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Turkey steps up gender equality cooperation with EU

As women's participation in the Turkish labour market remains lower than that of European Union member states and other OECD countries, Turkey is taking measures with relevant European bodies to close the gap.

One such measure is an EU funded project titled "Promoting Gender Equality in Working Life," being undertaken with the Turkish Prime Ministry's General Directorate on the Status of Women, or KSGM, and the Turkish Ministry of Labour. The 18-month project targets the gaps in Turkey's legislation in comparison with EU legislation, to avoid gender discrimination in the work place and is supported by experts from Germany and Austria.

Alexander Sopp, senior legal expert at the German Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency, visited Turkey for a week in December to conduct legal analysis and make a presentation to the ministry. Turkish legal texts are being compared to EU gender equality directives and relevant case-law of the European Court of Justice.

Following the advice of both Sopp and other foreign experts, the second stage in the project will include education and training. The final stage will be to raise awareness about the issues surrounding gender equality in the work place.

Raising awareness is more important than legal intervention

While there is still room for improvement, the considerable progress Turkey has made is a "well kept secret," said Monika Oels, a European official working as an advisor at the Turkish Ministry of Labour. As far as legal regulations are concerned, a circular was sent out by the Prime Ministry in May urging ministries to be more sensitive to gender equality and the recent 2010 referendum included an anti-discrimination paragraph, along with other changes to laws regulating social security.

Additionally, the Parliamentary Commission on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women was established and the 2003 New Labour Act No. 4857 brought strict anti-discrimination laws into the workplace. The KGSM has been implementing EU training projects and has also been working on creating a gender equality body since 2008.

However, legal regulation would never achieve the same kind equality as education, Sopp said. "Raising awareness in society is more important than changing laws."

As the 2010 EU progress report points out: “Turkey adopted a national action plan for gender equality for 2008-2013. However, women’s participation in the labour market remains the lowest among EU member states and OECD countries.”

The report also shows that while the legal framework is largely in place, further efforts are needed to turn these laws and regulations into reality.

Stereotypes and financing

The Ankara Businesswomen Entrepreneurs’ and Enhancement Association, or ANĠKAD, told the Hürriyet Daily News & Economic Review in a written statement the root of the problem was “the roles women are taught by society.”

These stereotypes prevent women from entering the work force, according to ANĠKAD. “They have a hard time balancing their careers and family life. And when the time comes, they choose their families.”

The government needs to enhance further public education regarding gender equality with laws and regulations in areas such as child care, care for the elderly and maternity leave for men, according to ANĠKAD.

The group also said the lack of financial support prevents businesswomen from being active, especially in the areas of entrepreneurship in male dominated sectors, and banks should notice and remedy the problem.