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Women officials of the Turkish Diyanet: Gendered transformations and predicaments of empowerment?

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ABSTRACT

The Presidency of Religious Affairs (the Diyanet) is a unique bureaucratic structure authorized to address the religious service needs of citizens in Turkey's secular system. For a long time, it was characterized by underrepresentation of women in its ranks. The longstanding quest of educated religious women for recognition of their expertise and integration into this institution coincided with a policy reorientation in the early 2000s, to expand the Diyanet's appeal for women through its enlightenment and educational functions. Under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) governments, the issue of gender disparity has been addressed through a new strategy of increasingly recruiting women graduates from Theology faculties. However, despite a 'feminization' process undertaken via the pro-women reforms of its organizational structure, the Diyanet's institutional and political-ideological limitations are intertwined with prevailing gender norms and patriarchal conventions. This article inquires into the gendered dynamics and predicaments that have constrained the status and roles of its women officials and impacted their empowerment prospects. Nevertheless, as women have started to exercise religious authority with men in the Diyanet's enduring male-dominated structure, the recognition for their expertise, professional commitment, and the potential impact of their work have reinforced the social significance of women's roles.

KEYWORDS Religious authority; the diyanet; women's recruitment; gender bias; male-domination; empowerment

Introduction

One type of patriarchal mechanism whereby women are discriminated against in Muslim-majority societies pertains to institutionalized domains of religious authority and organization of rituals and religious knowledge. The case of secular Turkey is no exception with respect to women's underrepresentation in public and semi-public bodies of religious scholarship and

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administration. With its distinctive institutional position as the official nexus between the secular state and society, the Turkish Diyanet (the Presidency of Religious Affairs) has been carrying out administrative functions of guidance and performance of rituals in religious and non-religious sectors. Since the early Republican period in the country, under the westernization and secularization reforms, gender equality in access to professional realms has always been central to women's emancipation. Pious women's educational and professional attainments, which progressed somewhat later, have ushered in prospects for their empowerment and agency, thereby facilitating egalitarian changes regarding religiously informed gender practices. However, the Diyanet was established with the objective of reconciling religious beliefs and secular practices of citizens and has retained a male-dominant structure, as seen in its composition and the authority it represents. In the early 2000s, it adopted a pro-women recruitment policy for its educational and religious service functions, culminating in the appointment of its first-ever female deputy-president in 2017.

This article aims at investigating the gendered formal and informal context of women's inclusion in the Diyanet as religious officials for conducting a wide range of missions, along with a visible policy reorientation under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) governments, as of the early 2000s. It examines the roles of its women officials to understand the gendered institutional dynamics that have generated dilemmas for them in their new roles of guiding people who look to them to find both meaning in faith and solutions to their problems in a patriarchal society. The significance of women's empowerment in the Diyanet's unique institutional setting as a complex administrative entity is twofold: First, by embodying the secular state's accommodation of religious patriarchy, this institution has not been conventionally in the forefront of advocating a particularly progressive gender order, given its religious and orthodox approach. Second, women's greater integration into its structure as religious experts, Quran course instructors, preachers, and deputy-muftis, with considerable resources and institutional backing, have been longstanding demands of educated religious women. These also imply recognition of their scholarly expertise in religion and equal civil rights in the secular public sphere. Their struggles for inclusion in the public sphere, given their pious identities, have also signified a quest for empowerment to reclaim their rights to influence society by exercising official authority, along with men. The Diyanet's female officials have thus defied the submissive status attributed to them and today have become role models for many religious women.

In both Turkey and elsewhere in the Muslim world, women have traditionally assumed unofficial roles in communities as preachers, teachers, and interpreters of religious texts (Kalmach, 2012; Rausch, 2012; Uzar Özdemir, 2017). Nevertheless, recently the growing acceptance for women's

participation in various realms of Islamic authority, including mosques, has heralded significant changes in the patriarchal organization of the public religious sphere. Ranging from secular Indonesia to countries that have Islamic governments such as Morocco and Egypt, the promotion of women as figures of religious authority has provoked debates in both secular and Islamic circles about the implications of such initiatives for transforming women's roles and status.¹ In Indonesia, the employment of women *ulema* have ushered in prospects for progressive religious interpretations of women's rights (Rinaldo, 2017), whereas in Morocco, their appointment has been criticized as a state-sponsored project for women's advancement in Islam (El Haitami, 2013). Similarly, in Egypt the inclusion of women preachers and women in the governing boards of mosques have been central to the governmental strategy of preventing extremist movements from gaining strength through more effective scrutiny of the public religious sphere (El Tohamy, 2018). In the Turkish case, the appointment of female preachers and female deputy-muftis in 2004 and 2007 respectively, has been significant in revitalizing the Diyanet's religious guidance mission of combating social problems that threaten the family and for supporting women "in the realm of belief, religious practice, and moral values" (Karaman, 2005, p. 41).

Organizational realms of academic, bureaucratic and political institutions have been sites of "institutional sexism," denoting gender discrimination through "explicit rules and implicit norms governing and structuring social institutions" (Cudd & Jones, 2005, p. 109). Gendered hierarchies and discriminatory practices stemming out of sex-role differentiation strengthen "normative masculinist cultures." Women's underrepresentation and horizontal segregation often work through prejudice, ignorance, and stereotyping within organizations (Riley et al., 2006). It can therefore be hypothesized that the Diyanet's long-standing gendered norms and expectations, which represent direct and indirect forms of institutional sexism, are likely both to shape the implementation of its pro-women policy and impact its female officials who exercise authority with men as agents of the state. The objective of this article is to examine the resilient gendered institutional dynamics in the androcentric structure of the Diyanet, following its adoption of a gender-inclusive policy. Accordingly, the theoretical departure point of my analysis is informed by the insights of feminist neo-institutionalism, which identifies institutionalized gender dynamics as a critical context in the adoption and implementation of equality policies or reforms and the resistance against them (Mackay et al., 2010).

Policies oriented to altering existing configurations of gender relations are themselves shaped by gendered power relations (Mackay et. al, 2010). For understanding the outcomes and implications of institutional change, using a gender lens, some studies have been engaged in analyses of the interplay between formal institutions, officially sanctioned rules/ procedures and

informal institutions, norms and practices which operate without official endorsement. From a neo-feminist institutionalist perspective, the power of informal institutions in reinforcing gender discriminatory formal institutions stems out of existing gender norms about masculinity and femininity and bolsters the supplementary roles of women, while allocating decision-making roles to men in institutions. Informal institutions are likely to prevent or facilitate formal change in rules, and “institutionalized forms of male bias” obstruct positive formal gender change (Waylen, 2014, pp. 215-216). Policies of western governments for promoting women’s employment during the two world wars were undertaken for instrumental reasons and sometimes followed up by initiatives for changing informal gender norms such as feminine dress codes (Waylen, 2014, p. 218). The implementation of egalitarian policies or reforms involves “a complex constellation of state and non-state actors,” producing “a wide range of outputs or practices,” which need to be assessed by considering the original content of the policy and the sources of resistance in the institutional context (Mazur, 2017, p. 73). Consequently, as formal and informal institutions interact in complex ways, the implementation of gender-progressive policies often produces mixed outcomes and may fall short of transforming prevailing norms and practices.

In Turkey, the Diyanet’s new pro-women recruitment strategy was initially formulated and presented as a positive discrimination policy, recognizing the need to expand its services for and maximize its appeal among women in view of a pro-family vision and concern. Aiming at promoting women as both subjects and objects of its policies, by compensating for its organizational shortcomings, the policy objective itself was modest. Nevertheless, it heralded a ‘feminization’ process, with formal alterations in its institutional set-up that paved the way for prospective and enduring changes in the institutional dynamics of its central structure and local branches. In pursuing the consequences of the transformation of an administrative religious institution through its shifting policy priorities on women, this study seeks to understand the implications of such change in the opportunities and, more importantly, the dilemmas it has generated for its women officials. To this end, firstly, this essay contextualizes women’s entrance into the Diyanet by delineating their past struggles in the public sphere, and the rise of a new service agenda and recruitment policy under the AKP governance.

Then, against the background of the Diyanet’s peculiar bureaucratic status, I demonstrate how the conventional gender gap regarding women’s participation and the gender-biased dynamics of its new policy have created invisible resistance against the transformation of gender hierarchies. A process-tracing approach is adopted here to review the trajectory of the Diyanet’s pro-women policy and identify its underlying social, politico-ideological and institutional limitations in order to account for the constraints imposed

on its women officials. The process-tracing approach in qualitative analysis of case studies emphasizes description, causes and sequence of events (Collier, 2011). This study first provides a discussion of the peculiar institutional context of the Diyanet with a gender perspective. It uses process-tracing methodology and highlights the significance of factors underlying this pro-women transformation for the institution, most notably its responsiveness to conservative women's demands and recognition of its services in public perceptions.

In addition, I seek to examine factors that shaped the new policy. This is problematized in terms of formal and informal patriarchal norms, institutionalized gendered power dynamics, and the Diyanet's growing politicization under a government that has adopted conservative gender approach to equality. Thus, a historical perspective is combined with a description of the institutional shortcomings that produced gendered consequences during the implementation of the new policy. To this end, apart from secondary sources on women religious officials, the documents examined in this study include the Diyanet publications on women and gender issues, its activity reports, press releases, and strategy documents; statements made by it and by government officials regarding its policies, objectives and projects; published interviews and news items on the views and experiences of its women officials; and media coverage on the organization's declarations on women and the family. All of these reflect both the diversity in public expectations from the Diyanet and the controversies generated by it.

The institutional context and gender distinctions

As a bureaucratic public service institution, the Diyanet was created in 1924 to administer worship activities and provide religious guidance in accordance with the principle of secularism and freedom of religion and conscience (Tarhanli, 1993, p. 42). Early republican secularization reforms and policies aimed at confining religious belief to the individual conscience of citizens. Since preventing threats of religious fundamentalism in time emerged as a major concern for the secular ruling elite, the Diyanet was also structured to control the public face of Islam in the country.² To this end, the dissemination of true Islamic knowledge via "the training of qualified religious staff emancipated from fanaticism" entailed regulation of appointments of officials, imams (prayer leaders) preachers, muezzin and, muftis.³ Strict controls were also imposed on the content of religious sermons and the organization of religious rituals (Kaya, 2018, p. 84; Tarhanli, 1993 p. 50). To guide citizens about what was required for pious Muslims, its officials address the daily inquiries of interested persons through hotline services for *fatwas* (religious decrees on individual questions), publications, and religious broadcasting services.

In Turkey's secular state structure, the Diyanet has not represented religious authority by law as it has no power without state support (Kaya, 2018, p. 133). Nevertheless, its intermediary position between political authority and religious beliefs and practices has made its functions controversial, owing to its representation via state-sponsored religiosity and the endorsement of the majority *Sunni* faith. Moreover, although the Diyanet presidents have had relative autonomy in managing the internal affairs of the organization, their appointment by the executive authorities has rendered it open to government influence (Gozaydin, 2009, p. 282).

Beyond the contentious issues, the Diyanet, over the decades, has become one of the most complex bureaucratic entities in the state structure, commanding a generous budget and vast human resources. Despite its indispensability in the eyes of the general public, there has always been a steady expectation for improvement in its services and for a more pluralist, inclusive and transparent structure (Cakir & Bozan, 2005; KONDA, 2014; Tarhanli, 1993). The public standing of its mosque officials, preachers and imams has not been high due to deficiencies in religious knowledge and self-confidence as well as prejudices about their civil servant status (Çakır & Bozan, 2005, p.33). Public ambivalence regarding the quality of its enlightenment services (Kaya, 2018, p. 123) relates to the conservatism and narrow-mindedness of its provincial mosque officials (Sevva, 2003, p.5). As noted in the annual activity reports of the Diyanet, some of these shortcomings, especially the ongoing deficiencies in educational qualifications of its provincial functionaries, have not been overcome (Diyanet, 2019, p. 175). The organization's endorsement of orthodoxy, reflecting Sunni-Islamic sources and traditions regarding gender relations, has meant that the westernizing, positivist and developmentalist gender regime of the Republic accommodated Islamic norms. The Diyanet upheld conservative gender norms in constructing the pious identity of women, notably through its education and enlightenment activities. Its provincial male religious officials have even continued to oppose gender equality, viewing it as incompatible with the spirit of Islamic sources (Sevva, 2003, p. 39). As women detractors from both within and outside the Diyanet have emphasized, its male-dominated structure and androcentric interpretations of religion have perpetuated exclusion of females from holding authoritative ranks within it and in its educational and service departments (Bilgin, 2005, p. 134; Sucu, 2005, p. 93).

It is important to note, as Gozaydin (2009) has rightly contended, that although the Diyanet has been utilized by successive governments as an "ideological instrument," its embeddedness in society has also engendered its own institutional dynamics (p. 305). Although the institution does not represent independent religious authority to reflect doctrinal debates in Islamic knowledge, its educational and enlightenment functions have necessitated understanding of beliefs and practices deriving from scientific knowledge

(Gormez, 2008, p. 248). However, indicative of a major institutional basis in its conventional gender deficit, the Diyanet has not engaged itself with an inclusionary concern to engage with theological scholarship. A major aspect of this failure that has brought about gender discrimination, has been the exclusion of women theologians from its highest and academic organ, the Higher Council of Religious Affairs, which is authorized to provide religious opinion. In the past, this body has taken decisions that have constrained women's citizenship rights and so has been orthodox regarding gender relations. For example, its official view, declared in 1993, was that head covering was a religious rule for Muslim women. However, as underlined by a prominent women theologian, this official stand has not provided any solutions for the predicaments of covered women who were excluded from the universities (Bilgin, 2005, p. 137). Far from aiming at promoting a pluralist approach towards progressive readings of Islamic sources on women,⁴ the Diyanet's institutionally precarious position has forced it to "walk a tightrope" by reflecting Islamic sources without conflicting with governments and antagonizing religious groups (Landman, 2020, p. 87).

The other strand in the Diyanet's conventional gender distinctions, which was an indirect consequence of both its orthodoxy regarding women and its peculiar institutional structure, has led to under-representation of women in the sphere of religious guidance. This was characterized by the informal institutional gendered norms of male-domination in recruitment and administrative policy. This in turn bolstered the institutional status quo and downgraded the capacity of formally educated women in spheres of religious leadership. For a long time, very few women preachers were recruited, most of whom served as voluntary preachers after 1967. As of 1997, there were only 27 officially employed female preachers, and this left the realm of sermons and spiritual guidance to devout women who were based locally, and to those of various Islamic communities and cults that were unofficially acknowledged as sources of knowledge and guidance (Uzar Ozdemir, 2017; Cakir & Bozan, 2005). Moreover, this institutional gender status quo, which had limited appeal and inadequate services for women, was justified by the Diyanet on grounds that women were not part of the regular mosque prayer community (Cakir & Bozan, 2005).

Women's quest for public inclusion and the rise of positive discrimination

For more than three decades, given the deepening political polarization of the secular sectors and Islamic circles in Turkey mobilized by Islamic parties, headscarves worn by religious university students became major markers of identity politics (Ozcetin, 2009, p. 110). The headscarf restrictions introduced by the military regime in the early 1980s, were extended into the

democratization process in the 1990s.⁵ The ensuing political conflict led to a heated controversy regarding female students in headscarves in educational institutions of the secular state. This remained unresolved for a long time due to the tug-of-war between the Islamists and the secularists (Arat & Pamuk, 2019, pp. 82-83). The latter, for their part, were characterized by high levels of distrust of the former as they felt threatened by them. As a result, female students started to reclaim their rights to education without giving up the headscarves they wore as a sign of their religious identity. They did this more vocally than ever before as a human rights issue, until the pro-Islamic AKP gained power.⁶ Throughout this period, the Prayer Leader and Preacher Schools (İHLs), the largest recruitment pool for the Diyanet, were also a favorite choice for the daughters of conservative families due to religious sensitivities. Established in 1924, although the İHLs had formally started to accept female students in 1976, their weight in the educational system had been expanding under successive right-wing governments from the 1950s (Bozan, 2006). Under the hardened headscarf restrictions, the number of female students (most of whom were İHL graduates) registered in Theology Faculties started to outnumber male students (Furat, 2012). Along with their surge into higher education and because of the deprivation they had endured, their protests against headscarf bans evolved into a quest for agency for educated religious women. Female graduates of these faculties as well as the İHLs, who had also been deprived of public employment, started to challenge both the Islamist men for downplaying their struggles as women and the narrow-mindedness of the secularists for victimizing and stigmatizing them because of their pious identities (Keskin, 2002, p. 250; Özcetin, 2009).

Consequently, by the early 2000s, some conservative women started to engage with the question of their empowerment in the religious sphere through educational and solidarity associations in civil society.⁷ As women graduates of İHLs and Theology Faculties, they problematized their exclusion from the Diyanet, whose ranks were still closed to female religious experts in authoritative positions at its provincial structure and headquarters.⁸ In 2004 over a hundred women were recruited as preachers, followed by the appointment of two women deputy-muftis in Ankara and Kayseri provinces in the following year. They were recruited through a rigorous selection process and were integrated into in-service training, following an amendment in the Diyanet's internal code that governed its personnel hiring policy.⁹

The shift in policy that enabled the inclusion of women officials was marked by a new strategy for the Diyanet, summed up as 'reaching women through women' through the Family Guidance Bureaus opened in 2003.¹⁰ This was evident in the emphasis placed by its President, Professor Bardakoglu, on "women's enlightenment and education with the right religious knowledge" by female religious officials ("Kadın Din Görevlileri," 2006). This

change struck a chord among the women theologians who considered the pro-women recruitment policy as indicating a change in mentality for overcoming gender stereotypes that were unfavorable for women's public roles (Halici, 2006), and for breaking the male-dominated religious tradition (Özkan, 2005). By 2008, women religious officials in the Diyanet's central and local staff reached 4.5 percent of its personnel, with the hiring of hundreds of female preachers, seven female deputy-muftis, and women officials who were sent to foreign missions (Gozaydın, 2009, 107-108). At the local mufti offices, most women worked as preachers and religious consultants and were largely assigned to the Family Guidance Bureaus in all provinces under the Directorate of Religious Services. In 2009, the organization framed its project in terms of "a positive discrimination policy," implying its determination to facilitate women's inclusion further into its ranks ("Diyanet-ten Kadına," 2009).

Following the enhancement of the Diyanet's institutional status in the state administration in 2010, with greater human and budgetary resources for its expanded social services, educated religious women in the civil society sought a continuation of this pro-women policy through the appointment of women to the Higher Council of Religious Affairs and new openings for women religious experts (Hazar Association, 2010).¹¹ In this period, there was a significant increase in the number of female officials, especially in provincial branches of the Diyanet. This led women to comprise 10 percent of the total staff in its headquarters in Ankara and 17 percent in its provincial units.¹² However, women's recruitment continued to be concentrated in the educational units; between 2010 and 2017, the number of women in the department of education rose from eight to 64 (Yildirim et.al., 2018, p. 86).

Although there was an expected surge in women seeking religious guidance services, a strikingly gendered pattern was manifested by the asymmetry in power and a predominance of men in supervising religious services. In fact, the gender gap in official positions was marked by a visible vertical and horizontal segregation: Male officials predominantly occupied decision-making, strategic and other prestigious positions in the Diyanet's central office, whereas women were confined to lower level positions in local branches, despite a 382 percent increase in female staff in the provinces between 2010 and 2017 (Yildirim et al., 2018, pp. 85 -89). When the first female deputy-muftis were appointed in 2007, there were only 76 preachers, 2,374 Quran instructors, and 54 religious service experts who were women. Between 2000 and 2018, the proportion of female preachers rose from 6 per cent to 31 per cent. Hence, a horizontal gender segregation was consolidated when women preachers and Quran course educators surpassed the number of administrative high-level bureaucratic positions in local branches as well as at the headquarters of the Diyanet.

In its Strategy Report (2012-2016), the Diyanet underlined the significance of its pro-women policy in terms of the need “to diversify its services and to expand them to reach different sections of the society” (as cited in Furat, 2012, p. 186). Nevertheless, it can be contended that gendered segregation within its ranks has ushered in an indirect institutional resistance to women’s integration into its structure on equal terms with men, despite emphasis on meritocracy in recruitment to improve the quality of religious services. In fact, this resistance was visible from the very beginning in the insistence by senior male officials that women’s roles were those of subsidiary functionaries. They also claimed that the appointment of female muftis was out of the question (Karaman, 2005, p.39). In the early 2000s, when the new policy was initiated, even a cursory glance at how the issue was framed by official or non-official religious or secular actors, demonstrated different approaches to and expectations regarding female deputy-muftis, for example, on whether they could issue *fatwa* and whether or not they should wear headscarves (Yıldız & Gökçe, 2004).

Discriminatory gender norms that constituted the ideational basis of the Diyanet’s gender-segregated structure have largely worked in its informal institutional dynamics, based on ingrained patriarchal notions about the social significance of the feminine identities of its women officials. This was epitomized in closing the positions of mufti for women who were then relegated to the roles of guidance and for facilitating contact with women. There was no legal impediment in their becoming muftis and, in fact, officially deputy muftis were authorized to deliver *fatwa* and sermons and lead prayers in the absence of the former (Konarili, 2019). Nevertheless, the prevailing gendered pattern in the allocation of official positions to women reflected gender-biased norms, informed by religious traditions, in the organizational practices of the Diyanet.

Formal acceptance and passive resistance: Gender-bias and institutional constraints

With progress in its pro-women policy, the Diyanet highlighted its new policy objectives for the prevention of discrimination against women, increase in its female personnel, and improvement of mosques to accommodate women, children and young people.¹³ Nevertheless, as it has been rightly contended by scholars, the Diyanet’s elevated status in state administration and social visibility after 2010 have not turned it into a “more representative and democratic structure” (Somer, 2015, p. 38). Although the representation of academics within the Diyanet has always reflected positively vis-à-vis its public standing as an institution that promotes public trust, research has continued to indicate its institutional shortcomings in reflecting social diversity, interfering in political issues, and its politicization (KONDA, 2014, p.8).¹⁴ In particular,

its vulnerability to influence by governments has been problematized by its own officials and presidents in view of the issue of institutional autonomy (Anatolian news agency, 2014, October 10). Amidst these concerns and despite the trend of a quantitative increase in the numbers of women as religious functionaries, the Diyanet's gendered deficits have not been overcome. Moreover, its policy became more contentious, particularly due to its endorsement of the government's increasingly conservative gender agenda.

The quest for professional recognition, resisting institutional sexism, and invisible barriers

Women preachers and deputy-muftis have challenged the conventional reservations of the Islamic and secular sections in Turkey regarding religious women's increasingly professionalized public roles in guiding the community (Hassan, 2011; Maritato, 2015, Tutuncu, 2010). With the increasing number of women preachers, the realm of religious guidance for them has shifted to new domains of social service, extending beyond the mosques and masjids. They have been assigned to prisons, dormitories, factories, hospitals orphanages, and women's guesthouses. Well-equipped in religious knowledge, fluent in Arabic and well versed in sociology and culture, preachers have used their oratory talents to participate in conferences and panels, teaching courses for the Diyanet's internal training programs and in Quranic seminars. They have also started to respond to individual queries in the Family and Religious Counseling Bureaus at the local mufti offices. Praising the performance of the Diyanet's new women officials, its President Professor Bardakoglu credited women's "better social communication skills," which introduced "a new dynamism" into its religious services ("Kadın Din Görevlileri," 2006). Given the conventional absence of women in visible official positions in Diyanet, thanks to the relentless and patient work of women preachers and deputy-muftis in their respective spheres and who often took the initiative to organize activities for women, their professional competence came to be recognized by their male colleagues. Recounting their challenges, Belgin Konarili one of the first female deputy muftis appointed to this position in the conservative town of Konya in 2005, contended that male officials initially did not take women deputy-muftis seriously and considered them as token figures or "window-dressing." Female deputy-muftis on their part were aware of their responsibilities and the challenge of being role models for future female recruits to the institution (Konarili, 2019).

According to Kadriye Erdemli, the first woman deputy-mufti to be appointed in Istanbul in 2007, the new policy was motivated by the need to "generate the woman's perspective in religious services." In her opinion, women could one day also serve as women muftis and as Presidents of the Diyanet (Ozvaris, 2011). However, back in 2004 a former head of the

Diyanet referred to the prospect of women muftis as “fanatical” on grounds that their appointment would go against traditions (Yildiz & Gokce, 2004). Acknowledging the weight of such sexist biases and informal norms within the institution, promoted by Islamic circles and social norms regarding women’s subordinate public roles, Hidayet Sefkatli Tuksal a leading woman theologian was of the opinion that women within the Diyanet would be discouraged to accept high-level authority positions due to “the male-dominated mentality and authoritarian male muftis” (Ozkan, 2005). The masculinist bias against women in authority was evident in the fervent reactions to the new policy by conservative male Islamic scholars outside the institution (Eygi, 2011). Within the Diyanet headquarters, dealing with sexist prejudices against women in its male-dominated structure has also proved to be a major challenge. A few years later, reflecting on her initial experience as one of the first female department heads in 2011, the former deputy mufti Belgin Konarili (2019) expressed her frustrations in her published memoirs regarding the resistance women experienced vis-à-vis the lower echelons of the organization, as follows:

... The two of us were the first female department heads in the history of the Diyanet ... It was as if all eyes were on us ... There were such moments when we felt that we were riding against the current. The first reactions to our suggestions and choices used to be negative, with “But, no, this is not possible, *hocam* (madam teacher).” When we asked for reasons for such objections, they would not give a valid answer ... In their eyes, we were just ‘the women on top.’ Yet, we never lost our motivation despite such hindrances, after all we had been used to these for years ... The biggest problem was our male colleagues who had been raised in traditionalist structures, and so were not used to pious women in administrative positions in their families and immediate environments ... (p. 196).

Sexist prejudices among the general public were widely prevalent, especially at the beginning when appointments of women preachers were expanded. As Istanbul’s first female deputy-mufti, Ms. Erdemli, reflected on the problems women faced in the mufti offices, where preaching used to be recognized as a man’s job:

... Our society has not been used to women religious functionaries ... Even in respectable circles we used to hear that they had seen a woman divinity expert as a preacher for the first time. But after listening to me, they started to make positive comments. There were also those who advised us to go home and to obey our husbands. At most, they wanted preaching for women to make them obey their husbands (as cited in Altay Karataş, 2007)

The reluctance on the part of the men to give up their monopoly over knowledge and official tasks of religious service was evident among the male muftis who disregarded suggestions made by women preachers (Tutuncu, 2010, p. 603), and within conservative Islamist circles who were opposed to

women addressing the male community at mosques (Atay, 2018). The Diyanet's institutional norms and bureaucratic internal dynamics have not been conducive to a women-friendly environment or for promoting the capacity of female officials to perform their tasks effectively. Although women preachers were obliged to educate themselves about a wide range of issues, competing with men for access to institutional resources such as in-service training or second language training, often disadvantaged them (Avcı Erdemli, 2008, p. 630). They faced other hardships as well, due to the misinformation about the nature of their work, especially regarding the broad range of responsibilities entailed by the task of preaching, apart from the reluctance within the mufti offices to help them commute to different places to perform their preaching activities (Konarili, 2019, p.137).

Ongoing communication problems with male officials were attributed to their gendered biases concerning the depth of women's knowledge. Research indicates that such concerns have had a discouraging effect on preachers, who have tended to have a great sense of responsibility and idealize their work as a special profession to serve as role models for other women (Mercil, 2018, p. 203). Gender prejudices were especially strong in the eastern regions and conservative towns, among communities that had no previous familiarity with women religious officials, especially because they had not been present in the mosques, or because local people preferred influential women of local Islamic communities to perform these tasks. Nevertheless, in such places female preachers in time were able to enhance their appeal among women, gather and address them as a following for guidance activities (Konarili, 2019, p.138). Recent studies have also underlined the largely positive image of women's roles, qualifications and public trust as religious functionaries (Hacıismailoglu, 2017, p. 143).

Finally, conventional male-centric traditions in public prayer rituals have meant that women did not make use of the enlightenment services of the Diyanet at Friday sermons, which catered only to the needs of males. The physical restrictions imposed on women via the spatial organization of mosques bolstered gender discriminatory practices through segregation and prevention strategies, by excluding them from daily rituals (Toker, 2018). The appointment of women preachers was motivated by the concern for attracting women, especially homemakers, to compensate for their educational deficiencies and guide them via religious insights towards solutions to their family problems ("Diyanetin Kadın Vaizler," 2005). In improving the mosque facilities, which was one of the objectives of a pro-women policy since 2010, work on their reorganization for educational, ritual and preaching activities has continued, as in case of the Istanbul-based "Opening Mosques to Women" project, pioneered by the first female vice-mufti in 2012.

The reorganizing of mosques, undertaken by the Diyanet to open up to women has been slow. This has been one of the concrete manifestations of

institutional sexism that has constrained its women religious officials. The “women phobia” of male officials and the mosque prayer community have been major reasons for the discrimination experienced by female preachers (Tutuncu, 2010, p. 603; Odabasi, 2017). In 2016, the Diyanet ordered the mufti offices to reorganize mosques for women. However, cultural impediments that have estranged them, along with insufficient mobilization of institutional resources for this purpose, have hampered large-scale transformation in the conventional structures of mosques (Kilic & Agcoban, 2013). The *hutbes* (sermons) of the *Diyanet* that emphasized the importance of women’s participation in the mosque prayers were criticized by male Islamic scholars who condemned these as a novelty inspired by Islamic feminism (Eygi, 2013). Since 2017, this exclusion has led to a grass-roots drive by women in “The Women in the Mosque Campaign,” that has protested and challenged their longstanding exclusion from mosques and as part of this they meet every week in a mosque in Istanbul. While such civic activism has been important for generating publicity on the issue, the broad changes across the country call for sustained pressure by the mosque community (Arslanturk, 2018). According to the Strategy Plan of the Diyanet (2019-2023), the number of mosques that have been reorganized to serve women, children and handicapped citizens were only 12,295 out of 88,681. By 2013, it aims at making 14,795 ready for women’s rituals (Treske, 2020). The modest targets of the Diyanet on this issue are striking in view of its acknowledgement about the “insufficiency of mosques in their current structures in terms of aesthetic, functioning and planning” for the use of women (Diyanet, 2019).

The shifting axes of policy on women and sharing authority

In the early 2000s, the Diyanet’s pro-women recruitment policy was marked by a more visible progressive agenda challenging the discriminatory religious practices of Islam. During the presidency of Professor Bardakoglu, under whose term religious officials with strong academic backgrounds gained greater prominence, its discourses became marked with references to women’s human rights and critiques of patriarchal mentality in religious tradition. On the occasion of International Women’s Day on 8 March 2004, Bardakoglu urged the Directorate to “take an active role in the solution, development and adoption of lasting policies” on gender discrimination (Bardakoglu, 2009, pp. 170-171). In 2006, the Diyanet was officially designated as a public coordinating body for work on the prevention of domestic violence and it started training its staff regarding this in the course of its collaboration with the Amnesty International in a project (Diyanet, 2015, p. 57).¹⁵

Then, with the removal of Bardakoglu from the Presidency of the Diyanet, its agenda and discourses have visibly started to epitomize the religious-

nationalist vision promoted by the AKP with increased vigor, summed up in the motto of the “New Turkey” (Ozturk, 2016). In the post-2010 period, the drift of the government towards a populist platform and its priorities for raising a “pious generation” were reflected by changes in the educational system and the rise of a pro-natalist social policy (Mutluer, 2018). The Diyanet was still involved in the implementation of the National Action Plans of the Ministry of Family and Social Policies for gender equality in the realms of girls’ schooling and women’s access to health services and employment. However, the gender dimension of the new populist vision of the government carved out a more assertive role for the Diyanet to promote conservative gender roles, with the protection of the family as the locus of traditional gender norms (Adak, 2021; Sancar, 2016). In this context, for example, given the Diyanet’s mission of “religious services with a social opening” to address marital problems and threats to the family, a project of community imams was launched to promote contact with the community outside the mosques (“İşte asıl açılım”, 2010).

As Verge and Lombardo (2021) have contended, “reinstatement of old assumptions” and “dilution of the policy’s core ideas” are less visible forms of resistance during gender policy change (p. 235). In the same vein, the vigorous reassertion of gendered norms in the course of the Diyanet’s pro-women policy in religious and social services attests to the significance of informal institutional resistance. Resistance also takes place in the form of “poor implementation and evaluation work” (Verge & Lombardo, 2021). In the case of the Turkish Diyanet, this has been strikingly evident, given the absence of any official monitoring work or gender impact assessment of policies that address women (Yildirim et al., 2018, p.79-80). This issue is closely intertwined with its conventional and seemingly gender-neutral institutional deficits in terms of transparency and accountability to the public.

In this period, under the gender policy of the government the Diyanet discourses, as given in statements by its officials and publications, were also marked by an increasing emphasis on women’s rights and gender relations from the perspective of “gender justice.” This approach, which has been in circulation since 2010, pitted it against the feminist rights-based equality approach, in challenging patriarchal structures. According to its proponents from the AKP government, its pseudo intellectuals, and the government-affiliated conservative women’s associations, the notion of gender justice denotes a “faith-based approach to equality,” underlining an “equality in differences” (Simga & Goker, 2017). As such, these elusive meanings of gender justice ultimately serve as ideological tools for the reaffirmation of a gendered division of labor and women’s access to formal equal rights, which are justified by references to the religious notion of *fitrat* or innate and essential biological differences between men and women.

The Diyanet's activities also embraced this new locus of gender justice. Its public programs organized on the March 8th International Women's Day were framed as "women in the context of justice and fairness" (Diyanet, 2018a). Its periodic publications that address women (for example, its periodical *Women and the Family*) have been overwhelmingly devoted to virtues of marriage, family life and raising children, while any discussion of women's equality and their legal rights has been conspicuously absent. Conservative Islamic circles in Turkey have always problematized women's employment and their quest for freedom as culprits in the erosion of the moral basis of the society. Recently, a prominent pro-government male theology professor also condemned rising divorce rates among the Diyanet's female officials (Karaman, 2019). This indicates that they too have come under considerable public scrutiny by conservative men.

At the onset of the Diyanet's pro-women policy a decade ago, women theologians had specifically called for increased cooperation with women's organizations (which was partly realized during work on the struggle against domestic violence), and in particular, the establishment of a specific department in charge of their problems. In 2010, the Department of Family and Religious Guidance was established within the Diyanet to administer the Family Guidance Bureaus for religious guidance of women and resolving family problems. Subsequently, these were turned into Family and Religious Counselling Bureaus and Centers in 407 mufti offices. However, their role in facilitating a rights-based awareness and solutions for women have been challenged by both secular and religious feminists. Their guidance and educational activities for strengthening the family (by preachers, religious service experts, Quran instructors and prayer leader-preachers), referred to religious sources, and emphasized values of patience, understanding, and affection. Focusing on moral support for women and other vulnerable family members, the Bureaus claimed to extend support to families on problems such as violence, abuse and addiction, suicide and honor killings (Diyanet, n.d.). However, while the activities of its female personnel have mostly focused on encouraging marriage and preventing divorce, (Adak, 2021), any guidance for women victims of male violence regarding legal means to seek protection and prosecution has been conspicuously absent (Karakas, 2020). In facilitating contact with women's rights advocacy organizations, these Bureaus have also been in touch with the conservative women's associations (Istanbul Müftü Office, 2019). Survey research indicates that although female religious officials were more likely to have gender egalitarian attitudes than their male counterparts, specific training for this is still necessary for orienting views of both appropriately (Nasanlı-Tam, 2020). Obviously, these have been important gendered institutional challenges to the Diyanet as its discourse frames feminism as an ideology that threatens the family in its discourses.

In November 2017, the AKP government appointed a theology professor, Huriye Marti, (formerly the chairman of the Department of Family and Religious Guidance in Diyanet) as one of its five deputy presidents. Beyond the symbolic significance of its first-ever female deputy-president, this underscored the Diyanet's determined involvement in regulating the private sphere through its pro-women religious services. Professor Marti declared that women in positions of authority in the organization would generate their perspective for its activities for females and families (Topal, 2018). She has been critical of religious justifications that subordinate women to men and has highlighted the potential of women's empowerment (Marti, 2019a, p.15). The components of peaceful and orderly family life and its moral basis have also been underlying themes of her academic approach to women (Marti, 2019b, p.61).

The politico-ideological context of the appointment of the Diyanet's first female deputy-president has been a new concern, framed by the government for preventing "unfair criticism of Islam in some circles" ("Bozdağ: Diyanet," 2017). The organization had already been the target of increasing criticism in public opinion regarding the sexist and discriminatory discourses on women and female children made by its male officials (Arat, 2010). At such a juncture, its President hailed the appointment of Professor Marti in the campaign "to convey to Turkey and to the world the honorable place of women in Islam" (Asimovic Akyol, 2018). Shortly after she took office, the Diyanet held a workshop on *Islam and Women* in April 2018 where it declared its intention for cooperating with women theologians at universities on women's rights in Islam (Demirtas, 2018). It also underlined the importance of women's participation in social life in accordance with Islamic notions of "justice and compassion" rather than an equality-based approach, which allegedly "connotes a rivalry between the sexes" (Diyanet, 2018b).

Then, in June 2019, the Diyanet's first woman deputy-president declared that sexism within the Islamic tradition was a "poisonous arrow," while targeting gendered discrimination in academic religious institutions in particular ("Diyanet'in İlk Kadın", 2019). However, shortly after this statement, she was forced to take a step back and clarified her position by stating that the organization's approach was opposed to an understanding of contestation between the sexes, and was aimed at "protecting the family" ("Huriye Marti: Aileyi", 2019). Clearly, this particular event reflected the precarious position of female religious officials working under androcentric expectations and norms. Despite the rhetorical importance and recognition attached to the credibility of women's expertise, sharing authority along with men at the highest levels takes place within a distinctively gender-segregated structure. Professor Marti's appointment was followed by the promotion of seven more women as section heads at the Diyanet headquarters. However, women still remain absent as members and experts in its supreme decision-making

and consultation organ, The Higher Council of Religious Affairs. Also, they are not represented among the heads of general directorates and of its major service departments at the headquarters in Ankara.

Conclusions

The initiation of a pro-women stance in the Diyanet since 2004, which led to enlarging the numbers of its female religious officials following a new recruitment policy, was marked both by a retrospective effort to compensate for the traditional gender gap in religious services and a prospective agenda to expand its social influence among women. In earlier decades, gender awareness of religious women grew through a politicized process, following their exclusion from higher education and public employment. In turn, this led to changing political opportunities with the growing power of the pro-Islamic AKP and paved the way for new women officials in the Diyanet to gain public authority along with men, despite the conventional male-centric biases against the former in such positions. Further, the organization has transformed into a more complex bureaucratic entity, employing the highest numbers of women officials among all existing public bodies. But its gender-segregated structure has continued to confine them to subordinate positions vis-à-vis the males who occupy authoritative positions.

This essay examines the manifestations and consequences of the gendered institutional constraints in the Diyanet, despite its visible pro-women orientation over the past decade. It has been contended that these have become accentuated because of its institutionally precarious position under the pressures and expectations of diverse sections such as the conservative and secular groups of men and women of the general public, the government and its detractors and its own male and female religious functionaries. As per the feminist objective, stated at the outset of this paper, the formal and informal norms and practices embedded in the Diyanet's administrative and religious organs are examined to highlight its prevailing gender-biased dynamics. Its formal institutional norms have been epitomized in the consolidation of a gender division of labor, wherein its qualified female scholars and officials have been confined to subsidiary positions and services that address only women and that, too, with biased norms and expectations.

With the rising tide of a conservative political climate, particularly regarding gender equality issues during Turkey's democratic backsliding, the Diyanet has not been engaged in promoting an egalitarian work environment for its women officials. This has also generated dilemmas for women to seek adequate empowerment in the sense of exercising authority through religious expertise in a male-dominated setting. As things have unfolded, through an interaction of androcentric norms and the formal

institutional deficits of the Diyanet, a resilient institutional sexism has emerged, leading to an invisible resistance against enduring progressive changes in existing gender relations. This has perpetuated structural discrimination most notably in the mosques. Moreover, the Diyanet's conventional lack of autonomy vis-à-vis the state, has further rendered it vulnerable to politico-ideological influence. Its deficiencies in accommodating social diversity, engaging with religious scholarship for improved services, and its failure to respond to social expectations of equality have also deepened gender deficits. After 2010, the Diyanet expanded its scope of services for women by espousing the pro-family gender policy of the government, which in turn has increasingly relied on the institution as its pillar for this policy. The various dimensions of this dynamic that impacts the perceptions of its women religious officials regarding their social roles and effectiveness need to be studied further at local levels.

This article has demonstrated that the most visible outcome of the new policy has been a consolidation of horizontal and vertical gender-based segregation and reinforcing patriarchal gender complementarity in the Diyanet, which is a leading bureaucratic organ of the secular state. Therefore, as public officials, its women officials are bound by the directives of the state in performing their roles without the benefit of equal footing with men. This situation compromises their capacities to be responsive to social expectations, particularly those pertaining to women in the face of pervasive forms of gender discrimination in Turkey within and outside of the family.

Finally, with the appointment of a female deputy-president, the Diyanet's institutional constraints have become more manifest and challenging, especially in view of the rise of the new political missions that have been carved out for them by political forces that shape its gender policy. In a recent high profile meeting at the Presidential Complex in February 2020, its women officials were called upon "to work as pioneers to promote women's rights from a human rights perspective" in the face of "Islam's longstanding unfair condemnation regarding women's rights" ("Emine Erdogan," 2020). Considering the longstanding gendered institutional deficits of the Diyanet, it remains to be seen how egalitarian transformations emerging out of such lofty objectives will be realized within and outside its current structure, given the prevailing predicaments faced by its women officials.

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Notes

1. Nowhere in the Islamic world, do women function as imams or prayer leaders in mosques, except for China
2. Among the Muslim majority countries, only Indonesia possesses a bureaucratic institution to administer religion.
3. A Muezzin is an official who calls Muslims to prayer from the mosque; a mufti is the highest administrative official in charge of religious services in a province or sub-province
4. As in a previous decision (2003) of the Higher Council of Religious Affairs condoning the unequal distribution of inheritance between male and female children (Gozaydin, 2009, p. 161).
5. After the 1980s, despite no ban on headscarves, the Higher Education Council regulations and the Constitutional Court decisions considered these to be a violation of secularism. Existing restrictions became stricter under the indirect intervention by the military in government in February 1997, which put into effect a series of measures to counter the Islamic movement. This resulted in the decision of the Constitutional Court to outlaw the headscarf on campuses and in the public sector.
6. The AKP tried to lift the bans, leading to a final settlement in 2013 allowing women to attend universities and also take up public-sector jobs while wearing headscarves.
7. Such as Ankara-based Capital City Women's Platform (BKP) and Hazar Association of Education, Culture and Solidarity Association in Istanbul.
8. In 1999, an official circular had opened the way for tenured positions of religious service experts in Diyanet to be reserved for women.
9. The prerequisites for application were IHL degrees, prior work experience in Diyanet or a theology graduate degree
10. These Bureaus were subsequently re-organized and those in the provinces were turned into Centers. They aimed at "promoting awareness about marriage and family under the light of religious and national values," and "providing moral guidance for the continuation of family union on strong foundations" ("Aile ve dini rehberlik", 2019).
11. With its new institutional legislation (law no. 6002), passed in 2010, the Diyanet gained further weight in the general administrative structure. Its major service units in its headquarters in Ankara were turned into general directorates. While Diyanet Presidents were appointed by the government until 2017, with the introduction of a presidential system in Turkey in 2017, the organization was attached directly to the office of the President of the Republic who, in turn, appoints its President.
12. The Diyanet's provincial (local) structure consists of mufti offices in 81 provinces and 922 sub-provincial mufti offices. However, it does not provide systematic and detailed breakdown of its personnel according to gender.
13. Decisions taken in the 4th Consultative Meeting on Religion in Ankara in October 2009. ("Diyanetten kadına", 2009).
14. 61 per cent of the respondents in the KONDA survey were in favor of an election for the Diyanet's president.

15. During the project, The Contribution of Religious Officials to the Protection of the Family, and the Prevention of Violence Against Women, in collaboration with Amnesty International (2006-2010), over 100,000 Diyanet officials were trained.

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ABSTRACT IN TURKISH

Türkiye'nin laik sistemi içerisinde, Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, (the Diyanet), vatandaşların dini hizmet ihtiyaçlarını karşılamakla görevli özgün bir bürokratik yapıdır. Kurumda görev yapanlar arasında kadınlar çok uzun bir dönem azınlıkta olmuşlardır. Eğitimli dindar kadınların süregelen ve uzmanlıklarının tanınması ve kuruma entegre edilmesi talepleri, 2000'lerin başında Diyanet'in aydınlatma ve eğitim işlevleri yoluyla kadınlara daha fazla ulaşabilmek amacıyla başlattığı bir politika değişikliğini de beraberinde getirmiştir. Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) hükümetleri döneminde, İlahiyat Fakültesi mezunu kadınların artan sayıda istihdam edilmesiyle kurumdaki toplumsal cinsiyet dengesizliğine karşı bir açılım gerçekleştirilmiştir. Ancak, yapısındaki kadınlar lehine gerçekleştirilen reformlar ile ortaya çıkan 'kadınlaşma' sürecine rağmen, Diyanet'in kurumsal ve siyasi-ideolojik kısıtları gayri resmi toplumsal cinsiyet normları ve erkek egemen geleneklerle iç içe geçmiş şekilde etkin olmaktadır. Bu makalede, toplumsal cinsiyet dinamiklerinin etkisiyle kadın din görevlilerinin statüleri ve rollerini belirleyen ve güçlenme olasılıklarını etkileyen açmazlar incelenmektedir. Bununla birlikte, kadın din görevlilerinin rollerinin toplumsal önemi, devam eden erkek-egemen yapı içerisinde dini otoriteyi kullanma sürecinde uzmanlıklarının kabul görmesi, mesleklerine bağlılıkları ve çalışmalarının potansiyel etkisi dolayısıyla güçlenmektedir.

KEYWORDS Dini otorite; Diyanet; kadınların istihdamı; toplumsal cinsiyet önyargıları; erkek egemenliği; güçlenme