

Women's Rights in Turkey: What You See Is the Tip of the Iceberg

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The presidential decision on March 20th, at midnight, declaring that "Turkey has withdrawn from The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence", commonly known as Istanbul Convention, has led the international community to turn their gaze upon Turkey once again. The decision itself is a violation of the Constitution, since Turkey's withdrawal from an international convention, which was unanimously accepted by Parliament, cannot be decided by one person by law. Of course, the rule of law has never been the strong suit of AKP governments. It's important to acknowledge that this outrageous decision, that was taken by the president of a country where violence against women and LGBTI, femicides and hate crimes increase unprecedentedly, was not an isolated one; rather, it is only one phase of a series of systematic steps taken towards creating a society where gender equality is no longer an "issue to be worried about."

There's a huge background of this Islamist-nationalist direction, which I'd prefer to call an active state of war against women and women's hard-won rights, that is manifesting itself as non-stop attacks against all national and international legal framework that guarantees protection of millions of women in Turkey under the pretext of "protecting Turkish and Muslim family values". Of course, women are aware of the fact that gender equality cannot be achieved only by passing some laws and signing some conventions; the real change towards equality cannot be realized without targeting all sorts of inequalities in all spheres of life.

So, the current situation in Turkey in terms of women's rights is not a stage before which women were living in a paradise and after the withdrawal from IC we're doomed. The feminist movement and the struggle for gender equality in Turkey did not start with Istanbul Convention and will not stop with the withdrawal (which is still unacceptable for millions of women rallying and marching all around Turkey despite police brutality). However, this is definitely a sign that gender equality goal is abandoned altogether and a huge step towards paving the way for a more patriarchal society socially, culturally and institutionally. The most recent declaration by University of Health Sciences after the administration started an investigation for the elective course named "Gender Equality" shows that the AKP government started to receive the fruits of their hard labor in the academies. There's no doubt that they sped up the process, and they will not stop with the Istanbul Convention, no way!

There were many signs before... The transformation of Ministry of Women Affairs into Ministry of Family and Social Policies in 2012 and an organized attack on women's right to abortion (which they did not succeed to abolish the law, but serious limitations were brought to prevent women's access to abortion) the same year were two very important stages that might give a rough idea about the "ideal" women and Turkey in AKP's mind. Another example was the foundation of Commission to Investigate Divorces in the National Assembly in 2015; what they mean by investigating the divorces meant taking action to decrease divorce rates, instead of preventing violence against women and femicides and building effective mechanisms to protect women from violence. This clearly shows the AKP mentality where women and children can be subjected to violence systematically as long as the sacred family institution is not broken.

One of the main issues brought in the agenda of women last year was the Penal Code Law No.103, in other words, a proposed

motion to pass an amnesty for the perpetrators of sexual abuse of minors. This scandalous motion that had been brought to Turkish parliament in 2016 was withdrawn with the votes of the opposition parties after the riots of women all over Turkey. However, the same motion was proposed again in 2020 and the issue still remains to be concluded; except, women are stronger and more organized than before. The platform established against this motion which gathered more than 300 women and LGBTI organizations, and which evolved into the most overreaching and inclusive joint platform with the participation of 340 women and LGBTI organizations in 2021 August, under the name of Women's Platform for Equality.

Within the couple of years, women's hard-won rights have been attacked not only by government representatives or initiatives, but so-called civil society organizations supported openly or indirectly by the government or pro-government circles. Their demands or discourse within these years can be predicted: Men should gain the custody of children, no to equal division of assets in case of divorce, no to alimony, the Law on Eliminating Violence against Women (6284) should be eliminated, Turkey should withdraw from the Istanbul Convention, so on and so forth... They have all the media power and financial resources to express their hatred against the Istanbul Convention of which they have no idea about and all they can say is "the convention promotes homosexuality". (Yes, really.) Well, one box seems to be checked on their part... But this is not the end of the story.

Of course, the debate around the Istanbul Convention is now the main agenda in Turkey in terms of women's rights not only because violence against women goes up enormously (especially throughout AKP rule since 2002), but also because it's more than obvious that all rights of women are under an active and well-planned attack and this is just the top of the iceberg. We all know something else, another attempt will come up right after this one; Law no 6284? Alimony rights? Abortion rights?

All of the above? Not sure yet. However, women in Turkey are more organized, locally and internationally connected and united than ever, despite the challenge of fighting against a mentality that occupies the absolute majority of the Parliament and dominates every single sphere of life. Women keep working to achieve equality not only in the legal sphere but in all spheres of life; and they will not give up the fight to live in equality and free from violence and discrimination.