

# TURKEY'S PROGRESS ON GENDER EQUALITY IN EDUCATION RESTS ON GENDER POLITICS

*Turkey came a long way from being a negative outlier on gender parity in the global scene to ensuring almost universal enrollment for girls. Effective education and social policy interventions together with national stakeholder mobilization enabled this progress. Nevertheless, Turkey has room to advance so that all girls finish secondary education with a robust foundation to become active citizens. This will require the Ministry of National Education to overcome its quality deficiency in schools and mainstream gender equality to educational pedagogy and practice. Most importantly, stakeholders should acknowledge the role of gender politics in girls' education and engage in a genuine discussion about education and empowerment of girls. This would require an inclusive dialogue, acknowledging Turkey's ethnic, religious, social, and cultural differences.*

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**I**n 2004, Turkey was among the 21 countries in the world considered to be at risk of achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education by either 2005 or 2015.<sup>1</sup> Among its peers in this notorious group, Turkey was the richest country (based on GDP per capita), the only OECD member and the sole representative of the Europe and Central Asia region. Fortunately, time proved this damning prediction wrong as a result of burgeoning national support for girls' schooling led by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). The gender parity ratio (calculated by dividing girls' enrollment figures to boys') surpassed the parity threshold (0.97) in eight-year basic education by 2007-2008 and in secondary education by 2012-2013.

Despite Turkey's commendable achievement in ensuring gender equality in numbers, its progress towards gender equality in education has been far more limited, hindered by the overall gender gap in national politics and economics. The central and provincial hierarchies of MoNE are still overwhelmingly masculine<sup>2</sup> and men constitute the majority of school principals. Though the curriculum is relatively more balanced, gender parity in textbooks has recently deteriorated.<sup>3</sup> MoNE projects geared towards raising awareness and the capacity of teachers have only reached a small portion of Turkey's one million teachers. More recently, pro-government media and civil society criticized these projects and MoNE, reaffirming yet again that politics of women and family still constitute a major ideological battlefield for pro-government Islamists in Turkey.

Future advancement on gender equality would require more than education and social policies that have driven girls' access to schools in the past 20 years. At the policy level, MoNE needs to prioritize quality of gender equality to ensure that all girls finish 12 years of compulsory schooling with a strong foundation to become active citizens and lifelong learners. Equally, important policy works lay on the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services so that the ecosystem enables educated young women's transition to and advancement in the labor force, as well as in other spheres of social life, including politics. Last but not least, all stakeholders that care about and work for gender equality in education should acknowledge the role that the politics of women and family play. This will facilitate a critical inquiry of previous and existing efforts and the barriers for future advancement through intellectually rigorous deliberation.

<sup>1</sup> "Gender and education for all: the leap to equality," *Education for All Global Minority Report report*, 2003-4, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000132513>

<sup>2</sup> Of the 167 senior and mid-level officials at MoNE, only 15 are women as of 13 May 2019. Of these 15 women, only one is a senior official. Data collected from the MoNE Website.

<sup>3</sup> Canan Aratmur Çimen and Sezen Bayhan, "Ders Kitaplarında Sekülerizm ve Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliği Araştırması Sonuç Raporu" [Secularism in Class Books and Findings of the Gender Equality Report], *Karşılaştırmalı Eğitim Dergisi*, 2018.

This article aims to draw attention to the combined success of public policy interventions and nongovernmental resource mobilization in ensuring girls' almost universal access to education. Subsequently, it will address why similar achievement was not secured in ensuring gender equity in education in Turkey, building linkages with recent political developments in the country since 2012. Gender remains a contested area in Turkey. A genuine conversation among stakeholders to deconstruct both the secular-modernist and conservative approaches to women empowerment would be valuable. However, the recent demonization of gender equality by pro-government Islamists and the advocacy for substituting the latter with "gender justice" looks more like deployment of anti-genderism rhetoric in Turkey than a genuine contribution to that debate.

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### ***The Alignment of Terminology***

While this journal addresses an English-speaking global audience, the terminology on gender and education in Turkish and English are not directly compatible, thus requiring a brief clarification at the beginning of this article. It is worth noting that even in international literature terms “parity,” “equality” and “equity” are often conflated, confused and co-opted to signify progress on gender and education.<sup>4</sup> According to Baily and Holmarsdottir<sup>5</sup> gender parity is about equal representation in numbers; gender equality incorporates equal access to meaningful learning in education for both boys and girls; and gender equity is “fair distribution between the sexes of responsibilities, resources and power,” to provide “people with what they need in order to achieve equality” from their uneven starting points.

In Turkey, gender equality has been the only terminology used by women's and human rights movements, academia, government, civil society and the private sector. It encompassed parity, equality, and equity depending on who used it and in which context. Thus, gender equality has provided a holistic framework for most gender studies. Throughout the article, I will adopt gender equality as the overarching

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<sup>4</sup> Supriya Baily and Halla B. Holmarsdottir, “The quality of equity? Reframing gender, development and education in the post-2020 landscape,” *Gender and Education*, Vol. 27, No. 7 (2015), p. 830.

<sup>5</sup> Supriya Baily and Halla B. Holmarsdottir (2015).

terminology except when I specifically write about equality in numbers, in which case I will use gender parity in reference to its international context.

It is important to note that a new terminology, namely gender justice, entered the public discourse recently. KADEM, the pro-government women's NGO, acts as the pioneer advocate of gender justice, an alternative paradigm initially introduced by their founding president and now a member of the parliament with the AK Party.<sup>6</sup> While more information on this development will be available below, gender justice is in principle an anti-egalitarian approach to gender.

### ***Progress Towards Gender Parity***

MoNE's remarkable success in increasing gender parity in education was led by the girls' education campaign launched in 2003. The campaign, which was developed in cooperation with and supported by UNICEF,<sup>7</sup> was called Haydi Kızlar Okula (Hey Girls, Let's Go to School) and claimed both national and international success in its design, implementation, and the national mobilization it sparked.<sup>8</sup> MoNE kicked off the campaign at the eight-year basic education level in 2003 in 10 provinces where the gender gap was highest in the country and scaled up to all of 81 provinces in 2006 following an effective mobilization of stakeholders from public, private, and civil society actors. As a result, the gender parity ratio for basic education increased from 0.9302 in 2003-04 to 0.9895 in 2008-09 and to 1 in 2012-13.

<sup>6</sup> Sare Aydın Yılmaz, "A New Momentum: Gender Justice in the Women's Movement," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Winter 2015),

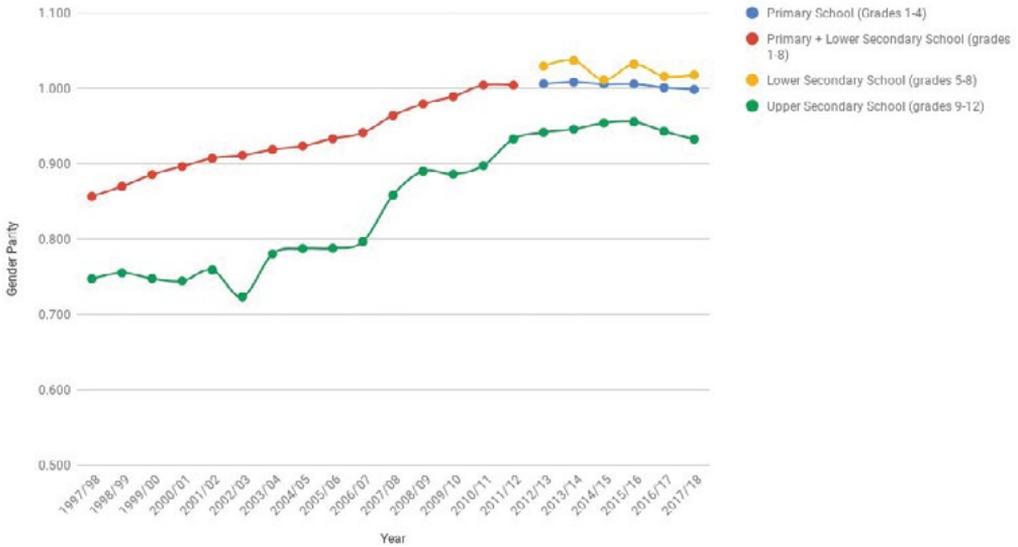
<http://turkishpolicy.com/article/719/a-new-momentum-gender-justice-in-the-womens-movement-winter-2015>

<sup>7</sup> "Haydi Kızlar Okula! Kız Çocuklarının Okullulaşmasına Destek Kampanyası," [Girls Off to School! Support the Campaign for Girls Education],

<https://www.unicef.org/turkey/raporlar/haydi-kizlar-okula-kiz-%C3%A7ocuklarin-okullula%C5%9Fmasina-des-tek-kampanyasi>

<sup>8</sup> Global Education Monitoring Report Team, "Gender and EFA 2000-2015: achievements and challenges; EFA global monitoring report 2015; gender summary," 2015, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000234809>

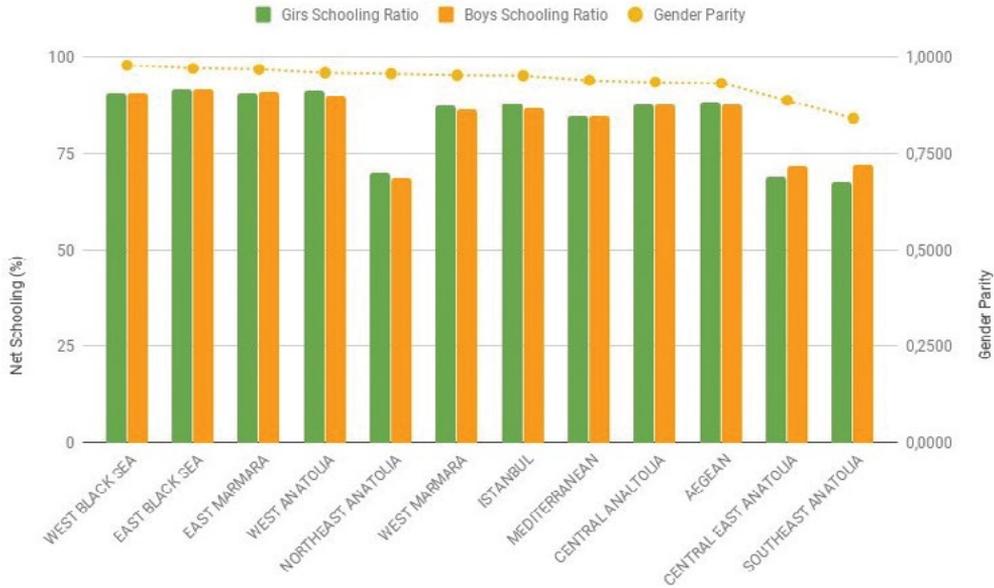
Gender Parity



As more girls enrolled in basic education, MoNE expanded its efforts to secondary education, where girls' enrollment has been historically much lower. In two projects launched in 2011 and 2015, both of which was funded by the European Commission, MoNE specifically focused on increasing girls' access to school in the South and South East Anatolia provinces. The gender parity ratio at secondary education, which was as low as 0.8361 in 2003-04, jumped from 0.9651 in 2011-12 to 0.9955 in 2017-18.<sup>9</sup> Despite this national progress as well as improvements in South and South East Anatolia, girls' access to secondary education in these regions remains limited. However, boys' access to education is also hindered by the lack of development in the region. While girls in South and South East Anatolia are disadvantaged when compared to their peers in other parts of the country, the gender gap has narrowed considerably.

<sup>9</sup> MoNE - National Education Statistics formal education (2017-18), [https://sgb.meb.gov.tr/meb\\_iys\\_dosyalar/2018\\_09/06123056\\_meb\\_istatistikleri\\_organ\\_egitim\\_2017\\_2018.pdf](https://sgb.meb.gov.tr/meb_iys_dosyalar/2018_09/06123056_meb_istatistikleri_organ_egitim_2017_2018.pdf)

## Net Schooling and Gender Parity in Secondary Education (Grade 9-12)



MoNE's girls' education campaign also opened up the education policy scene to stakeholder consultations and evidence-based policy debates. Together with the curriculum reform process launched around the same time, Turkey witnessed a paradigm shift in education policy, during which the state softened its monopoly on policy-making. Civil society gradually used this new space for engaging in constructive dialogue with the state. The Education Reform Initiative (ERI), an independent education think-and-do-tank established in 2003, benefited from and contributed to this policy scene by monitoring the progress of girls education. ERI's policy research identified the risk of dropouts as an emerging threat for girls who were enrolling in school, while its advocacy work on the ground enabled local stakeholders to report challenges of girls' education through their own lenses. In two memorable instances in 2005 and 2006, members of Local Monitoring Groups<sup>10</sup> from Mardin and Şanlıurfa highlighted the challenges faced by girls whose mother tongue is not Turkish in their adaptation to school before high-level bureaucrats in Ankara. Given the rigidity of MoNE's hierarchy and the state's sensitivity on language policy, these interactions were valuable in democratizing education policy both in participation and in content.

<sup>10</sup> Güher Erbil and Aygen Yenigün, "Project for Attaining Gender Equality in Education and Social Participation," *Civil Monitoring Activities Evaluation Report*, <http://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Civil-Monitoring-Activities-Evaluation-Report.pdf>

MoNE acknowledged attendance as an important priority in education for both girls and boys. In due course, a national administrative database, called e-Okul (e-School), was developed in 2007-08 and synchronized with the national census database, enhancing MoNE's overall implementation and monitoring capacity. Preventing dropouts entered MoNE's strategic plans as well as national development plans as an important policy goal for education. MoNE commissioned a series of policy research projects to identify and monitor the determinants of non-attendance, to identify the impact of the 2008 economic crisis on attendance,<sup>11</sup> and to understand the determinants of transition from eighth grade to secondary education.<sup>12</sup> In one follow-up policy initiative, MoNE introduced an induction program for secondary schools to facilitate students' transition and improve their success in 9th grade, where 28 percent of the student cohort was known to dropout from secondary education.<sup>13</sup>

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*“The Ministry of National Education's (MoNE) remarkable success in increasing gender parity in education was led by the girls' education campaign launched in 2003 called Haydi Kızlar Okula.”*

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Despite MoNE's emphasis on increasing attendance and preventing dropouts, Turkey still faces a significant challenge ahead. In 2016, 10 percent of young women aged between 15-19 did not complete their eight-year basic education, whereas this ratio was six percent for young men. These numbers were much higher for women aged 20-24 with 44 percent of them not having a high school diploma. However, at this age group, a gender gap does not exist; approximately the same percentage of men also had not finished high school. The latter progress was, in fact, the product of a decade long investment in girls' education where the percentage of women without a high school diploma decreased by a quarter since 2007, while it stalled for boys.

Since the launch of the girls' education campaign in 2003, MoNE has concentrated its gender and education policy on removing barriers (economic, cultural,

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<sup>11</sup> “İlköğretimden Ortaöğretime Geçişin Analizi” [Student Absence in Primary Education], 2014, [http://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ERG\\_İlköğretimdeDevamsızlığın-Belirleyicileri-ve-İzlenmesi.pdf](http://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ERG_İlköğretimdeDevamsızlığın-Belirleyicileri-ve-İzlenmesi.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> “İlköğretimden Ortaöğretime Geçişin Analizi” [An Analysis of the Transition from Primary Education to Secondary Education], 2014, [http://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ERG\\_İlköğretimden-Ortaöğretime-Geçişin-Analizi.pdf](http://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ERG_İlköğretimden-Ortaöğretime-Geçişin-Analizi.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Nationwide statistic for 2010-11, “Ortaöğretimde sınıf tekrarı, okul terk sebepleri ve örgün eğitim dışında kalan çocuklar politika önerileri raporu” [Grade repetition in secondary education, reasons for dropping out and policy suggestions for children outside of formal education], <http://www.meb.gov.tr/egaged/unicef/S%C4%B1n%C4%B1f%20Tekrar%C4%B1.%20Okul%20Terki%20Politika%20Raporu.pdf>

social) surrounding girls' access to school. National awareness-raising campaigns, door-to-door visits by teachers to convince families to send girls to school, and conditional cash transfer programs were some of the policy interventions MoNE used in partnership with national and international organizations. In economic terms, most of these interventions focused on the demand side of education to encourage girls—as well as disadvantaged boys at a later stage—back to school. Yet, it was equally important to keep girls in school, or prevent them from dropping out of school. The latter required improvements in the pedagogy of education, transforming schools to become gender-sensitive and building the capacity of teachers and administrators. In summary, it required transitioning the scope of gender and education policy from gender parity to gender equality.

### *Progress Towards Gender Equality*

The rapprochement between Turkey and the European Union at the turn of the century provided an enabling environment for civil society to grow and diversify. European Commission grants have supported many civil society organizations to undertake social projects, specifically with an emphasis on human rights. One such project that was initially undertaken between 2002–04 was Human Rights in Textbooks, undertaken by the History Foundation. As part of this project, teachers had screened human right violations in textbooks, including those related to gender discrimination. Fortunately, two follow-up projects were undertaken between 2002–09 and 2013–2014 to monitor the progress. According to these studies, Turkey had made some but not adequate progress in new textbooks published following the curriculum reform from a gender equality perspective by 2008.<sup>14</sup> By 2012, the evaluation had produced more encouraging progress in textbooks.<sup>15</sup> The visible progress towards gender equality in textbooks was linked to increasing gender awareness within the Board of Education, the MoNE unit in charge of curriculum and textbooks.<sup>16</sup>

In 2014, MoNE launched a major project formally titled “Promoting Gender Equality in Education Project” with financial support from the European Commission. The project aimed at evaluating and improving education policy and legislation, educational settings and processes and educational materials through a gender inequality perspective. By the end, the project had delivered an extensive list of reports, guides and handbooks all related to mainstreaming gender inequality in education and developed capacity of a core group of teacher trainers.<sup>17</sup> More importantly, the project

<sup>14</sup> The Education Reform Initiative, “Eğitim İzleme Raporu 2008” [Education Observatory Report 2008], [http://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ERG\\_EIR-2008.pdf](http://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ERG_EIR-2008.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> The Education Reform Initiative, “Eğitim İzleme Raporu 2012” [Education Observatory Report 2012], [http://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ERG\\_E%4%9Fitim-%4%B0zleme-Raporu-2012.pdf](http://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ERG_E%4%9Fitim-%4%B0zleme-Raporu-2012.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> The Education Reform Initiative, 2008 Report.

<sup>17</sup> “Promoting Gender Equality in Education Project Shows the Way Forward,” General Directorate for Secondary Education of the Ministry of National Education, 2016, [https://www.britishcouncil.org.tr/sites/default/files/proje\\_oyku-su\\_ingilizce2.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org.tr/sites/default/files/proje_oyku-su_ingilizce2.pdf)

team felt “justified in concluding that a systematic and continuous effort based on the outputs and experiences of the project would make a direct contribution” to gender equality.

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An unfortunate and tragic twist of fate in the summer of 2016 derailed MoNE's journey towards ensuring gender equality. The unsuccessful July 15th coup attempt to overthrow the government and the following government reaction towards the perpetrators triggered an expedited curriculum reform process which involved new textbooks. One overarching motivation behind the reform was to revise the curriculum in line with the AK Party government's values education agenda, one that did not sympathize with gender equality. The new curriculum barely touched on gender roles and women's rights and left the concept of equality out when discussing gender. Instead, the virtue of being a woman was celebrated as being enough.<sup>18</sup> When the new textbooks arrived, it became apparent that women's roles were minimally referenced. All of the previous content referring to gender equality was dropped from 9th grade textbooks, and both written and visual content in 1st and 5th grade Turkish textbooks were developed with a more sexist approach.<sup>19</sup>

How does gender inequality reflect in learning outcomes? According to research funded by the Aydın Doğan Foundation, girls outperform boys in reading, boys outperform girls in mathematics, and there is no difference between girls' and boys' performance in science in PISA 2015. However, survey data shows that girls enjoy more advantages: They receive more parental support at home and converse with their parents more often; they are likely to spend more time in school and less likely to work for pay; they are more likely to attend more disciplined schools; they have higher motivation for academic success and feel more sense of belonging to their school. Girls should, in fact, do better in both mathematics and science by utilizing these advantages, however, that is not happening. This research finding highlights the need for and importance of exploring how gender plays out throughout

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<sup>18</sup> The Education Reform Initiative, “Eğitim İzleme Raporu 2016-2017” [Education Observatory Report 2016-2017], [http://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/EIR2016-17\\_12.10.17.web-1.pdf](http://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/EIR2016-17_12.10.17.web-1.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> The Education Reform Initiative (2016-17)

the pedagogy and practices in school. In a panel<sup>20</sup> to discuss these findings, Yasemin Esen, an associate professor at the Ankara University, cautioned that only through promoting gender equality in educational pedagogy and practice could we empower girls in Turkey to reach their full potential.

### *The Rise of Anti-genderism*

In late December 2018, the Minister of National Education's statement<sup>21</sup> on a gender-sensitive school action plan—the outcome of the gender equality project—unleashed a wave of conservative backlash initially triggered by radical right media and columnists. Their arguments placed gender equality in a context explicitly narrowed down to combatting the promotion of sexuality and desexualization in Turkish society through education. Accordingly, youth and family were at risk of being deprived of Turkey's traditional and conservative values. I argue that the radical right media and civil society also used this opportunity to weaken the Minister himself, whose appointment had received a chilly reception in these circles. In response to these criticisms, the Ministry distanced itself from public debates by sharing a brief statement indicating that the gender equality project was implemented by previous administrations. Relatively more reasonable and somehow argumentative criticism of the Ministry also followed. It is worth noting that even these accommodated a rigid refusal of gender sexuality.<sup>22</sup> Otherwise, critiques challenged, prior to and following the Minister's statement, the "equality" concept and suggested that "justice" was a more suited conceptual framework for Turkish society.<sup>23</sup>

KADEM, the leading advocate of using gender justice in lieu of gender equality, states that they choose "to approach all theoretical and practical work aimed at organizing social relations among men and women through a gender justice conceptualization."<sup>24</sup> They critique gender equality as a product of European modernization and, thus, not appropriate for Turkish society, underlying the societies' unique journey of cultural identity development. KADEM's gender justice emphasizes the parity of existential value among men and women while outlining

<sup>20</sup> The Education Reform Initiative, "20. EPS: PISA ve TIMSS Bulguları Işığında Türkiye'de Cinsiyete Bağlı Başarı Farkı" [Success Factors According to Gender in Light of the Findings of PISA and TIMSS], <https://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/20-eps/>

<sup>21</sup> Yelda Gökdağ, "Cinsiyet eşitliğine duyarlı okul geliyor" [Gender-sensitive schools on the way], *Aksam*, 29 December 2018, <https://www.aksam.com.tr/siyaset/cinsiyet-esitligine-duyarli-okul-geliyor/haber-808272>

<sup>22</sup> KADEM, "Eğitimde Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliğinin Geliştirilmesi Projesi (ETCEP)'ne İlişkin Değerlendirme" [An Analysis on the Gender Equality Improvement Project in Education], <http://kadem.org.tr/degerlendirme-etcep/>

<sup>23</sup> KADEM, "Eğitimde Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliğinin Geliştirilmesi Projesi (ETCEP)'ne İlişkin Değerlendirme;" Sare Aydın Yılmaz, "Participation of Women in Politics in Turkey Within The Perspective of Gender Equality and Justice," *KADEM Women's Studies Journal*, Vol. 1, pp. 11-34; Sare Aydın Yılmaz, "A New Momentum: Gender Justice in the Women's Movement," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Winter 2015), <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/719/a-new-momentum-gender-justice-in-the-womens-movement-winter-2015>

<sup>24</sup> KADEM, "Eğitimde Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliğinin Geliştirilmesi Projesine İlişkin Değerlendirme" [An Analysis on the Gender Equality Improvement Project in Education].

the opportunity for their roles to vary based on the individual and family context.

The recent attack on gender equality seems to be a politically motivated assault on what remains of Turkey's liberal values rather than an attempt to start an intellectual debate around the issue. Both the narrative and organizational characteristics of gender equality critics (pro-government media and civil society) in Turkey mirrors the radical right in Hungary and Poland where the women's movement and gender ideology have witnessed similar attacks by pro-government media and civil society.<sup>25</sup> According to Peto and Grzebalska, "Hungary and Poland use nationalist ideas about the family to attack human rights, emphasizing the rights and interests of 'traditional' families over those of individuals and minorities."<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere, it has been argued that a transnational anti-gender campaign has been unfolding since 2012 and gender ideology (gender equality, gender mainstreaming, women's rights, LGBTI issues, etc.) have been under attack in Croatia, Germany, Italy, France, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and the United States.<sup>27</sup> In its capacity to constitute "a symbolic glue" for conservative movements, anti-genderism is perceived as a "not just" a feminist issue, but rather one threatening liberal democracy.<sup>28</sup>

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*“The new curriculum introduced by the government after the summer of 2016 barely touched on gender roles and women's rights and left the concept of equality out when discussing gender.”*

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The backlash against gender equality in Turkey has some anomalies in timing. A significant of policy work in both MoNE and higher education institutions, including the Higher Education Council, has been undertaken following then Prime Minister Erdoğan's attack on women's reproductive rights in fall 2011 and its infamous statement on educating a pious youth in February 2012. However, the Higher Education Council published its "Gender Equality in Higher Educational Institutions" policy document as late as 2016, stipulating that universities have to add an elective or compulsory course on gender equality to their curriculum. In the wake of the recent

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<sup>25</sup> Andrea Peto and Weronika Grzebalska, "How Hungary and Poland have silenced women and stifled human rights," *Huffington Post*, 14 October 2016, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-hungary-and-poland-ha\\_b\\_12486148](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-hungary-and-poland-ha_b_12486148)

<sup>26</sup> Andrea Peto and Weronika Grzebalska (2017).

<sup>27</sup> Weronika Grzebalska, "Why the war on 'gender ideology' matters," *Visegrad Insight*, 7 March 2016, <http://visegradinsight.eu/why-the-war-on-gender-ideology-matters-and-not-just-to-feminists/>

<sup>28</sup> I would like to thank Ayşe Gül Altınay, professor at Sabancı University, for making me aware of this international perspective.

backlash, the Higher Education Council revoked the policy. They stated that the policy was initially intended to prevent gender-based violence, but it was apparent that a larger meaning was attached to it, one which was in conflict with Turkey's social values. The Higher Education Council's statement illustrates the limited understanding and appreciation of gender equality by the Council itself in the first place. Nevertheless, it is evident that gender equality had found a more conducive policy environment in MoNE and the Higher Education Council even while Turkey's freedom score has been on a free fall since 2014.<sup>29</sup>

### ***Concluding Remarks***

The politicized and often manipulative and aggressive tone of recent attacks on gender equality does not preclude constructive criticism of Turkey's continuing efforts to achieve gender equality nor the overarching theoretical frameworks. Misra, in her Sakıp Sabancı International Research Award winner paper,<sup>30</sup> draws attention to the construction of a "static, ahistorical, and homogenous conception of "the girl child" in the Girls Off to School campaign through an interaction of international and national discourses. Accordingly, these discourses neglected a holistic and genuine inquiry to understanding the history and context of why the "girl child" found herself disadvantaged in the first place. In light of this criticism, attempts of local Civil Monitoring Groups to induce a sense of reality (i.e. linguistic challenges due to the state policy on rigid monolingual instruction) to mostly sterile debates on girls' education could get a more favorable ex-post evaluation.

Given the multi-pillar complexity of gender inequalities inherent in society, campaigns and projects could have been more effective and their effects more sustainable if these were grounded in a theoretical inquiry of these inequalities in the first place. Just like in other parts of the world, the significance of "quality of equality"<sup>31</sup> has been learned the hard way in Turkey. Girls' education should not be subject to a Faustian bargain in which gender equality is sacrificed for the sake of gender parity.<sup>32</sup> Nor should the sole outcome of educating girls be to serve society; it should empower them to become active citizens, critical thinkers, and life-long learners.<sup>33</sup>

Turkey has come a long way in achieving gender parity since 2003 when the Girls

<sup>29</sup> "Freedom in the World 2018," *Freedom House*, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH\\_FITW\\_Report\\_2018\\_Final\\_SinglePage.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_FITW_Report_2018_Final_SinglePage.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> Akanksha Misra, "Beyond Numbers: Rethinking the Education and Empowerment of Girls in Turkey," 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Supriya Baily and Halla B. Holmarsdottir (2015).

<sup>32</sup> Elaine Unterhalter, "Poverty, education, gender and the Millennium Development Goals: Reflections on boundaries and intersectionality," *Theory and Research in Education*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (November 2012), pp. 253-274, <https://sci-hub.tw/https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1477878512459394>

<sup>33</sup> Akanksha Misra (2014).

Off to School campaign was launched. However, it is still far from achieving gender equality. Although equality has been on the policy agenda and projects were implemented, their scope and impact seem to be limited primarily because gender mainstreaming in both MoNE and other government agencies never received sincere political backing. In light of pro-government conservative circles' opposition to gender equality and the country's democracy ongoing regression, it is unrealistic to expect a positive change on the political scene in the near future.

However, this will not discourage gender advocates in the government, private sector, civil society and advocates to keep working towards gender equality through whatever means they can find or create. The gender movement in Turkey still enjoys a robust group of civil society organizations and academic institutions despite the closing civil space recently. The conviction that action brings hope presents itself as an effective antidote to realistic pessimism that the current regime has been igniting in Turkey.

There is also an opportunity for critical reflection on Turkey's past performance on gender and education, one which should expose "girls' education" to a constructive debate. The secular "emancipation" of the girl child project needs to evolve into a genuine discussion about the education and empowerment of girls. This would require an inclusive approach, acknowledging Turkey's ethnic, religious, social, and cultural differences. A grassroots effort to lead this discussion from the bottom up has the potential of serving future macro policy and practice to achieve gender equality when Turkey finally gains its democratic health again.