

GENDER EQUALITY IN TÜRKİYE: HISTORICAL LEGACIES, INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORKS, AND THE UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

TÜRKİYE'DE TOPLUMSAL CİNSİYET EŞİTLİĞİ: TARİHSEL MİRASLAR, ULUSLARARASI ÇERÇEVELER VE BİRLEŞMİŞ MİLLETLER SÜRDÜRÜLEBİLİR KALKINMA AMAÇLARI

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ABSTRACT

This research provides a critical analysis of the historically gendered relationship between the state and the individual, revealing how state structures have long been dominated by patriarchal norms that systematically exclude women from political and institutional domains. While the state has functioned as a central mechanism for organising social order, its evolution has predominantly reflected male experiences and authority. Through a historical and theoretical lens, this research explores the ideological foundations of gender inequality embedded in state institutions from antiquity to the modern era. The study assesses the effectiveness of international frameworks, particularly those of the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU), in fostering women's empowerment. It further evaluates Türkiye's progress toward aligning with these standards. Drawing on legal, historical, and statistical evidence, the findings expose enduring structural and cultural barriers to gender parity. The study concludes with concrete policy recommendations aimed at promoting gender-sensitive governance and inclusive development.

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ÖZET

Bu çalışma, devlet ile birey arasındaki tarihsel olarak toplumsal cinsiyet temelli ilişkiyi eleştirel bir şekilde inceleyerek devlet yapılarını uzun süredir egemenliği altında tutan ve kadınları sistematik olarak siyasal ve kurumsal alanlardan dışlayan patriyarkal normları ortaya koymaktadır. Devlet, toplumsal düzeni örgütlemenin merkezi bir mekanizması olarak işlev görmüş olsa da tarihsel gelişimi büyük ölçüde erkek deneyimlerini ve otoritesini yansıtmıştır. Tarihsel ve kuramsal bir bakış açısından hareketle, bu araştırma, antik dönemden modern çağa kadar devlet kurumlarına yerleşmiş toplumsal cinsiyet eşitsizliğinin ideolojik temellerini incelemektedir. Çalışma, özellikle Birleşmiş Milletler ve Avrupa Birliği çerçevelerinin kadınların güçlenmesini teşvik etmedeki etkinliğini değerlendirmektedir. Ayrıca, Türkiye'nin bu standartlarla uyum sağlama yolundaki ilerlemesini analiz etmektedir. Hukuki, tarihsel ve istatistiksel kanıtlara dayanan bulgular, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliğine yönelik kalıcı yapısal ve kültürel engelleri gözler önüne sermektedir. Çalışma, toplumsal cinsiyete duyarlı yönetişimi ve kapsayıcı kalkınmayı teşvik etmeye yönelik somut politika önerileriyle sona ermektedir.

ANAHTAR KELİMELE: Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitsizliği, Feminizm, BM Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliği Amaçları, Türkiye

INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality emerges as a universal issue that has manifested across different historical periods and contexts, requiring comprehensive solutions (UN Women, 2020). Throughout history, gender inequality has functioned as a deeply embedded structural dynamic that shapes economic, political, and social hierarchies within societies, but has also posed a structural barrier to the economic, political, and social development of societies (World Economic Forum, 2022; Kabeer, 2005). As such, studies on gender inequality aim not only to defend individual rights but also to dismantle obstacles to sustainable development (Sen, 1999).

This study approaches gender inequality through historical, theoretical, and contemporary lenses, with a particular focus on global policy agendas shaped by the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015). The first section concentrates on the relationship between women and the state across various historical periods. Through an analysis of women's social and economic roles in Ancient Greece, the Middle Ages, and the Industrial Era, the study will explore how state institutions

have historically approached gender (Wiesner-Hanks, 2021).

Conceptually, gender inequality extends beyond disparities in resource distribution; it encompasses the reproduction of gendered norms and institutional practices that sustain unequal power relations; it also represents significant barriers to sustainable development (UNDP, 2020). The persistent disparities women face in participating in economic, political, and social life reflect a structural problem that directly influences societal progress and well-being (Connell, 2002; Fraser, 2020). In doing so, it also assesses the European Union's gender equality framework and critically evaluates Türkiye's level of alignment with both UN and EU policy priorities (Debusscher, 2023).

The second section aims to establish the conceptual foundation of gender inequality. It will distinguish between the concepts of sex and gender, and evaluate the root causes and consequences of gender inequality within a theoretical framework (Butler, 1990; Scott, 1986). In particular, the study will emphasise how inequality is reproduced through cultural norms, economic structures, and social institutions (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). This analysis will underline that gender inequality is not merely an individual problem, but a systemic and institutionalised phenomenon.

A historical overview of the UN's and EU's approaches to gender equality is provided in the third section. Both organisations conceptualise gender equality not only as a policy objective but fundamentally as a human right grounded in indivisible and interdependent rights frameworks (Smith, 2018; Sen, 2005). From this perspective, gender equality is understood through a rights-based approach that highlights the structural barriers limiting women's access to rights, the exclusionary mechanisms embedded in participation processes, and the ways institutional arrangements reproduce gendered hierarchies (Fraser, 2009; Razavi, 2016).

Within this rights-based framework, the UN has positioned gender equality as a prerequisite for economic, political, and social development (United Nations, 2015). Accordingly, the study will analyse the gender policies and implementation strategies developed under the SDGs, with particular attention to how they address discriminatory norms, unequal power relations, and obstacles to women's substantive participation. Concrete targets, such as equal pay for equal work, women's representation in leadership positions, and the elimination of gender-based violence, will be examined alongside their global implications for advancing gender equality (ILO, 2022; UN Women, 2023).

The fourth section focuses on the current state of gender equality in Türkiye across economic, political-legal, and social dimensions. Critical indicators such as low female labour force participation, underrepresentation

in leadership positions, and limited access to social services will be discussed in detail (TÜİK, 2023; World Bank, 2021). Moreover, Türkiye's efforts and challenges in the process of alignment with the EU's gender equality standards will be assessed. Special attention will be paid to the reciprocal relationship between economic development and gender equality (Çolak, 2021).

Finally, this study approaches gender equality not merely as a policy objective but as a structural and human-rights issue that is central to economic, political, and social sustainability. While historical analyses of women's social and economic roles, from Antiquity through the Middle Ages to the Industrial Era, are outlined to illustrate the embedded nature of gender inequality in state institutions, the study primarily focuses on contemporary frameworks. In particular, it examines the UN SDGs and the EU's gender equality policies, highlighting the structural causes and consequences of inequality and evaluating Türkiye's implementation performance within these global standards.

The conclusion presents actionable, rights-based policy recommendations at both national and international levels, aimed at promoting gender-sensitive governance, enhancing women's substantive participation, and addressing exclusionary mechanisms in institutional and social structures. In this way, the study seeks to bridge theoretical discourse and practical implementation, demonstrating the interconnectedness of gender equality and sustainable development.

ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY THROUGH THE UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)

At the current juncture, it has become evident that state-level efforts in combating gender inequality are insufficient, and that many problems stemming from gender disparities remain unresolved (UN Women, 2020; Fraser, 2020). A comprehensive literature review affirms that gender inequality is a universal problem, not limited to specific regions or cultural contexts (Kabeer, 2005; World Economic Forum, 2023). This recognition has led to a collective understanding that addressing gender inequality requires global cooperation, built upon shared standards and procedures (United Nations, 2015).

Living in the world today entails not only the sustainable use of resources but also the establishment of social peace and security. As part of humanity, unsolved societal problems hinder the creation of a sustainable future for all communities (Sen, 1999). Therefore, within the framework of a unified global response, Gender equality is the primary focus of the fifth goal within the UN SDGs (United Nations, 2015). This goal outlines several key objectives aimed

at eliminating gender-based disparities and promoting equitable participation of all individuals, regardless of gender. The visual representation of this goal is particularly symbolic: it incorporates both male and female international gender symbols, united by an “equals” sign, signifying the aim of universal equality (UN SDG, 2024).

A Historical Overview of Gender Equality and the United Nations

Studies on the social and political sphere are widely considered to have their origins in Ancient Greek civilizations, where women were regarded as inherently weak by nature. Women were deemed incapable and were consequently excluded from the political sphere and, to a significant extent, from the social sphere as well (Gleichauf, 2007, p. 10). In this period, during which concepts such as democracy, citizenship, and rights were systematically discussed, women faced political, economic, and social restrictions solely on the basis of their gender. In Ancient Greek society, which was shaped by a male-dominated mentality, the prevailing view was that “woman, from the moment of creation, was evil, dark, devoid of reason, curious, and the source of all disasters, suffering, and sorrow” (Yılmazcan, 2020, p. 278). Within Ancient Greek terminology, the concept of *oikos*, referring to the household or dwelling space, played a constitutive role in both the private sphere and the wider public order, while excluding women from these domains. Although absolute authority within the household belonged to men, women were not permitted to move beyond this sphere. Confined to domestic work and childcare within the household, women were subjected to numerous arguments, produced by men, that served to legitimize this condition.

During the Middle Ages, marked by wars and territorial struggles, the chaotic environment generated considerable pressure on social life. The story of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit, as narrated in the Abrahamic religions, was interpreted particularly within medieval Christian thought and social structures as evidence that women were sinful, and often associated with the devil or witchcraft. Moreover, the concept of the witch emerged as one of the most convenient means for a male-dominated society to control women through fear and, when necessary, to eliminate them. Medieval doctrine, rather than expanding women’s visibility in the political sphere, fundamentally placed obstacles before such a possibility. In the medieval period, women remained outside the realm of the political and continued to be valued only in relation to the “home and domestic duties.” The state and state administration in the Middle Ages were constructed through a divine model of rule and a masculine cadre of authority.

With the emergence of industrial society, in which women entered working life, women’s position began to be discussed within the economic sphere. For the first time, women began to work in return for wages. They became

particularly prominent in textile production, especially in tasks requiring finger dexterity. However, certain issues regarding women's position in this field should not be overlooked. Women's role in this area of work did not extend beyond that of wage laborers. They were compelled to work long hours for low wages. This was because women were perceived as more docile, more willing to work for lower wages, and more suited to repetitive machine-based tasks in mass production; such assumptions paved the way for their preference in these sectors (Wiesner-Hanks, 2020, p. 73). The struggle to increase low wages, prevent labor exploitation, and improve working conditions provided a preliminary basis for the development of women's awareness of defending their own rights. As a result of these movements, policies aimed at protecting women were, for the first time, regulated within the framework of the liberal understanding of the state (Topoğlu, 2007, p. 19).

The UN's engagement with gender issues and its evolving leadership in this domain has played a pivotal role in raising global awareness and fostering a collective consciousness regarding gender equality. As Bunch (1990) argues, international institutions like the UN have increasingly recognised women's rights as human rights, reframing gender equality as a global justice issue. Although the formal international discussion of gender inequality gained momentum primarily through the EU's legal and policy frameworks, scholars such as True (2010) and Walby (2004) emphasize that the UN's normative influence, particularly through instruments like CEDAW and the Beijing Platform, has significantly broadened the global discourse and institutionalization of gender equality norms.

While relatively late compared to the long history of women's political, social, and economic marginalisation, some of the most tangible efforts toward gender equality have been embedded within EU frameworks. These efforts began in the economic domain, most notably with the Treaty of Rome (1957), which laid the foundation of the European Economic Community. Article 119 of this treaty enshrined the principle of "equal pay for equal work" as a means to eliminate economic inequality between women and men (Kılınçarslan, 2024, p. 131; Özerdem, 2010, p. 18). This clause, introduced upon France's insistence, was also a response to the organised resistance of female workers in the country.

According to Kılınçarslan (2024, p. 135), five historical approaches have shaped EU gender policies:

1. Equal Pay
2. Equal Treatment
3. Positive Action
4. Gender Mainstreaming
5. Intersectionality

These approaches constitute the guiding principles for shaping national gender-related policies across EU member states.

One of the most illustrative cases emphasising the significance of international frameworks occurred in 1966, when female workers at a Belgian arms factory went on strike demanding the application of the equal pay principle embedded in Article 119 (Baş, 2011, p. 52). The Belgian Ministry of Labour eventually ruled in favour of the workers.

Following the Treaty of Rome, 13 directives were introduced to address economic inequality (Akbaş, 2010, p. 2). The Mid-Term Program of 1967 encouraged female employment (Kaya, 2012, p. 72). From the 1960s onward, economic-focused efforts gradually evolved into broader social policies, partly driven by the activist climate of the 1968 movements and the emergence of the Second-Wave Feminist Movement, which emphasized not only legal and economic rights but also cultural and structural issues in gender roles (Bayraktar, 2023, p. 52).

A significant milestone on the international stage was the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, which marked a decisive step toward gender equality. Following its adoption, member countries began ratifying the convention starting in 1980, demonstrating their commitment to addressing gender-based injustices. This treaty specifically aims to eliminate all forms of discrimination, restrictions, and inequalities faced by women, thereby affirming their right to full human rights. Importantly, CEDAW remains the only UN agreement explicitly focused on women's rights and the advancement of gender equality (Kadının İnsan Hakları Derneği, 2024). In line with this global commitment, Türkiye became a signatory to CEDAW in 1985, further embedding these principles within its national framework.

The EU directives and regulations further supported gender equality policies. Key examples include:

- Equal Pay Directive (75/117/EEC, 1975)
- Equal Treatment Directive in Employment (76/207/EEC, 1976)
- Directive 86/613/EEC, focused on maternity and pregnancy protections (Bolcan, 2010, p. 258)

The European Commission initiated its first action programs on gender equality between 1982–1985, addressing sexual violence, domestic abuse, child exploitation, harassment, trafficking, and discrimination against minority and refugee women (Kılınçarslan, 2024, p. 138).

The Treaty of Maastricht (1993) and the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) placed gender equality at the core of EU policy. The Social Policy Protocol, annexed to the Maastricht Treaty, deepened gender-related social policies.

Initially signed by 11 countries (excluding the UK), the Amsterdam Treaty unified these efforts and became the first EU treaty to explicitly frame gender equality as a foundational mission (Doğan, 2023, p. 111; Bolcan, 2010, p. 255).

The Lisbon Strategy (2000) emphasised gender equality in economic growth and employment planning. Declaration No. 19, annexed to the strategy, called for measures against gender-based violence and imposed obligations on states to protect women. The document also highlighted issues such as female entrepreneurship and women's participation in the labour force (İnan, 2005).

Another key international instrument in this field is the Istanbul Convention, officially known as The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence. Adopted in 2011 and opened for signature in Istanbul on May 11, it established the first legally binding standards in Europe aimed at preventing violence against women, safeguarding victims, and prosecuting offenders (Bayraktar, 2018, p. 92). The convention's authority on a global scale has been reinforced by the General Recommendations 19 and 35 issued by CEDAW, further solidifying its role in combating gender-based violence (Eryılmaz, Ayata & Çağrı, 2022, p. 187). This connection highlights the complementary nature of international efforts to protect women's rights and ensure their safety.

The Istanbul Convention was opened for signature in 2011 with the aim of providing rights-based protection for women, preventing domestic violence, and ensuring that such protection has a legal foundation. Türkiye hosted this convention and was its first signatory (Çağlayan, 2023). Being a pioneer in such an international treaty focused on human rights, and specifically women's rights, conferred positive prestige on Türkiye within platforms assessing human rights compliance.

However, according to a statement issued by the Directorate of Communications: "Initially intended to promote the empowerment of women, the Istanbul Convention was allegedly manipulated by groups seeking to normalize homosexuality, which conflicts with Türkiye's societal and familial values. Türkiye's decision to withdraw from the Convention was based on this rationale" (İletişim Başkanlığı, 2025). Consequently, Türkiye officially withdrew from the Convention on 21 March 2021 through a presidential decree. In this context, Türkiye's withdrawal from an international treaty it had spearheaded has been viewed negatively within indicators of international law compliance.

These recommendations emphasize that gender-based violence takes varied forms throughout different stages of life, necessitating a comprehensive

and ongoing response. In line with this, the Istanbul Convention imposes legal obligations on states, including specific provisions such as Articles 32 and 37, which deal with the annulment of early marriages and relevant criminal regulations. Additionally, the convention addresses critical issues related to sexual orientation, and the practice of female genital mutilation, broadening its scope to protect diverse groups from violence and discrimination.

The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 outlines policy priorities over five years, including a goal for 50% female representation in the European Commission by 2024 (Doğan, 2023, p. 113). The strategy adopts a dual approach combining targeted actions and gender mainstreaming, with intersectionality as a horizontal guiding principle (EU Gender Equality Strategy, 2024).

United Nations Gender Equality Goals

In 2000, the UN spearheaded the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to address global poverty. Among the eight objectives aimed for completion by 2015, Goal 3 focused on “Promoting gender equality and empowering women” (Ataman, 2020, p. 43). These goals later transformed into the SDGs, with gender equality integrated as Goal 5. This goal encompasses a wide range of targets aimed at eliminating all forms of discrimination, violence, and harmful traditions affecting women and girls worldwide. It calls for ending gender-based violence such as trafficking and exploitation, and outlawing practices like child marriage and female genital mutilation. The goal also stresses the importance of acknowledging unpaid care work, encouraging shared responsibility in households, and ensuring women’s and girl’s equal participation in leadership roles across political, economic, and public spheres. Additionally, it promotes universal access to sexual and reproductive health rights and services, reforms for women and girls equal ownership and control over land and economic resources, and the increased use of technology to empower women and girls. Lastly, it advocates for robust policies, enforceable laws, and transparent allocation of resources to support gender equality at every level.

AN EVALUATION OF GENDER EQUALITY METRICS IN TÜRKİYE

The World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report 2022 places Türkiye 124th among 146 nations in terms of overall gender equality. Breaking this down by sub-indices, Türkiye holds the 101st position for educational attainment, 112th for political empowerment, 134th for economic participation and opportunity, and 99th for health and survival (UN Women, 2024).

According to the 2024 SDG Gender Index report, Türkiye ranks 78th out of 139 countries, with a gender equality score of 65.9. In comparison, Switzerland occupies the top position with a score of 90.01, while Afghanistan ranks last with a score of 35.4. The SDG Gender Index not only provides a comparative snapshot of national performance but also benchmarks progress against the 2030 SDGs targets (Equal Measures 2030, 2024).

The report further highlights that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on gender equality outcomes worldwide, slowing or even reversing progress in many areas. In Türkiye, as in many other countries, the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing structural inequalities and revealed persistent gaps in women's economic participation, political representation, and access to social services. These findings underscore the importance of targeted policy interventions, comprehensive monitoring mechanisms, and rights-based approaches to ensure that commitments to gender equality translate into measurable and sustained outcomes (UN Women, 2023; Kabeer, 2005; World Economic Forum, 2022).

Economic Assessment

The economic marginalization of women is a key structural issue in gender inequality. As Kandiyoti (1988) notes, patriarchal bargains in societies like Türkiye have historically positioned women within the domestic sphere, reinforcing their exclusion from public and economic life. Women in Türkiye have long been socially associated with caregiving and household responsibilities, while economic sectors outside the home have been constructed as male-dominated domains (Arat, 2010). The absence of comprehensive, state-led strategies to challenge these gendered divisions of labor has contributed to the persistent underrepresentation of women in the workforce and the inefficient utilization of national human capital (İlkkaracan, 2012; Dedeoğlu, 2009).

This section analyzes the extent to which Türkiye has implemented Goal 5.5 of the UN SDGs, which calls for ensuring women's full and effective participation in decision-making processes in political, economic, and public life, and for providing equal opportunities for leadership at all levels. Relevant national policies and projects will be examined within this framework. The provisions of the Turkish Constitution that directly and indirectly emphasize equality of economic opportunity are significant in this context. In particular, Article 10, which is grounded in the principle of equality; Article 49, which defines work as both a right and a duty for everyone and assigns the state responsibility for improving working conditions; and Article 50, which provides for protective measures for women in working life, together with Labour Law No. 4857, the ILO conventions to which Türkiye is a party, and the obligations arising under the framework of the UN Committee on the

Elimination of Discrimination against Women, constitute a binding legal framework for Türkiye. In line with SDG 5.5, this analysis will consider two key indicators: 5.5.1, the proportion of women in the Grand National Assembly and local governments, and 5.5.2, the proportion of women in managerial positions.

The connection between women and the economy is essential in the context of sustainable development. Economic growth depends on the efficient and inclusive use of human resources. Excluding nearly half of a country's population from economic participation due to factors such as education or cultural norms negatively affects development.

Numerous studies have examined the relationship between economic performance and gender equality. For instance, Gürler and Üçdörük (2007), in their study *"Decomposition of Gender-Based Income Inequality in Türkiye,"* found significant gender discrimination in income distribution. They emphasised that such disparities begin with unequal access to education and persist throughout employment, especially in developing countries such as Türkiye.

Çolak (2021), in his econometric analysis titled *"Gender Inequality and Economic Growth in Türkiye,"* argued that gender equality and economic growth are mutually reinforcing. He found that gender-based income disparities, particularly among high school graduates, are significantly influenced by economic growth dynamics.

According to Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat) data from 2024, the labour force participation rate was 72% for men but only 36.8% for women (Turkstat 2024), indicating a substantial gap in women's inclusion in the workforce.

To address these inequalities, Türkiye has initiated several gender-focused projects, many of which are supported under the framework of the UN SDGs. These initiatives often aim to increase women's participation in the economy, reduce discrimination, and promote gender awareness.

Key programs include:

- **Women's Employment Promotion Grant Program:** A collaborative initiative between the EU and Türkiye, offering grants for projects focusing on skill development, women's empowerment in the workplace, and entrepreneurial support.
- **Women's Economic Empowerment Projects (2016–2021):** Led by UN Women and funded by the EU, this initiative provided vocational training, financing for women entrepreneurs, and the establishment of women's cooperatives.

- **Municipal Practices for Gender Equality (2017–2020):** This EU-supported project encouraged local governments to allocate budgets responsive to women's needs and to provide support services such as childcare facilities to increase women's labour participation.

- **Women's Cooperatives Empowerment Program (2018–2021):** Designed to boost the number of female entrepreneurs and encourage women to start their businesses.

In addition to labour force participation, gender inequalities in economic life can be highlighted through multiple indicators. According to TurkStat (2023), the overall labour force participation rate of women in Türkiye is approximately 34–35%, substantially below the OECD average of around 47%. Youth unemployment further exacerbates these disparities, with rates for women aged 15–24 reaching nearly 20%, significantly higher than their male counterparts. Moreover, a substantial proportion of young women, approximately 28–30% of those aged 15–29, fall into the NEET category (not in education, employment, or training), compared to 17% for young men (OECD, 2023).

Gender pay gaps remain a persistent issue, with women earning on average 15–20% less than men, particularly in managerial and senior positions (OECD, 2022). Beyond these measures, gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) represents a critical tool for addressing structural inequalities. While pilot GRB initiatives exist in some municipalities and at the central government level in Türkiye, widespread implementation remains limited. GRB can help make women's specific needs visible in resource allocation and policy planning, thereby reducing structural barriers to economic participation (UN Women, 2022). Taken together, these indicators illustrate the multidimensional nature of economic gender inequality in Türkiye, underscoring the need for targeted, rights-based interventions to enhance women's participation in economic life and access to opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic post-2020 further exacerbated existing challenges, highlighting the need for targeted economic policies to support women. Dinçer and Yirmişbeşoğlu (2020) argue that the COVID-19 pandemic had differential impacts on women and men, exacerbating existing challenges in female employment. They further contend that the pandemic particularly affected sectors with high female labour participation, such as tourism, cleaning, cosmetics, and hospitality, intensifying employment problems for women (Dinçer & Yirmişbeşoğlu, 2020, p. 782). The study suggests that the pandemic particularly affected sectors where women's employment is concentrated, such as tourism, cleaning services, cosmetics, and hospitality, leading to disproportionate negative consequences for women in the labor market. With the contraction of the labour market, women's positions

became more vulnerable, requiring specific intervention strategies. Moreover, when the findings of UN Women's studies are considered, it is observed that, during the COVID-19 period in Türkiye, among the respondents who were wage employees, 19% of women and 14.4% of men lost their jobs. Among self-employed respondents, 27% of women and 16% of men lost their jobs, while among employers, job loss was reported by 19% of women and 8.7% of men. Based on these data, it can be argued that women were affected more severely than men in the economic sphere and in working life during the COVID-19 period.

These projects gain full significance within a solid legal framework. Türkiye's Constitution guarantees equal pay for equal work under Article 10, and labour laws have been revised to support gender equality. Article 5 of the Labour Law emphasises equality, and policies related to maternity leave, breastfeeding breaks, and flexible working arrangements have been institutionalised.

Political and Legal Assessment

Gender inequality in politics must be examined in conjunction with legal regulations, as these form the basis of political rights and participation. However, legal equality does not automatically translate into *de facto* equality in political representation or power. Thus, both legislative structures and practical implementations need to be analysed.

In Turkish law, men and women are considered equal in exercising political rights: the right to vote and be elected, form or join political parties, and hold public office. Nonetheless, the low participation rates of women reveal that legal equality alone is not sufficient. As Tekeli explains, women's political participation entails two phases: Gaining political rights legally and struggling to ensure those rights are exercised equally in practice (Tekeli & Koray, 1991, p. 4).

Women gained political rights in Türkiye during the early Republican era: in 1930, they were granted suffrage in municipal elections, and in 1934, the right to vote and stand in general elections. These reforms marked a significant milestone in Turkish political history, placing women in equal legal status with men. Yet, despite being granted these rights earlier than many Western nations, Turkish women remain underrepresented in politics (Demir, 2018, p. 23).

A major shift came with the enactment of the New Turkish Civil Code in 2002, which redefined gender roles in the family. Key amendments included:

- Replacing the phrase "the husband is the head of the family" with "spouses jointly manage the marriage union."
- Granting both spouses equal representation of the family unit.

- Allowing spouses to pursue professions independently without seeking consent from each other.
- Redefining financial responsibility within the household as a shared obligation according to each partner’s means (T.C. Presidency Legal Database, 2025).

In addition to domestic legal reforms, Türkiye is a signatory to multiple international agreements reinforcing gender equality in politics, including:

- UN Charter,
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights,
- Convention on the Political Rights of Women,
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,
- CEDAW – Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

These conventions not only affirm women's rights but also guide for elimination of visible and invisible barriers to women’s political participation. CEDAW, in particular, offers detailed provisions on women’s political rights and obliges states to take proactive measures to correct gender imbalances in decision-making roles. In Türkiye’s 1997 CEDAW report, the election of Tansu Çiller as the country’s first female prime minister was noted as a significant development (T.C. Directorate General on the Status of Women, p. 33).

One of the most telling indicators of political participation in Türkiye is the representation of women in parliament and the cabinet. Since these are primary venues for legislative power and public policy, the underrepresentation of women reduces the visibility of women's issues in policymaking and perpetuates male-dominated discourse. The following section includes a table showing the rates of female ministers and parliamentarians in Türkiye over time.

Table 1: Gender Proportions of Ministers and Deputies by Year (%)

Year	Ministers Total	Male	Female	Deputies Total	Male	Female
2007	100.0	95.8	4.2	100.0	90.9	9.1
2011	100.0	96.0	4.0	100.0	85.6	14.4
2015	100.0	92.6	7.4	100.0	85.3	14.7
2019	100.0	87.5	12.5	100.0	82.7	17.3
2023	100.0	94.1	5.9	100.0	80.1	19.9

Source: Turkish Statistical Institute, 2024

To make sense of Türkiye's gender equality indicators in political participation, a cross-country comparison provides crucial context. For instance, Sweden stands out as a global leader in women's political representation, with 47% of parliamentary seats held by women (Usal, 2014, p. 160).

While equality-oriented legal reforms exist in many countries, including Türkiye, the limited presence of women in political decision-making roles reveals deeper socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors. Among these, traditional gender norms and cultural perceptions play a dominant role. As explored in earlier sections, women have historically been associated with the domestic sphere, such as household duties and child-rearing, while politics has been socially constructed as a masculine domain.

According to Demir (2018, p. 15), these traditional role assignments, reinforced by moral and social expectations, have long prevented women from entering political life. Consequently, women have often been perceived by male-dominated political institutions as passive voters rather than active participants.

Usal (2014, p. 151) outlines several systemic and structural barriers that hinder women's political engagement in Türkiye:

- The masculine nature of political life and elected offices,
- Insufficient support from political parties,
- Lack of coordination among labour unions and women's organisations,
- The absence of leadership training programs aimed at preparing women, particularly young women, for political roles,
- Electoral systems that structurally disadvantage female candidates.

These barriers highlight the multiple layers of exclusion that women face even in the presence of formal legal equality.

An additional concern in Türkiye's political landscape is the segmentation of women into limited political roles. Senior political positions (such as ministers, parliamentary commission chairs, or senior administrative posts) are overwhelmingly held by men. Moreover, women are disproportionately assigned to "soft" or gendered ministries, such as the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, where nearly all ministers have been women, while representation in other key ministries (e.g., economy, defence, foreign affairs) remains minimal or nonexistent.

The same trend is observable in parliamentary commissions. Women are underrepresented and often confined to commissions related to family, education, or social affairs, limiting the broader utilisation of their potential in other policy domains. This type of gender-role stereotyping in political assignments functions as an institutional barrier to comprehensive gender

inclusion. The following section presents data from 2022, illustrating the distribution of men and women in parliamentary commissions, further substantiating the argument on gendered political space in Türkiye.

Table 2: Number of Female and Male Members in Main Committees

Main Committee Name	Female Members	Male Members
Justice Committee	4	22
Constitution Committee	4	22
European Union Harmonization Committee	7	18
Public Works, Reconstruction, and Settlement Committee	1	23
Environment Committee	2	22
Foreign Affairs Committee	4	20
Digital Platforms Committee	7	13
Petitions Committee	1	9
Security and Intelligence Committee	3	18
Internal Affairs Committee	2	23
Human Rights Investigation Committee	1	21
Women's Rights Equality Committee	8	4
Public Economic Enterprises Committee	0	32
National Education, Culture, Youth, and Sports Committee	2	20
National Defence Committee	5	25
Planning and Budget Committee	3	28
Health, Family, Labour, and Social Affairs Committee	4	20
Industry, Trade, Energy, and Natural Resources Committee	4	22
Agriculture, Forestry, and Rural Affairs Committee	2	24

Source: Turkish Grand National Assembly (Mecliste.org), 2025

As a Turkish women’s movement striving to ensure political rights and equal representation in the political sphere in Türkiye, KA-DER (Association for Supporting and Training Women Candidates) can be regarded as a significant organisation. “Founded on March 4, 1997, the Association for Supporting and Training Women Candidates (KA-DER) holds the distinction of being the first women’s organization since the Turkish Women’s Union to solely raise the necessity of increasing women’s participation in political life and to actively work towards this goal” (Göl, 2014, p. 54). KA-DER embraces the belief that the inclusion of women in politics will transform the political

landscape and eliminate inequalities. It also advocates a holistic approach, viewing the issue as integrated with political, social, economic, and democratic processes. Furthermore, collaboration with NGOs within the framework of a “common women’s agenda” is envisaged. KA-DER supports the legalisation of a 30% quota for political participation. However, the demand for the legalisation of the 30% quota, which KA-DER has been advocating for 12 years, has yet to be realised.

Beyond KA-DER, the efforts of the Women’s Coalition are also significant for this study, as they aim to highlight that women are insufficiently represented in the political arena, that gender-based discrimination occurs during the electoral process, and that equal representation and participation are not ensured in candidate lists. As a solution to these unequal processes in the political sphere, the coalition invokes Article 67 of the Constitution, which is grounded in the principle of equality, under the slogan “We Want Equal Participation and Equal Representation,” advocating for a 50/50 gender balance in candidate lists (Eşit Katılım ve Eşit Temsil İstiyoruz!, 2025).

Social Assessment

The identification and elimination of gender inequalities affecting women in the social sphere can be evaluated under various headings. Key social indicators include access to education, healthcare, protection from domestic and public violence, and prevailing societal attitudes and cultural norms regarding women’s roles and potential (Yodanis, 2005; Kabeer, 2016). These indicators provide essential data for determining women’s position in society and the degree of systemic inequality they face.

Research has shown that achieving gender equality in the social domain creates positive ripple effects across multiple sectors, including economic participation and political representation (Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Changing misconceptions and gender-biased attitudes is critical; when women are provided with equal access to education and opportunity, as is often granted predominantly to men, gender disparities in capabilities and outcomes diminish significantly (Nussbaum, 2000; UNESCO, 2022). For sustainable development to be achieved, societies must tap into the full potential of their population and ensure a secure, inclusive environment that allows everyone to thrive (Sen, 1999).

According to the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report* (2022), Türkiye ranks 101st out of 146 countries in terms of women’s education levels (UN Women, 2024), indicating a concerning position. Literacy rates and school enrollment data from the TurkStat (TÜİK, 2023) and the Ministry of National Education (MEB, 2023) reveal that, prior to the implementation of nationwide education initiatives, female literacy and enrollment, particularly

in secondary and higher education, were significantly lower than those of males. In rural areas, social norms often limited educational opportunities for girls, with household chores and childcare responsibilities prioritized over schooling.

Following the introduction of free and compulsory primary education for all children, regardless of gender, and other educational outreach programs, notable improvements have been observed. Literacy rates among women increased substantially, and enrollment in primary and secondary schools became more balanced between genders (TÜİK, 2023; MEB, 2023). These policy measures are recognised as critical steps toward achieving gender equality in education, addressing historical disparities, and empowering women through access to knowledge and skills.

Initiatives such as “Come on Girls, Let’s Go to School” and “Modern Girls of Modern Türkiye” rightly frame girls’ education as an integral part of Türkiye’s modernisation process (Akşit, 2009, p. 11). The “Conditional Cash Transfer” (CCT) social assistance program in education has ensured children’s school attendance and empowered women within households by directing funds, even if modest, to women, thereby increasing their responsibility in education (Kılıç, 2014, p. 317).

The link between education and labour force participation is well-established for women. “Education is the most influential variable affecting women’s labour force participation. As education levels increase, labour force participation rises. (...) It has been found that there is a weaker correlation between men’s labour force participation and their education” (Gürler & Üçdoruk, 2007, p. 580). This underlines the necessity of women’s presence in education and the removal of obstacles in order to sustain a productive and efficient workforce.

Early marriages in Türkiye also stand out as an indicator of gender inequality. Women, viewed as part of the household and domestic system, are often pressured into early marriages. Legally, individuals who are 17 years old may marry, yet according to the “Convention on the Rights of the Child,” persons under 18 are considered children. Despite legal protections regarding marriage age, child and early marriages remain prevalent, especially in areas where traditional structures persist. Early childbirth poses high risks both for the mother and the baby (Eryılmaz, 2020, p. 10). According to TurkStat (TÜİK, 2025), the proportion of officially registered marriages among girls aged 16–17 within the total number of official marriages decreased from 7.3% in 2002 to 1.6% in 2024. In contrast, the proportion of officially registered marriages among boys in the same age group declined from 0.5% in 2002 to 0.1% in 2024. However, the reduction in these rates should not be considered sufficient. A significant number of girls and boys are still married at an early age. Early

marriage, particularly among girls, undermines access to fundamental rights such as educational opportunities, economic participation, and political engagement.

Türkiye has taken several steps to improve women's health. These include creating the General Directorate on the Status and Problems of Women in 1990, starting the Women's Health and Family Planning Service System in 1996, and establishing the Women's Health Commission led by the Turkish Family Planning Association with 17 volunteer organizations. Additionally, the National Maternal Mortality Study was conducted in 2005, and the National Strategic Action Plan on Sexual and Reproductive Health has been developed and updated every five years (Programs and Projects Implemented and Being Implemented in the Field of Women's Health in Türkiye, 2025).

The extent of violence in Türkiye is also reflected in the number of femicides. According to the 2019 report of the Platform to Stop Femicides, 474 women were killed in 2019, of which 115 cases were recorded as suspicious, and perpetrators remained unidentified. The 2020 report states that 300 women were killed by men, and 171 suspicious female deaths were recorded. In 2021, there were 280 femicides and 217 suspicious deaths; in 2022, 334 femicides and 245 suspicious deaths; in 2023, 315 femicides and 248 suspicious deaths; and in 2024, 394 femicides and 258 suspicious deaths, the highest numbers recorded since data collection began (kadincinayetlerinidurduracagiz.net, 2025). As Başar and Demirci emphasise, "The primary cause of violence against women is the male-dominated ideology embedded in social structures" (Başar & Demirci, 2015, p. 43). Violence, as both a product and instrument of power relations, functions as a tool of oppression against women.

To address this oppression, several initiatives have been introduced. One of the most significant legal frameworks was the widely known Istanbul Convention; however, Türkiye's subsequent withdrawal from the Convention has limited the scope of these protective mechanisms. Recognizing inequality as a social issue also led to the rise of civil society organizations. Until the 1980s, domestic violence in Türkiye was mainly seen as a private family matter. The first official acknowledgment came in 1993, when the UN issued the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, bringing global focus to the issue. In response, the Mor Çatı Women's Shelter Foundation was founded in 1990 and has since been actively working to combat violence against women and domestic abuse (Yılmaz, 2020, p. 149).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study analyses gender equality in Türkiye within historical, conceptual, and international policy frameworks. Subsequently, the global framework

of the UN SDGs is reviewed, and Türkiye's position in terms of economic, political-legal, and social indicators is assessed.

The data indicate that while Türkiye has made some progress in gender equality, existing policies remain insufficient, and structural changes are still needed. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2022, Türkiye ranks 124th out of 146 countries overall. In specific areas, it stands at 101st for women's education, 112th for political empowerment, 134th for economic participation and opportunity, and 99th for health and survival (UN Women, 2024). These figures reveal ongoing and growing gender gaps in economic, social, and political fields, showing that current efforts have not yet achieved their goals.

The findings of this study underscore that structural and legal barriers continue to impede gender equality in Türkiye. Persistent disparities in women's political representation, labor market participation, and access to education illustrate the entrenched nature of these obstacles. Early marriage, particularly among girls, further constrains access to fundamental rights, including education, economic participation, and political engagement (TÜİK, 2025). Moreover, gender-based pay gaps, limited representation in leadership positions, and the lack of widespread gender-responsive budgeting mechanisms highlight systemic inequities that go beyond individual empowerment, affecting broader societal welfare and sustainable development outcomes (OECD, 2022; UN Women, 2022). Education emerges as a central lever for change, as increased literacy and school enrollment among women not only enhance individual autonomy but also generate positive spillovers for social and economic development.

When benchmarked against global standards and countries with comparable socio-economic levels, Türkiye's progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 on gender equality, remains uneven. Addressing these structural impediments requires comprehensive policy interventions, including legal reforms, the promotion of gender parity in political and economic institutions, and targeted social programs that support girls' and women's education and employment. Policymakers and stakeholders are called upon to implement these measures decisively, as advancing gender equality is not only a matter of justice but also a prerequisite for inclusive and sustainable national development.

In this regard, the following actions are advised to advance gender equality in Türkiye and achieve the UN's targets: The legal protections for women's rights need to be broadened and properly enforced. Effective and preventive policies should be adopted in accordance with international agreements to combat violence against women. Specifically, it is important to reconsider Türkiye's recent withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, given

its significant role in promoting gender equality.

Gender Equality in Education: Mechanisms such as scholarships, incentives, and support programs should be established to increase women's educational attainment and guarantee girls' access to education. A gender equality perspective should be integrated into educational curricula to raise awareness. Traditional patterns that perpetuate gender inequality must be identified and removed from curricula. The idea that domestic chores, such as cooking, cleaning, ironing, and childcare, are part of life's cycle and should be skills shared equally by men and women should be incorporated into educational processes.

Increasing Economic Participation: Policies preventing gender discrimination in workplaces should be introduced, female entrepreneurship supported, and social state policies on care work strengthened to increase women's employment rates. Legal regulations incentivising women's participation in secure, formal employment rather than informal sectors should be enacted.

Empowerment in Political Representation: Quota systems should be expanded to increase women's presence in decision-making mechanisms, and policies encouraging greater political participation of women should be implemented. "Political parties should also take the lead in enabling women to rise within party ranks, allocate more positions to female candidates, and prioritise women in election campaigns. Researchers have a significant role to play in this regard" (Eser & Sarıahin, 2016, p. 55). While nearly all ministers in the Ministry of Family and Social Policies have been women, female ministers or deputy ministers remain scarce in other ministries. Limiting women's fields of activity to family and social policies poses an obstacle to utilising their potential in other sectors.

Transforming Social Perceptions: To establish gender equality as a societal norm, awareness campaigns should be conducted through collaboration among media, civil society organisations, and the state. Projects aimed at eliminating gender-based discrimination must be implemented. Committees or institutions formed to identify gender-based spaces, discourses, and activities should comprise at least 50% women participants representing all societal levels.

Achieving gender equality and ensuring that development benefits the entire society requires significant responsibilities for the state, civil society organisations, legislative authorities, law enforcement, health institutions, and, above all, every individual, especially men.

In conclusion, sustainable progress in gender equality in Türkiye demands comprehensive and resolute policies. Through reforms in legal, economic,

educational, and social spheres, women's full participation in social, political, and economic life must be ensured, considering international standards throughout the process. Actions aligned with the UN's gender equality goals will not only enhance women's status but also contribute to building a fairer society by improving the general welfare and development of the entire community.

NOTES

For detailed information, please see: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal>

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