

# For women in Turkey, the struggle continues

by Elifcan Çelebi and Ebru Ece Özbey on 1st July 2021

**As of today, the Istanbul convention ceases to be effective in Turkey. But that's not the end of the story.**

On March 20th, the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, issued a midnight decree, annulling Turkey's ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. The Istanbul convention, [signed](#) by 45 countries and the European Union collectively, has [four pillars](#): prevention, protection, prosecution and integrated policies.

Turkey was not only the enthusiastic host of the negotiations for the convention a decade ago—primarily due to advocacy campaigns and social mobilisations by the women's movement—but also the first signatory and, indeed, the first country to ratify it in 2012 in the national parliament, supported by aligned legislation, [law no. 6284](#). Being the only country to withdraw from the convention so far would thus be as ironic as it is tragic—[endangering](#) the law enacted with reference to it but now confusingly [presented](#) as an alternative.

## Populist target

There is [evidence](#) that the convention is bringing about positive change, such as funding for refuges for women fleeing intimate-partner violence and national helplines. Its purview extends to the rights of children and to LGBT+ individuals, in the context of gender inequalities and gender-based violence. It has become a target for right-wing populist leaders in recent years, in parallel with attacks on other gender-based rights and the undermining of democracy.

Announcing the decision to withdraw in March, the Turkish presidency tortuously [claimed](#) that the convention's original intention of promoting women's rights had been 'hijacked by a group of people attempting to normalize homosexuality', rendering it 'incompatible' with the 'social and family values' of the country. The statement referred to six EU member states which had not ratified the convention (Bulgaria, Hungary, Czechia, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia) and to Poland, which had taken steps to withdraw, having detected an alleged attempt 'by the LGBT community to impose their ideas about gender on the entire society'.

Erdoğan has set his sights on gender-based issues for some time, relentlessly commenting on how women are '[not suited to perform men's jobs](#)' and '[incomplete if they reject motherhood](#)', during which they '[should have at least three children](#)'. The centrality of the family as the supposed [foundation of society](#) and the [glorification](#) of traditional gender roles and purportedly Islamic values have been the defining features of Erdoğan's conservative ideology—and that of his Justice and Development Party (AKP)—in social and cultural domains.

## **Ideology institutionalised**

In recent years, this ideology has been institutionalised and fostered through the Ministry of Family and Social Services—which has undergone a remarkable transformation from a women’s to a ‘family’ ministry—as well as by government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs), the Directorate of Religious Affairs and various pro-government media promoting Islamic beliefs. [Lobbying](#) by religious groups, with their powerful connections in government, was seemingly influential in the decision to withdraw from the convention.

A women’s GONGO, *Kadın ve Demokrasi Derneği* (KADEM, the Women and Democracy Association), founded by Erdoğan’s daughter Sümeyye, has even introduced an essentialist, Islamic understanding of ‘gender justice’, as opposed to ‘western’ gender equality. Though part of the [anti-gender reaction](#), its stance towards the convention had differed from those claiming that it undermined the family (by encouraging divorce) and traditional social values. KADEM had [supported](#) the convention as a necessary tool to prevent violence against women. After the government’s decision, however, it [declared](#) that the convention had ‘turned into a subject of social tension’—showing that even the mildest fringe of the government cannot sustain an autonomous stance on women’s issues.

The growing anti-gender influence on the public agenda has been manifest in social indicators. In the latest World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report, Turkey [ranked 133rd](#) out of 156 countries. While the Turkish family and social services minister—the only female member of the current cabinet—has described the increase in violence against women during the pandemic as ‘[tolerable](#)’, a recent report by the We Will End Femicide Platform [found](#) that there were at least 300 femicides, as well as 171 suspicious female deaths, in 2020 alone.

## **Firestorm of controversy**

The March decision ignited a firestorm of controversy. The women’s and LGBT+ movements organised massive [protests in several cities](#). Human-rights lawyers [argued](#) that international agreements could not be terminated simply by presidential *fiat*. And opposition parties, bar associations and the [Women’s Platform for Equality](#), a coalition composed of more than 300 women’s and LGBT+ organisations, [appealed](#) to the Council of State to overrule the decision.

After a long wait, on Tuesday the Council of State rejected the appeal. Turkey’s highest administrative court [asserted](#) that the ‘authority’ to ratify and annul international treaties rested with the president, not parliament—which immediately sparked debate over the capacity of the judiciary to hold executive and legislative authorities to account.

[Severe international criticism](#) came from the United States president, Joe Biden, the high representative of the European Union for foreign affairs and security policy, Josep Borrell, the European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, and the Council of Europe secretary general, Marija Pejčinović Burić. These expressions of concern did not however translate into sanctions or other action against Turkey.

Domestically, meanwhile, opinion polls indicate that the majority of the population do not support the withdrawal decision. In a poll in March 52.3 per cent of respondents [disapproved](#) of it. Another poll [confirmed](#) public support for the convention while revealing that opinion on women’s issues was becoming more liberal over time.

In a wider context, the [gathering recession](#) in the face of the pandemic, rising unemployment and loss of trust in the judiciary and democratic institutions have empowered the opposition forces in Turkey. The [local elections](#) in 2019 and the findings of recently polls [confirm](#) that the AKP has been losing support.

Women's and LGBT+ rights have been under constant attack in Turkey. Still, the country has unique social and historical [dynamics](#), whatever the current government's illiberal tendencies and populist hostility to gender equality. The annulment of the Istanbul convention, effective from today, is an unexpected yet unsurprising result of the AKP's authoritarian and conservative policies, which have gained momentum in the last decade. The responses from the society and opposition groups have however restored hope for change, Erdoğan's *démarche* having unified the women's and LGBT+ movement in Turkey—which comprise fragmented groups with very different views—behind the same goal.



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