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Report

Women's Rights and Social Problems in Turkey

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A Turkish woman casts her vote in a referendum on changes to the constitution that was crafted in the wake of Turkey's 1980 military coup, in Istanbul, Turkey [AP Photo]

Abstract

This report is about women's rights and social problems in Turkey. It focuses on the legal, institutional and political developments from a historical perspective. It also focuses on the current situation without going into details about the different problems of urban and rural women and women of different social classes and ethnic communities. It concludes that although Turkey has made some progress, it is only a partial success since Turkish women still continue to face numerous problems.

Introduction

The issue of women's rights and social problems in Turkey can be looked at from different angles. From one angle, some may choose to base their arguments on the past and present legal and institutional framework; from another angle, some may choose to focus on the social and private life and try to analyse the role and the status of woman in her family; or some may like to merge the two perspectives and try to give a broad overview of the situation. This report will look at both angles and will also attempt to look at it from a third angle. Firstly, it will focus on the legal, institutional and political developments from a historical perspective and secondly it will examine the current issues and problems. With the existence of different concerns of urban and rural women and women of different social classes, ethnic communities etc., this report aims to provide a general overview of the current situation in Turkey without going into details.

The Legal, Institutional and Political Developments from a Historical Perspective

With the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, women's equality in the public sphere became more or less a national policy, in which many laws were changed, new laws were adopted, and women were encouraged to get involved in professional life, political life etc.

In 1926, the new Civil Code (from Switzerland) gave women a status of "person" and therefore, equal rights to men in some aspects (including marriage, divorce, inheritance etc.) was adopted. It was under these new changes that religious and polygamous marriages were banned. The right to vote in local elections was given to women in 1930, and full suffrage was adopted in 1934. There were also other social developments for women during the 1930s. For instance, Keriman Halis became the first Turkish lady who attended the international beauty contest that took place in Brussels in 1932. Sabiha Gokcen-the adopted daughter of Ataturk-became Turkey's first woman combat pilot. (1)

It can also be argued, however, that despite all these developments, the private lives of women in Turkey did not change much. These changes improved the lives of only a small group of women in the public sphere. Nonetheless, such criticisms should not allow us to undermine the legal, institutional and political reforms of the period concerned because it is on that foundation that later improvements in women's rights in Turkey were developed.

With this historical background in mind, we can argue that it was not until the 1980s that women's issues were discussed so openly in the public. An important factor was the signing of the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) by Turkey in 1985. By signing the CEDAW that was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979, Turkey committed itself to undertaking some measures to end discrimination against women in all forms. (2)

In 1989, the first Women's Research and Education Center opened at Istanbul University. This was later followed by the opening of some more centres including the Research and Implementation Center on the Problems of Women at Ankara University, the Research and Implementation Center for the Employment of Women at Marmara University and the Women's Research and Implementation Center at Cukurova University. (3) The year 1993 was another symbolic turning point for Turkey; for the first time a Turkish woman named Tansu Ciller from the True Path Party, became the prime minister of Turkey.

Furthermore in 1998, Turkey adopted the Family Protection Law (Law no: 4320). The Law was amended in 2007, and its scope was enhanced by the Law to Protect Family and Prevent Violence against Women (Law no:6284), that entered into force in March 2012. Despite its shortcomings, (exclusion of divorced and unmarried women), the Family Protection Law, was important in providing “a protection system if a spouse or child or another member of the family living under the same roof is subject to abuse”. (4)

During the first years of the AKP government, some reforms were made in Turkish legislation, due to the efforts of women’s rights lobbies that continued since the 1980s and the campaign by 126 women groups from all around the country in 2001. The reform of the penal code to recognise women as “individuals”, changes regarding sexual crime as “crime against an individual”, laws criminalizing sexual harassment, marital rape, laws that increased punishments (imposing life sentences) for honour killings or changes that abolished the discrimination applied to unmarried women in many cases, could be regarded as examples of such reforms.(5) The State shall have the obligation to ensure that equality exists in practice, the provision into the Constitution in 2004 and the signing of the Council of Europe “Convention on Preventing and Combating the Violence against Women and Domestic Violence” by Turkey (with the vision of Zero Tolerance for Violence) in May 2011. These are undoubtedly important steps for the legal and institutional developments of women’s rights in Turkey. (6)

A Long Road to Go

Despite the existence of some reforms concerning the status of women in Turkey during the AKP period, there are still some important issues that made advocates of women’s rights criticise the government seriously. The announcement of Prime Minister Erdogan that all Turkish women should have three children and that the AKP would draft a law that would ban abortion outright or the turning of the State Ministry Responsible for Women’s Affairs into Ministry of Family and Social Affairs in 2012 can be regarded as various examples of those issues. In one of Erdogan’s speeches in 2010 about the equality of men and women, he clearly stated that “Women are women and men are men. Is it possible for them to be equal?” (7)

However, Turkish women in general still continue to face some problems such as low literacy rates, low labour force, political and educational participation, domestic violence and honour killings etc.

Even when we compare Turkey’s rankings with other countries in the world in terms of gender gap, the statistical data are not promising. According to the World Economic

Forum Global Gender Gap Report 2013, Turkey ranks 120 out of 136 countries (8) and in the 2012 UNDP Global Gender Inequality Index, Turkey ranks 90. (9)

In terms of literacy rates, according to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat) illiteracy figures, 2.3 million of the 2.8 million of people who are illiterate are women. (846 thousand women whose literacy status is not known were not included into the statistics). (10) From these figures, it is not very difficult to understand the great disparity between men and women in Turkey.

In terms of labour force, according to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat) figures of 2012, women's employment rate is still low at 29.5% and with an unemployment rate of 10.8%, (11) despite the fact that Turkish businesswomen now have more access to funding through banks and the support of NGOs in terms of microfinance credits.

In the political sphere, women are still under-represented. In the general elections of 2011, 79 women parliamentarians entered into parliament. Currently there is only one woman minister - the Minister of Family and Social Affairs - in the cabinet. In the local elections that took place in March 2009, only 27 out of 2948 mayors who were elected and 1340 out of 31790 members of municipal councils were women. (12)

Apart from low literacy rates, labour force and political participation, there are still other issues related to women in Turkey that must also be taken into consideration. The first issues is domestic violence. According to the report entitled "Domestic Violence Against Women in Turkey" that was published in January 2009, 42% of Turkish women experienced domestic violence in their lifetimes and 11-29% of married women experienced serious physical violence from their husbands. (13) In addition, according to the Ministry of Justice figures (in 2009), the number of Turkish women who were murdered increased dramatically starting from 66 in 2002, reaching to 953 in the first seven months of 2009. (14)

Although the Law on Municipalities requires each municipality with 50,000 or more residents to have one shelter for women and children, according to the Ministry of Family and Social Affairs figures (in June 2013), there are only 120 women shelters in 79 cities (87 attached to the Ministry, 32 to local authorities and 1 to an NGO). (15) According to the EU standards, one shelter should be opened per 7,500 people. (16)

The mortality rate in maternal delivery is another issue of concern. According to the Ministry of Health figures (in 2011), the mortality rate of mothers still stand at 15.5%, which is very high when compared with other developed countries. (17) Early and

mostly arranged marriages, frequent and early pregnancies are also important problems that are still seriously affecting women Turkey, especially those in rural areas. Despite the legal improvements, honour killings are still being witnessed and continue to seriously threaten women's lives in the Eastern and South-Eastern part of Turkey.

Conclusion

With the accelerating role of the EU in the accession process, starting from the end of the 1990s, Turkey has made some progress in the establishment of the legal framework for the improvement of human rights. With Atatürk's reforms concerning women's rights on which the recent reforms were based, we can discuss a partial success in developing further. It is only a partial success because Turkish women still continue to have various problems ranging from domestic violence, to honour killings, from low participation in the labour force to low participation in the political sphere etc., in addition to the existence of other more specific problems depending on their social status, geographical location, ethnic origin etc. The underlining idea here is the fact that "human rights" issues in general and "women's rights" issues in particular require more time and a real social and mental transformation. For this to happen, legal changes can only be regarded as the first steps. Implementation which needs the "political will" as its core is the real step that must be taken seriously.

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