

July 2011

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### Recommended Citation

Kasapoglu, Aytül and Özerkmen, Necmettin (2011). Gender Imbalance: The Case of Women's Political Participation in Turkey. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 12(4), 97-107.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol12/iss4/6>

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## Gender Imbalance: The Case of Women's Political Participation in Turkey

By Aytül Kasapoglu<sup>1</sup> and Necmettin Özerkmen<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

The primary aim of this paper is to show the links between women's demographic characteristics and their political participation. Focusing on low female participation in politics, we carried out a survey with 408 women living in Ankara, Turkey. The paper attempts to answer the following questions: What is the level of female political participation? What are the obstacles preventing female political participation? What is the level of female participation in political parties and Non-Governmental Organizations? What kind of links can be made between women's demographic characteristics and their political attitudes and behaviors? What suggestions could be made to increase female political participation? Findings reveal that women's active political participation in Turkey is not at the expected level. There are several barriers to their higher involvement. Women are still not independent of their families and are influenced by the politics of their parents and spouse. This can also be seen as a sign of patriarchy. Several suggestions are made to improve the existing situation.

*Keywords:* Women, political participation, Turkey

### Introduction

Although women's contribution to society can be seen as higher than that of men due to their dual roles, in the economy in terms of production and in the family in terms of reproduction, their participation in every aspect of political systems and processes is insufficient. According to United Nations resources (UNDP, 2005), the proportion of women representatives in the political arena worldwide is only 15%. Despite high levels of commitment to gender equality on the part of international agencies watched by the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), desired changes still fall below the expected rates.

Women's political participation is one of the most important indicators in the evaluation of gender inequality in all societies. In this context there are two basic arguments: intrinsic and instrumentalist. As discussed by Bari (2005), the intrinsic argument refers to human rights in terms of democracy and the proportion of the female population, which is half that of the total world. On the other hand, the instrumentalist argument mostly focuses on the differences between men and women. Since women hold different values and views regarding politics, they bring special and unique implications for politics hitherto missing. One should be aware that there a very rich literature exists regarding the inclusion of women in politics and that both arguments carry equal importance for the present study, which considers the case of female political participation in Turkey in particular. As stated by Sancar Üşür (2000), participation of women in the decision-making process means having an equal opportunity in citizenship

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and society. This would fill a gap in Turkish democracy and assist in the struggle especially against domestic violence, since it occurs behind closed doors and intervention is usually extremely difficult.

In order to increase female political participation, structural and cultural burdens that create barriers to female empowerment should be evaluated. In the case of Turkey, in the first instance one should remember Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's contribution. Atatürk was the founder of the modern Republic of Turkey after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1923. He believed in the necessity of absolute equality between men and women, and hence all human rights and citizenship rights were given to women in a very short period of time during nation state building. For example, women obtained the right to vote and to be elected in local elections in 1930 and in Grand National Assembly parliamentary elections in 1934 (Caporal, 1982; Yaraman, 1999). There were only 27 countries in the world in which women had the right to vote for parliament earlier than in Turkey. In comparison, in France women obtained the right to vote in 1944, in Italy in 1945, and in Belgium in 1948. Turkey's position was really progressive in the world context. When we review the figures, it can be observed that eighteen women became members of parliament in 1935. Although the number of women who are interested in politics is increasing, the proportion of female MPs has always been lower than during Atatürk's period. For example, in the 1999 parliamentary election 22 out of 555 representatives were women (4%). One exception is the 2007 general elections. The percentage of women in parliament reached 9.5%, doubling former numbers. This was the highest ratio in the history of Turkey's democracy.

On the other hand, the representation of women in local administrations is not very high. As discussed by Alkan (2008), although worldwide women's formal political participation at local level is stronger than that at national level, when Turkey is considered this claim is not valid. In other words, women's representation is lower in local politics than in the national parliament. According to the latest UNDP report (2010), in Turkey there are only 834 female local administrators out of 34,477. As stated by Gülbahar (2010), who is a member of the Association for Supporting Women Candidates in Politics (KADER), women are doing their best to change the situation, but despite their efforts, the outlook remains black. KADER is continuously organizing campaigns, and one of them was titled "40 women for 40 mukhtar offices" (district head offices). KADER was not alone in this campaign and other women's organizations such as The Turkish Women's Union, The Turkish Mothers' Association, The All Women Association and The Black Sea Women's Solidarity Association supported them.

The acceptance of women's issues can be traced back to the Fifth Five Year Development Plan of Turkey (1985–1990). Another cornerstone was the establishment of the General Directorate for the Status of Women in 1990. The Turkish Civil Code, which was adapted from the Swiss Civil Code during the foundation of the Republic, was also revised according to the demands of the European Union. All amendments made to the laws were in accordance with international agreements signed by Turkey in 1998. The most important changes were as follows: establishing equality of both genders in terms of marriageable age by raising said age to seventeen for both sexes; the joint representation of marital unity by both of the partners; joint decision-making regarding the couple's residence and the opportunity for equal ownership of all assets procured during the span of marriage; removal of the act of adultery from the Penal Law; the right for a woman to

use her maiden name before her husband's name; and the right to work without permission of the husband. The reservations which Turkey had formerly expressed regarding certain articles of CEDAW were all removed in September 1999.

Although the status of women is quite high before the law, the social status of women is not as good as could be expected. The main indicator of this is the low level of schooling among women in Turkey. Despite the law regarding Unification of Education, which recognises equal opportunities for both genders, females are still less educated than males. For example, one third of women in Turkey was still illiterate in 2000. By applying a special training project, 231.000 illiterate women gained reading and writing skills. Primary compulsory education was also extended to eight years in 1998, and the state has provided a guarantee for girls' secondary education.

Although the majority of people in Turkey are Muslim and traditional patriarchal family values are widespread, it should also be noted that secularism is one of the unchangeable main principles of the Turkish Constitution. According to the Unification of Education law, women have equal educational rights, but traditional values prevent them from receiving higher education. At present only one third of the total female population is or has been in higher education. This inequality also affects women's employment opportunities (Ecevit, 1995). The participation of women in the labour force is low, at approximately 28% of the total. Furthermore, the majority of women are employed in the agricultural sector without pay. As these women are non-paid family workers, their status cannot be considered to have improved. Another obstacle that prevents women entering the job market is maternity and child-raising. Although the existing law regarding maternity and child-care leave is being modified to "parental leave", it requires further revisions. There are further issues that need to be mentioned. Due to the 2003 economic crisis, male workers are also unemployed, and according to state statistics the unemployment rate in cities is the same for both genders with higher education (28% for women and 30% for men). As a matter of fact, authorities interpret this slightly higher employment rate of women as evidence of their being more skilful. Therefore employers possibly prefer highly educated female workers to male workers. Furthermore, the Turkish Ministry of Health brought another issue onto the agenda by ensuring the participation of men in reproductive health and family planning. This really is a positive measure taken by the government to increase gender-sensitive health services.

Due to the research problem of this study, which focuses on the low participation of women in politics in Turkey, an answer will be sought to the following questions:

- a) What is the level of female political participation?
- b) What are the obstacles which prevent female political participation?
- c) What is the level of female participation in political parties and Non-Governmental Organisations?
- d) What kind of links can be drawn between women's demographic characteristics and their political attitudes and behaviours?
- e) What are the suggestions for increasing female political participation?

## **Subjects and Methods**

The present study is a policy-oriented study based on a survey partially supported by the European Union and one voluntary women's association in Turkey. Under the guidance of the Sociological Association of Turkey, a survey was carried out in 2008. After an initial literature review, the empirical research took place in two phases: a pilot study, followed by the main survey. The pilot study helped to refine the methods for measuring participants' attitudes and behaviors using a six-page questionnaire.

The participants were drawn from the Yenimahalle district, which has one of the largest populations in the capital city of Ankara. The reason for the selection of this district was the voluntary women's organization which supported this research. This women's organization works with the women of Yenimahalle, and their contributions to reaching respondents were tremendous and decreased the rejection rate to nearly zero. The quota sampling technique was used, the quotas being composed of working and non-working women. The educational level of the women was also taken into consideration. There were working women with a university degree (100), less educated working women who had completed secondary school (101), university graduate non-working women (100) and primary and secondary school educated non-working women (104). The total number of the sample was 408 women.

Participants responded to the interview schedule based on the directions provided. Researchers informed participants about the objectives of the study and participants were assured that their answers would remain confidential. It should also be noted that, since participation was voluntary and random selection was not possible, this study covers only the participants, not the general population, and results cannot be generalized.

Questions about the demographic characteristics of participants such as birthplace, marital status, and working status were designed as forced choice questions. Their socio-economic status was measured by respondents rating their income on a three point scale (low income was scored with one point, moderate income with two points and high income with three points) according to their perception of their income status. In order to measure age, year of education, and number of households, questions were designed as open-ended. Remaining questions regarding attitudes and behaviors were all designed to be answered using a Likert-type scale, starting from always/completely agree (four points), to never/not agree (one point).

Each interview took approximately 60 minutes. Collected data were analyzed using SPSS 11 and non-parametric and parametric statistical techniques.

## **Results**

Demographic characteristics of the sample were as follows: although their age varied from 18 to 78 years, the mean age was 44 (Std. 7) and the majority of the participants were middle-aged. The majority were born in big cities (58.6%) and small towns (30.9%). The majority of women in the sample were married (67.9%). Only 22.8% were single women. Half of the sample was working (49.3%). The majority of these were government officers (25.7%) and teachers in secondary schools (16.4%). There were only 8.3% professionals like lawyers and physicians with their own practice. Of the sample, 19.9% defined their position as housewife. Half of the sample had a university degree (49.9%). According to their self-evaluation, the majority of the sample assessed their income level as medium (68.6%), while 25.5% considered themselves to be on low and 5.4% on high income.

When power and authority distribution was asked for, the majority of respondents reported that the father and mother had equal authority in the family (39.7%), while 23.7% saw the father and 17.6% saw the mother as more powerful in family affairs. When it was asked who should be the most powerful, "must be equal" answers increased to 55.2%, while mother (14.2%) and father decreased (5.9%).

For social relations, the majority of respondents reported that their friends were those they most frequently met (49.8%), while relatives (20.3%) and neighbors (17.6%) were less frequent. When the frequency of sitting and talking about social problems was asked for, the majority of them answered "always" (46.6%) and "from time to time" (52.2%).

Politics brings negative connotations to women's minds according to the Yenimahalle survey. For 28.9% of women polled, the first thing politics called to mind was "lies and fraud"; for 27.2% the prime association was with "unfulfilled promises" and for 12.6% it was "corruption". The answer "the place of women in society" scored only 2.2%.

Almost three quarters of the women surveyed were not interested in politics (65.2%). In comparison, among their family members the husband seemed to be the most interested in politics (63%), while the father scored 48.8% and the mother 25%.

When women were asked whether there was a political party or platform which represented their ideas in Turkey, the answers for "yes" (49.8%) and "no" (50%) were almost equal. Among the "yes" answers the preference for one social democrat party (CHP) was the highest (25.5%), followed by the conservative party, which has been in power recently, at only 9.9%. Just 5% of them were members of political parties, primarily of the biggest parties. 24.5% of them were members of NGOs.

When the women were asked what the most important thing in their lives was, politics came last (1.5%). Religion (4.7%) and social activities (4.4%) were almost equal and considered to be relatively more important than politics. The vast majority of women (70.1%) want to be good mothers and wives.

The respondents mostly watched the news (52.2%) and movies and soap operas (20.1%). They were interested in political and economic programs (9.6%) more than in specific programs for women (2.2%). The majority of them read political news the most (52.9%), while articles scored 18.4% and magazine pages in newspapers only 8.1%. 65% of the respondents used the internet and the majority of them read the news (33.3%), while using online chat programs (5.4%) and reading women's websites also (3.7%).

When voting behavior was researched, the vast majority of respondents answered that they voted (90.0%). However, one should also remember that most of the time (75%) husbands tell their wives who to vote for (Ozankaya, 1962) and that women voted in line with their husband's wishes (Caporal, 1982) until recent years. In the present study, one of the main reasons for not voting was reported as "absenteeism of representing party and feeling hopeless about politics" (37.5%). When "other" answers are investigated in detail it can be observed that respondents were away from Ankara where they had to vote.

According to the answers the majority of them reported that the political stance of the party comes first when they vote (65.7%); the program of the party was second (17.6%) and the personal character of candidate came last (11.5%).

When political activism was asked for, results show that half of the respondents did not participate in any kind of activity, while 43.4% of them participated in political

demonstrations and meetings. Only 2% of them visited homes to promote their political party, and 2.7% attended lunches organized for political reasons.

The majority of them believed that there was not a high enough number of women in political parties, trade unions and NGOs (94.6%). The most important reasons stated for this low number were socio-cultural (34.8%), economic (17.25%) and individual barriers (13.5%). Beliefs regarding “politics is man’s business” (9.1%), “distrust in political institutions” (5.9%), and “women’s reluctance to take risks” (3.2%) were other reasons.

The majority of respondents agreed with several statements regarding the reasons for the lower political participation of women: “family responsibilities” (90%); “intense working conditions outside the home” (80%); “economic barriers” (92.%); “lack of sufficient knowledge and experience in administrative issues” (75%); “religious values of women” (49.9%); “social values regarding women staying at home” (71.9%); “lack of enough encouragement and support for women’s political participation” (96%); “low level of education” (52.9%); “lack of interest in politics” (73.8%); “potential risks – such as becoming the subject of gossip” (65.5%). It seemed that they were not in agreement on whether the nature of women or their physical characteristics (26.3%) could be a barrier to female political participation.

Findings regarding links between fifteen variables are given in Table 1. Significant relations are marked by stars beginning from age variable to political activism as participating in political meetings.

**Table 1. Zero-order correlations among variables.**

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1														
2	- .06													
3	.32 ** *	- .09												
4	- .32 ** *	.08	- .16 ** *											
5	- .14 ** *	.19 ***	- .27 ** *	.20 ** *										
6	.10 *	.03	.09	- .15 ** *	- .12 **									
7	.19 **	.04	.01	- .13	.15 ***	.44 ***								

	*			** *										
8	.01	.00	- .06	.01	- .00	.25 ***	.12 **							
9	- .03	.04	- .06	- .13 **	.00	.39 ***	.24 ** *	.41 ** *						
10	.04	.07	- .10	- .11	- .04	.52 ***	.35 ** *	.17 ** *	.36 ** *					
11	.18 ** *	- .06	.09	- .21 ** *	.02	.26 ***	.31 ** *	.02	.15 ** *	.14 **				
12	.15 ** *	- .07	.05	- .08	.07	.13 **	.13 **	- .04	- .01	.06	.18 ** *			
13	.06	.02	- .05	.00	.25 ***	.08	.14 ** *	- .10	- .04	.01	.13 **	.32 ** *		
14	.11 **	-. 04	.08	- .05	.10 *	.10 *	.12 **	- .03	.03	.01	.21 ** *	.11 **	.06	
15	.09	.10 *	- .08	.02	.07	.38 ***	.50 ** *	.29 ** *	.22 ** *	.31 ** *	.24 ** *	.17 ** *	.15 ** *	.12 **

(1) Age (years); (2) Birthplace (city=1); (3) Marital status (married=1); (4) Working status (Working=1); (5) Education (years); (6) Political activism as being a party member (yes=1); (7) NGO membership (yes=1); (8) Father's political party membership (yes=1); (9) Mother's political party membership (yes=1); (10) Husband's political party membership (yes=1); (11) Believing in existence of a political party representing respondent (yes=1); (12) Watching political programs on TV (yes=1); (13) Reading political news in the newspaper (yes=1); (14) Voting in the last election (yes=1); (15) Participating in political demonstrations and meetings (yes=1).

\* (0.05) ; \*\* (0.01) and \*\*\* (0.000)

Zero order correlation results show that there are positive significant relations between the age variable and being a member of an NGO, believing in the existence of a political party representing the respondent, watching political news on TV and voting behavior or whether the respondent voted in last general election. In other words, when the age increased those features are also increased. On the other hand, there are negative but significant statistical relations between age and working status and education as well. All these findings are in the expected direction, due to the younger generation's capacity for work and achieving a better education compared to older generations. Furthermore, there is no significant relation between age and political activism (defined as being a



member of political party). It seems that political parties are open to all age groups. One should however remember that the percentage of members of political parties was very low (6%).

For the birthplace variable, findings revealed that there is a significant relationship only between birthplace and education. The women who were born cities were educated to a higher level and findings are in the expected direction.

There are negative but significant relationships between education and marital status. Married women were less educated when compared to single and young women. This finding is also in accordance with former figures.

There are positive and significant relationships between education and working status. The more educated women were more likely to be working, due to the work opportunities in Ankara which is a capital city with less industrial development. Being an officer in the government requires as a minimum secondary level education or a university degree. But there are negative significant relationships between being in work and active political participation as being a member of a political party, NGO membership, having a politically active mother and finally belief regarding the existence of a party that represented the respondent. Working intensely under heavy conditions might affect all women, including mothers, negatively.

According to the findings, there are negative significant relationships between education and political activism as being a member of a political party, while there is a positive relationship between education and being a member of an NGO and reading political news in newspapers. It seems that the more highly educated women are not interested in politics. Their preference for NGO membership can be interpreted as a kind of realism. Because they are more aware of prevailing barriers, instead of losing their energy in the political arena they may prefer to work for more civic organizations. In Turkey NGOs are actually called organizations for civic societies (STK).

Zero-order correlation results show that there are positive significant relationships between the political activism of women as being a member of a political party and their mother, father and husband's political activism, believing in the existence of a political party representing the respondent, watching political news on TV, voting in the last general elections and participating in demonstrations. This can be interpreted as showing that the social environment of women plays a vital role in their attitudes and behavior.

Furthermore, findings indicate that there are positive significant relationships between being a member of an NGO and the mother, father and husband's political activism, believing in the existence of political party representing the respondent, watching political news on TV, reading political news in the newspaper, voting in last election and participation in political demonstrations. It seems there are close relationships between the civic and political sphere. At least some women see this connection and respond accordingly. Except as regards highly educated women, these findings can be interpreted as in the expected direction.

There are also positive and significant relations between the mother and father's political activism and participation in political meetings. This can also be interpreted as showing that the more women get support from their family, the more they participate in political movements. Besides the findings regarding the positive relationship between the mother's political activism and the husband's political activism, believing in the

existence of a political party representing the respondent and participating in political demonstrations or meetings are all expected results.

The findings also show that there is a positive relationship between the husband's political activism and believing in the existence of a political party representing the respondent and participation in demonstrations. This finding can be seen as an indicator of the importance of the family's interest in politics.

The positive relation between women's belief regarding the existence of a representing party and watching political news on TV, reading political news in newspapers, voting in the last election and participating in political demonstrations shows their interrelations and can be interpreted as going in the expected direction. A positive relationship exists between watching political news on TV, reading political news in newspapers, voting in the last election and participation in political meetings; these can all be seen as signs of political involvement. The more women read political news in newspapers, the more they participate in political demonstrations; this finding can also be interpreted as an indicator of increased political consciousness. Finally, a positive relation between voting in the last election and participation in political demonstrations is also an important indicator of the political awareness of women.

### **Suggestions**

When their suggestions for improving the political participation of women were asked for, respondents' answers were as follows: "to improve socio-economic status of women" (41.7%); "to provide training for males" (16.4%); "barriers for women should be removed" (17.2%); "provide better education for all women" (10.5%); "quota for women must be applied" (5.1%); "policies to increase ratio of organized women should be developed" (3.7%).

When their suggestions are investigated in detail, the following results can also be observed: the majority of them were in different levels of agreement with "improve socio-economic conditions" (96.4%); "more incentives for participation in family decisions" (92.9%); "support for professional career" (98.8%); "better education" (98%); "women's branches of political parties should be opened for all kinds of women" (92%); "more support for NGO, trade union and political party participation" (94.1%).

Almost all the participants in the survey said that female representation in politics was very low and measures should be taken by the state, the political parties and non-governmental organizations to increase it. The majority of women believed that the state was responsible for women's political participation in the first instance (38.5%). Political parties (21.3%), women themselves (16.2%), NGOs (10.8%) and the existing government (8.6%) were also seen as responsible to certain degrees.

When women were asked what political parties should do in order to increase political participation of women, the following answers were gathered: special political training programs for women should be organized (45.8%); women's organizations in every field should be supported (15.2%); quotas should be implemented (13.0%); funds should be raised to support women candidates (10.8%); specific arrangements in party programs should be made (9.8%).

Finally, the answers regarding what women should do for themselves in order to increase their own political status in terms of participation showed that majority of them were aware of the strength of being organized (49%) and of getting a better education

(40%). There was only a small percentage of women who felt that there was not much they could do and therefore felt powerless (9%).

### Conclusion

When all of these findings are put together, it would not be wrong to state that women's political participation in Turkey is not at the expected level. There are several barriers that prevent them from achieving higher participation. But the findings related to their familial ties that indicate that the increased familial political participation or interest results in an increased political participation of women are very important. They can be interpreted as showing that women are still not independent of their families, including the politics of both parents and spouse. This can also be seen as a sign of the patriarchy that is inherent in all kind of societies regardless of their developmental stage. The level of patriarchy as male dominance reflects societies' economic and political culture as well as social structure (Kandiyotyi, 1978; Ergil, 1982; Arat, 1984; Tekeli, 1991; Ayata, 1995; Koray, 1995).

More quotas and certain changes in party programs regarding positive discrimination for women can be a solution. However, for the participants of this survey gender quotas are not enough. Compulsory gender quotas to be applied in the elections should be legalized (Sancar-Üşür, 2000; 2010). Some other forms of encouragement are needed to increase the level of female participation, such as increasing female representation in political parties' managerial bodies, cooperation between civil society organizations and women candidates, media efforts to increase public awareness of the need for women's participation, and more financial support.

One of the main obstacles facing women in local elections as well as in general elections is the huge expense of campaigning. Since respondents said that one of the important factors keeping women out of politics was the financial aspect, this problem also has to be solved. Social values that assume that politics is a man's business because of its executive nature and think that it is difficult to get a place in male-dominated local politics, including other complaints about male chauvinist culture, are important, but they require more conscious and planned efforts targeting them. As Sancar-Üşür (2010) proposed, a female deputies' working group and 20% of the state financial contribution given to political parties should be dedicated to gender sensitive activities for the achievement of gender equality in Turkey.

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