Kadın/Woman 2000, 2018; *19(2)*: 51-68

Vigilante Violence against Women in Turkey: A Sociological Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines one of the disturbing political developments over the last years and one that has not received scholarly attention: the rise of vigilantism against women in Turkey. Building on the empirical data on vigilante incidents, I show that vigilantism in Turkey is an exclusively masculine practice carried out by individual men or small groups of men who, calling upon a moral order or higher moral sovereignties, target non-pious-looking women navigating the public places in densely populated big cities. By locating vigilantism in the larger dynamics of gender politics, I argue that vigilantism delineates the emergent dynamics of the current backlash against women's agency in Turkey, a backlash that manifests itself as a masculinist enforcement of morality in public.

Keywords: *vigilantism, violence against women, backlash politics, body, Turkey.*

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Original Research Article
Article submission date : 12 Augst, 2018
Article acceptance date : 6 December, 2018

Özgün Araştırma Makalesi
Makale gönderim tarihi:12 Ağustos, 2018
Makale kabul tarihi : 6 Aralık, 2018

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Türkiyede Kadına Yönelik Vigilantist Şiddet: Sosyolojik Bir İnceleme

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Öz

Bu çalışma son yıllardaki rahatsız edici gelişmelerden birini ve henüz üzerine akademik çalışma yapılmamış bir konuyu inceliyor: Türkiye'de kadına karşı artan vigilantist saldırılar. Saldırı vakalarından edinilen ampirik verilere dayalı bu çalışma, Türkiye'de vigilantizim saldırılarının ekseriyetle erkekler veya erkeklerden oluşan küçük gruplar tarafından, ahlaki bir düzen ya da daha yüksek ahlaki otoriteler adına icra edilen, ve yoğun nüfusa sahip büyük şehirlerdeki kamusal mekanlarda bulunan ve müteyyeddin görüntüsünü haiz olmayan kadınları hedef alan, eril bir pratik olduğunu gösteriyor. Vigilantizmi toplumsal cinsiyet siyasetinin daha geniş dinamikleri çerçevesinde ele alarak, bu şiddet türünün aslında Türkiye'de kadınların failliğine karşı çıkan bir tepki siyasetinin tezahürü olduğunu savunuyorum. Vigilantizm, bu tepki siyasetinin hatlarını çiziyor ve bu siyasetin, ahlakın kamusal alandaki kadınlara eril bir şekilde dayatılması biçimini aldığını gösteriyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler*: vigilantizm, kadına şiddet, tepki siyaseti, beden,Türkiye.*

Introduction

One of the disturbing developments over the last years and one that has not received scholarly attention has been the ascendance of vigilantism and vigilante violence against women in Turkey. In those incidents, self-appointed vigilantes, all of whom are male citizens, mete out punishments to those women whom they perceive to have transgressed the *moral codes* in Turkey. Thus, for example, women are assaulted for no other reason than wearing shorts, smoking cigarettes, sitting cross-legged in public, engaging public displays of affection, and exercising in parks. Mixed-gender groups consuming alcoholic drinks in public spaces are sometimes intimidated by the small business owners in the vicinity. And café and art galleries involved in so-called immoral activities, such as serving alcohol during an art exhibition find themselves in danger or their businesses threatened by resentful groups of religious-nationalist youth. Unlike domestic violence against women, often committed within the confines of home and even disguised as a private matter; vigilante violence is deliberately public, not hidden from sight and, from the start, enacted to create a public spectacle intended to punish those women who are alleged moral transgressors.

The current Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's response to vigilante violence has been noticeably lenient. The government officials denounce vigilante violence, while, at the same time, publicly chastising those women for their alleged moral transgressions. For instance, Binali Yıldırım, then Turkish Prime Minister, commenting on Ayşegül Terzi, who was attacked because of wearing shorts in September 2016, said on national TV, "You are allowed to grumble about improperly dressed women, if you don't approve it, but you do not attack them" (Başbakan Binali Yıldırım'dan `şortlu kadına saldırı` yorumu, 2016). This was not the first time one of the highest-ranking government officials invoked a moralist discourse, requiring women to conform to the norms of propriety. In 2013, for instance, a young couple kissing on the subway train heard over the loud speaker that they should stop kissing and comply with the moral codes. When asked about the kissing incident on subway, Tayyip Erdoğan, then Prime Minister, said, "A state-owned subway train has moral codes too" (Erdoğan: 'Erkek kız aynı bankta otururlarsa,' 2013).

The rise of vigilantism, on the other hand, triggered a new wave of street demonstrations held by feminists and women's groups to protest the increasing attacks against women in Turkey. In a series of street demonstrations organized in big cities, including Ankara, Izmir, Istanbul in the summer of 2017, women marched under the banner of *Kıyafetime Karışma* (Don't' Mess with My Outfit), chanting slogans and sometimes carrying denim shorts on hangers to assert their right to wear freely chosen dresses. Through effective uses of social media as well as mainstream media, women, not just the activists but also those who were targeted by vigilantes, were able to amplify their public voices against misogyny in Turkey. The recent acts of vigilantism against women also transformed the categories through which civil society organizations keep track of male violence. For instance, *We Will Stop Femicide Platform* (Kadın

Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu), a women's organization that strives for ending femicide in Turkey and ensuring women's protection from violence, began to generate a new set of data, due to the recent increase in the acts of vigilantism, beginning from 2016, classifying those attacks under the category of *attacks against women's life-styles*. According to data provided by the Platform, there are six cases of vigilantism documented in 2016, while in 2017 (between May and October) the number increased to twelve.

Why is vigilantism against women on the rise in Turkey? Why do women's clothes become a pretext for vigilante attacks? Why has the violence against women increasingly taken the form of public spectacle and display, with ordinary men inflicting harm and injury on women's bodies in public places? This essay discusses the occurrence of vigilante violence and its relation to the shifting dynamics of gender politics in Turkey. Taking my bearings from backlash literature, social science studies on vigilantism, and feminist phenomenology studies on body, I approach vigilante violence as a lens to delineate the emergent dynamics of the current backlash against women and women's empowerment in Turkey, a backlash that manifests itself as a masculinist enforcement of morality in public. The term masculinist[1] is used here to denote the mode of power that vigilante violence incidents manifest. Vigilantism endorses a masculinist mode of power in the sense that it not only makes men's assertion of power over women markedly discernible, but also discloses a mode of power, which echoes a particular modality of masculinity, a masculine subjectivity characterized by aggression, domination, and violence. Male vigilantes, who target embodied feminine selves in public spaces, as this study shows, are animated by a desire to restore a moral order, and feel entitled to punish women in the name of a normative notion of *femininity*. The current backlash, I argue, is provoked by and undermines the women's agency remarkably improved by gender equality politics in Turkey. This study, which accounts for vigilantism in contemporary Turkey, by locating it in the larger dynamics of gender politics, also presents detailed empirical data on vigilante attacks against women in contemporary Turkey.

The focus is Turkey, but implications offer scholarly insights into a disquieting problem that plagues global society today: the rise of hostility and punitive feelings in politics that exacerbates the crisis of liberal democracies. The rise of far-right ideologies and right-wing populism all over the world create breeding grounds for aggression against women in particular. While women in the United States now have to stand up to "presidential misogyny" (Levine, 2017), in Poland they have to confront the far-right government's push for ever-tighter laws for abortion, and in France they are forced to remove their burkini on beach by armed officers. Studying the Turkish case illuminates distinct ways in which male vigilantism aggravate the ongoing crisis of liberal democracies.

This study presents qualitative data from an ongoing project on the transformation of body politics in contemporary Turkey, which draws on a diverse set of data, including figures on vigilantism provided by women's organizations, media reports, and the interviews I carried out June 2017 and March 2018, with

three feminist activists, three lawyers, and ten individual women, who are under the risk of vigilante violence. The article starts with a discussion on the changing use of the concept of backlash in women's studies, then proceed with an outline of recent socio-political developments in Turkey, depicting the right-wing resistance to gender inequality in contemporary Turkey. The core of the article is formed by the third section, which examines, in detail, the basic tenets of vigilante cases. The final section before the conclusion, elaborates on the specificities of women's embodiment in urban Turkey to shed light on the connections between women's agency, body, and the backlash against women. The conclusion revisits and draws some broader implications from my argument about the relationship between vigilantism, backlash, and gender equality.

Backlash against Women: A Conceptual Framework

"The history of feminism is filled with backlashes, but this one looks to be especially bad," writes Katrina Forrester (2017) in her essay entitled Libidinal Politics, referring to the gender politics of Trump Administration. Indeed, a host of thinkers and scholars have begun to resort to the notion of backlash when accounting for the current political phenomena, such as the rise of right-wing populism across the world (Inglehart & Norris, 2016) and the roll back on women's rights (Tharoor, 2018). The term backlash, with the publication of Susan Faludi's famous *Backlash: the Undeclared War against American Women* in 1991 gained popularity on both sides of the Atlantic and made its way into feminist circles, shaping not only the popular, but also scholarly discussions around the politics of gender. Focused on the United States in the 1980s, Faludi argues that backlash against women's rights is not an unprecedented phenomenon in American political history. "Indeed," she wrote, "it's a recurring phenomenon: it returns every time women begin to make some headway toward equality" (Faludi, 1991: 61). The book, aside from carrying a powerful rhetorical value, has also offered a theoretical framework, allowing feminists to comprehend historical transformations, dynamics of social movements, policy changes, and a variety of trends in media and popular culture in terms of reaction and resistance to feminism and gender equality. *Backlash*, on the other hand, drew criticism from feminist scholars for its conceptual weakness (Browne, 2013), the sweeping historical generalizations it made (Walby, 1997), and its underlying assumptions regarding the dualistic structure of power relations (Cudd, 2002). Some acknowledged the historical significance of the concept backlash and favored a more complicated concept of backlash (Browne, 2013), while others expressed strong doubts about the utility as well as the explanatory power of the concept. Some scholars even advocated eliminating the concept altogether (Newson, 1993).

In spite of the heavy criticism backlash attracted, recently there has been a resurgent of scholarly interest in the concept by scholars who wanted to use backlash as an analytical tool with the aim of define an area of inquiry that poses a set of questions for investigation, and provides concepts and hypotheses to

guide research. In their theoretical study, Mansbridge and Shames (2008), for instance, define the concept laying out its distinct components and articulating how backlash differs from ordinary political opposition. Building on Raab's (1978) landmark study on backlash, which conceptualizes backlash as the resistance of power holders to attempts to alter the status quo, Mansbridge and Shames (2008) underscore two features, namely power and challenge to status quo, that are central to the concept of backlash. In their view, there are three distinct components of backlash. First, backlash constitutes a specific form of reaction, a reaction that materializes in response to change. Second, backlash exclusively relies on the use of coercive power. And finally, backlashers aim at restoring their former power and reinstating the status quo. Instead of advocating a loose definition of power, Mansbridge and Shames offer a specific one, limiting its meaning to coercive power. Unlike the ordinary political opposition, "backlash is the use of *coercive power* to regain lost power as capacity" (Mansbridge & Shames, 2008: 625). As a particular reaction to change, backlash manifests itself through various operations of coercive power, ranging from physical violence, such as rape, assassination, and lynching to more oblique forms, such as ridicule, stigmatization, and censure, directed against the agents of change.

A focus on coercive power and the desire to restore former power in analyzing backlash has opened up a venue to examine uncharted dynamics of backlash against women. Studies, in this vein, moved the focus away from social movements and counter-movements towards male violence, a gendered form of coercive power. Naila Kabeer (1999), for instance, suggests that male violence, conventionally regarded as a sign of women's subordination, might, in some cases, be incited by women's enhanced empowerment. Kabeer's remark well resonates with what Bailey and Peterson (1995) call backlash hypothesis. Initial gains in gender equality, Bailey and Peterson found, might aggravate masculinist operations of power, with men increasingly resorting to physical violence to compensate their loss of control over women[2]. Empirical studies, within this framework, investigate whether women's empowerment provoke honor killings (Grzyb, 2016), rape (Avakame, 1999), and spousal violence (Chin, 2012).

A few studies focus on the gendered workings of coercive power during the AKP government and reflect on its implications for the restoration of the gendered status quo in Turkey. Deniz Kandiyoti, for instance, traces the increasing levels of gender violence in Turkey not to the routine and uncontested functioning of patriarchy, but its erosion (Kandiyoti 2016). Violence against women, in her account, stems from an attempt to regain the lost patriarchal power. The pervasiveness and normalization of violence marks a period what Kandiyoti calls masculinist restoration, "when patriarchy is no longer fully secure, and requires higher levels of coercion and the deployment of more varied ideological state apparatuses to ensure its reproduction" (Kandiyoti, 2016: 20).

Contemporary Gender Politics in Turkey: A Backlash against Gender Equality?

Are women really faced with a backlash in Turkey? Can we talk about a masculinist restoration going on? There is already some empirical evidence to suggest that backlash politics is on the rise in Turkey, where a series of comprehensive gender equality policies, implemented in the 2000s, has now become the subject of intense moral-political criticism. In the early 2000s, the AKP government restructured the legal system, with the adoption of a new Civil Code and Penal Code, considerably improving gender equality in the country in response to the mounting pressure of feminist collectives as well as the Turkey's European Union candidacy procession. The new Turkish Civil Code, for instance, according to Deniz Kandiyoti, was "arguably the most progressive legislation for women since the Kemalist reforms of the 1920s and the 1930" (Kandiyoti 2010: 174). Further on, the new penal code introduced in 2004, removed women's body from the clutches of concepts such as public morality, honor, and chastity, by eliminating distinctions between married and unmarried women, or virgins and non-virgins, in addressing sexual crimes, and acknowledging, for the first time, honor-killings as aggravated homicides (Ilkkaracan, 2007). These changes, to be sure, are also reflected in women's increasing educational attainment levels in the early 2000s and in female labor force participation rates, which follow an upward trend in urban areas (Keyder, 2005; Gündüz-Hoşgör & Smits, 2008). The government further eliminated discrimination against women with a change in Higher Education Council regulation in 2007, ending the headscarf ban in the universities. Later in 2013, the government also changed the dress code directives for public offices, finally lifting the long-standing ban on headscarves for women sitting in parliament and working in the public sector.

Despite these momentous changes the AKP government introduced in the 2000s, the President Erdoğan, by 2008, had already become quite outspoken against the principle of gender equality, which he claimed to be alien to native and national culture in Turkey. The President repeatedly declared his faith in the Islamic *fıtrat*, a notion that can be translated as God-given-nature that emphasizes the inherent differences between men and women. Furthermore, particularly since 2007, AKP took a conservative turn in the implementation of gender policies and had reinforced the politics of strengthening the patriarchal family (Acar & Altunok, 2013; Korkman, 2016). A few years later, the AKP government introduced a new paradigm: gender justice[3]. Informed by Quranic notions of fair treatment of genders, the concept of gender justice echoes strongly the pre-modern Ottoman imperial notion of justice, an ideology that serves to justify and reinforce the fundamental hierarchies and differences between Muslim/Non-Muslim, Ruling Elite/People as well as Men/Women. The new legislation introduced in the aftermath of gender justice paradigm includes, allowing Muslim clerics to conduct civil marriages, de-facto ban on abortion at public hospitals, as well as the implementation of protectionist paternalist policies, through which underprivileged women benefit from welfare transfers, primarily as mothers, widows, and caretakers.

It is worth emphasizing that successions of changes, which push gender politics in opposite directions, were implemented within a very short time frame. In *Backlash*, Susan Faludi urges us to pay particular attention to timing, arguing that the timing of backlash is quite specific, materializing before a decisive change occurs, when women's gains are still relatively small. Backlash, according to Faludi, sets in early enough to make sure that women's advances are cut short and the gendered status quo is restored. Seen in this light, the time frame of and the direction of changes in Turkey, when taken as empirical evidence, vouch for the backlash hypothesis. Once we take on board the backlash framework, we can also understand why vigilantism, as a violent masculinist practice, rears its head in the public space just when the social and legal order in Turkey increasingly promotes gender equality. In what follows, I examine, in detail, the basic tenets of eighteen vigilante cases against women documented in 2016 and 2017 to flesh out gender dynamics of vigilante violence in Turkey.

Vigilantism against Women: Findings from Case Studies in Turkey

Vigilantism can be defined as the use or threat of extra-legal violence in response to an alleged criminal act, violation, or transgression and it is an illegal practice under Turkish Penal Code. In examining the occurrences of vigilantism against women in Turkey, I identified remarkable similarities among cases with respect to the gender of vigilantes as well as targets, the location, and the rationale used by vigilantes to justify the attacks, although the violent practices enacted by vigilantes differed, ranging from verbal assaults to brutal physical attacks. To further investigate the similarities among those eighteen cases, my analysis draws particularly on the typology offered by Eduardo Moncada (2017)[4]. The typology he offers opens up a venue to lay out the differences and similarities in vigilante cases by looking at five definitional dimensions of vigilantism: social organization, target, repertoire, justification and motivation. For the purposes of the analysis, I borrow four aspects of vigilantism from Eduardo Moncada, namely, social organization, target, repertoire, and justification[5].

Social Organization: The social organization of vigilantism refers to the social coordination and execution of vigilantism, which can be individual or collective. Vigilante attacks against women in 2016 and 2017 in Turkey demonstrate, to a great extent, a uniform pattern, characterized by individual rather than collective assaults, with the individual men assaulting women in public. In those four cases where the execution of vigilantism is collective, social organization takes the form of small groups of men (usually a group of two to four) that spontaneously enact vigilantism. For instance, in October 2016, a group of civilian men who were sitting at a tea house in the city of Trabzon verbally assaulted another group who were distributing ads for a laser hair removal center on the grounds that the public display of ads featuring *improper* acts such as hair removal violated the norms of Islam (Trabzon'da `epilasyon dinimize aykırı` saldırısı, 2016). When the tension escalated, a man from the group sitting in the tea house fired his gun and shot four people, including a woman,

who was passing by. In another case, a young woman in Istanbul was beaten up by three of her male relatives while she was sitting on a bench in her neighborhood, not because she herself wore shorts but her fiancé, a young man, wore shorts, a behavior, according to the vigilantes, constituted a moral transgression, an affront to masculinity in Turkey (Nişanlısı şort giydi diye, 2017). Although in this case the attackers were identified to be the relatives of the target, in the rest of the cases attackers are not related to the targets.

Repertoire of violence: In occurrences of vigilantism, the practices that individuals or groups make use of to assert their claims on targets constitute the repertoire of violence, which is distinguished into two categories: lethal and non-lethal. Hanging and necklacing are part of the lethal repertoire of violence well-documented throughout history, while non-lethal practices involve beating, whipping, sexual assault, and physical or psychological torture. Incidents of vigilantism in Turkey, with respect to the repertoires of violence, are characterized by non-lethal repertoires of violence, with none of the attacks involving lethal practices. Ten of the cases include physical attacks that resulted in severe bodily harm. A 53-year old woman in Istanbul, for instance, was beaten by a man at a supermarket on the grounds that her style of walking was inappropriate (İstanbul'da bir markette *Düzgün yürü* diyen erkek, 2016). The man broke woman's nose and bruised her arms. In another case, two young women in Izmir, after having been harassed by men, asked for help from two police officers they saw on the street, however, the police officers chastised them for their outfits and said, "You actually deserve more with this outfit. Look at yourselves," and then one of the police officers heavily battered the two women (İzmir'de tacize uğrayan kadını döven polis, 2017). In the rest of the eight cases non-lethal attacks are comprised of verbal attacks, threats, and sexual harassment. In Bursa, for instance, a young woman riding the metro faced with threat of violence after she reacted to a 60-year-old man who swore at a young man for listening to music too loudly through his headphones (Bursaray'daki taciz ve tehdit, 2016). When the young woman told 60-year-old men that she was uncomfortable with his swearing in public, the man angrily shouted, saying: "You know what happened to the woman wearing shorts. It can happen to you too. And you are still talking. Shut your mouth!" The woman with shorts that the man referred to was Ayşegül Terzi, a nurse in Istanbul, who, just a week prior to this incident, was brutally attacked on a bus for wearing shorts.

Target: Targets, a core facet of vigilante violence, are those who are accused of having violated the laws, norms, and mores associated with the order in question, which can be a legal, racialized, gendered, or religious order. In Turkish case, targets of vigilante violence are non-pious looking women, who have purportedly engaged in offensive or transgressive behavior that violates a local gender norm of propriety and modesty. Vigilante men do not actually know whether those women are religious or not, whether they are Sunni or Alevi, whether they believe in God, observe and celebrate religious holidays or fast during the month of Ramadan. Targeted women, however, appear non-pious, in the sense that they are not ostensibly engaged in the project of self-

constitution, in accordance with the local norms of Islamic modesty and they did not wear headscarf[6]. For instance, a civilian man in Istanbul harassed Canan Kaymakçı on the street for wearing "provocative clothing", asking her to dress more conservatively, as she was "turning people on" (Eminönü'de bir kadına kıyafeti bahanesiyle sözlü saldırı, 2017). Similarly, a man kicked Ipek Atcan, a 22-year-old music writer based in Istanbul, at a subway station in Istanbul for her *audacious* bodily comportment, shouting at her, "You can't sit here with your legs crossed like this" (İpek Atcan'a metroda tekmeli saldırı, 2016).

Location: Vigilante attacks mainly recur in densely populated big cities of Turkey, including Istanbul, Izmir, Antalya, Bursa, Adana, and Trabzon. A main feature of these urban zones is that secular and so-called western life styles are quite accepted and prevalent in these regions. Unlike small cities in the hinterland, where the informal social control mechanisms over gender relations are still solid, strict norms of propriety and modesty have eroded in those big cities and the embodied public presence of the women who longer conform to conventional norms about piety and chastity is fairly strong.

Incidents of vigilantism display similarity also in terms of the public character of attacks. All but one of the incidents came about in public spaces, including public transportation, streets, parks, and supermarkets. There was only one event, which, at first glance, seems to have occurred in private sphere, but can be indeed regarded as the public's intervention into private sphere. In this incident, an English teacher in Ankara was collectively harassed by her neighbors and the construction workers working in the vicinity for wearing shorts at home (Evinde şort giydiği için, 2017). Upon the complaints from neighbors, she was visited by apartment building superintendent, who asked her to keep the curtains close when at home. This incident, in which neighbors and workers watch a woman in her own apartment, exposes the extent to which "the public" might feel entitled to enforce norms of propriety. It is also worth noting here that the public character of the vigilantism overlaps with emergent patterns of violence against women in Turkey, which more and more takes place in public places. All the feminist activists and lawyers I interviewed during my research drew attention to this fact. Interviewees stated that incidents of male violence, not just vigilante violence, but also domestic violence, are reported to have taken increasingly in public places. For instance, Bianet, an independent Turkish press agency, which systematically keeps records of male violence in Turkey, created a new set of data in 2016 under the category of "murders committed in public spaces" due to a spike in the incidents of male violence against women in public. According to the data from Bianet, of all the murders covered in media in 2016, 13.5 percent were committed in public spaces including the streets, shopping malls, and workplaces in the presence of witnesses. In 2017, the percent of murders committed in public spaces reached to 17[7].

Justification: Justification concerns how vigilante actors legitimize their actions to the public, which includes witnesses to the action, the media and state officials. Justification perpetrators utilize might range from moral to legal, but often a single desire underlies these divergent justifications: the desire to

reinstate a particular order, whether a legal, racialized, gendered, or religious order one. For instance, in contemporary Indonesia vigilante groups invoke Sharia-based religious norms to justify the violent acts they perpetrated such as, beatings, forced marriages, sexual harassment, and the practice of publicly cleansing accused transgressors with sewage water (Kloos, 2014). The lynching of African Americans in the wake of the US Civil War by white groups, on the other hand, was not linked to the desire to restore a moral order, but instead a racialized one (Tolnay & Beck, 1995). The vigilante violence against African Americans was often justified on the flimsy ground that African Americans transgress informal rules of a racialized hierarchy. Sometimes vigilante perpetrators might even invoke the rule-of-law to justify the extra-legal violence the used. Vigilante gangs in South Africa, for instance, punish drug-dealers for allegedly violating the rule of law (Charney, 1991).

An examination of justifications male vigilantes provide in Turkey attests to the plenitude of moral justifications. Of particular importance here is the perpetrators' desire to regulate a gendered moral order. To this end, some vigilantes explicitly invoke Islamic norms, according to which feminine modesty is both a virtue and a Quranic mandate. In those cases, the use or threat of violence are directed against women for their ostensible transgressions of the codes of Islam. When a man in Istanbul brutally kicked Ayşegül Terzi in the face on a public bus, he ominously shouted, "Those who wear shorts must die" (Şortlu kadına saldırı davasında karar, 2017). Later, in the court, he defended himself by claiming Islamic law demanded he attack the young woman. Likewise, a university student, Asena Melisa Saglam, was on the mini-bus when the man seated behind her struck her in the face. She chased after him but he seized her and pushed her to the back of the mini-bus before fleeing the vehicle. Asena Melissa Sağlam later said that throughout the trip the man had been verbally harassing her by saying she should not be wearing shorts during Ramadan (Asena Melisa Sağlam yalnız değildir!, 2018). In some other cases, however, vigilantes do not explicitly utter Islamic codes, but call upon local understandings of gendered propriety. For instance, Dilay Özel, a 20-year-old young woman, was attacked over smoking cigarettes on the street in Antalya (Laf attı, boğazında sigara söndürdü, 2017). Accompanied by her aunt and mother, Dilay was on her way home just as she overheard a conversation between two angry young men, muttering "Look just how reckless they are. How dare women smoke on the street?" Dilay's aunt, the one actually smoking a cigarette at the moment, chided the men, telling them to mind their own business. One of the men, right there, punched the aunt in the chest and attacked the mother. When Dilay intervened, the man took the lit cigarette and extinguished it on young women's neck. The two male vigilantes who physically attacked the three women on the street did not explicitly invoke Islamic norms, but draw on women's *reckless behavior* and *audaciousness*, that is smoking on the street, which they regard as a violation of localized gender norms.

These incidents, regarding the justifications perpetrators use, show that vigilante cases in Turkey are examples of moral vigilantism, where violence or

threat of violence is cloaked in an appeal to higher moral orders and sovereignties. In other words, vigilante men call upon a moral order, instead of a legal order while giving justifications for their attacks. This, of course, is not surprising given that women's embodied acts, including wearing shorts, smoking cigarettes, sitting cross-legged in public, walking in the supermarket, exercising in parks, and engaging public displays of affection are *not* classified as a range of behaviors that are illegal, criminal, and thus punishable by the state. Besides, the practice of vigilantism is acknowledged as a criminal act under the law in Turkey and in those cases that were taken to courts, vigilante men were convicted of assault and received sentences. The legal order, based on the principle of equality, constraints the masculinist efforts to dominate women, whereas the field of morality, as the vigilante cases in Turkey illustrates, enables male actors to claim and use coercive power over women's bodies. It is against this context, moral transgression becomes a pretext for male violence against women, generating a backlash, in which vigilante men resort exclusively to coercive power to reinstate the moral status quo.

Women's Embodiment and Backlash in Turkey

The analysis of vigilante incidents in Turkey evinces how crucial women's embodiment to the masculinist moral enforcement. The embodied ways women inhabit public places, their demeanor, posture, confidence, elocution, dresses, and bodily comportment, seem to offend men and incite vigilantism. In other words, vigilante men take women's embodied capacities as signs of moral transgression and punish women for their alleged transgressions. The centrality of women's embodiment to vigilantism, in that regard, forces us to further investigate the links between women's embodiment, vigilantism, and backlash against women. Here I turn to phenomenology, especially its feminist and anti-racist strands, which render transparent the connection between body and structures of power. Juxtaposing phenomenology with vigilante studies and the backlash literature also helps us to see the link between women's agency and backlash by showing that women's body targeted by vigilantes is also the locus of women's agency.

Phenomenological studies powerfully demonstrate that the body is wedded to the structural power relations and that one's embodied experience is always undergirded by complex histories of race, class, and gender. Looking at feminine comportment, in her ground-breaking 1980 essay entitled Throwing like a Girl, Iris Marion Young, for instance, expanded on how woman's bodily hesitancy, timidity and uncertainty are intimately linked with the structures of patriarchy. "Women in sexist societies," she wrote, "are physically handicapped. In so far as we learn to live our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified" (Young, 1980: 152). The sexist society by splitting woman into two, an object and a subject, creates a profound tension for woman: she opens up to the world with the aim of realizing a task with a sense of agency, but at the same time, she

stiffens, holding herself back, the objectification leaving her with a heavy sense of incapacity. In a similar way, studies on racialized embodiment elaborating on the ways in which racial privilege fosters spatial entitlement, point out how white people are able to inhabit a variety of spaces and places and move through those spaces confidently without the fear of experiencing any obstructions, an embodied mode of being, which Shannon Sullivan defines as ontological expansiveness in her work *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*. The ontological expansiveness described by Sullivan is indeed also on full display in men's act of manspreading, a term that describes the tendency for some men to sit with their legs wide apart, a version of man's excessive entitlement to space[8].

If, by looking at body, we can understand one's place in the social hierarchy, then by the same logic, by looking at the bodies, we can trace the shifts in social and gendered hierarchies, and grasp, for instance, the embodied expressions of gender equality. With a phenomenological lens, it is also possible to identify embodied dimensions of agency. Women's agency finds its expression not just in woman's employment status, disposable income, participation in decision-making as well as politics, but also, in their embodied way of being in the world and with others. The body is shaped by social and political forces. However, it is never a passive receiver of those forces. Rather, it responds to the world in accordance with the capacities it is invested with. The body responds, for instance, to concrete tasks by shrinking away from them or by relaxing into them. An explosion might elicit fear response at bodily level, a racing heart, a tightened chest, and widened eyes. Likewise, a sense of agency, a sense of capacity, grants body a particular stance, comportment, direction, orientating the self in the world.

In contemporary Turkey, one can readily observe this embodied dimension of agency by attending the ways in which women inhabit spaces in urban zones. Woman no longer experiences her body as a burden to be dragged along and sheltered at the same time. Rather, her body expresses a sense of uninhibitedness. The way she walks, her stride not hesitant, her gait sure, her posture erect, becomes embodied markers of her agency and her capabilities. The way she dresses, the colorful attire and an array of styles and fits she observes, also unearths this embodied agency. Unlike her grandmother who was not supposed to wander freely on the streets, she now walks on the street in skinny jeans, Converse sneakers, or ballet flats, with her colorful headphones on, heading to work. After work, she visits shopping malls, meets with friends at a café, or take the bus late at night to return home after a date. In all these quotidian moments, she carries herself with ease, not feeling constrained in the urban space. Even late at night on the bus, her shoulders do not slump and her arms do not move in front of her body, because she does not feel the need to hide her breasts. Neither does she feel the need to lower her head and eyes down, when exposed to the piercing male gaze. Often, she looks away, pretending that she did not notice it. Sometimes, though, she returns the gaze, looking back defiantly straight into the pupils of the man. There she is; neither timid, nor inhibited, but gravitates towards those modes characterized by self-

assurance. Seen in this light, women's embodied capacities, such as demeanor, posture, confidence, elocution, dress, which serve as a pretext for vigilante attacks, indeed manifest the agency women attained in contemporary Turkey. In other words, her body marks her agency.

All these changes in women's embodied modes of being are closely connected with larger political and economic changes that transformed the established hierarchies of gender in Turkey over the last two decades. The legal order that the AKP government greatly improved in the early 2000s altered, the moral context of gender relations among other things. Those changes uncoupled women's body from a moral order based on public morality, honor, and chastity, enhancing women's bodily autonomy. In addition, under the global economic restructuring, a significant shift has taken place in employment opportunities from manufacturing to services, from muscle power to cultural capital, and from male to female, which have drawn more women into labor market in urban areas (Keyder, 2005). The new urban economy dominated by the service sector, which seizes on women's embodied and interactive capacities, has also made women less encumbered with the weight of conventional notions of feminine propriety, allowing them to articulate and express new embodied modes of being, compatible with gender equality.

It is worth repeating here that the public presence of women, who no longer conform to conventional norms about modesty, is particularly accentuated in the big cities and that vigilante violence incidents almost exclusively recur in those big cities. Women's embodied acts, including wearing shorts, smoking cigarettes, sitting cross-legged in public, engaging public displays of affection, and exercising in parks, all these express women's enhanced agency, an embodied agency marked with ease and self-assurance. And this is what offends men, inciting vigilante attacks, and unleashing a wave of backlash against women in Turkey, which finds its disturbing expression in the masculinist enforcement of morality in public. Because the body is the locus of women's agency, backlash is directed against women's bodies. This backlash, on the one hand, subjects women and their bodies to the operations of coercive power but on the other hand, it establishes unmistakably the fact that the gendered status quo has already been unsettled in Turkey.

Conclusion

This article have presented empirical data on male vigilantism against women in contemporary Turkey and found that vigilantism in Turkey is an exclusively masculine practice carried out by individual men or small groups of men (usually a group of two to four) who, invoking a moral order or higher moral sovereignties, target non-pious-looking women navigating the public places in densely populated big cities. I argue that despite its focus on issues of morality, especially on feminine propriety, vigilantism is in fact a component of the contemporary political backlash against women, which results from and responds to women's agency improved remarkably in the early 2000s through the gender equality

legislation and global economic restructuring. While gender equality, now well-entrenched in the legal order and widely accepted in the social life in big urban zones, constraints the masculinist efforts to dominate women, the field of morality enables male actors to claim and use coercive power over women's bodies. Consequently, the current backlash takes the form of masculinist enforcement of morality in public.

In accounting for the current backlash in Turkey, I have sought throughout the article to demonstrate the utmost significance of focusing on women's embodiment, by drawing on philosophical insight from the phenomenological analysis of sexism and racism. I have advocated, for instance, for a complex understanding of bodies. The body is a site of power, with the clash of political projects being acted out over woman's body. However, body is also the locus of agency, expressing woman's capacities as well as her sense of being in the world. Such an understanding of body that I employed has offered a theoretical anchor to uncover the connection between women's agency and backlash in Turkey. By examining the vigilante practices, I also hope to have carved out a space at the intersection of vigilante studies, backlash literature and phenomenology-a space in which scholars can engage with the urgent questions of embodiment and the political backlash against women.

Gender equality, without doubt, empowers women, helping them exercise agency. However, when women exhibit agency, they risk facing a backlash. One might regard this as the peril of improving gender equality in precarious political regimes and hierarchical social formations saturated by workings of power, violence, and exclusion. Individuals and groups, making use of coercive means resist antagonistically to women's agency. This reaction, by counteracting women's gains, evolves into a backlash taking many shapes, operating in different spheres, and attaining a trajectory of its own. It is important for future research to empirically investigate the direction, trajectory, and variegated manifestations of backlash as well as the collusion between male backlashers and political power. Such an analysis will offer valuable insights into the links between reproduction of gender inequality and the current crisis of liberal democracies.

Notes

[1] In my reliance of the term masculinist, I draw on Wendy Brown's work on the state power and manhood. In an article entitled *Finding the Man in the State*, Brown (1992) uses the term to masculinist to describe the gendered modality of state power. According to Brown, masculinism, as distinct from the power of men, refers to the fact that "multiple dimensions of socially constructed masculinity have historically shaped the multiple modes of power circulating through the domain called the state" (Brown, 1992: 14).

[2] This line of analysis also finds its echo in masculinity studies, which elaborate the notion of the crisis of masculinity. The term crisis of masculinity refers to a profound shift in the gender order prompted by a sea of changes in employment, family, legal structures, and the rise of second wave feminism in the second half of the 20th century, which resulted in women's higher educational attainment, rising labor force participation, and the erosion of patriarchal status quo. This profound shift in gender order triggered a crisis in men characterized by anxieties over gender identity, work, and perceived loss of power, which often resulted in violent and hostile behavior toward self and others. For more detailed accounts on the crisis of masculinity please see, Connell (1995) and Castells (1997).

[3] For a detailed account of gender justice and why it is conceptualized as an alternative to gender equality please see Yılmaz (2015).

[4] I use the typology offered by Eduardo Moncada (2017) largely because his account synthesizes different scholarly approaches to vigilantism.

[5] This study does not focus on the motivation dimension of vigilantism, which refers to why an actor engages in vigilantism. Closely linked with but also analytically distinct from justification, motivation refers to the rationale used by vigilantes to frame and legitimize their behavior in public. Motivation cannot easily be read off of the justifications provided by the vigilantes and addresses personal desires, longings, frustrations of the actors. Such an analysis requires a different set of data such as data gathered from in-depth interviews with vigilantes, which is beyond the scope of my study.

[6] That said, however, not all the women who wear headscarf adhere strictly to the codes of feminine propriety.

[7] Çiçek Tahaoğlu (personal communication, March 21, 2018), an editor from Bianet, provided the data.

[8] Sociologists who are inspired by phenomenology also accounted for the links between bodies and social hierarchies. Bourdieu, for instance, urges us to see class politics simultaneously as body politics. His notion of habitus asks us to consider bodily processes, appearance, dress, bodily posture, gait, handshake, eye contact, and emotional responses as relations of power in class societies. These hierarchies of class, to be sure, interact with that of race, ethnicity and gender, which are also incorporated into the body. "Bodies are", Beverly Skeggs writes, "the physical sites where relations of class, gender, race, sexuality, and age come together" (Skeggs, 2004, p. 82).

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