

# The participation of women in the Gezi Park protests reflects concerns that the Turkish government could roll back the country's gender equality reforms

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Turkey experienced a number of protests during the summer following a dispute over the redevelopment of the Taksim Gezi Park in Istanbul. **Gül Aldıkaçtı Marshall** writes on the role of women in the protests. She argues that many of the women participating were motivated by the AKP government's recent gender policies, which have threatened reforms carried out over the last 10-15 years to strengthen gender equality in the country. She writes that protecting the gains which have been made in the area of gender equality is becoming an increasingly significant issue for Turkish women.



Women were clearly visible during the Gezi Park protests that began in May in İstanbul and continued throughout the summer. Early protests reflected the environmental concerns of women and men over the elimination of green spaces, exemplified by slogans such as “trees, not buildings”; “we all live in the same tree”; and “what if they try to demolish Central Park to build a mall?” The presence of Turkish women in the early protests against the government's attempt to replace a small public park in Taksim square with a shopping mall (or possibly a military barrack) parallels the strong presence of women in environmental movements in many other places around the world.

Nevertheless, the protests in Gezi Park revealed more than environmentalism. There were many forums and groupings over the summer that connected a variety of issues with protecting the public park and its trees. The increasingly authoritarian attitude of the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his party was heavily criticised; so were his neo-liberal programmes and his emphasis on favouring businesses that champion him and his policies. Many protesters emphasised that the AKP government undertook several major building projects in İstanbul that would change the façade of the city without asking its residents. For numerous women, the meaning of protests went beyond protecting Gezi Park. It took the form of raising their voice against sexism among the protesters and within larger society; against violence, especially domestic violence, against women, which is pervasive in Turkey; and against governmental actions that signified setbacks from the gains made toward gender equality.

## Gender equality in Turkey

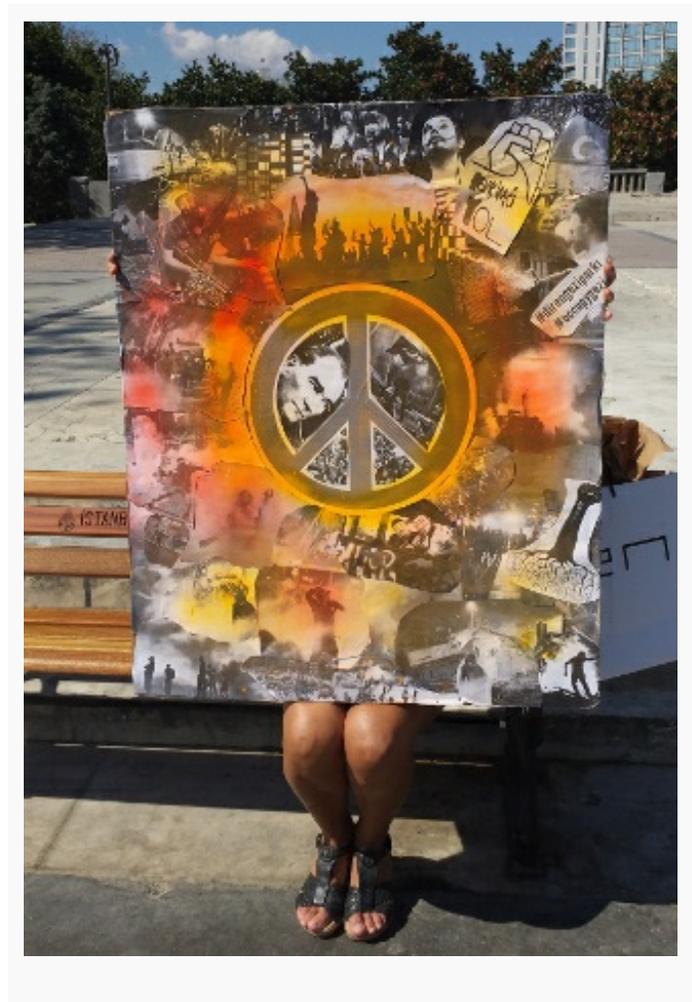
In the late 1990s, female activists were pivotal in the enactment of a law to curb domestic violence against women. Yet, there have been many problems with the implementation of the law. Some examples include keeping insufficient records of domestic violence, providing

Credit: Gül Aldıkaçtı Marshall

inadequate protection for the legal complainant, and demanding that the survivor provides a witness even though the law specifically states that a witness is not necessary. Moreover, despite calls from women's groups and the EU, the government has not made a significant attempt to increase the number of shelters to accommodate women who seek help. Lamentably, violence against women remains a significant problem.

In the 2000s, when Turkey undertook the task of aligning its laws with those of the EU in an attempt to receive a date to open accession negotiations, the pressure from a number of women's groups with women's rights agendas shaped the amendments to the Civil and Penal Codes. By means of lobbying, networking, press releases, fax campaigns, and protests, various women's organisations brought national and international attention to the provisions that discriminated against women in the Civil and Penal Codes.

Their efforts bore fruit when the Turkish Parliament amended the law. The amendment recognised women as equal partners to men in marriage, and eliminated the clauses that made men the head of the household and gave them the authority to decide on certain matters, such as where the family resides and which schools children attend. It gave women and men equal rights upon divorce to the assets acquired during marriage. It identified sexual assault against women as an assault on the individual rather than against public decency and family order. It also increased the penalty for murder based on family honour.



There were several other changes made to laws including the Constitution and the Labour Law to improve the legal gender regime. Furthermore, the AKP government and some large private enterprises took the initiative to increase women's literacy rates and girls' school attendance, especially in rural areas where patriarchal values and family obligations curb girls' education. Consequently, the gap between the literacy rate of girls and boys declined significantly, with the enrollment rates of girls to primary schools increasing to 98 percent by the late 2000s.

### **Progress under threat**

The progress made in the area of gender equality has slowed down since the mid-2000s. The developments of the early 2000s have been followed by the AKP government's engagement in launching institutional and legal changes that upset many women and played an important role in motivating a number of them to make their presence felt in the Gezi Park protests.

In 2010, article 10 of the Constitution was amended to categorise women in the same group as children, elderly, the disabled, and widows of the soldiers and war veterans who need social protection. In 2011 the government replaced the State Ministry Responsible for Women and Family with the Ministry of Family and Social Policies. Categorising women as a group that needs social protection and associating women primarily with the family are a reflection of the conservative worldview of the leader of AKP and some influential members of the party. Prime Minister Erdoğan has made public statements that women are not equal with men; that he and his party prioritise the family, not women; and that women should give birth to at least three children.

This worldview has been reflected in recent attempts by Erdoğan to change the law to limit abortion and ban births

by caesarean section. Even though the law that permits abortion up to ten weeks into pregnancy has not changed because of the pressure from women's groups and various institutions in Turkey, abortion has become more difficult. Caesarean section births are now allowed only in state hospitals.

Last but not least, the AKP government's response to the low participation of women in the formal labour market in Turkey, which has been heavily criticised by Turkish feminist groups and the EU, is being shaped by a policy to increase part-time and home-based work rather than full-time, full paying jobs with better benefits. To date, a Gender Equality Body has yet to be established. Women's rights groups have called for the establishment of such a unit, and the EU has made it a requirement. The Parliamentary Commission on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, which was founded in 2009 in response to EU stipulations, has not been effective on the policy platform.

When these developments are considered, it is not surprising that for the women who participated in the protests, Gezi Park has become a vehicle to publicise their discontent with the actions of the recent government regarding women's rights and gender equality. Protecting what has been achieved over the years in the area of gender equality has become an increasingly significant issue for Turkish women.

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Gül Aldıkaçtı Marshall is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at University of Louisville. Her research interests are in the areas of gender, politics, social movements, and mass media. She has written numerous articles on women's movements and women's rights in Turkey. Her current line of research highlights the significance of transnational feminist activism in influencing gender policies both at national and supranational levels. She is the author of *Shaping Gender Policy in Turkey: Grassroots Women Activists, the European Union, and the Turkish State* (New York: SUNY Press, 2013).



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