

From the Desk of the Editor

Since the founding of the Turkish Republic, women have been central to its image as viewed from abroad. They have also figured strongly into competing visions among domestic political groups. With this issue of TPQ we hope to look beyond the symbolism women have come to represent and identify real life trends women in Turkey are experiencing – along with their implications for economic development, human rights, and the consolidation of Turkish democracy.

Since 2001, there have been enormous legislative changes regarding women in Turkey. These changes have been largely driven by the women's movement, with its roots in the 1980s. Katharina Knaus introduces some of the lead figures in this increasingly diverse world of women activists, as well as reminding us of some of the inspiring women buried in Ottoman history.

In this issue, TPQ also gives a voice to some of the women who represent perspectives not always included in the mainstream platforms of debate on women in Turkey. Nebahat Akkoç, who has worked on domestic violence issues in the Southeast for many years, looks at the mindset she believes has led to various forms of discrimination and violence towards women. Akkoç chooses to imagine a new world rather than to list present problems. Based on field research in the eastern province of Van, a section of the recently published ESI report, reprinted in these pages, offers a glimpse into how varying regional socioeconomic and cultural realities factor into women's rights and opportunities. The challenges faced demonstrate the vast range of experiences within Turkey's borders – requiring policies to be designed accordingly.

From Ankara, Turkey's capital, Hidayet Şefkatli Tuksal shares her views about the issue of headscarves, which recently has dominated Turkey's agenda. The inability of women wearing a headscarf to study at universities, or to work in state institutions is described as an "unethical disqualification" by Tuksal, who points out that the headscarf is used as a political tool, at the expense of the basic rights of the women who have chosen to wear it based on their faith.

The suspicion that the headscarf is being used as a political instrument also prevails among people who support the headscarf restrictions. There are many women in Turkey who grew up learning about how the founding of the Republic freed women who had been forced to wear the hijab and brought them into public space as equals. The change of dress code was symbolic of the choice of the Republic –among the alternatives– to embrace western values. In any case, whether the oppression of women can be prevented by outlawing covered (veiled) women's entrance to educational facilities is questionable. As the debate continues to dominate Turkey's agenda, we choose to focus the discussion about women on other more tangible topics.

The wave of commitment to European Union integration, from the turn of the century onwards, played an important role in the accelerated speed of reforms regarding women's rights. As Commissioner Vladimir Spidla points out, by 2006, the Progress Report of the European Commission stated that the legal framework in Turkey was "overall satisfactory".

The consensus formed around the membership goal of Turkey, triggered a virtuous cycle of positive change in the country. It was in this atmosphere that women's NGOs were able to be most effective in intercepting and influencing the reform process. The strengthening of the NGOs' institutional capacity has also been fostered by the EU in a number of ways, such as through project assistance, capacity building and networking. Commissioner Spidla elaborates on the particular financial support that the EU has provided in relation to strengthening the place of women in Turkish society. On a related note, Hande Eslen-Ziya looks at both Turkish and Greek women's organizations to identify the role the EU has played in each country in terms of empowering the NGOs and influencing the domestic debate on women's issues.

One of the most important added values of the EU membership process for Turkey is the EU's focus on governance mechanisms. The role Emine Bozkurt has played as the European Parliament rapporteur on women's rights in Turkey showcases this function. In her article, Bozkurt highlights the pending steps for the new legislative framework in Turkey to translate into new realities for women. She underlines the need for starting off by collecting reliable data to identify problems, drawing up concrete action plans with the participation of stakeholders, allocating sufficient resources and punishing non-compliance. These steps are often "forgotten" in Turkey. Bozkurt reminds us that binding, operational and monitored strategic problems are a must for real progress in the area of women's empowerment. It remains to be seen whether Turkish politicians have the will to follow through with these initiatives seriously.

Commissioner Spidla points out that further legislative alignment is required in the areas of parental leave, equal pay, equal access to employment and social security. These are important issues for Turkey to address; given the gender gap for workforce participation is one of the most far reaching challenges.

The incorporation of a higher proportion of women of working age into the labor force is important not only for women's empowerment and independence but also for the competitiveness of the Turkish economy. However, as the ESI report points out, expecting dramatic change in this area in the short term may not be realistic given demographic and economic realities.

The problems taken up in this issue of TPQ are not exclusive to Turkey. Many are, or until recently have been, shared by all other nations. Turkey, thus, has many cases to draw upon in tackling its own gender gap.

Christina Bache writes about women in the United States and introduces the race dimension – highlighting how racial discrimination and gender discrimination were often intertwined in history– as has been the case in many different corners of the world. She argues that the struggle for women taking their rightful place in politics is ongoing in America, and mostly on the shoulders of civil society, as opposed to the state, unlike many European countries.

Even in a country like Norway, which is known for its high level of gender equality, the Minister in charge of Children and Equality, Karita Bekkellemem explains why a gender quota for company boards was needed for stronger representation of women in the private sector.

On the other hand Selen Lermioğlu Yılmaz, argues for a legislative quota to be imposed on the parliament in Turkey. It is a challenging task to make this point in a country where most

people deny that there is inequality to begin with. (If you are one of the 60 percent of women in some provinces in the east who is illiterate, with the average 7 children, no assets, no state subsidized childcare and receiving a regular battering at home, gender-based inequality of opportunity is no doubt more obvious). Without the quota, Lermioğlu-Yılmaz argues, women can not take their rightful place in decision making in Turkey in any reasonable stretch of time.

There have been significant NGO initiatives to empower women and the ARI Movement has also taken up a role as part of its aim to foster participatory democracy. From training women towards political life to capacity building among women's NGOs, ARI has been active in recent years in this sphere.

Yet another election is nearing in Turkey –not only without a quota for women's representation– but also without debate on each party's vision about the role of women or their strategies to implement their agendas.

There are many topics not covered in this issue and many voices not heard. From abortion to gender-sensitive city planning, every aspect of life has a gender angle to be considered. We do hope though, that this issue of TPQ offers some insight into the trends and the realities for women in Turkey – and how they relate to Turkey's democratization, governance, culture, and economic development.

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We hope that by creating synergy between the strengths of different individuals and institutions, we can continue to provide you with a pool of interesting opinions.

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