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## Women's participation in Turkiye's politics: obstacles and challenges

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**Abstract.** The article examines the obstacles faced by women in Turkiye who pursuit of political involvement and leadership. It sheds light on the problems that still exist today despite the fact that Turkiye has made great positive changes regarding women's rights and gender equality. These obstacles are categorized into structural, institutional, and cultural obstacles. Each category is explored in depth, revealing how these barriers collectively impede women's full participation in political life. Understanding these barriers is critical for several reasons. First, equitable political representation is the cornerstone of democratic governance, and removing barriers to women's participation is essential to ensuring that diverse perspectives are included in decision-making processes. Second, persistent inequalities in political representation can reinforce broader gender biases, impacting women's opportunities and influence across sectors. Furthermore, addressing these challenges can help build a more inclusive and representative political system, which is crucial for the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic institutions. By highlighting these obstacles, the article underscores the need for continued efforts to address gender inequality in Turkish politics. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of the challenges women face in political life and provide insights into possible ways to achieve greater women's participation in political representation.

**Keywords:** gender equality, political leadership, women's political participation, structural barriers, institutional barriers, cultural barriers, Turkiye.

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## **Introduction**

Providing gender equality in politics has become one of the areas of state policy in many countries around the world. The insufficiently high participation of women in politics is a global trend. In view of this, various mechanisms for increasing the potential of women's participation in the socio-political life of the country are being implemented in world practice, which requires their comprehensive study to identify the most positive and effective measures to increase the level of women's participation [1].

The issue of women's rights has been considered a central aspect of the historical transition from the Ottoman Empire to The Republic of Turkiye. As researcher in the field of gender relations and development policy in the Middle East, particularly Turkiye Deniz Kandiyoti has pointed out, "the woman question in Turkey became part of an ideological terrain upon which concerns about the changing nature of the Ottoman order and the question of Ottoman and later Turkish national identity were articulated and debated" [2].

In Turkiye, between the founding of the Republic in 1923 until the end of the first coup in the 1960, women's groups worked to protect the new system and supported the education of women. Even among these groups the pronatal and pro-nationalistic ideology that sees women's vocation as mothers breeding the children for the Turkish nation was endorsed. Though after the 1960 coup women became active in social movements, they continued to accept these gendered roles. It was in the 1980s that they started forming collective action and questioning women's role and status [3].

Despite this progressive history, Turkiye is among the lowest ranked countries in terms of gender equality as measured by the World Economic Forum's annual Global Gender Gap Report [4]. Women's political participation and representation in national and local elected bodies in Turkiye remains below the global average. The report, which measures relative gaps between women and men in four key areas (politics, education, economics and health), ranked 133 out of 156 countries in 2021. Women face serious challenges in accessing leadership roles and participating in politics at all levels, despite all political parties using quotas and other voluntary special measures to increase women's representation.

In a country like Turkiye, where the political culture is male-dominated and there are strong party and leadership structures, the obstacles faced by women who intend to pursue a career in politics are important in terms of shedding light on the reflection of gender inequality in this field, as well as addressing these issues. Before moving on to statistics and point descriptions of challenges, we would like to highlight the main trend that was observed during the study of this topic. The problem lies in society itself. The long historical development of humanity, which was subjected to collective traumas, formed in the conditions of political and economic changes, and simply based on a basic simplified black-and-white perception of the world, has complicated the process of its change several times. More precisely, a change in thinking in those categories that are already outdated. It is the primitivization of complex social processes that are based on the principles of past inequality that complicates women's participation in politics in modern conditions.

## **Methodological basis of the study**

The main data were collected from open statistical sources, such as government statistical reports, databases of international organizations, and information from official websites. These data provide quantitative information on women's political representation and other related aspects. Return attention was paid to previously conducted studies and publications on the topic of women's political representation. These studies were used to analyze current trends, identify key factors. Additionally, books and monographs on the topic were used, which provide a theoretical and conceptual context for understanding the problem. These sources helped to establish the theoretical framework of the study and justify the choice of analytical methods.

## **Discussion**

Despite the importance of women's political participation, it is not possible to talk about equal and qualified representation. The main reason for this is that there are a number of obstacles in front of women. These obstacles are examined in three groups: structural, institutional and cultural obstacles. The literature on women and politics has generally categorised the main obstacles hindering women's access to political decision-making positions as cultural and social, which impact the supply of qualified or willing female candidates, or institutional and structural, which impact the demand for female politicians by the state's political institutions [5].

Institutional or structural barriers include political systems, electoral rules, political party structures, state ideology, and institutional cultures, such as campaign financing priorities, which tend to discriminate against women. For instance, many of the institutional and structural obstacles that limit women's rise to political power are based on the assumptions of political elites of prevailing cultural attitudes that women are apolitical or that the public is unwilling (not ready) to elect women [6].

The most typical example of structural barriers is people's socioeconomic status. The fact that engaging in politics currently requires a certain level of wealth poses an obstacle for both female and male candidates. Given this structural inequality, women are at a disadvantage in terms of the resources they have and can therefore devote to politics. Moreover, while the costs of entering politics are already high in lower socioeconomic classes, the costs for women are magnified when women are solely responsible for the income coming into the household [5].

Unlike men, marital status can also be a structural barrier for women. The fact that women are primarily seen as part of the traditional family institution and as mothers also affects the political career prospects of women who do not fit these expectations. Recent research shows that single and childless women are less likely to be candidates [6].

In the context of women's participation in politics, education is most often linked to structural and sociocultural barriers. In some cases, especially in remote or poor regions, women may have limited access to quality education. This may result in a lack of the necessary knowledge and skills needed to succeed in a political career. Even when access to education is available,

women may face inequalities in educational opportunities compared to men. For example, in some cultures, girls may have fewer opportunities to study.

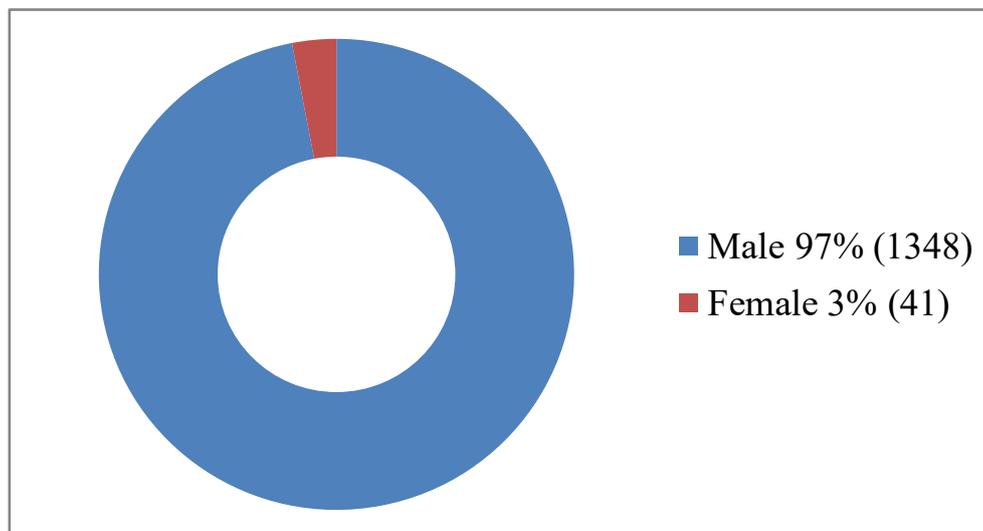
In the Education Reform Initiative's education monitoring report, it was stated that the net enrollment rate in secondary education in 2018-2019 was 83.9% for girls and 84.5% for boys across the country; the difference, which was 0.6% points in Turkiye in general, increased to 3.7% in the Southeastern Anatolia Region [7]. Even if the gap in enrollment rates seems relatively small it can have substantial long-term effects. In educational contexts, such differences can accumulate over time, leading to significant disparities in educational attainment between genders. For example, a lower enrollment rate for girls can translate into fewer women completing secondary education, which in turn can limit their opportunities for higher education and professional development. This educational gap can perpetuate a cycle of disadvantage, where women are less likely to gain the qualifications and skills needed for political leadership and decision-making roles.

Additionally, there exist institutional obstacles to women's participation in politics. It is observed that women who intend to pursue a political career in Turkiye are stuck with the obstacle of a leader-focused political party, even if they overcome socioeconomic obstacles. Participants pointed out that decision-making mechanisms in political parties are mostly controlled by men. The area where the concrete effects of this control are most intensely seen is the candidate list formation policies of the parties.

Party organizations are decisive in terms of candidate selection and intra-party career mobilization. The fact that the candidate selection processes of political parties are mostly directed by party leaders or leadership cadres constitutes a serious institutional obstacle for women. On the one hand, the fact that the candidacy criteria are determined by male "gate-keepers" in the parties reduces the participation of women in the candidate selection processes. On the other hand, the fact that the candidate lists are also prepared by these "gate-keepers" affects the place of women who can be candidates on the election lists and therefore their electability [8].

According to the study of Yıldırım Kocapınar (2019), the main reason for the low number of female politicians in Turkiye, especially in local politics, is that political parties nominate female candidates from regions where they have low chances of being elected [8]. In other words, even if women have voter support in these regions, they cannot be elected due to the strategies of political parties and leaders. It can be said that the fact that party organizations are leader-oriented and managed by male "gatekeepers" also makes it difficult for women to take initiative in their positions. The evidence supporting these findings is clearly reflected in the latest official statistical data from Turkiye. The table 1 below presents a detailed breakdown of the proportion of male and female mayors serving in local government positions.

Table 1 – Proportion of male and female mayors in local government , 2019



Source:TurkStat, Gender Statistics

In 2019, only 3% of local government mayors were women, indicating very low representation of women in this position [8]. One of the most important reasons why women need to have a high level of presence in local governments is that the services provided by local governments affect women more than men. Women doing their housework using the electricity, water and natural gas provided by local governments and taking their children to parks and gardens using the transportation vehicles provided by municipalities will both increase their relationship with local governments and enable them to escape from the confined home life. In this regard, it can be stated that it is a necessity and requirement for women to be represented more in local governments.

The group of cultural barriers refers to the effect of the male-dominated social culture on the political sphere. For the male-dominated social culture, women's place is in the private sphere and men's place is in the public sphere. According to the gendered division of labor between the two spheres, family, home and childcare tasks in the private sphere are the responsibility of women; other tasks in the public sphere are the responsibility of men. For this reason, politics in the public sphere is also seen as men's work. The masculine political culture that emerges as a result of this distinction shapes women's decisions to enter politics, their political career possibilities and their political experiences, regardless of the socioeconomic development of the society. The masculine political culture also affects women's perceptions of themselves and causes them to see themselves as "less suitable for politics" compared to men [6].

Traditions are still strong in Turkiye, and religion is a powerful social and political factor that influences the current state of gender equality and hinders women's participation in politics at different levels of government. The issue of women's political representation in Muslim societies such as Turkiye is complex and multifaceted, involving many actors and factors, impacted by diverse obstacles and opportunities arising out of specific political, legal, institutional and social structures. Traditional views on the roles of women in society and their place in politics can significantly limit their participation. In Turkiye, as in many other Muslim societies, cultural

and religious traditions can create barriers for women who aspire to political activity. Conservative interpretations of religious texts often reinforce traditional gender roles, which can restrict women's opportunities for political engagement and leadership. These traditional roles may emphasize domestic responsibilities and discourage women from pursuing public or political careers.

Despite these pervasive challenges, recent research indicates a significant shift in public perception regarding women in politics. For instance, research conducted by Ben Seçerim and the polling firm KONDA last year revealed that 62 percent of respondents believe that female politicians would play a crucial role in Turkiye's development and the improvement of society. This finding highlights a growing recognition of the positive impact that women can have in political roles. Additionally, a similar proportion of respondents supported the implementation of mandatory quotas for women in political parties, suggesting a strong public endorsement for structural changes to enhance female representation [9].

But since women in Muslim majority countries are among the most politically underrepresented across the globe, some scholars have emphasised religious and cultural factors, namely Islam and 'Muslim culture', as one of the barriers to female political participation. During the most recent elections (2023), well-known female politicians have spoken out about the ongoing challenges faced by women in Turkish politics. Gülseren Onanç, the founder of the SES Equality and Solidarity Association, described the political landscape as a "completely male-dominated playground," emphasizing the difficulty women encounter in carving out a space for themselves within this arena. Onanç noted that while women have made significant strides in civil opposition and activism, their achievements have not been adequately mirrored in the political sphere [10].

Similarly, Nilden Bayazit, president of Ben Seçerim, expressed frustration at the persistent barriers faced by women candidates, even within more progressive parties. Bayazit pointed out that there is still a metaphorical "wall" obstructing women's progress, indicating that many entrenched obstacles remain and that there is a reluctance to address these issues comprehensively. These statements reflect a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the slow pace of change and highlight the systemic challenges that continue to hinder women's full participation in Turkish politics [10].

Despite the low percentage of female mayors and the entrenched patriarchal and religious traditions that hinder women's engagement in politics, there is a noticeable shift in public attitudes favoring greater female representation. The acknowledgment of women's crucial role in societal development and the support for quotas reflect an evolving perspective that could foster significant changes. However, the persistent barriers identified by prominent figures like Gülseren Onanç and Nilden Bayazit illustrate that while public support is growing, substantial systemic and cultural obstacles remain. These challenges necessitate a thorough examination and targeted reforms to ensure that women can fully participate in and contribute to political processes.

## **Conclusion**

Many studies have been conducted and answers have been found to the question of why women are not more active in politics in Turkiye and what disadvantages they experience in this regard. The reasons for the limited political representation of women in the studies conducted are explained by the arguments that the dominant patriarchal family structure, the political

culture is not fully developed in this regard, the role of housewife and mother is attributed to women, politics is formed in a way that is disadvantageous to women, women do not have sufficient knowledge about politics, politics is not an interesting field for women and women are in a demonstrative position with only partial representation in politics [6]. Although Turkish women have gained the right to vote and be elected earlier than in other countries, it cannot be said that this has been fully implemented in practice and that they have equal opportunities for political representation with men. The data examined in this study also confirms this thesis.

The first obstacle to women's participation in politics in Turkiye is family culture. Sometimes family culture completely prevents political representation, while in some cases it causes women to turn to the political arena with the culture they inherit from their families, despite not having any interest in politics. Political representation within this framework is provided with the cultural ground they inherit from their families, rather than being based on interest, knowledge and talent. In addition, women who are familiar with the most basic problems of women, such as housewives, should be given the opportunity to be represented in politics and supported in this regard. This situation will allow women who are considered disadvantaged in terms of politics to move to a more advantageous position. It can be stated that increasing women's representation will have a positive effect on democracy becoming more dominant and economic development.

Among the structural barriers, access to socioeconomic resources is a more challenging obstacle for women than for men. Marital status is also more decisive for women. Married women are seen as more “acceptable” politicians, while single women are seen as less suitable for politics. This advantage of married women disappears when they have children. For this reason, women with children enter politics either after raising their children or when they can get help from outside. Young women who intend to make a presence in politics are on the disadvantaged side of both gender and age hierarchy.

In terms of institutional barriers, the frequently mentioned theme is the effect of strong party and leadership structures on women's political careers. Given these complexities, it is evident that overcoming the barriers to women's political participation in Turkiye requires a multifaceted approach. Addressing family and cultural norms, enhancing access to socioeconomic resources, and reforming institutional practices are all critical steps toward creating a more inclusive political environment. Future research should build on the insights provided in this study by expanding the sample size and exploring additional dimensions of women's political experiences.

In conclusion, addressing these barriers not only helps in achieving gender equality but also contributes to a more representative and effective democratic system. By fostering an environment where women can participate equally and meaningfully in political life, Turkiye can advance towards a more balanced and just society. The continued exploration and discussion of these issues will be vital in driving forward the necessary reforms and creating a political landscape that truly reflects the diverse voices of its population.

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### **Әйелдердің Түркия саясатына қатысуы: кедергілер мен қиындықтар**

**Аңдатпа.** Мақалада Түркиядағы әйелдер құқығы мен гендерлік теңдікке қатысты үлкен өзгерістер болғанына қарамастан, әлі күнге дейін әйелдердің саясаттағы өкілдігі мен саяси мансап жолында кездесетін кедергілер мен қиындықтар қарастырылады. Бұл кедергілер құрылымдық, институционалдық және мәдени кедергілер болып жіктеліп, әрқайсысы әйелдердің саясатқа толық қатысуына ұжымдық түрде қалай кедергі жасайтынын көрсету үшін талданды. Бұл кедергілерді түсіну бірнеше себептер бойынша өте маңызды. Біріншіден, тең саяси өкілдік демократияның негізі болып табылады және әйелдердің қатысуындағы кедергілермен жұмыс жасау шешім қабылдау процесінде әртүрлі көзқарастардың ескерілуін қамтамасыз ету үшін маңызды. Екіншіден, саяси өкілдіктегі теңсіздік әйелдердің мүмкіндіктері мен басқа салалардағы ықпалына әсер ететін қате гендерлік көзқарастарды күшейтуі мүмкін. Сонымен қатар, бұл міндеттерді шешу демократиялық институттардың заңдылығы мен тиімділігі үшін маңызды болып табылатын инклюзивті және өкілді саяси жүйені құруға көмектеседі. Зерттеу нәтижелері әйелдердің саяси алаңда кездесетін қиындықтарын жақсы түсінуге көмектесіп, әйелдердің саяси өкілділігін арттырудың ықтимал жолдары туралы түсінік береді.

**Түйін сөздер:** гендерлік теңдік, саяси көшбасшылық, әйелдердің саясаттағы өкілдігі, құрылымдық кедергілер, институционалдық кедергілер, мәдени кедергілер, Түркия.

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### **Участие женщин в политике Турции: препятствия и проблемы**

**Аннотация.** В статье рассматриваются препятствия, с которыми сталкиваются женщины в Турции, стремящиеся к политическому участию и лидерству. Она проливает свет на проблемы, которые все еще существуют сегодня, несмотря на то, что Турция добилась больших позитивных изменений в отношении прав женщин и гендерного равенства. Эти препятствия подразделяются на структурные, институциональные и культурные препятствия. Каждая категория изучается подробно, показывая, как эти барьеры в совокупности препятствуют полноценному участию женщин в политической жизни. Понимание этих барьеров имеет решающее значение по нескольким причинам. Во-первых, справедливое политическое представительство является краеугольным камнем демократического управления, и устранение барьеров для участия женщин имеет важное значение для обеспечения включения различных точек зрения в процессы принятия решений. Во-вторых, сохраняющееся неравенство в политическом представительстве может усилить более широкие гендерные предубеждения, влияя на возможности и влияние женщин во всех секторах. Кроме того, решение этих проблем может помочь построить более инклюзивную и представительную политическую систему, которая имеет решающее значение для легитимности и эффективности демократических институтов. Подчеркивая эти препятствия, статья подчеркивает необходимость постоянных усилий по решению проблемы гендерного неравенства в турецкой политике. Результаты исследования способствуют более широкому пониманию проблем, с которыми сталкиваются женщины в политической жизни, и дают представление о возможных способах достижения большего участия женщин в политическом представительстве.

**Ключевые слова:** гендерное равенство, политическое лидерство, политическое участие женщин, структурные барьеры, институциональные барьеры, культурные барьеры, Турция.

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