

Between Coping, Co-optation, and Resistance: Strategies of (En)Countering Anti-gender Challenges in Local Governance in the Context of Democratic Backsliding

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The article explores the strategies employed by gender equality proponents in local governance in Turkey, who confront numerous obstacles to their work in a context of anti-gender politics and democratic backsliding. An analysis of interviews with gender experts, their key allies, and municipal and city council members in fourteen municipalities in seven cities reveals that gender experts flexibly use operational, knowledge, and engagement strategies to advance gender equality. While some strategies may be perceived as co-optation, contextually they also help actors overcome immediate challenges when developing long-term mechanisms to resist the adverse effects of anti-gender politics. The political party stance has considerable influence on gender policies; however, the article also demonstrates diversity in the strategies of gender experts situated in disparate municipalities governed by the same political party. Availability of institutional support, personal expertise, and allies contributes to shifting from co-optation to resistance.

Key words: anti-gender politics; democratic backsliding; gender experts; local governments; strategies; Turkey.

Introduction

Worldwide anti-gender mobilizations targeting gender equality policies (Rodríguez Gustá and Laura 2021) and gender scholarship and activism (Krizsán and Roggeband 2021; Özbay and İpekçi 2024; Zaremborg, Tabbush,

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and, Friedman 2021) exhibit similar repertoires, such as the creation of moral panic for “protecting families and children” from “gender ideology.” They also display contextual specificity shaped by the configuration of actors, alliances, and discourses (Graff and Korolczuk 2021). In hybrid regimes, such as Russia, Hungary, and Turkey, anti-gender mobilizations are government-led with support from government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs). As anti-gender politics and democratic backsliding reinforce each other, gender equality becomes “a litmus test for the democratic health of Europe” (Lombardo, Kantola, and Rubio-Marin 2021, p. 527).

Local governments also become accomplices in anti-gender politics, self-declare as pro-life (Rabbia 2021), or support anti-gender mobilizations (Kovalá et al. 2018). Potentially they are also resistance sites given their ability to enact gender-sensitive policies and create subnational democratic enclaves (Öktem 2021). In an enabling national and local context, feminist institutional politics can democratize policy and advance intersectional agendas (Caravantes and Lombardo 2024). Research on women’s local representation (Sumbaş 2020), gender sensitive-budgeting (Alkan 2005), and local governmental gender-based violence policy (Güneş and Yılmaz 2021) attest to municipal actors’ progressive achievements. Nevertheless, studies on Turkey, predominantly focus on mid-2000s when the impetus for EU accession created a supportive policy context for gender equality, municipal gender equality units proliferated with UN support, and outright government reaction to gender equality was not pronounced as it has been since the early 2010s. There is little knowledge regarding how gender policy at the municipal level is impacted by democratic backsliding and anti-gender mobilizations, and how gender equality proponents respond to these challenges, especially at the local level.

In this article, based on the analysis of forty-two interviews with gender experts employed in municipalities’ equality departments and those responsible for gender-sensitive policies and services, their key allies, members of gender-related committees in municipal and city councils in seven metropolitan and seven district municipalities, we explore the strategies used by gender equality proponents in local governance in (en)countering, and/or coping with anti-gender mobilizations in the context of democratic backsliding. While the article provides insights into the experiences of a range of actors doing gender work in the local governance ecosystem, we predominantly focus on the strategies of municipal gender experts who increasingly face internal and external pressures. External pressures mainly originate from the central government and the right-wing media, and internal pressures are primarily manifested within the municipality, where gender equality is instrumental in securing votes yet often not internalized. Our research shows that external pressures intensify the existing patriarchal resistance within the gendered structure of municipalities.

In the face of these challenges, gender equality proponents use context-specific operational, knowledge, and engagement related strategies for short and long-term gains. Their short-term strategies are the mobilization of informal and personal networks, discursive reframing, and activity-based collaborations with civil society organizations (CSOs) and academics. Their long-term strategies are gender mainstreaming (GM), knowledge dissemination and role sharing, and alliance formation on local, national, and international levels. Markedly different from the disruptive and transformative strategies used by social movements and civil society (CS) in the face of anti-gender attacks (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018b), the short-term strategies involve certain costs, such as the lack of sustainability, self-censorship, and/or selective silencing. Nevertheless, municipalities' unique structures as elected service providers with access to local community also provide an opportunity for incremental change.

The article adds to the emerging work on feminist institutional responses to anti-gender politics on the local level in Turkey with a comparative dimension. Ertugal and Bagdadi (2023) argue that different from the Global North where institutional gender policy is often charged with criticisms of depoliticization and insufficient transformation, in Turkey, it is the politicization of gender that creates possibilities for advancing gender equality in the oppositional party context. This is because in a highly polarized context the main opposition party, the CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, Republican People's Party), distinguishes itself from the governing party, the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, Justice and Development Party), vis-à-vis its stance on gender equality. However, our research shows along with Öktem (2021) that the liberal enclaves in authoritarian contexts are fragile and oppositional politicians often resort to ways that contravene their declared values. Shared resistance to the government's anti-gender politics has led to the formation of broad-based coalitions among different segments of women's/feminist/LGBTI+ movements (Çağatay 2018; Gülel 2022). However, in institutional settings in a democratic backsliding context, the politicization of gender also works to the detriment of gender policies. Exposure to anti-gender challenges does not necessarily mean that gender experts will gather support within the municipality. In CHP municipalities as well, intersectional gender perspectives can be the first to be deprioritized when faced with pressure and driven by electoral concerns.

Anti-gender mobilizations and democratic backsliding

Anti-gender denotes mobilizations against gender equality policy, reproductive rights, and LGBTI+ rights (Graff and Korolczuk 2021; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Roth, Scheele, and Winkel 2022). Despite variance in their leading actors (e.g. institutionalized religion, political parties, think tanks), and targets across a political and geographic spectrum, there is shared "gender

hostility” interpreted as a threat to cishetero-family and essentialist gender roles (Çağatay et al. 2023). While these reactions originated from the Vatican and ultraconservative religious groups as early as the 1990s, they were increasingly mainstreamed vis-à-vis interaction with (far)right, populist, and religious-conservative politics (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). As is the case in Poland, an “opportunistic synergy” was created between right-wing populism and ultraconservatism such that the vilification of gender helped populists mobilize support from the ultraconservatives who in turn gained visibility and proximity to the mainstream (Graff and Korolczuk 2021). In Central and Eastern Europe, where the reactions to the failures of neoliberalism and the crisis of democracy strengthened right-wing populist configurations (Graff and Korolczuk 2021; Rawluszko 2021) anti-gender actors demonstrate a strong anti-Western stance, claiming to protect national sovereignty and gender norms from external imposition.

Like autocratic regimes, emerging authoritarian regimes co-opt women’s organizations, create “good/bad” CS (Arat 2022), use GONGOs to appropriate “gender equality” (Aksoy 2018), and strategically legitimize women’s groups in line with the regime’s ideological outlook (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022; Krizsán and Roggeband 2018a). Their strategy of “autocratic genderwashing” (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022), that is, supporting GONGOs and promoting “gender equality with ulterior motives,” is often accompanied by the delegitimation of oppositional actors for attempting to “wipe out the nation” (Bianet 2008), destroy the family, and alienate the society from its authentic values (Yabancı 2020). For instance, the government claimed to support women’s rights by lifting the headscarf ban yet framed it as an effort to promote “gender justice,” resting not on equality but on a notion of divine complementarity between women and men, and GONGOs were pivotal in disseminating this discourse (Diner 2018).

The current anti-gender politics can be interpreted as both a cause and an effect of democratic backsliding (Vida et al. 2022). Democratic backsliding in Turkey made it possible for the emerging authoritarian regime to instrumentalize women’s rights and entrench its conservative gender ideology (Arat 2022), and in the contemporary populist *Zeitgeist* the hardliners have gained further leeway (Ünal 2024). Since the early 2010s, the AKP government’s authority increased alongside democratic erosion and the weakening of CS through constraints, funding cuts, closures, and disproportionate monitoring. As such the government found the opportunity to singlehandedly backtrack on gender equality commitments. The assaults against the Istanbul Convention aimed to mobilize AKP’s ultraconservative electorate (Kandiyoti 2025) and Turkey withdrew from the convention with a presidential decree in 2021. The increased government intervention in women and LGBTI+ lives is legitimized in the name of protecting the family and supported by ultraconservatives, nationalists, and Islamists (Kancı et al. 2023). Gender-based violence gets normalized (Günel 2022) and is also manifested online as

networked misogyny (Eslen-Ziya 2022). On the political–economic front, family-oriented social policy incentives unfold in line with a neoliberal–conservative agenda (Coşar and Özcan 2021). The detrimental effects of all these developments are intensely experienced by lower-class women and single mothers who face heightened interference in their lives (Çağatay 2018). GM policies are also weakened, depoliticized, rendered technocratic, and reduced to procedural tools such as training manuals and checklists; hence they align with existing power structures rather than challenging them, leading to a dilution of feminist activism (Ertugal and Bagdadi 2023). In this context, pro-gender equality actors also expand repertoires of resistance.

Strategies for (en)countering anti-gender challenges

Existing scholarship on responses to anti-gender politics predominantly focus on CS and social movements. They demonstrate opportunities for flexible organizing in informal politics (Aksoy 2018) or in seemingly “apolitical” arenas of community work or sports (Arık et al. 2022), and attest to the intertwinement of resistance and resilience (Çağatay et al. 2023). While the worldwide backsliding in gender policy coincides with the recent economic crisis, feminist movements have failed in certain contexts, but they also occasionally came back, matured, and gave rise to new creative resistance forms (Krizsán and Zentai 2017). In democratically backsliding countries, women’s groups utilize four strategies: disruptive protests, coalition-building, abeyance, and demise (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018b). In Turkey, during the state of emergency after the failed coup attempt in 2016, the protests held by oppositional women’s coalitions were effective in having the government withdraw its proposed legislation allowing families to force young girls into marrying their harassers (Aksoy 2018). In Romania and Poland, the incorporation of women’s rights into a broader pro-democracy struggle helped prevent additional regression and enact progressive laws concerning domestic abuse (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018a). As a resilience strategy, in periods of abeyance (Taylor 1989), activists shift the weight from political to demised forms of activism, such as organizing workshops or engaging in academic feminism.

While providing insights, the findings of the research on social movements and CS do not fully transfer to the study of institutions. More recently, scholars have turned their attention to feminist institutional responses to anti-gender politics, particularly in parliamentary contexts. Kantola and Lombardo (2024, 5) define *feminist responses* as “feminist actors, practices, and discourses to counter opposition to gender equality and promote an equality agenda” and *feminist institutional responses* as “responses to anti-gender politics” that are articulated by various actors in the parliamentary context. The authors acknowledge knowledge, coalition-building, rule-making, and everyday pragmatic engagement as four analytic categories that capture feminist

institutional responses. While the first two categories overlap with those identified by the scholarship on social movements, *rule-making*, that is, the formulation or adoption of formal and informal rules to counter anti-gender behavior or promote pro-equality; and *everyday pragmatic engagement*, which are routine attempts to cope and interact with anti-gender actors, are two categories identified in the institutional context. Lombardo, Caravantes, and Diaz Fernandez (2025) show that the parliamentary capacity to respond to anti-gender challenges is situated by the state of democracy at the macro level; the level of gender equality institutionalization at the meso level, and individual critical actors at the micro level. Our research critically adds to this literature by focusing on a macro context of democratic backsliding and government-led anti-gender politics, and a meso context of weak institutionalization.

Municipalities are markedly different from both CSOs and parliaments. Furthermore, they demonstrate a great deal of diversity which influences the possibilities of advancing gender equality. Studying this context, we identify contextually employed strategies with different temporalities used by gender experts in the *operationalization* of gender-related work in municipalities, in their *knowledge-related* activities in and outside municipalities, and in their stakeholder *engagements*. While the knowledge category critically overlaps with Kantola and Lombardo's (2024) framework, in our article, *engagement* refers to engagement with "feminist critical friends" (Chappell and Mackay 2021) rather than with anti-gender actors.

Short-term strategies are costly. They involve self-censorship and/or silencing, yet they also help deal with challenges on the way to incremental change. They leave gender experts in an ambivalent position between coping and co-optation, encountering, and countering. Our article builds on approaches to institutional gender expertise that challenge simplistic binaries between co-optation and transformation, and a co-opted inside versus a pure outside feminism (Altan-Olcay 2020; Prügl 2009; True and Parisi 2013). Bringing experts' voices and practices to the center (Ferguson 2015) helps us be attuned to the micropolitical tensions and ambivalences unfolding in institutions (Altan-Olcay 2020), and the performative and political field of gender expertise (Kunz, Prügl, and Thompson 2019). Markedly different from international institutions of governance, in the context we study the risk is less about neo-liberal co-optation (Fraser 2009) and more about electoral instrumentalization and authoritarian co-optation. Furthermore, the micropolitical field of gender expertise is highly conditioned by a heavily polarized macropolitical one (Ertugal and Bagdadi 2023). This context necessitates more flexibility (Sandler and Rao 2012) and role-sharing in between different actors in the local governance ecosystem so much so that social movements, CS actors, and municipal actors may employ different strategies against anti-gender politics for varying short and long-term gains.

Methodology

Using primary data gathered through forty-two semi-structured interviews with representatives of municipal equality offices, CS members of city councils, politicians in the municipal councils' commissions of equal opportunities for women and men (hereafter CEO) and field experts in fourteen municipalities in Turkey, we explore these actors' strategies in (en)countering, and/or coping with anti-gender mobilizations. We conducted these interviews between November 2022 and December 2023, during the municipalities' 2019–2024 term. We reached the participants through personal networks and a call for participation in feminist/women's rights email groups with information about our research. Some responders volunteered to help locate potential participants in their cities. We conducted the interviews on dates/times chosen by the participants; audio recorded them with their permission and presented enlightened consent forms approved by the university research ethics committee.¹ The fact that we are scholars of gender and politics, familiar and involved with feminist networks in Turkey, helped build trust during the interviews. We anonymized all names or identifying information, such as place names.

We used purposive sampling to select fourteen municipalities with gender equality units in Ankara, Bursa, Eskişehir, İstanbul, İzmir, Mersin, and Trabzon. Among them, seven are district municipalities which are ranked similarly in a district-level gender equality index (Şeker et al. 2020). We conducted forty-two interviews. Eighteen interviewees were gender experts (of different ranks including staff and managers) working in municipalities' equality units, women and social services centers, and women's consultation centers; fourteen were CS members of the city councils mostly active in the council's women's caucus; and eight were elected representatives of municipal councils in CEOs. We also conducted two interviews with policy field experts with extensive knowledge on gender equality work in municipalities. They reflected on developments affecting municipal gender policies. Some interviews were participated by groups of staff; hence we met with a total of fifty-one individuals (five men and forty-six women). Except for seven online interviews, we conducted all others in interviewees' offices. They lasted forty-five to ninety minutes, and participants answered questions related to the local, national, and global developments setting barriers to municipalities' gender-related work, and the strategies they used to do their work in said contexts.

Out of seven metropolitan municipalities, two were governed by the incumbent government, five were governed by the oppositional CHP. However, in two of the CHP municipalities, the AKP had the majority in the municipal parliament, which made the passage of gender policies very challenging. All district municipalities were governed by the CHP. There were no municipalities governed by the Kurdish political party, the HDP (Halkın Demokrasi Partisi, People's Democracy Party), in the sample since at the time of research all HDP municipalities were taken over by the government with a decree,

making their well-advanced gender units de facto unfunctional. Upon the completion of the research, local elections were held on March 31, 2024, which resulted in the change of governance from one AKP municipality to the CHP, and the CHP's winning the majority in two previously AKP-majority local parliaments.

We employed a thematic analysis method and used the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA to analyze the interviews. Along with the challenges mentioned by the interviewees in undertaking their gender-related work, we identified short and long-term strategies they developed in response and inductively framed the three strategies discussed below. We then deductively reanalyzed the data to see which actors used these strategies under what conditions.

Contemporary challenges to local gender policy

Local politics exhibit a unique capacity for improving the quality of local services and facilitating women's representation (Sumbaş 2024). Different institutional mechanisms exist to establish equality at the metropolitan level: city- and district-level human rights councils and women's rights coordination councils under the governor's office, commissions for gender equality or CEO established in elected municipal councils, and equality/societal equality units in the municipalities (Şener and İnanç 2021). In addition, women's caucuses were established in city councils in 1997 with UN Development Program support to promote gender-responsive local governance (Sumbaş 2024).

In Turkey, municipalities are the main elected body of local governance. Equality units in municipalities were first established in 2006 in the supportive context for gender equality fostered by the European Union and the United Nations. As part of the UN Women supported Women Friendly Cities project, several cities started designing local equality actions plans (LEAPs). Another turning point was the launching of the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life (CEMR) in 2006. The equality units became widespread upon the 2019 local elections. By May 2022, thirty-five equality units were established across Turkey (Toksöz et al. 2022).

The duties of these units are defined at three levels: by the directorate/presidency with which they are affiliated; within the municipality as a whole (e.g. GM, data collection, staff trainings); and in relation to the society, namely, the region where services, such as psychological counselling, skill-based trainings, women's cooperatives, and care-related support are provided to women (Toksöz et al. 2022). Some municipalities also establish women's shelters and conduct awareness-raising events. As our research confirms, the units' effectiveness and capacity for action is largely influenced by its staff's expertise, the positioning of the unit within the municipal organization, the absence or inclusion of gender equality in the strategic plan, and discretion over finances (Toksöz et al. 2022).

We saw that gender equality units in municipalities have a dual function: promoting gender equality within the institution often in the scope of a LEAP,

and designing and providing social services, social support, and social policies. The services that promote gender equality and those supporting disadvantaged groups intermingle because it is difficult to implement a holistic empowerment strategy without social services (Şener and İnanç 2021). While some units predominantly engage in empowerment and counselling, others' activities are more family/domestic life oriented.

The AKP's increasing anti-democratic tendencies also impact local policies (Alkan 2015). Despite enacting several local administration reforms for administrative and fiscal decentralization, the government holds substantive local power (Tan 2020) and reproduces state power through local agencies (Savaşkan 2021). The new public administration system put into place with the 2012 municipal law brought political competition closer to the local government (Tan 2020) and municipalities became instruments of electoral gain through service delivery. Local electoral stakes are high because municipalities traditionally offer patronage for political parties and constitute the backbone of national elections (Esen and Gümüşcü 2019; Kemahloğlu and Özdemir 2018). The 2012 law put strains on the democratic participatory character of local governance; with rising neoliberal authoritarianism, mayoral powers increased with a concomitant decrease in the municipal councils' powers (Ergenc and Yuksekkaya 2024). The city councils increasingly became ineffective partisan tools (Sumbaş 2024). At the time of the research, the government implemented a low-visibility, low-severity strategy of repression in majority-run localities, such as imposing financial and administrative constraints, while implementing severe repression in Kurdish cities and replacing elected HDP mayors with presidential decrees (Hintz and Ercan 2024).

These developments have detrimental effects on gender policies particularly when combined with anti-gender mobilizations. While the political party's ideological stance and the mayor's supportive attitude make a difference when it comes to enacting gender responsive policies (Ertugal and Bagdadi 2023), CHP-governed municipalities find it difficult to work with local state agencies, public universities, and AKP-majority municipal councils. Added to these are frequent media attacks, negative implications of withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and an increase in government and media-led anti-LGBTI+ campaigns.

The interviewees identified three problems they encountered while working with the local community: increasing socioeconomic disparities, ignorance about or negative reactions to the concept of "gender," and increased anti-gender media attacks against gender equality offices. A predominant problem they encountered when integrating gender sensitivity to municipal services was patriarchal resistance displayed in attitudes, such as belittling gender work or deprioritizing it in budgetary and administrative plans. Others were challenges to gender disaggregated data collection, the frequent changing of staff responsible for gender work, and the general lack of gender awareness. People engaged in organizational gender work face these problems across political contexts, however, anti-gender pressures in democratically backsliding regimes empower the existing patriarchal

resistance in municipalities and provide resistant actors with a leeway to ignore specific gender issues or “make as if” they are supportive without following up on implementation. Another problem identified by our interviewees with respect to working within the municipality was the difficulties encountered because of the political conflict between the CHP municipalities and the government. In this context, gender experts employ several strategies to continue their work and counter negative developments.

Strategizing against challenges

Strategies of gender equality proponents are shaped by gendered norms and practices in organizations (Lowndes 2020, Mackay 2011). Gender equality proponents deliberately and reflexively develop strategies when interacting with societal and municipal actors. In this context, a strategy refers to a plan of action designed to achieve an overall aim, especially under uncertainty. As previously discussed, particularly, the municipal gender experts work under increasing pressure and are uncertain about the future. Therefore, they simultaneously need to think about saving the day and developing strategies to achieve long-term goals. Their short-term strategies predominantly focus on finding a way out of deadlock. Although instrumental in carrying out daily activities, the long-term strategies inhabit more transformative approaches, which can restructure governance and enhance gender equality (Ertugal and Bagdadi 2023).

In what follows, we describe the ways in which gender equality proponents balance short and long-term gains in their operational, knowledge, and engagement related strategies and articulate on the factors that diversify strategies across political and institutional contexts.

Operational strategies: balancing the personal and the institutional

Municipal gender experts’ skills, expertise level, and employment continuity are critical for the quality of work as they continuously interact with multiple actors inside and outside the municipality. Almost all interviewees identified building one-to-one relationships with key actors as an effective strategy. As a gender expert working in a district municipality said, establishing contact, even “dropping by for a cup of tea or coffee” and “developing personal relationships,” helps things get going (April 4, 2023). Personalized interaction also includes persuasion by reaching hearts and minds. These strategies are “adaptive” in the sense that they are learned along the way and refined based on what works for different people. The institutional context also matters. With Ertugal and Bagdadi (2023), we confirm the positive role that the support of the mayor has on the implementation of gender policies. However, as expressed by a district municipal council representative, sometimes it is more important and difficult to persuade the vice mayor: “if you are not on good terms with the vice mayor, after a while things get stuck even when the mayor says yes” (May 8, 2023).

Gender experts in another city told us that while metropolitan municipalities provide resources, there, it can be harder to get things done when compared to smaller municipalities. That is because in the former, there are more bureaucrats to convince on the way up to the mayor (April 18, 2023).

The gender experts in municipalities also resort to creativity to ensure that communication flows. Along with Çığatay et al. (2023), who argue that the cultivation of positive affect becomes a source of resilience for feminist/queer activists, we saw that humor also helps break down patriarchal resistance. For instance, a gender expert resorted to traditional coffee cup fortune-telling to convince a manager to implement a paternal leave policy:

We managed to get [a municipal bureaucrat's] attention after five months but ask me how we did it. We even did coffee cup fortune-telling. I'm not joking, just trying to explain to you how these relationships are built ... we made these crazy jokes about seeing paternity leave policy in his coffee cup ... you must find a way to build a relationship and enter his world (laughing) ... to make him feel like you are not aliens who are about to attack him. (October 19, 2022)

Personalized and informal strategies are also used in out-of-municipality interactions. A significant concern highlighted by gender equality proponents is the current polarization around gender policies. Apart from the AKP municipalities' experts, all others talked about difficulties of carrying out work with the central authorities, such as ministries and local state agencies, and public universities. In stark contrast to those in the CHP municipalities, the interviewees in the AKP municipalities talked about perceiving gender as a "beyond political parties" matter and did not recall any difficulty working with public institutions. As a gender expert in an AKP majority municipal council told us, choosing a conflictual communication style with central authorities gets one into trouble (December 28, 2022). In this context, interviewees believed that individual relationships with local state agencies also help save the day. As an expert in a CHP district municipality told us, the conflict between the government and the CHP municipalities makes it difficult for them to carry out formal work with public institutions, and to overcome this challenge, they build one-to-one relationships with specific people who are motivated to work and can benefit from the municipality's local outreach capacity:

Collaboration becomes possible if we work with persons, not with institutions or managers. As I said, official correspondence with central and local authorities does not work. Our requests for collaboration are always rejected. (April 4, 2023)

However, carrying out work through individual relationships is costly. The same interviewee talked about how personal contact with the district governor can save the day but also has its risks, such as "last minute cancellations"

because gender issues often ignite intense political conflict (December 18, 2023). Similarly, a gender expert in a CHP district municipality described building personalized relationships as a strategy that works in the short term, but she cautioned that “it destroys all the work when those people are gone” (December 27, 2023). In the context of municipalities where the AKP held majority in municipal councils, local politicians, and gender experts did not mention utilizing such strategies. They had close links to state institutions, and they stated that bureaucracy is “properly” established, and everything is running smoothly (CEO Member, December 26, 2022).

While personalized and informal action strategies seem to be effective in keeping the wheel turning, their success was often short-lived in the absence of institutional mechanisms. Communication was usually cut off when the talented and experienced expert left the municipality. In this sense, institutionalization of a gender-sensitive perspective is key to producing durable policy outcomes and it entails the long-term strategy of GM which “contributes to municipal policy-making by improving policy capacity, diffusing gender awareness and in some cases changing politicians’ perceptions of electoral prospects” (Ertugal and Bagdadi 2023, 2).

Because they have experts who are knowledgeable in feminist/gender perspectives and have strong ties with CS, CHP municipalities most often have a more holistic operation agenda. This agenda includes GM of the municipality, its urban policies, services, and infrastructures, such as security and transportation. In cities with active women’s CSOs and earlier experience with gender-sensitive policymaking within the Women Friendly Cities program, the interviewees prioritized data-driven policy design, monitoring, and evaluation, and CS participation in policy processes. In less experienced ones, and particularly in the AKP municipalities, they put less emphasis on holistic gender policies and spoke about women’s empowerment in more generalized terms such as improving women’s health or empowering them through cooperatives.

Many factors determine the effective operationalization of GM. For the municipal gender experts and field experts, the most important factors are the gender unit’s organizational position, governing procedures, and resources. They argued that if gender units are positioned under the Strategy Directorates, which are responsible for monitoring data collection and producing political and corporate documents, strategic plans, and performance programs, gender experts can effectively coordinate gender-disaggregated data collection and facilitate the integration of gender perspectives to various departmental processes. Otherwise, “having [a gender unit] located under the Woman and Family directorate is no different than having it under any directorate, even the health directorate” (Gender expert, May 11, 2023). Similarly, another gender expert told us that the unit’s location in the organizational structure is as crucial as the expertise of its staff, so that it is “transformed into a unit where people from municipality’s different units meet, come together and talk,” and only then the equality perspective can permeate within the

institution (December 28, 2022). Additionally, when they report directly to the strategy directorate, gender experts can be consulted in all policy processes and taken seriously.

The gender units also suffer from insufficiencies in data collection infrastructures, and shortages of staff and finances (Akduran, Önal, and Günlük Şenesen 2018). Their budgets were further reduced upon the pandemic, the following economic crises, and the 2023 earthquake. In such a context, the administration's perspective becomes the key facilitator of GM:

To what extent [administrators] care about [gender], what they want to focus on, how much support they provide are among the important factors. Another facilitating factor is the budget, absolutely. ... Others are employees' competence, interest and work motivation. (Gender expert, November 28, 2023)

When describing the story of the formation of the units, many interviewees talked about a change in the mayoral seat as a critical turning point. This was followed by the new mayor's ratification of an international convention, such as the CEMR, or involvement in a project like the UN's Women Friendly Cities, namely, making binding commitments to gender equality. Notwithstanding the importance of the mayor's stance, participatory processes are also crucial for effective GM. Such processes facilitate ownership and help counter resistance coming from the community and municipal staff of all cadres. A municipal gender expert conceived of the LEAP working group in the municipality as a group of "spies" who she hoped will convince others of the relevance of GM to their work (December 27, 2022). She also noted the positive effect of awareness-raising for fostering ownership which we address as part of knowledge strategies.

Knowledge strategies: from reframing to pedagogic adaptation

Anti-gender actors actively construct political, social, and epistemic power nodes for an alternative gender order (Korolczuk 2020; Paternotte and Verloo 2021) and promote conspiracy thinking (Ünal 2024). In response, "countering anti-gender with knowledge" became a critical feminist act (Kantola and Lombardo 2024). Municipalities in Turkey are targeted by misinformation campaigns and the ways in which mayors and their high-level teams respond to conservative groups' and media's anti-gender attacks have important ramifications for gender equality proponents. A gender equality monitoring CS expert thinks that municipal officials must correct misconceptions:

When [media] associated the equality units with LGBTI+ [activism] and attacked municipalities, [the then-mayor of Izmir] made a public statement, tweeted at length to explain what gender equality means. This is a way to prevent misinformation from spreading, [and] to be open. I believe that openness is important. ... You must trust your work. [Be able to say]

“we are not doing anything that is forbidden or bad, that needs to be hidden or concealed”. ... When attacked, [one needs to be able to say] “we are doing *this* for *this* reason.” (December 28, 2022)

However, electoral concerns prevent openness, and high-level municipal officers choose to keep the municipality’s gender-related work under the radar if not completely silenced. Consequently, gender experts in these municipalities employ certain discursive strategies when conducting gender equality trainings to municipal staff (including service providers) and the community. A CS/city council representative told us that the trainers pay attention to “finding the right discourse,” by which she meant not discomfoting the conservative electorate while explaining why gender equality perspective is needed in delivering urban services (November 22, 2022).

Similarly, municipal gender experts thought that while communicating their work in media and PR campaigns is important, complete transparency is not always favorable in the current political climate. Hence, they sometimes resort to the reframing strategy in trainings. Reframing and co-optation of content are qualitative policy erosions (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018a; Stratigaki 2005) used by governments to direct attention away from gender inequality towards family, and/or to switch emphasis from equality to an unrelated concept. These erosions present fundamental barriers to gender equality; changes in policy wording indicate changes in policy intensity. The government’s change of emphasis from women’s rights to family rights, and from gender equality to gender justice are examples to this. Whereas feminist movements often respond to far-right populism by counter-framing (Cullen 2021), municipal gender experts often employ reframing instead. In other words, they do what the anti-gender actors do and avoid using certain words, albeit without changing the training content. For instance, to prevent trolling and manipulation, they gave a gender equality training to public transportation drivers without naming the concept (Municipal gender expert, November 19, 2022). This strategy is different from “mystification” (Altan-Olcay 2022) where gender experts intentionally use certain terms ambiguously to secure their authority as experts, or “strategic ambiguity” (Eyben 2010) whereby feminist bureaucrats deliberately remain vague on what gender is to garner support from non-feminists. While the overall aim of drawing support is similar, in the context we study, the concept is reframed to avoid its ambivalent reception.

As previously discussed, the gender experts in the AKP municipalities work in a more supportive context, however, they too must reframe in the anti-gender context. In a former Women Friendly City, the interviewees told us that they previously experienced no problems using the concept of gender equality in trainings; however, they currently reframe the material because “some people tend to associate [gender equality] with sexuality, or conceive of it as very political,” so they started putting the emphasis on “equal opportunities in the provision of social services” or on “equal rights” (March 16, 2023). These cities are critical as they are sites where urban gender equality work was piloted and gender

experts had little or no problem working together with public institutions under the rubric of gender equality. While the current climate is putting more strain on the CHP municipalities, regardless of political party, gender experts face pressures, and they occasionally use similar strategies.

Reframing and discursive silencing are significantly different from outright opposition. The latter is symbolically powerful when used against delegitimation (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018b). Municipal experts' reframing strategy is heavily criticized by CS workers who refuse to give up on a concept that has been the outcome of decades-long fight against patriarchy. A gender expert working in a CHP district municipality with previous activist experience described her conundrum as follows:

When we were about to initiate our work using the term “gender equality,” the police and the gendarmerie opposed it, they told us that we could only use the term “violence against women.” I sometimes contradict myself. For me, the terms are important. Why? Because hiding myself feels like imprisonment. Why should I have to call it “violence against women” if I am going to talk about sexual orientation and gender identity? (December 27, 2023)

She told us that they faced a similar situation even when they were asked to deliver a training about LGBTI+ inclusion and the target group wanted to announce it as “combating discrimination” training without saying LGBTI+. She told them that this title would create the expectation of a more comprehensive training; however, in the end, the training was announced without LGBTI+ in the title. She recalls this as an instance where she “contradicted herself.” While she believes that reframing helps them to reach wider audiences, she also interprets it a “serious detriment of acquired rights” which happens when “you don't get to own up to your work loud and clear” (December 27, 2023). A field expert argued that since municipalities are not advocacy institutions, municipal actors can be flexible if reframing helps get work done:

We need to separate advocacy [from municipal work] ... a municipality should not do advocacy. Municipalities do not advocate, they provide services. Advocacy is carried out by CSOs. CSOs must protect and defend the rights that were acquired over the years. ... In fact, municipalities' services further [the CS's] gains. There is a big difference between the two. ... However, we should not make [reframing] a general strategy because it discursively regresses us. Yet, if you are going to work with the public institutions and there is sensitivity on the topic, you can still say what you want to say with minor changes in the titles. (December 28, 2022)

A city council representative thought that “the more you use the term, the more you contribute to awareness raising and ensure that the concept of

gender equality is accepted” but she acknowledged that local governments are restrained by the central government (April 17, 2023). Like the short-term strategy of operating through personal, informal networks, discursive silencing and reframing also help save the day, but the cost is self-censorship and delegitimization, which puts one in a discomforting, compromising, and ambivalent zone between coping and co-optation.

The long-term counterpart of reframing is the pedagogic adaptation of the content with respect to the target group. An important knowledge strategy used by gender experts is training the municipal staff first so that they become role-models, and challenge institutional patriarchy and resistance coming primarily from men. As described by a municipal gender expert, many started training “from the top,” and first trained the mayor and deputy mayors, then all staff, then chiefs and councilors (March 15, 2023). The interviewees argued that emphasizing men’s fatherhood role, particularly their relations with daughters, proved to be effective in convincing men that gender equality is also their business. A municipal gender expert stated that targeting fathers resonates with society and using the community’s language helps eliminate adverse reactions (December 28, 2022).

Affective mobilization is a strategy used both by anti-gender actors and feminists (Korolczuk 2020). Hence getting fathers on board for gender equality is important in a context where masculinist movements mobilize men against women’s rights (Eslen-Ziya and Bjørnholt 2023). While the CHP municipalities worked with local CSOs and talked about equitable role-sharing in the family in their trainings, the AKP municipalities, which have conservative gender perspectives, also delivered “family trainings” or “family seminars” (Gender expert in an AKP municipality, November 11, 2023). That said, in the context of attacks against women’s and LGBTI+ rights in the name of protecting the family, putting the emphasis on familial roles can also have ambivalent consequences.

Engagement strategies: collaboration, role sharing, and alliance

Gender equality policies may be jeopardized if CSOs, academia, or other stakeholders do not participate in policy processes beyond agenda-setting (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018b). Collaboration is also important to resist policy backsliding. Municipal actors use three strategies in their engagements with stakeholders: project-based collaborations, role-sharing, and value-based long-term alliances.

The municipal gender experts collaborate with academics, bar associations, and CSOs to organize trainings, panels, and workshops. They specifically find CSOs helpful in facilitating “hard-to-talk-about” issues. An interviewee from a CHP district municipality intentionally favors short-term, project-based work to avoid problems that stem from frequent staff and management changes:

Since periodic changes in staff affect the whole policy process, it may be better to participate in and design shorter-term projects. Because

[longer projects] can be interrupted or transformed. The promises [cannot be kept] and the trust between the institution and the community can be broken. Therefore, strategically speaking, shorter projects [are better]. (April 18, 2023)

Democratic backsliding negatively affects CS's chances of securing funding from foreign donors and grant organizations. In the last decade, as the same interviewee confirmed, international organizations started catering more funds to municipalities, and external funding provides them freedom for action. Municipalities also form long-term collaborations with international organizations based on shared commitments. International actors, such as the United Nations, have been and still are instrumental for implementing gender policies because international commitments act "as anchors, and as sources of legitimacy, in the absence of national regulations" (Ertugal and Bagdadi 2023, 11). Forming these ties necessitates expertise. The gender experts in prominent metropolises who can write projects and communicate internationally effectively use international connections to their favor whereas those who lack know-how, skills, and networks depend on finances allocated by their managers.

For some gender experts, the capability to relate to the community is key to sustainable societal transformation, and CS collaborations enable such capabilities. Having established a strong and long-term working relationship with a district municipality in Istanbul, a city council representative/head of a women's CSO argued that gender experts need to stop using the savior's language:

We need to show [the people] that we are with them, but also need to make them feel that we are not their saviors. ... One can only be a supporter. Of course, you can encourage a woman to change her life and help her set goals, but what's important is that she stands on her own feet. (April 7, 2023)

Another gender expert described how a local CSO helped make their trainings accessible and effective. Upon the CSO's suggestion, instead of delivering an academic gender equality training as they are used to doing, they carried on conversations about daily issues and domestic roles with women employed in a local atelier. They did this during working hours so that the women worked and conversed. This way, they became very interested in the topic and could relate its content to their daily experience (March 15, 2023).

Another engagement-related strategy involves strategic role-sharing among actors in different institutional settings that make up the local governance context. Division of labor with CS helps challenge barriers and increases effectiveness. A CSO representative working with a metropolitan municipality thought that bringing together diverse expertise is balancing (December 26, 2022). Effective role-sharing goes beyond tokenistic attitudes such as inviting CSOs to workshops without follow-up on their contributions. A gender expert in a CHP district municipality who has long-established ties with feminist and LGBTI+

groups emphasized the need to effectively use CSO's lobbying and monitoring capacities (April 27, 2023). In fact, municipal gender experts in another CHP municipality were lamenting the fact that their gender unit's work is unmonitored due to the underdevelopment of CS in their city (February 27, 2023).

With effective role-sharing, the differences in organizational forms and functions work in favor of gender experts in municipalities. Allies in city and municipal councils serve as entry points who help address difficult issues and come to the rescue of municipal gender experts who try to avoid negative public attention or media publicity in a highly polarized political context. A district municipality council representative/CEO member described how the city council was instrumental for carrying out LGBTI+ related work:

We were asking [the AKP members of the commission], which article of [Istanbul Convention] they were against. They don't know the answer. There is a religious sect in Turkey which constitutes the 4%–5% of their electorate, and [the commission members] are pressured by them. ... That's why we carry out the LGBT work through the city council, which is doing good work in this respect. (December 27, 2022)

As a gender expert in a CHP municipality stated, there are certain issues the municipal staff cannot resolve on their own; in such cases, allies in city and municipal councils serve as pressure points on municipal bureaucracy (May 11, 2023). A district municipal council CHP representative, who is actively involved in feminist networks, also talked about how being a politician helps her bypass the hierarchy in the municipality which often constrains gender experts. The fact that she can form equitable relations with municipal bureaucrats provides her with lobbying capacity (May 8, 2023). She also told us how they managed to find a location for the women's shelter by pressuring the governor. The Ministry of Internal Affairs constantly sends circulars to municipalities regarding the topic of combating violence against women, partly to put pressure on the CHP municipalities. The interviewee used the conflict between the central government and the CHP in her favor and asked the governor to allocate a shelter space, which the municipality had not been able to find due to financial constraints (May 8, 2023).

While the municipal council representatives use their identity as elected politicians to lobby for gender equality, city council representatives use grassroots techniques. For instance, the women's caucus members of a district city council in Istanbul organized a protest outside the same municipality and invited the press so that the municipal bureaucracy is pressured to speed up the process of opening the women's shelter (June 13, 2023).

In the context of decreasing powers of local representatives and consulting bodies and increasing powers of mayors (Ergenc and Yuksekkaya 2024; Sumbaş 2024), more responsibility falls on the shoulders of specific individuals in municipal and city councils to help support municipal gender experts.

Feminists inside institutions can mobilize support through alliances with the CS and by facilitating lobbyists' access to political spaces (Eyben 2010). Municipal staff, and city and municipal council representatives with strong ties to the feminist/LGBTI+ movements effectively mobilize their networks to garner support and build bridges. As Altan-Olcay (2020) argues, gender experts' circulation between these different domains gives them tools to navigate difficult situations and blurs the inside–outside binary. In the long run, shared (feminist) values rather than personal contact, in other words, principled rather than strategic alliance, is more effective for promoting gender equality and countering anti-gender politics. As a field expert noted, genuine alliance requires “standing side by side against attacks” (Ankara, December 28, 2022).

Conclusion

In Turkey, municipalities have increasingly become political battlefields. Polarization around gender issues puts gender policies in the spotlight and strains the work of the proponents of gender equality. Municipalities are significantly different from social movements in structure, hence movement-level strategies to counter anti-gender politics do not always resonate with the day-to-day reality of municipal gender experts. Understanding the strategies developed within the municipal structure could help shed light on responses to anti-gender politics in a more holistic framework and attuned to contexts of democratic backsliding. In a context where CS and social movements are heavily repressed, local politics have the potential for advancing democracy but also for entrenching conservatism.

The article contributes to the scholarship on gender expertise and feminist institutional responses to anti-gender politics from the vantage point of an increasingly authoritarian and government-led anti-gender context. We showed that when faced with internal and external challenges, gender experts use context-specific operational, knowledge, and engagement strategies for short and long-term gains, which tilt the balance between co-optation, coping, and resistance. Like Sandler and Rao (2012), who advocate the employment of flexible strategies in gender work, the study illustrated the ways in which experts contextually and flexibly utilize personal and informal strategies of action to deal with daily challenges while struggling to implement GM as a long-term institutional strategy of restructuring municipal services. The experts employ discursive reframing in the short run to cope with anti-gender challenges and pedagogic adaptation in the long run to make their epistemic work accessible to the community to incrementally achieve gender equality. They employ a variety of engagement strategies ranging from activity-based collaborations in the short term to strategic role-sharing and alliance-building based on shared values in the long term. Sometimes such balancing places

them in ambivalent positions; at other times, it poses dilemmas they contextually address. In such a difficult context characterized by multiple challenges, feminist politics happens in unusual places, and “paradoxically, even activism that looks like co-optation may include elements of contestation and ‘tactical struggles for change’” (Johnson and Saairinen 2013). Therefore, moving away from a simple co-optation versus resistance framework, being attuned to the dynamism, context-specificity and diversity of the strategies of CS, social movements, universities and local governance institutions, and exploring the ways in which different strategies contradict and complement each other becomes necessary.

The article also contributes to the literature on the ramification of anti-gender politics in local governments by providing a comparative analysis across Turkey. It shows that the availability of institutional support and the political stance of the high-level municipal bureaucrats are critical potential determinants of actions available to gender experts. It also shows how even within the same political party, strategies diversify based on the size of the municipal bureaucracy, the existence or absence of a local tradition of gender policymaking, and importantly, the gender experts’ expertise, skills, experience, and access to feminist/LGBTI+ networks and allies. Continuing gender work in municipalities in a democratically backsliding regime necessitates a complex skill set varying from conventional bureaucratic skills (such as expertise, grant writing, communication) to non-conventional ones (interpersonal skills, ability to reframe, creativity, performance, resilience, sense of humor). (Feminist) alliances are critical and gender equality proponents face similar challenges within and outside the municipality, yet thus far coalitions across municipalities have not been built. Finally, while all municipal gender experts switch back and forth between multiple strategies, given increasing pressures on the opposition party, those in opposition-led municipalities employ a more dynamic mix of strategies. Easier access to resources and non-contentious relationships with the central government provide the gender experts in AKP municipalities with more room for action albeit limiting their capacity to holistically enhance gender equality.

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