Article

Norm Localization and Contestation: The Politics of Foster Children in Turkey

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Abstract: International norms do not diffuse linearly; they are localized, adapted and contested at every turn. Foster care systems have been enthusiastically promoted by international organizations to serve the best interests of children. This study explores the recent adaptation of foster care (Koruyucu Aile) in Turkey. This elite-driven norm change was institutionalized through comprehensive legislation, economic incentives and national campaigns, situated in the "politics of responsibility" arising from moral duty and national and religious ethics. These efforts faced early resistance, leading to slow cultivation of foster families, while over time, the foster system found unlikely allies among urban middle-class women. Using Zimmermann's typologies of reinterpretation of norms through an analysis of narratives about foster parenting in 50 local and national TV productions, this article shows how the foster family system has evolved as a panacea for women's empowerment in contemporary Turkish society. In parallel, Turkey has embarked on an intense criticism of the care of ethnic Turkish children in European foster care systems. However, this creative utilization of the foster system has come at the cost of the rights of biological parents and a permanency that has decoupled the Turkish foster care system from its counterparts around the world.

Keywords: international norms; norm contestation; foster care; children's rights; politics of responsibility; norm localization; Turkey

1. Introduction

Studies have shown that international norms do not spread around the world in a linear manner; they are localized and translated as they are adapted, contested at every turn, substituted as needed and in some cases, rejected outright (Acharya 2004; Zimmermann 2017). The rise of foster care systems and the turn to families to replace institutionalization of orphaned and abandoned children have been enthusiastically supported by international institutions to protect the best interests of children (UNICEF 2018). There is global consensus that in-family care is a superior option to institutionalization for children who need alternatives to parental care (Kosher et al. 2018). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children specify that states should strive to keep children with their families where possible and to encourage countries "to undertake efforts to reduce the numbers of children living in institutional care and, whenever possible, to prevent institutionalization in the first place" (UNICEF 2017). Almost all industrialized countries have developed foster care systems and there is pressure for the transition to familial care to be part of post-conflict reconstruction and development in Latin America, the Middle East and Asia (Vis et al. 2016; Connolly 2014; Kang et al. 2014; Maluccio et al. 2006; Megahead 2017). Despite global support, challenges remain, such as recruitment and retention of foster families, long-term stability of the programs, and quality of outcomes for the children (Matheson 2008).

Foster care systems juxtapose concerns to protect the nation's abandoned children with anxieties about the costs of social welfare, the limits of development, and national responsibilities (Candas and Silier 2013). In this context, the shift to family care requires a significant reinterpretation of the state's welfare role in relation to families as new foster

care systems find their roots. This paper studies the recent transition of the Turkish care system from orphanages to family and foster care under the concept of *Koruyucu Aile* (Protective Family). Adoption of family care as a norm has been advocated by state elites at the highest levels of the Turkish government and institutionalized through a comprehensive set of economic incentives, legal changes and government campaigns situating the urgency for familial care for children within a "politics of responsibility" arising from domestic understandings of moral and national duty and religious ethical and family values (Kocamaner 2017; Acar and Altunok 2013). However, the state has found it difficult to identify and to encourage sufficient numbers of foster families to accept children into their homes (Ardal 2013).

In spite of government support over a decade, full transition to foster care has not been achieved, leaving 15,000 children still under institutional care. Utilizing Zimmermann (2017) model of norm translation, this paper shows that state-level discourse on the politics of responsibility and moral obligations in family life has created challenges for these foster care programs. Localization of the foster care regime has developed through a layered discourse coupling the retreat of the state in child care services with a fuller involvement and intrusion of the state in family life. In parallel, the foster care system has found unlikely allies among urban, secular, middle-class women who have embraced their roles as foster families as a way to reach personal empowerment and overcome gendered obstacles in Turkey.

Based on narratives about foster parenting in approximately 50 local and national TV productions and accounts of the experiences of foster families in non-governmental, government and media accounts, this paper provides an analysis of the narratives surrounding the *Koruyucu Aile* system in Turkey. It shows that the current application of the foster care regime in Turkey has diverged from other international models in terms of its interpretation of the foster parent–child relationships at the expense of biological parent relationships. At the same time, while government discourse on the politics of responsibility has resonated differentially among different segments of Turkish society, the government has capitalized on its foster care discourse internationally, criticizing European welfare systems for their care of ethnic Turkish children (Stolen Lives 2017). This has legitimized state interventions on behalf of select Turkish children abroad and their biological parents, even as domestic foster children's relationships with their biological parents are marginalized in evolving interpretations of the country's foster care system.

2. Situating Norm Localization

Treaties on the rights of children have advocated access to a parental and family environment as in the "best interests" of all children for physical, psychological and social growth (UNICEF 2013). Part of the global effort to protect children from harm has been to move orphaned and abandoned children into foster family systems. The potential growth and well-being of children is central to the proponents of alternative family care for children whose parents are unwilling or unable to take care of them (Cifci 2009). The general, widespread understanding that children should grow up in a family environment remains foundational for the development of global foster care and adoption systems.

There is a lag, however, between countries that have traditionally utilized state orphanages as part of their national welfare systems, and therefore still rely on these imperfect institutions, and industrialized countries that have moved away from the idea of institutionalized care settings to the private environment of the family (Matheson 2008). With the internationalization of children's rights, international organizations such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have supported foster care alternatives in a variety of countries (Connolly 2014). The potentially high costs of maintaining orphanages, negative effects of institutionalization on children's mental and physical development, and violations of children's rights that occur when these institutions are ineffectively governed have accelerated a general shift to foster care systems (Yazici 2012). UNICEF and other international organizations have

provided funds, training and support for the rapid establishment of foster care regimes around the world, leading to greater state willingness to tear down orphanages in a transition to foster care. International advocacy and European Union (EU) demands on accession countries to transform their social service sectors have led to the closure of state orphanages in many post-socialist settings, such as Romania, Hungary and Poland (Maluccio et al. 2006).

It is important to note that this shift has not meant a retreat of the states from the affairs of children. Rather, the long arm of the welfare state now typically extends into families and private spaces of the home to arguably "save" children by placing them in new foster care systems. These novel legal and institutional arrangements enable the state to enlist, control, inspect and judge the lives of children and their biological parents, as well as that of foster parents (Coskun 2017; Megahead 2017). In the meantime, foster care models in Europe, North America and Australia have faced serious challenges in terms of sustainable outcomes, with critics speaking to a level of abuse, neglect and harm that foster children may encounter, and an urgent need for systemic reform, standardization and transformation (Matheson 2008). Overall, foster care has globally proven difficult to standardize and implement effectively.

Foster care systems are informed by the priorities of the types of state in which they are constructed. Internationally, large developing states such as India and Brazil have adopted little formal legislation on foster care and rely on secondary foster systems in society, while post-socialist transition states have shifted from a position of dependence on formal institutional care of children to incentivizing families to provide alternative care (George et al. 2003). Liberal democracies differ from social welfare states in their lack of willingness to undertake long-term responsibility of children, making adoptions a priority over foster care. In this context, non-governmental organizations sometimes play crucial intermediary roles in negotiations between states' limited political will and civil society's manifest skepticism.

Novel transitions to foster care systems carry several challenges as states have an interest in limiting government spending while at the same improving services for children. Yet they have to persuade local populations that a retreat by the state from the burden of care and the commensurate shifting of responsibility to local families is both more effective and morally desirable. Substituting socially accepted institutions such as orphanages with a localized version of an internationally favored system requires, in many cases, a resonating moral discourse for the new institutions to be effectively implemented. As Acharya (2004, p. 241) points out:

Localization describes a complex process and outcome by which norm-takers build congruence between transnational norms (including norms previously institutionalized in a region) and local beliefs and practices ... The success of norm diffusion strategies and processes depends on the extent to which they provide opportunities for localization.

In his discussion of how domestic agents and political structures condition normative change, Acharya (2004, p. 247) further notes that "strategic local actors adapt international norms to their needs in order to enhance their domestic legitimacy." In this "dynamic process of matchmaking," norm contestation hybridizes, co-opts and resists the norm while giving meaning to it within the local context. This ideally produces "outcomes of a more legitimate, more stable, and locally more appropriate kind" (Zimmermann 2016, p. 105).

Localization of a norm depends on the resonance of government discourse in society, its compatibility with the local legal systems and its dynamic and shifting implementation (Zimmermann 2016, p. 99), leading to outcomes that range from norm rejection to its internalization. Zimmermann identifies at least two subcategories of localization of norms—*embedding*, in which the legal localization and implementation are compliant with transnational norms while the rhetoric supporting it is based on a widely different interpretation, and *active re-shaping*, whereby laws are reinterpreted through a discourse lens and actively modified during their translation into policy implementation. Reinterpretation is particularly important in norm implementation that introduces an "international norm's

precepts into formal legal and policy mechanisms within the state or organization in order to routinize compliance" (Holmes 2019, p. 2). Domestic laws and their implementation may depart from existing global standards with the evolution of local discursive frames, presenting "different, new and perhaps even creative deviations" (Zimmermann 2016, p. 111).

To be effective, foster care systems require an increase in civil society involvement to counter the effects of a state retreat from providing care and shaping of public discourse that explains, prescribes and advocates for the new system. The government also has to work in tandem to articulate legal instruments that must, at minimum, balance protection of the children's best interests, preservation of particular biological parent rights, and enhancement of the rights of foster families while maintaining state supervision and control. Yet, neither the government discourse nor the legal framework is sufficient in the absence of actual families who are willing to foster children. As a result, while the state may lead the effort at norm localization, its discursive and legal efforts are not sufficient on their own to create the conditions for an effective foster care system if the discursive framework and implementation efforts do not resonate with the population. Economic and social incentives alone may not be sufficient to cultivate foster families. The dynamic reinterpretations emerging at the implementation level between civil society groups and families that undertake norm modeling are likely to have prevalence in situating the new system in the local contours of society. Implementation drives how the new norm is given meaning and how it is reinterpreted, requiring that government discourse and legal instruments adjust in its wake.

The following account details the dynamics of this process in the context of the foster care system in Turkey, which was legally established in 2012. Based on narrative and thematic analysis of approximately 50 television productions that aired in Turkish television and social media channels between 2015 and 2019, it accounts for the contested narratives of foster care. Interviews of foster parents are often comprehensive, covering each stage of the foster parenting process. Programs include daytime talk shows, media interviews with foster parents and children, and promotional government programs advocating the *Koruyucu Aile* system, as well as local municipal broadcasts and non-governmental organization productions. More than a dozen of these programs were aired first on local public television channels across Turkish cities ranging from Bolu to Kayseri, and another two dozen were broadcast in private television channels including those affiliated with the government as well as those critical of government policies. Several Turkish private YouTube channels and non-profit organization media outlets are represented. The availability of such a wide range of programs at the local and national levels underscores robust governmental and civil society discussions over the foster family system within a politics of responsibility promoted through television (Kocamaner 2017) and also provides narratives appealing to both conservative and secular audiences in Turkey.

3. The Turkish Foster Family System

In Turkey, institutional care of orphaned or abandoned children dates back to the establishment of the Turkish Republic, where national state orphanages emerged in the aftermath of the war for independence. Previously, charitable or religious organizations helped care for orphaned children or shaped local practices in which orphans would serve as domestic servants or artisans in training in exchange for room and board. However, these practices were substituted with the state orphanage system that grew nationally as part of the Turkish Republic's social welfare system (Erdal 2014). Orphanages were established by foundations, religious communities and the government to accommodate children and foster youth. The post-1980 Constitutional order continued to build a state monopoly on the residential care of orphaned or abandoned children (Yazici 2012), deepening the legal foundation for the state's responsibility in the primary care of abandoned children and youth and replacing civil society organizations. Birth families left their children directly to state care due to economic problems, poverty, domestic abuse or other social problems,

and typically expected to get their children back if and when they proved able to improve their conditions. As a result, in contemporary Turkey, the total number of children under state care exceeded 30,000 children (Dogan 2013).

Efforts to transform the institutional system to familial care emerged within the first five years of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Following a scandal in 2005, in which the neglect and abuse of children at a state orphanage became publicly known, conservative elites advocated to shift the care of children under state protection from orphanages to smaller home-style care institutions called Houses of Affection (*Sevgi evleri*) and Children's Houses (*Cocuk evleri*). Emphasizing the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the government also initiated a "Back to Family" campaign that facilitated the return of 15,000 children under state care to their biological extended families by providing monthly cash transfers to help alleviate the poverty that the government has argued leads to abandonment of children to state institutions (Yazici 2012). In 2011, the AKP government transformed the Social Services and Child Protection Agency (*Sosyal Hizmetler ve Cocuk Esirgeme Kurumu*, or SHCEK) into the Ministry of Family and Social Policy (*Aile ve Sosyal Politikalar Bakanligi*, or MFSP). The Ministry of Family instituted Turkey's first foster care system through the *Koruyucu Aile* regulation to replace institutions such as orphanages with "foster family care under the supervision of state authorities" through the 2012 Fostering and Children Act (Erdal 2014). The regulation required training and certification of foster families, and divided the foster care model into categories of close relative/kinship care, temporary foster care, long-term foster care and specialized foster care (Erdal 2014).

Family care for children found support at the highest level of the political system, personified by the steadfast leadership of Emine Erdogan, the First Lady of Turkey (Emine Erdogan'dan Koruyucu Aile Aciklamasi 2018), who emphasized that every child in Turkey deserved a family environment to promote the best chances for psychological, physical and social growth (Simsek et al. 2008). In order to promote foster care, the Ministry of Family launched a media campaign called the Ambassadors of the Hearts (*Gonul Elcileri*), with support from the Directorate of Religious Affairs, conducting 1,850 meetings in 81 provinces (Karatas 2007). While the campaign was initially designed to advocate foster families throughout Turkey, the goals of the campaign have expanded over time to cover other types of social care (Ambitious Volunteer Project Expands Scope, Membership 2015). In a campaign spearheaded by Mrs. Erdogan, the wives of all mayors were invited to serve as role models and participate in a campaign that would advocate Turkish citizens to become foster parents (Emine Erdogan'dan Koruyucu Aile Aciklamasi 2018). There were over 5000 government hosted meetings held to introduce the concept of the foster families across Turkey, including in remotest principalities and towns (Foster Parenting Flourishes 2015). Every city in Turkey has held several government-hosted Foster Family campaigns, including advocacy meetings, training workshops, dinners and events that bring together foster families.

According to the foster family legislation, any Turkish citizen between the ages of 25–65 and with an elementary school education and a regular income may apply to be become a foster parent or a "Protective Family" (*Koruyucu Aile*), regardless of their marital status or presence of children of their own (Erdal 2014). All foster families receive a fostering stipend that covers the costs of the fostered child, including health, clothing expenditures, educational expenses including public college fees and quotas for scholarships in private schools. Foster family stipends are determined according to the rates of highest civil servant pensions, with variance allowed according to the age of the children and their educational expenses, ranging from about 750 to 1350 Turkish Lira. Health care for the children and social security payments for foster parents are included in the incentives that seek to remove the financial burdens of foster families (T.C. Aile, Calisma ve Sosyal Hizmetler Bakanligi Koruyucu Aile Resmi Internet Sitesi 2019).

The legislation's flexibility stands in stark contrast to the adoption system in Turkey. Measured against the foster family legislation, the requirements for adoptive families are highly restrictive in age, marital status, and economic requirements. Age limitations on

adoptive parents and a lengthy (typically 4–5 year) bureaucratic process tend to deter adoptions in a society where families prefer to adopt younger children and babies. Moreover, many of the children under state protection are not eligible for adoption as most biological parents retain their parental rights to their children.

In comparison, the bureaucratic process to apply to become a foster family in the new *Koruyucu Aile* system has been designed to be comparatively rapid (a few months) and relatively easy, with online options through the e-government digital system. The Ministry provides quick background checks and home visits following a review of the applicant's health and criminal records, and offers matches to each foster family according to the family's preferences (Koruyucu Aile Yonetmeligi 2012). The lack of restrictions and the breadth of incentives in the Turkish system are quite novel when compared to other foster systems around the world (Matheson 2008). The AKP government has arguably given priority to the rapid expansion of the system to as many families as possible, opting to keep restrictions minimal and the process as user-friendly as possible for foster families.

The conservative elite discourse that advocates for foster families underscores the government's willingness to undertake whatever costs are necessary to ensure a family environment that enhances the physical and psychological well-being of the children (Ozdemir et al. 2008). The government posits that the concept of the foster family is embedded in the notions of public, religious and moral duty to the society (Akkan 2017; Kaynak 2017). Support for community service through a government-advocated program such as foster care is a creative extension of the notion of moral and religious service, channeling civic participation in areas where there is strong state-level support (Diner 2018; Doyle 2016).

The shift toward a family-based foster care system is part of a larger transformation in which the AKP government has emphasized the "family" as a mechanism to solve issues associated with women, children or labor. This change has been widely criticized as a retreat from upholding women's rights and as part of a national discourse that prioritizes the family and marginalizes the rights of women and children (Babul 2015; Kandiyoti 2016; Korkman 2016; Koyuncu and Ozman 2018). Civil society organizations are concerned that by "returning" social responsibilities to the setting of the family and absolving state of its responsibilities, the state enables the very actors who caused the problems or were unable or unwilling to manage them in the first place. As Yazici (2012) notes, if a woman has been abused by her husband, rejected by her parents, and victimized by her extended family members, suggesting that she seek solutions in the family does not provide much refuge. Scholars are also skeptical of the government-supported turn to the family in a country where family seems to be a primary catalyst for social problems, such as domestic violence, restrictions on women's labor participation, sexual exploitation and gender discrimination (Pelendecioglu and Bulut 2009; Cindoglu and Unal 2017; Nas 2016; Korkman 2016).

Conservative elites counter that it is the deviations from a moral family life that cause social problems, and that the family, if "strengthened" by public resources and interventions, can serve as a venue through which many of these problems might be resolved (Yilmaz 2015). Treating the family unit as a rights-bearing actor, however, stands at odds with internationally recognized children's and women's rights. As UNICEF (2018) observes, in Turkey "a culture of child rights is not widespread throughout society." In this context, "the government's emphasis on the family as children's natural environment needs to be balanced out with a rights-based approach." Scholars further find that when the rights of the idealized family are protected, the abuses and the discrimination perpetuated by family members, which are directly related to the reasons citizens abandon their children to state care, remain unresolved (Candas and Silier 2013; Bozbeyoglu et al. 2010).

From an economic perspective, the foster care system provides a cost-saving measure for the state's welfare system. Even with current monthly payments to the foster families, observers note that the cost of keeping the same child in institutional care would have cost double or triple that amount per month, creating a cost-saving measure for the state (Erdal 2014). Even when the government makes monthly payments to families for each foster

child, including costs associated with education and recreational activities, total spending remains a fraction of the cost of running orphanages (Yazici 2012).

Furthermore, the rise of the foster family system has not resulted in a lack of government supervision. On the contrary, requirements for identification cards, home visits and background checks have opened-up families to government audits and inspection. In that sense, the foster family system increases the level of control available to government authorities and opens up the private domain of the family to state intervention. A narrative centering on the family has enabled the state to further extend its public reach into the privacy of households, influencing or even regulating them accordingly (Solaker 2016).

In spite of these concerns, with the support of government leadership, the foster system has grown from fewer than 100 families in 2012 to 7259 children residing with 5289 foster families just seven years later, according to the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services (Foster Family System 2019). However, while the total number of foster families has grown significantly, it is still low per capita in major cities such as Istanbul (796), Izmir (432) and Ankara (472) (T.C. Aile, Calisma ve Sosyal Hizmetler Bakanligi Koruyucu Aile Resmi Internet Sitesi 2019). In comparison, the Turkish government provides assistance to 22,876,798 children, including 128,047 children receiving conditional cash transfers within the households of their biological families and 13,867 children remaining under the state's institutional care (T.C. Aile ve Sosyal Politikalar Bakanligi Cocuk Hizmetleri Genel Mudurlugu 2021a). Ultimately, despite supportive legislation, extensive economic incentives to foster families, and political investment in advocacy campaigns, the number of children housed in foster families only represents one-quarter of the total number of children in the state protective system.

4. Foster Care Tropes for Pious Audiences

A 45 s trailer for a government campaign entitled "I am no longer afraid of the Dark" showcases a 10-year-old boy standing next to adults at a pedestrian crossings fantasizing they were his parents. The male narrator commands the audience to open their families to foster children because "we are all one big family." (Table 1: 42 TC Aile ve Sosyal Politika 2017). The boy in the trailer is "forlorn" (*Kimsesiz*), the narrator observes, indicating a state of profound precariousness and vulnerability. Such helpless representations of foster children play a central role in foster care tropes for pious audiences. Believers are reminded that they have a social and moral responsibility to help children in need, identified as "pure," "diamonds," and "angels." Campaigns point out cases of men and women who grew up in the orphanage system who are now themselves serving as foster families (Bilgehan 2018). Religious obligations to help orphans, which fits within a long tradition of social acceptance in the Muslim Turkish society, is juxtaposed in campaign videos with one's moral responsibility to the Turkish nation to "grow citizens who love their homeland."

In a 2017 government-funded short film (Table 1: 11 Kayseri 2017), becoming a foster family is directly framed as a moral duty and service to the Turkish state and the nation. The movie begins with an elderly mom who receives a letter from her foster son. The camera turns to show that her foster boy grew up to become a Turkish soldier, writing letters at a table adorned by regalia of the armed forces, surrounded by Turkish flags. He talks about how he grew up to "love his homeland," and that he loves his foster mother "at least as much." The program proceeds with the soldier himself walking away with his own foster daughter, with officials at the Ministry of Family applauding him. "I wanted to touch a child so she can also grow up to serve my country well, because I love my country so much," the soldier concludes (Kayseri 2017). In this short film, the foster care system is clearly linked with serving the interest of the homeland and fulfilling a moral responsibility of citizens toward their nation.

Table 1. TV Programs on Foster Care in Turkey.

Producer	Name of the Video	Number of Views	.
1. Bana Gore TV. Private TV channel.	Katarsis X-TRA: Sumru Yavrucuk ve Oglu -Turkiye'de Koruyucu Aile Olmak.	352,892	11 July 2019
2. Demiroren Haber Ajansi. Private TV channel.	Koruyucu Ailede Buyudu, Kendisi de Koruyucu Aile Oldu.	19,775	27 July 2019
3. NTV. Privately held TV channel.	Bir Farkli Konu: Koruyucu Aileler.	479	10 December 2019
4. Cep Hikayeleri. YouTube channel.	Koruyucu Ailelik/Cep Hikayeleri No: 114.	48,371	6 December 2018
5. Haber Turk. Privately held TV channel.	Koruyucu Aile Nedir? Nasil Koruyucu Aile Olunur?	10,350	8 November 2017
6. NTV. Privately held TV channel.	Deniz Kilisoglu Koruyucu Aile.	12,682	27 September 2016
7. TC Aile ve Sosyal Politikalar Bakanligi (Ministry of Family and Social Policy). Government agency.	Antalya Aile ve Sosyal Politikalar Il Mudurlugu. Koruyucu Ailemiz Yilin Annesi Secildi.	6534	14 April 2015
8. Demiroren Haber Ajansi. Privately held TV channel.	Once Koruyucu, Sonra Gercek Anne Oldu.	160,039	7 February 2019
9. Aile Bakanligi. Ministry of Family and Social Policy.	Koruyucu Aile.	10,897	5 June 2015
10. Dik Gazete. Conservative newspaper.	Koruyucu Aile' Olunca, Cocuk Hasretleri Son Buldu.	14,196	28 March 2018
11. Kayseri Aile Sosyal Politikalar Mudurlugu. Government agency.	Koruyucu Aile Tanitim ve Bilgilendirme Kisa Filmi.	4601	11 December 2017
12. Star TV.	Evlendiler, Aysima'nin Koruyucu Ailesi Oldu.	266	14 February 2019
13. Edirne Televizyonu. Local TV-Edirne.	Esinlendigi Annesi gibi Koruyucu Anne Oldu.	354	31 March 2018
14. TRT Haber. State owned TV channel.	Evlat Edinen ve Koruyucu Aile Olan Annelerin Duygulari.	28,113	27 May 2015
15. Yeni Bakis Gazetesi. Izmir local channel.	Koruyucu Aile Oldular, Kalabalik Aile Hayallerine Kavustular.	16,961	21 September 2017
16. Konya Postasi Gazetesi. Konya Local Channel.	Koruyucu Aile Oldular Hayatlari Degisti.	393	11 June 2019
17. TRT 1. State owned channel.	Koruyucu Aile Nedir? Koruyucu Ailelere Devlet Destegi.	2854	3 September 2018
18. Anadolu Agency.	Zihinsel Engelli Cocuga Koruyucu Aile Sefkati.	9898	10 August 2015
19. AnneTV. YouTube Channel.	Hamilelik Gunlugum/Koruyucu Annelik.	1881	27 June 2017
20. A Haber.	Koruyucu Aile Drami.	16,166	14 December 2017
21. Denizli Koruyucu Aile Dernegi. Non-profit Organization.	Koruyucu Ailemiz Burcin Sehil Anlatiyor.	2362	13 March 2017
22. Anadolu Agency.	Engelli Cocugun Koruyucu Ailes.	8152	26 February 2017
23. Kanal V. Antalya Local TV channel.	Koruyucu ailesi Oyku'yu geri istiyor.	369	9 August 2017

Table 1. *Cont.*

Producer	Name of the Video	Number of Views	.
24. Herkes Kadar Anneyim. YouTube Channel.	Koruyucu Ailelere Sorulan Sorular.	6857	16 December 2016
25. Yasadikca TV. YouTube channel for people with disabilities.	Downsendromlu Cocuga Koruyucu Aile Huzuru.	4502	15 February 2015
26. Denizli Koruyucu Aile. Dernegi. Non-profit Organization.	Koruyucu Aile.	8834	13 June 2014
27. TRT 1. State owned channel.	Koruyucu Aile Olarak Nelere Dikkat Etmeliyiz.	3958	30 October 2016
28. ATV. Conservative channel.	Siz de Koruyucu Aile Olabilirsiniz.	5745	21 October 2016
29. ATV. Conservative channel.	Avrupa'da Gundem-Nihat Hatipoglu Koruyucu Aile Roportaji.	8961	18 January 2016
30. Haber Media Group. Samsun Local channel.	Annelik Maceram/Koruyucu Aile.	900	7 May 2019
31. HTHayat TV.	Koruyucu Aile Nedir.	306	8 November 2017
32. MetroPol Haber. Kayseri local channel.	Koruyucu Aile.	357	19 August 2019
33. Kanal 23. Conservative channel.	Tekin Cifti, 4 yildir Buse'nin Koruyucu Ailesi.	125	3 August 2019
34. Haber Media Group. Samsun Local channel.	Yuva'da Tanidigi Colyak Hastasi Elif'e Koruyucu Aile Oldu.	3808	11 June 2015
35. Tavsanli Ekspres Gazetesi. Kutahya Local channel.	Koruyucu Aile Nedir.	198	10 December 2019
36. TRT Avaz. State owned channel.	Koruyucu Aile Olmak icin Neler Gerekiyor.	5679	1 June 2015
37. TRT Radyo 1. State owned channel.	Koruyucu Aile Uygulamasi.	151	6 June 2017
38. Merkez TV. Bolu Local Channel.	Koruyucu Aile Olarak Herkese Ornek Oldu.	704	29 March 2018
39. Merkez TV. Bolu Local Channel.	Koruyucu Aile Olmak Ister misiniz.	2629	13 January 2017
40. Koroglu TV. Bolu Local Channel.	Koruyucu Aile Olun.	330	13 May 2019
41. Anadolu Agency.	Suriyeli Kardeslerin 'Koruyucu Ailesi'.	3225	5 April 2017
42. TC Aile ve Sosyal Politikalar Bakanligi (Ministry of Family and Social Policy).	Koruyucu Aile Tanitim Filmi.	40	20 October 2017
43. NTV.	Koruyucu Aileler Kimsesiz Cocuklar icin Ek Is Yapiyor (Turkiye'de 5 bin koruyucu aile var).	605	8 October 2018
44. Euronews. International news channel.	KHK, Koruyucu Ailenin Hayatini Degistirdi:	1650	19 April 2019
45. Anadolu Agency.	Ruyadan Etkilenip Koruyucu Aile Oldular.	87	18 March 2018
46. Haber Media Group. Samsun Local Media Group.	Haberin Sesi/Koruyucu Aile Dernegi.	341	24 December 2018

Producer	Name of the Video	Number of Views	.
47. Diyanet TV. TV channel of the Presidency of Religious Affairs of Turkey.	Kimler Koruyucu Aile Olmali?	298	6 March 2019
48. Istanbul Koruyucu Aile Dernegi. Non-profit organization.	Istanbul Koruyucu Aile Dernegi-Babalar Gunu.	425	17 June 2017
49. CNN Turk.	12 Binden Fazla Cocuk Yurtlarda Buyuyor-Koruyucu Aile Nedir?	3712	23 March 2017
50. Dik Gazete.	Anyni Anda Hem Koruyucu Aile Hem de Anne Oldu.	187	12 March 2018
51. Siu Media.	KAGEM Koruyucu Aile-Kamu Spotu.	1398	5 March 2016

Women's daytime programs, especially on public television channels, have been a primary focus of the campaigns to cultivate foster families (Kocamaner 2017). Many of these programs feature 20–30 min interviews with foster parents of a similar socioeconomic status as the audience members. The conservative channels will feature fathers, mothers and grandmothers who have become foster parents, with an emphasis on the moral, religious, national and ethical benefits of fostering to the society. Interviews with more pious audiences frame foster care as a "divine responsibility" (*kutsal gorev*) (Table 1: 47 Diyanet TV 2019) with the goal of having these children grow up as adults "who will be beneficial to the good of the homeland and nation" (Table 1: 2 Demiroren 2019). Here, the connections between religious morality, national preservation and strengthening of the state (Kocamaner 2019) are evident as they flow from one to the other in the efforts placed on raising foster children. In general, fostering is referred to as "touching the heart" of a child in need, for the children to feel the "affectionate hand of the State on their foreheads", the state promoting the welfare of its children through its citizens (Table 1: 10 Dik Gazete 2018). The public service aspect of child fostering plays a primary role in these programs. The foster parents that speak to the cameras in pious television channels are gratefully aware of the social value of their roles as foster parents. These interviews do not dwell on the problems that foster families incur while raising the children, but instead emphasize societal benefits. Mothers frequently comment that they love their foster children far more than their own biological children (Table 1: 47 Diyanet TV 2019). Emphasis is routinely placed on the additional value that parents feel fostering brings to the society, the nation and their religious community.

A campaign video broadcast in 2014 features a playful cute blond 6-year-old girl and a 10-year-old boy, taking turns reciting a formal government statement about the benefits of fostering, the little girl and her big brother giggling along (Table 1: 26 Denizli 2014). The intended effect, of course, is to encourage adults to "take these children home." Based on a view of the available programming, "taking home" (*eve goturmek*) and "getting one" (*almak*) are among the most commonly used terms in discussions and interviews with foster parents. A survey of foster families in an Eastern province indicates that 85% of the families state their wish to make a difference for foster children, while 55% note their inability have children, and 20% of not having a daughter, as reasons to become foster families (Gokkaya 2014). In a conservative television channel, a young foster mom emphasizes the process of fostering as a popular, trendy act: "Our colleague got one, my neighbor got one, and I got one and told my mother to get one, too!" (Table 1: 32 Metropol Haber 2019). There is a commodification aspect to the foster children in this context; they are rarely present in these interviews and, if they do appear, appear as well-dressed, clean, quiet complements to their foster parents.

Yet, despite noteworthy government support, norm modeling of the protective family has not been easy to establish among Turkish families. Foster parenting remains only a

modest phenomenon, cautiously approached by Turkish parents and other citizens. In Turkish society, blood lineage remains central to kinship (Kaynak 2017). Biological links to children retain primacy in a patriarchal society where a woman's measure of worth is, for many, determined to a considerable extent on the basis of her ability to bear children. Moreover, some perceive that their efforts invested in a foster child may eventually be exploited by living parents or extended relatives demanding the children back (Kaynak 2017). Social norms of charity commonly advocate for citizens to donate money for orphans and anonymously pay the education and living costs of children under state care, stopping short of folding them into their own family structures (Cifci 2009). Ultimately, the enormity of caregiving jobs in the domestic sphere, perceived risks associated with fostering, and traditional preferences for indirect charity (Candas and Silier 2013) conspire to undermine or weaken the government's narratives about national duty and moral responsibility. This explains why their substantial and continuing efforts to bolster the foster care system has not, thus far, kept pace with the comparatively larger number of children who might benefit from alternative care.

5. Heart-Birth Moms: Domestic Support from Unlikely Allies

Perhaps the most unexpected support for the foster family system has come from the urban, often secular elites. There have been some highly visible cases of celebrities and artists electing to become foster parents and making their personal journeys available to the public on social media (Arman 2013). The lack of government restrictions and the fact that women of any age, regardless of marital status, may become foster parents, have enabled professional, middle-aged, urban, and/or single women to be able to find a novel way of experiencing motherhood without carrying the stigma of being a single mother (Table 1: 24 Herkes Kadar 2016).

Accomplished and economically independent Turkish middle-class foster mothers characterize becoming a foster mom as "a heart birth." (Kalben 2018) The rise of the foster family system corresponds with trends among upper–middle-class single women who would like to experience the joy of having children, without social discrimination or without having to rely on a spouse or a childbirth process. Protesting the perceived need in Turkish society for the lives of women to be fully complete only when married and bearing the biological child of a spouse, this group of vocal women are advocating that novel concepts of motherhood can be achieved while single or, if married, without wasting financial and physical resources for fertility treatments (Table 1: 24 Herkes Kadar 2016). In some cases, couples openly discuss their fertility challenges as a key reason why they decided to seek a foster child as an alternative (Table 1: 8 Demiroren Haber 2019). In narratives on social media and fostering campaigns, fostering is therefore coined as heart birth, in which the mother–child relationship is born from affection rather than a biological imperative.

In programs aimed at more secular audiences, fostering is centered on this narrative of affective birth as the mothers incorporate the children into their lives (Kalben 2018). Some mothers refer to a *seed* that gets planted with the arrival of the foster child, and others characterize the pains of the first year of fostering as *labor pains* to show that there was a personal process of emotional fertility and labor. Many refer to the *heart birth* of their foster child as a true birth. Such a narrative draws on the centrality of childbirth in the gendered expectations of women in Turkey and justifies fostering as a socially acceptable, and even superior, form of motherhood. In television programs, "I forget that I didn't give birth to him" is a commonly heard statement. Within this narrative, fostering is a socially sanctioned way to gain status of emotional fertility.

Women's daytime programs for secular audiences generally promote a narrative based on personal emotional growth for the foster parents who sacrifice for the "good of the society." The government's emphasis on the nation or the state is replaced by the importance of raising individuals who are capable of sharing love with humanity. In these tropes, the family environment is synonymous with an "environment of affection" that

has the potential to save the child from the harms of institutionalization (Table 1: 3 NTV 2019). Foster parents consider it their responsibility to step into the lives of children under state care with the assumption that without their intervention, the children will become criminally oriented. Yet, for the urban, middle-class advocates of foster parenthood, the greatest benefit of the foster relationship is to the person of the foster mother: it is a "way for the foster child to save you while you save the foster child." (Table 1: 1 Bana Gore TV 2019).

Foster parents, especially foster mothers, dwell on their own personal journeys to emphasize the personal benefits of fostering children. The foster child is often defined as a "light that brightens the house," moving the family into a new and improved state. They reflect that they used to be "self-centered, deprived of emotions, full of anxiety and fears," which changes after their experience as foster mothers (Table 1: 5 Haber Turk 2017). They identify their new selves as tolerant, loving, patient, open-minded and more mature: "I realize that all the things I worried about were futile and unnecessary. This love is real." (Table 1: 31 HTHayat 2017). Unlike their pious counterparts, this group of foster parents publicly reflects on their challenges of integrating a new child into their family and the fears that they experienced during their initial years fostering children—seeing the challenges they overcame as proof of their emerging parenting skills and personal growth. Foster mothers emphasize that they prefer children with "thick background folders" to achieve self-fulfillment. As a foster mom describes, "I learned to be a mother and he learned to be a child." (Table 1: 1 Bana Gore TV 2019).

The popularity of fostering among urban middle-class women has given rise to numerous non-governmental organizations that bring together foster parents to form networks, provide activities with foster children of like-minded individuals and to promote an expansion of this alternative way of building kinship (Kalben 2018; Korev Koruyucu Aile Evlat Edinme Dernegi 2018; Experiences 2019). Social media associated with these organizations convey statements from foster families that underscore the positive aspects of their relationship with the children they foster. These organizations also provide resources toward family-friendly activities such as dance and music classes or summer camps, or resources such as psychologists, tutors and babysitters that would appeal to the urban middle-class foster parents (Kalben 2018).

While foster families willingly undertake in their contract with the state a promise to return the children to the biological families, public narratives routinely downplay the rights of the biological parents and the potentially transitory nature of the children's stay with foster parents. Secular foster parents contend that "the biological parents must not have trusted themselves to take care of the child" (Table 1: 1 Bana Gore TV 2019), assuming consent on the part of biological parents for the children's indefinite stay with foster parents. Children's history with their biological parents are referred as "past sediments" or "lines in the child's face" that the foster parents must help erase. This view goes without challenge as in the relatively new system in Turkey, very few foster families have had the experience of having to "return" foster children to their biological families.

Foster mothers admit to some anxiety about biological families but they also strongly believe that it would be difficult for birth parents to overcome the conditions that caused them to abandon their children in the first place, whether mental health issues, unemployment, or criminal backgrounds. Urban professional families indicate that the risk of losing a foster child to his or her biological parents exists only until the children become legal adults at age 18—with an implicit assumption that by then, the young adults would prefer to remain with their foster parents instead of reuniting with their birth parents. Government reports show that 82 of the 117 foster children who came of age in 2019 continued to live with their foster parents (T.C. Aile, Calisma ve Sosyal Hizmetler Bakanligi Koruyucu Aile Resmi Internet Sitesi 2019), suggesting that there is some merit to this claim. While the government requires that foster children have a right to supervised visits with their siblings and biological parents once a month, foster parents note that many biological families do not even know that their children are placed with foster families (Table 1: 5 Haber Turk

2017). Foster parents note that a one-hour meeting with biological parents at a government facility would not be effective in terms of building a relationship between the birth parent and child. Still, middle-class, urban parents lament that even if they are getting financial and institutional support from the government, loving a child whose birth parents retain parental rights is a sacrifice that falls on their shoulders alone.

6. Norm Contradictions: Rights of Biological Parents at Home and Abroad

An interesting component of the Turkish foster family system is the seemingly permanent composition of the foster family and the operational compromise of the rights of biological parents. In the Turkish legislation chartering the foster care system, the biological parents of most of the foster children retain their parental rights. Initially, "Back to Family" campaigns established cash transfers to support biological families or extended kin to take care of children (Ozbesler 2009) and reunified some of the children in orphanages with their biological parents. However, as the foster care system evolved over the last decade, the emphasis on biological parents has dissipated.

Many foster families clearly consider their commitment to the children to be long term, if not permanent. Unlike other foster care systems, there are very few cases of children transferred from one foster family to another in Turkey, or returned to their biological families. UNICEF's Turkish office notes that their trainings emphasize that the foster family does not replace the biological parents, and that foster parents should not demand children to refer to them as their parents. However, almost every interview with foster parents on Turkish media accounts for the first time the child has called their foster care-givers "mom" and "dad" in contrast to birth parents referred as "*biolojik aile*" (biological family), a functional term devoid of affect. References to the foster home as the child's "forever home" abound, rendering the fostering experience permanence with the hope that the child will not seek to return the biological parents after s/he comes of age. The foster families work hard to narrate their permanent impact on to the child by claiming their years of influence: "I will rest in peace knowing that my child did not spend years of his childhood at an institution, getting damaged and broken in the meantime." (Table 1: 1 Bana Gore TV 2019).

Foster parents effectively communicated their anxieties about birth parents to government officials and, in response, the foster family legislation, while safeguarding the basic legal rights of biological parents, now requires a court order for the biological parents to be able to regain their rights to access their children. Biological parents are required to prove to the court that they have fully overcome the original conditions that led to the abandonment of the children to state care and that they possess the resources to meet the financial, affective and social responsibilities of their children. The lengthy and intense legal requirements that face biological parents to get their children back stands in great contrast to the ease with which foster families retain children under foster care (Dogan 2013). Foster care practices continue to evolve to further protect the rights of the foster parents, whose concerns the government remains responsive to in its continuing effort to increase the number of foster families in Turkey. For example, as a result of tensions between biological and foster parents, the monthly meetings are required to be in the presence of social services staff, with separate entrances to the building for foster and biological parents to prevent face-to-face altercations. Biological parents do not have any legal access to the whereabouts of the foster children or the contact information of the foster families. In addressing the needs of foster families, the foster care system has acquired de facto permanency, much more so than the legislation originally intended, and in effect (Dogan 2013) compromising the rights of biological parents in order to protect the foster families.

Yet a different set of norms are advocated for biological parents of ethnic Turkish children who are in foster care abroad. "Kin politics," and by extension, politics of children in foster care, have evolved into a transnational multifaceted phenomenon (Baklacioglu 2015). In 2013, a 9-year-old ethnic Turkish foster child under the care of a Dutch family with two mothers caused a diplomatic controversy. After losing multiple court battles to gain custody of her son who was placed in foster care shortly after birth, the Turkish

biological mother asked assistance from the government of Turkey to get her child back. The issue played in the media in a number of ways: the child was depicted as Turkish first and foremost, therefore the charge of the Turkish state; the placement of the child with a non-Muslim, non-Turkish foster family was seen as against the best interests of the child in terms of maintaining his cultural background; and the child's placement with that particular Dutch family played into homophobic fears (Turkey to Dutch 2013).

Turkey demanded that the child be placed with Turkish foster families in Netherlands, or allowed to return to her Turkish birth mother. When the Dutch authorities pointed out that no Turkish foster families had registered with their social services, the Turkish government started campaigns in European cities—that remain in effect today—to advocate for Turkish diaspora families to register as foster families (Turkey to Encourage Diaspora 2015). The call generated minimal interest abroad, yet domestically it led to a parliamentary inquiry into the status of approximately 3000 ethnic Turkish children who were in foster care in European countries (Grand National Assembly of Turkey 2013). Turkey has joined the ranks of countries that have recently criticized Norwegian child care services of "taking children away" (Coskun 2017), and Turkish government-endorsed non-governmental organizations such as *Umut Yildizi* (Star of Hope) have been vocal critics of the German foster care system that places ethnic Turkish children with German foster parents (Stolen Lives 2017). These groups demand that children be placed with Turkish relatives instead of foster families, paralleling the priorities of the domestic foster care regime. At the same time, the domestic foster care system is not designed to accommodate the ethnic, religious or racial differences of children in Turkey, even though children who hold foreign citizenship are eligible to enter the foster care system (T.C. Aile ve Sosyal Politikalar Bakanligi Cocuk Hizmetleri Genel Mudurlugu 2021b). Through its foster family discourse, Turkey aspires to enhance its diplomatic reach into immigrant communities and advocates for cases of foster children with deep emotional links to Turkish identity and national pride. In this context, the domestic norms surrounding foster care provides legitimacy to the Turkish government for interventions on behalf of select Turkish children abroad, even as the foster children and their biological families are rendered increasingly invisible in the evolving domestic foster care system.

7. Conclusions

Turkey has spent the last decade trying to develop alternatives for children under state care, utilizing a mix of group homes and foster families. As with other states where foster care systems have been implemented, government policies, legal codification, and local implementation have led to differential outcomes that resonate differently with varied stakeholders in each society (Maluccio et al. 2006; Kang et al. 2014; Kosher et al. 2018; Megahead 2017). The state continues to play a significant role in regulating intimacy, "its political actors constantly interfer[ing] in the private domain to endorse legitimate and normative forms of family," in an effort to enhance its sovereign power to maintain and regulate public order (Kocamaner 2019). Yet, implementation of these regulations boils down to the interpretations and agency of bureaucrats with their own missions, biological parents with their deep set challenges, and foster families with complex motivations in reimagining kinship in novel ways.

The Turkish government created a detailed legal framework to establish a foster family system and provided public incentives and discursive justifications based on moral responsibility and national duty, spearheaded at the highest levels of government and promoted through widespread media and government outreach campaigns. However, the discursive and legal framework ran into challenges in implementation and did not generate sufficient interest among families to model the norm. Instead, the co-option of the foster family system by civil society members transformed the foster care system into something of an archetype for individual and social empowerment of women. This creative reinterpretation decoupled the foster care system in Turkey from its counterparts elsewhere, making it a more permanent solution to the care needs of a select set of children

in a way that would benefit the foster parents. While contributing to the rising popularity of the foster care system, this innovative deviation has curtailed the rights of the biological parents and compromised the ability of children to form relationships with their birth parents while civil society members continue to push for state-level support and legislation protecting the foster families, further shifting the goals of the foster care system.

"Social policies can be analyzed in relationship to the totality of things states do—or refrain from doing." (Skocpol and Amenta 1986, p. 152). Situated in notions of public responsibility, Turkey has groomed its foster care system as one prong of an active welfare state model, tapping into existing initiatives in health care and public education, which have upheld this model so far. While its indefatigable emphasis on providing a family setting for children is laudable, Turkey's approach may be difficult to maintain in the long run, as the foster care system relies on drawing funds from the state in the face of growing economic pressures. In similarly situated countries, the economic and institutional costs associated with the top-down incentives have proven significant and in contrast with the realities of reduced government social welfare spending in most parts of the world.

The challenges of the novel foster family system indicate that it may be unrealistic to expect a full retreat from institutional care, unless civil society plays an active role. Given the notable public enthusiasm of the "heart-birth moms," Turkey might benefit from removing age and marital restrictions on adoptive parents to further build the permanent relationship with children that they crave. Moreover, resolving key structural and social conditions, such as poverty and deficits in women's rights, may help discourage families in difficult socioeconomic circumstances from separating from their children. Similarly, empowering women financially can help ameliorate some of the structural conditions or cultural circumstances that perpetuate separation of children from their families. Contributions of international organizations such as UNICEF could make a more significant impact on the children if the emphasis included building local capacity for all parents—birth and foster—to build viable livelihoods.

The Turkish case shows that international norms are not simply accepted or rejected by domestic actors, but rather creatively scrutinized, reinterpreted and modified to inform local discourse and local practices (Zimmermann 2016). The foster family system in Turkey illustrates that even when state entities provide a framework that is legally well articulated, awash with financial incentives, and enthusiastically promoted by state elites, the norm flourishes only to the extent that it becomes meaningful for those whose intimate lives are at stake. The state's newest efforts to create families in its own image is likely to facilitate novel forms of (possibly permanent) kinship relationships that are likely to be influenced by the best interests of a select set of parents and children, rather than national or religious morality. While governments may still garner policy inertia to influence certain interpretation of norms, it is ultimately those actors who vernacularize the norm in their own lives that also make it more imaginative, meaningful and grounded in the long run.

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