

## Gender Equality Mechanisms in Turkey's Higher Education System

21.04.2020 Heike Mauer / Lisa Mense

Zeynep Gülru Göker (PhD), Sabanci University Istanbul, und Aslı Polatdemir, Doktorandin an der Universität Bremen, forschen zu Gleichstellungspolitiken an Hochschulen in der Türkei. Beide sprechen mit Heike Mauer und Lisa Mense über den von ihnen verfassten Forschungsbericht „Gender Equality Mechanisms in Higher Education Institutions in Turkey. A Primary Evaluation Study“, der den institutionellen Transformationsprozess türkischer Hochschulen hin zu mehr Geschlechtergerechtigkeit beleuchtet und die Errungenschaften, aber auch Rückschläge und Widerstände bei der Umsetzung von Gleichstellungsmaßnahmen nachzeichnet.

**You conducted a research on gender equality in higher education in Turkey and authored the study „Gender Equality Mechanisms in Turkey’s Higher Education: A Baseline Assessment“. What are your main findings?**

*In 2018 as part of a research project co-funded by [SU Gender, Research Worldwide Istanbul](#) and [Raoul Wallenberg Institute](#) – we conducted 15 expert interviews with individuals who have undertaken gender equality actions in eight universities. We also organized a workshop and an expert meeting, to evaluate gender equality actions and mechanisms in a selected number of universities in Turkey in terms of their actors as well as the formal and informal mechanisms employed to promote gender equality. The interviewees were selected to represent the diversity of actions, university types and geographical regions. Our findings are compiled in a [report](#), which is currently only available in Turkish.*

*In this research, we concentrated on (1) the experience of being a woman in academia, and (2) gender equality mechanisms in academia. Asked about their experiences in academia, the academic women identify the following several issue areas as most pressing: the low numbers of women in leadership and decision-making positions, glass ceilings, gender imbalance on academic recruitment and promotion boards and committees, gender discriminative patterns in recruitments and evaluations of academic performance, unequal distribution of research funds, women’s disproportionate access to information regarding funding opportunities, overt and covert sexism, gender-insensitive language use, sexual harassment, dating violence, lack of campus safety and mobbing.*

*Concerning gender-equality-mechanisms, diverse action strategies can be observed depending on the universities’ characteristics. Whether it is a private or a public university, or established in the center or periphery, in a big or a small city make a difference in terms of what can be done or achieved. Besides feminist oriented, gender studies researchers, the main driving forces for gender equality are gender and women’s studies centers and networks, EU based project networks, NGOs, grant-giving foundations and grassroots feminist networks and activists. Within the university the Inter-University Sexual Harassment and Assault Prevention Network (CTS A??), (feminist) student clubs and other likewise networks also have a key role to play. We see a wide range of actions, including institutional transformation projects for developing gender action plans and project-based gender equality actions. The more individually run awareness-raising programs are mainly undertaken with the collaboration of students and academics.*

**In Germany, gender equality in higher education is often linked to questions of childcare and work-life balance. Is this similar in Turkey?**

*Issues related to work-life balance are mostly discussed in the frame of being a mother. The lack of lactation rooms and kindergartens in universities, unequal sharing of domestic responsibilities between couples are given as examples. The unequal division of caring responsibilities between men and women create disproportionate responsibilities for women at home and at work. Compared with men this causes for women extreme workload, lack of motivation to apply for leadership positions and inefficient and uneven use of sabbatical periods for research purposes. On the other hand, the biggest challenge for unmarried women academics without children is the perception that they have no private life outside of the academia. This perception brings extra workload, more responsibilities in comparison to married and/or women academics with children, long work hours and flexible job descriptions. The same assumptions also apply to single women administrators. The interviews reveal that these women are expected to work overtime. Related to their marital status and their plans about having children, doctoral researchers deal with the negative perception of not being able to complete their dissertations on time. In small cities, being single can cause additional social discrimination especially for feminist women.*

**In a talk, you recently gave in Berlin, you emphasized different strategies of implementing gender equality mechanisms in higher education, as well as policies against sexual harassment. Can you tell us something about these strategies and the obstacles that need to be overcome in order to successfully implement progressive change?**

*Drawing on insights from fieldwork, we can say that the most emphasized difficulties and areas of resistance are bias and prejudice. Gender equality efforts are undervalued, they are seen as “unnecessary” and as a “waste of time”, many people can easily dismiss them saying “There is no such problem here!”. Actors are also faced with invisible or indirect barriers. Furthermore, there is major resistance to positive discrimination, often also from women. LGBTIQ+ issues are still a taboo area. Efforts for the prevention and handling of sexual harassment cases have also received criticisms – seen as efforts to “discredit the university name”. We could say that participatory change efforts including a diversity of university bodies, an intersectionality perspective, and attention to systems of inequality and privilege and designing sustainable mechanisms are keys to implementing progressive change.*

**Based on your knowledge, where do you see differences and similarities between Turkey and Germany, with respect to the implementation of Gender Equality Measures in higher education?**

*The proportion of women in academia differs dramatically, in Turkey, 38 % of all academics are women, and this might perhaps differentiate the problems. According to our observations, gender equality actions in both countries need to adapt approaches that are more intersectional. In Germany, national gender equality mechanisms are more established. In Turkey, there is no national action plan for gender equality in higher education, the Council of Higher Education has a working committee on women in academia but there is no binding plan for action. The discourse of gender mainstreaming in research is quite new in Turkey and mostly taken up in the scope of EU projects. Another observation is that in Turkey, efforts for gender equality in academia overlap with the gender equality and feminist agendas in civil society and social movements. Therefore, gender equality issues in universities in Turkey are not limited to a discussion within the borders of a specific habitus. The existence of both institutional gender equality offices on administrative level and gender/feminist studies institutions on academic level in German universities, and the disconnection between these two, which have been observed from time to time, could be shown as a difference between Germany and Turkey. In addition, the distanced positionings of feminist student clubs against these structures make us curious. In Turkey, we can talk about a relatively more organic relation between (feminist) students, academics involved in gender action mechanisms and activists outside the university. We both share the observation that in Germany the “anti-gender” discussions are mostly constructed as an academic*

*issue. However, in Turkey, there seems to be more overlaps between anti-gender sentiments in and outside the university. It is a fact that legal and institutional infrastructures related to gender equality in Turkey still need to be developed, however, strong solidarity networks exist, especially with respect to issues of sexual harassment.*

**Due to the rise of right wing populism and antifeminist movements, gender studies and research integrating a gender perspective, but also gender equality measures in Higher Education like gender mainstreaming or quotas have been under attack. How do you experience the situation in Turkey?**

*We can observe reflections of these debates on a discursive level for instance regarding the use of the concept gender instead of women's studies, or the increasing emphasis on family and women's studies instead of gender studies. We think that it is vital not to single out what is happening in different countries in the frame of anti-gender or anti-feminist movements, we should be able to think about ways in which we can collaboratively continue conducting research and strive towards gender equality.*

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