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Gender Policies and Family Transformation: A Europe–Türkiye Comparison

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Abstract

This study examines perceptions of how gender policies affect the family, drawing on a Europe–Türkiye comparison. It rests on a long-term, unstructured field study conducted between 2012 and 2025: the 2012–2018 period was devoted to understanding and observation, and the 2018–2025 period to systematic field interviews. The European component covered 300 people across twenty-five cities in ten countries in two separate rounds (2019 and 2024–2025); the Turkish component covered 1,500 people in four cities (Ankara, Erzurum, Istanbul, and Kocaeli); in addition, interviews with 500 citizens living in Europe who visited Türkiye informed the European fieldwork. The findings show that, although the family is valued in both societies, it is increasingly seen as fragile. The most striking result is a divergence in the perceived source of threat: in Türkiye roughly half of participants (50%) identified “legislation” as the greatest threat, whereas in Europe “sexism” (30%) and “infidelity” (25%) stood out. The erosion of trust and fidelity, the rise of dual-life and partner-swapping tendencies (from roughly 1.7% to 2.1% in Europe), and the rapid emergence in Türkiye of trends already mature in Europe together point to a convergence. The study argues that family change stems from a combination of legal, economic, cultural, digital, and demographic factors, and that family policy should therefore

be designed in a multidimensional, data-driven, and non-polarizing manner. The findings are perceptual and make no causal claim; yet the comparative design renders visible how a global transformation opens different channels in different social settings.

Keywords: gender policies, the family, family stability, the Istanbul Convention and Law No. 6284, Europe–Türkiye comparison, unstructured field research.

1. Introduction

The family is the oldest and most enduring institution upon which human communities are built. It is within this circle that the individual forms his or her first relationship of trust and acquires, to a large extent, language, faith, habits, and standards of value. The accumulated heritage that passes from one generation to the next is likewise carried mainly through the family. How a society raises its children, cares for its elderly, cooperates with its neighbours, and trusts in the future is tightly bound to the soundness of relationships within the family. For this reason, changes that take place in the family concern not only spouses or the household; they extend across a wide field, from the conditions in which children are raised to the renewal of the population, and from neighbourhood networks to public finance. A view that treats the family as merely a corner of private life often overlooks the fact that this

institution is one of the load-bearing columns of the social order.

Over the past half-century, the appearance of the family has changed rapidly. First in Western Europe and then in many countries around the world, marriage rates declined, the age at first marriage rose, fertility fell, and divorces increased. In the demographic literature this change is most often discussed under the heading of the “second demographic transition”; it points to a period in which traditional family patterns gave way to individual preferences, the pursuit of self-realization, and more flexible forms of partnership (Lesthaeghe, 2010). Some researchers anticipate that, in the long run, these tendencies will produce a lasting decline in marriage and fertility, whereas others note that, with the consolidation of gender equality, certain countries have experienced a recovery in fertility and partnership stability (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015). There are also studies showing that the transformation in family structure reproduces social inequalities (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). The picture is not one-directional, which is precisely why the debate remains lively.

A large part of the recent debate on the family revolves around gender policies. Those who defend these policies argue that the regulations introduced have reduced the discrimination to which women were long exposed and have advanced equality in education, employment, and politics (Walby, 2011). Critics, by contrast, maintain that some applications may upset the balance within the family and produce unforeseen consequences for marital stability (Hakim, 2011; Benatar, 2012). This second strand has become especially visible in Europe over the past decade. On one side of the debate stands the concern to protect rights-based gains, and on the other the concern to safeguard the integrity of the family. Each concern rests on its own grounds of justification, and it is by no means easy to advance without sacrificing one to the other. Attempting to grasp the issue from a purely legal or a purely sociological vantage point also frequently falls short.

In Europe the most organized expression of this critical strand consists of the formations examined in the literature as “anti-gender” or gender-opposed movements. Although they draw on different political traditions in different countries, these movements have developed a common language and a common ground of criticism (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Their basic claim is that the concept of gender has over time moved beyond women’s rights and has given rise to a broad transformation that directly affects family structure. Some authors note that behind these reactions lie not merely ideological motives but also the social unease produced by the rapid change in family structure (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Researchers who support gender

policies, on the contrary, read most of these criticisms as a backlash against the gains of equality (Verloo, 2018; Corredor, 2019). The concept itself also functions as a kind of common denominator in this contest: it brings widely differing conservative actors together under a single heading (Kováts & Põim, 2015; Kováts, 2018).

Another dimension of the debate is the transformation of gender politics into a transnationally organized and well-resourced field. The fact that both equality-oriented networks and the coalitions opposing them operate through cross-border ties, funding sources, and shared agendas is among the topics emphasized by the literature in this area (Grzebalska, Kováts & Pető, 2017; Graff, Kapur & Walters, 2019). One body of work points out that gender-opposed mobilizations narrow civic space and possess a coordinated character aimed at rolling back equality policies (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2021). Another body of work, conversely, stresses that the equality agenda itself has spread from the top down through international organizations and conventions and has at times met strong local resistance (Krizsán, Roggeband & Zeller, 2024). Which side is the more organized is a separate matter of debate; the common point, however, is this: the field is not merely the sum of individual preferences. There exists a political arena steered by transnational actors, funds, and norms. In the field observations of the present study, a significant proportion of participants likewise explained the changes they had experienced not solely through personal choices but through an external influence spreading in an organized manner.

In Türkiye the debate has largely gathered around the Istanbul Convention and Law No. 6284, which is grounded upon it. On one side stand studies that regard these regulations as necessary for protecting women from violence, and on the other critical studies that draw attention to problems arising in implementation (Kızılırmak, 2020; Bölükbaşı, 2022). The legal character of protective measures, the scope of practices based on a woman’s declaration, and their reflection on intra-family relationships are among the most heated headings of the debate. This contention has not remained confined to academia; it has spilled over into the media, politics, and everyday conversation. Studies examining the matter show that public discourse has become markedly polarized (Çoban Keneş & Kocabay-Şener, 2023; Gezgin, 2024). The Turkish case is a convenient setting for observing how a regulation of European origin is received on a different social ground and how it gives rise to a new field of debate.

An important strand of the debate on the family touches on the relationship between legal regulations and everyday behaviour. Law is used not only to resolve disputes but also to steer behaviour in a particular direction; every step taken in

the family domain may, directly or indirectly, affect choices concerning marriage, divorce, having children, and cohabitation (Dnes & Rowthorn, 2002; Amato, 2010; Brinig, 2011). Nor is this relationship one-directional: law sometimes opens the way for an existing social tendency and sometimes follows behind it. Moreover, the effect of a rule is often determined less by its text than by the meaning people attach to it. People's compliance with the law depends largely on their seeing it as legitimate and just; fear of punishment alone does not produce lasting compliance (Tyler, 2006). For this reason, understanding a regulation's real effect on the family requires attention both to its text and to how it is perceived in society. The field data of the present study aim precisely to shed light on this layer of perception.

A relatively underexplored aspect of the gender literature is the changing social position of men. A body of literature arguing that men, too, face new problems in many areas—from education to working life and from marriage to parenthood—has gained ground in recent years (Benatar, 2012; Reeves, 2022). Some authors note that men who withdraw from the labour force tend also to withdraw from family life (Eberstadt, 2022); others stress that young men experience problems of purpose, identity, and belonging (Farrell & Gray, 2018). In the legal domain, it is argued that masculinity and men's roles should be examined not only through privileges but also through obligations and, at times, victimhood (Collier, 2010; Dowd, 2010). This approach does not claim that women's rights are unnecessary; it argues that legal regulations should be constructed in a balanced way for all parties. A pattern frequently recounted in the field interviews is that some men feel helpless in the face of legal processes and over time give up reacting; this resembles the pattern termed “learned helplessness” in the psychology literature (Seligman, 1975). Men's attitudes toward the family have become a variable of direct interest to the present study with respect to the avoidance of marriage and anxieties about the family's future.

Gender is one of the key concepts of the present study. In its simplest sense it denotes how the roles of femininity and masculinity are defined by society; gender policies, in turn, encompass the legal, administrative, and social practices that states, international organizations, and civil-society actors develop in this area. There is no consensus on the content of the concept. One approach reads it as the expansion of individual freedoms, while another questions its effects on family structure and social cohesion (Verloo, 2018; Corredor, 2019). The study uses these concepts not with a preconceived judgement but with regard to the differing views in the literature. Its principal interest, moreover, lies less in the concepts themselves than in the meanings people attach to them and to the family—for what guides behaviour is most

often not objective tables but how the individual interprets reality.

Among the concepts that occupy a special place in the study's conceptual framework is family stability. Family stability cannot be measured by divorce rates alone. A formally subsisting marriage may carry severe problems of trust, whereas in a legally dissolved relationship the parties may sustain a healthy bond. Stability therefore comprises several dimensions, such as trust between spouses, the sustainability of shared life, the healthy development of children, and mutual responsibility (Regnerus, 2017; Wilcox, 2024). Participants' particular emphasis on the concepts of trust and fidelity in the field interviews has moved this multidimensional character of stability to the centre of the research. This dimension, invisible in statistical tables, is often decisive for understanding the family's actual condition.

One of the conspicuous gaps in the existing literature is the scarcity of studies comparing Europe and Türkiye within the same framework. Research on Europe largely examines its own internal dynamics; that on Türkiye generally remains within the framework of national law and social structure. Yet between the two there is intense migration, trade, and cultural exchange spanning many years; debates in the field of family, women's rights, and gender are directly affected by developments of European origin. By contrast, Türkiye's distinctive historical and cultural ground shapes the same debates in different ways (Saraceno, 2016; Arat & Pamuk, 2019). It would be misleading to assume that a tendency observed in Europe will produce exactly the same outcome in Türkiye; yet globalization and digital communication bring different societies face to face with similar debates. A second gap is that the literature most often makes do with official statistics and institutional data and gives insufficient place to individuals' perceptions. A third gap is the predominance of short-term research and the scarcity of observations spread over a long period. The present study seeks to respond to all three gaps at once: to offer a comparative, perception-focused, and long-term perspective.

The origins of the research go back to 2012, the period in which the texts of the Istanbul Convention and Law No. 6284 began to be examined article by article. The years between 2012 and 2018 were largely a period of understanding, observing, and making sense of what was taking place. During these years, long and intensive conversations were conducted in many cities of Türkiye and with persons of Turkish origin coming from Europe. In the 2018–2025 period, the observations were turned into a more regular field study; unstructured interviews were conducted both in Türkiye and in Europe, and extensive conversations were also held with citizens living in Europe who came to Türkiye. In the

European leg, a total of 300 persons were interviewed in twenty-five cities of ten countries—nine of them members of the European Union—across two separate periods (2019 and 2024–2025). In the Turkish leg, a total of 1,500 persons were spoken with throughout 2018–2025 in four cities of differing social and economic characteristics (Ankara, Erzurum, Istanbul, Kocaeli). No distinction of sex or education was observed in the interviews, and persons in the 20–80 age range were included. The conversations centred on the family as an institution, trust and fidelity between spouses, legal regulations, and assessments of gender policies.

The data rest on unstructured interviews conducted in everyday conversational settings, without adherence to a fixed, pre-prepared questionnaire, and on the notes kept during these conversations. Participants took part in the conversations voluntarily. For an observational study of this nature, ethics committee approval is not required; throughout the research no information capable of revealing participants' identities was recorded, and no ethical violation was committed. Unstructured interviewing has its own limits: the findings make no claim to statistical representation and reflect participants' perceptions and assessments. Perception and objective reality may not always coincide exactly. Yet perception is itself a subject of inquiry in its own right, since people often construct their behaviour according to the reality they perceive. For this reason, the field findings have been read together with the literature and official data, so that the interpretations rest on firmer ground.

One of the tendencies long observed in European societies is the loosening of the expectation of fidelity between spouses. In the interviews it was recounted that the existence of couples who, while continuing their marriage, also turn extramarital relationships into a way of life is increasingly regarded as ordinary; the perception in this direction rose in the European sample from about eighteen per cent in 2019 to twenty-five per cent in 2024–2025. A narrower and more particular form of this—the pursuit of satisfaction based on swapping spouses or partners—is becoming distinct within a small but growing segment: the visibility of this orientation, at about seventeen per thousand (1.7 per cent) in 2019, rose to twenty-one per thousand (2.1 per cent) in 2024–2025. Although the figures are modest, their direction is striking in showing which way the norms of relationships are moving. A similar change accords with the literature examining the transformation of the concepts of commitment and intimacy (Regnerus, 2017; Inglehart, 2018). In Türkiye, tendencies in this direction remain far more limited but are nonetheless slowly becoming distinct; the perception that extramarital relationships are maintained alongside marriage rose in this sample from about three per cent in 2018 to seven per cent in 2025. This picture leaves open the interpretation that a cultural change maturing

in Europe is reflected in Türkiye in a delayed and attenuated form.

The field data point to a striking contrast between the two societies. In the European sample, participants assessed the condition of the family largely negatively and foregrounded gender-based conflict and infidelity as the elements most threatening to the family. In the Turkish sample, by contrast, the family was found relatively healthier, yet legislation was most often cited as the principal source of threat. In other words, in Europe the concern gathers chiefly around the dissolution of relationship norms, whereas in Türkiye the effect of legal regulations comes to the fore. This contrast shows that the perception of threat to the family is strong in both societies but is fed from different sources. The study's comparative question gains its meaning precisely here: why is a similar concern attributed to different causes in different societies?

The principal aim of the research is to understand how perceptions of gender policies are shaped around the family in Europe and Türkiye. The study proceeds around three main questions. First, how do participants assess the present condition of the family? Second, how is the effect of gender policies and related legal regulations on family relationships perceived? Third, is there a marked difference between Europe and Türkiye with respect to these perceptions? These main questions are accompanied by subsidiary questions investigating the effect of participants' age, country, immediate environment, and observational experience on their assessments: In what direction is the perception of intra-family fidelity and trust changing? How do legal regulations affect family relationships? Which risks do participants foreground for the future of the family? Together, the questions constitute the study's analytical framework.

Within the framework of these questions, one main hypothesis and subsidiary hypotheses dependent on it have been developed. The main hypothesis is that, as critical perceptions of gender policies strengthen, the conviction that the family is weakening rises together with them. The first subsidiary hypothesis holds that negative assessments of legal regulations lower the perception of intra-family trust and stability. The second subsidiary hypothesis assumes that participants in Europe assess the family more negatively than those in Türkiye. The third subsidiary hypothesis argues that anxieties about the family's future are linked to tendencies regarding marriage and having children. The fourth subsidiary hypothesis anticipates that assessments of the effect of legislation on the family differ significantly from country to country. These propositions are not truths accepted in advance but assumptions to be tested. In the social sciences, the falsification of a hypothesis is as valuable as its confirmation;

for this reason, alternative explanations are also given place throughout the study.

The study adopts a perspective that brings together the fields of law, sociology, family studies, demography, and social policy. Because the family is a multifaceted reality, explaining it within the bounds of a single discipline often proves inadequate. Legal regulations affect family relationships, economic conditions shape marital decisions, and cultural norms determine behaviour within the household. Studies in the literature likewise show that multivariate models yield more successful results in explaining family transformation (Cherlin, 2010; Smock & Schwartz, 2020). For this reason, the study is, rather than a narrow inquiry measuring the effect of a particular regulation, a broad assessment aimed at understanding the family's place within a changing social ground. Such an approach also allows the findings to be read meaningfully across different disciplines.

Transformation in the family concerns not only spouses; it also closely affects the future of children and social solidarity. Many studies have shown that divorce, prolonged intra-family tension, and parental separation can leave a mark on children's emotional development, educational life, and social adjustment (Fagan & Churchill, 2012; Bernardi & Mortelmans, 2018). There is no single view in the literature on the effects of different family forms; nonetheless, there is a strong tendency toward the view that a stable family environment is an important factor in children's development. Studies arguing that strong family structures nourish social trust and solidarity support this line (Wilcox, 2024). Because the family is the place where the individual forms his or her first relationship of trust, the erosion of trust within the family may also affect the stock of social trust and solidarity; studies drawing attention to the long-term consequences of growing isolation and the weakening of civic ties share this concern (Putnam, 2000). The frequent prominence of the themes of trust and fidelity in the field interviews shows that the debate on the family is not confined to the individual level but is intertwined with the future of children and social stability.

With all this, the study aims to contribute both to academic debate and to public policy. Conversations about the family often proceed in the shadow of political and ideological polarization, which makes sound assessment difficult. Yet such headings as the future of the family, women's rights, the social position of men, the development of children, and social solidarity concern a broad public and deserve to be addressed in as data-grounded a manner as possible. The aim of this text is not to vindicate one side but to render visible participants' assessments and their social reflections. It is not claimed that the findings represent the whole of society; they are nonetheless taken to offer important clues for understanding

the perceptions present in particular social segments. The study's subsequent sections are organized as follows: the second section reviews the literature on the family, gender policies, men's studies, and demographic transformation; the third section presents the theoretical framework; the fourth section explains the research method; the fifth section sets out the field findings; the sixth section discusses the findings in the light of the literature; and the seventh section presents the conclusions and recommendations. In this way, the multifaceted relationship among the family, legal regulations, and social transformation is assessed in an integrated manner through a Europe–Türkiye comparison.

2. Literature Review

The family is among the institutions that the social sciences have engaged most intensively over the past three decades. This interest rests not on abstract curiosity but on a concrete observation: marriage rates decline, the age at first marriage rises, fertility falls, divorces increase, and individual preferences increasingly take precedence over the shared obligations of the household. Lesthaeghe's theory of the second demographic transition is the most influential attempt to gather these scattered trends within a single framework; in his account, Western societies are moving from a child-centred and relatively stable marriage pattern toward a relationship pattern that privileges self-realisation and autonomy (Lesthaeghe, 2010). Reading the same period, Cherlin argues that marriage has not disappeared but that its meaning has changed: marriage is no longer a point of departure but a marker of having attained a certain standard of living—a kind of status symbol—and, moreover, this “deinstitutionalisation” is felt most acutely among lower-income groups (Cherlin, 2010). Esping-Andersen and Billari, for their part, move the debate from a purely cultural explanation onto an institutional footing; for them, change in family behaviour is tied to women's labour-force participation and the rebalancing of gender norms, and once that balance settles, even a recovery in fertility becomes possible (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015). What emerges at the very first step is this: the field is split in two over whether to read the same numerical trend as “the inevitable outcome of individualisation” or as “a process that can be steered through policy,” and this division pervades the entire literature.

The second-demographic-transition literature is itself riven by fault lines, and the field is difficult to grasp without seeing them. Lesthaeghe's value-centred explanation ties the transformation to the displacement of material concerns by the values of autonomy and self-realisation; that is, mindsets change first and behaviour follows. The institutional explanation represented by Esping-Andersen and Billari largely reverses this causality: the fall in fertility is less a value

choice than the result of a half-completed equality transition in which women bear the double burden of work and home, and the picture can change once institutions support men's domestic contribution and care services (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015). The practical implications of these two readings are diametrically opposed; one treats the transformation as an irreversible cultural drift, the other as an equation open to policy design. This is precisely where the present study is positioned, because field data alone do not resolve this theoretical choice; they can, however, show which explanation aligns more closely with people's own narratives.

A natural corollary of this distinction is the question of how family stability is to be measured. The divorce rate is misleading on its own; a marriage that persists on paper may harbour deep mistrust, while a union legally dissolved may turn into a functioning cooperation between the parties. For this reason, the literature tends to assess stability together with relational criteria such as trust between spouses, the sharing of responsibility, the level of conflict, and children's development (Amato, 2010). The OECD's comparative study shows that there are consistent links between family integrity and educational attainment, income, and child well-being (OECD, 2011). McLanahan and Percheski, in turn, connect the matter to the inequality debate; in their account, differentiation in family structure can become a mechanism that transmits disadvantage from one generation to the next, with poverty accumulating in segments where single-parent households are concentrated (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). On the protective-factors side, there are studies indicating that the time and joint investment devoted to a relationship nourish marital quality; Wilcox and Dew show the association between the quality time couples spend together and commitment and stability (Wilcox & Dew, 2012). Wilcox further argues that strong family ties nourish not only the individual but also the surrounding network of solidarity (Wilcox, 2024). By contrast, another strand examining the same data reads what is happening not as dissolution but as diversification; the family is not disappearing but changing form. This very tension between the two readings also accounts for the productivity of the literature.

At the heart of the family debate stands the concept of gender. In its plainest definition, the concept holds that roles relating to femininity and masculinity are socially constructed rather than biologically given; gender policies, in turn, encompass the legal and administrative arrangements that states, international organisations, and civil actors develop in this domain. Yet there is no consensus on the boundaries of the concept. On one side are approaches that equate it with the expansion of individual freedoms; on the other, approaches that interrogate its indirect effects on family structure. Corredor analyses how the discourse of "gender ideology" is

produced and how it has become the symbolic glue of a new countermovement on a global scale (Corredor, 2019). Kováts shows that the concept has turned into a symbol of ever-widening ideological battles in Europe, and that the debate often detaches from concrete policies and slides toward the axis of identity (Kováts, 2018). The studies compiled by Kováts and Põim reveal how conservative and far-right parties have turned this discourse into a shared language of mobilisation (Kováts & Põim, 2015). Verloo's comparative volume emphasises that opposition to equality is not uniform but harbours many forms of opposition that vary from country to country (Verloo, 2018). Case, descending to the concept's roots in the idea of "complementarity," reminds us that, given its religious background, the debate cannot be explained by current politics alone (Case, 2016). Grzebalska, Kováts, and Pető, for their part, argue that "gender" has become an umbrella term gathering discontent with the neoliberal order (Grzebalska, Kováts & Pető, 2017). This conceptual expansion also explains why the term sits at the centre of such a tense debate.

The conceptual tension turned, over the past decade, into a movement visible across Europe. The studies compiled by Kuhar and Paternotte show that country cases which appear independent of one another have in fact developed a shared language and a shared repertoire of opposition (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). In another work, the two authors note that behind these reactions lie not merely ideological motives but also concrete anxieties produced by rapid change in family structure (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). Graff and Korolczuk link the matter to populism; in their account, gender opposition has become an instrument mobilising the anger that broad segments feel toward globalisation and elites (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Along the same lines, Graff, Kapur, and Walters show how gender debates have become intertwined with the rise of the "global right" (Graff, Kapur & Walters, 2019). Roggeband and Krizsán, in turn, draw attention to the constricting effect of the debate on civic space; opposition to equality policies also restricts freedom of association in some countries (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2021). Krizsán, Roggeband, and Zeller, by examining support for and opposition to the Istanbul Convention comparatively, explain why the convention has become the focus of such intense polarisation (Krizsán, Roggeband & Zeller, 2024). The convention thereby stands out as a common junction binding the European and Turkish debates; this also constitutes one of the grounds for reading the two contexts within the same framework.

A less-examined wing of the gender debate focuses on the condition of men; but this wing is sharply divided within itself, and folding its two poles under a single heading is misleading. At one pole lies the critical strand often referred to in academic parlance as the "men's rights" discourse. Benatar argues that

some of the disadvantages men face in modern societies are insufficiently visible in public debate (Benatar, 2012). Reeves documents with data the declining position of men across domains from education to employment and proposes treating this as a social-policy problem (Reeves, 2022). Eberstadt shows that men who detach from the labour force also drift away from family ties (Eberstadt, 2022). Farrell and Gray point to the deepening void of purpose and belonging among young men in particular (Farrell & Gray, 2018). At the sharper edges of this strand stand Nathanson and Young's indictments of the legal system, Sommers's defence of equity feminism, and Paglia's provocative cultural critique (Nathanson & Young, 2015; Sommers, 2013; Paglia, 2017). At the other pole lies the academic tradition that examines masculinity critically, much of it in dialogue with feminism. Connell and Messerschmidt's concept of "hegemonic masculinity" provides the roof of this field (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005); Connell later carries the matter to a global scale (Connell, 2014); Hearn reads masculinity within transnational processes (Hearn, 2015); Collier and Dowd discuss the relationship between law and masculinity along the axes of both privilege and obligation (Collier, 2010; Dowd, 2010). Messner describes the fork in the road between "men's rights" and pro-feminist men's movements (Messner, 2016); Flood, for his part, evaluates programmes aimed at engaging men in violence prevention (Flood, 2019). The conflict between these two approaches is among the most productive lines of debate in the field and shows that it is insufficient to read men's experience solely through privilege or solely through victimhood.

A sub-strand of this wing, concentrating in particular on education and boys, renders family transformation visible as a matter that will span generations. Reeves explains boys' falling behind girls in school achievement through developmental and institutional factors that come into play at an early age, and argues that this later affects the capacity for marriage and parenthood as well (Reeves, 2022). Sommers raised the debate over education policies neglecting boys' needs early on and updated this view in her revised work (Sommers, 2015). Farrell and Gray, too, associate the loss of purpose among young men with the absence of the father, the lack of role models, and the influence of the digital environment (Farrell & Gray, 2018). The shared inference of these studies is that social transformation profoundly affects not only women but also men; the construction of the family debate around a single sex would therefore remain analytically incomplete. At the same time, this same literature also carries the risk of overstating the problem; it is therefore important to distinguish on what data the claims rest.

The point where these lines intersect most tensely is domestic violence and protection policies. The dominant approach

rightly prioritises the protection of women; by contrast, a literature seeking to render male victimisation visible has flourished in recent years. Hines and Douglas document the existence of violence directed from women toward men and the health problems of these men (Hines & Douglas, 2010; Hines & Douglas, 2015). Douglas and Hines reveal the blockages male victims encounter with institutional mechanisms when seeking help (Douglas & Hines, 2016; Douglas, Hines & McCarthy, 2012). Bates shows that these experiences often remain invisible because they are not believed (Bates, 2020). Scott-Storey and colleagues, reviewing the studies in the field critically, conclude that men's experience has been systematically under-examined (Scott-Storey et al., 2023). In the European case, the Portuguese study by Machado, Hines, and Matos reveals the difficulties male victims face in accessing services (Machado, Hines & Matos, 2016); Tsui, as well as Taylor and colleagues, examine the reservations that arise in the help-seeking process (Tsui, 2014; Taylor et al., 2022); Huntley and colleagues' systematic review maps these barriers comprehensively (Huntley et al., 2019). Lombard's edited handbook, too, gathers the multivocal point the field has reached (Lombard, 2021). The shared lesson of this accumulation is that the one-sided construction of domestic-violence policies may remain analytically incomplete; the necessity of protection and the obligation to see all forms of victimisation must be observed at the same time.

The intricacy of this area stems largely from the problem of measurement, and this aspect is often overlooked. Straus argues that research conducted with the conflict tactics scale points to the possibility that, in some relationships, violence may be reciprocal; this "symmetry" claim is the most contested finding in the field (Straus, 2011). Dutton, contending that the one-sided construction of the dominant theoretical framework weakens explanatory power, calls for the matter to be rethought (Dutton, 2012). Anderson, precisely at this point, poses a cautionary question: without sufficiently asking the question "why," the field leaves intent and context aside and looks only at the number of incidents, thereby oversimplifying the meaning of violence (Anderson, 2013). Stemple and Meyer show how sensitive victimisation statistics are to choices of definition and method; when the measurement instrument changes, the distribution of victimisation changes strikingly as well (Stemple & Meyer, 2014). The lesson that follows is that numbers are never "bare"; behind every measurement lies a definition, and behind every definition a point of view. This also explains why qualitative data—in which intent and context can be seen—need to be added alongside quantitative data.

Another layer of the debate in the family domain is the relationship between law and society. Law does not merely

resolve disputes; it also steers behaviour. But this steering is not unidirectional. The law-and-economics studies compiled by Dnes and Rowthorn show that rules concerning marriage and divorce visibly alter individuals' incentives, while existing social trends also shape the law (Dnes & Rowthorn, 2002). Brinig treats the family as a "covenant" and argues that legal arrangements may strengthen this relational ground just as they may weaken it (Brinig, 2011). Amato, for his part, in assessing the course of divorce research, reminds us that measuring the effects of legal change is far more arduous than it appears (Amato, 2010). The methodological principle that follows is clear: asserting that a given regulation single-handedly produces a particular social outcome requires caution. The relationship is reciprocal and dynamic; individuals' assessments of particular legislation should therefore be read not directly as items of "reality" but as data of social perception. Yet these perceptions are themselves an object of research in their own right, because people often act according to the reality they perceive rather than objective reality—and the consequences of that action are entirely real.

A natural extension of the family-stability debate is children. Fagan and Churchill compile evidence that family breakdown leaves traces across a broad area extending from a child's educational success to psychological development (Fagan & Churchill, 2012). The studies compiled by Bernardi and Mortelmans address, from a life-course perspective, the structural difficulties that children growing up in single-parent households encounter (Bernardi & Mortelmans, 2018). At the same time, an honest summary of the field also requires acknowledging that the effects are not homogeneous; the level of conflict, economic resources, and the quality of post-separation parenting are variables that determine the outcome, and the same structural situation leaves different traces in different children. McLanahan and Percheski's emphasis on inequality re-enters here; family structure is one of the channels through which disadvantage is transmitted (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). OECD data, too, support the link between child well-being and family integrity (OECD, 2011). In the end, change in the family institution concerns not only spouses but the coming generation as well; this removes the matter from being a purely private question of preference and turns it into a question of social policy.

Another axis that has come to the fore in the European literature in recent years is the change in the meaning ascribed to marriage and sexuality. Regnerus argues that, in the process he terms the "cheapening" of sex, the bond among marriage, commitment, and monogamy has loosened (Regnerus, 2017); in his work discussing the future of faith-based marriage, he descends to the cultural roots of this dissolution (Regnerus, 2020). Smock and Schwartz regard the diversification of family forms as one of the defining features of modern society

(Smock & Schwartz, 2020). Blankenhorn, for his part, draws attention to another face of the same diversification; he cautions that the erosion of marriage's public and institutional character may produce long-term social consequences (Blankenhorn, 2007). Stacey interprets the same diversification as a positive flexibility and opposes the notion of "the one correct family" (Stacey, 2011); Rosenfeld, by examining couples' relationship durations in the era of same-sex marriage, shows that different forms of union do not diverge in terms of stability as much as is supposed (Rosenfeld, 2014). A more contested edge of this diversification is constituted by the loosening of exclusivity between spouses and the growing visibility of consensual polygamous/multi-partner relationship forms. Hauptert and colleagues reveal that, in large samples, a non-negligible proportion of adults have at some point in their lives experienced a consensually non-monogamous relationship (Hauptert et al., 2017). A recent study conducted in Belgium with a highly representative sample shows that non-monogamous practices are more widespread in the general population than is supposed and have increased especially among younger generations (Van Den Noortgate et al., 2025). Rodrigues's review, in turn, discusses the gap between society's negative perception of these practices and the experiences of those who live them (Rodrigues, 2024). These studies indicate that the norm of fidelity between spouses is being renegotiated in Western societies, and that this renegotiation still harbours large gaps in terms of both its measurement and the assessment of its social consequences. The comparison of Europe and Türkiye with respect to the perception of fidelity falls precisely within this gap.

Behind this transformation there often lies an overlooked role of religion and secularisation. Inglehart shows that, in post-industrial societies, as religious bonds loosen, value systems shift profoundly, and traditional family morality gives way to values of autonomy and self-realisation (Inglehart, 2018). Wilcox and Wolfinger, by examining the relationship of religious participation with marital quality and stability across different communities, reveal that faith can still serve an important binding function (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016). Regnerus, in discussing the narrowing sphere of influence of faith-based marriage, shows another face of the same process (Regnerus, 2020). Case, descending to the conceptual roots of the matter, reminds us that family and gender debates are intertwined with the religious doctrine of "complementarity" (Case, 2016). When these studies are read together, it becomes clear that family transformation must be explained not only through economics and law but also through change in the world of meaning and in bonds of faith. This dimension also illuminates a significant part of the differences between Europe and Türkiye, because the secularisation trajectory of

the two contexts and the weight of religion in everyday life diverge markedly.

The population-level counterpart of all these trends is the demographic decline that Europe has long debated. In many countries, fertility runs below the population's self-replacement threshold; the population is ageing and the labour force is shrinking. Lesthaeghe's second-demographic-transition framework is the principal approach establishing this link between family behaviour and population dynamics (Lesthaeghe, 2010). Esping-Andersen and Billari note that the transformation will, in the long run, directly affect the sustainability of the welfare state (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015). Eberstadt's work on men detached from the labour force completes this picture from the standpoint of the labour market; the increase in non-working men produces not only economic but also demographic and familial consequences (Eberstadt, 2022). The family is thereby positioned not merely as a matter of individual happiness but also as a domain of public policy concerning the future of states. The fact that the same trends are observed in Türkiye with a different intensity—the rising age at marriage, the decline in fertility—makes carrying this framework into the local context meaningful.

Alongside demographic and legal explanations, cultural values, too, are determinative; yet this transformation does not follow a straight line. England, Levine, and Mishel reveal that progress toward gender equality has slowed in recent years and has even halted in certain areas; this picture, referred to as the “stalled revolution,” points to the gap between equality's gains on paper and its reality in everyday life (England, Levine & Mishel, 2020). Harkness and Waldfogel document, comparatively across seven industrialised countries, the lasting gap that having children creates in women's wages; this “motherhood penalty” makes concrete why the discourse of equality does not find its full counterpart (Harkness & Waldfogel, 2003). Hakim, with the preference theory that holds women's preferences not to be uniform, objects to some assumptions of equality policies; in her view, a significant proportion of women consciously choose a family-centred life (Hakim, 2011). Walby, by contrast, in discussing the future of feminism, foregrounds the institutionalised gains of the equality struggle and its continuing necessity (Walby, 2011). These two poles render visible how contested the cultural ground of family and gender policies is; the matter is a contest not only over numbers but also over the meaning ascribed to those numbers.

There is a common blind spot on which all this literature dwells: the dimension of perception. In a domain such as the family, which rests directly on human relationships, studies often lean on official statistics, legal texts, and institutional

data; individuals' everyday assessments of marriage, fidelity, trust, and law, however, remain outside the statistical tables. Yet what people think, as much as why they think so, steers social behaviour; belief or disbelief in the fair operation of a legal regulation may produce consequences independent of that regulation's purpose on paper. Huntley and colleagues' systematic review and Bates's research show that the experience people recount in their own words reveals dynamics that numerical data cannot capture (Huntley et al., 2019; Bates, 2020). For this reason, interest in unstructured interviews, in-depth interviews, and long-term field observation has grown in recent years. Qualitative data do not invalidate quantitative data; they render visible what the latter cannot see and become indispensable, in particular, in the study of phenomena such as fidelity, trust, or confidence in the law—subjective, yet objective in their consequences.

Turning to Türkiye, the domestic literature on family and gender regulations has taken shape largely around the Istanbul Convention and Law No. 6284. Kızılırmak examines the legal nature of protective measures in detail and points in particular to the contested areas that arise in the implementation of these measures (Kızılırmak, 2020). Bölükbaşı, comparing the relationship between the convention and the law, addresses the problems that emerge in implementation (Bölükbaşı, 2022). These legal analyses show that the regulations must be assessed not only by their normative aims but also by the outcomes they produce, and that issues such as declaration-based protection orders, durations of removal from the home, and financial obligations are intensely debated in the public sphere. Studies examining the discursive dimension of the debate, in turn, show the depth of the polarisation: Çoban Keneş and Kocabay-Şener find that, during the withdrawal process, even newspapers of diametrically opposed ideological positions converged—albeit for different reasons—on the discourse that “the convention harms Türkiye” (Çoban Keneş & Kocabay-Şener, 2023). Gezgin examines the development of anti-gender movements in Türkiye in their relationship with the academy and shows that the matter does not fit into the legal domain alone (Gezgin, 2024). Arat and Pamuk, for their part, draw attention to the distinctive political and cultural dynamics of Türkiye's recent social transformation and recall the importance of this locality (Arat & Pamuk, 2019). All this shows that, in the Turkish case, family, law, and gender policies are intertwined and form a domain too layered to be resolved with the tools of a single discipline.

Despite this broad accumulation, two distinct gaps stand out. The first is the comparative gap. Studies on Europe mostly close in on the continent's internal dynamics; studies on Türkiye close in on national law and social structure. Yet Saraceno shows that family policies, as the same institution,

can produce different outcomes in different societies, and that comparison is therefore unavoidable; “familialism,” though referred to by the same word, works quite differently across different welfare regimes (Saraceno, 2016). Arat and Pamuk, too, emphasise that Türkiye does not share the same dynamics as Europe; this means that assuming a trend in Europe will be repeated identically in Türkiye would be mistaken (Arat & Pamuk, 2019). Even so, globalisation, digitalisation, and the spread of international norms bring different societies face to face with similar pressures; this makes reading the two cases within the same framework both possible and necessary. What matters is a gaze that can see the two together, without turning similarities into a forced identity or differences into an unbridgeable chasm.

The second gap is one of method and perspective. The number of studies that address the triangle of family, gender, and law through individuals’ perception—moreover, without remaining confined to a single country and with an observation spread over years rather than a short cross-section—is rather small. Short-term research yields the photograph of a particular moment; long-term observation, by contrast, renders visible the direction and pace of change. Data gathered through unstructured interviews in different years and different countries offer the possibility of capturing both the perception of a particular period and how that perception has shifted over time. The joint assessment of interviews conducted in Europe in two separate periods together with observations spread over years in Türkiye is, in this respect, among the rare approaches in the literature. Such a design also has its limitations; unstructured interviews make no claim to representativeness, and their generalisability is limited. Nevertheless, the aim is not generalisation but to understand, in depth and comparatively, the everyday reflections of social transformation; this affords a level of comprehension that quantitative studies cannot reach.

To sum up, the existing literature shows that the relationship between the family and gender policies is contested and multilayered. On one side are studies foregrounding equality- and rights-based gains; on the other, critical studies drawing attention to the indirect effects of these policies on family structure, demography, child well-being, and social trust. The second-demographic-transition literature, the anti-gender literature, studies of masculinity and family law, the symmetry debate in the field of violence, and the literature on religious and value change each illuminate a different face of the same phenomenon; yet most of these are confined either to a single country or to a single type of data. A study that addresses Europe and Türkiye together, places individuals’ perceptions at the centre, and rests on field observations spread over years is a candidate to forge the link this fragmented picture leaves missing. Reading the relationship among fidelity, trust, legal

regulation, and gender policies comparatively corresponds to one of the most distinct gaps in the literature. In the following section, the theoretical approaches to be drawn upon in explaining these debates—the second demographic transition, social capital and the theory of social trust, the law–society interaction, and critical masculinity perspectives—will be addressed in detail in their relationships with one another.

3. Theoretical Framework

Explaining the transformation the family has undergone over the past half-century by appealing to a single cause or to the conceptual vocabulary of a single discipline is difficult. Trends in marriage and divorce, fertility levels, trust between spouses, attitudes toward legal regulations, and dispositions toward debates over gender are not independent of one another; each is the joint product of processes operating simultaneously at different societal layers. For this reason, the theoretical framework constructed here is designed not as a sequential listing of disconnected approaches but as an integrated model that links three levels. At the macro level lie the structural tendencies shaped by demographic transition, cultural value change, and welfare–family regimes. At the meso level, legal institutions, the legitimacy perceptions these institutions generate, and the economic logic of the family come into play. At the micro level, individualization, relationship norms, social capital, and trust shape an individual’s everyday choices and perceptions. Four core constructs recur throughout the framework: family stability (the sustainability of the bond between spouses, the sharing of responsibilities, and the environment provided for children); trust (across three layers—interpersonal, institutional, and generalized); legitimacy perception (a regulation’s being regarded not merely as legally valid but also as just and appropriate); and perceptual reality (behavior being driven less by events themselves than by the meaning ascribed to them). Because the field component of the study rests on a long-running process devoted, between 2012 and 2018, to understanding and observing the subject and, between 2018 and 2025, to gathering data through unstructured interviews, a framework capable of seeing all three levels at once was required. One point deserves emphasis: the theories addressed below function as interpretive lenses for reading participants’ perceptions and assessments. The aim is not to prove the validity of any particular theory but to render visible the intellectual foundations on which the views gathered in the field rest.

There is a classical answer to the question of why family change concerns not merely private life but society as a whole. Durkheim showed that social order rests on mechanisms of integration, which bind individuals to one another, and of regulation, which constrain behavior; when these mechanisms

weaken, a condition of normlessness—*anomie*—emerges (Durkheim, 1897/1951). The family is the institution in which both integration and regulation are experienced most intensely; consequently, from the standpoint of classical theory, the loosening of family bonds ceases to be a matter of individual preference and becomes an indicator bearing on social cohesion. The functionalist tradition extends this line. Parsons and Bales define the two basic functions of the modern family as the primary socialization of children and the emotional stabilization of the adult personality (Parsons & Bales, 1955). Many aspects of this approach are today contested—its rigid tethering of family roles to sex, in particular, has drawn justified criticism. Even so, the functionalist frame helps explain why participants in the field so frequently define the family as “the cornerstone of society,” the first setting in which values and trust are transmitted. The classical foundation establishes the common point of departure for the contemporary theories the study will later invoke: the family is the principal transmission belt between the individual and society, and every loosening of that belt produces upward social consequences.

The first contemporary anchor at the macro level is the Second Demographic Transition theory. Developed by Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa, this approach ties tendencies observed in Western societies since the 1960s—the postponement of marriage, the spread of nonmarital unions, the loosening of the link between marriage and childbearing, and the fall of fertility below the replacement level—to a shared transformation of values (van de Kaa, 1987; Lesthaeghe, 2010). At the core of the theory lies a shift in priorities whereby concerns for material security give way to expectations of individual autonomy, self-realization, and quality of life. Within this frame, marriage ceases to be the obligatory institutional mold of childrearing or economic solidarity and becomes one option contingent on the individual’s pursuit of satisfaction. In the European data, the widespread conviction that marriage rates are steadily declining while divorces are rising aligns with the tendency the theory identifies. The theory’s explanatory power is nonetheless not beyond dispute. Esping-Andersen and Billari argue that change in demographic behavior must be read not solely through value shifts but together with women’s labor-force participation, the renegotiation of gender roles, and the character of welfare-state policies (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015). Studies that take critical stock of the theory likewise note that in some countries the process does not follow the predicted sequence (Zaidi & Morgan, 2017). Here the theory’s principal value is that it provides a basis well suited to making sense of the timing gap observed between Europe and Türkiye: the transformation that began decades

earlier in European societies surfaces later and more modestly in Türkiye.

The second anchor, which concretizes at the micro-relational level the value shift underlying the demographic transition, comprises the theses of individualization and the transformation of intimacy. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim speak of a process of “institutionalized individualism” in which, in modern societies, the individual—released from traditional bonds—is compelled to construct his or her own life course; in this process the family ceases to be a given destiny and turns into a continually renegotiated domain of choice (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Giddens reads the same transformation through the concept of the “pure relationship”: the contemporary intimate bond has become one contingent less on external obligations than on the satisfaction the parties derive from each other, a bond for which no reason to continue remains once that satisfaction ends (Giddens, 1992). In the accompanying notion of “confluent love,” commitment is not a moral debt expected to last a lifetime but a continually revisable choice contingent on the persistence of mutual satisfaction. The normative weight fidelity has traditionally carried weakens within such a conception of the relationship, for commitment becomes a matter of calculation rather than of norm. This frame makes it possible to view one of the most frequently voiced concerns in the field—the erosion of perceptions of fidelity and trust—not as an individual failing but as a symptom of a structural shift in relationship norms. This loosening of relationship norms is also the common root of many of the tendencies the subsequent anchors will discuss.

A framework that explains more concretely the mechanism the pure-relationship thesis implies is the sexual-economics approach. Baumeister and Vohs treat the heterosexual relational sphere as a kind of exchange market and argue that values such as fidelity, commitment, or chastity strengthen or weaken according to conditions of supply and demand; they show that under conditions in which supply is abundant and cost is low, the expectation of commitment also relaxes (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). Carrying this analysis into modern Western societies, Regnerus argues that the process he calls the “cheapening” of sex has transformed the value placed on marriage and monogamy (Regnerus, 2017). This frame renders intelligible certain extreme forms observed in the field. For instance, it was observed that even among married individuals in European society a pursuit of gratification based on swapping spouses or partners has spread in a limited but discernible manner; this orientation, at roughly seventeen per thousand (1.7 percent) in the 2019 observations, rose to twenty-one per thousand (2.1 percent) in the 2024–2025 period. The low level of these figures indicates that the behavior remains exceptional; the steady upward direction, however, is consistent with the theoretical expectation that

fidelity, ceasing to be a moral norm, becomes indexed to satisfaction. Rather than condemning such tendencies as individual moral collapse, the sexual-economics approach allows them to be analyzed as products of the structural conditions of the relational market—an orientation consistent with the descriptive and nonjudgmental stance the study adopts.

The third anchor, which foregrounds the fact that relationship decisions have not only an emotional but also a calculative dimension, is the economics-of-the-family approach. Becker modeled decisions about marriage, divorce, and childbearing as choices in which individuals weigh expected benefits and costs, treating the family as a unit within which division of labor, specialization, and long-term investment take place (Becker, 1991). On this view, marriage resembles an investment that is difficult to reverse; when its expected return falls or its risk rises, individuals may avoid or postpone it. Lundberg and Pollak, analyzing marriage as an ongoing process of bargaining between spouses, show that external rules and options directly affect the parties' bargaining power (Lundberg & Pollak, 1996). At this point the law enters. Studies addressing the economic and social consequences of family law reveal that regulations such as protection orders, alimony, and the divorce regime reconstitute the incentive structure and the distribution of risk between spouses (Brinig, 2011; Dnes & Rowthorn, 2002). The fact that participants in the field increasingly assess the decision to marry in terms of "calculation," "risk," and "cost," and that they invoke economic uncertainty together with perceived legal risk, bears directly on this approach. Here, too, what is measured is not the objective outcome of the law but the growing tendency of individuals to regard the family as a risky investment.

These shifts in relationship norms and economic calculations are directly connected with the literature on family stability. The family-stability approach holds that marriage constitutes a resource not only for the happiness of spouses but also for children's development and for societal sustainability. In assessing the accumulated evidence on the effects of divorce and intra-family conflict on children, Amato shows that while stability is not the sole determinant, it carries a consistent effect on children's educational attainment, mental health, and social adjustment (Amato, 2010). McLanahan and Percheski note that differentiation in family structure reproduces social inequalities across generations (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). Reviews examining the difficulties faced by children raised in single-parent households also support this line (Bernardi & Mortelmans, 2018; Fagan & Churchill, 2012). One wing of this literature treats the weakening of the institution of marriage as a loss and foregrounds the contribution of strong family bonds to social solidarity (Wilcox, 2024; Regnerus, 2017; Blankenhorn, 2007).

Cherlin's thesis of the "deinstitutionalization of marriage" is likewise central to the same debate: marriage has ceased to be a powerful social template that governs behavior and has increasingly become a symbol of personal achievement and satisfaction (Cherlin, 2004, 2010). This literature is not monolithic, however; another wing reads the diversification of family forms as an expansion rather than a dissolution and argues that different family models, too, can be functional (Smock & Schwartz, 2020). Without deeming either side right in advance, the study aims, through this frame, to identify which theoretical debate the participants' tendency to assess family stability largely through "the future of children" and "social order" corresponds to.

The backbone of the meso level is formed by the sociology of law together with the theories of procedural justice and institutional legitimacy. Legal rules do not merely resolve disputes; they are also expressive instruments that direct behavior, shape expectations, and reconstitute social relations. Individuals' compliance with these regulations, and the trust they place in them, depends largely on perceptions of justice. According to Tyler's procedural-justice approach, people attend less to the outcome of a rule than to whether the process operates fairly; where the process is seen as fair, legitimacy and voluntary compliance are strengthened, whereas where it is seen as unfair, trust in the institution weakens (Tyler, 2006). Suchman's theory of legitimacy likewise emphasizes that a regulation's durability depends not only on its legal validity but on its being regarded by social actors as "appropriate and warranted" (Suchman, 1995). These concepts are well suited to making sense of the fact that, in the Türkiye sample, "legislation" is identified as the greatest threat to the family. The critical point here is that participants' assessments are treated not as an objective measurement of legal reality but as the expression of a legitimacy perception. The aim a regulation carries with respect to protecting women and the way that regulation is perceived in the field may not always coincide; the task of social science is precisely to render this distinction visible. The effect of law on the family thus becomes investigable not as a direct causal claim but as a matter of legitimacy operating through perception.

The phenomenon of trust necessitates the fourth anchor that links the micro level to the macro level—namely, the theories of social capital and social trust. Social capital denotes networks of trust, reciprocity, and solidarity among individuals and is conceived as a resource convertible into action (Coleman, 1988; Bourdieu, 1986). The family is the primary setting in which this resource is first produced and transmitted to subsequent generations; indeed, Coleman shows that closure within the family—that is, the integrity of the bond of trust among mother, father, and child—is decisive for the child's development (Coleman, 1988). Putnam argues

that the erosion of social trust and civic participation is a widespread tendency in modern societies and that this erosion affects many solidarity institutions, the family included (Putnam, 2000). Fukuyama, in turn, contends that the level of generalized trust in societies produces consequences extending to economic and institutional functioning (Fukuyama, 1995). This frame also makes it possible to distinguish trust across three layers: the interpersonal trust between spouses, the institutional trust placed in institutions (especially the law), and the generalized trust placed in society at large. Why the most frequently recurring theme in the field is “trust” becomes clearer through this distinction, for participants often link these three layers, associating the weakening of trust in a spouse with trust in both the law and society. Hesitation over marriage decisions and concerns about fidelity can thus be assessed, beyond individual psychology, as a problem of social capital.

That participants’ assessments of the family, marriage, and legal processes occupy a marked place in the study’s field findings necessitates the fifth anchor—critical men’s studies. This field argues that reading gender solely through women remains incomplete. Connell and Messerschmidt’s concept of hegemonic masculinity shows that masculinity, too, is a historically changing, internally conflicted, and renegotiable construct (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Studies examining the relationship between law and masculinity note that certain practices in family law may be perceived by men as imbalanced (Collier, 2010; Dowd, 2010). While Benatar argues that some of the problems men face in modern societies are insufficiently visible in academic and political debate (Benatar, 2012), Reeves contends that men’s new difficulties—extending from education and working life to family relations—should find the place they deserve in social policy (Reeves, 2022). In the literature on domestic violence, too, a strand has developed showing that one-sided explanations may fall short, that violence can take reciprocal forms in some relationships, and that male victims may face difficulties accessing support mechanisms (Straus, 2011; Hines & Douglas, 2015; Douglas & Hines, 2016; Scott-Storey et al., 2023; Bates, 2020). This literature is well suited to conceptualizing the “learned helplessness”—like conditions voiced by male participants in the field; at the root of the concept lies the individual’s abandoning effort altogether once convinced that the outcome cannot be changed (Seligman, 1975). The point to underscore is this: adopting this approach does not mean trivializing the victimization women experience. On the contrary, because the family is a structure resting on reciprocal relations, an analysis focusing on the experience of only one party cannot capture the whole of reality. The study, too, aims to see the experiences of men and women together rather than setting them against each other.

To understand the discursive frames within which attitudes toward gender policies take shape, the sixth anchor draws on the literature on anti-gender movements. Kuhar and Paternotte show that, in many European countries, movements opposing gender policies—though nourished by different traditions—construct a shared language and a shared ground of critique (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). Grzebalska, Kováts, and Pető argue that in these movements the concept of “gender” functions as a “symbolic glue” binding diverse discontent together (Grzebalska, Kováts & Pető, 2017; Kováts, 2018). Corredor, for her part, notes that debates surrounding gender ideology have produced new political cleavages in many countries (Corredor, 2019). Set against this critical frame, the literature defending gender policies argues that a substantial part of these objections is nourished by ideological reactions to equality gains and that the protection of women and rights-based approaches are indispensable (Walby, 2011; Verloo, 2018). The concept of the “gender regime” that Walby developed in earlier work offers a productive tool for comparison by arguing that patriarchy shifts in form from the private to the public sphere (Walby, 1990); for whereas Europe approximates a more public gender regime, Türkiye exhibits a transitional configuration. The comparative analysis of support for and opposition to the Istanbul Convention likewise reveals how alive this polarization is in both contexts (Krizsán, Roggeband & Zeller, 2024; Kováts & Pöim, 2015). The study accepts none of the sides of these debates as true in advance; it treats participants’ assessments as the everyday reflection of these discursive frames.

The seventh anchor is the cultural-evolution approach, which makes it possible to read value change at the level of generations and through cross-cultural diffusion. Inglehart and Welzel argue that economic development, rising educational levels, and improving security conditions move societies from traditional, survival-oriented values toward secular-rational and self-expression values (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Inglehart, 2018). This shift produces marked differentiation across generations on matters such as marriage, fidelity, and parenthood; indeed, the divergences observed in the field between younger and older age groups in their view of the family accord with this expectation. The cultural-evolution approach is also well suited to reading the difference between Europe and Türkiye not as a hierarchy of “backwardness” but as different positions along the same curve. The mechanism of this diffusion is completed by social-learning theory. Bandura shows that individuals learn their behaviors not only from their own experiences but also from the examples they observe in their surroundings and in the media (Bandura, 1986). With the spread of global communication media, relationship patterns emerging in one

society become visible more rapidly in others; that many participants in the field state that certain tendencies observed in Europe have over time appeared in Türkiye points to this process of learning and diffusion. Cultural change can thus be conceived neither as a purely internal maturation nor as a copy imposed from without, but as a process operating through observation, learning, and adaptation.

The possibility of comparing Europe and Türkiye within the same framework requires the eighth anchor: the comparative family- and welfare-regimes approach. This approach holds that, under similar global pressures, societies respond differently to the same process in accordance with their own historical, cultural, and institutional endowments. Distinguishing countries along an axis of “familialism by default,” “supported familialism,” and “de-familialization,” Saraceno and Keck show that the extent to which the state assumes family responsibilities varies profoundly from country to country (Saraceno & Keck, 2010; Saraceno, 2016). This typology explains why the same demographic tendency produces different outcomes under different regimes: in “familialism by default” regimes, where the state supports the family only weakly, family bonds remain strong out of necessity. Türkiye largely approximates this pattern. Esping-Andersen and Billari likewise emphasize that family demography is intertwined with welfare-state structures (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015). Studies noting that Türkiye’s social transformation does not share the same dynamics as Europe’s complete this line (Arat & Pamuk, 2019). To grasp the pattern specific to Türkiye, Kandiyoti’s concept of the “patriarchal bargain” is especially illuminating: individuals strike a balance between the securities and the constraints a given patriarchal order offers, and when that balance is shaken, both women and men confront new uncertainties (Kandiyoti, 1988). That the emphasis on family integrity and solidarity comes to the fore in the Türkiye sample, and the emphasis on individual choice in the European sample, is consistent with the two societies’ reliance on different family regimes and different forms of patriarchal bargain.

The meta-theoretical axis that holds all these lenses together and determines the study’s methodological stance is the understanding of perceptual reality. According to the Thomas theorem, when individuals define a situation as real, it is real in its consequences (Thomas & Thomas, 1928). Merton develops this idea through the concept of the “self-fulfilling prophecy”: even a groundless belief can produce its own reality once acted upon (Merton, 1968). This axis explains why the study measures not behaviors directly but perceptions of behaviors. The factual consequences of a legal regulation and the meaning individuals ascribe to that regulation may diverge; yet what guides behavior is most often the latter. For

instance, an individual’s avoidance of marriage because he perceives it as a “risky decision” is a social consequence independent of how objectively accurate that perception is. At this point the risk-society approach also enters: Beck argues that in modern societies individuals increasingly decide amid uncertainty and unpredictability, with traditional zones of security having weakened (Beck, 1992). The perception of the decision to form a family as a costly and hard-to-reverse risk can be considered together with the rising age at marriage and tendencies to avoid marriage. The frequent recurrence in the field of expressions such as “risk,” “uncertainty,” and “anxiety about the future” suggests that family decisions are made according to a logic grounded not in mere emotion but in a calculation of risk. The perceptual-reality axis thus brings all the theoretical lenses together on a common ground: the study aims not to render a final verdict on objective reality but to map systematically the perceptual world that actually guides social behavior.

This integrated framework also grounds the study’s hypotheses theoretically. Behind the principal hypothesis—the expectation that a strengthening of critical perceptions toward gender policies and an increasing conviction that the family is weakening rise together—lies the link between the discursive frame set out by the anti-gender literature and concern over family stability. The first auxiliary hypothesis, that negative assessments of legal regulations lower perceptions of intra-family trust and stability, is derived directly from the theories of procedural justice and institutional legitimacy, for a rule perceived as unjust erodes trust both in the institution and in the relationship that rule governs. The second auxiliary hypothesis, that the assessments of participants in Europe will be more negative than those in Türkiye, rests on the timing gap predicted by the Second Demographic Transition and comparative-familialism approaches; Europe is further along this curve. The third auxiliary hypothesis, that concerns about the family affect tendencies toward marriage and childbearing, arises at the intersection of the economics-of-the-family and risk-society approaches; as the family is perceived as a risky investment, the decision is postponed. The fourth auxiliary hypothesis, that assessments of legislation differ significantly across countries, is a direct consequence of differences in gender regime and family regime. The hypotheses are thus positioned not as arbitrary conjectures but as expectations logically derived from the framework, and they are tested in the findings section against this theoretical ground.

The internal tensions of such a multilayered framework must also be openly acknowledged. The value-centered explanation of the Second Demographic Transition theory and the cost-centered explanation of the economics of the family do not always point in the same direction; the individualization thesis

is read by some authors as a dissolution and by others as an emancipation. This study regards these tensions, rather than suppressing them, as an analytical resource, for the same field finding can often be illuminated through more than one lens, and this plurality enriches rather than weakens the explanation. A second point concerns causality. The framework asserts no one-directional or definitive cause-and-effect relationship at any level. Law shapes cultural values even as cultural values shape law; economic conditions transform family structure even as family structure alters economic behavior. This reciprocity makes it imperative to avoid one-directional explanations. Third, the study does not seek to declare one of the sides of the debate correct. Both approaches that deem the protection of women indispensable and approaches that draw attention to the unintended consequences of practices are placed on the same table to read participants' perceptions. This balance is also an indication that the study aims not at an ideological position but at understanding the world of social perception.

When these eight anchors and the perceptual-reality axis that encompasses them are considered together, an integrated model emerges, summarized in Figure 1. At the macro level, demographic transition, cultural value change, and comparative family regimes determine the general direction of family behavior. At the meso level, legal institutions, the legitimacy perception of these institutions, and the economic logic of the family serve as a filter that strengthens or breaks this direction. At the micro level, individualization, pure-relationship norms, sexual economics, social capital, and trust shape the individual's everyday choices and perceptions. Critical men's studies and the literature on anti-gender movements and gender regimes are intermediate links circulating among these levels, one explaining experience and the other discourse. The model's central proposition is that the transformation of the family cannot be reduced to a single cause; it is shaped within the reciprocal interaction of legal, cultural, demographic, economic, and psychological factors. Such a model makes it possible both to read the similarities and differences between Europe and Türkiye in the same language and to lift the field findings out of being scattered observations and tie them to a coherent interpretation. The findings presented in the following sections will be assessed in light of this framework; the theoretical framework will serve as a conceptual bridge between the findings and the discussion.

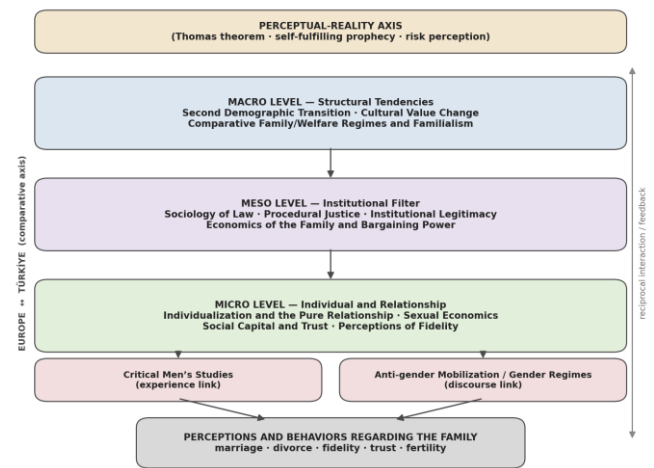


Figure 1. An integrated, multi-level theoretical model of family transformation.

4. Research Methodology

This study was designed as an exploratory and interpretive qualitative inquiry aimed at developing an in-depth understanding of how ordinary people perceive the transformation of the family institution, gender policies, and the legal regulations concerning the family. The conception of knowledge underpinning the study draws on the interpretivist tradition: it holds that social reality has no single, objective form and that reality is largely constituted through the meanings individuals attach to their own experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This premise carries a methodological corollary: if we wish to understand change relating to the family, we must first listen to how people themselves perceive that change, what they attribute it to, and why it troubles them. Indicators such as marriage, divorce, and fertility broadly reveal the direction of change; yet on their own they cannot account for the meaning people ascribe to the family, the trust they feel, or their unease about the future (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015). Rendering visible this domain, about which numerical tables remain silent, is possible only through a design that makes room for people's own words. For this reason, the study was built upon an unstructured field approach grounded in everyday conversations rather than upon structured surveys that lay claim to statistical representativeness. Rather than testing a predetermined hypothesis, the research followed a mode of reasoning that moves back and forth between the patterns emerging from the field and theoretical debates, proceeding from observation toward explanation.

Within this framework, the central research question is the following: How do individuals living in Europe and in Türkiye evaluate the family institution, marital fidelity, trust, and the legal regulations concerning the family? Three sub-

questions follow from this central question. First, how do participants define the present condition of the family institution and the threats it faces? Second, how do these perceptions change over time, particularly between the two successive field waves? Third, on which points do the European and Turkish samples converge, and on which do they diverge? The design of the study was conceived as a coherent whole in which every successive step is linked so as to serve these questions (Maxwell, 2013).

There are particular reasons for situating the study on a comparative footing. The transformation of the family institution is regarded as part of a broad process rooted in Europe that has, over time, spread to other societies; Türkiye, too, has taken its share of this process in terms of both demographic trends and legal regulations. Reading the two contexts side by side makes it possible to distinguish the trends common to both societies from the local particularities specific to each. This is precisely where the strength of the comparative qualitative approach lies: it renders visible how a similar phenomenon assumes different forms within different social structures (Ragin, 2014; Saraceno, 2016). Comparing two societies, however, is a task that demands care. Concepts such as “family,” “fidelity,” or “trust” may not carry the same connotations in every culture; comparison therefore requires attention to conceptual equivalence—that is, separate consideration of what the same word means in different contexts (Esser & Vliegthart, 2017). This concern was adopted from the outset: the European and Turkish data were first assessed within their own internal contexts and only thereafter opened to comparison through shared themes.

An honest account of the method requires making clear where the researcher began and how the subject was approached. The origins of the study reach back to December 2012, when the provisions of the Istanbul Convention and of Law No. 6284—its anchor in domestic law—were read and analyzed one by one. In that early period, the question occupying the researcher was the possible repercussions of these regulations on family relations. In qualitative research the researcher is herself a primary instrument of data collection and interpretation; the researcher’s background, expectations, and initial convictions are therefore part of the process and should be openly discussed rather than concealed (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002). Because the subject carries a heavy political and emotional charge, there is a genuine risk that the researcher’s strong initial convictions might overshadow the findings. Three measures were taken to limit this risk. First, the researcher’s own presuppositions were made explicit and, as far as possible, bracketed, with priority given to participants’ own statements. Second, accounts that conflicted with the initial expectations—that is, those that did not confirm these presuppositions—were deliberately sought out and recorded;

not neglecting disconfirming instances is among the principal safeguards against one-sided interpretation. Third, throughout the field notes the researcher’s own interpretations were kept separate from participants’ words, so that the provenance of each interpretation would remain traceable.

The research consists of two successive periods. The first period, covering 2012-2018, was a time not yet of systematic data collection but of an effort to grasp, make sense of, and observe the phenomenon. During these years the researcher conducted long, unstructured conversations with people from various walks of life in many cities of Türkiye and with Turkish citizens coming to Türkiye from Europe, while closely following developments in family policy, debates on gender, and family law. In the same period the relevant legislative texts were analyzed in detail, so that the relationship between official regulations and the narratives of everyday life became visible at an early stage. This preparatory period served as a foundation that shaped the questions and focal points of the subsequent fieldwork. The second period, covering 2018-2025, was the period of unstructured field research carried out in both Türkiye and Europe with the aim of obtaining scholarly data. Spread over a long span of time, this design made it possible to view social change not as a snapshot of a single moment but as an ongoing process; it is well established that shifts in values and attitudes can be tracked soundly only through such a long-term perspective (Inglehart, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The data on which the research rests come not from a single source but from several mutually complementary streams. The first is the field interviews conducted directly in Europe (three hundred people). The second is the field interviews conducted in Türkiye (one thousand five hundred people). The third is the interviews conducted with Turkish citizens who live in Europe and come to Türkiye, which fed into the European fieldwork (five hundred people). To these are added the legislative analysis carried out in the first period and the contextual information provided by publicly available demographic indicators. Using different sources together—that is, data triangulation—is a widely accepted way of grounding interpretation more securely in situations where a single source might be misleading (Patton, 2015). In this way, no conclusion was placed on the shoulders of a single interview group or a single type of data.

The European component of the research was carried out in two waves, in 2019 and in 2024-2025. The first wave was conducted in 2019 across twenty-three cities of ten countries in total, nine of which were members of the European Union, with Switzerland added to these. In the second wave, the core questions were taken up again in selected cities, among them Frankfurt, which had been visited previously; the number of

distinct cities visited thus reached twenty-five. This two-wave structure made it possible to pose the same questions at different times and thereby to track change. In the European component, unstructured interviews were conducted with three hundred people. Participants comprised individuals aged between twenty and eighty; without applying a predetermined quota for gender or educational status, an effort was made to reach as diverse a range of groups as possible. The sampling was not probability-based; it was constructed through a purposive and convenience-based approach in which accessible individuals who had something to say on the subject were included, in keeping with the aim of the research. In qualitative studies, the adequacy of a sample is measured not by number alone but by whether the collected data attain the information power needed to address the research question. The fact that, beyond a certain point, new accounts largely began to repeat earlier patterns indicated that the volume of data reached met this threshold (Malterud, Siersma & Guassora, 2016).

The Turkish component of the research was carried out between 2018 and 2025 in Ankara, Erzurum, İstanbul, and Kocaeli, and interviews were held with one thousand five hundred people. These four cities were selected with regard to their population sizes, their characteristics of receiving migration, and their capacity to represent different social fabrics. Participants again comprised individuals aged between twenty and eighty, of varying educational levels and from different occupations. In the interviews, in addition to assessments concerning the family institution, marital relations, divorce, fidelity, trust, and family law, participants' views on gender policies were also addressed. The interviews conducted with five hundred Turkish citizens who live in Europe and come to Türkiye for holidays did not stand in for the European sample; because these people know both societies from the inside, they served to test observations regarding European society at close range and to strengthen the framework of the interviews conducted there. Not remaining confined to the voice of a particular social segment has been a principle the research has observed from the outset (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021).

An unstructured interview technique was adopted in collecting the data. At the basis of this choice lies the fact that topics such as family, fidelity, and trust are too personal and too layered to be compressed into ready-made answer options. The unstructured interview allows people to recount their own life stories, reservations, and reasons within their own flow; this flexibility is decisive especially in researching sensitive and socially stigmatized topics (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Lee, 1993; Liangputtong, 2007). The interviews were conducted in their natural settings, in the atmosphere of an everyday conversation; the researcher opened the topic with

only a few framing questions and then left the direction of the account largely to the participant. The interviews were not audio- or video-recorded; instead, detailed field notes were kept during and immediately after the conversation. This choice was deliberate: it was considered both that a recording device would make participants reticent on sensitive topics and that the natural conversational setting should be preserved. As the ethnographic tradition also emphasizes, field notes kept promptly and meticulously are, in situations where recording is not possible or appropriate, a reliable data source in their own right (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). The analysis was carried out entirely on the basis of these notes, by hand, without recourse to any qualitative data software.

The framing questions that served as a gateway into the interviews were kept limited in number. These questions were posed in parallel in both contexts and were gathered around the following three headings: the extent to which the family institution in the relevant country was seen as sound and healthy; the condition of the level of marital fidelity; and what the greatest problem or threat facing the family institution was. In the first two questions, participants' assessments were obtained through a five-point verbal scale: "Excellent," "Good," "Average," "Poor," and "Terrible." The level to which each verbal step corresponds was defined at the outset; each step was tied to a band positioning the soundness of the family institution between zero and one hundred percent (Table 1). In the third question, participants were presented with a five-option list of threats—infidelity, lack of faith, legislation, sexism, and distrust—and which of these they emphasized was recorded. These few framing questions served as a skeleton that initiated the conversation and lent a common axis to comparison; the remainder of the account was left to the participant's own flow.

Table 1. Definition of the five-point verbal scale used in evaluating the family institution, by percentage bands

Verbal scale value	Soundness level of the family institution (0–100 band)
Excellent	81–100%
Good	61–80%
Average	41–60%
Poor	21–40%
Terrible	1–20%

Beyond the three framing questions, deeper themes that surfaced again and again throughout the unstructured conversations were also recorded. The erosion of trust in one's spouse and family, the avoidance of marriage and of having children, the unease that legal regulations were thought to create in intra-family relations, and perceptions concerning the visibility of extramarital relationships are foremost among these recurring themes. These themes were tracked by being taken up repeatedly over the years through the same questions, so that not only the picture at a given moment but also the direction of the trends was recorded. Since detailed findings concerning these themes are presented in the following section, the aim here is merely to indicate how data collection captured this depth.

The real value of the unstructured approach became evident in its capacity to bring to light infrequent phenomena, difficult to speak about, that ordinary surveys most often fail to capture. Foremost among these are the forms of partnership, increasingly visible in European society, based on the mutual exchange of spouses or partners. Such inclinations are phenomena difficult to measure with structured instruments, both because they are of low prevalence and because they are surrounded by privacy; yet they can be voiced in a conversational setting based on trust and free of pressure. The fact that the European component was designed in two waves made it possible to track even small stirrings in inclinations of such low prevalence; indeed, signs relating to this tendency, which stood at around seventeen per thousand (approximately 1.7%) in the 2019 wave, rose to a level of twenty-one per thousand (approximately 2.1%) in the 2024–2025 wave. This example demonstrates two things at once with respect to method: that sensitive phenomena can be grasped only through a flexible interview arrangement grounded in trust, and the capacity of repeated fieldwork to render visible small

but meaningful changes. The principal interest of the research, accordingly, lies not in the numerical magnitudes themselves but in their direction and trajectory.

A thematic analysis approach was adopted in analyzing the data collected. The process began with reading the field notes from beginning to end and repeatedly, so as to gain familiarity with the data as a whole. Subsequently, similar statements were brought together to form initial codes, these codes were gathered under more encompassing themes, and the themes were reviewed and named to reach their final form (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021; Saldaña, 2021). The family institution, marriage, fidelity, trust, legal regulations, social change, and expectations regarding the future constituted the principal categories of the analysis. On this path from coding to theme construction, various summarizing and matching matrices were used to organize and render the data visible, so that statements from different individuals, cities, and countries could be placed side by side and compared (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2020). The findings were assessed not through individual participant statements but through the trends recurring across different people, cities, and countries, so that scattered observations were transformed into coherent patterns. During the analysis, recurring response tendencies were also tabulated proportionally; quantifying the patterns drawn from qualitative data in this way is a complementary operation that renders trends visible and comparable, the aim here being not statistical estimation but the provision of a descriptive summary (Sandelowski, 2000). In the final stage, the field findings were read alongside the relevant literature, and the points of overlap and divergence were evaluated separately.

The scholarly robustness of the study was assessed not through the validity and reliability criteria borrowed from quantitative research, but through the trustworthiness criteria specific to qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017; Tracy, 2010). Credibility was strengthened through more than twelve years of prolonged field engagement, the combined use of interviews, observation, legislative analysis, and the literature, and the deliberate search for instances that did not confirm presuppositions. Transferability was supported by a diversity encompassing ten countries, twenty-five cities, a wide age range, and different social segments, together with a detailed description of the context, so that readers might themselves decide to what extent the findings could be carried over to their own context. As for dependability and confirmability, the meticulously kept field notes served as a kind of traceability record; keeping the researcher's interpretations separate from participants' statements from the outset facilitated tracing the inferences backward. Repeated data collection is one of the accepted ways of testing the stability of findings in qualitative

research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018); accordingly, the same topics were taken up and compared again across the 2019 and 2024-2025 waves in the European sample and across the 2018-2025 period in the Turkish sample. Because the fieldwork was carried out by a single person, a criterion such as inter-coder agreement could not be used; robustness was instead built upon the trustworthiness safeguards enumerated above.

Ethical principles were adhered to at every stage of the research. The interviews rested on the principle of voluntariness; participants were informed of the aim of the research in general terms, were asked whether they wished to share their views, and were left free to withdraw from the conversation at any time. Identifying information was in no way recorded, and no audio or video recording was made; the data obtained are therefore wholly anonymous. In addressing sensitive topics, every attitude that might exert pressure on participants was carefully avoided, no leading expressions were used, and participants' cultural sensitivities were observed. This research was conducted on the basis of everyday conversations and field notes, without collecting personal identifying data and without making audio or video recordings. When this character of the study and the period in which the major part of the fieldwork was carried out are assessed together, there is no circumstance requiring ethics committee approval for the study. Nevertheless, the research was conducted in full conformity with the principles of scientific research and publication ethics, and no ethical violation of any kind occurred at any stage.

Like every field study, this research too has certain limitations, and stating them clearly is essential for the correct interpretation of the findings. First, since the sampling was not probability-based, the results obtained cannot be generalized directly to the whole of Europe or the whole of Türkiye; the reported proportions describe only the sample composed of the people interviewed. In qualitative research the aim is not numerical generalization but an analytical generalization resting on the transferability of findings to other contexts and on theoretical inference (Smith, 2018). Second, the fact that the data rest on field notes rather than audio recordings points to a margin that may stem from the researcher's selective attention and recollection; this margin was kept in check by recording the notes promptly and in detail and by rendering the interpretations traceable. Third, the fact that the fieldwork was largely carried out by a single researcher raises both the effect of a subjective viewpoint and the absence of a second eye in coding; this was counterbalanced by explicit positioning, regular self-reflection, and the search for disconfirming instances. Fourth, in the European field, which extends across ten countries, differences of language and translation may have led to part of the meaning being

attenuated in transmission; the complementary interviews conducted with Turkish citizens living in Europe alleviated this difficulty to some extent. Fifth, the study records not behaviors themselves but perceptions concerning behaviors; the share of the social desirability effect, especially on topics carrying a risk of stigmatization, should not be overlooked. Finally, the fact that the two waves were carried out partly in different cities may introduce a contextual variability into the comparison over time. Despite all these limitations, the research's extension over a span of more than ten years, its reading of two different societies side by side, its combination of multiple data streams, and its rendering of sensitive phenomena visible lend it a sound and original footing within its own boundaries.

In sum, the method described in this section sets out the steps of a long-term, multi-source, comparative, and interpretive qualitative design. All the elements of the design—paradigm, questions, sample, data collection, analysis, robustness, and ethics—were conceived so as to complement one another. In the following section, the findings obtained through this method will be presented first for the European sample and then for the Turkish sample; finally, the two samples will be evaluated comparatively, with the common trends and the particularities specific to each of the two societies considered together.

5. Findings

The data presented in this section were distilled from two distinct fieldwork periods. The first covers the years 2012–2018 and was devoted largely to understanding, making sense of, observing, and situating the phenomenon. During these years, in extended conversations conducted in numerous cities of Türkiye and with Turkish citizens arriving from Europe, an effort was made to grasp the axes along which the transformation of the family institution was unfolding; notes were kept on the matter and initial impressions were formed. The second period spans 2018–2025. During this period, unstructured field research was carried out both in Türkiye and in Europe, and intensive interviews were also conducted with Turkish citizens living in Europe who came to Türkiye. On the European leg, the data were gathered in two separate rounds: in 2019, in twenty-three cities across Switzerland and nine European Union member states (ten countries in total); and in 2024–2025, in three cities, including Frankfurt twice. Each round was conducted with approximately 300 individuals. On the Türkiye leg, 1,500 individuals were interviewed between 2018 and 2025 in four cities (Ankara, Erzurum, İstanbul, and Kocaeli).

A further data source strengthens the reliability of the findings concerning European society. Between 2018 and 2025,

unstructured interviews were also conducted with 500 individuals who live in Europe and came to Türkiye on holiday. These interviews served to become more closely acquainted with European society in all its aspects and to consolidate the questions used in the European fieldwork. Accordingly, the assessments concerning Europe rest not only on the interviews conducted in Europe but also on this second group, who know European society from the inside. In this respect, the findings concerning European society stand on as firm a footing as those concerning Türkiye.

All interviews were unstructured in nature; the data rest on notes taken in the course of conversation. No pre-prepared, closed-ended scale was administered, and participants were not steered toward particular response patterns. The distributions reported below as percentages were constructed by subsequently classifying the opinions expressed in these conversations. The persons interviewed were selected at random from the 20–80 age range, without regard to gender or educational level. Given this nature of the study, no ethics committee approval was required, and no ethical violation occurred at any stage of data collection. One point must be emphasized here: the data measure not the behaviors themselves but participants' observations and opinions regarding those behaviors. In other words, the figures below mean not “this many people do such and such” but “this many people see the situation in such and such a way.” The findings should be read within this framework.

For the questions on the soundness of the family institution and on the level of fidelity between spouses, participants assessed the matter along a five-point scale: Excellent (Harika), Good (İyi), Average (Normal), Poor (Kötü), and Terrible (Berbat). Each of these grades corresponds to a percentage band (Terrible: 1–20%; Poor: 21–40%; Average: 41–60%; Good: 61–80%; Excellent: 81–100%). In addition to the raw percentage distribution, a weighted composite score was computed by assigning each grade the midpoint of its corresponding band (10.5, 30.5, 50.5, 70.5, and 90.5, respectively). A single family-soundness indicator and a single fidelity indicator were thereby obtained for each sample, facilitating comparison between the two societies. Below, the results from the European sample are presented first, followed by those from the Türkiye sample; the two samples are then evaluated comparatively.

The first and most salient result emerging from the European sample is a predominantly pessimistic view of the family institution. Table 2 presents, side by side, the distribution of responses on the condition of the family institution and on fidelity between spouses, together with the computed composite scores.

Table 2. Distribution (%) and composite score of perceptions of family soundness and fidelity in the European sample

Grade	Condition of the family institution	Level of fidelity
Excellent (81–100%)	3	2
Good (61–80%)	15	11
Average (41–60%)	26	37
Poor (21–40%)	24	18
Terrible (1–20%)	32	32
Positive (Excellent + Good)	18	13
Negative (Poor + Terrible)	56	50
Composite score (band)	37.1 (Poor)	37.1 (Poor)

Note: n = 300 (the sample interviewed across two rounds). The composite score is a mean weighted by band midpoints.

As the table shows, only 3% of participants regarded the family institution as “excellent” and 15% as “good.” By contrast, 24% described it as “poor” and 32% as “terrible.” The two positive grades together amount to 18%, whereas the two negative grades together reach 56%. That is, in the European sample one in every two persons characterizes the family institution in directly negative terms. The composite score came to 37.1, placing family soundness in the “Poor” band. In the interviews, this pessimism was attributed not to a single cause but to a pattern in which fidelity, trust, individualization, and legal regulation are interwoven. Assessments to the effect that the sense of intra-family attachment has weakened markedly relative to earlier generations, and that individual preferences have come to take precedence over familial responsibilities, were especially prominent. This pattern is also consistent with demographic analyses of the long-observed transformation of family behavior in Europe (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015).

The picture regarding fidelity between spouses is no brighter. Those who rated the level of fidelity as “excellent” stood at 2% and “good” at 11%, while “poor” stood at 18% and “terrible” at 32%. Strikingly, the composite score for the fidelity indicator is likewise 37.1; that is, the perception of

fidelity is as negative as the perception of family soundness. The internal structure of the distribution, however, differs. In the fidelity question, the share answering “average” (37%) is markedly higher than in the family-soundness question (26%), while the shares at the positive end are even lower. This suggests that European participants tend to place fidelity on a middle, “neither good nor bad” line, but that this middle line is being pulled steadily downward. In the interviews, the concept of fidelity was addressed not only in the context of extramarital sexual relations but also in terms of emotional attachment, familial responsibilities, and the new forms of privacy emerging in the age of digital communication. Some participants argued that the pace of modern life and an expanding conception of individual freedom have transformed the expectation of fidelity; others held that legal and cultural change has eroded traditional roles within the family. Not all participants share the same view; a small number argued that the situation is exaggerated. Even so, the overall distribution reveals that concern over fidelity has become a widespread perception in the European sample (Cherlin, 2010; Smock & Schwartz, 2020; Regnerus, 2017).

The third question concerns the greatest threat facing the family institution. The distribution of responses in the European sample is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Perceived greatest threat to the family institution in the European sample (%)

Greatest threat to the family institution	Share (%)
Gender-based conflict	30
Infidelity	25
Legislation	21
Distrust	15
Irreligiosity	9

Note: n = 300; single-choice question.

In the European sample, the first rank was taken, at 30%, by gender-based conflict—that is, the increasing displacement of male–female relations onto a conflictual footing. This was followed by infidelity at 25%, legislation-related problems at 21%, distrust at 15%, and irreligiosity at 9%. The placement of gender-axis tension at the very top of the threats draws on the same reservoir of concern as the anti-gender debates that have gained strength in Europe in recent years (Kuhar &

Paternotte, 2017; Kováts, 2018; Corredor, 2019). In the interviews, this concern was voiced for the most part not as an abstract ideological critique but as a concrete tension permeating the language, the balance, and the very foundation of trust of the relationship at home. Some participants regarded gender policies as necessary for equality, while others maintained that these policies have opened new fields of tension within family relations. On this point participants did not converge on a single view; the same tendency was found to be explained by different rationales in different countries. This indicates that the perceived threat to the family institution in Europe is too multilayered to be explained by a single variable.

Because the European data were collected in two separate periods (2019 and 2024–2025), it is possible to observe how opinions have moved. Table 4 summarizes this change over time. The most striking feature of the table is that some indicators have remained almost stationary while others have risen quietly but steadily.

Table 4. Change over time in selected perceptions in the European sample (%)

Indicator (perception)	2019	2024–2025
Belief that men are driven toward alternative pursuits	41% (122)	41% (124)
Parallel relationship becoming a way of life while married	18%	25%
Belief that marriage is declining / divorce rising	75%	81%
Pursuit of gratification through partner–lover swapping	1.7%	2.1%

Note: n = 300; for each indicator, the share of participants who assume/affirm the relevant condition is given.

The first indicator is the perception that men, owing to a decline in their trust in the family, in their spouse, and in themselves, are driven toward a kind of alternative pursuit. Participants described this pursuit not as a single behavior but as a broad spectrum: withdrawal from the family, avoidance of marriage, reluctance to have children, drift toward searches for different genders and sexual orientations, individualization, descent into psychological emptiness, non-interference in a spouse's conduct despite being married, and a turn toward infidelity. According to participants, behind this picture lies a collapse of trust produced by practices grounded in taking the woman's statement as the basis and by harsh

measures applied against men under the rationale of “protecting women”—removal without inquiry, together with the risk of slander and imprisonment. The share of those who hold this belief remained at 41% in both periods (122 individuals in 2019, 124 in 2024–2025). This stability is significant: on this matter European society appears already to have transformed and to have settled at a fixed point; change has all but halted over the years. The pattern depicted by this perception also partly overlaps with findings discussed in the international literature under the headings of men's intra-family victimization, hesitancy in help-seeking behavior, and problems of trust in institutional support mechanisms (Douglas & Hines, 2016; Bates, 2020; Scott-Storey et al., 2023).

The second indicator is the perception of couples who, while continuing their marriage, also make an extramarital relationship a way of life, and this perception rose from 18% to 25%. Participants associated this tendency with a state of mind they termed the “learned helplessness syndrome”: in order not to be subjected to slander, not to be imprisoned without cause, not to be removed from the shared home, and not to be dragged into unforeseeable consequences in the face of provocation by power centers characterized as feminist (the media, non-governmental organizations, funding bodies, organized clubs), men become desensitized to their spouses' conduct beyond the bounds of fidelity, seeking peace and gratification outside instead. The end point this process reaches is that conducting marriage and an extramarital relationship in tandem increasingly becomes a culture. Moreover, according to participants' accounts, married couples for the most part either know that their spouse—this holding for both the male and the female side—is sustaining such a parallel relationship or believe so with a certainty of between ninety and one hundred percent. In this respect, the finding points not merely to the prevalence of a behavior but also to its normalization and its becoming mutually known and accepted (Regnerus, 2017; Inglehart, 2018).

The third indicator is the belief that marriage rates are continually falling and divorce rates continually rising; this belief rose from 75% to 81%. Participants explained this tendency by the way in which women's rights are advanced as a pretext to place men in a vise on every front—legal, administrative, judicial, social, economic, and cultural. Within this frame, some participants reported that in European society the concept of gender equality is now being broadened toward a plurality exceeding two—by some claims, around forty different genders or sexual orientations—and that this blurs the classical ground of the male–female relationship. Such statements stand on the same line as the discourse addressed in the literature under the heading of the “gender ideology” debate, a discourse fed by anxieties over family structure

(Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Here too it must not be forgotten that what is measured is not a “claim about reality” but a “perception” shared by a broad segment.

To these three indicators is added a fourth, more extreme but pointing in the same direction. The prevalence in European society of a pursuit of gratification through partner and lover swapping rose from 17 per thousand (1.7%) in 2019 to 21 per thousand (2.1%) in 2024–2025. Low in absolute level, this figure may seem small when viewed in isolation; yet the movement of even an extreme indicator in an upward direction may be read as a sign of a broader normalization. Indeed, international research has shown that consensual, non-monogamous forms of relationship have attained a measurable prevalence in Western societies, with one in five adults in the relevant national samples reporting such an experience at some point in their lives (Hauptert et al., 2017). The field finding here captures a movement in the same direction as this international trend, but at a far lower, “visible-edge” level. Taken together, all these indicators show that the transformation of family behavior in Europe is proceeding along the trajectory charted by the second demographic transition theory; this trajectory, however, now appears to be at a largely completed and stabilized stage (Lesthaeghe, 2010).

The Türkiye sample paints a picture that is both more favorable and of a different threat profile than that of Europe. Table 5 presents the response distributions and composite scores for the condition of the family institution and for fidelity.

Table 5. Distribution (%) and composite score of perceptions of family soundness and fidelity in the Türkiye sample

Grade	Condition of the family institution	Level of fidelity
Excellent (81–100%)	11	13
Good (61–80%)	20	21
Average (41–60%)	32	43
Poor (21–40%)	22	12
Terrible (1–20%)	15	11
Positive (Excellent + Good)	31	34
Negative (Poor + Terrible)	37	23
Composite score (band)	48.5 (Average)	53.1 (Average)

Note: n = 1,500; data pertain to the 2018–2025 period. The composite score is a mean weighted by band midpoints.

When asked about the condition of the family institution, 11% of participants said “excellent,” 20% “good,” and 32% “average”; those saying “poor” stood at 22% and “terrible” at 15%. The two positive grades together amount to 31% and the two negative grades to 37%. This is markedly below the 56% negative figure in Europe. The composite score settled at 48.5, in the “Average” band. The picture on the fidelity question is more favorable still: those answering “average” form the largest group at 43%, while the two negative grades together remain at 23% and the composite score reaches 53.1. In the interviews, a substantial share of participants stated that attachment to the family and the value placed on the institution of marriage remain strong in Türkiye and that intra-family solidarity—despite some erosion—persists. At the same time, these same participants added that the recent rise in divorce rates and in the age at marriage has generated anxiety about the future. On fidelity, a new dimension came to the fore: participants noted that fidelity has not only a physical but also an emotional and a digital dimension, that the spread of social-media use has given rise to new problems in this domain, and that this is more pronounced among the younger generations (Amato, 2010; Smock & Schwartz, 2020).

The truly striking result emerges in the threat question. As Table 6 shows, exactly half of the participants in Türkiye

(50%) identified legislation as the greatest threat facing the family institution.

Table 6. Perceived greatest threat to the family institution in the Türkiye sample (%)

Greatest threat to the family institution	Share (%)
Legislation	50
Gender-based conflict	17
Infidelity	14
Irreligiosity	10
Distrust	9

Note: n = 1,500; single-choice question.

Legislation was followed by gender-based conflict at 17%, infidelity at 14%, irreligiosity at 10%, and distrust at 9%. Two aspects of this distribution are of great importance. First, gender-based conflict, which ranked first in Europe (30%), falls in Türkiye to nearly one-third of that level (17%). Second, legislation alone approaches the sum of all the other options combined—a concentration seen in no other threat category. Herein lies the sharpest divergence between the two societies: whereas gender-axis tension stands at the center of Europe's threat map, legal regulation stands at the center of Türkiye's. In the interviews, the emphasis on legislation was made not as an abstract critique of law but through very concrete headings: protective measures, alimony—particularly indefinite alimony—practices, eviction decisions based on the woman's statement, and divorce proceedings. That half of the participants placed legislation in first rank shows how deep a resonance the debates surrounding Law No. 6284 on the Protection of the Family and the Prevention of Violence Against Women and the Turkish Civil Code No. 4721 have found in everyday life over the years. That these debates are conducted not only in academic circles but also in the language of the ordinary citizen has likewise been documented in the relevant legal and communication literature (Bölükbaşı, 2022; Kızılırmak, 2020; Çoban Keneş & Kocabay-Şener, 2023; Gezgin, 2024). At the same time, there is also a segment of participants who maintain that these regulations are necessary for the prevention of violence; that is, the picture is not one-sided. The real common ground is that, whatever their view, participants demand that the

principles of equity and equal treatment be upheld in intra-family disputes (Brinig, 2011; Collier, 2010).

The spread of the Türkiye data across 2018–2025 reveals that, in stark contrast to the stability observed in Europe, opinions have climbed from year to year and in a steady manner. Table 7 gives the trajectory of the three principal indicators by year.

Table 7. Trend of selected perceptions by year in the Türkiye sample (%)

Indicator (perception)	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Belief in alternative pursuits	14	16	15	15	16	20	23	24
Perception of parallel extramarital relationships	3	5	4	4	5	6	6	7
Belief: marriage ↓ / divorce ↑	17	19	19	22	24	25	27	29

Note: n = 1,500; for each indicator, the approximate share of participants affirming the relevant condition is given.

The share of those who believe that men, owing to pressure and loss of trust, are driven toward alternative pursuits stood at 14% in 2018 and, with minor fluctuations, accelerated after 2023 to reach 24% in 2025. Behind this increase lies a Türkiye-specific reproduction of the mechanisms voiced in the European sample: according to participants, within the framework jointly formed by Law No. 6284 and the Civil Code, practices grounded in the woman's statement produce a state of “learned helplessness” in a segment of men, and the risks of slander, baseless imprisonment, eviction, and indefinite alimony deepen this state. The second indicator is the perception of those who, while continuing their marriage, also make an extramarital relationship a way of life; this share rose from 3% to 7%. In Türkiye this tendency advances from a far lower base; yet here too participants conveyed assessments to the effect that spouses know of, or believe with a certainty of between sixty and one hundred percent in, one another's parallel relationship. The third indicator is the belief that marriage is declining and divorce rising, which climbed from 17% to 29%. According to participants' accounts, approximately eighty percent of the public in Türkiye understands by gender equality “equality of women and men”; consequently, debates around the concept of gender equality proceed in Türkiye on a different plane of meaning than in Europe. It may be argued that this difference partly explains

why gender-based conflict ranks lower in the threat ordering in the Türkiye sample.

That the absolute level lags behind Europe across all these indicators is clear. Nevertheless, the direction and pace of the trend strongly suggest that Türkiye is entering—albeit from a far lower base—the path Europe traversed years ago. Whereas in Europe the indicators have largely stabilized, in Türkiye they are all on the rise. This difference is not merely one of quantity but also one of the stages of the transformation process in which the two societies find themselves.

When the two samples are placed side by side, a two-layered picture emerges. Table 8 summarizes the principal indicators comparatively.

Table 8. Comparative summary of the European and Türkiye samples

Indicator	Europe	Türkiye
Family-soundness composite score	37.1 (Poor)	48.5 (Average)
Fidelity composite score	37.1 (Poor)	53.1 (Average)
Positive family perception (Excellent + Good)	18%	31%
Negative family perception (Poor + Terrible)	56%	37%
First-ranked threat	Gender-based conflict (30%)	Legislation (50%)
Second-ranked threat	Infidelity (25%)	Gender-based conflict (17%)
Position of legislation among threats	21% (third)	50% (first)
Belief in alternative pursuits (latest)	41%	24%
Perception of parallel relationships (latest)	25%	7%
Belief marriage ↓ / divorce ↑ (latest)	81%	29%
Direction of indicators over time	Largely stable	Steady increase

Note: “Latest” refers to the 2024–2025 data for Europe and the 2025 data for Türkiye.

The first layer is level. In absolute terms, Türkiye is well ahead of Europe on the family-soundness and fidelity indicators; Europe lies in the “Poor” band on both composite scores, whereas Türkiye lies in the “Average” band. The negative family perception is 56% in Europe and 37% in Türkiye. This shows that the family institution in Türkiye has largely preserved its cultural legitimacy. The second layer is the nature of the threat, and here the two societies are virtually mirror images of each other: Europe places gender-based conflict (30%) at the top, while Türkiye places legislation (50%); legislation ranks only third in Europe (21%), while gender-based conflict ranks second in Türkiye (17%). The third and perhaps most important layer is the direction of change, and on this layer the picture reverses. In Europe the principal indicators are largely stationary, whereas in Türkiye they are all increasing steadily. Read together, these three layers show that the gap between the two societies—at least at the level of opinion—is gradually closing. The trajectory of non-family life toward which European society has turned is, in Türkiye too, becoming a little more pronounced each year, even if at a far lower level. Herein lies the chief contribution of the comparative frame: the ability to see, at one and the same time, that a transformation moving in the same direction is being experienced at different speeds and for different reasons in two distinct cultural and legal contexts (Saraceno, 2016; Inglehart, 2018).

Beyond the numerical distributions, certain common threads pervade the entirety of the conversations in both samples. These threads, by revealing the world of meaning behind the figures, are an inseparable part of the findings. Below, these common themes are taken up one by one.

Foremost among these threads is trust. In both the European and the Türkiye samples, the concepts of trust, fidelity, attachment, and responsibility were continually mentioned together, and the weakening of intra-family trust was seen as the common root of many problems. Participants tie the sustainability of the family institution largely to mutual trust. The centering of trust joins with the widespread conviction that trust within the family is reflected in social trust as well. In the Türkiye sample in particular, the family was described not merely as “the smallest unit of society” but as the fundamental structure that keeps the general functioning of society upright. Similar views were expressed in the European sample as well, though the emphasis on individual autonomy was stronger there. It was frequently noted that the loss of the sense of trust affects not only the relationship between spouses but also children and the extended family circle. In this

respect, the concept of trust stands at the intersection of many other themes appearing in the findings.

The second common thread is the perception that men behave more cautiously than in the past with respect to marriage and family formation. In Europe this caution was explained chiefly by individualization and change in relationship norms; in Türkiye, by the perception of legal risk alongside economic uncertainty. In both samples, participants stated that the decision to marry has become one evaluated not only emotionally but also through legal and economic risks—a decision requiring more calculation. In some interviews this state was described with the term “hesitancy,” in others with “distrust.” In particular, it was stated that the fear of being misunderstood or of being subjected to unjust accusation in intra-family disputes has become widespread. A portion of participants put forward a different view, holding these interpretations to be exaggerated and the truly decisive factor to be economic conditions. Thus, there is not a single explanatory model but several that exist simultaneously. That this theme is increasingly studied in the international literature under the headings of men's intra-family victimization, help-seeking behavior, and access to institutional support mechanisms suggests that a similar debate is only now becoming visible in Türkiye as well (Hines & Douglas, 2015; Taylor et al., 2022; Huntley et al., 2019).

The third common thread is the situation of children. In the interviews, children's emotional development, sense of belonging, and psychological security frequently came to the fore. Participants believe that intra-family conflict and unstable relationships may leave long-term marks on children; the problems children experience, especially in divorce processes, were a common theme in a great many interviews. Some participants stated that children are directly affected by parental disputes, while others held that strong social-support mechanisms can mitigate this effect. Even so, the conviction that intra-family peace is of fundamental importance for children's development is quite widespread. It is noteworthy that concerns about the family institution are often expressed directly through the future of children, which shows that the family debate is not confined to the expectations of adults. These assessments are also consistent with studies examining the relationship between family stability and children's social and psychological development (Fagan & Churchill, 2012; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016).

The fourth common thread is that gender policies are evaluated by most participants not as an abstract concept but through the practical outcomes encountered in everyday life. Participants spoke through concrete events they had experienced or observed rather than through theoretical debates. For this reason, family law, divorce processes,

protective measures, and custody practices repeatedly came up. One segment found these regulations necessary and protective, while another argued that there are problems of balance in the implementation processes. The chief theme to emerge was the perception of justice and the expectation of equal treatment. This shows that support for, or criticism of, gender policies is fed for the most part not from the normative level but from the level of implementation; a similar observation is made in the literature as well (Verloo, 2018; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). The field data thus reveal a strong interaction between theoretical debates and everyday experience.

The fifth common thread is that explaining family problems solely through economic factors was found insufficient by participants. While many participants acknowledged the effect of economic conditions, they stated that change in family relations rests on more complex causes. The loss of trust, the transformation of the perception of fidelity, and intergenerational value differences came especially to the fore. In the European sample, the persistence of concerns about the family institution even in regions of high economic prosperity was regarded as a striking observation supporting this view. In some interviews economic problems were said to increase intra-family conflict, while in others the truly decisive element was held to be cultural change. These differing assessments once again render visible the multidimensional structure of the family institution (Amato, 2010; Bernardi & Mortelmans, 2018).

The sixth common thread is the direct link drawn between intra-family trust and social trust. According to participants, the weakening of trust within the family also adversely affects broader social relations. This assessment reflects a view that regards the family not merely as a private domain of life but as a fundamental structure in which social solidarity is produced. This view is more pronounced in the Türkiye sample; it is present in the European sample as well, but is there balanced by an emphasis on individual autonomy. It is noteworthy that, in both samples, there is broad agreement on the central importance of trust (OECD, 2011; Brinig, 2011).

The seventh and final common thread is the generational difference. Older participants tend to explain change in family structure chiefly through the dissolution of the value system, whereas younger participants foreground economic conditions and individual life choices. The assessment that the family institution was stronger in the past is especially widespread among older age groups. The dominant conviction among younger participants, by contrast, is that the family will not disappear altogether but will change form. Choices such as cohabitation outside marriage, marrying late, and a childless life were interpreted by some participants as a sign

of social dissolution and by others as an expansion of individual freedom. This divergence clearly shows that the social perception of the family is not uniform and cannot be treated independently of the age variable (Cherlin, 2010; Bernardi & Mortelmans, 2018). In the European sample this generational difference becomes pronounced along the axis of individualization, and in the Türkiye sample along the axis of the weight of cultural and religious references; indeed, a substantial share of participants in Türkiye defined the family not merely as a legal union but also as a moral and cultural institution (Saraceno, 2016).

When all the findings are evaluated together, four principal conclusions stand out. First, the transformation of the family institution is strongly perceived in both geographies, yet in neither sample does it turn into an expectation that “the family will end.” Participants see the family not as an institution in collapse but as one changing form under pressure. Second, the difference between Europe and Türkiye is essentially one of level, not of direction: Türkiye starts from a sounder picture but is advancing toward the direction in which Europe has gone, and indeed more rapidly. Read together, Europe’s stability and Türkiye’s steady increase show that the gap between the two societies is closing. Third, the threat maps of the two societies diverge clearly; at the center of the problem for Europe lies gender-axis tension, and for Türkiye, predominantly legislation. Fourth, behind all the numerical indicators stands the concept of trust; the themes of family soundness, fidelity, men’s caution, the future of children, and social solidarity all ultimately tie back to the matter of trust. These four conclusions will be discussed in detail in the next section in the light of the theoretical framework and the literature; the meaning and the limits of the findings will be evaluated more comprehensively.

6. Discussion

This section brings the findings of the field study conducted in Europe and Türkiye into direct dialogue with the theoretical framework and the relevant literature. The resulting picture cannot be captured in a single sentence, for in both settings the family is being reshaped rather than dissolved. In the European sample, roughly six in ten participants (the combined total of those rating the current state of the family as “poor” or “terrible”) assessed the present situation negatively, whereas in Türkiye this figure remained just above one-third. In both samples, however, those who saw the family as “excellent” or “good” were in the minority. Turkish society thus stands at a more optimistic point than Europe, yet shares a milder register of the same concern. This intermediate position—neither outright collapse nor an unchanged continuity—is in fact the underlying pattern that pervades the findings as a whole. The gap in magnitude is consistent with

the theoretical expectation that the family develops different forms of resilience on different social grounds. Indeed, studies arguing that marriage has not entirely lost its central place in the field of intimate relationships but has rather changed in meaning and function draw attention to a similar distinction (Cherlin, 2020). What the findings ultimately imply, therefore, is not the end of the family but its ongoing redefinition.

A useful distinction for analysing this redefinition is that between the proliferation of alternatives to marriage and change in behaviour within marriage. The field data indicate that both layers are at work. On the one hand, alternatives such as postponing marriage, non-marital cohabitation, and childlessness have gained visibility; on the other, expectations of fidelity, commitment, and responsibility have become subject to renegotiation even while the institution of marriage persists. The literature stresses that these two layers do not advance at the same pace and that exit from the institution is often more pronounced than transformation within it (Cherlin, 2020; Smock & Schwartz, 2020). In the Turkish sample, the preservation of marriage's cultural legitimacy alongside an increasingly cautious approach to the decision to marry is precisely a manifestation of this two-layered structure. For this reason, measuring change in the family solely through divorce statistics may be misleading, since the formal continuity of the institution can conceal the extent to which the expectations within it have been transformed.

The most stable axis among the finding's clusters around trust and fidelity. In the European sample, the share of those evaluating the level of spousal fidelity negatively reached half, presenting an even sharper picture than the general pessimism about the family institution. In Türkiye, by contrast, negative assessments of fidelity remained below one-quarter, with most participants placing the level of fidelity in the "average" category and above. This divergence is no accident. According to social capital theory, trust between individuals is the load-bearing ground not only of private relationships but also of broader social cooperation; the erosion of trust first manifests itself in the closest circle, namely the family (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Approaches that treat trust as a direct component of social prosperity are likewise consistent with this picture (Fukuyama, 1995). That participants frequently linked the loss of trust within the family to a wider social unravelling shows that, for them, trust is not merely a matter of dyadic relationships. In this respect, trust is the common denominator at which many of the other themes prominent in the study intersect.

Recognising that the theme of trust operates on two distinct levels makes the picture more intelligible. At one level there

is interpersonal trust: confidence in a spouse's fidelity, word, and shared future. At the other there is institutional trust: confidence that the legal system, the courts, and public authority will act fairly. The field data show that these two levels feed one another; where trust in institutions weakens, individuals find their relationships more fragile and their outcomes less predictable. Analyses holding that institutional trust is intertwined with perceptions of legitimacy, and that people comply voluntarily with an order they regard as fair, account for this pattern (Tyler, 2006). The fact that, especially in the Turkish sample, participants drew a direct link between trust in legal processes and trust in the family institution shows that the two levels are not separated in practice. Consequently, any approach aiming to strengthen the family must take into account not only private relationships but also trust in institutions.

The finding that most clearly distinguishes Europe from Türkiye emerges in response to the question of what constitutes the greatest threat to the family institution. In the Turkish sample, exactly half of the participants marked this threat directly as "legislation," placing legal regulations far ahead of all other options. In Europe, by contrast, the share of legislation remained around one-fifth, with gender-based tensions taking first place. This difference shows that the relationship between law and social behaviour has not only a normative but also a strongly perceptual dimension. A point must be underlined here: the criticism participants directed at legislation is not the objective consequence of a regulation but a perception of it, and it should not be read as direct causal evidence. Even so, the perception itself is sociologically meaningful, because the long-term effect of a rule depends as much on its legitimacy in the eyes of society as on its legal validity (Tyler, 2006). In an emotionally charged domain such as family law, the perception of legitimacy becomes all the more decisive (Brinig, 2011).

The effect of law on the family must be considered not only along the protection–sanction axis but also along the axis of incentives and deterrence. Studies that conduct an economic analysis of family law argue that divorce, alimony, and custody regimes can indirectly influence parties' decisions to marry and to sustain a relationship (Dnes & Rowthorn, 2002; Brinig, 2011). Participants' description of the decision to marry as a calculated risk can be read as the field-level counterpart of this theoretical debate. In the Turkish context, these assessments were largely shaped under the shadow of the public controversy surrounding the Istanbul Convention and Law No. 6284; that support for and opposition to these regulations coexist with high tension has also been demonstrated in comparative political research (Krizsán et al., 2024). At this point the study's stance is not to decide whether the regulations are "good" or "bad," but to understand why

perceptions of them are so intense and polarised. For there is also a strong body of literature emphasising the gains these same regulations provide in terms of protecting women from violence (Walby, 2011).

Behind the perception that men feel defenceless before family law lies an ongoing and contested body of literature on the direction and mutuality of domestic violence. While some researchers argue that, in certain relationships, violence may arise not unidirectionally but reciprocally (Straus, 2011; Dutton, 2012), other studies point out that men too can be victimised at non-negligible rates (Stemple & Meyer, 2014; Hines & Douglas, 2010). This literature, however, in no way denies the gravity of the violence women endure or the necessity of protective policies; rather, it argues that the question of why has not been asked often enough and that victimhood cannot be reduced to a single mould (Anderson, 2013). The field findings show that this academic debate is also reflected in everyday perceptions, with participants demanding both the protection of women and the fair conduct of processes at the same time. The issue, therefore, is not to weaken protection but to safeguard balance by rendering the possible side effects of protection visible.

One of the most striking patterns in the field data is that the perception of men withdrawing from family and marriage follows a different trajectory in the two regions. In the European sample, the share of those subscribing to this view remained almost unchanged from 2019 to 2024–2025, hovering around 41%. In Türkiye, by contrast, the same perception, which stood at 14% in 2018, rose steadily over the years to reach 24% by 2025. In other words, a view that is settled and stagnant in Europe appears in Türkiye as a still-emerging and rapidly strengthening tendency. Participants did not attribute this withdrawal to a single cause; alongside economic uncertainty, unemployment, and housing costs, they also cited the perception of risk associated with family law. Studies that have recently brought to the social policy agenda the constraints men face in education, working life, and family relationships can be related to these assessments (Reeves, 2022; Benatar, 2012; Farrell & Gray, 2018). Assessments suggesting that a simultaneous withdrawal from the labour force and from family life has become pronounced among certain groups of men further complete this picture (Eberstadt, 2022).

Reading men's situation as a loss vis-à-vis women, however, would be misleading both theoretically and empirically. Masculinity studies emphasise that masculinity is not a single, fixed category but a relationally constructed position that changes with class, generation, and culture (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hearn, 2015). On this view, some of the difficulties men experience are not the price of women's gains

but a different face of the same social transformation. Indeed, approaches that place men not in opposition to but within gender issues, casting them as agents in the prevention of violence, are also gaining ground (Flood, 2019; Messner, 2016). That the majority of participants in the field findings see protection and the family as complementary rather than opposed supports precisely this non-zero-sum perspective. Understanding the change in men's attitudes toward the family requires not disregarding women's position but seeing the picture in all its dimensions.

The invisibility of the difficulties men experience has been concretely documented in research on help-seeking behaviour. It has been observed in various countries that men subjected to domestic violence encounter significant barriers in accessing institutional support mechanisms and often remain silent out of fear of disbelief and stigmatisation (Douglas & Hines, 2016; Bates, 2020; Huntley et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2022). Similar findings have been obtained in the European context, where male victims have been shown to struggle both to reach services and to find them helpful (Machado et al., 2016; Tsui, 2014). A comprehensive review of this literature concludes that men's experience is still insufficiently studied in the field (Scott-Storey et al., 2023). The field data show that this perception of invisibility is increasingly voiced in Türkiye as well, particularly in recent years. The debate on the family is thereby carried into a broader frame encompassing the experiences not only of women but also of men.

Behind the perception of men's withdrawal lies a mood that participants frequently described with the words "risk," "uncertainty," and "anxiety about the future." Whereas marriage was once a relatively self-evident stage of life, today it has become a decision whose cost and likely consequences are calculated. Analyses holding that the individual is increasingly left alone with uncertainty and that the sense of security once provided by traditional institutions has weakened help to make sense of this picture (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). What is decisive here is not legal or economic reality itself but the individual's perception of risk regarding that reality, for what guides behaviour is often not facts but the meaning attributed to them. When the rise of this risk perception over the years in the Turkish sample is read together with assessments that the decision to marry is taken ever more cautiously, it suggests that a possible slowdown in the tendency to form families cannot be explained by material conditions alone.

The transformation in the perception of fidelity becomes concrete in assessments of extramarital relationships sustained within marriage. In the European sample, the perception that spouses know of, or strongly believe in, one another's

extramarital relationships rose from 18% in 2019 to 25% in 2024–2025. In Türkiye, the same perception rose from a far lower base, from 3% to 7%. The difference in level between the two samples shows that the norm of fidelity still rests on firmer cultural ground in Türkiye, while the direction of change is the same in both societies. As an extreme and relatively marginal form of the same tendency, a pursuit of gratification based on partner- and spouse-swapping was also noted in field observations to be gaining limited but increasing visibility in Europe; the perception of this orientation, at roughly 17 per thousand (about 1.7%) in 2019, reached about 21 per thousand (around 2.1%) in 2024–2025. The smallness of the figures is as meaningful as the direction of their increase, for it points to the gradual erosion of a cultural threshold. It must be particularly emphasised that what is measured here is not behaviour itself but the social perception of behaviour. Even so, these perceptions are consistent with the predictions of studies examining the transformation of the concepts of commitment and intimacy in modern relationships, and especially with those of second demographic transition theory and approaches attentive to the individualisation of intimate relationships (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Giddens, 1992; Regnerus, 2017).

The belief that marriage rates are falling and divorces rising is the most widely shared assessment in both samples; the picture here, however, is instructive in terms of the speed of convergence. In Europe, the share endorsing this belief, already at a very high level (from 75% to 81%), showed only a small increase, approaching what is almost a ceiling. In Türkiye, by contrast, the same belief climbed proportionally much faster, from 17% to 29%. This supports the convergence thesis, according to which trends long observed in Europe are reflected in Türkiye in a delayed but accelerating manner. In an age in which cultural patterns circulate more rapidly through global communication media, individuals often derive their expectations of the family not directly from their own lives but from the examples they observe (Inglehart, 2018; Giddens, 2000). That participants referred to international developments as much as to the conditions of their own countries shows that the debate on the family no longer fits within national borders. The rapid rise in Türkiye must therefore be read together not only with local dynamics but also with processes of cultural transmission.

Reading concern about the family solely through men's experience leaves the picture incomplete. It has been documented that progress toward gender equality has slowed in recent years and has even stalled on many indicators (England et al., 2020). The price women pay in wages and careers on account of motherhood and family responsibilities—the pattern referred to in the literature as the “family pay gap”—persists in many industrialised countries

(Harkness & Waldfogel, 2003). These structural disadvantages are the principal basis of the view that sees gender policies as a necessary and not-yet-completed project (Walby, 2011). That a substantial proportion of participants in the field data openly advocated the protection of women shows that this perspective has a strong resonance in society. Accordingly, the debate on the family requires a framework capable of weighing together the different kinds of difficulty experienced by women and by men, rather than setting them against one another.

That gender-based conflict and polarisation take first place in the European sample's perception of threat is another finding that diverges from Türkiye. Roughly one-third of participants saw the increasingly contentious terrain on which relations between women and men are debated as the principal problem facing the family. This pattern draws on the same reservoir of concern as the reaction that has gained visibility in Europe in recent years and is most often examined in the literature under the heading of “anti-gender movements” (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). In these movements, the concept of gender has been argued to function as a symbolic glue binding together different forms of opposition (Grzebalska et al., 2017; Kovács, 2018). The framing of the concept as an “ideology” and its turn into a globally organised countermovement have likewise been analysed in various studies (Corredor, 2019; Graff et al., 2019; Case, 2016). The aim here is not to confirm any of these claims but to render visible the intellectual grounds on which participants' perceptions are shaped.

In the Turkish sample, the same concern was expressed largely through legal regulations and, in particular, through the debate over the Istanbul Convention. Why opposition to and support for the Convention have become so sharp has been explained by the broader political polarisation surrounding gender equality (Krizsán et al., 2024). It is also noted that this debate is not confined to law but is intertwined with broader dynamics such as the shrinking of civic space (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2021). That participants in Türkiye see legislation as by far the foremost threat is an indication of the extent to which this public debate has seeped into everyday perception. While in Europe concern is voiced more at the cultural and relational level, in Türkiye it crystallises at the legal-institutional level. Even this “linguistic” difference between the two samples reveals how the same global debate finds different channels in local contexts.

Another important distinction the field data reveal is that participants approach the issue not from theoretical principles but from the concrete examples they encounter in everyday life. Gender policies were evaluated mostly not through abstract concepts but through lived or observed experiences

such as divorce proceedings, protection orders, alimony, and custody arrangements. This shows that a marked distance sometimes emerges between academic-political debate and social perception. The literature likewise notes that support for or criticism of these policies is largely fed by their outcomes in practice (Verloo, 2018). The conclusion that follows is this: policy analyses must be nourished not only by normative frameworks but also by experiences in the field, for an individual's daily life is the most reliable source for rendering visible the gap between the aim of legislation on paper and its reflection on the ground.

Beneath all these differences lies the determining force of cultural context. The same global pressure—individualisation, digitalisation, demographic contraction—does not produce the same outcome in the two societies. Whereas in Europe the earlier and more deeply rooted processes of individualisation have led to a profound transformation of family structure, in Türkiye family ties and the cultural legitimacy attributed to the family appear to be comparatively preserved. Approaches foregrounding the institutional consequences of transformation in value systems are useful in explaining this difference (Inglehart, 2018). Comparative studies that distinguish welfare regimes by their degree of familialism, for their part, show that in some societies the family continues to fill the space vacated by the state and the market, so that family-based solidarity does not dissolve easily (Saraceno, 2016). The prevalence in the Turkish sample of assessments defining the family not merely as a legal union but as a moral and cultural institution points precisely to this familialist ground. This, in turn, suggests that family policies should be designed not by a universal template but with regard to local social dynamics.

Treating the diversification of family forms automatically as a sign of collapse is also incompatible with the findings. In modern societies, non-marital cohabitation, single-parent households, and different forms of living together have become increasingly commonplace (Smock & Schwartz, 2020; Stacey, 2011). Some research has shown that the capacity of these new forms for commitment and stability is by no means to be underestimated (Rosenfeld, 2014). That is, being different and being weak are not the same thing. In the field data, too, participants described the change mostly not as a disappearance but as a change of form. For this reason, assessing the family against a single “ideal family” model falls short both empirically and theoretically. What matters is whether the burden of trust, commitment, and responsibility carried by the relationship persists, under whatever form it takes.

That participants frequently invoked demographic concerns when evaluating the family institution reveals that the debate

has not only a sociological but also a demographic dimension. The rise in the age at marriage, the decline in fertility, and the proliferation of single-person households were voiced as an established reality in the European sample and as a concern that has gained visibility in recent years in the Turkish sample. While the literature explains the decline in fertility through structural factors such as urbanisation, rising educational attainment, women's labour-force participation, and the cost of living (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015), there are also assessments suggesting that the weakening of family-centred norms accompanies this process (Eberstadt, 2022). That participants did not reduce demographic transformation to purely economic causes but also took cultural and normative change into account is consistent with this multi-causal picture. Moreover, studies drawing attention to the fact that transformation in family structure can reproduce social inequalities (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008) make it imperative to address the issue together with population dynamics. Given the long-term repercussions of demographic change on social security and intergenerational solidarity, it becomes difficult to discuss family policies apart from demographic sustainability.

Another axis that came to the fore repeatedly in the interviews is the situation of children. Participants often saw the family not as a relationship between spouses but as the child's first ground of socialisation, and they stated that conflict within the family and unstable relationships can leave lasting marks on the child's emotional development. These assessments are consistent with the literature emphasising that family stability is an important variable in children's development (Fagan & Churchill, 2012; Amato, 2010). At the same time, the literature also shows that the fate of children raised in single-parent or differently structured families is not predetermined, and that what determines outcomes is less the structure itself than the quality of relationships and available resources (Bernardi & Mortelmans, 2018). The majority of participants, too, did not tie the child's future to family form alone but drew a more balanced picture taking economic conditions, education, and the social environment into account. Even so, that domestic peace and a sense of trust are regarded as fundamentally important for the child shows that concerns about the family are largely expressed through future generations.

That participants regard the family as a mainstay not only of individual happiness but also of social stability is another consistent axis of the findings. Many stated that the solidarity produced within the family functions as a safety net that comes into play in times of crisis. Classical sociological approaches treating the family as the basic unit of society (Parsons & Bales, 1955), together with the social capital perspective arguing that the weakening of family ties can

increase individual isolation and social fragmentation (Putnam, 2000), point in the same direction as this assessment. Comparative data showing that family stability is associated with education, income, and child welfare likewise support this functional view (OECD, 2011). Given the supportive function family networks assume especially in periods of economic and social turbulence, it becomes clearer why concern about the family overflows the individual level. In this respect, the family is, in participants' eyes, not a corner of private life but one of the load-bearing columns of the social order.

The differentiation of assessments of the family institution across generations is also a finding that cannot be overlooked. While participants in the older age group read the change mostly through a dissolution in the value system, younger participants foreground economic conditions and individual life choices. The young tend to think that the family institution will not disappear but will change form. This differentiation is consistent with studies emphasising that value change is often observed through the shift between generations (Inglehart, 2018). At the same time, the findings show not a complete rupture between generations but also a common ground of concern: that the age groups largely converge on the importance of the family reveals that the real divergence lies not in whether the family matters but in how it should be protected. For this reason, strengthening intergenerational dialogue in debates on the family is a need pointed to by both the field findings and the theoretical framework.

Perhaps the most surprising finding is that two goals often presented in public opinion as opposed to one another can be advocated by participants at the same time. In the interviews, many people, while clearly regarding the protection of women from violence as necessary, expressed within the same sentence that the family institution should also be strengthened. The issue, then, is not a choice of the form "either women's rights or the family," as most political debate assumes. A substantial proportion of participants consider individual freedoms necessary yet are concerned about the weakening of a sense of shared responsibility. This search for balance between individual rights and social obligations brings back to the agenda one of the fundamental tensions of modern societies (Etzioni, 1993). Within this framework, building family policies in a conciliatory rather than a polarising language appears more appropriate both to the expectation indicated by the field data and to the complexity of social reality.

The effect of digitalisation on family relationships also came up frequently in both the European and the Turkish samples. While participants acknowledge that technology eases daily life, they are uneasy about the decline of face-to-face

communication and the increasing migration of interaction to screens. What is striking is that the criticism is directed not at technology but at the manner of its use. Studies pointing out that being constantly connected paradoxically erodes real conversation and time spent together are consistent with these assessments (Turkle, 2015). Moreover, digital communication is redrawing the boundaries of fidelity and intimacy; the perception that online interactions facilitate new forms of relationship is directly linked to the findings on extramarital relationships in particular. For this reason, it is no longer possible for debates on the future of the family to ignore the digital transformation.

One of the factors enhancing the study's explanatory power is that the data are spread over a long span of time. The field study originates in the intensive conversations and observations—aimed at understanding and making sense of the phenomenon—conducted between 2012 and 2018 in many cities of Türkiye and with citizens arriving from Europe. In the 2018–2025 period, this accumulation turned into unstructured field research in both Türkiye and Europe, so that not merely a snapshot of a given moment but the direction of change could be tracked. Placing side by side the interviews repeated in two separate periods in Europe (2019 and 2024–2025) with the observations spread over the years in Türkiye made visible that certain perceptions stagnate in Europe while they climb in Türkiye. This continuity suggests that the findings are not the product of a transient conjuncture. That the data rest on notes taken in unstructured conversations is a strength in that it opens space for individuals to think in their own words, and a limitation in that it brings with it both subjectivity and the constraint of statistical representation. The aim of qualitative research is, after all, not generalisation but to reveal how phenomena are perceived (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Owing to this design—its structure resting on voluntariness, the non-collection of identifying information, and notes kept in a conversational setting—the study did not require separate ethics-committee approval, and at no stage of the process were ethical principles violated.

Alongside these strengths, the limits of the findings must also be stated plainly. Because the sample was not selected by a probabilistic method, the proportions cannot be generalised to the whole population of Europe or of Türkiye; the information they provide consists not of precise figures but of tendencies whose direction and consistency are meaningful. The absence of a detailed statistical classification of participants by characteristics such as age, education, and occupation likewise limits the capacity for quantitative analysis. Nevertheless, the study's treatment of two regions within a single framework has made visible something that studies focusing on a single country could not see: how the same global tendency opens different channels on different cultural

grounds. Reading side by side the perceptual patterns that are settled and stagnant in Europe and rising in Türkiye has made it possible to see not only the level of change but also its speed and direction. This is precisely where the principal contribution of the comparative design lies, for a tendency that has become commonplace in one society can shed light on the future of a tendency still emerging in another.

The policy implications that can be drawn from the findings are likewise multifaceted. Above all, it is clear that policies aiming to strengthen the family should not be reduced to legal regulations alone; elements such as trust, commitment, and responsibility cannot be produced by legislation but can be nourished through education, counselling, and social support mechanisms. Second, that protective policies, while continuing to ensure women's safety, also attend to perceptions of the fairness of processes is important for preserving institutional trust. Third, a conciliatory framework embracing together the protection of women and the strengthening of the family—rather than a polarising language—appears more suited both to the social expectation indicated by the field data and to the complexity of the issue. Finally, long-term outcomes such as demographic sustainability, child welfare, and intergenerational solidarity must not be left in the shadow of short-term debates.

When all these axes are brought together, it becomes clear that the transformation of the family institution cannot be tied to a single cause. Legal regulations, gender policies, economic pressures, cultural change, digitalisation, and demographic contraction are dimensions of this process that operate not separately but by feeding one another. This reciprocal bond, in which one factor triggers another, reveals why the debate on the family resists reductionist explanations. Although the European and Turkish samples rest on different historical and cultural grounds, the place where concerns are knotted is largely shared: trust, commitment, the future of children, and social solidarity. Participants see the family not as a structure to be abandoned but as an institution to be strengthened under new conditions. For this reason, confining the debate on the family to a quarrel between “nostalgia for the past” and “limitless individualisation” would mean overlooking the third and more balanced path that the field data indicate: protecting the family by transforming it. The following section takes up the general conclusions and policy recommendations on the basis of these assessments.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has examined the transformation that the institution of the family has undergone in Europe and Türkiye through the lens of gender policies, seeking to read people's views on family, fidelity, trust, and legal regulation by way of field data.

The study rests on a long and incremental process. The period between 2012 and 2018 was devoted largely to understanding the issue, observing developments first-hand, and listening to people from a wide range of backgrounds; lengthy conversations held in many cities of Türkiye and with citizens visiting from Europe formed the backbone of this period. Between 2018 and 2025, these observations were turned into unstructured field interviews; numerous individuals were interviewed in four cities of Türkiye (Ankara, Erzurum, Istanbul, and Kocaeli), while in Europe interviews were conducted in two separate rounds—in 2019 and in 2024–2025—across twenty-five cities in ten countries. When this accumulation of more than a decade is brought together, the resulting picture is clear: in both regions the family remains one of society's most valued institutions, yet the very same people believe that this institution is sliding toward a more fragile footing. This is the central conclusion distilled from the study as a whole; the remainder is an effort to disentangle the causes, manifestations, and consequences of this tension.

The most fundamental finding the data yield is that the transformation of the family cannot be attributed to any single cause. In describing the changes in family life, those interviewed pointed simultaneously to a wide array of factors, ranging from legal regulation to economic hardship and from the spread of digital life to individualization. Explanations that reduce the family to nothing more than male–female relations, or to legislation alone, do not match the multilayered picture emerging from the field. Indeed, international research on divorce and family structure likewise reads this change not as the product of a narrow domain but as part of a broad societal transformation (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 2010). Accepting this multicausality from the outset is a precondition both for interpreting the findings correctly and for developing workable policy proposals.

When the findings are read not one by one but as a whole, the three principal perspectives adopted in the study's theoretical framework each find an echo in the field. The first is the second demographic transition approach, which holds that traditional family patterns have given way to individual preferences; the decline of marriage, the postponement of childbearing, and the spread of solitary living correspond precisely to this framework (Lesthaeghe, 2010). The second is the legal legitimacy approach, which contends that compliance with a rule rest not so much on fear of punishment as on regarding that rule as legitimate; the intense criticism directed at legislation in the Turkish sample points to exactly this problem of legitimacy (Tyler, 2006). The third is the social capital approach, which treats the family as one of the principal sources of a society's capacity for trust and solidarity; the fact that participants saw the family as a social value beyond individual happiness bears out this approach

(Putnam, 2000; Fukuyama, 1995). That these three perspectives complement rather than exclude one another also explains why the question of the family does not fit within the confines of any single discipline.

The heading that stands out most in the field findings is trust and fidelity. In Europe, more than half of those interviewed (approximately 56%) rated the state of the family as “poor” or “dreadful”; where spousal fidelity was concerned, negative assessments again reached close to half (approximately 50%). In Türkiye the responses to the same questions were more measured: those rating the family negatively remained just above one-third (approximately 37%), while negative assessments of fidelity fell below one-quarter (approximately 23%). In other words, in Türkiye family bonds are still seen as comparatively more robust, and concern about fidelity lags considerably behind that in Europe. Yet this relatively more optimistic picture should not be found too reassuring, for what is decisive is not only the level of these figures but their direction. The international literature, too, has repeatedly shown that trust, commitment, and a sense of mutual responsibility are the principal pillars of family stability (Smock & Schwartz, 2020; Brinig, 2011).

This concern also leaves traces in behaviour. In the European sample, the prevalence of an attitude that, while remaining within marriage, turns an extramarital relationship into virtually a way of life rose from roughly one-fifth in 2019 (18%) to one-quarter in the 2024–2025 round (25%). In Türkiye the same attitude, though running at a much lower level (3% in 2018, 7% in 2025), is likewise trending upward. In the same vein, the pursuit of gratification described in European society as “partner-swapping, lover-swapping” stood at around 1.7% (some seventeen per thousand) in the 2019 field observations and rose to 2.1% (twenty-one per thousand) in the 2024–2025 period. The absolute magnitude of this last figure is small; yet the increase it shows within just a few years lends concrete empirical support to the widely held perception that norms of fidelity are gradually loosening. Studies highlighting the changing expectations within intimate relationships and the growing decoupling of sexuality from marriage are consistent with this picture (Regnerus, 2017); research on the durability of unions, meanwhile, demonstrates that the erosion of the commitment norm directly affects how long relationships last (Rosenfeld, 2014).

The principal axis of the debate in this study is gender policy, and one of the most striking impressions emerging from the field is that people frequently connect changes in family life to the controversies surrounding these policies. The “gender ideology” debates that have intensified in Europe in recent years have moved the issue beyond the frame of women’s rights alone, turning it into a broad cultural conflict organized

around family, identity, and social order (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Corredor, 2019). It has been noted that this concept has become a kind of common denominator bringing together very different forms of opposition, and that it often comes to stand not for a concrete policy but for a deeper social unease (Kováts, 2018; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). In Türkiye, the debate that has persisted for years around the Istanbul Convention and Law No. 6284 has produced a comparable polarization. Here it must be underlined in the boldest terms: this study passes no judgement on whether the policies in question are right or wrong. The literature has likewise shown that opposition to gender policies fits no single mould and varies from country to country and from group to group (Verloo, 2018); the aim here is merely to render visible the field-level resonance of this many-voiced debate.

The second major heading is legal regulation, and here a striking divergence emerges between the two regions. In Türkiye, roughly half of those interviewed (50%) marked “legislation” directly as the greatest threat facing the family—a figure far ahead of all other options. In the European sample, by contrast, “sexism” (30%) and “infidelity” (25%) take the lead, with legislation (21%) trailing further behind. In other words, while in Türkiye the threat to the family is read largely as a legal-institutional matter, in Europe it is seen as a cultural and relational one. It is difficult to think of this divergence apart from the fact that the Istanbul Convention and Law No. 6284 long dominated Türkiye’s agenda. The legal literature, too, has examined in detail the differences in scope and implementation between the Convention and the Law—particularly the protective measures that may be issued without the requirement of evidence and the inconsistencies in their application (Bölükbaşı, 2022; Kızılırmak, 2020). There are also studies on how these debates were carried into the public sphere and even on how the stance of the press shifted over time (Çoban Keneş & Kocabay-Şener, 2023). Comparative research has shown that support for and opposition to the Convention are not unique to Türkiye but have produced similar political alignments in many countries (Krizsán et al., 2024). Even so, it must be stressed that the legitimacy of a legal order is closely bound up not only with the outcomes it produces but with how citizens perceive it (Tyler, 2006); accordingly, the aim of protecting women’s safety and the concern not to injure the sense of justice should be framed as complementary rather than mutually exclusive goals.

The findings on the European side clearly show that the transformation of the family is not peculiar to Türkiye. The decline of marriage, falling fertility, and the spread of solitary living and of diverse family forms are trends long observed in Europe; this process has been documented in detail both in the second demographic transition literature and in studies

examining the life course of lone-parent families (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015; Bernardi & Mortelmans, 2018). The intriguing point arising from the field is that these trends are read by the public not as dry statistics but as developments that weaken social solidarity. Moreover, while some perceptions stand at a high but settled level in Europe, they are rising rapidly in Türkiye. For instance, the belief that marriage rates are falling and divorce is rising is already widespread in Europe (75% in 2019, 81% in 2024–2025), whereas in Türkiye it is climbing from a lower base (17% in 2018, 29% in 2025). Similarly, the belief that men are being pushed away from family and marriage remained steady at around 41% across both rounds in Europe, while in Türkiye it rose from 14% in 2018 to 24% in 2025. This picture points to a convergence: Europe is ahead and stationary, Türkiye behind but accelerating. It is from here, too, that one understands why the European experience warrants close attention for Türkiye.

Beneath all these figures lies a slow-moving shift in values. The cultural transformation that foregrounds the individual's self-realization, autonomy, and freedom of choice has quietly reshaped, across generations, the very meaning attached to the family; studies tracking how values shift across generations have set out this process comprehensively (Inglehart, 2018). In the interviews, too, it was frequently expressed that the importance attached to the family has not diminished but that what is expected of it has changed. Marriage, once regarded as an institution of duty and continuity, is increasingly becoming a relationship by which individual gratification is measured. Considered together with observations that progress toward gender equality has stalled in many domains in recent years, this shift shows that the change is neither unidirectional nor complete (England et al., 2020). Value change, alongside legal and economic factors, is the complementary third layer of the picture.

Nor is it possible to remove the economy from this picture. Among the most frequently cited factors in young adults' postponement of marriage are job insecurity, the housing problem, and uncertainty about the future. The international literature has shown in detail how low- and precarious-income delays marriage decisions, and indeed what a void is created when no durable alternative replaces the stable family model (Cherlin, 2014; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). The disadvantage that having children creates for women's income and careers reveals how thoroughly family decisions are interwoven with economic calculations (Harkness & Waldfogel, 2003). Studies on men's detachment from the labour force, in particular, show that fragility in working life directly affects not only the individual but the very capacity to form a family (Eberstadt, 2022). To think of family policy

apart from employment, housing, and income-security policy is therefore to ignore half of the problem.

Digitalization, for its part, is the relatively new but rapidly growing branch of the debate. Although it varies in intensity between the European and Turkish samples, there is a widespread conviction that digital technologies have profoundly transformed family life. Some participants said that digital tools facilitate communication within the family, while a substantial number believe that these tools thin out face-to-face interaction and that, in particular, the intense bond children form with screens weakens communication within the family. Digitalization appears to be changing not only modes of communication but also relational expectations, conceptions of privacy, and processes of socialization. For this reason, designing family policy independently of technology policy is steadily losing its meaning; it is already evident that a significant share of the challenges the family will face in the future will be bound up with the digital transformation.

Despite all the differences of opinion, a surprisingly strong point of agreement emerged in the field: even people holding very different worldviews converged on the need to protect the family. The divergence concerns not the importance of the family but the means of protecting it; some foregrounded legal reform, some the importance of cultural change, and some the decisive role of education. This widespread conviction—seeing the family as the fundamental institution in which children are raised, values are transmitted, and social solidarity is nourished—accords directly with the social capital and trust literature, which treats the family as one of the principal sources of a society's capacity for trust and cooperation (Putnam, 2000; Fukuyama, 1995). The link between family stability and child welfare, educational success, and social cohesion has likewise been consistently demonstrated in the comprehensive reports of international organizations (OECD, 2011). The family, then, should be seen as far more than a heading in social assistance—as one of the load-bearing columns of long-term societal sustainability.

Another theme encountered again and again in the interviews is the conviction that men's experiences within the family have long gone insufficiently discussed. What men go through in terms of divorce proceedings, their relationships with their children, and their psychological well-being has, in recent years, found increasing place in the international literature as well (Reeves, 2022; Bates, 2020). Studies pointing out that tension and violence within the family are not a one-sided phenomenon but can be reciprocal (Straus, 2011), together with critical reviews finding that what men experience often remains invisible (Scott-Storey et al., 2023), reinforce this picture. To stress this is not to belittle the problems women

face; indeed, it has been shown that men's political demands follow two distinct paths—one that clashes with the women's rights movement and one that aligns with it (Messner, 2016). The real lesson from the field is that family policy should rest on a framework that, rather than pitting men and women against each other, views the experiences of both together. The family is a structure founded on reciprocity; approaches that focus on only one of the parties fall short of explaining the whole of its reality.

The matter on which the field achieved the broadest consensus, however, is children. Whatever their views, participants regard children's growing up in a safe and stable environment as the true priority of family policy. Concern about the effect of intra-family conflict and unstable relationships on children is pronounced; the literature examining the consequences of divorce and of ruptures in family structure for children offers findings that support this concern (Amato, 2010; Fagan & Churchill, 2012). It has also been shown how instability in family structure transmits inequalities across generations (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). All of this calls for thinking about the family not only through adults' rights and obligations but also through the principle of the best interests of the child. Establishing closer coordination among education, social services, and family policy is one of the soundest ways of carrying the debate from ideological ground to concrete needs.

The first thing that may be recommended on the basis of these findings is that the social, legal, and cultural policies bearing on the family be addressed not in separate lanes but within an integrated framework in which they speak to one another. When a regulation concerning family law is prepared, account should be taken not only of the intended outcome but also of how that regulation is perceived in the field and what it produces in practice. A substantial portion of those interviewed expressed the need for broader consultation in making decisions that affect the family. A standing consultative platform operating among public institutions, universities, civil society, and the relevant professional organizations could ensure that regulations are evaluated together with their sociological and psychological effects, not merely their legal ones. Such a platform is also the most realistic way of making the family a subject of common reason rather than of ideological polarization.

The second recommendation concerns education. It was frequently expressed in the interviews that matters such as intra-family communication, the sharing of responsibility, mutual respect, and long-term commitment need to be reconsidered, especially for the younger generations. The family cannot be protected by law alone; it also needs a sound cultural and educational foundation. Giving greater place in

educational programmes to topics such as conflict resolution, parenting, and solidarity would be beneficial. What is decisive here is to design these programmes so as to strengthen intergenerational dialogue, without turning them into the instrument of any ideology. The picture emerging from the data shows that there is no deep rupture between the generations in the importance attached to the family, the real difference lying in expectations of it; a well-designed education can help to manage this difference in expectations before it turns into conflict.

Third, the economic dimension of policies aimed at strengthening the family must not be neglected. The field data indicate that as economic fragility rises, so too does tension within the family. A family policy not thought through together with employment, housing, and income security hangs in the air. Comparative studies that reveal how greatly a state's approach to the family varies from society to society—and how differently the consequences of these choices play out—demonstrate the importance of the difference between models that “lean on the family” and those that “support the family” (Saraceno, 2016). International assessments have likewise shown that family-friendly public policies yield positive results across a broad range, from child welfare to women's employment (OECD, 2011). A substantial portion of participants expect the state to adopt an approach that supports the family not only in times of crisis but in ordinary times as well.

The fourth recommendation is that the effects of regulations concerning family law be monitored on a regular basis. A regulation is most often prepared to solve a particular problem; yet over time it may also produce unforeseen consequences. For this reason, legislation should be kept open to scientific evaluation not only at the moment it is written but throughout the process of its implementation. Measuring separately the consequences of regulations for women, men, and children allows problems to be noticed at an early stage. Institutionalizing regular data collection, impact assessment, and public-opinion research enables decisions to rest on concrete findings rather than on assumptions. Within the same framework, the protection of individual rights and the strengthening of the institution of the family should not be presented as rival aims; a substantial portion of people in the field defend, at one and the same time, both combating domestic violence, discrimination, and inequality and protecting the institution of the family. The success of policy depends less on meeting the demands of a particular group than on strengthening the sense of justice and trust across society as a whole.

The fifth and final recommendation is that debates about the family not be surrendered to ideological camps. A substantial

portion of those interviewed said that matters concerning the family are at times confined to a language that forces one to take sides, and that this makes sound assessment harder. An attitude that closes the family off to every criticism, and one that ignores its social weight, both leave reality incomplete. The transformation of the concept of gender, in many countries, into a symbol that gathers together disparate anxieties shows precisely how unproductive such polarization can be. The task of scholarly work, by contrast, is to examine such complex matters free of preconceptions. Conducting public debate in a more inclusive language will raise the quality both of academic work and of policy processes.

At this point it is worth saying a few words about method as well. A significant part of the study's strength derives from its being spread over a span of more than a decade and from its having posed the same questions to different societies—and, in the European sample, to the same society in two separate rounds. The unstructured interview technique is valuable, especially on sensitive topics, because it allows people to speak in their own words and according to their own order of priorities, without being confined to ready-made answer categories. The recurrence of the same themes across different countries and different years was taken as a sign reinforcing the consistency of the findings. In this way the study has sought to render visible the layer of perception, concern, and expectation that quantitative indicators cannot capture.

The limits of the study must also be stated plainly. The interviews were unstructured; the data rest on notes taken during conversations that proceeded in their natural flow. Although this design is strong in the depth and candour it affords, the findings cannot be generalized to the whole of society because they do not rest on probability sampling. The data obtained reflect perception; perception and objective reality may not always coincide, and these data do not by themselves provide proof of causation. This limit is not a weakness of the study but an honest statement of its scope; indeed, one of the important tasks of social science is precisely to render visible the gap between perception and reality. Given that it consists of conversation-based interviews in which no identifying information was recorded, the study does not require ethics committee approval; no ethical violation was committed at any point in the research process, and the voluntary participation and privacy of participants were scrupulously observed.

Several directions are especially promising for what lies ahead. Examining, with larger samples and with designs that combine qualitative and quantitative methods, the links between family structure and economic conditions, digitalization, psychological well-being, and social trust would be valuable for testing and deepening the findings here.

Longitudinal studies that track children's and young people's views of the family over the years are needed in order to capture the slow and gradual nature of the change. An increase in comparative international research, for its part, would allow us to see how different societies respond to similar processes. On a subject like the family, where many disciplines intersect, the addition of psychology, economics, demography, education, and communication studies alongside law, sociology, and political science would enrich the picture considerably. Perhaps the most modest contribution of this study lies precisely here: in rendering visible the new questions that need to be asked, rather than in providing definitive answers.

In conclusion, the family—despite all the upheavals it has undergone—retains its social importance in both Europe and Türkiye. The most enduring impression arising from the field is that the debate about the future of the family is in fact a debate about the future of societies. This transformation, more mature in Europe and only now becoming pronounced in Türkiye, displays a striking similarity around shared concerns such as trust, commitment, the future of children, economic stability, and solidarity. Although the two societies come from different histories and different cultural foundations, they are grappling with the same questions; this shows that the matter is a debate of global scale, one that transcends local boundaries. For this reason, every decision affecting the family must be weighed not only for its short-term outcomes but also for its long-term social costs. A more inclusive, more balanced approach grounded in more data will produce far sounder results for both scholarly knowledge and public policy. This comparison setting Europe and Türkiye side by side likewise shows that family research and family-focused policy, far from losing importance in the coming years, will only grow in significance.

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