

Women and the Changing Face of Turkey

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What women do in a society says a lot about where a country is headed. ESI's recently published report titled "Sex and Power in Turkey: Feminism, Islam and the Maturing of Turkish Democracy" offers a unique glance into these dynamics, offering a reassuring perspective at a time when concerns about Turkey have been heightened (www.esiweb.org).

Since the turn of the century Turkey has taken significant strides with regards to enshrining full gender equality into laws, implementing this legislation and empowering women nationwide. In four short years, from 2001 to 2005 many changes took place. The discriminatory elements of the Turkish Civil Code were amended to grant equal rights to men and women in marriage, divorce and property ownership. The state has been mandated to promote gender equality with an amendment to the Turkish Constitution. Family courts were established in 2003 and in the same year new initiatives were launched in order to combat domestic violence and increase the rate of the enrolment of girls in primary and secondary schools. In addition the new Penal Code, in force since 2004, treats female sexuality for the first time as a matter of individual rights, rather than family honour or social morality.

The convergence of a number of factors led to these developments taking place one after another: effective campaigns run by the women's movement (which itself is a product of the strengthening of civil society since the mid 1980s), the benchmark and motivation provided by the viable goal of EU membership (especially since candidacy status was granted in 1999), critical members of parliament being receptive to well-articulated arguments, and media outlets being used by opinion leaders to touch the pressure points of decision makers when the drive seemed to be waning. All these elements are in fact indicators of a maturing democracy. The fact that the virtuous cycle began under a coalition government of quite different ideological leaning than the AKP single party government - that continued the process with increased dedication when it came to power at the end of 2002 - is reassuring in terms of continuity.

A common perception is that the rise of the religious conservative classes inevitably would have taken Turkey backwards in terms of the status of women. Indeed, the profile of Islam is higher in the political scene and more women with headscarves may be visible on the streets of Istanbul in neighbourhoods where they previously weren't. On the other hand, besides legal progress, there are some very positive realities. Women's organizations that clearly do not support the ruling AKP had an enormous impact on the process of drawing up the new Penal Code. This is a positive sign in terms of civil groups being influential due to pragmatic and participatory policymaking rather than based on special relationships with politicians. More recently, with the elections in July, the proportion of women in parliament doubled, climbing from 4.4 to 9 percent. This moved Turkey ahead in the international league, surpassing countries like Albania and Ukraine and reaching EU member Malta. How to make sense of these changes in the face of Turkey that are assumed to be contradictory...?

Many Istanbulite women in their mid 50s remember the 60s fondly, noting that Istanbul's fashionable streets resembled Europe – in contrast to today where there are many crude-mannered men and headscarved women. Those were the years when female literacy in the country was 25 percent. The total population was 27 million. The population today is 70 million and female literacy is over 80 percent – most illiterate women being of an older generation. Istanbul streets may have looked more European – but the country wasn't.

Until the 80s, Turkey was largely a rural society. With the economic liberalization that began in the 80s - the final phase of which took place in 2001- a new socio-economic strata came about: more conservative, yet economically empowered through entrepreneurship. Through business dealings they increasingly got glimpses of the wider world. The second generation received education and opened up to the world further. However, in many cases, they clung to their traditions culturally. This class has evolved and diversified over the years –liberalizing in various ways, preserving their values and lifestyles in others. With AKP, those with such a background consolidated their economic power with political power. There was also massive migration to the larger cities from areas where hardship was experienced – be it conflict in the Southeast or unemployment in the Black Sea region.

Many of the challenges that remain in terms of women's empowerment reflect the country's general deficiencies. Though remarkable laws have been passed with a participatory process, the implementation of these laws has not been kept on the agenda with the same fervour. The discrepancies between implementation in different corners of the country are hardly tracked diligently or publicized and debated. In fact, debating the basis of regional disparities and how to close the gap can be considered politically incorrect. Moreover the state needs to gather and publish reliable data in order to monitor the effectiveness of initiatives which aim to improve the status of women and prepare action plans that concretely outline how goals will be met.

Mirroring the polarization witnessed in society, the civil society organizations working on women's issues are also divided. Sensitivities over issues like the headscarf or problems particular to Kurdish women in the Southeast are at times an obstacle for unified action. Opposition parties have been at best "shallow" in their concern for women, and the patronizing nature of the rhetoric that women should "appreciate" the rights granted to them in the 30s no longer impresses.

Though the number of women jumped from 24 to 51 in parliament, again, there is only one minister, the minister of state in charge of women and family affairs. And we are yet to see whether the women in parliament will achieve important roles in the commissions to be formed when the parliament sessions begin in October.

Perhaps most important is the problem of the economic dependence of women in Turkey. The labour force participation of women is 28 percent – with over 40 percent of these unpaid, mostly in agriculture. In urban areas, the participation rate is only 18 percent – again, including women working in the family market without pay, and if paid, often in the informal market.

Moreover, unlike in Europe where rapid industrialization and post-war periods played an important role in the integration of women into the workforce, due to demographic and structural realities, even with sustained economic growth, a rapid process of absorbing women into the workforce is not likely in Turkey. Due to population growth, the number of young people that are set to enter the workforce each year is 1 million. It will take time for the housewives' turn to come. An additional problem is the absence of institutions to take care of children and the elderly (the welfare system). While cultural values continue to encourage women to stay at home, there is a lack of interest in these challenges among politicians and bureaucrats.

There remains much work ahead, but Turkey is on the right track. In the past, European countries experienced similar phases and overcame similar challenges. Turkey has much to learn, particularly from the experiences of countries like Spain that in the early 80s looked very much like Turkey does today in terms of rapid transformation in women's rights and status.

