



## THE DECISIVE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN TURKISH WOMEN'S PERCEPTION OF POLITICS

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### **Abstract:**

Although Turkish women received their political freedoms even before many European countries, today Turkey lags behind many countries in terms of the proportion of women in active politics. This research, which aims to question the reasons for this decline and whose findings are the subject of this paper, also shows the problems women face in politics and their expectations from politics. In this research, which was conducted with the participation of 958 women representing different sociocultural segments, a very different and comprehensive diversity of findings was provided through the original questions included in the questionnaire. The women who responded to the research questions agreed that the number of women in politics is too low and expressed their suggestions for solutions to improve their conditions. In Turkey, women voters outnumber men. Therefore, the findings of this research will help political parties to communicate with and understand women properly and will provide important clues to politicians who want to gain the support of women voters. These findings will also give ideas to sociologists and political scientists who want to investigate the way of doing politics and voter tendencies in Turkey. A democracy can only be a true democracy if women have the right to participate in politics on an equal basis with men and if they can exercise this right freely. The findings of this research give very important messages to society on how this can be realized.

**Keywords:** communication, feminism, politics, Turkey, women

### **1. Introduction**

Gender discrimination, which emerges as discrimination against women, isolates women in all areas, and confines them to second-class status, has always been one of the most

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important social problems for centuries. There is no evidence that men were superior to women in the social structure until thousands of years after the transition to agriculture, that is, at the end of the Urbaid period (4000 BC), when there was no class or state authority yet. Some archaeologists argue that men considered it 'natural' to pray to women, based on the presence of female fertility statues. The decline in the social status of women and the division of society into male and female began with the emergence of the state. With the emergence of the state, women were dragged from the position of being decision-makers together with men to the position of being dependent and submissive (Harman, 2009). In fact, according to Georg Simmel, one of the founders of German sociology, our entire culture is a male culture. The state, laws, morality, religion, science, that is, everything that determines universal culture is the work of men (Horney, 1991).

Gender has historically assigned different roles to men and women. For example, the power differentials between men and women have enabled men to be more active and influential in public spheres such as politics, labor, and war, while women's mission has been childbearing and motherhood (Giddens, 2008). According to Marx, the domination of men over women emerged after class divisions. According to Engels, the liberation of women from the domination of men is also the most concrete measure of the level of freedom in societies (Engels, 2012).

However, in ancient Turkish societies, in the Gokturk, Uighur, and Hun states, there was no male domination in the social or public sphere. According to Gökalp, the most democratic tribe in the world was the ancient Turks, and the most feminist generation was also the ancient Turks (Gökalp, 1968). In the ancient Turkic states, women had a high social status and freedom arising from the natural and social structure of nomadism (Roux, 2008). The country was run by the joint responsibility of husband and wife. The sovereigns who ruled the Turkish states shared the authority of power, which they believed was given to them by God, with their wives. Women could directly become rulers, castle guards, governors, and ambassadors (Gökalp, 1968). Women were powerful, privileged, and very influential in state administration. With the adoption of Islam, women began to fall rapidly from the advantageous position they held in the old Turkish states. The change in social relations and the establishment of the Islamic lifestyle caused Turkish women to lose many of their rights against men, first in the city centers and then in the provinces (Kırkpınar, 1999).

## **2. General Overview**

### **2.1 Women and Democracy**

The fact that all segments of society are equal in terms of participation in politics, that is, women share the right to take part in the administrative levels of the state equally with men, constitutes the essence of the theories of normative democracy. It is difficult for a democracy to present its virtues to a social structure in which cultural, socioeconomic, and political contexts are opposed to the principle of gender equality (Tremblay, 2007). The goal of the concept of democracy cannot be limited only by the idea of increasing the

number of women in politics. It is even interesting to note that women's representation in some countries and parties, which are known as democratic, is lower than those labeled autocratic. Democracy is not a real democracy unless women's voices are also raised in laws, political institutions, and decision-making processes (Mervis et al., 2013). A true democracy is one in which women and men are represented equally. Or, as Madeleine Korbelt Albright, the first female Secretary of State of the United States, put it, success is impossible without democracy, and democracy is impossible without women (Agbalajobi, 2017).

## **2.2 Turkish Women and Political Freedoms**

Turkish women gained their political freedom in 1934, after the proclamation of the republic when women were granted the right to vote and be elected. But before that, the efforts made in the last period of the Ottoman Empire, in the process known as the Tanzimat Edict, were very important (Konan, 2011). Within the scope of the regulations in this process, girls' secondary schools were opened in 1859, and girls' art schools and teachers' schools were opened in 1870. Writers and opinion leaders who criticized the Ottoman Empire's backwardness against Europe drew attention to the importance of the education and cultural upbringing of women, who constituted half of the population (Özer, 2013). While the negative effects of the First World War were being experienced all over the world, women in the Ottoman Empire were forced to become productive and participate in working life. Just like women in European countries, women living in the Ottoman geography started to work in state institutions such as post offices, hospitals, and the army (Yeşilorman, 2010).

Turkish women gained the right to participate in local elections in 1930 and general elections in 1934, and to run for political office, thus becoming an individual with equal status with men in the political sphere. Of course, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the leader of the Turkish Revolution, played an important role in this (Gökçimen, 2008). On October 29, 1923, Atatürk founded the Republic of Turkey, abolished the sultanate and the caliphate, and in 1926 put an end to sharia law. With new laws under the Swiss-inspired Civil Code, the state banned polygamy, introduced civil marriage, and guaranteed women's equality before the law (Gündüz, 2004). This is one of the aspects that shows the magnitude of Atatürk's revolution that created modern Turkey. Turkish women were the primary beneficiaries of this visionary revolution, and not only Turkish women, but also all Muslim women who were sisters of Turkish women (Caporal, 1999). On February 8, 1935, Turkish women ran for parliamentary seats for the first time. The interest and participation of women in the elections, both as voters and candidates, was quite high. After the elections, 18 of the 399 deputies in the parliament, in other words, 4.5% of the parliament, were women (Sezer, 1998).

Turkish women achieved their political rights much earlier than women in many Western countries (Özer, 2013). While some countries such as the Netherlands or Scandinavian countries were among the first to recognize women's political rights, others such as France, Italy, and Belgium granted women the right to vote only after World War

II (Rubio, 2014). For example, Germany in 1919, the UK in 1929, France in 1945, Belgium in 1946, and Switzerland in 1971 granted women political equality.

### **2.3 Women's Political Participation Rates in Turkey**

However, in Turkey, which granted women the right to vote and be elected long before many developed western democracies, the representation rate of women in elected mechanisms is low, which shows that gender discrimination still exists in social life (Yaylı & Eroğlu, 2015). Although women make up at least 20-25% of those working in public institutions, bureaucracy, judicial institutions, universities, and different professional occupations in Turkey today, the same participation rate is not valid in politics (Sancar, 2008). According to the official figures announced by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, the number of women deputies in the 577 deputies in the Parliament of the Republic of Turkey, which was formed as a result of the elections held on June 24, 2018, and is in office as of the date of this article, is 100 and the rate is 17.33%. (TGNA, 2023) According to the official report of the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK, 2023), which is also a state institution, the rate of female deputies in the Parliament was 9.1% in 2007 (TÜİK, 2023), while this rate was 17.3% in 2019, i.e. a significant increase has been achieved. However, when compared to other countries around the world, the proportion of women in politics in Turkey is still not satisfactory.

According to figures from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which consists of representatives of parliaments of independent states and works in parallel with the United Nations, Turkey ranked 117th out of 192 countries in terms of the proportion of women parliamentarians. Among European countries, Turkey ranks third to last among 37 countries in terms of women's representation in parliament (Euronews, 2020). In the current Presidential Cabinet, only one of the 18 Ministers is a woman (TCCB, 2023). In terms of the number of women ministers in national governments, Turkey ranks 4th from the bottom among 37 European countries (Euronews, 2020). These ratios show that women in Turkey are disproportionately behind in terms of taking part in political decision-making mechanisms (Sancar, 2008). Although women were granted the right to vote and be elected before many European countries such as France, Belgium, Italy, and Switzerland, women in Turkey today are underrepresented in active politics and politics is one of the most noticeable areas of gender inequality. In a country where a woman politician, Tansu Çiller, was elected Prime Minister, it is also thought-provoking that women remain in the shadow of men in politics and struggle with inequalities.

### **2.4 Barriers to Women's Political Participation**

There are various political, socio-economic, ideological, psychological (or socio-cultural), political, socio-economic, and ideological reasons for women's inability to assert their presence in politics (Shvedova, 2005). If we look at the specific circumstances of Turkey, culture is a determining factor in women's low participation in active politics. In many parts of Anatolia, men try to influence women's political preferences and guide their decisions (Kızılaslan & Kızılaslan, 2020). On the other hand, although politics demands that women compete on equal terms with men, women are never in an equal race with

men outside politics, i.e. in social life. Politics expects women to put their family and motherhood responsibilities on the back burner and behave like their male competitors as if they do not have children. This situation, with these balances, leads to the conclusion that only a limited number of privileged women who have the freedom to play the game according to men's rules can be successful in politics (Deniz, 2007). Although the "male-dominated model" has a discriminatory effect on political decision-making processes, political parties do not see this inequality between men and women as a matter of democracy. Eliminating this inequality is not even among the goals of political leaders. Even if every political party has women's branches, the opportunities, and rights offered by these organizations to women party members are very limited (Işık, 2010). In addition to all these, it is also a social reality that women in Turkey face various forms of violence and harassment in both public and private spheres, including the political arena.

### 3. Methodology and Sample

The findings of the research revealed not only the issues that Turkish women criticize in politics, but also their expectations and demands from politics.

In Turkey, the number of female voters is higher than the number of male voters, thus women's votes have a decisive impact on the outcome of elections. In Turkey, a total of 57,058,636 voters cast their ballots in the last national election, the March 31, 2019, Mayoral General Election. When we look at the distribution of voters by gender, the number of female voters is 28,929,732 and their share of total voters is 50.7%. The number of male voters is 28,128,904 and their share is 49.3% (YSK, 2019). These rates show that women's votes had a higher impact on the outcome of the election than men's votes. In other words, the development of Turkish women's political consciousness and their relationship with the political institution is crucial for the political future of the country and for the future of democracy and the regime in Turkey. In this context, the findings of the research in this paper offer a comprehensive vision for all political parties in Turkey. In the theoretical preparation part of the research, the findings of previous scientific studies in this field were examined, and in the second stage, data collection was carried out in light of this theoretical information. The data of this quantitative research, the findings of which are presented in this article, were collected through an online survey technique. Consisting of 35 questions, the first part of the questionnaire form questioned the demographic characteristics of the participants and the second part questioned their views on politics. 958 women living in different geographies of Turkey and having different sociocultural characteristics were interviewed in the study, which was conducted in 2021 and lasted for three months. Participation in the research was completely voluntary. Within the scope of the study, 63% of the women interviewed were married and 40% were single. 40% of the sample was between the ages of 54-65, 26% between 41-53, 9% between 28-40, 6% between 18-28, and 9% over the age of 65.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Voter Awareness and Responsibility

81% of the women who answered the questions stated that they prefer to talk and discuss the issues on the political agenda of the country when they are with their friends, and 69% of them stated that they feel the need to follow the statements of the leaders and political parties regularly. This shows that women's interest in political issues is quite lively and strong. 98% of the women interviewed in the study stated that they have participated in both parliamentary and mayoral elections regularly. The rate of women who stated that they sometimes fulfill their duty to vote in the elections and sometimes do not vote is only 2%. This rate is well above the 84.3% turnout rate in the mayoral elections held across the country on March 31, 2019. This finding shows that women voters in Turkey are aware of their responsibilities and are conscious as a voter. When the women who stated that they did not vote regularly were asked why they did not go to the polls, 46% of the women stated that they did not trust the electoral system, 25% did not believe that their vote would change anything, and 21% did not trust the existing parties. On the other hand, 8% stated that if they were in another place on election day or went on holiday, they did not want to break their schedule and come to vote.

### 4.2 Women as Spectators of Politics

Political party memberships of women were also questioned in the study. Only 20% of the women who answered the research questions stated that they were members of a political party. 77% of the sample said that they have not been a member of any political party so far, and 3% said that they were a member of a political party before but later left their party. This ratio shows that women prefer to be a spectator rather than active players in politics, and also reveals the low participation of women in politics. When asked whether they would like to join a political party in the future, 56% of those who stated that they are not members of any political party in the research stated that they definitely did not want to be a member of a political party, and 44% stated that they would consider joining a party where they would reflect their opinions. When asked about how they became a member of a political party, 80% of the women replied, "I personally applied." The rate of those who stated that they received an invitation from a political party while giving their answer is 20%. This result shows that political parties are not sufficiently inviting and encouraging in the context of including women and bringing them into politics. When women who are members of a political party were asked whether men and women had equal opportunities and opportunities in the parties they belonged to, 30% stated that they did not agree with the proposition that they had equal chances with men, and 21% strongly disagreed. 14% of the women stated that they were undecided, 25% agreed, and 10% strongly agreed. 69% of the women participating in the research stated that they believed that if they decided to enter politics one day, their husbands, fathers, or boyfriends would find this decision positive and support them. While the rate of those who think that they will not receive support is 13%, those who state that they are undecided on this issue constitute 18% of the sample. Well, while

women are choosing the political party they will vote for in the elections, do they face the manipulation of their husbands or other men in the family, are they affected by their views? 88% of women answered "no" and "10%" answered yes to this question. 2% of women stated that they were undecided on this issue.

### **4.3 Women and NGOs**

The results of the research showed that women who stay away from politics are more enthusiastic about participating in non-governmental organizations. While 54% of the women who answered the questions stated that they are not members of any non-governmental organization, the rate of women who are currently members of non-governmental organizations is 46%. In other words, women prefer to work in any NGO rather than being a member of a political party. However, women participating in the research do not find the work of women's associations sufficient. While 42% of the women participating in the research found the effect of women's associations in announcing the problems and expectations of their fellows insufficient, 13% stated that they found it absolutely insufficient. While 20% of the women state that they are undecided on this issue, the rate of those who express a positive opinion, namely those who find the work of women's associations successful, is 25%. One of the issues where the segregation in the answers of women has decreased is the perspective of political parties on women's branches. 78% of women think that the women's branches of political parties are important in increasing women's participation in politics. While 9% of women are undecided on this issue, the rate of women who think that women's branches have no effect is 13%.

Women who prefer to work with NGOs, which are an important element of democratic culture, tend to take part in democratic mass movements as well. While 74% of the women who answered the research questions stated that they had participated in democratic mass movements such as rallies, marches, and signature campaigns, the rate of those who stated that they had never been involved in any democratic activity before is 26%.

### **4.4 Lack of Communication between Politics and Women**

The results of the research revealed that there is a lack of communication and a disconnect between women voters and women politicians. When asked whether there is a woman politician with whom they are in constant contact, the vast majority of the respondents, 80%, answered "no".

The women who responded to the survey questions think that women politicians are insufficient in paving the way for their fellow women and motivating them to participate in politics. In response to the question of whether women in active politics make efforts to encourage other women to participate in politics, 36% of the women answered "No". The rate of women who consider the efforts of women politicians to be sufficient in this regard is 29%. What is noteworthy in this question is that the rate of undecided women is as high as 35%. This distribution of responses reveals that women

expect their fellow women in active politics to strengthen the position of women in politics.

Almost all of the women who participated in the survey, 91%, stated that they did not find the number of women candidates in mayoral and parliamentary elections sufficient. According to the findings of the research, only 4% of the respondents think that the number of women candidates nominated by the parties is sufficient, while 5% are undecided. 69% of the women who participated in the research stated that they believe that the implementation of women's quotas will pave the way for women candidates in the elections. While 17% of women do not believe that quotas would be an effective method, 14% of women are undecided.

In light of the results of the research, Turkish women see the patriarchal structure of Turkish society and the general socio-cultural structure that perceives women at home, as mothers or wives as an obstacle to their active participation in politics. 53% of the women whose opinions were taken into consideration in the research think that the Turkish social structure is an obstacle to women's participation in politics. While 36% of the sample did not see the social structure as a problem, 11% were undecided on this issue. In parallel to this question, women were also asked whether their responsibilities as housewives and mothers prevented them from participating in politics. While 42% of the women interviewed within the scope of the research thought that these responsibilities prevented them from participating in active politics, 51% disagreed with this view and stated that these special duties did not prevent them from entering politics. The undecided rate is 7%.

#### **4.5 Women's Expectations as Voters**

So, according to which criteria do women act when determining which party to vote for, in other words, what influences their decision-making process? 69% of the women voters who responded to the research questions stated that they care about the program and promises of the parties, while 13% stated that they vote according to the leader, 10% according to the candidate list, 4% according to the general public opinion and 4% according to the general political tendency of their family. At this point, the findings of the research reveal that women voters do not tend to vote for a political party simply because it nominates a woman candidate. 36% of women who were asked whether they give special support to parties that nominate candidates of the same gender, especially during election periods, stated that this was not a criterion for them. While 40% of women stated that they especially prefer parties that nominate women candidates, 24% said that they were undecided. In light of this result, it is possible to say that women question not only the gender but also the potential of the candidate.

When asked which media is the most influential in the formation of women's political opinions, it was observed that "Social Media" ranked the highest with 30% in the light of women's responses. This was followed by "Print Media" with 25%, while 23% of women stated that they were influenced by "Television" and 22% by "Internet" media. 88% of women think that the media does not give equal space and chances to women and



men politicians. While only 5% think that the media behaves equally, 7% are undecided on this question.

Among the existing political parties, is there a party that they consider close to them? 11% of the women who participated in the survey stated that there is definitely not, while 21% stated that there is not. On the other hand, 35% of the women stated that there is a party that expresses their own opinion and 7% stated that there definitely is. The rate of women who have no opinion on this issue is 26%. The findings of the research revealed that the office that excites women the most in politics is the parliamentary deputy. When asked "If you were a candidate for any office in politics, which office would it be?" 40% of the women stated that they would like to be an MP, 24% said they would like to be a Municipal Assembly Member, 18% said they would like to be a mayor, 10% said they would like to be a Mukhtar, and 8% said they would like to be a Provincial or District President.

## 5. Discussion

Various studies have been conducted at different times, aiming to reveal the political perception of Turkish women. For example, the research titled "Turkey Through the Eyes of Women: Politics, Economy and Social Issues" conducted by the Public Policy and Democracy Studies Association (PODEM), reveals that only 21% of women in Turkey are interested in politics. In our study, the percentage of women who were asked whether they were members of a political party was almost the same, and the findings of the two studies were similar. In the same research, women were asked, "Do you prefer a female candidate just because of her gender?" The rate of answering "Yes" to the question is 67.4%. There is a question in our research as to whether female candidates will be preferred, and the rate we have reached is 40%.

In TESEV's (Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation) 2003 research titled 'Women in Business, Senior Management and Politics' (TESEV 2003), which questions women's problems and their relations with politics, 34.0% of the women in the sample are members of a political party. They said they might consider doing politics. In our study, the rate of women who stated that they would never be a member of a political party was 56%. It is seen that women have moved away from politics even more in the 18 years that have passed since that research.

In March 2011, KONDA conducted research titled 'Women's Representation in Politics' for KADER (Association for Supporting Women Candidates). In the survey, the rate of those who said, "I would support a woman (for example, your wife, daughter, mother) to enter politics" is 69.8 percent. A similar question was asked in our study. The rate of women who stated that they believed that their male relatives would support them in making politics was determined as 69%.

This finding reached in both studies, that is, the hopeful attitude of women in the context of receiving support from men shows that the patriarchal structure of Turkish society and male-dominated politics have evolved positively. In its research, KONDA also questioned the effect of female candidates on the opinions of female voters. 63

percent of the sample said, "my decision will not change". In our study, this rate is similar; It is 60%.

'Ben Seçerim" (I choose) Association carried out a study titled "The Situation and Prospects of Women Politicians in Turkey" in the Autumn of 2022, with the support of the Canadian Government and in cooperation with KONDA Research and Consultancy Company (Bensecerim, 2022). They stated that there should be a mandatory quota for women in parties. Those who did not agree with this idea made up only 23% of the sample. In our study, the proportion of women who demanded a quota was 69%. This result reveals the determination of women regarding the quota demand. In the same study, 73% of the participants were women While stating that the number of deputies should increase, the same demand was emphasized with a rate of 91% in our research.

When the results of the research on the relationship between women and politics in different countries are examined, similar rates have been observed. In a 2012 survey for the Women's Forum in Fiji, funded by the Dutch Government, and coordinated by the International Agency for Women's Development in the Pacific (IWDA), 81% of respondents said women were adequately represented in Fiji. They stated that they thought it was not. In the same study, 77% of the participants stated that they did not consider the gender of the candidates while voting. These results are also consistent with our research.

In Japan, The Nippon Foundation conducted its 2nd Awareness Survey on "Women and Politics" in 2020 (Nippon, 2020). 63.7% of the sample stated that the percentage of women elected to the national and prefectural assemblies in Japan is too low and should be increased.

When asked whether Japan should have a quota for women candidates, 35.5% agreed, 14.1% disagreed and 50.4% were undecided. When Japanese women were asked why they did not want to enter politics, 56.8% said they did not think they were suitable for politics, while 25% said they were not sure if they could balance a political career with their personal and family life. The fact that the research in Japan and the research whose findings we share in this paper reveal similar findings with close percentages shows that the problems faced by women in politics in Turkey are shared by women in many countries.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings of this study show that the political awareness of women in Turkey is extremely high. They are more sensitive to the responsibility of voting than the average Turkish voters. Women's enthusiasm for taking part in NGOs and participating in democratic mass movements is promising for the future of politics and democracy in Turkey.

It is indeed an important problem that women, who constitute such a sensitive voter profile, are or are forced to be spectators rather than actors in politics. The fact that women stay away from active politics and do not want to become members of political parties is an indication that something has gone wrong in the relationship between

politics and women and that politics has alienated women. Political parties need to encourage women and women politicians need to pave the way for women who are eager to enter politics. And for this, politicians need to establish strong and effective communication with women voters.

The fact that some of the findings of the survey overlap with the findings of surveys conducted 10-15 years ago shows that some of the criticisms and demands of women, such as quotas, have been insistently not heard or not wanted to be heard over the years. In particular, the similarities with the findings of studies conducted in some foreign countries show that some of the issues identified in the research are not only the common criticisms and demands of Turkish women but of all women in general.

The revision of the factors that women voters take into account when voting, such as not supporting a candidate just because she is a woman and leaving leader-oriented policies behind, is also noteworthy.

The numerical rate of female voters in Turkey is higher than the rate of male voters. Therefore, gaining the support of women should be one of the most important goals for a political party that wants to win elections in Turkey. Of course, this is only possible by correctly analyzing women's criticisms and expectations regarding politics. Moreover, the majority of women believe that no party reflects them.

Political parties that can communicate effectively with women voters, hear their voices and open their doors to female politician candidates will always be one step ahead of their competitors not only in Turkey but also across the world. The findings of this research offer politicians an important opportunity and a broad perspective in this context.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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