

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. How were the participants recruited?**

In order to understand perceptions of LGBTI+ and women's rights in Türkiye and identify key issues that need to be addressed, a cluster analysis was conducted based on the results of the population survey. The cluster analysis divided the sample population into six major segments with certain general characteristics. Afterwards, these 6 segments were subdivided to better reveal the main character types in Turkish society. While creating the sub-segments, we have formed 7 different sub-segments ranging from conservative to liberal, in line with the current situation in Türkiye and in the light of our past focus group experiences. Except for the cultural conservative group, following questions were taken as a guiding question set:

1. To what extent do you agree with the following statements: "Domestic violence usually has reasons."
2. What do you think about Türkiye leaving the Istanbul Convention?
3. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about "gender equality"?  
[LGBTI+ individuals should have equal rights with everyone]

The 7 sub-segments consist of the following:

#### **a. Fundamentalist (radical Islam)**

Participants belonging to this group consist of religious conservatives and shari'ahists in terms of political view, and they state that they have religious beliefs and fully implement religious practices. They think that it is the right decision for Türkiye to leave the Istanbul Convention and they embrace the discourses that will legitimize violence against women. On the other hand, they oppose LGBTI+ individuals to have the same rights and freedoms as everyone else.

In order to change the perceptions of LGBTI+ and women's rights in Türkiye, we believe it is necessary to master the arguments of this group. Findings from the group will be useful for producing counter-arguments and making propaganda.

### **b. Religious Conservative**

This group symbolizes the average conservative profile in Türkiye, which is relatively more moderate, unlike the Sharia subgroup, which lives entirely according to religious practices. The Religious Conservative group included participants who had religious beliefs and practiced religious practices as fully or as much as possible. Those included in the group do not find it wrong for Türkiye to leave the Istanbul Convention and are against the protection of LGBTI+ rights and freedoms. Going out with friends at night is one of the behaviors that a woman should not do according to this group. A likert scale from 1 to 5 (1- strongly disagree and 5- strongly agree) was used to learn to what extent they agreed with the statements: "If a woman expects trust and respect from her husband, she should listen to him." and "A woman should get permission from her husband or wife to work", this group's answers were of 2,3 or 4.

### **c. Cultural Conservative**

This group stands out as a group that does not have religious beliefs or practices yet has conservative beliefs.

While forming this group, we examined the importance given to the concept of honor among girls, participants' thoughts on abortion, the level of legitimation of violence against women, and the extent to which they recognize LGBTI+ rights and freedoms. This group has misogynistic and homophobic tendencies, which may be associated with social norms rather than religious references. It would be a mistake to think that misogynistic and homophobic rhetoric in Türkiye is only justified by religious discourse. Examining the cultural conservative group plays an important role in understanding the social norms and taboos that prevent us from changing the perception of women and LGBTI+.

### **d. The "Undecided" (moderate)**

This group represents a type of person we encounter often in focus group work. While it is difficult to talk to this group, it is important to have a persuasive community through media propaganda. It stands out as a group that does not have radical tendencies and refrains from expressing opinions.

Those who do not know what the Istanbul Convention is and are undecided about it, and those who say "neither agree nor disagree" to the question on LGBTI+ rights and violence against women in the guiding question set are included in this group.

The indecisive group stands out as a group with a high potential that can be worked on to change the perception of LGBTI+ and women's rights in Türkiye due to its lack of radical tendencies and indecision.

#### **e. Homophobic Feminist (conservative/moderate)**

According to the set of questions we base on while separating the sub-segments, this group consists of participants who think that Türkiye's exit from the Istanbul Convention is a wrong decision, who are absolutely against violence against women, but who think that LGBTI+ people should not have equal rights with everyone. This group also states that abortion is a woman's right.

As in the world, there are anti-LGBTI+ feminists in Türkiye as well. The LGBTI+ phobia of this group should be investigated in order to produce appropriate policies.

#### **f. Fake Progressive (moderate/progressive)**

This group was designed as an audience to represent the liberal wing of the country. According to the answers given to the basic question set, the participants think that it is a wrong decision for Türkiye to leave the Istanbul Convention and are sure that violence against women cannot be excused in any way. They express that they respect the rights of LGBTI+ individuals and women, but do not want to see an LGBTI+ presence "nearby" (such as a neighbor, teacher or colleague). Those who agreed with the statements "I am worried that a teacher in my child's class is an LGBTI+ individual" and "I would never want my neighbor to be an LGBTI+ individual" alongside those who disagreed "I consider it normal for my own child to be LGBTI+" were included in this group.

The fake progressive group stands out as a group that supports LGBTI+ and women's rights. However, it is seen in the answers that this stance is not internalized and that the latent LGBTI+ phobia continues. Analysis of this group's responses may help in generating arguments against latent LGBTI+ phobia.

### **g. True Progressive**

According to this group, Türkiye's decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention is wrong, violence against women is not legitimate under any circumstances, and LGBTI+ individuals should have equal rights and freedoms with everyone. The main difference that distinguishes this group from the Fake Progressives is that they do not feel uncomfortable with the LGBTI+ presence around them, whether they are a teacher, colleague or neighbor. The possibility of their own children being LGBTI+ does not worry the participants of this group as well.

The True Progressives represent a more conscious community in Türkiye that seems genuinely respectful of LGBTI+ and women's rights.

### **1.2. Organization of focus groups**

A screener was sent from the Türkiye Report mobile application to invite participants from sub-segments to focus groups. At the beginning of the survey, potential participants were informed that video recordings will be taken during the focus group and that these recordings are confidential. The participants who stated that they wanted to participate in the focus group meetings were reached and the meetings were planned.

As we have seen from our previous focus group experiences, some particularly conservative female participants may be hesitant to attend video chat meetings with men. Since we wanted to learn about thoughts and beliefs about issues such as gender identity, sexual orientation, gender, sexuality in focus groups, we planned separate groups for men and women so that the participants could feel comfortable and safe.

Among the 7 sub-segments in the focus groups, we combined the groups that did not differ sharply in terms of findings and analyzed them under 5 headings. Religious Conservative and Fundamentalist groups are very similar in terms of their family structure, their perspectives on women's rights and LGBTI+ rights, and the types of information they refer to, so we examined these two groups together. Similarly, there were many common findings in the Cultural Conservative and Homophobic Feminist groups; Although the participants of these groups rarely refer to discourses based on religious knowledge, they have phobic characteristics.

### **1.3. Who were the participants?**

Except for the true progressive group, middle aged-older adults predominated in all sub-segments. In relation to their age, a significant majority had children. Since the values that are thought to be given to children are questioned during the focus group, this can be considered as a positive factor for the research findings. It is noteworthy to underline that all the participants we interviewed in the true progressive group were younger than 30 years old. As far as we have divided it into sub-segments, we know that there are participants of many ages belonging to the true progressive group. There may be many reasons why they did not want to participate in focus groups, but it should not be overlooked that younger individuals may have felt more comfortable expressing their opinions about LGBTI+ rights and freedoms.

During focus groups, we asked all the participants to describe what kind of family they grew up in. We learned that the participants, especially those belonging to sharia and religious conservative groups, migrated from the countryside to the city and came from large families. In more liberal groups, however, it was less common to hear such story.

### **1.4. Who moderated the focus groups?**

**İlkan Can İpekçi** completed his undergraduate education in Translation Studies at Yeditepe University between 2012-2016 (which he was entitled to with a YÖK degree scholarship). In the same years, he received a double major education in the Department of Psychology and graduated from the Department of Psychology and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences as the second. He completed the Cultural Anthropology program between 2016-2018 as the top of the department. In the same year, he was accepted to Central European University (CEU) Gender Studies master's program with a full scholarship, but he chose to continue his academic studies in the gender doctorate program at Sabancı University. He taught undergraduate courses at different levels in the Department of Anthropology and Psychology at Yeditepe University in 2018-2022. He continues his queer trauma focused thesis studies from a psychoanalytical perspective, after successfully passing the doctoral qualification exam within the scope of Social Developmental Gender and Sexuality Psychology specialization. Apart from the texts published in various international conferences, the most recent publication has been published in a peer-reviewed and international journal called *InterAlia: A journal of Queer Studies*. Currently, he continues his research in the fields of

critical masculinities, psychoanalytic queer studies, and critical trauma studies and is busy preparing new articles for publication. He moderated 3 focus groups and their names are as follows: True Progressive (men), Fake Progressive (men) and True Progressive (women).

**Çiğdem Erol** graduated from Galatasaray University with a Bachelors Degree on Sociology. During her education, she volunteered at various non-governmental organizations, including Amnesty International. She completed her compulsory internship at the Hrant Dink Foundation's "Hate Speech in the Turkish Media" project. In her third year, she studied at Toulouse-Jean Jaurès for one semester by participating in the Erasmus+ Program. Her graduation thesis was about vaccine opposition in the era of coronavirus and its relation to post truth, social media and conspiracy theories. She has been working in the qualitative team of Istanbul Economics Research since 2021. She moderated 7 focus groups from a total of 15 (including the pilot). These groups were all made up of women and their names are as follows: Fake Progressive (pilot group), Fundamentalist, Religious Conservative, The Undecided, Fake Progressive, Homophobic Feminist and Cultural Conservatives.

**Onur Gerey** is a cultural anthropologist and a qualitative researcher from Istanbul, Türkiye. Being a socially active young person eventually led him to social sciences to study human life and social phenomena. During his bachelor's study at Istanbul Yeditepe University, he began to experience fieldwork as a survey taker. Then he became one of the first and youngest members of Habitus Research & Consultancy – the first qualitative-focused research agency in Istanbul. Where he began as a focus-group moderator and interviewer, he left as a young anthropologist who designed successful studies for major private sector actors, social entrepreneurs and NGOs in Türkiye. Onur left for Sweden, where he joined Master's in Applied Cultural Analysis program at Lund University. He developed his academic skills as he specialized in qualitative methods and using such methods to contribute business and public organizations. During his time in Sweden, Onur worked with several Danish and Swedish organizations as a graduate-researcher. He moderated 5 focus groups from a total of 15. These groups were all made of men and their names are as follows: Fundamentalist, Religious Conservative, The Undecided, Cultural Conservative and Homophobic Feminist.

## 1.5. Conceptual Framework

The literature review we had conducted before the focus groups allowed us to develop the conceptual framework presented below. These concepts guided the semi-structured questionnaire and the focus groups. The focus group data is coded and analyzed based on the literature review and the conceptual framework.

<p><b>Pro-family</b></p>	<p>It is very common that conservative voices around the world position themselves as “pro-family” whereas feminists and LGBTI+ individuals are positioned as “anti-family”. The term “pro-family” is intended to be used as an analytical tool for categorising family-related and other homophobic/misogynist rationalisations alike, which may or may not come from the participants.</p>
<p><b>Culture War</b></p>	<p>The concept of Culture War can be thought of as an East-West conflict, or a new type of Cold War. Especially in the Middle East and Eastern European countries, right-populist politics legitimize homophobia as “imperialism” and “the game of the West”. Apart from homophobia, issues such as abortion and clothing preferences are tried to be translated into populist discourses with religious explanations. Türkiye is not exempt from these examples. The “culture wars” approach is also anti-multicultural because the approach stands out because it is based on opposing dualities.</p>
<p><b>Gender Roles</b></p>	<p>Gender roles can be defined as the role or behavior that a person learns and performs in accordance with their gender, determined by cultural norms. During the research, we used this concept to learn the stereotypes of the interviewees about gender roles.</p>
<p><b>Biopolitics/ Essentialism</b></p>	<p>Biopolitics/essentialism can be understood as a political rationality which takes the administration of life and populations as its subject: ‘to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order’. The concept is relevant to gender performance, meaning that gender roles are learned and performed in social settings. In this sense, gender is a social construct and biopolitics ensures/appropriates the norms of the social construct in question. These concepts are intended to be used as analytical tools for categorising participants’ expressions and opinions in relation to gender stereotypes.</p>

<b>Stigma</b>	The concept of stigma includes concepts such as "othering", "marginalizing", "labelling". It can be said that the behaviors considered as deviant in societies are not inherent in the nature of the behavior. The reaction of a group of people is imperative for it to be labeled as deviant. The concept of stigma has been used as a tool to understand the nature of stigma against LGBTI+ individuals.
<b>Pro-rights</b>	Pro rights is a concept we use to learn how human rights are perceived by the participants, and who the subjects who are thought to have human rights are.
<b>Multiculturalism</b>	The secular-Islamist tension coming from the history and lasting throughout long AKP rule, is the true “culture war” of Türkiye. Often manifesting itself as a widespread political polarisation in the country, this domestic conflict causes segregation amongst women. Based on different political camps, women adopt different values and opinions regarding human rights and gender rights as well as the political struggle revolving around rights and laws. Thereby, the analytical tool “multiculturalism” is intended to be used for categorising the participants’ diverse opinions and values in relation to different worldviews, political standpoints, and political polarisation.
<b>Media</b>	The media has a significant impact on the formation of gender stereotypes and prejudices about gender identities and sexual orientations. The issues that the media put on the agenda and/or choose not to include, the identities allowed to appear on the screen, give many messages about social codes. Compared to the mainstream media, the fact that many individuals become information producers can be argued as an important potential force for LGBTI+ individuals and women.
<b>Anti-Politics</b>	Anti-politics is a concept that refers to a reaction or rejection behavior against practices or attitudes associated with traditional politics. The purpose of using the concept of anti-(gender) politics during the analysis is that we have seen the tendency of the willingness to exclude issues such as LGBTI+ rights and visibility, women's bodily integrity and sexuality from the field of traditional politics & public sphere.



<p><b>Narrational Distance</b></p>	<p>Narrational distance refers to the distance between the audience and the subject of a news coverage. The style of reporting and how the journalist positions herself influences how or if the audience can relate or not. So, the term “narrational distance” is intended to be an analytical tool for categorising relevant responses from the participants.</p>
<p><b>Patriarchal Bargain</b></p>	<p>Patriarchal bargain, refers to women’s compliance with patriarchal norms and practices for gaining social status/power within their own social context. The term may be interpreted as “internalised misogyny” as well. In the context of Türkiye this term was initially developed as an analytical tool specifically for explaining the role of elder female members’ compliance in “honour killings”, and in this study it’s intended to be used as an analytical tool to categorise female participants’ negative opinions on women’s rights and feminism, if encountered any.</p>

## 2. Focus Group Findings

Before beginning with specific patterns amongst focus groups, we believe it is important to mention a common theme that was not intended to be looked at but eventually became impossible to not notice during the study. While more progressive and/or non-binary participants talked about confusion and social pressure regarding individual rights and freedom, conservative groups (including both the fundamentalists and moderate groups) openly argued against normalization of LGBTI+ culture within the society. Such responses manifested (even though not asked) the reasons why “coming out”, “pride march” and such empowering practices within the LGBTI+ community do and should exist. Conservative participants and even rather moderate groups have been open about excluding LGBTI+ individuals from the society, pushing the LGBTI+ culture towards “underground” and suggestions of “treating/curing” homosexuality. Common phrases used for expressing homophobia were:

*“they should live their homosexuality in secrecy, or better hold inside so we won’t know about it”*

*“they should not advertise it [homosexuality]”*

*“they should keep it among themselves. they should not get out to the public in the name of liberty”*

Despite open homophobia in most groups, most participants except very few rejected that violence can be a solution. On the other hand, even fewer participants implied violence in their responses but not mentioned directly as a solution. An example for the harsh responses on LGBTI+ topic:

*“In the old times there used to be social pressure in the neighborhood. I used to hear boys talking about a tranny being shot and dumped on the street. Now they [LGBTI+ community] declared a de-facto freedom, unfortunately...”*

Some other conservative or moderate participants did not use homophobic phrases openly; instead, they distanced themselves towards the LGBTI+ topic by either remaining silent on the subject or denying any knowledge related to the LGBTI+ movement and culture. They did this by invoking a moral doctrine of avoiding “private matters such as sexuality”. Since the LGBTI+ topic is usually imagined in relation with sexuality, “avoiding” becomes a justified moral choice instead of “othering” or “ignoring”.

*“I live in Istanbul, here we see all kinds. We don’t push people asking why are you, why are you in this shape. We just ignore”*

## **2.1. Anti-(Gender)-Politics**

To begin with the political context: The term “anti-politics” refers to a different political attitude than “apoliticism”, which refers to an unwillingness to participate or a lack of interest in politics. On the contrary, “anti-politics” refers to a high interest in politics and a strong will to dominate the political domain, even if it comes at the expense of others’ (political rivals, certain demographics groups etc.) freedom of expression, human rights - and of democracy, in general. According to the assumption that democratic action shall be the norm of political action, but not merely an alternative to authoritarian or totalitarian regimes; double-standards, polarization, violence/intimidation and censorship are common undemocratic methods of the anti-political approach, as seen in populist movements or radicalism/fanaticism etc. In more simplistic terms, anti-politics can be imagined as pushing others out of the political domain or occupying the political domain with undemocratic and/or dogmatic discourses (i.e. religious, xenophobic, ultra-nationalist, populist etc.). Here is a sample quote from the focus groups, on democratic action **not** being accepted as the norm of political action:

*“[responding to positive comments on LGBTI+ rights] I don’t think it is right to approach this from such a democratic angle. It should not be included as a human right. Democracy is not so large. Too much democracy is not nice at all”*  
(moderate)

Avoiding contact with LGBTI+ culture or pushing LGBTI+ culture towards the underground are both examples of the anti-political strategy, by denying freedom of expression, democratic representation and equality under law to a certain demographic group. The same anti-political attitude is observable when it comes to abortion and women’s rights over their body. By denying women’s control over their body, their agency becomes reduced to a subject of an ideological doctrine. For instance, when asked if the issue of “abortion” is a political or a medical one, a conservative female participant replied:

*“I believe it’s neither of those. It is a religious one. That’s how I see it”*

Besides stripping women of their right to speak for themselves, the quote above is also an example of how the (democratic) political domain becomes occupied by religious doctrine. There are many examples of this from the conservative groups as we will mention in further sections. Here, we sort out obvious examples of “anti-politics” from the focus group study:

- Conservative participants tend to acknowledge democratic rights relatively and to not acknowledge LGBTI+ rights, in general.

*“LGBTI+ is a disease, whether hormonal or psychological. So they have a right to health service like everyone else. But it is not a right living sick within the society”*

- Children’s sexual orientation and sexuality is a taboo
- Conservative participants tend to describe the concept of “respect” as “holding back objections” or “remaining silent” within a social hierarchy context.

*“Youth is very different. They take rebellion as a merit. We were young too but we had respect for our parents. We were supposed to say okay mom, okay dad to whatever they say”*  
(moderate female)

- Both conservative and progressive participants tend to not share space with each other, for example, don’t want each other as neighbors etc.

*“I live by building upon and I have nothing to share with someone who doesn’t do so”*  
(progressive female)

*“[LGBTI+ neighbor] No, I wouldn’t like it. They would have guests. Could be a bad influence on my child. I also have guests often. Maybe my guests wouldn’t like it too, they could feel uncomfortable”*  
(conservative female)

- While progressive participants criticize the anti-gender-politics strategy of conservative politics, conservative participants on the other hand criticize the anti-patriarchal-politics of progressive politics.

*“When they present the story of Lot the Prophet, one cannot say anything [against dogmatic nature of religion]”*

*“Feminist is a person who doesn’t listen to others and who doesn’t let the others speak”*

*“I don’t have anything to talk about with someone who says the woman had it coming [regarding femicides and violence]”*

## 2.2. Knowledge

Adopting a strategy of anti-politics often leads to populism and polarization as the examples above point out. The Foucauldian discourse analysis approach allows us to analyze reference points of polarizing discourses, which we call in this report “a type of knowledge”.

“Knowledge is power” because, from an epistemological perspective, “a type of knowledge” spreads out in the form of everyday-life discourses and the “type of knowledge” that dominates everyday lives (which is often unquestioned) determines who is in power. The dominant “type of knowledge” within a community/a society can be scientifically-proven facts as well as religious, traditional or ideological “types of knowledge”. Another specific type of knowledge, which we will call “misinformation” in this report, includes conspiracy theories, pseudo-science and alike. Based on the focus group data, we imagine misinformation as a mash-up of all sorts of knowledge, with an inefficient ratio of various discourses.

As we mentioned above, the anti-political strategy of a radicalizing group may invade the democratic political domain. An example of this, as a progressive-identifying participant had mentioned, has been the story of Lot the prophet (a.k.a. story of Sodom & Gomorrah). Conservative participants often invoked the Biblical/Quranic anecdote to express their opinions against LGBTI+ movement. Some conservative participants also added that “those who ignored the sins of Sodom & Gomorrah were also damned even though they were faithful”. Religious “type of knowledge” in this case, becomes the reference point for marginalizing LGBTI+ movement and for some, the reference point of agency/initiative for standing against LGBTI+ movement as a religious duty. This mobilizing effect of religious “type of knowledge” brings power to the islamist movement. The same can be argued for the mobilizing effect of “empowerment” campaigns for women’s rights movement or LGBTI+ movement, only based on a different “type of knowledge”.

Examples for different “types of knowledge” that participants referred to during the focus group study:

- **“scientific”:**

“[on sexual orientation] *there are things that we cannot control and there are consequences that we cannot change*”

*“I don’t believe that men and women are equal. They have different roles since the time of hunter-gatherers [in the evolutionary sense]”*

- **religious:**

*“Secular laws are not dissuasive. In secular law, the judge sentences to a maximum of 150 years in prison. I find it funny. One doesn’t live that long anyway. Moreover, some general pardon will be issued. There is no justice in this country. There can be no justice by human laws. Western-imposed laws are against our faith. The [current judicial] system does not understand me”*

- **traditional/personal experience:**

*“I believe in life experience very much. As our ancestors said; I grew up through hard lessons. Now at the age 34, I do exactly my mom says because I learned she is always right”*

- **ideological:**

*“[about Türkiye’s decision to leave The Istanbul Convention] I don’t have much information about it. I completely trust our government. I have confidence in their decision”*

*“Things such as feminism, nationalism are Western concepts anyway”*

- **misinformation:**

- **pseudo-science:**

*“May have hormonal issues. No need to condemn too much. The state should provide support in terms of treatment, medicine, therapy”*

- **conspiracy theory:**

*“[allegedly LGBTI+ propaganda on TRT Kids] It doesn’t have to be obvious any longer. It is enough to impose into the subconscious... I have awareness now so I can see that”*



It was common in focus group sessions that a participant referred to multiple “types of knowledge” at different times to support their opinions. This doesn’t make them necessarily right or necessarily conspiracy theorists. One example of this would be creationism (in religious sense) and essentialism (in biological sense) going hand-in-hand throughout focus group sessions. The quote below is an example from a moderate male participant, who expresses his opinion by creationism and feminism together:

*“Women and men are not created equal. But they are equal in terms of rights. Especially equal at our house”*  
(moderate male)

In the Turkish context, “history” makes a good example of how the valid “type of knowledge” makes a big difference between communities. Until the 2000s, the national education system produced an anti-imperialist historical narrative that is focused on the foundation of the republic, following World War I and the Turkish War of Independence. This historical narrative represents a disengagement with the Ottoman imperial past and identity with a shift towards modern Türkiye. As you will see further in this section, this historical narrative is still a reference point for some participants whereas some other participants refer to another historical narrative. With Erdoğan coming in power in early 2000s, formerly marginalized interpretations of history moved to the mainstream domain with growing influence over Turkish media and academia. The alternative narratives are focused on the Ottoman identity and achievements before the World War I and Turkish War of Independence. They represent a re-engagement with the imperial Ottoman past whereas the foundation of the republic is considered to be another Ottoman achievement or the kemalist movement and its reforms to be “a betrayal” (with a hint of misinformation “type of knowledge”). Regardless of the historical facts, these two narratives represent two slightly different cultural groups within Turkish society.

In the context of the focus groups, religious conservative and fundamentalist participants expressed an alternative historical narrative that claims the Ottoman past and downplays the republican era. However, different from most conservative participants, fundamentalist participants referred to an era before the Ottoman Empire as “the time of the prophets”. Following the foundation of the modern Republic of Türkiye in 1923, secularism was adopted by the new authority in 1937. During this early era of the republic, “Turkic” identity became a focal point in politics and academia whereas Turkish language and historiography went through radical reforms. Pre-Islamic and Central Asian Turkic societies and cultures were explored to be assigned as a new reference of the new national identity. The exclusion of history of Islam was the official state policy, as the early Islamic era was considered to be “out of Turkishness” or “belonging to Arabic history”. Still a source of political conflict today, fundamentalists along with many conservatives and muslims are not comfortable with “disengagement from Islamic history and Ottoman history”. As we heard in the focus group sessions, the fundamentalist participants preferred this chronology:

- The era of the prophets (pre-Islamic and early-Islamic era)
- The Ottoman Caliphate era
- The secularist era

When asked about LGBTI+ community, no participant denied their existence either today or in the past. However, fundamentalist and some conservative participants referred to “the era of the prophets” to explain “how far homosexuality goes back”. As the progressive participants knew very well, the anecdote of Sodom & Gomorrah (“during the era of the prophets”) is a strong argument from a religious point of view (or derived from religious “type of knowledge”), against the legitimacy of LGBTI+ community. Although, this anecdote revealed a difference in interpretation between fundamentalist participants and conservative/moderate participants: fundamentalist participants stressed that *“along with the homosexuals, also faithful ones, who did not stop the homosexuals, were damned too”* whereas conservative/moderate participants did not mention this. While the fundamentalist participants interpreted the Quranic anecdote as “a duty”, conservative/moderate participants interpreted it as “a warning”.

### 2.3. Culture War

The concept of “culture war” has a long history but its appearance in the literature begins with Otto von Bismarck’s concept of *“kulturkampf”*, when he aimed for protestant domination over catholics in Germany. Any “religion war” or “cold war” can be an example of culture war but in a modern sense, it can be imagined as “information war” or propaganda war. Turkish society has its own internal cultural struggles and historical baggage. The most salient one in Turkish history, literature and politics is the East-West dichotomy. Broadly speaking, most conservatives identify with “East” as the authentic Turco-Islamic identity whereas the Western identity is attributed to secularist and/or liberal groups in the society. Also, the Eastern identity is often associated with anti-capitalist movements (i.e. communism, islamism). Within this broader context of culture war, of course the individual’s role is limited but in the focus group sessions participants often reflected relevant discourses. Also, one participant explained how he takes part in “the culture war”:

“[about allegedly harmful content on TikTok] *If those people upload [harmful content], I also upload but only helpful content. If that person posted something bad, I post hadith. I post useful information. We should fight against this instead of deleting TikTok”*  
(fundamentalist male)



## - The East-West Dichotomy

Many conservative participants stated that they are uncomfortable with the increasing visibility of the LGBTI+ culture in various media as well as in the public sphere. Most of them attributed a Western identity to both LGBTI+ culture and feminism:

“[feminism] *It is a conspiracy against muslims*”  
(fundamentalist female)

*“Feminism is strange for a muslim country. It is something imposed by Europe on us. It is not a part of traditions. Another one like that is LGBTI+”*  
(conservative male)

When asked about Turkish society and Turkish family, most conservative and moderate participants as well as few progressive participants described feminism as “*a trend that cannot gain a foothold in Türkiye because the society is too patriarchal*”. In this sense, the majority does not consider feminism as a local trend. This is relevant to the feminist stereotype the participants imagine, which we will discuss further in the following sections. Here are some quotes from fundamentalist participants, who referred to the East-West dichotomy in the context of gender issues:

*“Women and men are not equal in Europe, too. But propaganda is being made as if they are [equal]”*

*“Kids are influenced by Europe... My daughter is veiled but she says we should respect [LGBTI+ individuals]. There is no such thing! If we show respect today, they will be even further inside amongst us”*

One conservative female participant spoke against the idea of feminism being a Western imposition:

*“It began with the rights Atatürk gave to women. But also there was a demand from many women. We cannot call it foreign. I don't see it as something foreign”*

In another session, a moderate male participant in a moderate group named early 1900s' feminist figures Sabiha Gökçen and Halide Edip Adıvar. Both lived as national heroes under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's presidency. This era is often criticized for state feminism, which essentially aims for imposing a new public image of Turkish women under the new (secular) republic, as a part of disengagement from the Ottoman past rather than the feminist

movement. Nevertheless, none historical or contemporary references were given regarding the LGBTI+ movement's origins in Türkiye.

Besides the historical figures, there were very few contemporary feminists named during the focus group sessions except the true-progressive group. Deceased author Duygu Asena and actress/celebrity Berna Laçın were named as contemporary feminists. Most well-known contemporary LGBTI+ figure among the participants is Murat Övünç, who is a controversial social media celebrity known for use of foul language, misogyny and “provocative behavior”. Pop singer Gülşen, who is under house arrest for “hate speech against muslims”, was named as an LGBTI+-ally but not as a feminist. It is evident that there is a lack of role-models for the society in terms of LGBTI+ representation and feminist representation. As a result of labeling feminist figures as kemalist, islamist, leftist etc., such figures wear out and become forgotten. Besides underestimating especially female figures' agencies, this is also a broader problem for the feminist movement in terms of feminist figures, who could be local references for the movement, being deducted from the public memory.

Nowadays singer Gülşen's case is a hot topic in Türkiye as some believe that she was punished for displaying a rainbow flag during her stage show whereas some others claim that she demonstrated islamophobia by associating religious schooling with perversion based on a joke she made on the stage. This case came up during focus group sessions a couple of times. A fundamentalist participant expressing her disapproval with Gülşen's actions was replied by another fundamentalist participant, saying; “*you already know that they are not muslims. they are all jews* [Gülşen and other LGBT-allies]”. The anti-semitic tone here is attention grabbing, which we will touch upon in the next section. Nevertheless, it is also a theme in the culture war, which comes down to a conflict between islamophobia and homophobia.

### - International Context

Gender politics is also “a conflict zone” on the international scale, as well. The “islamophobia-homophobia” dichotomy is imposed on the world through “culture war” politics. Since 2013, Russia has “anti-gay-propaganda law” in effect, as if LGBTI+ culture is Western propaganda. According to the 2017 UN CEDAW report on Serbia; the right-wing populist trend in the country describes gender politics as “gender extremism” and “foreign”.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>RIDH. (2019, January 28). *Alternative Report for the Evaluation of Serbia*. Retrieved September 14, 2022.

In 2021, Bulgaria also rejected the Istanbul Convention like Türkiye did.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, Türkiye also adopted the same discourses with Russia, Serbia and Bulgaria; before and after the decision of leaving the Istanbul Convention. While in the 2000s Erdoğan had a rather egalitarian approach towards LGBTI+ rights, the current position of the Turkish government is closer to Russia's. On the other hand, Dutch politicians such as Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders have become symbols of islamophobic politics. Both are also LGBTI+-allies in the EU context. Israel is often accused of pinkwashing since the country became an LGBTI+ haven of the Middle East. Critics of Israel's pro-LGBTI+ policies draw attention to the country's tourism interests as well as its positioning against "homophobic Islam".

In such a heavy propaganda environment, it should be expected that any participant can be a victim of misinformation. The sessions with fundamentalists (both males and females) are the ones we heard the most misinformation "type of knowledge". Within these groups, an influx of ideological discourses over religious, traditional and/or scientific knowledge leads to a (semi)fictitious narratives, especially regarding LGBTI+ movement. Anti-semitist and anti-Western sentiment in fundamentalist and conservative groups are often directed towards LGBTI+ culture as the movement's historical reference is the Western world. Associating LGBTI+ culture with anti-Western sentiment happens in accordance with the current Turkish government's policies, as well. On the other hand, the Turkish LGBTI+ community borrows Western practices such as "coming out" and "pride march", although it is severely lacking local references that could progress normalization within the Turkish context.

#### 2.4. Agency

Most fundamentalist participants and conservative participants provided various examples of downplaying individual agency, when asked about minority groups such as women, LGBTI+, youth, children. When asked about the concept of "freedom" itself or when asked questions regarding all these minority groups, at different times; participants referred to "freedom" as a red flag:

*"They subverted freedom. A woman going out may be freedom but going out half naked, provoking without losing her dignity, is something that I don't find normal"*  
(moderate female)

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<sup>2</sup> Todorov, S. (27.10.2021). *Bulgarian Court's Rejection of 'Istanbul Convention' Alarms Activists*. Balkan Insight.  
<https://balkaninsight.com/2021/10/27/bulgarian-courts-rejection-of-istanbul-convention-alarms-activists/>

*“Unbelievable things happen in the name of freedom. Men turn into women, women turn into men and they call it freedom”*  
(moderate male)

*“I think the youth are not free but they believe they are”*  
(conservative male)

*“There should not be too much freedom. Freedom must be limited”*  
(fundamentalist female)

At different times, fundamentalist, conservative and some moderate participants’ main tendency was to ignore minorities’ agency by assigning them a passive role, as if they were “possessed” by a disease or a mental disorder. Also, young and progressive participants who come from conservative families complained that their own agency is often downplayed by their parents:

*“Even though I’m a university student, my family believes that my friends will trick me and make me go wrong in life”*

*“My daughter is starting her student life at the university. I’m worried about what if she becomes a drifter or what if she goes through disassociation”*

*“[on their arranged marriage with her cousin] even if we did not want it, we wouldn’t say anything... I did not want to marry but I did not want to embarrass my father, so I did not say anything. In short, this is what you call a family. Now I’m very glad [contented]”*

*“The youth might get affected. The youth jumps on whatever that is new”*

*“It’s better and more productive if a woman doesn’t work. It’s difficult to find an ethical working environment. Also, working women have bigger egos, they talk more. Besides, there is the danger for a woman to find the attention she seeks at her workplace instead of her home. They begin to aspire to the freedom of a divorced woman or an unmarried girl, which leads to a negative perception of spouses”*

*“I’m against women working outside [of home], in the private sector. These are bad times, everyone goes after another”*

*“LGBTI+ people are the ones who did not have a normal childhood. They experience bad stuff during childhood and then they get this kind of orientation”*

Stigmatization of LGBTI+ individuals targets their agency directly, so that it becomes “justified” to condemn LGBTI+ individuals to hormone treatment, “normalization” therapy or “underground” life. When participants (except progressive groups) were asked about what they would do in case that some they love (i.e. friend, child, neighbor etc.) comes out as an

LGBTI+ individual, they replied saying they would try “to save them”. However, when asked about what they would do in case the LGBTI+ individual - or the LGBTI+ community in general - refuses to be treated or saved, most participants did not welcome this option. If it is a child in question, then some participants said they would accept it. Although there were very few participants who said they wouldn’t accept even if it's their own child. Besides the child topic, the participants take such a refusal as “a disrespect to society”. Once again, we see here that “respect” is defined in terms of “obedience”. One of the quotes above is an example of this definition of “respect” as the participant explains obeying the family decision of an arranged-marriage.

Besides passivizing or demanding “respect”, another common way of downplaying “the Other’s” agency is the use of “wannabe” discourse. Becoming an LGBT or a feminist is attributed to an influence over the individual rather than the individual’s own agency or orientation:

*“I just read the other that because [LGBTI+ content] it is constantly on media, the number children who applied for sex-change increased by thousands. This made me very upset”*  
(conservative)

*“If a doctor explains to me that this is not just a phase or a “wannabe” situation, then I cannot reject my child. I would accept him as a patient”*  
(moderate)

As we mentioned earlier, anti-(gender)-politics often silence feminists and LGBTI+ individuals, in accordance with official government policies. Most of the conservative participants reject violence as a solution, however, this is not because they think that human rights include LGBTI+ rights.

*“LGBT is not included in freedom of expression”*  
(moderate)

*“I believe everyone should have same equal rights without any discrimination of race or faith - except LGBT”*  
(moderate)

*“The Istanbul Convention was defending freedom of LGBT. It is better if it’s not free. So it’s better that did not happen”*

(moderate)

Instead, rejection of violence has political significance. While Quranic anecdotes that are relevant to LGBTI+ issues were interpreted against LGBTI+ rights, “violence” as a form of punishment that is explicit in Islamic laws, was never acclaimed in the same focus groups. Because the concept of violence is not legitimate in terms of modernity, most conservative participants (as mentioned earlier) distanced themselves towards violence (including fundamentalists) even before they were asked about it. As we will see further in this section, modernity has a similar consequence for feminism, too.

Many responses stressed “human being” discourse against violence, as in rejection of violence universally. However, rejecting violence doesn’t necessarily mean recognizing everyone’s agency - especially when psychological violence is neither recognized nor a general concern. In this case, conservative participants subsume all minorities into the “human” category (i.e. “all lives matter”), where the individual experience fades into a collectivist narrative. While this is good news in terms of basic human rights, it is not enough in terms of women’s rights, LGBTI+ rights or any other individual rights as even though violence is rejected in general, it might become justified through “states of exceptions”:

*“Women, men or LGBTI+; it doesn’t matter. There shouldn’t be violence against anyone. There should be equal justice for everyone”*  
(fundamentalist female)

*“Instead of men and women; shall we see this as a “human” issue?”*  
(conservative female)

## - **Guilt & Shame**

On the psychological violence side, most participants except the “true progressive” groups, acclaimed many different forms of shaming regarding women and LGBTI+ issues:

*“[unhappy about the contemporary society] No one is ashamed in general, so this [LGBTI+ culture] is getting normal, as well”*

*“My mom never restricted me but she always said ‘if you think it’s good for you, you should wear it’. When I was a child, I didn’t really understand what she meant but then I did”*

*“They subvert freedom a little. Maybe it is a freedom for a woman to go out but I don’t find it normal when she goes out half-naked, provoking people - all without losing her dignity in the society”*

“[on youth sexuality] *In the old times they used to be shy. Now, the kid just tells the father like it's nothing*”

Based on the focus group sessions, so far we sorted out different ways of downplaying individual agency that are passivizing, demanding “respect” and “wannabe discourse”. In addition to these, there is another common phenomenon that we observed during the focus group sessions: “guilt & shame”, which intervenes in individual agency instead of downplaying it. The literature of anthropology takes on “shame” as two sides of a coin: one side is “guilt”, one side is “shame”. In the psychology literature, both are considered to be the same as they are essentially the same mindset. However, in anthropology the difference is made for analytical purposes to understand social pressure better by separating intrinsic and extrinsic causes of “shame”. According to this separation; it is still considered “shame” if it is triggered by other individuals or the society, whereas it is considered “guilt” if the feeling of shame is triggered by the individual itself due to an identity crisis or an inner conflict with internalized values. In this sense, “guilt & shame” make up a “social control mechanism”, which requires individuals to watch themselves and others in everyday life. In short, we imagine “guilt & shame” as an ancient form of surveillance that is still active today. It is also a form of violence (and violation of individual rights) when it is used for keeping individual agency in line, by forcing the individual to appropriate itself.

“Social gender roles” are defined according to social norms (in Turkish case, mainly patriarchal norms) and imposed on newborns by naming, clothing, color codes, pronouns etc. This reproduction of social norms through practices and discourses is embedded in the cultural experience of motherhood/fatherhood, ethics, aesthetics, faith, language etc. From a deterministic perspective in social science, one can argue that the collective cultural experience is what makes an individual a person. In this sense, social change is possible only with structural changes beyond the individual. During the focus group phase, we have seen strong signs of structural change through cultural appropriation and modernization. However, the role of the individual is still very significant in terms of regaining its own agency and taking initiative to carry on modern discourses and practices.

## 2.5. Social Gender Roles

As we mentioned earlier, subjective perspectives of the individual and the public opinion are highly dependent on what “type of knowledge” the society or the individual takes as a valid reference point. Individual agency builds upon the discourses that are derived from the valid “type of knowledge”. What is called “normative gender roles” in the gender studies literature is internalized discourses on masculinity and femininity derived from traditional and/or religious “types of knowledge”, which are also very influential over social norms, in general. Including the progressive ones, many participants confirmed normative gender roles whether from a religious or a traditional perspective, often by referring to “traditional Turkish family values” in a broad sense. Some progressive participants also referred to scientific discourses, as well, for justifying normative gender roles:

*“It’s better for a lady to stay with her children, at her home. Because of the children. I cannot iron or do the dishes, but I can only help. Household work, child-care and work; it’s too much altogether.”*

*“If my husband had a lot of money and paid for my social security, it makes sense to not work. I would like to spend time with my children. If there is no financial security concern, it is better for a woman to take care of her children”*

*“We went to Gratis with my husband and two children. Along with 18-19 year-old girls, there was a boy with women’s trousers. He was wearing accessories, lipstick, and eye make-up. He was checking women’s products. My child asked me if he is a male or not. After we left the shop, I told my child that the boy is aspiring to be a woman, so what we do, we ignore. I didn’t really know what to say, I was shocked. Now thinking about it, it seems funny.”*

*“I live in Antalya. There is an abundance here [of LGBTI+ individuals]. My child asks; mom, are they men or not, why are they behaving like this. I have a hard time explaining. Excuse me, **but they do kissing man-to-man**, in the sea. On the way, we see trannies with beards - even wearing a skirt. And the child always ask why they dress up like that”*

### - LGBTI+ & Display of Sexuality

There can be many more examples of confirming normative gender roles from each focus group, although, the very same participants should **not** be labeled as *anti-feminist* or *anti-gender-equality*. If there is something to be generalized from the focus group study is the “sexuality” taboo. The highlighted phrase in the quote above from a conservative female participant refers to a sexual act she witnessed in public, which is unacceptable or a taboo for most participants. “Display of sexuality” is considered to be a shameful, immoral act equally



for both men and women. However, some participants closely associate public display of sexuality with LGBT culture:

*“Nobody should take sexuality to the streets. Except for some paparazzi incidents, we have never seen immoral, undignified public behavior from Bülent Ersoy. LGBTI+ deviants want to show it to everyone. They want to commit immorality publicly. I’m against that”*  
(moderate male)

Exposing sexuality is shamed or shunned for various reasons such as disrupting the public space, bad influence on children and youth, being a sinful act, overstepping/disrespecting others’ boundaries etc. Regardless of diverse reasons, public nudity and display of sexuality is considered to be beyond modernity. From a “modern” conservative perspective, an LGBTI+ individual having a single social role of displaying sexuality - or - a role of disrupting already established roles does not seem constructive. The reason why we cannot generalize *anti-feminist or anti-equality* sentiment is that; the very same participants who expressed these sentiments had also expressed feminist discourses they internalized - whether for the sake of feminist movement or not. We will discuss the issue of “feminism” and relevant examples further in this section. Before that, we should mention the role of children when it comes to family and gender roles.

#### **- The role of children**

Most participants changed the topic to childcare when asked about family, gender roles and LGBTI+ rights. Other than religious or traditional “types of knowledge”, participants often referred to science (or what they consider as science) to justify their actions and/or opinions regarding childcare. Nevertheless, there is no consensus on, for instance, how long should maternity leave be for working mothers. The answers vary between 6 months old to 12 years old and the longer the duration gets, women’s role as “the childcarer” becomes more justified. Also, as some of the quotes above show, the presence of minors becomes a justifying argument for downplaying LGBTI+ agency or stigmatizing display of sexuality. It is also the same for the digital space as most participants who are parents complained about minors’ accessibility to TikTok and social media in general, where they encounter various representations of sexuality and LGBTI+ individuals. Since the children are legally stripped of agency and the parents are legally and culturally bound to look after them (and this is

accepted universally), taking the gender discussion from the adult domain to the minors' literally blocks the discussion itself (in an anti-political sense). Here are some examples:

*“Family exists to raise a person. To be an effective individual, to be able to participate in society. We see children growing up in youth shelters. When you look at them, in general terms, most of them are not on the right track.”*

*“[on the Istanbul Convention] There were some parts that gave us no rights over our children. It would be better if those parts about children and LGBTI+ were ruled out. Very little of it was defending women”*

*“It is good that the bachelor-bachelorette reality shows are banned. They should not have been aired at the time when children are watching”*

*“Series usually show sexuality, LGBTI+ and that kind of content. I'm not OK with 10-12 year olds watching them. It comes to their screen. I can block them but a child cannot”*

*“My child likes it when women dance on TikTok. She is 6 years old and I don't find it appropriate for her to watch.”*

Childcare is also considered to be the main reason for the rising violence in the society. When asked about the most common troubles that women face in everyday life, discrimination and violence were the most common answers. Most participants (in fundamentalist groups, more women than men) believe that children should learn cultural values (i.e. *namus*) equally, they should be responsible for them equally and they should learn to share workload equally.

## **2.6. Feminism**

Earlier we mentioned that we cannot generalize normative gender roles due to **some** feminist discourses being internalized by many participants; progressive and conservative. This, for sure, doesn't mean that feminism is fully adopted and internalized by everyone. It would be more realistic to take these participants as neither feminist or anti-feminist but somewhere in between. It is obvious that **some** feminist discourses are adopted to justify “modern” Islamic way of life, which includes conservative values. Thereby, we interpret this as a consequence of modernity rather than feminism itself. Here are some examples of feminist discourses from conservative and moderate groups:

*“Men want to establish their domination, in result, violence comes. For example, men believe doing the dishes is unmanly, thus, violence occurs”*  
(moderate)

*“Women must be extra strong. We all can be the ideal woman. I believe that our women are very strong. A woman should be a jack of all trades, should be equally successful and not remain dependent”*  
(moderate)

*“A working mother can provide for her children. A woman must stand on her feet”*  
(moderate)

*“If we expect a child to become a responsible individual, we should set an example for the child ourselves by working. The child should look up to us in that sense”*  
(conservative)

*“I think mothers should work. Today everything is about money. Money is necessary to give a good education to your child. Also, for not depending on the husband, mothers must earn their own income.”*  
(fundamentalist)

*“A working woman is tired when she comes home, then the housework needs to be shared. If you tell your wife to do the housework when she comes home from work, then you should not let your wife go to work in the first place.”*  
(conservative)

Here our intention is not to underestimate the feminist movement and our interpretation is based on the focus group data. Conservative participants (including fundamentalist ones) stressed the importance of equality between men and women in terms of employment, financial freedom, civil rights, division of labor and childcare. We see this as a result of the socio-economic realities of our time; a necessary adaptation to industrialized society and to the rising living and education costs instead of a genuine gender rights awareness. This issue will be discussed in the next section. Nevertheless, few moderate and conservative female participants even stated their enthusiasm and open support for feminism:

*“I love feminists. I think a woman can do anything, she can achieve anything. I always defend women. They can wear whatever they want to. If I was too feminist, I would not consider getting married. I don't react much to my husband not helping me at home. He stretches his feet and drinks tea while I do the work. If I was too feminist, I wouldn't be able to stand it. I could have not get married, for the sake of peace of mind”*  
(conservative female)

*“Feminism must be about women's rights. It sounds positive”*  
(moderate female)

## **- The Feminist**

The problematic part is that many participants, including some of the progressive ones, distanced themselves towards feminism itself and feminists, in general. Despite their use of

**some** feminist discourses and/or open support for feminism, they deliberately avoided calling themselves a feminist and denied any association with the feminist identity. This phenomenon was observed in progressive groups as well:

*“[on **not** identifying as a feminist] I do not wish to be part of a specific group or to claim a title. I’m not sure about what feminists are defending these days, anyway”*  
(progressive)

When asked “who is a feminist”, it was revealed that the imagined “feminist” is someone who is also very anti-political as well as radical, aggressive, and unfair. This stereotype of a woman, who “expects respect”, overlaps with the conservative definition of “respect” that expects obedience. The stereotype also can be interpreted as a consequence of lack of feminist public figures. Besides the negative stereotype, many conservative participants also acknowledged they don’t have enough information about feminism, or their information may not be accurate:

*“Was it someone who hates men? Or women?”*

*“As far as I know, feminists are ladies who hate men but... Am I wrong?”*

*“On [Turkish] TV series, feminists were always those who hate men”*

While the quotes above reflect the “archaic” cliché about feminism being “hatred against men”, we believe it is important to focus on the association between “hate” and “feminism” in this case - especially given that the imagined “feminist” is a hateful character in the eyes of many participants. Not only hateful but, “feminist” is also imagined as a foreign character, a stranger to Turkish culture. As we mentioned in relation to culture war theme, there are conservative participants who believe feminism itself is merely a propaganda material. Also, there are conservative, moderate and progressive participants who speak of “feminism” merely as a foreign idea:

*“I believe men and women are not equal in Europe, as well but it is propagated as if so”*  
(fundamentalist female)

*“Feminism is strange for a muslim country. It is something imposed by Europe on us. It is not a part of traditions. Another one like that is LGBTI+”*  
(conservative male)

*“Things such as feminism, nationalism are Western concepts anyway”  
(progressive male)*

## **2.7. Folk Futurism**

It was observed that participants with different worldviews have different visions of the future. While some long for a liberal future, others wish for a conservative future. Those who project a conservative future, usually refer to Turkish customs and traditions and the importance of conserving the traditional family structure. Since children are closely associated with the concept of “future”, especially conservative parents reflect their anxieties on their children in terms of a total control and surveillance over their children’s socialization. Issues such as LGBTI+ rights and feminism are highly politicized with discourses like *“new generations are deteriorating”*, *“the future of Türkiye is getting weak”*, *“society is collapsing”*. Since nobody knows the future, one can only speculate: especially fundamentalist participants demonstrated use of misinformation “type of knowledge”, even before asked, in relation to LGBTI+ topic and social media:

*“[About technology] This is how they attempt to destroy the society”*

*“ [Speaking of LGBTI+ visibility] It is something that has been increasing in our country for a long time to accustom our children to deviancy. It is a fiction made up by foreign powers to disrupt the integrity of the country”*

This is also a good example of how social change and “side-effects” of modernization are interpreted from a conservative standpoint:

*“Our family lives in accordance with Turkish customs and traditions, and is a conservative family. I hope the next generations will continue to be the same in our family as it is now.”*

*“There are people living alone, young people. We are in a process leading to the disintegration of family unity. Our society is adapting to it with the effect of this corruption. Customs and traditions are not adopted. When the old generation is gone, these values will not be left in the Z generation.”*

We have not heard much about alternative future scenarios of participants regarding co-habitation, contact or cultural appropriation. While the idea of emigration was heard among the progressive participants, (homo)paranoia was the focal point of conservative future scenarios. Rather than future scenarios, gender-positive experiences were found in the past as some participants shared their memories of contact with “the Other”:

*“[Speaking of LGBTI+ individuals] I live in Bursa and there are a lot of them here. I’m taking it easier now.”*  
(moderate)

*“[Speaking of Alevis] After declaring that he is an Alevi, no one came to his recitation. He was very upset when it happened. I felt very sorry for him too... It is important to know and understand. Don't tag right away. We are very biased”*  
(conservative)

*“There was one feminist and one LGBTI+ at my workplace. It was strange at first, but over time we got used to it. Our eyes got used to it”*  
(conservative)

*“My ex-boyfriend's family was conservative. The father was cheating and all. But their son was not like them, we had much more in common”*  
(progressive)

### **3. Conclusion**

Before we discuss certain common themes the focus groups provided and that are critical for pro-rights communication and normalization efforts, here we list standing-out differences and commonalities among all focus groups:

#### **Common Grounds:**

- “Boys’ education” is thought to be the root cause of violence against women and femicides, as for the participants it is wrong that boys learn they are more privileged than girls and they are supposed to be dominant.
- Gender inequality (and LGBTI+ normalization) is a cause of generational conflict - especially with the growing media interest in the topic.
- The ideological assumption that “feminism is Western” is adopted by some participants in each group.
- Everybody hates Turkish TV series (but still watching).
- Social media is considered to be harmful for children, in general. Specifically, TikTok is named in every group as a threat to society / to new generations due to its wide-range of contents.
- There were participants in all groups, who defined “respect” as “maintaining one's own and other’s personal space and privacy” - although less in conservative groups, more in progressive groups.

- Except for the “true progressive men” group, the idea of public nudity was not welcomed in any other groups.
- When asked “*which one would you prefer if you had to choose; to be as you look, or to be as you are*“, everyone chose “to be as I am”. However, some conservative participants associated the question with LGBTI+ topic and changed their answers to “to be as I look”. Associating an individual’s self with its sexuality is a consequence of modernity, according to Michel Foucault: the emergence of scientific, medical and legal discourses regarding the individual’s desires and sexuality as a core element of the individual’s subjectivity. In this sense, some conservative participants’ commitment to essentialism can be regarded as a modern approach, with a belief that there is an apriori essence of the relation between one’s sex and sexual desires. Also according to this modern approach, such an essence must be regulated by social structures.

### **Major Differences:**

- Islamophobia vs. Homophobia: We know from first hand experience that it is not easy in Türkiye (due to political or bureaucratic consequences) to discuss that Islam is not against homosexuality. One of our team-mates had been threatened by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) with an official investigation on him, when he wanted to take on “islamophobia vs. homophobia” as a PhD topic.
- While some progressive and moderate participants attempted to imagine a future of cohabitation, some moderate and most conservative participants displayed homophobia.
- Within the progressive - conservative conflict, there is an inevitable science-religion conflict.
- While progressive participants mostly defined “intolerance” as a threat to family, conservative participants (especially fundamentalist participants) defined “freedom” as a threat to family (as in “being free from religion itself”).

### **3.1. Modernity**

A very influential British sociologist, Anthony Giddens, defines “modernity” as;

- a certain set of attitudes towards the world (a worldview),
- a complex economic/industrial structure,
- a future-oriented society
- mass democracy within a nation-state context

that rules the given society. The concept of “modernity” is widely associated with secularization, rationalism and democracy, which is not wrong at all. Assuming that freedom and prosperity would be the ultimate goal; a liberal and egalitarian society, governed by science and reason, advancing industry and technology: this is - more or less - what every mainstream modern ideology proposes (i.e. communism, fascism, capitalism etc.). It could be argued that this is also what modern Western societies claims to achieve. Nevertheless, modernity doesn’t mean Westernization; from a post-modern perspective, it is assumed that modernity is not singular, instead, there are “multiple-modernities”.

Broadly speaking; the idea of “multiple modernities” overlaps with the idea of “cultural relativism”: the first implies that every society has its own means towards modernity, developing through its own historical context whereas the latter implies that every culture has its own set of values developed in its own historical context, thus, each one is unique. In the cultural sense, Giddens’ “modernity” would be interpreted as;

- a social structure that provides certain collective values and goals,
- which holds the masses together,
- who actualizes the complex socio-economic relations that governs everyday life.

To be more specific; “modernity” is a common ground that provides modern ideologies the required cultural context of:

- precision and punctuality as shared values,
- setting common goals, minimizing risk, planning and quantifiable foresight as shared practices,
- constructing a collective identity based on common goals, for regulating everyday life and structuring next generations,
- making industrialization, standardization, commodification a part of the social norms / core values.

Since these are cultural aspects of modernity, which can be relatively adapted to or appropriated by any other culture, it becomes possible to think about “modern Islam”; an idea that influences Turkish politics for decades. In fact, many resources attribute the idea of “Islamic modernity” to the late Ottoman era; when 19th Century Ottoman intellectuals took



on “a modernization project” to save the empire. One of the common political ideas of the era was “pan-Islamism”, in a context where the Ottoman Empire still controls a large portion of the Islamic world and holds the title of “the Caliphate”. As we mentioned that “multiple modernities” is a postmodern idea, “modernity in the Ottoman Empire” has been interpreted mostly as a process of Westernization. Specifically called “the Tanzimat era” in Ottoman history, Turkish historiography recognized this era as “the beginning of Turkish/Ottoman Westernization” - especially until postmodern times. The “Westernization” discourse that lasted for more than a century makes the East-West dichotomy and the internal culture war, contemporary sources of political polarization in Türkiye.

#### - **Islamic modernities**

“Modernity” is where we draw the line between Islam as a religion (or an ancient teaching) and islamism as a modern ideology; based on the focus group findings regarding rejection of violence and adopting egalitarian (somewhat feminist) modern values among conservative participants. However, from an islamist point of view; it can be argued that modernity (at least in the cultural sense rather than industrial or philosophical) began with Islam itself. Indeed, the Quran proposes a judiciary system, an economic structure and means of regulating everyday life to achieve a common goal (either in the secular or the divine sense). This point of view aims for disengagement from the process of “Westernization” and claiming “Islamic modernity” as in “multiple modernities”. Occasionally in the contemporary Turkish society and media, like the unfortunate misinterpretation of “modernity” as “Westernization”, also “postmodernity” is interpreted as “islamism”.

Mainstream “islamic modernity” or “islamism” has to reject violence and adopt egalitarian values, in order to maintain its civic legitimacy (locally and globally) and to distance itself from contemporary salafism/jihadism. The same can be argued for Iran, which is a constitutional republic and where power is legitimized based on elections and Shia-interpretation of Islam. Another example from breakdowns of the Islamic world would be Muslim Brotherhood (*el-ihvan el-Müslimin*), which is a political movement much favored by Erdoğan. Muslim Brotherhood identifies itself as a democratic movement, with a pan-Islamist tendency.

Based on the literature review and the focus group data, we conclude that gender politics is also widely interpreted in the context of East-West dichotomy and culture war, because its

acceptance or rejection is the differentiating factor between “Western modernities” and “Eastern modernities”. According to contemporary islamism (or islamic modernity in Türkiye), gender politics is taken as an existential threat. Nevertheless, there is observable progress in terms of gender politics amongst conservative participants: women’s agency. This takes us back to one of the main principles of culture; it is dynamic and it changes. Therefore, rather than a strong resistance against change, our conclusion is that there is a severe lack of postmodern interpretations of islamic modernity and Turkish modernity. While relativity of modernity is a strength of contemporary islamism, relativity of culture is its weakness.

### **3.2. “Patriarchal bargain”:**

Women’s agency stands out in the focus group sessions as a progressive factor. Although, this factor doesn’t work only one way in the broader social context. The case of Konca Kuriş is a great example from Türkiye, for a woman’s agency and initiative for progress in women’s rights.

Born to a conservative family and raised by fundamentalist discourses, Kuriş was a young female Hezbollah member. Later in her life, Kuriş experienced cultural contact and discovered feminist thought. She became one of the first “modern muslim feminists” in Türkiye, whose ideas made it to the mainstream media in the late 1990s. In simplistic terms, she was interpreting the Quran in a way that allows much more agency to women. However, Kuriş was kidnapped by Hizbullah to be tortured for 18 days and killed due to blasphemy, to make a public example of her.

As we discussed a weakness of islamism above, it would be unethical not to discuss a weakness of Turkish feminist movement: it is hard to hear Kuriş’s name in the mainstream media after 20 years, as nobody mentioned in the focus group sessions, as well. Terror fulfills its purpose by replacing Kuriş’s memory with fear, since the Kuriş case is still a horrifying one for the public. Being unable to transfer the memory of such a critical public figure to the next generation or the current severe lack of public role models makes us question the resource management (in terms of both economic capital and human capital) of the feminist organizations in Türkiye.

Another major weakness of the Turkish feminist movement, as also observable in the focus group sessions, is the common practice of “patriarchal bargain” within the society. The term is coined by Turkish anthropologist Deniz Kandiyoti, referring to her fieldwork regarding

“honor killings” in Türkiye. In the context of Kandiyoti’s fieldwork; “patriarchal bargain” is when the young bride becomes the elder member of the traditionalist family, she also approves the femicide of the new young bride as her social status requires from her. In this context, following patriarchal discourses and practices brings a degree of safety and authority to some (elder) women along with men. However, in relation to Kandiyoti’s fieldwork and media representations of “honor killings”, the concept of “patriarchal bargain” is often misunderstood as a phenomenon unique to Kurdish/Eastern traditions or unique to women in power. While Kandiyoti never said “patriarchal bargain” is bound to a specific time and place, a postmodern interpretation of “honor killings” would lead us to contemporary femicides in Türkiye. Some of them can be and should be categorized as “honor killings”<sup>3</sup>. Just like “honor killings” is not a phenomenon unique to a certain age group or a community, the same goes for “patriarchal bargain” too. The focus group sessions provided various examples of patriarchal bargain, through opinions and memories of the participants:

“[on experiencing pressure and restriction as a teenage girl] *We followed the rules, we didn’t face pressure*”  
(conservative female)

“[on women’s clothing] *A man always keeps tabs on. Even a man who genuinely doesn’t want to do so may end up doing so*”  
(conservative female)

“*My father is the authority in our family. In general, he has the last word. Although, my mom and I also have a saying in matters - as in, men can be manipulated or influenced*”  
(progressive female)

“*Women call the shots, men pretend as if they do*”  
(conservative female)

“*If there is violence, a woman should divorce immediately. Because [such a family or relationship] it is no good neither for the child or the society. [For a man] It is not a good scene for a family man*”  
(moderate male)

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/kiskanclik-krizine-girdi-esini-yaraladi-yanindaki-kisiyi-oldurdu-41933535>

<https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/sanliurfada-yasak-ask-cinayeti-namusumu-temizledim,h7TN3YnuTUeauEmLJVORqw>

*“We are a patriarchal family. But yet, my grandmother [fathers’s mother] is very important. She is regarded with high value by everyone. But the brides, not so much...”*  
(progressive female)

*“I already believe women and men have the same rights, but women and men are not equal. Men have the responsibility of protecting women”*  
(fundamentalist female)

Although conservative participants recognize feminist discourses as egalitarian values in a “modern” sense, feminism cannot be imagined apart from classical modernity. Rationalization and secularization may be subtle but they are inevitable during the shift from Islam to islamism. Often by anti-feminist discourses, “feminism” is defined as an “ideology”. The truth is feminism is rather a philosophical trend, branching out from rationalism and secularism. To achieve a higher and more accurate awareness of feminism, feminist movement should be more aware of its own weaknesses, whether in terms of patriarchal bargain or of anti-political strategies. “Patriarchal bargain” should not be ignored whatever the context is, and it should be recognized as a form of **reproduction of patriarchy** rather than merely “women’s weakness” or “women’s responsibility”.

### **3.3. Narrational Distance: Lack of Relational Contact**

In the context of journalism, the journalist’s role creates a narrational distance between the source and the audience. Here we use the term “narrational distance” in a broader sense, as a lack of cultural/relational contact due to polarization in media and social segmentation. By this definition, as an anti-thesis of cultural contact, “narrational distance” is also a major element of culture war. In a broader context, it is a social problem, where individuals lack the context for relating to another:

*“[about interactions with LGBTI+ individuals] Their way of talking, way of moving are different. I don’t know what to do or when”*  
(fundamentalist female)

*“[about LGBTI+ neighbor] What are we going to talk about?”*  
(conservative female)

*“[on transgender individuals] Are you going to switch back ten years later? What the heck..!?”*  
(moderate female)

*“On [Turkish] TV series, feminists were always those who hate men”*  
(moderate female)

*“Celebrities support LGBTI+ only to get a couple of more concert deals”*  
(conservative male)

The quotes above are mostly relevant to lack of representations of LGBTI+ and of feminism, even though some quotes imply that those participants encounter LGBTI+ and/or feminist representations on various media. Here we question the LGBTI+ or feminism relevant contents they encounter (some examples were already mentioned in the previous section) in terms of how useful these contents are for providing a context to interact with “the Other” in public and private domains. For these participants, it was obvious that they did not encounter such representations of LGBTI+ or feminists, whereas, they also seem clueless about how to interact with them in real life, without conflict or without instantly associating them with certain ideological discourses or sexuality taboo. Here, the concept of “narrational distance” is not relevant to the individual journalist, instead, it is a narrational distance on the structural level. In this sense, the current Turkish government’s policies on freedom of press and freedom of expression should also be revisited.

As we discussed in the previous section; in the context of culture war, there is a huge narrational distance (in the structural sense) between our conservative participants and Western feminist movements. Other than “culture war” discourses, such narrational distance manifests itself also as a lack of meaningful (according to social norms) and relatable representations of LGBTI+ and feminism in Türkiye. As an example of this; the focus group sessions with conservative participants showed how frequent the use of “treatment” discourse is (regarding LGBTI+ rights). The participants explicitly stated that they believe LGBTI+ people should seek medical aid:

*“[about causes of homosexuality] It may be medical or maybe it is spiritual. There might be a spiritual deficiency”*  
(conservative female)

*“[about causes of homosexuality] It might be a medical issue. It is wrong to politicize this”*  
(conservative male)

*“[about causes of homosexuality] There is a sick, defective situation”*  
(moderate male)

“[about having an LGBTI+ neighbor] *If I have some sort of relation from earlier, I would offer all the help I can. I would offer to take this person to doctor*”  
(conservative female)

Thus, we started asking the participants “what would be the treatment like” and “what if the LGBTI+ person refuses treatment”. However, they never specified how these treatments would work; one could get the impression that hormone treatment or anti-gay therapy would be more or less similar to addiction treatment. Inside the research team, we call this narrational distance situation “a lack of Alan Turing”, referring to insufficient LGBTI+ representation in Turkish public space and media. The reason we chose “Alan Turing” is because, besides his LGBTI+ identity, he is known as a war hero, a hero of science and a pop culture figure, at the same time - yet, he is out of Turkish context.

### 3.4. “Human” Rights

Besides representations of LGBTI+ and feminism, representation of human rights is also very problematic in the Turkish context. The current Turkish government often interpretes the human rights issues in a culture war context, with an anti-political attitude<sup>4</sup>. The recent cases of Kavala and Demirtaş at the ECHR have been a topic of discussion in Turkish politics for some years so far. The government’s standpoint is based on the East-West dichotomy; as if ECHR underestimates the Turkish judiciary system<sup>5</sup>. Among the few responses regarding human rights, a participant confirmed the government’s position on the matter:

“*ECHR decisions [regarding Türkiye] are not objective*”  
(conservative male)

Another participant confirmed the government’s position against the Istanbul Convention, which also a human rights agreement:

“[about Türkiye’s decision to leave The Istanbul Convention] *I don’t have much information about it. I completely trust our government. I have confidence in their decision*”  
(conservative female)

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<sup>4</sup> Turkish Minister of Justice claims that Türkiye implemented the ECHR decision on Kavala even though there are no signs of such implementation and the minister knows it too:  
<https://bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/265691-bakan-bozdog-aihm-in-osman-kavala-kararinin-uygulandigini-ileri-surd>  
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<sup>5</sup> Here the media outlet A-Haber, known for open support for Erdoğan and his party, announces the ECHR decision and Demirtaş as “a scandal”:  
<https://www.ahaber.com.tr/gundem/2020/12/22/son-dakika-aihmden-skandal-selahattin-demirtas-karari?paging=2>

Earlier we mentioned that most conservative participants did not consider LGBTI+ rights as human rights. Also in the moderate groups, participants either drew attention to cultural differences between Türkiye and the Western countries, or, they agreed with most conservative participants on this matter. Although, when asked about human rights and how human rights affect their lives (in general or particularly their daily-lives), we noticed that most participants remained silent or provided vague answers. Few participants who talked about human rights described the concept as “the foundation of the judiciary system”, “social justice” or “decent life conditions”:

*“Human rights makes no difference in my life”*  
(moderate male)

*“About human rights, it shouldn’t exceed the religion”*  
(moderate male)

Those participants also took on the “human rights” concept in the context of femicides in Türkiye, using “women’s rights” and “human rights” interchangeably. However, without the political context provided by mainstream media content, participants had difficulties making a connection between “human rights” and daily-life, as none of them mentioned any kind of minority group whose rights are being violated on a daily basis, other than women. We interpret this as; “human rights” doesn’t exist for most participants outside the political polarization or culture war.

Besides local politics and propaganda, it is a global issue that “human rights” is understood as an ambiguous/vague concept. The focus group sessions demonstrated a local example of this problem. “Human rights” is an important concept of modernity yet modernities and cultures are “relative”. So, definitions of “human” are also quite relative. Fundamentally, the problem of “defining human” only contributes to the ambiguity of the “human rights” concept, especially in the eyes of the participants. Although we never asked them “what do you think human is”, the participants (except the progressive ones) referred to religious “type of knowledge” very frequently - even the moderate ones - when talking about diverse topics including human rights. Therefore, we assume that their definition of “human” is based on religious “type of knowledge” and our assumption is also based on such statements:

*“According to our religion, homosexuality is wrong. If they feel so, then they should match their body and their feelings”*  
(moderate female)

*“Due to creation, woman is a weak being”*  
(conservative male)

In the previous section we mentioned the use of creationist and essentialist discourses together during the focus group sessions. This gives a hint about the participants’ references for what “human” is. The quotes above show that, “human” is regarded as “a creation” because, as a core narrative of religious “type of knowledge”, the genesis narrative defines human as a creation of God. Accordingly, the essentialist perspective defines human in biological terms; consisting of the male and the female sex. So, it is expected to see creationism and essentialism go hand-in-hand as “the God created human, in two biological forms”. For instance, while transgenders were the first target of participants when asked about LGBTI+ topics, some other participants approached from an essentialist/creationist perspective that justifies sex reassignment:

*“I asked the hodja at a gathering. He said if his hormones are like that, created in that way, it is ok [sex reassignment surgery]. I don’t know if it’s true but he said so”*  
(conservative female)

Compared to gender topics, when asked about local ethnic minorities, for instance, there were only inclusive responses:

*“We live under the same flag, prejudices must be overcome. The ones from East shouldn’t all be considered as terrorists”*  
(moderate male)

*“[on Alawites] Them being different doesn’t necessarily mean that they have a bad way of life... It is important to know and to understand each other... We have too many prejudices. We can’t live with each other. If we can change that, we can establish better relations”*  
(conservative female)

*“[on freedom of expression, in general] If I don’t like another person’s opinion or the way he/she uses his/her freedom of expression, then I just get away. I mean, if you don’t like someone’s opinion or reaction, you don’t have to overreact to that”*  
(moderate male)

Such comparison shows an awareness on ethnic issues, in the sense that these issues are not racial, biological or divine but merely cultural issues. Nevertheless, gender topics are not considered in a cultural context, rather they are always linked to the problem of “how humans are and how they should be”. Given that there is a long history of ethnic conflicts, and thereby, extensive (humanizing or informing) content related to ethnic issues - unlike the



gender issues; it can be argued that such a result (of the comparison) is inevitable. Although, it is not always about media content or some borrowed “type of knowledge” that defines “human” for an individual. The individual’s own conditions, in terms of socio-economic conditions and available interpersonal relations, may lead to essentialist or other sorts of “human” definitions:

*“Women are fragile. Women cannot lift heavy, they cannot work at construction”*  
(conservative female)

#### **4. Suggestions**

##### **4.1. Solution-Oriented Approaches**

Even though focus group participants were selected based on the cluster analysis of survey data, the focus group sessions showed that the groups are highly permeable (except the “true progressive” group) as each group had more conservative or progressive participants in itself, whereas, many same or similar discourses were reflected across different groups. Therefore, we suggest focusing on various discourses and “types of knowledge” rather than broad segments, which will be much harder to address. The problem with segmentation or “personas” is that they are mostly imagined outcomes of research data whereas particular discourses, sets of values and “types of knowledge” are much more real and tangible in the social context. Coming from this perspective, we have prepared one-pager “mission cards”, which contain contextualization and problematization of specific issues relevant to this study.

The main point of the “solution-oriented” approach is to take action for social change as quickly as possible. The key to social change, especially in highly polarized contexts, is creating safe domains for relational contact to take place. This could involve bringing culturally and narrationally distant individuals together in real-life, as well as, providing content that allows such individuals to contextualize a relational contact with each other. This is harder than it sounds as such a contact always bears the risk of open conflict. Besides minimizing risks, it also requires tolerance and flexibility.

We recommend “childcare” to be treated as a neutral topic, which brings (especially female) participants together in real-life and/or digital space. Also, “childcare” is a topic that makes the groups even more permeable, in terms of bringing diverse discourses and “types of knowledge” on the same table. While it is already a politically polarized topic in Türkiye, making “childcare” a neutral ground might lead to conservative participants exploring new

media outlets and new content. These are also the participants who experience modernity, especially in terms of egalitarian family relations and women's rights.

#### 4.2. Further Research Suggestions

The survey and the focus group study showed that “masculinity” is problematized among the participants. “Masculinity studies” is also a recent and developing field of research in academia. Further research focusing on “masculinity” would provide further insights on childcare, gender roles, violence and women's rights perception. Further research on “human rights” would also be very useful in terms of understanding how culture war and gender rights are related in the eyes of Turkish people. One of the main conclusions of this study, a severe lack of LGBTI+ and feminism representations brings a lot of responsibility to media outlets and content producers. However, regular nation-wide surveys on popular figures and various representations regarding LGBTI+ and feminism issues would lead to more accurate content production processes.

For further suggestions, please see the appendix “Workshop: Mission Cards”.

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