Turkey’s gender equality record is marked with contradictions and controversies. The country was the first in the Middle East to recognize equal rights for women in public and private life. As early as the 1930s, the state encouraged women to obtain an education, pursue diverse professions, run for parliament, and participate in public life beyond spousal duties. However, the country still scores low in global gender disparity rankings.¹ The state is heavily involved in the gender equality narrative, conservative groups have a strong voice in the implementation of laws, and various women’s movements are divided.

**PHASES OF WOMEN’S GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM IN TURKEY**

Until the 1980s, state feminism dominated mobilization efforts in Turkey.² Scholars argue that the state labeled women as either de-feminized citizens or national mothers.³ Women’s organizations downplayed this issue and bargained for equal citizenship.

In the 1980s, a group of feminists began to question this view and challenged the patriarchy in public and private life. Due to these efforts, private life now represents one of the most important sources of struggle between Turkish secularists, Islamists, liberals, and conservatives.

Between 1990 and 2010, the feminist movement’s endeavors led to significant achievements: Turkey signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), changed the civil code to enhance equality in private life, eliminated references to traditional values in the penal code, and established positive gender discrimination in the constitution. These legal reforms culminated in the signing of the 2011 Istanbul Convention.⁴

Until 2010, the Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) government perceived gender equality as an important requirement for EU accession and was prepared to take necessary steps. However, in light of the diminishing interest in EU membership over the last decade, the government now dismisses gender equality.⁵ President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated in a meeting with women’s organizations in 2010 that he does not believe in gender equality.⁶ He has further remarked, “Women are obviously different from men. You cannot bring women and men to the same position because it contradicts the creation (fitrat). What is correct is the equality of men to men and equality of women to women.”⁷ While some women’s organizations agreed with this sentiment, others vehemently disagreed, leading to a highly divided front.

**SPECIFIC ISSUES SURROUNDING WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS**

Three specific issues constitute the main agenda for Turkey’s women’s movement in recent years: domestic violence, alimony, and child marriage. Different women’s groups have positioned themselves as for or against these issues.⁸ This controversy stems from a classic debate on whether women should be glorified as mothers or considered equals in

**Due to these efforts, private life now represents one of the most important sources of struggle between Turkish secularists, Islamists, liberals, and conservatives.**
society. The distinction is reflected in many debates, including in the Istanbul Convention. The debate is not only discussed by women; the conservative and male-dominated media, the president’s office, the AKP Parliamentary group, the Ministries of Justice and Family, and the president’s wife also participate in this discussion, often taking contradictory positions. The conservative circles criticize the Istanbul Convention for promoting gender equality, rather than the recognition of biological and sexual differences (fitrat).

Domestic Violence

Violence against women is a major issue in Turkey; in 2019 alone, 474 women were killed, mostly by their husbands. Moreover, 40% of women claim they have personally experienced intrafamily violence. The government claims it is sensitive to the issue and will take legal action against perpetrators. Unlike some radical Islamist theologists, the government does not agree that husbands have the right to commit domestic violence; it is seen as a crime and a basis for divorce in Turkey. In fact, even though the victim’s protection may be difficult to ensure, intrafamily violence may lead to an emergency barring of the perpetrator from the home by the court.

Nonetheless, the Istanbul Convention and national law forbid any mediation after the initial emergency barring. Male AKP members of parliament disagree with emergency barring, claiming that three million men have been forced from their homes. The female AKP members suggest such court orders only total 69,500. Conservative groups do not agree at all with state intervention and would rather family elders and local leaders deal with the problem.

Another controversy surrounding the Istanbul Convention concerns the concept of gender. Conservatives criticize the convention’s view of gender, as it is based on a social view of femininity and masculinity rather than biological features, which they argue challenges the traditional sexual division of labor and the familial authority structure. The conservatives further criticize the inclusion of LGBT people in the concept of gender, as it is seen as a deviation from God-created order.

The lobby against the Istanbul Convention mainly consists of men, but has also revealed divisions among women’s organizations. All of the women’s organizations recognize the rights acquired by the Istanbul Convention, but some are not proactive in its promotion.

On November 25, 2019—the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women—the president and his wife announced their determination to eradicate intrafamily violence and their recognition that violence against women is a violation of human rights. Simultaneously, however, police used pepper gas to intervene in feminist protests in Istanbul. The state therefore did not actively implement the president’s public determination. Only Emine Erdoğan (the president’s wife), KADEM (a pro-government gender-based NGO organized by Sümeyye Erdoğan Bayraktar, the president’s daughter), and the state’s gender mechanisms were given visibility on that day. The same day, the Minister in Charge of Family launched a campaign strengthening women’s roles as mothers, saying, “prosperous and powerful nations are the ones where happy individuals live under congenial families.” In opposition to this, secular feminists claimed that the patriarchal society’s view of the family unit is only one of the reasons for domestic violence; the state’s unwillingness to take precautions—such as through educational programs, safe houses, or treatment for perpetrators—and its unwillingness to implement existing law also contribute to the issue.

Alimony

A change to alimony and property laws in 2002 also produced controversy. The conservatives oppose the equal division of property as alimony, claiming it facilitates divorce and encourages women not to remarry. Male AKP parliament members agreed that proposed alimony amounts were too high and long-lasting. Female AKP members of parliament retorted that the average monthly income from alimony is around one-tenth of the minimum wage. KADEM is actually more proactive on the alimony issue than on intrafamily violence. It published a report in 2019 recognizing...
the right to alimony, but it compromises by proposing mediation and reemphasizing that continuing alimony is not obligatory but instead depends on the decisions of courts.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Child Marriage}

A similarly controversial issue is that of child marriage. Presently, Turkish civil law allows marriage at 18, with the option to marry at 16 under exceptional circumstances. Perpetrators who marry outside of these age minimums are charged with child abuse. The conservatives claim that this ruling came too late and is against Islamic jurisprudence.

KADEM officially argued against child marriage in 2014.\textsuperscript{13} Since then, the government stance has not changed, and Kadem has been notoriously silent, as the organization refuses to take sides. AKP’s women’s organizations are also silent over child marriage. Many conservatives argue that the child marriage law leads to the breakup of families.

Conversely, secular women’s groups take a strong stance against lowering the marriage age and decriminalizing perpetrators; they argue that such laws, if enacted, would not only violate gender equality by restricting women to the role of motherhood but will also lead to abuses of a child’s rights.

\textbf{CONCLUSION: TURKEY IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT}

This brief highlights some of challenges that women’s rights organizations face in Turkey, including conservative governance and a highly involved state as well as a fractured gender movement. While Turkey is unique in some regards, its struggle for gender equality also follows global patterns. Since the 1995 Beijing conference on equality for women, there have been significant advances in gender rights around the world. Many governments have taken steps forward by establishing mechanisms such as legislative quotas and affirmative action. Feminist movements reaffirmed that gender equality not only means equality under the law, but also within social structures, culture, politics, and the economy. International organizations drafted charters, conventions, and funded significant projects for policy formation and implementation. However, a backlash followed the Beijing conference and grew more prevalent with the rise of right–wing populist movements.\textsuperscript{14} In the mid–2000s, the Catholic Church drew attention to same–sex marriages, critiquing their “gender ideology,” “gender theory,” and “(anti–) genderism.”\textsuperscript{15} The pushback against gender equality is therefore neither specific to Turkey, nor to MENA countries. It runs parallel to and is inspired by the anti–gender movements that have developed globally. However, an additional dimension exists in the MENA region, not only because of the existence of Islamic fundamentalists, but also due to the authoritarian populist nature of these countries’ governments.

\textbf{ENDNOTES}

5. The landmarks of this period differ, but a general consensus exists that AKP’s attitude toward the EU and liberalism consists of two adverse periods.


ABOUT THE SERIES

This brief is part of a series on “Women’s Grassroots Mobilization in the MENA Region Post–2011.” The briefs were presented at workshops in Rabat, Morocco and Amman, Jordan in February and March 2020 hosted by the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis and the American Center for Oriental Research and involving scholars and activists from Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, Turkey, Palestine, and Jordan. The workshops were funded with the generous support of the Kelly Day Endowment as part of the Baker Institute’s program on Women’s Rights, Human Rights and Refugees.

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