NewsFeatures

Equal rights not yet a reality

InsideTurkey

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Laws and constitutional codes are being modernised, but there is an enduring gender gap in terms of education and employment, while many women suffer domestic abuse

Turkish women are rich, elegant, sophisticated and jet-setting. Turkish women are poor, ragged and live in feudal societies where they are prevented from going to school and can be murdered for a teenage flirt. Nowhere are the paradoxes of Turkey so apparent as in the status of women, a central question in debates about Turkey joining the European Union.

Since he came to power five years ago, prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has overseen the most radical transformation of women's legal status in 80 years, giving Turkey what the non-profit, Berlin-based research and policy institute ESI calls "the legal framework of a post-patriarchal society".

But the women's groups who fought tooth and nail to obtain improvements in the civil code, constitution and penal code see Erdogan as a reluctant reformer who reverts to conservative mode if left to his own devices. (Erdogan's last-minute, failed attempt to criminalise adultery nearly scuppered the penal code reform in 2004.)

Only 28 per cent of Turkish women enjoy paid employment – less than half the EU average – while only 89 per cent of Turkish women can read and write, compared to 97 per cent of Turkish men. As ESI reports, a study of the "gender gap" published at a meeting of the World Economic Forum in Istanbul in November 2006 ranked Turkey 105th of 115 countries, behind Mali and Burkina Faso, and far behind the lowest ranked EU member, Cyprus, at 83. (Ireland ranked 10th in the same study.)

Yet as a result of a well-organised lobbying effort by women's groups, all references to chastity, morality, shame and decency were removed from Turkish law in the past five years. Sexual crimes are now treated as violations of women's rights rather than attacks on her family's honour, and "honour" is no longer a mitigating circumstance in crimes against women. Sexual harassment and rape in marriage are now punishable by law. Legal discrimination against non-virgins and unmarried women is a thing of the past.

"It was a huge battle," sighs Pinar Ilkaracan, the co-founder of Women for Women's Human Rights, who spearheaded the campaign to change legislation. "Every night we send 200 briefings to journalists and diplomats. We sent protest letters to all 550 MPs. We went to parliament a dozen times. The minister of justice wouldn't see us, so we forced our way into his office."

A few days ago, Ilkkaracan launched a campaign to stop a set-back in Turkey's new draft constitution. "I am 45-years-old," she says. "I've been fighting so long. The government must understand that it is *their* role to promote gender equality. As a Turkish citizen, I'm ashamed of them." In 2004, Ilkkaracan and other feminists managed to amend article 9 of the constitution to include this sentence: "Men and women are equal and the state has a duty to translate this into equality." They tried, but failed, to have the words "de facto" inserted before the word "equality".

WHEN THE GOVERNMENT released the draft constitution this month, Ilkkaracan got a shock: "They removed the sentence we fought to include in 2004!" The new constitution alludes to equality of gender but contains no specific statement that men and women are equal. Furthermore, article 10 considers women part of "groups that need special protection" along with children, the elderly and people with disabilities.

"Erdogan keeps saying he's protecting women!" says Ilkkaracan. "We want equality: not his protection!" Turkish feminists say the fact that the new parliament, elected in July, is 10 per cent female is disgraceful, while supporters of the ruling, neo-Islamist AK Party hail it as an advance for women's rights. The feminists want a quota for female political representation, like those that exist in 98 other countries. "Even Rwanda has a quota for women," Hulya Gulbahar, the head of a women's group, told Erdogan when parliament opened this month. "You want to be Rwanda? So go to Rwanda!" Erdogan snapped. Turkish women then held a demonstration with placards saying they were bound for the African country, where 43 per cent of deputies are women.

A lifelong feminist, Ilkkaracan refuses to brand Turkish men as more violent than others. "The less rights a woman has, the weaker she is, the more likely she is to be beaten," she explains. "The worst area is the (Kurdish) southeast, because the illiteracy rate is very high and women's participation in the workforce is almost non-existent. It doesn't mean Kurdish men are more violent, but that women have less rights."

Ilkkaracan was instrumental in forcing Turkey to pass a law on protection orders, but Turkish women rarely use it, because prosecutors and judges demand proof that they're in danger, and the procedure takes months.

Turkish media have publicised two recent cases where women were murdered by a husband and a fiance during protection order procedures. "Even if an order is given, the police don't enforce it," says Ulfet Cayli, a volunteer at Mor Cati ("Purple Roof") one of six shelters in Istanbul, Turkey's largest city. (Every Turkish city of more than 50,000 is required to build a shelter for battered women, but there are at most 30 centres across the country.)

"If a woman phones to say her husband is back, the police don't come," says Cayli. "You see men returning to murder their wives; it comes from the idea that women are property."

"So let's go to Rwanda!" was the rallying cry at a women's rights demonstration in Istanbul, reacting to a comment by prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan about Rwandan electoral quotas for women. Photographs: Lara Marlowe

'When women are hit by men, they beat their children' – Dr Sebnem Korur Fincanci (left)

DR SEBNEM KORUR FINCANCI is a forensic medical specialist at Istanbul University faculty of medicine. A gentle soul, she is bravely suing the justice ministry, which fired her seven years ago for investigating torture by security forces.

Now Dr Fincanci drafts medical reports on the victims of domestic violence. Such non-governmental evidence became admissible in court only two years ago. She says the Istanbul University outpatient "social trauma unit" is the only one in Turkey to provide psychiatric as well as physical help to battered women. It treats between 10 and 15 women every month.

"The most frequent injuries are bruises and black eyes," says Dr Fincanci. "Usually they are struck on the face, because men are jealous and they want to make women ugly. We see broken noses, teeth, ribs, arms … Sometimes there is serious organ damage. We had a kidney haematoma, a ruptured bladder, a ruptured spleen." Dr Fincanci forgives Turkish men for the injuries she sees "because they grew up witnessing domestic violence. When women are hit by men, they beat their children, so this is like a chain. [The US writer] Truman Capote wrote that 'Love is a chain of love.' Violence is a chain as well. Men do not have any choice. It is very hard to break out of this chain. It is learned behaviour."

Most victims of domestic violence never report it, Dr Fincanci says, because "women are often afraid of families, husbands and neighbours. They are afraid people will think it is their fault they are subjected to violence. Tradition makes women obedient to their fathers and husbands." Many secular women fear the AKP government will destroy their rights by Islamicising Turkey. They are alarmed by little things: the construction of 14 luxury hotels for conservative clients, with no alcohol and separate beaches for men and women; a new line of Islamic beach clothing that will not stick to a woman's body when she emerges from the water; the presence of books on how to be a submissive, obedient wife at fairs sponsored by the semi-governmental religious affairs foundation.

Women who wear the Islamic headscarf also see themselves as victims of discrimination. Because of Ataturk's legacy of secularism, "covered" women are not allowed to sit in parliament, hold government jobs or attend university. The government's attempt to modify the constitution so they can go to university has so upset secularists that some advocate a military coup to prevent it.

THOUGH AN AVOWED secularist herself, Ayse Kulin, the author of best-selling novels, believes women should be allowed to wear the headscarf to university. "In a secular democracy, if boys can wear baseball caps, why shouldn't girls be allowed to wear scarves?" she asks. "But should we believe our religion demands this? We have to reread our book, and interpret it in a new light. The Muslim world needs this more than any other religion. We have to be progressive Muslims."

Kulin wrote a book entitled *Snowdrops*, telling the stories of girls sent to school under a programme financed by the mobile phone company Turkcell. The foundation pays thousands of families for every month their daughters attend school, increasing the payments as girls advance through the system.

"There are six million women in this country who are completely illiterate," Kulin notes. "Families with 10 or more children send the boys to school and keep the girls at home. They want the girls to work in the fields and house, or they don't see the point, because they intend to sell them for a dowry when they're 14."

Under Turkish law, primary school is compulsory for boys and girls, and marriage is banned before the age of 18. The reality is different. Some poor families never even bother to register the birth of daughters, so girls have no legal existence. Kulin tells of a mother in eastern Turkey who locked her daughter in a barn rather than send her to school. When asked why, she said, "shame".

"In these (Kurdish) areas, they don't want children to learn Turkish and integrate into society. These girls are miserable," she explains.

One father told Kulin he didn't go to the coffee house for a year because his friends ridiculed him when he allowed his daughter to go to school. The girl became a midwife, returned to the village and saved the life of a woman in labour. "Now the father is very proud," Kulin adds.

Men can rise from humble origins in Turkey, Kulin notes, referring to past presidents who were the sons of peasants and school teachers. "Turkey gives a man an opportunity," she continues. "It's the men who don't give women an opportunity. It's in the DNA. This is not the middle east, but it is Muslim. It's not in their DNA to think of women as equals."