

EMPOWERING WOMEN IN TURKEY: A PRIORITY IN THE PRE-ACCESSION PROCESS

Empowering women must be a priority in the pre-accession process and all stakeholders must be mobilized to ensure effective progress and implementation on the ground of the new rights. This means strengthening the administrative capacity of relevant bodies and appropriate structures to monitor women's situation. Member States have a lot to share with Turkey and exchanges of best practices in different fields will enable the various actors to face the challenges brought by the need to adapt the welfare system.

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The European Union is not only a gathering of States, it is above all a Union of people where both women and men enjoy rights, have an active role to play and benefit from policies. In this context, gender equality is an essential value of the European Union and a core element of the European Social Model. Indeed, empowering women in social, economic and political fields relates to questions of effective democracy, equality of rights for all citizens and the sustainable development of pluralist societies.

Equality between women and men is enshrined in the European Treaties and is the objective of various legal texts that must be fully applied in the Member States. In addition, the European Union has adopted a positive approach to mainstream gender in all policies and to fight against discrimination on the ground of sex. This legal frame and active policies and programs have led to real progress on equality of women and men in the European Union. This progress was acknowledged by the Heads of State and government in Spring 2006.

However, further progress in the European Union is still necessary. The Strategy for Growth and Jobs sets the objective of 60% of women employed in the labor market by 2010. To support the expected progress, the European Commission has proposed a Roadmap for equality between women and men (2006-2010), endorsed by the Council, which highlights key objectives, focusing on equal economic independence for women, work-life balance, equal participation of women and men in decision-making, the eradication of gender-based violence, and the elimination of gender stereotypes.

The European Union has thus established clear priorities with regard to gender equality. For this reason, women's rights constitute an essential element in the negotiation process. The candidate countries have to comply with legal texts and ensure effective implementation of the rules provided by the *acquis communautaire*. In this context, the European Commission closely monitors the progress in Turkey regarding women's rights and the approximation of gender equality legislation. The application of the principle of gender mainstreaming in policies such as education, health, social services and employment, is also reviewed with great attention. At the same time, the European Commission supports all actors in the process of improving women's rights and gender equality in Turkey.

Ensuring Further Progress in the Implementation of Women's Rights

Turkey has accomplished important progress with regard to gender equality legislation. However, the situation of women in Turkey remains a source of concern, in three inter-related areas: violence against women, low participation in the labor market, and access to education. Particular consideration has to be given to strengthening the role of women in society and their representation in political decision making, whether on national level or on regional and local level.

The Turkish Constitution provides for equality between women and men. Further reforms must be adopted in order to translate this general principle into practice, and to genuinely comply with the *acquis communautaire* and to implement it on the ground.

As mentioned in the Progress Report adopted by the European Commission in November 2006, the legal framework is overall satisfactory. The Penal Code, the Labor Code and the Law on Municipalities, amongst other texts, have been revised to provide better protection and promotion of women's rights. Still, the report notes that further alignment is required on inter alia parental leave, equal pay, equal access to employment, and social security.

Implementation remains a challenge. Full respect of women's rights remains a critical problem, particularly in the poorest areas of the country. Women are vulnerable to discriminatory practices, due largely to a lack of education and a high illiteracy rate. Overcoming the gender gap in education and training and boosting women's overall level of education and skills is a fundamental factor to provide the present and future generations of women with the necessary basic skills to enter the labor market.

Domestic violence against women remains an important problem across Europe, and Turkey is no exception. Honor killings are also a major concern, especially in the South East. The report of the ad hoc Parliamentary Committee on custom and honor crimes and violence against women submitted in February 2006 clearly analyzed these issues and provided recommendations. The Circular issued by the Prime Minister on the "measures to prevent violent acts against women and children, and crimes in the name of honor and custom" published in July 2006 provides for priority actions.

In this respect, strengthening the administrative capacity is essential. The Directorate General for the Status of Women still suffers from a lack of staff. Furthermore, the Equality Body required by the *acquis* remains to be established. Interesting initiatives and measures have been taken, namely the initiative designed to provide young men at the occasion of their military service with education on the prevention of violence against women and the inclusion of information about women's rights in the curriculum of police schools. Further efforts to pursue measures against all forms of violence against women are however necessary.

Strengthening Participation of Women in the Labor Market

The situation of women on the Turkish labor market further deteriorated in recent years. Participation of women in the labor market remains very low (employment rate of 24% in 2005 to be compared to 56% in the EU); one of the lowest amongst OECD countries. Female unemployment is on the rise. There is a strong gender divide in the labor market partly coinciding with the

urban/rural and regional divides. Women activities are highly concentrated in agriculture and unpaid employment.

Turkey needs to attract more women to the labor market and ensure good working conditions in line with the decent work agenda promoted by the International Labor Organization and the European Union. This is essential not just for the sake of equal opportunities, but also for the sustainable growth and productivity of the Turkish economy. Women constitute more than 75% of the informal economy, as a result of a combination of the low level of education of many women, regulatory obstacles and the limits of the social services. In this respect, the efforts engaged to combat undeclared work and to transform informal economy into formal economy must be praised. Social partners have a key role to play in this process.

Turkey will need to prepare a national employment strategy with a view to participating in the medium term in the European Employment Strategy. In this context, the situation of women will have to be clearly mainstreamed. The changing socio-economic situation of women and the links to poverty, urbanization, displacement and internal migration must be taken into account. In the processes to be urgently set up jointly between the European Commission and Turkish authorities on social inclusion and employment, specific priorities must be identified to promote women's activity and ensure active follow up to address the various challenges women face.

The Accession Partnership with Turkey, revised in January 2006, calls for further promotion of the role of women in society, including their education and participation in the labor market and in political and social life. To fulfill these goals, Turkey needs to support the development of women's organizations.

Recognizing the Active Role to be Played by the Civil Society and Women's NGOs

In the past few years, Turkey has experienced an impressive development of civil society. Women's NGOs are a good example of this development with more than 450 active associations. These organizations have grown increasingly vocal and have been struggling to become social and political centers of influence.

The role of women's associations has been recognized by the Turkish Government. Together with social services and the Directorate General for the Status of Woman, they need to become fully-fledged partners in implementing the relevant legislation and initiatives. The social partners can also participate in the promotion of women's rights –the Turkish Confederation of Employer Associations has organized a first women's employment summit in February 2006– and the implementation of the revised Labor Code as well as the combat against the unregistered economy.

Working together leads to success stories. The campaign “Stop domestic violence” was launched in October 2004 by the daily Hürriyet, in cooperation with the Foundation of Contemporary Education and the Istanbul Governor’s Office, and has brought concrete results since. Another successful project was “Come on Girls, Let’s Go to School” geared towards increasing the school enrolment of girls in primary education. Most daily newspapers and TV channels extended their support to this campaign.

In addition, through close links between women’s rights and equal opportunities organizations in the EU, the Turkish associations will contribute to the objectives of strengthening the position and participation of women in all aspects of Turkish society.

Providing Financial Assistance to Support the Empowerment of Women

In the process of accession negotiations, the European Commission is actively supporting the reforms and efforts made by Turkey. Various projects related to the situation of women have benefited from EU funds.

The Commission has provided support to strengthen the administrative capacity of the Directorate General for the Status of Women as well as encouraged exchange of best practices to facilitate mainstreaming of gender issues into all public policies and promoted the implementation of gender equality legislation with the participation of central and local authorities and NGOs. In addition, special assistance has been granted to associations to promote communication among women’s NGOs and local governments in order to develop further cooperation for the improvement of women’s rights.

Dedicated projects supported the combat against violence by increasing public sensitivity on domestic violence and creating sustainable counseling centers and shelters. Financial support was offered to reduce gender disparity in education and to promote girls’ literacy. Other projects provided support to women entrepreneurship through management training and consultancy, including the creation of a Business Development Center in Istanbul. Improving the socio-economic position of women in Turkey has been the objective of other initiatives to encourage existing micro and small business in which women play a key role. For example, assistance was provided to increase the vocational and entrepreneurial skills of women in traditional arts (gift box making, traditional Antep embroidery, jewelery design).

The new Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) will further enable the support of key projects on strengthening the administrative capacity and human resources development. The Turkish authorities must urgently set up relevant structures and adopt operational programs. The European Commission will remain very attentive so that women are actors and beneficiaries of upcoming projects.

Member States have a lot to share with Turkey and exchanges of best practices in different fields will enable the various actors to face the challenges brought by the need to adapt the welfare system. Moreover, the participation in Community programs in the field of gender issues also helps Turkey gaining experience on the implementation of the acquis. To this end, participation in the new program for employment and social solidarity (PROGRESS) is under consideration.

Conclusion

In conclusion, gender equality is an enormous challenge and a top priority for the European Union, and indeed for all democratic societies. Turkey also has to face challenges to ensure equality between women and men. The ongoing transformation of Turkey into an industrial urban economy and society is likely to further impact on women's activities.

Empowering women must be a priority in the pre-accession process and all stakeholders must be mobilized to ensure effective progress and implementation on the ground of the new rights. This means strengthening the administrative capacity of relevant bodies and appropriate structures to monitor women's situation. The establishment of a permanent Gender Equality Committee in the Parliament, as foreseen in a circular of the Prime Minister, would be a strong commitment to further consider women's issues.

Overall, there has been growing public attention on the issue of women's rights in Turkey and further debates must be supported. As I have said during my official visit to Turkey in March 2006, it is time to fight stereotypes and change mentalities. Indeed, Turkey can play a leading role in the region, as demonstrated by its commitment in the organization of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Ministerial Conference on women held in Istanbul in November 2006 and the further adoption of a common framework for action to strengthen the role of women in political, civil, social, economic and cultural spheres as well as to fight against discrimination.

The European Commission will continue to monitor the progress and support Turkish actors to ensure genuine improvement of the situation of women in Turkey. As an historian by background, let me finally quote Atatürk: "Human society is composed of two genders which are men and women; is it possible for one half to catch the sky while the other remains anchored to the land?" Empowering Turkish women and further promoting women's rights in Turkey is the answer.