**The Situation of Gender Equality in Türkiye**

**Introduction**

Gender equality is a fundamental human right and a critical component of social and economic development. In Türkiye, the situation of gender equality reflects a complex interplay of historical, cultural, socio-political, and economic influences. The country has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, with efforts to bridge gender gaps in education, labor, and political participation. However, deep-rooted traditional norms and changing political landscapes present ongoing challenges. This essay provides an in-depth analysis of the situation of gender equality in Türkiye, focusing on its historical context, legislative frameworks, socio-economic indicators, gender-based violence, political representation, and the role of civil society.

**Historical Context of Gender Equality in Türkiye**

The history of gender equality in Türkiye is heavily influenced by the legacy of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent reforms under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic. Atatürk’s reforms in the 1920s and 1930s aimed to modernize Turkish society, and many of these initiatives had significant impacts on women's rights. Legal changes granted women the right to vote and be elected to office in 1934—well ahead of many Western countries. The reforms also included the abolishment of polygamy and advancements in women’s education, which were intended to foster greater gender equality.

However, these top-down reforms had limited success in changing the deeply entrenched patriarchal values within Turkish society. Traditional gender roles, particularly in rural areas, continued to influence women's lives, limiting their participation in public life. Over the decades, political and social shifts, including periods of military intervention and the rise of political Islam, further shaped the gender equality landscape. The early 2000s, marked by Türkiye's bid for European Union membership, saw renewed efforts to advance gender equality, influenced by the need to align with EU standards. However, recent political dynamics have complicated these efforts, resulting in a mixed picture of progress and setbacks.

**Legal and Institutional Framework for Gender Equality**

Türkiye has established a legal framework aimed at promoting gender equality. The Constitution guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination based on gender. Significant legislative progress has been made, particularly in the early 2000s, with reforms aimed at aligning Türkiye's laws with EU standards. These include amendments to the **Turkish Civil Code** in 2001, which granted women equal rights in marriage, property, and family matters. Additionally, the **Penal Code** was revised in 2004 to increase penalties for gender-based violence and to criminalize honor killings more effectively.

The most significant institutional mechanism for promoting gender equality is the **Ministry of Family and Social Services**, which is responsible for policy implementation related to women’s rights. There is also a **Parliamentary Commission on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men** that monitors the gender impact of legislation. The **General Directorate on the Status of Women** (KSGM) plays a role in formulating and coordinating policies related to gender equality.

Despite this legal and institutional framework, implementation remains inconsistent. Political will and cultural resistance often undermine these efforts, and the rollback of certain policies, such as Türkiye’s withdrawal from the **Istanbul Convention** in 2021, has raised serious concerns about the country’s commitment to combatting gender-based violence and ensuring women's rights.

**Economic Participation and Gender Disparities**

Economic participation is a significant area where gender disparities in Türkiye are pronounced. Women’s labor force participation rate is around **35%**, considerably lower than the global average and one of the lowest in the OECD. Traditional gender roles, which assign women the primary responsibility for childcare and domestic work, significantly limit women’s participation in the workforce. Economic inactivity among women is particularly high in rural areas, where cultural norms and limited access to education create additional barriers.

The **gender pay gap** is also a critical issue. Women in Türkiye earn significantly less than their male counterparts, and they are overrepresented in informal and low-paying sectors, such as agriculture and services, where job security and social protections are minimal. Moreover, women are significantly underrepresented in higher-paying sectors like technology, finance, and manufacturing, as well as in leadership positions. Female entrepreneurship, although increasing, faces numerous challenges, including limited access to credit, inadequate support networks, and societal expectations regarding women’s roles.

Efforts to increase women’s economic participation include government initiatives to support female entrepreneurs through loans and training programs. However, these initiatives often have limited reach, particularly in the most conservative regions of the country. Furthermore, the lack of affordable childcare services and the absence of widespread family-friendly workplace policies contribute to the low labor market participation of women.

**Education and Gender Inequality**

Education is an area where Türkiye has made substantial progress in addressing gender inequality, particularly at the primary and secondary levels. Government initiatives to boost female enrollment rates have led to near parity in basic education. However, challenges remain, particularly regarding access to quality education in rural and conservative areas, where gender norms may still prevent girls from continuing their education beyond primary school.

At the tertiary level, the participation of women has increased, but there is still a significant gap in terms of the fields of study chosen by men and women. Women are more likely to be enrolled in humanities and social sciences, whereas men dominate fields such as engineering and technology. This gender segregation in education contributes to the occupational segregation observed in the labor market.

The government's **Conditional Cash Transfer Program**, which offers incentives for families to send their daughters to school, has been one of the successful strategies in increasing female enrollment. Nevertheless, the quality of education and the persistence of gender stereotypes in curricula continue to be barriers to achieving true gender equality in education.

**Political Representation and Leadership**

Political representation of women in Türkiye remains relatively low compared to European standards. Women hold approximately **17%** of seats in the Turkish Parliament, which is well below the global average. Although there has been an increase in the number of women entering politics, they remain underrepresented in leadership positions both within political parties and in government offices. Women's presence in local government is also limited, with very few women serving as mayors or in other influential local positions.

The **quota system** implemented by some political parties has helped to increase female representation. However, these quotas are often symbolic, and women still face numerous obstacles in achieving significant political power. Cultural attitudes that question women’s capabilities as leaders, combined with the male-dominated nature of political networks, limit the effectiveness of such measures. The **Justice and Development Party (AKP)**, which has been in power since 2002, has made mixed progress in terms of gender equality, with some initiatives supporting women's participation but also policies and rhetoric that sometimes reinforce traditional roles for women.

**Gender-Based Violence and the Impact of Withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention**

Gender-based violence is a major issue in Türkiye, affecting women across all socio-economic strata. **Domestic violence** remains widespread, and the rates of femicide have alarmingly increased over the past decade. The Istanbul Convention, which Türkiye was the first country to sign in 2011, was a significant milestone in committing to combat gender-based violence. However, Türkiye’s withdrawal from the convention in 2021 sparked national and international outcry, as it was seen as a step back from the country’s efforts to protect women from violence.

The withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention has highlighted significant challenges in addressing violence against women. Despite legal protections under the **Law to Protect the Family and Prevent Violence Against Women (Law No. 6284)**, enforcement remains weak, and there is often reluctance among authorities to fully implement protective measures. Social attitudes also play a significant role in perpetuating violence, with many cases of domestic abuse going unreported due to fear of stigmatization and mistrust of the judicial system.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and women’s rights groups play a crucial role in providing support services to victims of gender-based violence, including shelters, legal aid, and psychological support. However, these organizations face significant challenges, including limited funding and, at times, government pressure that restricts their activities.

**Role of Civil Society and International Influences**

Civil society organizations have been pivotal in advocating for gender equality and protecting women's rights in Türkiye. Groups such as **KADEM (Women and Democracy Association)** and **Mor Çatı (Purple Roof Foundation)** work tirelessly to provide support to women and to campaign for legal and policy changes. The activism of these organizations has played a significant role in keeping gender equality issues on the national agenda, despite government policies that have at times limited their ability to operate freely.

International bodies, including the **European Union**, **United Nations**, and various human rights organizations, have also influenced Türkiye’s gender equality landscape. EU accession negotiations have been a powerful driver for legal reforms aimed at improving women's rights. However, with the slowing of Türkiye’s EU accession process, the momentum for aligning with European gender equality norms has also diminished. Moreover, international criticism following the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention has highlighted the tensions between international expectations and domestic political agendas.

**Cultural Attitudes and the Impact of Political Dynamics**

Cultural attitudes remain a significant barrier to achieving gender equality in Türkiye. Patriarchal norms are deeply ingrained, particularly in rural and conservative regions, where women are often expected to adhere to traditional roles centered on the family and household. These norms are reinforced by political rhetoric that at times glorifies motherhood as women's primary role, which further restricts women's participation in public and economic life.

Recent political shifts towards more conservative values have impacted the gender equality discourse in Türkiye. The rhetoric of political leaders has sometimes emphasized traditional family roles over women's empowerment, creating an environment where gender equality is not always prioritized. Such shifts have contributed to a polarization of attitudes towards gender issues, with progressive urban areas often advocating for greater equality, while rural regions remain resistant to change.

**Conclusion**

The situation of gender equality in Türkiye is characterized by both progress and persistent challenges. While there have been significant advancements in the legal and educational arenas, the implementation of gender equality measures is often hindered by cultural norms, political dynamics, and inconsistent enforcement. Women’s economic participation remains limited due to traditional gender roles, the lack of family-friendly policies, and the gender pay gap. Political representation is improving, yet still falls short of true equality, and recent political developments, such as the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, raise concerns about the future of women’s rights in the country.

Moving forward, Türkiye’s journey towards gender equality requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses legal, economic, social, and cultural barriers. Strengthening the enforcement of existing gender equality laws, increasing women’s representation in decision-making positions, and challenging societal norms that limit women’s potential are critical steps. The role of civil society, supported by international bodies, remains crucial in this regard. To achieve true gender equality, Türkiye must balance its cultural heritage with its aspirations for modernization, ensuring that all citizens, regardless of gender, can fully participate in and benefit from the country's development.