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Negotiated Conformism: Gender Norms, Everyday Politics and Pro-government Actors in Turkey

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ABSTRACT
Despite ideological alignment, right-wing populist constituencies and civic groups may openly resist and renegotiate the anti-gender and anti-feminist stances of populist parties through a process we call *negotiated conformism*. To analyse this phenomenon, we draw on two qualitative datasets from Turkey: one focusing on ordinary citizens who ideologically support and vote for the populist-conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP); the other on conservative and openly pro-AKP civil society organisations. Negotiated conformism brings three facts to light that contradict current literature on right-wing populism: 1) civil society actors and the constituency might demonstrate agency and independence from their parties with regard to gender equality; 2) populist parties fail to consolidate complete control over the civic space; and 3) multiple pathways exist to forge agency and subjectivity within populist gender orders and hierarchies. These findings highlight that populist constituencies are not homogenous and simply submissive actors, echoing only what the leaders of populist-conservative movements preach. The populist-authoritarian desire to polarise society into two clearly defined camps based on a conservative gender order does not always resonate with supporters. Our conclusion calls for the disaggregation and decentring of the 'demand side' of populism ~~and extending it to concrete~~ practitioners and networks.

KEYWORDS
Populism; conservatism; gender; LGBTQ*; civil society; agency

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> I may look like a sinner, but maybe, I have stronger faith in myself than all others, or I am a better person. A heterosexual person murdering, stealing, cheating, robbing … They say, "your [homosexual] prayers or fasting will not be accepted [by God]". God created us this way. All of us are tested. Some have a disability, some have wealth, and some have poverty … And we are being tested by homosexuality. I have homosexual friends who work as imams and go on pilgrimage. Homosexuality and worship are two separate things.
>
> Melih Meseli, a member of a loose LGBT network supporting Erdogan's AKP (cited in Ogunc 2015).

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> Being close to the government does not mean approving all its deeds. Civil society needs to distinguish between right and wrong. KADEM was the first organisation to object to the resolution proposing that girls might marry their harassers.[1]
>
> Volunteer of Women and Democracy Association (KADEM).

Populism is a political strategy for gaining and maintaining power by polarising society and politics as a struggle between 'the people' and 'the elites'. Populists attribute moral superiority to 'the people' as the main source of legitimacy and position themselves as their sole representatives (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). However, populist political actors persistently redefine who belongs to the people (and who to the enemy or elite) (Müller 2014). Gradually, populism moves to 'the outer edges of democracy' in search of a 'united' citizenry, which often converges with democratic decline and autocratisation (Arditi 2005; Haggard and Kaufman 2021). The right-wing variety of populism is particularly prone to this slide into undemocratic rule by allying with other exclusionary ideologies such as nationalism (Brubaker 2020; Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2017; Jenne *et al.* 2021; Yabanci 2021) and politicised religion (Marzouki *et al.* 2016; Yabanci and Taleski 2018; DeHanas and Shterin 2018).

The ~~intersection~~ of right-wing ideologies, populism, nationalism and religion has several implications for the gender debate. 'The global right' has embraced family-oriented gender roles for women and men, the abortion ban, and opposition to LGBTQ* rights and gender equality. Gender minorities and feminism are labelled as the enemies of 'the people and their traditional values' (Graff *et al.* 2019). The populist 'backlash' against gender equality takes place in democratic, semi-democratic and authoritarian contexts at worrisome degrees, uniting diverse groups in "gender conservatism" (Piscopo and Walsh 2020). Ranging from *La Manif pour tous* [marriage for all], a loose coalition of several but mostly religious actors against the legalisation of gay marriage in France, to Putin's crusade to safeguard the 'Russian family', these mobilisations are based on arguments that deliberately distort science and on conspiratorial narratives, like the 'feminist and LGBT lobby', 'a global war on family', 'intentional halting of birth rates' and 'creating' 'genderless' children (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018; Roggeband and Krizsan 2020; Kourou 2020; Corredor 2019; Sanders and Jenkins 2022). Moreover, ruling populist political parties have empowered nebulous and once marginal anti-gender grassroots groups through new laws that reverse legal gains in gender equality. They give these groups visibility and access to lobbying.

Scholars often highlight the co-opted nature of such grassroots anti-gender/anti-feminist mobilisations by ruling populists. It is often presumed that these mobilisations strictly adhere to the government and unreservedly support polarisation based on ostracisation of feminist and gender equality groups. In turn, the prevailing assumption is that only democratic, liberal and progressive constituencies and openly feminist and pro-LGBTQ* groups reject and resist the populist anti-gender/feminist backlash. This picture surprisingly fits into the populist, imaginary antagonism between 'the true people and traditional values' that support family and 'the enemies within' that push for 'liberal' and non-traditional (or 'imported' and 'alien') values.

[1]Interview with author, 2019.

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Focusing on the communities and civil society organisations that are ideologically aligned with Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) that combines populism with nationalist-conservative authoritarianism,[2] this article argues that there is more to this story than the dichotomies between autonomy and co-optation, resistance and support. The AKP's much-debated heteropatriarchal ideals encounter several challenges *from within* the pro-populist conservative bloc. Drawing on our research findings, we claim that the so-called 'demand side' – that is, the populists' supporters – is far from granting unconditional support to polarisation around gender roles and incessantly generates its own unmaking of the populist gender order. We focus on two types of actors, (1) ordinary citizens with ideologically conservative and openly pro-AKP stances and (2) civil society organisations with close organic ties to the AKP, to illustrate our argument and provide solid corroborating evidence. We aim to show how individuals, communities and civil society organisations implicitly reconfigure and deny traditional gender relations that populist autocrats use as a reference to polarise society through their reworking, resignification and negotiation. While these two groups are not representative of all AKP voters, their ideological allegiance to nationalist-conservative ideas and vested interests in the AKP's rule make them important actors in terms of negotiating a top-down anti-gender/feminist agenda.

Our contribution to the lively debate on populism and gender is threefold. First, the discussion goes beyond the investigations that focus exclusively on gender discourse, actions and policies of populist-conservative leaders, parties and other institutions. We argue that pro-government citizens and civil society organisations are not totally submissive, reiterating only what populist leaders and governments preach. On the contrary, our research findings invite us to rethink how our populist constituencies support and yet renegotiate, affirm and yet subvert, defend and yet criticise conservative gender discourses. Second, we underline that the populist-authoritarian desire to co-opt the constituency and organisations fails to consolidate complete control over the civic space. Instead, populist actors need constant careening and generate uneasy 'compromises' to keep these allies on their side. This observation invites the disaggregation of populism's 'demand side' and ~~extending it to~~ concrete practitioners, loci, networks and techniques implemented by various pro-populist groups. Supporters of populist and autocratic rulers do not form not a homogenous bloc. Paying attention to the internal fragmentations of populists' supporters could be vital to develop de-polarising narratives and political strategies for civic and political opposition groups. Third, and relatedly, our analysis of the concept of *negotiated conformism* reveals multiple pathways to forge agency and subjectivity, especially concerning the reconfigurations of the populist gender order in contemporary Turkey. As we discuss further below, while subjectivity and agency have often been formulated in relation to "resistance to power" and an emancipatory theorisation (Mahmood 2004), our investigation of negotiated conformism invites us to rethink how subjectivities and agency may be fashioned across socialities of submission, conformism, obedience, negotiation and co-optation.

The following sections first discuss the concept of negotiated conformism and the methodological framework and provide details of the data collection. Then, we briefly

[2]A discussion of the AKP as a populist ruling party is beyond the scope of this paper. However, there is extensive literature on this topic (Dinçşahin 2012; Baykan 2018; Aytaç and Elci 2018; Yabanci 2016).

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discuss Turkey's anti-gender mobilisations throughout the AKP's rule. The empirical section is divided into two parts: the first part analyses ordinary citizens through insights from ethnographic field research in Trabzon; the second focuses on the pro-government women's organisations. The concluding section summarises the arguments and highlights our theoretical contributions.

Negotiated conformism: a new conceptual lens on populism and its demand side

We propose the concept of *negotiated conformism* to highlight the manoeuvrings of constituencies and civic groups who commonly support right-wing populist rulers while renegotiating populist-conservative gender discourses and their antagonistic framing between 'the people with traditions' and 'immoral secular-liberal elites and enemies'. We draw extensively on the explorations of pious women's subjectivity and agency in the context of Muslim-majority contexts (Kandiyoti 1988). Studies focusing on the intersections of gender and piety have long favoured the abjected and/or resisting margins of the socio-political enactments of governments (for example, LGBTQ* groups, feminists, minorities, migrants, etc.) to explore (political) subjectivity and agency, based on a long-held Foucauldian presumption that subjectivity can only be traced through a negation of the ideological-technological workings of power (Foucault 1980; Heller 1996).[3] Although helpful in deciphering how individuals and communities incessantly push back against discrimination, inequality and violence, this framing of subjectivity fails to explain how more compliant and non-resisting subjectivities are shaped and maintained (see Sehlikoglu 2021).

This shortcoming stems from two factors, one methodological/epistemological and one theoretical, dominating the extant literature. The first of these factors underlines how disciplinary conventions and methodological limitations have led most scholars of populism – informed by political science's focus on public instantiations – to turn to interviews, public documents, institutional arrangements and statements of populist political figures. While these investigations undoubtedly produce insights into the recalibrations of institutional landscapes and the juridico-political structures, they fail to properly account for how they reverberate across the everyday lives of individuals and social groups operating within them. Similarly, anthropological explorations – especially those focusing on the margins of society – tend to focus on individuals' incessant labour to resist (the institutionalised operations of power) and often refrain from exploring their condoning of or active participation in structures of exploitation, inequality and oppression. This attention to suffering and resistance, which has characterised anthropological research since the 1970s (Nader 1972), also fails to provide a comprehensive perspective

[3]In her discussion of women's manoeuvrings across patriarchal domination, Deniz Kandiyoti (1988, 280) bases her articulations on a liberal-Kantian model of subjectivity: "women in areas of classic patriarchy often adhere as far and as long as they possibly can to rules that result in the unfailing devaluation of their labor. The cyclical fluctuations of their power position, combined with status considerations, result in their active collusion in the reproduction of their own subordination. […] Even though these individual power tactics do little to alter the structurally unfavorable terms of the overall patriarchal script, women become experts in maximizing their own life chances." Although it is obviously important to understand the generation of consent and the legitimation of patriarchal domination as well as women's manoeuvrings within such contexts, this formulation does not necessarily account for the formation of subjectivities but departs from the liberal-Cartesian presumptions of an innate and already-agent subject.

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on the maintenance of political and economic status quo despite considerable hurdles and crises.

Intricately related to the disciplinary conventions that limit the scope of analyses both in anthropology and political science, the second shortcoming pertains to a much broader phenomenon: theoretical underpinnings of subjectivity and agency. Heavily influenced by liberal-Cartesian and Foucauldian articulations, explorations of subjectivity have long focused on social relations where antagonism to power was evident and a propensity to freedom was presumed. In liberal-Cartesian theorisations, subjectivity is pervasively associated with a cognisance of the external world alongside an innate capacity for resistance (often against the workings of power) and to affect change (Ahearn 2001; Dyson and Jeffrey 2022; Mahmood 2004).

Although both liberal-Cartesian and Foucauldian theories have been immensely helpful in capturing human potential, they have proven less useful when docility rather than resistance is the dominant relation to power. Criticising these conventional articulations around subjectivity and freedom, which remarkably failed to explain the participation of women in religious movements, Saba Mahmood (2004, 22) underlines how the liberal-Cartesian canon is undergirded by "the impetus to tether the meaning of agency to a predefined theology of emancipatory politics", which is often marked as the defining step of (political) subjectivity. Mahmood also notes how agency, especially across the scholarly analyses of the Global South, has come to be regarded "as the capacity to realise one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)" (8). Drawing on Judith Butler's work on performativity, Mahmood then invites researchers to look beyond the binaries of "consolidation/resignification, doing/undoing of norms" and gain awareness of how "norms are not only consolidated and/or subverted, […] but performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways" 22).

Following the critique of the reduction of subjectivity and agency to resistance, especially in anthropological research (Fassin 2014), negotiated conformism offers a closer look at how alternative modalities of subjectivity and agency are cultivated. It particularly attends to the ways in which docility, conformism, obedience and submission underpin the negotiation factor in the formation of subjectivities in counter-intuitive ways, opening up possibilities for the self to exert a significant degree of influence over broader social structures, institutions and processes. Rather than simply attending to subjects' strategies to overcome the socio-cultural constraints and to maximise their interests ('weapons of the weak' or 'bargaining with patriarchy'), we treat these engagements as processes of subject formation, that is, the very fashioning of subjectivities in relation to the particularities of socio-political configurations surrounding them. In this sense, negotiated conformism invites readers to look for alternative venues and methodologies to investigate agency and subjectivity in the future (and, specifically, the 'demand side' of populism). We underline the importance of deciphering the multiple ways in which non-state actors embody norms and yet critically also alter them and – through such engagements – form their subjectivity and agency.

Negotiated conformism allows us to reflect on political positions that combine docility with resistance and explain the intricate relations between right-wing populism, populist political actors and their various constituencies. Through this focus, we demonstrate how conservative groups – which align themselves with the family-oriented policies and

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discourses of right-wing populists – do not always blindly follow the anti-gender and anti-feminist line of populist-authoritarian figures, but can instead negotiate gender norms in different modalities. Through their negotiated conformism, some populist constituencies maintain a conservative 'gender order', conceived as socio-historical configurations of gender and sexualities in the broadest sense. For instance, they defend heterosexual families and women's traditional role as mothers. And yet, drawing on their privileged positions as supporters of the AKP and access to political institutions, they simultaneously seek to influence the way gender norms are defined and experienced in relation to broader socio-political transformations. This often leads them to challenge the AKP's socially conservative prescriptions that define LGBTQ* groups and feminists as 'immoral outsiders and enemies' or attempts at undermining previous gains in gender equality through legislative means.

In the following sections, we will detail how negotiated conformism operates across multiple modalities and scales, permeating institutional settings (civil society organisations) and formalised procedures (policy-making processes) at the national level, as well as everyday encounters, ordinary utterances and interpersonal relations at the local level. This intriguing amalgam of affirmation and negotiation reveals the unstable, processual and ever-dynamic constitution of gender norms – even in the face of a public commitment to preserving a presumably 'natural' moral order.

Methodology: sites, methods and scales

The findings that we present in this article draw on two qualitative datasets developed through extensive field immersion.[4] Following the field research, all qualitative data were anonymised and translated into English to allow iterations of coding. The authors used open manual coding to identify emergent patterns, themes and markers in the qualitative analysis of the datasets.

The first dataset focuses on the pro-government 'ordinary citizens' and was compiled through ethnographic field research (extended participant observation and unstructured interviews) in 2015 among rural communities in Trabzon, in north-east Turkey, and follow-up visits since then. Since ethnographic research requires an immersion into the everyday lives of one's interlocutors (Brewer 2000), the authors worked in local establishments and participated in various political and social gatherings (including coffee houses, shops, electoral meetings in political party offices, weddings, funerals, local council meetings, association events, etc.). The informants in Trabzon were of different generations (ranging from their 20s to their 70s) and had different occupations (including but not limited to those of bureaucrats, imams, merchants, artisans, teachers, caretakers and business owners – or they were retired) and educational levels. Alongside this socio-economic diversity, the informants displayed different political orientations, even though an overwhelming majority of them identified as nationalist-conservative (*milliyetçi muhafazakar*) (Saglam 2021a; 2021b). While we do not equate Trabzon's residents with the AKP's diverse supporters, Trabzon was chosen as the leading site to focus on the level of 'ordinary citizens' for its representativeness of a hardcore subset of AKP

[4]Both research projects went through ethics review from the researchers' institutions and received positive appraisal. In each case, the participants were given relevant information about the research projects to ensure informed consent.

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voters with a nationalist-conservative profile, receiving up to 80 per cent of the votes cast in the examined area.

The strength of (Sunni) Islamic conservatism (and Turkish nationalism) has been particularly pronounced in the Trabzon region (Bakirerzer and Demirer 2017; Biryol 2021; Meeker 2002; Saglam 2021b), where the ever-intensifying integration of secluded rural communities into the country's broader politico-economic structures – often through urban education and employment – has accelerated the consolidation of a conservative gender regime (Saglam 2020). While rural communities used to have less strict gender segregation, our interlocutors indicated that, in the last 20 years, a more conservative moral outlook has generated mutually exclusive homosocial arrangements, with men and women being kept apart in most contemporary social gatherings (Sedgwick 1985). This gradual consolidation of conservative gender norms seems to coincide with the consolidation of a conservative moral outlook regarding the regulation of sexuality and gender roles across contemporary Turkey in the 2000s (Çokoğullar Bozaslan 2022; Bilgin Aytaç and Sezgin 2022).

And yet, despite this publicly visible conservative turn, we also noted that gender norms among citizens in the region have moved in very different directions. The first of these changes pertains to women's visibility in public spaces. While women had once been secluded from society and relegated to the privacy of estates and homes, and their presence in village centres was described as "shameful", in the last two decades, they have become more active in the public sphere, occupying public roles – both through education and employment – in previously men-only spaces. Second, non-heteronormative gender identities have become more and more visible in the region, giving unprecedented visibility to trans and gay men and women. We will discuss this further below in relation to the visibility and accommodation of non-conforming gender roles in the region.

To analyse civil society organisations' manoeuvres, we rely on a dataset of in-depth interviews conducted between 2017 and 2022 with the representatives, volunteers and activists of openly pro-AKP women's associations, networks and foundations in Istanbul and Ankara. Respondents were, on average, young and middle-aged (from their 20s to their 50s), educated (university graduates, students or at least with a high school degree) and urban upper-middle-class women. Initially looking into the dynamics of the repression of civil society, the fieldwork quickly revealed that the transformation of civil society could not be understood without addressing the quick spread of pro-government civic organisations. Women's organisations with close ties to the AKP have become a particularly prominent actor in gender policy and women's rights debates and policy-making (Yabanci 2016). Their ties with the AKP mean that they not only share – ideologically and politically – the AKP's familial, traditional gender position, but they also have a vested interest in continued access to financial resources and policy-making.

During our encounters, we had a chance to meet both the top-level managers of these organisations as well as lower-rank volunteers and activists. The top-level derived considerable advantages from their links to the government, whereas lower-ranking members and volunteers aspired to take part in these networks in the future. Participant observation in the public events and rallies of these organisations, visits to their premises and their women-only gatherings ('*hanım sohbetleri*') supported our interview data. All primary data were corroborated by pamphlets, reports and policy proposals submitted to

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the government, newsletters and information obtained from the organisations' websites, and social media accounts.

Continuous engagement with these women's organisations and extensive conversations with representatives and volunteers have also revealed that when it comes to public advocacy, they take a stance that remains consensual even if they sometimes subtly disagree with the AKP's position. Ammon Cheskin and Luke March (2015) call this behaviour "consentful contention", a strategy that Turkey's pro-government women's organisations have masterfully adopted. In such instances, these organisations seek to "ease the potential public reaction through offering a justificatory coating [to legitimise the AKP's policy] and even gradually prepare the grounds for legal changes" (Yabanci 2023, 133). However, we have noted that in private conversations, they also show discontent with the way in which the conservative-nationalist gender order is imposed through public discourses and policies. Hence, using their privileged ties with the AKP, they seek to get involved in policy and public debates and counterbalance the impact of radical anti-gender mobilisations on the AKP.

Operating across multiple scales and disciplinary limits, our interdisciplinary exploration does not simply juxtapose social anthropology and political science with distinct epistemological underpinnings and methodological orientations. Rather than succumbing to conventional pathways, we emphasise the productive pathways unlocked by excursions beyond disciplinary boundaries that help us forge new analytic trajectories, methodological strength and a more comprehensive outlook. In this sense, interdisciplinarity allows us to develop "a new object [of research] that belongs to none" (Barthes 1972, 3) as well as multi-scalar and multi-disciplinary tools to comprehend it.

Populism and anti-gender mobilisations in Turkey

When the AKP came to power in 2002, women's organisations pushed for gender policy reform. Thanks to their diligent lobbying efforts, the AKP played an active role in the process leading to the Istanbul Convention. As a result, Turkey became the first signatory and quickly codified the treaty through Law No. 6284 in 2012. LGBTQ* organisations also collaborated with the government, as was the case with their participation in the parliamentary consultative meetings to deliver their requests about citizenship, discrimination and equality the same year (TUSEV 2013).

However, the AKP's autocratic turn in the 2010s has devastated efforts to achieve gender equality in Turkey. The government has openly endorsed the 'traditional three-generation family' and the heteropatriarchal gender order that positions women in the service of raising 'a healthy nation'. Motherhood has repeatedly been highlighted as the sacred status that Islam endows upon women, while birth control was called a "conspiracy against the nation" and abortion was morally condemned. The government has also used incentives to encourage marriage at a younger age and having many children, and it has stigmatised divorce. New public policies now include cash transfers to women for having multiple children and domestic care of the elderly and facilitating temporary and subcontracted work in female-intensive sectors to encourage women to prioritise domestic labour and parental roles. Meanwhile, the AKP has adopted a conservative-religious and nationalist outlook to define 'the people' (Yabanci 2021). Gender equality demands have been identified as being 'against the traditions' of the

people. Feminists and LGBTQ* people have come to occupy a pejorative connotation from a moral/religious point of view, depicted as outcasts and alien to 'the people's authentic culture', motherhood, family and social gender roles (Güneş-Ayata and Doğangün 2017; Cindoglu and Unal 2017; Yabanci 2020; Eslen-Ziya 2020).

365 The AKP's stigmatising attitude has encouraged a radical anti-gender grassroots mobilisation by Islamic orders (*tarikatlar*), radical conservative organisations, far-right nationalist associations and Islamist-conservative public figures such as journalists, writers and theologians. These have formed loose networks or platforms for public advocacy and lobbying, and they have pressurised the government through protests, demon-
370 strations and social media campaigns (see Figure 1). In recent years, they have demanded Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, calling it a conspiracy against the family and claiming that it encourages legislation to "convert youth and children into LGBT people". These efforts led to the government's withdrawal from the Convention in 2021. They have now increased their efforts to reverse domestic legislation on
375 gender equality as prescribed in civil and criminal law and call on the government to annul Law 6284, which criminalises gender-based violence.

Given the prominence of these anti-gender/feminist mobilisations in the pro-AKP media outlets, their claims have become normalised and tolerated – if not encouraged – within the gender debate in Turkey. However, while their proponents promote hate speech against
380 LGBTQ* and feminists, and campaign against gender equality, some pro-AKP organisations and communities do not necessarily succumb to this populist-antagonistic instantiation and incessantly negotiate gender relations and their reverberations across society.

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Insights from Trabzon: new companions for (heteronormative) men in public

Trabzon did not promise much in terms of explaining the resistance to configurations of the populist-conservative gender order. Most of our interlocutors adhered to a strict

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Colour online, B/W in print

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Figure 1. Posters for the 'Great Family Meeting', an anti-LGBTQ* gathering in Istanbul in 2022. Source: Authors' collection.

405 Note: the poster in the middle reads: "Do not remain silent in the face of plans to destroy the family and generations [to come]. We march to protect our children". The poster on the right: "Only Islam can protect our family".

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patriarchal code, which included masculine control over women's sexuality and arrangements through which men and women were segregated socially and spatially. For instance, coffee houses in villages were designated homosocial, masculine spaces where women should not enter (Polat 2008; Saglam 2020). In a similar vein, many of the women we talked to stressed how, during their childhood and as late as the 1970s, walking through the town centre and in front of the coffee houses made them feel ashamed of themselves because, as (moral) women, they were not to be seen in town but had to stay in the privacy of their family homes and estates (Darici 2011; Saglam 2021b; Sirman 1990). Although the exclusion of women from the public sphere has now become much more relaxed, such spatial arrangements continue to this day, as can be seen in the case of the reception of unrelated men in the house, which requires young women (except for the matriarch of the household) to leave the living room. Complementing this spatial segregation, heteronormative conservatism has also affected relations between men and women in different ways. Most of the economic establishments were owned and run by men, while women were tasked with domestic and menial chores (for example, agriculture). In a similar vein, women's participation in local politics has been severely curtailed by local customs, which have posited politics as a masculine endeavour.

And yet, this virtually universal adherence to the conservative gender order did not necessarily mean that our interlocutors in Trabzon adhered to a static normativity. On the contrary, alongside their nominal submission to conservatism, many research participants showed a considerable willingness to renegotiate the gender order. This negotiation from within engaged with both the reconfigurations of public visibility for non-traditional genders as well as their participation in public – all the while conforming to the overarching ideals of heteronormative binaries and without embracing a direct confrontation with political, religious and socio-cultural norms.

The first of these transformations pertains to the visibility and participation of women in public, well beyond the traditional sites (homes, estates, villages) and socialities (socio-religious gatherings for women only) that they were assigned to. Working across the district as bureaucrats, nurses, teachers and shop owners, many women have unprecedentedly taken up public roles that had previously been performed exclusively by men. One of the pioneers of women's public engagements in the town centre was Cemile, a local woman in her sixties who managed a small shop alongside her duties as a member of the executive board of a local political organisation. She said that her participation in the town's economic and political life did not necessarily conflict with her religious and moral views, which – she stressed – were no different from those of others in the area.[5] Moreover, she boasted that the region has, for centuries, been the home of many Islamic seminaries, where imams were trained. Cemile underlined that the strong tradition in religious teaching and training ensured the moral integrity of local communities and her participation in public life. In a similar vein, Nermin – a nurse in her 40s – was an outspoken and active member of the local community. She expressed her dissatisfaction with the moral decay of the urban environment and contrasted it with the moral and religious integrity of the community. Despite her strong emphasis on the area's religious integrity, Nermin – like Cemile – often had discussions with more

[5]Field notes of author, 2015.

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conservative businessmen active in the town centre who, according to her, wanted to limit the visibility of women in public roles.[6] Neither Nermin nor Cemile wore a headscarf and yet they emphasised their (private) piety as proof of their moral integrity and the authenticity of their faith, allowing both to be as active as possible in public.

455 Hanife, an ambitious bureaucrat in her early 50s, presented a similar case. Wearing a headscarf and describing herself as a devout Muslim, she nevertheless criticised her fellow bureaucrats for harbouring sexist views and underlined how gender equality had been an ideal throughout her career.[7] She also highlighted how, as a university graduate, she had to fight her father for a college education and, drawing on this experi-460 ence of struggle, constantly had to negotiate to have her husband share the domestic chores with her. Like many other women from the area, Hanife embodied a combination of conservatism and subversion, both underlining the strength she derived from her pious-moral stance in public and in her career and using this strength to fight against gender inequalities, albeit gradually and discreetly. She stressed that she wanted to pre-465 serve the local community's religious and moral traditions and thus give her daughters better opportunities than she had. Her strategy, in this sense, was to uphold the norms in public and to change them through her privileged position within the bureaucracy. Even though her male colleagues and superiors often curtailed her propositions, she still continued to labour for change.

470 In addition to this ever-growing participation of women in public life, the region has also witnessed unprecedented visibility of non-traditional sexual and gender identities over the past 20 years. The most remarkable illustration of this transformation is the case of a female singer-entertainer, a figure performed by a local man from a village in the area. The man impersonated a sharp-tongued, witty and swearing woman and had 475 a wide repertoire of high-tempo songs and local folk stories about local women's struggles with labour, sexual control and love, which nevertheless highlighted their strength and agility. And yet, these performances did not necessarily challenge the heteropatriarchal gender order per se but often succumbed to its normative imperatives – despite the fact that it inevitably pinpointed the performative constitutions of gender 480 and sexualities. Interestingly, the performer continues to live in the area and engages in practices that many local community members deem inappropriate for heterosexual men, such as nail polishing and knitting, alongside their public interest in domestic chores, house decoration, and feminine clothing. In this sense, they exemplify the ultimate 'other' for the populist anti-gender front. In fact, on several occasions, even 485 though they are a beloved figure for almost everyone in the community, they were criticised for subverting familial roles and gender norms. Many others, however, came to their defence and stressed that it was not up to others to criticise people for their non-conformism to gender norms, and that everyone has different factors – often connected to one's biology (for example, 'hormones') by our interlocutors – that affect their sexual 490 orientation.

In addition to the popularity of transgressive figures and reflecting their tacit accommodation in everyday life, many of our interlocutors did not view LGBTQ* identities as a point of political debate and considered them to be biologically determined states in

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[6]Field notes of author, 2015.
[7]Field notes of author, 2015.

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which the individuals had no input. One of our discussions with two local elderly men, who ardently revered and supported Erdogan's AKP, illustrates this point: the debate concerned remarks made by then Prime Minister Erdogan's about a feminist-activist protester, whom Erdogan had insinuated to be a lesbian, seemingly to delegitimise her dissent. Like virtually all members of their generation, both men were married with children and grandchildren, identified as devout Muslims and have supported right-wing conservative-nationalist parties throughout their lives. Yet, one of them found Erdogan's remark unacceptable and elucidated his objection as follows: "It is none of his job to intervene in her sexuality!" For him, political debates should not have included one's private engagements.[8] His interlocutor agreed but still – albeit reluctantly – defended Erdogan: for him, Erdogan did not really mean to "say that being lesbian is bad" but was trying to target her political orientation. They admitted that her sexual orientation or whom she loved did not matter in politics and that the government could not delegitimise one's political position because of such "personal" issues. Many other respondents agreed; for most of them, the issue was too personal and moralistic for a government to meddle with.

And yet, these remarkable transformations, which affect the configurations of the local gender order, did not necessarily lead disadvantaged gender and sexual identities to antagonise patriarchal heteronormativity upfront. Rather than taking a directly confrontational direction, many in the region seem to deploy their embodiment of modesty, morality and tradition to alter social relations incrementally. Several of the publicly active women we met in Trabzon seem to underline their moral integrity as a tool to constrain patriarchal control and stereotypes and constantly work to advance women's engagement in the public sphere. In a similar vein, while non-conforming sexualities are ever more visible in local communities, the individuals remain cautious about the full repercussions of their non-heterosexual identities and reiterate their commitment to conventional, heteronormative ideals. These incremental reworkings push, from within, the boundaries of local conservative traditions and the impositions derived from public political discourse on non-conforming gender identities and roles.

Pro-government women's organisations

> If you had attended our meeting last week, you would have been amazed. There were forty women and seven or eight men in the hall. A man with a public role, that is, a bureaucrat in the public sector, said: 'Dear, we train women too, but they leave their husbands. I have an acquaintance who also got vocational training in hairdressing. Then she got divorced.' What would you reply? Men take mistresses when they have money and leave their wives, too. So, let's leave women without education and men without money. Do we dream of such a society?[9]

These words belong to the director of a prominent pro-government women's organisation in Istanbul. This organisation, like several other pro-government women's NGOs, was invited to join the government's consultative meetings on several occasions, promoted a pro-AKP line during electoral or referendum campaigns and supported the AKP's public policies and discourse on women's familial role as modest wives and

[8]Field notes of author, 2015.
[9]Interview with author, 2019.

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mothers. However, its support for conservative gender policies is not without limits, as the chair's remarks implied.

While steering public opinion in favour of the AKP's proposals, these women's organisations do not always and unreservedly follow the government's discourse and policies. On the contrary, they seek to negotiate and subtly challenge the role and image of women, particularly conservative and/or Muslim women, within the deeply patriarchal and religious social and political circles that they are a part of. Our respondents argued that all women feel the pressure of the "modern world", such as being very beautiful and thin while making steady progress in their career and serving as the perfect mother and wife at home. They furthermore noted that conservative and pious women not only carry the burden of the "modern secular world": they also face pressure from conservative Islamic pro-AKP circles that many women in these organisations identify with. As Leyla, a representative and board member of one organisation, said, these pressures motivate them "to freely express [one's] own thoughts".[10]

"To freely express [one's] own thoughts" entails several practices. First, that of better and directly explaining 'the self' without the mediation of men. Ultimately, this means creating subjectivities that defy the traditional role and image that Muslim women evoke in the minds of the AKP leadership and the party's conservative Islamist constituency. For the current rulers, Muslim women's rights were violated by the secular Kemalist establishment until the AKP came to power. In fact, the military intervention of 28 February 1997 and the subsequent headscarf ban prevented women from wearing headscarves while attending university or taking up public employment. This repression helped the AKP to anchor its populist claim of representing the pious masses as opposed to the secular elites. The AKP positioned itself as the only defender of Muslim women (among other pious constituencies) and the headscarf ban became a means to keep religious-secular polarisation alive. Rather than giving women the right to wear whatever they choose, the AKP sought to monopolise the voice of Muslim women, preventing them from self-mobilising, agency and rejecting victimisation. Zeynep – a representative from the youth branch of a pro-AKP women's organisation and a university student – mentioned that there is a fixed image of Muslim women wearing headscarf in Turkey that is uneducated, socially and economically deprived and engaged in low-skill jobs such as housekeeping. From the AKP's perspective, this image sustains that of 'victimised Muslim women'. This is why self-confident, educated, outspoken Muslim women speaking for themselves are not appreciated:

> This is not something that men, even conservative Muslims, would prefer. A Muslim can accept a woman as a teacher, but I don't know if he would respect a teacher, a lawyer and a manager wearing ~~a~~ headscarf. In this struggle, I think we have not been left alone by feminists but by men; we thought we shared the same cause [but t]hey have misinterpreted our struggle.[11]

These remarks reveal that, despite their socialisation within conservative-pious and pro-AKP circles, these women are critical of their secondary role in social life and criticise the AKP's populist strategy that politically benefits from Muslim women's continuous victimisation. Fulya, another volunteer, also recalled – with great disappointment – the

[10]Interview with author, 2018.
[11]Interview with author, 2020.

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reaction to the headscarf ban of some men back in 1997, and who are now politically active in the AKP. While she and several other women were protesting to be able to continue higher education with their headscarves, these men 'assured' them by stating that they would still find husbands among conservative-religious men and that they need not worry about finding work.[12]

The 'unconventional' stances of these women also renegotiated, albeit subtly, traditional gender relations in their dealings with the government. On the one hand, these organisations publicly acknowledge that there are only two genders: men and women. Both have their 'naturally' assigned, biological (God-given) capabilities and attitudes that are best accomplished in a heteropatriarchal family. Many respondents asserted that they would never cooperate with other civil society organisations that try to make LGBTQ* demands visible. On the other hand, they follow a third path that is neither totally submissive to the government, which seeks to reduce women's social role to domestic life, nor supportive of gender equality inclusive of LGBTQ*. They endorse the 'empowerment of women within society and family'. This refers to a twofold goal: the empowerment of society and the empowerment of the family. Accordingly, society can be reformed by strengthening the family. Hence, the mission of these organisations is to fight against what threatens the family.

What is surprising is that, when asked about the factors that threaten the family, these organisations' stance contradicts that of the government and radical anti-gender groups. When the AKP speaks about the family, the burden is on women: namely, women who participate in the workforce and seek 'too many' social and public roles threaten families. Conversely, pro-government women's organisations mention domestic violence as the main threat to the family, followed by substance abuse by young people and men, lack of education and economic difficulties. They refer to those threats as obstacles to women's empowerment. Hence, many of the interviewed members of organisations emphasised that they were against forcing women into abusive families, unlike the government that declared that divorce is a social threat (like the high-level bureaucrat who complained about women who "leave their husbands"). For instance, Yeliz, the chair of a prominent women's organisation, stated that "at no point in our struggle, there has been the idea that all marriages should survive, [that] women should not get divorced, or [that] women should stay in their home at all costs"[13]

The fact that domestic violence and femicides have skyrocketed in Turkey also concerns pro-AKP women's organisations. According to the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, the rise is due to a simple fact: more women report violence and abuse compared to the past, and they do so because they now trust the government and security forces more. However, pro-AKP women's organisations think differently, and their position is closer to that of feminist organisations. During an interview, Bircan complained about how difficult it is to convince even only her spouse – a pro-AKP conservative – that domestic violence is a problem. Her statement is very striking, given that Bircan presented her spouse as an example of a broader group of AKP supporters who ignore femicides:

[12]Interview with author, 2021.
[13]Interview with author, 2020.

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> Violence against women has increased so much lately that I cannot discuss it with my husband. He says that they are either exaggerating or lying. They are not exaggerating: these women are dying. When you talk to the men of our community, they have a philosophy. Whenever Europe and secular people complain about an issue, a trust problem emerges. But these women die! Don't count them as numbers; consider each of them as a different person. Ayşe was killed by her husband. It is not a matter of 500 women or just one woman. Ayşe could have escaped her violent husband. Don't these women have the right to start a new life?[14]

Perhaps more importantly, pro-government organisations seek to rework resolutions that the AKP put forward due to pressure from anti-gender coalitions. One example is the plan to cancel compulsory financial support that courts order people to pay their spouses following divorce, known as alimony or maintenance payment. Women are the primary beneficiaries of these payments, being a disadvantaged group in terms of income and participation in the workforce during marriage. In 2018 and 2019, men who self-identified as "the victims of unlimited alimony payments" mobilised under the Platform of Divorced People and Family Initiative. After gaining visibility through social media, they pressed the AKP for a legal regulation to cancel "the unlimited duration of payments after divorce". In reality, alimony payments are limited in duration. The law only foresees regular payments under certain conditions, for instance, until the recipient starts working or remarries. However, the Platform claimed that many women did not seek employment or avoided remarriage to continue receiving these payments, arguing that this situation increases the unemployed workforce and encourages immoral behaviour as opposed to traditional values because women prefer cohabitation, not marriage.

When the government decided to consider a reform of maintenance payments, a group of pro-government women's organisations submitted a report to the government. To counter the false information and allegations of "immoral behaviour of divorced women", the report emphasised the unequal conditions that marriage creates for women. They took a critical stance on the traditional gender roles that force women to undertake unpaid domestic work. The report also argued against the social codes, stating that divorce "cannot be evaluated independently of the social reality that pushes many women into marriage as the only way to secure a future" (Hazar 2019). Pro-government organisations lobbied for the continuation of alimony payments, arguing that any approach promoting women's participation in the workforce only after divorce to avoid alimony payments had nothing to do with women's empowerment. Although the report also praised the AKP for providing cash and in-kind transfers to women shouldering domestic care duties, it was a frontal attack on the Platform of Divorced People and Family Initiative and sought to influence the government through negotiated conformism.

Another occasion when these organisations challenged the reactionary anti-gender mobilisation was during the lengthy debates about child marriages and the sexual assault of minors. Since 2016, the government has introduced three similar drafts of legislation that lower the age of consent to 15 and grant acquittals from charges of the sexual assault of minors in cases where the perpetrator marries the victim. Several pro-AKP

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[14]Interview with author, 2018.

women's organisations adopted a strategy of direct access and lobbying to block the legislation. They visited the Minister of Justice and demanded not to create a roadmap for whitewashing the sexual abuse of minors, and they played a role in convincing the government to shelve the plans.

Whether and to what extent these direct lobbying efforts effectively influence the government depends on the issue area and their interlocutors. Autonomous women's organisations are excluded from policy consultations and lobbying, whereas pro-government ones have access to many levels of policy-making. Lobbying often takes place through backdoor meetings away from the public eye. For example, one representative openly stated that their organisation could reach people from President Erdogan's inner circle because they are also active in civil society. However, during interviews, respondents heavily complained about the government not taking necessary and effective measures into account to tackle problematic areas concerning women, children and the family. Dilek complained that "as an organisation, they are heard but not listened to".[15]

Lobbying and invitations to consultative meetings with the government do not yield the desired outcomes because these organisations do not have the executive power for timely implementation. Berfin's story about a particular policy was revealing in this sense. Complaining about implementation deficiency, Berfin argued that even if they could speak to the minister, the deputy minister or the under-secretary, they would put their requests on a long list of demands awaiting action. She mentioned the Social Support for Families (*Aile Sosyal Destek Programı*, ASDEP), the government's landmark social support programme for families with special needs.[16] The organisation that the respondent works at was involved in ASDEP's creation. However, once the project was launched, they could not get involved in the follow-up:

> It is unclear whether it is being implemented or not, whether it is piloted or generally applied. It is impossible to understand. When I expressed my reservations about the ASDEP's inadequate implementation at a meeting, I could directly speak to the minister. But the civil servant in charge of the actual task did not accept this. He said I deviated from the report, misunderstood or did not understand the project's implementation. So, you may influence the minister, but a civil servant can block the situation. It is a very interesting experience.[17]

Many organisations expressed similar frustrations with the slow pace of implementation of policies, even those in line with a conservative gender perspective, as in the case of ASDEP. Efforts to push for reforms and new policies turned out to be futile because of unresponsive attitudes at bureaucratic or ministerial levels. The fact that these frustrations were not only expressed during our interviews but conveyed in such a manner not to accuse the government officials directly for being unresponsive is yet another example of negotiated conformism. On the one hand, they criticise the slow pace or absence of the implementation of policies and push the government to stand behind policies that, they believe, would empower women. On the other hand, as Berfin claimed, while expressing

[15]Interview with author, 2020.

[16]Initiated in 2017, ASDEP is a government programme to determine the needs of families and individuals for social assistance and social services, to plan and implement social assistance as well as social and public services (education, health, employment, etc.) for families.

[17]Interview with author, 2019.

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this criticism, they avoid blaming the high-level party officials and rather put the burden on irresponsible, incompetent lower-level bureaucrats. This position actually allows them to keep the dialogue open and subtly steer the government on a continuous basis.

Conclusion

Our research has introduced an alternative conceptualisation to understand the populist backlash against gender equality that we have termed negotiated conformism. Our findings have highlighted that populist constituencies' conservative yet subversive attitude challenges clear-cut populist dichotomies in several ways. The populist 'us vs. them' antagonisms informed by the conservative and nationalist dictum of gender relations do not receive unconditional backing from the supporters of populist political actors. Focusing on the case of Turkey and the AKP, we have investigated two types of such supporters, pro-government citizens and civil society organisations, to provide hard-to-obtain evidence for our argument; that is, the fact that the AKP's much-debated heteropatriarchal polarisation encounters several challenges *from within* the populist-conservative bloc. Taking the local communities in Trabzon as a case study, we have been able to focus on an ultra-conservative and nationalist constituency and their everyday reconfigurations of the gender order. Exploring the machinations of women's organisations has allowed us to look into the manoeuvres across public political discourse and social policy of organised interest groups despite their ideological, financial and political alignment with the AKP.

Negotiated conformism demonstrates that citizens, in their everyday lives as well as in organisational settings, move beyond the populist dichotomies and ideological frameworks imposed by political actors. The choice, as experienced on a daily basis, does not seem to be between compliant or rebellious, between being part of 'virtuous people' or an 'immoral enemy'. On the contrary, despite their socialisation within the ideological and political circles of the AKP and their public support for a traditionalist gender agenda, our interlocutors gradually renegotiated the populist antagonism that the government relies on to forge and maintain the traditional gender order. In other words, their support for the government and the traditional gender order is neither unconditional nor irreversible.

As individuals and organisations with organic and ideological ties with the government, these two groups incessantly renegotiate the government's anti-gender/anti-feminist line. They disagree with the AKP government's alignment with hardcore groups and ideas. And yet, for fear of straining relations with the government, they avoid publicly challenging it. They try to bend the government's hardcore line through community discussions and 'unconventional' everyday lifestyles as well as through inside lobbying, out of the sight of public declarations. This indicates the multiplicity of actors with diverse demands and interests within the 'populist-conservative bloc' who pull and push populist incumbents in different directions. The negotiated conformism of pro-populist constituencies reminds us that beyond the populist 'us vs. them' antagonisms, the gender debate requires us to be attuned to nuanced and heterogeneous positions within what is often presumed to be a coherent and homogenous, populist-conservative 'demand side'.

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