

# Reshaping the Role of Women in Politics: The Case of Turkey

Written by Paula Lobato Gonzalez

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PAULA LOBATO GONZALEZ, JUN 8 2021

The Istanbul Convention has been on the agenda in recent months. The Turkish government's decision on 19 March to withdraw from the agreement and the celebration of its 10th anniversary on 11 May has attracted a considerable amount of international concern. But what issues does this international convention deal with? Why did Turkey abandon this agreement? And, above all, how is the situation of women being addressed at the political level in Turkey? The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, or as it is commonly known, the Istanbul Convention, is an agreement of the Council of Europe following the line that started in the 1990s to fight against gender-based violence, especially against women. It was adopted at the 121st session of Ministers in Istanbul, hence its name (Council of Europe 2021). Furthermore, Turkey was the first country to ratify the Convention in March 2012, thus becoming an active symbol for bringing gender-based violence from the private to the public sphere. The Convention has been signed by 45 of the 47 Council of Europe countries, with the exception of Russia and Azerbaijan, and ratified by 34 of the signatories (Council of Europe 2021b).

The Turkish government has justified its withdrawal from the Convention by stating that it is intrusive concerning the construction of gender in the country, dehumanising and clashing with the traditional values on which Turkish society is built ('Mahir Ünal açıkladı! Türkiye İstanbul Sözleşmesi'nden neden ayrıldı?' 2021). It also states that no real positive changes were being achieved through this Convention ('Istanbul Convention to expire in Turkey on July 1' 2021), and that the country has sufficient measures in place to combat gender-based violence and protect women at the national level ("Turkey's Istanbul Convention withdrawal is right decision" 2021).

## Theoretical Framework

It is noteworthy to observe how the handling of gender has evolved in Turkey and what the measures mentioned above are. To do that, this article will draw its theoretical framework from the historicist theory of feminism and women studies (Burton 1992, p. 33-34). This article has selected this framework to offer a detailed and cross-cutting analysis of the historical developments that have taken place. It allows us to observe the (re)shaping of women's role in Turkey's political sphere. Through this theory, it is possible to understand the different roles that women and feminist politics have taken since the beginning of the 20th century in formal politics and civil society movements and to examine such evolution.

As Simone de Beauvoir pointed out in *The Second Sex*, 'women are not born, but made' ([1949] 2010, p. 340). It is, therefore, crucial to observe how they are constructed varies according to the historical moment. Feminist historicism begins to gain importance in the 1970s (Zinsser 2013, p. 238-239). However, it has traditionally been Western history that has been analysed in greater detail (Burton 1992, p. 30-32). This article also wishes to contribute in this regard, advancing a historical analysis of Turkey's feminism.

In order to contextualise and give meaning to the development of feminism in the place and time analysed, feminist theory should never be ahistorical. Put differently, acquiring a clear historical perspective of the present is fundamental to understand it (Burton 1992, p. 33). The history of women, the history of feminism, and the history of gender are not the same and should not be run together. For that, this article looks at Turkey's history of women in

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the first section and the history of feminism in the second one (Smith 2013, p. 269-272).

In addition to the historicist theory, this analysis also considers the theory of gender equality mainstreaming (Daly 2005, p. 435-437). This perspective, proposed by the EU and other international organisations, aims to “promote equality between men and women in all activities and at all levels of public policy” (European Commission 1996). Despite having been criticised for its excessive technocracy, this approach is the most useful one when examining the concept of gender from a political, public policy, and macro-level perspective (Daly 2005, p. 436-440). Within this perspective, Booth and Bennett’s three-legged equality stool theory (2002, p. 440-446), which proposes to analyse the state of gender equality based on public policies, legislation, and discourses, is particularly relevant.

This theory has been chosen because it is one of the most recognised within the field of gender equality mainstreaming (Lombardo, Meier & Verloo 2009, p. 5). Additionally, it proposes a methodology that is easy to understand and extrapolate, allowing us to observe in a straightforward and logical way how gender mainstreaming is introduced in different spheres, from legislation to public policy passing through discourses and associations themselves. Therefore, its explanatory capacity, together with the fact that it has never been applied in the Turkish case before, makes this approach suitable for this analysis.

Hence, using both the historicist theory of feminism and of gender equality mainstreaming, this article will try to shed light on the historical trajectory of how women’s participation and roles in politics have been articulated in Turkey, both in the formal sphere—i.e., in parliament, through legislation and the main public policies—and in the informal sphere, through the demands of women’s associations and feminist movements. The aim is to understand how the current situation has come to be from a historical perspective and analyse whether and how equality has been reshaped at different times. It should be noted that although this is a particularly gendered approach, this article deals only with the role and handling of the female question.

## **Main historical modifications in the field of formal politics**

The history of women’s rights in Turkey is highly particular, with a sudden secularisation and westernisation. During the last century, the legal and political status of women has undergone enormous changes.

This article takes as its starting point the late Ottoman Empire, where women were confined to the private sphere, and their rights were centred on what was indicated by the shari’ah (Zilfi 2010, p. 15-20). During the Tanzimat reforms (1839-76), the issue of women first appeared in the public debate and became a topic of discussion. However, although some debates on women’s rights were raised, no tangible results were achieved (Toledano 1998, p. 275-277).

The fundamental change came in the period of the Republic, since 1923, when there was a shift, from an absence of specific measures for women to legal equality in the 1924 constitution and the 1926 Civil Code. This change took into account some of the women’s needs and imposed certain restrictions, instituting an intensive and highly militant westernisation (Kadioğlu 1994, p. 652). This meant that the only women who could benefit from these changes were those who fulfilled what it meant to be a ‘good Turkish woman/citizen’ from the Kemalist republican perspective (Ozkaeli 2018, p. 130). During this period, a multitude of changes were elaborated to bring women into the public sphere (Mango 1999, p. 525-643). However, as Yeşim Arat (1989, pp. 33-46) rightly points out, it is noteworthy that these changes were not introduced because of pressure from women but from a male-oriented perspective, leading to a shift from Ottoman patriarchy to Turkish patriarchy.

After 1934, women were given the right to vote, and in 1935 the first 18 women entered the Grand National Assembly (Arat 1989, p. 52-53). However, the percentage of women in the assembly did not increase over time, reaching around 3% during the one-party period (1925-1945), then declining to about 1% during the subsequent multi-party period (Arat 1989, p. 52-60). There has been an increasing trend since the beginning of the 21st century, reaching 17% at present, the highest total number of women in the history of Turkish parliamentarianism. With regard to women in higher positions, it was not until 1971 that a woman became Minister, with a total of 25 women having reached these positions, an increasing trend since the mid-1990s. These women have mainly been from the Justice

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and Development Party (AKP) or independent candidates. Out of 17 ministers, only one woman serves in the cabinet. She currently heads the Ministry of Family and Social Services, a traditionally female ministerial position (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey 2021). There has only ever been one woman Prime Minister in the country, Tansu Çiller, who held the office from 1993 to 1996.

Historically, after a long and turbulent political period, demands for change, especially in the Civil Code, are generally caught in the paradox between the myth of having been the pioneers in introducing women's equality and the small percentage of women in politics (Tekeli 1992, p. 141). It was not until the 1980s that demands for change produced specific results, with a broad debate on certain changes to the Civil Code, proposals to introduce quotas for women on party lists, and the promise of the creation of a Ministry for Women (Tekeli 1992, p. 141-143). However, these measures took time to materialise. During this period, albeit in 1986, Turkey signed the CEDAW, an international convention to eliminate discrimination against women (Arat 2010, p. 241). Later on, the first changes began to be made at the beginning of the 21st century. In 2001, significant amendments to the Civil Code were adopted, followed in 2004 by new amendments in the Penal Code introducing real changes and responding to some of the feminist demands.

During AKP's period in government, since 2002, one of the amendments that generated the most attention and debate was the ban on wearing the veil in public institutions, which was eliminated in 2013 after much controversy and mobilisation. Furthermore, several policies were developed to actively introduce women in different public spheres (Çavdar & Yaşar 2020, p. 8-15). However, a certain paradigm shift is observed, moving from 'gender equality' to 'gender justice' and a process of 'de-Europeanisation' in the way gender is addressed, aiming towards a return to Turkish identity and traditional roles (Bodur Ün 2021, p. 131-134).

## Activism: The other side of demand and women in politics

During the republican period (1925-1945), the changes that took place are temporally framed within the first wave of feminism at the international level. However, women were taken as an instrument to show change and westernisation (Arat 1989, p. 46). During this period, legislative changes and the introduction of women into the public sphere were launched, but, as mentioned in the previous section, these changes were made from a male perspective and directed towards a very particular profile of women who would fit into the ideal of the Kemalist Turkish woman.

Due to the tumultuous period that followed the establishment of the Republic, together with the change to a multi-party system and three coups d'état, the second wave of feminism took a slightly longer time to arrive than in the international arena. After the 1980 coup d'état, when parties were closed, and political participation was vetoed for the previous people in power, the feminist movements found a window of opportunity to push for political change (Diner & Toktaş 2010, p. 45). Certain women's circles began to question the discourse of gender equality promoted by the elites in power since the establishment of the Republic. The main issues in this second wave were related to sexuality, the underrepresentation of women in the media, the violence against women, and the use of the veil, among others. The motto 'the personal is political' defined the demands of this period (Keysan 2019, p. 52). An auspicious civil society began to form, giving rise to the second wave of Turkish feminism, with initiatives such as the Purple Needle (Mor İğne) or Purple Roof (Mor Çati), which achieved a great deal of support among the female public (Diner & Toktaş 2010, p. 46). The second wave of Turkish feminism is fundamental because, for the first time, changes were demanded by the female population itself. Organised through a network of associations, they managed to bring about real changes and establish research groups, magazines, or women's support networks, among others (Coşar & Onbaşı 2008, p.327).

The third wave of Turkish feminism began in the 1990s and is closely related to the development of identity politics. During this period, the introduction of new identities of Turkish women was central. The third wave was marked by Islamic and Kurdish women movements' critiques to mainstream Turkish feminism (Diner & Toktaş 2010, p.47-48). From the spheres of the Islamic women organisations, the main criticisms focused on the excessive secularisation of the state, advocating for the free use of the veil as a tool for women's liberation (Keysan 2019, p.79). Regarding the Kurdish women's movement, its main criticisms focused on male domination in the Kurdish social structure and traditional Turkish feminism's ignorance of this social group and its particular problems (Keysan 2019, 56).

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Likewise, during the 1990s, with the possibility of Turkey's accession to the EU, women's groups from different backgrounds lobbied and worked collaboratively to ensure that their interests and demands were included in the harmonisation and adaptation of the *acquis communautaire* (Kabasakal Arat 2017, p. 253). Similarly, Kemalist, Kurdish and Islamist women worked together on the recommendations for the amendments to the 2002 Civil Code (Arat 2010, p. 241).

After the institutionalisation of the feminist movement in the 1990s, a large number of organisations related to the field began to emerge. Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, there has been a trend of NGOisation of feminism, with an increasingly dense network of associations and project-based feminism with its supporters and serious criticisms within the movement (Keysan 2019, p.54-58). This process has come about partly due to the EU's support for civil society, which has allocated significant funds and programmes for bottom-up participation. Also, during the first decade of the AKP period, the discourse changed. The party sought to portray itself as representative of civil society, increasingly talking about the integration and participation of organisations in the debate. (Keysan 2019, p. 85)

During the AKP period, two phases can be defined: the first from 2002 to 2011, with strong integration of civil society, and the second from 2011 to the present, with both a shift in discourse (Keysan 2019, 95) and with the implementation of measures such as the modification of the Ministry of Women and Family to the Ministry of Family and Social Affairs. In this last period, public discourses focused on gender justice instead of gender equality and highlighted and underscored the role of women as mothers. Civil society denounces that only some organisations are being included in policy-making processes and as advisors, as is the case of the organisation KADEM (Negron Gonzalez 2016, p. 206). Therefore, clashes between civil society demands and government measures are becoming increasingly common (Keysan 2019, p. 95-98).

## Conclusion

This article has shown that to understand or capture the current state of gender politics, a historical perspective is needed. It is crucial to look at the history and key milestones that women in politics in Turkey have experienced and achieved to understand the current situation and how it has come to be. Without considering the republican period, the different feminist waves, or the AKP periods, among others, and observing how the figure of women has been constructed and dealt with in politics at each of these stages, it is not possible to understand the debates that arise today.

Thus, we can observe that there has been an abrupt and constant reshaping of gender politics and feminism in Turkish politics over the last century, moving from Ottoman patriarchy to Turkish patriarchy and from women's rights advocacy to organised activism. During the period of Turkish patriarchy, there were several phases in the treatment of women, from male-oriented Kemalism to the introduction of women's demands, the organisation of Islamist and Kurdish women, and finally, with a growing trend of NGOisation towards civil society participation in politics. However, as this article has shown, there has been a shift in the government's gender discourse from 2011 to the present (Keysan 2019, p. 96) and a trend of further complexification with new national and international actors.

Following the methodology of mainstreaming gender equality analysis proposed by Booth and Bennett (2002, p. 440-446) of the three-legged equality stool, it can be observed that, in the Turkish case, this stool has never managed to have all of its 'legs' at the same time. However, during the mid-1990s and the first phase of the AKP government, greater equality was achieved. During this period, a more significant number of legislative measures were implemented, with the amendments of the Civil and Penal Code, the introduction of specific public policies highly focused on the demands of women's movements, and the involvement of national NGOs and international bodies. Hence, the 'three legs' had a slightly more harmonious evolution pattern during that time. However, other periods show a less balanced development or progression. That is the case of the analysed period between the Republican Era and the 1980 coup d'état when the 'leg' of associations and discourses was the one that evolved to a lesser extent. Differently, from the 1980s to the present day, this 'leg' has been highly developed, with rapid advances and implications, something that describes and elucidates the country's current debates. Hence, this analytical tool allows us to capture and explain the dynamics and patterns of change of gender mainstreaming.

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However, with the changes in the current government discourse, seeking gender justice rather than gender equality, there is a new reshaping of the figure of women. This is causing some clashes between the demands of civil society and the governmental measures, such as the whole debate of the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention.

As President Erdoğan said in 2011 'I do not believe in the equality of men and women. I believe in equal opportunities. Men and women are different and complementary' (Kandiyoti & Heinen 2011, p. 10). Therefore, the evolution of this new trend needs to be carefully analysed for its future consequences on the role of women in politics in Turkey.

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