

TURKISH DAILY NEWS

Gender equality given carrot and stick in ESI report

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European Stability Initiative evaluates gender equality in Turkey in a recent report. Gerald Knaus, president of the think tank, calls the last six years as the second period in Turkish history when gender equality has taken a major leap.

The European Stability Initiative (ESI), the Berlin-based think tank, launched a report on gender equality in Turkey last week. The report titled "Sex and power in Turkey" claims that gender equality in Turkey is largely a popular myth, which plays down the fact that legislation was reformed only recently to grant equal status to women.

The report distinguishes two periods in the history of the Turkish Republic when major improvements were made to the status of women: the reforms of Atatürk in 1920s and the period since 2001.

But regardless of these two periods of reforms, today Turkey still scores poorly in global league tables on gender equality. At a meeting of the World Economic Forum in Istanbul in November 2006, a table measuring the "gender gap" (inequality between men and women) put Turkey 105th of 115 countries, behind Tunisia, Ethiopia and Algeria.

Origins of the report

ESI got the initial motivation to research on women's rights in Turkey from the public debate in Germany on Turkey's membership in the European Union. "Some 18 months ago we realized that the public debate on Turkey's EU membership was no longer focused on history but on Turkish culture. More specifically, it had become more and more focused on women," Gerald Knaus, President of ESI, told Turkish Daily News.

According to Knaus, the debate had its origins in an honor killing that took place in early 2005 in Berlin and received wide media attention. Also several books on immigrant women were published at the time. "For example, a book called The Foreign Bride became a best seller. By and large it conveyed the kind of image of Turkey where violence against women is rampant. There were also several television shows where people discussed integration and women in Turkey," he said. "Because of this popular attention to Turkish women, we felt it important to evaluate the root causes of the situation and distinguish facts from myths," he adds.

Gender quality in Turkey is a myth

Knaus believes there are several reasons for Turkey's poor rating. "One of the reasons for the lack of gender equality in Turkey is the surprisingly strong myth within political discourse that Turkey is, in fact advanced in the field. But the fact is that in year 2000, Turkey was further

behind every European country especially in civil law and penal code. These were clearly discriminatory towards women," says Knaus.

Another reason for Turkey's poor rating in gender equality tables is the country's socio-economic evolution. "Turkey has remained longer than other countries in Europe a rural and agricultural society," says Knaus and notes that the spread of democracy throughout the country is the key to the emancipation of women.

"Unemployment in southeastern Turkey is rife. Women in the region either work for the government or as unpaid family workers in agriculture. These realities make emancipation of women very complicated," he adds.

Radical improvement of women's status since 2001

According to the ESI report, the reforms of the last two years have been "the most radical changes in the legal status of Turkish women in 80 years."

"For the first time in its history, Turkey has the legal framework of a post-patriarchal society. The period since 2001 is the second period since the 1920s when the state has improved women's rights. Reforms to the Turkish Civil Code have granted women and men equal rights in marriage, divorce and property ownership."

The report states that the recent reforms have come about in a very different way from those of the 1920s: "as the result of a very effective campaign by a broad-based women's movement, triggering a wide-ranging national debate."

Knaus says that the changes in the last two years are spectacular and that they are mainly due to the active lobbying of women's organizations.

"What is even more significant is that in the past years, women's organizations have actually been able to affect the political process. The current government has been largely open to be influenced regardless of its conservative voters and agreed to change the penal code. Also, the Turkish media has visibly shaped the debate in recent years," Knaus explains.

Fears of Shariah not based on reality

The ESI report also questions the fears of those who accuse the Justice and Development Party (AKP) for trying to introduce Islamic Shariah law in Turkey.

“There are some who fear that Turkey may be turning its back on its secular traditions. Some of the loudest voices come from Kemalist women, who insist that the rise of ‘political Islam’ represents an acute threat to the rights and freedoms of Turkish women,” it says.

“There have even been calls for restrictions to Turkish democracy, to protect women's rights. Yet such ‘authoritarian feminism’ is out of touch with the reality of contemporary Turkey and the achievements of recent years,” the report says.

Quotas a potential solution?

There is a strong argument in favor of introducing quotas in Turkish politics, says Knaus.

“On one hand, it is true that the inequality can be solved also without quotas. But politics is a competitive field. Even if the AKP party may double the number of its female deputies, it would still be too slow a progress to bring Turkey to European standards,” he explains.

On the question if the headscarf ban at state institutions is hampering introduction of quotas, Knaus says: “The way the debate is conducted in Turkey is not parallel with any other European country. The failure to solve this contributes to the lack of attention on more serious issues.” He also points out that there is no other country than Turkey in Europe where the headscarf is banned in Parliament and universities.

Reactions yet to come

Reactions on the report have so far been mainly positive. However, its Turkish version is still being translated. “What is important here is that the timing of our report is not in any way connected to the timing of the elections,” says Knaus.

“Furthermore, the center of our report is not any one political party, but the evolution of Turkish democracy itself. It is crucial to Turkey to explain to the world that changes in gender equality are also taking place in Turkey,” he concludes.