

## From the Desk of the Editor

This issue of Turkish Policy Quarterly (TPQ) looks at how dynamics unleashed by the Arab Spring are affecting women's rights and liberties across the Arab world, and how Turkey relates to these complex trends. Authors seek to illuminate questions such as: Is Turkey a model when it comes to women's rights and empowerment? Or, is Turkey increasingly importing ideas and practices *vis-à-vis* women from its conservative Islamic neighbors? Does more democracy necessarily mean more freedom when it comes to lifestyle choices and gender orientation? What can governments and international actors do in order to empower women and also help protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights in the region? How do structural changes in the economic sphere play into women's empowerment? Might there need to be another "Spring" – a form of revolution in gender relations?

In exploring the intricate relations between Islam and democracy in Turkey, two issues related to identity and freedom surface: the headscarf as a freedom of religious practice, and LGBT rights as an issue of individual rights and liberties. Accordingly, these two themes figure high in this issue of TPQ, highlighting different dimensions of the relationship between morality debates and freedom, conservatism, and liberal democracy.

Women's rights are an issue of human rights, development policies, and the relationship between religion and state. Examining gender rights and relations sheds light on many dimensions of governance, intellectual trends, social change, and democratization dynamics. A woman's identity and body are also fronts in the battles of power politics. As authors in this TPQ also note, political debates about a woman covering her hair, the number of children she should bear, at what age she should marry, and what kind of education and job she can pursue, often disregard choices made by the women themselves.

As always, in this issue we again draw on a range of perspectives, representing different ideological leanings and backgrounds – activists from the field, decision makers, and academics. From Poland to Bahrain, a broad spectrum of experiences are shared.

Though the Arab Spring was essentially a wave of uprisings for freedom, many of the Islamist politicians it brought to power –in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya– appear to carry a vision entailing even less freedom for women than they had before the uprisings. In a region with the highest gender gap rates in the world, liberties for women risk becoming further restricted. One central question is: now that

authoritarian repression has been lifted, how will the oppression of women, homosexuals, non-believers, dissidents, and minorities be curbed?

A number of authors in this issue of TPQ point out the wide gender gap and the negative effect of traditional social perceptions in the wider Middle East region, as well as the “rolling back” of women’s rights in post-revolution Arab countries. Haifa Fakhour Al Kaylani, Founder and Chairman of the Arab International Women’s Forum, draws on examples from countries across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, from Kuwait to Morocco, to relate both the achievements of Arab women in the last 10-15 years, and the barriers that have persisted. Stressing the key role women played in the upheavals across the region, she underlines the importance of ensuring that women are not marginalized in the course of the current social, political, and economic transitions.

The Former Minister of Family and Population of Egypt, Moushira Khattab, focuses on the case of Egypt, warning that conservative discourse and the post-revolution Islamist Constitution threaten to widen the gender gap and curtail the current status of women. Pelin Gönül Şahin, working at the Barcelona Center for International Affairs (CIDOB), walks the reader through gender related policies before and after the revolution in Tunisia.

As revolutions unfolded in the Arab world, Iranian women were watching, writes Haleh Esfandiari, Director of the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center. She draws parallels between the setbacks for women after the Iranian revolution of 1979 and experiences in the Arab Spring countries, noting that for some Arab Islamists, Iran may be the model for legislation and policies towards women.

Esfandiari points out that, Iranian women from all walks of life and ideologies, took part in the massive year-long demonstrations that culminated in the overthrow of the monarchy in 1979. The revolution in Iran generated hope among the secularists, the religious, liberals, conservatives, the poor and the affluent, the illiterate and the educated, workers and intellectuals, believers and cynics – as did the massive movements in 2011 in the Arab Spring countries. However, “for 33 years, [Iranian women] have been fighting an uphill battle for their rights” she explains.

A piece by *CNN International* Senior Correspondent Arwa Damon reflects the reality of women from diverse backgrounds taking part in the ongoing Syrian uprising. Damon relates the “two-pronged battle” of women among the Syrian opposition today: “fighting for freedom against an oppressive regime, and battling just as hard to ensure that their individual rights do not perish in the process, as the landscape and dynamics of the Syrian uprising shift.”

The personal stories Damon relates portray different trends taking place simultaneously. On the one hand, the revolution brings together people of different backgrounds—moderate, conservative, Islamist, Salafi—on a regular basis, leading them to exchange ideas. On the other hand, one can foresee the potential tensions that might flare up among them when there is a concrete opportunity to shape what Syrian governance will look like in the future. Nevertheless, the stories inspire hope in women's role towards ensuring the original ideals of the revolution are realized.

The women whom Damon has interacted with, point out the vicious cycle of women not having had opportunities to gain experience, and thus finding themselves at a disadvantage to men. This phenomenon is mentioned by various other authors in this issue of TPQ. Bahiya Jawad Aljishi also echoes the reality of “doubt of the aptitudes of women,” a result of years of repression. Due to decades of restrictive upbringing, the seclusion of women, and the practice of traditional roles, by now it is not only men, but also women who believe in their own inferiority. Dr. Bahiya argues that “education, awareness campaigns, responsible media, and a total change in the methods of upbringing” are needed. This requires, she says, “a concentrated campaign which is not based on political decisions alone but on a constant and effective action by governmental and non-governmental organizations.”

Sedef Küçük, Member of Parliament of the Republican People's Party (CHP), and a Member of the Equal Opportunities Commission in the Turkish Parliament, asserts it is too early to judge where developments in the region will end up. The new political demands emanating from the region are rooted in economic and demographic changes (modern economic structures and small families that put the individual at the center of public life). These same pressures might inevitably transform gender relations. Küçük argues that the best way to change perceptions is for women to take greater part in economic life.

The view that these problems are inherent to Islam, or that Islam is incompatible with women's rights, is largely perceived to be Orientalist. Kaylani reminds readers that Islam brought rights to women, as well as examples of strong women. Yet, it is also realities that make stereotypes, even if stereotypes often outlive the reality. Whether religion will be used to justify undermining women's rights is a reasonable question, particularly given the discourse and practices of the political parties proclaiming their commitment to Islamic ideology in many Arab countries today.

As Khattab notes, though the reasons for the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria might be similar, the dynamics of post-revolution realities are different. She points out that the rise of political Islam with the Arab Spring has placed Turkey under the spotlight due to the Republic's successes under a conservative government.

Accordingly, Turkey's credentials also need to be examined. Turkey has implemented significant legal reforms in the past decade – adopting a new civil code granting women and men equal rights in every respect, and a penal code treating female sexuality as a matter of individual rights, cleansed from notions such as “honor”. Yet equal opportunity for women is far from reality, patriarchal pressures dictating women's choices remain strong, intimidation of feminists persists, and debates familiar to the Muslim Middle East resonate in Turkey as well – such as whether women should be defined as “complementary” to men, or whether women are responsible for incidents of sexual harassment. However, the diversity at play in such debates in Turkey can be illuminating for observers from the region. Moreover, the strong Turkish women's movement –with experience functioning in conservative environments– can potentially transfer useful experiences to their counterparts in the Arab world.

Given female labor force participation and employment are the areas in which Turkey's gender gap is highest, many of this issue's articles elaborate on this topic. In the league of the Middle East, Turkey may offer positive benchmarks; however, as Sedef Küçük points out, Turkey does not fair well in the Global Gender Gap Index. Moreover, among the European Union (EU), Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and Europe and Central Asia (ECA) countries, Turkey has the worst female labor force participation and employment rates.

Selma Acuner, International Relations Coordinator of the Women's Coalition of Turkey and a member of the UN Women Global Civil Society Advisory Group, draws attention to the wide gaps in the education, employment and lifestyle opportunities available to women in Turkey, dictated by culture and traditions, economic realities, religious beliefs, and urban versus rural settings.

Dr. Acuner also underscores the rise of religious conservatism in Turkey and the new challenges for the individual rights of women and gender equality. She relates some of the government discourse and practices that have dominated recent debates about women's rights in the country.

One case Dr. Acuner mentions in her article is the education bill approved in March 2012. While increasing compulsory education from an uninterrupted eight years to 12 years in three instalments, the bill can potentially allow girls to be home-schooled after fourth grade, thus having an adverse effect on girls' school attendance rate and affecting their socialization in public life. While some such policy shifts are justified by citing that they are common in developed countries, the current realities in Turkey need to be factored into the evaluation of policy choices. Despite decades of legal requirement and efforts, 17 percent of women over 15 are illiterate, and the

school dropout rate among girls in the 11-15 age bracket continues to be a problem, particularly in rural areas. If supplementary policies were drawn up in order to avert the risks of these policies, government critics might not be as skeptical as they are about these legal changes.

Relatedly, Acuner draws attention to the style of policy shifts and public debates, observing that changes that will impact women's opportunities and choices are abruptly dropped into the agenda and pushed through hurriedly, rather than being subjected to a consultative process with primary constituents and the stakeholders.

Acuner also takes up the case of abortion. Though Turkish women have had the right to abortion since 1983, as of May 2012 this has become a politically charged issue due to strong statements by the Prime Minister about the matter. Certain official practices introduced are also said to violate privacy and intimidate women who seek abortion. The government's advocacy of women to have at least three children and statements against birth control, feed into this approach.

Meanwhile there remains a strong need for an informed debate over how to make it easier for women to juggle work and family. The provision of public childcare and other family policies, as well as social security systems, play an important role in women's labor force participation decisions. Adjustments to such policies could increase or decrease women's incentives for economic independence. Tuğba Bozçağa, an EU expert in the Turkish public sector, explains that Turkey has traditionally had a passive family policy. It has neither granted transfers to the family for childcare, nor provided public care institutions in order to make it more convenient for parents to join the labor force. This has left families –and in practice, women– responsible for these burdens. Nowadays, there appears to be a transition to gender-biased familialistic policies, Bozçağa explains. She also points out that while amendments to the social security system are creating a model where women and men join the labor market under the same conditions, they are not accompanied with regulations that will enable working women to reconcile their work and family life.

Another significant problem is violence against women. Despite new state programs to combat domestic violence, murders of women by their "significant others" are rising. A majority of victims are those who have previously appealed to the state for protection. Clearly, public administration falls short in this area. One of the causes of increased violence against women is said to be related to women's increased sense of entitlement and demand for personal choices. Supposedly, as women try to break out of the traditional roles, incidences of rape and domestic violence have spiked. Reform of the Penal Code and state programs for more effective responses by law enforcement agencies are insufficient in curbing this trend. Therefore, the education

system and a strong political message need to be geared at breaking the incompatibility between legal rights and entrenched mentalities. Authorities' prioritization of the preservation of family unity can be counterproductive, for it pressures women to withstand abusive environments. At this phase of transition, state action and political discourse can determine whether a critical mass of Turkish women revert to submission or pass to a higher league of freedom, choice, and opportunity.

The debate in Turkey about women has at times been caught between secularist claims that democracy might need to be curbed in order to protect women's liberties and conservative calls for liberal choices to be curbed due to "demands of the majority." The projection of this troubling dichotomy is reflected in both restrictions of the headscarf and in legal restrictions based on ambiguous concepts such as "public morality" or "chastity". Authors of this issue of TPQ take on these mirror images of "social engineering" instincts, arguably present in both the old and the new Turkish establishment.

Umut Azak, Assistant Professor of International Relations at Okan University in Istanbul, analyzes secularism and the freedom of religion in Turkey. Through the prism of the headscarf controversy, she distinguishes between the "liberal" interpretation of secularism and Kemalist secularism. The former, she explains, opposes discrimination of headscarved women (or their limited access to public institutions) for the sake of protecting the freedom of religion of the Sunni Muslims, while the latter defends the headscarf ban for the sake of protecting the secular regime. Neither, she argues, comes to terms with patriarchy, and both impose an ideal of the identity and preferences of "the Turkish woman", thereby marginalizing the others. Azak argues that this impasse is caused by fears of either top-down Islamization or secularization, and can be overcome only when women's rights and freedoms at large become the main concern for all parties in the debate. She underlines that headscarved women are in a critical position to challenge the subordination of women within Islamic/conservative communities, and to break the hegemony of patriarchy legitimized by Islam. Calling for a *critique* of patriarchy by women from within and outside of Islamic circles, she claims that only this can end the current polarization by carrying debates beyond the headscarf.

Fatma Benli, Representative of the International Jurists Union, explains that Turkey's poor performance in women's empowerment is also a factor of the years of exclusion of headscarved women from universities and their continued exclusion from various sectors of employment. Offering an overview of the course of events on this front, including the military's role in bringing about polarization, Benli relates the agony that discrimination has caused headscarved women. She notes that covering hair with the Islamic headscarf is a pious responsibility and a matter of individual freedom. The choice to wear or not to wear a headscarf, she states, should rest solely with the

individual, not with the state or society. Benli suggests that the reality of economic class distinctions coinciding with the practice of wearing the headscarf was also instrumental in protracting prejudices against headscarved women. Like race-based segregation was thought to be appropriate by many people in the United States before the civil rights movement, discrimination of headscarved women was seen as reasonable and supported by large segments of Turkish society. Only now, slowly, the problem is being comprehended and overcome, she argues.

Benli also asserts that without allowing women wearing headscarves full access to the workforce, including public offices –thus enabling more women to economically sustain themselves– it is not possible to advance women’s rights in Turkey. “Women already have difficulties accessing the workforce; hence, the additional exclusion of covered women further diminishes female participation in economic, social, and political life,” she writes.

Another human rights debate taken on by authors of this issue of TPQ is that of LGBT citizens. The recognition and rights of the LGBT community is seen as a prism through which the depth and breadth of democracy can be measured – particularly as a litmus test of whether conservatism necessarily casts a shadow on individual rights and freedoms.

All authors on this topic agree that, with the turn of the century, the Turkish LGBT movement has become more actively organized in demanding recognition and equal rights. The EU accession process and related legal reforms, as well as the breaking of taboos over other issues (such as challenging of historical narratives, recognition of Kurdish identity and demands, weeding out of value-ridden notions from the Penal Code, easing of restrictions for headscarved women) empowered and emboldened LGBT rights activists. Thus, the rise of activism on behalf of LGBT rights was part of a larger trend of entitlement and democratization.

Just as LGBT rights has surfaced as a continuum of the spreading sense of entitlement in the country, the obstacles to LGBT demands also echo the problems faced by other minorities and activists that do not conform to the mainstream narratives or norms. Discrimination and violation of rights in all cases are enabled by weak political will on behalf of those rights, intimidation by various social groups, impunity of law enforcement officials, provocative media, and vaguely worded laws. LGBTs still lack legal recognition, and suffer discrimination in many different policy domains including employment, housing, education, and social services.

Volkan Yılmaz, a Ph.D candidate at the University of Leeds and research coordinator at the Civil Society Studies Center at Istanbul Bilgi University, relates how the LGBT

community has a more strained relation with the ruling party now than it did before 2010. From the perspective of the LGBT movement, since all political movements have ignored the rights and demands of the LGBT community in Turkey, the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) appeared to be no different, he says. However, a shift took place in 2010 when no one in the party opposed the words of the Minister responsible for Women and Family Affairs, who stated that homosexuality is a disease and needs to be cured. Yılmaz observes that not only LGBT people, but many human rights activists, turned against the AKP after this incident.

Yılmaz, who is also an academic coordinator at the Social Policies, Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Studies Association (SPoD), goes on to relate how the process of the making of a new constitution has entrenched divisions. The constitution process, which has been going on since Summer 2011 and has brought together different groups that are stigmatized or suffer from restriction of rights in Turkey, included strong participation from LGBT organizations, which formulated demands for recognition and equality. One of the issues in the forefront has been the need to remove subjective wording in laws that enable arbitrary interpretation, such as defining a crime on the basis of violation of “public morality”, “general health” or “public order”. The right to privacy is another important issue that has surfaced. A dividing issue has been whether reference to sexual orientation and gender identity should be added to the clause prohibiting discrimination.

Yılmaz concludes that AKP’s majoritarian approach makes it highly unlikely that the new constitution will include a clause on LGBT equality. Besides AKP, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the Felicity Party (SP), and various institutions representing political Islam have expressed that they are against any constitutional changes that might imply the recognition of LGBT citizens. The SP has gone so far as to call for the criminalization of homosexuality and consensual sex outside of marriage. Yılmaz points out that, as a result of these processes, the polarization and the incompatibility of positions are now distinct in a way that they were not before 2010.

Sedef Çakmak, a sociologist and the Chairperson of the SPoD, explains that the basic human rights of the LGBT individuals living in Turkey are systematically infringed upon by state institutions, as well as by private individuals. She relates a number of cases that reveal systematic pursuit of a discourse of “public morality” in order to justify the human rights violations of LGBT individuals. She argues that the Turkish state prioritizes safeguarding so-called public morality over carrying out its responsibility to protect the well-being of all of its citizens.

Mehmet Sinan Birdal, Assistant Professor at the Department of International Relations of Işık University, examines AKP’s attempt to combine liberalism with

conservatism. Birdal details the trends of globalization and localization which have unleashed social groups' demands for recognition of their identity, and the need for politicians to respond to these demands without alienating and "othering" certain identity groups. Extending pluralism to accommodate LGBT rights "is the crux of conservative democracy's incompatibility with liberal democracy," he notes.

The dissolution of the family, which is the most important institution from a conservative outlook, is perceived as a social degeneration that needs to be prevented. Birdal observes that the AKP interprets its electoral victories as a license to "represent and define national values" and accordingly adopts a hegemonic discourse bent on protecting public morality and national values. "Sexual deviance, signifying the ultimate degeneration of the nation, constitutes the main dilemma for the re-articulation of Turkish conservatism within the conceptual universe of liberal democracy and multiculturalism," Birdal concludes.

Birdal traces arguments by conservative journalists, intellectuals, and NGOs on homosexuality, reflecting the contours of the debate. Some conservative intellectuals argue that condemning homosexuality is their democratic right, and complain that homosexuality is used to test how "democratic" they truly are. Some conservative opinion makers quoted by Birdal suggest that minimal engagement with homosexuals –in other words, segregation– is the only way to live together within the same society. They also argue that it is necessary to limit liberties for the sake of not offending public morality.

There have been concerns that conservative majoritarianism can extend to limiting a range of other non-conventional (or non-family-friendly, as commonly referred to in Turkey) lifestyle features, including alcohol consumption from mainstream public space, containing "degenerate" people and practices to touristic districts, entertainment and shopping complexes, and so-called red light districts.

Another theme explored in this issue of TPQ is whether Western intervention into the gender rights of countries in the Middle East is useful. Louis A. Fishman, Assistant Professor at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, points out some positive effects of Western engagement, yet also alludes to hypocrisy and self-interest in how Western actors use the issue of LGBT rights as a lever against countries of the Muslim Middle East. Partly because promotion of LGBT rights can be perceived as a type of Western exclusivism or cultural imperialism, Fishman argues that if change is to come in Turkey, it will be a result of domestic activism and Turkey's own choice to continue with EU reforms.

Fatma Benli's piece contributes to the understanding of a different angle of Western influence. She argues that the Turkish effort to "look like" the West, seen as a

measure of modernity, was a factor that caused headscarved women to be branded as a “problem” and subsequently discriminated against.

Regarding Western involvement in promoting women’s rights, Küçük warns that an Occidental view prevails in the Middle East. Therefore, she suggests, an effort must be made to ensure that Western encouragement of democracy not be perceived as interference in the internal affairs of the Arab Spring countries, or that democracy not be perceived as a Western cultural imposition.

Małgorzata Druciarek and Aleksandra Niżyńska recount the campaign launched by female activists in Poland to change the electoral law and introduce gender quotas for the 2011 parliamentary elections. The co-authors relate useful recommendations on how to improve the effectiveness of equalizing mechanisms in the electoral process.

Certainly, literature from the West, interaction with counterparts in Europe, benchmarking of standards, and pressure from the EU were important factors in the growing power of the women’s movement in Turkey over the years. The organizations and platforms these women established have been the main driving force behind many advances in women’s rights in the country.

The Internet was an instrumental factor in the uprisings that spread across the Arab world. Internet is also increasing women’s exposure to ideas and information, fostering heightened recognition of repression, and aiding new forms of “awakening” and empowerment through interaction.

Rana F. Sweis, a freelance journalist and lead researcher for the Open Society Institute-sponsored Mapping Digital Media Study for Jordan, and Dina Baslan, a communication officer at the European Commission’s Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department (ECHO) in Jordan, relate how the enhanced access to information and news has contributed to political and social activism in the Jordanian society. Jordanians have created communities and contributed to “digital and social activism,” making an impact through active public participation, they explain.

Although not by our choice, this is one of the rare issues of TPQ without a high level government official represented. However the Minister of Family and Social Policies, Fatma Şahin, had shared her perspectives on the themes taken up in this issue of TPQ for the Spring 2012 issue of TPQ, which is available on our website, – along with all content of past issues, at [www.turkishpolicy.com](http://www.turkishpolicy.com)

As TPQ, we are happy to be developing new relationships in Europe and Turkey's neighborhood. We are looking forward to being media partners in two upcoming summits. One is the 4th Thessaloniki Summit, organized by Strategy International on March 8th and 9th, focusing on Transatlantic and Mediterranean security challenges. The other is the Conference organized by the Beirut Institute in April, titled "Investing in Transition: A Conversation with the Future," to take up the region's most pressing challenges and foster better decision-making in an Arab region in transition. We also value our developing case-basis collaboration with the Paris-based Robert Schuman Foundation.

We are grateful for the partnership of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Liberty in this issue of TPQ. We appreciate the generous support of Kadir Has University, and continue to enjoy our partnership with *Hürriyet Daily News*, and close relations with *Caucasus International*.

A special thanks goes to Garanti Bank, the main corporate sponsor of this issue of TPQ. We also welcome Odeabank as a new sponsor, and we appreciate the continuing contributions of Beko, Turcas Petrol, BP Turkey, TAV, Akbank, İş Bank, and Finansbank.

Diba Nigâr Göksel