

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN TURKEY

Diba Nigar Göksel

In enshrining gender equality into the laws, the period since the turn of the century can be termed a revolution for Turkey. The women's movement, which fueled this process, is impressive in the sophistication of its campaigning as well as its courage. It is counterintuitive, according to many observers, that significant strides were taken to improve women's position in society under the leadership of the conservative AKP. The role of the EU must not be dismissed in these long due reforms.

However, empowering women takes more. Especially in areas of Turkey where traditional values grossly limit the choices and opportunities of women, primarily in the east, a more effective state is needed. As long as the

individual – man or woman – is so dependent on his or her extended family or feudal kinship entity, the values these social structures impose can not be challenged and women will remain the most trapped of all. Jobs, welfare services, well-staffed and coordinated public institutions, better infrastructure and policies more geared to the reality of these regions are needed.

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The status of women in society has been seen as a litmus test for Turkey's direction since the foundation of the republic in 1923. A penal and civil code introduced in the 1930s, both modeled after European examples, were, judged by European standards of the time, progressive in terms of women's rights. The issue was then deemed resolved and placed on the shelf for the sake of not

distracting from national unity. It was 50 years later that women sociologists discovered that the reforms had not penetrated far into Anatolia where, despite being illegal, girls were often not sent to mandatory primary school, married off younger than 17 and "married" by only religious unions, sometimes into polygamous marriages. The figures were staggering. In the 1960s, urbanization was at around 30 percent and female literacy was only 25 percent. A significant majority was totally left out of the modernization wave.

In the 1980s, awareness groups of intellectual women studied the evolution of women's empowerment in foreign literature and discovered that the laws still blatantly favored men in Turkey. Leveraging CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) and, when candidacy status was granted, the EU, 

▶ platforms formed by women's NGOs demanded amendments to the laws, drafted acceptable versions and, partnering with sympathetic individuals in the press and political arena, placed these issues high on Turkey's agenda. Their work, which for almost 20 years had fallen onto deaf ears, bore fruit from 2001 onwards.

Two consecutive governments of a very different ideological nature followed through with the demands: the 1999-2002 coalition government and the conservative AKP, in power since 2002. In 2001, the discriminatory elements of the Turkish Civil Code were amended to grant equal rights between men and women in marriage, divorce and property ownership. The new Penal Code, in force since 2004, treats female sexuality for the first time as a matter of individual rights, rather than family honor or social morality. In addition, an amendment to the Constitution obliges the state to ensure gender equality. Family courts were established in 2003 and in the same year new initiatives were launched to combat domestic violence and increase the rate of girls' education. Turkey is now, in terms of its laws, post-patriarchal. Moreover, the style in which a new Penal Code came into being in 2004 seemed to signal a new era of participatory policymaking, perhaps not significantly acknowledged up to now.

However, since 2005 the focus on a roadmap for women's further empowerment seems to have been lost. Anti-AKP fervor among a segment of the society has detracted from monitoring the implementation of reforms and the demand for complementary steps. Instead, criticism and dwelling on symbolic battles such as the headscarf have dominated. On the other hand, AKP's willingness to listen to and be persuaded by those that are not in their camp has faded. All parties involved need to reorient themselves towards recapturing the exemplary collaboration witnessed in 2004 simply because it undeniably worked wonders.

The East, perhaps the Achilles heel of Turkey's quest to empower women, offers a context for which a stronger formula is required. The region is composed of a young population, large families, early marriages – often arranged or forced – and widespread unemployment. Informal structures such as religious sects or kinship based tribes step in to fill the ideological and economic gaps the state is not able to fill. These power structures sustain values of women's subordination

and the distrust of the state in the Kurdish regions only perpetuates these power structures. For easy votes and control in the region, politicians have largely appeased the powerful figures of the region in crony relationships rather than breaking up the power centers to favor ordinary individuals. Shortcuts such as these have high costs, as can be seen in the crisis Turkey faces in this region today.

The lost potential due to women not working in Turkey is significant. Only around 25 percent of working age women work. Almost 70 percent of these are unpaid, largely in rural areas performing low-productivity, semi-



Detail of Anny and Sibel Öztürk's temporary interactive light sculpture "Mehr Licht" in Brussels. © Council of the European Union

subsistence farming. Welfare policies such as childcare and elderly-care are close to absent and there is no serious effort to integrate women into the workforce. The lack of a strong social democrat party is an important detriment in bringing these issues to the forefront.

Despite a municipality law in 2004 requiring that municipalities establish childcare and elderly care facilities, as well as shelters for women subject to domestic violence to turn to for protection, only a few have. Neither the government nor public opinion have penalized this negligence. Tracing the cases of women subject to extreme domestic

violence, sometimes even facing the threat of honor killing, reveals a disjointed public administration with insufficient means to perform effectively. Moreover, without a systematic demand for accountability on these institutions, lethargy seeps in.

Despite the domestic polarization that has replaced the strongly-backed reform agenda, there have been positive developments recently. The increase of women in parliament from 4.4 to 9 percent with the elections this summer is a significant development. Women activists remain highly critical of this still low figure and demand that a quota be introduced.

Turkish politicians can no longer afford to neglect the wide array of demands of the women's movement. AKP has set the bar higher than the previous governments in this sense. However this also puts more responsibility on the shoulders of the women's rights activists. Setting reasonable expectations, giving constructive support when due, and allowing society to celebrate positive steps are necessary considerations for a force with the political power these organizations have obtained in unison.

Though there is still significant ground Turkey needs to cover to close its wide gender gap, the ingredients for doing so are largely on the table. The debate about these issues is a setback.

Nowadays, the debate about women is hostage to the larger ideological divides revolving around Islamism as a rising threat and the Kurdish Southeast as a security challenge. Focusing on issues such as diligent collection of gender-specific data, accessible and unwavering public institutions, and measures to ease women's effort to balance responsibilities at home and at work are prerequisites to consolidating the impressive progress recently made.

Political will is the most critical component in making sure the intent of the new laws are translated into an irreversible reality of widespread empowerment for women in Turkey.

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