

ADVANCING WOMEN'S EQUALITY IN TURKEY

Over the last 15 years, there has been a steady erosion of women's freedoms and rights in Turkey. While the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) rose to power by advocating for women's rights – through legislations on child custody, divorce, and protections against violence – the political discourse throughout much of the AKP era has been characterized by gender inequality and patriarchal norms. In this article, the author examines the status of women in Turkey from two perspectives: the family and the workplace. According to the author, the government's rhetoric encourages women to fulfill traditional roles by enshrining the duty of motherhood over the pursuit of a career. In the workforce, women face a myriad of obstacles including harassment, unequal pay, and sexist stereotypes.

Aylin Nazlıaka*



TURKISH POLICY
QUARTERLY

Summer 2017

* Aylin Nazlıaka is an Independent Member of the Turkish Parliament, Deputy for Ankara, and Former Member of the Turkey-EU Harmonization Committee and the Turkey-EU Joint Parliamentary Committee at the Grand National Assembly of Turkey.

Women in Turkey are increasingly being compelled to fulfill traditional societal roles, which are preventing them from becoming free, independent, and powerful, as well as isolating them from the rest of society. Some government leaders have even said: “One or two children mean bankruptcy. Three children mean we are not improving but not receding either. So, I repeat, at least three children are necessary in each family, because our population risks aging;”¹ “Motherhood is the best career;”² “Unemployment rates are rising because women have started to look for jobs;”³ “The economic crisis is over, men can find jobs, women can go back to housework;”⁴ and “Isn’t your work at home enough?”⁵ It comes with the belief that men can intervene and control a woman’s appearance, behavior, and decisions, especially with regards to having children.



For this reason, when I criticized President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan after the Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) attempt to ban abortions during my first year in parliament in 2012, AKP members tried to denounce me and label me as a marginal politician. With time, I became accustomed to sexist remarks such as: “Be quiet, as you’re a woman”⁶ or, “how could a mother of two children, a married woman, speak this way?”⁷ When I used my democratic right and handcuffed myself to the rostrum during an ongoing constitutional debate, those who told me I should be ashamed of myself because I am a woman were again AKP members of parliament. They suggested that my protest was somehow sexual – although such a thing would never have been insinuated had a man done the same. The AKP’s female lawmakers who physically attacked my colleagues and I – under command from a male AKP

¹ “Turkish PM Erdoğan reiterates his call for three children,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 3 January 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-pm-erdogan-reiterates-his-call-for-three-children.aspx?pageID=238&nid=38235>

² Minister of Health Mehmet Müezzinoğlu, 2015.

³ Minister of Finance, Mehmet Şimşek, 2009.

⁴ Minister of State for Economic Affairs, Ali Babacan, 2003.

⁵ Minister of Environment, Veysel Eroğlu, said this to a woman who asked for work, 2009.

⁶ Deputy Prime Minister and Government Speaker, Bülent Arınç, said to Nursel Aydoğan who is a Member of Parliament for the opposition, 2015.

⁷ Deputy Prime Minister and Government Speaker, Bülent Arınç, said to Aylın Nazlika who is a Member of Parliament for the opposition, 2012.

lawmaker – are unfortunately causing great harm to democracy and our struggle to restore and protect women's rights.

Women's Rights in the AKP Era

Many policies implemented during the AKP's regime serve to separate women from society – away from professional life and confined to their homes. For example, a working mothers' salary and right to retire early correlates to the number of children she has, and severance pay is provided to women who quit their jobs one year after getting married. In many developed countries, where childcare is not perceived solely as the mother's responsibility, both maternity and paternity leave is granted. In Turkey, however, paternity leave ranges only between two and 10 days. These are just a few examples of AKP policies which underline the importance of motherhood and encourage women to leave the workforce.

“Many policies implemented during the AKP's regime serve to separate women from society – away from professional life and confined to their homes.”

The AKP sees women not as one of two genders, but as the second gender. The government has not adequately protected women against violence or sexual assault, and aims to reinstate discriminatory policies. Such policies would include establishing beaches reserved for women, a segregated metro compartment, and female-only taxis.

With regards to education, the 2012 shift to the “4+4+4” education model is paving the way for the government to align the country's education system with their ideological and religious priorities, by steering a number of pupils towards religious schools.⁸ The reform has negatively impacted school enrollment rates for girls in particular, due to a provision which allows parents to home school their children after the first four years of elementary education. This shift has triggered a drop in female education rates, and has increased the risk of child marriage. For example, an estimated 15 percent of girls marry before the age of 18 – one of the highest rates of child marriage in Europe.⁹ According to Eğitimsen's 2014 report, 36,401 girls who finished middle school did not register for high school. The Women in Statistics report published by the Turkish Statistical Institute in 2016 revealed that 82 percent of illiterate people in Turkey are female.¹⁰ These changes are a part of a

⁸ “Turkey: Toward a more religion, less secular social order, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 5 August 2017.

⁹ Girls Not Brides, “Child Marriage around the World: Turkey,” <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/turkey/>

¹⁰ Turkish Statistical Institute, *Women in Statistics 2016*, 7 March 2017, <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=24643>

broader shift in government policy towards a less secular, more religious education and social system.

Sexist and derogatory rhetoric has also seeped into the country's religious institutions; several people holding influential positions who claim to be religious have encouraged society to view women as sexual objects. For example, Head of Furkan Foundation (*Furkan Eğitim ve Hizmet Vakfı*), Alparslan Kuytul said, "Even your mother will arouse you above the knees."¹¹ The leader of the Social Fabric Foundation (*Sosyal Doku Vakfı*), Nurettin Yıldız, has been quoted saying the following: "It is possible to marry a 6-year-old girl;" "Women prepare for prostitution by working;" and, "It is unacceptable to watch female news presenters."¹² Theologian Ömer Tuğrul İnançer said, "A pregnant woman should not be out on the streets during Ramadan."¹³ Female family consultant Sibel Üresin of the AKP-run Fatih and Eyüp Municipalities declared, "Polygamy should be legal."¹⁴ Leading members of the AKP in the media and on social media have said, "A woman without a headscarf is like a house with no curtains. A house without curtains is either for rent or for sale," encouraging hostility toward women. I have filed numerous legal complaints about these perverted statements and applied to the state broadcasting watchdog to penalize television programs featuring these views, but with no results. Still, I continue my fight to raise public awareness, by working with women's organizations to stage actions and news conferences and taking these issues to court.

As a female politician, the point I emphasize the most regarding women's rights is that women are not fighting for equality, but for their lives. Violence against women – at home, on the streets, in factories, on buses, and in schools – has increased significantly during the AKP's rule. According to the Ministry of Justice, there has been a 1,400 percent increase in the number of murdered women between 2003 and 2010.¹⁵ Nevertheless, women's organizations have proven to be effective in the battle to prevent violations of rights, such as the abortion law and the law to exculpate rapists. They have raised public awareness and united opposition parties. By monitoring trials, they have prevented murderers, rapists, and sex abusers from receiving reduced prison sentences.

¹¹ "Annen de olsa diz kapağının üstü tahrik eder" [Even your mother will arouse you above the knees], *Cumhuriyet*, 26 January 2015, http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/video/video/197068/_Annen_de_olsa_diz_kapaginin_ustu_tahrik_eder_.html#

¹² "Kadin haber spikerini izlemek caiz degildir" [It is unacceptable to watch female news presenters], *Hurriyet*, 2 January 2015, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/video/-kadin-haber-spikerini-izlemek-caiz-degildir--103587>

¹³ "Ömer Tuğrul İnançer: Hamile Kadının Dışarıda Dolaşması Terbiyesizliktir" [A pregnant woman should not be out on the streets during Ramadan], *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JYO7cMZ5Y0>

¹⁴ "Çok Eşlilik Olmalı" [Polygamy should be legal], *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjVkdWkBS9c>

¹⁵ Pinar Tremblay, "Turkey's rate of murdered women skyrockets," *Al-Monitor*, 12 September 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/09/turkeywomenmurder.html>

Seeking to benefit from the growing solidarity amongst women, the AKP has also established its own women's organizations – although they were formed under a man's orders and have become merely window dressing. For example, at the first meeting of the Women and Democracy Foundation (*Kadın ve Demokrasi Derneği* – KADEM) in 2014, set up by the President's daughter Sumeyye, Erdoğan said, "You cannot put a woman and a man in an equal position because that is against nature." The women at the meeting responded with applause.

“According to the Ministry of Justice, there has been a 1,400 percent increase in the number of murdered women between 2003 and 2010.”

Same Work, Different Wages: Because We're Women!

As a businessperson who established Turkey's first local human resources company, I must also address the inequalities women face during recruitment processes. In developed countries, it is uncustomary to ask questions about a prospective employee's personal life during interviews. However, in Turkey this practice is not followed. For example, women often field inappropriate questions ranging from their marital status to the number of children they have or will have.

Aside from the recruitment process, women who are hired in the private sector do not get paid equally for the same work; on average, their wages are 20 percent lower than men's. This means that for a woman to obtain the same pay as men do in one year, she must work an additional 87 days.¹⁶

According to official data from the Turkish Statistical Institute, 34 percent of women in Turkey are unregistered workers, although the actual numbers could be even higher. One out of every two working women has no social security benefits. A female worker once told me in tears that she had to sell her wedding ring to afford treatment for her sick son. Stories of women like Emine Akçay, who committed suicide after not being able to keep her children warm during the winter, or Fadime Ana, who committed larceny to provide an education for her son, are all too common in Turkey.

Inequalities in the Workforce

Undoubtedly, gender inequality is not a problem that only women should address, but society as a whole. According to the World Economic Forum's 2016 Global

¹⁶ Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu [Turkish Statistical Institute], 2013 survey (in Turkish), <https://goo.gl/8kVUaX>.

Gender Gap Report, Turkey is ranked 130th out of 144 countries.¹⁷ On the list of Women's Participation in the Economy and Equality of Opportunities, Turkey ranks 129th. It is a pity that our country is ranked last in female employment among 35 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations and 27th among European Union (EU) countries.¹⁸

In OECD countries, the average rate of female participation in the workforce is 63 percent, and in the EU it is 59 percent.¹⁹ In Turkey however, it is only 31.5 percent.²⁰

In Turkey, women are employed primarily in the services sector, followed by the agricultural sector – which does not require a special education or skill set. Women working in agriculture are typically family laborers with no wages, and the majority lack social security.

Only six percent of Turkish women are entrepreneurs. As a female entrepreneur myself, I have experienced firsthand the difficulty in establishing a company with a lack of resources. When I founded my own company at the age of 24 from a middle-class family, I applied for a bank loan. I was asked if I owned any property as insurance. I had none, but I was not an exception: 65 percent of property owners in Turkey are men.

In the public sector, 9.4 percent of administrators are women, and in the private sector only 12 percent of chief executive officers are women. Only two out of 81 governors in Turkey are women. 11 out of the 957 district governors and two of the 30 metropolitan mayors are women. When women first received the right to be elected in 1934, five percent of the members of parliament were women. This figure has not changed throughout the Republic's history. Since 1935, there have been 493 female members of parliament, compared to 10,237 men acquiring the role. It is little consolation that the percentage of women in the current legislature is 14.7 percent, especially when we consider that six female parliamentarians are currently under arrest.²¹

In universities – the sector in which women are represented the most – the rate of female researchers stands at 49 percent, female professors at 28.7 percent, but only two percent of rectors are female. This shows that women are very successful in academic studies, but for some reason are not given leadership roles.

¹⁷ World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report 2016," <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2016/rankings/>

¹⁸ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "Labour Force Statistics by sex and age: Turkey," <http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?QueryId=64196>

¹⁹ Labour Force Statistics by sex and age: Turkey (OECD).

²⁰ Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu [Turkish Statistical Institute], 2016 survey (in Turkish), <https://goo.gl/8kVUaX>

²¹ "Kadın İstatistikleri 2015" [Women Statistics 2015] *K.A.DER*, February 2015, <https://goo.gl/bZUWFq>

Regardless of education level or career, the responsibilities that women are expected to carry out in the home do not change. A report published by the McKinsey Global Institute in September 2015, shows that the biggest problem women face globally is tending to the family and managing their careers. Men who do not have to make this choice

“Gender inequality is not a problem that only women should address, but society as a whole.”

can focus more on their careers. According to the research of Women Labor and Employment Foundation, a man's participation in housework falls 38 percent upon marrying, while women's household workload increases by 49 percent. On average, women work on household chores four hours more each day than men; this puts working women in a disadvantaged position compared to their male colleagues.

The Working Mothers Survey, a 2016 study conducted by job portal *kariyer.net* with 64,418 Turkish women, demonstrates that women experience difficulties returning to their jobs after having a child; when they do so, promotions become more elusive. Women who take unpaid leave lose their titles and positions. A survey by another job portal, *yenibiris.com*, revealed that 35 percent of women who quit their jobs after childbirth are unable to find new jobs. When social prejudices and male-dominated perspectives are added to this dimension, the “glass-ceiling syndrome” is felt massively.

As both a businessperson and politician, I work in very male-dominated environments and have at times competed with my male peers. Unfortunately, when a woman aspires to a higher position, she is labeled as someone who only cares about the title. When a man aspires to the same job, he is said to be guided by a sense of service. If a very hardworking person is a woman, she is criticized as being too ambitious, while a man is appreciated for being successful.

Sexist stereotypes also impact career choices. Jobs such as teaching, nursing, and public relations are viewed as women's jobs, while doctors and engineers are the career choices for men. Turkish expressions such as: “He who doesn't beat his daughter beats his knee;” “Don't keep a stick absent from a woman's back nor a baby absent from her womb;” “Don't cry like a woman;” “Men don't cry;” and the use of “businessman” over “businessperson” sharpen gender divisions in society.

Concluding Remarks

In a speech in Izmir on 1 December 1923, Atatürk said: “If a society makes use of

only one of its genders, then that society is weakened by half. The reason for our society's failures is the negligence and mistakes done to our women." The research conducted in recent years on the impact of gender inequality on the economy and social life of a country supports Atatürk's view. It shows that an increase in female employment directly spurs growth and provides economic stability.

12 trillion dollars could be added to the world's GDP by 2025 by advancing women's equality in the workplace or closing gender gaps in both the public and private sectors.²² Turkey is among the countries that underutilizes the economic potential of its female population.²³ Economic losses due to gender inequality in Turkey were calculated at about 25 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP). Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Şimşek said in a speech on 10 June 2017, that if female employment increased by 10 percentage points, the national income would rise by three points. Unfortunately, appropriate policies to support this view have not been implemented.

The first thing that has to happen to advance women's rights is altering the prevailing patriarchal mindset. Only a government that truly believes in equality can produce policies that will strengthen women, create equal opportunities in education to increase girls' enrollment in school, and boost their participation in politics, the workforce, the arts, and culture. By doing so, we can eliminate injustice and inequality, protect women who are exposed to violence and oppression, and put forth powerful women as role models.

²² Jonathan Woetzel et al., "How advancing women's equality can add \$12 trillion to global growth," *McKinsey Global Institute*, September 2015, <http://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/employment-and-growth/how-advancing-womens-equality-can-add-12-trillion-to-global-growth>

²³ International Monetary Fund, "IMF Survey: Turkey: Growth is Robust but More Structural Reforms are Needed," 25 April 2016, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2015/09/28/04/53/socar042516b>