

Vaginal Obsessions: Masculinist Violations of Women's Sexual Privacy in Turkey

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Summary: The genre evolved around the controversies over abortion and reproductive rights in Turkey reveal unacceptable violations of women's sexual privacy by male politicians.

In late May 2012, the prime minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, made a striking statement about abortion while addressing the third annual congress of the women's branch of his party. Referring to the dreadful Uludere incident in December 2011- in which 34 Kurdish smugglers were killed near the Iraqi border after the Turkish military mistakenly thought them to be members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) <http://www.economist.com/node/21556616> he said "You constantly discuss Uludere for days and nights. And I say that every abortion is an Uludere" His statement directed the attention of feminist activists to the ways in which abortion was being redefined as murder from the perspective of the Prime Minister. These discussions were followed by public policies and new regulations. It was first announced by the Minister of Health, Recep Akdağ, that a new law is being prepared for parliamentary approval banning abortion altogether with the exception of compelling medical circumstances. The draft law is currently taking shape and will be presented to the public in a few days. Until then, abortion is still legal but [women are faced with ill treatment ranging from verbal insults to withholding anesthetics or painkillers during the procedure.](#)

Politicians, in order to demonstrate their support to the Prime Minister on the issue of abortion, declared their points of view in various problematic terms going as far as stating in the case of the Minister of Health, Recep Akdağ that: "rape victims should also give birth, the state should take care of the baby". All of a sudden, the Turkish public was speaking about rape and abortion, as if these were not related to traumatic sensitive experiences but were daily, mundane issues.

Feminist activists in Turkey have a history of awareness of bodily rights and one of their core slogans is "my body is mine". Even Islamic women intellectuals, who have reservations about the feminist emphasis on women's exclusive choice, felt extremely uncomfortable about the way a male politician talked about women's sexuality. Hidayet Şefkatli Tuksal, for instance, criticized feminist activists for using cliché slogans, which build a barrier between themselves and Islamic women, who are, according to Tuksal, "also critical about the regulations about abortion and birth control". Cihan Aktaş, another prominent figure, [said](#) "Since abortion is related to women's bodies, it should have been discussed in terms that take women's feelings and experiences into consideration".

Aside from the political positions expressed, the genre used in public, employing vulgar and even abusive jargon is as problematic as the ideas themselves. Male politicians seemed oblivious about the traditional Islamic notion of privacy (*mahremiyet*) that requires sensitivity and circumspection when it comes to intimate personal and/or familial issues. Yet, on this occasion, male lawmakers were putting women's sexuality out in the public domain and thus turning it into a mundane and trivial issue. They were, thus, sacrificing the values of privacy for the sake of population policy. Nihal Bengisu Karaca, another Islamic female intellectual who believes that "abortion is not solely a matter concerning women's bodies", also drew attention to the fact that the PM's concern was not religiously based at all, but a population control strategy since "[if it was only about religion, the PM should have said a word or two about the IVF clinics popping up at every corner](#)".

The word *mahremiyet*, which denotes the personal sexual realm of individuals, couples or families also refers to a notion of privacy, and confidentiality that an outsider is expected not to violate. Referring to a woman's sexuality is therefore a violation of her privacy and creates a tension akin to psychological and sexual harassment. Statements such as "[I am a prime minister who is against caesarians and perceives abortion as murder](#)" or "[why should the baby pay for the adultery of the mother? She can kill herself, but cannot kill the baby](#)" (from Melik Gökçek, the local governor of Ankara), are simultaneously about women's sexuality and their private lives. Men are not expected to address an unrelated woman's sexuality as openly and as bluntly as this. Tuksal outraged by the words of Gökçek and said "[This language is the language of violence in and of itself. \(...\) They \(male governors of Turkey\) act and speak so recklessly and exhibit total lack of sensitivity to such issues since they are aware that they can gain some credit from the macho men image](#)" At the hands of male law-makers women's privacy became assailable and was shifted from a *mahrem* (intimate) realm to being a frivolous matter of public debate.

Although abortion is subject to regulation in every society there are no strictures concerning caesarian sections, which are performed on medical grounds, or the number of children a family ought to have, which is a matter of choice. It is therefore significant that the PM chose to make statements about the undesirability of caesarians and the necessity for each family to have a minimum of three children. After the Prime Minister's pro-natalist propaganda, it became routine for MPs, ministers or heads of local authorities who are invited to act as wedding witnesses to tell the young couple to have at least three children (in public). We witness highly problematic scenes when ministers urge newly married female professionals to have a child as a 'friendly' yet public request. This once took place at a reception in the presence of the press when the minister (who shall remain unnamed) told the female professional within earshot of everyone present including members of the media "I want a child from you". Quite amusingly, the sentence has the same double meaning in Turkish as in English. It was unclear whether he wanted to father the baby or was just encouraging her to become a mother. However, as I stated above, women's sexuality has become so public and in such a crude fashion that nobody in the room showed disgust at the minister's comment. As a researcher interested in intimacy and sexuality in the Muslim world, this was the clearest indication to me of how

women's previously "honorable", "sacred" and "precious" bodies were made into public objects.

Aylin Nazlıaka, a female MP from the opposition party (CHP), referring to this prevailing attitude, stated in her parliamentary speech that: "the Prime Minister should stop standing guard over women's vaginas". Her statement is very familiar to those who are accustomed to the activist genre of feminism in Turkey and [elsewhere](#). She was calling upon the Prime Minister to show respect and sensitivity when it comes to issues involving women's privacy and sexuality.

Deputy Prime Minister, Bülent Arınç, characterized her speech as 'shameful'. Arınç is, according to those who are close enough to know him, a very well mannered gentleman who is aware of both Islamic and modern-Turkish etiquette. However, after Nazlıaka's speech, he stepped up to comment on her statement. He said that he felt *ashamed* and that he *blushed* when he heard a woman, and a mother, referring to "her own organ" in public. Arınç's words were deliberately targeting Nazlıaka's honour as a woman in the public eye and implying Nazlıaka was a woman of dubious morality -while hinting about his decorous manner, as a gentleman who *blushed*. It was also as if Nazlıaka had not been commenting on the social crisis triggered by debates on abortion but literally speaking about her own body and referring to her own vagina.

Vagina in Turkish is a technical word that refers to women's genitalia and the term itself does not carry much historical baggage. It is neither an inappropriate term nor a swearword nor is it one of those euphemisms taught to children not to have to mention private parts. When I read the statements by Arınç I thought about the concept of intimacy, *mahremiyet* and the ways in which women's *mahremiyet* is crudely put on display and violated by male politicians. Nonetheless, women are still expected to keep silent about their much publicized sexuality even when they need to address such problems as the abortion issue. Apparently, from Arınç's standpoint, women's mention of their sexuality using correct anatomical terms is shameful. Yet, he fails to realize that his male colleagues have been violating women's sexual privacy far longer and in very problematic terms. They were not just violating privacy, as I tried to indicate above, but also turning everything about women's sexuality into a public spectacle for the display of vulgar, random, devaluing comments. When a female politician refers to sexuality in order to address a pressing problem, she is perceived as someone *shamelessly* talking about 'her own organ'. Yet it is male lawmakers who put women's sexuality on display in the most vulgar terms and they still attempt to silence women with "call for *shame*". Given the fact that Islamic tradition, through rules and regulations regarding *mahremiyet*, indicates that women's bodies and sexuality are an important and inviolable part of the private domain, it is paradoxical that it is Islamic men who make it more and more public through their daily obsessive debates.