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Turkey striving for sustainability through 'Women Friendly Cities'

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The aspiration of the Women Friendly Cities Programme is to contribute to the creation of sustainable cities by improving gender equality in a number of Turkish provinces. Women Friendly Cities are places where everybody can equally enjoy the economic, social and political opportunities offered by the city. Image: United Nations Population Fund/United Nations Development Programme.



# Turkey striving for sustainability through ‘Women Friendly Cities’

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**UN agencies are working together to facilitate gender equality and human rights for women throughout Turkish cities. They are being supported by the Global Compact Network Turkey.**

Women Friendly Cities is a Joint UN Programme implemented by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Turkey’s Ministry of the Interior. The program aims to contribute to the creation of sustainable cities by improving gender equality in a set of Turkish provinces.

The program strongly upholds the principle of gender equality as the cornerstone of sustainable development due to its potential to transform the physical and social environment not only today but also for future generations. Having worked at the local level since 2006, we know that progressive national policies, while unquestionably valuable, can only become transformative once their connection to local contexts is safeguarded. Consequently, we see the Women Friendly Cities Programme as a fully-fledged intervention for change that guarantees the penetration of gender equality into the lives of ordinary urbanites.

## Why local intervention?

Like many other countries, Turkey experiences gender inequality at its peak at the local level. When employment, literacy and reproductive health are analyzed, we witness many regional disparities, and such disparities require tailor-made action. For example, according to the latest statistics published by the Turkish Statistical Institute (Turk Stat), while the rate of illiterate women over the age of 15 in Antalya province is 2.77 per cent, this rate increases to 16.39 per cent in the Şanlıurfa province.

The above figures underline the importance of developing gender-sensitive local policies. Problems, challenges and constraints that women face at the local level are directly related to local policies and measures. However, inequality is also persistent in women’s participation in local decision-making mechanisms. Women represent 14 per cent of the Turkish Grand National Assembly’s members of parliament. However,

when we examine local assemblies, this rate drops to 4 per cent (2009 elections). Although this rate went up to 10.7 per cent in the 2014 local elections, it is still below the national ratio. In all of Turkey’s 81 provinces, there are only four female mayors.

As these figures demonstrate, even though women constitute half of total city populations, they cannot fully and equally participate in local decision-making processes as local policies are traditionally designed by men and these designs do not sufficiently account for the needs of women and girls. However, women are the natural partners to be consulted by local administrators in planning and management processes. Decisions made about issues regarding housing, security, transport, education and health directly affect women and have the capacity to make their lives easier or more complicated. Since women are not equally represented in local assemblies, they are unable to influence these decisions.

For instance, services such as building facilities where women can gather or a kindergarten and a day care centre for each neighbourhood are generally not prioritized in urban planning. Poorly lit streets, a lack of public bus services to remote areas and poor security conditions at existing facilities prevent women from exercising their freedom to travel, which is one of their fundamental rights. Meanwhile, overpasses and high pavements make it hard for women to use city streets with strollers. Women constitute one of the most ignored groups when it comes to cultural, sports and leisure facilities offered by cities. Furthermore, women’s shelters and support hotlines — through which women can notify authorities in case of exposure to violence — tend to be disregarded by city administrations despite being compulsory measures set by national jurisdictions.

To remedy the lack of local policies that ensure Turkish cities are gender sensitive, we initiated the Women Friendly Cities Joint UN Programme in 2006. The first

phase of the program was piloted in six cities – İzmir, Kars, Nevşehir, Şanlıurfa, Trabzon and Van – dispersed geographically around Turkey. With its sustainable and human rights-based approach, the program was chosen as one of the six best global projects “carried out in the area of human rights” after the evaluation made on the occasion of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of Human Rights by UNFPA. The program also implemented the first project in Turkey to introduce gender equality activities to local administrations.

Upon completion of the first phase of the Women Friendly Cities Programme, in accordance with the importance attached to this subject by the Ministry of Interior, a circular dated 19 February 2010 was issued by the Ministry and called on all cities to implement the ‘Women Friendly City’ model.

As a result of the success achieved in the pilot cities, many new provinces applied to be among the Women Friendly Cities of Turkey. Applicants were ranked on their ‘capacity’ and ‘needs’ and value-weighted mapping was

performed to select new program provinces. Following this mapping, seven new provinces – Adıyaman, Antalya, Bursa, Gaziantep, Malatya, Mardin, Samsun – were included in the subsequent phase of the program.

### Switching to Women Friendly Cities

A Women Friendly City is a place where everybody can equally enjoy the economic, social and political opportunities offered by the city. Full and equal participation of women in decision-making processes is compulsory for these cities.

Central to creating a Women Friendly City is to be able to correctly analyse the infrastructural, social and spatial needs of women and girls. By analyzing these needs, women-specific urban services should be developed and all urban services should be assessed in terms of gender equality and remedied accordingly. These approaches should not be considered as alternatives but, rather, as complementary and parallel.

### City of Bursa

In Bursa, the metropolitan city released a circular that obliges all municipal directories to integrate the principle of gender equality in all their planning and implementation processes. To ensure that this circular becomes more than a vague statement, the Bursa Metropolitan Municipality, which is also a signatory party to the European Charter on Equality of Women and Men in Local Life, commissioned the Equality Commission of the Municipal Assembly to oversee the integrity of the proposals submitted to the municipal assembly from a gender equality point of view.

The city also revised the municipality's Public Works Bylaws in order to establish solid legal grounds for gender-sensitive urban space planning, including compulsory construction of nursery rooms and children's playgrounds in all regenerative areas, social and cultural spaces and municipal buildings.

Nilufer, a district of Bursa that has been a signatory to the United Nations Global Compact and part of the Cities Programme since 2007, reports annually on how it advances universal principles including Human Rights and Women's Empowerment. The district's 2013 Communication on Engagement states that a total of 257 women have benefited from services offered through its Women's Cooperation Centers, which offer a range of tools to women, from access to adult and children psychologists to advice on professional skills development. Furthermore, this data is tracked and disclosed at all levels through direct applications, face-to-face meetings and telephone calls.

### City of Izmir

In İzmir, the metropolitan municipality established a Branch Office for Women and issued bylaws for its operation with two subdivisions: the Women's Counselling Center/Shelter and the Gender Equality Unit. The office has a total of 30 employees and, in terms of its name and administrative structure, is the first of its kind in Turkey.

The Gender Equality Unit collects gender discrimination data from municipality staff on a regular basis and organizes activities on important dates such as International Women's Day. The unit also provides gender equality training regularly for groups ranging from neighbourhood governors to the general public, and invites women's organizations to offer their opinions in relation to changes in municipal regulations on land development planning.

The efforts in İzmir have been scaled down to the neighbourhood level as well. The Municipality of Konak initiated neighbourhood mobilization activities within the framework of the Women Friendly Cities Programme. Following a series of systemized seminars and focus group discussions, the neighbourhood women assessed their most urgent local need as the reformation of the neighbourhood park that had been widely occupied by substance abusers. The municipality's Equality Commission pursued the matter at the Municipal Assembly and the park was subsequently transformed and named 'The Park of the Leader Women' after the women who advocated to improve it. Though only a small scale example, it showcases how transformative local equality mechanisms can be when it comes to the lives of women living in cities.

The City of Izmir was the first municipality to join the Women Friendly Cities Programme, and the Equality Mechanisms that have been formed in the city have now been dispersed to local administrations at the district level.

## Achieving Women Friendly Cities

In the Women Friendly Cities Programme, our guiding principle is sustainable development through gender equality. Our overarching norm is human rights. Our approach is threefold: to create mechanisms, develop the capacity for the good functioning of these mechanisms and involve civil society. The latter is achieved through cooperation and dialogue between local authorities and civil society organizations (CSOs) in the process of drafting and implementing Local Equality Action Plans. We also deploy a grant scheme that advances and facilitates dialogue and collaboration among different actors while providing internal capacity building for CSOs.

### Local ownership, dialogue and participation: Local Equality Action Plans

Local Equality Action Plans (LEAPs) are essential roadmaps to ensure women's and men's equality in a particular city. LEAPs are prepared in six categories (education, health, employment, participation in management mechanisms, violence against women, and urban services) in accordance with the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and other national plans and international conventions.

The fact that these action plans are prepared through a 'participatory' approach makes LEAPs realistic, feasible and result-oriented. In accordance with this process, we ensure that all relevant stakeholders convene at workshops and training activities organized as part of the program, and that they determine their own duties and authority by discussing the problems and needs of women in that city.

## Local Equality Mechanisms

Within the context of the Women Friendly Cities Programme, each partner city should establish Local Equality Mechanisms. These mechanisms are formed on the basis of Provincial Women's Rights Coordination Committees, Governorship/ Municipality Equality Units and Gender Equality Commissions established within local councils.

### Provincial Women's Rights Coordination Committees

The implementation, success and overall outcomes of the LEAPs are monitored by Provincial Women's Rights Coordination Committees, which serve as umbrella mechanisms.

Due to their participatory structure, these committees also ensure accountability and transparency and can monitor efforts to becoming a Women Friendly City in an efficient and realistic manner. The committees bring all relevant stakeholders (e.g. governorships, municipalities, special provincial administrations, provincial directorates, development agencies, women's civil society organizations, universities, professional organizations and the private sector) together every one or two months.

### Equality Commissions

Within the scope of the Women Friendly Cities Programme, each partner city establishes an Equality Commission within their local assembly.

These commissions are a fundamental aspect of the Local Equality Mechanisms, resulting in draft resolutions



Women are the natural partners to be consulted by local administrators in planning and management processes, given that decisions made regarding housing, security, transport, education and health directly affect and complicate their lives. Image: Nezih Tavlas, UNFPA, Turkey.

prepared by councils to ensure the inclusion of gender perspectives. For example, the positive and negative impacts of a park or a road's construction for women in a particular city can only properly be assessed if these specialized commissions evaluate them. In the same vein, the inclusion of LEAPs within local administrations' strategic plans, the allocation of resources for activities within these plans and their implementation is made possible because of the efforts of Equality Commissions.

### Equality Units and Equality Desks

One of the most important elements in maintaining the sustainability of Local Equality Mechanisms is the Equality Unit/Desk. These are established in municipalities, governorates, regional development agencies, universities and provincial directorates of line ministries. These units/desks are responsible for the preparation of institutional action plans, together with relevant institutions within the LEAP framework, monitoring programs and reporting on them, determining problems in practice and developing strategies and finding solutions to challenges.

### The way forward

Based on the work done so far, it is clear that the first step in creating a Women Friendly City is to get to know the women and girls living there and correctly analyze their needs, problems and opportunities.

Collecting gender sensitive data to address local inequalities and disparities, and political willingness to remedy those inequalities, are the first steps toward the creation of Women Friendly Cities. We believe wholeheartedly that the equality of both men and women leads the way to the creation of 'fair-shared', equal and sustainable cities. Such efforts can be further advanced and strengthened through multi-stakeholder platforms where best practices and lessons learned are shared.

In 2014, in partnership with Global Compact Turkey and UN Women, we launched a local working group, the Women's Empowerment Turkey Working Group, that includes business and women's CSOs, municipalities and city level organizations. The working group consists of over 40 dedicated organizations seeking to advance the social and economic wellbeing of women in Turkey and the Women's Empowerment Principles.

The Women Friendly Cities Programme serves as a model for the working group in which mapping of private sector actions in relation to the Joint Programme will be conducted.

*The municipality of Nilufer, Bursa has been a participant of the Global Compact since 2007. It reports annually on how it advances universal principles, including human rights and women's empowerment.*

*The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), is the lead UN agency for delivering a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled. For more than 30 years, UNFPA has been bringing gender issues to wider attention by advocating for legal and policy reforms, helping to collect gender-sensitive data and by supporting projects that help to empower women and safeguard all aspects of their reproductive health.*