

Selime Büyükgöze

Triumph of the Women?

*The female face of
right-wing populism
and extremism in
selected countries*

10

*Shifting Gender Regimes:
AKP, Right-Wing Populism, and
Women's Political Participation in Türkiye*

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Editor's Foreword

Since the 2010s, we have been observing a dynamic in many countries that was considered unlikely for a long time: right-wing, right-wing populist and authoritarian parties are not only gaining influence – they are also deliberately winning over women voters, integrating women into their organisational structures, and increasingly presenting themselves to the public with visible women leaders. This is precisely why, since 2018, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) has been conducting a series of country studies entitled *“Triumph of the Women? The Female Face of Right-Wing Populism and Extremism”*, in order to examine the political offers right-wing actors make to women – and how anti-feminist strategies operate as a force for division. (↗ <https://www.fes.de/themenportal-gender-jugend/gender/triumph-der-frauen-ii>)

The two studies presented here on Turkey and Russia build on this perspective, yet they deliberately shift the lens away from the sole question of electoral success and representation – towards the mechanisms of political order-making and the role of (governing) parties.

Gender politics is not a marginal issue; but a key arena of power politics. It is used to define belonging, to frame social conflicts, and to delegitimise opposition.

A central finding shared in the studies¹ by Alexandra Talaver and Selime Büyükgöze is this: in authoritarian and right-wing-conservative politi-

cal projects, “the family” becomes the guiding political formula. What sounds like caring is often a programme for recalibrating social power relations. In Russia, the party United Russia does not position itself as a moderniser on gender issues, but as the guardian of a “normal” order: equality is rhetorically sidestepped or translated into a policy of the “strong family”; women appear primarily as mothers, caregivers, and bearers of social stability. A similar trend can be discerned in Turkey: over years, women’s policy is reinterpreted through a family-centred lens; “women’s and children’s protection” and the reference to the family as the societal core of the nation simultaneously legitimise conservative role attributions.

In both cases, this focus on the family is linked to a second pattern: externalisation and scapegoating. Gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights are labelled as “imports” or “foreign interference” – and thus pushed out of the sphere of legitimate democratic negotiation. In Russia, “sovereignty” is staged as a shield against “the West”; feminism and LGBTQ+ activism do not appear in the official narrative as part of plural societies, but as externally steered threats. In Turkey, a similar rhetoric serves to delegitimise criticism and to organise a morally charged mobilisation – culminating in an openly anti-LGBTIQ+ family agenda.

Thirdly, both studies reveal how women’s rights are addressed and limited at the same time. Visibility, participation and recognition do not auto-

¹ Volume 09: Alexandra Talaver; For the ‘protection’ of the nation? Women, gender politics and mobilisation in the United Russia party, FES 2026; Volume 10: Selime Büyükgöze, Shifting Gender Regimes: AKP, Right-Wing Populism, and Women’s Political Participation in Türkiye, FES 2026

matically emerge as expressions of equality, but are often part and parcel of political mobilisation. In Russia, a state-led and party-aligned orchestration of women's mobilisation is also used to relativise the existence of independent feminist critique – according to the motto: if women are 'represented after all,' there can be no structural disadvantage. In Turkey, women's party structures fulfil central functions for social mediation and mobilisation, but remain politically tightly controlled. The common finding of both studies is uncomfortable – but analytically crucial; in authoritarian contexts, 'women's advancement' can become an infrastructure of domination without questioning power relations.

And yet, both studies do not end with a diagnosis of repression and co-optation. They also show the persistence of feminist and civil-society counterforces – whether in visible waves of protest, in alliances, in local support structures, or in resistant practices that keep spaces open despite restrictions. In Turkey, this is evident, for example, in the wide-spread protests surrounding the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. In Russia, even under the conditions of a war of aggression, there are fractures and counterpositions that do not fit entirely into the offi-

cial family and sovereignty narrative.

Taken together, these two studies therefore offer more than two country analyses. They illuminate just how closely current struggles over democracy, social rights and social cohesion are intertwined with questions of gender, family and belonging. They reveal why a democratic counter-strategy can only be viable if it recognises these lines of conflict, takes them seriously, and responds to them politically.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to the authors for their courageous analyses, and my colleagues in international cooperation for their outstanding support in this publication project.

The Friedrich Ebert Foundation continues to work within its networks and through its country projects to strengthen democratic resilience and to effectively counter anti-feminist divisive strategies.

Dr Stefanie Elies
Gender Coordinator, FES

Berlin, March 2026

Introduction

Türkiye ranks 135th out of 146 countries in the World Economic Forum's 2025 Global Gender Gap Report.² This ranking clearly reflects the extent of gender inequality in the country. Although Türkiye ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1985, it has still failed to address systemic barriers to women's employment, political participation, and access to justice, as well as to prevent violence against women, which is a particularly serious problem in Türkiye.

In power since 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government did not create these inequalities, and some argue, driven by the EU harmonisation process, the AKP in fact initiated positive changes in this area, such as the ratification of the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, even lobbying in the Council of Europe for this major convention to be opened for signature in Istanbul. Indeed, it was eventually named the Istanbul Convention, and Türkiye became the first to sign and ratify it. However, since coming to power, the AKP has also played a significant role in the reproduction, normalisation and institutionalisation of gender

inequality. Although the AKP adopted what was arguably a reformist and democratic approach during the EU accession process, it gradually shifted towards a religious conservative gender regime³ centred on the family as the core of society and seeks to strengthen traditional gender roles by systematically emphasising women's role within the family and sacralising motherhood.

The party's gender order is combined with neoliberal, Islamist, and nationalist policies and discursive strategies.⁴ For example, the emphatic "strong family" discourse serves both as a moral stance and a governing strategy that clearly places the responsibility for care work on women's shoulders.⁵ These policies are usually framed as protecting women and children. Yet, they limit women's autonomy, even replacing them with the family in government policies,⁶ and reinforce traditional gender roles. Criticism of and opposition to these gender policies are often treated as "extreme forces", "deviants", or Western interference.⁷

Türkiye's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention was a key turning point. Although the AKP's support for anti-gender policies did not start with this step, we could argue that it

² The Global Gender Gap Report 2025. <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2025/digest/>

³ Ayşe Güneş-Ayata and Gökten Doğançın, "Gender politics of the AKP: Restoration of a religio-conservative gender climate," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 19, no. 6 (2017): 616.

⁴ Simten Coşar and Metin Yeğenoğlu, "New Grounds for Patriarchy in Turkey? Gender Policy in the Age of AKP," *South European Society and Politics* 16, no. 4 (2011): 555–73.

⁵ Berna Yazıcı, "The return to the family: Welfare, state, and politics of the family in Turkey," *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (2012): 103–40

⁶ An example of this is the AKP's replacement of the Ministry of State Responsible for Women and Family with the Ministry of Family and Social Services in 2011.

⁷ Hande Eslen-Ziya, "Right-Wing Populism in New Turkey: Leading to All New Grounds for Troll Science in Gender Theory," *HTS Teologiese Studies* 76, no. 3 (2020).

was a consequence of growing anti-gender and conservative sentiments.⁸ Moreover, a discursive and political analysis of the debate around the Istanbul Convention in Türkiye is pivotal to understanding how the country engages with the transnational anti-gender movement. Similar to anti-gender discourse around the world, the AKP also garnered significant support by exploiting resentment against neoliberalism, with the anti-gender movement serving as a channel to criticise neoliberal policies and promote familialist policies as a means of a diversion from the failures of neoliberalism, creating a binary between pro-gender approaches and the family.

This article discusses the case of Türkiye within the broader context of anti-gender and right-wing politics and movements in the country, specifically focusing on the gender politics of the governing party. Erdoğan's AKP has ruled Türkiye for over 20 years and has thus had a profound effect on how politics are shaped at every level. Given how broad the subject, the article will concentrate on the 2023 general elections, analysing the party's election programme, voter sentiments, and public discussions around gender, as well as the influence of the opposition parties and the role of the feminist movement.

⁸ Didem Unal, "Securitization of gender as a modus operandi of populism: Anti-gender discourses on the Istanbul Convention in the context of AKP's illiberal transformation," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* (2023).

The AKP's election programme and the reconfiguration of gender around family values

The AKP's 2023 election manifesto⁹ frames women's issues largely within a family-centred and conservative discourse, continuing what has long been its approach to gender policy. Its manifesto opens with the claim "without mobilising the potential of women, who make up half of society, it is not possible to achieve the desired progress in development or democracy", a statement that gives the impression of placing women at the centre of party politics. However, such claims are reframed within a broader narrative of family and national values. Women are presented primarily as mothers and described as "central figures in the family, the institution that carries the fundamental values of our nation". Women and the family are used almost interchangeably or synonymously. This framing illustrates the AKP's consistent strategy of prioritising women's "crucial role" within the family over their individual rights and autonomy.

The AKP's approach to women and gender is shaped by the religious conservative idea of *fitrat* (innate or God-given nature). According to this concept, women and men are not equal but complementary. In other words, gender roles are considered natural and God-given. This line of thought perceives gender equality as a project that aims to dedifferentiate the sexes, defying the natural order. However, the AKP's gender politics do not rely solely on either religion or culture, but also on capitalism. Erdoğan is notorious for asking people how many children they have and constantly encouraging women to

have at least three children. These pronatalist policies, along with flexible labour market models designed to enable women to participate in the workforce, indicate neoliberal concerns.¹⁰

The AKP's manifesto further lists the legislation, laws, and institutions it has initiated, including Law No. 6284 on the protection of the family and the prevention of violence against women, women's shelters, and support services against violence. However, the AKP understands violence against women not as an issue of gender inequality but as a disruption to family unity, a kind of disorder to be cured. All these legislative and institutional measures are therefore situated within the "strong family" discourse. Violence against women should be prevented to preserve strong families.

The AKP's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and removal of the term *gender equality* from policy documents (for example, from the 2021–2025 National Action Plan on Violence Against Women) is a clear step back from the more "liberal" approaches of the AKP. These changes are not only rhetorical but also reflect an institutional shift that clearly prioritises a conservative understanding of gender roles and a familialist policy vision.

The second major theme is the AKP's claim that its time in office has brought real gains in women's education and their role in politics. The party shows that the number of women MPs increased from 24 (4.4 percent) in 2002 to 104 (17.45 percent) in 2018. The AKP also

⁹ AK Parti, "Türkiye Yüzyılı için Doğru Adımlar. 2023 Seçim Beyanamesi," 2023 <https://akparti.org.tr/media/clni5h4t/turkiyeyuzyil-iic%C4%B1-indogruadimlar2023secimbeyanamesi.pdf>

¹⁰ See F. Acar and G. Altunok, "The 'politics of intimate' at the intersection of neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism in contemporary Turkey," *Women's Studies International Forum* 41: 14–23; S. Dedeoğlu, "Gendering the Welfare State: Turkish Neoliberalism and the Politics of Female Employment," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 44, no. 5: 1061–78.

highlights the Women-Men Equal Opportunities Commission (KEFEK) established by the parliament. It further claims that the percentage of women mayors rose from 0.9 percent in 2009 to 3 percent in 2019, noting that the number of women in municipal councils also grew from 4.5 percent to 11.1 percent in the same period. While these figures indicate that women have made numerical gains, they are still significantly below global levels, often being more for show than representing any kind of real change. Women in the party are expected to adhere to its conservative belief system. These women are unlikely to break from patriarchy and rarely push for new policies. This specific and limited way of allowing women to take part in politics is in line with the AKP's moral laws, with women only being "seen" when they adhere to the rules about how they should act.

Despite the quantitative increase in women's representation in the AKP, the inclusion of women, the limits of their political participation and their positions within the party's power structure have remained restricted to the party's margins. These increases in the political participation of women do not reflect a pro-women and/or feminist shift but are rather part of a broader strategy of publicly limiting women's role to an "acceptable" form of womanhood. This approach also mirrors right-wing populist politics in Europe, where women's visibility is encouraged only to the extent that it supports pro-family values.¹¹ In this sense, the AKP's strategy resonates with a broader trend observed among European right-wing populist parties, which adopt selective gender policies that instrumentalise women's participation to legitimise authoritarian and exclusionary political agendas.

The AKP's focus on institutional mechanisms, such as the creation of KEFEK or the increase in the number of women in local government, gives the impression of progress but does not automatically lead to genuine improvements in gender equality. In reality, these mech-

anisms frequently lack the authority, independence or political resolve to contest the party's conservative gender hierarchy. Patronage networks also have a significant impact on local and national appointments, where loyalty is valued more than promoting women's agency and political participation. Instead of dismantling patriarchal power structures, these changes strengthen a gender system in which women are used to support the ideological goals of the party-state.

It is therefore impossible to fully understand the AKP's gender policy without considering the global rise of anti-feminist populism, where gender becomes a crucial arena for political contestation. In this context, right-wing actors portray LGBTI+ rights, feminism and gender equality as endangering social order, family values and national identity. The AKP is increasingly aligning with the discourse of this broader authoritarian populist script, demonstrated by its emphasis on "family-centred" development and its withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention.

The intentional blending of nationalist, religious and moral narratives characterises the AKP's gender discourse, which redefines women's rights within the framework of a patriarchal and heteronormative moral order. The semantic change from "gender equality" to "gender justice", a term that has been widely used in party discourse since 2010, has been one of the AKP's primary tactics. Under the pretence of fairness and balance, "gender justice", which is framed as a culturally suitable substitute for Western feminist agendas, aims to uphold traditional gender roles and has become a key component of the AKP's ideological reinterpretation of women's rights.

Rather than merely rhetorical, this change is ideological, supporting the claim that calling for equal rights and opportunities for men and women violates their "natural differences". In this framing, the idea of *fitrat*, or God-given nature, is crucial. The family, which is portrayed

¹¹ See E. Kováts and M. Pöim, eds., *Gender as symbolic glue: The position and role of conservative and far-right parties in the anti-gender mobilisations in Europe* (Foundation for European Progressive Studies and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015) <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/buda-pest/11382.pdf>

as the cornerstone of both national stability and spiritual continuity, is the main domain in which women are depicted as nurturers and moral guardians. In addition to limiting women to traditional roles, the AKP's emphasis on motherhood, sacrifice and household responsibilities also frames these roles as their innate and divine obligations.

According to this framework, initiatives such as family counselling centres, early marriage and childbirth incentives and flexible work schedules for women are marketed as ways of enabling women to balance work with their "natural" role in the family rather than as instruments of empowerment. This can be described as neoliberal populist patriarchy – a form of government that selectively gives women more power as long as they perform the expected gender roles, while undermining systems that are meant to promote gender equality.

In addition, the AKP recontextualises conservative ideas and uses progressive terminology. For example, although the party places a strong emphasis on "protecting women", it hardly ever discusses the need to challenge patriarchal norms or the structural causes of violence against women. Rather, violence is depoliticised and removed from the realm of gender justice by being framed as an aberration that threatens family unity or by being individualised.

A broader moralising discourse that stigmatises feminist movements and portrays calls for LGBTI+ rights, bodily autonomy or secular education as endangering moral and national values serves to further support this narrative technique. Presidential speeches and public campaigns often link Feminist demands to "Western decadence" or "foreign agendas". This creates a discursive environment where gender equality is questioned and feminists are depicted as morally reprehensible or disconnected from their country.

The AKP effectively shuts down other gender discourses by claiming to be the only legitimate protector of both morality and modernisation. Women are only visible in public life

– in politics, education and business – if they do not go defy the conservative rules set by the party. This controlled visibility is also evident in the party's gender representation: although the AKP has the highest number of female deputies in parliament, with 51 (18.75 percent) of its 272 MPs being women, they remain numerically and politically marginalised. In the 2023 cabinet, there is only one woman minister, Mahinur Özdemir Göktaş, who serves as Minister of Family and Social Services, while just five of the 68 deputy ministers are women. Although, overall, women's representation in the Turkish parliament has risen to a record 20.1 percent, and opposition parties such as the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Party) have relatively higher proportions, with 20.14 and 48.21 percent respectively, women in the AKP are largely confined to roles that align with the party's conservative gender framework. This controlled visibility serves as a form of symbolic inclusion that conceals the degradation of institutional mechanisms and legal safeguards previously established by international agreements such as the Istanbul Convention.

This controlled visibility can also be seen in how prominent women in the AKP operate within their limited political space. Even high-ranking individuals such as former Minister of Family and Social Services Derya Yanık and Deputy Chair of the AKP's parliamentary group Özlem Zengin faced severe backlash from within their own party when they defended Law No. 6284, which protects families and prevents violence against women. They continued to defend the law despite calls for changes from the AKP's coalition partner, the New Welfare Party (*Yeniden Refah Partisi*, YRP). Zengin openly expressed¹² that she felt "alone and exhausted" after receiving organised threats and verbal attacks just for opposing amendments to the law. Similarly, Yanık's claim that the law is a "red line" for women's rights received backlash from male party members who accused her of harming party unity. These reactions show how even women

12 Bianet, "AKP'li Özlem Zengin: Hedef haline getirildim," 2023, <https://bianet.org/haber/akp-li-ozlem-zengin-hedef-haline-getirildim-275903>

in high positions face difficulties within the AKP. They encounter the same structural and ideological obstacles that limit women's involvement across the party.

In short, the AKP's narrative and framing strategies do not mean that they are distancing themselves from gender politics; instead, they are trying to fundamentally change the way things are done. The party maintains a gender regime that is not only unequal but also increasingly hostile to feminists by carefully blending religious morality, nationalism and controlled modernisation.

The AKP's policies towards LGBTI+ people in Türkiye are in line with the party's overall conservative and family-centred beliefs, which do not allow for rights-based approaches to gender and sexual diversity. Instead of seeing LGBTI+ people as citizens who deserve protection and equality, the AKP's words and actions present them as a social threat that needs to be contained or eradicated.

The 2023 election manifesto does not mention the term LGBTI+ at all, which is likely to have been a deliberate omission. President and party leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, however, has frequently attacked LGBTI+ groups in his speeches. At a campaign rally in İzmir, he said: "The family structure of this nation is strong; there is no room for LGBT ideology in this nation.", portraying LGBTI+ identities as a threat to the "traditional" family and to society as a whole.

This kind of speech not only marginalises LGBTI+ people, but it also undermines the larger fight for gender equality. Türkiye's decision to leave the Istanbul Convention was based on the same logic, which framed LGBTI+ rights as a threat to national values and social cohesion. People often refer to more visibility for LGBTI+ people as "propaganda" or an effort to "promote homosexuality", which instils fear in people and encourages them to hide their queer identities.¹³

In addition, the Turkish government has

banned Pride marches and similar events in many cities, including Istanbul and Ankara, since 2015, claiming that they are a threat to public safety. In practice, these bans are used to silence the LGBTI+ community and make it illegal for them to gather in public places. LGBTI+ organisations and activists have experienced increasing repression, legal harassment and stigmatisation, which has further limited opportunities for civil society participation.¹⁴

In Türkiye, systemic discrimination against LGBTI+ people also affects their access to jobs, healthcare and education. There are no legal safeguards to protect their rights, nor is there any legislative protection against hate speech directed at them. Their lack of legal recognition exposes them to institutional neglect, violence and discrimination. In summary, rather than just ignoring them, the AKP has adopted an actively hostile stance towards LGBTI+ issues. The party legitimises discriminatory practices and incites public animosity by portraying queer existence as a threat to social order and national morality. Instead of guaranteeing protection and equality, the government has embraced a policy of repression, surveillance and erasure that targets not only LGBTI+ people but also the feminist and human rights movements that support them.

In addition to influencing state policy, the ruling AKP's anti-LGBTI+ and anti-gender equality stance also impacts the political tactics of Türkiye's opposition parties. Parties on the centre left or left of the political spectrum typically adopt more pro-equality frameworks in response to the AKP's regressive stance, especially when it comes to gender, and prioritise gender-related commitments in their campaigns. This stance is not consistent throughout the political spectrum, however.

¹³ BBC Türkçe, "Türkiye'de Seçim ve LGBTI+: Siyasette Kutuplaşma Nasıl Derinleşti?" 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cd1rylgypz2o>

¹⁴ Teyit, "2023 Seçimlerinin Çelişkili Tartışması: Millet İttifakı ve Teyit LGBTI+'lar," 5 May 2023, <https://teyit.org/dosya/2023-secimlerinin-cekisikli-tartismasi-millet-ittifaki-ve-lgbtilar>

Women and right-wing populist parties in Türkiye

Due to societal and structural barriers, women's political participation in Türkiye has long been restricted. Despite some progress in the representation of women in politics, gender inequality still prevails, particularly in positions of leadership. The AKP Women's Branch, known as *Kadın Kolları*, is one of its most active groups and is crucial in forming and maintaining the party's support at the grassroots level. President Erdoğan referred to the AKP Women's Branch, which was established in 2002, as "the locomotive of our party's organisation that has allowed us to reach every household in the country",¹⁵ highlighting its symbolic and functional significance in the party's mobilisation strategy. The AKP Women's Branch organises house visits as a form of grassroots mobilisation, with the aim of creating natural bonds with the citizens, particularly among the poorer segments of society. This is why Erdoğan has described them as the "locomotive" of the party's organisation. However, this central position when it comes to outreach does not mean that they play a crucial role in politics; on the contrary, their male counterparts act as gatekeepers, and party politics remain largely closed to women. Indeed, the women in *Kadın Kolları* sustain the party's traditional understanding of women's roles in society – as mothers and caregivers. Erdoğan's cult-like leader image among these women is rooted in the fact that the Women's Branch provides both the opportunity and a legitimate reason for them to leave their homes

and be involved in public life.¹⁶

In terms of party hierarchy, while a limited number of women hold visible leadership positions within the AKP, be that vice presidencies or parliamentary roles, their influence tends to remain confined to "soft" policy areas such as family, education and social services. The party's broader ideological stance, which prioritises women's roles as mothers and caregivers, is consistent with this trend. The AKP's internal dynamics also suggest a top-down approach to women's mobilisation, with decisions being made centrally and women frequently being used as a tool for electoral outreach, especially during campaigns in conservative or low-income areas.

Women's presence in right-wing populist parties, such as the AKP, does not equate to transformative power. Instead, their participation frequently serves to strengthen patriarchal discourses. Women are visible but have no agency; they campaign, organise and influence other women, but they hardly ever influence policy or oppose male-dominated party structures. Scholars¹⁷ attribute the AKP's wider appeal to a combination of clientelism, community belonging, ideological affinity and practical considerations. The AKP provides a sense of identity representation and moral alignment for a large number of conservative women. The popularity of the AKP among economically disadvantaged women is also influenced by its municipal outreach and social assistance programmes.

¹⁵ Daily Sabah, "Turkey's AK Party reshuffles cadres with eye on future," 23 February 2025, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/turkiyes-ak-party-reshuffles-cadres-with-eye-on-future/news>

¹⁶ D. Süslü and Halifeoğlu, "Quo Vadis: AKP'de Kadın Temsili ve Kadın Kolları [women's representation and the Women's Branch in the AKP]," *Akdeniz Kadın Çalışmaları ve Toplumsal Cinsiyet Dergisi* 6, no. 1: 232–62, <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/2578314>

¹⁷ G. Çavdar, "Why Women Support Conservative Parties: The Case of Turkey," *Political Science Quarterly* 137, no. 1, (spring 2022): 43–72, <https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.13279>

Surveys indicate that a sizable percentage of women, particularly in rural or conservative areas, still support the AKP despite the slow improvement in educational attainment and urbanisation. Younger urban women, in contrast, appear more likely to avoid the party. Recent election data shows that although the AKP continues to have a high percentage of women voters overall, young women's support for the party has been dwindling, especially in urban areas such as Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. This generational divide suggests that the gendered terrain of Turkish politics may change in the future¹⁸.

Women are much less prevalent in leadership or public-facing positions in parties such as the Free Cause Party (*Hüda-Par*) and the YRP. The ideologies of these parties are more anti-gender and firmly patriarchal. For example, *Hüda-Par* has consistently attacked LGBTI+ communities in its discourse and has actively lobbied against the Istanbul Convention. These parties may mobilise women at the grassroots level, but they do not portray them as independent political agents, instead maintaining strict gender segregation and male guardianship as essential components of their political identity.

Although women are clearly involved in Türkiye's right-wing populist parties, particularly through organised branches and community outreach, party ideologies and hierarchical structures limit their political agency. Rather than being driven by a pro-women or egalitarian agenda, their motivations for participating frequently combine material needs, social pressures and personal belief systems. However, the widening generational divide among women voters might create new opportunities for political changes in the near future.

Women's support for the AKP is frequently motivated more by survival and practical considerations than by ideological affinities. Many women, especially those from conservative or low-income backgrounds, turn to the AKP because the party has historically positioned itself as a source of continuity, social protection and material support during times of precarity,

rather than because they are politically passive or have been manipulated.

The strategic growth of the AKP Women's Branch, which has been crucial for voter outreach, grassroots organisation, and keeping in close contact with households, is largely responsible for the party's success in mobilising women. Rather than just serving as symbolic platforms, the AKP Women's Branch actively incorporates women into the party structure, frequently through networks of moral values, religious identity, and social support. Supporting or taking part in party activities is a means of gaining visibility, social capital or even making a living for many women, especially those who are economically or socially vulnerable.

Furthermore, women's support for the AKP can be interpreted as a manifestation of conservative gender norms that are affirmed and rewarded within the party structure. In line with the AKP's broader ideological stance, women are frequently mobilised around maternal identity, family-centric policies and community service. However, many women actively negotiate these roles to create spaces of resilience, solidarity and influence, meaning this alignment should not be seen as passive acceptance.

Such support is not without conflict, however. Visible rifts have resulted from growing discontent with the party's position on gender equality, its withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and rising institutional violence, particularly among younger, urban or better-educated women. These changes imply that women's support for the AKP is not uniform, and those who previously saw the party as a guarantee of stability may have changed their views due to changes in the political environment.

In conclusion, it is impossible to attribute women's propensity to support the AKP or take part in party-related activities to ideological conformity. In a patriarchal but materially responsive party structure, it is better understood as a complex interplay between political opportunity, strategic agency and socio-economic need.

¹⁸ Metropoll Araştırma, "Türkiye'de Seçmen Yapısı," 2025, <https://www.metropoll.com.tr/upload/content/files/1921-turkiye%E2%80%99de-seçmen-yapisi.pdf>

Opposition parties and the limits of progressive gender politics in 2023

During the 2023 elections, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the main opposition party the CHP, pledged to adopt a relatively progressive gender equality agenda. Kılıçdaroğlu¹⁹ promised to create a Ministry of Women and Family, guarantee gender-sensitive budgeting in public administration and have Türkiye rejoin the Istanbul Convention. In addition to promising legislative changes to advance gender equality in politics and the workplace, the party's platform placed a strong emphasis on the necessity of preventative and protective measures for women who are victims of violence.

The pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) was replaced by the Green Left Party (*Yeşil Sol Parti*, now the DEM Party), which in 2023, had one of the most extensive agendas for gender equality of any political party.²⁰ The DEM Party maintains a strong commitment to gender parity through structural mechanisms such as the co-chair system and equal representation across all decision-making bodies. Notably, it released a separate "women's election manifesto" that included policies such as promoting inclusive, anti-patriarchal educational practices, supporting women's economic autonomy and combating male violence. Nevertheless, the party's election platform lacked any clear LGBTI+ rights policy.

The radical left-leaning Workers' Party of

Türkiye (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi*, TİP) also incorporated pro-equality aspects into its election platform, emphasising²¹ women's political and economic engagement, the fight against patriarchal systems and the defence of women's and children's rights. Although it expresses support for equal rights and acknowledges LGBTI+ discrimination, its policy recommendations on the subject stayed broad rather going into specific detail.

On the other hand, during the 2023 elections, two Islamist and far-right parties, *Hüda-Par* and the YRP, emerged as key actors within Türkiye's growing far-right bloc. The YRP formally joined the AKP-led People's Alliance (*Cumhur İttifakı*) through a last-minute agreement submitted to the Supreme Election Board, while *Hüda-Par* candidates ran on the AKP's parliamentary lists after declaring their support for President Erdoğan.²²

The Kurdish-Islamist political party *Hüda-Par* has continuously advanced extreme gender ideologies. The party rejects gender equality in favour of a concept of "gender justice" that is rooted in religious and traditionalist ideals. *Hüda-Par* actively supported Türkiye's exit from the Istanbul Convention and has attacked LGBTI+ people in public discourse, claiming they threaten social order and family values. These opinions are supported by its election manifesto,

19 EŞİK, "Kılıçdaroğlu vs Erdoğan: Kadınlar İçin Seçim Vaatleri," 2023, <https://esitlikadaletkadin.org/kilicdaroglu-vs-erdogan-kadinlar-icin-secim-vaatleri/>

20 DEM Parti, "Kadın Seçim Bildirgesi," 2023, <https://www.demparti.org.tr/Images/UserFiles/Documents/Editor/Materyaller/2024-kadin-secim-bildirgesi-tr.pdf>

21 TİP, "Seçim Bildirisi: Halkın Kırmızı Çizgileri," 2023, <https://tip.org.tr/tip-secim-bildirisi-halkin-kirmizi-cizgileri/>

22 BBC Türkçe, "Yeniden Refah Partisi Cumhur İttifakı'na katıldı, HÜDA PAR adayları seçime AKP listelerinden girecek," 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cmjzylvk5vo>

which calls for the preservation of traditional gender roles and the “natural family”.²³

In a similar vein, the YRP propagates narratives that are anti-gender and anti-LGBTI+. The party describes LGBTI+ existence as abnormal and immoral, rejects the Istanbul Convention and calls gender equality a Western import. Using alarmist rhetoric, its manifesto frames LGBTI+ rights as an assault on religious and family values. By pushing the AKP into a more moderate-looking stance in contrast, the rhetoric of both parties served to further radicalise the conversation on gender and sexuality.²⁴

As a result, the 2023 elections revealed a very divided political environment in Türkiye, where opposition parties tended to oppose the AKP’s regressive gender policies regardless of their ideological underpinnings. On the other end of the spectrum, Islamist and ultra-conservative parties such as *Hüda-Par* and the YRP not only shaped the discourse in general but also contributed to the acceptance of hateful, anti-gender discourse in the political mainstream.

The AKP’s continued attacks on women’s rights have created a political environment in which demanding pro-women policies is perceived as an act of opposition to the government. This division pushes opposition parties to adopt a progressive approach. However, the backlash against women’s rights and the spread of anti-gender discourse also impact these progressive policies, ensuring they remain at a “moderate” level. Policies on LGBTI+ rights are the clearest indicator of this moderate line, or what can be described as a form of conservatism among the progressives. The hate spread by the government towards LGBTI+ people also silences the opposition. The far-right and Islamist parties also play an influential role in this shift. Although they are not powerful in terms of parliamentary representation, their extreme views on gender further obstruct democratic demands.

²³ Hüda-Par, “2023 Seçim Vizyon Belgesi,” 2023, <https://hudapar.org/yayin-detay/4660qva3tcdtj0vvbjr5ac2n5t-2023Se%C3%A7imVizyonBelgesi>

²⁴ Yeniden Refah Partisi, “2023 Genel Seçimleri Beyannamemiz,” 2023, <https://yenidenrefahpartisi.org.tr/page/2023-genel-secimleri-beyannamemiz/2501>

Reactions from (feminist) social movements and opposition parties: The case of the Istanbul Convention

Feminist groups in Türkiye have been keenly aware of the conservative, religious and increasingly anti-gender equality agenda of the AKP since the early 2000s. They have consistently condemned Erdoğan and the government for rejecting gender equality since the start of his rule, citing the ideological shift in the relationship between men and women from “equality” to “complementarity”. By protesting against laws, policies and discursive practices that uphold patriarchal norms, feminists have created and maintained a counter-narrative that contests the AKP’s gender ideology.

Being well aware of the political unease that feminists cause, Erdoğan has occasionally explicitly targeted the feminist movement in his speeches, trying to undermine its credibility and paint it as opposed to national interests or driven by foreigners. However, feminist resistance has mostly remained intact despite these discursive assaults. The feminist movement’s broad-based, intersectional organisational strategy, particularly among young women and LGBTI+ communities, has proven resilient to the divisive rhetoric that Erdoğan has successfully employed against other opposition actors.

The 2021 withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention is a prominent instance that exemplifies this tension. Widespread protests were organised in dozens of cities across Türkiye by feminist organisations, who swiftly denounced the decision as an attack on the right of women to live without violence. These demonstrations

were not isolated events; they were characterised by partnerships with wider civil society, persistent public visibility and innovative forms of resistance (including digital campaigns and symbolic protests).

Importantly, mainstream opposition parties such as the then HDP (now the DEM Party) and the CHP openly endorsed the Istanbul Convention and denounced the withdrawal, demonstrating that the feminist opposition was not alone. Both parties demanded that this unilateral presidential decision be overturned, condemned the decision and pledged to restore the Convention if they were elected. These positions reinforced feminist narratives in the political sphere and demonstrated broader public support for the Convention. On the other hand, as an authoritarian regime, the AKP avoids engaging with strong opposition on any issue; it follows its own agenda and remains indifferent to public demands. The campaign around the Istanbul Convention was a powerful example of how women’s rights can generate strong mobilisation in Türkiye, compelling political parties to position themselves in relation to feminist demands. However, these efforts failed to prevent the withdrawal, and even political parties that openly supported the Istanbul Convention and feminist causes stopped short of integrating these principles into their party agendas and political practices, revealing the limited visibility of women’s agency within these parties, too.

Conclusion

President Erdoğan has declared 2025 as the “Year of the Family”, and the AKP has prepared an action plan purportedly to empower families. Yet, this plan does not aim to strengthen families; rather, it represents a stance against gender equality and an open war on LGBTI+ people in Türkiye. Amid the ongoing economic crisis, austerity measures, inflation and a minimum wage that does not even cover the cost of living, families are indeed under pressure. But instead of seeking economic or social solutions, the AKP turns to a discourse that blames “deviant ideologies” for the breakdown of families. In this sense, “family” also functions as a symbolic glue – an ideological tool that unites conservative forces by scapegoating an abstract enemy and channelling hate towards LGBTI+ people. Although this discourse ostensibly aims to preserve traditional gender roles and places the burden of care work on women’s shoulders, it simultaneously pretends to be unrelated to women’s position in society.

The feminist movement in Türkiye has provided a template for persistent grassroots resistance to right-wing populism, which progressive parties have occasionally used. Some of the most important tactics have consisted of creating issue-based coalitions, particularly pertaining to violence against women, putting testimonies and lived experience front and centre to humanise policy debates, using frameworks for rights and international agreements as political leverage, preserving an independent, non-party feminist voice while interacting with political actors when required.

Erdoğan has directly targeted feminists in the past but has failed to discredit them, largely because their demands resonate as legitimate for most women in Türkiye. The unifying language of the feminist movement has been key to this resilience. However, the growing emphasis on “the family” and the urgency of taking measures to protect it function as discursive strategies to overshadow feminist demands. Feminists have consistently highlighted the connection between anti-gender policies and the strong family discourse, yet this binary has become a strategic tool used to shift the conversation. Opposition parties, in particular, have struggled to develop effective strategies to counter this narrative. To do so, they must translate these familialist policies into concrete social policy proposals that genuinely address inequality and improve living conditions in Türkiye.

Another reason why the AKP places such strong emphasis on the family is the changing demands of younger generations. According to a youth survey conducted by KONDA,²⁵ the average age of marriage among young people is rising, and more young respondents identify as “modern” rather than “conservative”. The percentage of those who believe that “a woman must obtain her husband’s permission to work” has dropped from 57 to 22 percent, while the proportion of young people who say, “I would fine with my child having a different sexual orientation”, has increased from 11 to 21 percent over the past decade.

The AKP, which has traditionally mobilised around low-income groups and social

²⁵ KONDA Araştırma, “Türkiye’de 100 Genç Olsaydı [Veri görselleştirme raporu],” 2025, <https://interaktif.konda.com.tr/rapor/turkiyede-100-genc-olsaydi/78>

needs while placing women at the centre of its grassroots organisation, now relies on the discourse of “protecting the family” to address the problems caused by the economic crisis. Yet, it remains unclear how effective this rhetoric will be. It may still resonate with women supporters of the AKP, reinforcing their loyalty to Erdoğan, at least symbolically, but the situation is likely to evolve differently among younger generations. Ultimately, the real distinction will depend on the opposition’s capacity to develop meaningful responses to the social devastation caused by neoliberal policies and to genuinely advance women’s agency and political participation in practice.

About the author

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The study series *Triumph der Frauen? Das weibliche Antlitz des Rechtspopulismus und -extremismus in ausgewählten Ländern* (Triumph of the Women? The female face of right-wing populism and extremism in selected countries) can be found online at:

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Triumph of the Women? 10

The study by author Selime Büyükgöze traces how the gender regime in Turkey is shifting under the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP): away from earlier promises of gender-equality reforms towards a religiously conservative order in which the ideal of the “family” is treated as the moral centre and political benchmark. In this framework, women’s policy is systematically presented as an agenda of protection and care, but it is often accompanied by the re-traditionalisation of gender roles and the rollback of women’s rights. Anti-gender and anti-LGBTIQ rhetoric function as a unifying frame that reinforces social polarisation and delegitimises criticism. It is also discussed how these policies are being received by opposition parties and alternatives they are developing. At the same time, the study shows that it is precisely where state narratives are becoming more restrictive, that feminist mobilisation, protest, and civil society networks remain a crucial counterforce—visible, contentious, and resilient.

Since 2018 the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung’s series “Triumph der Frauen?” has investigated how women have helped to shape the rise of right-wing movements, both as voters and actors. Country-specific case studies analyse what links them politically.

In focus here are the gender policy strategies of right-wing parties, their positioning in government or opposition, as well as anti-feminist ideologies, and the influence of female leaders.

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