

### **Turkey's Weakest Link**

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Turkey has undergone a major transformation in the past decade. The country has progressed economically and emerged as a major strategic player on the regional and international scene. But Turkey still faces significant democratic shortcomings that stand in the way of its global ambitions. One of these problem areas is the country's persistent gender inequality, which regularly leaves Turkey lagging at the bottom of international gender equality tables, in the company of nations less developed than itself.

Turkey was only 124<sup>th</sup> out of 135 nations assessed on economic, political, education, and health-based criteria by the World Economic Forum for the 2012 edition of its Gender Gap Index ("World Economic Forum"). In health and life expectancy, Turkish women are faring relatively well and in education, the gender gap at the primary school level has nearly closed. But girls are still more likely than boys to drop out of high school and lack of skills keeps women out of the workforce or pushes them into informal and low-paid forms of employment with no social benefits.

These obstacles to gender equality, as well as the violence that four Turkish out of ten experience at the hands of husbands or relatives, have begun to be discussed more openly in Turkey. However, the country remains deeply patriarchal. Liberal as far as economic policy is concerned, the current Turkish administration, in line with its electorate, is socially conservative. Yet, it is also pragmatic and some important legislative reforms benefiting women, such the overhaul of the Penal Code which came into force in 2005, and the Law on the Prevention of Violence against Women, adopted in 2012, took place during its tenure.

Women's rights organizations, which have actively been working to raise awareness of Turkey's gender gap and the widespread violence against women in the country since the mid-1980s, have played a key role

in shaping legislation. Thanks largely to their efforts, the new Civil Code of 2002 established full equality in marriage between men and women. The matrimonial property regime was also changed, allowing women, in the case of divorce, to be able to acquire an equal share of the assets acquired during marriage. Dozens of feminist groups, organized in a joint platform, successfully lobbied lawmakers to ensure that thirty crucial amendments were made to an initial draft of the Penal Code. Sexual crimes, for instance, which were categorized in the past as “crimes against public morality” are now recognized as crimes against individuals.

Awareness of women’s issues, especially of gender-based violence, has improved. However, implementation of the laws remains patchy and colored by traditional social perceptions which have yet to shift significantly. Many judges still interpret legislation from a patriarchal point of view. In 2011, for example, the Supreme Court of Appeals upheld lenient sentences against twenty-six men accused of raping a thirteen year-old girl, arguing that the victim had consented (“Court Ruling”).

Professor Yılmaz Esmel of Bahçeşehir University, who conducted a survey of Turkey’s social values in 2012, pointed out that sixty-four percent still believed that a woman should obey her husband, while seventy-six percent, including seventy-one percent of women, thought that fathers should be head of the family (Tahaoglu, “Türkiye”). In the early 1930s, Turkish women were granted the right to vote and to run for public office, ahead of several western nations. However, the concept of gender equality, although enshrined in the Constitution, never filtered through society. In the following decades, the situation of women regressed on several fronts, including political and labor force participation. As agriculture’s share of GDP declined and more villagers migrated from rural areas to the cities, women’s involvement in the workforce declined. In 1990, female labor force participation stood at thirty-four percent but fifteen years later, it had dropped to twenty-three percent (KEIG).

In the past couple of years, positive signals have emerged as more women seek paid employment. However, while labor force participation, which also takes into account women doing unpaid agricultural work, is now close to thirty percent, the urban female employment rate, at around twenty-five percent, remains well below the sixty-two percent average in the European Union (European Commission). The widespread belief that

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women's primary role should be as wives and mothers partly explains this disparity. Lack of skills and a limited child and elderly care infrastructure are also significant obstacles.

Financial independence is seen as a crucial element to empower Turkish women. Since the mid-1980s, women's groups have also been fighting against widespread domestic violence and murders committed in the name of "honor." In recent years, they have campaigned with renewed vigor as murders, fuelled by rapid social change, reached epidemic proportions. In 2012, 165 women were killed by their husband or partner, in most cases because they were seeking a divorce or had left an abusive relationship (Tahaoğlu, "Erkekler"). New legislation to improve protection for women at risk was introduced in 2012. Judges can now swiftly issue injunctions against potential offenders and electronic tags are available to ensure they keep away from potential victims. But the text of the document, prepared by Minister Fatma Şahin in cooperation with women's groups, was watered down at the last minute to remove mentions of gender equality. According to the Independent Communications Network Bianet, which keeps track of violent incidents through the media, twenty-four of the 165 women murdered in 2012 had turned to the authorities, seeking protection, to no avail.

Shaping policy remains largely a male domain, even if women's share of parliament seats increased to fourteen percent in 2011. The pro-Kurdish BDP is the only party where women have real decision-making power. Across Turkey, the ratio of women involved in local administration is a paltry one percent. For instance, only twenty-six of Turkey's 2,950 mayors are women and of these fourteen are from the pro-Kurdish party (Ka-Der). Turkey has only one female governor, one female minister, and no ministry is led by a female undersecretary.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has publicly stated that he does not believe in gender equality, because, in his view, men and women have different social roles to fulfill. He regularly praises women as mothers and homemakers, urging them to have at least three children, but he is clearly ambivalent about encouraging them to step out into the public arena. The AKP, which won a third popular mandate with fifty percent of the vote in June 2011 did include female candidates on its lists, but it shunned women wearing the Islamic headscarf, although party leaders

have often criticized a ban on the Islamic headscarf in universities and in public places that was enforced by secular Kemalists.

In 2011, the renaming of the Ministry for Women and Social Affairs, which became the Ministry for the Family and Social Policy, was seen as indicative of the government's main focus on the family, rather than on the individuals within it. In 2012, Prime Minister Erdoğan caused uproar when, out of the blue, he launched an attack on abortion and the common use of caesarean sections to deliver babies. Abortion has been legal until ten weeks since 1973 in Turkey and, unlike in the United States, it has not been a much-debated issue. Although the government, facing strong opposition from women's rights advocates, has shied away from introducing an outright ban on abortion, new regulations currently being prepared are expected to make it much harder for women to obtain legal pregnancy terminations within this time limit.

Despite all the obstacles still standing in Turkish women's way, society is nevertheless changing and women, be they from a secular or religious background, have become more vocal in demanding their rights. Authorities may still promote a traditional view of the family, but Turkey's economic success under Prime Minister Erdoğan's leadership and the rising consumerism it has fueled may in fact be undermining traditional lifestyles. The cost of living has risen in a largely urbanized Turkey and the aspirations of the country's rapidly expanding middle class have evolved, increasing the need for a second salary. Economists have also pointed out that unless Turkey makes better use of its human capital, the country is unlikely to reach its ambitious goal of becoming one of the world's leading economies by the centenary of the Republic in 1923.

Improving the situation of women in Turkey and speeding up the pace of social change requires decisive action on multiple fronts. Politicians may pay lip-service to gender issues, but they have so far shown little willingness to tackle its roots. Turkish women will not be able to exercise fully their rights unless traditional gender roles are challenged. Improved legislation has already given women's rights defenders important new legal instruments to use in their struggle for gender equality. Better access to childcare would allow more women to seek paid employment. But until society and politicians accept that women are individuals, and not just mothers and wives, and that men should shoulder some of the

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responsibility for taking care of the household and children, progress will remain slow.

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