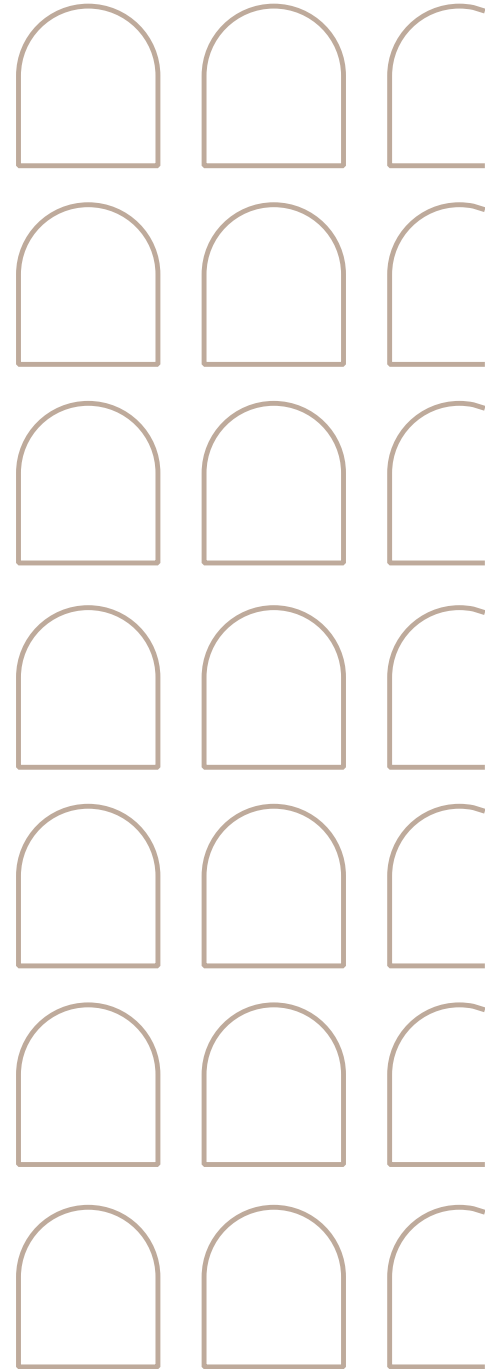


STG Policy Papers

# POLICY BRIEF

## BOTTOM-UP AND TOP-DOWN: PROMOTING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION THROUGH PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women’s political participation is essential for robust democratic governance. Despite significant historical progress, women around the world continue to be marginalized in politics and decision-making processes due to persistent structural, cultural, and institutional inequalities.

In times of democratic backsliding, gender equality and women’s fundamental rights face significant threats from anti-gender politics, a phenomenon observed in many countries around the world, including in Europe. In Turkey, the authoritarian regime has undermined many democratic institutions, leading to violations of basic human rights and the right to a decent livelihood. Nonetheless, women demonstrate some of the most authentic and powerful forms of democratic participation, challenging anti-gender and authoritarian policies.

This policy brief aims to address the advancement of women’s political participation, with a particular focus on women’s collective actions and voices in creating inclusive democracies across all spheres of public life.

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## 1. LOOKING AT TURKEY THROUGH COMPARATIVE DATA

The latest report from the IPU shows that the proportion of female MPs globally increased slightly to 26.9% in 2023, while in the European Parliament, the representation of women stands at 39.6%. The data reflects that gender inequality in politics is still a global issue<sup>1</sup>.

Turkey falls behind the OECD average of 33.8% for female representation in national parliaments, with only 20.1% of women parliamentarians.



Female representation in national parliament (2023)

Figure 1

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023), Turkey comes 132nd in the world, with 20.1 per cent of its deputies elected in 2023 being women.



The seats held by women in the parliament of Turkey (2023)

Figure 2

Women in Turkey gained the right to vote in the 1930s, but they have been underrepresented in both national and local

politics. After the general elections of 14 May 2023, women's representation in parliament reached a historic high of 20.1%, with one-fifth of the seats now held by women. This is the highest-ever ratio of women's representation in the parliament but women are still under-represented. This data reflects that even though women make up half of the population, they do not yet share decisions on distributing political, social, and economic power resources. In Turkey, 119 women were elected in 2023, representing 19.8 per cent of all MPs, which is 2.5 percentage points higher than after the previous elections in 2018.<sup>2</sup>

While Turkey has no legally required quotas, some political parties have adopted voluntary quotas. In 2023, political parties were less likely to include women at the top of their electoral lists, further reducing women's chances of being elected. For example, 18.8 per cent of the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AK) candidates were women. However, only four of these 113 women candidates were at the top of the party lists. The main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) nominated 156 women candidates (26 per cent of all candidates) but placed only 11 women at the top of their lists.

## 2. BARRIERS TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

As data suggests, women have been underrepresented in high-level political decision-making structures. The persistent inequalities between women and men in public decision-making have complex and varied reasons. These reasons range from structural, cultural, and institutional barriers to practical obstacles women encounter

<sup>1</sup> For Figures 1 and 2 see: IPU's latest Women in Parliament 2023 report (<https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2024-03/women-in-parliament-2023>) and OECD (2024), Women in politics (indicator). doi: 10.1787/edc3ff4f-en (accessed on 25 March 2024).

<sup>2</sup> IPU-UN Women (2023) "Map of Women in Politics".

when accessing different levels of public decision-making.

Structural barriers: it is structural inequalities that are hardest to overcome to increase women's political participation. Structural barriers refer to gender parity in access to socioeconomic resources, unequal division of labour, and gender-based violence, including in politics. All these interconnected indicators define women's status in society and the public sphere and determine their participation in politics and decision-making processes. Barriers to access to socio-economic resources hinder women's participation in politics and power relations, while the burden of unpaid domestic labour on women limits the time and space for political action. The structural inequalities that women are subjected to in both the public and private spheres also prevent them from developing competence, such as self-confidence, skills, and capacities for politics.

Institutional barriers refer to barriers arising from the patriarchal structure of institutional politics, electoral systems and political parties. The dominance of men in the hierarchy of most political parties presents a significant obstacle to women: political party mechanisms have male gatekeepers who have political power in leader-oriented party structures. Discrimination against women in political participation processes is produced at different stages, such as party organization and the institutionalization of party systems and culture. Women's participation in elected mechanisms is limited by the extent to which male party leaders allow them to participate; their political efforts are often considered secondary<sup>3</sup>.

Since the processes of determining candidate lists and party policies, as well as the formation of administrative staff, are not transparent and democratic, getting elected as a woman is often predicated on first gaining the approval of the male party leader.<sup>4</sup>

In Turkey, many political parties provide opportunities for women to participate in politics through their 'women's branches' (except for the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party, DEM, the party of the Kurds, and left-wing parties). Women's branches have the specific function in campaigning of going into homes where men cannot go and asking women to vote for the party at election time. The women's branch, rather than being a place that prepares women for politics, is an auxiliary arm that helps the party recruit women to the party and reaches out to housewives in particular.<sup>5</sup> Although women put a lot of effort into politics in these women branches, their representation and visibility remain low because they are not included in decision-making mechanisms in party politics.

In addition to male-dominated political party organizations, every stage of the electoral system constitutes an institutional obstacle for women. In Turkey, no legal/constitutional gender quota is implemented at the parliamentary level, nor is it binding for political parties. Except for the DEM party, which has a co-chair system in all representation mechanisms, political parties can implement various voluntary quota practices within themselves. However, it should be noted that the co-chair system was achieved by the historical struggle of Kurdish women in politics.

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<sup>3</sup> Pınarcıoğlu, N. Ş. (2011). *Yerel siyaset ve kadın katılımı: İstanbul ve Kocaeli'nde niteliksel bir araştırma* (Doctoral dissertation, Marmara Üniversitesi (Turkey)).

<sup>4</sup> Cengiz, Bengi R. G. Doğan and G. Karabağ. (2021). "Women's Political Participation in Turkey: Obstacles and Experiences". Istanbul Political Research Institute.

<sup>5</sup> Çakır, Serpil (2019). *Erkek Kulübünde Siyaset* (Politics in the Men's Club), İstanbul: Sel Yayıncılık.

### 3. DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING AND ATTACKS ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS: UNDERSTANDING THE CURRENT CHALLENGES FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Similarly to the pattern across Europe, trends of de-democratization in Turkey have emerged with attacks on the rights women have achieved and threats to gender equality. When the AKP came to power in 2002, by taking into account the European Union accession negotiations, it adopted liberal laws on women's rights to legitimize its rule and cement its reputation. After the process of backsliding began in 2010, the AKP started to impose its conservative policies and hostile attitude toward gender equality.<sup>6</sup> When the regime moved steadily in an authoritarian direction, Erdoğan and his political companions inscribed the image of women as mothers and wives, required to give birth to at least three children. Hostile attacks on gender equality have not been limited to the discursive level. Several attempts to amend the gender-related provisions of the Turkish Penal Code, Civil Code, and Law no.6284, the principal laws for preventing gender-based violence; thanks to powerful demonstrations and the consistent advocacy of the feminist movement these attempts have failed.

Yet, the pressure on women's rights has continued with several prohibitions and restrictions on civil society. Under the state of emergency in 2016, Kurdish women's organisations were shut down and many Kurdish women politicians were arrested. Furthermore, after the LGBTIQ Pride March was banned in 2015, women's demonstrations on special anniversary days (8th March, November 25, which is the International Day for the Elimination of Violence, etc) have been banned in recent years for arbitrary reasons. However,

despite the hostile attacks of the authoritarian regime and heavy police blockades, women continue to take to the streets and participate in politics to defend their rights and make their voices heard.

As the women's movement in Turkey has a long and hard-fought history, the legal gains, including the signing of the Istanbul Convention, represented significant progress. However, Erdoğan's government has since launched a systematic attack on these very rights. The withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021, a move that disregarded protests from women who supported the AKP, exemplifies this erosion of progress. This rollback extends to discussions on alimony, the civil code, and abortion rights. Conservative rhetoric has painted these rights as threats to the family structure, attempting to justify limitations on women's freedoms in both public and private spheres.

#### Why does women's political participation matter?

Although it has many meanings, politics is a struggle for interests. Politics is the only way for women to fight against all forms of inequality that they are subjected to in the patriarchal system, which affects all areas of their lives and every stage of their life cycles. **Therefore, advancing women's political participation is essential if women are to defend their social interests, transform the patriarchal system, and establish an equal world order.** The barriers they face to participate in politics—structural, institutional, and cultural—can be overcome only: if women make, and are involved in, politics.

Existing power relations in politics in Turkey are strongly bound to an authoritarian vision of society, with a hierarchical decision-

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<sup>6</sup> Arat, Y. (2022). "Democratic backsliding and the instrumentalization of women's rights in Turkey". *Politics & Gender*, 18(4), 911-941

making process. Many political parties are structured in a high-level patriarchal hierarchy, which represents a men's club with the oldest member at the top. **Dismantling men's clubs, which have a powerful impact on politics, and changing the masculine structure of politics will likely challenge the hierarchical decision-making process and authoritarian vision of society.**

The strong political participation of women is also critical in terms of democracies. Democracy was historically defined with basic principles of freedom of speech and the protection of human rights; when even the basic principles are neglected in authoritarian regimes, democracy is performed with low trust, low political participation, and high-level corruption. Societies living under authoritarian regimes are challenged by both anti-democratic policies and the failure of representative democracy to deliver and guarantee democratic principles.

Increasing women's political participation has the potential to contribute to the democratization of institutions and policies by transforming unequal power hierarchies and decision-making processes. **As the existing structurally unequal societies are shaped in favour of male elites, democratic participation requires the inclusion of underprivileged and underrepresented groups.**

#### **4. UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION FROM THE TOP DOWN AND BOTTOM UP**

The mainstream discourse on women's political participation focuses fully on

increasing the numbers of women in electoral bodies. However, unless political demands are constructed collectively, some will be left behind and some will not have their needs met. As Young<sup>7</sup> (1990) and Fraser<sup>8</sup> (1990) show, because existing unequal societies, based on unequal power hierarchies, tend to maintain their hierarchical perspectives, the democratic process must be participatory and inclusive, including the heterogeneous public and, in particular, unprivileged groups. **Opening a democratic process for 'outsiders' likely contributes to social justice through the inclusion of people as 'insiders' who are subjected to intersectional inequalities of gender, class, ethnicity, and citizenship status.**

As Pateman<sup>9</sup> (1970: 42) posited, participatory democracy has the potential to facilitate the learning of citizens to apply democratic processes in practice. By participating in the decision-making process collectively, citizens have a chance to learn to decide on common goods and to respect others' differences.

Yet, growing authoritarianism, in Turkey and globally, has made visible the limitations of representative democracies and the possibilities that exist for innovative ways to participate in democracy through new social actors and movements. In Southeast European countries, there has been a mobilization of social movements and local initiatives, which represent participation in politics in Turkey. It is important to note, that the women's movement, particularly in urban centres, played a pivotal role in initiating and advancing this political engagement, challenging the authoritarian regime in the last couple of years.

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<sup>7</sup> Young, I. M. 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Fraser, N. (1990). "The uses and abuses of French discourse theories for feminist politics". *boundary 2*, 17(2), 82-101.

<sup>9</sup> Pateman, C. E. (1970). *Participation and Democratic Theory* Cambridge Univ. Pr., Cambridge.



In Turkey, the authoritarian regime has rendered many democratic institutions dysfunctional, resulting in violations of basic human rights and the right to a decent livelihood. **Women have been setting the most authentic and powerful example of democratic participation, despite the challenges of democratic backsliding and brutal attacks on gender equality.** In politics as a struggle for self-interest, women are taking to the streets to defend their own lives, making their voices heard outside court houses during femicide trials, organizing humanitarian support for cities destroyed in earthquakes, and defending their homelands against mining, geothermal companies, and ecological destruction. The participation of women in politics, which is facilitated by their capacity for self-organization, presents a challenge to conventional politics. However, it also offers the potential for the development of new ideas of democracy, including the possibility of the spread of these ideas to institutional democracy and politics. **The struggles of women in different fields under the authoritarian regime show that the 'struggle over needs' is also a political school that teaches politics, democratic participation, and the collective decision-making process through practice, which has the potential to build inclusive and participatory democratic governance.**

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendations for national opposition parties

- **Implementing gender quotas is a transitional mechanism, but not enough**

Introduce mandatory gender quotas as a transitional mechanism in all electoral positions. Mandatory quotas are an important step to break the resistance of the male gatekeepers rooted in the political parties and to change the male party culture

that is an obstacle for women. When well-designed and effectively implemented, quotas can be temporary measures to increase women's access to the political decision-making process.

- **Strengthen women's branches to deliver gender equality policies from the bottom up**

Women's branches have been institutionalized as mechanisms through which political parties organize women and solicit women's votes for the party during election campaigns. Despite the considerable efforts made by women in these political arenas, their contributions remain unacknowledged and ineffective in terms of influencing the decision-making process. However, women's branches can be positioned as an effective mechanism that actively determines the gender policy of the party and trains women and young girls to be leaders. **Furthermore, women's branches have the potential to serve as a conduit through which political parties can engage with the women's movement and women's organisations, thereby facilitating the incorporation of women's voices and political demands.**

- **Invest in women's leadership by fostering inclusivity and making internal democracy a priority**

Promote women's engagement in politics by creating leadership spaces and roles. Leadership positions must be made accessible not only to privileged women but also to women who are subject to intersectional inequalities.

It is important to open decision-making mechanisms not only to those with access to leadership positions but also to the participation of women with different disadvantages who work for the party. Making decision-making mechanisms collective creates a culture of democratic participation where the voices of those outside the leadership are also heard. **The increasing number of women's political**

leaders does not automatically transform the power balance in favour of women and adverse gender inequality. Building feminist consciousness in female leaders would be a meaningful step towards challenging the patriarchal structure of party mechanisms.

- **Ensure political culture is free from gender-based discrimination and violence**

Violence against women in politics and in decision-making positions is still a serious issue and threatens inclusive democratic participation. **The party statute should clearly define violence against women in all its forms and a penal system with sanctions should be implemented.** Furthermore, a commission should be established within the party to investigate cases of gender-based violence. The commission should function as a mechanism where the male politician who is a perpetrator of violence is evaluated under the party statute and his violent behaviour is punished.

### **Recommendations for local opposition governments**

- **Expanding public care services to provide women equal time use**

Time use is not equal between men and women; women work a double shift between paid work and unpaid care work. Yet empowerment starts in the home and the community. Women's emancipation in the use of time empowers them in both the private and public spheres. Expanding qualified and public care services provides time for women to use their right to organize, and to participate in the democratic decision-making process.

- **Keep on fulfilling obligations under the Istanbul Convention as it is in force**

Women need to exist in public and private spheres free from violence, to participate in

politics, and to enjoy their democratic rights. **Municipalities should continue to implement the provisions under the Convention by establishing shelters for survivors, equality units and 24/7 hotlines.** Municipalities should also continue to advocate for the Istanbul Convention and organise awareness-raising activities and training in collaboration with women's organisations.

- **Integrate a gender-sensitive perspective in local policies and design a participatory policy-making process**

Opening a space for women to participate in the local policy-making process through gender budgeting, workshops, neighbourhood forums and round table discussions is essential to ensure the inclusion of women's perspectives in the local policy-making process. **Women's involvement in decision-making mechanisms in local politics enables the opportunity to learn from practice and become empowered in politics.** This is the only way that more women can start new dreams by imagining themselves in positions and spaces of power. The inclusion of women in politics at the local level improves the practice of democratic participation while also addressing gender inequality. Women's participation in local government is also essential to deliver democracy.

- **Facilitate training to promote female leadership for women and young girls**

Facilitating training focused on women's rights and gender equality; showing women and young girls how to use their rights promotes their self-confidence and empowers their capacities in politics as future leaders.



- **Bringing participation of women's grassroots organizations into the policy-making process**

Women's grassroots organizations are places where women learn to exercise and defend their human rights. Opening a space for women's grassroots organizations is an opportunity for collaboration and mutual learning. **The inclusion of women's historical experience in policy-making processes offers the possibility of transforming the hierarchical and masculine institutional structures of local governments, and the barriers to women's participation in local governments, through feminist innovation.**

## **6. CALLS TO ACTION FOR EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS**

- The European Union should prioritize its democratic values and principles in neighbouring countries, including Turkey, against democratic backsliding and anti-gender policies.
- The EU should acknowledge that Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention is highly relevant to anti-gender attacks and the anti-democratic regime, which are in stark contrast to international human rights instruments.
- To achieve its strategic objectives, the EU Commission for Gender Equality should engage in dialogue with democratic women leaders and women's organizations in neighbouring countries.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

In this policy brief, a series of bottom-up and top-down policy recommendations are presented to reverse the gender gap in politics, which is a reflection of gender inequality in all spheres of society. The approach presented suggests that formal

representation might be an initial step but not an adequate one if we are to create inclusive democratic spaces in all areas of public life. Acknowledging grassroots women's organisations' historical experience in institutional politics, and establishing local democratic participation tools, carry unique potential. This approach is significant both in terms of empowering women in the political sphere through learning from the practice of participation in democratic decision-making processes, and in terms of reversing the masculine hierarchical structure of institutions. However, for women to be able to exist in both the political and private spheres, democratic principles need to be brought back and urgent action must be taken in cooperation with opposition parties, EU institutions and local authorities.

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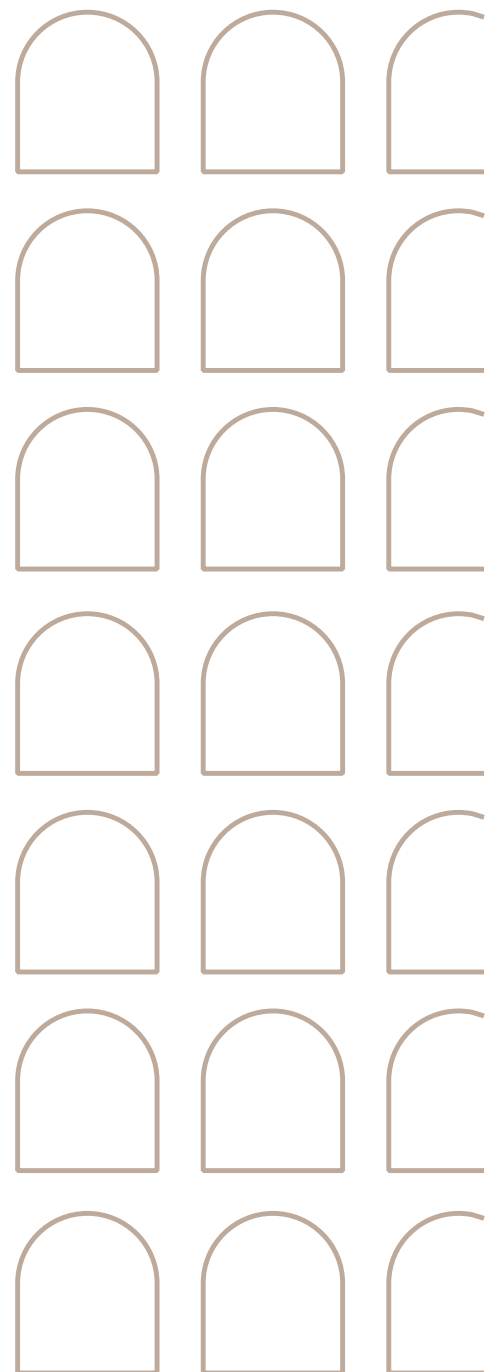
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