

# ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK: GENDER EQUALITY IN TURKEY

*Since the early 2000s, Turkey has been taking steps to advance gender equality, which became part of the governments' agenda as a major component of EU accession negotiations. While there have been advancements in this regard, including the updating of the country's fundamental laws and a new Penal Code in 2004, the implementation of national gender equality commitments has lagged. Women continue to be under-represented in decision-making, both on the political and private sector level. In this article, the author provides an overview of the status of women in Turkey and emphasizes the critical role women's NGOs can play in raising consciousness and influencing the legislative process.*

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**T**urkey is experiencing an erosion of fundamental human rights, with women primarily experiencing the repercussions of this regression. Each day the situation is deteriorating, ranging from discrimination and violence against women, to their representation before judicial bodies.

The bill drafted in July 2017 to amend the Population Services Law is one of the most important examples of this regression.<sup>1</sup> The proposed bill not only violates the principle of secularism but also the Constitution and the Civil Code, and will result in the establishment of multiple legal frameworks. For example, according to the bill, the criteria for marrying such as age limit, holding a marriage license, being of suitable health, and not being close relatives will not be determined based on the law, but rather based on a religious grounds. This point clearly shows that girls will be most affected by the application of this law.

Women's organizations believe the proposed bill will have the following implications:

- Drafting a law that concerns all citizens but is based only on Sunni Muslims is discriminating towards other religious groups. This is a violation of the principle of equality and the constitutional principle that says: "The state shall treat all its citizens equally and not discriminate based on race or sect."
- The bill will increase the exploitation of children and forced underage marriages. Abrogating women's rights provided as outlined by the Civil Code will pave the way for making religious marriages compulsory.
- Similar to Germany, Switzerland, and France, civil marriage in Turkey is carried out by civil servants with no religious affiliation. There will not be any prohibitions of parties getting married before religious authorities after the proposed bill. Given the 18,000 neighborhood representatives who are qualified to perform marriage ceremonies and the marriage offices in 919 districts and 81 provinces, this is not a regulation born of need.

### ***Women in Politics***

In 2005 during EU accession negotiations, Turkey undertook serious steps towards strengthening the foundations for a more equal, modern, democratic, and constitutional state, with a commitment to the principles of secularism. The steps that were taken to advance gender equality in Turkey during this time period were increasingly linked to the country's accession process.

<sup>1</sup> This law is intended to keep records of citizens from birth to demise about their civil status and regulates natural and lawful situations that may arise due to changes in their records. This law also allows such information to be registered in physical and electronic records as well as associating their population records and addresses for communication.

These positive steps were also reflected in Turkey's elections after 2005. With one exception, most parties saw an increase in the number of female parliamentarians – due to voluntary quotas in some parties and undisclosed quotas in others. For example, the June 2015 election witnessed the entry of a record number of women to the Turkish parliament, constituting 17.5 percent of total parliamentarians. Unfortunately, this number fell to 14 percent in the elections held five months later. It must also be emphasized that there were numerous cities in Turkey with no women elected.

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Of Turkey's four main political parties with representation in the Grand National Assembly, female representation differs both across regions and between parties; in some regions the number increased while in others there was no change. It is crucial that the number of female neighborhood representatives increase as neighborly relations make up the foundation of human relations in Turkey and are the grass-roots level of political representation. After the local elections of 2014, the number of female metropolitan governors rose to three out of 30, compared with just one before.<sup>2</sup> When looking at female representation in mayoral positions, the fact that there are only two female mayors in Turkey's 81 provinces is an unacceptable statistic. Furthermore, while the rest of the world is undertaking steps to strengthen equality by developing policies and strategies –with the number of female ministers increasing in many civilized countries – in Turkey, only two of the 26 ministers in cabinet are female. Women should hold more influential positions than men on many issues ranging from energy conservation to child care to the economy. However, the fundamental problem in Turkey today is the lack of equal opportunity and, of course, violence against women and unequal representation in all areas of society.

### *Women in the Economy*

Another point to be raised is the position of women in the economy. According to the “Business World Woman” report released by the Turkish Enterprise and Business Confederation (TÜRKONFED) in August 2017, 1.1 million more women left the workforce compared to the previous year.<sup>3</sup> The most important reason for women

<sup>2</sup> “Turkey's female mayors pledge to prioritize women's issue,” *Al Jazeera America*, 15 June 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/6/5/turkey-s-new-femalemayorspledgetopriorizewomensissues.html>

<sup>3</sup> “İş Dünyasında Kadın Raporu” [Women in Business World Report] TÜRKONFED, August 2017, <http://www.turkonfed.org/Files/ContentFile/turkonfed-kadin-raporu-2-faz-sonuclari-bb-190807.pdf>

leaving the workforce is that due to the traditional gender roles, women are expected to provide care for children and the elderly. At a time when governments are expected to strengthen policies of equality, it is clear that this regression is an intentional effort to increasingly confine women to home life and cut them off from society.

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was due to expensive and poor quality childcare, and a lack of places providing this service. Although the government intended to increase female participation in the workforce with its “flexible work” bill enacted in 2015, these types of laws actually resulted in women returning to their households.

Special measures must be put in place to ensure that there is more female participation in the workforce, especially in the public sector but also in the private sector. In order for this to happen, daycare must be provided in public institutions and all organizations. The above-mentioned report conducted by TÜRKONFED proves this is necessary; the vast majority of the women surveyed said that the reason for leaving their job

The fact that society continues to view childcare as women’s work is a very serious problem. Even though laws passed in recent years cover both paternity and maternity leave, the fact that there are no formal incentives means that women are left with all of the responsibility. For example, Sweden is considered to have one of the best parental leave systems in the world; parents are offered a total of 480 days of leave at 80 percent of their normal pay, and fathers have an exclusive right to 90 of those days according to the law.<sup>4</sup>

Discrimination in social, cultural, economic, and political spheres is worsening in Turkey, where violence against women has now taken to the streets and an increasingly masculine culture is evolving. It must be noted that there has been an attempt to normalize apathy towards violence. The government must satisfy the requirements of the “Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence,” also known as the Istanbul Convention, which was signed by Turkey for the first time in 2011. In accordance with the convention and based on the 4P principle, the state is required to implement the following: prevent violence against women in Turkey, protect victims, punish the guilty, and both make and encourage policies to prevent violence.<sup>5</sup> The oversight mechanism

<sup>4</sup> “Swedish fathers to get third month of paid paternity leave,” *The Guardian*, 28 May 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/28/swedish-fathers-paid-paternity-parental-leave>

<sup>5</sup> “Istanbul Convention,” Centre for Women, Peace + Security, London School of Economics, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/vaw/regional/europe/istanbul-convention/>

for this convention is an independent expert body called Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO), which was implemented after the convention took effect in 2014. Retired professor Feride Acar is part of GREVIO and successfully represented Turkey as the CEDAW committee chairman for two terms. She has followed and personally participated in gender studies both academically and practically for years.

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Turkish female activists and academics who have labored on both the national and international level and who represent Turkey in top-level international organizations will continue to speak out against the gender inequality that is perpetuated by a deeply-entrenched patriarchal mentality. They will continue to do so not only at home but abroad as well.

In this vein, Flying Broom has been actively involved in women’s rights issues since its founding in 1996. Through networking, communication, and capacity building, Flying Broom has evolved into a powerful network connecting women’s NGOs around the country, and facilitating the pursuance of their goals. The fact that Flying Broom has its base in Ankara means the ability to influence the legislative process as well.

Several projects have defined the Flying Broom including the “Building Bridges” project and the International Women’s Film Festival, which was the first of its kind to be organized in Turkey. This year, the festival was organized in 20 cities in cooperation with local women’s organizations, champions of the women’s movement, and famous actresses. One of the main aims of the festival was to shine a light on the women behind the camera, and celebrate female filmmakers and directors.

Through a variety of projects and publications, Flying Broom will continue to raise awareness about women’s issues and contribute to the process of democratization and development of a civil society in Turkey. The fight for gender equality in Turkey must continue in an organized and powerful manner – more than ever before. The most important thing that must be done to achieve this is a revolution in the mindset and perception of women not as just a member of the family, but as individuals.