

Striving for Gender Equality

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All I wish for New Year...

...less violence against women in Turkey

This year on November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, women took to the streets again. In Istanbul, several hundred protested but were hindered by the police. No final numbers on gender-based violence were published yet, but until mid-November around 330 cases were reported. 2017 saw a sharp rise in the increase of deadly violence against women with 25%, adding up to 409 cases. Whereas in 33% of the cases the perpetrators were not known (or could not be identified by the police), in most cases the perpetrator came from the immediate surrounding of the women: 39% were murdered by husbands, boyfriends or ex-partners; another 24% by fathers, sons, brothers or other male relatives (Details on many cases can be found in the online archive at <http://kadincinayetleri.org/>). Possible reasons being discussed among both experts and in the media are a higher number of reported cases due to awareness campaigns by the government, but also gender-based violence as a symptom of a nation in distress caused by a state of emergency lasting for nearly two years, or a political climate discriminating against women.

Although several times president Erdoğan announced concentrated efforts to tackle the problem, it is clearly not solved; according to surveys, nearly 50% of all Turkish women have experienced domestic violence, often on a regular basis. It needs to be added that violence against women, which is predominantly violence experienced at home, is one of the underreported criminal acts due to the fear of being stigmatised, to fear in general, to economic dependency, or due to prioritising the interest of children or of an intact family. Often social pressure or societal acceptance of male violence used to 'discipline' women are another reason. Further, women often do not receive the assistance needed from the side of state officials, or the existing laws against domestic violence (e.g. sexual assault, including rape and spousal rape, is prohibited, with penalties of two to 10 years' imprisonment for attempted sexual violation and at least 12 years' imprisonment for rape or actual sexual violation) are not enforced effectively by prosecutors or judges.

Their protest was not only against the status quo, but also against the government's handling of it. Despite the declarations by state officials condemning gender-based violence (the latest being first lady Emine Erdoğan at a conference in Antalya in October this year), many activists criticise a sexist rhetoric from the government side. In the past years statements from government representatives regarding e.g. women laughing in public, equalising abortion with murder, or the 'need' to have three children repeatedly arose public outcry. That is particularly surprising as in the early days Erdoğan had presented himself as one of the main defenders of women's rights for example by initiating changes in divorce legislation, or condemning gender based violence. However, after 2010 the government has focused predominantly on religious themes and defined gender roles more and more traditionally and restrictive. In this vein the then prime minister Erdoğan also declared that men and women were not equal. Similarly in 2016, Akif Çağatay Kılıç, the Youth and Sports Minister, publicly claimed that women's most significant trait was motherhood, adding that men and women were not equal in all areas. Around the same time the government's attempt to change the law in order to exempt a perpetrator who had raped a girl under 18 from punishment if he later married her arose much criticism both nationally as internationally. Also, in late November this year the

women organisation KADEM, often criticised for its proximity to the AKP government, organised a summit in Istanbul named 'Family Empowerment' giving proof that the lens through which the conservative-religious spectrum sees women clearly is a family lens.

...less patriarchal domination

The public and private roles of women depend on many factors like region, class, ethnicity, religion, age, marriage and family status, education, independent income, political affiliation and more. Family and conjugal life are main spaces of patriarchal domination and also spaces where children are socialised into gender roles. Paradoxically, it is not only the father but also the mother (as well as other female members of the nucleus and extended family) who act as transmitters of the 'values' related to it. A main value is *namus*, the sexual honour of the family which is seen as being protected by the male members of the family but carried by the female members. The way a woman dresses, talks, or interacts may be perceived as acting against this concept of the sexual honour. Other main influences circumscribing women's freedom are the state by political practice, legislation and, through education institutions, as well as economy; thus the public sphere. Often the sole focus on the headscarf as a main (political) symbol, has blocked the view to the extend low education, low economic power, or growing unemployment actually hinder women's political and social participation.

One may argue that not only conservative-religious, but also the 'modern' (secular? Kemalist? neo-liberal?) Turkish family does not display the patterns of autonomy of family members to allow self-determination and room for manoeuvre for women. Further one may argue that for various reasons - an important one is clearly the bad state of social insurance and state welfare provision - families tend to rely on interdependence within larger family and community structures, thus informal means instead of institution based ones. Particularly, the absence of a reliable public welfare provision has strengthened the characterisation the inner-family roles of women as dependent (on a husband) and responsible (for family matters). Further, the fact that welfare is often provided by religious organisations has worked to strengthen traditional role models for women as the receipt of welfare, which in this context is not based on a right but on the organisations' generosity, mainly depends of one's proper behaviour.

...more gender equality in politics

Turkish women in political functions face many more restrictions to avoid that their behaviour in public space is not classified as disreputable. Women in politics have a potential key function in opening up the public space for other women and enabling their participation in political and social matters. Women in politics are constantly at risk to not respond to role expectations, or to lose their good reputation. What makes the whole thing tricky is that most of these role expectations are based on unwritten rules which are difficult to point at and even more difficult to change. The general rule says: the earlier a country introduces the vote for women, the better they will be represented politically later on. Turkey, somehow, breaks that rule: Turkish women were given the right to vote in 1930 in local elections and 1934 in national elections. However, the political representation of Turkish women remains weak. Widely, this is accredited to the 'state feminism' introduced by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the early years of the republic. On the one hand, women were given a wide range of rights. Apart from the right to vote and be elected, Atatürk also introduced coeducation, or introduced a secular family law having large impact on family life, e.g. by abolishing polygamy and secularising marriage and divorce. On the other hand, the top-down character of Turkish feminism meant that initiatives as the Women's People Party founded in 1923 by intellectual Nezihe Muhiddin and other activists, or the Union of Turkish Women founded a bit later, were closed under state pressure.

Further, women became icons in Kemalist propaganda showing the country as westernising and modern. Just as other symbolic means such as e.g. rapid industrialisation, a new architecture or use of cultural markers as painting and sculpture, women too became carriers of the new Republic. Much of this was transmitted through their body, by clothing, hair style or body language, but also more generally by their changing position in public space. Other than with regard to men, who were not allowed to wear the 'Ottoman' Fez anymore, women were still allowed to wear a headscarf, however faced severe pressure by the side of state authorities or in the education system. Women, or rather modern women, thus became a main symbol for the break with the Ottoman past. Emotionally state feminism resulted less in pride or a feeling of strength but rather gratefulness towards Atatürk for liberating the Turkish women – expressed by Kemalist women up to this day. What however might be positively accredited to state feminism is the amount of women in politics. Whereas between 1935 and 1950 numbers accounted for around 4,5%, in 1950, with the introduction of the multi-party system the number declined to around 1% and only rose again in the 1980s.

With regard to women participating in politics a survey conducted 2008 in Ankara found that much of the rejection is actually coming from women arguing that family responsibilities (90%), religious values of women (49%), lack of interest (65%), the nature of women (25%) or potential risks, such as becoming the subject of gossip (65%) keeps them away from political activism. Large-scale gender equality is practised by pro-Kurdish parties, e.g. by a 40% quorum, a female-male duumvirate, and a 50% representation in inner-party institutions. Due to the patriarchal social structures often dominating in Turkey's South-East this might be surprising at the first glance. The turn to gender equality is significantly influenced by PKK-leader Abdullah Öcalan's stance on the topic; Öcalan who has published on the topic and foresees a Woman's Revolution. However, similarly to Atatürk's state feminism one may argue that female empowerment here also is given from above and that women (e.g. as female fighters) take on a symbolic function within the Kurdish movement. Despite these criticisms, the pro-Kurdish Democratic People's Party (HDP) clearly is at the forefront of gender equal practise, nearly half of its deputies being women.

Whereas the ruling Justice and Development Party AKP may be accused of keeping up a discourse on women which harms gender-equality, the numbers of political representation of women the party has are not as low as one may expect, currently 54 of the 295 AKP MPs are female. For women from the conservative spectrum headscarf and *tesettür* often were symbols not only of male oppression but also of mobility, taking part and forging ones place in an (alternative) modernity. Significant is, however, that the discourse on the headscarf was mainly held by men determining what it was supposed to stand for. (And one may like to add that similar tendencies may be observed these days in Europe likewise.) Women being active in the AKP for example, particularly in its early days, or within its predecessor, the Welfare Party (RP) often did so to open up new spaces and to improve their status. However, just as in other parties, they were not able to transform their much welcome grassroots engagement into positions of influence of power. Just as in the conservative-religious spectrum, also on the left, men argued that the system itself would not be ready and that certain (left or right-wing inspired) parameters needed to be installed first to establish a just society where also women would find their place. Tansu Çiller, the so far one and only female Turkish prime minister, is in no way a representative case for women in Turkish politics, nor a role model of how one might successfully enter politics. Her political career was clearly shaped by sugar daddy Süleyman Demirel who 'installed' her in the relevant political positions: Although politically socialised by a father who was very interested in politics, she only entered politics in 1991 when she became a member of the True Path Party (DYP). In the same year she was elected to parliament and obtained the position as minister of economics. Her fast-paced political career made her party president of the True Path Party in 1993 replacing Süleyman Demirel.

When he was elected as president in the same year, she also succeeded him as prime minister.

However prior to the presidential election, one had the impression that things were slowly changing in Turkey: Meral Akşener with regards to the place and reach of women in Turkish politics is much different from Tansu Çiller – irrespective of how one judges her political positions and her origin in the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Rather than relying on a protégée status, Akşener opposed MHP's long-time president Devlet Bahçeli who runs the party since 1997, and founded the İYİ Party (Good Party) in October 2017. Akşener, a former minister of the Interior (1996-1997), with a long history in Turkish centre-right parties is known as both a devout Muslim and an ultra-nationalist politician. She was thus seen as constituting a real threat to the AKP and MHP as she might have been able to reach moderate to more radical voters from the religious-nationalist spectrum who were either upset by the economic situation or the leadership qualities of either Erdoğan or Bahçeli. Subsequently in polls she ranked rather high, however, in the election Akşener reached a mere 7,2% staying much below what the surveys had predicted for her. It might be that many conservative Turks, although being disappointed by Erdoğan, could not come to terms with possibly having a female president. The complex interplay of formal and informal factors clearly shows that a women check list (as e.g. women and legal situation, female labour, women in politics etc.) often used by governments or NGOs alike is not sufficient to understand the complex interplay of various hindrances but also chances regarding the position of women in Turkish politics. Women in politics is thus just one, albeit an important brick.