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Turkish human rights lawyer dies after hunger strike

OHCHR (02.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/32fP1qF> - The death of Turkish human rights lawyer Ebru Timtik after a long hunger strike was entirely preventable, UN human rights experts* said today, calling on Turkey to release other human rights defenders.

"No one should have to die in pursuit of a fair trial; it is a fundamental human right," they said. "This is an utter waste of a human life, and we are greatly dismayed at the death of this, courageous woman human rights defender, as well as the circumstances that led to her death."

Ebru Timtik died on 27 August 2020 after three years in detention and a hunger strike lasting 238 days. Along with other lawyers from the People's Law Office, she was arrested in September 2017 and sentenced to 13 years and six months in prison under the charges of belonging to a terrorist organisation. She went on a hunger strike on 02 January 2020 claiming her right to a fair trial.

Shortly after the lawyers were arrested, the UN human rights experts formally asked the Turkish government to explain the legal basis for their arrest and the accusations against them.

"We asked the Turkish Government in 2017 to explain how their arrest and conviction were compatible with the State's obligations under international human rights law", said the experts, highlighting allegations of unlawful detention, unfair trial and restrictions on the freedom of expression and of association. "While we acknowledge and appreciate the engagement of the authorities with us on the issue, we regret that little was done to prevent this tragic outcome."

The experts called for an effective investigation into her death. “We call on the authorities to establish an accountability process for the victim and to uphold fair trial principles by reopening the cases of arrested human rights lawyers. The Government of Turkey must also take immediate action to release individuals detained and sentenced contrary to international law.”

Turkish women rage against sexism with topsy-turvy tweets

Ever since last week, Turkish women have been giving their male counterparts a taste of sexist remarks by switching sex in popular sayings or political statements.

By Nazlan Ertan

Al-Monitor (10.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2NieHhb> - An unprecedented flurry of reverse sexism raised its head in Turkey’s lively Twittersphere last week. “I am a modern woman, so I help my husband with housework,” said a tweet, whilst another declared, “The greatest gift a man can offer his wife is his virginity.” Simply by switching the word “woman” with “man” and “wife” with “husband,” Turkish women — and some men — of all walks of life mocked misogynist or chauvinistic expressions, idioms, maxims and particularly political statements that discriminate against women.

“Thousands of tweets under the hashtag #menshouldknowtheirplace were witty and impactful,” Meltem Agduk, gender programme coordinator at the United Nations Population Fund in Turkey told Al-Monitor. “No wonder that some [conservative or chauvinistic] groups felt threatened by it and tried to counter it with another hashtag — #womenshouldknowtheirplace — or criticize it with media declarations. But these attempts have been futile; even after a week, the online campaign is still going strong.”

The spontaneous campaign started June 3 with a single, punchy tweet, “My husband can work if he wants” — an allusion to an often heard saying by men who try to drive home the point that they “allow” their wives to work. A 2001 legal amendment gave married women in Turkey the right to work without seeking spousal consent. But traditions, mentality and a host of legal and structural obstacles — such as the absence of child care centers and gender pay gap — prevent many women from joining the workforce. Only 34.5% of women in Turkey work, which is nearly half of the European Union average (61.4 %).

Replies to the tweet by Ruq, who now has more than 95,000 followers, poured in, repeating all-too-familiar sentences with the roles reversed: “I would never allow my husband to work, his job is to take care of my kids” and “Since we both work, I lend a hand to my husband while he does the housework. I even load and unload the dishwasher or shop on the weekends. What’s the big deal with housework anyway?”

But it was only after Gaye Su Akyol, a singer, activist and wit, started the hashtag #menshouldknowtheirplace that this initiative snowballed into a trending topic. Retweeting Ruq’s tweet, Akyol commented, “Men should be chaste. They should not laugh out loud in public.” This was a reference to a comment in 2014 by Bulent Arinc, one of the heavyweights of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) then and a notorious anti-feminist, who said that women should be chaste, act with modesty and “refrain from laughing out loud in public.”

Within hours, many women's rights activists and Twitter users joined in creating a chronicle of headline-grabbing sexist statements by government officials or acts of violence against women. One said that a man wearing shorts on public transport is "asking to be harassed," which alluded to a nurse who was kicked for wearing shorts on a bus in Istanbul in 2016. "Why would a decent man be out on the streets in the early hours of the morning?" joined in a male tweeter, referring to some of the statements made when a 19-year-old was threatened with a knife and raped in Istanbul's posh Bagdat Caddesi four years ago.

Most of the political satire targeted AKP officials whose statements often border on chauvinistic and misogynist. Many users switched around President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's remarks that motherhood was the highest honor bestowed upon women and that women who rejected motherhood were "deficient." Others mocked the words of an ex-minister who said that family values were threatened if "men" did not know how to bake a good traditional borek.

Opposition politicians joined in the campaign. "We are going to put up men from each constituency [in key posts] so that men can start being actors in politics, not mere accessories," tweeted Canan Kaftancıoğlu, the Istanbul chair of the Republican People's Party (CHP). Some CHP municipalities started tweeting that they were considering the launch of "blue buses" so that men can commute without harassment, mocking the AKP initiative of women-only pink buses.

Ruq was surprised by her newly-found fame. "I posted a [similar] tweet last year but nothing happened then," she tweeted. Akyol explained that the campaign had snowballed because women have become tired of femicides, domestic violence and daily demonstrations of sexism. "We are tired of this nauseating system where the name of the murder suspect is disguised, but the morality, life and choices of the victim are questioned. ... It is 2020 and we want to do something about this."

"The initiative showed us plainly how sexism exists in the everyday life in word and deed," Agduk noted. "It compliments, motivates and encourages other — more formal and structured — gender equality campaigns that international organizations and private groups carry out in Turkey."

One of those groups — Koc — launched in 2017 a Manual for Gender Mainstreaming in Communications, proposing alternatives for sexist forms of speech.

"From a communicator's point of view, this was a brilliant campaign," agreed Zehra Gungor, a communications expert and an activist for women's entrepreneurship. "The tweets were spontaneous, intelligent and very, very funny." She told AI-Monitor that she had also joined with a tweet that read, "We support our male colleagues who want quotas for men in political parties."

Not everyone was amused. While most women's groups, such as Stop Femicides Association, applauded the campaign, Women and Democracy Association (KADEM), vice-chaired by the president's daughter Sumeyye Erdogan Bayraktar, lambasted it, saying it was against the "values of society." On June 9, Ismail Kilicaslan, a columnist of Yeni Safak, also blasted the initiative, saying what started "innocently" had turned into offending religion by paraphrasing certain words of the prophet. "This is a dark project," he wrote, comparing it to the attempted coup against the government on July 15, 2016.

A feisty Akyol retorted with a tweet saying she was surely on the right path if her tweets irked conservative and chauvinistic groups. Posting an image of herself on a sunbed, she said she was toasting "to bury bigots who are disturbed [even] by the 'f' of freedom and the 'w' of woman in the dusty pages of history."

Turkey's Islamist President Erdogan attacks women's rights activists as 'Enemy of the Nation'

By Ben Cohen

The Algemeiner (11.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2CaUunZ> - Turkey's Islamist President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Monday redoubled his attack on the women's rights activists who last week defied a state ban by marching on International Women's Day.

Erdogan had previously decried the marchers at Friday's demonstration for allegedly whistling and booing as the Muslim azan, or call to prayer, was played over public loudspeakers in central Istanbul. Thousands of mainly female protestors who defied the ban on the march were brutally dispersed by police, who fired tear gas while attacking the protestors with batons and guard dogs.

"The batons and tear gas are not enough for them, now they're setting dogs on women approaching from side streets," one Twitter user said on Friday.

Erdogan defended the treatment of the protestors in comments at a campaign rally on Monday in the southeastern province of Adana.

"It's our honor to be against the enemy of the nation, the enemy of the azan, the enemy of the land, and the enemy of the state," Erdogan said in remarks quoted by Turkey's Anadolu news agency.

"They directly attack our independence and our future, disrespecting our flag and our prayer," the Turkish leader added.

One of the political parties behind Friday's march denied that the protesters had intended to insult the call to prayer.

Faik Oztrak, spokesman for the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), said the noise during the protests was against police intervention, insisting that "no one has any problem" with the call to prayer.

Human rights groups say that state restrictions on freedom of assembly in Turkey have become more stringent in the last year, with many of them citing as an example the 2018 ban on Gay Pride marches on the grounds of "security threats and public order."

Women's activists meanwhile accused Erdogan of making political capital out of the march ahead of local elections at the end of this month.

"Police violence against tens of thousands of women trying to take part in the march cannot be covered up with polarizing language, fake news, and hate," a statement from the "March 8 Feminist Night march" said on Monday.

440 women were killed in 2018 in Turkey: Women's rights group

By Zeynep Bilgehan

Hurriyet Daily News (25.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Xn39wK> - A staggering 440 women were killed in Turkey in 2018, according to an organization that keeps a tally of femicides across the country.

Of this number, 131 were logged as “shady deaths,” in which there is no blatant connection between the cause or reason and the death. But women’s rights groups have long blamed authorities for failing these women by ignoring circumstances and factors that may have led to the murders.

Some 43 women were killed just in January of this year, a report by Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu (We Will Stop Femicide Platform) stressed, adding that the bodies of seven out of the 43 women were found in lakes, streams or buried in the woods.

The number of women killed in 2017 was 409, according to a previous report published by the same organization.

“The forms of violence against women are changing. Shady deaths and femicides by unknown assailants are on the rise. Many incidents are being covered up. When [femicide] cases are identified as ‘suicide,’ it becomes exemplary for similar incidents,” Fidan Ataselim, secretary-general of the platform, has told daily Hürriyet.

Ataselim underlined that the state’s agencies “need to side with women” and police officers need to meticulously collect and analyze evidence in women murder cases.

“The more we bring shady deaths out into the open, the more the numbers will decline,” she said.

“In our report, 10 out of 43 femicides are labeled as ‘shady killings’ [in January of this year], but this is only the figure we could have gathered [from news reports],” said Gülsüm Kav, the general representative of the platform, implying that the actual figure could be much higher.

“Unless perpetrators and their motives are identified, unless deterrent penalties are given to suspects and killers, and unless precautionary measures are taken, violence will continue,” Kav said.

“It is getting more difficult to identify the perpetrator in femicides, because cases are not being taken seriously,” said Leyla Süren, one of the lawyers of the platform. “In Turkey, if the victim is a woman, investigations are not being launched,” Süren said.

The lawyer also stressed that when the Istanbul Convention, formally known as The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, was signed in 2011 violence against women had reached its lowest rates in recent years in Turkey. “Discourse has changed since, and since 2000 violence against women has increased by 1,400 percent,” she said.

Süren also drew attention to the importance of public opinion in femicide cases and said for cases which the public follows closely, the relevant court’s decision of good conduct time “gets precluded about 83 percent.”

An example of this is the case of Şule Çet, the lawyer said, referring to a 23-year-old university student who died after being thrown out of the 20th story of a tower in the capital Ankara in the early hours of May 29, 2018. Two male business partners have been indicted by a prosecutor for sexually assaulting and then murdering Çet by throwing her out of the window of the tower. The case is still ongoing.

"The case of Şule Çet has reached this level of importance thanks to the women's movement and the pressure of the public. People have come to the point of seeking justice on Twitter. They are sharing it [the case of Çet] on social media to access justice... Families only feel relieved after they are convinced of an efficient investigation," Süren said.

'She insulted my manhood': murder underlines Turkey's LGBT backlash

In a country where anti-gay violence is often excused as unjust provocation, a fatal shooting has raised fresh fears

The Guardian (16.08.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2wjsdbf> - Simge Avcı loved practical jokes, says her roommate Bahar, recalling how her friend would giggle after pretending to spill the contents of an empty teapot on her startled victims.

Bahar (not her real name), 25, had lived with Avcı for seven years in Samsun, a small, sleepy city on the Black Sea coast of Turkey.

On 13 July, the roommates went out for a long breakfast with Avcı's boyfriend, Mecit Sezer, and her mother. They chatted as they ate and later went to a local pool to combat the sweltering heat. "It was a normal day," says Bahar.

The group parted company at about 7pm. Less than five hours later, Avcı was shot in the stomach and died.

Sezer, her boyfriend of six months, has been arrested, but not charged. Sezer has reportedly claimed that Avcı "insulted his manhood".

Bahar and Avcı are both trans women. At 24, Avcı had just started her transition. She was excited about getting surgery, and being able to live fully and honestly with her family.

Once the home of one of the largest LGBT pride marches in the wider region, in recent years there has been a growing backlash against the community in Turkey. Pride marches were banned four years ago. People who have taken to the streets have been met with teargas and violent dispersals.

In 2017 all public LGBT events in Ankara, the capital, were banned. Earlier this month, the head of Turkey's public broadcaster TRT said that Turkey would not rejoin Eurovision if it continued to have contestants like "the bearded Austrian in the skirt" – in reference to 2014's winner, Conchita.

"There's this constant emphasis on one nation, one religion, one ethnicity. Everything is consolidated around this uniformity of what it means to be a Turkish citizen who deserves to live," says Asli Zengin, an LGBT activist and visiting professor at Brown University's anthropology department.

Transgender women are especially vulnerable to violence. Discrimination means it can be difficult to find jobs; many are forced into sex work to survive, putting them at even greater risk. Institutionally, the court system is stacked against them. Under Turkish law an "unjust provocation" can lower sentences. In cases of violence against transgender

women, men will often say they did not know the woman was trans and, like Sezer, that she “insulted their manhood” as evidence for an “unjust provocation”.

“Often, judges use their discretion to interpret the whole interaction between a transgender woman and a cisgender man – and their sexual intercourse – as a trigger of unjust provocation,” explains Zengin.

Yasemin Öz, a Turkish LGBT rights activist and lawyer, says the number of judges willing to accept an “insult to manhood” as a reason for an unjust provocation defence has decreased over the years, as LGBT lawyers and activists have worked on more of these cases. Nevertheless, it remains potent: in a recent case, the killers of a gay Syrian refugee murdered in 2016 were given a reduced sentence on grounds of “unjust provocation”.

In places like Samsun, where there are no LGBT organisations advocating for the rights of the local community, the situation is even more insecure. “It all depends on the attitude of the judge, unfortunately,” says Öz. “But where there are no LGBT organisations, the attitude change can be slower.”

Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir all have multiple LGBT organisations that provide legal and social support to the community. Samsun is a quiet, traditional city in a part of the country that has consistently voted for the conservative ruling party AKP.

Deniz, 25, a trans woman who did not want to reveal her last name, says some trans women in Samsun do not like to leave the house. “If someone has long hair and breasts as a trans woman, they’re excluded from society,” she says. Deniz recently stopped taking hormones and cut her hair so she could pass more easily on the street. Her family does not accept her as a trans woman, and she says she doesn’t feel safe going outside while presenting as female.

In contrast, Avci’s family accepted her, and were able to help her financially. Her friends are full of anecdotes about her generosity. “If she saw someone on the street, she would give them 100 Turkish lira,” recalls Can, a 22-year-old trans woman and friend of Avci’s.

“There is this sense of masculinity, which feels entitled to anything,” says Zengin. “Impunity is becoming the norm ... it’s not only transgender murders, but also cis women whose murders have reached a statistically high number in Turkey.”

In Samsun, this feeling is visceral. After Avci’s death the community was in shock. “We wondered if this is how we’re going to die in the end,” says Can. For many in the LGBT community, the atmosphere in Samsun is now tinged with fear. Avci’s death has made the dangers starker.

“I feel alone now,” says Bahar. “We’d understand each other just by looks, not even through talking. We were together every day ... I can’t express it. I still don’t believe that it’s real, I still don’t believe she’s gone.”

Refugee child marriages drive adolescent pregnancies underground

By Rebecca Zerzan

UNFPA (26.07.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2OR9PyM> - “Even today, we saw a 17 year old who is pregnant and already has a child,” said midwife Neval, sitting in the Devtesti Centre, a women’s and girls’ safe space in Sanliurfa, Turkey.

Some 475,000 Syrian refugees have sought safe haven in the desert city, about an hour's drive from the Syrian border. Many are mired in poverty and struggling to rebuild their lives. Some have resorted to marrying off their underage daughters.

These girls are at high risk of becoming pregnant early – even before their bodies are ready. “Sometimes we see girls who are 14 or 15 who are pregnant,” Neval said.

“We pay special attention to pregnant teens,” she added. “We ask them to come more frequently. They are more fragile.”

Vulnerable, malnourished

Child marriage is both a harmful traditional practice and an economic coping mechanism for parents straining to care for their children.

The practice is closely linked to teen pregnancy; in developing countries, nine out of 10 births to adolescent girls take place within a marriage or union.

These pregnancies can be dangerous. Globally, complications of pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death for girls aged 15 to 19.

And it is often the most vulnerable girls – those who are poorly educated, deeply impoverished, without knowledge of their human rights – who are most at risk of child marriage.

Their health is commonly neglected until they become pregnant, said Huda, a long-time midwife working at the Hayati Harrani Centre. The centre is one of four UNFPA-operated women's and girls' safe spaces in Sanliurfa funded by European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO).

“Among child brides, the number one problem we see is malnutrition,” she explained. “These girls don't go to the doctor regularly. Their condition is usually first detected at their appointment with the midwife after they are pregnant.”

Malnourishment – including anaemia – increases risks for both pregnant girls and their developing fetuses.

Going underground

Studies show that child marriage is increasing among some Syrian refugee communities.

It is hard to know just how pervasive the phenomenon is among refugees in Turkey, however. Many marriages are unregistered.

And midwives say fear is driving child marriages – and the resulting pregnancies – underground.

They, and other staff at the women's and girls' centres, are required to report marriages among girls under 16 to the Turkish authorities.

“We see three to four [child brides] per month,” Huda told UNFPA. “We know the number is higher, but they don't want to get caught so they don't show up in the health centre.”

"Before, we had many patients who were children," Neval explained. "In the last few months, there has been a visible decline because they have to fill out a form with their age. Word got around, and pregnant girls are afraid to come."

But without proper maternal health care, pregnant girls face even greater risks.

"Many don't give birth in public health facilities. They may go to private hospitals, but I don't know how they manage to pay for this. Some probably give birth at home," said Huda.

"Our hands are tied"

The four women's and girls' centres in Sanliurfa are part of UNFPA's support to the Ministry of Health as it addresses the refugee crisis.

The centres, run together with Harran University, provide more than sexual and reproductive health services to refugees. They also offer counselling, information on health and human rights, language classes and other services. Many of the staff members are themselves Syrian refugees.

When staff do encounter child brides, they direct the girls to social workers. "Aside from seeing the midwife or doctor for check-ups, these girls are referred for social services, also provided at the centre," Huda said.

Health outreach workers, called health mediators, also frequently discover child brides when visiting refugee families. "UNFPA's health mediators often learn about child brides and check on them," said Fatima Al Hamad, a health mediator at Hayati Harrani.

They inform the girls about their rights – including the right to marry a person of their choice, with full consent and without coercion or fear – and encourage them to visit the women's and girls' centres for services and information. Pregnant teens are also urged to seek proper maternal care.

But health workers say they worry about all the girls they simply cannot reach.

"They need special attention," Huda said, "but our hands are tied because so few come for care."

Turkish marriage law a blow to women's rights, say activists

Bill allowing Muslim clerics to conduct civil marriages passed despite protests amid fears it could lead to more child brides

By Kareem Shaheen and Gokce Saracoglu

The Guardian (14.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2AHputJ> - Activists and opposition politicians in Turkey have rounded on a law that allows Muslim clerics to conduct civil marriages, describing it as a blow to women's rights and secularism and part of an ongoing effort to impose religious values on a polarised society.

The law allowing "mufti" marriages was passed by parliament and Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then published in the country's official gazette on Friday, despite

protests by civil society activists and opposition lawmakers. Last month, Erdoğan declared the bill would be passed “whether you like it or not”.

“Women’s rights are going to decline,” said Nazan Moroğlu, an expert on gender law and a lecturer at Yeditepe University. “Everything that has been pushed on to women in this land has been done in the name of religion.”

Muftis are clerics empowered with issuing religious opinions on matters of day-to-day life. Previously, only state officers in branches of the family affairs directorate were able to conduct marriages.

A requirement has also been added that prohibits individuals who carried out “immoral acts” before marriage from becoming Turkish citizens.

Many people in Turkey, a Muslim-majority country, conduct religious ceremonies in addition to civil marriages, as do Syrian refugees who tie the knot in the country, and see it as a religious obligation. Other Middle Eastern countries do not allow civil marriages because of religious restrictions on Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men, but often recognise marriages performed abroad. Many couples in the region often travel to Cyprus or Turkey to conduct such marriages.

Supporters of the law point out that it does not change the requirements for a legal civil marriage. They say it does not create a loophole that allows child marriages or polygamy, and simply makes it more convenient for citizens who are religiously observant.

Opponents contend that the law is an unnecessary distraction in a country still reeling from the aftermath of a coup attempt last year and enduring an ongoing crackdown on dissidents under a 16-month long state of emergency. They say it is part of a broader campaign by the government to impose conservative Islamic values on a divided society.

Critics point to other recent changes that they say are indicative of an attempt to establish the dominance of Sunni Islam in a republic created on secular principles. They cite changes to the school curriculum that have ended the practice of teaching evolution in high school and introduced a state-sponsored explanation of the concept of jihad.

They also fear the government is turning a blind eye to other dangerous trends that are harmful to women’s rights, such as child marriage. The Turkish legal system sets the minimum marriage age at 17, with some exceptions for girls aged 16, with an estimated 232,000 such marriages conducted in the past four years. Women’s rights campaigners estimate that a third of all marriages in Turkey include girls under the age of 18.

“From the way this draft law was prepared without the participation of sides who will be affected, such as muftis or women’s groups, it is a sign of an enforcement of an idea,” said Selina Doğan, an opposition MP in Istanbul, who pointed out that women campaigning against the law in front of parliament were pepper sprayed. “One man [Erdoğan] has the power and a change to a political Islamist regime is planned.”

Efforts to change long-established family legal principles in Turkey have emerged as a lightning rod in the battle between Islamists and secularists. A parliamentary commission established in 2016 by the ruling Justice and Development (AK) party to study the causes for high divorce rates introduced a series of recommendations last year that were seen as a backward step on women’s equality and an attempt to impose conservative family values.

Among the recommendations was a widely condemned proposal that would have granted amnesty to some men convicted of child sex assault if they marry their victims. The

recommendation was tabled as a bill late last year then withdrawn after widespread protests.

Other proposals included introducing mediation by religious scholars in divorce cases and changes to the penal code that would decriminalise the practice of couples living in a religious marriage without a civil one registered with the state.

"This is another trick by Erdoğan to polarise society and consolidate his 50% base and nothing else," said Engin Altay, a politician with the largest opposition party. "While Turkey is burning with mountains of problems they are bringing this up just to separate his base [from his opponents] with unfounded discussion."

Report reveals 38 women killed in Turkey in January

Turkish Minute (05.02.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2kpczrQ> - A report released by the Stop the Murder of Women Platform has shown that a total of 38 women became the victims of domestic violence in Turkey in January.

Most of the murders took place in the western province of İzmir, where six women were killed, followed by İstanbul, Balıkesir, Trabzon and Şanlıurfa, where three women were murdered in each province.

The platform said it could not determine whether all of the murdered women had state protection but said 8 percent of the women killed in January died while they trying to protect another woman.

"These data clearly show that women are not protected by the state. Thirty-one percent of the women were killed because they wanted to divorce, end a relationship or simply because they wanted to make a decision regarding their lives," the platform said in its report.

Women's rights organizations have for years been trying to raise awareness about the rise in violence against women that has taken place in the last decade.

According to local reports, between 2003 and 2010 there had been a 1,400 percent increase.

Many women think that this is linked to the policies or rhetoric of the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, which has its roots in political Islam and has been in power since 2002.

Other reading:

[İHD Report: Human rights abuses systematically grew in Turkey following failed coup](#)

Turkish grannies to get state salaries for grandchildren's care

By Zulfikar Dogan

Al Monitor (16.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2jdFSbZ> - Child care is the biggest challenge for working mothers, but the Turkish government has found an easy solution: pay grandmothers to look after the children.

Turkish law requires workplaces, both public and private, to provide child care facilities for their employees, but most establishments do not comply with the rules to avoid additional costs. Instead of fulfilling their responsibilities, they prefer to pay fines.

The governing Justice and Development Party has been closely concerned with family affairs. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has led a campaign for Turks to have at least three children, while the government has introduced incentives for marrying early, including while still at university, and gold-coin awards for each newborn baby.

In 2015, the government launched a European Union-funded child care support program in three pilot provinces, under which working women with children ages 0-2 receive 416 euros (\$441) per month provided they employ a socially insured nanny. The program, expanded to Ankara and Istanbul provinces in November, aims to boost female employment, both by keeping the mother at work and ensuring the labor rights of nannies. One eligibility condition for the program is that the caretaker is not a grandmother of the child.

In Turkey, grandmothers traditionally volunteer to look after the children of their sons or daughters, and the practice is widespread in all social segments. The government has now announced a plan to pay salaries to those grandmothers as part of a program called National Mobilization in Working Life.

The project is scheduled to kick off in February in two provinces — Bursa and Izmir — and cover 1,000 families initially. After a six-month monitoring and evaluation period, it will be expanded to other provinces with an ultimate target of covering 500,000 grandmothers.

For nonworking or retired grandmothers, whose pensions range mostly between 1,000 and 1,800 Turkish liras (\$250-\$450), the project means an opportunity to earn additional income while taking care of grandchildren at home.

When the plan was first announced in early January, grandmothers were truly excited, expecting a salary similar to the 416 euros (1,664 Turkish liras) in the EU-funded nanny program. But Labor and Social Security Minister Mehmet Muezzinoglu soon cooled the excitement, announcing that the program would cover the children only of women who work part-time, to allow them to shift to full-time jobs and hence earn more. In an interview with CNN Turk, the minister said the grandmothers would receive about 400 Turkish liras (99 euros or \$105) per month.

Then the project came under fire for promoting home care for young children by older people rather than in an environment among peers in nurseries and kindergartens.

Burcin Demirkan Baytar, a Turkish child psychologist and family consultant, writes on her personal blog that a grandmother cannot keep up with the energy of a child. If home care is the preferred option, she advises that an experienced nanny who is at least 25 take care of the child under the supervision of the grandmother.

In a Jan. 6 statement, the Women's Labor and Employment Initiative (KEIG), a platform of civic groups working to empower women, sharply criticized the government's plan, saying it reflected a "cost-cutting economic mentality" whereby the state attempts to get rid of a duty it is supposed to perform and place it on the shoulders of women.

Citing statistics by the Ministry of National Education, the statement said the number of public nurseries had fallen from 497 in 2007-2008 to 56 in 2015-2016, stressing that child care had been left almost entirely to the private sector and the family. And because

private nurseries are quite expensive and often of low quality, child care duties are met largely by women in the family, it said.

"When put in the context of problems such as female poverty, female labor's concentration in low-paid, insecure jobs and the poor accessibility of child care and education services, this policy speaks of opportunism," the statement said.

In KEIG's view, the government not only flouts its duty to provide child care facilities as a public service but, with its latest plan, discriminates against working mothers who need them most — those who lack elder relatives for child care. "This approach precludes both the opportunity for a more independent life for women, who, after a certain age have lighter burdens, and the understanding of early childhood education and care as a public service that needs to be provided institutionally," it said.

In sum, the support offered to families raising children — the future of the nation — should be thoroughly analyzed before being put into practice. Experts stress that the education and care children receive in their first three years bear directly on their future.

Sadly, uneducated, low-income grandmothers have already started to compete for the care of grandchildren. For working parents, any relief from the prospect of state support could be now superseded by family crises in which the grandmother assumes the care of the child.

Turkish marriage guide sparks controversy

The Turkish city of Kütahya is known for fresh mountain air, ceramics - and now, for promoting misogyny: The city hands out a free guide on married life to newlyweds that says beating wives is justifiable in some cases.

By Sertan Sanderson

DW (07.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2j7QSeb> - Turkish authorities in some cities have come under criticism for handing out "marriage guides" that advocate mistreatment of women as being beneficial to conjugal bliss.

A 394-page book entitled "Marriage and Family Life" says that wife beatings are a legitimate and recommended means for conflict resolution if a woman refuses to wear makeup for her husband, and recommends that "a wife has to remain quiet and apologize if her husband is angry with her."

Other pieces of advice in the book include the notion that women should not talk during sex "as this will lead to the child developing a stutter" and that they should stay away from public parks and sports facilities. Polygamy is suggested as a way to keep a "wayward" woman in check, as it apparently creates competition among wives.

The book also allows for children as young as 10 years of age to be married.

'No complaints'

The leader of Kütahya's main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), Zeliha Aksaz Sahbaz, said in December 2016 that the book "depicts woman as second-class citizens and sexual slaves."

But the mayor of Kütahya, Kamil Saracoglu, a member of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP), defended the writings in an interview, saying there had never

been any complaints and that the advice given in the document was based on Islamic principles.

Copies of the same book published under a slightly different title, "Marriage and Privacy," were meanwhile also found in the resort town of Pamukkale. Issued by Pamukkale's city council, those copies have reportedly even made their way to the parliamentary library in the Turkish capital, Ankara.

Unconstitutional

Parliamentarian Fatma Kaplan-Hürriyet picked up one of those copies and said in parliament the writings were in breach of the Turkish constitution, adding that they were reminiscent of Sharia law. Kaplan-Hürriyet, who is also a member of the opposition CHP, said that she sent a request to the municipal prosecution services in Kütahya and Pamukkale, which are both run by the AKP, to start legal proceedings against the book. If they failed to take action, Hürriyet warned, she would take matters into her own hands, seeking to make sure that taxpayers' money wasn't spent on hate speech.

"Each time the AKP mentions the issue of violence against women I will throw this book at them. Whenever they mention child marriage I will stick this book into their eyes," she said, adding she might bring a lawsuit against the municipalities distributing the book to newlyweds. Kaplan's outspoken activism against the publication has drawn a lot of attention in Turkish media.

Members of the AKP, founded by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, have acknowledged that the books were unsuitable as actual marriage guidelines; they have, however, not initiated any discourse on the legal status of the writings so far. Education Minister Ismet Yilmaz merely described them as "primitive."

The "marriage guide" was penned by Hasan Caliskan, a former employee of Turkey's powerful Ministry of Religious Affairs, known as "Diyanet," which under successive AKP governments has seen a major increase in funding and support. In reaction to the controversy, Diyanet has reportedly announced that municipalities should ask the ministry before deciding to distribute the book.

Identity crisis

In addition to dealing with widespread terrorism and the consequences of a failed coup in July 2016, the Turkish government has also been embroiled in ongoing discussions on various aspects of gender equality. With crimes against women being tolerated in many parts of the country, some of the debate has moved away from safeguarding equality and toward portraying the two genders as unequal by nature - a concept that would seem to be supported by the publication of these marriage guidelines.

Women's rights groups are, among other things, enraged by attempts in parliament to pardon child rapists, if they agree to marry the rape victim. The motion was rejected only after protests across the country. Earlier in 2016, reports surfaced about child abuse in a government-sponsored charity for children - one that was headed by a woman. The December 2015 rape and murder of student Özgecan Aslan led to protests across the country, but resulted in little to no reaction in government circles. Violence against transgender women meanwhile remains rampant, as many manage to find an income only as prostitutes.

The public discourse on women's rights and domestic violence, sometimes regrettably absurd in nature, has also sparked a debate about the Turkish identity, one forged nearly a century ago by the founder of the Turkish republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

An assault on the secular order

Atatürk's idea of a secular state protected by a secular constitution, which in turn was to be protected by a secular military, has gradually been eroded under Erdogan's leadership, dividing the nation between those who wish to follow a decidedly religious world order and those who follow Atatürk's principle of "laiklik" - a term borrowed from its French counterpart "laïcité," meaning the principle of the separation of religion and state.

Atatürk established the Diyanet ministry, the publisher of the controversial guide on marriage, as a means to keep religious affairs away from government. Erdogan has turned this idea on its head and has used the ministry as a way to further expand the influence of Islamist ideas in the public sphere.

Meanwhile, the vacuum created by Erdogan's purge against all kinds of social groups, including his gradual withdrawal of power from the military - the constitution's intended guardian - has been filled by only one thing, and that is the expansion of patriarchy. Erdogan himself appears to be the chief representative of this oppressive social system, repeatedly making clumsy comments on women's place in society based on his interpretation of Islam, such as "a women who rejects motherhood (...) is deficient."

Patriarchy at its best

While Islam itself maintains the equality of both genders in many areas and, in particular, the protection of women in certain affairs as expressed in the Koran, it is the cultural aspect of patriarchy that usually gives rise to misogynistic ideas, not only in towns like Kütahya and Pamukkale but throughout the country. Although not always communicated through violence, the daily discrimination against women in Turkey is typically expressed by belittling their concerns.

Kütahya mayor Kamil Saracoglu, for instance, commented that "no one should dare try to make political gains with such unimportant issues while our nation is struggling to rebuild."

Further reading:

[A Chronic Problem: Violence Against Women and Girls in Turkey](#)

Turkey withdraws child rape bill after street protests

Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim has withdrawn a bill that pardons men convicted of sex with underage girls if they have married them.

BBC (22.11.2016) - <http://bbc.in/2gx8fnX> - The bill, part of a package of amendments to the legal system, was sent back for further work just hours before a final vote in parliament.

It had sparked protests across Turkish society and was condemned abroad.

Critics said it would legitimise statutory rape and encourage the practice of taking child brides.

UN agencies had called on the government not to approve the bill, arguing that it would damage the country's ability to combat sexual abuse and child marriage.

But the government says the main aim is to exonerate men imprisoned for marrying an underage girl apparently with her or her family's consent.

The draft law will now be returned to a commission which will take into account the views of the opposition and civil society, Mr Yildirim said.

This would allow for "broad consensus" and to "give time for the opposition parties to develop their proposals".

Turkey's legal age of consent is 18 but the practice of underage weddings in religious ceremonies remains widespread.

Opposition parties heavily criticised the bill which had been approved in an initial parliamentary reading on Thursday.

The ruling AK Party dominates parliament in Ankara.

Justice Minister Bekir Bozdag had defended the legislation, saying: "The bill will certainly not bring amnesty to rapists.... This is a step taken to solve a problem in some parts of our country."

In July, Turkey's constitutional court annulled part of the criminal code which classified all sexual acts with children under 15 as sexual abuse.

Elif Shafak, one of Turkey's best-selling novelists, explained the concern over the bill.

"One of the main weaknesses of this draft is that word, consent," she told the BBC.

"What does that mean? We're talking about children here. So if the rapist negotiates with the family, if he bribes or threatens the family, the family can easily withdraw, you know, their complaint and they can say OK there was a consent and there was no force involved."

But Ravza Kavakci Kan, an AKP MP, said the bill had been misunderstood.

"It is about giving normality to young women who have been married underage due to cultural norms, other norms, and now find themselves with their children suffering because their husbands are in prison," she told the BBC's Newsday programme.

"One of the examples is when the woman is 15 and the man is 17, they get married, they're both underage, a few years later after they've had children, or when they go to register their babies, or when they go to the doctor, the doctors or officials have to report this case if it is an underage marriage, so now they are 24, 25 and all of a sudden their husbands are in prison."

Further reading: [MPs in Turkey support bill allowing child rapists to go free if they marry their victim](#)

MPs in Turkey support bill allowing child rapists to go free if they marry their victim

'If you give him a pass by marriage, the young girl will live in a prison for her whole life,' argues opposition politician

The Independent (18.11.2016) - <http://ind.pn/2foJAOn> - Men who sexually abuse children could have their convictions quashed if they marry their victims, under a controversial bill supported by Turkish MPs.

Critics said the bill would legitimise and encourage rape, but the government argued the law had been misinterpreted.

The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) – which brought the bill to parliament – reacted angrily to the backlash, saying the law was needed to resolve legal complications associated with child marriage in the country.

If it passes, men who sexually abuse girls under 18 could avoid prosecution if they marry their victims.

The act cannot have been committed with “force, threat, or any other restriction on consent” to qualify for the pardon.

MPs approved the draft law in its initial reading on Thursday and will vote again on the bill in a second debate in the coming days.

Opposition parties have been alarmed by the AKP’s proposals.

Ömer Süha Aldan, of the Republican People’s Party (CHP), said the law would “encourage forced marriages and legalise marriage to rapists”.

“If a 50 or 60 year-old is told to marry an 11-year-old after raping her, and then marries her years later, she will suffer the consequences,” Mr Aldan told Hurriyet Daily News.

“If you give him a pass by marriage, the young girl will live in a prison for her whole life.”

CHP group deputy chair Özgür Özel said the bill was approved by only one vote and claimed that AKP Justice Minister Bekir Bozdağ had “strategically” issued it at the last moment of the session.

As the bill was debated and approved, the hashtag #TecavuzMesrulastirilamaz (Rape Cannot be Legitimised) became a top-trending topic on Twitter, as users took to social media to express their distaste.

Yet the justice minister claimed campaigners were “distorting” the issue and denied the bill would legitimise rape.

“What we do is to find a solution to an ongoing problem, it is not to protect rape nor protect rapists,” he told state-owned news agency Anadolu.

Instead, he argued the bill would help couples who have consensual sex when they are underage and want to marry.

“When a child is then born from this non-official union, the doctor warns the prosecutor and the man is sent to prison, putting the child and mother into financial difficulties,” he told the AFP news agency.

Although the legal age of consent is 18 in Turkey, child marriage is widespread, particularly in the southeast.

The country has one of the highest rates of child marriage in Europe, with an estimated 15 per cent of girls married before their 18th birthday.

35 women killed in October in Turkey

Hurriyet Daily News (16.11.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2eZZvBF> - A total of 35 women were killed in October and 21 others were subjected to sexual violence, according to a report released by the Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu, a women's rights activist organization that keeps track of violence against women.

According to the organization, a total of 42 children were left motherless as a result of femicides and 29 children were sexually abused.

Three hate crimes were committed against members of the LGBTI community.

The total number of femicides reached 272 since Jan. 1, the report also said.

Four women were killed in the southern province of Muğla, three of them were killed in Istanbul, and two murders each were committed in five provinces, the western provinces of Aydın and Manisa, the northwestern province of Balıkesir, the southeastern province of Şanlıurfa and the Black Sea province of Ordu.

Some 46 percent of the murdered women were married, according to the statistics presented by the organization. The statistics in the report also showed that 51 percent of the 35 women killed in October were murdered for making decisions regarding their own lives, for ending their relationships or for seeking divorce, while 9 percent were killed as they attempted to protect their daughters from their husbands.

Three of the murdered women had previously been subjected to violence, applied for state protection or were taken under police protection, the report also said.

More reading: [One of the 12 suspects arrested after rape of 14-year-old girl](#)