

Women in Erdoğan's Turkey

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During the last ten years, a new Turkey has been created. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has begun the establishment of an authoritarian regime built upon Sunni Islamic principles and neoliberal economics. We are in an era where the two have combined to create the worst of all worlds for women.



We can divide the period of AKP rule into three parts as Erdoğan himself has done. The first period was from 2002 to 2007, when the AKP was trying to convince the peoples of Turkey and Europeans of its commitment to democracy. During the second period, from 2007 to 2012, Erdoğan's government came to dominate the key arms of the state. The third period began with the 2012 elections and the Gezi Park Revolt.

During the first period between 2002 and 2007, the AKP's policies and practices were focused on achieving Turkish integration with the European Union. The government took the necessary steps to improve democracy and a so-called "freedom and democracy atmosphere" was created in the country. The AKP convinced a wide section of society that it would not create a society based on religious references. The government, helped by the economic boom, established the social legitimacy necessary to put its plans and projects into operation in the very near future. Having consolidated its political power in the first period, AKP won a landslide victory in the 2007 elections. It increased its votes from 34.63 percent in the 2002 elections to 46.58 percent in 2007.

During the second period, between 2007 and 2012, the AKP and its principal partner "The Community" (the Fethullah Gülen Movement), a conservative religious movement, took control of all state agencies, intimidated those who resisted, and cowed all the dissenting voices into submission one by one. Towards the end of this period, legislative, executive, and judicial powers were gathered in the hands of AKP. The Ergenekon and Balyoz police operations involving the arrests of scores of military officers accused of planning a coup were carried out in the name of overcoming the military domination and eliminating the deep state. Suddenly everyone opposing the government in one way or another was labeled a "terrorist."

Nor was that all. Nearly two thousand people were arrested under the KCK (Kurdish Democratic Confederation) operations to suppress the Kurdish political movement. Media groups that criticized the government were also silenced by various methods, such as the imposition of fines almost equal to their assets. Dissenting journalists, academics, students, and intellectuals were imprisoned. Even journalists such as Ahmet Şık and Nedim Şener, who always took a stand against military domination and the deep state, were imprisoned for a year. Journalists and executive editors who were ardent supporters of the AKP were assigned to important positions in the mainstream media and the government intervened directly in the editorial policies of newspapers and television.

Erdoğan's achievement was remarkable. No other conservative government had succeeded in coordinating its efforts with a network of religious communities and sects in order to undermine the secular basis of the state. The AKP completed this process during the second period and proceeded to redesign the social and cultural life of the nation with reference to religion. The 2012 elections initiated its third period, and then Gezi Park exploded.

Women in the Religious, Neoliberal State

What has been going on in Turkey for almost a decade is also in full compliance with the economic and political interests of the capitalist world, the new cultural climate encouraged by the neoliberal system, and the American government's Greater Middle East Initiative, albeit sometimes increasing tensions between Turkey and the United States due to Erdoğan's expansionist desires in the Middle East. To grasp the relation between Sunni Islam and the political and economic components, we could look at many areas from the foreign policy of Turkey to the Kurdish issue; however, what will clearly and dramatically show us how the society is being transformed is an examination of the condition of women.

Nowhere in the world, including Turkey, have women received their rightful share of the country's wealth or been fully represented in the political process; nor have they benefited equally from the education and health systems. Nothing has changed fundamentally for women in the latest statistics published by the United Nations.[1] Patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism have found their most brutal practice in the hands of the AKP which is in a mad rush to integrate Turkey more fully into the global market. As a result, Turkey has retreated from being 105th in 2006 to being 124th in 2013 according to the Global Gender Gap Index[2] of the World Economic Forum and won first place in the category of women's murder rate.

While the countries of the world have been brought into a single global market formed in compliance with neoliberal criteria, their integration forces the participants towards a compulsory division of labor. What Turkey can supply to the global market is cheap labor, a capacity to assume environmental risks and dangers, and a vast terrain and natural resources waiting for the arrival of multinational agricultural and mining companies, for tourism, and for construction.[3] All these items, except the first one, have their own capacities and limits. However, as all the statistics show, Turkey is a capitalist paradise of cheap labor. The AKP government has created several neoliberal mechanisms to expand this paradise both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Turkey has to maintain this cheap labor system as long as possible because it has no other alternative. The AKP government is not capable of envisioning real economic development that would mean moving to a higher value-added economy—that is, moving away from the low-wage economy—because the AKP government is not able to introduce and pursue genuinely independent policies. From the very beginning, the AKP government has been a project of the United States, backed by the European Union and the organizations of the neoliberal order such as the WTO, the World Bank, and the G8. Erdoğan has no choice but to submit to the rules of the global market and the division of labor determined by these prominent actors and to assume his role as a cheap labor supplier.

Let's see what a neoliberal paradise looks like. First of all, before turning to women in particular, let's look at the state of the Turkish working class as reflected in the figures for the labor market. "Persons not in the labor force" comprised 50.1 percent of the working age population, the highest rate in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The main sub-groups of persons not in the labor force were those who were busy with household chores (44.2%), students (15.7%), the disabled (12.7%), and retired persons (13.5%). Needless to say, the persons "busy with household chores" are overwhelmingly women. Therefore, the unemployment rate of 9.4 percent as of 2013 July should be reconsidered carefully with due regard to "persons not in the labor force."

As of February 2012, some 8.7 million out of 24.8 million people—or about one-third of the economically active population—were working informally. Turkey has the highest agricultural employment and the lowest employment in the service sector among the OECD countries. The youth unemployment rate is 18.3 percent as of 2012. According to 2011 data from the Ministry of Labor, only 682,000 workers out of a total of roughly twelve million benefit from collective bargaining agreements. Turkey has the lowest rate of unionization (5.9%) among the OECD countries and

unionization fell by 38 percent between 2002 and 2011 during the AKP government. In short Turkey brings up the rear in unionization among the OECD countries but wins first place for deunionization. Each day in Turkey, four workers die in labor accidents due to unsafe working conditions.[4]

Now, let us look at the figures for women in the labor market. Turkey has the lowest rate of female employment (28.7 percent) among all OECD countries, behind Mexico, Italy, and Chile (which have female employment rates of 45.3, 47.8, and 52.2 percent respectively, figures that are more than 50 percent greater than those of Turkey).[5] Some 11.9 million of Turkey's nearly 27 million women who are over age 15 are defined as "housewives" and three million of the employed women are working in the agricultural sector, with women in both categories essentially working as "unpaid family workers." When we add to these numbers the unemployed, sick, and disabled women and those who have given up the hope of ever finding a job, we can see that more than half of the women living in Turkey don't have any independent income. The rest of the country's working women are mostly employed in low-wage jobs due to their limited education and are not able to support themselves.

The underground economy is smaller and the wages are higher in services than in agriculture, but women have trouble securing more jobs in the service sector due to their lack of education. Curiously enough, the highest female unemployment rate in Turkey is among those with higher education. The unemployment rate among women with higher education is double that of men with higher education (15.2% and 7.6%). All in all, there is no way out for an independent and honorable life for most women in Turkey.[6]

What do the statistics presented here tell us about the economic and socio-cultural position of women in Turkey? 1) The primary task of women in Turkey, as mother, wife, or sister in the home, is to reproduce the cheap male labor force supplied to the global markets. 2) The large numbers of unemployed women represent a competitive threat to unemployed men and function to keep the price of men's labor low. This is so because even though they have limited access to the labor market, they contribute to the general unemployment rate, which in turn leads to lower wages. 3) Similarly, the high numbers of unemployed men keep the price of women's labor low, especially in flexible and informal production, and function to incarcerate women in their own homes where every day they are charged with the reproduction of men as cheap labor. 3) Violence against women and murders of women have risen sharply. The patriarchal mindset and the neo-conservative policies that mesh so well with it leave women unprotected against domestic violence. 4) By means of flexible or informal production which has been integrated into our lives together with the neoliberal economy, the division between home and work largely disappears for many women. Relatively recently women have started to do piecework in their homes for the garment industry, a practice that has become widespread, and the chance to escape from the house and be visible in the public sphere fades away; and despite the doubling workload there is not a similar increase in income that might lift them out of poverty.

In order for Turkey to sustain its role as a cheap labor supplier, it is imperative to maintain or even worsen the position of women, because there are many cheap labor suppliers in the world and the competition is sharp. And it is exactly at that point that the neoliberal model and the conservative Islamic mindset come together. In most places the neoliberal model encourages greater female participation in the labor market, leads to lower birthrates, and to a tendency to break up traditional forms of marriage and childrearing. However, that's not always the case in a conservative and religious country that has been designated by the capitalists' international financial organizations to be a cheap labor supplier to the global market. In a country in which more than half of the women over age 15 don't have an independent income, this impoverished population of women incarcerated in their own homes becomes a very favorable apparatus for the permanence and maintenance of these cheap labor reserves.

The state has responded to falling marriage and birth rates due to urbanization by encouraging marriage and pregnancy through incentives such as giving a 10,000 Turkish Lira interest-free loan to the young married couples between 18 and 24 years of age, postponing the repayment if the woman gets pregnant during the first year of marriage, writing off the education credit debts of the university students and providing free dormitory rooms if they get married while studying at the university. Just after the government announced these incentives, however, Erdoğan stated that they wouldn't allow male and female university students to stay in the same house because that was "against society's" values.[7] (Since there are not enough dormitory rooms in Turkey for every university student, several students often get together and rent an apartment while studying at the university. The day after that statement, the police forces raided an apartment in Manisa and imposed fines for "disturbing the environment" on five university students (three women who rented the apartment together and two men who were guests there).

Within this context, however, AKP policies will downgrade women's rights even more.

The "4+4+4" Education System

In March 2012, the Grand National Assembly passed new legislation on primary and secondary education usually called "4+4+4": four years for first-level primary education between ages 5-8, four years for second-level primary education between the ages of 9-12, and four years for secondary education (high school) between the ages of 13-16. The legislation divides primary education, which had been a single block of eight years since the 1997 reforms, into two levels and allows the children to attend religious vocational schools or other vocational schools after the first four-year period, that is, from the age of nine. Also, under these regulations, if the parents approve, students will be able to continue their schooling through informal education outside of a standard school setting after the second fourth year, namely at the age of 12. (This was after the first fourth year, at the age of 8, in the law draft, but changed because of the reactions of civil society, especially the protests of women's organizations.) The new legislation includes the reopening of religious schools, the so-called Imam Hatip schools, for the second-level primary education, which was banned in 1997 and had only provided high school education since then. The number of the Imam Hatip schools (both middle and high schools) increased to 2,074 in 2013 from 537 in 2012.[8]

This educational system is a fundamentalist and reactionary model—put into practice without any negotiations with labor unions or associations—that will have a devastating impact on the country. With this system, the road from the ghettos to the universities of the country for both girls and boys is blocked, because regular high schools that prepare youth for the university are rapidly being transformed into vocational schools or Imam Hatip schools.

Under these circumstances, what awaits the girls living in the ghettos is an early marriage, becoming a wife or a second wife to a man (according to a study,[9] the rate of polygamy is already 10 percent in some Eastern cities), and an unpaid family worker, living under constant economic pressure and exposed to domestic violence. In this way, the AKP has paved the way on the one hand for confining women in their families to child-birth and child-care activities, and on the other for using them as unskilled labor for insecure, informal, and precarious jobs. Boys will either go to the vocational schools, whose numbers have increased dramatically, to be trained to become part of the low-wage labor force as apprentices or they will attend Imam Hatip schools and receive an education intended to create the "religious and revengeful generations" personally demanded by Prime Minister Erdoğan.[10]

Domination over Women's Bodies

Over the last several years the Erdoğan government has launched an ideological campaign,

accompanied by decrees and laws intended to take greater control of women's bodies. The prime minister himself, as well as members of his cabinet, judges, and prosecutors have made shockingly arrogant and insensitive statements about how many children women should have and under what circumstances, as well as about caesarean sections and abortions. Prime Minister Erdoğan announced in March of 2008, "Each woman should give birth to at least three children," with no concern for the women's earning capacity, career goals, or other family responsibilities.[11]

Government officials' statements on women's right to abortion in the event of rape have been outrageous. The Supreme Council of Judges and Prosecutors suggested in September of 2011 that, "Women who are rape victims can marry their rapists." [12] On May 30, 2012, Health Minister Recep Akdağ stated, "The state can look after the babies of the raped women if necessary." [13] The very next day, Ayhan Sefer Üstün, Chairperson of the National Assembly's Commission of Human Rights and AKP legislator, claimed that abortion was a crime worse than the rape itself and suggested that women who had been raped should just give birth to their children. [14] A permit from the state prosecutor allowing an abortion is often demanded from rape victims, even though it is not legally necessary for the doctor to perform the procedure. Due to the elongation of the bureaucratic process, there are cases in which the twenty-week legal abortion period since the rape was committed is exceeded and so the abortion cannot be performed. (In many countries this period is 24 weeks. [15])

Abortion in any case is restricted in practice. Most public hospitals appear to restrict abortions to the first eight weeks, though the law states that abortions can be performed up to the tenth week. Doctors prefer not to use general anesthesia during the abortion procedure, despite the patients' demands for it. [16] The law allows single women above the age of eighteen to decide for themselves if they want an abortion. However, doctors working on a bonus system don't want to perform abortions because the bonus is smaller than that for other operations. So, to avoid performing abortions, they may even demand a marriage license from single women. Women demanding abortions are sent home to think about the operation for a full two or three days. They are also made listen to the heartbeat of the baby. Doctors try to convince women to abandon abortion, even though the Turkish Doctors' Union states that this practice is unethical and represents psychological violence affecting the mental health of the women. [17]

The Turkish government and Erdoğan personally are opposed to cesarean section deliveries. Speaking on May 26, 2012, Erdoğan made the incredibly bizarre and paranoid statement that "Cesarean delivery is an operation intended to prevent population increase and to earn money. There is no difference between killing a new born baby and terminating the pregnancy with an abortion; both of them are homicides. Abortion and cesarean delivery are parts of the big plan targeting the elimination of this nation from the earth." [18] The Cesarean Law dated July 2012 represented a de facto ban on cesarean delivery. A massive and successful women's movement stopped the banning of abortion; nevertheless de facto practices in the public hospitals have tended to restrict c-sections and abortions.

Finally, the state does all it can to reinforce patriarchy when dealing with women's reproductive rights. The Ministry of Health sends circulars to all laboratories providing pregnancy tests demanding the names and mobile phone numbers of the women whose test is positive. They give the contact information to family doctors and want them to get in touch with the pregnant woman and her family. If the pregnant woman is married, then her husband is informed of the positive result of the pregnancy test; if the woman is not married, then her father is informed. This practice threatens the woman's personal security and violates her human rights as well. Above all, it is an open invitation to violence or honor killings in a conservative society like that of Turkey. [19] Taken together, the Turkish state's positions on women's reproductive rights—control of natality, caesarian sections, abortion, and privacy—constitute a reactionary, atavistic attempt to control and to

subjugate women's bodies to the state and to their fathers and husbands. While Turkey may be undergoing modernization in some areas of infrastructure, industry, and technology, in the area of women's rights it remains antiquated, pre-modern, and, one could even say, barbaric.

Violence Against Women

The number of women murdered in Turkey skyrocketed from 66 in 2002 to 847 in the first nine months of 2013. Between 2008 and 2011, 47 percent of murdered women were killed by their husbands or ex-husbands; this rate is now 69 percent. Some 39 percent of women living in Turkey experienced physical violence at least once during their lives. Child brides are also often victims of domestic violence and experience maternal health issues. According to International Strategic Research Organization, an Ankara centered liberal think tank, the highest child bride rates in Europe are in Georgia with 17 percent and Turkey with 14 percent.[20] A few months ago, the Union of Turkish Bar Associations[21] stated that one in four brides in the country is a child bride.

The AKP named the law enacted to protect women against violence the "Law for the Protection of the Family and Prevention of Violence Against Women." Under this law, the women who have experienced domestic violence must engage in persuasion and reconciliation, rather than pursuing justice by legal means. With this law, the privacy of the women's shelters has been removed, violence against women is not defined as a violation of human rights, and the women experiencing violence are expected to prove the violence.[22] As the name of the law suggests, for the AKP the protection of the family comes before the protection of women.

Family and Social Policies Minister Fatma Şahin states that there is a dimension of psychological transformation with regard to the solution to the violence against women. To bring about this transformation the Ministry will carry out an "enlightenment project" together with other agencies including the Directorate of Religious Affairs.[23]

The AKP government and its courts have not only concealed the rapes and violence against women but tacitly encouraged these human rights violations. This takes place in a number of ways. In July 2009 after a woman named Münevver Karabulut was premeditatedly and savagely murdered by being cut up with a saw while she was alive, Erdoğan said, "If a girl is left unattended by her family, she will run away either to a drummer or a trumpeter." [24] Regarding the same murder, Istanbul Police Commissioner Celalettin Cerrah said, "The family should have safeguarded their daughter." [25]

At the conclusion of the trial of 26 men for the rape of a 13-year-old girl named N.Ç. in Mardin, the court imposed light sentences, having determined that the rape was carried out with the "consent" of the girl.[26] There are many gang rape cases in the courts at the moment and most of the victims are under 18.[27]

Women Resist

Women are not simply accepting the government's policies but are resisting in the courts, in the legislature, and in the streets. Women's resistance comes out of the long struggle of Turkish feminists for equality and for social justice. During the nineteenth century, at the end of the Ottoman Empire, educated women began organizing themselves as feminists and fought to increase women's access to education and paid work, to abolish polygamy and the Islamic veil, the *peçe*. Early feminists published women's magazines and established various organizations dedicated to the advancement of women. The first women's association, the Ottoman Welfare Organization of Women was founded in 1908 and became somewhat involved in the Young Turks Movement that was a driving force in the founding of the Turkish Republic.

Mustafa Kemal, known as Atatürk, the head of the new state, wanted to create a secular republic. Consequently, the new government passed a Civil Law that banned polygamy, required civil marriage, and made women legally equal to men in terms of divorce, inheritance, and testimony in the courts. The feminist movement of that era gradually became integrated into the state and established itself as part of the Kemalist modernization efforts from 1923 onwards. There was no independent women's movement again until the 1980s.

While feminism began to sweep the world in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in Turkey independent and radically minded women became involved in social movements that were focused on reconstructing the Turkish state with socialist ideals in mind. The military coup of 1980 suppressed the left throughout Turkey. In the 1980s, after the coup, women's movements truly became more independent, existing both outside the state organizations and also outside of leftist groups.

We can say that the Second Wave of feminism came to Turkey only after the coup. The 1980 coup d'état had crushed the socialist movement, and socialist women, being left unorganized and having experienced the male dominant political culture of the opposition movements, organized the contemporary feminist movement in Turkey. Women—especially socialist women—from both urban and academic milieus began to meet in reading groups and discuss feminist literature together, especially translations of feminist literature from the United States, Britain, and France. They discovered that the patriarchal culture was not only present in the state, but also in their own lives and criticized the standard construction of the family in Turkey as well as the gender-specific roles that were forced on women from a feminist perspective. For the first time women rejected the notion that only the state could advocate for women's rights and began to politicize the inequality present in private life. Women began to discuss the notion that “the personal is political,” just as in the West, though there were also other questions, such as the “headscarf issue” which is still being discussed by women in Turkey.

Feminists organized hundreds of public meetings and country-wide campaigns and published many independent journals during the last 30 years. Although there are more than 250 women's groups (women's groups of socialist parties and unions, independent feminist groups, Islamic feminists, Kurdish feminists, etc.) and although there are many ideological differences between these groups, feminists come together to work on common issues affecting women's lives such as violence against women. As the rising neoliberal conservatism of the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government and its religious conservatism is now threatening the basic rights of Turkish women, we can talk about a new Third Wave feminist movement embracing the legacy of the socialist feminists of the earlier generation. This movement started to unfold during the rallies held in June, 2012 against the attacks on abortion rights and raised its voice in defense of women's social rights and control over their own bodies.

The Erdoğan government has attacked women in an extraordinary way never seen before in Turkish history, in an attempt to establish its overriding authority over women's bodies. That's why it is no coincidence that so many women stood behind the barricades during the Gezi Park Revolt and why the news agencies sent out to the media around the world many photos of women standing up against water cannons, tear gas, and pepper spray. A recently published demographic analysis made by security forces on a “sample” group including more than five thousand suspects who were taken into custody during Gezi Park Revolt showed that 50 percent of the suspects were women. Women's participation in the revolt stands in stark contrast to their subordinate role in Turkey today, especially in terms of employment, education rates, and representation rates in the parliament. Many women today are critical of the government, of neoliberalism, and of patriarchy, are active in broad social movements including their own feminist movements, and fight for a more democratic, just, and egalitarian society.

The statistics, laws, and statements of the authorities are sufficient to comprehend how well-organized is the assault on women. The required response to this assault can only be given when the courage that shields its chest against the water cannons meets with a more organized and political consciousness of women and their allies.

Footnotes

1. United Nations, Statistic Division, Demographic and Social Topics, Statistics and indicators on women and men.
2. World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Index.
3. Turkish Government, Invest in Turkey.
4. Turkish Statistical Institute (TSI), Household Labor Force Statistics 2011; OECD, Population and Labor Force in OECD countries; TSI, Household Labor Statistics, 2012; T24, Nov. 3, 2012; TSI, Household Labour Force, 2012.
5. OECD, Employment Rate of Women.
6. TSI, Statistics on Women; TSI, Household Labor Force Statistics 2011.
7. Vercihan Ziflioğlu and Sevim Songün, "Regulation on mixed-student houses would be 'unconstitutional'," *Hurriyet Daily News*, Sept. 13, 2011.
8. *Sozcu*, Oct. 8, 2013.
9. Özgün Duras, Oct. 19, 2009.
10. Video.
11. *Hurriyet*, Mar. 8, 2008.
12. NTVMSNBC, Sept. 13, 2011.
13. *Sol*, May 30, 2012.
14. Interview with TBMM Commission of Human Rights Chairperson and AKP Sakarya Deputy Ayhan Sefer Üstün.
15. *Bianet*, Nov. 19, 2012.
16. *Bianet*, May 3, 2013.
17. Turkish Medical Association, Jan. 18, 2013.
18. Turkish Medical Association, May 30, 2012; *Radikal*, May 25, 2012.
19. <http://ekonomi.haberturk.com/makro-ekonomi/haber/753536-tebrikler-kiziniz-hamile>.
20. NTVMSNBC, Nov. 18, 2011.
21. CNN Türk, May 4, 2013.
22. Official Journal (complete text of the law).
23. *Sol*, Nov. 9, 2011.
24. Video.
25. *Milliyet*, July 20, 2009.
26. *Sol*, Jan. 17, 2103.
27. *Hurriyet*, Apr. 10, 2013.