

“You Won’t Walk Alone”: Online Feminist Testimony and Transforming Subjectivities of Veiling

Alparslan Nas

Marmara University

[ORCID: 0000-0002-1759-4357](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1759-4357)

alparslan.nas@marmara.edu.tr

Abstract

Throughout the 1990s, women’s Islamic headcover (hijab or headscarf) has been subject to restrictions in public offices, leading to faith and gender discrimination in Turkey. In the last two decades, the visibility of Islam in politics and the public sphere has increased, leading to the resolution of the “headscarf ban” in 2013. Since then, discussions about veiling have moved from the official sphere to the cultural sphere. In recent years, there has been a growing tendency among a new generation of conservative women to problematise veiling. In this regard, this article analyses the digital activism of “You Won’t Walk Alone,” which was founded in July 2018 as a platform aiming to give visibility to women who experience forced veiling. Through a thematic analysis of ten different testimonies, this article argues that the activism transforms the cultural meaning of veiling and challenges hegemonic religious body politics by facilitating feminist witnessing.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Activism, Hijab, Islam, Feminism, Testimony, Veiling.

• • • • •

<http://federgi.ankara.edu.tr>

“Yalnız Yürümeyeceksin”: Çevrim İçi Feminist Tanıklık ve Örtünmenin Dönüşen Öznellikleri

Alparслан Nas

Marmara Üniversitesi

[ORCID: 0000-0002-1759-4357](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1759-4357)

alparслан.nas@marmara.edu.tr

Öz

1990'lı yıllar boyunca kadınların dini giyinme biçimleri (tesettür) kamusal alanda çeşitli kısıtlamalara maruz kalırken, bu durum Türkiye'de inanç ve toplumsal cinsiyet temelli ayrımcılıkların gerçekleşmesine neden olmuştur. 2000'li yıllardan günümüze dek İslam'ın kamusal görünürlüğü artmış ve 2013 yılında başörtüsü yasağının kalkmasıyla sonuçlanmıştır. Bu dönemden itibaren tesettür üzerine tartışmalar politik alandan kültürel alana taşınmıştır. Son yıllarda muhafazakar toplumsal sınıf içerisinde tesettüre eleştirel yaklaşma eğiliminde olan yeni bir jenerasyon ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu bağlamda bu makale, kadınların zorunlu örtünme deneyimlerine görünürlük sağlamayı amaçlamak için Temmuz 2018'de kurulan “Yalnız Yürümeyeceksin” dijital aktivizmini analiz etmektedir. Belirlenen 10 adet tanıklığın tematik analizi sonucunda bu makale, aktivizmin feminist tanıklık aracılığı ile, tesettürün kültürel anlamlandırmasını dönüştürdüğünü ve bu doğrultuda egemen dinsel beden politikalarına meydan okuduğunu öne sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Aktivizm, İslam, Feminizm, Örtünme, Tanıklık, Tesettür.

•••••

<http://federgi.ankara.edu.tr>



Introduction

An integral tool of the feminist movement, activism aims to bring about social or political change by raising awareness and campaigning on a social issue that causes women’s oppression (Ackerly and True 2010, 465). This article offers a critical discussion of contemporary issues relating to Islam and women in Turkey through an analysis of the recent activism “You Won’t Walk Alone” (hereafter referred to as YWA). Launched by a group of women in 2018, the YWA website focuses on giving a voice to women who are subjected to Islamisation through veiling. Women build their activism mainly through the website, <https://yalnizyurumeyeceksin.com>, and their social media accounts on Twitter (@yalniz_yurume) and Instagram (@yalniz_yurume). Aiming to build solidarity among women forced to wear the hijab by their parents during their childhood and early adolescence, the website contains testimonies of women who have written about their traumas of forced veiling. Since the 2000s, veiled women have faced difficulties in participating in the public sphere, including universities and state offices, due to the official state discourse that associated veiling with Islamist politics and tended to limit its visibility. Throughout the 2000s, the hijab was part of the country’s democratisation agenda that sought to increase the public visibility of veiled women. When the issue was finally resolved in 2013, and Islamism gained hegemony in the po-

litical sphere through successive AKP (Justice and Development Party) governments, the meaning of veiling was transformed. By discussing the YWA's activism focusing on the detailed analysis of ten different testimonies, this article will highlight that veiling is being challenged by women in the Islamic habitus through feminist witnessing and testimony. Here, I refer to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "habitus" to point at the "subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class" (Bourdieu 1977, 86). I prefer to employ the term Islamic habitus throughout the article to refer to the complexity of women's experiences within a particular social class, which is characterized by the shared perceptions and world-views associated to political Islam in Turkey. Women who are or have been veiled share their traumatic experiences within the Islamic habitus, which problematises their consent to veiling as a hegemonic cultural practice. Feminist witnessing through the publication of online testimonies is crucial to highlight the changing meaning of veiling from a symbol of resistance, change and democratisation to a symbol of religious oppression.

Women, Islam, and Digital Culture in Turkey

The role of women in Turkish society has been one of the most debated issues since the establishment of the Republic as a modern secular state in 1923. Assigning women the role of raising the next generation of modern Turkish citizens, the nation-state granted women civil and political rights (Kandiyoti 1987, 320-321). However, the public sphere in which women could participate was limited, as it was largely designed for middle-class, urban and secular women (Arat 2016, 129; Kandiyoti 1987, 323). Islamist politics accelerated after the 1970s as a reaction against the modernist Republican project, asserting tradition over modern and Western values and favouring a religious vision of the public sphere (Arat 1998, 126-127; Kavakci Islam 2010, 47-48). In the 1990s, veiled women seeking their right to be visible in public were largely mobilised under political Islam and Islamic feminism (Aldikacti Marshall 2008, 226). As women gained public visibility with their hijab, they are considered a threat by the official ideology (Saktanber 1994, 104). The military memorandum of 28 February 1997 forced Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of the pro-Islamist Welfare Party, to resign as prime minister, accompanied by a strict policy on veiling in public offices and universities. Tensions were heightened by the 28 February period, during which veiled women were subjected to physical and symbolic violence (Jenkins 2008, 163; Mutluer 2019, 110). As women within the political Islamist currents insisted on their right to be present in public with their identities, veiling came to signify rights, freedoms and resistance to the official secularist state ideology (Göle 1996; 1997). Until

then, the main criticism of veiling was that it was a backward religious practice that led to women's subordination. There were two main perspectives on the hijab issue were the "liberal perspective," which supported the hijab as a woman's right and the "enlightened perspective," which argued that the hijab was an instrument of control over women's bodies, thus legitimising the ban (Küçükalp 2013, 242). From an enlightenment perspective, the unveiling of women was seen as a liberation from patriarchal Islamic ideology, hence echoing a colonial mindset that positioned women as subordinate subjects in need of "saving" (Abu-Lughod 2013).

This article argues that the emergence of YWA complicates the meaning of veiling in line with contemporary political and social developments in Turkey. The 2000s witnessed a major shift in terms of power structures as the power imbalances between the centre and the periphery, the secularist republican elite and the conservative social classes were re-balanced during the AKP's rule (Bakiner 2018, 510; Somer 2019, 47). The AKP transformed the rhetoric of Islamist politics after its founding in 2001 (Nas 2018, 8). The party managed to form a single-party government in the 2002 elections and began negotiations for full EU membership (Coşar and Yeğenoğlu 2011, 556), and maintained a conservative-democratic approach. Throughout the 2000s, the AKP actively negotiated EU membership and took steps to resolve the country's long-standing problems, such as the headscarf ban and the "Kurdish opening." (Celep 2018, 734) Therefore, the right to wear the hijab has become a counterpart of Türkiye's democratisation process which aims to achieve a more inclusive society (Aksoy 2015, 160). Eventually, the ban on veiling in public offices was lifted in 2013 (Oztig 2018, 599), and veiling marked a victory against the secularist official state ideology. With the rise of pro-Islamist politics in the 2010s, several studies have pointed to paradoxes regarding the decline of religious visibilities in the public sphere, particularly in relation to the hijab (Cebeci and Mengü 2021). Okumuş (2022) analysed women's tendencies to unveil with reference to Fastinger's theory of cognitive dissonance and secularisation. In her MA thesis, Koca (2020) conducts fieldwork to analyse the conditions and processes that lead women to unveil in different ways. Topal (2022, 100) argues that since 2016, unveiling has emerged as a phenomenon that "potentially challenges the Islamist political project." The author suggests that unveiling is not a collective action, but rather a tactic used by women to examine their true political and spiritual beliefs in the face of the AKP's power in the spiritual sphere. (Topal 2022, 118). Finally, in her thesis research, Parla (2022) analyses women's unveiling practices after 2015, and argues that women are motivated to unveil because they want to show that they are not responsible for the AKP's policies.

The questioning of veiling within the Islamic habitus brings with it

a further discussion of the problem of Antonio Gramsci's (1971) notions of consent and cultural hegemony in Turkey. Scholars point out an expansion of Islamist-conservative cultural policies throughout the 2010s; such as the rapid increase of İmam Hatip schools (vocational schools for the education of state employed religious functionaries), state schools incorporating Islamic curriculum, and the government's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, which is considered as backlash in terms of secular social life and gender equality (Buyruk 2021, 670; Güneş and Ezikoğlu 2022). This period illustrates the government's attempts to implement cultural hegemony in different areas, which are reflected in different political statements. In May 2017, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan addressed the general assembly of a pro-Islamist foundation and criticised his party by stating that "we have achieved political power in the last 14 years, but social and cultural power is different and we have problems with it" (Hurriyet.com.tr 2017). He made similar remarks in October 2020 during the opening of the academic year of Ibn Haldun University, saying the following: "We have succeeded in providing services to our people, but we have failed in education and culture. We have problems in science and the arts. We have media technology, but it does not represent our voice and our ideas" (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı 2020). The statement admits that the government has not been successful enough in achieving cultural hegemony and that there is a crisis that is recognised by the party elite. Following Gramsci that cultural hegemony can only be realised with the consent of the social classes, YWA shows that women's objections to the Islamic lifestyle point to a crisis of consent within the Islamic habitus. YWA demonstrates the problematisation of this consent against the pro-Islamist cultural project through feminist testimony.

In this respect, YWA's testimonies show that the meaning of veiling has been transformed in two main ways. Firstly, critiques of veiling emerged from within the Islamic habitus, rather than from secular critics. Second, critiques of veiling no longer mimicked colonialism, but were based on women's lived experiences and encounters within the Islamic habitus. Social media acts as a space for opposing views to be heard in the process of cultural hegemony crisis (Saka 2019). In this respect, social media provided women with the digital means to campaign through online activities such as hashtag activism and blogging (Altınay 2014; Eslen-Ziya 2013). In addition, women are using social media to unite and build solidarity against patriarchal culture by sharing testimonies and memories (Goker 2019). In recent years, women from different backgrounds have increasingly challenged the Islamic habitus. For example, a group of women launched the Women in Mosques campaign in 2017 to highlight the patriarchal organisation of mosque spaces, which discriminates against women by positioning men as the primary religious subjects (Nas 2022).

Another initiative, Reçel-Blog, provides a forum for women to share their experiences and discuss the potential of an Islamic interpretation of feminism (Goker 2019). In addition to these platforms, YWA was initiated in 2018 by women who used to wear the hijab and unveiled after a series of struggles. As Arda and Akdemir (2021) argue, the activism aims to forge a "connecting and collective group identity" among women to achieve feminist solidarity through their online presence. By analysing YWA's use of digital space and categorising the key themes, this article will focus on the important role of feminist testimony as a tool for a counter-hegemonic struggle.

You Won't Walk Alone: Challenging Hegemony through Witnessing

Using digital means such as its website and social media pages, YWA actively engages in creating a space of testimony and provides a space for women's self-expression. YWA's website is the main medium through which women's testimonies are published and the aims of the platform are communicated. As of June 5, 2023, YWA provides a definition for "Who We Are" from their web page as follows:

"You Won't Walk Alone" is a platform created with the aim of standing in solidarity with women who are under pressure to wear a headscarf during any period of their lives, by acknowledging and sharing their stories of struggle. The platform is voluntarily created by people who have experienced the same difficulties and who have found each other online.

By September 2022, women had published over 1000 entries on the YWA website and Instagram, eventually gaining 8500 followers on Instagram and 15000 followers on Twitter. YWA gained online popularity when women participated in the #10yearschallenge hashtag on Twitter in January 2019. By publishing two side-by-side photographs of their veiled selves and their current unveiled selves (@nojnest, January 18, 2019), the campaign opened up a public discussion about forced Islamisation through veiling (Kasapoğlu 2018). The #10yearschallenge was heavily criticized by some groups in the Islamic habitus, as a news website targeted YWA as "a plot by BBC Turkish using a couple of deceived women on the wrong path, a so-called activism staged against Islam" (Dursun 2019). Cyber-bullying and media intimidation against the campaign did not stop the sharing, but forced the activists to remain anonymous. The website provided a safe space for activists to publish their testimonies about their veiling experiences and traumas. The digital activism of the #10yearschallenge marked the first occasion on which women of the Muslim social class problematised their consent to Islamist cultural politics and coun-

tered the hegemonic practices of dress and lifestyle imposed on women.

In the aftermath of the campaign, activists largely focused on publishing testimonies through the website rather than organising online campaigns. Despite being cyberbullied in the media by conservative social groups, YWA managed to increase the visibility of women facing forced veiling and received hundreds of testimonies. Meanwhile, the website gained its unique digital identity. It became available in five languages (Turkish, English, Spanish, Persian and Arabic). An “Open Corner” button was created to call for women’s testimonies, which remained anonymous. The activists also added a “scholarship” tab to their website to support women who cannot attend university due to family pressure. Most young women are pressured by their parents to attend university only under a veil, so women who resist this oppressive decision face family barriers to participation in public spaces such as universities. The YWA website is not only a response to the oppressive structures, but also a platform for solidarity to constitute a potential for an alternative lifestyle against the hegemonic religious culture.

For women, a crucial strategy for problematising the processes of cultural hegemony is to bear witness to trauma in the digital sphere through remembering. As Hamilton (2009, 86) notes that the digital age, particularly websites and blogs, has provided women with the means to actively construct memory through first-person testimonies that ultimately configure memory in collective and cultural forms. Encouraging remembrance and facilitating recollection of oppressive events experienced by women have been widely used as research methodologies and psychoanalytic treatments by scholars and experts in the field of women’s and literary studies (Berg 2008; Chidgey 2013). Since writing positions women as speaking subjects who can find a language to bear witness to trauma, various modes of self-expression, including testimony and autobiography, have been seen as instruments of resistance and empowerment against oppressive social structures (Gilmore 1994; Felman and Laub 1992; Smith and Watson 1998). In this regard, YWA facilitates a space for women to actualise feminist witnessing that actively problematises the boundaries between the private and the public. As Parkins explains:

Given the historical—and persistent—ideological positioning of women and the feminine as “private” entities, witnessing as a moment that underscores the public incorporation of personal experience, and thus challenges the gendered binary of public and private, is crucial to a feminist theorization of remembrance (2007, 95).

YWA challenges the dichotomy of the public and private by expo-

sing the gendered and religious subordination in the private sphere. The women in YWA configure the meanings created by the hijab, transcend the strict boundaries between public and private, and expose the subordination by the hijab in the private sphere. As women tend to deconstruct the dominant meanings associated with the hijab as a symbol of Islamic social class and political Islam, they succeed in undertaking a counter-hegemonic struggle by publicizing their personal experiences of forced veiling. In this regard, this article analyses women's testimonies published on the YWA website by focusing on 10 different testimonies published in 2020 and 2021 under four key themes: Patriarchal pressure, science and education over religion, sexualities, and political indoctrination. The themes highlight the different ways in which veiling is challenged as an instrument of cultural hegemony in Turkey's contemporary social and political landscape through public testimony. The themes show that veiling is a crucial element of gendered socialisation within the family, as an instrument of patriarchal control over women's bodies. The testimonies also reveal how women resist hegemonic practices in the private sphere and problematise consent within the Islamic habitus.

Patriarchal Pressure

The first theme of the testimonies is a critique of patriarchal culture and exposes the oppressive family structures in the private sphere. For example, an author (YWA December 20, 2021) narrates her relationship with her father as follows:

"I'm 15 years old. Last year my father forced me to wear the hijab. This started in my childhood with pressure from my mother. I couldn't wear tank tops, shorts or dresses... Then my father started threatening to make me wear the veil, and now I'm here. I really don't want to do it, and I do it so reluctantly."

When she told her mother about her thoughts on not wearing the hijab, her mother reacted harshly, saying the following:

"When I told my mother, she reacted badly. 'If you tell your father, he will kill you' and so on... I once tried to poison myself and kill myself. But I didn't succeed. My father would kill me if I told him, so I wanted to kill myself to escape."

The testimony shows that in addition to the oppressive father figures, mothers also participate in the perpetration of symbolic violence against women. Another testimony, "What I do for my loved ones does not help me with my loneliness," comments on the patriarchal dynamics

of the family:

“If I had to sum it up in one sentence, I realised that my father thought I was worthless. I fought against that thought; I tried very hard to think otherwise, but in the end I couldn’t make him love me. I can never forget him saying: ‘Leave this inglorious one alone, let her die,’ pointing at me. All this for a piece of cloth. It turned out that the piece of cloth was the thing that made him love me, even if it was just a little. Since I rejected that piece of cloth, he no longer had any reason to pretend to love me.”

According to the testimony, the father forces his daughter to wear a hijab. The daughter is expected to do this voluntarily in order to maintain a good relationship with the father. As the testimony continues, “When my father saw that we were wearing the hijab, he said, ‘Now you look like a human being,’” women who resist veiling are degraded and dehumanised by patriarchal ideology. Women often write their memories of dehumanisation, which is mainly perpetrated by the father figure in the household. According to the testimonies, fathers are a crucial point of trauma in feminist testimonies. By criticising the authority figures in the family, women use their testimonies as a challenge to hegemonic actions and discourses within the Islamic family structure. One of the testimonies (YWA November 21, 2021) mentions the trauma as follows:

“It was a week after since I covered my hair. We all went out together as a family. I was excited to dress up and cover my hair for the occasion. After a while my dad turned around and looked at me and suddenly took off my headscarf. I was only 11. He said, ‘If you are going to wear it like this, don’t wear it at all.’”

Surprised by her father’s reaction, she then realises that this was a ploy on his part to make her wear the hijab even more carefully. In the years that followed, she says, her father interfered with her choice of clothing, apart from the hijab:

“As I grew up, we had more fights. He intervened in everything from wearing trousers - which was outside the limits- to how I should do my hair inside the hijab.”

The father’s interference was exacerbated by threats of physical violence:

“I am 17, but I still cannot forget that day. It is even worse now. Once he said: ‘You wear your hair up and you are a pig and disgusting.’ Thou-

sands of threats like 'If you wear trousers, I will make you leave school' or 'I will beat you until your bones break,' etc."

Despite the hardships she faces, she dreams of one day taking off the hijab, saying: "No matter what the outcome, I will do it. I will never give up. If my father has the right to question my faith, I have the right to live. I hope one day." The ongoing struggle against patriarchal pressures and the possibility of liberation from them are common motifs in many of the testimonies published on the YWA website. Aside from stories of women's successful exit attempts, many stories point to the ongoing struggle for emancipation from religious barriers. The testimonies point to women's repeated and persistent actions to problematise their acquiescence to cultural hegemony in the Islamic habitus.

The patriarchal subordination of women makes it difficult for them to adapt to the demands of everyday life when they come into conflict with modern life. In this respect, one of the testimonies (YWA December 4, 2021) narrates the following remarks:

"High school was completely different. Even girls who weren't as pretty as me were noticed, but I was treated like I was invisible. I'm in 10th grade now. I am aware that I am a beautiful person, but I can't see myself as beautiful when I wear a headscarf, it doesn't suit me anymore. I'm not that person, I'm a lively person. For example, we go shopping with my sister - she doesn't wear a headscarf - and I can't find anything for me. When I wear an outfit, I feel like my mother or sister is looking at me strangely, and that makes me sad."

As the testimony underlines, wearing a hijab makes her feel different and limits her ability to fulfil and express herself in consumer culture. Veiled women are forced to participate in a consumer culture that is completely different from mainstream fashion. As a result, women feel isolated and "invisible" in the crowd. In this regard, the women point to a contrast between the private and the public spheres, which clearly illustrates how, from their perspective, veiling is at odds with modern life. After she decided to open up to her father about taking off the hijab, his father said the following:

"Today, after breakfast, I bravely explained my feelings to my father. At first he was a little surprised, he hesitated, then he said that he wouldn't interfere, that this was my life, but what I wanted to do was a sin."

Although her father claimed not to interfere in her decision, he told her that she would be sinning if she took off the hijab. This experi-

ence shows that women can be subjected to direct or indirect patriarchal pressure, sometimes legitimised by religious doctrine. Another testimony (YWA December 29, 2021) points to the relationship between gender socialisation and veiling, in which the father plays a crucial role:

“I was brought up in a conservative family. In the summer holidays of my 15th year, my father said, ‘All your friends are veiled, when will you veil?’ Just one sentence, nothing more. So the next day I was veiled (...) I was veiled all through high school, but I never felt beautiful and free. I wasn’t natural at first. For example, I was not free to wear a T-shirt over my trousers and go to the market. Although I wore a modern veil outside, I was still traditionally veiled at home. It was like putting me in a mould. I should have shaped my ideas according to that mould.”

Similar to the previous testimony, the father acts as an authority figure by forcing her to wear the hijab through peer pressure from her cultural environment. The testimony also shows that women’s ordinary daily activities, such as going to the market, are monitored and controlled in terms of what they wear in public. Women are expected to be constantly mindful of how they appear to others, both in private and in public, and to correct themselves according to religious expectations, which places a heavy burden on them in participating in modern life. Women are constantly tempted to conform to the hegemonic lifestyles dictated by their families; and when they resist such practices, they are threatened and oppressed by their parents.

Science and Education Over Religion

Women's interest in scientific and educational endeavours is also evident in their testimonies. YWA testimonies show that religion is not enough for women to realise their potential, so they show interest in secular fields of science, education and the arts. In this regard a testimony (YWA December 18, 2021) makes the following remarks:

“I am 17 years old, I wear a headscarf and I have no religion. When I tried to take off the headscarf, I was confronted with violence. Needless to say, I was devastated and lonely. At the moment I am studying for the university entrance exam. A few months ago, and again a few days ago, I thought about committing suicide. While I am alive, but unable to ‘exist’ under the pressure of a certain ideology, I suppress myself and ask myself, ‘Why am I living?’”

The testimony offers a feminist testimony on religiosity and domestic violence, showing that forced Islamisation can lead women to react

negatively to religion and distance themselves from Islam. Looking for a way out of her problems, she finds freedom on the internet and in science, as the following remarks make clear:

"Questioning and the internet have given me guidance in my life. ... My wish for the rest of my life is to study at a university far away from my family, to be a good scientist and to prevent my siblings from being crushed under this ignorance. Every time I fell, I got up and held on to these ideas."

Under oppressive cultural trends that intersect with Islam, women can access alternative views through the internet, demonstrating the liberating potential of the digital sphere for women and feminism. By going to university, she wants to realise herself as a scientist, to confront and transform the "ignorance" that people face within the Islamic habitus. As YWA's scholarship initiative shows, going to university is a crucial step for women to act freely and change the course of their lives by freeing themselves from oppressive religious ideology. At this point, another testimony (YWA December 11, 2021) marks the importance of education as follows:

"Hello, I'm a 17-year-old senior in high school. Like everyone who has shared their stories here, I covered my hair without thinking. (...) My mother would praise the secondary religious schools, also known as "İmam Hatip", and tell me that I should go there. She would say things like, 'It's a very nice place where you will get religious education and become a pious Muslim girl.'"

The testimony introduces a crucial discussion on the ideological role of İmam Hatip schools in Turkey, which are vocational secondary and high schools that aim to train personnel for religious services. Over the past 20 years, the number of İmam Hatip schools has grown rapidly (Butler 2018) and they have become symbolic of the introduction of an Islamic curriculum into the education system (Ozgun 2012, 63). When she failed to adapt to the style of education at this school, failing the religious classes, her parents decided to transfer her to a regular private school. After feeling the tension of being forced to wear the hijab and arguing with her family members, she decided to concentrate on the university entrance exams:

"And right now, I'm preparing myself for the university entrance exams. There are only 4 months left, and when I go to university, I'll take off my hijab. My mother saw how determined I was and said, 'Move to another city, do whatever you want as long as I don't see it.'"

I hope I succeed.”

The testimony emphasises that the mother approaches her with a negative attitude that dehumanises her daughter. She faces exclusion and isolation from her family and community because of her desire to remove her hijab. At this point, the women's testimonies illustrate that the university provides a liberating environment where they can distance themselves from religious oppression in their private spheres and communities. In this respect, the YWA testimonies point to the complicated dynamics behind the meaning of the hijab. Once a symbol of women's resistance to an oppressive state ideology in the 1990s, the hijab is now opposed by a group of women within the Islamic habitus as an apparatus of religious oppression. In sum, women's interest in science, education and digital culture provides them with the means to counter the hegemonic tendencies of the Islamic habitus and to form alternative subjectivities by pursuing careers in these fields.

Problematizing Sexual Identities

While science and education provide women with fields of emancipation from religious ideology, women show their interest in exploring different sexual subjectivities. The testimonies point to women's endeavor to break the taboos regarding sexual identities within the conservative social class. The issue of sexuality opens up another critical area of analysis where cultural hegemony within the Islamic habitus is being challenged, especially in recent years as anti-LGBTQ discourses have become more prevalent in politics. In this regard, homophobia/transphobia become an integral part of the religious habitus that women encounter. The ideological shaping of the private realm is further problematized in the testimony (YWA December 11, 2021) through the emphasis on sexual identities as follows:

“In 9th grade there was a girl I will never forget with whom I had arguments about religious issues. She told me that religion was oppressive and regressive for people. I told her that wasn't true. Later there was a Pride march that was not allowed and my friend mentioned it by saying 'they're banning the march for religious reasons' and I said 'so they shouldn't march, do we have to see it?'”

The testimony points to another important category of discussion among YWA participants, namely sexualities in the Islamic habitus. The dominant trends within Islamic theology have opposed sexual orientations other than heterosexuality (Kumpasoğlu, Hasdemir and Canel-Çınarbaşı 2022, 304). Although there is no law banning LGBTQ identities in

the Turkish legal system, there are cultural stereotypes and discrimination against sexual minorities. In June 2015, Pride march was banned by the Istanbul governor's office due to the "inappropriateness" of the activity in accordance with religious values during the month of Ramadan (Göçmen and Yılmaz 2017, 1054). Since then, Pride marches have been banned and the LGBTQ community has been the target of vilification and hatred from the Islamic lifestyle (Mutluer 2019, 104). Anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQ statements are central discourses to the government's cultural hegemony project. The increasingly hostile discourse towards sexual minorities is another point of women's alienation and disillusionment with Islam. In this regard, a testimony (YWA December 17, 2021) states the following:

"Hi, I would like to tell my story too. I'm 15 years old. Where I live, people are very conservative and homophobic. When I was six years old, my sister reacted to the cartoon I was watching by saying "that's a boy cartoon." I was always mature for my age, physically and mentally. In primary school I looked like a middle-schooler. My friends always made comments about my appearance. I loved to play football, but my friends wouldn't let me and would say, "You're a girl. Piss off!" Of course, the most oppressive thing is my family."

Like many other witnesses, she was forced to attend the İmam Hatip school, but despite the challenges, she is critical of the patriarchal and homophobic culture she was exposed to. Another testimony (YWA August 5, 2020) narrates as follows:

"Being a lesbian woman with a headscarf was very difficult. I was hiding my true identity from everyone. Being gay from those who know the hijab; and my hijab from my gay community."

Crucially, the testimony states that she voluntarily covered her hair at the age of sixteen and "gained freedom" by removing it on her 22nd birthday. As she also explored her sexual identity during these years, she feels the issues of being veiled and lesbian at the same time, pointing to the intersectional dynamics of women's subordination.

Political Indoctrination

The growing discussions on LGBTQ politics point to the problem of political indoctrination that women face within the Islamic habitus. As the new generation of women show interest in diversity of identities, their tendencies are challenged by their families with references to the symbolic political events that play important roles in the making of political Islam. In this regard, a testimony (YWA December 1, 2021) makes the following

remarks:

“We told our mother crying that we wanted to stop wearing the hijab and the reaction we got was unbelievable. My father kept us up all night reading Quranic verses, giving examples from the 28th of February, and he said: ‘You are brainwashed, you always find and read these books by secular people, both of you have betrayed your brains.’”

After her intention to remove the hijab, she was accused of being imposed by secular teachings and was reminded of the period of 28 February, when veiled women faced problems in participating in public offices and universities. The testimonies show that the previous generation of Islamist men fear that their daughters will develop secular behaviours and tastes that will eventually challenge the dominant political and cultural dynamics of the Islamic habitus. The testimonies point to a crisis of cultural hegemony experienced by the Islamic habitus as the new generation of women develop alternative tastes, interests and political views that are usually considered contradictory to the hegemonic religious and political environment. In one testimony (YWA November 7, 2021) the following is claimed:

“I started wearing the hijab when I was in 8th grade. It was the environment of the Imam Hatip rather than my family. Also, I was a really religious person at that time. Later I realised that I didn’t wear the hijab because I was a religious person, but because I was strongly influenced by the environment I live in.”

Unlike the testimonies analysed previously, she claims that her family did not pressure her to wear the hijab and that it was her own decision. However, she analyses that she wanted to wear the hijab because of the cultural environment of the Imam Hatip school, rather than because of her sincere religious feelings. As she continued her education in the Imam Hatip school, she developed certain political thoughts:

“When I started high school I wasn’t sure about my political views and I also thought that students shouldn’t have political views. (...) Now I’m a junior high school student. I wear the hijab, but I do not fulfil any religious obligations other than fasting. More specifically, I do not pray and I do not read the Quran. These are the things I stopped doing when I started high school; I didn’t do them properly in middle school anyway. I don’t know whether I should take off my hijab or not. I am a person with liberal ideas. I am not against the LGBTQ community. I am a Kemalist.”

Her statements show that as she continued her education in the İmam Hatip school and was exposed to a certain ideology of religiosity, she was conversely inclined towards different political and cultural identities, such as LGBTQ and Kemalism (modernist and secular ideology put forward by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey). Her statements highlight the crisis of cultural hegemony within the Islamic habitus and point to the complex dynamics of the meaning of Kemalism, which used to be an official state ideology and has been transformed into a potential for liberation from religious and gendered forms of subordination. In addition to their political views, their testimonies suggest that young women are increasingly disillusioned with religious rituals. The growing disinterest of young people in Islamic rituals has been recognised by the government, as evidenced by a report published in 2018 entitled "The Youth is Sliding to Deism" (Akyol, 2018). The report, prepared by the Ministry of Education, focuses on the religious views of İmam Hatip students, analysing how students are leaning toward deism and how Islamic education is failing to convince and attract young people. Akyol (2018) argues that the growing interest in deism among young people is a result of Islamism becoming a symbol of power, which is pushing young people away from faith and accelerating secularism. In response to the report, the Directorate of Religious Affairs issued frequent statements about deism and atheism as "traps" against Islam and argued that "children must be protected from ideologies other than Islam" by warning against "organisations that promote deism and atheism" (Duvar English 2021). The official statements show that the government's discourse on the transformation of youth has become increasingly reactionary, accusing certain organisations of "hidden forces" corrupting young Muslim men and women. The testimonies, however, show that women actively problematise religion in everyday life and tend to explore new subjectivities that can free them from the government's attempts to reproduce the cultural hegemony of the Islamic habitus.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to discuss the changing meanings of veiling in Türkiye's contemporary political and cultural landscape. From veiling as a symbol of freedom and resistance to veiling as an instrument of subjugation, women's bodies and their relations to power are changing over the years in line with political and cultural developments. YWA's activism illustrates how a new generation of women is attempting to challenge the social meaning of the hijab within the Islamic habitus. Bearing witness to trauma and testifying through digital culture provides women with the means to challenge the cultural hegemony of the Islamic habitus. At a time when pro-Islamist policies are gaining dominance, women's ob-

jections to hijab facilitate a crucial field of struggle that problematises their consent to the government's project of cultural hegemony. In sum, YWA activism points to the emergence of a new social class of women, born into the Islamic habitus but challenging it from within by engaging with progressive ideas and currents of global culture. This new social class of women pose a challenge to Islamist cultural hegemony, as they are eager to embrace the values of secularism, feminism and diversity. This article draws on a thematic analysis of women's testimonies and attempts to discuss their relationship to wider discursive practices. Future research on this topic can provide a better understanding of how women's activism is situated within broader cultural and political dynamics through feminist ethnography.



References

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: Harvard University Press, 2013).
- Ackerly, Brooke, and Jacqui True. "Back to the Future: Feminist Theory, Activism, and Doing Feminist Research in an Age of Globalization" *Women's Studies International Forum* 33, no. 5 (2010): 464–72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2010.06.004>.
- Aksoy, Hürcan Aslı. "Invigorating Democracy in Turkey: The Agency of Organized Islamist Women" *Politics & Gender* 11, no. 1 (2015): 146–170. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X1500001X>.
- Akyol, Mustafa. "Why so many Turks are losing faith in Islam (April 16, 2018)." <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/04/turkey-why-so-many-turks-are-losing-faith-in-islam.html>.
- Aldikacti Marshall, Gul. "A Question of Compatibility: Feminism and Islam in Turkey" *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 17, no. 3 (2008): 223–238. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10669920802405563>.
- Altınay, Rüstem Ertuğ. "'There Is a Massacre of Women': Violence against Women, Feminist Activism, and Hashtags in Turkey" *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 4 (2014): 1102–1103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2014.975445>.
- Arat, Yeşim. "Feminists, Islamists, and Political Change in Turkey." *Political Psychology* no. 19 (1998): 117–131. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3792117>.
- Arat, Yeşim. "Islamist Women and Feminist Concerns in Contemporary Turkey: Prospects for Women's Rights and Solidarity" *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 37, no. 3 (2016): 125–150. <https://doi.org/10.5250/fronjwomestud.37.3.0125>.
- Arda, Balca, and Ayşegül Akdemir. "Activist communication design on social media: The case of online solidarity against forced Islamic lifestyle" *Media, Culture & Society* (2021): 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720986002>.
- Bakiner, Onur. "A key to Turkish politics? the center–periphery framework revisited" *Turkish Studies* 19, no. 4 (2018): 503–522. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2018.1438846>.
- Berg, Anne-Jorunn. "Silence and Articulation—Whiteness, Racialization and Feminist Memory Work." *NORA—Nordic Journal of Women's Studies* 16, no. 4 (2008): 213–227. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740802446492>.

- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
- Butler, Daren. "Special Report: With more Islamic schooling, Erdogan aims to reshape Turkey," Reuters, January 25, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/turkey-erdogan-education-idINKBN1FE1FZ> (Date of Access: 05.06.2023).
- Buyruk, Halil. "The role of religious education in hegemony construction: the case of imam hatip schools in Turkey" *Paedagogica Historica* 57, no. 6 (2021): 657-674. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2020.1762677>.
- Cebeci, Büşra, and Nevşin Mengü. "Herkes istediği gibi yaşasın": Türkiye ve İran'daki kadınların başörtüsünü çıkarma pratikleri (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2021).
- Cebeci, Büşra (@nojnest). "Ay dayanamadım, ben de geldim." Twitter, January 18, 2019. <https://twitter.com/nojnest/status/1086272969913991169?s=20&t=j1fnBwU1c7EUideh87Sd8g> (Date of Access: 05.06.2023).
- Celep, Ödül. "The moderation of Turkey's Kurdish left: the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP)" *Turkish Studies* 19, no. 5 (2018): 723-747. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2018.1483195>.
- Chidgey, Red. "Reassess Your Weapons: the making of feminist memory in young women's zines" *Women's History Review* 22, no. 4 (2013): 658-672. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2012.751773>.
- Coşar, Simten, and Metin Yeğenoğlu. "New Grounds for Patriarchy in Turkey? Gender Policy in the Age of AKP" *South European Society and Politics* 16, no. 4 (2011): 555-573. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2011.571919>.
- Duvar English, "Children must be protected from ideologies other than Islam: Turkey's top religious body," March 29, 2021, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/children-must-be-protected-from-ideologies-other-than-islam-turkeys-top-religious-body-news-56839> (Date of Access: 05.06.2023).
- Dursun, Sevdâ. "#10yearschallenge değil, BBC Production," *Gerçek Hayat*, January 28, 2019, <https://www.gercekhayat.com.tr/gundem/10yearschallenge-degil-bbc-production/> (Date of Access: 05.06.2023).
- Eslen-Ziya, Hande. "Social Media and Turkish Feminism: New resources for social activism" *Feminist Media Studies* 13, no. 5 (2013): 860-

870. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2013.838369>.

Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

Gilmore, Leigh. *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1994).

Göçmen, İpek, and Volkan Yılmaz. "Exploring Perceived Discrimination Among LGBT Individuals in Turkey in Education, Employment, and Health Care: Results of an Online Survey" *Journal of Homosexuality* 64, no. 8 (2017): 1052-1068. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2016.1236598>.

Goker, Zeynep Gulru. 2019. "Memories, Stories and Deliberation: Digital Sisterhood on Feminist Websites in Turkey" *European Journal of Women's Studies* 26, no. 3 (2019): 313-328. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506819855414>.

Göle Nilüfer. *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

Göle, Nilüfer. "The gendered nature of the public sphere" *Public Culture* 10, n.1 (1997): 61-81. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-10-1-61>.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).

Güneş, Ayşe, and Çağlar Ezikoğlu. "Legal and Political Challenges of Gender Equality and Crimes Against Women in Turkey: The Question of Istanbul Convention" *Women & Criminal Justice* (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2022.2040695>.

Hamilton, Carrie. "Feminist testimony in the internet age: sex work, blogging and the politics of witnessing" *Journal of Romance Studies* 9, no. 3 (2009): 86-101. <https://doi.org/10.3828/jrs.9.3.86>.

Hurriyet.com.tr, "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: 'Sosyal ve kültürel iktidarımız konusunda sıkıntılarımız var'," May 28, 2017, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-sosyal-ve-kulturel-iktidarimiz-konusunda-sikintilarimiz-var-40472482> (Date of Access: 05.06.2023)

Jenkins, Gareth. *Political Islam in Turkey Running West, Heading East?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

Kandiyoti, Deniz. "Emancipated but Unliberated? Reflections on the

- Turkish Case" *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 2 (1987): 317-308. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177804>.
- Kasapoğlu, Çağrı. "Başörtüsünü çıkaranlar: Neden bu kararı alıyorlar, neler yaşıyorlar?" *BBC Türkçe*, January 4, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-46758752> (Date of Access: 05.06.2023).
- Kavakci Islam, Merve. *Headscarf Politics in Turkey: A Postcolonial Reading* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
- Koca, Sümeyye. "The Changing Dynamics of the Headscarf Question in Turkey: The Women's Struggle to Take off the Headscarf" Unpublished MA Thesis (Istanbul: Sabancı University, 2020). https://research.sabanciuniv.edu/id/eprint/41263/1/10219673_Koca_Sumeyye.pdf.
- Kumpasoğlu, Güler Beril, Dilara Hasdemir, and Deniz Canel-Çınarbaş. "Between two worlds: Turkish religious LGBTs relationships with islam and coping strategies" *Psychology & Sexuality* 13, no. 2 (2022): 302-316. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2020.1772354>.
- Küçükalp, Derda. "The Headscarf Problem in Turkey in the Context of Discussions on Freedom" *İlahiyat Studies* 4, no. 2 (2013): 239-55. <https://doi.org/10.12730/13091719.2013.42.87>.
- Mutluer, Nil. "The intersectionality of gender, sexuality, and religion: novelties and continuities in Turkey during the AKP era" *South-east European and Black Sea Studies* 19, no. 1 (2019): 99-118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2019.1578049>.
- Nas, Alparlan. *Media Representations of the Cultural other in Turkey* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
- Nas, Alparlan. "'Women in Mosques': mapping the gendered religious space through online activism" *Feminist Media Studies* 22, no. 5 (2022): 1163-1178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1878547>.
- Okumuş, Beyza. "The Examination of Taking Off Headscarf Behaviour in the Context of the Cognitive Dissonance Theory" *Hitit İlahiyat Dergisi*, 21, no.1 (2022): 281-308. <https://doi.org/10.14395/hid.1057989>.
- Ozgur, İren. *Islamic Schools in Modern Turkey: Faith, Politics, and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- Oztig, Lacin Idil. "The Turkish Constitutional Court, laicism and the headscarf issue" *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2018): 594-608. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1396536>.

- Parkins, Ilya. "Feminist Witnessing and Social Difference: The Trauma of Heterosexual Otherness in Vera Brittain's Testament of Youth" *Women's Studies* 36, no. 2 (2007): 95-116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497870601115385>.
- Parla, Zeynep Gül. "2015 Sonrası Kadınların Başörtüsünü Çıkarma Pratikleri Üzerine Bir Araştırma" Unpublished MA Thesis (Ankara: Hacettepe University, 2022). <http://www.openaccess.hacettepe.edu.tr:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11655/26807/ZEYNEP%20G%C3%9CL%20PARLA%20TEZ%20BASILI.pdf?sequence=1>.
- Saka, Erkan. *Social Media and Politics in Turkey: A Journey through Citizen Journalism, Political Trolling, and Fake News* (London: Lexington Books, 2019).
- Saktanber, Ayşe. "Becoming The "Other" as a Muslim in Turkey: Turkish Women vs. Islamist Women" *New Perspectives on Turkey* no. 11 (1994): 99-134. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S089663460000100X>.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Women, Autobiography and Theory: A Reader* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).
- Somer, Murat. "Turkey: The Slippery Slope from Reformist to Revolutionary Polarization and Democratic Breakdown" *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681 no. 1 (2019): 42-61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218818056>.
- Topal, Semiha. "Rethinking Piety and the Veil Under Political Islam: Unveiling Among Turkish Women After 2016." *American Journal of Qualitative Research* 6 no. 3 (2022): 99-123. <https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/12527>.
- Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı, "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, İbn Haldun Üniversitesi Külliyesi Açılış Töreni'ne katıldı," October 19, 2020, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/122413/cumhurbaşkanı-erdogan-ibn-haldun-universitesi-kulliyesi-acilis-toreni-ne-katildi> (Date of Access: 05.06.2023).
- YWA, "Being a lesbian woman wearing a headscarf was very heavy," August 5, 2020. <https://yalnizyurumeyeceksin.com/en/2020/08/05/being-a-lesbian-woman-wearing-a-headscarf-was-very-heavy/> (Date of Access: 05.06.2023).
- YWA, "Do I want to take off the hijab to be accepted by a certain circle?" November 7, 2021. <https://yalnizyurumeyeceksin.com/en/2021/11/07/do-i-want-to-take-off-the-hijab-to-be-accepted-by-a-certain-circle/> (Date of Access: 05.06.2023).

- YWA, "I want to play the violin, but my father broke the violin that I bought with the money I secretly saved," December 17, 2021. <https://yalnizyurumeyeceksin.com/en/2021/12/17/i-want-to-play-the-violin-but-my-father-broke-the-violin-that-i-bought-with-the-money-i-secretly-saved/> (Date of Access: 05.06.2023).
- YWA, "I was treated as if I was invisible," December 4, 2021. <https://yalnizyurumeyeceksin.com/en/2021/12/04/i-was-treated-as-if-i-was-invisible/> (Date of Access: 05.06.2023).
- YWA, "I wish to be a good scientist and prevent my siblings from crushing under this ignorance," December 18, 2021. <https://yalnizyurumeyeceksin.com/en/2021/12/18/i-wish-to-be-a-good-scientist-and-prevent-my-siblings-from-crushing-under-this-ignorance/> (Date of Access: 05.06.2023).
- YWA, "If I go to university, I will take my headscarf off," December 11, 2021. <https://yalnizyurumeyeceksin.com/en/2021/12/11/if-i-go-to-university-i-will-take-my-headscarf-off/> (Date of Access: 05.06.2023).
- YWA, "It was as if it was putting me in a mold," December 29, 2021. <https://yalnizyurumeyeceksin.com/en/2021/12/29/it-was-as-if-it-was-putting-me-in-a-mold/> (Date of Access: 05.06.2023).
- YWA, "My dad kept us up all night reading Quran verses, giving examples from February 28th," December 1, 2021. <https://yalnizyurumeyeceksin.com/en/2021/12/01/my-dad-kept-us-up-all-night-reading-quran-verses-giving-examples-from-february-28th/> (Date of Access: 05.06.2023).
- YWA, "My dad turned around and suddenly took my headscarf off," November 21, 2021. <https://yalnizyurumeyeceksin.com/en/2021/11/21/my-dad-turned-around-and-suddenly-took-my-headscarf-off/> (Date of Access: 05.06.2023).
- YWA, "My father would kill me if I told him, so I wanted to kill myself to escape," December, 20, 2021, <https://yalnizyurumeyeceksin.com/en/2021/12/20/my-father-would-kill-me-if-i-told-him-so-i-wanted-to-kill-myself-to-escape/> (Date of Access: 05.06.2023).