How do women’s GONGOs influence policymaking processes in Turkey?

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the most prominent women’s Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization (GONGO) in Turkey, named KADEM, as a case to illustrate the mechanisms that GONGOs use to influence gendered labour policies. Existing studies underline the ideological and discursive role that GONGOs play in the late-AKP era, while the specific mechanisms that they use to influence policymaking processes require investigation. To address this gap, the analysis reveals each step that contributes to KADEM’s occupation of power in policymaking processes and explores the mechanisms that they use to interact in these processes with their essentialist gender justice agenda. These mechanisms are the direct engagement of the organization in domestic policy programs, their representation in international organizations, their expertise and advocacy to public institutions, and their strong institutional and personal links with the government. The findings are based on 48 interviews conducted with key actors and reveal that KADEM acts in line with the conservative and authoritarian labour policy agenda of the ruling party to erase gender equality in public discourse, policy formulation, and policymaking while emphasizing essentialist gender justice. The article contributes to the literature on the politics of gender under authoritarian regimes by presenting the mechanisms that GONGOs use to translate their agendas into policymaking procedures.

1. Introduction

In the past decade, anti-gender and anti-feminist movements have arisen in countries across the world. These movements have served as a way to stabilize authoritarian regimes and justify their practices (Grzebalska & Petö, 2018; Hinterhuber & Schneider, 2018; Köttig et al., 2017; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Verloo & Paternotte, 2018). Authoritarian regimes use both civil society and gender relations to consolidate their power; they support particular segments of the civil society as a way to suppress the voices of those who criticize the views of the regime and a channel to mobilize their ideologies (Kováts,
In that sense, the Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organizations (GONGOs) are established, deployed, or supported by the governments. They are key intermediary actors that governments use to occupy a more extensive and controllable sphere in civil society, carry out a certain political agenda and legitimize their power.

An interesting case of this is Turkey, which is part of the growing transnational anti-feminist and anti-gender mobilizations in recent years (Cindoğlu & Ünal, 2017; Çağatay, 2019; Özkazanç, 2019; Ünal, 2021). In Turkey, the prominent actors that influence and implement gender policies and priorities have changed in the past decade. Experts, scholars and independent civil society organizations have become excluded from policymaking processes while GONGOs have proliferated and become influential, particularly regarding gender and civil society (Hülagü, 2020; Özkazanç, 2019; Yabancı, 2019). GONGOs have used their policy platforms to advance their Islamic ‘gender justice’ agenda. Gender justice asserts the inherent differences between women and men justified by their interpretation of Quran and prioritizes familial responsibilities of women as against gender equality practices (Diner, 2018, p. 106; Bodur-Ün, 2021, p. 144).

Scholars have underlined the strategic and discursive role that GONGOs in the women’s rights field play in politics by promoting and advocating a particular ideological gendered repertoire, which aligns with the government’s stance. To be more precise, studies examining women’s GONGOs have emphasized the discursive position of these organizations regarding the civil society-state relationship (Keysan & Özdemir, 2020), their discursive strategies of appropriating international gender norms (Bodur-Ün, 2019; Koyuncu & Özman, 2019), or the ideological components of the gender norms that these organizations seek to mobilize (Ayhan, 2019; Diner, 2018). However, the specific mechanisms that women’s GONGOs use to interact in policymaking processes remained a subject that requires further investigation.

This article takes a closer look at GONGOs in Turkey and investigates the channels through which they influence gender policymaking procedures with their agendas. It examines the most prominent GONGO in Turkey, KADEM, as a case to illustrate the political mechanisms that women’s GONGOs use to influence labour policies targeting women, with their agendas, in the late-AKP era (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, Justice and Development Party). The focus is on the last decade since there has been a significant transformation in the labour policy field in Turkey. Studies on gendered labour policy change (which includes labor market and care policies) in Turkey show that in the late-AKP era (starting from the abolishment of the Ministry of Women and Family Affairs and its replacement with the Ministry of Family and Social Policies in 2011), the policy priority of the AKP government has evolved. It reflects a change from status equality-oriented policies to a mix of non-contractual, flexible employment practices and familial cash assistance (Buğra, 2020, p. 453). It is notable that the government prioritized social assistance programs as a policy solution for issues that could also be addressed with public social service programs (Yılmaz, 2018, p. 111).

Recent labour policies have become further market-oriented, conservative, and family-centred, (Acar & Altnunok, 2013; Cindoğlu & Ünal, 2017; Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011; Kaya, 2015; Toksöz, 2016) and endanger women’s active and sustainable participation in economic life (Akkan, 2018; Alnaçık et al., 2017; Gökşen et al., 2015).

The objectives of these policies were to increase the commodification
and flexibility of women and mothers while at the same time prioritizing their family duties. Even though active labour market policies (which include vocational training courses, job-trainings, and public work programs, to prevent long-term unemployment) and incentives for women’s employment and entrepreneurship were still in place, flexibility and familialism became prominent policy targets (Akgökçe, 2015; Çelebi, 2021; Ermiş-Mert, 2018). The significant transformation in gendered labor policies requires an analysis of the political dynamics behind this change.

Moreover, labour policies targeting women are fundamental since they dictate women’s relationship with the private and public spheres of social life (Lister, 2012; Okin, 1998). They are crucial determining women’s position in the society and encompassing paid and unpaid realms of gender policymaking. Therefore, labour is an important policy area to examine the similarities and differences between government’s and GONGOs’ policy perspectives. In addition, the limited number of studies examining GONGOs’ engagement in the policy realm focus on violence against women (Akyüz & Sayan-Cengiz, 2016; Kandiyoti, 2016) and labour is a neglected policy area to examine GONGOs’ perspectives in policymaking procedures.

After this section, which also introduces the data and methods, the paper first conceptualizes GONGOs and their organizational characteristics. Then, it presents the contextual background of the AKP, women’s GONGOs and gender justice in Turkey. In the analysis part, institutional and political conditions, as well as the reconstellation of actors are evaluated. The paper depicts the channels through which GONGOs become effective in the policymaking procedures and analyzes the outcomes of this process. The findings show that GONGOs are becoming prominent in the policy field, surpassing the discursive level of social policy legitimization and directly affecting public policymaking processes. Through public projects, international organizations, expertise activities and political affairs, their interaction in policymaking processes has reflected on the gendered labour policy field. KADEM, as a case study of women’s GONGOs in Turkey, has influenced the terrain of policymaking in the last decade through four distinct channels: (1) direct engagement in domestic policymaking processes, (2) international agenda setting and representation, (3) expertise and advocacy work, and finally, (4) the solid institutional and personal links between the organization and the government.

1.1. Data and Methods

The article uses process tracing to investigate how GONGOs influence labour policies targeting women through policymaking processes. Process tracing as a with-in case method scrutinizes processes that lead to specific outcomes by looking at historical explanations at each critical step (Bennett & Checkel, 2014). Thus, it is a suitable method to understand policymaking as a process, analyzing the foundations of a changing policy framework and uncovering the process of change in preferences, ideas, and institutional restructuring (Trampusch & Palier, 2016). The article analyzes how KADEM influences gendered labour policies through the public projects that they run or cooperate with, their expertise and consultancy activities for public institutions, and their organizational links with international and national policy machinery.

The findings presented in this article are derived from the doctoral research project and the field research conducted in Turkey between December 2018 and April 2020 as
part of the doctoral dissertation. The data include semi-structured interviews conducted with forty-eight key policymakers and policy influencers in Turkey, field observations and field notes, as well as primary documents and secondary literature, which complement field observations and interviews (Jorgensen, 2015). The primary documents include the website and printed materials of KADEM, media reports, and secondary literature.

Interviews are conducted with government officials, members of the opposition parties, and the representatives of various women’s civil society organizations in Turkey. The interview partners were selected using a purposive and snowball sampling strategy (Robinson, 2014) and either had been or were currently in the position of power in the processes being studied (e.g., practitioners, consultants, or politicians), or have/had vital information on the processes (e.g., scholars or experts). In these interviews, the interview partners are asked to evaluate the labor policies targeting women, the changing dynamics of policymaking processes, and to explain the mechanisms that their organizations use to influence these processes.

This article first explores the literature on GONGOs and presents background information on the late-AKP era to provide context for the case of KADEM, their advocacy of gender justice, and their role in gendered labour policy. Next, the findings highlight the political and institutional conditions under which KADEM becomes effective. After that, the article demonstrates four channels through which the organization influences policymaking processes. Finally, the conclusion discusses the outcomes of the process and its implications for gendered labour policies.

2. GONGOs as Key Actors of Gender Politics

2.1. Theorizing GONGOs and Their Organizational Characteristics

Civil society is ‘an area of contesting projects’ (Walby, 2011, p. 6). Various actors position themselves in this area with different ideas and interests, seeking to dominate the hegemonic discourse, politics, and policies. Even though civil society could play a transformative role in achieving gender equality and progressive gender outcomes (Htun & Weldon, 2012, 2018), not all civil society actors are independent of the state (Berman, 1997; Naim, 2007; Schmitter, 1974) or pursuing a progressive agenda toward gender equality (Avanza, 2018; Chappell, 2006; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018).

GONGOs are intermediary actors between governments and civil society and are crucial ways that authoritarian governments promote their agenda. The contemporary literature that focused on countries under authoritarian rule highlight the fact that GONGOs, which are government-established, government-co-opted or government-supported civil society organizations (Al-Ali, 2003; Carapico, 2000; Doyle, 2017; Lewis, 2013; Spires, 2011), ‘have proliferated as a deliberative strategy by the state to have a corporatist mechanism that feeds directly into a “grassroots civic space”’ (Hasmath et al., 2019).

State feminism literature also underlines that state and state-related actors typically generate policy outcomes compatible with dominant state policies (Mazur & McBride, 2010) and states may support selected women’s organizations to maintain power or realize political strategies (Lorch & Bunk, 2016, p. 7). However, state feminism literature
is inadequate to understand states’ intense cooperation with particular segments of the civil society in recent times of increasing authoritarianism and anti-genderism. In that sense, GONGOs’ strong normative and practical harmony with the state is their defining feature, through which they are distinguished from other organizations in civil society by assessing how they are established and led (Hasmath et al., 2019, p. 3).

GONGOs around the world share some common organizational characteristics: First, they are generally operating in non-democratic contexts. Second, they are established or founded by individuals who are close to government circles or run by individuals and groups who have direct personal and institutional relations with the government (Hasmath et al., 2019, pp. 5–6). Otherwise, they are co-opted by the governments. Therefore, they have strong ties with the government, which they are purposefully initiated or led by, to support the government’s strategies or praise the government’s policies (McGaughey, 2018, p. 125). Third, these organizations’ agenda is parallel to the government, and they provide an intellectual framework to legitimize the government’s political power (Hasmath et al., 2019, pp. 9–10). Fourth, the government predominantly finances GONGOs using state sources, and GONGOs, therefore, rely on the government’s consent for their activities. Even independent grassroots civic organizations rely upon the state’s support for their associational activities (Martens, 2002). However, GONGOs have become more prominent in non-democratic contexts because the unfair allocation of public resources increases their financial and operational scale compared to independent organizations (Hsu et al., 2016).

The mechanisms or the channels that intermediary actors use to influence political processes are critical to the analysis. Ideational mechanisms, in which actors operate in policymaking processes with their ideas and agendas, are the particular focus of the empirical findings since competing arguments are the constellation of various interest groups in a policy field (Hall, 1993, p. 281). Therefore, ideational scholars underline the instrumental use of agendas as a mechanism that links ideas to policymaking outcomes. Mark Blyth offers the concept of ‘ideas as weapons,’ which refers to the fact that the norms that actors mobilize in the public sphere that could be used to (re)organize the political space (Blyth, 2001, pp. 34–45), in an instrumental way to gain political power. Since policymaking is a site of contestation and conflict, actors weaponize ideas by using them strategically in policy spheres to attain political goals.

The literature emphasizes the way policy actors define, frame, and mobilize gendered issues and how gender norms affect policies (Mazur, 2002; Orloff & Palier, 2009; Verloo & Lombardo, 2007). However, the manifestation of the instrumental use of agendas in policymaking processes requires further case study research. In that sense, the way women’s GONGOs instrumentalize their agenda into policymaking processes and the channels that their agendas manifest into policymaking is an important topic to investigate. Before illustrating the findings, the following section presents a contextual background for the Turkish case.

2.2. The Context: The AKP, Women’s GONGOs and Gender Justice in Turkey

In Turkey, the AKP came into power in the 2002 general elections and incrementally increased its votes in the 2007 and 2011 general elections. As the votes and support
received by the party increased, its power was consolidated, and more structural and authoritarian changes were observed in the policymaking processes (Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün, 2017, p. 2). In 2018, with the transition to a (semi-) presidential system, the President was granted a wide range of legislative and executive powers by the new constitution (Aslan Akman & Akçalı, 2017). This affected the government’s approach to gender issues as well. Scholars have demonstrated that the gender equality agenda has lost its significance (Acar & Altunok, 2013) and that non-democratic processes have negatively affected women’s organizations (Eslen-Ziya & Kazanoğlu, 2020) because neoliberal, patriarchal, and religious discourses have dictated the gender policies of the late-AKP era (Coşar & Yeşenoglu, 2011).

Within this context of increasing authoritarianism, studies find that the government has instrumentally used meso-level actors in organizing labour and civil society to control the economic and political space in Turkey (Yabancı, 2016). Similarly, Alemdaroğlu (2018) emphasizes the government’s systematic effort to shape youth-oriented civil society by supporting pro-government youth organizations. These studies underline the changing landscape of how proliferating government-organized actors influence civil society in the field.

Moreover, scholarly works demonstrate that GONGOs are prominent in the field of gender politics. These organizations play a crucial role in redefining and mobilizing a particular conservative ideological framework on gender relations, embracing the traditional division of labour in the family and a patriarchal societal order (Bodur-Ün, 2019; Diner, 2018; Keysan & Özdemir, 2020; Koyuncu & Özman, 2019). Concerning women’s issues, GONGOs attack the concept of ‘gender equality’ and support its replacement with ‘gender justice’ as the ideal concept for gender relations in society (Diner, 2018). This clash over ideal gender relations requires a more profound focus regarding the conceptual framing of gender equality and gender justice in the literature, which is the backbone of the configuration of policy ideas.

Ultimately, the difference between gender equality and gender justice lies in their approach to women and LGBTI+s. Gender equality does acknowledge the difference between men and women while equally valuing and favouring this difference and arguing that their rights and opportunities should not depend on their sexual difference (being born male or female), sexual identity or orientation (ILO, 2000, p. 48). Similarly, according to an integrated and critical approach, gender justice is the fair distribution of material conditions and equal recognition of statuses among genders, which challenges the prevailing patterns of unequal material conditions and patriarchal societal norms (Htun & Weldon, 2018, p. 3; Fraser, 1997, p. 5). Therefore, in the literature gender justice is defined as an integral part of social justice, interested in remedying injustices embedded in social, political and economic relations.

However, the way the women’s GONGO, KADEM in Turkey frames gender justice is centered on the difference between men and women with reference to Islamic God-given characteristics of the sexes due to God’s creation (KADEM, 2018), which neglects the social construct of injustices and the role of politics in remedying these injustices. The framing of gender justice by KADEM conveys the idea of socially constructed roles (gender) on two biological sexes (binary understanding of male and female); however, it still preserves female subordination and upholds men’s privilege [as Kandiyoti (2016, pp. 109–110) refers ‘masculinist restoration’ as contemporary resistance to rising
autonomous women’s rights movements, which denotes a break with the routine functioning of patriarchy]. The concept preserves the religious content by referring to God’s creation and God’s justice while at the same time legitimizing traditional gendered division of labour in the family and society.

In a published article by the founder of KADEM in 2015, it is written that ‘women and men must be regarded as two equivalent entities with the same essence, complementing each other . . . , and the concept of gender justice will provide fair and proper sharing of roles in favor of women . . . as human beings and subjects of God’ (Yılmaz, 2015, pp. 112–114). Even though KADEM asks for a fairer division of responsibilities and rights between women and men, they negotiate established gender relations within the boundaries of patriarchy. KADEM employs the essentialist framing of justice, referring to the traditional forms of (religious or communal) justice and centred on the ’nature’ of women (and men with a binary understanding), with reference to God-given characteristics of sexes according to their interpretation of Islam. Thus, the concept inevitably neglects injustices’ social and material construct. Furthermore, Yılmaz indicates that gender justice is a superior concept than the ‘Western’ concept of gender equality (2015, p. 111). By doing so, they strategically promote gender justice as a normative contestation against gender equality (Bodur-Ün, 2019) and aim to integrate women in modern life while re-traditionalizing their familial and maternal roles (Çağatay, 2019).

The way KADEM influences policymaking processes with their gender justice agenda is crucial. Three key features define the essentialist approach to gender justice: prioritizing patriarchal norms in the family (i.e., defining women as the primary caregiver in the family and not as an equal independent individual), attributing essentialist characteristics to sexes, and an acceptance of binary heteronormative norms. Therefore, the policy reflections of this approach on gendered labour policies could be summarized as prioritizing the family and signifying family as the primary institution of the society, positioning woman as the primary caregiver, and designing public policies according to the familial needs, as well as due to essentialist approach to sexes and perpetuating sexual segregation of labour. These policies that frame women within the boundaries of the ‘strong’ family are also in tandem with neoliberal employment regime of the AKP as noted by several researchers (Buğra & Yakut-Çakar, 2010; Kandiyoti, 2016). The following quote is an illustration of how gender justice is framed by a member of parliament from the AKP.

We replaced gender equality with gender justice. Because justice crowns all. When you say equality, your conditions are not equal to a man; it is not the reality. You are neither physically nor spiritually equal with men. There are points where you are spiritually strong as a woman, but there are areas where you are physically weak. First, we should accept that. So, the concept of gender justice is more appropriate to our society . . . It is not a term that is imported from the West. (Interview, A member of Parliament from AKP and a member of KADEM)

Existing studies on Turkey that analyze the role of GONGOs focus on the ideological and discursive dynamics in play. The first strand of the literature discusses these clashing gender norms’ intellectual baggage, namely gender equality and gender justice, how they can be differentiated, and what political agenda they advocate for women (Ayhan, 2019; Diner, 2018). Second, part of the studies focuses on the discursive strategies of
GONGOs and the way they work as local norm entrepreneurs to mobilize gender justice (Bodur-Ün, 2019; Koyuncu & Özman, 2019). Finally, the third line of the literature examines how anti-gender actors discursively seek to influence the public debate (Ünal, 2021) in Turkey. However, there is a question that existing literature does not explore: Through which mechanisms do women’s GONGOs influence gendered labour policymaking processes with their ideas? Before moving on to the findings, the following section discusses the anti-feminist movements in Turkey and locates KADEM in the field to better illustrate the case.

2.3. Anti-feminist and Anti-gender Movements in Turkey: Locating KADEM in the Picture

The contemporary literature on social movements demonstrates that politically secular and Islamist sections of women’s civil organizations are not uniform nor homogenous (Çağatay, 2018; Özcan, 2019; Ünal, 2015). Therefore, anti-feminist civil society groups are heterogeneous. GONGOs – representing the government elites – are the principal actors of Turkey’s anti-feminist movements. The most prominent GONGO in the women’s rights field is Kadın ve Demokrasi Vakfı (KADEM, Women and Democracy Association). However, there are other government-organized, and government-supported organizations such as, İstanbul Kadın ve Kadın Kuruluşları Derneği (IKADER, Istanbul Women’s and Women’s Organizations Association), Ayırıcılığa Karşı Kadın Hakları Derneği (AK-DER, Women’s Rights Against Discrimination Association), or Hazar eğitim kültür ve Dayanışma Derneği (HAZAR, Hazar Education, Culture and Solidarity Association). Despite some internal differences, these organizations strive to represent Muslim women in the social and political arena and meet their demands for a more egalitarian marriage relationship (Hülagü, 2020). The difference between GONGOs and other anti-feminist women’s organizations lies in the governmental financial support and direct involvement of GONGOs in policy processes.

The actors mobilizing essentialist and religio-conservative ideas are not limited to GONGOs. Organized and mobilized anti-gender groups have also recently been active in the political field (e.g., Boşanmış İnsanlar ve Aile Platformu, Divorced People and Family Platform; Türkiye Aile Meclisi, Turkey Family Council; Düşünce Platformu, Thought Platform). Even though some scholars argue that anti-gender groups are not powerful in Turkey as they are in the European context (Özkazanç, 2020), they gained strength in the field, positioning against specific policies or advocating specific topics; for example, they advocate eliminating alimony and legitimizing early-age marriages (Hülagü, 2020; Özkazanç, 2019). Although both GONGOs and anti-gender groups are anti-feminist, anti-LGBTIQ rights, pro-family and using an anti-West discourse, the main difference lies in their approach (acknowledge or denial) to gender roles.

First, GONGOs are biologically and religiously determinist in their approach to sexual differences. They rely on notions such as ‘complementarity’ and ‘fitrat’ (God-given creation). However, at the same time, they acknowledge the role of society in determining social relationships among the sexes while taking it for granted. Their main argument is that although there are essential differences among the sexes due to God-given and biological features, society and culture also designate some socially constructed roles to sexes. However, acknowledging the role of society and culture does not mean that
they challenge the patriarchal system or the oppressive structures resident in the economy, society, or politics. On the other hand, anti-gender groups deny the norm of gender fundamentally, and they have an essentialist approach to the sexes, which accepts the societal roles that are attached to sexes as essential and natural.

Second, GONGOs’ approach to parental responsibilities, fatherhood, and women’s role in society is relatively egalitarian compared with extremist views of anti-gender groups. According to the final declaration of the 6th Gender Justice Congress – organized by KADEM under the theme of ‘Parenting in a Changing World’ – the organization aims to foster a fair division of labour and responsibility-sharing between parents in childcare and education (KADEM, 2020a). They advocate an active role of women in society, in the labour market, and politics, but within the boundaries of family responsibilities and according to the traditional division of labour between women and men (Yılmaz, 2016).

Third, the groups’ different stances in the policy field are also essential. What distinguishes these two groups is their support or objection against specific policies. For instance, GONGOs support policies such as preventing violence against women or prohibiting early-age marriages, while anti-gender groups, such as Boşanmış Bireyler ve Aile Platformu (Divorced Individuals and Family Platform), advocate abolishing laws requiring alimony responsibilities to ex-wives and children. In addition, there is an increasing controversy between the anti-gender groups and KADEM. These groups accuse KADEM of harming Islam, harming the family, demonizing men, and encouraging anti-Islamic ideas and practices since they support the Istanbul Convention and advocate alimony (Çakır, 2019).

In AK Parti [referring to AKP] circles, there is an audience that finds KADEM very feminist and therefore dangerous. These circles were not strong before, but over time, the discourse of the party and the President became increasingly Islamic, and these small groups gained great power and voice. In particular, they object to three issues: the Istanbul Convention, the ban on early marriages, and the issue of alimony payments. (Interview, A former member and one of the founders of the AKP)

Islamist sections of women’s civic organizations are not limited to anti-feminist groups, such as GONGOs or far-right conservative groups. Feminist Islamic organizations are important actors active in the women’s rights arena as Islamist organizations, and they position themselves apart from or/and against these anti-feminist organizations. Başkent Kadın Platformu Derneği (Capital City Women’s Platform) and Havle Kadın Derneği (Havle Women’s Association) are some examples of active and mobilized Islamic feminist women’s organizations in the field. These organizations support gender equality in public programs and policies, while GONGOs propagate the alternative ideology of gender justice to distinguish themselves from feminism and feminist organizations.

The tension between KADEM and anti-gender groups, as well as KADEM and feminist Islamic organizations signal a competition among these groups over public attention. While tension is the illustrating feature between these groups, cooperation is explicit among GONGOs. KADEM often engages in cooperation with other government-supported women’s organizations, which have a similar stance on women’s issues, such as HAZAR, HEKVA or AK-DER, for instance against headscarf bans or preparing common statements on women’s issues (Yıldırım, Çinar, & Hilal, 2018: 111). It is important to note that GONGOs usually affirm the government and incline toward government’s position on women’s issues. However, there are rare cases that KADEM did
not affirm government’s stance on publicly polarized topics, such as the law on sexual assault of minors (KADEM, 2020b) and Turkey’s withdrawal from Istanbul Convention (Bianet, 2020). Both were the regulations that created public debate and caused serious losses in terms of women and children’s rights.

3. How Do GONGOs Interact in Policymaking Processes: The Case of KADEM

Since its establishment in 2013, KADEM has been the most prominent partner for large government projects, including organizing nationwide campaigns and events and even representing Turkey at the international summits on women. The origins of KADEM lie in the biographies of founding members and organizational leaders. There are close personal relationships between the government and the organization. Considering the organizations’ wide financial and political sphere of influence, it is crucial to understand the role of GONGOs in policymaking processes. Figure 1 depicts the process of how GONGOs interact in policymaking.

3.1. Institutional and Political Conditions Under Which GONGOs Become Effective

Institutional and political settings provide ideal conditions for GONGOs to be convenient transmitters of new ideas in policymaking processes. Therefore, it is essential to describe the political and institutional conditions through which GONGOs become effective. The first institutional and political condition is that there is no competitiveness through which GONGOs influence policymaking processes.

![Figure 1. GONGOs' influence in policymaking processes. The figure is prepared by the author.](image-url)
in the public policymaking field. Associational entities that seek to influence policymaking processes—or civil society groups, in general—could not compete in the policymaking sphere to implement or influence policies since the government chooses particular entities to cooperate with.

Second, GONGOs operate in authoritarian contexts in which governments directly choose their policy partners, and there is no competition among different groups or entities. Thus, an absence of competitiveness among non-governmental actors in the policy field is closely linked with the party’s dominance in these organizations. Additionally, only party representatives or people with close ties to the government can enter into these organizations. Furthermore, GONGOs are ‘elite clubs,’ which is contrary to a grass-root organization.

KADEM is not an organization for the lower class. They aimed at the mid-to-upper class and intellectuals. Lower-class women can find a place in the AK Party Women’s Branch. KADEM uses a higher language in that sense. Everyone in the foundation is well educated. Most of them are women who went abroad and received training during the 28th of February process. That is why KADEM is more progressive and saying that all working areas should be open to all women. (Interview, KADEM’s former employee)

The quote above belongs to an interview partner, a former KADEM employee who has worked as a project assistant in the organization. To become a board member of one of these organizations, one needs to have a party connection. GONGOs are not grassroots organizations, nor do they have members from diverse socio-economic and political backgrounds on their board. The party’s dominance in these organizations is prominent, and they operate as the elite organizations of the party, representing middle-upper class women. These conditions are crucial to understanding the contextual implications of GONGOs’ influence on policy processes. The next section explains how GONGOs have become significant policy actors in Turkey.

3.2. Re-constellation of Actors and its Reflection on Gendered Labour Policies

Actors and their changing hegemony over policymaking shape policy agendas and instruments (Hall, 1993). A re-constellation of actors in the policymaking field has resulted in the marginalization and exclusion of feminist activists from policymaking processes, while new GONGOs and strengthened Islamic women’s organizations are becoming active in the policy field. This has weakened the institutional and ideational power of feminist organizations and movements and their influence on policymaking processes.

Ministerial and European Union (EU) projects focused on gendered labour policies were led by feminist academics and women’s NGOs in the first decade of the 2000s (Acar et al., 2013; ASPB, 2014; KEİG, 2009; KIH-YÇ, 2008; Müftüler-Baç, 2012). Therefore, the EU process historically provided leverage for feminist academics and women’s NGOs (Aldıkaçtı-Marshall, 2013), as mentioned in the interviews:

I was able to observe the enormous transformation of the bureaucrats and experts from the projects of the Ministry. Until 2011-2012, the public [institutions] involved us as consultants. We often received offers from state institutions for consultation. We cooperated with the experts in EU projects. Nevertheless, now we have no contact. (Interview, Feminist expert and scholar)
Parallel to the positive developments in Turkey’s EU membership negotiations, the government had been keen on complying with EU standards to remedy discriminatory laws against gender equality (Coşar & Özkan-Kerestecioğlu, 2017; Keysan, 2019, p. 6). Previous commitments to international organizations and the influence of independent women’s organizations were also effective in implementing equality-oriented policies (Arat, 2010). However, while taking steps in the direction of legal/status equality between the sexes, the real impact of these international commitments and international funds on women’s lives was limited and variable (Dedeoğlu, 2009; Landig, 2011; Molyneux & Razavi, 2002). The change in actors has been reflected in policies.

They lifted everything in the Labor Law that was for women’s benefit, with the implication of flexible work options/regulations. It is tough for a woman to be independent while working in these flexible jobs and almost impossible if she has a child. Therefore, these policies and job types create low-paid, precarious jobs for women or small contributions to the family income. Besides, other policies are actually inviting women to become stay-at-home moms. The priority is the family. (Interview, A Feminist Labor Unionist, Istanbul, 2019)

In the late-AKP period, proliferating and waxing government-organized and government-supported organizations are observed in the sphere of gender policymaking. The AKP, as a political party or as the government, is not a monolithic organization. There are different actors associated with the party and the government as many hands of the organization (Morgan & Orloff, 2017), and one in the realm of civil society are women GONGOs. Their essentialist framing of gender justice co-opted a growing space in civil society and strengthened their epistemic hegemony.

In the KEFEK commission (Parliamentary Committee on Equality of Opportunity for Women and Men), we made many important policy proposals in favor of women. What do you think is the result? No result at all. Everything is for the sake of appearances. They should invite everyone who wants to contribute to the topic of women. However, they only invite the same few women’s associations, such as KADEM, leaving the others out. The ones that are invited are conservative organizations sanctifying the family. Eventually, this does not bring any positive results to women. (Member of Parliament, Republican People’s Party)

These new policy partners have led to a change in policy agenda and norms, which is also supported by the changing importance of policy institutions on the government’s side. As aforementioned, they have different perspectives on ideal gender relations, namely gender equality and gender justice, that have influenced the policies and debates on gender issues. Accordingly, these perspectives have different implications for gendered labour policies and changing configurations of women’s positioning in political economy and society. Gender justice is a norm that advocates changing policy priorities as protecting and prioritizing the family. The conservative Islamic familialism combined with the flexibilization of women’s labour and increasing women’s labour participation while sexually segregating jobs.

Even though the literature repetitively indicates that Turkey is a familialist state (Kılıç, 2010), the current developments point out that familism has undergone a change in its political meaning. As Akkan (2018) underlines, the new features of (‘sacred’) familialism idealize family ideologically as the carrier of religious and societal values, and strategically through policies and practices, that religious and traditional values meet the market’s need for cheap and flexible labour and that families are an essential part of the welfare
system. Still, it should be noted that GONGOs and the government are not opposed to women’s presence and active participation in the public sphere and the labour market. However, designating the priorities and relative importance of familial responsibilities in line with gender justice affects policy choices.

3.3. The Four Channels Through Which GONGOs Influence Policymaking Processes

KADEM is influential in policy processes through four significant channels. The first channel of influence is the direct engagement of GONGOs in domestic policymaking processes. KADEM engages in domestic policymaking processes by cooperating with government institutions on several projects and attracting public financial support by drafting new policies. Below, three flagship projects are analyzed to illustrate KADEM’s involvement in public gendered labour policies.

KADEM’s young women’s employment and training project (‘Geleceğe İşbaşı Projesi’) has been providing vocational training and career support to young women since 2015. It is supported by the Turkish Employment Agency (ISKUR), the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services, and the İstanbul Chamber of Commerce (KADEM, 2015). The project targets young women (18 or older) who are aging out of children’s youth centres without any vocational training (KADEM, 2016a). The first part of the project aimed at steering young women into employment, particularly in the tourism sector, and provided special sectoral training, while the second part of the project concerns the health sector by training intermediate staff for hospitals (KADEM, 2017). Those who regularly attend the trainings can receive a training certificate approved by the Ministry of National Education. An internship period begins after the training, but employment is not guaranteed.

Another project targeting women’s employment is the ‘Women in Innovation Entrepreneurship Camp’ organized in cooperation with the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TUBITAK) to increase women’s entrepreneurship in Turkey. The project has been repeated every year since 2015. Five women entrepreneurs selected from the applicants receive 25,000 Turkish Lira (approximately 2.900 Euro) of financial support, training, and the opportunity to meet angel investors to develop their innovations (KADEM, 2020c). Thus, the project promotes women’s entrepreneurship and provides limited financial resources and network opportunities to a limited number of entrepreneurs.

Similarly, the Protocol on Deniz Yıldızı Umut Project (Sea Star Hope Project) is made between KADEM, the Istanbul Provincial Directorate of Family and Social Policies (ASPİM) and ISKUR, to increase the employability of disadvantaged young women. The program provides short-term vocational training and life coaching sessions (Akşam, 2015). Unfortunately, neither the number of beneficiaries nor the total amount of financial support received from the state organizations for the projects are publicly available.

These large projects on women’s employment and entrepreneurship are administered in cooperation with public institutions and receive institutional and financial support from state organizations. As the below quote from an interview with a representative of an independent feminist NGO confirms, KADEM became one of the major partners of public
projects, attracting financial support and implementing programs for women. This has limited the capacity of independent organizations to get involved in public projects.

Along with the establishment of KADEM, the government no longer needs to look for cooperation with women’s NGOs, especially to carry out ministerial projects. Foreign grants finance our NGO. Only government partisans can get financial support and cooperate in huge public projects. *(Interview, A representative of a Feminist Women’s NGO, Istanbul)*

Furthermore, the projects align with the government’s labour regime for women, promoting active labour market programs and women’s entrepreneurship to provide women temporary and flexible access to employment. None of these projects aims to provide regular and secure employment or promote women’s mass and sustainable inclusion in employment. The functional role that GONGO undertakes in the realm of gender politics signals continuity with the government’s ideological repertoire since they promote the government’s agenda and advocate the concept of gender justice, which in line with the government’s ideology and discursive strategy.

The second way in which KADEM influences policymaking processes is through international organizations. KADEM is influential in policy processes through *international agenda-setting and representation*. The organization is representing Turkey at international women’s summits and simultaneously strengthening international networks with Islamic organizations. One of the largest international organizations led by KADEM is the International Women and Justice Summit. KADEM is the organizer of this international summit in cooperation with the Ministry of Family, Labor, and Social Services. The last summit, in 2018, was organized under the theme of ‘Family Empowerment.’ It focused on women’s familial responsibilities and supporting gender justice.

KADEM is also a member of the Women 20 (United Nations’ Commission on the Status of Women) committee, along with two other women’s business organizations, the Women Entrepreneurs Association of Turkey (KAGIDER) and the Turkish Businesswomen Association (TIKAD). These organization(s) represent the official voice of government at an international level while also appearing independent. The increasing representational power of specific GONGO in national and international arenas signals their power to shape the policy environment.

The third channel KADEM uses to influence policy is through *expertise and advocacy work*. These activities involve giving consultancy to parliamentary commissions as experts, publishing journals to advocate the gender norm of gender justice, organizing trainings, and opening dormitories for young women to increase support and strengthen the organizational and ideational networks. KADEM provides consultancy to the national parliament and ministries on several topics, including women’s status in Turkey *(KADEM, 2016b)*, problems encountered by working women *(KADEM, 2016c)*, and the role of civil society in the field of women’s rights, as well as the elimination of violence against women *(TBMM, 2015)*. In these consultancy activities, the organization advocates gender justice as a framework to improve women’s conditions in the social and economic spheres of life *(KADEM, 2016c)*.

The organization also holds conferences and panels with state institutions, such as panels on the family’s role in sustainable social protection jointly organized with the
Ministry of Family Labor and Social Services (KADEM, 2019). The organization is also invited to parliamentary commissions and governmental boards as an expert on civil society and women’s rights. For example, KADEM is invited to the parliamentary research commission on Protection of Family Integrity to report their views on family and women.

KADEM’s Journal for Women Studies is a periodical peer-reviewed publication on gender justice that started in 2015. The journal publishes twice per year and reports on women’s issues in economics, politics, literature, art, social sciences, and health. The articles published in this journal provide insights into KADEM’s approach to social, economic, and political issues. There is an article advocating gender justice as the ideal gender norm and as a framework to alleviate women’s poverty and increase women’s economic and political participation in almost every volume.6

Furthermore, KADEM has been organizing the Gender Justice Congress annually since 2015, with high-level bureaucrats – including the President – and scholars from public universities. The sixth congress was organized in 2020. Through these channels, the organization is providing a normative framework on ideal gender relations. Journals, surveys, publications, and conference organizations are prominent examples that emphasize the organization’s role in ideological power struggles – struggles that reflect in the policy field.

The organization is not only a transmitter of ideas and expertise. Their board members and founders also occupy vital governmental positions and have strong personal links to the government. The government recruits public officials from KADEM, making the organization ideationally and personally linked to the government. Thus, the last and the fourth way in which KADEM influences policy is through strong institutional and personal links between the organization and the government. The most prominent case is that the current Minister of Family, Work, and Social Services was the former Ankara representative of KADEM (Evrensel, 2018). She oversees the most important public institution for women and labour policies. Another illustration is that the founding member of the organization is the President’s daughter. Similarly, several members of the board of directors are current or ex-members of the AKP parliament. These personal and organizational links are the channels through which KADEM’s gender justice agenda is represented in policymaking processes.

3.4. Outcomes of the Process

As the examination of the process reveals, GONGOs operate as important actors for creating the political space for imposing and transforming the ideas of the authoritarian ruling party to the policies promoting gender justice over gender equality. The ideational position of the most prominent GONGOs acts in line with the conservative and authoritarian policies of the ruling party to erase gender equality in public discourse, policy formulation, and policymaking while emphasizing the term gender justice. In particular, the ruling party has positioned KADEM as the leading actor in civil society, which determines the direction of the gender-related policies, working on gender issues.

As Blyth (2001) reveals, the new ideational agenda of KADEM, articulated as ‘justice beyond equality’ (Yılmaz, 2015), is used as a weapon to perpetuate the hegemonic position of the government’s ideational approach to women’s issues. Specifically, their ideas
are used as weapons to interfere with the labour domain. KADEM is exerting influential power in the policymaking realm and influencing policy change accordingly. The quote below illustrates the political space that GONGOs aim to create for civil society’s government. This political space is created to provide a base for policy formulation.

Women’s rights issues were only narrated by a marginal segment [meaning specific feminist women’s organizations] in Turkey. For them, prioritizing our society’s national and [Islamic] moral values was not a priority or an issue. However, now, KADEM is working for women’s rights in light of these values. The President is sharing his views in KADEM congresses. As you may appreciate, a feminist women’s organization cannot invite the President to their marginal events, so KADEM provides the ground for a dialog. When the President speaks in our women’s association, it is beyond politics. I believe that this is very important and beneficial for all women. (Interview, KADEM’s Executive Board Member)

The Turkish case indicates a shift in actors’ authority over policy and an increase in the positional advantage of GONGOs with their competing arguments within a broader institutional framework over time (Hall, 1993). Since the supporters of this new paradigm have secured for themselves a position/authority in the policymaking processes, they have become the agents of policy change. GONGOs, as intermediary actors and ideological tools of the government, are the new powerful actors that are being influential in policymaking and are mobilizing a new vision of ideal gender relations (gender norm of essentialist gender justice). GONGOs’ transmission of new ideas into politics is one of the particular causal mechanisms driving the policy change.

4. Conclusion

The article establishes a link between the proliferating women’s GONGOs and their influence on policymaking procedures. The growing importance of GONGOs in the civil society sphere reveals that the relationship between the state and civil society was reconfigured during the AKP period. The findings demonstrate that GONGOs are key actors in the gendered labour field and dominate policymaking in Turkey by using links to the government to translate their ideas into policies. The strategic deployment of GONGOs and the exclusion of feminist actors from policy processes have increased the influence of conservative ideas and agendas on public policies.

In this article, KADEM was presented as a case study of GONGOs’ influence on policymaking processes in Turkey. The findings present the ways in which GONGOs have come to occupy positions of power in the policymaking processes and the mechanisms that they use to translate their agendas into policy. These mechanisms are the direct engagement of GONGOs in domestic policymaking processes, their representation and influence in international agenda-setting, their expertise and consultation work especially to public institutions, and finally, their strong institutional and personal links with the state institutions and the government.

Establishing KADEM was crucial for the Turkish government for several reasons. On the national level, the functional role that KADEM undertakes in the realm of labour policies provides a continuity of the government’s agenda in the public sphere. The projects run by the organization promote active labour market programs and women’s entrepreneurship, which aligns with the government’s agenda to provide temporary and flexible employment for women. Furthermore, KADEM advocates a political agenda, namely
gender justice, which is a blend of conservative policies that perpetuate the family’s priority in society and increase female labour commodification while perpetuating the sexual segregation of jobs. Therefore, in the political field, the binary conception of gender, anti-feminist and anti-LGBT+ attitudes, and traditional conservative gender roles portraying women as temporary labour force and primary caregivers are prevailing.

The relationship between the ruling party and KADEM, as the leading GONGO in the field, operates as a base for policy formulation and perpetuation of existing policies that limit and prevent equality and empowerment of women. While the conservative discourse, policy formulation, and policymaking are led by the collaboration of the ruling party with many different actors, GONGOs function as the operating tools of the government. The government’s active intervention prevents civil society from democratic outcomes and narrows the channels to articulate political demands and conflicting interests. This leads to further fragmentation in society. As a result, the reaction from opposition groups escalated and produced further polarization in Turkey.

The article ultimately examined how GONGOs play a role in policymaking processes and in the consolidation of the material and symbolic power of the government over gender relations in Turkey. The findings revealed that the government cooperate with particular segments of the civil society that they could work harmoniously and share a similar normative perspective on gender relations. Therefore, the findings contribute to the literature on the politics of gender under authoritarian regimes by presenting the patterns that link using GONGOs as unconventional governance instruments to changes in policymaking processes. This research opens new dimensions to interrogate the tensions and struggles that GONGOs posit in the national and international area and further research should address these dimensions in a comparative perspective.

Notes
1. Also, President Erdogan’s statements on motherhood: The Guardian (2014): “Our religion has defined a position for women: motherhood … Women are not equal to men” (24.11.2014), https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/24/turkeys-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-women-not-equal-men. The Telegraph (2016), “A woman who rejects motherhood, however successful her working life is deficient and incomplete.” (05.06.2016), https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/05/turkeys-erdogan-women-who-reject-motherhood-are-incomplete/
2. The discrepancy between their potential and practiced autonomy is an open question.
3. Here, essentialism refers to “existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes and ahistorical functions which limit the possibilities of change and thus of social reorganization” (Grosz, 1990, p. 334).
4. It is important to point out that these organizations are different from KADEM in two regards. First, in contrary to KADEM, these organizations have a history dating back to the AKP rule. Second, they were founded primarily by women who organized against the headscarf ban in grass-root organizations.
5. For more examples, please see the tweets of Boşanmış İnsanlar ve Aile Platformu (Divorced Individuals and Family Platform) regarding the elimination of alimony payments of men: @trbiaplatformu (Retrieved on 26.03.2021) https://twitter.com/trbiaplatformu
6. Articles such as, Sare Aydın Yılmaz’s article in the first issue titled “Cinsiyet Eşitliği ve Adalet Perspektifinden Türkiye’de Kadının Siyasal Alana Katılımı” (Participation of women in Politics in Turkey from the Perspective of Gender Equality and Gender Justice), KADEM Journal of Women’s Studies, Volume 1, Issue 1. ; Gökşen Sayar Özkan’s article
in the second issue titled “Yoksulluğun Kavramsal Çerçevesi İçinde Kadın” (Women in the Conceptual Framework of Poverty), KADEM Journal of Women’s Studies, Volume 2, Issue 2. Serdarhan Duru and Veli Duyan’s article in the third issue titled: “Engelli Çocuğa Sahip Ailelerde Toplumsal Cinsiyet Rolleri” (Gender Roles in Families with Disabled Children), KADEM Journal of Women’s Studies, Volume 3, Issue 2.

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