In Turkey, women are the ones who suffer most from the growing trend towards a new type of ultra conservatism which does not consider women and men equal in the words of the Prime Minister. In order to address this problem, and in the wake of the upcoming elections, as the Republican People’s Party (CHP) we attribute great importance to pro-women policies. We aim to raise the education levels of women and ensure their economic freedom. To this end, we have prepared a Family Insurance scheme which will directly benefit housewives living in poverty. Furthermore, we promote a range of positive actions that provide women with the chance to higher participation in the working and political life.

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World War II was a catastrophe starting in Europe and spreading throughout the world between 1939 and 1945, resulting in the death of 50 million people in Europe alone. Soon after this enormous grief, the leaders of the time decided to establish an organization to institute and maintain peace, with the motto “Never Again!” Today, despite some challenges, the EU is one of the most significant integration projects of the world. Although it has not yet reached its goal of becoming a political and military power, economically and with a population drawing close to 500 million, it is an important global player.

Turkey’s experience of the World War II was quite different. Having only recently emerged from decades of wars, Turkey remained outside the war. It joined the institutions that emerged after the war and became a member of the United Nations in 1945, and the Council of Europe in 1949. With the 1963 Ankara Agreement, it committed itself for membership to the European Economic Community. On the day of signing the agreement, the Head of the Commission, Professor Walter Hallstein stated:

Turkey is part of Europe: and here we think first and foremost of the stupendous personality of Atatürk, whose works meet us at every turn in this country, and of the radical way in which he recast every aspect of life in Turkey on European lines. It is an event without parallel in the history of the influence exerted by European culture and politics. I would even say that we sense in it a certain kinship with the most modern of European developments: the unification of Europe. Do we not feel the workings of a kindred spirit when we meet this enlightened, rational and sternly realistic attitude; the methodical application of modern knowledge; the importance attached to teaching and education; the progressive and forceful dynamism which we witness everywhere; and the bold pragmatism in the choice of means. What then can be more natural than that Europe –that part of Europe which represents the free expression of its own character– and Turkey should show themselves to be as one in their actions and reactions – in the military, the political and the economic spheres?  

After 48 years, we see there are some contradictory and worrying changes in the EU’s perspective on Turkey which also affects the corresponding hopes and aspirations of Turkey. While our long journey is still continuing, the EU has become a power that is able to make vital decisions on important matters involving its 27 members. Today, the decisions taken for EU member states are binding and can

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1 Speech by Walter Hallstein, extracted from Olli Rehn, “45 Years from the Signing of the Ankara Agreement: EU-Turkey Cooperation Continues”, Conference on EC-Turkey Association Agreement, Speech/08/581.
supersede internal law. The EU changes the living standards of societies, setting new rules and restrictions. The aim is to create more civilized, more prosperous societies. And this aim also includes ensuring gender equality.

The Treaty of Rome, with its article 119, introduced the obligation to ensure “equal pay for equal work or work of equal value” to men and women for its member states. In 1977, when a Belgian air-hostess learned that the airline paid higher wages to its male employees, she applied to the Court of Justice and won the case. As a result of the binding decision of the Court, the Union issued a series of directives pertaining to women’s rights. According to these directives, which are included under the Social Policy section: a woman doing the same work as a man has the right to demand equal pay; Women shall be given equal rights in matters such as occupational training, employment and career development, and there shall be no discrimination between men and women in job advertisements; Men and women shall be granted the same rights in the social security system; Women who want to set up their own businesses or who want to work shall be granted all the rights granted to men; Relevant facilities shall be offered to ensure that employed men and women can fulfill their work and family responsibilities in a balanced way. Adopting the concept of equality and reaching EU standards with regard to the rights of women have been among the reasons for Turkey’s choice of EU accession.

In countries traditionally characterized as being “macho”, such as Italy, Portugal, Spain, Greece and Ireland, significant progress in gender equality took place as part of EU integration processes. In some aspects, Turkey’s women were already way ahead of some of these countries in terms of legislation thanks to the rights granted by the Republic and the revolutions of Atatürk. For example, in Turkey, women’s suffrage was achieved 10 years earlier than in France, 14 years earlier than in Belgium, 18 years earlier than in Greece and 42 years earlier than in Portugal. In other areas, Turkey made progress at a time when there were no Copenhagen Criteria. In particular, in the early days of the Republic, promoting the rights and role of women were a high priority of the movement headed by Atatürk and his pioneering friends, and were raised to important positions in most fields of society’s activities, notably at Village Institutes, Adult Learning Centers, and in the National Mobilization for Education.

“The ultra religious movement gaining momentum aimed to trap women in traditional, restrictive and conservative lifestyles.”
However, there was subsequently a reversal; the number of female deputies in the parliament dropped from 17 to three with the elections in 1950. Girls were most heavily affected from the closing down of Village Institutes and Adult Learning Centers. The girls at schools were forced to go back to their homes or return to work on their farms. The ultra religious movement gaining momentum aimed to trap women in traditional, restrictive and conservative lifestyles. There was a return to more traditional dress code. The place of women in the family started to diminish. Advocating the rights of women and making progress in this area was no longer a part of the state policy.

However, the women’s movement that began to rise first in the 1970s and then more explicitly in the 1980s gained a new momentum with Turkey’s advances along the EU membership project. The process that started with the 1999 Helsinki Conclusions of the European Council gained speed, leading to a silent but very strong advances in women’s rights particularly in the field of legislation in Turkey in the recent years.

In 2001, the new Civil Code was adopted, as a result of which men’s position as the “head of family” was nullified; Women were given the right to choose between keeping their own surnames and taking their husband’s surname; the family was given rights over the family residence; equality was ensured in the custody of children and in representation of the matrimonial union; the legal property regime in marriage was changed. The right to take up employment with no requirement to seek their husband’s permission was accepted a few years before the new Civil Code in the 1990s.

Two years later, in 2003, the Labor Law was renewed as a result of which prohibited gender discrimination and harmonization to some EU directives on gender discrimination. Women were given the right to 16 weeks of maternal leave. Family Courts Law was accepted in the same year and these courts were established in Turkey.

The following provision was added to Article 10 of the Constitution: “Men and women have equal rights. The State shall have the obligation to ensure that this equality exists in practice and may use any positive measures to this end.” Article
41 of the constitution was also amended to state that the family is the foundation of the Turkish society and based on the equality between women and men.

Furthermore, in 2007, the Law No. 4320 on Protection of The Family (Protection Order Law), which was accepted in 1998 at first, was amended along with the new Turkish Penal Code (TPC) which was adopted in 2002-2003. In the new Penal Code, custom/honor killings were covered under the crime of qualified homicide and sexual harassment at workplace and marital sexual assault were defined as crimes with aggravated sanctions.

Today, the women of Turkey rank the highest in terms of rights among countries with a Muslim population. 40 percent of female students seek higher education, and approximately 30-40 percent of women are employed in respectable fields, such as medicine, law, media and academia requiring high qualification. Yet, these positive statistics unfortunately reflect only one part of reality for Turkey.

According to the EU Progress Reports, the main areas that continue to be a cause of concern for women in Turkey are domestic violence, honor killings, high illiteracy rates, and the low rate of participation in the parliament, in local representative organs and in the workforce. And the implementation of many legal reforms, particularly the Law on Protection of the Family is not consistent.

The literacy rate among women in Turkey is only 85 percent, which means that four million women are illiterate. 300,000 girls do not have the opportunity to go to a school. In the 15-29 age range, 66 percent of females do not go to school or work. Only six percent of women of Turkey have a university degree.

Women’s participation in the labor force is at a mere 24 percent. The corresponding EU average is 60 percent. Only seven percent of women find employment in the management sector. On average, Turkish women receive 20 to 40 percent less pay than men doing the same work (In the EU, women receive on average 15 percent less than men for the same work). Over 80 percent of women in Turkey do not have any property deeded or registered on them.

As far as the health category goes, in Turkey, there are 17 maternal deaths for every 100 thousand births. 30 percent of women do not use any method of birth control and 40 percent marry at 18 years of age. Early marriage and forced marriage appear as one of the most serious human rights violations that our young people face. One out of every five marriages takes place between blood relatives.

Other figures are further worrisome. In terms of domestic violence, one out of every three women is exposed to violence every three minutes. According to the 2008
State research on domestic violence against women, 39.8 percent of women are exposed to physical violence. With the words of the Justice Minister in 2010, in the last seven years, violence against women has increased by 1400 percent. Turkey is ranked 126th out of 134 countries on the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap List.

Finally, in terms of political representation, we see that women hold only 9.1 percent of the seats in the Parliament. This figure is 24 percent among EU countries. At the local elected authorities, the situation is worse. For example, rate of women’s political representation at municipal councils is less than five per cent. Women mayors constitute only 0.9 per cent among all mayors. 2.5 per cent of members of the special province councils are women since 2009.

Even laws that are structured the best are doomed to remain on paper unless there is a corresponding change of mentality. To achieve contemporary gender equality, we need leaders who will embrace this challenge as a civilization problem, just as in the early Republican period, and who will set an example and demonstrate political will by implementing it to their own life styles. However, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has clearly declared in the July 2010 meeting with representatives of women’s civil society organizations of Turkey in Istanbul that he does not believe in gender equality.

In Turkey, women are the ones who suffer most from the growing trend towards a new type of ultra conservatism which does not consider women and men equal. In order to address this problem, and in the wake of the upcoming elections, as the Republican People’s Party (CHP) we attribute great importance to pro-women policies. We aim to raise the education levels of women and ensure their economic freedom. To this end, we have prepared a Family Insurance scheme which will directly benefit housewives living in poverty. Furthermore, we give our support to all positive actions that provide women with the chance to higher participation in the working life and political life. We are determined to stop the ugly rise in violence against women and combat effectively against any such violence and we are preparing new regulations that will correct the implementation and increase penalties as a part of a comprehensive program. Overall, our aim is to ensure more rights in practice as well as more power, freedom and happiness for Turkey’s women.