For nearly a century, Turkey has been a model of a modern secular Islamic nation. As a member of the G-20 and NATO, a candidate for the European Union, and boasting the world’s 16th largest economy, Turkey’s influence in regional and international security and economics has steadily grown. Yet modern Turkey is at risk from a rising conservatism, willing to trade economic growth for human rights advances.

Domestically, the country appeared to have bridged the divide between the forces of modernity and tradition, with the gradual adoption of important progressive legal reforms, particularly regarding gender equality. But beneath the surface, the Turkish republic has always balanced an uneasy tension between democratic rights and government control, and between secularism and religiosity. The 2013 Gezi protests highlight many fissures between elements of Turkish society and the state. Some 3.5 million people participated in the largest anti-government protests in a generation, seizing the opportunity to highlight the governments’ increasing restrictions on rights in legal and political spheres.

Since 2002 when the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP or AK Party) swept into power, these tensions have emerged in sharp focus. The party’s outspoken and conservative Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, panders to public anxiety about Muslim identity, regional political role, and relation to its Ottoman past. Under Erdoğan’s leadership, AK party has maintained unprecedented longevity in democratic politics, winning nine successive municipal and national elections and managing to appeal to

**Key findings**

- Under the Justice and Development Party, Turkey is backsliding on women’s and human rights.
- Turkish women’s rights groups are focused on three critical issues: 1) gender-based violence in all of its forms; 2) women’s low labor-force participation; and 3) women’s low political participation, including in peace processes in the Kurdish, Cyprus, and Syrian conflicts.
- The women’s movement succeeded in pushing for extensive legal reforms in the early years of AK party control.
- Rising violence against women has failed to motivate sufficient government action.
- Despite the growing conservatism in the country, the women’s movement continues to be an important voice for critique and source of ideas for change.

For nearly a century, Turkey has been a model of a modern secular Islamic nation. As a member of the G-20 and NATO, a candidate for the European Union, and boasting the world’s 16th largest economy, Turkey’s influence in regional and international security and economics has steadily grown. Yet modern Turkey is at risk from a rising conservatism, willing to trade economic growth for human rights advances.

Domestically, the country appeared to have bridged the divide between the forces of modernity and tradition, with the gradual adoption of important progressive legal reforms, particularly regarding gender equality. But beneath the surface, the Turkish republic has always balanced an uneasy tension between democratic rights and government control, and between secularism and religiosity. The 2013 Gezi protests highlight many fissures between elements of Turkish society and the state. Some 3.5 million people participated in the largest anti-government protests in a generation, seizing the opportunity to highlight the governments’ increasing restrictions on rights in legal and political spheres.

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a wide range of political groups, from Islamists\(^1\) to secular liberals; business leaders to the young urban educated middle class; and a sizable segment of the Kurdish population.\(^2\)

From the outset, the AK party instigated a conservative social agenda rooted in Islamist ideology. Turkish women’s rights and human rights activists were the first to see and experience the rising conservatism and closing democratic space. In the past decade, the government’s policies and rhetoric have more aggressively targeted women’s rights as a means to impose (or restore, as some say) more conservative values and restrict women’s freedoms.\(^3\) Examples include the government threatening to ban abortion rights, failing to build the legally-required number of domestic violence shelters, and reducing the budget for the General Directorate on the Status of Women.\(^4\)

Robust economic growth has not been shared equally: only 28 percent of women now work outside the home.\(^5\) This low rate of female labor force participation, which already sets Turkey below all other OECD members and many developing countries worldwide,\(^6\) appears to be dropping further.\(^7\) Turkey also scores poorly when it comes to women’s political participation. At the parliamentary level, women occupy only 14.4 percent of seats and in local government, less than 4 percent.\(^8\)

Civil society activists across the board—including peace activists, free speech advocates, women’s rights groups, pro-democracy groups, and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual) groups—work tirelessly on a range of issues in response to threats to rights and freedoms, including the imprisonment of free speech advocates and the Syrian conflict. Turkish women’s civil society organizations are currently focused on three critical issues: 1) gender-based violence in all of its forms; 2) women’s low labor-force participation; and 3) women’s low political participation, including in peace processes in the Kurdish, Cyprus, and Syrian conflicts. Activists increasingly find themselves battling simply to retain progressive laws and policies in the face of rising conservative politics and the ruling party’s sophisticated use of political theater to agitate conservative anxieties.

This brief examines the current challenges of women’s and civil society groups in Turkey, highlighting effective initiatives and advocacy strategies. Turkey offers significant lessons for other countries similarly struggling to maintain the momentum of democratic reform in the context of growing conservatism. The stakes are higher than ever for international actors, Turkish civil society, and women’s rights groups to strategize and work together effectively.

**Economic and Diplomatic Prowess but Democratic Weakness: The AK Party’s Ongoing Legacy**

The AK party came to power in 2002 shortly after Turkey was accepted as a candidate for the European Union. The election produced Turkey’s first single-party government since 1987 and the country’s first two-party parliament in 48 years. The AK party emerged as a conservative but secular party, faced with two opposing challenges: the need to legitimize itself to legitimize itself within the secular establishment at home and abroad, and cultivate loyalty among faith-based constituencies, the AK party pursued socially conservative policies alongside rapid economic reform.

\(^1\) The term “Islamist” refers to those who politically organize in the name of religion, as distinct from those who privately identify as Muslim.

\(^2\) See Tisdall, Simon. “Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: Turkey’s Elected Sultan or an Islamic Democrat?” The Guardian (Oct 24, 2012).

\(^3\) According to the European Commission’s 2014 accession progress report, “There was no progress on adopting laws … to promote gender equality, which have been pending since the relevant 2010 constitutional amendments were adopted.”[pg. 14]. Turkey Progress Report 2014. Available at ec.europa.eu.

\(^4\) UNDP. “Women’s Empowerment and Gender Equality.” Available at tr.undp.org.

\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) UNDP. “Inequalities are deep and women suffer the most.” Hurriyet Daily News (July 22, 2010).

\(^7\) Inter-Parliamentary Union. “Women in National Parliaments.” Available at ipu.org.
within the secular establishment both at home and abroad (i.e., the U.S. and the EU), and at the same time cultivate the loyalty of its faith-based, religiously conservative constituency.9 The party’s solution was to position itself as socially conservative secular free-marketers. The party’s economic reforms led to an extended period of high growth and while many economies were unable to recover from the 2009 global financial recession, the Turkish economy stood out as the fastest-growing economy in Europe and one of the fastest growing economies in the world.10

The party also took on important geostrategic and diplomatic initiatives. In 2010, it partnered with Brazil to bring forth a proposal on the Iran nuclear negotiations. In the same year, it was a leading voice of support for the Gaza humanitarian aid flotilla that set out to break Israel’s blockade. In 2011 together with Finland it co-sponsored the UN General Assembly Resolution on the Peaceful Mediation of Disputes. It continues to lead internationally in the mediation debates. By virtue of geographic proximity and political influence, it is a critical player in the unfolding tragedy of Syria.

Yet Erdoğan’s power has grown at the expense of the very same democratic institutions that distinguished Turkey in the early the 20th century, according to critics. The party’s strategies increasingly include reactionary restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly, attacks on independent media, jailing of individual journalists, and attempts to censor internet content and access.11 The party has used the courts to rein in what it views as threat to its control.12 Since 2008, even the army, which always saw itself as the guarantor of the secular democratic state, has not been spared. Although increased civilian control over the military may be viewed as a positive move for democratization, the party’s actions have ironically paved the way for further restricted rights and loss of democratic accountability.

Dissent & Crackdown in Numbers

- 3.5 million Turks participated in over 5,000 protests in 79 of 81 provinces in 2014 after the government crackdown on Gezi protestors.
- 5 people were killed; 5,000 injured; 4,900 detained within five months
- Turkey has had the highest number of detained journalists in the world for two consecutive years; in 2014, scores of journalists were fired.
- Over 100 army officers, including generals, have been arrested, detained, or interrogated for alleged treason since 2008.

Freedom of expression and the media have also come under systematic attack. At a campaign rally in March 2014, Erdoğan threatened to “wipe out” Twitter, blaming social media for fueling anti-government rhetoric. That same day, a court order banned Twitter, and less than one week later, YouTube. Both bans were overturned, but government pressure against free speech continues. Freedom House calls Turkey a “battleground state” for internet regulation.13

Yet as the 2013 Gezi protests illustrate, the party has significant adversaries. When police violently attacked peaceful protesters who had organized in response to Erdoğan’s aggressive urban development projects, the protest became a national referendum on the AK party. Human rights groups criticized the state’s excessive use of force, including tear gas, plastic bullets, and water cannons, and its unwillingness to engage in dialogue with the protestors.

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9 The party rejects labels such as “Islamist” or “Islamic-leaning.” See “AKP explains charter changes, slams foreign descriptions.” Hurriyet Daily News (March 28, 2010).
11 Committee to Protect Journalists. Special Reports: Turkey. (Dec 18, 2103). Available at cpj.org.
12 Dozens of army officers, including several generals, have been arrested, detained, or interrogated for suspected involvement in Ergenekon, an alleged clandestine, ultra-nationalist organization suspected of treason. The court cases have led to the first significant decrease of the military’s power in Turkish politics since 1923. Yildiz, Guney. “Ergenekon: The court case that changed Turkey.” BBC News Europe (Aug 5, 2013).
A Path of Reform and Reversal: Gender Equality and the Rise of Conservative Democracy

The AK party’s central ideology is the protection of the family and traditional values, particularly through restricting women’s rights and freedoms and reducing women’s roles to mothers, wives, and daughters. Their conservative-liberal synthesis as outlined in the manifesto Conservative Democracy has proven to be an effective formula for political success.

In the early years of the AK party’s control, the Turkish women’s movement, which had been at the forefront of democratization efforts since the 1980s, succeeded in pushing for extensive legal reforms in both the civil and penal codes by organizing advocacy coalitions, working with the Parliament, implementing national campaigns, and winning public and media support.

Turkish women ensured violence against women (VAW) gained national prominence as a political issue and became a matter for government action. In addition, activists have worked to demonstrate that the economy itself is a gendered issue. Civil society has advocated for equal employment opportunities, child-care centers, and unpaid laborers’ right to social security, and paid parental leave. Numerous groups are committed to ensuring women are in the room and on the agenda for peace negotiations in the Kurdish, the Cypriot, and the Syrian conflicts.

During the AK party’s first term, the government implemented a raft of EU-directed reform packages. It established the Advisory Board on the Status of Women (2005) with the participation of representatives from the ministries, academic institutions, and NGOs. In 2009, the Equal Opportunities Commission for Women and Men was established, composed of parliamentarians from different political parties.

The gains were tremendous, given the legal context in which women found themselves. Turkish women gained the right to vote in 1930, but national legislation in Turkey contained deeply discriminatory restrictions on women until the late 90s. The 1926 Civil Code defined the husband as the head of the family with authority over all choices regarding the domicile, children, economic issues, and divorce. At the same time, the 1926 Penal Code sanctioned practices such as honor crimes and the abduction and rape of women; and considered women’s bodies the property of their families, husbands, and society. Numerous constitutional articles constructed women’s sexuality as a potential threat to public order and morality and therefore in need of regulation. All sexual crimes were regulated under the section entitled “crimes against society,” sub-section “crimes against traditions of morality and family order,” instead of under the section, “crimes against individuals.” Women’s bodies were regulated inside the family, rather than as individuals.

The Justice and Development (AK) Party

2001: AK party is founded by reformist-minded, secular social conservatives.
2002: AK becomes the first party in 11 years to win an outright majority.
2004: AK party members call themselves “conservative democrats.”
2007: AK party increases its share of the vote to 47%.
2010: A constitutional referendum becomes another endorsement of AK party, with 58% in favor and 42% against.
2011: AK party forms a majority government for a third consecutive time.
2014: Despite the Gezi protests and widespread corruption allegations against Erdoğan, AK party sweeps the March local elections. In August, Erdoğan becomes the first popularly-elected president, with 52% of the vote.

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16 Muftuler-Bac argues, “This was a critical development for gender equality in Turkey ... having a Commission at this level means that legal proposals ... are analyzed by the Commission from a gender equality perspective. The Commission works towards the adoption of tools that would eliminate gender based discrimination at all levels of public life. It also accepts individual applications and complaints on gender based discrimination from all segments of the Turkish society. The Commission also ensures the compatibility of Turkish legislation with Turkey’s international commitments such as CEDAW.” (pg. 7).
Moreover, while the Code criminalized a broad definition of sexual behaviors, it failed to penalize crimes of marital rape, sexual harassment at the workplace, virginity tests, discrimination based on sexual orientation, or sexual crimes by security forces. In the 78 years until its full-fledged reform in 2004, several articles in the former Turkish Penal Code were amended; but with the exception of two revisions, none of the amendments concerned women’s rights or women’s right to bodily autonomy.

**Feminists’ Campaigns for Legal Reform**

**1998:** The Law on Protection Orders, aiming to prevent domestic violence, was the result of a two-year advocacy campaign despite strong opposition of the coalition government.

**2001:** A full decade of activism—and, at the eleventh hour, a wide coalition of support—resulted in the reform of the Civil Code. The new Code redefined the family as an entity “based on equality between spouses;” abolished all legal articles related to men’s supremacy in marriage; raised the minimum marriage age to 17; provided for equal division of proper; allowed single parents to adopt children; and gave equal inheritance rights to children born out of wedlock.

**2004:** Reform of the Penal Code represented a revolutionary change in the philosophy of the law to accept women’s right to bodily sexual autonomy. Women’s advocacy groups achieved the removal of all references to morality, chastity, virginity, and honor.

**2012:** A broad-based coalition advocated to extend the VAW law’s protections to unmarried women. But the new law actually shifted legal protections from victims to the “family.”

**Legal Advocacy Campaigns for Gender Equality: Tackling the Civil and Penal Codes**

The post-1980 feminist movement achieved extensive reforms in the legal sphere for gender equality through a series of influential national campaigns. Its hard-won successes include the 1998 enactment of the law on protection orders; the reform of the Turkish Civil Code in 2001, the reform of the Turkish Penal Code 2004, and the reform of the Turkish Constitution in 2010.

It took a full decade of collaboration by civil society groups, legal reformers, academics, and women’s rights organizations to reform the Turkish Civil Code. Passage of the draft was ensured since the coalition government controlled a majority of seats in parliament, even if all of the opposition, including the religious-right Welfare Party, united against the new civil code. Adding to the successful momentum, Turkey was officially named as a candidate for EU accession. Women’s groups had worked with the EU commission for years and fully understood the role that the EU could play in pushing for reforms.17

But it soon became clear that this optimism was unfounded. In a surprise move, in April 2000, a cross-party alliance of coalition members of parliament took the lead in opposing the gender equality clauses, in some cases breaking with their own parties to do so. They argued that the gender equality provisions would create anarchy in the family and thus threaten the foundations of the nation. Within a month, more than 120 women’s civil society organizations joined together to initiate the Civil Code Women’s Platform—the widest coalition since the new feminist movement in the 1980’s. The campaign was successful in gaining the support of the media and the public, creating an atmosphere in which resistance to equality between men and women was viewed with scorn. As a result, the opposition stepped back. The campaign played a key role in saving the reforms of the new civil code, but the situation was indicative of the powerful forces against reform.

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17 Marshall argues that while the EU accession process was vital to catalyzing reforms, these extensive legal reforms could not have been achieved without the successful advocacy networks developed by women’s groups on the ground. Marshall, Gul Aldikacti. *Shaping Gender Policy in Turkey: Grassroots Women Activists, the European Union, and the Turkish State.* SUNY Press, 2013. Chapter 6.
Breaking Taboos

Faced with intense opposition from the AK party government, groups such as Women for Women’s Human Rights (WWHR) again galvanized a massive three-year public campaign (2002-2004), triggering the widest discussion on issues related to sexuality in Turkey since the founding of the Republic, breaking taboos on discussing issues such as morality, honor, virginity, sexual orientation, and adultery. The result was a new penal code reflecting a dramatic change in philosophy, from one that regarded women’s bodies and sexuality as belonging to their families, husbands, fathers, or society to one that accepts their bodily rights and sexual autonomy. Civil society—in this case women’s and LGBT organizations—had led an advocacy campaign that resulted in groundbreaking reforms at the national level, despite strong governmental opposition.

The campaign was a pioneering example of an effective democratic opposition initiative that involved a long process of awareness-raising and efforts to gain public and media support. It is exemplary of a long-term, sustained democratic political bargaining between two opposed social actors: feminists and a social conservative government.18

Regressive Reform & the Rise of Gender-Based Violence

By 2005, however, the AK party had accelerated its pro-family agenda.19 One moment in 2011 is repeatedly cited by activists as a key indicator of the government’s shift on women’s issues: The government changed the Ministry for Women and Family to the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, clearly signaling its move away from women’s rights and women as individuals under the law to a more restrictive view of women within the family.20 Erdoğan has claimed the new Ministry as one of his greatest achievements, “to regulate and ‘rescue’ the institution of the family from crumbling, undermined as it had been by previous republican elites.”21

The impressive legal reforms of the early 2000’s do not mask the government’s subsequent lack of political will in pursuing a progressive agenda. It is most obvious and egregious with regard to gender-based violence (GBV).22 Ministry of Justice reports show a steady increase from 2002-2009 in the murder rate of women.23 According to a widely-reported figure, 42 percent of women in Turkey experience violence by a relative.24 “Honor” killings are also common. Activists point out that the term “honor killing” itself contributes to the problem by suggesting that some murderers are above the law; indeed, Turkish courts are often lenient on murderers in such cases, giving lighter sentences under the pretext of “unjust provocation.” New depths of the problem include a rise in “gay honor killings”25 and a rise in “honor suicides,” where women are pressured by families to kill themselves.

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22 The situation is even more ironic because Turkey is the first country to ratify the Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention (which is in effect in peace and armed conflict situations), yet has not internalized the articles of the Convention to its legislation completely. Though the new law on VAW was issued after Turkey signed the Istanbul Convention, it still lacks important provisions raised in the Convention.
as a way around the 2005 penal code reforms that introduced mandatory life sentences for the killers.26

“Prevent murders, not divorce” is one slogan of the broad-based coalition, The Urgent Action Plan Group Against Women’s Murders, who urge parliament to convene a special session addressing the high incidence of murder of women and transgender persons. Highlighting the central role of the Minister of Family and Social Policies, the coalition points out that the Minister rarely brings women’s issues to the public agenda, but is instead focused on the divorce rate in the country.27

The Women’s Movement Rises Again

In early 2012, work began to improve landmark 1998 legislation protecting victims of domestic violence.28 Some 237 organizations collaborated with the Minister of Family and Social Policies to extend the law’s protections to unmarried women.29 But despite active involvement of women’s groups and civil society leaders, the new law actually shifted legal protections from protection of victims to protection of the “family” and imposed new requirements such as mandatory arrest of perpetrators—creating disincentives to report incidents to the police.30 As one activist put it, “You can’t protect both the family and the woman—it is an oxymoron.”31

To add further insult to injury, the number of domestic violence shelters originally planned by the government was reduced. According to law, the country needs at least 100 more, and all shelters need stronger quality regulations.32 In the meantime, women’s organizations are filling the gap in services. An organization called Mor Çati combats violence against women and runs one of the only independent women’s shelters in the country.33

Reproductive Rights

The AK party government has also worked to limit reproductive rights. In an infamous remark, Prime Minister Erdoğan called every woman to bear at least three children in order to increase the Turkish population,34 a statement he has repeated many times in recent years.35 Erdoğan regards birth control, caesarean sections, and abortions “a sneaky plan to wipe the country off the world stage.”36 He is the first Prime Minister in Turkish history to call abortion rights into question.

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26 Navia, Ravita. "Women told: “You have dishonoured your family, please kill yourself.” “The Independent” (March 27, 2009).
33 For more information on Mor Çati, see morcati.org.tr.
35 Erdoğan is not the only voice in AK party on women’s behavior. See “Turkish deputy Prime Minister says women should not laugh out loud.” The Guardian (July 29, 2014).
Against this changing social and political backdrop, reproductive rights advocates have been busy. Women’s groups called mass rallies across the country to protest the government’s 2012 and 2013 efforts to restrict access to abortions, and succeeded in keeping the law on the books. Women’s organizations criticized the government’s actions for stigmatizing women who seek abortion services. Activists report that abortion has become much more difficult to access because state hospitals, though required to offer free abortions up to 12 weeks, systematically create new barriers to access, such as removing the option from the online appointment system, or telling women that no appointments are available.

**Women’s participation in politics and the labor force**

A public perception survey conducted among members of political parties before the 2007 elections showed that the roles given to female politicians replicate those they hold at home and in their communities. The 2014 elections showed only modest gains for women in elected positions. But it is noteworthy that the leftist Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) now claims 23 of the 37 elected female leaders, plus 46 co-mayors serving alongside BDP male mayors.

The exceedingly low level of women’s participation in the paid labor force (29.8 percent) stands in sharp contrast to the country’s education indicators. Turkey has nearly achieved gender parity in primary education, and adult literacy rates are at 94 percent. However, the vast majority of those who remain illiterate are women. Turkey continues to lag on gender equality, according to many international indicators. The World Economic Forum demonstrate that Turkey’s policies are unsatisfactory, and in some cases, even detrimental to gender equality. UNDP argues that existing structural inequalities, especially those exacerbated by geography and gender inequality, will obstruct Turkey’s ability to reach its development goals.

Although the government is obligated as part of its EU accession program to

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**KA.DER**

The Association for the Support and Training of Women Candidates (KA.DER) defends the equal representation of women and men in all fields of life. Founded in 1997, KA.DER sees equal representation as a precondition for democracy and calls for equal representation in all elected and appointed decision-making positions. KA.DER’s work includes the School of Politics, the Citizen’s Empowerment program, and advocacy for more women in the judiciary. www.ka-der.org.tr

**Cash-for-Care Policies**

- Government cash transfers for dependent care typically pay very little and the caregivers must be unemployed.
- Caregivers can only earn social security benefits for five years.
- Caregivers, mostly women, remain dependent on wage-earners, mostly men.
- Cash-for-care policies may seem like “income” for the poor and a convenient solution to a growing social need, but such policies tend to absolve the state of its caretaker role, and leave the burden of dependent care on women.

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[37] Letech, Constance. “Turkish law will make legal abortion impossible, say campaigners.” The Guardian (Feb 1, 2013).
[40] Research carried out by the Hurriyet Daily News reports that many women who seek abortions at state hospitals are turned away. And many hospitals do not allow abortions for women who are not married. Yeginsu, Ceylan. “Abortion restrictions a painful reality in Turkey.” Global Post (Jan 13, 2013.)
[42] “Turkey’s Female Mayors Pledge to Prioritize Women’s Issues.” Al Jazeera (June 15, 2014).
improve the extremely low rate of women’s participation in the labor force, its policies have encouraged women to stay at home. For example, in 2007, the AK party instituted a major policy change by offering payment to unemployed family members (typically women) to care for the disabled and the elderly instead of obtaining care from public or private institutions.

Cash-for-care policies are particularly disadvantageous when considered from a gender equality perspective, because they absolve the state of its responsibilities for care, and maintain the burden of care on women. In addition, the government’s policy requires the beneficiaries to be unemployed. Payments are very low, and by accepting them one opts out of the paid labor market and labor protections. By making unemployment conditional, the policy reinforces women’s exclusion from the work force. The Party’s policy significantly clashes with the government’s declared aim of increasing the extremely low rate of women’s participation in the labor force.

Turkey’s maternity leave laws ironically put undue pressure on working women. The law provides for 16 weeks’ paid leave and up to six months’ unpaid leave for mothers, but only three days of paid leave for fathers. Anecdotal evidence suggests women are pressured not to take the full leave. One proposed law would allow new mothers two years’ of part-time work, but activists point out that such laws would act as a further disincentive to hiring women, since employers already perceive female employees as “costing more” than male workers. Instead, activists argue that the government should adopt a system of parental leave.

### Turkish Women’s Labor and Employment Initiative

The Turkish Women’s Labor and Employment Initiative (KEIG) is a collective that addresses the barriers to Turkish women’s labor force participation. This collective of women’s organizations, labor unions, academics, public institutions, and local governments publicizes the effects of the new labor laws on women, works to make household work and child care visible and recognized, advocates against discriminatory labor practices, and for decent working conditions and wages. – www.keig.org

### The women’s movement in Turkey today

Turkish civil society is remarkably diverse. The major fault lines include feminist, Kemalist (secular), Kurdish, and Islamist. Within these larger categories, there are further divisions which sometimes threaten cohesion: groups accepting no less than full gender equality and groups working for gender equity; anti-gay Islamist women’s groups and pro-Islamic gay rights groups; groups that focus exclusively on peace-building, LGBT rights, entrepreneurial interests, and so on.

Civil society organizations face ethical and logistical challenges. Government policies restrict the abilities of NGOs to raise funds or ask for donations. And within the civil society community, there are splits between NGOs that raise funds, those that believe their efforts should be volunteer-only, those who receive international funding and support and those that do not.

Despite these challenges and the diversity of perspectives, one area of common ground is civic freedoms for the plurality of voices and views and protecting spaces for alternative voices. The 2013 Gezi protests were noteworthy for illustrating how otherwise divergent groups could show solidarity and build alliances across the left and right. The presence of women and LGBT activists at the Gezi

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48 For a detailed discussion of government impediments to civil society funding and legislative support, see the EU’s Annual Report 2014 on Turkey’s EU accession progress, page 21. Turkey Progress Report 2014 (Oct 2014). Available at ec.europa.eu.
protests put women’s and LGBT issues on the political agenda of protest, reminding men that they, too, need be concerned with gender equality.

LGBT activists were in full force at the Gezi protests, taking extraordinary risks.49 Alliances between women and various LGBT groups made alternative sexualities and ways of life more visible and raised the social acceptability of such diversity. Women played other critical roles in the protests, including in some cases working to recapture the rhetoric of motherhood. This is a complicated discursive dance that reveals the fault lines in the women’s movements, as some groups argued that “mothers” belonged at the protest, and others argued that “people” belonged at the protest.50

viewpoints came together to sign a widely-circulated open letter by the Women’s Initiative for Peace calling for international opposition to Turkey’s call for the creation of a buffer zone with Syria.51

Numerous women’s rights organizations, coalitions, and new alliances continue to work for equality under the law, women’s political participation, and social and legal reforms to end violence in all its forms. For example, Women for Women’s Human Rights (WWHR)–New Ways, an independent women’s NGO founded in 1993, was formed with the aim of promoting women’s human rights in Turkey and on the international level. Such organizations continue to expand their alliances and areas of focus.

The Kurdish women’s movement arose in response to violence from the Kurdish patriarchal tribal system, as well as the environment of violence and insecurity in their communities from the 30-year conflict with the Turkish government. As one activist put it, “We’re forced to wage a struggle on two fronts—against male dominance, and the political system.”52 Yet Kurdish women’s rights groups have recently found allies in Islamist feminists for their views on legalizing the headscarf.53

...
Women’s groups, particularly in the Kurdish women’s movement, have long advocated for a just peace for the Kurdish population in Turkey, as well as for Kurds, Arabs, Yazidis, and other groups suffering displacement in Syria and Iraq. NGOs such as KAMER are highly visible in Kurdish communities, and work to support the many ethnic minorities whose needs often seem invisible to the government. Groups such as KAMER advocate on a wide range of issues, from the right to receive schooling in one’s home-language, to opposing polygamy (illegal but still practiced in rural areas).54 The Democratic Freedom Women’s Movement (DÖKH), the largest organization of Kurdish women’s groups, works for democracy and gender equality in politics.55

Since 1995, a group of women known as the “Saturday Mothers” have been peacefully, usually silently, protesting in busy central Istanbul every Saturday, demanding to know the fate of relatives (usually sons) who disappeared without trace after being taken into police custody. Though shut down by police periodically, the sit-ins have been staged more than 500 times.56

Looking Forward, Going Backward

Turkey is at a crucial juncture politically, with deep repercussions for the future of democracy and civic freedoms in the country. Despite some positive progress on democratic reforms in its early years of governance, Erdoğan and the AK party have consolidated political power in part by introducing more conservative policies. The government has taken purposeful steps to impose a conservative view of women’s rights in which women’s roles are confined to family caretaking. As a result, Turkey remains stagnated on women’s participation in public life—both in politics and in the labor force—decelerating the chance for Turkey to reach its development goals and attain the position it seeks on the international stage. Further, given the AK party’s double triumph in the polls in 2014, it is likely that Erdoğan will continue his strategy of ideological polarization.

Against this backdrop of growing conservatism in the country, civil society groups across the spectrum have struggled, and pressure against journalists has increased. Yet, the women’s movement continues to be an important voice for critique and source of ideas for change. Women’s groups have achieved remarkable victories, ensuring women’s equality under the law, better protection for the many who experience domestic violence, new opportunities for political participation, and strengthened sexual and reproductive health and rights. But they are facing increasing opposition.

Building on these past successes, the women’s movement together with other civil society movements must play a pivotal role in the struggle for democratization and equal opportunity in Turkey—ensuring that women’s rights and gender equality continue to be defended. Turkey’s future depends upon it.

“We’re forced to wage a struggle on two fronts—against male dominance, and the political system.”

-Kurdish women’s rights activist

54 Pope, Nicole. “Kurdish women in Turkey: double discrimination.” Turkish Review (March 1, 2013). For more information on KAMER, see kamer.org.tr/eng/.
55 For more information on DOKH, see: http://rojwomen.org/tag_democratic-and-free-women-movement-dokh/.
56 “500th meeting of Saturday Mothers draws large crowd.” Today’s Zaman (Oct 26, 2014).
Recommendations for Action

To International Actors:

- Encourage the Turkish government to fully implement democratic reforms and policies, and respect freedom of assembly, privacy, and expression.
- Encourage the Turkish government to fully implement gender equality provisions already guaranteed by the constitution, and close the gender employment and wage gap.
- Provide support, including funding, for civil society in Turkey. Support the inclusion of women’s groups and groups supporting gender equality in relevant bilateral and multilateral forums.
- Bring attention to and hold the Turkish government accountable for rights violations, including arrest of journalists, discriminatory policies against ethnic minorities, and impunity for perpetrators of crimes against women.

To The Turkish Government:

- Demonstrate Turkey’s regional leadership by taking on a progressive agenda for gender equality.
- Respect freedoms of expression and the press, and release journalists jailed for criticizing the government.
- Apply policies, including gender quotas, designed to increase women’s participation in political and decision-making mechanisms. This includes reforming the Law on Political Parties to allow for more democratic decision-making mechanisms in political parties, and lowering the 10% threshold in elections to allow smaller parties to compete more fairly for parliamentary seats.
- Increase women’s employment opportunities in the labor market: adopt policies to address the wage gap, provide affordable child care, and reform cash-for-care policies.
- Ensure sexual and reproductive rights for women, including access to safe and legal abortions.
- Improve access and protective services to victims of violence. This includes increasing the number of domestic violence shelters and continuing to improve training for officials who address domestic violence cases. Ensure the effective implementation of legislation both for protecting the victims and punishing the offenders.
- Promote and protect human rights and increase gender equality in all spheres of public life. This includes accelerating implementation of international gender equality commitments.
- Dedicate all possible resources towards full implementation of women’s legal rights and judicial remedies, using time and target-bound measures.
- Enact anti-discrimination legislation that includes protection of sexual orientation and gender identity, institute programs to combat prejudice and hatred, and repeal laws that provide an opportunity for police to harass stigmatized groups. Disaggregate statistics on domestic violence to measure violence against LGBT people.
- Promote equal access to secondary education, and include gender equality and tolerance principles in school curricula at all levels.
- Acknowledge the importance of an independent civil society in a democracy and facilitate the work of human rights defenders.

All What the Women Say publications are available at: www.icanpeacework.org
Twitter: @whatthewomensay

1779 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W. Suite 710
Washington, D.C. 20036, USA

355 Lexington Avenue; 3rd floor
New York, N.Y. 10017, USA

ICAN
International Civil Society Action Network
For Women’s Rights, Peace & Security