

# GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT IN TURKEY

*While many significant institutional and legal improvements have been realized in the last two decades in Turkey, women have continued to experience significant setbacks. Turkey's commendable economic development does not always benefit men and women equally. As a review of a range of indices reveals, Turkey's ranking in terms of women's economic opportunity and participation is low. The rise in religious conservatism risks rolling back women's rights that had been attained painstakingly. While the educational participation of women and girls had not yet reached desired levels, changes made in the education policy in March 2012 are expected to negatively affect girls' school attendance after the first four years of schooling. The promotion of larger families is another dimension of this political atmosphere.*

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**T**urkey's five-year vision for development, as outlined in its Ninth Five-Year Development Plan 2007-2013, is to become "a country with an information society, growing in stability, sharing more equitably, globally competitive and fully integrated with the world community and the European Union."<sup>1</sup> Equitable human and social development is a key government goal. However, the development process does not always benefit men and women equally. A review of the situation of women in Turkey over the course of several decades reflects that, despite progress on many fronts, women's status remains vulnerable.

A range of recent research as well as the national statistics, which are reported annually by Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), support the conclusion that gender inequality and poverty continue to constitute the two key problems in Turkey's development agenda. These issues require careful assessment and prioritized policy implementation.

In Turkey, as in many other countries, all ideologies, irrespective of their contextual frames –secular, conservative, nationalist, Islamist– contain patriarchal conceptions regarding women's place in society. As attested by the disaggregated data and improved statistics, which have become more available in the recent years, in Turkey, women experience many varied social realities at many different layers of the society. A rural woman will not have the same life opportunities as those living in the more developed urban areas. An illiterate woman will have less access to the opportunities for quality of life and a lower standard of living. A girl living in a poor rural household will not, in all likelihood, attend school beyond the fourth grade as compared with counterparts in the developed urban areas. In all cases, women have different experiences in accessing their basic citizenship rights, influenced and determined by the cultural, religious, social, and political norms that often govern their communities and affect their individual life chances in turn. When reviewed, education and labor participation rates of women in Turkey reveal many significant gaps depending on region, community, ethnicity, and whether they are from urban or rural areas.

There are factors that facilitate or prevent women from achieving the basic development level and capabilities necessary for them to become active individuals.<sup>2</sup> The situation of women in Turkey cannot be analyzed without looking into the specific life opportunities that the society makes available to them.

1 "Ninth Development Plan 2007-2013," *State Planning Organization*, 28 June 2006, <http://www.maliye.gov.tr/Lists/TabMenuIcerik/Attachments/106/9developmentplan.pdf>

2 Seyhan Aydınligil, "İnsani Gelişme Yaklaşımı: İyi Yönetişim ve Sosyal Politika için Önermeler," [Human Development Approach: Propositions for Good Governance and Social Policy], *4.Bölgesel Kalkınma ve Yönetişim Sempozyumu, Bildiri Kitabı*, [4th Regional Development and Governance Symposium, Proclamation Book] (Ankara: Tepav Yayınları, 2009).

### *The Gender Gap of Turkey's Development*

A detailed review of the reports and statistical yearbooks provides important data and indicators for analysis and policy action on gender equality issues. The Global Gender Gap Index 2012, ranks Turkey at 124th place among the 135 countries reviewed, down from 122nd place in 2011 index, despite a slight increase in its score.<sup>3</sup> Turkey also occupies the last place in the regional (Europe and Central Asia) rankings. The country performs above average on the health and survival sub index, but lags behind on the other three sub indexes.

Turkey is the lowest performing country from its region on the economic participation and opportunity sub index. Turkey ranks 129th in economic participation and opportunity, 108th in Educational Attainment, 98th in political empowerment, and 62nd in health and survival. All of these values reflect that the social development has not taken place at the same pace as Turkey's widely acclaimed economic growth. Women have been among the most adversely affected groups from this development gap which has undermined the "social" over the "economic".

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The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Report for 2011 ranked Turkey at 92nd place among 187 countries with comparable data relating to its performance of human development, calculated on the basis of equal values attached to educational, health, and economic achievements per person.<sup>4</sup> This rank places Turkey among the high human development performing countries. However, when this is adjusted for women only, namely the Gender Inequality Index (GII) –a composite measure reflecting inequality in achievements between women and men in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment, and the labor market– Turkey's rank drops down to 77th place. This is indeed an important indicator to consider in the analysis of the prevailing gender inequality in the country. It is also a clear indication that the current development processes in Turkey have not been directed to treat men and women equally.

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

4 "UNDP Human Development Report 2011," *UNDP*, [http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR\\_2011\\_EN\\_Complete.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2011_EN_Complete.pdf)

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Turkey are placed in a more disadvantaged position than men. This is further manifested in the GII, which brings Turkey 15 ranks below to the 77th place.<sup>5</sup>

The 2011 Human Development Report notes that the GDP per capita in Turkey has significantly increased, to 12,246 dollars, and that the life expectancy overall figure has reached 74 years. But, overall, females in Turkey benefit much less from human development opportunities when compared with men. This is particularly the case for women living in the less developed regions and rural areas. In addition, the Education Achievement Index, which points to the literacy rate, is at the moderately high rate of 90.8 percent.

With limited life opportunities and achievements in the basic development capability areas, women constitute the poorest segment of the society in Turkey. According to data published by TÜİK, poverty in Turkey is measured at 16.1 percent in 2011. Undoubtedly, women constitute a larger portion of this percentage. Women’s participation in paid labor is also at a low rate of 24 percent. Other countries of similar social and economic development levels as Turkey reflect a female labor force participation rate of no less than 30 percent. It should also be noted that the unpaid family labor force in Turkey is predominantly female, constituting at least 45 percent of the total unpaid family and agricultural labor force.

### ***Women’s Education and Political Participation***

In contrast to these improvements, recently some new policies have also been introduced. One indicator, in this respect, is the mean years of schooling per person. According to data available for 2011, the mean years of schooling in Turkey

<sup>5</sup> “Gender Inequality Index and Related Indicators,” UNDP, [http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR\\_2011\\_EN\\_Table4.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2011_EN_Table4.pdf)

remained at a low of six and a half years.<sup>6</sup> The same report indicated that expected years of schooling of children is 11.8 years. Adult literacy rate for both men and women in the 15 and above age group is 90.8 percent. Several policy measures were introduced in 2000, raising compulsory education to eight years. Mean years for schooling for women have increased only modestly. The education index value for Turkey, which is based on mean years of schooling (of adults) and expected years of schooling (of children) is reported as 0.583 in UNDP's 2011 Human Development Report. This value places Turkey among the medium human development performance countries.

The “4+4+4 education system” introduced in 2012 can have some unwanted and adverse results regarding the school attendance rates of girls in formal education, somewhat “relaxing” the eight-year compulsory education. This controversial education reform bill was approved in March 2012 and increased the current duration of compulsory education from an uninterrupted eight years to 12 years, which is divided into three four-year stages. According to the Education Reform Initiative (ERG), in practice, the new system will limit compulsory primary education to four years.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, ending eight years of uninterrupted education will legitimize, especially girls, to be taken out of school once the first four-year period is completed. As a result, many educators estimate that a significant number of girls will be deterred from attending the school at the higher levels. Moreover, with this new system, girls are expected to enroll more in distance education and learning, which are not available in sufficient numbers.

By further dropping the age limit for apprenticeship to 11 years, the new policy is expected to promote child labor. This is obviously in conflict with many of the objectives and the provisions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions, the Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC), and other similar international human rights agreements, to which Turkey is a signatory.

6 “International Human Rights Development Indicators: Mean Years of Schooling,” UNDP, <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/indicators/103006.html>

7 “Declaration on the Law Proposal Concerning 12 Year Compulsory Education,” *Education Reform Initiative (ERG)*, 25 February 2012, <http://erg.sabanciuniv.edu/sites/erg.sabanciuniv.edu/files/ERI.Declaration.4%2B4%2B4.LawProposal.pdf>

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In light of the above concerns, it is also worth noting that, the current situation regarding educational participation of women and girls in secondary and higher education has not also reached the desired level over the past two decades. Illiteracy among adult women in the 15-65 age groups remains at 17 percent. Despite the efforts, female illiteracy problems remain unsolved. The school dropout rate among girls in the 11-15 age groups has not slowed down, particularly in the rural areas. This problem becomes even more critical when read together with an accompanied increase in the rates of early-age marriages, resulting in higher maternal and infant deaths.

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The low participation rate of women in decision-making processes in Turkey is also an important deficiency. Turkey has a much lower female political representation at the national as well as local administrative levels, compared to EU member state counterparts. The 2010 Millennium Development Goals Report (MDGs) for Turkey, EU Progress Reports, and the 2012 Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum,

all reflect that the low participation of women in Turkey’s political decision-making processes is indeed a major development challenge. It is also a matter of having a democracy based on the principles of equality and justice.

The Association for the Support of Women Candidates (KA.DER), a women’s civil society organization, established in 1997 with the specific focus to enhance female political participation has made significant efforts towards this end. Still, the representation of women in the Parliament is currently 14.1 percent, is one of the lowest in Europe. The representation of women in the local administrations is one of the lowest in the world, with two percent. This is all notwithstanding the high rate of women academics in Turkey, which is close to 40 percent.

### ***Laws Versus the Political Atmosphere***

While many significant institutional and legal improvements have been realized in the last two decades in Turkey, women continued to experience significant development setbacks. Development concerns regarding women’s equal participation with men in the educational, health, economic, and, in the political spheres of

their society have not been adequately addressed. Basic human development achievements by women in Turkey are low when compared with their counterparts in some of the other middle-income countries.

Turkey is experiencing a rise in religious conservatism. As such, some new and critical challenges are posed in the arena of the human rights of women, their citizenship rights, and gender equality. These challenges have become so critical that the legal rights gained by women in the past are now being contested, once again.

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Ironically, the Law to Protect Family and Prevent Violence Against Women was enacted in 2012. Turkey was the first country to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention, in March 2012.<sup>8</sup>

However, in contrast to these commendable developments, right to abortion, which was secured as early as in 1983 in Turkey, emerged once again as a highly contested issue, subsequent to a statement made by the Prime Minister Erdoğan on 25 May 2012, when he said “Every abortion is an Uludere,” referring to the killing of 34 Turkish citizens of Kurdish origin, with an airstrike in December 2011 in southeast Anatolia. Erdoğan stated further that “there is no difference between killing a baby in a mother’s womb and killing her/him after birth.”<sup>9</sup>

Women’s organizations immediately responded through several women’s coalitions and platforms such as “Say No to Abortion Ban Platform”. The response declared that,

Prime Minister Erdoğan equated women’s enjoyment of their bodily rights with killing people in a bombardment attack. This is a discriminatory and militarist statement that calls to question the human rights of both Kurds and women, whereas the primary responsibility of any state should be to ensure that its citizens lead a decent life, and to guarantee equal rights and freedoms

8 “Law no. 6284: Law to Protect Family and Prevent Violence Against Women,” 8 March 2012, <http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2012/03/20120320-16.htm>

9 “Her Kürtaj Bir Uludere’dir,” [Every abortion is an Uludere], *NTVMSNBC*, <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/id/25352590/>

to all (...) A decision to ban abortion will constitute an open violation of the right to life for millions of women, and, the right to live with dignity for men, women, and children alike.<sup>10</sup>

No legislative setbacks have taken place since this statement, however, much is being done in practice to intimidate and deter women from having abortions.

Cases like this, as well as the example related to compulsory education, attempt to take back some of the already granted legal and social as well as medical rights and opportunities for women. These actions are often undertaken without an adequate consultative process which would allow for the participation of the primary constituents and the stakeholders. In the same token, a new discourse has also emerged whereby women are called upon to have at least three, and sometimes four or five children to promote larger families, which, despite the resistance from women's organizations, appears to be a new approach that the government wishes to pursue in the coming years.

As in many other countries, women's identity in Turkey often becomes the arena where power politics are at a display. A woman's body and the way she dresses, covers and/or uncovers her hair, the number of children she should bear, when she marries, and what kind of education she should pursue become issues over which, essentially a largely male-dominated political battles are waged. Such battles often disregard the legitimate constituency –the women themselves.

There is a very strong and vocal women's movement in Turkey that has been successful in setting the political agenda on equality issues and in driving multiple legal reforms for gender equality. The principles of equality and human rights can be realized only if women's presence is ensured as key actors of social change, in all dimensions of the development process.

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<sup>10</sup> Please see the full text at: "Say No to Abortion Ban," <http://saynoabortionban.com/>