



This book chapter was originally published by I. B. Tauris as:
Sarioğlu, E. (2021). **Misogynist body politics under the AKP rule in contemporary Turkey**. In H. Alkan, A. Dayı, S. Topçu, & B. Yarar (Eds.), *The politics of the female body in contemporary Turkey: Reproduction, maternity, sexuality* (pp. 187–204). I. B. Tauris.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780755617432.ch-009>

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The Politics of the Female Body in Contemporary Turkey

Reproduction, Maternity, Sexuality

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LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

Misogynist Body Politics under the AKP Rule in Contemporary Turkey

Esra Sarıoğlu

In July 2018, a young Istanbul woman appeared on SHOWTV news, a nationwide television channel, in a pink sleeveless cotton shirt, jean shorts, and sneakers, wearing her hair in a low ponytail that kept it off her face. She paced herself as if she were just a local resident casually traipsing through the neighbourhood until the camera zoomed in on her face to reveal two black eyes she had suffered after neighbourhood bullies punched her in the face. A closer look also revealed the white bandages wrapped around both of her knees as well as the fact that she was visibly shaken. She had been attacked at night by a group of men, she explained, after giving a hug to her boyfriend, who walked her home where she lives with her parents. Upon seeing the couple on the street, a neighbourhood woman insulted the young woman and told her not to engage in public displays of affection in the presence of children, insinuating that what she had done was obscene. A group of local men, including the neighbourhood woman's husband, arrived at the scene, became violent and attacked the young woman, punching her in the face several times, pulling her hair, pushing her to the ground and dragging her body along the street. The young woman reported the incident to the police and initiated legal action against her attackers. One of the perpetrators spoke to the cameras and explained why he assaulted the young woman: 'My wife saw them while they were doing something inappropriate. I have been living here for thirty-five years and have never let anything obscene like this happen in my neighborhood. If someone came to my street and behaved in a way I did not want them to, not just me but the whole neighborhood would do the same thing again' (*Show Ana Haber* 2018).

One cannot help feeling appalled while watching the male perpetrator maliciously speak to the cameras. Instead of feeling guilty or expressing regret, he vindictively justified his anger and aggression, his body posture domineering, his voice loud and hand gestures imposing, calling the victim to account for her allegedly immoral act. When asked about the other perpetrators' identities, he turned to his fellow residents, a group of men strolling far behind him in front of a house on the street. 'Tell me guys! Is it just me who beat her up, or?' he yelled at them. Then facing the cameras again with a grin on his face, he answered, 'Yes, the whole neighborhood!' looking satisfied with the clever answer he had come up with and appearing totally unconcerned about the legal repercussions of his actions, as if he had legal immunity or some sort of moral entitlement.

He is not the only man who has recently inflicted harm on women who allegedly transgressed gendered moral codes in Turkey. In fact, over the last few years, vigilante violence against women – a paradigmatic act of misogyny – has been on the rise again in the country. Between September 2016 and July 2018, nineteen cases of vigilante violence against women were documented in Turkey, where male vigilantes meted out violent punishments to women who did not conform and failed to adhere to so-called moral norms in public places.¹ In other words, male vigilantes, rather than attacking women across the board, target women selectively and punish them by creating a public spectacle. Women whose *habitus*, including their demeanour, posture, confidence, elocution, dress and bodily comportment, does not evince a strong commitment to a particular understanding of feminine propriety – a gendered construct deriving largely from localized gender hierarchies infused with Islamic norms – are the ones who are most likely to be subjected to vigilante violence as they navigate public spaces in densely populated cities such as Izmir, Antalya, Istanbul, Bursa and Adana. Indeed, women have been violently assaulted over the last few years for no other reason than wearing shorts, walking in the supermarket, smoking cigarettes, sitting cross-legged in public, engaging in public displays of affection and exercising in parks. The recent recurrence of vigilante violence against women is limited to large cities; in small towns and rural areas, norms about feminine propriety and modesty have always been strict. In densely populated cities, on the other hand, the embodied public presence of the women who do not conform to norms of propriety and chastity is fairly strong. Nevertheless, women who feel less encumbered by the weight of gendered norms are at an increasing risk of becoming the victim of vigilantism in today's Turkey.

Violence against women is widespread and well documented in Turkey. A study on domestic violence found that 34 per cent of women reported to have experienced physical violence from their partners (Altınay and Arat 2007). Domestic violence, as a certain type of male violence, however, manifests different patterns than that of vigilante violence. While domestic violence affects women across the board, vigilante violence in contemporary Turkey targets particular groups of women, those who ostensibly do not conform to localized norms about feminine propriety. And unlike domestic violence against women, which is often committed in the confines of the home and even disguised as a private matter, vigilante violence is deliberately public, not hidden from sight and committed with the aim of creating a public spectacle by male attackers who the victims do not know personally.

This chapter sets out to explore gendered power dynamics of contemporary vigilantism in Turkey. It specifically investigates moral notions that figure prominently in the justifications vigilante men utilize. Vigilantism, its resurgence in public places and deliberate performativity, I argue, can be understood as a *new* mode of coercive power operating on women's bodies in Turkey, a form of power that has become staggeringly visible in the post-2008 period. This mode of power is directed at particular embodiments of femininity, not with the aim of regulating and disciplining bodies, but with the aim of attacking, injuring and punishing feminine selves, humiliating them by taking advantage of their embodied vulnerability. Far from being anchored in legal-judicial concepts, this modality of power exclusively relies on, and operates

through, the moralization of embodied selves. A particular understanding of moral transgression enables this rather masculinist power to function in a period in Turkey when legal and social changes have considerably unburdened women's bodies from the weight of feminine modesty. In this moralistic framework, vigilante men present themselves as moral actors who are concerned about women's moral transgressions and actively invoke notions of feminine modesty to justify the violence they inflicted on women in public places.

The chapter focuses on the recent male involvement in feminine bodily comportment, as opposed to women's own understandings or practices of bodily comportment, to examine gendered dynamics of vigilante violence and its larger implications for the AKP's (Justice and Development Party) gender politics. First, I illustrate how vigilante men, in an effort to reassert the male entitlement to bodily control, draw on the notion of moral transgression. By claiming an active relationship with women's modesty, perpetrators provide justifications for their public enactments of violence. Men recast vigilantism in terms other than those defined in legal debates by framing their violent acts as legitimate punishments through which women receive what they deserve because of their moral infractions.

An analysis of vigilante violence also offers insights into the changing body politics in Turkey in the post-2008 period, a phase when misogyny has become more pronounced with the resurgence of punitive practices such as vigilantism. The practice of utilizing the notion of feminine modesty in the service of asserting male entitlement to bodily control is not confined to vigilante men. The concept of moral transgression seems to occupy a recognizable place in the AKP's recent gender politics too with the government condoning punitive practices against the women who allegedly commit moral infractions. This chapter shines a spotlight on the notion of 'gender justice', a new gender paradigm that the AKP-led government has introduced over the last few years, to investigate into possible connections between punitive practices, moral transgression and the AKP's authoritarian rule. Of particular importance here is the idiosyncratic notion of 'fair treatment' the AKP's concept of (gender) justice entails. By teasing out the gendered logic embedded in the notion of fair treatment, I show how the AKP's concept of (gender) justice might facilitate an understanding of masculinist fair treatment that juxtaposes moral transgression and punishment, hostility against certain groups of women and moral norms, male entitlement and violence together.

Part of my thinking on the misogynistic direction that body politics have taken in the post-2008 era in Turkey is shaped by the discussions of backlash and backlash politics. It is possible to situate both vigilantism and the AKP's gender justice paradigm as part and consequence of the backlash politics. A focus on backlash allows us to consider the AKP's conservative turn as a reactionary political response to women's increasing empowerment in Turkey. The AKP's recent gender politics, in this light, is not simply a conservative turn but also one that exemplifies the backlash politics fomented by the AKP to counter the gender equality as well as the improvements in women's status gained in the early 2000s.

The chapter presents qualitative data from an ongoing project on the transformation of body politics in contemporary Turkey, which draws on a diverse set of sources, including data on vigilantism provided by women's organizations, media reports,

court cases and the interviews I carried out in June 2017 and March 2018 with three feminist activists, three lawyers and ten women whose embodied comportment does not conform to localized norms about feminine propriety. While interviews with feminist activists and lawyers offered insights into the legal and political dynamics of vigilantism, by listening to the narratives of insubordinate women, I was able to understand how women navigate a social environment in which they are likely to encounter misogyny. The chapter begins with an account of the sharp turn that gender politics has taken in Turkey in the post-2008 period. It then proceeds to a discussion of vigilantism in Turkey and offers an examination of some cases of vigilante violence in order to shed light on the connections between misogyny, morality and women's embodied comportment. The penultimate section attends to the AKP's version of justice as well as the discourse on gender justice formulated and promoted by women's associations that back the government, elucidating how fair treatment and punitive practices are coupled together within this framework. The conclusion draws some broader implications from my argument about the relationship between misogyny, body politics and the ascendance of anti-equality politics.

The AKP's gender politics after 2008: A backlash against gender equality?

The conservative turn in gender politics during the second term of the AKP government has inspired a flood of research and speculation about the larger dynamics underlying this shift. Studies have highlighted the government's efforts to blend neoliberalism with neoconservatism (Bugra 2014). According to these studies, the AKP government implemented between 2002 and 2007 a neoliberal economic program as Turkey integrated itself into the European and global markets. During the same period, the government also carried out gender equality measures following Turkey's candidacy for EU membership. After 2008, however, the government began to pursue staunchly a politics of strengthening the patriarchal family (Kandiyoti 2010; Acar and Altunok 2013; Korkman 2016; Cindoğlu and Ünal 2017). For many scholars, the main tenet of the change in the government's gender agenda in the post-2008 period was the rising power of the neoconservative ideology in the AKP's politics. Studies showed how this conservative gender ideology, often framed by moderate Islamism, lent the welfare regime an increasingly masculine and paternalistic character (Acar and Altunok 2013; Koyuncu and Özman 2018). Others illustrated the morality discourse the AKP embraced in order to advocate for a conventional gendered division of labour and modest feminine subjectivity (Cindoğlu and Ünal 2017).

While existing studies underscore the importance of the neoliberalism/neoconservatism nexus to explain how the AKP came to foreground moralism in gender politics, scant attention has been paid to the link between the AKP's increasing moralism and its anti-equality politics in the post-2008 era. By conceptualizing the AKP's emphasis on conservative morality as a form of reactionary politics that emerged just as Turkey was witnessing increasing gender equality, I claim that the AKP's gender

politics in the post-2008 era represent a backlash² against gender equality. Here, I adopt Mansbridge and Shames's (2008) concept of backlash, which they define as 'the use of coercive power to regain lost power as capacity' (Mansbridge and Shames 2008: 625). From this perspective, the AKP's conservative turn in the post-2008 era has not just been a regular political transition in which the party's inherently conservative agenda has found its full expression as the party has consolidated its power after 2007 elections. Rather, it could also be seen as a reactionary politics that operates under the mantle of moralism against women's increasing autonomy in Turkey.

The current backlash, I argue, seeks to eliminate the empowerment of women that followed out of the gender equality reforms that the AKP carried out in the early 2000s, which disentangled women's bodies from an order based on public morality, honour and chastity, thereby enhancing women's bodily autonomy. The concepts of virginity, chastity and honour historically underpinned men's entitlement to women's bodies (Parla 2001; Ozyegin 2009). The removal of these concepts from the penal code in the early 2000s decisively circumscribed male capacity to control women's bodies. Initially, the reforms were carried out as part of Turkey's efforts to become a member of the European Union; the government was not substantially invested in the project of deepening gender equality in the country. However, the feminist movement in Turkey, which is quite strong and militant, seized the moment and exerted pressure on the government through lobbying and activism. Thanks to feminists, what started as a minimal legal change that took no account of women's needs grew into a full-blown legislative project that more integrally codified gender equality in the country. The new Turkish Civil Code, according to Deniz Kandiyoti, was 'arguably the most progressive legislation for women since the Kemalist reforms of the 1920s and the 1930s' (Kandiyoti 2010: 174). Further, the new penal code, which went into effect in 2004, eliminated the distinctions between married and unmarried women, and virgins and non-virgins, in punishing sexual crimes, and acknowledged, for the first time, honour killings as aggravated homicides.

These legal reforms were accompanied by structural changes that improved women's lives. For instance, by the early 2000s, the total fertility rate had fallen from five births to two and an unprecedented rise was recorded in the educational attainment of women in Turkey. Certainly, the restructuring of the global economy extended the effects of gender equality reforms, prompting a change in employment opportunities from manufacturing to services, from muscle power to cultural capital, and from male to female (Keyder 2005), all of which drew more women into the labour market in urban areas and transformed the decades-long downward trend in women's labour force participation rates (Sarioğlu 2013).

One distinctive aspect of the backlash politics the AKP pursued in the post-2008 era was the government's reactionary response to gender equality. Take, for example, President Erdoğan's statements against gender equality. As early as 2008, he became quite outspoken against the principle of gender equality and claimed that it was alien to Turkish culture. Later, Erdoğan repeatedly declared his belief in the Islamic *fitrat*, which denotes the idea that there are inherent, God-given differences between men and women. A few years later, the AKP introduced a new paradigm: gender justice. As opposed to the contemporary notion of gender justice, which seeks to eradicate

all forms of gender inequality, the notion of gender justice that the AKP promotes is informed by Quranic notions of fair treatment of different genders (Yılmaz 2015; Diner 2018). Moreover, the concept echoes strongly the premodern Ottoman imperial notion of justice, an ideology that serves to justify and reinforce the fundamental hierarchies and differences between Muslim/non-Muslim, ruling elite/common people, as well as men/women. Viewed as aspects of the backlash politics, these manoeuvres illustrate how the AKP's enthusiasm for moral conservatism has become the government's major line of attack against gender equality.

Unlike regular political opposition, the backlash exclusively relies on the use of coercion to restore power. This understanding of backlash helps to account for why misogyny is ascendant in contemporary Turkey, with men physically attacking women in public spaces in the name of a moral order. Seen in this light, male resort to vigilante violence is closely tied to the men's struggle around controlling women's bodies, a struggle aggravated by the limits placed on male entitlements following the entrenchment of gender equality in the country in the early 2000s. It is against this background that men invoke moral transgression to assert male power over women's bodies and that women are subjected to hostility and violence due to the alleged moral transgressions they committed.

Here, I draw on the concept of misogyny that Kate Manne put forth in her book *Down Girl* (2017). Manne defines misogyny as a hostile form of gendered oppression 'in which women are liable to encounter hostility due to the enforcement and policing of patriarchal norms and expectations – often, though not exclusively, insofar as they violate patriarchal law and order' (Manne 2017: 19). Morality and hostility are central to Manne's account, which explains how misogyny threatens to harm and penalize a woman if she transgresses the moral norms that keep the patriarchal order intact.

This chapter also shows how hostile emotional energies, such as the resentment encapsulated in misogynistic acts such as vigilante violence, are enabled by and exacerbate a larger backlash politics. This brand of anti-equality politics thrives on the notion of Ottoman justice and separates those groups who are seen as deserving of paternalist protection from those who are not. In this framework, matters pertaining to gender are regarded not as political disputes to be settled through political discussion among social actors, but as moral issues that can be understood and resolved through the binary of moral transgression versus conformity, a criterion that serves as a pretext for punitive practices.

Vigilantism against women in Turkey

Women's so-called punishment by men for their alleged offences against morality used to be a widespread misogynistic practice in Turkey and has been historically enabled by particular discourses such as those of shame and honour, in which men maintain their honour through controlling women's sexuality and body. However, vigilantism has not always operated under the mantle of morality. In the 1990s, for instance, when the headscarf ban was in effect, vigilantism, especially in large cities in the western part of Turkey, took the form of secularist vigilance against women wearing headscarves in public places.

Throughout the early 2000s, vigilantism, in both its moralist and secularist streaks, was far less common, and it seemed like the practice had been consigned to the dustbin of history until the news about a vigilante incident forcefully made the headlines in June 2013 during the Gezi resistance. The news revealed to a shocked public the gruesome details about a young woman wearing a headscarf who was viciously assaulted by male protestors. Known as the *Kabataş* incident, the only eyewitness to the alleged crime was the victim herself, a young woman who claimed to have been attacked by a gang of seventy male protestors in the centrally located neighbourhood of Kabataş in Istanbul. The half-naked men wearing black leather pants and leather gloves, the woman explained, first verbally harassed her, then beat her, crushed the stroller carrying her baby and finally urinated on her and her six-month-old child, leaving the woman lying on the street unconscious. When a small number of journalists from the mainstream media testified that they watched the video footage showing the incident, AKP officials lashed out against the Gezi Park protestors. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then prime minister, seized the moment and accused the Gezi protesters of moral turpitude, galvanizing his political base by bemoaning on media channels: 'They harassed and beat my fellow head scarf-wearing sisters' (Erdoğan 2013).

The period of the Gezi protests was one of the turning points in the AKP's strategy to tighten their hold on power, in which political opposition to the government was depoliticized and framed as a moral insult to the larger Sunni majority in the country. The government, in the meantime, worked diligently to push particular practices such as the consumption of alcoholic beverages, abortion, women's sexuality and coed living out of the sphere of political negotiation by framing them as moral transgressions. It was not until two years after the Kabataş event that the video footage was finally leaked to the press and it was proven that the allegations were grossly distorted, with some parts entirely fabricated. The footage showed a group of six young men who seemed to be walking past the young woman and verbally harassing her.

It is in this context that moral vigilantism resurfaced in Istanbul in 2015, where cafés and art galleries involved in so-called immoral activities, such as serving alcohol during an art exhibition, were threatened by resentful groups of religious, nationalist youths.³ Sometimes, mixed-gender groups consuming alcoholic drinks in public spaces were intimidated by local small business owners. Vigilante incidents that exclusively target women, on the other hand, erupted after the democracy vigils in 2016. Instigated by President Erdoğan, the vigils started on the night of 15 July 2016, when a faction of the Turkish military initiated a coup against the AKP government. That night, Erdoğan appeared on a live CNN Türk broadcast via the anchorwoman's smartphone on FaceTime and called on the people to go out, violate the curfew and stop the attempted coup. Held nightly for weeks in urban streets and squares, the vigils often drew thousands of participants. Islamic calls, *Sala*, were recited from mosques, not to call to prayer, but to spark off civilian resistance against the attempted coup and urge believers to pledge allegiance to the AKP regime. Never before had a political government in the history of the Turkish Republic called the masses to the streets to display resistance against a military intervention. Tayyip Erdoğan's call on that night was met with enthusiasm by AKP supporters, and large masses of men and a small number of women took to the streets to join the vigils. During this period, men easily assumed the role of vigilantes protecting the regime.

The first vigilante attack on a woman for her alleged moral infraction was reported just a few weeks after the vigils ended. On 12 September 2016, Ayşegül Terzi, a 23-year-old nurse, was violently attacked on a public bus for wearing shorts. The male perpetrator later defended himself in court by claiming that at the time of the incident, his moral and national feelings were particularly intense (Terzi v. Çakıroğlu 2016). On 20 September 2016, a woman in Bursa stepped in to intervene in a bullying incident on the subway where an older man verbally harassed a younger man for playing music at a high volume through his headphones. When the woman told him to stop swearing, the older man threatened her by reminding her vulnerability to violence with an allusion to Ayşegül Terzi: 'You know what happened to that woman wearing shorts on the bus. And you are still talking!' he retorted. Two months later, İpek Atcan, a 22-year-old music writer based in Istanbul, was at the subway station, waiting for the train when a man kicked her in the legs, furiously shouting, 'You can't sit here with your legs crossed like this' (İpek Atcan'a 2016). By the end of July 2018, nineteen cases of vigilante violence against women, in which women were attacked by men for their alleged moral infractions, had already been documented.

Vigilantism: Misogyny under the cloak of morality

Vigilante men seem to harbour resentment and hostile feelings towards certain groups of women, and when they encounter them in public places, such as on the bus, in the subway, on the street, at parks or at a supermarket, they assault them. Recently, performativity of violence is not confined to vigilantism and an increasing number of domestic violence incidents repeat the pattern. For instance, the percentage of women murdered in public places in the presence of witnesses is reported to be on the rise (bianet Şiddet 2020). Feminist activists and lawyers I interviewed also drew attention to the performativity of male violence across cases. One feminist activist pointed out that acts of femicide committed by men have become more gruesome and extreme. 'Now', she said, 'men are killing women by using torture methods, with intense hatred, and by using lethal electroshock weapons, for instance. Or else, they kill women by placing explosive devices in women's cars.'

In the cases of vigilante violence, moral infractions allegedly committed by women often instigate these attacks. Vigilantism refers to the use or threat of extralegal violence in response to an alleged criminal act, violation or transgression. In contemporary Turkey, male vigilantism exhibits an unequivocal desire to reinstate a gendered moral order. A 53-year-old woman in Istanbul, for instance, was attacked by a man in a supermarket on the grounds that her style of walking was inappropriate (İstanbul'da 2016). As the woman was walking down the aisle in the grocery store, a man shouted at her and ordered her to 'walk properly'. He then attacked her, breaking the woman's nose and bruising her arms. Indeed, all of the nineteen cases of vigilante violence documented between September 2016 and July 2018 in Turkey attest to the pervasiveness of moral vigilantism, a type of vigilantism where violence or the threat of violence is cloaked in an appeal to higher moral orders and sovereignties. Vigilante

men, in a sense, call upon moral norms to justify their attacks and actions to the public, including witnesses, the media and state officials.⁴

Moralism – the framing of political disputes as moral issues – serves as a pretext for punitive and violent hostility against women. Vigilante men are fixated on providing moralistic justifications for their crimes. The accounts given by male vigilantes of their actions suggest that men present themselves as actors exacting penalties on women for their moral transgressions. Some vigilantes, for instance, explicitly invoke religious morality; that is, Islamic norms, according to which feminine modesty is both a virtue and a Quranic mandate. In these cases, the use or threat of violence is directed against women primarily for their ostensible transgressions of Islamic codes of feminine propriety. For instance, Abdullah Çakıroğlu, an Istanbul man who brutally kicked Ayşegül Terzi in the face on a public bus, defended himself in court by citing Ayşegül Terzi's alleged moral transgression. His statement was as follows:

It was the Feast of Sacrifice [*Eid al Adha*]. My national and moral feelings were heightened and intense. Every single day, some moral values in our country are made to erode further. It was one of those days. I don't think my action was right. I don't think it was constructive. The woman's way of dressing was not normal. It offended my moral feelings. A woman should appear chaste and in order to do that, she should dress according to the norms and position herself accordingly. If she had been dressed decently, we would not have been morally offended and would not have acted this way. We would have been less offended if she had at least put on trousers or a tracksuit. They are ruining our mental and spiritual chemical balance. I have been fasting for the last four years. However, because of these people, I cannot turn towards the eternal life and cannot have a peaceful religious life. (Terzi v. Çakıroğlu 2016)

Abdullah Çakıroğlu lapses into the first-person plural when offering a justification of his own action, a crime he committed by himself without the involvement of any other persons. The use of the first-person plural in his statement seems to have multiple meanings. Primarily, his use of the first-person plural, 'we' (*biz*), denotes a strategy of humble self-referencing, a culturally specific use of 'we' in colloquial Turkish that communicates the speaker's observance of particular norms about cultural conformity and the avoidance of putting himself before others. In this system of self-reference, one's individual identity, instead of accentuating a free-floating ego, signals a humble self that is subordinated to a larger community. It also enables the person to tacitly claim certain entitlements on the basis of being a member of the community, such as the entitlement to surveil others in order to uphold the community's moral order. This sense of entitlement informed Abdullah Çakıroğlu's belief that he should be subjected to fewer legal and moral penalties for his action. Çakıroğlu, in his defence, also evoked an understanding of 'we' as a bounded collectivity. Through the statement, 'They are ruining our mental and spiritual chemical balance', he sets up an obvious antagonism between 'us' and 'them', with those who do not belong being malicious, corrupt and self-indulgent, as opposed to members of the group, who are presented as being religious, morally decent, plain-spoken people. One can readily identify parallels between the

moralizing discourse that the AKP mobilizes and the ‘us versus them’ rhetoric that Çakıroğlu resorts to. It is partly through this antagonism, which draws the boundaries between insiders and outsiders and which stigmatizes certain women as outsiders to be weeded out, that vigilante men draw on the notion of moral transgression to mark particular women as outsiders and use violence against women.

The pernicious moralism that male vigilantes evoke does not always explicitly draw on Islamic codes, but sometimes operates through localized understandings of gendered propriety; which are only loosely associated with Islamic norms. For instance, Dilay Özel, a twenty-year-old young woman, her aunt, and her mother were attacked on the street in Antalya for their so-called audacious behaviour – that is, smoking cigarettes. Upon seeing Dilay walk home in the company of her mother and aunt, who was smoking a cigarette at the moment, the two male attackers grew furious and began loudly heckling the women: ‘Look just how reckless they are. How dare women smoke on the street!’ (Lafattı 2017). When Dilay’s aunt confronted them and told them to mind their own business, one man, in just a blink of an eye, punched the aunt in the chest and attacked the mother, while the other man took the lit cigarette and extinguished it on Dilay’s neck. Here, women were reprovved and attacked not for failing to comply with norms of religiosity but for being audacious and smoking, an act which, according to the men, constituted the crossing of boundaries of feminine modesty.

Despite male perpetrators’ claims about women’s moral transgressions, vigilante men do not actually know whether their female victims are religious or not, whether they are Sunni or Alevi, whether they believe in God, whether they observe and celebrate religious holidays, or whether they fast during the month of Ramadan. Targeted women, however, appear immodest and lacking in piety, because they are ostensibly not engaged in the project of self-constitution in accordance with the local norms of Islamic modesty and do not wear a headscarf. It appears that it is women’s embodied comportment in public places that incites vigilante attacks. The embodied ways women inhabit the city – women’s demeanour, posture, confidence, elocution, clothes and bodily comportment – seem to offend men. To be more specific, vigilante men regard women’s embodied capacities as signs of moral transgression and punish women for their alleged offensive behaviour. Take, for instance, the case of Canan Kaymakçı, an Istanbul woman harassed by a man on the street for wearing ‘provocative clothing’ and ‘turning people on’ (Eminönü’de 2017) or that of Çağla Köse, a young woman in Istanbul was asked by a security guard to leave a public park where she was hanging out with her friend on the grounds that her outfit was inappropriate. When the woman told him to mind his own business, the security guard told her: ‘There are families here and you are disturbing people by dressing up like that’ (Woman harassed 2017).

In some of the cases of vigilante violence, it becomes evident that the ways in which women inhabit spaces in urban zones and the ways they use their bodies do not just offend, but also intimidate men. For instance, Ercan Kızılateş, an Istanbul man who attacked Asena Melisa Sağlam, a university student, for wearing shorts on a minibus during the month of Ramadan in 2017, was utterly appalled when the young woman fought back. ‘She came to her feet and started yelling at me “Who are you to push me?” she shouted. At that moment, I thought she was an athlete because she attacked me with great courage and force’ (Asena Melisa 2018). Partly on the basis of this incident, I

believe that there are serious grounds to think that men's moral vigilantism is intimately linked to women's refusal to adhere to certain norms. These norms encompass an amalgam of local norms about feminine bodily comportment. Male vigilantes punish those women whose embodiment conveys a sense of insubordination, the most explicit form of insubordination being the rejection of the moral obligation to obey the male authority. In fact, a closer look reveals that male vigilantes are more likely to resort to physical violence when women confront them by talking back or fighting back – acts which convey women's autonomy, an unwillingness to obey male authority. Consider Abdullah Çakıroğlu again, who attacked Ayşegül Terzi on a public bus. His description of the attack tells us that what threw him into a rage was not her alleged violation of moral norms, but the moment when she confronted him: 'The way she sat was obscene. When I told her to sit properly, she made a facial gesture which meant none of your business. I wasn't able to stomach that. It was an involuntary reflex what I did... I warned the plaintiff but she didn't care and didn't change the way she sat. Then this event occurred' (Terzi v. Çakıroğlu 2016).

In a similar vein, two young women in Izmir were heavily battered by male police officers on the street when the women, instead of remaining silent, requested to file a report of sexual harassment against men who harassed them. The two women asked two nearby police officers for help, but the police officers, instead of helping, chastised them for their outfits and said: 'You actually deserve more with this outfit. Look at yourselves.' One of the police officers assaulted the two women when they protested against what he had said (İzmir'de tacize 2017). Such incidents suggest that at those times when women question, explicitly reject the masculine authority or take action against male violence and harassment, men are more likely to resort to violence.

Why do vigilante men seize on morality to justify their violent actions? What is it about moral transgression that enables men to advance their claims over women's bodies? It seems that alleged moral infractions function as an occasion for hostility and violence against women in two explicit ways. First, by drawing on the notion of religious morality, men attempt at framing women's embodied actions in terms of moral transgression and conformity. A particular understanding of morality enables male actors to advance their claims of unchecked authority on women's bodies and to enforce a moral order, all without being held accountable, at least fully, by the police. Second, the masculine authority that male perpetrators wanted to exercise is rooted in a particular interpretation of moral transgression. According to this understanding, woman's body is the repository of man; men can watch women's conduct and even resort to violence when women commit moral infractions. It is this understanding of morality that male perpetrators utilize to circumvent many of the barriers that gender equality poses to male resort to violence. Men, by hewing closely to the notion of moral infraction that makes women's bodies vulnerable to attacks, often give themselves licence to commit violence against women.

Such a moral authority is indeed very difficult to obtain, because the legal and social orders, both of which are based on the principle of equality, place severe constraints on attempts to subjugate women. Under Turkish law, the practice of vigilantism is punishable as a criminal act. And despite the fact Turkish courts have often handed down reduced sentences in cases of violence against women, vigilante men have been

convicted of assault and punished, not least because feminists' sustained efforts to raise public awareness about vigilante cases have often proven to be quite successful. Confronted with severe legal limitations put in place to reduce male entitlements, men turn to an understanding of morality, which strongly resonates with an inverted notion of justice, a notion that grants men the capacity to take justice into their own hands. Such a notion of justice that opens the door for punitive practices has been brought back to politics by the AKP's justice discourse.

The curious link between justice and misogyny

In *Down Girl*, Kate Manne primarily provides an analytical account of misogyny, but, at times, her account also offers glimpses into misogyny from the first-person point of view by imagining how misogyny might feel to a male misogynist:

If it feels like anything at all it will tend to be *righteous*: like standing up for oneself or for morality, or – often combining the two – for the ‘little guy.’ It often feels to those in its grip like a moral crusade, not a witch hunt. And it may pursue its targets not in the spirit of hating women but, rather, of loving justice. (Manne 2017: 20)

Perhaps the most curious connection between justice and misogyny in contemporary Turkey is the particular version of justice touted by the AKP, which envisions a restoration of justice in the country. The influence of justice in Turkish politics, however, stretches far beyond AKP politics. The concept continually appears throughout the history of the modern Turkish Republic, with the majority of right-wing political parties drawing on the discourse of justice to articulate their political vision, whereas left-wing politics and social-democratic parties historically have embraced primarily the principles of equality and freedom (Bora 2019). For instance, the centrist right-wing party founded in 1961 and a prominent political party throughout the 1960s and 1970s was called the Justice Party. Moreover, Necmettin Erbakan's Welfare Party, founded in 1983, appealed to Sunni populations through the populist ‘Just Order’ program, a form of popular rule that sought to fuse economic redistribution with Islamic morality.

Justice in these usages is not necessarily connected with the modern understanding of justice, which entails the rule of law. Rather, justice as it has been appropriated by right-wing political parties in Turkey often tends to hark back to the imperial Ottoman notion of justice, a government philosophy that denotes a particular relationship between the ruler and the ruled. Drawn out of the Quran, the Ottoman notion of justice, set behavioural norms for all spheres of life, including economics and politics, represents an alternative to secular law (Mardin 1991). What is salient in this notion of justice is that it hinges on, and naturalizes, a society rooted in inequalities. Justice here refers to the way in which the ruler treats the empire's subjects. The Ottoman notion of justice thus accommodates entrenched social hierarchies while at the same time promising those at the bottom of the hierarchy a paternalistic type of protection or fair treatment. For

instance, it stipulates that non-Muslims, common people and women, those at the very bottom, should be shielded from brutal treatment as long as they know their place in the hierarchy and do not challenge the status quo (Eldem 2017). When they do, justice requires punishment, because the very notion of fair treatment is based on the idea that, if an offender breaks the law, she in return suffers. This notion of justice, in which the distinction between fair treatment and brutal forms of mistreatment is blurred, allowed Ottoman Muslims, as opposed to non-Muslims, to advance their claims as belonging to the community of the just, a moral community that contrasted with outside, non-moral communities (Mardin 1991). This version of justice, however, historically began to lose its command over politics in the late nineteenth century. In 1856, *Islahat Fermanı* (The Royal Edict of Reform) marked a momentous shift, replacing Ottoman justice with the principle of equality, which, in particular, meant acknowledging the legal equality between Muslims and non-Muslims (İrem 2008).

In contemporary Turkey, the Ottoman notion of imperial justice has recently undergone a renaissance. This has been fostered most prominently by the shift in the AKP's politics towards anti-equality in the post-2008 period. In the early 2000s, when the AKP first came to power, the AKP's concept of justice promised to correct the injustices of past militarist rule and Kemalist authoritarianism and emphasized fair treatment of popular classes through an array of paternalist welfare policies. However, beginning in 2008, the party's concept of justice began to take on hostile and revengeful undertones, with the government singling out and chastising those groups who deserve punishment in accordance with the imperial, Ottoman principle of fair treatment. How has this specific understanding of justice recently gained currency in the field of gender politics? A look at the AKP government's recent discursive practices makes it possible to grasp the sense in which a punitive understanding of justice and gender is connected. Of particular importance here is the notion of gender justice that the government introduced and promoted through the establishment of civil society organizations focused on women's rights (Diner 2018).

Gender justice, to begin with, just like the Ottoman notion of justice, is neither complementary to, nor associated with, the principle of equality. Instead, gender justice has been introduced with the aim of supplanting gender equality (Akyüz and Sayan-Cengiz 2016). In an article on gender justice, then associate professor Sare Aydın Yılmaz, the founding president of the Women and Democracy Association (KADEM), a civil society organization established to disseminate and popularize the AKP's gender politics and gender justice discourse in Turkey, outlined the notion in the following way: 'This framework centers on justice, in opposition to the approach that seeks to establish "equality" enshrining the same rights and responsibilities for men and women in social life' (Yılmaz 2015: 107). Second, gender justice, in the same way as the Ottoman notion of justice, is predicated upon the concept of fair treatment. For the author, Sare Aydın Yılmaz, who criticizes the notion of gender equality for failing to recognize the differences between men and women, the concept of gender justice accommodates so-called cultural specificity of Turkey by introducing the notion of fair treatment. As such, fair treatment prescribes genders to receive differential treatment on the basis of their *fitrat*, those essential and God-given differences between genders.

This alternative to gender equality grants a man a higher rank in the gender hierarchy. It is worth pausing over man's purported superiority for a moment, since Sare Yilmaz, who became an AKP member of parliament in 2018, in the same article claims that men's superior position in the hierarchy follows from the natural differences between a man and a woman. 'Some differences inherent in men and women may require that men could be regarded as *primus inter pares* (first among equals) in some cases,' she writes (Yilmaz 2015: 114). At least in some cases, the understanding of gender justice that takes supposed innate gender differences as sufficient evidence for men's superiority resonates well with the Islamic approach to gender, in which men and women are not taken on their own as individuals, but as parts of a whole that complement each other in the family. Yilmaz positively affirms the overlap between gender justice⁵ and the Islamic order:

The view of Islam toward women and men also supports this argument. Islam regards women and men as human beings and identifies differences in what they can do. It considers women and men as parts of a whole that complement each other, stating that 'women constitute the other half as men, complementing a whole' by accepting that 'the two spouses cannot be reduced to each other, cannot be blended with each other but cannot be separated either'. (Yilmaz 2015:112)

And finally, the AKP's gender justice discourse, like the notion of Ottoman justice, might readily lead to mistreatment, punishment or other forms of punitive practices in the guise of fair treatment. Since the notion emphasizes not only the inherent differences but also hierarchies between genders and bases its conception of fair treatment on this ontology of gender, it promotes a heavily gendered and all too often a sexist logic of fair treatment. It creates vicious hierarchies among women themselves by splitting women into two categories: those who deserve punishment and those who deserve fair treatment (benign paternal protection). Because fairness is a virtue possessed by those sitting in the higher ranks of the hierarchy, such as God and the ruler, fair treatment, by the same logic, becomes the bastion of men. Women are expected to be protected by men as long as they squarely comply with the gender norms, which mandate that women live according to their *fitrat*. There is already an abundance of empirical evidence that the politics of the AKP – and not just the behavioural propensities of individual men – promotes paternalistic, masculinist behaviours, in which morally conforming women are treated benevolently (Toksöz 2016). This ethos of gender justice finds strong expression in the implementation of paternalistic social policies and welfare assistance for some underprivileged women, and particularly mothers, widows and caretakers.

However, the ethos of gender justice easily backslides and fosters hostility against women who are seen as deserving punishment. Insubordinate women, offbeat women, women who aspire to equality, those who want to believe in themselves and also have confidence in their bodily capacities, those who are unwilling to obey male authority or those who just exercise in public parks whilst pregnant might face vilification, punishment, stigmatization and humiliation. What lurks right beneath the ethos of gender justice is the basic assumption of misogynistic thinking: punishment is actually

a form of fair treatment reserved for those women who transgress moral norms. This is the exact point where the AKP's concept of gender justice intersects with the logic of vigilantism against women.

Seen in this light, violence against women for alleged moral transgressions raise unsettling questions about the connections between male vigilantes, the AKP's notion of gender justice and misogyny. Moral transgression, pivotal both to vigilantism and to the AKP's moralizing political strategy, is one key aspect of anti-equality politics in Turkey. Vigilantism against women, we can argue, is ascending in urban Turkey despite its illegality largely because corporal punishment of women from below aligns with the misogynistic anti-equality politics that the AKP advances. In other words, male vigilantes' masculinist street justice overlaps with the AKP's version of justice in Turkey.

Discussion and conclusion

Vigilantism, in which men deliberately inflict harm on women's bodies in the name of moral norms, forces us to examine a new form of coercive power operating on women's bodies in contemporary Turkey. In this chapter, I argued that this new modality of coercive power, which targets embodied selves, does not aim at disciplining and regulating women, but aims at punishing, injuring and assaulting them. A localized understanding of moral transgression enables the operations of this new form of coercive power in a period when legal and social changes have, in many respects, freed women's bodies from the burden of feminine modesty. I also argued that moral vigilantism is, in fact, a component of the contemporary political backlash against women, which counteracts the remarkable gains for women's autonomy made in the early 2000s. Finally, by highlighting the overlap between street justice, male vigilantes' performance and the Ottoman imperial notion of justice that the AKP is bringing back into politics, I drew attention to the unique collusion between civilian men from popular classes and AKP rule in Turkey. My analysis suggests that grasping misogyny as an autonomous sociopolitical force is vital for understanding the different directions that body politics have taken in the post-2008 era in Turkey.

Backlash politics, as cases of moral vigilantism demonstrate, derives its emotional energy from hostile feelings and a moral entitlement to assert and regain power. These actions deepen social hierarchies in a particular way: those who arrogate for themselves the position of superiority establish their superiority through acts of degradation, that is, by brutally forcing other groups into an inferior or subordinate status in public. It is in this context that misogyny animates and drives the current backlash in Turkey. However, very few studies have been conducted on misogyny in contemporary Turkey and the broader implications it has in Turkish society and politics. To gain more insight into the operations and various strands of misogyny in institutions such as the family, the market and the state, we need to carry out more studies that treat misogyny as an autonomous force, a force that awakens and mobilizes hostile feelings against women in a given society.

Here, it is important to underline that women are not the only target of the backlash politics that have taken hold in Turkey; so too are groups who aspire to, or benefit from, the improvement of political equality, including Kurdish people and the queer

movement. Driven by a pressing sense of urgency to reinstate inequality by violently degrading the status of certain groups in society, the backlash politics, as a politics of anti-equality, is not limited to vigilantism, but encompasses a variety of different strategies and practices targeting different groups. It is thus also important for future studies to empirically examine the direction, trajectory and varied manifestations of backlash politics in different fields of social and political life.

Notes

- 1 The data on vigilantism is provided by the We Will Stop Femicide Platform (Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu), a women's organization that strives for ending femicide in Turkey and ensuring women's protection from violence.
- 2 For a deeper discussion of backlash in gender politics in Turkey, see Sarioğlu (2018).
- 3 Please see Basaran (2015) for a detailed account of those vigilante incidents.
- 4 In this section, while discussing the vigilante violence cases in Turkey, I draw on my earlier work (Sarioğlu 2018).
- 5 Although Sare Yılmaz does not specifically address how gender justice manifests itself in different parts of life, it is not difficult to imagine a myriad of ways in which gender justice paradigms can go awry and undercut gender equality in social life. To begin with, the emphasis on embodied gender differences serves to reinforce an ideology of familialism, which regards the family unit as the primary ordering element of society and predicates the social relationship between men and women on familial relations exclusively. After all, the view that a woman and a man complement each other follows directly from the spousal model. This familialism also entails a heterosexual, gendered division of labour, in which women are heavily burdened with a host of reproductive tasks, whereas men, freed from those tasks, are granted certain privileges, such as the privilege to act as *primus inter pares*.

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