

CALL TO ACTION

GENDER INEQUALITY AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN TURKEY



25 November 2020

Women's rights and the Istanbul Convention

Violence against women and gender inequality have intensified in Turkey in the past year. Particularly after the outbreak of Covid-19 women have been forced into the home into ever more difficult domestic violence situations, which have been compounded by challenges relating to childcare and increasing debts.

In the run up to 25 November International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, SPOT spoke to women resisting in Turkey to find out more about their experiences and how they are resisting.

In 2020, according to We Will Stop Femicides Platform in Turkey, so far at least 335 women were murdered in Turkey, most of them by current or former partners, family members, or men who wanted a relationship with them. There have also been a number of high-profile killings, which have sparked protests both online and on the streets. In particular, the brutal killing of Pinar Gultekin, a 27-year-old student in the southwestern province of Mugla, came on the heels of the AKP stating its intention to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention, which caused widespread outrage in the country – prompting thousands to take to the streets.

SPOT heard from Filiz Kerestecioglu (HDP MP) and Cevriye Aydin (Lawyer) on the issue of legal protections and prevention against violence for women in Turkey. Cevriye Aydin highlighted that “the Istanbul Convention requires, first accepting that men and women are equal and secondly, that governments will take precautions and take steps to achieve this. It is a convention prepared from this perspective and recognises that violence is caused by gender inequality” and the AKP have made commitments and put in place legislation aimed at countering violence against women in Turkey. However “We are at a point where they want to get rid of the Istanbul Convention... They are saying that the spirit of this convention is not compatible with our national values, it is destroying and harming the family, making men more like women, women like men and making society genderless, causing moral harm, so on and so forth.”

The Governing AKP is an Islamist party, which uses religious sects to promote its religious agenda. The AKP and the groups with which it works view women's rights as incompatible with Islam and the national moral values. This is reflected in Government policies and announcements which undermine gender equality and ignores the needs of women in society. Filiz Kerestecioglu highlighted to us that “They [AKP] want moderate women; ... a woman that behaves within particular restrictions. A woman that isn't this rebellious. They don't want a woman who is persistent in demanding her rights, freedom and refusing to

submit.” She added that “There is something else which is tragicomic about the Istanbul Convention...While on the one hand discourse is happening about the Istanbul Convention not being suitable for us or being scrapped, on the other there is a commission in charge of effectively implementing and monitoring the Istanbul Convention” which is unable to make recommendations or issue a report on its findings.

We also heard that whilst there are laws to protect women from violence, these are not applied by the judiciary or police, and impunity is encouraged with reduced sentences and the release of perpetrators becoming routine. Moreover, during the pandemic the AKP introduced a law on the execution of sentences citing fears about Covid-19 in prison. This resulted in perpetrators of domestic violence being released home, without the women at home even being notified.

And during this period, regardless of employment status, we have seen that women have been pushed back into their homes where they face poverty, hunger and no protection from violence. Women frequently employed in the food, textiles and public health sectors as cheap labour with few protections, have faced even tougher working conditions. With this pandemic they have been faced with losing their jobs completely, have been forced to take unpaid leave or have been forced to work longer hours to meet increasing demand (even at the expense of leaving young children unaccompanied in the home).

For those women still working, we heard from Hilal Tok at Ekmek ve Gul (Bread and Roses) that they are working under poor and unhealthy conditions and face the constant risk of losing their jobs. There has been an increase in violent, oppressive and sexist behaviours. Women workers are also being forced by their managers to take responsibility for the “hygiene” in their workplaces alongside their regular responsibilities. The fear of being dismissed is leading to an increase in sexual assault and degrading treatment of women in the workplace. The fear of being first in line for dismissal and having to be even more reliant on parents or their husbands economically is a growing anxiety for women.

The Women’s Movement

The position of women in public life, particularly in politics and the judiciary have also been under attack by the AKP, with female politicians being detained and imprisoned as part of the Government’s clamp down on all democratic opposition in Turkey. In 2019 Gulden Kisanak, the elected Mayor of Diyarbakir Province, and Sebahat Tuncel, the Co-chair of the Democratic Regions Party (DBP), were sentenced to a combined total of 29 years and three months of imprisonment for so-called membership of a “terrorist organisation”. Kisanak received a sentence of 14 years and three months whereas Tuncel was handed 15 years of jail time. Both women remain in prison and their trial continues despite clear evidence of a lack of independence by the judiciary and political motivations driving their ongoing imprisonment.

The lack of independence of the police and judiciary is a significant barrier for progressive women and organisations seeking to enforce their rights. Combined with the regressive gender politics of the AKP, women’s ability to seek legal protection is diminished by the AKPs increasing control over the judiciary and police. One such example is the case of Ebru

Timtik, who was on indefinite hunger strike demanding a fair trial. She died in Bakırköy Dr. Sadi Konuk Hospital after 238 days. Timtik's only demand was a right to fair trial and she had called on the Minister for Justice to intervene, but despite numerous warnings the government stood idly by – choosing instead to watch as she slowly died. During her 238-day hunger strike many human rights organisations and campaign groups called for the government to take steps to prevent her death.

We also saw Women in Turkey actively participate in the Las Tesis demonstrations, a number of whom were detained after participating in the December 2019 demonstrations in Kadikoy. Women's organisations have campaigned against the criminalisation of the women, whose trial began on 2 November, with the the Platform for ending violence against women and Women's councils, who organised the original the demonstration, calling for "murderers to be tried not Las Tesis".

Despite these developments the women's movement is a source of hope for Turkey's progressive and democratic movements. In the face of attacks on women's rights, gender equality and failure to protect women and girls from violence, Women have organised and stood up to the AKP government. Indeed, it was the women's mass resistance against the intentions to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention, which led to increased support for the Convention across the country and the AKP quietly shelving the issue.

There is an urgent need to support women and women's organisations in Turkey fighting for gender equality and for the prevention of violence against women and girls.

Call to Action

In the absence of physical delegations and visits to Turkey, we have made a conscious effort to hear from women's organisations and representatives in Turkey over the course of the past year. As SPOT we aim to amplify the voices of women in Turkey and work together in the struggle for safety and equality for women and children in Turkey.

This year, on the day for the elimination of violence against women, the UN has called for survivors, activists, decision-makers, and people from every walk of life, to shine a light on the need for funding, essential services, prevention and data that shapes better-informed responses. These are essential for women, but we recognise the need also for democracy, the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law to be upheld in Turkey, without these we cannot implement legislation or empower and protect women in society, in the home, in education or in the workplace.

The UK Government must end its silence on the increasingly authoritarian and regressive regime in Turkey. Parliament should debate the issue of violence against women in girls in Turkey, and call on Turkish Government to:

- end its criminalisation of progressive and democratic opposition, including the women's movement, and
- improve gender equality, prevent violence against women and girls, end the exploitation and discrimination of women in the workplace, and fund organisations supporting women.

We also call on MPs, Trade Unions, Human Rights Organisations, Women's Organisations Campaign Groups, media and individuals to support women in Turkey by:

- SPOT regularly releases news stories and updates. Help us by sharing updates with your organisations, followers, members and communities to increase the visibility of women fighting against gender equality and violence against women in Turkey.
- Trade Unions and branches can affiliate to SPOT and adopt motions on Women in Turkey. SPOT can also provide support to build links with women's sections of trade unions in Turkey to amplify the voices of women workers in Turkey.
- Human Rights Organisations and Women's Organisations can proactively engage with developments on women's rights in Turkey and promote the demands of the women's movement in Turkey through social media and innovative campaigning.
- Work with us to monitor trials of notable femicides, as well as female activists, political leaders, journalists and public figures. Close trial monitoring has in the past been shown to be effective in putting pressure on the Turkish judiciary to act lawfully.
- MPs, Mayors and Council Members can send video or written messages of solidarity to arrested and detained political leaders in Turkey.
- Write to the Government and your MP asking them to publicly condemn the AKP Government's attacks on women in Turkey, call for the effective implementation of legislation to protect women from violence and take steps to address gender equality.

SPOT is ready to work with interested organisations and individuals to continue building solidarity with the Women's movement in Turkey.

If you are interested in getting involved in our campaigns please contact us.

About us:

SPOT is an umbrella group made up of progressive organisations, campaign groups and trade unions in the UK. Chaired by Louise Reagan, former President of the National Education Union, SPOT aims to support those struggling for democracy and fundamental freedoms in Turkey, whilst also contributing to the working people's struggle in the UK.

The steering group is made up of representatives from the NEU, RMT, Stop the War, Campaign Against Arms Trade, Day-Mer Turkish and Kurdish Community Centre, Socialist Party, Socialist Worker's Party, Morning Star, National Shop Stewards Network, UCU and Unison.

