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A century-long struggle for equality

Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention has further united women's movements across the country, challenging the politics of the ruling AKP

The attack on the 'Mirabal sisters' 60 years ago in the Dominican Republic is symbolic of what has happened and continues to happen to women around the world. Their murder prompted the UN to declare 25 November the *International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women*. This year, Minou Mirabal, daughter of one of the murdered sisters, took part in a day of action of the Turkish Women's Platform for Equality, *EŞİK,* organised on the same day – an important sign in light of Turkey's shocking decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention (the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence). The withdrawal shows that in the name of Islam, the ruling AKP is calling into question past successes in terms of gender equality, which Turkish women's movements had achieved only after a long struggle.

Almost a century after the founding of the Turkish Republic, the ideological struggle over the power to interpret the republican legacy is great. On one side is the saga of the Republican People's Party CHP (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*), which transcends class, gender and ethnicity and which, as the founding party of the state, sees in the republic a history of modernisation. On the other side is the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*), the Justice and Development Party, which has been in power since 2002 and presents itself as the standard bearer of Islamic-Ottoman tradition. It interprets the history of the republic as a history of the oppression of Islam, and thus, of the 'true' people, by the Kemalist elite represented by the CHP.

However, the 100-year history of a state created from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire and two wars cannot be summarised in such a linear fashion. Every modern nation-state is based on a notion of political, linguistic, historical and, where applicable, ethnic unity. But under this rhetorical unity lie several sub-histories that deviate from the broadly defined official meta-history and deserve closer scrutiny. One such case is the history of women in Turkey.

Private versus public life

Women under the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Ottoman Empire had enjoyed their first legal gains from the mid-19th century, but these did little for women of Islamic faith. Islamic interpretation in the Ottoman Empire, with its Sharia strictly discriminating against women, stood in the way. Nevertheless, from the mid-19th century until the founding of the republic in 1923, around 40 women's magazines were produced. The 'Newspaper for Ladies' (*Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete*) (1895–1908) even published well over 600 issues, which stands as an unbroken record to date.

The republic created limited legal equality for all women in public life. The Civil Code of 1926, which was adopted from Switzerland, introduced monogamous marriage but designated the husband as the head of the family, who could, for instance, determine the couple's place of residence and prohibit his wife from practicing a profession. Similarly, the penal code adopted from fascist Italy that same year did not classify acts of violence against women as crimes against the mental and physical integrity of women, but as crimes against the family and social order.

Although the principle of equality was recognised in the first republican constitution, the rights to vote and stand as a candidate in municipal and general elections were only granted in 1930 and 1934. The proportion of women in parliament has never been higher than 18 per cent to date, although even this figure was only achieved thanks to the gender parity of the pro-Kurdish party HDP (*Halkların Demokratie Partisi*). The average in previous legislative periods was rather around four to eight per cent.

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The male-dominated state also held the power of official historiography, according to which it was only under the republic that women were 'granted' modern rights. According to this version, it was not women who fought for their rights, who demanded something, but men, who came up with this 'gift'. It took the academic works of women in the early 1990s to bring to light the history of the first civic women's movements in the Ottoman Empire.

Despite formal equality, the entire legal system was based on a traditional 19th-century image of women. Until the early 1980s, women were 'allowed' to take part in public life and formally possessed all rights such as education, political participation, work and equal inheritance. But their private lives were viewed separately from public life and remained a

private matter, not a political issue.

In Western women's movements, the phase in which formal-legal equality was fought for is considered the most difficult and longest-lasting. This is also true for the Turkish women's movement. The many legal norms that completely sealed off the private from the public sphere and naturally integrated traditional gender roles into the interpretation of the norms were repeatedly called into question by fierce protests from women's organisations. The women's march on 17 May 1987, in Istanbul against domestic violence was the first major demonstration after the military coup in 1980. Domestic violence, rape, incest, so-called honour killings (which mostly went unpunished), virginity tests on young women at the request of family members and criminal prosecution of adultery were just a few of the issues that affected women's right to self-determination about their own bodies. The political claim to demand this right as a means of de facto equality was now on the agenda.

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After 1980, many politically active women broke away from their respective groups and turned to the issues of the international women's movement. At the same time, institutions were founded that smoothed the way to the centre of power and aimed at taking charge of women's own historiography. The Office for the Status and Problems of Women (*Kadının Statüsü ve Sorunları Başkanlığı*), the Women's Works Library and Information Center Foundation (*Kadın Eserleri Kütüphanesi ve Bilgi Merkezi Vakfı*), the Women's Shelter Foundation (*Mor Çatı Kadın Sığınağı Vakfı*) and the Association for the Support of Women Candidates KA-DER (*Kadın Adayları Destekleme Derneği*), established in the 1990s, are just a few but the most important examples of this.

Even if the political views of women in different organisations differ from each other to an extreme degree, it is beyond dispute that only women were – and still are – able to come together beyond political borders and carry on a common struggle against patriarchy and for gender equality. In this regard, the Turkish women's movement is far ahead of all political parties in its heterogeneity, plurality and democratic openness. Feminist lawyers came together before major changes in the law and forced the parliamentary majority to abandon their traditional thinking and abolish discriminatory laws. The major reforms of the Civil Code and the

Criminal Code in the 2000s should be seen in this light. Another example is the demonstration of solidarity in the face of hate crimes directed against LGBTI+ people by many feminists believing in Islam, who threatened to burn their headscarves if any of these persons were harmed in the name of religion.

Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention by presidential decision has further united the women's movement in Turkey. Over 200 women and women's organisations have filed a complaint with the Council of State against the President's decision on 20 March 2021 and have joined forces for collective action. They are aggressively challenging the policies of the AKP, which in the name of Islam wants to take a step backwards with regard to the achievements of gender justice. The women's movement knows that Turkish politics is still a long way from a gender mainstreaming strategy. But it is all the more aware of the value of its hard-won achievements, which it is prepared to defend in non-partisan solidarity and without compromise. This is precisely what makes the women's movement dangerous for any regressive policy that disregards human rights.



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