

Charlotte Binder; Sevgi Uçan Çubukçu;  
Deniz Dağ; Yasemin Karakaşoğlu

**Paradigm Shifts Within and Between the Women's and Gender  
Studies Centres at Universities in Turkey:  
Modernist, Feminist, and Neo-Conservative Approaches**

2021

Universität Bremen. Fachbereich 12. Arbeitsbereich Interkulturelle Bildung.  
AbIB-Arbeitspapier 3/2021  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.26092/elib/1340>

**Kontakt:**

Prof. Dr. phil. Yasemin Karakaşoğlu  
Postfach 330440  
DE-28334 Bremen  
karakasoglu@uni-bremen.de

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*Kontakt: [iboffice@uni-bremen.de](mailto:iboffice@uni-bremen.de)*

**Zitierhinweis:**

Binder, Charlotte; Uçan Çubukçu, Sevgi; Dađ, Deniz; Karakaşođlu, Yasemin (2021). Paradigm Shifts Within and Between the Women's and Gender Studies Centres at Universities in Turkey: Modernist, Feminist, and Neo-Conservative Approaches. Universität Bremen. Fachbereich 12. Arbeitsbereich Interkulturelle Bildung. AbIB-Arbeitspapier 2/2021.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.26092/elib/1340>

## **Abstracts**

### **Deutsch**

In Folge der Entstehung der feministischen Bewegung in den 1980er Jahren wurden die Frauenstudien zu Beginn der 1990er Jahre an türkischen Universitäten als eine unabhängige akademische Disziplin begründet. Bis zum Jahr 2017 etablierten sich in der Türkei rund 100 universitäre Frauen- und Geschlechterstudienzentren (FGSZ). Ein an der Universität Bremen durchgeführtes Forschungsprojekt hat basierend auf Expertinnen-Interviews und Dokumentensammlungen die Institutionalisierungs- und Transformationsprozesse dieser Zentren in ihrem Verhältnis zu Akademia, Staat und Zivilgesellschaft analysiert. Dieser Artikel diskutiert, wie die vielfältigen politisch-ideologischen Haltungen der Frauen- und Geschlechterforscherinnen und die verschiedenen wissenschaftlichen Paradigmen, wie modernistisch, feministisch oder neokonservativ, sechs ausgewählte FGSZ im Verlauf der Jahrzehnte unterschiedlich geformt haben. Er untersucht außerdem, inwiefern Namensgebung, Themen und Begriffe, wie z.B. ‚Gendergleichheit‘ versus ‚Gendergerechtigkeit‘, als Indikatoren für ihre verschiedenen akademischen Konzepte von Frauen und/oder Gender identifiziert werden können. Die Analyse deutet darauf hin, dass ein Paradigmenwechsel mit generationaler Zugehörigkeit, akademischem Feminismus und internationalen Debatten sowie mit dem Einfluss des unter aktuellen politischen Bedingungen gewandelten Verhältnisses zwischen der Zivilgesellschaft und dem Staat in der Türkei erklärt werden können.

**Keywords:** Frauen- und Geschlechterstudien, Gendergleichheit, Gendergerechtigkeit, Akademischer Feminismus, Hochschulbildung, Türkei

### **English**

Following the feminist movement of the 1980s, Women's Studies as an independent academic discipline was established in the early 1990s at Turkish universities. By the year 2017, about 100 Women's and Gender Studies Centres (WGSCs) existed at universities in Turkey. A research project at the University of Bremen has analysed the institutionalisation and transformation processes of these centres in their relation to academia, state, and civil society based on expert interviews and document collections. This article discusses how six selected WGSCs were shaped differently over the decades by diverse WGS scholars' political-ideological stances and various scientific paradigms, such as modernist, feminist, or neo-conservative. It also investigates in how far centres' names, topics, and terms such as 'gender equality' versus 'gender justice' can be identified as indicators of their different academic concepts of women and/or gender. The analysis suggests that the paradigm shifts can be explained, by considering the influential factors of generational belonging, academic feminism, and international WGS debates, as well as recognising the impacts of the relations between the civil society and the state in Turkey that undergo changes due to recent political developments.

**Keywords:** women's and gender studies, gender equality, gender justice, academic feminism, higher education, Turkey

## 1 Introduction

Following the feminist movement of the 1980s, Women's Studies was established as an independent academic discipline in the early 1990s at Turkish universities, primarily in Istanbul and Ankara. By the year 2017, about 100 Women's and Gender Studies Centres (WGSCs)<sup>1</sup> existed at public and foundation universities in Turkey, both in big and in small cities.

The research project "Women's and Gender Studies at Universities in Turkey"<sup>2</sup> examined the institutionalisation and transformation processes of WGSCs at universities in their relation to academia, state, and civil society in Turkey by using qualitative empirical research methods. Based on expert interviews and document collections, the project investigated representatives' statements, websites, activities (such as teaching, research, publication, and events), as well as institutional documents for a purposeful selected qualitative sample of WGSCs.

Following a literature review on Women's and Gender Studies in Turkey, the United States of America (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), as well as Germany, a web search on WGSCs in Turkey was carried out to create an inventory for the purpose of selecting the WGSCs to take into consideration for a deeper analysis in the study. Subsequently, the research sample was designed based on criteria to represent WGSCs from:

- different central and periphery regions of Turkey;
- early and recently established centres;
- different types of university funding (state vs. foundation);
- and WGSCs with different political-ideological orientations evident in their activities, discourses, and collaboration partners.

As part of the field research, researchers visited the centres, and in cases where libraries and archives existed, collected documents, such as leaflets, posters and conference programmes, as well as conducting expert interviews. In total 28 expert interviews were conducted in Turkish by members of the research group between October 2017 and January 2019. Thus, most quotations in this text (if not originally formulated in English, which was the case in some interviews) are translated from Turkish to English by members of the research team. All members of the research team are trilingual in different degrees in Turkish, English and German, and in case of doubt we collectively gave our best to keep the original spirit of the words, seeking to understand the "institutionalised competence for the construction of reality" by the experts (Meuser/Nagel 2008). In addition, all quotations from academic literature in Turkish or German are translated by us. Expertise can be described as the opportunity to "hegemonise in practice in a particular organisational functional context" and thus "to structure the conditions of action of other actors" (Meuser/Nagel 2008: 466-470). Thereby, experts are not seen as "objects" of the research, but as "witnesses" to the processes being researched (Gläser/Laudel 2009: 10-11). The expert interviews were transcribed, coded and categorised

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<sup>1</sup> These institutions are called women's research, women's studies, institute for the studies of women's problems, women's and gender studies, and women and family studies. The abbreviation of 'WGSC' is used throughout the article to refer to all these research centres established at universities regardless their specific names.

<sup>2</sup> The project was conducted by the authors between 2017 and 2019 at the University of Bremen and funded in the framework of the programme "Blickwechsel. Contemporary Turkey Studies" by Stiftung Mercator. For the study's report including a literature review on WGSCs as well as the complete research sample, see Binder et al. 2019. This article was reviewed and thus further developed by Prof. Dr. Betül Yarar who was the primary consultant to the project.

with reference to Flick's proposal for Thematic Coding (1995) which is based on the Grounded Theory method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Thereby, the study gained insights into both the different and shared academic and political motivations that have shaped the field of WGSCs at universities in Turkey.

The research focus concerned 'Application and Research Centres', which are not only the first institutional model through which Women's and Gender Studies found a place for itself in academia since the early 1990s, but are also dynamic institutional academic spaces constituted through ongoing contestations between the state, academia and civil society. Therefore, by focusing on WGSCs, the research attempted to explore the ways in which these important institutional units have been established and transformed on the basis of continuing struggles among different influential actors and institutions. The field is far more than the centres, but embraces the centres as an institutional form and practice. Focussing on WGSCs can be seen as one lens to read the overall picture of Women's and Gender Studies.

Turkey – due to its political circumstances – is a difficult research field. This is especially true for the academic field, which is threatened by restrictions in freedom of speech and the growing influence of the restrictive governance of state universities. Many critical scholars have been expelled from their positions, and suspicion and mistrust amongst different political camps is growing and also reflected in academia. Thus, collection of data and the use of experts interviews from the field has proved to be very sensitive and in some cases even impossible. Consequently, the anonymisation strategy for the study was developed both in consideration of the (ethical) standards for qualitative research and of the feminist methodology, which should enable visibility of and simultaneously ensure protection for the interview partners.

Thus, this article is based on 10 – partly anonymised – expert interviews with representatives of six selected WGSCs which represent the different paradigms in WGSCs. The article discusses in particular the transformation in the knowledge production, which is reflected in research themes, teaching practices, publications, public events, and the organisational structures in the field of WGS in Turkey.

## **2 A short overview on the phases of Women's and Gender Studies in Turkey**

For Kandiyoti (1996), the predecessor of the institutionalised Women's Studies was initially embedded in the outgoing Ottoman Empire's new ideology of nationalism, then later at the time of the founding of the Turkish nation-state in modernisation theory, and then in the 1950s and 1960s in state-critical Marxism. Women's Studies in the 1970s had been shaped in particular by the increasing political fragmentation of society and academia in Turkey. Thus, the 'women's problem' was analysed on the basis of diverging Islamic, Kemalist or Marxist perspectives. According to Kandiyoti Women's Studies has been in particular influenced by Western feminism since the 1980s.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> It should be stressed, that the neo-liberal and neo-conservative turn in the political leadership has also affected WGS in Turkey since the 1980s. Moreover, among others, the ever-extending privatisation of higher education and new patterns of internationalisation have to be mentioned as factors that are as well very influential on paradigmatic shifts in the field. However, due to its limited scope, this article doesn't allow to elaborate on these effects in depths. For further reading see Yazar/Karakaşoğlu (under review).

In 1979, Nermin Abadan Unat, a social scientist from the Ankara University, published the anthology *Toplumunda Kadın (Woman in the Turkish Society)* – a conference proceedings – and thus “the first pioneering work on women’s issues” (Arat 1996: 404). In the wake of the emergence of the feminist movement in the 1980s, the focus of Women’s Studies at universities shifted from the social discrimination of women to the structural conditions of this injustice with the aim of self-empowerment and the visualisation of women in academia and society. In this period of Women’s Studies, monographs on violence against women, women’s work, or women’s political participation were published in various disciplines of science, e.g. sociology, politics, law, history, economics, psychology, and literature studies. This shift in focus is reflected in particular in the publication of the anthology *From a Woman’s Perspective: Women in Turkey of the 1980s* published by Şirin Tekeli in 1989. The editor describes the concerns shared by the authors despite different perspectives as “to understand how women’s status is determined by the system of patriarchal power relations in specific conditions, what kind of oppression women experience, and how they can resist oppression” (Tekeli 1990: 37). In particular, for the substantive debates and the introduction of terms such as ‘patriarchy’ or ‘gender’, impulses of and transnational networks with WGS scholars based in the USA and European countries played a significant role. WGS scholars from Turkey who graduated at universities abroad transferred their acquired gender knowledge in their “intercultural suitcases” to Turkish universities after their return to Turkey (Al-Rebholz 2013: 167 -68; examples from the study’s research sample: İstanbul, Ankara).

Since the 2000s, research projects on ethnicity, identity, body, media, militarism, and masculinity which were mostly conducted by the ‘third generation’ of WGS scholars have further diversified ‘feminist studies’. Due to the diversification of feminist approaches and the increase in WGSCs since the turn of the millennium, Kerestecioglu and Özman (2017: 183) speak of the ongoing “period of plurality” of WGS. However, on the basis of the empirical data this article questions the notion of an ongoing “period of plurality”. At least for the last years we would suggest to speak rather of a neo-conservative paradigm shift very much influenced by a continuously stronger intervention of the both neo-conservative and neo-liberal government in Turkey’s higher education system.

### **3 WGSCs adopt modernist, feminist or neo-conservative approaches**

In times of postmodernism, a diversification of theoretical and methodological concepts in the sciences can be observed since the 1980s. Despite of this ‘plurality’, the analysis shows that the selected WGSCs adopt(ed) notably modernist, feminist or neo-conservative approaches.<sup>4</sup> These analytical categories are based on the literature review and the categories we found in our empirical data. They are therefore based both on a deductive and an inductive strategy, and thus should not be equated with the self-definitions of the interview partners.

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<sup>4</sup> Sancar and Akşit (2011) use the more specific terms ‘developmentalist modernist’ and ‘critical feminist’ to categorise approaches in WGS in Turkey. An alternative analytical categorisation is for example mentioned by an interview partner who describes the centre’s founders’ paradigm as “equality feminism” or “liberal feminism” and therefore assigning these WGS scholars to feminism instead of modernism. For a differentiation of the history of ideas of feminism between equality feminism, difference feminism, and gender feminism, see Casale/Windheuser (2018).

Different approaches to concepts and practices indicate shifting scientific paradigms. The term ‘paradigm shift’<sup>5</sup> is used in this article to describe these transformations in the knowledge production in the academic field of WGS. For this purpose, it is analysed how and what kind of knowledge is produced within the last three decades in the framework of the selected WGSCs. The understanding of fundamental concepts, such as the categories of women and gender, and the implementation of practices, for instance apparent in the centres’ activities and cooperations can be categorised under specific scientific paradigms. This article identifies in the following the guiding scientific paradigms of the selected centres at six universities (İstanbul, Ankara Çukurova, Dokuz Eylül, Sabancı, and an anonymous case which follows the neo-conservative paradigm) and examines paradigm shifts within and between the WGSCs.

### **The Modernist Paradigm**

The reforms of the country’s founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk were a series of political, legal, religious, cultural, social, and economic policy changes that were designed to convert the new Republic of Turkey into a secular, modern nation-state in accordance with the Kemalist ideology (Steinbach 2012: 28-36).

In the research sample, especially in the foundation processes of the cases İstanbul, Çukurova, and Dokuz Eylül, the modernist paradigm was influential for the WGSCs’ activities, including teaching and research, according to the empirical data. This means that a Kemalist understanding of modernism as an ideology was reflected in the basic concepts and practices of these WGSCs, and therefore in the centres’ knowledge production on women.

A hint to this is the fact that, besides providing scholarship programmes for girls in cooperation with the Kemalist oriented Association for Supporting Contemporary Life, the WGSC at the İstanbul University developed training programmes for women and girls in rural areas and poor neighbourhoods to foster women’s literacy and employment. The link between the Kemalist ideology and the centre’s paradigmatic identity becomes obvious in the following quote. The centre’s founding director states that in the framework of a training how to use a sewing machine they designed a programme to impart “knowledge on the values of the Republic, the women’s problems, health, [and] education” to the participants in a top-down process. The cooperation partners from civil society, the centre’s activities and target groups, as well as its aims and goals point to the guiding modernist paradigm under the centre’s founding directorate: to develop women as Turkish citizens through education.

At the Çukurova University in Adana female academicians began to meet at the end of the 1980s to raise their consciousness as women and likewise to develop women through education according to Erbatur, the centre’s founding director. She describes the somehow maternalistic motivations of the scholars who had been educated and employed thanks to the Kemalist modernisation project – that can be characterised as a development project to achieve parity with Western countries – as follows in the interview. According to her the approach could be summed up in a statement like: “We are women and we want to do something for women. We will save the women!” It is obvious that the centre during its foundation process operated with an uncontested educationalist understanding of scholars who know best what is good for less educated women. In the framework of an UNDP project on agriculture, the

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<sup>5</sup> The concept ‘paradigm shift’ – developed by the physicist and philosopher Thomas Kuhn in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (1962) – refers to a fundamental change in the basic concepts and experimental practices of a scientific discipline and was initially invented for the natural sciences.

centre provided a gender training for women in rural areas on topics such as violence against women, women's rights, and women's health. In addition, the scholars organised (gender) trainings for political parties, NGOs or schools, which included topics such as women's history and the gains of the Republic, to empower girls and women and to strengthen the political participation of women.

In the cases of İstanbul and Çukurova, mixed-gender organisations in the field of culture (The Association for Supporting Contemporary Life) and in the field of education (The Association of Faculty Members Çukurova) rather than women's organisations were important for these WGSCs' institutionalisation processes. Apparently, the founding directors of these centres of the first period were more open to mixed-gender organisations than their feminist-oriented successors who followed an autonomous strategy.<sup>6</sup>

Belkis, director of the centre at the Dokuz Eylül University in İzmir, has analysed the university management's decision to establish the WGSC officially in 2009 as an ideological strategy against the Islamic neo-conservative state's policy thus "to emphasise and strengthen a more modern Western oriented women's profile". Belkis interprets her predecessor's intention to name the centre as 'Human Rights and Women's Research Centre' with the founding director's disciplinary background as a political scientist and her Kemalist orientation as "an ideological preference". Thereby, it is the only centre in the sample in which the choice was given to an emphasis to women's rights in addition to women's problems or women's studies. Belkis' argument can be supported by referring to the centre's website, which welcomes the users quite symbolically with a slide show of Atatürk's pictures with 'western style' modernly dressed women by his side.

For Belkis, however, the application of a feminist methodology and a feminist stance are the fundamental conditions to conduct research and teaching in the field of WGS. To strengthen this approach, she would re-name the centre as 'Gender and Cultural Research Centre' to include Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex (LGBTI+) and to emphasise the aspect of culture, "because we cannot separate sex from the culture, the identity, self-expression, and all the socio-economic and socio-political structures".

### **The Feminist Paradigm: Understandings of 'Academic Feminism' and a shift to 'Gender'**

There are numerous ways to draw an historical genealogy for feminism, which cover multiple aspects and dimensions. For Notz (2011: 12), for instance, the term describes a political theory, a social movement and a scientific discipline. In the scientific discourse on WGS in Turkey, the concept feminism, which relates to a 'Western' tradition, also implies the demand for a fundamental transformation of patriarchal, hegemonic social structures (according to Somersan 2011: 112).

Sancar (2009) defines the penetration of feminism into academia as a gradual and transformative process. According to her, feminism has entered social sciences to challenge and bring an alternative to the female excluding and overlooking discourse of (political) history on the mention of women. According to Sancar, the feminist discipline aims at questioning uneven representation of women by looking into male and authoritarian forms of relations. In this

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<sup>6</sup> For an analysis on the relation between women's movements and WGS in Turkey, see Binder/Dağ 2020.



sense, the field goes beyond a simple effort of making women more ‘visible’ and discusses the functions and manifestations of gender regimes.

The term ‘academic feminism’ aims to incorporate feminist perspectives into teaching and research and to create an academic milieu that contributes to gender equality within university structures. In addition, academic feminism aims to raise awareness on gender equality in the society at large.

For the cases Ankara and Sabancı the feminist paradigm has been guiding since the centres’ establishment, whereas in the cases İstanbul, Çukurova, and Dokuz Eylül the modernist approach was gradually replaced by the feminist approach over the years of the centre’s existence. In the following, it will be discussed how feminist strategies and objectives affect the fields of research, teaching, publications, and events as well as the organisational structures at these WGSCs.

In the case of the WGSC at the Ankara University the feminist self-identification is prominent. For instance, the centre’s director Sancar states: “I mean, we were academics, but feminists. We wanted to be feminists where we were. [We wanted] feminism to have a place in the academic career that we have, to talk about it when we teach. But [back then] there was no feminism in academy. To put it more correctly, there were no women’s problems in academy.” Besides establishing feminism in the academia, according to Sancar and the former head of the MA programme Özkazanç they both ‘became feminists’ and ‘created feminists’ in the framework of WGS at Ankara University. Özkazanç reports on the WGS scholars’ political-ideological orientation: “Because we were a feminist circle, a circle who had a strong feminist belonging; for instance, we used the word ‘feminist’ more. Within the lectures, the lecture’s naming, ‘feminist’ was so much the background.”

As it becomes apparent in the interviews with Sancar and Özkazanç, the centre pursued the mission to teach feminism to the leftist oriented civil society through education programmes in order to ‘socialise feminism’ especially in the 1990s. Here the intermingling of feminism as a trigger for scientific identity and for social activism becomes quite obvious. Furthermore according to Özkazanç, the WGS scholars established successfully feminist and queer perspectives in the social sciences at Ankara University. Both Queer Studies and Masculinity Studies were first introduced in Turkey at Ankara University and were influential for the diversification of WGS in Turkey. The centre’s director Sancar describes in the interview how they apply central feminist strategies, such as autonomy from the university management as well as non-hierarchical and horizontal relations between the WGS scholars at their university. This means, feminism is not only relevant as content for research, teaching and activities, but also influences the working relations within the university.

According to the WGSC’s academic coordinator Irzık, the WGS scholars first established a ‘forum’ at the private Sabancı University in İstanbul, which, unlike a ‘centre’, was thought to be “more flexible, open and inclusive”. The forum was designed for all university status groups as a structure, which was “very egalitarian”, and where decisions were usually taken collectively.<sup>7</sup> The centre’s principles – formulated on its website – point to an orientation towards feminist strategies, for example, when a working and decision-making understanding based on “collective, transparent, participatory, polyphonic and open communication” is postulated.

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<sup>7</sup> Due to a changed strategy of the university management to support centres because of their potential for research and third-party funding, the forum was transformed into a centre in 2010. For this purpose, the university directorate appointed a director, an executive board and a supervisory board.

Specifically, the text published on the website under the heading “About Us” refers to the centre’s fundamental “feminist principles” and “solidarity”. Both interviewees emphasise the feminist positioning of their WGSC, which expressed itself in a feminist understanding of teaching and research, e.g. the application of a feminist pedagogy, but especially in its organisational structure. For example, the academic coordinator should be replaced regularly after democratic elections. With the position of the manager required by the Higher Education Council as a prerequisite for the official recognition as a ‘Research and Application Centre’ the employees deal creatively: “For example, we say with each other that we have an academic coordinator. In the terminology of university management this is defined as ‘director’. [At the Higher Education Council] as ‘manager’. We are still in a phase of transformation, adaptation and change. But as far as possible, we try to do that work by maintaining our flexibility, our equality.” Similarly, the number of members of the executive board designated as the Gender Core is handled flexibly and decisions are still taken collectively. For the centre’s director it is particularly important to “receive contributions from different people”. According to her, the WGSC does not belong to anyone, but should be understood as a space in which everyone can express herself, an area that produces itself and therefore materialises.

Both the centres at the Ankara University and the Sabancı University cooperate mostly with civil society actors with (queer-)feminist orientations. Over time and in relation to the shifting scientific paradigms, cooperation partners with a feminist orientation became also more prominent for the İstanbul case, such as the Foundation Women’s Library and Information Centre or the Foundation Women’s Shelter ‘Purple Roof’.<sup>8</sup>

Whereas the WGSC at the İstanbul University under the founding directorate had a modernist approach, the MA programme on Women’s Studies followed the feminist paradigm since its establishment in 1993. The former centre’s director Berktaş who taught in the MA programme from the outset emphasises the dual existence of both approaches in WGS at the İstanbul University. Only under the feminist-oriented directorates since 2010 the centre began to apply feminist strategies, which are described by Berktaş as follows: “In these departments there was a horizontal and democratic relationship, a student-teacher relation as not existing in any other academic field in Turkey. The students were invited to participate actively in all activities here and they participated. Because they saw [the centre] as a place which belongs to themselves, where they can express themselves, where they can discuss, where they can relocate the student-teacher relation in real terms academically. What we tried to do for 20 years was to offer opportunities in the sense: ‘here is your space, you learn knowledge, but at the same time you produce knowledge, you share, it is yours with everything’. As a matter of fact, they participated in all the activities we organised at every level voluntarily. Also, they participated with pleasure. They also motivated us mutually.”

Her successor as a centre’s director adds that the centre’s office was open to be used both for teachers and students as a common and autonomous space. In addition, the centre operated with a democratic approach: “Always participatory, by working together with experts on each topic.” For this feminist-oriented generation of scholars a “mutual relationship” between the WGS scholars was also essential. With the focus on gender, including LGBTI+, the application

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<sup>8</sup> This shift from cooperation partners with Kemalist orientations to feminist orientations can be also traced for the cases of Çukurova and Dokuz Eylül in a weakened form.

of alternative (feminist) methodologies<sup>9</sup> and the acceptance of different writing styles for degree theses, both the WGSC and the MA programme created a (queer-)feminist space at the Istanbul University.

According to the centre's former director, topics shifted from women to gender issues both in the centre's activities and the MA programme at the Istanbul University.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the WGS scholars use gender instead of women as their category for analysis. The decision to integrate the term 'Gender and Women's Studies' into the name of the centre at the Sabancı University is explained by the centre's director as follows: "We did not want that it is only Women's Studies, because we want to look broader. We want that it is also open to other human beings and men; Men's Studies – as we have such friends. But we also did not want to eliminate the women and do only gender. Because we always emphasise both with our own trainings and in our discussions the following: The question 'where are the women?'. The question is very important in every field, it is a question which we still should ask. But it is necessary that we do not stop here. It is necessary that we ask then 'where is gender?' and render this more complex. By questioning this dual-sex system, by emphasising that womanhood and manhood are plural formations. To stress this, how womanhood and manhood defines each other accordingly and how it transforms socially. Despite of all of these, no matter how complicated the gender organising is, for that reason, the question 'where are the women?' is still a very fundamental and important question. Because women are still in an invisible status. Thereby, we did not want to eliminate Women's Studies, but also did not want to restrain it."

Under the selected centre's name the entire gender relevant research and teaching activities at Sabancı University are represented and simultaneously the special status of women in the society is highlighted. For the centre's founding director the naming also shows the bond with feminism: "[To express] our gratitude to feminism and not to forget and emphasise the origin and history of Women's Studies". In addition, there is a strategic reason, since the "word woman" is also relevant for the success of project applications or joint research projects according to her. The PhD programme at Sabancı University is only named as 'Gender Studies' due to its theoretical orientation on international literature. This points to the focus change from women to gender in the Turkish speaking scientific community comparable to the international debates in the academic discipline.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, it points to the epistemological shifts carried by the influential political conjunctures, as in this case 'gender' refers to a policy area of development brought by the European Union (EU) processes of Turkey. The former head of the MA programme at Ankara University Özkazanç sees this as a trigger to shift from 'feminism' to 'gender', which was previously predominant in the activities of the WGS.

Despite the diversity of feminist approaches most WGS scholars unite in analysing and criticising the patriarchal system or rather the male-dominated system of Turkey. In this respect, also the neo-conservative oriented centre's director at a foundation university in Istanbul (anonymised case) claims her critical approach to that system. According to her, one single

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<sup>9</sup> Already in 1996 Serpil Çakır and Necla Akgökçe published on "The Method in Women's Studies in the Light of Different Feminisms".

<sup>10</sup> A comparable analysis – a shift from women to gender – can be given for the centre's topics at the Dokuz Eylül University.

<sup>11</sup> For an international discussion on the name shift from women to gender, see Do Mar Pereira 2017: 34 or O'Neil/Bencivenga 2018: 211.

understanding of women like “in the era of the Republican regime” does not exist anymore. Instead she states a diverse understanding of women in Turkey: “It is talked about women of different social classes, more different identities, more colourful, more diverse. Well, there is not one single type, we go towards a more pluralistic structure.” Comparably, the centre’s director describes the diversity of women’s movements in Turkey. For her, “radical feminist groups, more conservative feminist groups or groups who do more liberal feminist work” form this social movement. In the same interview passage she uses the very contested term ‘post-feminism’<sup>12</sup>. For the centre’s director this concept is an even more ‘progressive’ approach than the feminist ideology which was used by the Kemalist and feminist oriented women’s movements. With the introduction of its own terms and topics this WGSC aims to establish a new – the neo-conservative – paradigm in the field of WGS to transform the scientific community in Turkey accordingly.

### **The Neo-Conservative Paradigm: A shift from ‘gender equality’ to ‘gender justice’?**

According to Acar and Altunok, , the political discourse and practice in Turkey has been transformed due to neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism since the AKP took power in 2002.<sup>13</sup> . They argue that particularly since 2007 “patriarchal and moral notions and values, often framed by religion, have increasingly become dominant in the party’s rhetoric regarding the regulation of social and cultural domains (...)” (Acar/Altunok 2013: 14) They state that the neo-conservative stance of the Turkish government undermines gender equality by emphasising the centrality of the family institution by glorifying traditional gender roles. In their understanding the neo-conservative rationality conceives “the family as the kernel of social order” which is viewed as the effective remedy for social problems and other risks of modernisation and economic crises in Turkey (Acar/Altunok 2013: 18). Thus, in the last decade “the conception of women as ‘sacred’ mothers, keystones of the family structure and guardians of the moral-cultural order has been more and more strongly emphasized by the government (...)” (Acar/Altunok 2013: 18).

In the case of the Application and Research Centre Woman and Family located at a foundation university in Istanbul the effect of neo-conservatism as a ‘moral-political rationality’ on WGS in Turkey becomes obvious. For the centre’s director the family as a “social institution”, where all individuals are socialised, is significant for the empowerment of women: “That not just the woman alone, [but] the family, her position within the family will be strengthened much more: Well, the woman is part of the family and cannot be separated.” Following a neo-liberal approach a balance between work and family life, the public and the private sphere, must be found in the centre’s director’s opinion. Therefore, the centre tries to develop policies in order to support women’s participation in working life in a way that they do not lose anything in family life. To emphasise this centre’s prioritisation, the director, who postulates the “unity of the family” as a social norm, suggested the centre’s name to the university management. In

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<sup>12</sup> For instance, according to Hausotter (2010) the term is used for and/or by three different entities. It describes an ideology which celebrates emancipation in an uncritical way and thereby supports the neo-liberal transformation of society. In addition, deconstructive queer-feminist as well as anti-feminist approaches are likewise labelled as post-feminist.

<sup>13</sup> Acar and Altunok refer to Wendy Brown who defines neo-conservatism as a “moral-political rationality (...) which identifies the state, including the law, with the task of setting the moral-religious compass for society (...)” (Brown 2006, in: Acar/Altunok 2013: 15-16).

doing this, the centre's director marks the act of naming as an autonomous academic action motivated by a specific approach not imposed by authorities but coming from inside academia. In 2014, this WGSC organised in collaboration with the Woman and Democracy Association KADEM a conference on "City Poverty and Family Friendly Development Strategies". The use of the adjective 'family friendly' instead of 'woman friendly' in the conference title as well as the centre's naming as 'Woman and Family' refer to the neo-conservative oriented conception of 'woman'. The woman is still thought as an individual, however especially regarding to her 'natural' responsibility for reproduction and care work in the context of a heterosexual family structure.<sup>14</sup> This conception is in opposition to feminist claims to empower women as individuals – especially independently from family.

The centre – and thus the interview partner as the only representative of WGS at her university – focus on the topics of women, family and children, violence and abuse, entrepreneurship and employment, as well as the social, economic, and political participation of women in general. Besides of different approaches to naming and thereby related topics, the director introduced the term 'gender justice' to the state, academia and civil society to differentiate from 'the other' – mostly feminist oriented – WGS scholars and women's movements in Turkey and their understanding of 'gender equality'.

Examples for the understanding of 'woman' and 'gender' as socially constructed and intersectional categories can be found in the empirical data related to the WGSCs of the cases İstanbul and Sabancı. Therefore, the scholars working there call for 'gender equality' (toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği), which means for them the equality between men and women in all societal areas. In opposition, the centre at the foundation university in İstanbul advocates on its website that due to the fixed biological differences between the sexes, the term 'gender justice' (toplumsal cinsiyet adaleti) should be used additionally to take fairly into account the different needs and capacities of men and women. In the interview the centre's director presents her introduction of this term to the Turkish speaking academic discourse via publications, congresses, and courses<sup>15</sup> as a conceptual advancement due to changed political and societal environments: "It is a perspective which goes one step further than equality. Taking into account the physical roles of woman or man or their biological roles. The woman gets pregnant, not the man! Well, it can maybe mean equality that a pregnant woman sits on a desk for eight hours next to a male civil servant, but this is not justice." Whereas she recognises the feminist struggles in the last century for equality and the resulting term 'gender equality', due to the 'double burden' of women in private and working life, she finds it more appropriate for her WGSC to use the term 'gender justice': "We say that to advocate equality on the basis of being human between man and woman, to defend the equality on their access to rights, when you look from the perspectives of roles, [there must be] a fair distribution of men's and women's roles which result from their nature."

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<sup>14</sup> O'Neil/Bencivenga (2018: 217) even argue that "women are generally viewed not as individuals but as members of families" using the example of the former Ministry for Women and Family which became the Ministry for Family and Social Policies in 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Besides a publication on the term 'gender justice', the annual Gender Justice Congress on the 2018's topic divorce received 400 applications according to the organiser. In addition, the interview partner teaches the seminar "Gender Equality and Justice" for about 150 student participants.

Her approach is, comparably analysed for the government-organised NGO KADEM<sup>16</sup> by Dursun, “vague and hybrid, because it merges feminist, anti-feminist, and post-feminist elements with each other” (Dursun 2018: 122). The centre’s director, who is simultaneously the chair-woman of KADEM puts forward the emphasis on biological differences between men and women in order to explain her use of the term ‘gender justice’. The concept of difference – developed within the feminist discourse in the 1980s – is adopted by neo-conservative oriented actors to occupy the (feminist oriented) WGS in Turkey and worldwide.<sup>17</sup> Dursun points out that ‘gender justice’ has been used by the Vatican since the 1990s to “prevent the recognition of women’s rights and their sexual and reproductive rights – in a coalition with Christian and Muslim conservatives” (Dursun 2018: 120). Comparably to Acar and Altunok, Somersan argues that this discourse is led by the Turkish governing party AKP and its Government-Organised Non-Governmental Organisations (GONGO) to “undermine the universal principle of equality between women and men” (Somersan 2018: 88). In summary, an attempt to overwrite established feminist discursive elements, such as the term ‘gender equality’, with new terms to claim an ownership for the field of WGS in the framework of a neo-conservative paradigm can be identified.

But it is not only the term ‘gender justice’ that finds its way into the university landscape in Turkey, but also related topics introduced by this foundation university and its cooperation partner KADEM. Evidence for this can be found in the empirical data related to two WGSCs located in the periphery regions of Turkey. For instance, family empowerment, education and communication are explicitly mentioned on its website as the centre’s interests and suggestions to design educational programmes and seminars on these topics are made. At another university, a ‘Family School’ and a ‘Mother University’ were organised in cooperation with the municipality and the Ministry for Family and Social Politics to educate mothers.

In this section the anonymised WGSC was presented as an example for the influence of WGS arguing in line with the religious-conservative women’s movement (organisations) and following a neo-conservative paradigm. The scientific journal *Women’s Studies* edited by the KADEM as well as a WGS conference organised by the Sakarya University and the Istanbul University in 2018 – under new directorates and without the participation of established, feminist oriented WGS scholars – are additional examples for an ongoing transformation of the field and shows the gradual domination of the field of WGSCs by the neo-conservative paradigm.

#### **4 Conclusion: Discussion and Outlook**

This article aimed at scrutinizing paradigmatic shifts in the field of WGSCs that gain visibility in terms of the selection of the centre’s names, topics, and terms used such as ‘gender equality’ vs. ‘gender justice’. We interpret them as indicators not only for the WGSCs’ different approaches to women and gender (concepts) in the ongoing ‘period of plurality’ of WGS as they not only develop in parallel but successively. In some of the cases investigated in the empirical research both changes in centre’s names and experiences of WGSCs leadership personnel

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<sup>16</sup> This organisation, which was founded in 2013, can be categorised as a government-organised non-governmental organisation (GONGO) due to its close relations to the Turkish government which is even reflected in the personal involvement of members of the president’s family into the bodies of the organisation.

<sup>17</sup> For the feminist theory discussions on equality, difference, and dissolution of categories, see Pimminger 2018.

point at the fact that the field is – especially after the failed coup d'état from 2016 – under ongoing political pressure towards an adaptation of the neo-conservative paradigm.

Since its establishment, the field of WGSCs has undergone several developments going both in lines with and opposing political ideologies of the state. The deconstruction of the category 'women' as an universal subject in the framework of postcolonial and poststructural critique lead to an intersectional understanding of gender and therefore a further diversification of the WGS worldwide and so in Turkey. Thus, the selected centres focus on a wide range of topics such as women, men, gender, LGBTI+ as well as family and motherhood. The debate on the proper naming of the centres points to the shifting paradigms within and between the WGSCs as well as to the academisation process of the institutions.

The empirical data show that WGS scholars' diverse political-ideological stances and various scientific paradigms developed over the decades shape the centres differently. The analysis of the cases İstanbul, Ankara, Çukurova, Dokuz Eylül, Sabancı as well the anonymised WGSC point to the fact that paradigm shifts appear within and between the WGSCs: These centres adopted modernist, feminist and neo-conservative approaches. This article discussed how different scientific paradigms shift gradually and for example in the case of the WGS at the Istanbul University even exist simultaneously.

The cooperation partners from civil society, the centres' activities, and target groups, as well as their aims and goals indicate the guiding modernist paradigm under the centres' founding directorates at the cases İstanbul, Çukurova, and Dokuz Eylül. Feminist strategies and objectives have been affecting the fields of research, teaching, publications, and events as well as the organisational structures at the cases Ankara and Sabancı since their establishment. Comparably, academic feminism was essential for the second generation of WGS scholars at the cases İstanbul, Çukurova, and Dokuz Eylül. In the interviews, the experts mention feminist approaches in particular in the shape of strategies to create autonomous and common spaces for WGS, and the establishment of non-hierarchical, horizontal, democratic, and non-competitive relations between scholars, as well as between academics and students. The feminist-oriented WGS scholars emphasise the meaning of collective working and decision-making processes. In addition, the cooperation with women and LGBTI+ is the prerequisite for the production of feminist knowledge according to this group of WGS scholars who follow the feminist paradigm.

With the introduction of terms and topics specifically the anonymised WGSC aims to establish a new – neo-conservative – paradigm in the field of WGS. Some WGS scholars describe the difficulties feminist-oriented scholars currently are confronted with when it comes to be able to teach and do research under a feminist paradigm in times of the recent dominance of conservatively oriented scholars. Due to changes in activities and discourses, obvious in differences in content and concepts, the question can be raised whether we are currently confronted with a critical epistemological break in WGS at universities in Turkey comparable with the paradigm shifts from modernism to feminism in the past. To give an adequate answer to this question further research on the dissemination of the neo-conservative paradigm in the WGS in Turkey is necessary.

According to Bourdieu, who developed his concept for the Western higher education system, universities are embedded in science as a specific social field, which operates quite autonomously with its own rules. It can be understood as a 'battle field' between the actors of the field who have different power based on their 'scientific capital' and thus can influence paradigm shifts within their academic discipline (Bourdieu 1998). However, the analysis suggests

that the paradigm shifts in WGSCs in Turkey can be explained, besides of the influential factors generational belonging, academic feminism, and international WGS debates, with the impacts of the civil society and the state or more precisely with the tensions between the civil society and different governments and their political ideologies. Surely, the formation of referred influential factors are not independent of changing national and international political conjunctures that evolve not only around the issue of 'gender' but under the general effects of an ongoing neo-liberalisation of universities. The rise of authoritarian measures of the state against academic freedoms and academia since 2016 is a factor which seems to have a specifically massive impact on the field of WGSCs as several former leadership personalities have been dismissed in the cause of the aftermath of the failed coup d'état and the reaction of the state towards the initiative of Academics for Peace Petition the same year.<sup>18</sup> But this aspect would deserve a special treatment in a paper because an elaboration on the complex impacts of the recent political ruptures in Turkey would require further investigation.

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<sup>18</sup> For an analysis on how developing international and national political conjunctures effect the WGSCs in Turkey, see Dağ et al. (under review).



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## 6 LIST OF INTERVIEW PARTNERS

- Prof. Dr. Fatmagül Berktaş, 2018: former director of the Women's Problems Research and Application Centre at the public Istanbul University founded in 1989.
- Prof. Dr. Serpil Sancar, 2017: director of the Women's Problems Research and Application Centre at the public Ankara University founded in 1993.
- Prof. Dr. Alev Özkazanc, 2017: former head of the Women's Studies Departmental Field at the public Ankara University founded in 1994.
- Prof. Dr. Gaye Erbatur, 2017: founder of the Women's Problems Research Centre at the public Çukurova University in Adana founded in 1994.
- Assoc. Prof. Dr. Özlem Belkıs, 2017: former director of the Women's Problems Research and Application Centre at the public Dokuz Eylül University in Izmir founded in 2009.
- Prof. Dr. Sibel Irzık, 2017: former academic coordinator of the Gender and Women's Studies Excellence Centre at the private Sabancı University in İstanbul founded in 2010.
- Four experts anonymised upon request.

## 7 AUTHORS

Dr. Charlotte Binder, (formerly) University of Bremen, Women's and Gender Studies, Contemporary Turkey Studies, charlottebinder@posteo.de

Dr. Sevgi Uçan Çubukçu, (formerly) University of Istanbul, sevgiucan@gmail.com

Deniz Dağ, (formerly) University of Bremen, Women's and Gender Studies, Contemporary Turkey Studies, ddag@uni-bremen.de

Prof. Dr. Yasemin Karakaşoğlu, University of Bremen, karakasoglu@uni-bremen.de