

BEING A WOMAN IN TURKEY AND IN THE MIDDLE EAST

In all of the Islamic geography, there is a wide gap between men and women in terms of rights, and society expects women to solely fulfill the traditional roles of a wife and a mother. The initial hopes of the Arab Spring bringing increased women's rights have been replaced by rightful concerns due to the election of Islamic parties to power. The women, who went to the streets to demand change, have been excluded from the reconstruction process of their countries. However, it is too soon to tell how the Arab Spring will turn out for women, since not everything has fallen into place yet.

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Being a Woman in the Middle East

Be it traditional or modern, eastern or western, it is well known that women are more disadvantaged than men in all societies. In the Middle East, however, women are born even more disadvantaged than those in other countries. The 2012 Global Gender Gap Index published by the World Economic Forum is telling, since it presents the worrisome situation of gender inequality in Turkey, and the Middle East in general.¹ Turkey ranks 124th among a total of 135 countries. While Egypt (126th), Iran (127th), Saudi Arabia (131st), Syria (132nd), Pakistan (134th), and Yemen (135th), present an even worse picture. Although countries like Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Qatar are ranked higher than Turkey, none of them ranked above 115. Not only in overall ranking, but in each area –health and survival, economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, and political empowerment– these countries fair poorly.



This situation is not limited to Middle Eastern and North African countries. In all of the Islamic geography, there is a wide gap between men and women in terms of the rights they have and the rights they can exercise. One of the main reasons for this gap is the status of women in Islam. It is well known that women are disadvantaged under Islamic Criminal Law and Inheritance Law. In addition to legal regulations, traditions stemming from religion also give women a secondary status in society.

The fact that the aforementioned societies are underdeveloped democracies or not democracies at all is another important obstacle to women exercising their rights. In Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Brunei –which share the last place in the political empowerment area of the 2012 Global Gender Gap Index– women do not even possess the right to vote or be elected. On 25 September 2011, the *BBC* reported that King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia had announced that Saudi women could vote and be elected in the 2015 local elections.² In this country, women cannot travel, work, be medically operated on without a male relative’s permission, or drive a car without a

1 “The Global Gender Gap Report 2012,” *World Economic Forum*, 2012, <http://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2012>

2 “Women in Saudi Arabia to Vote and Run in Elections,” *BBC*, 25 September 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-15052030>

male relative's presence. Although this situation –which would surprise or even shock a Western person– does not apply to all Islamic countries, it explicitly reveals that there is a lot that to be done for the development of women's rights.

In all countries from West Africa to Central Asia, women are stuck in a situation where society expects them to solely fulfill the traditional roles of

good mother, good wife, and good housewife. It must be shown that the women in this geography can also be good businesswomen, politicians, scientists, and that they want to share with men not only the responsibilities, but also the rights. However, there is strong resistance against changing perceptions.

The best way women can change the old perceptions is by taking more part in economic life. The more women engage in the workforce and become economically independent, the more this perception of women being inferior can be overcome, and the infringement of their rights can be prevented. Moreover, women's awareness of gender inequality and discrimination in society rises with their economic and social independence.

Given this transformational power of the economic development, it is unfortunate that in Islamic countries, women's participation in the economy is very limited. According to the 2012 Global Gender Gap Index, African and Middle Eastern countries rank last in the world in economic participation and opportunity. In general, both the female labor force participation and the employment rates are fairly low. Along with the traditional structure of these societies, the main reason appears to be the fact that these economies lag behind in industrialization and development, and also have high youth unemployment rates.

The linear relationship between the level of economic development and democracy is well-known and these countries are no exception. The more an economy develops and the more economic welfare people have, the stronger the prospects of democracy and human rights. Though it would be insufficient to explain democratic credentials only with economic structure, economic factors surely play an important role.

Therefore, the Western world has the responsibility to not merely wish for stability in this region, but also for the kind of economic development and socio-political

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progress that would enable the people of the region to exercise all of their human rights, including in particular, women's rights.

Being a Woman in the Arab Spring

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Initial hopes that the Arab Spring would bring positive development regarding women's rights have been replaced with rightful concerns due to the elections of Islamic parties to power, most of which interpret Islam rigidly. In Egypt, where the Arab Spring has led to deep transformation in the society, there were significant protests due to the lack of guarantees for political freedoms and women's rights in the drafted constitution. The people in Tunisia and Libya have the same concerns. In Syria, where

a bloody civil war is going on, the opinion that the expected regime change will negatively affect the lives of women is prevailing. It is a pity that women who went to the streets and demanded change have been excluded from the reconstruction process of their countries. Considering recent attempts to undermine gender equality with legal amendments in Tunisia and Egypt, they can also be considered to be in relative decline in terms of women's rights. Sadly, the Arab Spring has not brought much sunshine to women.

However, despite all the negative developments, it is too soon to tell how the Arab Spring will turn out for women. Transition periods are always difficult, and not everything has fallen into place in the region yet. The fall of several authoritarian regimes does not mean that democracy will follow immediately. In the meantime, women remain uneasy.

To aid this difficult transition period democratic countries have a huge responsibility. In a sense, it is a sincerity test for them too. Having ignored human rights infringements in the Middle East for the sake of their economic benefits and the stability of oil prices, and having closed their eyes to women who have been ignored in the region, Western countries have to revise their approach, and should support the efforts for economic development, democratic transformation, and secularism in the region.

Contrary to the Orientalist view prevailing in the Western world, in the Middle East, the occidentalist view, –i.e. negative views toward the West and the Western culture– prevails, hence, the people in the countries that are experiencing the Arab Spring are suspicious of the Western world. Therefore, effort must be made in order to avoid encouragement of democracy to be perceived as interference in the internal affairs of the Arab Spring countries. The support of democratization should not reinforce the strong perception among Middle Eastern people of democracy being a Western cultural imposition.

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People in the Islamic world want change, and change is inevitable. The inevitableness of this change is ever more apparent in light of the ongoing economic transformation and the transition from the wide family model to the modern small family structure, putting the individual at the center of public life. This is also true in the Middle East. A different and more positive perception towards women and their role in society has risen in the last few years. However, this change in perception is going in a slower pace than expected.

It is not only men’s negative perception of women and the traditional segments of society that should change. The way women perceive themselves and their roles should also change. To give an example from Turkey, in the Turkey Values Atlas 2012, a research conducted by Prof. Dr. Yılmaz Esmer of Bahçeşehir University in Istanbul, it was shown that 59 percent of women believe that “women should always obey their husbands and should not question their words.”³ This rate rises to 71 percent in eastern Anatolia, where a more traditional society perception prevails. This misguided perception can be readily observed throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Being a Woman in Turkey

With the reforms made in the early days of the Republic, Turkey took giant steps towards establishing equality between men and women. In 1924 educational institutions were gathered together within a single system, providing women with equal educational opportunities. The Turkish Civil Code, adopted in 1926, regulated the

3 Yılmaz Esmer, “Türkiye Değerler Atlası 2012,” [Turkey Values Atlas 2012], *Bahçeşehir University*, [http://www.bahcesehir.edu.tr/files/files/ATLAS%20SUNUM%2010_2012%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.bahcesehir.edu.tr/files/files/ATLAS%20SUNUM%2010_2012%20(2).pdf)

social life of women in a manner more appropriate to the times, granting women their fundamental rights. By 1930, Turkish women could vote and be elected in local elections; by 1934, they could vote and be elected in national elections and become members of the Turkish Parliament. However, these reforms and efforts for modernization have not been extended successfully to all parts of society. Whereas a modern and secular lifestyle prevails in some parts of Turkey, the traditional society structure has remained intact especially in the rural areas. Although the secular system and the early reforms have resulted in a significant leap, this progress came to a halt after the 1940s. Even though the wave of migration and urbanization that started in the 1950s brought with it some amount of modernization, this has not been adequate for the development of women's rights.

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In the 1980s, rising awareness of women's rights and of the importance of women in economic development led to the empowerment of women's NGOs. The reforms undertaken within the European Union (EU) accession process followed after 1999 and significantly improved women's rights in Turkey.

In Turkey, which stands out among Islamic countries with its secular and democratic structure, the rights that

women can exercise and their legal framework look sufficient. According to Article 10 of the Turkish Constitution, “Men and women have equal rights. The state shall have the obligation to ensure that this equality exists in practice.”⁴ Also in statutes, appropriate regulations have been made. Turkey has its signature under the UN International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) Agreement which is seen as the “Women Rights' Constitution”. However, the legal framework developed is not sufficient to solve practical problems. The European Commission highlights this issue, stating that: “The legal framework guaranteeing women's rights and gender equality is broadly in place. However, further substantial efforts are needed to turn the legal framework into political, social and economic reality.”⁵

4 “The Constitution of the Republic of Turkey,” *Constitutional Court Website*, http://www.anayasa.gov.tr/images/loaded/pdf_dosyalari/the_constitution_of_the_republic_of_turkey.pdf

5 “Turkey 2012 Progress Report,” *European Commission*, 10 October 2012, http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2012/package/tr_rapport_2012_en.pdf

Turkey's ranking as 124th in the 2012 Global Gender Gap Index clearly demonstrates the current situation of women in the country. Turkey is ranked 129th in economic opportunity, 108th in educational attainment, 98th in political empowerment, and 62nd in health and survival. Amongst the 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. The participation rate of women in the labor force in Turkey is 30.7 percent. Female labor force participation and employment are the most common areas of discrimination against women.

This situation in Turkey clearly demonstrates the disadvantaged position of women not only in social and political life, but also in economic life. As for the political standing of women in Turkey, there is only one woman governor in all of the 81 provinces, and the representation of women in local administrations is only three percent. The ratio of women parliamentarians is just 14.5 percent, while the rate of senior executive women in the public sector is 13.5 percent, and declining. The disadvantaged position of Turkish women is clearly reflected in these socio-economic and political indicators. Sexist values and attitudes within the social structure create obstacles preventing women from fully exercising their existing rights, both in their socio-economic life as well as in their daily lives.

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In Turkey, the main reason for inequality between men and women is the traditional social structure and the resulting mentality. The religious base plays a decisive and significant role in the formation of this structure, and therefore the public mentality. However, that does not mean that this mentality prevails only in the traditional parts of society. The mentality that traps women within the wife-mother-housewife triangle and limits women's role in society to her family has been dominant for more than a decade of Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule in Turkey since 2002. The following expression from the “shadow report” by Women's NGOs to the CEDAW Monitoring Committee in 2010 is still valid: “The increasing conservatism in Turkey during the reporting period poses a threat to women's ability to enjoy their rights and freedoms. The already acquired legal rights of women are subject to backlash and efforts that aim to eradicate existing discrimination are usually met with resistance.”⁶ The tendency towards conservatism can easily be detected in the

⁶ “Shadow NGO Report on Turkey's Sixth Periodic Report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination

statements of the highest level members of the Government. Last year's abortion debate, which provoked a lot of reaction from women's NGOs, is the most recent example.

The problem for women in Turkey is not only that they live in a conservative society. They also have to endure domestic violence, discrimination in the economic platform, and the twisted perception of women in the media.

The regulations and the efforts for improvement have not borne fruit yet. Despite all the precautions, the murder of nearly 200 women annually by their husbands, boyfriends, or their relatives is still a fact. Surely, it would be unrealistic to expect the decades-old problems of women to disappear overnight. This will be a long-term process. In this process, all NGOs, politicians, and the media need to be determined and insistent. Following up the legal regulations and enforcement efforts, drawing attention to problematic areas, and continuous feedback and encouragement for the officials will facilitate this process.



In Lieu of a Conclusion

The following words of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, founder of modern Pakistan and an admirer of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of modern and secular Turkey, should be an inspiration for us all: “There are two powers in the world; one is of the sword and the other is of the pen. There is a great competition and rivalry between the two. There is a third power stronger than both, that of the women.”⁷ If we, the women who share this geography, can use our power in the right way, we can shape our future. Then the world will surely be a more peaceful and better place.

against Women,” *The Executive Committee for NGO Forum on CEDAW*, http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/ngos/WPTPC_Turkey46.pdf

⁷ Muhammad Ali Jinnah, speech delivered on 25 March 1940, Islamia College for Women.