

Men's rights activism and anti-feminist resistance in Turkey and Norway

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Abstract

This article by addressing the growing anti-feminist activism and mobilization and its consequences for gender equality and women's rights, sheds light on antifeminist resistance in Turkey and Norway. Using the concept of counter movement, we study men's rights mobilization in Turkey and Norway, two countries with different histories and realities of women's rights and gender equality. We first compare how the respective men's rights movements emerged in response to, or parallel with, the advances of women's movements. Investigating mass media and social media content from the most prominent contemporary men's rights groups in each country provides a qualitative comparative analysis of men's rights mobilization. Men's rights groups in Turkey and Norway share many of the same concerns, but while men's rights activists in Turkey challenge gender equality and defend the traditional family, in Norway, men's rights activism is a masculinist co-optation of the gender equality discourse.

Key Words: Men's rights activism, Norway, Turkey, anti-feminism, counter movements

Introduction

The recent anti-feminist mobilization has attracted the attention of a wide international group of researchers (Anderson 2014; Dragiewicz and Burgess 2016; Jordan 2019; Kimmel 2013; Kováts and Pöim 2015; Mellström 2016; Messner 2015 and 2016). Chafez and Dworkin (1987) foresaw this mobilization of resistance to gender equality policies as arising on two fronts: first, at the state/political level, where dominant and powerful elites oppose the

feminist movement; and second, at the civil-society level, where activists participate in to produce backlash with the ambition of undoing legal amendments in favor of women's rights. Hence, while the former type of resistance is expressed by political and religious actors' use of gender as a key pillar of right-wing populist discourse (Kandiyoti 2016), the latter type consists of anti-feminist interest groups, like men's rights activists. Although both right-wing populist states' vested interests in anti-feminism, and men's groups' opposition to feminism, are interconnected as well as individually significant, we will focus on the latter in this paper – that is, the mobilization of men's groups. Because we study men's rights activism, we will also touch on this movement's association with right-wing populist discourses and politics, using Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's (2013; 2018) definition of populism, a set of morally charged ideas leading to conflict between elites and non-elites over political decision-making.

Men's rights activists (Wojnicka 2016, 36) serve 'the interests of white, heterosexual men, including fathers, while promoting traditional, hegemonic definitions of masculinity and femininity and thus the reestablishment or defense of patriarchal gender relations.' Their voices, as Kimmel (2013, 14) points out, 'are expressions of the angry white men's claim – mobilized by a rhetoric of fear – for compensation for their alleged "humiliation".' With a perspective based on those two observations, we will analyze the role that men's rights activist groups currently have in shaping the resistance to women's hard-earned achievements in Turkey and Norway. We refer to men's rights activists/men's rights groups as a type of counter or backlash movement characterizing 'a conscious, collective, organized attempt to resist or reverse social change' (Mottl 1980, 620). Subsequently, we define men's rights activism as counter-social movements that resist the social change achieved by the women's movements. By comparing men's activism and anti-feminist rhetoric in Turkey and Norway, we will unpack the narratives and strategies they share, as well as be able to highlight the differences between them.

Men's rights activism as a counter-social movement

Social movements emerge either to encourage or resist social change. Change-oriented social movements foster greater awareness of differences and a wide range of public issues, and they strive to combat oppression and discrimination. Like the women's movement, the LGBTIQ movement and the green movement have developed into influential social movements challenging the status quo, and corresponding counter-movements have arisen to oppose them. These counter-movements, also referred as 'the new right,' 'anti-movements,' 'neo-conservatism,' and the 'radical right (Lo 1982; Nash 1979; Rossiter 1962), resist change and either aim to preserve the status quo or to oppose the consequences of social change in defense of traditional social values. In this paper, we will use the term counter-movements when we talk about the anti-feminist movement of men's rights activist groups.

The emergence of men's rights activist groups has been a reaction to the feminist movement that became large and effective in the pursuit of women's goals; furthermore, the men's movement across Europe that opposed the advancement of women in political, educational, and occupational arenas arose only after the women's movement was perceived as a threat. Both observations are in line with Dworkin and Chafetz's (1987) outlook on counter-movements. Men's rights activist groups have lobbied for fathers' custody rights and alimony payments, and divorced single fathers were construed as the victims of a feminist worldview (Flood 2004; Kimmel 2004; 2013; Messner 1997; 1998; 2016). These groups hold that the feminist movement would disrupt their social and occupational status, and they mobilize in an attempt to 'convince the authorities and bystander public to turn back the clock' (Chafetz and Dworkin 1987, 37). This desire to 'turn back the clock' is what Graff (2020) calls the emergence of conservative nostalgia against progressive hope.

Organized anti-feminism and men's rights activism in Europe

Across Europe, anti-feminist mobilization (outspoken resistance to gender equality, feminism, and gender theory) has gained momentum (Grzebalska and Soós 2016; Bracke and Paternotte 2016). This opposition was against the use of gender as an analytical concept (Eslén-Ziya 2020) or as a policy tool. While resistance to gender-based policy resulted in the closing of gender studies departments in Hungary, opposition to gender as an analytical tool had more far-reaching effects and has meant a 'backlash in gender mainstreaming and gender equality within the realm of politics, policy making, governance as well as within the workforce and family life' (Eslén-Ziya 2020, 3).

The contemporary men's rights movement focuses on criticism of a 'fatherless society' and the 'devastating consequences for boys and men' as long ago as the 1950s (see Bjørnholt 2009a). The emergence of the fathers' rights movement in the 1970s, and the recent anti-gender movement directed at gender studies and non-binary concepts of gender, have defended the traditional family and traditional gender roles, viewing gender as naturally given and mobilizing against LBGTIQ and feminist groups.

One of the largest protests in Europe, France's *La Manif Pour Tous* ('The Protest for Everyone'), opposed same sex marriages. Their slogans 'stop gender ideology', 'stop gender' or 'we want sex, not gender' were later adopted in anti-gender mobilizations in other parts of Europe like Croatia, Italy, Hungary, Germany, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spainⁱ. The men's activists' resistance was '... a new manifestation of resistance, shaped by new forms of organization, new types of mobilization and new discourses that seek to address wider audiences and not only traditional circles of conservative groups' (Kuhar and Zobec 2017, 31).

Opposition has mostly been connected to issues like reproductive policies and abortion, violence against women, LGBTIQ rights and gay marriage, gender mainstreaming, sex education at schools, and antidiscrimination policies. Their goal was to preserve the status quo and resist long-established feminist reforms ('abortion law, domestic violence, sexual assault law and gender equality', Wojnicka 2016, 36), and to promote traditional gendered roles and hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005). The antifeminist men's rights activists, through their protests, have facilitated 'ways to misogynis[e] political and economic culture' (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016, 172). Across Europe, these groups have become a powerful force in resisting feminist reforms and producing anti-feminist movements.

Background – women's movement and gender regimes in Turkey and Norway

The women's movements in both Turkey and Norway have realized major accomplishments for women and have paved the way for various legal reforms. A few examples include championing women's bodily rights, and combating domestic violence, sexual harassment, and sexual violence. Although Turkey and Norway have had different routes to modernization and types of governance in the past years, both have seen the rise of right-wing, conservative, anti-gender movements (Sümer and Eslen-Ziya 2015). Since 2002, Turkey has been governed by the authoritarian party AKP (Justice and Development Party) and its populist discourses are connected to Islamist elements of nationalism and conservatism. The party's policies and political discourses, aligned with pro-Islamic narratives, have helped reproduce traditional gender roles and marginalize feminism and gender equality (Cindoğlu and Ünal 2017). Norway, on the other hand, has been a pacesetter in gender equality with its democratic and inclusive traditions, and has achieved near gender balance in its government (Walby 2009) and comprehensive welfare system, which has been touted as 'women friendly' (Hernes 1987) because it has alleviated the care burden and

enhanced payment for working women. However, gender inequalities persist in wages and wealth, and in family responsibilities and access to positions of power (NOU 2011, 18; NOU 2012, 15). The strong focus on family policies at the cost of policies of reallocation may be part of the reason for the lack of progress (Bjørnholt 2012).

The Turkish women's movement dates to the early 1920s, when *laïcité* (secularism) was introduced and women were granted equal rights in matters of divorce and child custody. Although this policy change was a significant turn in Turkish history, it essentially represented state feminismⁱⁱ, with policies being introduced in a top-down fashion (Turam 2008; Eslen-Ziya and Korkut 2010). With the passage of time, alternative branches of the feminist movement achieved significant legal reforms of the status of women, and the movement became more inclusive. Women's unified activism reached its peak starting with the Gezi Park protests in 2013 (Eslen-Ziya in press), which coincided with the Turkish government starting to freely express and implement its anti-feminist, anti-gender equality discourses. As the Turkish state became more and more patriarchal and open against women's rights – i.e., Turkey's recent withdrawal of the Istanbul Conventionⁱⁱⁱ - women's activist mobilization becomes stronger. The 'We Will Stop Femicides Platform' (*Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu*), perceive this withdrawing from the Convention as a threat leading to violence against women and LGBTI communities^{iv}. For this they lobby and network both nationally and internationally, through social media platforms and street protests. The We Will Stop Femicides Platform along with other supporters, protest, despite police brutality and violence they receive during such resistance.

The women's movement in Norway dates to the late 1800s and it played a crucial role in the nation's secession from Sweden in 1905, which at the time provided an important argument in favor of acceding to the demand of the women's movement for full citizen's rights for women. Norway was among the first countries to grant women the right to stand for

parliament (1907) and to implement universal suffrage (1913). The second wave of the women's movement in the 1970s led to reforms such as abortion on demand, universal support for single mothers, a ban on discrimination in the labor market, access for women to occupations such as church pastorship, and the institutionalization of gender equality in the Norwegian Gender Equality Act. In 1981, a gender-neutral family law was passed that dismantled the remaining special provisions for mothers upon divorce (the so-called 'mother presumption' from 1909) against the wishes of the women's movement. While the women's movement in the 1970s was split between a wing that promoted a 'sameness' model of gender equality and those who defended differences and argued for special rights for women, today, the sameness model has been almost unanimously embraced by the women's movement, which has been criticized for ignoring relevant differences (Bjørnholt 2012; 2013). In recent decades, the major achievements of the Norwegian women's movement include the institutionalization of policies and services for victims of domestic violence, and prostitution legislation that criminalizes the purchase of sex and the clients, while the sale of sex is decriminalized.

Putting it into context: development of men's mobilization in Turkey and Norway

In Turkey, the masculinist movement emerged with the founding of Divorced Fathers in Istanbul in 2006 to create awareness of alleged discrimination against men in child custody, while a similar movement in Norway dates to the 1970s. In Turkey, the movement began to protest the Turkish family laws which they saw as discriminating men in child custody, alimony, child support settlements and in a presumption of maternal custody. They requested better enforcement of child visitation rights and shared custody. For this they got together in different groups and organised activities and demanded change. Some of these groups were: 'Family Council of Turkey' (*Türkiye Aile Şurası*); 'Divorced Fathers Platform' (*Boşanmış*

Babalar Platformu)^v, and ‘Divorced Fathers and Family Platform’ (*Boşanmış Babalar ve Aile Platformu*)^{vi}. The men’s rights movement re-emerged in 2012 as a reaction to the ‘my body my choice’ (*benim bedenim benim kararım*) campaign^{vii} of women’s activists.

‘My body my choice’ campaign was a street protest organised by the women’s organisations in response to the government’s plan to ban abortion in Turkey. This plan to ban abortion, according to Sümer and Eslen-Ziya (2015) was the “ensuing repoliticization of women’s reproductive choices”. It had started with the Prime Minister of the time, Erdoğan’s declaration that ‘every abortion is Uludere’ – an analogy between abortion and an air strike by the Turkish military that killed 34 civilians in Uludere in December 2011 (Hürriyet 2012). In the same speech he affirmed abortion as murder and that he will soon be passing the abortion legislation. This anti-abortion discourse in return paved way for the possibilities of intersectional and egalitarian pro-feminist coalition where women from all walks of life came together and took part in the ‘my body my choice’ protests. Women’s powerful mobilisation resulted in government backing up on anti-abortion legislation.

Though, thanks to the women’s mobilization, the government was not able to pass the anti-gender legislation, they continue with the anti-gender, anti-feminist rhetoric, which we argue in return discursively reinforces the masculinist movement in Turkey, whereas in Norway, it is the men’s movement that lobbies to change gender policies to favor men. In other words – in line with Chafetz and Dworkin’s (1987) perspective on organized anti-feminism – it is the Turkish state *per se*, or the dominant power elites, who are against gender equality and the women’s movement. In Norway, on the other hand, organized antifeminism is found predominantly in activist men’s rights groups, some of which receive state funding, and who also have allies in the right-wing ‘Progress Party’ (*Fremskrittspartiet*) in the Norwegian Parliament. Subsequently, the focus of men’s rights activists in Norway is not

undoing gender equality as such, but rather, *embracing* it, and using the gender equality framework for the benefit of men.

Unlike other European countries, in Turkey, the mass mobilization against the women's movement and/or gender ideology is very recent. It is only in the 2010s that we began to see journalists and/or Islamic intellectuals criticizing feminism and/or gender ideology and gender theory. However, the anti-gender politics go back to the second term of the AKP, when the party started freely expressing pro-nationalist policies and bypassing gender equality laws. Eslen-Ziya and Kazaonoğlu (2020) refer to this period as de-democratization of Turkey, when gender equality discourses in domestic settings and in national public debates were weakened. The government freely started defining women as mothers and sisters responsible for taking care of their families – husbands, children, and the elderly. This definition of women was manifested in President Erdoğan's three-children thesis (he believed that all women should bear at least three children). Expression of this ideology was important not only because it marked the start of a new era (one that the AKP government refers to as 'the New Turkey'), but it also started a new conservative tradition, a 'break with the secularist tradition of the past . . . re-defined democracy along majoritarian principles. Rather than gender equality, it framed gender justice^{viii} as the new currency for gender relations' (Eslen-Ziya and Korkut 2010, 109).

Around this time, both President Erdoğan and the dominant power elites (journalists, conservative academics, etc.) started using the term *fitrat* ('nature') when referring to differences between women and men and their complementary natures and biological differences. This term too was invoked to negate gender equality. There was also a transition from woman to family, where the Directorate General on the Status of Women, for example, was replaced by The Ministry of Family and Labor Social Services. The pro-marriage and anti-abortion incentives not only triggered backlash against gender equality policies in

Turkey, but also created an environment where the misogynist, anti-feminist and/or anti-gender equality voices became salient and loudly outspoken. In other words, in Turkey, the anti-gender politics at the level of the nation-state paved the way for the development of the anti-feminist mobilization, unlike Norway.

In Norway, the men's movement emerged parallel to the feminist movement in the 1970s. Originally, it consisted of pro-feminist men who wanted to take up the challenge of the feminist movement to change and liberate themselves from a narrowed male role, to shape egalitarian relationships with women, and to bond with other men (Breivik 2011). The changing role of men was the topic of an immensely popular book *En bok om menn* ('A book about men') published in 1976 (Bjørkly, Collett, Ringnes and Rudeng 1976; lack of capitalization in the original)."

Parallel to the development in other countries (see Kimmel 1996; Messner 1998), during the 1980s, the men's movement in Norway also transmogrified into a more ambiguous and masculinist position (Bjørnholt 2007; 2009b). When confronted with the hurt feelings of many men following divorce (and rates were rapidly increasing at the time), the emotional and therapeutic orientation of the movement facilitated male bonding over feelings of resentment and shared antifeminism, as posited by Groneman (1987) in an analysis of the rise and fall of the Danish men's movement. In her analysis of the men's movement in Sweden, Hill (2007) similarly concluded that the focus shifted from men's right to be *human* to men's right to be *male*. A study of the Norwegian men's movement (Breivik 2011) found that some of the men who were attracted to the movement were not interested in changing the roles of men towards more egalitarian practices, but rather, they sought a platform for mobilizing against women and were in favor of men's rights as fathers.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, men's rights activism grew, and influenced family law, starting with a new, gender-neutral family act that was passed in 1981. They were

perceived by policymakers as partners in the struggle for gender equality, an alliance that may be described as state masculinism (Bjørnholt 2007; 2009a; 2009b). Because of a gender-neutral principle of gender equality, rights were also extended to men, which came to bear on the paternal quota of parental leave and the Shelter Act for victims of domestic violence in 2010. At the time when these reforms were initiated, neither parental leave for fathers nor shelter services for male victims of intimate partner violence were on the agenda in the men's movement. In contrast, regarding intimate partner violence, men's organizations were split between a pro-feminist wing that focused on men as perpetrators, and antifeminist men's rights activists who dismissed the idea of violence against women as false accusations against men in custody struggles and as part of a wider feminist conspiracy against men (Bjørnholt 2007).

In the following section, we will look at the mobilization of anti-feminist activist groups and their online and offline activism, along with the discourses and knowledge claims they draw on, and we will explore the ongoing struggles relating to gender and gender equality, as well as the anti-gender political agenda that has become prevalent.

Method

In both countries men's rights activist groups and their online and offline activism were studied – for the Turkey it was *Family Council of Turkey* and for Norway *Mannsforum*. Both groups were active on Facebook and Twitter when this research was conducted (January 2021 – August 2021). Their website and social media accounts, in addition to media news about them were collected and later analyzed discursively. For both cases, we only drew on publicly available content. In the Turkish case the analysis also included the news from conservative and pro-Islamic newspaper Akit.

We chose to look at social media/news media as a means of accessing contemporary and ongoing activities. For the same reason, we limited our search to the timespan 1. January 2021, till completion of the draft article August 2021. We had about 100 tweets for each country. The texts were read in the original language by the respective authors sorted into broad categories by each author. The authors agreed on common themes across the two samples such as expressions of misogyny, fathers' rights and framings of men, gender, gender equality. Selected excerpts from each sample were translated into English during/as part of writing up the analysis. This analytical approach may be seen as a pragmatic, 'tailor made' qualitative analysis, informed by several sources, including variations of thematic and grounded approaches (see Charmaz, 2006), as well as Carol Bacchi's, (2009; 2015; Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016) problematization approach.

Choosing to analyze masculinist mobilization in two rather different country contexts helps us elucidate the commonalities as well as the particularities of the ongoing and rather successful masculinist mobilization as part of a global trend, adding depth that would be missed if we had chosen to study one case only.

Content analysis – In the data we traced references to anti-gender discourses, and their construction of misogyny in a political sense. They were translated to English and no personal information was processed to protect the anonymity of the users^{ix}. The thematic analysis of the tweets, blogs and the newspaper articles revealed an unformulated mobilization and anti-genderism in Turkey while in Norway their mobilization was structured. These categories formed the basis for the organization of the results section.

Contrasting men's activism and anti-feminist narratives

Unformulated groups, and anti-genderism in Turkey

The anti-feminist developments in Turkey are a product of both online and offline mobilization of small-scale associations as well as conservative Islamist newspapers like Akit. Yeni Akit is the Islamic conservative daily newspaper, and it is known for its expressions of hate speech towards minority ethnic groups in Turkey such as Jews, Armenians, Yazidis, secularists, LGBTIQ groups, and feminists (among others) on a daily basis (Gümüş and Dural 2012). Papers like Akit argue that the Turkish state is causing harm to the family by being in close alliance with the local feminist women's groups and the West. They see the legal measures such as custody rights, child support (which feminist activists succeeded in having included in the Turkish Civil and Penal Codes), and the international bills of rights for women (like the Istanbul Convention and CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women) as leading to marginalization and alienation of man.

Insert image 1 about here

The above headlines from the Akit newspapers read: 'the feminist pressure is breaking the family', 'the annulment of the convention will save the family', 'mischief convention should be annulled', 'Istanbul convention should be a cancelled before families are broken', 'Istanbul Convention is a dead project.' Such views are also shared widely on Facebook: 'Family Council of Turkey' (*Türkiye Aile Şurası*); 'Divorced Fathers Platform' (*Boşanmış Babalar Platformu*), and 'Divorced Fathers and Family Platform' (*Boşanmış Babalar ve Aile Platformu*) and Twitter: *Velayet ve Nafaka Hapsi Platformu* ('Custody and Alimony Prison Platform') and *Nafaka Magdur* ('Victim of Alimony') accounts. These accounts claim that they represent 2 million alimony victims (mostly men and their second wives who do not want their husbands' supporting children from their previous marriages).

They make statements like ‘the one who takes custody of the child should cover his/her costs, and the other party should voluntarily participate, and the alimony must be lifted.’

Subsequently, they define men as victims of injustice and infinite alimony:

#infinitealimony is terror applied to men (September 14, 2018)

A father cannot bring milk to his child at home but is forced to pay #alimony to the ex-wife... nobody should talk about justice. (February 15, 2021)

To disseminate such views, they use hashtags: #The one who takes care of the child for money cannot be the guardian and #Let the custody problem be lifted. They position themselves against feminist and LGBTIQ groups as well as treaties like Istanbul Convention and CEDAW, and the West in general (or more specifically, the European Union).

#TerminatetheIstanbulAgreement! The Turkish family structure should be saved!
(January 29, 2021)

Whoever defends homosexuality and regards LGBT people as legitimate, be God's curse on them...Amen. #Istanbulconventionistreachery (04. August. 2021).

For them the Istanbul Convention was fueling immoral behavior, excessive abortions, and childlessness that would eventually bring an end to the Turkish family and eventually the Turkish nation. They widely shared the following meme “Istanbul convention will kill” (*Istanbul sözleşmesi öldürür*), and urged the President to cancel the convention:

Insert image 2 about here

Dear @RTErdogan Our Requests; 1. Istanbul Agreement should be cancelled 2. CEDAW agreement should be cancelled 3. Let alimony be 3 months. 4. Abolish alimony prison 5. Release young victims of marriage 6. Let LGBT be banned # make Kuran [holy book of Islam] our Constitution #terminatetheIstanbulAgreement, #saveTurkishfamily (January 29, 2021)

Similarly, the Islamist intellectual Mücahit Gültekin, who often writes about the ‘future of Turkey’, argues that Turkey should forget about joining the European Union. The following quote from his blog clearly shows that political Islamist Western ideologies are seen by many as a threat:

Turkey needs to give up the dream of EU membership. Rebuilding the Turkish society on a western model under the pretext of harmonization laws is an obvious treachery. All the conventions, especially the ones with humanitarian, societal and cultural aspects, signed on the base of ‘EU Harmonization Process’ must be cancelled. CEDAW, Istanbul Convention and the law numbered 6284 must be cancelled immediately^x (Translated by the first author).

Hülagü (2020) refers to such opposition as gender panic, where the Islamist ruling elite are feeling threatened. According Hülagü, this panic is based on the fact that not only secular feminists, but also Muslim women are now questioning their own communities and are focusing on gender equality and women’s rights:

The situation in which Turkey has found itself because of these laws and conventions can be summarized in a few points: 1. Family is being disbanded. Wife from husband and husband from child are being separated/disassociated from each other. And soon children will be separated/disassociated from their mother. Like family has been subjected to public scrutiny. Child will be a public matter as well. Law No. 6284 has been prepared with the sole purpose of destroying the family^{xi}... (Translated by the first author).

The Istanbul Convention (which the Council of Europe created on May 11, 2011, in Istanbul, Turkey)^{xii} was created as a human rights treaty to prevent and combat all forms of violence against women. For many Islamist intellectuals, as the previous quote clearly demonstrates, such collaborations with transnational organizations and ratification of such treaties were seen as projects betraying the Turkish nation, or as Western projects that intended to break the family unit.

The Istanbul Convention was (and is) seen as a source that will disrupt the cultural and religious texture of the Turkish nation. The attendant gender panic, then, is reflected in the attempt to preserve not only the family as an institution, but also male privileges within the family. Men who are concerned about male privilege in the family sphere support the view that gender ideology is a lie, constructed by feminist and LGBTIQ groups, and that the West does not wish the Turkish nation to thrive. These feelings are also evident in President Erdoğan's direct accusations of feminists as not accepting the role of motherhood: 'Our religion regards motherhood very highly...and feminists do not understand that; they reject motherhood.'^{xiii}

The use of family as the point of intervention in the pursuit of an ‘ideal’ society is not new. In fact, what Sirman (2005) called ‘familial citizenship’ also refers to an imagined community of equal men as the heads of their households. This idea of ‘familial citizenship’, in return, has implications about the gendering of the Turkish society where men are portrayed as the heads of the households and women as the dependent wife and/or the mother (Kandiyoti 2016). The family and the powerful role of men within the family – demanding obedience and respect – has defined what being a man means, and anti-feminism seemed to be evolving as an attempt to preserve this role. Kandiyoti (2016, 109) refers to this state as ‘masculinity restoration’, which, she argues, ‘comes into play at a point in time when patriarchy is no longer fully secure and requires higher levels of coercion and the deployment of more varied ideological state apparatuses to ensure its reproduction.’

Such a restorative effort is apparent in one of the videos that has been widely shared and re-tweeted among men’s activists, a video (originally in Russian) that featured in President Vladimir Putin’s political campaign. It depicted a young boy in a Russian orphanage who, along with the orphanage employees, were disappointed at his adoption by a gay family. A version of the video that included Turkish subtitles was shared widely on Twitter with the text and hashtag:

is this the family you want to be? #Istanbulconventionistreachery (04 August 2020)

As the gay couple hugs, the sub-titled video ends by asking ‘Is this the Turkey you will choose? Decide the future of the country. Vote for the amendments to the constitution.’^{xiv}

Tweets sharing the video argued that the Istanbul Convention should be opposed because it promotes gender ideology, which will lead to gay marriages:

Whoever defends homosexuality and regards LGBTIQ people as legitimate, be God's curse on them...Amen. #Istanbulconventionistreachery (04 August 2020).

For these groups, gender ideology and the Istanbul Convention will lead to what they see as immoral behavior, excessive abortions, and childlessness, which would eventually bring an end to the Turkish family and the Turkish nation (Eslen-Ziya 2022).

The age of sexuality is falling, and children are being homosexualised by LGBT institutions on the pretext of non-discrimination, raising awareness against hate speech, informing about gender equality^{xv} (Translated by the first author).

Through such misogynistic discourse, the anti-feminist mobilization not only shapes the politically masculine environment, but also prepares the foundation for far-reaching polarization, which Ozduzen and Korkut (2020) call ‘mundane polarization’. They argue that such polarization in social media curtails the everyday interactions of people and therefore reflects the real-world opposition. It serves the yearning to ensure Islamist masculinist cultural hegemony over women in all segments of Turkish society. In the case of the Istanbul Convention, men’s mobilization resulted in Erdoğan pulling Turkey out of the convention overnight (March 20, 2021)^{xvi}. Though the decision resulted in significant protest across the globe, anti-feminist groups continue to celebrate their victories on social media platforms.

Men’s Rights Mobilization in Norway

Flippant, negative generalizations will be cracked down on. For example: ‘mothers freeload off society’, ‘feminists are idiots!’ ... are not accepted, but ‘some mothers / father’s exploit ...’, or [...] a lot suggests ... / the statistics show that ...’, are okay.^{xvii}

Mannsforum is the largest and most active men's rights organization in Norway. It also has a public website/online newspaper Mannsforum.no^{xviii} and public profiles on Facebook^{xix} and Twitter.^{xx} The membership rules of the private Facebook group of the men's rights organization *Mannsforum* ('Men's forum'), presented above, provides us with some clues about the general sentiments among its users. These outlets showcased articles and activism by the organization and its members in other mass and social media accounts. For instance, footage of members' visits to the Norwegian parliament, where they brought forth the challenges that men face in Norway, was posted on the website and in social media. Information and videos of their own activities and media coverage were widely shared.

Our analyses revealed that the topics covered in these platforms were mostly in relation to fathers' rights, more specifically, on joint custody, shared parenting/living arrangements, child support, parental alienation^{xxi}, and what they refer to as 'visitation sabotage.'^{xxii} Discrimination against men was also discussed in relation to fathers' (allegedly lacking) rights. Members also wrote about the lack of recognition of male victims of intimate partner violence as well as the invisibility of male victims of sexual harassment.

Other issues discussed were related to men's health and well-being, and the underachievement of boys in school. Our analyses showed that, in these outlets, the debate regarding a proposed amendment to the Children's Act most often discussed custody, visiting arrangements, and child support,^{xxiii} reflecting the organization's activism and lobbying on these issues. These topics are interlinked, because mothers' alleged obstruction of fathers' contact is linked to the level of child support, and the organization claims that mothers therefore have economic motives for restricting the amount of contact children have with fathers, as illustrated by a post on February 23: 'Should it pay to carry out visitation sabotage? And should the person who is not allowed to see their child pay more child support

when there is visitation sabotage?’^{xxiv} They later conclude “*No!*”, and state that they plan a group lawsuit against the Norwegian state on this issue.^{xxv} The posts included links to videos and coverage in other national media. Other articles referred to scientific research that supported the organization’s main arguments and criticized gender research^{’xxvi} . Some of these posts were shared with images depicting vulnerable men or broken families.

Insert image 3 here

Their media outlets also provided coverage on their participation in international networks and conferences. On February 22, 2021, a letter^{xxvii} they sent to the Prime Minister and to the Norwegian Parliament’s Standing Committee on Family and Cultural Affairs was posted on their website.^{xxviii} Here, the goal was to voice the organization’s concerns regarding men’s problems and the perceived discrimination men face in Norway, and to demand that politicians act. This letter provides a general summary and condensed overview of the organization’s worldview, their claims, and arguments. Some of the main points emphasized in the letter were that the Children’s Act favors mothers and discriminates against fathers’ rights upon divorce, and that the courts treat men and women differently and practice inequality before the law. Furthermore, the letter criticizes the Gender Equality Act and the gender equality machinery and claims that these implements discriminate against men. The letter also argued that state health policy and gender research discriminate against men. The arguments involve both an alleged lack of gender neutrality, explicit prioritization of women, and arguments of (a lack of) gender balance and few if any measures to promote gender balance in woman-dominated fields.

The letter starts with a statement of the general lack of recognition of men and men’s problems in Norway:

Many boys, men, and fathers experience that their family and gender equality challenges are not taken seriously enough in the Government's policy and administration, as well as underlying public service bodies and authorities. This applies to the areas of upbringing and care, child and family protection, equality / discrimination, and health.^{xxix}

As the above quote indicates, the men's rights organization sees and presents men's challenges and problems in Norway as a gender equality problem (see Bacchi 2009, Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016) and as the result of a long-lasting discrimination against men in Norway:

The state's conscious prioritization of women in family and gender equality policy and administration over many years has led to a serious underreporting and underestimation of boys', men's and fathers' real life and gender equality challenges.^{xxx}

This discrimination against men and fathers, they argue, has resulted in men's loss of trust in the system and 'risks alienating a growing proportion of men from society and our democracy.'^{xxx}^{xxxi} The letter warns against "ignoring the "boys' crisis" and an increasing number of frustrated men and fathers' "right-wing radicalization" and / or "withdrawal from society", and the authors urge Norwegian politicians "to take boys', men's, and fathers' life and equality challenges seriously before it's too late".^{xxxii} By linking the undervaluation and exclusion of men to right-wing extremism, the group illustrates the urgency of the issue and place the responsibility for men's radicalization on (feminized) society.

For them the Children's Act favors the rights of mothers over the rights of fathers upon divorce.^{xxxiii} They argue 'shared residence [i.e., for a father and child] is only selected in approximately one in five marital breakdowns.' They see the state as having an alleged tolerance towards mothers who are 'sabotaging' father-child contact, invoking the long-debunked but increasingly popular theory of parental alienation (Lapierre, Ladouceur, Frenette and Côté 2020; Rathus 2020). They demand that shared residence be the norm after marital break-ups, and a clearer ban on 'visitation sabotage', parental hostility, and neglect, and more effective sanctions for breaches of the law.

They also argue that courts practice inequality before the law, and that men and women are subject to differential treatment in the courts, and that the gender equality act discriminated against men:

Several lawyers have pointed out that women are generally punished more leniently. [...] Some mothers today use perjury because it pays off for them, not for the child. Many fathers lose the right to visit their own children based on the mother's false testimony against the children's father about violence and incest.^{xxxiv}

As is well known, women are already favored over men in the purpose clause of the Act, cf. §1, sub-section 3: "The Act is particularly aimed at improving the position of women and minorities". The wording implies discrimination against men that is peculiar to Norway, as all other Nordic countries' gender equality laws are gender neutral.^{xxxv}

According to the men's rights organization, this legal discrimination leads to prioritization of women over men in gender equality policy and public administration. They argue that the state gives higher priority to improving the gender balance in areas where women are underrepresented but not where men are underrepresented, and contrary to public perception:

‘[...] female dominance in the public sector (incl. the cultural sector) is increasing, including in the proportion of management positions.’^{xxxvi}

Here, the argument is that men are directly discriminated against in the public sector and in positions related to gender equality. Although our concern here is not to counter each of their assertions, it is necessary to note that this claim does not give a correct picture of the situation. Rather the opposite – even in fields related to gender equality, there has been a concern that female experts are being passed over in favor of less qualified men. The strong emphasis on gender balance in this field has led to the paradoxical – and unlawful – practice of radical gender discrimination in *favor* of men.

Mannsforum, by drawing attention to the lack of gender balance in what they call ‘particularly gender-sensitive occupations and work areas’, argues that men are being discriminated against in these areas:

The Gender Equality Ombud and the Ministry of Gender Equality do not prioritize requirements for gender balance in particularly gender-sensitive occupations and work areas, where participation/accessibility to both sexes is significant for the development of children and young people, e.g., care, upbringing, school and physical and mental health. The dominance of women among employees in kindergartens, schools, child and family welfare, school, health, nursing, and the PPT service is currently 75-95%. The lack of interest in gender balance in female-dominated gender-sensitive occupations and work areas is striking and has a gender-discriminatory effect.^{xxxvii}

In the letter, the group also highlights how the female dominance in the care and education sectors is discriminatory against boys. It argues that ‘the large dominance of women among employees in kindergartens and schools, and the lack of men, means that girls in kindergartens and schools get more/better adapted learning than boys.’^{xxxviii}

The health sector and health policies are another area in which the group perceives discrimination against men, and that it is dominated by women:

Over twice as many men as women die from violence, drug abuse, and suicide. This is gender discrimination, and the Government is encouraged to take men’s health as seriously as women and present a separate report on men’s health.^{xxxix}

The group contends that the state prioritizes women within the health sector as a combined result of the neglect of men’s health problems, the lack of gender balance in the sector, and the direct prioritization of women’s health in terms of specific reports on women’s health. Finally, it argues that gender research discriminates between the sexes and that this unbalanced and deficient research results in incorrect policy measures:

The gender imbalance in the country’s gender research and equality centers is serious and violates the intentions of the Gender Equality Act on gender balance in important areas of society. The female dominance in gender research is approximately 90%.^{xl}

The problem of the lack of gender balance is also exacerbated, the group claims, by the (female) gender researchers’ gender biases and lack of neutrality, and the group deplors the lack of efforts to implement positive special regard for men to improve the recruitment of men to gender research: ‘Politicians need to take the gender equality challenge/differential

treatment within gender and equality research seriously, both regarding selection of research assignment topics, and recruitment.^{'xli}

The men's rights movement in Norway, by framing its arguments within a gender equality framework, substantiated by arguments and knowledge claims, mimics in many respects the arguments and the style of gender equality and anti-discrimination fields. In this way, the movement creates an alternative pillar within the gender equality discourse. The gender-neutral approach to gender equality has been criticized for ignoring relevant differences that may negatively affect women, for instance as mothers (Bjørnholt 2013). The ways in which the gender equality rhetoric may be co-opted and inverted for the promotion of men's rights further illustrates such dangers.

Rhetorically, their claims follow an argumentative and scholarly writing style both in their press releases and in social media posts. One example is the argument regarding the lack of gender balance in gender research and the state apparatus and gender policies, and the ensuing gender bias, which the organization sees as leading to the misrecognition of men and men's problems. This argument mirrors feminist arguments against male domination and male bias in other academic disciplines and professions. The organization also positions itself and its main claims actively within the gender equality discourse and presents these claims as arguments for gender equality. For instance, in a Facebook post that commented on a forecast of the Norwegian economy, it is argued that 'Mannsforum therefore believes that a new egalitarian child support system and a new Children's Act with shared residence will provide more equality and help ensure access to labor.'^{xlii}

In conclusion, the public posts on the men's movement's website and social media are generally framed within the Norwegian gender equality discourse, which is made possible by the tendency in the mainstream gender equality research and policies to emphasize gender neutrality and gender balance. In this respect, the Norwegian MRA fit within a larger picture

of MRA's co-optation of gender equality discourses beyond Norway (see Messner, Greenberg, and Peretz 2015; Jordan 2019 for the US and the UK respectively).

However, many of the movement's claims build on unsubstantiated and misogynist assumptions that are not supported by research and are informed by controversial or debunked theories, like the 'parental alienation' theory (Lapierre et al. 2020; Rathus 2020). They have been rather successful in attracting public attention to its views and in conveying those views to politicians.^{xliii} The groups have appeared several times in national media and been involved in extensive exchanges with members of parliament, the minister of children and family affairs, and the media. They regularly meet with the Standing Committee on Family and Cultural Affairs.^{xliv}

Politically, the Progress Party has an important political ally of the men's movement. The Progress Party that has been an ally of fathers' rights activists for several decades, and has repeatedly presented law proposals in parliament aimed at strengthening father's rights.^{xlv} More recently, on October 23, 2020, the Progress Party presented a bill on 'visitation sabotage.'^{xlvi} In this particular case, several parties in parliament expressed support for the bill, and it has been widely debated in national media, in particular, on the popular TV channel TV2, which has also been an important outlet for the men's movement.^{xlvii} On February 22, 2021, the organization shared a Facebook update with the comment 'TV2 holds on to the ball regarding the practice of the rules for child support and visiting sabotage.'^{xlviii} Two days later, parliament called upon the government to propose measures to counteract 'visitation sabotage.'^{xlix}

Another breakthrough for fathers' rights rhetoric is the production by the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (*Bufdir*) of two instruction videos and a pamphlet with advice for professionals and parents when child refuses contact with a parent. The publication of this material indicates that the debunked notion of 'parental alienation',

which is an important theoretical building block of fathers' rights rhetoric, has found resonance in the Norwegian gender equality apparatus.

Concluding notes

This paper by scrutinizing men's anti-feminist, pro-masculinities mobilization and their online and offline activism in Turkey and in Norway, and sheds light on antifeminist resistance in Turkey and Norway. By comparing the two, we have explored how masculinist counter movements may both differ and share certain traits across national contexts. In Turkey, our focus was on the conservative and pro-Islamic newspaper Akit as well as the Facebook and Twitter accounts that the Family Council of Turkey created to support fathers' custody rights, and their rights to alimony payments. In Norway, we concentrated on the organization Mannsforum, which defines itself as a supporter of equality, but a sceptic of feminism. We studied both their online and offline presence, as well as their statements and claims.

As suggested by the counter movement theory, men's mobilization and the anti-feminist advances in both Turkey and Norway emerged primarily as a reaction to the advances of feminism in these countries. In other words, our exploration of men's rights activist groups has revealed both important similarities and national particularities relating to their activism as a counter movement. For example, fathers' rights upon divorce is a common concern among the groups we have studied in the two countries, and in practice, men's rights groups in both places seem to share many of the same issues, and they lobby and network for the same purpose, such as to protest against paying child support.

Though the concerns about divorce and child support are similar in some ways, there are also some noticeable differences. In Turkey, the issues are linked to a defense of the traditional family and the role of man as the head of the household, while the concern in Norway is framed in terms of individual rights – which is to say, men's rights. Another

difference is that a focus on time spent with the child and shared parenting, which is prevalent in the Norwegian men's rights rhetoric, is absent in the Turkish case. This is understandable because the ideals of involved fatherhood and shared parenting are highly valued in Norway, and state policies to promote fathers' involvement in childcare form the cornerstone of Norwegian gender equality policy, most visible via the paternal quota of parental leave (Bjørnholt 2010; 2012; 2013; Johansen 2010).

Criticism of gender research is also part of the anti-feminist resistance in the two countries, but with different framing and content. In Turkey, criticism of the concept of gender as ideology is more prevalent, and 'gender ideology' is taken to refer to both feminism and LGBTIQ rights, which are equally seen as an attack on a presumed natural sexual order and the family as an institution. In Norway, on the other hand, men's rights activists invoke and use the gender equality discourse and arguments for their own benefit and to promote men's rights, thereby co-opting the gender equality discourse and mimicking the gender equality and anti-discrimination rhetoric. In this conceptualization, men's rights are mainly framed within an assumption of heterosexuality, and the men's rights organizations and their members position themselves exclusively from the position of heterosexual men (as fathers) against heterosexual women (as mothers). In both countries, men's rights activist groups through their misogynistic rhetoric and activism become more than merely efforts to defend men's rights, but instead serve to bolster mainstream political anti-feminism.

The main contribution of this article is to demonstrate that regardless of where states stand in terms of gender equality, men's anti-feminist mobilisation is taking a similar but at the same time country specific turns. In the Turkish case, it is supported by the state's anti-gender discourse and it is part of a wider anti-gender approach, whereas in the Norwegian case, men's rights activists are using and coopting the gender equality discourse to

argue that men are being discriminated against. The contribution is to gender research in general, and to the study of men's rights movements is to add empirical nuances as well as expanding the understanding of the dynamic relationship between the progression of gender equality and backlash.

Notes

ⁱ Some of these men's rights organisations in Europe are: *Fathers4Justice* in the UK, the *Italian Association of Separated Fathers* (*Fathers' armada* and *Paternity* in Italy; the *Association of Divorced Fathers* in Hungary; *Catholic Men's Group* in Poland; and *The Father's Rights* in Spain.

ⁱⁱ State feminism (a phrase coined by Helga Hernes, 1987) in the Scandinavian context describes the particular kind of partnership between (women in) the state administration and politics, and the women's movement. In the Middle East and Turkey, in contrast, the concept refers to top-down, government supported feminism (White 2003).

ⁱⁱⁱ The Istanbul Convention is the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence, supporting a zero-tolerance policy for family violence. Turkey signed the Istanbul Convention in 2011 and ratified in 2012 and pulled out of the convention in 2021 as the paper was being written.

^{iv} 2019 November Report of We Will End Femicide Platform.

<http://kadincinayetlerinidurduracagiz.net/veriler/2888/2019-november-report-of-we-will-end-femicide-platform> accessed on 01.11.2020.

^v <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100032095041629>, accessed on 01.12.2021

^{vi} <https://www.facebook.com/groups/biaplatformu/posts/1384203751715437/>, accessed on 01.12.2021

^{vii} More than 3,000 women marched on the streets carrying banner "My body, my choice".

<https://bianet.org/english/women/138850-my-body-my-decision>, accessed on 01.12.2021

^{viii} The concept gender justice in this context is based on an interpretation of Islam which considers male and female natures (*fitrat*) as being complementary but different from one another. According to this view, gender justice will provide fair and proper sharing of roles differently for women and men (Eslen-Ziya 2020). These discussions on gender justice are in fact parallel to the anti-genderism in Europe.

^{ix} NSD <https://www.nsd.no/en> was consulted during this process.

^x <https://www.islamianaliz.com/h/65186/mucahit-gultekinden-2053te-turkiye-nasil-bir-ulke-olacak-yazisi-bati-tarafindan-hacklenmek> accessed on February 10, 2021

^{xi} <https://www.islamianaliz.com/h/65186/mucahit-gultekinden-2053te-turkiye-nasil-bir-ulke-olacak-yazisi-bati-tarafindan-hacklenmek> accessed on February 10, 2021

^{xii} <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168008482e> accessed on 10.02.2021

^{xiii} https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2014/11/141124_kadininfiltrati_erdogan Accessed on August 31, 2020

^{xiv} https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQ_5kNnuFss Accessed on August 31, 2020

^{xv} <https://www.islamianaliz.com/h/65186/mucahit-gultekinden-2053te-turkiye-nasil-bir-ulke-olacak-yazisi-bati-tarafindan-hacklenmek> accessed on February 10, 2021

^{xvi} https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-women-erdogan-idUSKBN2BC00J?fbclid=IwAR1DO26aCID67_mAloziWg3KcHc_ayrFAMz4Ch8q0YqIW1e28awBUHk0mCM accessed on March 29, 2021

^{xvii} Mannforum. Private Facebook group. Group rules from the moderators, rule 6,

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1661120067455789> Accessed February 9, 2021.

^{xviii} www.mannsforum.no accessed on January 15, January 27, January 31, February 3, February 9, February 10, February 11, February 23, February 24, February 25, and February 27 (all 2021)

^{xix} <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1661120067455789%20accessed%209> accessed on February 26, 2021

^{xx} <https://twitter.com/mannsforum> accessed on February 26, 2021

^{xxi} According to the parental alienation theory, during divorce the child may identify strongly with one parent, usually the custodial parent, and that the other parent is rejected.

^{xxii} Although the phenomenon 'visitation sabotage' (*samvaerssabotasje*) is not supported by research, it has become widely accepted in the Norwegian context, based on anecdotal evidence and men's rights activism.

^{xxiii} <https://www.mannsforum.no/nyheter/samvaerssabotasje-vi-ser-et-skifte-i-fokus-og-stemming/> accessed February 3, 2021

- ^{xxiv} <https://www.facebook.com/groups/mannsforum.org> accessed February 28, 2021
- ^{xxv} <https://www.mannsforum.no/nyheter/varsler-gruppesoksmal-mot-staten-i-bidragsskandalen/?fbclid=IwAR3zcF8SoZG5M5i76yIN5V960r2hLWmcPLbI8u1NO2j3V6WsnOsiMvx5oXY> accessed February 28, 2021
- ^{xxvi} <https://www.mannsforum.no/nyheter/kjonnsforskning-i-barnehagen/> accessed February 3, 2021
- ^{xxvii} <https://www.mannsforum.no/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/brev-til-statsministeren-mf-lsg-01-2020.pdf> accessed February 24, 2021
- ^{xxviii} <https://www.mannsforum.no/nyheter/mannsforum-ber-statsministeren-ta-menns-utfordringer-pa-alfvot/> accessed February 24, 2021
- ^{xxix} See endnote xviii
- ^{xxx} See endnote xviii
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- ^{xxxix} See endnote xviii
- ^{xl} See endnote xviii
- ^{xli} See endnote xviii
- ^{xlii} <https://www.facebook.com/groups/maskulinitet/permalink/3814360038610569> accessed February 27, 2021
- ^{xliii} <https://www.facebook.com/search/top?q=samv%C3%A6rssabotasje> accessed February 27, 2021
- ^{xliv} <https://www.facebook.com/groups/121954854641660/search/?q=kulturkomiteen>
- ^{xlv} See for instance <https://www.stortinget.no/no/Saker-og-publikasjoner/Publikasjoner/Representantforslag/1998-1999/dok8-199899-044/?lvl=0> accessed February 27, 2021
- ^{xlvi} <https://www.stortinget.no/no/Saker-og-publikasjoner/Publikasjoner/Representantforslag/2020-2021/dok8-202021-040s/?all=true> accessed February 27, 2021
- ^{xlvii} <https://www.tv2.no/a/11837320/> accessed February 27, 2021
- ^{xlviii} <https://www.facebook.com/groups/mannsforum.org/permalink/1577275385776259> accessed February 27, 2021
- ^{xlix} <https://www.tv2.no/nyheter/11976061/> accessed February 27, 2021

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