

Feminist Reforms in Turkey Reflect the Progressive Face of Islam

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Turkey has strong ties both with its Muslim history and with secularism, where the latter is taken to mean not mixing religion with politics. After decades of struggling between these two identities, this strategic NATO ally and EU contender has developed a hybrid identity that encompasses both.

As a result, Turkey has increasingly been perceived as a liberal and progressive face of Islam on the global stage and, in congruence with the true spirit of the religion, it is demonstrating its commitment to the empowerment of women.

In order to positively affect women's daily lives, though, it will take engaged leadership by religious scholars and feminists in addition to government-initiated reforms.

The Directorate of Religious Affairs, the government institution overseeing religious matters since it was established in 1924 and the highest Islamic authority in Turkey, is at the center of the debate on religion and women. Originally, the directorate - which currently employs approximately 83,000 clerics in local mosques -- was limited to the administration of mosques; it is now focused more on developing new interpretations of Islam.

Recently, the Directorate of Religious Affairs initiated a review of hadiths (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), which was well received by Turkish society and reverberated beyond national borders.

According to the directorate's explanation, the project's aim is to raise awareness about the inaccuracy of some sexist and apocryphal hadiths accumulated after the death of the Prophet Muhammad by re-emphasizing the importance of morally credible and viable sources. For example, many sexist cultural traditions were wrongly attributed to the Prophet and were added to hadith collections even though their chains of transmission were flawed. The project is expected to yield a collection of hadiths on women combined in a five-volume publication. Its aim is to support women's rights activists in their fight against "honor" killings, violence against women and misogyny in general.

In addition, since 2005, the Directorate of Religious Affairs has also offered its female employees the opportunity to upgrade their educational and professional skills so that they can become more qualified for higher-ranking positions.

According to Ali Bardakoğlu, head of the directorate, the institution has suffered from a lack of women's contributions for decades. The directorate's goal in recent years has been to promote women to the highest levels of the institution, which Bardakoğlu hopes to accomplish by gradually incorporating them into the directorate's structure. Women will be promoted to positions of assistant cleric, cleric and mufti, an official scholar of Islamic law. Bardakoğlu does not deny that men have thus far been more influential within Islamic institutions, but states that the absence of women in such positions has been due to their lack of higher education -- a reality that can be changed.

Despite the women-friendly attitude and speeches of Bardakoğlu, parts of the institution appear reluctant to change. Soon after the directorate's declaration in 2005, which announced its intent to hire 200 new female preachers and appoint women as muftis and vice muftis, a member of the institution authored an article on how women should behave around men so as not to arouse men's sexual desire. Thanks to a vigilant feminist response, the article was removed from the directorate's Web site and the institute issued an apology. Strong feminist criticism -- from both those outside the institution and within it -- is essential to holding the directorate to its goal of empowering women. Feminists continue to push the directorate to implement and institutionalize initiatives that are more inclusive of women.

Over the last four years, the Directorate of Religious Affairs has successfully implemented target quotas for women in the above positions (seven women have already been appointed to the position of vice-mufti) and established bureaus to address concerns of women in 21 cities across the country.

The drive toward the greater empowerment of women in Turkey has affected not only women's representation in the directorate, but also society more broadly. The well-known religious leader Fethullah Gülen wrote an article in the Zaman daily in September 2008 on the topic of domestic violence. He stated that a woman should be brave enough to take legal action against her husband if she is beaten. Gülen referenced a newer interpretation of religious texts with a Sufi perspective to support his advice. He explained that in the case of domestic violence, the husband should be perceived as zalim, which means tyrannical, and judged guilty of exercising unjust power. Such interpretations can give women the legal backing to press criminal charges against their husbands, or to achieve monetary retribution for mistreatment. His comments provide invaluable scholarly justification for the many women who have long been advocating similar views.

Developing modern religious interpretations to address women's issues provides a rich and strong foundation for feminist discourses. The Directorate of Religious Affairs has made significant progress in developing modern and accurate religious interpretations in general and specifically on the subject of women. Though Muslim women still have a long way to go to achieve the rights due to them in Islam, the directorate's reforms -- including giving women access to clerical positions -- and the prevalence of new interpretations of religious sources, are slowly paving the road to empowerment. Feminists are prompting many of these changes in religious interpretation. In turn, strengthening feminism by referencing religion provides guidelines for feminists living in other Muslim countries, a project which is consistent with Turkey's mission to become one of the models of a modern Muslim country.

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