

WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN TURKEY

This article elaborates on Turkey's progress in areas such as the increase in girls' school enrolment rates and the drop of infant mortality rates, as well as efforts in the area of domestic violence. The Minister points out the centrality of women in driving change and development, as well as the importance of having a range of actors – such as women's organizations, the private sector, and universities- involved in the transformation, to ensure that positive legal changes actually function efficiently in real life. The Minister also recognizes that women's employment and participation in local politics is lagging behind, despite egalitarian laws.

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Within the confines of the opportunities they have been provided, women have always been frontrunners in the transformation of societies. Revolutions, uprisings, and ideological movements have generated arguments and policies related to the status of women in society. Changes or transformations that were not supported by women have never been achieved.



Turkey has a deep-rooted experience of equality between women and men, resting on historical, cultural and religious foundations, related to being geographically located where cultures and civilizations spread.

The foundation of the Turkish women's movement was laid in the Ottoman Empire, and empowered in the Republican Era. The women's movement in Turkey has an exceptional and unique historical experience in terms of world history. It is possible to see the reflections of the historical empowerment of women in a wide range of decisions made and policies implemented.

Since 1923, when the Republic of Turkey was founded, the reforms performed under the leadership of Atatürk not only enabled women to have civil rights, but also the society to be reconstructed.

In the early period of the Turkish Republic, with the adoption of secular law, women were enabled to participate in public domains such as education, business life and politics, and the government encouraged this involvement with equitable public policies. The Law on the Unification of Education enacted in 1925, provided equal educational opportunities for women and men by arranging the education under a single system. Dress reforms enacted in 1925 and the Turkish Civil Code enacted in 1926 provided equal rights both in domestic affairs and in individual terms. These were the primary reforms that transformed the legal status of women. Another important phase in shaping the legal status of women was women's gain of political rights. Turkish women were entitled to vote in local and general elections, respectively in 1930 and 1934, long before many of their European counterparts.

Turkey has taken steps required by international law in order to eliminate the discrimination against women and to support women's rights. In this regard, efforts have concentrated on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which was ratified by Turkey in 1985, the European Social Charter, the Convention on the Rights of Children, the Action Plan of the Cairo Conference on Population and Development, and the Beijing Declaration, as well as the relevant decisions and recommendations of institutions such as ILO, OECD and OSCE.

In 1995, in the Fourth World Conference on Women convened by the UN, Turkey adopted an Action Plan, without any reservations, in an international convention, aiming to increase the status of women around the world. In the conference, the Turkish government made commitments to decrease the mother and child death rates by 50 percent, extend compulsory education to eight years, and bring women's literacy to 100 percent by the year 2000.

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Subsequent to the ratification of CEDAW by Turkey, the Directorate General on The Status of Women (KSGM) was established in 1990 with the purpose of improving policies towards women.

With the entry into force of the Decree Law on the Organization and Duties of the Ministry of Family and Social Policies on 8 June 2011, the Directorate General on the Status of Women (KSGM) was reconstructed as a component of the the Ministry, taking on functions of policy-making and implementation that were previously executed by other institutions.

Efforts to incorporate the "women's perspective" in dealing with challenges women face is essential for facilitating a humanistic approach to every issue and this perspective requires generating and implementing rights-based policies.

Turkey makes an effort to implement the decisions taken by projects, initiatives and protocols, and has carried out significant legislative reform on education, health and employment to empower women's individual rights and role in public life.

Education is a pre-condition for a productive life and higher life quality. The changes ongoing in the world and the development processes require social transformation, which can be achieved through education. Accordingly, increasing the quality and efficiency of education, and embracing all segments of society, are vital.

Turkey has had exemplary achievements due to the accomplishments in the area of education since 2002. With the extension of the compulsory education period especially in primary schooling, intensive efforts of all partners in the process, and initiatives such as “Haydi Kızlar Okula”¹, Cash Transfer in Education, the Bussing System and YİBO (Regional Boarding School for Primary Education), gender parity in primary schooling has been achieved. Two million mothers have benefited from the Conditional Cash Transfers which aim to increase girls’ schooling rates by providing additional support to poor families with daughters attending school.

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There is a dramatic increase in the rates of primary schooling. While the net number of primary schooling in 2001-2002 was 92.4 percent in total, the rates of boys and girls were respectively 96.2 percent and 88.4 percent. In 2011-2012, the net schooling rates were 98.67 percent, while the rates of boys and girls were respectively 98.77 percent and 98.56 percent. The gender ratio in primary education has risen up by 100.4 percent with a 10 percent augmentation in the last decade.

In the 2001-2002 academic year, while the net schooling rate in high school education was 48.1 percent, the rate of boys and girls were respectively 53 percent and 42.9 percent. In 2011-2012, the net schooling rate is 67.37 percent and the rates of boys and girls are respectively 68.53 percent and 66.14 percent. The total rate of school enrollment in 2001-2002 was 12.9 percent, whereas it is 33.06 percent in 2010-2011. For women, it was 12.1 percent in 2001-2002 and it mounted up to 32.65 percent in 2010-2011.

The gender ratio in higher education is 83.38 percent. In 2010-11, out of 3,817,086 students, 45 percent of them –that is 1,723,602 students– were female. The objective is, by 2023, to increase the number of multi-purpose community centers around the country, with the collaboration of local authorities, governorates, and NGOs. These centers aim to increase the schooling rates for both boys and girls by 100 percent in primary and high schools, to strengthen the qualifications of

¹ Haydi Kızlar Okula [Come on girls let’s go to school!] is a campaign launched in 2003 to address the complex range of economic and social factors that contribute to the non-attendance of girls at school.

pre-school education, to eliminate the obstacles for girls within the scope of vocational education, to enable their access to science and technology, and to empower women and strengthen their status in the peripheries and rural areas of the country.

Turkey has made commitments, by virtue of international conventions, to increase the quality and quantity of medical services provided to women and girls to the international standards. Life expectancy at birth –an indicator for the standard of living– has been increasing in Turkey, currently standing at 76.8 for women and 71.9 for men.

One of the most important medical improvements in our country is the dramatic decrease of infant mortality. Infant mortality decreased by 48 percent in the two five-year periods 1998-2003 and 2003-2008. In the latter period, the rate of child mortality decreased by 33 percent and the mortality rate of children under five years old decreased by 41 percent. The drop in the child mortality rate for the last five years, which was steady at the rate of 9-10 per thousand, is quite remarkable. Turkey has already exceeded the Millennium Development Goals and is one of those rare countries with mortality of children under five years old decreasing by more than two third. This development indicates that infant mortality rates can be decreased when a systematic and sustainable program is implemented by an influential institution.

The aim is to enable women's and girls' access to qualified medical services, strengthen social support mechanisms for women with challenges, eliminate the preventable factors to minimize the mother and infant mortality, extend safe maternal services, including delivery and post-delivery, nationwide.

Active participation of women in economic life is one of the most important parameters of sustainable development. International experiences indicate a relationship between increasing the economic equality between men and women and reducing poverty as well as between higher national income and better governance.

One of the issues taken up in Turkey's EU Employment Project is parity between women and men. Despite the egalitarian structure in laws, the lack of mechanisms to enable women's qualitative development and their access to the labor market is still an important problem. While the rate of women's participation in the labor market was approximately 34.1 percent in 1990, it became 26.9 percent in 2002, 25.4 percent in 2004 and 28.8 percent in 2011.

In general, according to 2011 data, whereas women employment rate in Turkey is 25.6 percent and unemployment rate is 11.3 percent, these rates are respectively

59.5 percent and 9.8 percent in EU-15; 58.2 percent and 9.8 percent in the EU-27. 42.2 percent of employed women in Turkey work in the agricultural sector, 15.2 percent in the industrial sector, and 42.6 percent in the service industry.

The public and private sector and NGOs in Turkey work to promote women's entrepreneurship in Turkey. The roles changed by the active participation of women in the labor force require generating solutions for strengthening the family policy.

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Women's employment has enhanced women's roles in the public and private domains. The new generations prefer to get married and have children later in life, yet they want to retire earlier. It is important that the policies involving all the periods of woman life –infancy, adolescence, participation in the labor market, maternity, and retirement– are complementary and support each other.

While they have a job, women remain responsible for housework and maternal obligations, thus they have to struggle more. In this process, policies encouraging men to assist women in housework or childcare should be developed. For this purpose, protocols have been signed with the Ministry of Labor and Social Security and the Ministry of Science, Industry and Technology with the aim to regulate women's workplace according to these needs. The aim is to increase the rate of women's employment to 29.6 percent by 2013 and to 35 percent by 2023.

Participation in political life –be it following political issues or taking political actions, voting, running as a candidate or taking part in decision making mechanisms– is important for individuals to be linked to the political system. If they participate in politics, women can more efficiently pursue their rights and have a voice on policies regarding family, society and national affairs.

In the general elections held on 12 June 2011, the number of woman parliamentarians increased to 79, or 14.4 percent. There is one woman minister in the cabinet.

In the local elections held on 29 March 2009, the rates of voting nationwide was 80 percent and the candidates competed in 81 provinces and 2946 districts and towns. In this competition between 19 participating political parties, 44 women ran as candidates for provincial mayoress and 321 women as candidates for district or

town mayoress. In the said elections, 2948 mayors were elected in Turkey and only 27 of them (0.9 percent) were women; merely two of these 27 women were elected to the province level. Out of 31,790 members of municipal councils, 1340 are women (4.21 percent). The number of women members of Provincial Assemblies does not present a very different picture. Out of 3,379 Provincial Assembly Members, there are 100 women (3.25 percent). Given the importance of women's involvement in decision-making mechanisms, clearly these rates need to increase.

With the vision of "Zero Tolerance for Violence", a struggle in all domains is ongoing. The "Convention of The Council of Europe for Preventing and Combating the Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence" ratified in Strasbourg on 7 March 2011 by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe was opened for signature on 11 May 2011 in Istanbul and was signed by 17 countries including Turkey. Turkey is the first country to have ratified the Convention in its Parliament. The Convention was ratified by Turkey on 24 November 2011 and published in the Official Gazette on 8 March 2012.

The Law on Protecting Woman and Family Members From Violence, Law no. 6284, was prepared by the Ministry of Family and Social Policy with the contribution and involvement of related parties in order to enhance the scope of the Law on Protecting Family (Law no. 4320) dating back to 1998. This law is the first case in Turkey of domestic violence being defined and tackled. The law entered into force on 20 March 2012.

According to the Istanbul Declaration, the execution area of the law has been expanded and all women, children, other family members and the stalking victims were included without any discrimination. The terms "violence", "domestic violence" and "violence against women" have been defined, including physical, verbal, sexual, economic, and psychological violence. Generating a cross-sectoral model to combat violence against women is among the objectives. This model will be formulated in collaboration with various players in academia, civil society, state institutions and private sector.

In terms of parity between women and men, the government, international organizations, women's organizations, syndicates, the private sector, and universities have succeeded in the process of amendments and become pioneers of change, using collaboration and negotiation techniques, as well as consensus methods. This is important to ensure the positive legal changes function, are efficient, and sustained.

Turkey will continue to take steps to achieve equality of women and men. Unless economic, political and legal improvements are supported with social policies,

they will be temporary. Accordingly, each step taken for the empowerment of women both individually and socially should have a holistic perspective. Since 2002, Turkey has carried out the necessary regulations by addressing women, family, economy, and social structure with a holistic perspective in all dimensions. The women's movement in Turkey and its function as a bridge between the East and the West have exhibited a uniqueness with a perspective of conserving the national and moral values typical Turkey. By the 100th anniversary of the country's foundation, the Republic of Turkey intends to achieve the standards, in terms of equality between women and men , of Europe and the world