Women’s Human Rights in Turkey: Between Islam and Secularism?

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A dualistic view of women’s human rights: Discourse versus Practice

Women’s human rights have been, and still is, a major issue of contention in the so-called conflict between “West” and “Islam”, and between “universal” and “cultural” views of human rights, between secularist and Islamist elites. I believe that women’s status and rights have historically been perceived through the dualism of Western civilization and values versus Islamic civilization and values, turning it into an interreligious and intercultural conflict. I think this dualism is an ideologically charged and politically expedient myth. In the case of Turkey, this dualism is prevalent in political rhetoric but does not reflect reality. The reality is much more messy where both Western and Islamic views thrive side by side, at times in confusing and contradictory ways. I will discuss below how this dualism arose and how women’s rights came to be seen through the prism of these opposing worldviews before turning my attention to Turkey.

The rise of industrialization and capitalism, along with the principles of Enlightenment focusing on reason, rationality and individualism are products of Western culture and Christianity. They have often spread throughout the world through colonialism and even to countries that weren’t colonized who were forced to adopt. By the late nineteenth century, Europeans developed a number of arguments to demonstrate the cultural inferiority of the nations of the Orient, including Muslim countries. More importantly, for the purpose of this paper, the colonial powers used the position of women in Islam as a demonstration of the cultural superiority of the West. According to Carl Ernst (2003), a new and

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1 I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Meltem Ağduk and Yannis Toussulis for their assistance in preparing this paper.
surprising weapon in the colonialists’ arsenal was the language of European feminism. Victorian officials may have been uncomfortable with feminist agitation for equal rights at home, but they eagerly and hypocritically criticized Asian and especially Muslim men for their bad treatment of women. By maintaining that Islam is essentially oppressive to women and by linking Muslim backwardness to the practice of veiling women, colonial administrators could justify their rule over Asia and Africa, since they were the bearers of modernity.

The discussion of women’s rights came to be highly politicized, since criticism of the treatment of women in Islamic cultures was a primary element of the rhetoric of colonialism used to justify domination. In short, Western dominance, colonization and women’s rights merged into one in the minds and psyches of Muslim countries. This meant that whoever spoke about women’s rights became ‘an apologist for the West, spurring reactions of defensiveness and resistance. Ironically, Westernizing elites in newly independent ex-colonies used women’s rights as a tool to demonstrate their modernity and how Westernized they had become. Women’s position became the centerpiece of the rhetoric of independence movements. The elites educated by colonial institutions had internalized the values of the West, and certainly a central one was equal rights for all, as claimed by the French Revolution. No state could claim to be democratic and respectful of human rights unless it publicly announced that its entire people would be treated equally regardless of race, gender or class. Thus, giving rights to women became a symbol of Westernization as newly independent states eagerly announced the equality of women with men.

But the majority of people who remained resistant to the top down modernization efforts of the elites came to associate women’s rights with the West. Women who claimed to be feminist and their allies were seen as apologists of the West. Thus, a call back to Islamic values became the means for a search of an authentic identity, including gender identity that is not influenced, dominated or shaped by the West. In fact, from this perspective, Westernization and globalization have turned women
into commodities for the consumer culture. Islam is then presented as a panacea for women’s problems. On the other hand, from the perspectives of Westernized elites, a call to Islamic values sounded like a call to give up the freedoms Westernization had provided women. As an Iranian woman wrote: “In Iran, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, women who acquired a feminist consciousness in either a Western or an indigenous form have always faced a tension between the different components of their identity: their Muslimness is perceived as backward and oppressed, yet authentic and innate; their feminism as progressive and emancipated, yet corrupt and alien.” (Mir-Hosseini, 1999)

Even though Turkey was not colonized, its experience with Westernization is representative of the process described above. Beginning with the reform efforts of the Tanzimat Period during the Ottoman Empire, this process produced a dualism that pitted forces of Westernization and secularism against the forces of tradition and Islamic values against each other, which continue to color politics to this day. Modernity was equated with Western mores, values, appearance and behavior, pitting everything local, Islamic or traditional as ‘backward’ something that should be gotten rid of, disposed of, while everything from the West was presumed to be good, and symbolizing modernity and progress. This went to the point of sublime and ridiculous when the elite had to learn to eat at tables in Western ways, dance the waltz, listen to Chopin and Bach, speak French (or the language of the relevant dominant Western power) while the men were asked to don rimmed Western hats and get rid of the Fez.

Is it true that Westernization and Islam are opposites of each other? I don’t believe so. Western secular ideas influenced Islam, and vice versa. Secularism and Islam have drawn from each other since the Tanzimat period. They are binaries that have influenced each other. It is a reductive and simplistic view to see them as opposites, as they have informed each other throughout Turkey’s history. As the Ottoman Empire began to engage with Western powers more and more, people began to incorporate both Western/secular and cultural/traditional norms into their thought
processes, attitudes, daily lives in various combinations. As Navaro-Yashin claims, there is no inherent conflict or necessary difference between Turkey and Europe, Islam and the West: “It is not possible, in the context at hand, to distinguish native from Western points of view because there is no space where they have not been integrally and historically engaged with one another.” (2002, p. 9) According to historians such as Richard W. Bullet, a continuous interchange between Muslims and Christians shaped an “Islamo-Christian Civilization” that gave rise to the modern world. (in Toussulis, 2010) Navaro-Yashin (2002) further notes that ‘Westernization’ as a category of analysis is a positivist notion that assumes an original distinction between a constructed East and West. I would agree with her assessment and further note that these categories are simplistic and reductive, but the reason they are still around is that they are politically expedient.

**Policies on Women’s Human Rights in Turkey**

I would argue that the women’s human rights are still discussed within the context of secularism/Western values versus Islam, while the practice on the ground has been quite different. The tendency has been to draw from either Western or Islamic norms depending on political usefulness, and many times concurrently and in contradictory ways. What has not yet happened is the emergence of a synthesis, which represents something new and authentic.

Women’s position became the centerpiece of the rhetoric of Westernization in the early 1920s, while ironically Mustafa Kemal, the founder of modern Turkey, had fought against those very Western powers. No new state could claim to be democratic and respectful of human rights unless it publicly announced that its entire people would be treated equally regardless of race, gender or class, at least on paper. Thus, giving rights to women became a symbol of modernity as newly independent states eagerly announced the equality of women with men. In the new Republic of Turkey, women were given the right to divorce, to elect and be elected to political office, among others. Polygamy was outlawed.
Yet, at the same time, state officials turned a blind eye to its continuation under ‘imam nikahi’ (religious marriage ceremony) and the kuma system that traditionally allows more than one wife. According to some commentators, this was to gain the political support of the tribal leaders in the East and Southeast regions who practiced it. While elite women were encouraged to get an education and become professors, lawyers, and judges, in practice, gender hierarchy and male superiority continued. Without the husbands’ permission, a woman could not work or travel. The roles of mother and wife were exalted in the new ideology of the state, and the family was proclaimed to be the cornerstone of society. In short, there was this uneasy tension between a woman’s communal identity as wife and mother (aunt, sister etc.) versus her individual identity as a citizen which continues to this day.

After the military coup in 1980, a women’s movement arose in Turkey. Supported by the United Nations and women’s movements around the world, women in Turkey pressured the government for legal reforms. It is important to note that governments around the world were also changing policies and laws in favor of women’s rights around the same time as a result of pressure from above (international human rights law, donor pressure and pressure from international networks of NGOs) and below due to lobbying by local civil society actors. (Ertürk 2004) Representatives of women’s NGOs from Turkey traveled to the global conferences and increased their awareness of global gender issues. Once they returned home, these NGOs set up workshops and conferences to disseminate CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for action and other international conventions on women’s rights. They prepared a Plan of Action for Turkey and submitted to the government and prepared Shadow Reports and presented them to the Committee on CEDAW. In other words, they used what they learned at global forums to lobby for change.¹ Women’s NGOs also received funds and technical assistance from international donor organizations, including the European Union, the United Nations and bilateral donor agencies in Europe for training and advocacy. They collaborated with the government to devise training programs for public officials, as
well as women in civil society in order to promote effective implementation of new legal reforms, which promoted women’s rights.

These legal reforms include the new Turkish Civil Code in 2002 where men’s supremacy in marriage was abolished and full equality of women and men in the family was established. The new Civil Code also removed the final say over the choice of domicile and children from men. It set the equal division of property acquired during marriage as a default property regime, assigning an economic value to women’s hitherto invisible labor. It changed the legal minimum age for women’s marriage from fifteen to eighteen, although with the permission of her family, a woman can still get married at age seventeen, and even at sixteen if the judge acquiesces. Furthermore, Article 159 of the Civil Code was annulled by the Constitutional Court, which had stated that women needed their husbands’ consent to work outside the home. Article 438 of the Criminal Code was repealed which had provided for a reduction of one-third rape if the victim was a sex worker. A new Penal Code was passed by the parliament in 2005, which no longer accepts provocation as a defense in honor killings. Underage men who commit these crimes will no longer receive reduced sentences. In fact, honor crimes are now punishable by aggravated life imprisonment. However, this time suicides among the women have increased and according to some women’s NGOs, these are forced suicides. Another important legal reform on combatting violence against is the Law on the Protection of the Family (1998), which was amended in 2007. This law was named ‘Law on the Protection of the Family’, again demonstrating the tension between women’s individual and communal identities instead of Law on Violence against Women (VAW). In March 2012, a new law passed from the Grand National Assembly titled “Law on Family Protection and Preventing Violence against Women. The new law has a broader perspective for protection and prevention of VAW, which is parallel to the Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.
Even though the dynamics of pressure from above and below are very salient in bringing about the legal reforms mentioned above, this doesn’t mean that the AK Party government, in power since 2000, was passively accepting. AK party, a major player in this process, developed a neo-conservative ideology, which incorporated democracy and human rights norms. Islamist groups supported by AK party, claimed modernity. They embraced capitalist practices, yet they also incorporated the element of ‘social relatedness’ and ‘trust’ (Islamic norms as they claimed) into the way they do business. There is little doubt that AK Party was influenced by secular, European views. In fact, with its Islamist roots, it has enacted more legal reforms on women’s human rights than any other government before it. While substantial legal reforms were being enacted in favor of women’s rights, the Prime Minister was at the same time advising women to have at least three children and women’s employment went down. The process on how the government bureaucracy was restructured to deal with women’s rights is also an interesting story of contradictory juxtapositions; first as State Ministry responsible for Women and the Family, and later renamed the Ministry of Family and Social Policies. In short, an impressive set of secular/Western style reforms supporting women’s individual rights went hand in hand with statements by the Prime Minister that there is no such thing as gender equality, and that women’s ‘fitrat’ (innate temperament and capacity) means that they are best suited to be homemakers, wives and mothers.

What was happening in civil society in the meantime? More and more educated women stepped into public space in their religious identities and set up their own NGOs, which initially created a sense of threat and fear among secular women’s NGOs. But over time, there was a trend towards learning from each other and towards collaboration. Secular women’s organizations emulated the religious ones, adopting their effective grassroots organizing strategies, while religious women demanded their individual rights to cover on university campuses and government offices. The latter referred to Western norms of democracy and individual rights in fighting for their right to wear hijab in public spaces and appealed to the European Commission of Human Rights. Secular and religious women’s organizations came
together to work with the government on issues related to violence against women, issues of concern to both sides. Religious women’s organizations explored patriarchy and women’s oppression and tried to find solutions within Islam. A researcher who studied the religious women’s organizations in Turkey suggests that that the impact some of these leaders (of religious women’s organizations) have on their followers – especially in terms of empowering them vis-à-vis established authority structures – has perhaps more in common with Western feminism (in challenging patriarchy) than is normally recognized. (Sawae) Hidayet Tuksal, a leader of the religious women’s organizations, urged women to seek education and insist on their rights. Tuksal started a joint education project with secular women leaders and the Directorate of Religious Affairs. One of the objectives of this project was to inform the beneficiaries, the assistant Müfti, (Müfti is the head of a local branch of the Directorate) and Qur’an instructors employed by the state of the recent changes in the Penal Code. The Directorate of Religious Affairs set up Community Centers for Family Guidance and Education and appointed such women to serve as guides and educate the women in their communities, not just on the Qur’an itself, but also on women’s human rights, violence against women and about the laws that protect them. They also meet in homes, not just in government community centers. One such woman guide told me: We tell the women that not all traditions are part of Islam and sometimes men may feel like their throne is being shaken. In other words, she was speaking out against patriarchy.

**Implementation of Legal Reforms on Violence against Women**

It is fair to say that violence against women has become part of the public agenda in Turkey, and the government has taken some major steps towards overcoming it. Since 1990s, the AK party government has focused on four major areas: a) legislative changes; b) new monitoring structures in the Government such as platforms, committees and circulars; c) media campaigns for raising the awareness of the general public, and d) training for service providers. Several interventions of the Government such as “National VAW Monitoring Committee‘ paved the way to
the Inquiry Commission for Determining the Causes of Violence against Women and Children/Honor Crimes” established under the National Assembly in 2005. Parliamentary Report of the Committee led to the Prime Ministry Circular (No. 2006/17) on “Measures to Prevent Violent Acts against Women and Children, and Crimes in the Name of Honor and Custom” addresses the recommendations voiced in the Parliamentary Report. In this document, the Directorate General of Women’s Status and the Directorate General of Social Services and Child Protection are named the coordinator institutions for the implementation of these recommendations. In addition, implementation is being monitored by quarterly activity reports of Local Coordination Committees at the provinces. However, a broader mechanism was developed after the establishment of the Ministry of Family and Social Policies. The General Directorate on the Status of Women became the sole source for the protection and prevention of VAW.

At local levels, training for Service Providers has become increasingly important since it is they who are in charge of implementation of the new laws. To this effect, in-service training programs have been developed and delivered to public sector professionals. Both government bodies and women’s NGOs have been active in this area. In addition, the European Union, United Nations and other international donors are partners in many initiatives. For example, UNFPA office in Turkey has been working on violence against women since 2004. A UNFPA project on in-service trainings for public sector professionals have included the training of police officers, health care providers, family court judges, armed forces, public opinion leaders such as teachers, district leaders (muhtars) and now religious personnel all over the country. Among women’s NGOs, Women for Women’s Human Rights – New Ways established a curriculum and trained social workers at the Directorate General of Social Services and Child Protection, who then offered women’s human rights courses in community centers around the country. (Kardam, 2003) The participants learned about their rights in front of law, including the new laws so that they can demand their legal rights, when needed. They also found out that the public officials, such as judges and the police, along with the men and women such as
mothers in law in their own families whether they considered themselves religious or secular lived by similar social norms that justified male dominance. They emphasized that without changing the prevalent social norms on gender roles, learning about the legal reforms is not very relevant; they just go home to their husbands and their mothers in law who continue to enforce the social norms that deny their individual rights. Social norms often dictate that the husband has final authority over what happens in the home: He may love his wife or beat her; it is his prerogative. Social norms demand that what happens in the family should remain in the family. The honor crimes continue. Newspapers report that men who commit these murders proudly claim that they would do it all over again if they had a chance. When they go to jail, such men are received with a pat on the back and congratulated by their prison mates. As Yirmibeşoğlu has observed, the men at the courts and at the National Parliament have the same values as the men on the street: “While I was investigating honor crime cases at courts, I have come to the realization that the uneducated man who commits a murder crime on the street has the same mindset as the men who make the laws in the Parliament and implement them. Unfortunately in our society, to be educated does not mean that this mindset is changed. When I asked several lawyers about honor crimes, they said that if circumstances required it, they could commit honor crimes themselves”. (Uçan Haber, 2003, p.p. 38-39)

To what extent are these social norms derived from Islam or are rooted in tradition and culture? This is sometimes quite hard to distinguish. Chastity (namus) is an extremely important concept in Turkish society, a value that many people live by and are willing die for. Even though the Directorate of Religious Affairs have instructed imams (preachers) to tell their constituencies that honor crimes are ‘unIslamic’, and stipulated that they preach on women’s human rights, human rights and children’s education, clearly the notion of ‘honor’ as a cultural/traditional norm that persists. Ali Bardakoğlu, who heads the Religious Affairs Directorate, has instructed the preachers in mosques (imams) to discuss honor crimes and tell the people that such acts are not just a breach of the law but also a sin against God; they
contravene the Prophet's teaching on clemency. (Economist, 19 February 2004). Yet, honor crimes continue because the concept of 'honor' is rooted in traditional social norms, and in fact, it is found across Christian cultures of the Mediterranean, such as Spain or Greece. Thus, it is not confined to Islamic cultures.

It is not important to the men who value their 'honor' whether or not Islam condones honor crimes. A women's rights activist, who met with local leaders, including religious leaders in Diyarbakır, challenged the concept of honor killings by arguing that the Qur’an does not permit women to be treated like this. A religious leader’s response was: ‘This is honor, what has that got to do with the Qur’an? Men’s honor comes before the Book” (Pervizat, 2003). As Pervizat (2003) notes, challenging these power dynamics is complex since they are so imbedded in interpersonal relations, family, community, and culture, as well as in economic and political relationships. They are also part of the bargaining and accommodation between the state and the clan (aşiret) leaders, pointing again to the importance of political expediency.

A journalist reiterates:
“The authorities have taken a hypocritical stance against customs (töre) supported by clans (aşirets). Such a dishonest stance has oppressed this society for hundreds of years, and supported such customs on the basis of cementing society. The Turkish state has used such clan organizations to build a national identity: the Anatolian person is emotional, hospitable, holds chastity (namus) dear; one must not hurt these people’s feelings, and if the finger of ‘töre’ (customs and traditions) points towards murder, this must be the right thing to do. Thus, this bargaining between ‘töre’ and governments has laid the road filled with bloody victims.” (Türker, March 1, 2004)
Redefining Masculinity

In Turkey, the word “namus” is used for honor crimes. ‘Namus’ cannot be translated into English just as honor because it incorporates the notion of chastity of women as men’s right and responsibility. I think this is the key. Losing the control and ‘sovereignty’ over females and especially their sexual behavior means that a man has lost face, in some cases lost his honor, and he has lost his masculine identity! If the chastity of women is men’s right and responsibility, this means that this notion overrides women’s individual rights. Without the redefinition of masculinity, it is next to impossible to curb violent crimes against women or to overcome the notion of male superiority.

Parvizat notes that at local levels, workshops have been organized where ‘masculinities’ are being questioned, including ways in which men can maintain their honor without resorting to violence: “In order to prevent honor killings, it is crucial to redefine the concept of honor within the community. When talking to families, a cultural discourse proves to be very effective. We believe that male members are also victims of the concept of masculinity – they suffer throughout the decision-making process. We try to give men what I call cultural and psychological space where their masculinity is not challenged, and they do not feel forced to kill in order to cleanse their honor. To do this, and in order to create space for long-term change, we take advantage of some of the positive aspects of Turkish culture to offer individual men an excuse to avoid violence. These include special occasions and gatherings where nonviolence negotiations are encouraged, and where authority figures can act as intermediaries, in which we can make use of traditions of hospitality towards guests or respect for elderly people’s recommendations as tools to prevent these crimes.” (2003, 31)

The bottom line is there is no way to speak about women’s human rights, and gender equality when gender relations are based on relations of domination and submission and hegemonic masculinity places men in a dominant and women in a
submissive or inferior role. Bourdieu (2001, p. 20) writes: ‘A political sociology of the sexual act would show that, as is always the case in a relation of domination, the practices and representations of the two sexes are in no way symmetrical. Not only because, even in contemporary European and American societies, young men and women have very different points of view on the love relation, which men most often conceive in terms of conquest, but also because the sexual act itself is seen by men as a form of domination, appropriation, ‘possession’. Bourdieu (2001) continues to say that if the sexual relation appears as a social relation of domination, this is because it is constructed through the fundamental principle between the active male and the passive female, which then is reflected in political, economic and social relationships as well.

Women in Turkey have generally internalized these norms in many cases such that they see it as the husband’s right to control their freedom of movement, or to even to beat them if they are disobedient. Thus, it seems that both gender identities are shaped by these norms: women give up some of their rights, in return for what they perceive as ‘men’s protection’; and men assume the role of protector and controller of female behavior and sexuality. This, of course, goes against the grain of individual rights and turns gender relations into a master-slave relationship. Male identity, masculinity and manhood too, is limited, by this very right and responsibility such that the biggest threat to their manhood is the sexual freedom of the women in their family. Any possibility of such sexual freedom must be resisted; the ramifications are that sexuality cannot be openly discussed; it is strictly confined to within the marriage for women. (Kahraman, 2004)

Ertürk (2004) argues that there is a need to deconstruct hegemonic masculinity and to engage in a dialogue and alliance with alternative masculinities that do not condone oppressive uses of power. In redefining masculinity, it is absolutely necessary to discuss sexuality. As long as sexuality is a taboo issue, and men are raised to be the gatekeeper’s to women’s sexual behavior, it will not be possible to redefine masculinity. Without an education on sexuality where masculine and
feminine identities are debated and renegotiated, any change towards greater respect for women’s human rights is bound to be very limited. Sexuality is part and parcel of every individual. Sexuality permeates every facet of private and public life—rituals, rites, etc. The basis of gender-based norms and socialization is very well instituted and stems from a society’s expression and/or understanding of sexuality.

Ortaş (2004), who has written about gender relations in Turkey says that the history of sexuality has grown along with the growth of societies. The institution of marriage was shaped and supported by religions, as well as economic and political power relationships. According to him, under the victimization of women lie centuries-old sexual taboos, and beliefs that chastity is between a woman’s legs, defined by the patriarchal culture. Thus, the men, especially the macho men, must be educated about these norms on ‘chastity and honor’. Men and women must learn about each other’s sexualities and bodies because there is a great of misinformation and ignorance. Meanwhile, it is well-known that pornographic materials are most popular among immigrant Turks compared to other immigrant groups in Europe. Ortaş claims rightly that Turkish society must solve its own problems with sexuality through widespread education programs on sexuality and gender identities, which will then lead a generation of young people who no longer discriminate on the basis of gender and who understand that ‘chastity’ is found in one’s head, and not in one’s sexual organs.

In my view, women's human rights can ultimately only be attained as both feminine and masculine identities are reshaped, not as distinct from each other and fixed but as interconnected. As Murata (1992) notes, in Islam women and men do not embody mutually exclusive or opposite attributes; rather they incorporate both masculine and feminine attributes. Each manifests the whole. A Tibetan proverb echoes the same idea: ‘A hundred male and a hundred female qualities make a perfect human being’ (Schipper, 2004). Is this how Imams, who are ascribed a lot of authority by their constituencies define gender norms? Probably not. How religious leaders define gender norms, what is acceptable behavior and what is not, and how they
justify them on the basis of the Qur’an and Sunna are of utmost importance. I remember a bureaucrat whom I met in the Southeast region of Turkey telling me, that no man in the surrounding villages would agree to send his wife to a women’s human rights training course, unless he was convinced that this was compatible with the Qur’an. Thus, the importance of engaging with Islam, or engaging with those who have the authority to define the ‘right Islam’.

_Engaging with Islam_

Engaging with Islam means engaging with the bureaucracy responsible for religious life. The Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (DIB) is the official organization giving public service on religious issues, from the perspective of Sunni Islam, to which majority of Muslims adhere to. Even though Turkey claims to be a secular state, religion is, in fact, under state control. Until 2011 the Presidency was under the direction of Ali Bardakoğlu, who follows a more modernist, moderate version of Islam by his own proclamation. Under his direction, the DIB promoted women’s rights, organized conferences on Violence against Women and Honor Crimes, and encouraged religious women’s NGOs’ collaboration with secular ones. It collaborated with UNFPA in a project to train religious personnel called “Mobilizing Religious Leaders to Combat Violence against Women”, which started in 2006 and is ongoing. This project provides training for religious leaders, mainly imams, preachers, muezzins and trainees of Qur’anic learning courses. It is fair to say that during this period, progress was made towards a common discourse, a common language between more secular and more Islam-based views of women’s rights, one that claimed compatibility with universal human rights (including women’s human rights) and Islam. Trainers emphasized the Prophet Muhammad’s life and sayings, which clearly rejects violence against women and supports women’s right to education, economic participation, and political participation, as demonstrated by his wives’ activities.
A common language also became possible with a focus on the moral worth of each
worth of the individual and its concomitant support of human rights are not an
exclusively Western idea and have become part of the collective heritage of
mankind....To believe that a human nature does exist and that it implies a set of
inalienable rights does not suppose a religious belief at all. No religion or
civilization can claim exclusive right over it. Millions of people throughout the world
in all kinds of societies and of all creeds, defend human rights on the basis of moral
belief, and to claim that the idea is exclusively Christian or Western is an affront to
them.”(p. 30)

The Qur’an holds both women and men to the identical standards of moral praxis,
knowledge, rationality, ability to reason. It teaches that humans, both women and
men, are created from a single self (nafs), possess the same attributes, and have the
same capacity for moral choice, reasoning and individuality. We can see prominent
sources for an ethic of gender equality in Islamic scriptures. A number of women
are said to have approached Prophet Mohammed to ask him about the prevalence of
male pronouns in the Qur’an, wanting to know if women were included in those
statements. The next revelations of the Qur’an responded directly to these concerns,
with an extended series of balanced phrases that make it clear that men and women
share equally in life. “For the submitting men and submitting women, for the
believing men and believing women, for the devout men and the devout women, for
the sincere men and sincere women, for the patient men and the patient women, for
the men and women who guard their chastity, and for the men and women who
remember God much, for them God has prepared forgiveness and a great reward”.
33:35 In another section of the Qur’an, God specifically regards the acts of men and
women as of equal worth: “I do not neglect the deeds done by any of you, whether
man or woman, the one of you comes from the other”. 3:195
This common language was lost, however, after Ali Bardakoğlu stepped down as the head of the Presidency of Religious Affairs in 2011. A year before Ali Bardakoğlu stepped down, the Presidency was restructured and an upward move on the bureaucratic ladder has been realized. The new president, Mehmet Görmez, is considered to follow a more traditional Islamic perspective. As the AK Party government turned authoritarian, and is deemphasizing, if not dropping, its emphasis on democracy and human rights, the DIB has followed suit. Thus, from the national level of religious organization at least, more mainstream (Sunni) Islamic norms now seem to inform issues related to women. From this position, the ‘fitrat’ of women and men are different and it informs their roles in life. The ‘innate temperament and capacity’ (fitrat) of women allows to perform certain roles and others. As such, women are primarily seen as homemakers, in their familial role and under male protection. The discourse has switched from ‘women’ as individuals to ‘women in the family’.

According to Öztürk, a prominent theologian, the Qur’an is distorted when it is interpreted from a male perspective. This perspective has defined two roles for women: a) to do house work b) to be available for sex. Öztürk argues that after the Prophet Mohammed’s death, male superiority has been justified as if it is derived from the Qur’an and the Sunna, and that it was posited that the ‘fitrat’ (innate temperament and capacity) of men and women are different and therefore, women should be confined to the home, and be under men’s tutelage. “Fitrat” actually means that each individual will attain only what is possible for him or her according to the innate temperament and capacity (fitra) each individual is already given, regardless of gender.

According to many scholars such as Fatima Mernissi, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, the Qur’an has historically been interpreted by Muslim communities so that the realm of sexual politics in shaping religious knowledge and authority must be investigated. As Barlas write: “We need to examine who has read the Qur’an historically, how they have read it, and in particular need to examine the roles of
Muslim interpretive communities in promoting patriarchal interpretations of the Qur’an. “(p.5)

As at the beginning of this paper, we return to the centrality of political expediency. Throughout Turkey’s modern history political interests have primarily shaped the discourse on women’s human rights and continues to do so. Political leaders manipulate both Islamic and secular discourses in ways that suit them. This is continuing to happen at this historical juncture where an authentic identity that incorporates what Turkey has inherited and, at the same time, redefines modernity remains elusive. The transformation of women’s human rights in Turkey ultimately will need to be understood within this larger context of Turkey’s search for its own identity, including gender identities.

1 See for example, www.wwhr.org or www.ucansupurge.org Websites of two prominent women’s NGOs in Turkey for more information on these activities.

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