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Turkey as Producer and Exporter of Anti-Gender Politics: Islamic civil society's epistemic, transnational, and everyday mobilizations

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Zeynep Atalay

Resumo: Este artigo argumenta que a Turquia se tornou simultaneamente produtora e exportadora de políticas antigênero por meio dos esforços coordenados do Estado e de uma densa rede de organizações islâmicas da sociedade civil. Enquanto mobilizações antigênero em outros contextos costumam emergir de coalizões de base formadas por atores religiosos, conservadores e de direita, o modelo turco é distintamente conduzido pelo Estado. Na Turquia, o discurso e o ativismo antigênero são orquestrados por instituições estatais e por ONGs confessionais alinhadas ao governo, que funcionam como extensões da agenda ideológica e política do regime. Trabalhando em estreita articulação com o Estado, esses atores da sociedade civil ajudam a legitimar a hierarquia de gênero, promover o familismo religioso e atacar estruturas de igualdade de gênero. A partir de uma abordagem de sociologia política feminista, o artigo rastreia como ONGs islâmicas, think tanks e coalizões transnacionais operacionalizam a política antigênero nos domínios epistêmico, transnacional e cotidiano. Demonstra ainda que o rótulo de sociedade civil permite a esses atores enquadrar políticas excludentes como defesa culturalmente enraizada, ao mesmo tempo em que constroem modelos concorrentes de gênero que desafiam o consenso global baseado em direitos.

Palavras-chave: Política antigênero; Sociedade civil liberal; Turquia; Sociologia política feminista.

Abstract: This article argues that Turkey has become both a producer and exporter of anti-gender politics through the coordinated efforts of the state and a dense network of Islamic civil society organizations. While anti-gender mobilizations elsewhere often emerge from bottom-up coalitions of religious, conservative, and right-wing actors, Turkey's model is distinctly state-led. In Turkey, anti-gender discourse and activism are orchestrated through state institutions and loyalist faith-based NGOs that function as extensions of the regime's ideological and policy agenda. Working in tandem with the state, these civil society actors help legitimize gender hierarchy, promote religious familism, and target gender equality frameworks. Drawing on a feminist political sociology approach, the article traces how Islamic NGOs, think tanks, and transnational coalitions operationalize anti-gender politics across epistemic, transnational, and everyday domains. It demonstrates that the civil society label enables these actors to frame exclusionary politics as culturally grounded advocacy and to construct competing gender models that challenge the global rights-based consensus.

Keywords: Anti-gender politics; Illiberal civil society; Turkey; Feminist political sociology.

Introduction

At the 2025 International Family Forum in Istanbul, President Erdoğan warned an audience of ministers, representatives of international institutions, academics, and civil society members from 27 countries that societies where the family deteriorates are doomed to decay. The family, he insisted, is humanity's final line of defense against moral collapse: "our safest harbor, our strongest fortress, our unbreachable barrier against global imperialism."(Presidency of Communications [İletişim Başkanlığı], 2025).

The family must be protected at all costs, he declared, because it faces an existential threat from LGBTQ+ movements and gender equality agendas, which he portrayed as part of a coordinated assault by global powers. A "fascistic tyranny" backed by multinational corporations, international organizations, and powerful states, he warned, is assaulting human nature with "gender-neutralization projects," targeting children with irreversible medical procedures, and "lynching" those who speak out. Fighting this, he asserted, was "a struggle for freedom, for dignity, and for the future of humanity." Casting Turkey as a voice of resistance, Erdoğan pledged to shoulder the burden of this global struggle: "We

will not allow this anomaly to be normalized under the cover of freedom or personal choice." Turkey, he promised, was ready to bear the weight of this fight, to lead where others falter, and to carry the cause onto the international stage. The forum's final declaration, he said, would reverberate through the United Nations and other global institutions.

Recent comparative research underscores that most anti-gender formations originate as bottom-up social mobilizations (Korolczuk *et al.*, 2024). Across Europe, Latin America, and parts of Africa, campaigns against so-called "gender ideology" have been propelled by alliances of religious institutions, right-wing parties, and grassroots activists who contest feminist and LGBTQ+ rights through mass demonstrations, lobbying, social media campaigns, and litigation aimed at reversing gender equality policies and blocking progressive legislation (Kuhar e Paternotte, 2017). These movements typically emerge in reaction to liberal democratic reforms and gain political traction by capturing or influencing ruling coalitions, as in Poland, Hungary, Brazil, or Spain (Biroli e Rousseau, 2025; Cabezas, 2022; Gwiazda, 2020).

Turkey presents a different model. Here, anti-gender mobilization has been distinctly state-led (Özbay e Ipekci, 2024). Since coming to power in 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has crafted a governance regime that fuses Islamic morality, neoliberal restructuring, and authoritarian populism (Erensü e Madra, 2022; Özden *et al.*, 2017). Its anti-gender agenda unfolds through policy rollbacks, public messaging campaigns, and blocking feminist and LGBTQ+ demands (Kancı *et al.*, 2023; Özkazanç, 2024; Ünal, 2024). Overall, the AKP has institutionalized a campaign against "degendering," coordinated across ministries, universities, and religious directorates, and operationalized through education policy, family programming, and coercive policing.

A key pillar of this regime is the instrumentalization of civil society. Much like other hybrid and authoritarian governments in an era of global democratic backsliding, the AKP has reshaped the civic field to marginalize independent, rights-based actors while empowering loyal, regime-aligned ones (Roggeband e Krizsán, 2021; Toepler *et al.*, 2020). Through a combination of securitization, criminalization, legal restriction, and bureaucratic pressure, feminist, LGBTQ+, and human rights organizations have been sidelined, while Islamic NGOs, foundations, and think tanks connected to the government have become active players in anti-gender politics. These organizations produce reports, host conferences, run media campaigns, and shape public discourse around a worldview grounded in patriarchal family structures, gender essentialism, and religious morality.

Tracing the co-production of anti-gender politics by the AKP and its symbiotic Islamic NGOs, this article argues that their partnership has turned Turkey into both a producer and exporter of anti-gender ideology. Over more than two decades in power, the AKP has retooled the Islamic civil society sector into a moral infrastructure that produces, circulates, and legitimizes religiously grounded opposition to gender rights. Charities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and think tanks, operating as part of the regime's broader political apparatus, generate epistemic authority, forge transnational alliances, and embed conservative norms in everyday life. Taken together, this government-NGO nexus has institutionalized the infrastructure of anti-gender mobilization within and beyond Turkey.

Adopting a feminist political sociology perspective, the analysis highlights the ideological framing of gender, the institutional mechanisms that sustain it, and the political work it performs within the broader governance regime (Benhabib e Cornell, 1987; Fraser, 1989). A central focus of the analysis is how gender is constructed and mobilized through organizational formats that draw legitimacy from the civil society label. Institutional isomorphism, which now saturates the global associational sphere, enables illiberal actors to appear as credible and rightful participants in it. By adopting the vocabularies and professional practices of liberal civil society, conservative organizations use the very

tools of participatory governance to advance exclusionary agendas in both national and international arenas.

Methodically, the study draws on qualitative document and discourse analysis of policy reports, conference materials, publications, and digital campaigns produced by major Islamic NGOs, government-affiliated think tanks, and umbrella coalitions. These materials were selected for their visible coordination with state institutions through shared personnel, policy alignment, or formal partnerships. Beyond rhetoric, the analysis traces how state priorities are embedded in NGO outputs and how organizational activities mirror governmental frameworks in areas such as family, education, and gender policy.

The article proceeds in four sections. The first examines the transformation of civil society from a normative democratic ideal into a field increasingly used by illiberal and conservative actors. The second section maps NGOs and think tanks as the global infrastructure of anti-gender politics by focusing on discourse, ideology, and transnational mobilization strategies. Situating Turkey within this broader field, the third section traces the state-led development of the anti-gender agenda and the role of Islamic organizations in advancing it. The final section turns to practice and analyzes how anti-gender mobilization operates across epistemic, transnational, and grassroots levels: through knowledge production by think tanks such as KADEM, global coalition-building via the Union of the NGOs of the Islamic World (IDSB), and the diffusion of moral norms in everyday life through local NGOs, family programs, and religious discourse.

Civil Society Recast: from normative ideal to strategic format

The concept of civil society has long occupied a central place in liberal democratic thought as both a normative ideal and an institutional safeguard. Conceived as a sphere of voluntary associations autonomous from state and market, it was imagined as the arena where citizens cultivate civic habits, articulate collective interests, and hold power to account (Cohen e Arato, 1992). Associational life, in this model, is a school of democratic participation that generates social capital, fosters trust, and enables the horizontal coordination of interests (Putnam, 1993; Tocqueville, 2000).

Its appeal rested partly on the role it appeared to play in landmark democratic transitions. From the Solidarity movement in Poland to anti-apartheid coalitions in South Africa, civil society was celebrated as a domain through which authoritarian rule could be challenged from below (Ekiert, 1991; Habib e Taylor, 1999). In the post-Cold War era, it was treated as both the engine and the measure of democratization. International donors and institutions such as the World Bank, USAID, and the European Union invested heavily in 'civil society development' across Eastern Europe, Africa, and Latin America to promote liberalization, transparency, and participatory governance (Carothers, 1999; Mendelson e Glenn, 2002).

By the 2000s, civil society had become an exportable model and a governance tool. In EU accession countries, for example, NGO registration and consultative mechanisms became prerequisites for funding. Indicators of associational strength were folded into evaluation frameworks used by Freedom House, CIVICUS, and the UNDP to assess democratization and good governance (Heinrich, 2004; UNDP, 2002). Through these development agendas, the liberal model of civil society was institutionalized and standardized.

This enthusiasm also transformed the field organizationally. What had once been imagined as a participatory space became dominated by professional NGOs; a shift (Salamon, 1994) famously termed an "associational revolution." Donors promoted standardized models of engagement that signaled credibility, professionalism, and normative legitimacy (Boli e Thomas, 1997). For many, NGOization became the only route to funding and recognition, and eventually, synonymous with civil society itself (Alvarez, 2009).

It is worth remembering that even at the height of its appeal, civil society was never a politically uniform or normatively coherent sphere. Associational life may indeed foster collective action, but that action is not necessarily democratic or pluralist. Historically, it has also enabled fascist consolidation, deepened cleavages, and mobilized exclusion in the name of cohesion (Berman, 1997; Riley, 2005). In hybrid and authoritarian contexts, it often works in tandem with the state, sustains legitimacy, and delivers regime-aligned services (Jamal, 2009; Lorch e Bunk, 2017; Spires, 2011). Rather than serving as a stable counterweight to state power, civil society is a politically contingent arena shaped by context, resources, and the agendas of its participants.

The same logic applies to its organizational expressions, *i.e.*, the NGO, the association, and the think tank. The procedural and organizational infrastructure of associational life is not value-natural. As theorists of institutional isomorphism have shown, organizations adopt similar structures and practices because doing so confers legitimacy and access within a given field (DiMaggio e Powell, 1983). Reflecting this dynamic, conservative, religious, and right-wing actors have increasingly embraced the language, structure, and procedural norms of NGO-based civil society. They register NGOs, develop donor-ready infrastructures, and invoke the vocabulary of rights and participation to pursue illiberal aims. Though institutionally indistinguishable from progressive organizations, they mobilize to advance ethno-nationalist, anti-feminist, and anti-refugee agendas (Molnár, 2016; Narkowicz, 2018; Sahoo, 2014).

In this context, gender has become the symbolic glue that unites otherwise illiberal and conservative forces (Grzebalska *et al.*, 2017). Their strategic use of civil society formats has been central to the rise of anti-gender mobilization. Rather than remaining on the margins, conservative and religious groups have embedded themselves within the institutional core by founding NGOs, policy institutes, and think tanks that mirror liberal forms. Drawing on the NGO model's legitimacy, they challenge frameworks of gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and reproductive justice. As the following section shows, these actors deploy the language of rights, participation, and grassroots legitimacy to gain access to policy platforms, influence international institutions, and reshape public discourse.

Civil Society as the Global Infrastructure of Anti-gender Politics

Over the past decade, anti-gender politics has become a distinct field of mobilization (Korolczuk *et al.*, 2024; Kuhar e Paternotte, 2017). Operating through NGOs, think tanks, religious associations, and, at times, state-aligned institutions, this field brings together a transnational and ideologically diverse array of actors: international organizations like the World Congress of Families, ultraconservative policy institutes, religious authorities, populist politicians, public intellectuals, and local activists. It has gained traction across liberal democracies and hybrid regimes alike, spanning Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East (Holvikivi *et al.*, 2024; Vadakka Chandran, 2025; Zaremberg *et al.*, 2021).

Despite differences in context, ideology, and institutional base, these actors converge in their opposition to gender equality agendas (Corredor, 2019; Grzebalska *et al.*, 2017). Gender becomes a condensed symbol through which broader anxieties about moral decay, demographic decline, the erosion of sovereignty, and the perceived imposition of Western liberalism are articulated. In this discourse, "gender ideology" represents a global menace allegedly advanced by international institutions, Western elites, feminist movements, and what is often called the "homosexual lobby" (Ayoub e Stoeckl, 2024). Feminist and queer rights are portrayed as existential dangers to children, family, national identity, and the moral order (Cabezas, 2022). In contrast, anti-gender actors cast

themselves as guardians of tradition and social cohesion, as they seek to recenter law, policy, and culture around a patriarchal and heteronormative ideal of the family.

Religion provides both the moral coherence and the institutional scaffolding for this mobilization. Across Catholic, Evangelical, Orthodox, and Islamic contexts, religious doctrine furnishes the moral grammar that sustains the movement. Institutions such as the Vatican, Evangelical alliances, and Orthodox churches serve as hubs of coordination and authority. They forge coalitions, train leadership, and mobilize resources (Bracke e Paternotte, 2016; Case, 2019). Clergy often collaborate with conservative politicians, intellectuals, and activists. The U.S. Christian Right, Russian Orthodox-linked organizations, and Catholic networks in Europe and Latin America have been particularly effective in exporting this agenda through financial, strategic, and discursive support (Bob, 2012; Buss, 2003; Datta, 2021; Stoeckl, 2020).

At the same time, anti-gender movements borrow heavily from the institutional repertoire of liberal civil society. They found registered NGOs, policy institutes, and advocacy groups that adopt the vocabulary of rights, development, and participation to gain legitimacy and access (Association for Women's Rights in Development, 2021). Organizations such as CitizenGo, Family Watch International, and C-Fam hold consultative status at the UN, where they submit shadow reports, lobby delegates, and contest gender-related language in human rights frameworks and Sustainable Development Goals (Sanders, 2018). Presenting themselves as grassroots defenders of cultural sovereignty, children, and family values, they participate in UN committees such as the NGO Committee on the Family or Freedom of Religion, where they coordinate advocacy and cultivate allies (CIVICUS, 2019).

Events like the World Congress of Families bring together religious leaders, strategists, and state representatives from Hungary, Russia, Nigeria, the U.S., and elsewhere, to synchronize messaging and share tactics(Cullinan *et al.*, 2020). These gatherings often result in joint declarations, partnerships, and legislative pledges to expand anti-gender legislation. Many participating organizations maintain close relationships with illiberal regimes that offer them legal protection, political access, and funding. From international summits to national legislatures, they produce policy briefs, legal analyses, and peer-reviewed articles that challenge feminist frameworks while presenting themselves as empirically grounded and morally authoritative (McEwen e Narayanaswamy, 2023). Through this strategic mimicry of liberal organizational forms and normative language, anti-gender networks have gained entry into institutional arenas, displaced rights-based advocacy, and redirected policy agendas from within.

The movement's achievements are visible across legal, discursive, and institutional domains. Activists have succeeded in restricting abortion rights, reversing LGBTQ+ protections, and removing gender education from curricula. Hungary banned gender studies in 2018 and constitutionally defined "mother" and "father" as biologically fixed categories(Dunai e Komuves, 2020). In the U.S., conservative legal networks played a pivotal role in overturning *Roe v. Wade* (Dias e Lerer, 2024).Uganda passed one of the world's harshest anti-LGBTQ+ laws, justified through appeals to child protection and African values (Human Rights Watch, 2024). These victories extend beyond national laws. Terms like "gender ideology" and "pro-family rights" now appear in official UN and EU documents, and often dilute gender equality language in international resolutions (Holmes, 2024).

Finally, anti-gender activism has forged new political identities, such as Christian parents, defenders of tradition, protectors of children, who organize protests, run for office, and shape public debate. Religious language increasingly circulates within secular policy arenas, redefines what counts as legitimate political speech, and embeds moral discourse within global governance.

The Politics of Gender and Anti-Gender in AKP-Era Turkey

Today, more than two decades into the AKP's rule, gender politics in Turkey are defined by the strategic rollback of rights, ideological retrenchment, and an assertive, state-led moral agenda. Yet, this was not the government's initial posture. In the early 2000s, under pressure from European Union accession criteria, the party adopted a reformist posture (Müftüler Baç, 2005). It collaborated with feminist organizations, revised the Civil and Penal Codes, and enacted Law No. 6284 to strengthen protections against domestic violence. In 2011, Turkey became the first country to sign and ratify the Istanbul Convention.

This reform era gave way to reversal after the 2010 constitutional referendum, which expanded executive power and set the AKP on a more authoritarian course (Akçay, 2021; Esen e Gumuscu, 2016). From that point forward, the party's gender discourse grew increasingly conservative (Güneş-Ayata e Doğangün, 2017). Feminist claims were recast as threats to national values and social cohesion. Gender roles were redefined in essentialist, moral-religious terms, and the language of equality was replaced by "gender justice," which emphasized complementarity between men and women while confining women's identities to motherhood and caregiving. State rhetoric elevated the heteronormative nuclear family as the foundation of national identity and social stability (Yazici, 2012). By the mid-2010s, the government had adopted a pronatalist stance, promoting early marriage, large families, and the moralization of reproduction, while de facto restricting abortion and family planning in public institutions (Dayı, 2019; Ünal e Cindoğlu, 2013).

A series of legislative and discursive turning points consolidated this shift. The most consequential was Turkey's 2021 withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, justified by government officials and Islamic NGOs as an act of defending national sovereignty and family values (Güneş e Ezikoğlu, 2023). Gender equality initiatives, such as the EU-funded ETCEP project, were dismantled after sustained pressure from Islamic civil society and pro-government media outlets.

Institutional restructuring soon followed. Feminist consultative bodies lost influence or were quietly dissolved. Organizations that had once been invited to advise on policy were excluded from the decision-making process (Arat, 2022; Diner, 2018). Public rhetoric hardened, with Erdoğan depicting feminists as corrosive to national culture and tradition.(Birgun, 2019) March 8 demonstrations were banned for multiple years, and feminist organizations faced legal scrutiny and administrative obstruction (Bianet, 2025a; b). As independent women's groups were pushed to the margins, pro-government Islamic organizations rose in prominence.

This selective marginalization of rights-oriented actors and the cultivation of a loyalist civil society segment mirrors broader trends across hybrid and populist regimes such as Hungary and Poland (Roggeband e Krizsán, 2021; Toepler *et al.*, 2020). In these systems, governments foster ideologically compatible civil society sectors that mimic participatory pluralism while consolidating illiberal governance. Turkey's ruling party has followed a similar path and built a symbiotic network of conservative NGOs and think tanks that function as the moral and organizational extensions of the state.

As the following section demonstrates, these faith-based organizations and policy institutes reproduce and institutionalize the AKP's anti-gender ideology across epistemic, transnational, and everyday arenas of civic life.

Islamic Civil Society and the Politics of Gender

In Turkey, Islamic civil society refers to a sphere of non-state organizations, including NGOs, foundations, associations, think tanks, and religious charities, that operate in accordance with Islamic values and moral frameworks (Sarkissian e Özler, 2012; Zihnioğlu, 2018). These actors range from large umbrella networks to neighborhood-based charities. They provide welfare and humanitarian aid, manage schools and dormitories,

offer religious and vocational training, and shape public discourse on education, family, and morality through a conservative Islamic lens (Kaya, 2014; Zencirci, 2024). Though formally autonomous, many align closely with the AKP's political agenda. Through service delivery, advocacy, and community mobilization, they promote a normative vision of social order grounded in Islamic ethics, conservative communitarianism, and traditional gender hierarchies.

Both the AKP and many of these organizations trace their origins to *Milli Görüş* (National Outlook), the political Islamist movement that emerged in the 1970s (Eligür, 2010; Yavuz, 2003). In response to the constraints of Turkey's secular order, the movement pursued a dual strategy: establishing electoral parties while cultivating Islamic consciousness through associations, foundations, and solidarity networks (White, 2002). Often rooted in religious brotherhoods (*tarikats*) and community-based initiatives, these networks offered Qur'anic education, student housing, and charity. The AKP became the movement's most successful political offshoot, coming to power in 2002 and maintaining its dominance in Turkish politics ever since.

Once in power, the AKP oversaw, and benefited from, the rapid institutionalization of Islamic civil society. Informal and semi-formal networks were converted into registered NGOs and foundations. Many secured public funding, legal protections, and policy access through proximity to the ruling party and overlapping personnel. NGO status conferred domestic and international legitimacy, while professionalization expanded their operational reach. What had been a fragmented field of religious charities evolved into a dense institutional network operating on both national and transnational scales.

Over time, Islamic civil society organizations became increasingly integrated into the AKP's governance apparatus (Atalay, 2022). Though nominally independent, many organizations function as quasi-state actors. They deliver welfare services, distribute government aid, and partner with ministries in areas such as education, family policy, social welfare, youth development, and humanitarian assistance. At the municipal level, they collaborate with local social support directorates to implement neighborhood programs (Gürakar e Bircan, 2018; Morvaridi, 2013). Nationally, larger organizations sit on advisory councils or coordinate with ministries. In that respect, rather than acting as checks on state power, they have become its ideological and logistical extensions.

Their influence is particularly visible in the realm of gender and social policy. Islamic NGOs advance a worldview anchored in patriarchal family structures, gender essentialism, and heteronormative morality (Atalay, 2017). Within anti-gender politics, they serve as the AKP's grassroots machinery.[1] Their activities span three interrelated domains. First, think tanks and research centers engage in epistemic production by publishing policy reports, white papers, and academic studies that challenge feminist frameworks and construct alternative moral discourse. Second, transnational umbrella organizations circulate this discourse across Muslim-majority contexts through conferences, summits, and regional partnerships. Third, local NGOs embed these ideas in everyday life through family counseling, education programs, women's circles, and community outreach. Together, these layers form both the infrastructure and the instrument of anti-gender governance.

1: Shared religio-political ideologies notwithstanding, Islamic civil society in Turkey reflects generational, ideological, and organizational divides. Older Islamist charities such as IHH and Ensar Vakfı draw on the traditional Milli Görüş ethos of moral order and resistance to Western moral decay, thus frame gender primarily through family preservation and women's modesty. Newer actors like KADEM, by contrast, adopt a more institutionalized advocacy model that borrows the language of empowerment and professional expertise. Tensions surface around women's visibility and labor participation: while KADEM promotes education and limited professional engagement within a "gender justice" framework, more conservative networks denounce such participation as a symptom of Westoxification (garbiyatçılık). Yet apart from brief and rare disagreements (most notably over Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention) these differences are seldom brought into public confrontation.

Producing the Agenda: Islamic think tanks and gender knowledge

A key source of power in the anti-gender movement lies in its growing command of epistemic politics, which allows it to institutionalize competing systems of gender knowledge. Across political contexts, anti-gender actors have become active producers of ideas and expertise (Verloo, 2018). They cultivate legitimacy by constructing frameworks that contest feminist paradigms and redefine the terms of gender discourse (Korolczuk, 2020). Drawing on religious conceptions of family, sexuality, and moral order, these actors develop alternative knowledges that directly rival feminist scholarship and gender studies. Their work is anchored in think tanks, policy institutes, and media platforms modeled on professional civil society (McEwen e Narayanaswamy, 2023). Through peer--reviewed journals, conferences, policy briefs, and white papers, they present their claims in formats that project neutrality and institutional rigor. In doing so, they construct alternative epistemic regimes that position themselves as correctives to feminist paradigms.

In Turkey, the most prominent site of such epistemic production is KADEM (Kadın ve Demokrasi Derneği, or Women and Democracy Association), a government-aligned NGO (GONGO) with close ties to the AKP (Ün, 2019). Founded in 2013, KADEM presents itself as a women's rights organization grounded in moral values, social cohesion, and "authentic" cultural traditions. While invoking the language of empowerment, it explicitly rejects feminist paradigms; liberal notions of gender equality, in particular (Gerçek Hayat, 2019). According to KADEM, the equality model imposes a homogenizing conception of womanhood, devalues motherhood and family, and pressures women to emulate men. Equality, in this view, burdens women with dual responsibilities while disregarding their "natural" differences.

At the center of this discourse is the concept of *gender justice* (*toplumsal cinsiyet adaleti*), presented as a culturally grounded and faith-compatible alternative to feminist understandings of equality (Günay-Erkol e Sünbüloğlu, 2024). Framed as a corrective to what KADEM sees as the ideological overreach of feminism, the gender justice model posits that men and women are equal in worth but fundamentally different in nature (Aydın Yılmaz, 2015). These biological differences are treated as both socially meaningful and morally instructive. KADEM's first Women and Justice Summit report, "a new approach is needed in the relationship between women and men; one that recognizes equality in terms of rights, but takes justice into account in the distribution of social responsibilities and roles." (KADEM, 2014) Fairness, in this logic, entails assigning men and women roles and responsibilities in line with their presumed innate capacities, with men as providers and protectors, women as caregivers and nurturers. The organization calls for policy reforms in employment, education, political representation, and family law to institutionalize this differentiated but "just" arrangement. In line with this agenda, the organization places significant normative weight on the preservation of the family as the cornerstone of social cohesion and moral life (KADEM, 2018). But the family it promotes is also a sphere where the division of labor is assigned along biologically defined roles. Informed by essentialist and complementary models of gender, this framework advances a vision of balance that appears equitable but ultimately reinforces a gender hierarchy rooted in patriarchal power asymmetries.

Operating as both a think tank and an advocacy hub, KADEM advances its agenda through a wide range of activities. It hosts the biennial *International Women and Justice Summit* (KADEM, 2025b); publishes the peer-reviewed academic journal, the Kadın Araştırmaları Dergisi (KADEM, 2015), which features articles on family, education, social roles, and Islamic perspectives on gender; and produces reports on fatherhood, family well-being, and gender role perceptions. Beyond academic output, it invests heavily in public pedagogy and outreach. It offers training programs on leadership, career development, and violence prevention for teachers, civil servants, and young professionals, all framed within the gender justice paradigm (KADEM, 2025a).

Over the past decade, KADEM has become a cornerstone of the AKP's project to reorganize civil society around ideologically aligned actors. As feminist organizations were systemically excluded from advisory bodies and policymaking platforms, KADEM emerged as the state's preferred partner that offers a state-compatible model of women's advocacy (Çelebi, 2022). It collaborates with ministries and local governments on initiatives in vocational training, entrepreneurship, and family-oriented education. On the international stage, KADEM holds consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which grants it access to deliberations such as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). Through this platform, it hosts side events with like-minded groups and promotes its "gender justice" framework as a culturally sensitive alternative to liberal gender norms (KADEM, 2019, 2021).

Ultimately, KADEM shapes state gender policy by offering ideological justification for anti-feminist reforms. The organization was instrumental in the government's decision to scrap the Gender Equality in Education Project (ETCEP), a joint initiative with the EU that aimed to integrate gender equality into school curricula. KADEM denounced the project for promoting Western feminist values, lobbied for its removal, and called instead for 'culturally grounded' alternatives (KADEM, 2024). More recently, as anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric has become entrenched in state discourse, the organization has extended its epistemic labor to this domain. Through reports, panels, and public statements, it frames gender and sexual diversity as threats to national morality and social cohesion (KADEM, 2023). In doing so, KADEM mirrors and legitimizes the AKP's heteronormative moral agenda under the guise of civil society expertise.

Spreading the Agenda: transnational networks and Islamic solidarity

The epistemic work produced by Turkish Islamic think tanks is disseminated transnationally by networks of Islamic solidarity. From its early years in power, the AKP positioned Turkey as a representative of the Muslim world and promoted the expansion of Islamic civil society across borders (Akkoyunlu, 2021). It encouraged the formation of coalitions that linked actors from Muslim-majority countries through umbrella organizations, international summits, and civil society platforms that share a moral and political vocabulary grounded in Islamic values and *ummah*-based[2] solidarity. Within this field, Turkish Islamic NGOs act as knowledge exporters and norm entrepreneurs, advancing Islamic alternatives to international rights frameworks.

Among these initiatives, the Union of Non-Governmental Organizations of the Islamic World (IDSB) stands out. Founded in 2005 and led primarily by Turkish NGOs, the IDSB now unites roughly 350 member organizations across Africa, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and the Balkans. It operates under the banner of Muslim solidarity and shared moral responsibility (IDSB, 2025a). Although the IDSB presents itself as a broad-based civil society coalition, its leadership, financing, and institutional agenda remain closely aligned with government-affiliated actors in Turkey. Many of its executive members also hold positions in state-supported civil society organizations.

The organization's worldview portrays the Islamic world as fragmented, impoverished, and under cultural siege. Western imperialism is identified as the root cause of Muslim disunity, economic dependency, and ideological decline. Against this backdrop, the IDSB calls for an Islamic revival grounded in religious renewal, institutional coordination, and global solidarity. Its mission is to consolidate Islamic NGOs into a unified platform capable of articulating shared moral, religious, and political priorities.

At the heart of this agenda is the defense and redefinition of the family as a divinely mandated institution under existential threat. In conference declarations, keynote speeches, and public reports, the family is described as the foundation of Islamic civilization and

2: The term ummah refers to the global community of Muslims bound together by shared religious beliefs and a sense of collective identity that transcends national borders.

the last barrier against moral collapse (Acar, 2014). International legal frameworks such as CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention are denounced as instruments of secular, individualist, and gender-neutral values imposed on Muslim societies (IDSB, 2016a). Within this narrative, gender equality represents a form of "cultural imperialism." Western countries are accused of exporting their "broken and distorted family structures"(IDSB, 2016b) that erode parental authority, legitimize "deviant lifestyles," (IDSB, 2015) and destabilize the social fabric. In its place, IDSB promotes a vision of religious familism based on gender complementarity, male moral leadership, and women's primary role as caregivers. Defending the patriarchal family, in this framework, is a civilizational imperative and a political act.

To institutionalize this vision, IDSB has launched several initiatives, including drafting an International Family Convention based on Islamic principles (IDSB, 2025b) and founding the International Family Institute to develop educational and policy materials in coordination with Turkish ministries. These platforms are designed to offer, in the organization's words, "an international alternative based on our Islamic moral values(IDSB, 2016a) to widely ratified agreements like CEDAW.

Through these efforts, the organization and its affiliates function as norm entrepreneurs. Their summits draw hundreds of academics, clerics, policymakers, and NGO leaders from across the Muslim world, as they unite under the banner of cultural authenticity and Islamic revival. In all, through coordinated civil society activism, they aim to challenge and ultimately displace the liberal rights framework by advancing an alternative moral order that redefines what counts as legitimate, moral, and culturally authoritative.

Embedding the Agenda: grassroots outreach and gendered publics

Across Turkey, thousands of Islamic NGOs and foundations form the everyday machinery of anti-gender politics. From rural areas to urban neighborhoods, they translate ideological commitments into programming, partnerships, and community outreach. Their initiatives range from public lectures, neighborhood events, and workshops, to pre-marital counseling sessions and family education seminars. The consistent message across these programs is the notion of the family as a sacred institution under existential threat, and motherhood as a woman's highest and most valuable calling. Rising concerns about divorce, delayed marriage, falling fertility, and weakening kinship ties are framed as symptoms of a deeper moral crisis. In response to what they describe as global forces undermining the family, such as gender ideology, Western cultural influence, individualism, and the "homosexual lobby," they call for the restoration of faith-based values in everyday life, social roles, and the routines of the household. Tailored programs for mothers, fathers, youth, students, and engaged couples present this message as community service or moral education. Through such initiatives, Islamic civil society performs the ideological labor of reinforcing patriarchal divisions of labor, valorizing women's unpaid care work, and cultivating publics attuned to the moral vocabulary of conservative religious politics.

Islamic civil society organizations circulate this religious familist discourse in close coordination with state institutions and official religious bodies. In partnership with the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), municipal governments, local religious authorities (mufti offices), and provincial education directorates, they organize events with titles such as "Our Safest Refuge: The Family" (*En Güvenilir Sığınağımız: Aile*), "The Unshakable Moral Compass: The Family" (*Sarsılmaz Manevî Pusula: Aile*), "Raising the Ummah Begins at Home" (*Ümmeti Yetiştirmek Eve Başlar*), and "A Home Built on Faith" (*İman Temelli Bir Yuva*). These events, typically held in gender-segregated settings, feature sermons, lectures, and panels that instruct women on domestic responsibility, maternal devotion, and religious obedience, and advise men to uphold religious leadership and moral discipline within the household. NGOs also co-sponsor "Marriage School" certificate programs for newlyweds or engaged couples, where participants are

taught Qur'anic and Hadith-based marital responsibilities, gender-specific communication norms, and parenting practices grounded in piety. Smaller, neighborhood-based women's organizations host *ev sohbetleri*, intimate gatherings in private homes for moral discussion, spiritual reflection, and emotional support. Many also run Qur'an courses and values-based education programs for mothers and children, along with informal activities such as picnics, film screenings, and youth excursions that help sustain communal ties and religious belonging.

Motherhood programming is where the notion of gender justice takes its most tangible form. Reproducing gender essentialism, these organizations portray women as divinely endowed with the capacity to nurture, care, and raise children. Across panels, seminars, and publications, motherhood is described as women's highest calling and their natural role, framed as part of their *fitrat* (innate nature), and justified through religious references blended with psychological idioms. A woman's foremost duty, in this view, lies with her family and especially her children. The ideal woman is imagined as a self-sacrificing, sheltering figure who finds empowerment not in independence but in devotion to her maternal responsibilities. Organizations host events like The Path to Heaven Lies Beneath a Mother's Feet (Cennet Annelerin Ayakları Altındadır), The First Teacher is the Mother (*İlk Öğretmen Annedir*), From the Womb to the Ummah: The Journey of Moral Upbringing (*Rahimden Ümmete: Ahlaki Terbiyenin Yolculuğu*), each celebrating motherhood as a divine duty and moral achievement. Speakers urge women to prioritize their families over personal ambition and warn against the perils of "individualistic" thinking. Young women, in particular, are encouraged to reassess their aspirations and embrace motherhood as their defining contribution to society.

Alongside religious and moral pedagogy, Islamic charities and NGOs also engage in overtly political forms of anti-gender mobilization. In recent years, and in step with state narratives, they have organized protests, launched petition campaigns, and coordinated online actions targeting perceived threats to the family. Gender legislation and LGBTQ+ rights have become focal points of this activism. Leading up to Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, Islamic NGOs held rallies and issued statements claiming that the treaty undermined family values, legitimized homosexuality, and conflicted with Turkish cultural and religious norms (Family Academy (Aile Akademisi), 2019; Sahin e Gultekin, 2014).

Anti-LGBTQ+ mobilization has since become a routine component of their public engagement. Groups have staged demonstrations, released public declarations, and circulated petitions that frame LGBTQ+ rights as dangers to children, religion, and morality (TRT Haber, 2023).Slogans such as "Stop the LGBT Imposition" and "Reject the Global LGBT Agenda" depict religious conservatives as victims of cultural imperialism, coerced into silence by Western-led activism (KADEM, 2020). Echoing government rhetoric, hashtags such as #AileyiKoru (Protect the Family) and #CinsiyetsizToplumaHayır (No to a Genderless Society) regularly trend during these peaks of mobilization.

Conclusion

In 2023, reflecting on the trajectory of anti-gender politics, Paternotte remarked that like Frankenstein's creature, these campaigns have broken free from their creators and now move through the world with a force of their own. What began in the Vatican as a doctrinal objection to gender equality has become a diffuse, transnational formation no longer confined to its Catholic origins. Initially structured through alliances with Evangelical and Orthodox churches, the movement has expanded across denominations and political systems. Today, from Latin America to Eastern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa to the Middle East, actors with distinct theological and ideological orientations converge around a shared political project: to revoke gender rights and reassert normative control over sexuality, reproduction, and family life.

This article has examined how that project has taken shape in Turkey. Over the past two decades, the AKP has built a domestic anti-gender regime and positioned the country as an international exporter of it. Unlike the predominantly bottom-up mobilizations seen elsewhere, which are often driven by religious movements and grassroots alliances, Turkey's model is orchestrated from above. It is executed through a coordinated apparatus that links the ruling government with a network of civil society organizations bound by a common ideological framework. These actors translate political imperatives into normative claims, policy frameworks, and public discourse.

During the AKP's tenure, and with the patronage of the political Islamist regime, Islamic civil society organizations have been reconfigured into the operational core of anti-gender governance. They function as the engine of anti-gender politics as they enable the production, diffusion, and normalization of a normative framework shaped by religious morality and institutionalized gender hierarchy. Think tanks and research institutes craft policy discourse that mobilizes essentialist and complementary views of gender. Transnational NGO coalitions connect actors across Muslim-majority contexts, promote religious alternatives to global rights frameworks, and position Turkey as a normative hub. At the local level, charities and faith-based organizations implement these scripts through family programs, youth outreach, and moral pedagogy.

Islamic civil society has become an effective vehicle for advancing religious discourse precisely because it operates under the legitimating guise of civil society. Across contexts, religion supplies the normative core of anti-gender mobilization. But what makes these actors particularly effective is not religion alone; it is the strategic coupling of conservative religious discourse with the institutional credibility of civil society. Framed as participatory, non-state, and community-oriented, faith-based NGOs are able to disseminate patriarchal and heteronormative agendas while securing access to policy platforms, multilateral institutions, and international development channels. The civil society label grants them entry into arenas where religious conservatism, on its own, might be dismissed as partisan or doctrinaire. In this way, the civil society format legitimates their claims, translates exclusionary politics into the language of rights and empowerment, and opens institutional pathways for embedding religious moralism into governance structures.

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Data Availability Statement

The research data are available within the article.