

State-Led Antigender Politics, Islamism, and the University

Experiences of Gender Studies Scholars in Turkey



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ABSTRACT Gender studies and its professors are attacked and oppressed by patriarchal, masculinist, antifeminist, and anti-LGBTI discourses and institutional practices. This trend is not limited to white- and/or Christian-majority countries, as the literature has documented thus far. Antigender campaigns can easily infiltrate Middle Eastern and/or Muslim-majority contexts in which feminists and queers have long struggled to transform societies, cultures, and states. In Turkey a state-led antigender movement has been unfolding, with burdensome outcomes for women and sexual minorities as well as activists and faculty members. The most recent step taken in the state-led antigender turn was Turkey's withdrawal from the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention Action by a precipitous presidential decree. Drawing on thirty-three interviews with gender studies scholars, this article documents their ambivalent and perturbing connection with the state. The recent antigender atmosphere may make them feel downtrodden, silenced, and vulnerable in personal and professional domains, while it rejuvenates their resilience, renders their ongoing feminist/queer struggles meaningful and passionate, and cultivates an air of hope and optimism. To fight ostracism by public institutions and to attain their academic rights, the respondents use their empowering feelings, hope, and commitment against patriarchal and homophobic state forces.

KEYWORDS antigender politics, the state, Islamism, university, Turkey

How do gender studies scholars deal with the current antigender politics? This article seeks an answer to this question by examining the narratives of women's, gender, feminist, sexuality, queer, and LGBTI studies (hereafter gender studies) scholars. Although we focus on the recent Turkish case, antigender movements are

gaining ground virtually everywhere. Thus this article is part of an attempt to respond to increasingly global questions, such as whether it is possible not to be affected by the antigender campaigns when one works in gender studies at academic institutions or how meaningful and promising it can be to do gender studies while “gender ideology” is systematically demonized (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). The faculty members we talked to practice gender studies vis-à-vis hostile state discourses and institutions at the intersection of affective, social, institutional, and political fields at various costs. Their accounts shed light on the ways that conservative, Islamist, neoliberal, and authoritarian politics reproduce patriarchy and maintain hegemony across public and private spheres in an increasingly polarized and politicized society (Arat and Pamuk 2019; Çelik and Göker 2021; Özbay and Soybakis 2020).

In Turkey a state-led antigender campaign has been unfolding since the early 2010s with burdensome outcomes for women and sexual minorities as well as feminist/queer activists and faculty members. This backlash does not easily fit into the convoluted process of modernization and gender relations in the country after more than a century of collective movements, dedicated struggles, and the impact of inspirational pioneers (Bora 2018; Kandiyoti 1997; Sancar 2011; White 2003). The prevailing moment is radically different from both the 1920s’ and the 1930s’ reformist and modernist, family-centered “state feminism” (inspired by first-wave feminism) and the diversified grassroots feminisms of the 1990s (spurred by the third wave) (Diner and Toktaş 2010). Hence the feminist agency of gender studies scholars has been set apart from the modernist-Enlightenment early republican subjectivity as well as the dissident, postmodern identity that focused on differences, social movements, and activism, backed by globalization and transnationalism (Göker et al. 2018; Saygılıgil and Berber 2020).

Recent scholarship on Turkey includes an impressive number of studies on issues of gender inequality, gendered violence, feminist theory and grassroots movements, and LGBTI-queer cultures. Although there are significant and groundbreaking works among them, this dominant interest and orientation of analysis have obfuscated alternative probes regarding professional and academic practices in institutions of higher education and gender studies professors’ entanglements with the state and political structures. Feminist/queer faculty members have always had an ambivalent and perturbing connection with the state. The recent transformation of the state toward an unblinking misogynist entity (Sarioğlu 2022) and a homophobic one (Özbay 2022) has repositioned these scholars as agents of a new, existential form of resistance and struggle. Here we aim to show the contours of these professors’ fight for a sense of control in institutional settings and meaning in their lives as the grounds that have made them legitimate, significant, and convincing shift historically.

In this conundrum, gender studies scholars’ troubling relationship with the Turkish state is the organizing principle that would enable them to construct their

own *muhaliif* (opponent, dissident) subjectivity, which is articulated with the existing nonconformist public that emerged against the historically *makbul* (acceptable, respectable) citizenship (Üstel 2004) in the eyes of the statesmen. This political subjectivity presupposes a critical distance from the self-justifying nationalistic, racist, and statist narratives about the state and listening to these official reiterations with suspicion. It provides a crucial lens in their collective attempt to decipher how state authority is defined and exercised in a fashion that legitimizes and reproduces patriarchy, heterosexism, misogyny, and homophobia. The respondents' constitutive standpoint on what they deem as wrong with the state discourses and institutions (and the state's ruthless attacks on multiple fronts against the gains, purposes, and ideals of gender equality) informs the boundaries, commitments, and capacities of the field of gender studies and its practitioners' understanding of resistance in Turkey. The recent antigender atmosphere may make them feel downtrodden, silenced, and vulnerable in personal and professional domains, while it simultaneously rejuvenates resilience, renders their ongoing feminist/queer struggles meaningful and passionate, and cultivates an air of hope and optimism.

Below, we outline the debates about gender studies' overlapping difficulties in protecting its position in the higher education system and the most recent political campaign that targets "gender ideology" as well as the academic discipline, its ideals, and its members. Then we present the Turkish case. After the methodological explanation, the article proceeds with two sections on the resistance and hope of the academic staff we interviewed.

Transnational Situation: Gender Studies in Affliction

As a composite field of study and an interdisciplinary academic unit, gender studies has had multilayered issues regarding organizational matters, institutionalization, professionalization, and pedagogy since its inception (Drew and Canavan 2021; Eddy, Ward, and Thawaja 2017; Griffin 2005, 2006; Henderson 2019; Pereira 2015; Saraceno 2010). To make things more striking and complicated, the emergent logic of the neoliberal university threatens gender studies as it disrupts other programs in the social sciences and humanities. The marketization and financialization of higher education, the ascendant competition-based academic capitalism (i.e., publish or perish), the domination of human resources departments in universities' treatment of faculty members (i.e., performance-based evaluations), and principles of remuneration (i.e., the number of tangible outcomes per year) contribute to this deepening tribulation. In this perspective, gender studies does not stand out as a profitable, functional, or investment-worthy area with lucrative collaborations with STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields or with markets and industries based on empiricism, experimentation, technology development, and design, knowhow, and innovation (Connell 2013; Ergül and Coşar 2017; Hark 2016; La Paglia, Nash, and Grant 2021; Morley 2016; Slaughter and Rhoades 2009).

There have also been political challenges and attacks against gender studies from the Far Right, neoconservative, populist, and fundamentalist groups in many transnational contexts (Dahl and Kennedy-Macfoy 2020; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Martinsson 2020). These attacks and similar burgeoning hostile discursive movements focus on the very concept and “ideology of gender” as well as its articulations in the academic institutions that explore gender critically, the theorists and researchers who verbalize feminist/queer theory, the dissemination of knowledge, and the policies that aim to mainstream gender equality and sexual diversity (Graff and Korulczuk 2022; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). Such antigender campaigns are explored mostly in the Central and East European contexts through emergent cases in Hungary, Poland, and Russia (Dietze and Roth 2020; Edenborg 2021; Krizsán and Roggeband 2019), in addition to the rest of Europe and the Americas (Case 2019; Hennig 2018; Verloo 2018), while Middle Eastern and Muslim-majority countries are underrepresented in recent feminist/queer analyses of these mobilizations.

Gender studies as an academic institution seems troubled by the antigender and antifeminist campaigns. It is condemned and stigmatized as an improper, unscientific, nonacademic, useless, antistate, immoral, ineligible, or unprofitable enterprise by different authoritarian, neoliberal, patriarchal, and conservative hegemonic powers that are influential at universities and across societies around the world (Redden 2018). The vilified discipline appears challenged and unsettled, while its engaged public feels increasingly defensive and insecure. This unfolding situation has severe political, practical, and affective consequences for those who commit their lives and careers to the cause of gender equality, justice, and sexual democracy amid heightened animosity, uncertainty, and precariousness.

The Context: Gender Studies in Turkey

Turkey has had a strong feminist and women’s movement since the late 1980s (Sayılıgil and Berber 2020). This wave of grassroots organizations has called for the state to face up to ubiquitous masculine domination, paved the way for gender reform in political structures and language, and brought about a transformation in the legal codes toward a more gender-neutral and less sexist composition (Arat and Pamuk 2019; Diner and Toktaş 2010). Meanwhile, the LGBTI and queer associations began to emerge in the 1990s, striving to change public discourse and institutional practices toward a less homophobic, transphobic, and heterosexist tone (Özbay and Öktem 2021; Savcı 2021).

Even though there have been interactions between feminist/queer social movements and scholarly discussions, as many respondents of this study explained, it is difficult to argue that there has been impactful synchronicity and mutually rewarding connection between gender/sexual activism and the academic priorities and agendas of gender studies faculty. One reason for this lack of engagement and

congruity might be the universities' highly bureaucratic, traditionalist, and state-centric nature, which actively supports an apolitical reticence about social issues and conflicts — especially those in which the state participates. Some of the faculty members we talked to mentioned that the volunteers from feminist/queer social movements accuse them of being elitist, passive, and fearful. They also noted that some of them find these activists to have an anti-intellectual, impetuous, and exaggeratedly aggressive mood incompatible with the ideal qualities of a scholar.

In Turkey public and private universities have been heavily supervised by the National Council of Higher Education (YÖK) even though the constitution guarantees the autonomy of universities. Following the 1980 coup d'état, the military government established YÖK to control and depoliticize youth through higher education. Since 2016 President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has directly appointed university rectors without election or consultation with academic units. The increasingly authoritarian state institutions shape and govern university administrations and social and physical spaces within campuses through ideological, political, and often partisan interventions (Abbas and Zalta 2017; Gambetti and Gökarişel 2022; Vatanserver 2020).

As of January 2021, academic staff employed in universities at all ranks numbered 176,044; of these, 45 percent were women and 55 percent men (YÖK 2021). However, there is a direction of change toward more women being employed in academe than men because while there is one female full professor for every two male full professors, younger women have outnumbered younger men among the junior faculty. Despite this inclination toward gender equality in academic employment, currently only 4 percent of administrative positions at universities (deans, rectors, school managers) are held by women (Sevgi 2021). This small proportion of women in power at institutions of higher education denotes the existence of a glass ceiling for women in academe. There is much to do to push the university toward a more inclusive, just, and gender-equal future (Göker et al. 2018).

There have been significant developments in the institutionalization of feminism and gender studies in universities over the last three decades. There are ninety-seven women's and/or gender studies research centers at Turkish universities. Numerous undergraduate minor degrees and MA and PhD programs are also offered (Parmaksız 2019). However, as Deniz Kandiyoti (2010) notes, these high numbers can be illusionary, given that most of these centers and programs cautiously position themselves far from transformative feminist/queer politics. The conservative, neoliberal, and Islamist approaches to gender studies departments and faculty members have intensified alongside political and organizational interventions to impose a series of imagined "local and familial" (antifeminist and anti-gender) traditions and values in the last decade (Acar and Altunok 2013; Arat and Pamuk 2019; Cindoğlu and Unal 2016). The construction and circulation of these discourses mark a transition from a "modernist-republican" gender order to an

“Islamist-traditionalist” one (Özbay and Soybakis 2020) through reifying and consolidating heterosexism and patriarchy at the hand of the state.

The State-Led Antigender Campaign in Turkey

The shift from an aspirational secular, modern, democratic sociopolitical climate to an Islamist, ultranationalist, and authoritarian one with certain anti-Western sentiments can be traced to the gender and sexuality politics of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) governments (Acar and Altunok 2013; Arat and Pamuk 2019; Cindoglu and Unal 2016). Kandiyoti (2010: 173–74) underscores the “first moment” when the public in Turkey encountered Erdoğan’s disavowal of the idea of gender equality in a meeting with representatives from feminist and women’s associations:

On 18 July 2010, Erdogan held a meeting with women’s NGOs. . . . [There] the PM interjected: “I do not believe in the equality of men and women. I believe in equal opportunities. Men and women are different and complementary (*mütemmim*.)” Turkey’s signatory status to CEDAW notwithstanding, the PM had nodded in the direction of the Islamic concept of *jitrat* (*fitrat*) as his point of reference. The reactions of the participants were reported in the press as “utter shock,” “having the effect of a cold shower,” “total astonishment,” and “deep disappointment.” The real question to ask here is why exactly this comment, coming from a PM who had never made a secret of his conservative Islamic leanings, caused so much consternation.

Since this declaration at the most unexpected time and place, the state-led anti-gender campaign has continued to escalate — in parallel with “the incremental nature of the backsliding process” (Arat 2021: 912) in all democratic institutions — and manifests itself in numerous social situations. These include the violent reaction against the Gezi protests in 2013, the banning of women’s (feminist) demonstrations and celebrations of the March 8 International Women’s Day, the government’s diminishing dialogue with the feminist and women’s rights organizations, the not-so-implicit proscription of abortion, the expressed desire to raise a pious generation (Arat 2021; Arat and Pamuk 2019; Erkmén 2020; Koyuncu and Özman 2019; Lüküslü 2016; Özyegin 2015b), and the prohibition of the Istanbul LGBTI Pride Parade and other queer cultural activities (Özbay and Öktem 2021).

The most recent step taken in the state-led antigender turn was Turkey’s withdrawal from the Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention Action (against gendered and domestic violence) by a precipitous presidential decree. Feride Acar, an emeritus professor of political science and a former chairperson of the CEDAW Committee, says that the marginal Islamist circles and sects demanded the state pull out of the convention because they claimed and seemingly were successful in persuading the president that the convention harmed the cohesion of the Turkish family and legitimized the public presence of LGBT groups:

I cannot believe the point that we have arrived at. Can a state that respects human rights discriminate against people because of their sexual orientation, let alone permit violent attacks on them? . . . According to our law, having a different sexual orientation is not a crime. Why is it deemed unacceptable to safeguard people with different sexual orientations or to say that the state must protect these people's rights? (*Independent Türkiye* 2021)

Acar's words confirm that the affective state of puzzlement and disappointment persists — perhaps even in an intensified state — more than a decade after Erdoğan's rejection of gender equality, as Kandiyoti recounts above.¹ Feminist/queer gender studies professors have conducted research, taught classes, and striven to transform society within this political climate of hostility and instability with their limited emotional, social, and economic resources.

Method and Participants

Data for this article come from a collective qualitative research project that aims to explore the experiences of academic staff who have expertise in gender studies and work in higher-education institutions. The research team consisted of a professor and six graduate students. We conducted twenty-five interviews via Zoom in November and December 2020; then Cenk Özbay conducted eight in-person interviews in June and July 2021. We combined the techniques of “snowball” sampling (to reach out to participants) and “maximum-variation” sampling (to vary respondents). We took the existing differences within gender studies faculty, such as gender, age, experience and rank, race and ethnicity, and location, into account to have an intersectional lens that highlights specificity and commonality across experiences. All interviews are semistructured, Zoom- or tape-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. We changed all the names to protect the respondents' anonymity.

The interviewees ($n=33$) are all gender studies scholars with PhDs. Five individuals declined to participate because they did not think they were “entirely” or “truly” committed to gender studies, although some of their work could be considered to align with this field. Despite a positive approach, we could not meet with three other people in person or online due to scheduling problems.

Twenty-six respondents identify as women, six as men, and one as nonbinary. Twelve are full professors, seven are associate professors, and twelve are assistant professors, while two work as instructors. Among them, five listed masculinity studies and four listed queer studies as their primary specialization within gender studies, and twenty-three of them told us that they were mostly engaged with women's and feminist studies — although, in each group, a few individuals said all of the subfields had similar levels of importance to them. Six participants work in provincial or small cities in Turkey, while the rest are employed in Istanbul and Ankara, and three were working in the United States during the time of the

interview. One interviewee is teaching part-time, and six are retired—including three professors who were forced to retire because they signed a peace petition.

In 2016, more than a thousand academics signed a petition for peace titled “We will not be a party to this crime” regarding the human rights violations of Kurdish citizens in Turkey. Erdoğan called the signatories “terrorists,” and YÖK and public prosecutors started legal and administrative investigations (Abbas and Zalta 2017; Biner 2019; Vatansever 2020). Hundreds of academics were forced to resign or retire; the rest were dismissed from universities and migrated to other countries to work as part of a transnational solidarity network (Korkman 2022; Özdemir, Mutluer, and Özyürek 2019). However, the Constitutional Court of Turkey in 2019 ruled that signing the petition was part of exercising free speech, a legal right in Turkey. Local courts started to acquit the signatory academics. The case of Academics for Peace destroyed the existing academic autonomy, culture, and traditions (as imperfect as they were). It once again demonstrated the state’s inimical power over dissident scholars and critical scholarship in Turkey by rendering the positions of the remaining faculty members more vulnerable, precarious, and insecure, as our respondents articulate below.

The next section documents the plight of gender studies faculty vis-à-vis the state institutions in three interconnected sections. The last section before the conclusion explores their resilience and resistance against oppression.

The Patriarchal State Merges with Islamist Conservatism

All the faculty members participating in this study mention their troubling encounters with entrenched patriarchy in different institutional settings. They explain their growing concern with the approach that the oppressive political regime in the country has taken against gender equality and sexual rights. Most underline the increasing level of conservative thinking, discourses, and social actions that have become hegemonic in the last decade. Fatma, for example, describes the status of gender studies as a “minefield” and says that an overarching antigender culture, which silences all alternative voices, is traceable through the platforms of knowledge- and discourse-production, including the media and online forums. Berk agrees, saying: “Universities suffer from an intense form of conservatism, and the radical questions that gender studies would ask will please no one in this context.”

Sabite expounds on the evolving state patriarchy and its relation to the emergent Islamist-conservative framework:

The state was always patriarchal, even when suffrage was granted to women during the state feminism of the 1930s. Despite its wishes, this Islamist government cannot erase women from the public sphere. So, instead of acting like women don’t exist as full citizens, they have adopted this version of conservative patriarchy which claims that women and men aren’t equal, by God’s creation, and thus they should be treated differently, and women should take care of children and families.

Although a collectively imagined “deeply patriarchal” Middle Eastern culture (Joseph and Slyomovics 2000; Kandiyoti 1996; Özyegin 2015a) was occasionally referred to during the interviews, a comparison with the recent authoritarian conservatism of Poland and Hungary (Graff and Korulczuk 2022) surfaced more frequently. Serap expands this trend to the Trump and Bolsonaro administrations: “We used to connect [the problem of] gender inequality with the late-modernizing countries, but now conservatism is on the rise everywhere in the world. You can see [it in] Hungary, Brazil, or the United States. Unfortunately, we live in this era. Feminism and the women’s movement were bolder and freer when we were younger. Now [they are] oppressed and threatened.” Like Serap, most of our interlocutors told us they feel oppressed, threatened, and suffocated. The ultraright political dynamics, the actions of state organs, and the speech acts by the Islamist politicians complement this affect of subjugation and insecurity.

Participants who identify themselves with the leftist, socialist, peripheral, and/or critical political traditions put the notion of the state, with its oppressive and masculinist capacities, at the center of their analyses. They agree with the opinion that political Islam undermines the ideals of gender equality and sexual democracy. Still, they believe that we need to look at the not-so-hidden mechanisms of the state in Turkey to understand the emergent antigender movements. Sevim says: “You’re always fragile in front of the state. A huge power waits there to threaten you. People would think, ‘Oh, I will have trouble again.’” This kind of perturbation and anxiety, Sevim and others believe, makes the feminists and other critical agents of gender studies potentially and inevitably political (in a *muhaliif* way of being) even when they strive to remain neutral. Sevim refers to the aphorism “Gender is political” and continues: “But in contexts like Turkey, it is political in terms of opposition to the state policies and most of the political parties. It is not only a professional or a technical issue.” This line of thinking puts the focus on the state and deemphasizes the activities and plans of the current Islamist government. In this picture, political Islam is yet another factor exacerbating the situation, not the sole actor. Murat maintains that “we have been living under this Islamist regime, and it has made everything worse. However, it would be too quick and easy to think that everything would be nicer if a secularist government would rule the country.” Mediha reformulates the struggle’s target: “To blame political Islam would be extreme. I would say a neoliberal, conservative gender and family policy defines the field [current gender inequality] and governs the demographic trends.” Safiye thinks similarly and claims that the Islamist practices have even triggered a form of countermovement in society: “People became more responsive to gender issues because of the AKP government’s attack on gender equality. The public doesn’t necessarily appreciate what we do. If there were a more moderate government, they wouldn’t probably care.” In this sense, the Islamist blitz against the “ideology of gender” pushes the majority, which has been undecided, uncaring, silent about gender and sexual politics, to adopt an antigovernment, and hence progender and egalitarian, attitude.

On the other hand, participants who speak from a more liberal and/or central-left political persuasion explicitly underscore the role of Islamism in the contemporary state-led antigender campaign. Berk, for example, elucidates that the biggest hardship they experience is “the interpenetration of the state and religion. The state speaks in the name of religion, and vice versa, and they are united against gender equality.” Hamiyet notes that they are troubled with the “Islamist stance of the government and nothing else. How does this Islamist structure perceive feminists and gender equality? As if we [feminists and queers] were going to destroy the family.” She thinks the emergent homophobic standpoint of the state in Turkey is also related to political Islam. Uras connects this point to the painstaking censorship and prohibition of course and thesis titles containing terms such as *sexuality*, *LGBT*, *sexual orientation*, and *homosexuality*. He says scholars, even feminist ones, were afraid of being targeted by the state, YÖK, the university, and their departments for stepping into these “dangerous” fields. According to Hamiyet and Uras, the state would not suddenly become a feminist or queer organization if political Islam were erased. However, the latest antigender and antifeminist (and homophobic) constellation owes its existence first and foremost to the Islamists. Serpil also views political Islam as solely responsible for the current predicament, and she notes the “compulsorily dissident” (*muhallif*) position of gender studies scholars: “For me, it is impossible to analyze gender without being dissident. In such a tense and violent context, if you work on human rights, women’s rights, or LGBT rights, you must be oppositional. And then there is no funding or support for you. It’s the dark side of the academy in Turkey.” However, this is not an entirely new situation, and the seasoned gender studies faculty members in Turkey have thrived in difficult and compelling circumstances.

Struggle as a Gender Studies Tradition

The academics in our sample delineate personal stories of how they come across sexism, misogyny, patriarchy, heterosexism, and homophobia in different social situations. They also share encounters that have been told to them by scholars of previous generations. Taken together, these accounts constitute an oral tradition and active social memory through which the respondents position themselves vis-à-vis state patriarchy and homophobia. The stories also demonstrate how our interlocutors embody and exemplify gender/sexual justice and freedom in everyday contexts. The feminist/queer scholars reshape their selves and the contours of the collective struggle against the patriarchal state within a historical continuum that spans the last forty years — with Islamism as the dominant factor in the second half of this period.

This memory was told to Berk by one of his former professors, recalling how feminism upset state officials even before the inception of feminism as a major social movement in Turkey:

It was probably the first meeting to discuss women's problems, maybe in 1978, in Ankara. Many men, state-employed, high-level bureaucrat listeners, came to hear what the speakers, all women, were to say. At one point, my late professor pronounced the word *feminist* without much consideration, like "I am a feminist woman" or "These are feminist questions." This triggered a shockwave among the audience. The organizer, a very famous professor of political science, who is still alive, whispered to my professor that they should not have gone so far as to use the word *feminist*.

Like the memories narrated to recall the past turn of events, gender studies professors discuss their experiences with one another and add a comparative dimension to their historical struggle. Sevim shows that Berk's late professor's line of thinking and feeling is still prevalent among state bureaucrats today: "Gender scholars from Ankara are more pessimistic and panicked than the rest of us, saying that we could not even pronounce the word *gender* anymore. I don't mean they're exaggerating. It's just when you live in the capital city and constantly communicate with state bureaucrats, you start to be enmeshed in that patriarchal logic and language which is self-assuredly very antifeminist and antigender."

Despite academe's creation of a relatively protected and respected social space in the countryside and smaller cities, everybody in our sample agreed that it would be a harsher experience to teach gender studies outside the metropolis (Roberts and Connell 2016). Decentering gender studies in Turkey seems like a consequential project for the scholars we talked to, who express their belief and commitment to destabilizing patriarchy and homophobia outside major urban centers. Hamiyet maintains that the conservative antigender movement is felt more strongly in provincial towns, where the ideological orientations of the state are communicated and exercised more directly than in big cities: "University administrations in the smaller cities refrain from appointing women to open positions: no female provost or dean. They always talk about religion and tradition, and they even nominate men to secretarial positions, which are culturally stigmatized as a women's job."

University Administrations versus Gender Studies

There are many subtle ways to diminish or belittle the work of feminist women. This can be seen in the ways university administrations have treated gender equality as an ineffective, unimportant cause (Griffin 2005). Samime recollects her feelings as a feminist woman when she was dean and served as a member of the university's executive board: "You are the black sheep in these administrative platforms. They make you understand that you are allowed to be there because they graciously let you in. You're represented as a child as if you weren't capable and tolerated by these grown men. It gets difficult to be there when your equals deem you worthless. You are cornered by the power hierarchy." Seyyal underlines the way the men with administrative power underplay gender studies institutions and professors in similar ways to Samime's experiences:

We founded a center for gender studies. We were doing important activities, like inviting respected people to workshops. We did not have any money, and the university did not contribute at all. People attended the events, and we couldn't even offer them tea. Really shameful. So, we went to the rector's wife for help. The rector never forgot this. Whenever he saw me, he pointed the finger at me and said cheerfully, "You're doing stuff behind my back." He was making it look cute. As if it was a delightful dispute, or a joke, hiding how despicable it was that we were without resources and how mistreated we were.

Academic freedom is in great jeopardy in Turkey (Kandiyoti and Emanet 2017). Guzide draws a line for similarities between Turkey and other contexts as well as the peculiarity of their experience: "We have the same process as many other countries with rising conservative authoritarianism. . . . And then the term *gender* has become taboo. Maybe this isn't unique to Turkey, but we seemingly have a greater impediment because academic freedom is also at risk here." The intergenerational longevity of the fights for gender equality, the overburdening presence of patriarchal and homophobic social dynamics in provincial towns, and powerful men's conscious (hetero)sexist performances against gender studies faculty members and institutions draw a gloomy picture and lay the groundwork for an affective state of precariousness, self-vigilance, and languidness despite our respondents' unending self-motivation and passionate commitment.

The Downtrodden Mavericks

One of the fired "peace academicians," Serap elaborates on her activities as a feminist scholar and her dismissal from the university by a presidential decree during the state of emergency in 2017:

I was fired for allegedly "politicizing the university." The peace declaration was just the official reason. Before that, I was the director of the women's issues research center. We were doing "marginal" activities: Supporting the LGBTI Pride Parade, starting the parade from the campus, collaborating with Kaos GL [a queer NGO], inviting politicians from the HDP [the pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party]. Fundamentalist newspapers referred to us as "pervert terrorists." We used to receive warnings from the rector's office or somewhere even higher. So, we got sacked not only for being entangled with politics but for engaging with a [subaltern] politics of rights, disseminating gender studies, and doing activism.

Samime thinks in parallel with Serap on how the state deems gender studies scholars an eccentric threat and handles them accordingly. She says: "I have retired at a relatively young age for a scholar. This doesn't happen for no reason. Because the university became a place where it was really hard to stay." She adds that, although

universities and progressive scholars had turbulent times in the past, this last wave of dismissal was the hardest: “At the institution where I used to work, the number of the dismissed scholars was equal to those who were able to stay. In such a world, you cannot interfere with academic life.” Her and Serap’s words signify the structural and institutional upper hand of the state when in conflict with gender studies academic staff.

Emel is among those who kept their academic positions, but she also feels uneasy and paralyzed in a different way:

I still do have a job, but I am terrified when I think about when they would fire us. I did not make any move, anxiously waiting for bad news for the last two years. They could have started investigating me or suspended my contract. I have never felt secure. Students make recordings during lectures and complain about professors to the state. They can do this to me as well. I am always worried that what happened to others can happen to me.

The nuisance of recordings taken illegally during lectures and then leaked to pro-government newspapers and websites with the purpose of instigating a witch hunt is a very serious, pressing issue for gender studies scholars, given that some professors got fired because of these recordings in the past. Bulent talks about the pedagogical consequences of this fear: “I used to teach a class on sexualities, and I used to show movies as a part of that class. At one point, I thought what if somebody recorded these and informed on me for showing pornography during the class? This happened to others before. So, I gave up on the class; I no longer teach it.” The sense of self-vigilance for the reality of being recorded has intensified during officially recorded online lectures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Füsün says when she was about to criticize the state, she would pause for a moment and underscore “how patriotic I was, and I exaggeratedly loved the president. Of course, the students laugh at me, but it is just a way to remind myself as well as them that we were recorded.” Similarly, Leyla mentions that she was going to talk about Erdoğan’s use of *jiträt* (*fitrat*) to elucidate how he disavows gender equality during a class. Then she remembered that she was recording the class, which became an official requirement during the pandemic. “I noticed that I hadn’t pushed the button to start recording. After I made my point about the president and gender, I started recording.” The moment Leyla experienced during the class demonstrates how self-vigilance and cautiousness interpenetrate with an implicit self-censorship and limit academic freedom in Turkey.

Deniz works in a liberal, progressive academic atmosphere at a private university, and she has not been confronted personally with the risk of being dismissed. However, she says she experiences the consternation and self-censorship that engenders vigilance and a desire to play it safe:

We organized a workshop titled “imagining inclusive sports.” We aimed to talk about women and queer athletes but could not explicitly say so. We tried to formulate a better title or to name it just “queer sports,” but we couldn’t. Why? Because it will be a public event and tomorrow you would see an Islamist, progovernment newspaper reporting on us, saying that sports were perverted at this university. They would aim at us, speculate about us.

Hamiyet, however, works at a university in a provincial town in which unrestrained patriarchal and sexist tendencies are conveyed:

Let’s say a municipality invites me to give a public talk on gender. Later, they disinvite me, saying that something went wrong and they needed to reschedule. Because after inviting me, somebody warned them, or they dug out how oppositional a figure I was. If I ever go somewhere, I always find out that the other speakers are from AKP or connected to the presidency. They balance my presence with politically engaged progovernment people. When I tell them, “Women and men are equal,” they would immediately oppose and say in panic, “No, the family is sacred.”

The most recent antigender discourses are not isolated incidents peculiar to state patriarchy, homophobia, or the manifestations of political Islam. One of the examples Safiye recounted reminds us that capitalism and patriarchy work together to subordinate women, although the capitalist professional classes act as if they are the backbone of modernity and civil society in Turkey. Safiye attended a public event titled “Towards Gender Equality,” organized by a major business association. During her talk, she mentioned a boss who arranges a meeting at 7:00 a.m. or 9:00 p.m. for their workers. Safiye maintained that such a boss did not consider the familial responsibilities of their female workers simply because day-care facilities do not work at these hours. She concluded that women were not promoted, not because they were not ambitious or hardworking, but instead because of implicit patriarchal and sexist practices. Later she encountered an unexpected response: “The chairperson, also the president of the organization, looked at me coldly and said nothing. Then, he called a coffee break. I was surprised, expecting he would comment and say something like you’re right. Nothing. Later, his workers told me he always calls for meetings at 7 a.m. So, even when you don’t exactly know, you know men’s position and how patriarchy works.” Safiye’s experience with the president of the leading business association (“the bosses’ club”), portrayed as one of the main supporters of modernization, democratization, and globalization in the country, is not unique. Hence it represents a strong current of gender inequality and sexism prevalent among the capitalist classes, in addition to the high-level state bureaucrats and Islamist politicians (Buğra and Savaşkan 2014). Even though they

frequently feel suffocated and circumscribed under these conditions, our interlocutors show no sign of giving up on their continuous struggle against patriarchy, heterosexism, and gender inequality.

Resilience, Hope, and Resistance

The scholars we talked to maintain their passionate resistance against oppressive structures, such as the state and the neoliberalizing university, as well as an optimism for and devotion to feminist movements and queer politics and faith in the younger generations despite the current disheartening and imperiling circumstances. Almost all of them think that the outcomes of the authoritarian tendencies of the state and the conservative social forces that became hegemonic in the last decade are twofold. The first outcome relates to the anger, exhaustion, worthlessness, strife, and inertia they feel, especially when they ask themselves reflexively what they have been working for. This affect of ennui is stronger among the more experienced scholars, as some of them mention their desire to quit immediately or retire earlier than they might have. The second aspect relates to the persuasion that oppression brings resistance, causes mobilization and politicization, bolsters grassroots movements, and triggers a bolder and richer front of action in academe and other sociocultural spheres. Inspired by Michel Foucault's famous words "Where there is power, there is resistance," the scholars imagine that the difficulties we address above are somehow a required part of the historical process that cisgender heterosexual women and queer groups must pass through and learn to navigate for a brighter future that they all seem to imagine.

After emphasizing that the "real" struggle of feminist/queer politics must be against the "deeper" mentality and not the current oppressive structures, Leyla says she is hopeful for the future of gender studies: "Although we have lost many friends, it will flourish again, like a tree which is pruned." Fatma is in the same spirit as she underlines the power of the "creativity of the opposition" that engenders new mediums (including social media campaigns and feminist blogs) to render gender equality more visible and mainstream. Sevim shares similar views, reiterating that the government's disavowal of the ontological legitimacy of gender equality generates a countermovement through which people come to comprehend that they need to embrace gender equality to distinguish themselves from the toxic effects of political Islam. She gives an example:

The provincial president of the CHP [the central-left main opposition, Republican People's Party] in Diyarbakir is a woman. People within the party cadres criticized this, saying having a woman leader wasn't suitable for their culture. The president told the press it was a "sexist attack." Watch the terminology. It also reads as "If you're against AKP, which is sexist, you aren't supposed to be so." CHP has found itself in a situation



where it had to embrace LGBT people as well. So, as the government makes itself proudly sexist and homophobic, the opposition must transform itself to be more tolerant and open. This gives a tactical departure point for future gender and sexual politics.

In the academic context, having a low profile and “going underground” are common strategies among gender scholars as they walk through the transitional period that will end with unseating the Islamist government.² At least they hope so, in a shared sanguineness. Serap states that scholars were exhorted to not offer gender studies courses (and classes on sexuality, as Bulent mentions) and not approve graduate theses about sexuality. The administrations think these actions would be risky and harmful to their universities, yet she argues: “I think our friends keep working and doing research without making it explicit. They will operate underground, without support, until their reputation is restored and redeemed.” Muzeyyen thinks similarly: “Right now, I am evading a spotlight on my research. Eventually, things will be more suitable for us; we’ll see a more tolerant and permitting period. Then, people like me will be redeemed.” The shared optimism and belief that everything will be better in the future stem from a reliance on the next generation’s noticeable openness to gender equality and sexual diversity as the youth express themselves in more egalitarian and less (hetero)sexist ways. Another factor that reinforces the professors’ hopefulness is the general direction of the world, moving toward gender and sexual modernity on a global scale despite certain local obstacles and distractions.

Many respondents informed us about the ways in which the European Union’s policy change toward necessitating a gender dimension in funded research projects has influenced universities to take this issue more seriously (Griffin 2006). Serpil gives an example: “My university is a member of the United Nations’ Network of Universities, which has certain criteria for gender equality. So, there is a motivation for them to hire people who have expertise in gender. It justifies our presence.” Semra thinks similarly:

Our universities are most scared of being ridiculed in the international arena. Today, they count how many men and women they employ because if your institution is full of male professors, you look like a remnant from the Middle Ages. Even ours would not want that. Tomorrow, they will have to report something on LGBT issues. Only when they understand that they can be ashamed in front of Westerners do they feel the need to reform themselves. It is good that the world is a smaller place now.

Mujde’s elaboration, “We are stuck between the anti-gender climate and the funding centers’ generosity to back us,” is especially telling in this impasse. Professors conduct research on gender/sexuality and get funding in a clandestine manner, especially from transnational organizations. University administrators want them to be present, productive, and representable under certain conditions (Drew and Canavan 2021) and then to avoid attention and publicity, which would lead to

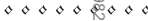
Islamist attacks from state institutions or the press, recalling Deniz's words above. In the same manner, gender studies professors are explicitly discouraged from challenging and contesting university policies and governmental practices. Still, as long as they are able, they adopt a resilient and flexible attitude to sustain their academic endeavors, and they wait for the right moment to surface again, as Muzeyyen implies.

When we look closer at the field of gender studies and its representations in cultural and political domains (Eddy, Ward, and Thawaja 2017), we can observe the depth of the conflict between, on the one hand, the top-down state-led antigender attacks alongside religious dogmas and ideological maxims, and, on the other, the feminist/queer grassroots movements, knowledge production and scholarship, and the funding support from regional and global structures. People from our sample try to respond to and satisfy both directions, strategize their approach, negotiate the contradicting demands to preserve their earned positions, invest in themselves, and expand their influence when possible. Resilience, hope, determination, and passion unite and jointly work in our respondents' lifeworld and empower them in their attempts to make the university a gender-equal place and actively contribute to the production and circulation of knowledge on gender and sexuality.

Conclusion

Today it seems increasingly difficult to think about advancing democracy and laying the foundations of inclusive politics without taking gender and sexuality into account. Simultaneously, political Islam, ultraright politics, and antigender movements turn their eyes to these arenas, vilify the concepts of gender and LGBTI movements and actors, and fight against the gains of the last century. These are not easy to ridicule or ignore. Their strengthening imperils not only gender equality and sexual diversity but also the legitimacy of gender studies as an academic institution and its practitioners. Hence it is a feminist/queer responsibility and requirement to understand the ways these use coercion over gender studies and document scholars' experiences, emotional dynamics, and strategies to cope with transnational demonization and repudiation.

This article demonstrates some of the ways the state-led antigender turn in Turkey consolidates and justifies the authoritarian, conservative, and Islamist political swing. It has been harmful and exasperating for gender studies scholars, forcing them to navigate social, economic, political, and affective domains with a sense of insecurity, precarization, and self-vigilance. Given the antigender movement and the most recent attack on LGBTI communities in the form of state homophobia (Özbay 2022) and hate discourses during the "profamily" public meetings against the possibility of same-sex marriage in Turkey, we may need different mechanisms and spaces of knowledge production, alternative feminist/queer visions, and critical thinking that not only question and challenge but also destabilize and threaten the ultraright, state-led antigender and anti-LGBTI mobilizations (Martinsson 2020). Sharing



stories of, experiences with, and transformative imaginings of oppressive political structures and forceful antigender campaigns is indispensable for feminist/queer scholars. In the Turkish case, the organizing principle in scholars' attempts to control their lives and construct meaningful, self-possessed *muhaliif* (opponent) feminist/queer subjectivities is positioning themselves carefully vis-à-vis the state. This anchor also affords the faculty members we talked with a zealous commitment to resistance and fighting patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia, as well as a desire to uphold the historical movement for gender equality.

Gender studies scholars are attacked and oppressed by the patriarchal, masculinist, antifeminist, and anti-LGBTI discourses and institutional practices around the world. The narratives we present here demonstrate that this transnational trend is not limited to white and/or Christian-majority countries, as the literature has documented thus far. The Turkish case proves that antigender campaigns can easily infiltrate Middle Eastern and/or Muslim-majority contexts in which feminists and queers have long struggled to transform societies, cultures, and states. It is an ongoing, incomplete transformation that demands collective and individual efforts, participation, and buoyancy. Hence our respondents feel empowered, worthy, and hopeful through their commitment to the *muhaliif* positionality against patriarchal and homophobic state organs. The ideals of gender equality and sexual democracy, the significant place they give to feminist/queer social movements and grassroots activism, their optimism for the youth's unbinding approaches to gender and sexuality, and transnational support cultivate our respondents' aspirational hope and make them ardent strugglers, despite obstacles presented in the social, economic, political, and emotional arenas.

As some of our interlocutors suggested, eliminating the authoritarian Islamist government may not be enough to solve all the problems that gender studies and its professors experience. Patriarchal, misogynist, and homophobic state logic and practices will still prevail alongside the neoliberal precepts that govern the higher education system, even when there is a government led by a secular political party. Their understanding of resistance and hope should not close our eyes to the reality that "millions of people in Europe and beyond have been mobilized against 'gender ideology' and in support of what they call 'family values'" (Graff and Korulczuk 2022: 3), and "sacred familialism" in Turkey (Akkan 2018). Therefore we need to be concerned with the next set of questions, which focuses on the responsibility, capacity, and role of gender studies scholars in the collaborative attempt to mainstream gender equality and sexual diversity in a post-Islamist sociopolitical order, which might still be statist, racist, nationalist, and neoliberal. In this sense, social change in and the emergent cultural politics of trans identity and genderfluidity, cishnormativity and heteronormativity, intersectionality and intersectional activism, homonormativity, and queer families need to be incorporated into gender studies' public influence and self-reflexive accounts of its scholars.

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Notes

1. One anonymous reviewer has reminded us that Acar's words might have a performative quality to publicly express her views and demonstrate her (and other feminists') political as well as emotional frustration with the circles against the Istanbul Convention. We also agree with this performative aspect and thank the reviewer.
2. For a similar case concerning political scientists who strive to do political science without talking about politics, see Ersoy and Karakoç 2021.

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