

## **The Politicization of Rape as a Consequence of Western Modernity and Religious Conservatism: Competing Media Narratives on Gender**

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Through a feminist critical discourse analysis of newspaper columns from both secular/nationalist and religio-conservative outlets, this article illustrates how the issue of increased violence against women—which was made visible by the murder and attempted rape of a young university student, Özgecan Aslan—was instrumentalized by secular media outlets to critique the current government’s conservative family policies based on Islamic principles, while conservative progovernment media outlets used the murder as a moral tale about both the importance of a devout, humble life devoid of consumerism, and other temptations of modern life that encourage lewd behavior. Although patriarchy was not addressed as a root problem for rape, Özgecan Aslan ended up becoming a polarizing and tragic symbol of the consequences of either Western modernity or conservative Islamism—depending on the ideological composition of the media outlet in question—further helping both sides legitimize their versions of patriarchy.

*Keywords: gender policies, Western modernity, religious conservatism, Islam, feminist movement, Turkey, partisan media, discourse analysis*

The murder of a 20-year-old university student, Özgecan Aslan, in an attempted rape in February 2015 in Turkey caused an uproar and nationwide protests denouncing violence against women and the government’s failure to respond. Although a number of rape and domestic violence incidents have led to protests by women’s organizations and have been well covered in the media since the 1990s, Özgecan Aslan’s case was the one that attracted the most media coverage and brought the entire country together in grief, anger, and condemnation. A number of factors contributed to her murder gaining public attention of this magnitude: One is the shock that the sheer violent nature of her murder ignited in society. Her body was mutilated and burned after she was stabbed for defending herself against her rapist. In addition, the rapist’s best friend and father were his accomplices. Another factor was that the details of this cruelty were juxtaposed in the media against her high character and chaste lifestyle, which caused collective grief and anger. She was represented as a good and modest student with high morals whose only fault was to be riding a minibus by herself after school on her way to a shopping mall, as expressed by her grieving mother—instead of as an

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independent woman posing in pouty-lipped selfies on social media,<sup>1</sup> as Örnek (2015) stated in her newspaper column critiquing how we still rally around a rape case only when the victim is perceived as virtuous.

The third main factor behind the Özgecan Aslan case and the issue of violence against women occupying center stage in the public sphere for weeks following her murder was that both the street protests and massive social media campaigns were effective in holding the conservative gender policies of the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, or AKP) accountable for the increase in gender-based violence. Feminist organizations demanded specific changes in the laws that protect the perpetrators, which made the ideological and political polarization of the country along the lines of secular Kemalists and religious conservatives even more evident and ripe for public debate. In this article, my aim is to illustrate how competing gender discourses from these polarized political camps voiced via partisan mainstream media are at work even around an issue such as violence against women, which is often condemned by all ideological factions, and how the commonsense narratives produced by these discourses to explain the reasons for increased violence further impede any constructive exchanges that could help any of the sides to come to terms with their own versions of patriarchy.

The politicization of women's issues in Turkey can be traced back as far as the debates in the 1920s over the role that women should play in the country's establishment as a modern republic and their consequent participation in the public sphere. As Kandiyoti (2016) has argued, "The politics of gender in Turkey is *intrinsic* rather than *incidental* to a characterization of its ruling ideology" (p. 105, emphasis in original). In all three waves of the feminist movement in Turkey (see Diner & Toktaş, 2010), the struggle over how to improve women's place in society has always been an ideological battle against and negotiation with patriarchal practices entrenched within conservative, religious, and liberal policies that still dominate society and everyday life. For instance, although the main opposition party in Turkey—the secular Kemalists—takes a clear stance against religious patriarchy and will rally its constituencies against Islamist and right-wing parties' conservative gender policies, it also fails to fully protect women from statist and market-driven policies that are detrimental to women's economic emancipation; this is due to its mixture of republican and liberal patriarchal ideologies in which women are assumed to occupy prominent roles in society, but their domestic roles are seen as disconnected from the public sphere.<sup>2</sup>

At the other end of the polarized Turkish political spectrum, even though the ruling AKP party has carried out a number of important legal and structural reforms since the 2000s, it has also created a "religio-conservative gender climate that simultaneously trivializes legal advances and unleashes traditional forces . . . limiting the social absorption of legal changes" (Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün, 2017, p. 611). Other examples of AKP's contradicting patriarchal stances are its open hostility to feminist activism (Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011) and its revival of restrictive sex roles for women while promoting the exercise of religious freedom—all of which threaten gender equality, according to Arat (2010). As Coşar and Yeğenoğlu (2011) argue, the tenets of AKP's gender policies differ from the three modes of patriarchy—namely, republican, religious, and liberal—because AKP's neoliberal conservatism does not necessarily find its origins in Islam, but a new version of patriarchy "that is formed through a strategic combination of religious-conservative,

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<sup>1</sup> The author translated all newspaper columnists' quotations.

<sup>2</sup> For more about Kemalist state feminism, see Arat (2000).

nationalist and liberal value sets" (p. 557). Therefore, central to AKP's ideology and practice is the policing of women's bodies and preserving conservative family values in "shoring up populism" and "normalizing violence" (Kandiyoti, 2016, p. 105). According to Güneş-Ayata and Tütüncü (2008), the reason that AKP sees women as "important interlocutors of the Islamist populism" (p. 382) has to do with the party's refusal to entertain the question of whether Islamic claims to politics and economy are compatible with Western democracy; as a result, gender issues are used to constitute "the 'Muslim face' of the AKP" (p. 384).

Against this complex ideological context, women's organizations representing various cultural and political groups in Turkey mobilized around the Özgecan Aslan case and targeted their criticisms at AKP's gender policies; these policies were largely shaped by Erdoğan's personal views on women's roles in society, focusing on their centrality in family and childrearing. According to Yılmaz (2015), "arrangements for strengthening the family by marriage and children have been the indicators of the indispensable alliance between conservative authoritarianism and family politics under the AKP's governance since 2011" (p. 150). Indeed, the policy of addressing gender equality by "improving the status of family" (Toksöz, 2016, p. 76) reflects the AKP government's treatment of women as a part of the family, as opposed to individuals, and the instrumentalization of family in authoritarian governance of women and everyday life based on religious conservative values.

The AKP government's family policies led to a number of highly criticized initiatives, such as building family consultancy and reconciliation mechanisms "to reduce the number of divorces," as articulated in the Article 254 of the 10th Development Plan 2014–2018 (Kalkınma Bakanlığı, 2013, p. 41), instead of providing protection and assistance to women who want to seek divorce or are subjected to domestic violence. As the AKP government replaced programs for women with those for family and directed resources toward establishing premarriage education and enhancing family assistance, government agencies and institutions from which women could seek assistance have been weakened; in some cases, resources have been completely eliminated, such as those that sustained women's shelters. According to Toksöz (2016), encouraging flexible work options for women so that they can "perform care and housework activities simultaneously" (p. 76), which is another initiative under the same family policies, has also resulted in women's isolation.

The already inadequate and deeply flawed justice system—weakened further by Erdoğan's family policies, which treated women's issues as matters to be resolved within families, or by strengthening the family as an institution through Islamic principles—has not only contributed to an increase of violence against women, but also discouraged women from reporting crimes or standing up for their rights. Indeed, between 2004 and 2011, which corresponds to the beginning of the AKP's reign in 2003, murders of women went up by 1,400%, and femicide became a visible problem in the public sphere (Acar & Uluğ, 2013). According to the We Will Stop Femicide Platform on <http://kadincinayetlerinidurduracagiz.net/>, an NGO that keeps a tally of femicides across the country, the number of women killed by men (mostly by their [ex-]husbands and partners) continues to increase steadily every year; 121 women were murdered in 2011, and in 2018, this number increased nearly four times, to 440 (Kakissis, 2019). These numbers are unofficial because the Ministry of Justice and Directorate of Security Affairs under the AKP government stopped keeping records on the number of women being battered/killed in 2009 (Kakissis, 2019). Since then, women's organizations in Turkey have taken over the recordkeeping and developed various Internet digital repositories, such as the digital monument on [www.anitsayac.com/](http://www.anitsayac.com/) and the femicide map on [kadincinayetleri.org](http://kadincinayetleri.org/), with the help of the data acquired from

Bianet Independent News Network's Male Violence Monitoring Report (Ulukaya, 2015). Collecting data on men's assaults on women that do not result in femicide is even more difficult, but the UN estimates that 38% of Turkish women have endured physical or sexual violence from a partner (McKernan, 2020). According to the data from the Ministry of Justice, between 2002 and 2008, 61,469 women were raped, and between 2009 and 2011, the number of women raped was 29,980—indicating that an average of 10,000 women are being raped per year in Turkey (Acar & Uluğ, 2013).

In the face of the deteriorating environment around women's safety and the lack of institutional support, Özgecan Aslan's murder and attempted rape became a moment that brought together millions of women, not just activists or members of women's organizations (Aktaş & Akçay, 2019; Sarıtaş, 2015). On February 14, 2015, the hashtag #ÖzgecanAslan became one of Twitter's most popular worldwide and was followed by another hashtag, #sendeanlat (which translates as "tell your story"). This spurred thousands of women to share their own experiences of what it means to be a woman in Turkey and to describe the sexual harassment and gender discrimination they endured. Such social media uproar and visible street protests covered on television nationwide also faced a backlash from conservative groups on social media; these groups questioned the virtue and morality of a young woman—Özgecan Aslan—who wears miniskirts and goes home late in the evening after a visit to the shopping mall, and progovernment outlets produced commentaries trying to deny arguments that framed the AKP government and Erdoğan's policies as responsible for her murder.

Through a feminist critical discourse analysis of the stark differences in coverage of Özgecan Aslan's murder and attempted rape between secular/nationalist and religio-conservative newspaper columns, this article will illustrate how the columnists' patriarchal discourse from the male-dominated partisan mainstream newspapers ended up framing the event as an opportunity to either support or criticize the current religio-conservative AKP government. While the media coverage also gives us hints regarding "the social production of the feminine body" (Cahill, 2000, p. 45) in Turkey, in this article, I mainly treat media as "a 'site' to monitor how individual experiences become entangled with social discourses in the realm of sexual violence" (Hưng, 2012, p. 30) and focus my analysis on newspaper columnists' commentaries in both secular/nationalist and religio-conservative outlets. I argue that Özgecan Aslan's murder and the issue of increased violence against women in the past decade were instrumentalized by secular media outlets to critique the current government's conservative family policies rooted in Islamic principles. At the same time, conservative progovernment media outlets used the murder as a moral tale about both the importance of a devout, humble life devoid of consumerism and other temptations of modern life that encourage lewd behavior, and as an example of the secular opposition media's anti-Islam and anti-AKP attacks. Although patriarchy was not seen or addressed as a root problem for rape, Özgecan Aslan ended up becoming a polarizing and tragic symbol of the consequences of either Western modernity or conservative Islamism, depending on the ideological composition of the media outlet in question—further helping both sides legitimize their own versions of patriarchy.

### **Media Coverage and Representation of Rape**

While media's representation of sexual assault and rape varies greatly depending on the scale and nature of the structural gender inequalities in a particular country or region, such representations continue to

show how patriarchy operates in that context and media's role in reinforcing it. The representation of rape as a gendered crime has been shaped not only by the ideologies of gender, race, class, religion, age, and other signifiers of identity politics, but also by mainstream media's institutional tendencies toward safeguarding its economic and political interests. While there are examples of improved representations of sexual assault and rape among some groups in some parts of the world, thanks to women's activism demanding that the judicial system and law enforcement agencies treat rape as a violent crime, and media to cover it without victim blaming or double victimization, because of the gendered nature of the crime and the entanglement of patriarchy with other systems of inequality, the representations of rape continue to reveal existing ideological rifts, perceptions toward intersectional identities, and various societal power differentials at work.

Analyses of media coverage of rape have indicated varying levels of reinforcement of common rape myths, such as seeing the perpetrator's mental state as the culprit, as opposed to the patriarchal system, and blaming the victim for her negligence, poor judgment, and lifestyle choices, such as alcohol and drug use, staying out late at night, and promiscuous behavior (Kahlor & Eastin, 2011; Sacks, Ackerman, & Shlosberg, 2018). The representation can differ based on the specific medium, race, and class of the victim or perpetrator(s), as well as other specifics, such as whether a celebrity or politics is involved. As a result, media coverage of violence against women rarely focuses only on gender discrimination and patriarchy, but often becomes an avenue for critiquing party politics, blaming a certain class or race position, or postcolonial control of Third World women's bodies. For instance, in her analysis of the coverage of rape in India's television news, Rao (2014) found that the victim's caste and class, rather than the severity, frequency, or nature of the crime, were the determining factors behind journalistic decisions to cover the crime; as a result, the media ignored sexual violence against poor, rural, and lower caste women. The journalists whom Rao (2014) interviewed also believed that television news media portrayed victims as "shamed," thus placing women, rather than the perpetrators, as the focus of the crime. Similarly, in their analysis of British media's coverage of the rape and murder of 15-year-old British teenager Scarlett Keeling in India in 2008, Tranchese and Zollo (2013) show how mainstream media created a stereotyped construction of gender-based violence; the mainstream media first blamed the victim via their coverage of the role of drugs and alcohol that the victim consumed on the day of the rape, and then by shifting the responsibility from the perpetrator to the victim's mother for her negligence and leading a hippy lifestyle, invoking social class issues.

According to Baird (2009), the politics of race and whiteness have dominated the framing of rape stories in Australian media since the 2000s, giving moral justification for the racist and colonialist policies in the country. Due and Riggs' (2012) analysis of the Australian mainstream news media's coverage of an indigenous child rape case is illustrative of this; they found that by "drawing upon discourses of 'protecting' and 'saving' indigenous children, the mainstream news media largely echoed the rhetoric used by many politicians who supported 'intervention' as a necessary step to stop child abuse" (p. 4). The coverage presented child sexual abuse as a "pornographic spectacle" that justified White control over indigenous lives (Due & Riggs, 2012). Looking at U.S. newspapers' coverage of the brutal gang rape and murder case of a young woman on a New Delhi bus, Durham (2015) found that the U.S. media "reinvoked archetypes of the Third World as a primitive and undisciplined place populated by savage men and subordinate women" (p. 185) and reinscribed a geographical hierarchy of power in terms of sex and gender by choosing to ignore the well-known cases of sexual violence and rape in the First World in its coverage of the Indian rape case.

Based on a textual analysis of how one of South Africa's elite news media organizations constructed the rape trial of Jacob Zuma, the nation's former deputy president who was charged with raping an HIV-positive family friend, Worthington (2010) found that the *Mail & Guardian Online* depicted the rape trial in ways that "prioritized party politics over gender politics by foregrounding contemporary discourses related to political power, rape myths, class and ethnic division" (p. 609). Similarly, in high profile rape cases, others also concluded that, when focused on rape allegations involving elites or celebrities, national media outlets often turn the coverage into a spectacle of other issues such as race, as in Kobe Bryant's case (Markovitz, 2006) or the Duke University lacrosse case (Barnett, 2008, 2012; Phillips & Griffin, 2015).

Turkish newspapers have also traditionally covered rape by resorting to various rape myths, such as the victim's whereabouts during the crime, and by focusing on how the incident took place rather than discussing problems with the patriarchal structural system (Alat, 2006; Çelenk, 2010). A well-known example of this is the coverage of Italian feminist artist/activist Pippa Bacca's rape in Turkey. Doğanay and Kara (2011) found that Turkish mainstream newspapers covered her rape as an exceptional occurrence perpetrated by a deviant individual rather than as a consequence of patriarchal structure, while highlighting the victim's behavior—such as hitchhiking and traveling alone—as a contributing factor. Analyzing the coverage of Şefika Etik's and Özgecan Aslan's murders in 2011 and 2015 respectively, Arslan (2017) showed that mainstream newspapers fictionalized, reproduced, and, thus, legitimized violence against women—either through their pornographic coverage of the victim, as in the case of Etik's murder, or by mentioning that the perpetrator had watched and commented on a popular TV drama featuring rape that was resolved by marrying the victim, which resulted in the normalization of the crime through evoking tradition, as in the case of Aslan's murder. In their analysis of the coverage of Özgecan Aslan's attempted rape and murder in three mainstream newspapers, Deniz and Korap Özel (2015) found that media sensationalized the presentation of the crime by highlighting the details of the case; they described the victim's lifestyle and used the perpetrator's uncensored statements, which contributed to the reinforcement of sexist discourse and legitimization of rape.

In this article, my goal is to focus on the commentaries of Turkish newspaper columnists who explain for their readers Özgecan Aslan's murder and attempted rape. By doing so, I hope to scrutinize the ways in which the coverage of rape differs in Turkey based on the ideological stance of the media outlet and is instrumentalized in the service of partisan party politics.

### **Partisan Media and Commentary Columns as Spaces of Knowledge Production**

Throughout Turkey's political history, there has been a strong tradition of media partisanship and political parallelism, in which the newspaper system has paralleled the party system. Çarkoğlu and Yavuz's (2010) research indicates that newspaper coverage became more partisan within the first five years of AKP's tenure and that the "concentration of newspaper readers with similar political orientations in particular newspapers conforms to the situation where media outlets are also aligned with particular political ideologies" (p. 622). Similarly, according to Bayram (2010), political parallelism in the Turkish press is at moderate to high levels and is associated with the rise in ideological polarization. However, as Somer (2010) discovered,

when one examines all the views expressed in the press and not just the headlines or the dominant view of each newspaper, the findings reveal that there is much more internal pluralism, discussion and dissent within both religious and secular elites than often perceived. (p. 574)

Moreover, the number of newspapers that identify with the ruling AKP party's political orientation is disproportionately high because nearly all media organizations in Turkey are owned by large holding companies with ties to political parties or business interests in other industries. Although Turkey's media organizations appear to be commercial and private, they have faced direct pressure to conform with state and the government agendas because of various measures taken by the AKP government. The 2019 World Press Freedom Index reported that "after the elimination of dozens of media outlets and the acquisition of Turkey's biggest media group by a pro-government conglomerate, the authorities are tightening the vice on what little is left of pluralism" (Reporters Without Borders, 2019, para. 1) and ranked Turkey 157<sup>th</sup> of 180 countries. Media outlets critical of the government have been closed or placed under investigation and disciplined via tax audits, accreditation sanctions, or other financial, legislative, and social pressures, and journalists have sued by government officials, all of which has resulted in unprecedented self-censorship (Akser & Baybars-Hawks, 2012).

Independent online news channels have been especially affected by government bans of websites for national security concerns. Broadcast bans put into effect after each major conflict situation have become another practice employed by the government to prevent media from immediately reporting events in their naked truth, which allows government officials to add their interpretation and spin when the ban is lifted a few days later. With all these policies and practices, the government has managed to create a distinct line between media organizations that are progovernment and those that refuse to work as propaganda outlets. In this article, I analyze the columns of two newspapers that are openly and widely known to be pro-AKP, neoliberal, religio-conservative and loyal to Islamic values, *Yeni Şafak* and *Star*, and another newspaper, *Sözcü*, which is on the other side of the political spectrum and known for its secular, Kemalist, nationalist, and anti-AKP and anti-Erdoğan stance.

The reason I have chosen to analyze commentary columns for this study is twofold. First, opinion news, which includes editorials, op-ed articles, and commentary columns, carries a significant communication function by offering newsreaders "a distinctive and authoritative 'voice' that will speak to them directly about matters of public importance" (Greenberg, 2000, p. 519). Similar to editorials, commentary columns in Turkey reflect the newspaper's institutional viewpoint and thus help the paper's readers to interpret the news through its ideological lens, playing a crucial role in the formation of public opinion. Second, newspaper commentaries have traditionally been used as a space for knowledge production in Turkey because the development of scholarly publications in Turkey was late compared with Europe, and because journalists and columnists filled that intellectual gap in their self-assumed role of service to the state (Kılıç Aslan, 2016). According to Kılıç Aslan (2016), columnists in Turkey function as "idea entrepreneurs" who "create a sphere of influence with their ideas and use this sphere to further create new ideas or transform existing ones thanks to the networks provided by this sphere" (p. 2). Somer's (2010) findings stemming from a comprehensive content analysis also show that "the press plays an important role as a public forum for elite discussion" (p. 574) in Turkey. The high number of columnists in newspapers,

successful journalists being promoted as columnists, and newspapers recruiting well-known columnists and using their names for promotion and marketing all indicate the importance of columnists' influence in society and for knowledge production. As the following feminist critical discourse analysis of Özgecan Aslan's murder and attempted rape coverage illustrates, the incident gave the columnists a platform to discuss and further push their political ideologies while explaining for their readers why such violence occurs.

### **Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of the Coverage of Özgecan Aslan's Murder**

This study takes a feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) as its methodological approach when analyzing the coverage of Özgecan Aslan's murder in Turkish mainstream newspaper columns. This approach brings critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2001) and feminist studies together "to advance a rich and nuanced understanding of the complex workings of power and ideology in discourse in sustaining (hierarchically) gendered social arrangements" (Lazar, 2007, p. 141). Feminist critical discourse analysis can help us critically examine the ways that patriarchy, as a complex ideological system, interacts with other ideologies, such as statism, secularism, Islamism, and neo-liberalism in the case of Turkey. As Lazar (2014) noted, "While for FCDA, gender remains a radical political focus, that does not mean that other potentially relevant dimensions of social identity are overlooked and that gender is studied as an isolated category" (p. 189). As my analysis in this article shows, intersectional identities such as nationality, religion, and social class are very much a part of gender in the narratives of columnists commenting on the Özgecan Aslan case.

In this article, I analyze both secular and Islamist newspaper columns to identify competing discourses concerning the reasons behind violence against women in Turkey and their dialogue with other discourses, especially those of neo-liberalism, authoritarianism, and Islam, where possible. I have chosen three mainstream newspapers: Two, *Yeni Şafak* and *Star*, are known for their closeness to the Erdoğan government and championing Islamic and conservative values, and the other, *Sözcü*, is known for its staunch opposition to the government and dedication to secular, Kemalist values. Using the aforementioned newspapers' online archives, I analyzed all the opinion columns that commented on, and were published within two weeks of, Özgecan Aslan's murder on February 11, 2015. Most columns were published during the first week of the incident.

When conducting the analysis, I followed the methods of critical discourse analysis spelled out by van Dijk (1998). Thus, in the analysis, I examined the context of the discourses; determined the groups, power relations, and conflicts that were involved; identified how arguments about those different groups (Us and Them) were constructed; explained the presupposed and the implied views; and explored the structures that emphasized polarized opinions (van Dijk, 1998)—all while taking an approach informed by feminist theory. The analysis aims to elucidate how the mainstream columnists as "idea entrepreneurs" participate in the creation of the hegemonic knowledge that sees violence against women as a direct consequence of authoritarian leadership or acclimation to a modern, secular, neoliberal lifestyle, and ignore the structural sexism embedded in all facets of life in Turkey.

### ***Covering Özgecan Aslan's Murder via a Secular/Kemalist Lens***

The discursive trajectory of *Sözcü* columnists' comments on Özgecan Aslan's case was narrowly and directly focused on criticizing President Erdoğan and the AKP government for her murder. There were



no columns on *Sözcü* about the case that did not mention President Erdoğan or AKP's conservative gender policies and sexist statements against women. Their criticism clustered around two main arguments, analyzed in detail in the following two subsections. The first was that Erdoğan's conservative statements about women's role in society and AKP's subsequent policies on women and family were the culprit behind the increased violence against women. The second blamed Erdoğan and the AKP for weakening the secular rule of the state and the subsequent deterioration of public morality and religious values due to their misuse of Islam for political gains.

#### *Erdoğan and AKP's Gender Policies as the Culprit in Özgecan Aslan's Murder*

In his *Sözcü* column, Bekir Coşkun (2015a) writes that every minute of every day, 20 women are battered and 34 women are murdered in Turkey. He states that "because we are a conservative society, we see this as a private matter between a husband and wife" (para. 1). While Coşkun (2015a) seems to embrace the second-wave feminists' declaration that private is political, illustrating his stance on secular feminism, he also provides answers to the question of why 4,000 women have been murdered in the past six years by listing sexist statements from AKP politicians, including Erdoğan, in the following critical way: Because they say 'keep your skirt long,' they say 'you shouldn't go out on the streets when pregnant,' they say 'women and men are not equal,' they say 'laughing is prostitution,' but you don't get it (para. 6). In his column, Coşkun levels his criticism against those who don't give much thought and weight to President Erdoğan and AKP politicians' stance on women's place in society while making a direct correlation between Erdoğan and his administration's discourses on women and Özgecan Aslan's murder.

Similarly, in his *Sözcü* column, Soner Yalçın (2015) also lists a number of the president's previous statements about women, along with those of the other AKP politicians: Women shouldn't laugh out loud in public, women shouldn't dress provocatively, and violence against women has been exaggerated, among others. He then blames Erdoğan directly for Özgecan Aslan's murder by addressing him as "the instigator." His rationale is that the AKP government created an environment in which there are morality gatekeepers ready to be turned on by women and go on the offensive to protect male dominance (para. 2). In this characterization, Yalçın (2015) suggests that AKP uses its religio-conservative rhetoric to weaponize men into policing women in order to protect male dominance, further insinuating that AKP is a traditional conservative party that serves its male constituents only. A clear parallel established in his discourse in which women equal "modern" and men equal "traditional." With this dichotomy, Yalçın (2015) evokes the early Kemalist republican patriarchal discourse in which women were seen as the symbols of the modern nation-state.

In their respective *Sözcü* columns, Yılmaz Özdil (2015) invites the AKP government to take responsibility for Özgecan Aslan's murder, while Emin Cölaşan (2015) asserts that AKP's gender policies exploit and emotionally harass women in Turkey. In another of his *Sözcü* columns, Coşkun (2015c) invites all his male readers to join the men protesting violence against women by wearing miniskirts, and he criticizes Erdoğan for starting one of his speeches with "ah these feminists. . ." to illustrate Erdoğan's disapproval of the feminist movement. He then discusses how women parliamentarians were harassed during the very same session that Özgecan Aslan's murder was unanimously condemned by parliament earlier. Coşkun's highlighting of Erdoğan's hostility toward feminism is meant to evoke among readers a juxtaposition between the early Kemalist regimes' recruiting of women to take part in the formation of the

new republic, and Erdoğan's disapproval of elected women politicians. This juxtaposition further functions to legitimize the republican patriarchy of state feminism that is rooted in secular nationalist values.

*Blaming Erdoğan and the AKP for Misinterpreting Islamic Values, Co-opting Religion for Political Gain, and Weakening the Secular Rule of the State*

In another column, Coşkun (2015b) criticizes President Erdoğan for his first response to Özgecan Aslan's murder—sending a prayer. According to Coşkun (2015b), Erdoğan having his supporters recite a prayer for Özgecan Aslan during one of his public square speeches is the only solution to violence against women that Erdoğan and the AKP government are willing to offer. With these comments, Coşkun brings forth the dichotomy between the secular/scientific/modern, as opposed to the religious/fatalistic/conservative, to criticize the AKP's religio-conservatism and further reinforce the newspaper's secular Kemalist ideology.

In her *Sözcü* column about Özgecan Aslan's murder, Ayşe Sucu (2015) critiques how, during the AKP era, Islam has been reduced to the practice of a few rituals, such as fasting and praying, contemplating how children's marriages should be conducted according to Islam, how fathers shouldn't kiss their daughters after they turn 7, and why women's behavior is culpable for male sin. Sucu (2015) blames the current government for weakening laicism, which, she believes, undermines the virtues of Islam and prevents "real faith" from being experienced. Sucu's narrative invokes the well-known ideologies of Kemalism in which secularism is regarded as the guarantor of "true Islam," capable of restoring it to its original values and protecting it from being co-opted and corrupted by religious clerics and demagogues.

***Coverage of Özgecan Aslan's Murder in Religio-Conservative Newspapers***

In the conservative newspapers analyzed (*Yeni Şafak* and *Star*), we see one of the common tropes of rape coverage—victim blaming—invoked by the columnists. As my analysis that follows will show, victim blaming is done indirectly with the help of the values and teachings of Islam, while the troubles of modern, secular life are also brought to the fore. Second, the deterioration of morality is presented as a reason for the violence against women, and the reinforcement of religious values through better policy and education is offered as a solution in some of the columns. The third theme identified suggested that death, dying, murder, and rape are natural occurrences that AKP should not be blamed for; this is in line with Islamic teachings that point to the inevitability of death, thus legitimizing religio-conservative patriarchal ideologies.

*Indirect Victim Blaming*

In his *Yeni Şafak* column, Özdenören (2015) responds to voices calling for reinstatement of the death sentence after Özgecan Aslan's murder, based on Islamic teachings and their interpretation. According to him, in Islam, executing someone who committed a murder can only be justified if all the conditions that would have prevented that murder had already been eliminated. Although he does not discuss what those conditions were in Özgecan Aslan's case—she was alone at night returning from a shopping mall without a chaperone, headscarf, or pious clothing—there is a clear undertone of blaming the societal institutions and structures that allow Özgecan Aslan to roam freely without appropriate mechanisms to protect her. Although Özdenören (2015) did not comment directly on Özgecan Aslan's case, but rather on the issue of reinstating

the death sentence for rapists, he ended his column by saying that a balanced punishment is impossible if a thief is punished mercilessly even though the conditions of violent capitalism that encourage theft cannot be eliminated (para. 8). With this statement, the reader is invited to think that if current societal conditions allow for private encounters between genders (such as a young woman and a minibus driver) that can result in rape—given that the minibus driver must carry his passengers even if only one is left on the bus, as happened with Özgecan Aslan—it is the young woman's responsibility not to allow such possible encounters; thus, the victim is blamed, albeit indirectly.

Süngü's (2015) *Yeni Şafak* column starts with a vague opening sentence where, he suggests, the worst aspect of economic and moral poverty has been experienced with the violent murder of Özgecan (para. 1). In the rest of his column, Süngü points to a need to correct humanity's errant path and distinguish good from bad. He believes that this can be achieved by learning to discern between a true believer in God and an imposter. He says that a good Muslim is not the one, who lives alone in the mountains, but one who stays away from questionable and sinful acts (haram) while doing commerce at the bazaar (para. 3). Although there is not a direct reference to the minibus driver who attempted to rape and then murdered Özgecan Aslan, Süngü clearly suggests that those who work among people, such as the minibus driver, should practice self-restraint against carnal desires—a central teaching in Islam. With this article, Süngü responds indirectly to some of the popular voices who believe that a young woman like Özgecan Aslan should not be alone at night by seeming to put the blame on the minibus driver. However, by invoking traditional gender politics attributed to the Qur'an and Islamic teachings, he still positions Özgecan Aslan as a sexual being capable of attracting a lustful male gaze that could encourage sinful acts; thus, he ends up blaming the victim, even if indirectly.

#### *Alienation and Lack of Moral Values as the Cause of Violence Against Women*

In his *Star* column acknowledging the terrible violence committed against Özgecan Aslan, Taşgetiren (2015) draws an overly pessimistic picture of violence in Turkey overall and situates Aslan's murder within that context. He questions where society is headed with all this violence, such as baby rapes, youths stabbing each other and then spending the rest of their lives incarcerated, drug trafficking in a hypersexualized environment, and teenage girls dating older men (which is a criticism of marrying girls off to rich, older men for financial security). He answers this question with the help of a verse from the Kor'an that refers to the destruction that can be caused by people with no fear of God. Taşgetiren then complains that Turkey has failed to find an education system that cultivates the virtues inherent in human beings. Although he does not clearly articulate the problems with Turkey's education system, from the piece's context, it is apparent that he blames the state's secular education system for failing youths and causing an increase in violence against women.

In his *Yeni Şafak* column that discusses various violent ways Muslims kill other Muslims, including Özgecan Aslan's case, Tenekeci (2015) states that the violence is due to our inability as a society to trust each other. He further suggests that politicians play a big role in alienating people from one another, having created an environment of mistrust that causes people to behave mercilessly. Even though he does not specify which politicians act in such a manner, it is apparent from the context that he is referring to the secular Kemalist politicians who criticize the current government for the increased violence against women. Both columnists blame the violence against women on the deterioration of morality; Taşgetiren (2015)

specifically blames it on the current secular educational system, and Tenekeci (2015) specifically blames it on opposition politicians who cause distrust in the current rulers.

*Treating Murder and Rape as Common Occurrences to Shore Up the AKP*

In his *Yeni Şafak* column in which he explores death and dying in general, Markar Esayan (2015) also acknowledges the tragic death of Özgecan Aslan. He offers his condolences to her parents while praising them for handling the tragedy with dignity and seeking justice without also seeking revenge. In the rest of his column, however, he discusses how death is not an end, but a new beginning, a transformation into a new life. Esayan starts his column by saying that death is not that scary because we are not there when it happens (para. 1), and ends with a reference to Thomas More's words right before he was executed: "Nothing bad happens to a person when a person gets executed" (para. 3). From the whole column, the reader is given the clear impression that Özgecan Aslan's "death" is not worthy of all the public grieving and rage that ensued. Although Esayan also uses the word *execution*, the column is predominantly about death. His choice of the word *death* instead of *murder* and focusing his column on dying should be noted here because the word *death* suggests that Özgecan Aslan died of natural and inevitable causes—even though she was murdered. Because Özgecan Aslan died as a result of fighting against her attempted rapist, in this characterization, "rape" is also positioned as a common occurrence that can happen to any woman—even though he does not directly address it. Esayan also cautions the reader that if grief is turned into a routine, we end up bothering and hailing our loved ones' souls from this world (para. 3). His cautionary remark illustrates his attempt to downplay the significance of Özgecan Aslan's murder and disengage the public from discussing the case at length, and thus issues related to violence against women.

In his *Star* column, Ahmet Kekeç (2015) criticizes Kemalists for using Özgecan Aslan's murder to attack the AKP's gender policies. He suggests that violence against women has not increased, but rather is now more visible because of modern communication technologies; thus, Özgecan Aslan's murder is not a consequence of the AKP's policies, but rather can be explained as an 'occurrence' [*hal* in Turkish] (para. 1). In her *Yeni Şafak* column, Leyla İpekci (2015) also blames the media for "glorifying violence" and reacts to those who "insult religion" and "get upset with Erdogan" for further contributing to divisiveness in society following Özgecan Aslan's murder. In her *Yeni Şafak* column, Cemile Bayraktar (2015) believes that those who attacked her on social media when she tweeted about the high incidents of rape in the United States have succumbed to the official state ideologies, which, she suggests, lie at the heart of the hatred against the AKP (para. 12), and she condemns her attackers for unreasonably "blaming the sect, party and Islam" for Özgecan Aslan's murder. Mehmet Şeker's (2015) *Yeni Şafak* column also briefly criticizes the opposition party for using Özgecan Aslan's murder to "politicize rape" and for "blaming the AKP."

**Concluding Thoughts: Legitimization of Multiple Modes of Patriarchy**

Kandiyoti (2016) has argued that "terms such as patriarchy, Islamization or authoritarianism fail to capture the increasingly complex ways in which neo-conservative gender discourses and policies are articulated, enforced or resisted" (p. 111). As this analysis has shown, Özgecan Aslan's murder and the issue of increased violence against women in the past decade were instrumentalized by liberal media commentators and columnists to criticize the conservative family and gender policies of the current

government, while conservative progovernment media outlets used her murder either to make the case that Muslims should lead a moral and humble life devoid of consumerism and the other conditions that encourage lewd behavior, or to illustrate how the current religious conservative government is blamed and attacked senselessly by liberal and secular institutions, including the media. Nevertheless, secular Kemalist columnists treat violence as an issue that emerged during the conservative Islamist party's reign in the past two decades. Such coverage legitimizes the republican mode of patriarchy, whose underlying premise lies in the assumption that secular values and women's visibility in the public sphere can automatically emancipate women, so the private sphere can be overlooked.

On the contrary, pro-AKP newspapers treat violence against women as a part of a larger social problem to be remedied, but not necessarily as a result of patriarchy. In her *Yeni Şafak* column, Özlem Albayrak (2015) criticizes those who blame rape on the conservatives' beliefs by stating that rape has not been eradicated in modern societies and that in the United States, rape occurs every 90 seconds (p. 7). So, Albayrak (2015) ends up framing rape as a consequence of modernity, where, she argues, gender relations are experienced in a way that does not occur in our [Turkish] society (para. 7). While she has a valid point that rape has existed long before the AKP era, her accusation that Western modernity is the main culprit and Turkey is its victim also fails to acknowledge rape as a consequence of patriarchy and, as a result, legitimizes AKP's religio-conservative patriarchy. On both sides of the political spectrum, secularism and Islamism have been naturalized as common sense, and the commonsense discourses produced by columnists' narratives explaining the increase in violence against women via the secularism/Islamism axis then further legitimize the multiple modes of patriarchy that the feminist movement in Turkey continues to fight against.

As Nilsson (2019) stated, "A rape report in the news media is never simply a rape report" (p. 1191). As evident from the previous research presented in this article on the representation of rape in various parts of the world, issues of gender inequality become entangled with discussions about significant fault lines in society, whether they are related to race, political alliances, corruption, religious identity, or social class. As a result, analyses of media coverage of rape often have to consider the interests and ideologies of those behind particular representations of sexual assault and violence against women in that society. In a partisan media environment, such as that of Turkey, where the newspapers each support a political faction and its associated ideologies, any gender issues (such as like Özgecan Aslan's murder and attempted rape) are explained and interpreted by columnists in a way that prioritizes their political agendas and gives weight to their ideological worldviews—while women's voices against patriarchy get muffled by discussion of partisan politics.

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