

WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN TURKEY

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In this new century of rapid global transformations, women still face inequalities in fields such as education, health, employment and decision making – despite the fact that women’s struggle to obtain equal rights and opportunities began in the 19th century and gained importance and recognition after the two major wars of the 20th century.

In spite of two centuries of organized struggle that culminated in many gains –including internationally binding agreements on gender equality–discrimination against women exists even in the most developed societies. However, in underdeveloped and developing societies the barriers to gender equality are much greater in comparison and human rights abuses against women are much more widespread. The optimistic angle is that in the 20th century, much effort was put into improving the status of women in all fields of life in both national and international arenas. Especially in the last quarter of the past century, rising women movements carried issues relating to women’s social and economic rights into public discourse.

In this framework, the four international World Women Conferences that unified the international community around the goals of “gender equality, economic development and peace,” had important effects. Firstly, gender inequality became a part of the global agenda, and secondly, the basis was formed for setting up national structures to deal with these issues in many countries. Turkey has made considerable progress in three critical categories with the effect of internal and external dynamics:

The first is education, health and employment – all of which are prerequisites in empowering women. The second is state bodies’ taking on the responsibility to make progress in the field of women. The third category is the effort against customs, traditions and values of the “private sphere” that have been used to legitimize and reinforce gender discrimination.

The process which began with the laws that became effective after the declaration of the Republic has evolved until today and recently picked up in speed with new legal arrangements and steps for their implementation.

The clearest expression of the changing policies towards women is the amendments made to the Constitution. Although, the principle of gender equality was previously in the Constitution, an addition made in 2004 set the basis for this equality and made the state responsible for taking the necessary precautions to make equality a reality.

Another important arrangement was to elevate all international agreements pertinent to human rights and liberties, including the CEDAW Agreement, above all laws in the norms hierarchy. Thus, by harmonizing the Constitution and the CEDAW Agreement, a stronger legal base was set in the struggle for gender equality.

The longstanding expectation of society, and particularly women, bore fruits with the new Civil Code that came into effect in 2001. Organized efforts towards this end succeeded in the removal of clauses that were behind the times of social life and, for all practical purposes, inapplicable.

Turkey is going through a real harmonization process, based on closely following developments in the international platform, signing international documents pertaining to human and women's rights, and actualizing important legal changes – to the Constitution, Turkish Civil Code, Turkish Penal Code and Turkish Labor Law. Undoubtedly, the goal of becoming a member of the European Union, the greatest social project of Turkey, has played a very important role in these developments.

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In our country, the state, civil society organizations, local governments, and the media are working together to solve the problems that women face in many fields such as education, health, employment, politics and domestic violence. While the EU is raising the bar for gender equality with the 'roadmap' looking towards 2010, Turkey has accelerated the implementation of legal changes. Having carried out a vast array of economic, social, and political reforms, Turkey, located at the crossroads between the East and the West, is a candidate to join the democratic societies that will shape the future.