem’: the Istanbul Convention. Portraying male domination as an essential part of the family structure, those powerful men argued that the Convention is the enemy of family as it provokes women against men. Re-formulating the Turkish Sunni-Muslim state agenda on the grounds of biological essentialism, they also argued that the Convention draws on the Malthusian principles of population control, claiming that it aims to prevent the growth of the Turkish Muslim population through its promotion of same-sex relationships and ‘trans-sexuality’ which abolishes the categories of men and women. In defending the racist state agenda, a few of these commentators have suggested that the Convention equates the foreign invasion of the city of Istanbul. These claims were supported by religious leaders, members of the parliament across different political parties, and a few artists.

Furthermore, academics associated with this group of elite men have attempted to theorise and legitimate the group’s irrational and unsubstantiated opinions by utilising the decolonisation debate. Emphasising the oppressive nature of colonial knowledge production, they have pointed to differences between the individualistic Western societies and the family-focused Turkish Muslim society (e.g., Akuduman, 2020). By redefining the Islamic principles, those journalists, commentators and academics have portrayed their chambers as an alternative field of knowledge production to the Eurocentric methodologies and epistemologies. However, such declaration of their alternative position has not constituted a barrier to the widespread usage of ideas mostly adopted from the catholic and orthodox churches. As well as closely following the state-led anti-gender frameworks developed in Poland, Russia and Hungary, this powerful group of elite men have embraced the homophobic and transphobic aspects of those state’s patriarchal agendas (Birgin, 2021; IslamiAnaliz, 2020). In this respect, the patriarchal state agenda in Russia appears to be particularly influential. For example, a video, which was initially produced for Vladimir Putin’s campaign in 2020, has been widely shared with Turkish subtitles via social media. Within this video, a young Russian boy is adopted by a gay couple who gifts the boy with a fluffy dress (Federal News Agency, 2020).

To emphasise, under the conditions of patriarchal de-democratisation, men-of-the-regime have played a significant role in re-establishing the Turkish Sunni-Muslim racist state agenda on the grounds of male domination, biological essentialism and decolonisation. In doing so, they have not only legitimized the patriarchal movements’ demands but also heightened the public visibility and impact of their campaigns, all while fabricating a case against the Istanbul Convention.

4.3. Feminist struggle

In response to the unified attacks on the Convention, women fought back in many ways by, for example, organising street protests and social media campaigns, and spreading accurate information against disinformation campaigns. Irrespective of their differences and the relationship with the current regime, women were initially united behind the same agenda that secured the Convention. For example, conservative women’s organisations (e.g. the Women and Democracy Association, KADEM) defended the necessity of the Istanbul Convention within the context of Turkey. A few women close to the leadership of the regime also supported the Convention but faced verbal abuse from their fellow men (Bianet, 2020). As women hold greater sway within the majority of opposition parties (such as the Peoples’ Democratic Party, Republican People’s Party, and Good Party), the leadership of these parties took a stand in support of the Convention.

Facing such a unified reaction from women, the state’s decision to withdraw was not straightforward. A closer look at the declarations and actions of state officials (2020–2021) demonstrates their unsteady progress. An influential think-tank organisation (Türkiye Düşünce Platformu) cancelled their consultation meeting with the Justice and Development Party and announced their withdrawal from the discussion on the Convention. At the same time, the Party announced in August 2020 that it would no longer pursue eliminating Law No. 6284 on violence against women but would continue to listen to those who supported the Convention and those who did not. Engaging with the previously addressed debate on decolonisation, Erdoğan initially insisted on developing a national framework instead of relying on translated texts, but at the 25th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in October 2020 he stated that Turkey will never tolerate violence against women. His subsequent statement in December 2020 was interpreted as meaning that Turkey’s membership of the Convention was secure: “I believe that the debates surrounding Istanbul Convention are based on the ongoing wrong implementation rather than the core of the issue. We won’t allow drifting to wrong paths when we correct some mistakes” (Duvăr.English, 2020). However, in March 2021, Erdoğan officially announced Turkey’s withdrawal. By referring
to the homophobic statements of Poland and Hungary, he stressed that the Convention is used to normalize homosexuality which is incompatible with Turkey’s social and family values.

What explains this defeat? Why did women fail to maintain their influence over the state? Given that the discussion revolved around the family as a focal point, I suggest that the biological essentialist accounts of sex and gender not only divided the feminist struggle, but also obscured the significance of the cis-gender heterosexual family to the patriarchal character of the state. Since 2010, the leadership of the ruling Justice and Development Party has continuously rejected the concept of equality between men and women and highlighted the significance of differences. In their emphasis on nature, they draw on essentialist perceptions of reproductive roles and responsibilities and stress that men and women cannot be equal because as a result of their biology they are different. This debate on equality versus difference has disrupted feminist understandings of gender equality and has divided women into two camps. While some have insisted on the concept of gender equality, others have re-conceptualised the meaning of gender justice.

Research on gender equality versus gender justice debate proposes that the influential organisations of conservative women, especially KADEM, manipulated the original meaning of gender justice in order to promote Islamic principles and provide support to the ruling regime (Bodur Ün; 2019; Bodur Ün & Arslan; 2021; Koyuncu & Ozman, 2019). However, this localised version of the concept draws on biological essentialist accounts of sex and gender which, to a certain extent, continue to be influential in feminist theorizing (for the critique of these accounts, see Kocabıçak, 2022a). By explaining the gendered patterns of domestic roles and responsibilities as natural, women have sought gender justice without challenging the gender-based division of labour within the family (for details, see Gümrükçüoğlu, 2021). The biological essentialist understanding of sex and gender has, therefore, prevented these women from considering the role of the cis-gender heterosexual family in gendered oppression and inequality. But, at the same time, women demanding gender equality have increasingly problematised the role of the family in sustaining gender inequality and considered rights of LGBTQ+ communities.

Such division between the gender equality versus gender justice movements and the polarised understanding of what is best for women have provided a favourable context for the patriarchal collective subject to make a case against the Istanbul Convention. Targeting the lack of consensus amongst women, and having support from the men-of-the-regime, those patriarchal mobilisations accused the Convention of putting the family as well as the Turkish Sunni-Muslim population at risk by promoting same-sex relationships and the ‘third gender’ (i.e. transgender, non-binary or genderqueer people) (e.g., Yeniden Refah Partisi, 2019; DKV, 2020). Due to the biological essentialist core of their gender justice concept, the influential organisations of conservative women have failed to develop an effective response to this accusation. For example, in their defence of the Istanbul Convention, KADEM (2020) insisted on the importance of biological sex and cis-gender heterosexual family. Later, following the withdrawal decision, they were quick to claim that “[KADEM] will not allow the LGBT lobbyist to damage the struggle for women’s rights” (Erdogan Bayraktar, 2021). By distancing themselves from the rights and demands of the LGBTQ+ community, the influential organisations of conservative women have, therefore, failed to develop a strong response. In contrast, the gender equality movement has increasingly shifted towards a consensus on the necessity of defending both gender and sexuality based rights (Kabasakal-Arat, 2020; Kans, 2021). This division has, in turn, weakened the feminist movement’s overall ability to maintain their influence over the state.

To summarise, the case of the Istanbul Convention shows that the patriarchal collective subject has increased its influence over the state by redefining and adopting the Turkish Sunni-Muslim state agenda on the basis of biological essentialism, male domination and decolonisation. Despite their differences, previously women were united behind the same demand that secured the Convention. In doing so, the feminist struggle became an effective barrier to the patriarchal demands regarding child-marriage, alimony, the custody of children, and Law No. 6284. However, since 2019, men’s rights-based groups have strategically reframed their demands by (1) labelling not only same-sex relationships, but also transgender, genderqueer, or nonbinary experiences as the biggest threat to the family, (2) stressing the significance of the cis-gender heterosexual family structure for the material and social existence of the Turkish Sunni Muslim population, and (3) popularising the well-known delusion that the West seeks to ruin Turkey. While the support of the men-of-the-regime has increased the influence of the men’s rights movements over the state, the biological essentialist accounts of sex and gender have divided the feminist struggle as well as obscured the significance of the cis-gender heterosexual family for gendered oppression and inequality. In accepting the realm of ‘nature’ and ‘biology’, women have left themselves open to patriarchal attacks on the grounds of biological difference. Under the conditions in which the racist state agenda has drawn on the biological reproduction of the Turkish Sunni-Muslim population, these attacks have sustained the connection between biology and women’s domestic roles and responsibilities and given grounds for male dominance within the family. As a result, the patriarchal collective subject has succeeded in putting an end to one of the most significant interventions against gendered violence in Turkey.

5. Conclusion

The research presented here extends the scholarship on the state and contributes to gender regime theories by (1) distinguishing two major forms of the patriarchal state character and (2) by considering the role of the racist state agenda (3) cis-gender heterosexual family and (4) gendered patterns of de-democratisation in increasing the influence of the patriarchal collective subject over state formation. My analysis shows that since the 2000s, the shift towards a public patriarchal state in Turkey has remained limited and its scale is insufficient to challenge the predominance of the domestic patriarchal state. By focusing on the case of the country’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, the paper demonstrates that the patriarchal collective subject maintains the domestic patriarchal state character by adopting the Turkish Sunni-Muslim racist agenda. Under the conditions in which the de-democratisation process has excluded women from public decision making, a particular group of elite men who I call men-of-the-regime have provided significant support to the men’s rights-based mobilisations thereby increasing their influence over the state. Meanwhile, the biological essentialist accounts of sex and gender have divided the feminist struggle as well as weakening its capacity to reveal the significance of the cis-gender heterosexual family for the patriarchal state character.

In light of the evidence presented in this paper, I suggest that the cis-gender heterosexual family regulates the social construction of human reproduction, sexuality and bodies in a way which rationalises the patriarchal exploitation of labour. Rather than dispersing the gendered practices associated with the family across four institutional domains or perceiving family as the fifth domain, I propose that the cis-gender heterosexual family mediates the gender-based division of labour and labour exploitation, and therefore embodies one of the most complex mediating categories of the patriarchal system. My analysis also implies that the struggle over the family-mediated powers of labour exploitation determines the organisation and the reproduction of the patriarchal system, including the patriarchal state character and the gender gaps within the institutional domains.

Alternative to the argument which associates the domestic (private) patriarchy with the family and the public patriarchy with the state, my analysis also highlights that the state plays a crucial role in confining women to unpaid work in rural and urban households thereby maintaining the hegemony of domestic patriarchy. In light of my assessment, I also argue that the gendered patterns of de-democratisation give rise to a particular group of elite men whose influence over the state is greater.
than the anti-gender movements found in the global North. My investigation further implies that the hegemon identified by the World Systems scholarship is not always as effective as those scholars suggest with regards to shaping the trajectories of patriarchal transformation in the global South. Reviewing the evidence suggests that despite the disapproval of the US and the EU, the patriarchal collective subject in Turkey has allied with other states and reinforced the country’s withdrawal from the Convention.

What does the future hold? While the processes of de-democratisation increasingly shape the future of gender regimes in the world, a cisgender heterosexual family structure and gendered violence appear to be maintained within different trajectories of patriarchal transformation. This research shows that feminist strategies need to consider the role that various forms of violence play in shaping the patriarchal state character and expand post-patriarchal imaginations with respect to the social construction of bodies, sexuality, and intimacy. In this respect, the case of Turkey sheds light on the question of how to intervene in the future of gender regimes. For example, under the conditions in which the racist state agenda is maintained on the grounds of male domination and biological essentialism, the feminist movement needs to have a stronger alliance with the groups targeted by the racist state agenda. This would help to increase their influence over the process of state formation.

Moreover, this paper shows that de-democratisation coupled with the exclusion of women from public decision making gives rise to men-of-the-regime, who have greater influence over state formation than the anti-gender movements found in the global North. In considering the power of this group of elite men, it is important to note that these actors “do not only aim to dismantle existing institutions of knowledge production... but are also proactively promoting new structures and practices of what makes valid knowledge and, ultimately, of what is true” (Paternotte & Verloo, 2021: 558). Therefore, developing strategies to deal with disinformation as well as communicating critical gender knowledge widely are crucial.

Finally, the question of how to communicate critical gender knowledge sheds light on the necessity of de-essentialising the concepts of sex and gender. I propose that not only the discourse-based approaches but also the historical materialist accounts of sex and gender need to be considered. De-essentialising sex and gender serves to challenge the naturalised rationale for the male control over women’s labour within a determinate set of production relations and the division of labour. It thereby reveals the role of the cis-gender heterosexual family in mediating the relations of patriarchal labour exploitation. In so doing, this strategy would align the diverse demands and strategies of women despite their different experiences of “becoming a woman” (De Beauvoir, 1969).

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References

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