



## “Overcome your anger if you are a man”: Silencing women's agency to voice violence against women



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### SYNOPSIS

This study traces the relation between male violence and masculinist norms that attribute political agency exclusively to men. Through critical analysis of a recent campaign initiated as an effort to fight violence against women in Turkey by addressing men as the only agents endowed with agency to solve the problem, we explore the ways in which this discourse risks marginalizing women who seek empowerment through women's solidarity. We uncover three patterns: (1) the assumption of a “cultural particularity” in Turkey nested in the traditional family structure which should allegedly be left unquestioned; (2) glorification of values attributed to the masculine; (3) taking violence as an individual problem of “anger management.” We argue that this campaign is inimical to the aim it declares because by marginalizing feminist efforts to question the social and structural patterns of male violence, it deprives women of political agency essential in the struggle against this problem.

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### Introduction

A short film opens with a man leaving his house in the morning. He is shaven and wears a clean, smart suit. He starts walking in his neighborhood, smiling, and greeting people all around. Apparently, everyone knows him, but there is an air of uneasiness: a gardener and elderly neighbors refuse to greet him, giving him accusing glances. Even little boys give him the cold shoulder. Then an authoritative, almost angry male narrates: “Did you think that we would take you for a man?” At that moment, the camera pans to the man's house from the outside. From between the curtains, there is a mere shadow of him hitting a woman, presumably his wife. The short film concludes with the voiceover, almost to the point of shouting: “Those who hit women are not men! Be a man first!”

The short film is part of a campaign in Turkey to battle male violence against women. The slogan, “Be a man first,” is the follow-up to a 2013-slogan of “Overcome your anger if you are a man.” The campaign is organized by KADEM (Women and

Democracy Association), a relatively new woman's organization. As a conservative association, KADEM's vision is “conserving the essential values of women in Turkey.”<sup>1</sup> The short film contains striking moments that convey messages similar to the slogans of the campaign. In step with the slogans addressing only men, there are no women among the “people of the neighborhood”; even the kids are boys playing football: The message conveyed in the film is all about men, men beating their wives, and other men giving them the cold shoulder, through symbolic gestures of disapproval. Apparently, violence is a secret that is disapproved of and that “everyone knows but no one (in the neighborhood) talks about.” The audience only sees violence through the curtains of the home: while watching the shadows, the spectator is made to feel like an intruder into the sanctity of the “private space.” Even more interesting is the fact that the battered wife does not even have a body: she is a mere shadow reflected on the wall of her home. She has no voice.

Violence against women is a major human rights issue. According to a study conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO), 35 % of women around the world

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experience physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lives.<sup>2</sup> Among the most pervasive types of violence against women is intimate partner violence, which damages a woman's physical, psychological, sexual, and social integrity. In Turkey, the numbers are by no means better than the world average. According to the latest national research carried out by Turkey's Directorate General on the Status of Women (DGSW), "39.3% of women reported having experienced physical partner violence, 14.3% of them reported sexual violence, 43.9% emotional violence, 23.4% economic violence at any time in their life" (Güvenç et al., 2014: 334). According to the data recorded by Bianet, an online communication network following cases of male violence in national, local, and internet media, in 2014, at least 281 women were killed by men while 190 women were raped and 140 women were sexually abused.<sup>3</sup> Despite positive developments in the legal framework, such as the adoption of a new domestic violence law, namely Law no 6248,<sup>4</sup> violence against women has not decelerated its increasing trend. Although amendments to the country's Penal Code hinted at political gains by recognizing government's responsibility for providing shelter to victims of domestic violence, not much progress has been made. In power since 2002, JDP (Justice and Development Party) government evinced the party's anti-feminist stance by advocating "a neoliberal conservative version of patriarchy" marking "the familial sphere as the natural locus of women" (Coşar and Yeğenoğlu, 2011: 567). Within the neoliberal restructuring of the country, the JDP's family focused policies as well as discussions concerning women's bodies and reproductive functions have reaffirmed that Turkish women's bodies have become a battleground for political actors. Instances of discussion include government attempts to ban abortion, emphasis on motherhood as "the central career for women," and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's (former JDP leader and Prime Minister) "advice" for bearing at least three kids (Onar & Müftüler-Baç, 2011; Ünal & Cindoğlu, 2013). Such a formulation packs the patriarchal view of the government aligning with an anti-feminist agenda by not recognizing women's autonomy. This is the backdrop that should be considered when analyzing KADEM's "Overcome your anger if you are a man!" campaign.

KADEM was founded in 2013, with the mission of "formulating common public awareness in society in terms of women's rights and equal opportunities with the family and in social roles."<sup>5</sup> In this way, the organization has aligned itself with the government's conservative position by situating the woman within the boundaries of the family. In addition, their vision of "preserving the Turkish women's essence while elevating her to a compatible position with women all around the world in national and international platforms"<sup>6</sup> emphasizes cultural essence and hints at the idea of conserving traditional gender roles.

In declarations regarding their campaign, KADEM officials emphasize that they aim to address men and give them the central role in seeking solutions to the problem. Indeed, this objective at first seems compatible with global trends in the struggle against male violence: there are several campaigns and programs conducted by governments and civil society organizations to engage men in this struggle "as participants in education programs, as targets of social marketing campaigns, as policy makers and gatekeepers, and as activists and

advocates" (Flood, 2011: 358). Scholarship exploring the relationship between masculinity and violence discusses how to mobilize men against male violence without losing critical perspectives on masculinist norms and patriarchal relations of domination (Seymour, 2011; Greig, 2001). Analyzing the KADEM campaign and its slogan "Overcome your anger if you are a man" is particularly of significance for this discussion as it lays bare the risks of abandoning the critical perspective on masculinities in the name of addressing and engaging men. In this paper, we delineate the ways in which the campaign becomes counterproductive by normalizing masculinist norms and patriarchal relations of domination, even to the point of reserving the agency to deal with the issue exclusively to men and excluding women from the struggle. While the campaign calls men to simply "be men" in an effort to fight violence against women, it bears the danger of ossifying and reinforcing patterns of male domination as it avoids a critical questioning of the connotations attributed to "being a man."

This article discusses the campaign's three interconnected lines of argumentation which form the discursive ground on which the slogan "Overcome your anger if you are a man" rests. The first pillar is the emphasis on "cultural particularity" and the centrality of the traditional family structure in Turkey. The second pillar is the argument that men and only men are the agents who will solve the issue of violence and that a relevant campaign should avoid conflicting with social codes of masculinity and stay on "men's good side" in a bid to convince them to stop being violent. The third pillar relies on the argument that male violence is a "personal," "individual" issue of anger management, therefore solutions to this problem are at the individual level. All in all, this discursive ground diverts attention from the problem of patriarchy and promotes a view of male violence stripped from patriarchal relations of power and domination.

### Drawing theoretical boundaries: Revisiting normalized gender hierarchies

Before analyzing the campaign in detail, this section draws theoretical boundaries that the analysis is based on. It is significant to revisit the male-centered political domain with its embedded discourses and meanings as it offers the ways in which normative masculine domination is reproduced. This study employs the conceptual framework of critical masculinity studies to understand the reproduction of normative masculine domination and its role in breeding male violence. We argue that in order to understand the reproduction of masculine domination, it is essential to explore, first, the relational construction of a gender order, in other words "how masculinities and femininities are produced together in the process that constitutes a gender order" (Connell, 1995: 72), and second, to analyze this relational construct within the specific historical, social, and political context it is produced.

Scholars of gender studies have problematized male violence as the most visible form of masculine domination.<sup>7</sup> Considering that "interpersonal violence is about power and the negotiation of power relations and it is also organised along gender boundaries" (McCarthy, 2007: 412), it is vital to understand unequal gender hierarchy and the gender order it generates as the context that breeds male violence. As McCarthy

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