

'I WANT TO BREAK FREE!'

A Study on Women Who Seek Freedom from Religion and the Islamic Veil in Turkey

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Abstract

Since the late 2000s, Turkey has experienced de-Europeanisation, de-democratisation, and Islamist and authoritarian transformation that has also reinforced patriarchal understanding of gender relations and regressive gender norms. This study focuses on women's freedom *from* religion and their liberty to decide whether to wear an Islamic veil in such a gendered socio-political climate. The online platform *Yalnız Yürümeyeceksin* [you will not walk alone] was born in 2018, and it anonymously publishes women's life experiences around veiling. By examining 592 letters published between 2018 and 2020, this original study ascertains that women's rights under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) have been disregarded against the backdrop of oppressed women's lived histories. In doing so, the study reveals how various parties' decisions around veiling shape women's lives and how women's rights and freedoms are violated vis-à-vis these decisions.

Keywords

Women's Rights – Islamic Veil – *Yalnız Yürümeyeceksin* – Turkey – Freedom of Religion – #LetUsTalk

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Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women.¹

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1 Introduction

Earlier studies on the role of religion in modern societies revealed that there is not one model of secularism.² Göle argues that there is a ‘plurality of secularisms’, but with interconnected histories within the scopes of various national, cultural, and religious contexts – including non-Western secularism.³ The difference between secularism and the French term *laïcité*, can be argued in the sense that the latter gives priority to ‘freedom from religion’, whereas the former prioritises ‘religious freedom’.⁴ Within this context, in Turkey, the concept of *laiklik*, deriving from *laïcité*, is widely embraced to signify the separation of state and religion. Whilst *laïcité* in France is depicted by the separation of State and Church, neutrality of the State towards religions, and the secularisation of the public space, within the scope of *laiklik* in Turkey, religious matters are regulated by the State.⁵ In 1937, the constitution was amended to adopt laicism as a constitutional principle – for the first time in a Muslim-majority country – and by 1982, an article was added to the constitution stating that the clause of laicism “shall not be amended, nor shall its amendment be proposed”.⁶ The laic Turkish state strove to remodel state-religion relations in order to keep ‘political Islam’⁷ outside of the political sphere.

1 Angelou, *Rainbow in the Cloud*, p. 101.

2 Göle, *Islam and Secularity*.

3 Göle, *Islam and Secularity*, p. 53 et seq.

4 Göle, *Islam in Europe*, p. 105.

5 Göle, *Islam in Europe*.

6 Şen, *The AKP Rule and the Directorate of Religious Affairs*, p. 40.

7 “Political Islam” and “Islamism” are often used interchangeably in the literature (Roy, *Siyasal İslamın İflası*; Akdoğan, *Siyasal İslam*; Fuller, *Siyasal İslamın Geleceği*; Aktay, *Türkiye’de*; Arpacı, *Türk Siyasetinde Erbakan*; Tunççaşık, *Political Compromise*). The author of the article is aware of other occasions where different terms like traditional Islam, civil Islam, cultural Islam, social Islam, radical Islam are discussed in the literature. However, for all intents and purposes of this article, Islamism and political Islam refer to the same phenomenon. Political Islam can be defined as “a movement

However, previous research in the literature categorised the State's top down approach to *laiklik* as authoritarian and anti-democratic, claiming that it had confined Islam and eliminated it from public space.⁸ This is because they reflect on *laiklik* as if it was imposed on society by the elites of the time, without support or acceptance from Muslim people.⁹ Such critics also see the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) coming to power as a consequence, exhibiting their reign as a “democratic reaction of the excluded, oppressed, and marginalised Muslim masses, to the strictly secular, and consequently, authoritarian Turkish state”.¹⁰

Be that as it may, such a perspective disregards the gender dimension of political Islam. Islamists argue that Islam has a specific theory on politics and the state; an alternative political system. They unreservedly believe in the sufficiency of Islam as a socio-political blueprint.¹¹ In other words, political Islam as an ideology seeks to establish an Islamic state ruled according to Sharia (Islamic law), because it is considered to be the *sine qua non* for the attainment of an absolute Muslim life.¹² Indeed, Akbulut and Kuru capture the Islamists' ways and means precisely: They adopt strategies in line with the changing political climate of a country; participating in multi-party elections (if they are allowed) or organising underground (if they are oppressed).¹³ The fundamental components of their ideology are “taking the Qur'an as the source of political, legal, and social systems; and claiming to return to the example of the Prophet Muhammad”.¹⁴ In sum, the target of political Islam is reaching power, eliminating other political ideologies, and founding a theocratic state consistent with the times of more than 1400 years ago, which will undoubtedly bring about immense adverse consequences for women.¹⁵

that holds Islam as a fulcrum and tries to transform or change the established political regime according to the frame of Islamic rules by either legal or illegal ways (Duman/Üşenmez, *Dünyada Ve Türkiye'de Siyasal İslam*, p. 258 in Tunçkaşık, *Political Compromise*, p. 80).

8 Göle, *Secularism and Islamism in Turkey*; Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion*; Mardin, *Religion and Secularism in Turkey*; Yavuz, *The Emergence of a New Turkey*; Yavuz, *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey*.

9 Şen, *The AKP Rule and the Directorate of Religious Affairs*.

10 Şen, *The AKP Rule and the Directorate of Religious Affairs*, p. 40 et seq.

11 Esposito, *Islam and Politics*, p. 135 et seq.

12 Akbulut Kuru/Kuru, *A Political Interpretation of Islam*.

13 Akbulut Kuru/Kuru, *A Political Interpretation of Islam*.

14 Akbulut Kuru/Kuru, *A Political Interpretation of Islam*, p. 100.

15 For repercussions on women's rights, see studies on Islamic Revolution in Iran, women's rights in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. E.g. Graham-Harrison, *Taliban ban girls*; Bogaert, *History Repeating Itself*.

Likewise, Islamists in Turkey organised underground through cults (*tariikat*) and congregations (*cemaat*) when they were not allowed to participate in the elections, and took part in multi-party elections when they were,¹⁶ even if they do not embrace democratic values and fair elections.¹⁷ Erdoğan and the AKP have been following the method of changing the state from secularism to Islamism by maintaining governmental power, and securing the state institutions and apparatuses.¹⁸ In the literature, the impact of the approximately two decades of Erdoğan and the AKP's reign on gender equality is already clear.¹⁹ The current study involves delving into the everyday lives of the “excluded, oppressed, and marginalised Muslim masses”,²⁰ who should be doing better under the reign of Islamists, only to find out who have really been “excluded, oppressed and marginalised” inside: Women. For these reasons and much more, the issue of the ‘Islamic veil’²¹ has not been a fight about women’s rights for Islamists in Turkey, but rather, a struggle to make the veil visible in the secular public space, as an Islamist and political symbol, thus delivering a victory against the secular backbone of the Republic. Consequently, the other side of the coin, the right not to wear a veil, has not been part of the discussion for Islamists.

To study the issue of the Islamic veil in Turkey under the reign of Erdoğan, the origin of enquiry should be the early Republic formed out of the ruins of Islamic Ottoman Empire, and its secular state-building agenda. Following its establishment in 1923, the early Republic’s comprehensive reform agenda brought about fundamental rights for women, such as the civil code (1926)

16 Erdoğan: “Democracy is like a bus ride. Once you reach your destination, you get off.” Newspaper *Milliyet*, 14 July 1996, p. 20.

17 In 2021, Freedom House categorised Turkey as “Not Free”, with its score on “fair electrical laws and impartial election management bodies” being 1 out of 4. For more information, see Freedom House, *Turkey*.

18 Recep, *The Political Theology of Political Islamists of Turkey*.

19 Güneş-Ayata/Tütüncü, *Party Politics of the AKP (2002–2007)*; Coşar/Yeğenoğlu, *New Grounds for Patriarchy in Turkey?*; Kandiyoti, *The Gender Wars in Turkey*; Korkut/Eslen-Ziya, *The Discursive Governance of Population Politics*; Güneş-Ayata/Doğangün, *Gender Politics of the AKP*; Cindoğlu/Unal, *Gender and Sexuality*; Alınçık/Altan-Olcay/Deniz/Gökşen, *Gender Policy Architecture in Turkey*; Mutluer, *The Intersectionality of Gender, Sexuality, and Religion*; Keysan, *Activism and Women's NGOs in Turkey*; Gülel, *Patterns of Misogyny*; Gülel, *Turkey's Positive Obligations in Combatting Violence against Women*.

20 Şen, *The AKP Rule and the Directorate of Religious Affairs*, p. 40.

21 Some examples of the range of the interpretations of Islamic Veil are: *Hijab* (a veil that covers the head while leaving the face exposed), *chador* (a long garment covering the body but not the face), *niqab* (covers the face and head but leaves the eyes exposed), *burqa* (covers the whole body, including the head, face and eyes).

replacing Islamic (Sharia) law, and suffrage (1934). This agenda aimed to transform Turkey and eliminate stereotypes of Turks as ‘backward’ and ‘uncivilised’,²² while also reforming clothing to diverge from religiosity, oppression and backwardness, of which the Islamic veil was considered a symbol.²³ The early Republic, therefore, launched a public relations campaign to ‘unveil’ women; strongly urged removal of veiling, and implored men to reject the niqab and veil, however it did not issue a national ban on veiling whereas many local authorities prohibited it.²⁴ Unveiling women was to create the ‘ideal woman’, who was not oppressed by Ottoman-Islamic rule anymore; who was emancipated, modern, visible in the public space, and recognised as a citizen of the Republic.²⁵

However, in the following years, the early Republic’s reforms that promoted women’s rights and existence in the public space were not reinforced to transform society and eradicate gender roles, biases and stereotypes. Instead, women were expected to behave in line with traditions, customs, and culture that asked for specific virtues, while still being encouraged to participate in the public space.²⁶ Consequently, there has not been satisfactory progress regarding women’s place in the family and society, despite relative progress in women’s practice of equal citizenship owing to the substantial transformation from “divine law to positivist and rational thinking”.²⁷ In such a socio-political climate, gender biases, roles and stereotypes have become increasingly entrenched through unchallenged customs, traditions and culture for decades. In other words, patriarchal understanding of gender relations in the family, society and state has influenced the way women are seen and treated in society, which has dramatically shaped the lives of both secular and religious women.

22 Onar, *Freedom of Religion versus Secularism*, p. 11.

23 O’Neil, *You are What You Wear*.

24 Vojdik, *Politics of the Headscarf in Turkey*; Göle, *The Forbidden Modern*, p. 73; Çınar, *Modernity, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey*, pp. 62–64; Onar, *Freedom of Religion versus Secularism*, p. 11.

25 Göle, *The Forbidden Modern*, p. 73.

26 Tekeli, *Birinci ve ikinci dalga*.

27 The goal of the founders of forming a nation-state that would reach the level of modern/western civilisation, was to include the following set of transitions: (a) the transition in the political system of authority from personal rule to impersonal rules and regulations; (b) the shift in understanding the order of the universe from divine law to positivist and rational thinking; (c) the shift from a community founded upon the “elite-people cleavage” to a “populist based community”; and (d) the transition from a religious-based community to a nation-state. Mardin, *Türkiye’de Din ve Siyaset*, p. 14 et seq.; Keyman, *Modernity, Secularism and Islam*, p. 220 et seq.

By the 1980s, the state-religion relations in secular Turkey were transformed as a result of the 1980 coup, because the military regime used (Sunni) Islam strategically as the key means to promote its authoritarian policies, and took decisive steps towards widening the religious field.²⁸ Meanwhile, the military regime also instigated a ban on veiling (commonly known as 'headscarf ban') in universities and public offices in 1982;²⁹ confined veiled women into private space, restricting their presence in public. The governments following the coup, Turgut Özal and his Motherland Party (ANAP), were also committed to the authoritarian policies of the coup and to religio-conservative values in politics and culture, broadening the religious field in the country even further.³⁰

Subsequently, Islamists rose to power in the 1990s—partly owing to the support from veiled women, who were banished from the public space due to the ban. The Welfare Party (RP), the predecessor of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), mobilised Muslim women very effectively to spread Islamist ideals and party principles, mainly in the shantytowns of the big cities.³¹ As a result, the RP's votes increased in the 1990s, and it became the larger partner in a coalition government.³² Up until that point, there was no political party that instrumentalised women in their election campaigns.³³ However, none of the women who worked for the RP was appointed to any senior positions in the Party or the government after the election.³⁴ Later, in 1997, the rise of the Islamists was interrupted by the memorandum of the National Security Council (NSC), which issued strict views on political Islam and secularism in Turkey. Following the memorandum, the ban on veiling had also become rigorous as one of the measures the army imposed on the government since women were the most dynamic actors in the RP.³⁵ Consequently, it is not inaccurate to state that both seculars and Islamists used the veil for different biopolitical agendas, but both ignored women's rights, like education and political representation.

The focus of the current feminist debates in many Muslim societies is on women's right not to wear a veil, especially in Islamist regimes where it is compulsory. Within the secular context of Turkey, this article does not claim that

28 Şen, *Transformation of Turkish Islamism*.

29 The first formal prohibition of the headscarf was in 1978 when the government issued a circular on the dress code for governmental employees. Akbulut, *Veiling as Self-Disciplining*.

30 Şen, *Transformation of Turkish Islamism*, p. 69.

31 Simga/Goker, *Whither Feminist Alliance?*; Aksoy, *Invigorating Democracy in Turkey*.

32 Arat, *Rethinking Islam*, p. 8 et seq.

33 Güneş-Ayata, *The Politics of Implementing Women's Rights in Turkey*.

34 Simga/Goker, *Whither Feminist Alliance?*

35 Arat, *Rethinking Islam*; Akboğa, *Türkiye Siyasi ve Toplumsal*.

families did not coerce women to veil in the secular past of Turkey. During that time, the State assumed that banning the veil in public space had fixed the veil problem.³⁶ However, the ban did not enhance women's status in conservative families and social circles; it only limited the public presence of veiled women, while facilitating wider public space for Islamist men. Also, this article does not promote the Islamic veil as "a symbol of freedom, virtue, respectability or modesty"³⁷ or "the last stage in a long struggle against colonialism".³⁸ The current study focuses solely on women's freedom to make decisions about their bodies, decide on their actions and shape their lives in the current socio-political climate of Turkey: Wearing or removing the veil independently of the diktat of the state, family and society.

This article does not cover gender equality in Turkey exhaustively, so that the focus does not shift from women's experiences of veiling. Many similarities with other Islamic regimes become apparent in the data, but it should be remembered that Turkey has a unique context due to its secular political history explained above, and its connection with Europe and the European Human Rights regime. Hence, there are tensions that may play out differently from geographies like post-colonial Muslim countries.³⁹ The article contributes to the literature on human rights and gender studies, with an original empirical study conducted on a discursive safe space concerning the connection between women's rights and decisions around veiling. To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first study questioning the veiling issue on a dataset of 572 women. The article explicates whose freedom of religion it is, if veiling is coerced/compulsory, and to what extent decisions around veiling disregard women's rights and freedoms. In doing so, the study reveals how decisions around veiling shape women's lives and how their rights and liberties are disregarded vis-à-vis these decisions. The methodology section follows this introduction, while the subsequent section focuses on the compulsory nature of the Islamic veil and the discussions in the literature. Following this, the implications of Erdoğan's reign in Turkey are scrutinised within the study context. Next, the findings are laid out and discussed in subsections against the background of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), before the conclusion section.

36 Balca/Akdemir, *Activist Communication Design on Social Media*.

37 Hussain, *Muslim Women who Veil*, p. 19.

38 Majid, *Unveiling Tradition*, p. 117.

39 E.g. Freeman, *Re-locating Moroccan Women's Identities*.

2 Methodology

Social media, also known as web 2.0, has developed as a computer-mediated communication method since the late 1990s. As web 2.0 has grown and expanded (e.g. blogs, social network sites) year on year, researchers have become increasingly interested in the area, especially in storytelling studies.⁴⁰ As part of this world, the social platform *Yalnız Yürümeceksin* [you won't walk alone] was brought to life in July 2018 by women who were coerced into wearing the Islamic veil at some point in their lives.⁴¹ The platform creates a space to share life experiences anonymously and provides women with a freeing feeling that they are not alone in their struggle. Many women have commented that they thought they were the only ones that felt and thought in a certain way, when having to deal with the experiences they faced. Whilst coercion and violence around Islamic veil is an individual process in women's lives, the platform brings about solidarity through a bonding experience over women's individual yet similar fights in their lives, and being anonymous, which gives them the courage to share their stories. Hence, the platform becomes a discursive safe space.

This study establishes the link between coercion and violence in/by (extended) family, social circles and the State; it analytically connects socio-political developments in Turkey to women's life stories. It contributes to the literature by its distinct approach using gender as a critical lens to the negative freedom deriving from 'freedom of religion' within the scope of Islamic lifestyle and the Islamic veil. The focus of the study is on the rights and liberties of women from Turkey's conservative and Islamist circles. To this end, 592 anonymous letters published between July 2018 and August 2020 on *Yalnız Yürümeceksin* were examined.⁴² Data collection stopped when a dataset for a total period of two years had been created. Ten letters were excluded from the set, because seven were clearly written by men, and three revealed no information about the women's lives. A further ten letters contained follow-up stories continuing from the previous letters from the same ten women, so their letters were analysed together as pairs. In the end, 582 letters that gave voice to 572 women were analysed.

The methodology comprises content analysis, with both qualitative and quantitative aspects. Holsti defines content analysis as "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified

40 Page, *The Narrative Dimensions of Social Media*.

41 Platform, *Who We Are*.

42 *Yalnız yürümeceksin*, *Homepage*.

characteristics of messages".⁴³ Moreover, content analysis is depicted as an instrument for listening to the words of the text, thus providing robust understanding of the perspectives of the producer of those words.⁴⁴ To ensure comprehensive analysis, the contents of 50 randomly selected letters were initially analysed, and a coding framework was developed around the emergent themes based on an inductive approach. The 582 letters were hand-coded using the framework and then, re-coded to refine major themes in line with women's rights deriving from the ECHR. Since interpretivism⁴⁵ makes it possible for researchers to immerse themselves in the situation studied, to empathise with people and see things from their standpoints,⁴⁶ hand-coding was deemed the appropriate method to get the richness and nuance of the meaning in the cultural context, as the letters were written in Turkish.

Subsequently, the themes and sub-codes were re-evaluated to the saturation point until there was a reliable representation. In the end, the acquired data were categorised as per the consequences of Islam and conservatism on 572 women's rights, agency and welfare using the ECHR as an index. The analysis revealed which individual articles were the most representing the findings, and, in turn, which were reflected in the discussion: Article 3 (*prohibition of torture, degrading treatment or punishment*), Article 8 (*right to respect for private and family life*), Article 9 (*freedom of thought, conscience and religion*), and Article 2 of Protocol No.1 (*right to education*). The results were visualised in the discussion as figures: the bar charts were produced in Excel and the Euler diagrams were created in R.

Whilst the letters were very generous in terms of contents, inductive analysis and emerging themes were not given any further weight in the discussion due to the mixed methods approach of the study. The study's innovative methodology blended Islamists' understanding of gender relations, the current regime's gender politics and gendered conduct in Turkey and the European human rights regime. The analysis, therefore, focused on the extent of women's liberty to veil or not, especially under Erdoğan's authoritarian and Islamist reign, because the other side of the coin, the right to 'not veil', has never been part of Islamists' agenda. By using a mixed methods approach, the goal was to show how women's rights deriving from ECHR are affected on a daily basis. In doing so, the methodology provided the researcher with an opportunity to

43 Holsti, *Content Analysis*, p. 14.

44 Berg, *Qualitative Research*, p. 242.

45 According to interpretivism, social reality is created by individuals and groups, and, therefore, it is complex, dynamic and context-dependent. Mabry, *Case Study in Social*, p. 214.

46 Della Porta/Keating, *How Many Approaches in the Social Sciences?*

shed light on whose freedom of religion it is, if veiling is coerced/compulsory (i.e. women are not given the chance to remove or not wear the veil at all) and to what extent women's rights have been disregarded/violated by decisions around veiling taken by families, relatives, social circles and the State. Thus, the analysis revealed how women are restricted, silenced and subjected to oppression and violent conduct by their families, relatives, social circles and the State.

One limitation of the study is that it is not possible to verify the identities of the authors of the letters, which might bring their authenticity into question; both the founders of the platform and authors are anonymous. However, anonymity is the only reason why in-depth data on this topic exists to begin with due to the potential adverse consequences for the authors. Anonymous writing protects women from their families, and trolls who blame the platform with Islamophobia⁴⁷ and brainwashing Muslim women.⁴⁸ Moreover, the founders were interviewed in 2019 without their faces being seen on camera.⁴⁹

Another limitation is that there is not available information in every letter for every question/theme in the coding framework. For example, 78 women did not share information on how old they were when they started veiling.

47 Islamophobia is very commonly used to silence women and invalidate women's experiences with traumas caused by Islam, Sharia law, and Islamist families and social circles. The latest example of such accusations was the retraction of a letter by the Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ) in December 2021. Dr Sherif Emil's letter was about a picture of a toddler in hijab, which was used on the cover of CMAJ's November 2021 issue. In the letter, he reminded that the picture was triggering traumas, and gave an example of a woman who told him that she grew up in Islamist society, where she was forced to wear the hijab from very early childhood and it was taught to her that her body was desired by the opposite sex and should be covered. The picture was triggering her painful childhood memories (the editorial team of the CMAJ contacted the concerned person before publication). Dr Emil stressed that there are millions of women around the world who do not have the luxury of the choice. By leaps and bounds, CMAJ and Dr Emil were accused of Islamophobia by many, including the National Council of Canadian Muslims. Within 72 hours, the CMAJ backtracked, retracted Dr Emil's letter, and issued an apology. However, the Oxford English Dictionary defines phobia as "a persistent, irrational fear of an object, event, activity, or situation called a phobic stimulus, resulting in a compelling desire to avoid it". Nowadays on social media, women from Islamist Countries (and some women from the Muslim Communities in the West) are using the hashtag #LetUsTalk to make their voice heard, to bring attention to their life experiences and traumas around the Islamic veil and lifestyle, to rights and opportunities stolen by Sharia law, Islam, and Islamist families and circles. What these women aim is to show the world is that their fear of Islam is rational and it is counterintuitive to label their fears and opinions as Islamophobia.

48 Twitter, *Platform*.

49 BBC News, *Başörtüsünü çıkaranlar*.

Nevertheless, the findings shed light on women's everyday lives, their rights, opportunities, and wellbeing, as shaped by decisions taken around veiling. They also reveal the ways women's liberties are taken away as a result of such decisions. It is not claimed that the findings are universal (or represent the experience of every veiled woman in Turkey),⁵⁰ yet they do have weighty implications, raising new questions for future research on gender, human rights, and religious studies.

3 Freedom from Religion and its Alleged Dress Codes

The relationship between religion and gender politics is a complex matter. The issue of the Islamic veil in a political and geographical context is even more challenging, albeit sociologically enlightening. The Islamic veil is not only a matter of freedom of religion, but also, part of a bigger picture of women's rights and freedoms that should be protected against forced lifestyle and dress codes that are claimed and dictated as being Islamic. As such, it should be underlined that the freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 9 ECHR) also protects one's freedom to change religion/belief. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has already established that Article 9 is one of the foundations of a democratic society and 'a precious asset' for atheists, agnostics, sceptics and the unconcerned.⁵¹ Subsequently, the ECtHR stressed that Article 9 protects the freedom to hold or not to hold religious beliefs and to practise or not to practise a religion.⁵²

There have been discussions for decades on the obligatory nature of Islamic dress codes and especially the veil. Reformist scholars, who have delegitimised patriarchal customs and practices by uncovering gender-biased interpretations of Islamic scriptures, insist that verses in the Quran do not oblige women to cover their body or head, claiming that male religious scholars decontextualised verses according to patriarchal culture and gender biases.⁵³ However,

50 For example, two women in this study started veiling willingly and still wanted to wear it, but they faced oppression and violent conduct to make them stop doing so.

51 Kokkinakis v. Greece, para. 31.

52 Buscarini and Others v. San Marino [GC], para. 34.

53 Cf. Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*; Üçok, *Atatürk'ün izinde Bir Arpa Boyu*; Hassan, *Equal Before Allah*; Mernissi, *Women and Islam*; Kandiyoti, *Women, Islam, and the State*; Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*; Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*; Hassan, *Feminist Theology*; Roald, *Feminist Reinterpretation of Islamic Sources*; Stowasser, *Gender Issues in Contemporary Qur'anic Interpretation*; Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender*; Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*; Hassan, *Challenging the stereotypes of Fundamentalism*; Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam*; Badran/Cooke, *Opening the Gates*; Al-Hibri, *Is Western Patriarchal*

the idea of the veil as a *product of culture* is not supported by Islamist regimes, because such labelling limits its imposition as an Islamic duty.⁵⁴ Since veiling is a way to regulate women's bodies and lives, Muslim societies have still not settled the controversial debate surrounding the veil's origin, although dissenting voices have become very loud since the early 1990s.⁵⁵ Customs that are discriminatory and harmful towards women are still considered religious mandates more than 1400 years after Islam was founded, and Islamists still resist any re-interpretation, particularly if it is coming from women.⁵⁶ In this regard, Islamist regimes around the world and Islamist circles in Turkey are identical.

From the 1990s onwards, research on women and Islam has generally been influenced by Nilüfer Göle's well-known work 'The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling'. Göle approaches veiling as the entry of women into public space, and sees the veil as a sign of an alternative modernity, where veiled female students symbolise the urban, educated, and activist new countenance of Islam.⁵⁷ However, Göle's narrative was built on interviews with a small group of veiled female students at Boğaziçi (Bosporus) University, and it overlooked the significance of Islamist cults and congregations and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyānet*) in indoctrinating Islamist understanding of gender relations, which fundamentally govern the life of Islamist families and circles.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Göle's narrative has been superseded in the literature, and this led to the moulding of a victim-perpetrator discourse: shifting the focus towards how secularism and the West overlooked and discriminated against veiled women in their authenticity.

However, it is not possible to maintain Göle's narrative anymore owing to Erdoğan's Islamist and authoritarian reign that has been ruling Turkey for almost twenty years. While Göle takes up the perspective of women who feel patronised and restricted by the ban of veiling, this study investigates the perspective of women who experienced force and suppression in relation to

Feminism Good; Saidi, *Hijab is not an Islamic Duty*; Ali, *What does the Quran really say?*; Women News Network, *Wearing the hijab*; Dhan, *The Hijab as Cultural Edict*; Hussain, *Muslim Women who Veil*.

54 Hussain, *Muslim Women who Veil*, p. 21.

55 See Hassan, *Muslim Women*; Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*; Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*; Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*; Roald, *Women in Islam*; Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam*; Hassan, *Feminist Theology*; Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*; Hassan, *Challenging the stereotypes of Fundamentalism*.

56 See Hussain, *Muslim Women who Veil*; Hari, *Irshad Manji: Islam's Marked Women*; Green, *After Taking a Bullet*; Ali, *The Islam Reformers vs. the Muslim Zealots*.

57 Göle, *The Forbidden Modern*.

58 I thank the anonymous reviewer #1 for bringing this original aspect of my research to the front.

veiling. The analysis is based on a broad empirical base (572 women's narrations) and demonstrates a different perspective on who is a victim and who is a perpetrator. Hence, a critical research gap is closed. The current study reveals the oppression, constraints and violence under which women and girls were forced to veil and to follow other dress codes. It gives insight into what kind of consequences women face growing up in Islamist and conservative circles, because of Islamic lifestyle – the lifestyle that has been systematically promoted by Erdoğan's regime.

On the other hand, Göle's work demonstrated the exit of veiled, young, urban women from '*mahrem*' [private space/domestic sphere]. It showed how their demands for participation in social life confronted the Islamist ideology and subverted the engrained gender relations in Islam, such as traditional gender roles as well as licit/illicit behaviour for women.⁵⁹ Göle highlighted that these veiled women claimed their right to a personality, a life of their own, and in doing so, they provoked disorder in Islamists' understanding of gender relations, questioning power relations between women and men in Islam.⁶⁰ In this respect, there is a commonality with Göle's claim since the women in the current study also challenged the Islamist ideology in order to access their rights and freedoms, such as the right to life without violence, having a say in leading their own lives and performing agency.

Previously, Saba Mahmood focused on agency in patriarchal Muslim societies, where she advocated separating the analytical dimension of feminist scholarship from feminism's politically prescriptive dimension.⁶¹ According to Mahmood, the definition of agency should be freed from liberal views of individual freedoms and the feminist view of one's ability to resist domination and repression. Otherwise, such a definition of agency "sharply limits our ability to understand and interrogate the lives of women whose sense of self, aspirations and projects have been shaped by non-liberal traditions".⁶² Mahmood contributed to the literature by widening the discussions in order for agency to be recognised even when actions do not aim to embrace gender equality and freedoms. To Mahmood, agency does not need to develop as resistance against patriarchy, and should be considered as "the capacity to realise one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)".⁶³ In other words, agency emerges

59 Göle, *The Forbidden Modern*.

60 Göle, *The Forbidden Modern*.

61 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*; Mahmood, *Agency Performativity*.

62 Mahmood, *Agency Performativity*, p. 15.

63 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, p. 29.

through acts that resist norms as well as in multiple ways that inhabit norms.⁶⁴ The experiences of some women in the current study confirm Mahmood's approach to agency as "a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable"⁶⁵ since women need to develop various strategies to survive and circumvent under ceaseless domination and oppression. However, the experiences of women in the current study also demonstrate the utmost importance of 'resistance' for agency, especially in a secular country going through a transformation of political Islam.

As above explained, since the 1980s, Turkey has witnessed constant advancement of the Islamist movement in addition to permanent expansion of the religious field (through the State's official religious apparatuses, and non-official Islamist, organised groups), and the continuous spread of neoliberalism in every sphere of social life.⁶⁶ However, the Islamist movement and circles in Turkey continue to be dominated by men and they have a very limited view of women's rights, even though Muslim women have actively challenged the state, protested the veiling ban on many fronts, and organised very efficiently at the local level before the elections that returned increased votes for Islamists.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the rules affecting inter-spousal and relations between women and men are still built on patriarchal assumptions of mediaeval Islam,⁶⁸ in the same way as Islamic traditions in the world have remained strongly patriarchal.⁶⁹ Hence, the line that Islamists draw on women's citizenship still stems from male religious scholars' interpretations of patriarchal gender relations as religious mandates, despite the secular nature of the Turkish Republic. For decades, Islamists have vehemently defied some women who have attempted to question the patriarchal readings of Islam.⁷⁰ So much so, that *Bahriye Üçok*, a feminist historian, theologian and member of the parliament was assassinated by a parcel bomb,⁷¹ whilst *Konca Kuriş*, a

64 Mahmood, *Agency Performativity*; Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

65 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, p. 35.

66 Şen, *Transformation of Turkish Islamism*.

67 For more information on Islamist Women's activism, see Arat, *Islamist Women and Feminist Concerns*; Simga/Goker, *Whither Feminist Alliance?*; Aksoy, *Invigorating Democracy in Turkey*.

68 Moosa, *The Dilemma of Islamic Rights Schemes*.

69 Hassan, *Feminist Theology*.

70 Simga/Goker, *Whither Feminist Alliance?*

71 *Bahriye Üçok*, who was a theologian and a prominent supporter of laicism, wrote a book about female governors in Islam, interpreted the Quran with a contemporary and tolerant vision, and frequently spoke about the threat she saw in the growth of the Islamist movement. She also defended that it is not compulsory for women to veil, and was against

feminist Islamist woman who challenged male interpretations of the Quran, was abducted, tortured and murdered.⁷²

In such a threatening gendered socio-political climate, different interpretations of women's rights, including the right not to veil, have been deliberately discouraged and ignored. This stance of the Islamist movement is also accurate in a broader political context. Islamists have agreed that the state should get involved in religion, but they have been against the secular State's control over it. Rather, according to Islamists, the State should do so much more for religion. Thus, for the Islamist Movement, the State's freedom from religion, too, was never part of the discussion.⁷³ For these reasons and many more, the Islamic veil has not been a fight about women's rights, but rather, one to make the veil visible in public space as a political symbol – a win against the secular state. In other words, veiling of women has served as the emblem of political Islam.⁷⁴

4 The Role of the Islamist and Authoritarian Transformation

In the literature, it has been established that as early as in the late 2000s there had been a rise of conservatism in everyday life, and 'neighbourhood pressure' (*mahalle baskısı*) against the secular segments of the public.⁷⁵ However, this study focuses on everyday life of and pressure on women from Islamist and conservative social circles. The majority of the women who wrote to the platform have veiled and pro-veiling families from these circles. Conservative and religious circles, Islamist cults and congregations are the support base

wearing a veil in educational establishments and public offices. See, e.g. Üçok, *Atatürk'ün izinde Bir Arpa Boyu*; Rampoldi, *Bahriye Üçok – Female Sovereigns in Islamic States*.

72 In 1998–1999, the renowned Islamist-feminist Konca Kuriş was kidnapped, interrogated, tortured and murdered by Hezbollah, an Islamist terrorist organisation. Konca Kuriş fearlessly led debates around Islam and women's rights, and claimed that all interpretations of the Quran are written by men in a male-dominated society so as to reach a point of crude falsification of the Quran's message in terms of the status of women. Hezbollah declared her an 'enemy of Islam' and took the responsibility of her murder. Mater, *Gender-Turkey: Slain Muslim Feminist Writer Honoured*.

73 For more information on why Islamists and nationalists want the Turkish State not to distance itself from religion, but rather, get involved more, and how it has worked so far, see Şen, *Transformation of Turkish Islamism*; Şen, *The AKP Rule and the Directorate of Religious Affairs*.

74 Göle, *The Forbidden Modern*.

75 Toprak, *Türkiye'de Farklı Olmak*; Bozan/Çakır, *Mahalle Baskısı Var Mı Yok Mu?*; Çakır, *Mahalle Baskısı*; Şen, *Transformation of Turkish Islamism*.

of Erdoğan and the AKP, who have been in power for approximately two decades. As a means to attract Islamists' votes, the Islamic veil has been part of the regime's discourse even though the ban was not removed until 2013. The regime's discourse and practices have created a 'religio-conservative gender climate' that defines women in terms of family and motherhood within the territory of religion, tradition and customs.⁷⁶ This religio-conservative climate rejects gender equality, upholds a misogynistic social environment against women, and reflects an endorsement of the Islamic veil. For example, in his speeches about women and women's rights, Erdoğan referred to history, culture, customs and values 51 per cent of the time, and to religion, Islam or belief 40 per cent.⁷⁷ Therefore, it is of minor significance if the Islamic veil is a mandate by the god, or a cultural by-product, because Erdoğan's regime reasserts both alleged origins.

In the early days of Erdoğan's regime, the ECtHR examined the ban within the scope of Article 9 in *Leyla Şahin v. Turkey*. The ECtHR ruled that the ban was an interference with the freedom of religious expression, but it also deemed the ban as being justified and proportionate due to the legal and socio-political context specific to Turkey.⁷⁸ As a process, secularisation shapes countries' religious map, whilst forming a less polarised landscape.⁷⁹ In addition, secularism protects non-believers from the pressures of the majority and the secular order from extremist political movements that impose a society ruled by Islamic precepts.⁸⁰ With this in mind, the Turkish State's vision, too, aimed at safeguarding the secularist nature of the constitutional order in a Muslim-majority country.

The relationship between the State and religion has legal implications, whereby the absence of a considerable degree of state neutrality is detrimental to compliance with human rights protection.⁸¹ The ECtHR also emphasised the State's role as "the neutral and impartial organiser of the exercise of various religions, faiths and belief", which is a role "conducive to public order, religious harmony and tolerance in a democratic society".⁸² Since they came to power in late 2002, Erdoğan and the AKP have moved away from this secular vision and neutral role. In line with religious conservatism and the new right's project of

76 Güneş-Ayata/Doğangün, *Gender Politics of the AKP*.

77 Gülel, *Patterns of Misogyny*.

78 *Leyla Şahin v. Turkey* [GC], paras. 75–123.

79 Griera, *The Many Shapes of Interreligious Relations*.

80 *Leyla Şahin v. Turkey*, paras. 39, 115 and 165.

81 Temperman, *The Neutral State*.

82 *Leyla Şahin v. Turkey*, para. 107.

the radical reform of democracy,⁸³ they have built the idea of a “New Turkey” of Islamisation, authoritarianism and a religio-conservative gender climate, which reinforces gender norms and attempts to raise “pious and furious generations”,⁸⁴ according to gendered Islamic precepts. Hence, the ideology behind “New Turkey” is gender-biased religious conservatism, which escalates intolerance and conflict, and polarises society contrary to a State’s neutral and impartial role. To illustrate, Erdoğan has repeatedly claimed that *Gezi* protesters (the most significant uprising in Turkey’s recent history) attacked and abused ‘his headscarf-wearing sister’, who was a mother, and the daughter-in-law of a mayor from the AKP.⁸⁵ Even though the story is bogus,⁸⁶ he used it very efficiently to provoke Islamists against the protesters. Furthermore, his regime very frequently silences dissenting voices and stifles pluralism⁸⁷ by using indictments like “insulting/defamation of the president”, “making propaganda for/being a member of a terrorist organisation” and “degrading or inciting the public to enmity or hatred”.

In fulfilment of a “New Turkey”, Erdoğan’s regime also encourages Islamist cults and congregations;⁸⁸ signs cooperation protocols to provide pupils in schools with proselytising religious activities, summer camps, and opening up Islamist private schools, university student halls, kindergartens and Quran courses.⁸⁹ Likewise, Erdoğan and the AKP have been continuously expanding

83 Schelkshorn, *The Ideology of the New Right and Religious Conservatism*.

84 Babacan, *Hegemony and Privileges Reproduction*, p. 133.

85 Mutluer, *Gendered, Sexualized and Ethnicized*.

86 Hurriyet Daily News, *Released Footage*.

87 Gülel/Choukroune, *Turkey: Erdoğan’s Decision*.

88 Islamist cults and congregations and their services are not under audit or control, although domestic law renders the Ministry of Internal Affairs the institution responsible for audit mandates. There have been many cases of child sexual abuse, physical and psychological abuse; death by fire; murder; suspicious death; and suicide in various dormitories and Quran courses that are run by Islamist cults and congregations. The most common reaction of the government is to impose confidentiality orders and broadcast bans as well as to reject any parliamentary inquiry motions asking for the investigation of the Islamist cults and congregations. Thus, the cults and congregations are not held responsible nor do they receive meaningful penalties. Some examples of such cases are the child sexual abuse cases at Ensar Vakfi (Ensar Foundation); the murder by decapitation of an 18-year-old university student, Mehmet Sami Tuğrul, in a dormitory run by an Islamist cult; the deaths of 12 children in fire in a dormitory of an Islamist cult; the suspicious death of Mehmet Halit Yavuz, a 12-year-old boarder on a Quran course; and very recently, the suicide of Enes Kara, another university student staying in an Islamist cult’s dormitory. Enes Kara left a video recording in which he explicitly described the violence as well as the abusive and exhausting conduct of the Islamist cult towards students staying in the dormitory.

89 Eğitim-Sen, *2019–2020 Eğitim Öğretim Yılı*.

the capacity of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*).⁹⁰ It has established nation-wide local branches operating under the office of the muftis (*müftülük*), launched nation-wide Family and Religious Counselling Bureaus, augmented Quran courses, extending them to pre-schoolers, whilst also increasing the number of religious vocational schools (*Imam Hatip – IHS*), Quran course instructors and preachers.⁹¹ A study on sermons (*hutbe*) illustrates the importance of the Directorate further for the gendered agenda of “New Turkey”. The study reveals that the Directorate’s sermons defend the superiority of men to women; depict women as powerless, meek and weak members of a community; demand decency and obedience from women under the rule of men; and entrust children to men, because they face the threat of moral erosion.⁹² Furthermore, sermons endorse men as heads of families, with women as ‘family honour’, arguing that it is a man’s duty to protect the female children and the family’s honour.⁹³ Millions of people listen in mosques to similar sermons that enforce gendered Islamist norms and deliberate intolerance of ideas that are outside of these. To all intents and purposes, the discourse and conduct of Erdoğan, the AKP and the state institutions under their control validate the Islamic lifestyle and patriarchal Islamic exegeses as the ‘correct way’ of living, impose gendered Islamist norms, and crack down on dissenting voices, ergo, they promote the misogynistic social environment against women. Such endorsement, in return, reassures violent conduct of women’s (extended) families and social circles, who represent the ‘correct way’ of life and have the God-given right to coerce this onto their daughters, wives, students, and so on. It is, therefore, understandable why Erdoğan’s regime disregards the negative freedom arising from Article 9 of the ECHR and pays no attention to women’s liberty to decide whether to veil and live according to the Islamic lifestyle.

90 Diyanet was initially established in 1924 as an instrument to promote a secular State and keep religious services under control. In 2010, Law No 6002 enhanced the status, power and authority of Diyanet within the State, society and international politics to unprecedented levels by strengthening its administrative structure as well as its bureaucratic and hierarchical organisation. With the Law No 6002, Diyanet was legally endowed to carry its activities beyond the mosque into every sphere of public and private life. For details of the rise of the Diyanet under Erdoğan’s reign, see Şen, *The AKP Rule and the Directorate of Religious Affairs*.

91 Şen, *The AKP Rule and the Directorate of Religious Affairs*.

92 Korkut/Eslen-Ziya, *How do Public Narratives in Hutbe Texts*, pp. 50–76.

93 Korkut/Eslen-Ziya, *How do Public Narratives in Hutbe Texts*.

5 'Yalnız Yürümeyeceksin' Online Platform: A Discursive Safe Space

The average age of those writing to the platform is 20.⁹⁴ Thirty-seven per cent of women in this study had removed their veil, while 58 per cent were still wearing it. The letters demonstrate three main reasons why they were still veiled: (1) not being psychologically ready to take the veil off because of having worn it for so long, (2) not feeling ready to explain their wishes to (extended) families or social circles, and having to face the consequences, and (3) waiting until their future plans take place (e.g. economic independence, studying in a different city). These plans might take years, but the horror and coercion women endure on a daily basis led to them veiling unwillingly for the intervening years. Five per cent of the women had never worn an Islamic veil and wrote to the platform about the immense coercion they had been under for months/years to 'convince' them to start veiling. Women's life stories also show that they are coerced to follow other 'Islamic' dress codes. For example, many women reported that they had never been allowed to wear any garments that revealed shoulders, arms, or the shape of their legs from as early as two or three years old.

In line with the literature, numerous women have researched religion and verses in the Quran, concluding that a veil is not mandatory. However, they lack a safe space where they can discuss their beliefs and religious dogma. Their attempts to converse about the disagreement on the obligatory nature of veiling escalate arguments in the (extended) family and social circles, often resulting in intimidation or violence. For example, when some women wanted to discuss veiling and gender bias in Islam, their families accused them of prostituting themselves, among other insults and curses (e.g. deserving rape, praying for the death of their daughters). Consequently, when women who are coerced to veil as their 'Islamic duty' start to scrutinise and reinterpret the Islamic exegeses that were written from men's perspective, they are alienated by their (extended) family and circles.

5.1 *Willingly or Unwillingly: Veiling*

Whilst there are women who started wearing long, body-covering clothes as young as two, three years old, and started veiling as young as six years old, the average age to start veiling unwillingly is 12 years old. Fifty-six per cent of women in this study explicitly said that they did not start willingly; they were relentlessly coerced and intimidated since their childhood by their (extended)

94 The average age of 273 authors, which does not reflect the entire sample, because not all the letter writers referred to their age at the time of posting.

families, teachers and principals in their schools. The beginning of menstruation was also significant in their lives; numerous women had had traumatic experiences. As they knew what was expected of them once they reached puberty, they had suffered from mental distress pre-menstruation and went to great lengths to hide their first period.

The average age to start veiling willingly is 14 for diverse reasons. However, most realised through traumatic experiences that they were not going to 'be allowed' to take the veil off in the future. The letters disclosed that women's right to change their mind about 'willingly' veiling is not respected. Once veiled, they were expected to veil for their whole lives; they were not allowed to remove it. Hence, many women questioned in hindsight whether it was really their free will to start veiling at such a young age. Some had already expressed regret to their families as early as a week into veiling, but their families had not allowed them to unveil. Retrospective deliberations of many women also demonstrate that it was not a decision made with free will. Bearing in mind how young they were, it is apparent that they lacked an alternative discourse/lifestyle in their circles.⁹⁵ Women's (extended) families and social circles indoctrinated and intimidated them from a very early age to convince them that veiling is a natural process, and their only option in life.

"Veiling is how it was supposed to be; it was the right way, I cannot even contradict that, so I started veiling willingly" (Letter 31). "Such persuasion, systematically conducted over the long term, it is impossible to think, imagine, or wish otherwise. It is such a conviction that you start questioning yourself when it is against your better judgment, thinking you aren't faithful enough. Such a persuasion, you actually convince yourself. You genuinely think that you did it by your own free will" (Letter 43). "Like many other women here, I was veiled by assuring myself that it was with my consent" (Letter 45). "I know what was expected of me; I learned what was right, it was time – yet it was *my* decision. There were no unveiled women in my social circle – yet it was *my* decision. I was 13 years old – yet it was *my* decision. I felt mature. Being approved, appreciated, rewarded [...] it helped me stay veiled" (Letter 52). "I was nine years old and around the 4th grade. I was going to the Quran course, first, then

95 This is not an experience uniquely associated with Islam; many women from conservative circles in various societies are faced with a lack of alternative discourse/lifestyle in their lives. However, the consequences of political Islam for women transcending conservatism are dire given the deliberate intolerance of ideas that are outside gendered Islamist norms, in other words "the limits laid down by Sharia" (see for example: Bogaert, *History Repeating Itself*).

to school. One day I spoke to the teachers at the course and said I want to veil. My mother accepted immediately [...] but when I was 13 years old, I wanted to remove it. Of course, my family said no" (Letter 466).

Some other women veiled willingly to receive affection and approval from their parents or to avoid eternal torture in hell.

"I started willingly. My father kept telling people that he was ashamed that I wasn't veiled, and he would be pleased if I started veiling. It was the times I held him dear. Looking back, I understand that I only started veiling to make my father happy" (Letter 2). "I veiled willingly. Why wouldn't I? Everyone else was wearing it. God required it. It sounded fun; my family was proud of me. I was finally accepted, approved [by the family]" (Letter 50). "I veiled willingly at nine years old. My family's attitude towards me had positively changed. As I grew up, I found myself imprisoned in my own body. As I was dismayed with sins and intimidated with [burning in] hell, I knew I could not live through this any longer" (Letter 117). "On the Quran course I was going to when I finished 4th grade, they constantly asked us to veil or burn in hell. So, I believed them and started veiling" (Letter 394).

Forty-two per cent of women who had veiled willingly had already removed it by the time they wrote to the platform. The rest who still veiled stressed that they were either not psychologically ready to do so or yielded to their families' violent conduct, including physical violence, restrictions, and threats. Notably, figures 1 and 2 show that women are slightly less likely to take off the Islamic veil, if they believe they started veiling freely. However, among women who started voluntarily and were still veiled, 87 per cent wished to remove it soon, while only five per cent were undecided.

5.2 *To Believe, or Not to Believe*

Women's life stories also reveal their coping mechanisms that vary according to the level and types of violence women endure on a daily basis. Some women pretend to be believers, they are impelled to fast and pray in front of their families in order to avoid adverse consequences, such as physical violence. Some keep quiet, study and wait patiently until they complete their studies in order to avoid losing (financial) support for their education. Some women leave the house veiled, change outside and veil on the way back home. Some take 'breaks' like going on the balcony unveiled or answering the door unveiled,

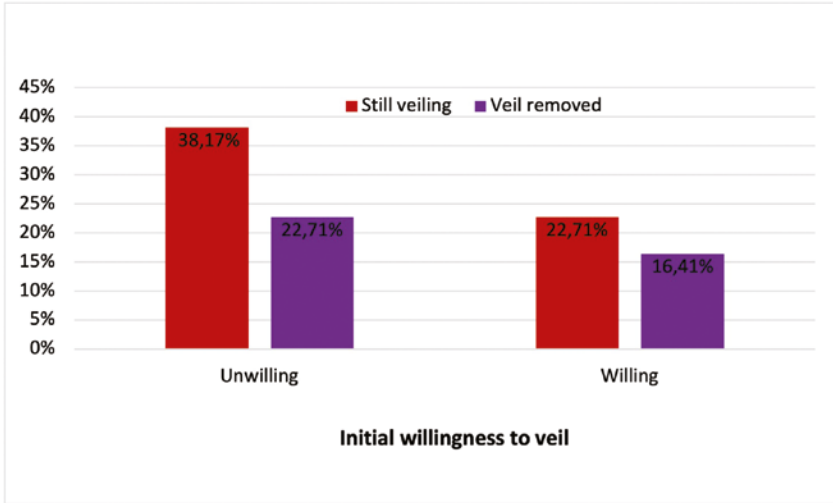


FIGURE 1 Removal of veil by initial willingness to veil

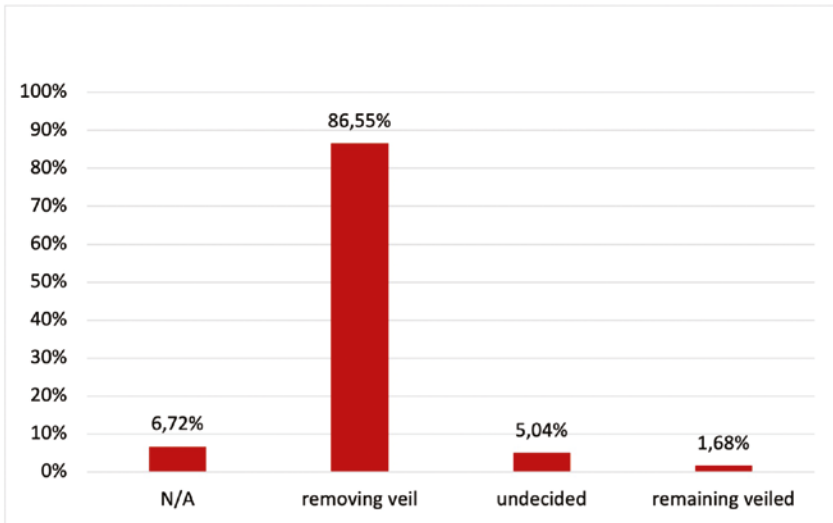


FIGURE 2 Future plans of veiled women who started veiling willingly

but even such short moments breed happiness. In contrast, some women defy, fight back, and face the consequences.

Forty-two per cent of all women in this study and 40 per cent of those who still veiled stated that they did not believe in God/Islam anymore, or they questioned Islam (e.g. deism, atheism, agnosticism). Whilst there might be various reasons of why women continued to veil despite not being a believer

anymore (such as feeling exposed without it due to years-long habituation of the veil), the most important one was that they were still coerced; that veiling was made compulsory by their (extended) families and social circles. Figure 3 demonstrates the status quo between women's current religious beliefs or lack of faith and the veiling question. The numbers of veiled women who were non-believers or questioning illustrates the degree of violence in their lives to keep them veiled, so they continued to wear it against their beliefs.

5.3 *Covert Violence*

Veiling or unveiling, such decisions are motives of abusers to inflict violence on women. The intrinsic link between decisions around veiling and violent conduct should be, therefore, scrutinised to ensure women's rights, including the right to a private life, under Article 8 of the ECHR. Whilst "private life" is a broad concept without an exhaustive definition, it comprises a person's physical and psychological integrity⁹⁶ and embraces a person's body as an intimate aspect of their private life.⁹⁷ Article 8 also guarantees the development of individuals' personalities, without outside interference, in relations with other people.⁹⁸ Consequently, the ECtHR recognises that Article 8 covers the right to establish

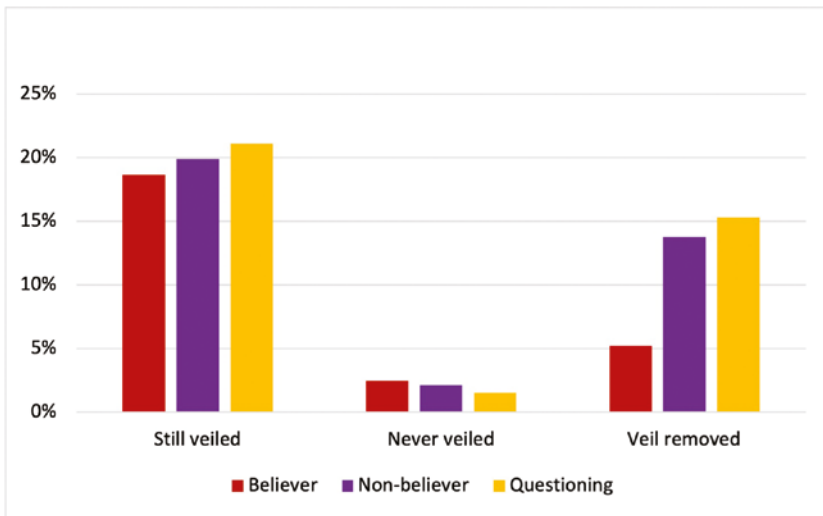


FIGURE 3 Current religious beliefs by status of veiling

⁹⁶ X and Y v. the Netherlands, para. 22.

⁹⁷ Y.F. v. Turkey, para. 33.

⁹⁸ Council of Europe, *Guide on Article 8*, p. 38.

and develop relationships with the outside world and that the preservation of mental stability, i.e. psychological integrity, is indispensable to having the right to private life.⁹⁹

Furthermore, the ECtHR regards minor interferences with a person's physical integrity as an interference with their right to private life, if it is carried out against the person's will.¹⁰⁰ Regarding the gravity of the interference with physical integrity, there is an intersection between Articles 3 and 8. Article 3, the absolute right to live free from torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, cannot be contravened under any circumstances, and therefore, there is a high threshold for its violation. If interference in a person's physical integrity does not reach this threshold, it is examined under Article 8. As regard to violence against women in Turkey, there are cases where the ECtHR found Turkey guilty of violating Article 2 (right to life), Article 3 and Article 14 (prohibition of discrimination).¹⁰¹

The ECtHR strictly emphasises that there is a climate conducive to domestic violence in Turkey.¹⁰² This is because religion, patriarchal culture and traditions cause long-standing oppression of women and generate coercive control (psychological violence) over women's bodies and lives. Likewise, the majority of the women in this study suffered from violence. Violence is inflicted by fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, husbands,¹⁰³ relatives, and social circles¹⁰⁴ to make women start veiling or stop them from taking it off. The Euler diagrams in Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the sources of violence in women's lives. In a Euler diagram, the area of each circle corresponds to the percentage of women contained in each set, while each intersection represents the percentage contained in the overlapping sets.

The findings show that women endure physical violence, coercion, threats and indoctrination throughout their lives, in most cases beginning from early childhood. The Istanbul Convention defines psychological violence as intentional conduct that is "seriously impairing a person's psychological integrity through coercion or threats".¹⁰⁵ It can be inflicted by various means and

99 Bensaid v. the United Kingdom, para. 47.

100 Storck v. Germany, paras. 143 and 168.

101 Opuz v. Turkey; M.G. v. Turkey; and Halime Kılıç v. Turkey.

102 Opuz v. Turkey, para. 198.

103 'Husband' as the source of violence is relatively low, because the average age of women in the study was young (See figure 5).

104 Social circles involve teachers, principals, neighbours, cult members, Quran course instructors, friends, and so on.

105 Council of Europe, *Convention*, Article 33.

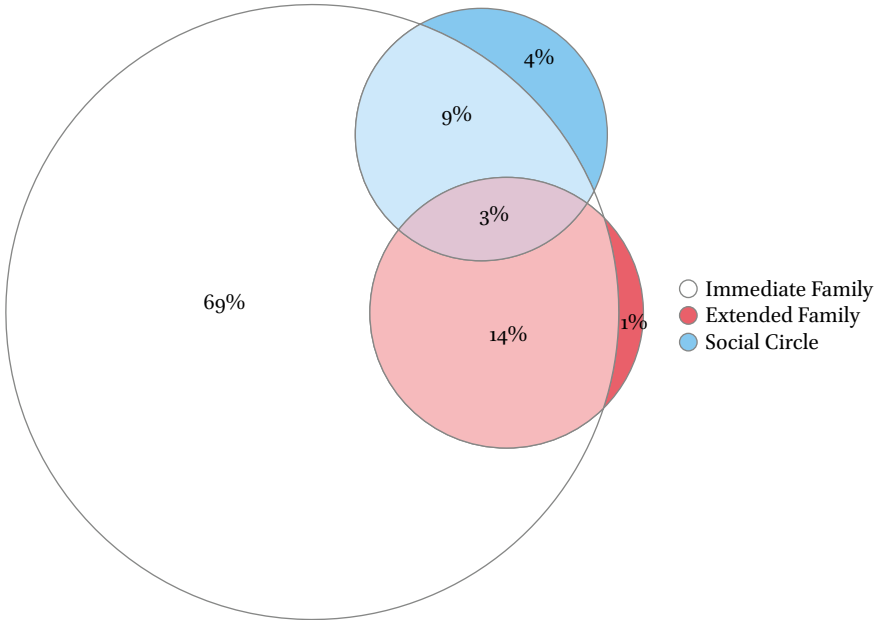


FIGURE 4 The sources of violence in women's lives

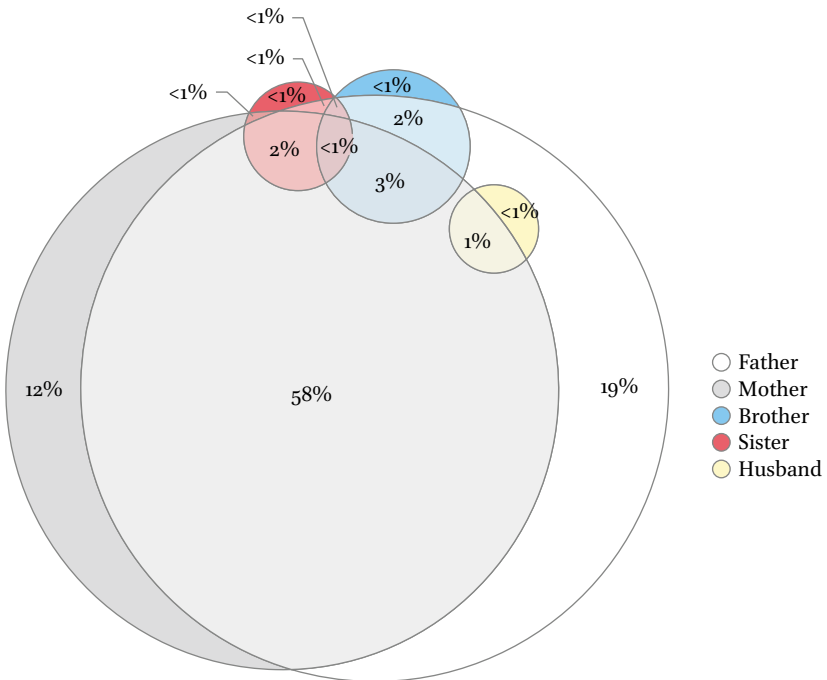


FIGURE 5 The sources of violence in the immediate family

methods like coercion, threats, defamation, verbal insults and harassment.¹⁰⁶ The longevity of psychological violence and abusive behavioural patterns can be considered as having attained a level of 'serious impairment',¹⁰⁷ so much so that all of the 498 women who endured violence in their lives suffered from psychological violence in addition to at least one other type of violence. While many women constantly faced physical violence, numerous other women were frequently threatened with physical violence. Figure 6 demonstrates violent conduct in 572 women's lives.

The level of violent behaviours in women's lives ranges from minor to major interference with their bodily integrity, which might disregard their rights protected under Articles 3 and 8 of the ECHR. Inflicting violence cannot be justified through the freedom of religion (article 9), because the ECHR's Article 9 protects women's right to change their beliefs and limits their families' freedom of religion to protect others' rights and freedoms. The majority of women in the study were directly and repetitively intimidated by their (extended) families or social circles, with three per cent having actually received death threats relating to their veiling on more than one occasion. Typical abusive behavioural patterns include: Removal from official education; sending to IHS /

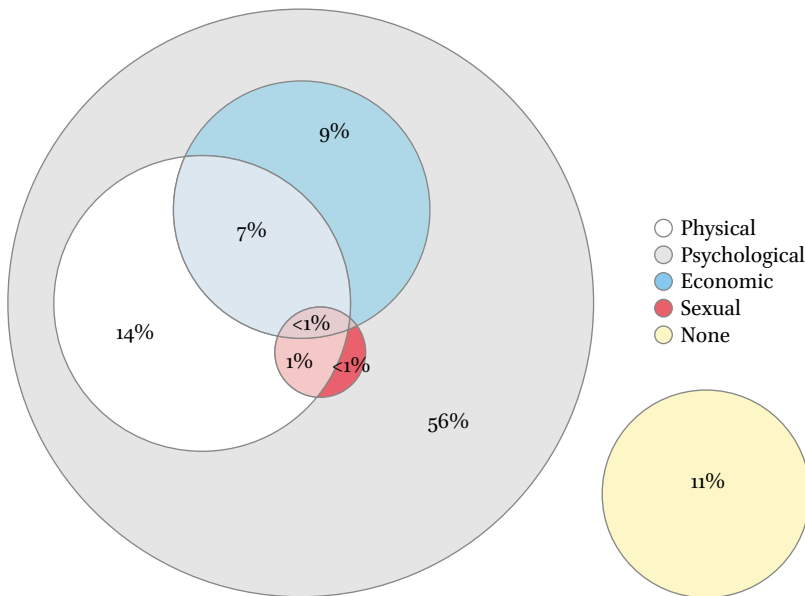


FIGURE 6 Types of violence in women's lives

106 European Institute for Gender Equality, *Glossary & Thesaurus*.

107 Council of Europe, *Explanatory Report*, para. 181.

Quran courses/boarding schools;¹⁰⁸ physical violence; not permitting higher education or study in a different city; expulsion from the house or locking women in; disowning daughters; restrictions (e.g. food access, meeting friends, electronic devices); cutting off allowances; being threatened with forced marriage; terrorising girls with hell and the afterlife; and forcing them to undergo psychological treatment (from psychologists who agree with the Islamic mandate of veiling). Furthermore, families of 36 per cent of the letter writers consistently harassed them in the name of 'other people': "What would they (people) say?", if the women were to stop veiling.

Undeniably, the intentional and abusive conduct of the people who are usually the closest family members has taken its toll on women's physical and mental integrity. Many women feel betrayed by their loved ones, unable to realise themselves, live their 'real' identities, and have self-confidence problems. Six per cent of the women affirmed that they had attempted suicide at least once and occasionally had suicidal thoughts. The majority had reported health problems, such as panic attacks, migraines, anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, bipolar affective disorder, schizophrenia, eating disorders, rapid hair loss, lack of vitamin D, trichotillomania, eczema, addiction to antidepressants and/or sleeping pills.

The findings suggest that women's bodily and psychological integrities are at risk and are repetitively interfered with throughout their lives by their families due to decisions around veiling. The violent behaviours of their families have the capacity to violate, or at least to neglect, women's right to life, right to live free from violence, and right to a private life.

5.4 *Education: A Right or a Threat?*

The right to education has always been a part of the discussions on veiling. From a human rights law perspective, the right to education is a multifaceted problem as the right of parents to choose the education of their children comes into play. For children under 18, the right to education is effectively exercised by their parents, but their right is not unlimited since the guiding principle is the child's best interest. However, the findings show that many parents think 'the best interest' of their children is Islam and veiling since many chose the veil over their daughters' right to education.

108 Children are sent to boarding schools to learn about and live according to Islam. These schools usually are established by, or at least have ties with Islamist cults and congregations.

“I was going to the [Quran] course when I was six years old [...] I was so little, I even became hafiz¹⁰⁹ at the age of 9. My family has never sent me to school; I just grew up [going to] Quran courses in such a [pious] environment. I started veiling when I was very little; I was sent to boarding courses at 11 years old. It was so hard [...] my mom still says I can only unveil once she is dead” (Letter 297). “I’m a daughter of a well-known sheikh [...] I started veiling at 12 years old [...] I even wish I went to IHS [but] I couldn’t even complete elementary education, because of my father” (Letter 300). “When I was in 8th grade, they told me I wasn’t going to high school, but the Quran course next year. I did, I learned religion, devotion, and decided that I didn’t want to be pious [...] all I wanted was to go to school and go to high school” (Letter 410). “I started veiling at eight years old. My father removed me from school when I was nine and put me on a course [...] then they sent me to a boarding course [...] the course I went to was very mediaeval, all black [...] Today I’m a hafiz [...] if I went to school, I’d take the placement exam nowadays” (Letter 571).

Data analysis suggests that parents’ exercising of their daughters’ right to education is unrelated to education, but rather, used to enforce ‘choices’ that their daughters may or not wish to embrace. Threats to remove women from education feed families’ goal to convince women to start veiling (or remain veiled against their declared wish). Attending official education is crucial for women as it is the first step towards economic independence. In contradiction with the mainstream outlook, the women’s stories demonstrate that lifting the ban has not resolved the problems about veiling. On the contrary, the findings confirm that families and social circles force women at even earlier ages now that the ban has been lifted.

“During our first meeting, the school’s founder said it would be nice if I veiled. When we went back for registration, I was following my father with a brown veil on my head and tears in my eyes [...] it got even worse later; I was put in an Islamist cult dormitory” (Letter 89). “My mother did everything she could to make me a ‘believer’. I went to Quran courses instead of kindergarten. She goes to religious cult meetings¹¹⁰ almost every day, and she sends me to the cult’s summer school every summer. There were times that I was left hungry all day and coerced to read

109 Hafiz means a person who has memorised the Quran.

110 Cults come together informally in private homes in order to indoctrinate people with Islamist ideas.

their [religious] books. I went to IHS in the 5th grade; like all girls there, I wanted to veil and started veiling.” (Letter 136). “The next day I had to go to school veiled, or I couldn’t continue my education [...] I forced myself to get used to it, but I can’t bear it anymore [...] I gave them [her parents] my childhood now they want my youth from me” (Letter 317). “There were only 3–5 unveiled girls in the classroom [IHS middle school]. I felt alienated. The numbers decreased every day as teachers were constantly asking us to start veiling [...] I started wearing it” (Letter 448).

In the past, the ban restricted veiled women’s existence in public; many veiled women fought for their right to higher education. However, this study uncovers another dimension of the ban. Before it was lifted, many women who had to remove their veil in schools were happy to unveil since they were coerced, and at school, they felt ‘free’.

“We were unveiling in the restroom and veiled again after school. Deep down, I was thrilled; I was free at school! Then, in the 11th grade, the regulation changed. I learned about it at school, went to the restroom, and put it back on. I felt very desperate, so ashamed” (Letter 11). “All I wanted was to be my age, a child, like my friends. Headscarves were banned in schools, and fortunately so! [...] In the classroom, I was like everyone else. Years later, I understood that they [parents] shaped my life via emotional manipulation for 22 years. By then, the ban was lifted in universities, and my freedom was taken away from me. It was the first time I had to wear a headscarf all day at school. For four years, I couldn’t adapt to it. I hated myself every day” (Letter 51). “I live with the hope that one day I will feel the wind in my hair [...] I used to pray that [the state] puts the veiling ban again; at least then I could have been myself at school. It seems like this isn’t me. My body and soul are two different worlds” (Letter 199). “Back then, the ban wasn’t lifted yet and I was glad. The ban was removed at the end of the second semester. They said I had to veil in the 10th grade. That summer, without asking for my consent, they put my hair in a veil that I hated all my life” (Letter 219). “It was banned in school. Being veiled on the way to school, being unveiled in school, wearing the veil every time I get in and out of the school, I didn’t mind at all. I could even say I liked it. In the 10th grade, the ban lifted, and since then, I could never unveil (Letter 236). “I used to go to school veiled and then unveil at school due to the regulations. I had long, beautiful black hair and liked to flip my hair, but being able to do that only in school started to bother me, because I wanted to be free” (Letter 256).

The education system has an undeniable influence on women's future. In the 1990s, five years compulsory education increased to eight years, and İHS middle schools were closed down, with the intention of halting the rise of the Islamist movement.¹¹¹ However, in 2012, Erdoğan's regime restructured the education system as '4+4+4', which decreased schooling age, allowed home-schooling following the first four years, and rendered the remaining eight years of education optional.¹¹² Thus, it has facilitated removals and endorsed child marriage and labour.¹¹³ The system also transformed general high schools into vocational high schools so that İHSS are ubiquitously available. It, therefore, minimised options for parents who seek secular education for their children and excessively increased the number of pupils in İHSS. Many women in this study also went to İHSS against their will. For example, some families and teachers secretly changed women's lists of preference in the placement examination so that they had to go to İHSS, despite having sufficiently high scores to study in science high schools. Whilst women are not allowed to work as an *imam* (prayer leader) or *hatip* (preacher), they do attend İHSS, because the other option is usually having no education.

The regime's support of various Islamist cults has also affected girls' freedom to choose whether or not to veil and their right to education. For example, some teachers organise 'veiling parties' at primary schools to proselytise them,¹¹⁴ whilst some kindergartens veil girls and teach them roles like washing men's feet in the name of religious teachings.¹¹⁵ The two examples are not singular instances in that the latest report from the Union of Education and Science Workers underlines that students are coerced to select religious courses, and religious activities in schools have increased at every level from kindergartens to higher education.¹¹⁶

Therefore, it is apparent that reinforcing patriarchal gender relations is a fundamental feature of "New Turkey", because it has gendered religious and political conservatism at its heart. This mentality, in return, escalates the violent conduct of the (extended) families and social circles to force women to veil at even earlier ages, before women develop identities or complete their emotional development. Hence, within the scope of the right to education, "New Turkey" reassures sources of violence in women's lives, and it constructs insurmountable obstacles before them when they want to break the violent cycle of their (extended) families and social circles.

111 Coşkun/Şentürk, *The Growth of Islamic Education in Turkey*.

112 Lüküslü, *Creating a Pious Generation*.

113 Eğitim-Sen, 2018–2019 *Eğitim Öğretim*; and Eğitim-Sen, 2019–2020 *Eğitim Öğretim Yılı*.

114 Sendika, *Öğretmen ilkokulda türban partisi düzenledi*.

115 Bianet News, *Kerestecioğlu'ndan*.

116 Eğitim-Sen, 2019–2020 *Eğitim Öğretim Yılı*.

6 Conclusion

Political systems founded on Islamic law define women's rights and place in society very different to the West. They create gendered public and private spaces corresponding to men's interpretations of gender relations as religious mandates. Consistently with the outline of political Islam in the introduction, Islamists' standpoint on women's rights and equal participation in society as equals of men is very limited; women's citizenship even in a secular state still originates from gendered Islamic precepts. Despite Turkey having been a secular State since its establishment, Islam has a vital role in the current regime's agenda of "New Turkey", which has already reshaped women's rights and their existence in gendered public and private spaces.

In the past, the ban on veiling hid veiled women from the public, whereas the current authoritarian and Islamist regime reassures domination of the public space by Islamist men in line with the patriarchal Islamic exegeses. Erdoğan's discourse on "New Turkey" and law- and policy-making reject gender equality, reinforces discriminatory customs and values, and limits women to being child-bearers and caretakers of husbands, children and the elderly. Hence, the State's policy is to confine women to the home, veiled or not. In return, this misogynistic social environment validates the Islamic lifestyle and imposes one 'correct way of life' that reassures the violent conduct of women's (extended) families and social circles.

The majority of women in this study had removed or wanted to remove their veil. Some hoped to convince their families one day or to start a new life without a veil in a different town. Some were waiting until they graduated and found a job. Some planned to run away when they came of age, while others could wait longer, because their young sisters might face adverse consequences of their actions. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, many women have been stuck at home with their abusers. In brief, there are countless reasons causing women to wait longer and continue veiling unwillingly. However, they actively negotiate for retrieving access to their rights in a violent atmosphere. It is striking how women persevere for years and continue veiling so that one day they can finally make decisions about their bodies and lives without consequences for their physical and mental integrity. In this regard, the most frequently repeated themes in the 572 women's letters demonstrate women's determination and hopes: achieving freedom, being able to breathe one day, becoming happy one day, and finally, yet very poignantly, 'feeling the wind'.

Many studies in the literature have focused on the relationship between gender, identity and religion. Building on feminist research in both the West and East that attempts to improve women's rights, equality and status in different societies, this article contributes to the literature on gender, religious, and

human rights studies, with an empirical study. The article does so through an approach that deconstructs justification of cultural differences for the absence of women's human rights. While the study's findings may appear to confirm orientalist stigmas on the surface, a closer look reveals that the women have the strength and willpower to fight for their rights and liberties. For many years, women have resisted and found ways to create space for themselves in gendered public and private spaces. In line with MacLeod's 'accommodating protest',¹¹⁷ Gallagher's 'gender dependency schemas',¹¹⁸ and Mahmood's approach to 'agency',¹¹⁹ the women in this study negotiate and operate their identities, individualities, and relationships with their (extended) families and social circles in the process of 'deserving' and 'obtaining' their rights, such as access to education, food, accommodation, and a private life. Consistent with Gissi's findings,¹²⁰ the women's courage and actions, while under the risk of retribution from their (extended) families and social circles challenge orientalist rhetoric on veiled and/or Muslim women.

On the other hand, the current study distances itself from Mahmood's well-known work on the women's mosque movement in Egypt, which is aimed at "unsettling key assumptions at the centre of liberal thought",¹²¹ and detached the concept of agency from the goals of progressive politics. This is because the current study has been built on women's rights and freedoms deriving from the ECHR, while dealing with the oppression, violence and fundamentalism of the Islamist families and circles that marginalise, subordinate and oppress women, and undermine their agency. Consequently, this study does not entirely agree with Mahmood's approach on separating the analytical dimension of feminist scholarship from feminism's politically prescriptive dimension.

In another renowned work on women and Islam, Göle argued that the arrival of outspoken, educated and activist veiled women in public space in the 1990s transformed existing relations between women and men in Islam, and revoked the traditional, domestic roles of Muslim women.¹²² However, this study is critical of this narrative shift on veiling because it has provided empirical evidence for the reinforcement of Islamist understanding of gender relations by women's (extended) families, their social circles, and the State authorities and institutions. The findings have shown the gendered spaces, while unveiling the consequences on women's rights, agency and welfare.

117 MacLeod, *Hegemonic Relations and Gender Resistance*.

118 Gallagher, *Agency, Resources, and Identity*.

119 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*; Mahmood, *Agency Performativity*.

120 Gissi, *Countering Depoliticized Representations of Syrian Women*.

121 Mahmood, *Agency Performativity*, p. 39; Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, p. 145.

122 Göle, *The Forbidden Modern*.

Göle's work established that the politicisation of some urban, educated, and activist veiled women challenged the secular state's biopolitics, but at the same time, their mobilisation in the political sphere defied Islamist biopolitics, confining women to *mahrem* – private space, too.¹²³ In contemporary Turkey, however, Islamist biopolitics have expanded to the state level. The ruling regime has extended it in the last twenty years via political discourse, law- and policy-making, and other practices that have been re-constructing and fortifying gendered private and public spaces. Thus, the women in this study who have been administered discipline and coerced and intimidated to Islamic veiling, dress codes and lifestyle are burdened with Islamist biopolitics, both by their extended families and social circles as well as by State authorities and institutions. Without ignoring or undermining the difference between secular biopolitics and Islamist biopolitics, it is evident that personal is still political in Turkey.¹²⁴

To illustrate this point further, the Islamist and authoritarian government continued exerting biopower after the ban was revoked by ignoring the negative freedom arising from Article 9 of the ECHR and hindering women's other rights, such as abortion.¹²⁵ Meanwhile, women's families and social circles continue to apply biopower on women in private and public spaces throughout almost all phases of their lives. Thus, building on Sewell and Gallagher's distinct works on agency and structure,¹²⁶ this study empirically elucidates that the decisions of the women in this study around veiling are not made by them

123 Göle, *The Forbidden Modern*.

124 The first wave of feminism theorised and transformed public space, whereas the second exposed the necessity of the transformation of the private space, using the slogan "personal is political". Here, *personal* refers to private space and also, what is considered intimate, personal. This is because what women undergo and endure in private space are undeniable consequences of patriarchal understanding of gender relations in the society concerned; they stem from the gender climate of the country, and reflect governments' gender politics. Hence, *personal is political* highlights this, and emphasises that private space should be transformed and improved regarding women's rights. In Islamist circles, private space is considered *mahrem* (domestic sphere), and deemed to be about women. By displaying what women have to endure in *mahrem*, i.e. negligence or violation of their rights by their (extended) families in the private space, this study exposes why personal should be very much political in Islamist social circles, too. Despite previous activism of Muslim women for a right to education and political participation in Turkey having already demonstrated that these women disconfirm to Islamists' confinement of women to private sphere, Islamist biopolitics have expanded to the state level in contemporary Turkey.

125 See O'Neil, *The Availability of Abortion Services*; and Gülel, *Feminist Movement and Law-making*.

126 Sewell, *A Theory of Structure*; and Gallagher, *Agency, Resources, and Identity*.

independently. Rather, they develop at the intersection of personal agency, limited access to essential resources, and human rights violations, such as the right to live without violence.

The findings confirm that the freedom of religion should be reassessed from a gender perspective, when it is about the Islamic lifestyle, including countless alleged dress codes coerced on women sometimes from very early ages. The average age of women to begin veiling reveals that they were very young when they started to do so. Even if they wear it voluntarily, women should have the freedom to change their mind and unveil. It is women's liberty to make decisions about their bodies and lives. As the ECtHR acknowledged, a person's body as well as their physical and psychological integrity are protected under the ECHR. It is up for discussion, whether it is 'freedom of religion', if veiling is coerced or women are not given a chance to change their decisions throughout their lives. Hence, future discussions on the Islamic veil and lifestyle should expand upon violence against women and women's freedom *from* religion, along with the other rights discussed in this article. In turn, this kind of studies will be valuable assets to 'hearing women',¹²⁷ for navigating women's freedom *from* religion in political Islam.

Bio

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127 See women's narratives of their experiences tagged #LetUsTalk on social media.

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