

MONITORING CITY COUNCIL WOMEN'S ASSEMBLIES



kader

Kadın Adayları
Destekleme Derneđi

MONITORING CITY COUNCIL WOMEN'S ASSEMBLIES

**The Şişli Municipality City Council &
The Silivri Municipality City Council**

August 2020

**KADIN ADAYLARI DESTEKLEME DERNEĐİ
(KA.DER)**



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(The Association for Support of Women Candidates)

(KA.DER)

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Despite being among the first countries where women earned the right to vote and to stand for election, today Turkey ranks among those countries where women's representation in the political and public sphere is relatively low. It is not possible to talk about equality unless social equality comes hand in hand with political equality. In order to talk about democracy, women should be equally represented in all decision mechanisms throughout the institutional sphere, including politics. Until now, no political system has provided women with the complete and equal right to participation and the means to enjoy this right. The concept of democracy will only acquire full and dynamic meaning and have a lasting effect, when women and men share political decision making and implementation processes and when these processes take into account the interests of both sides equally.

In Turkey, 77 per cent of the population live within the borders of metropolitan municipalities while 93 per cent live within municipalities. Considering the level of urbanisation, it is crucial to eliminate the inequalities experienced by women regarding their social position at the local administration level. Women are not represented in the ranks of local administrations at the level they deserve and suffer due to inequality. The needs of women and girls are often ignored during city planning processes. However, local decisions regarding education, health, transport, security, kindergartens, care homes and shelters directly affect the lives of women and for this reason, including gender equality principles in the planning and programming processes of local administrations is of critical importance. Local administrations are units to which women can most easily have access in terms of participation, representation and services. At this point, what matter for women are the institutionalisation levels of city councils [*kent konseyleri*] and how they will position themselves according to the administration of the municipality where they are located. One of the most significant examples in this regard are the **city council women's assemblies**, in which



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women participate on a voluntary basis.

Representation and organisation structures of city councils and women's assemblies should be strengthened for participatory democracy, local governance, gender equality in political and public life and sustainable urbanisation. For this reason, the need for legal and political reforms for city council women's assemblies is inevitable.

On the other hand, Turkey has achieved significant developments in eliminating gender-based inequalities thanks to women's movements over the last 40 years. At the root of these developments lie the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW); *The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention)* as well as *The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)*; *The European Charter of Equality for Women and Men in Local Life*, *The European Urban Charter* and *the European Declaration of Urban Rights*. Within this context, the adoption of these agreements in every sphere of society is crucial for strengthening efforts that will reveal the needs and demands of women in terms of urban services. It is necessary to disseminate the monitoring and evaluation work related to monitoring, implementation and working on CEDAW and other agreements at the local level and plan well the preparation processes of shadow reports. Field research was conducted under this study. The results show that it is crucial to include women's assemblies in decision making processes.

At KA.DER, we say that equality starts at the local level and spreads to the global. We hope that the study we carried out is implemented at all municipalities and serves as a model.

Nuray KARAOĞLU
KA.DER Executive Director

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings and subsequent analysis of the research carried out at city councils within the scope of the *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)* regarding institutional developments in Turkey, the importance of local administrations in terms of democracy and participation and the role of city councils in the local democracy context.

There have been many undertakings at both national and international level with the purpose of protecting women in the institutional environment, prevention of all forms of discrimination against women and ensuring equality between women and men. One of the most important undertakings conducted to this end is *The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* accepted by the United Nations.

Aiming for true equality, CEDAW is the main convention among the documents that are related to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women by signatory state parties and the protection of women's rights at an international level which specifically addresses the issue of discrimination against women. Examining the articles of CEDAW, it can be seen that four key concepts are emphasised in its contents, which are "discrimination against women", "equality of rights and opportunities for women and men", "women's rights" and "stereotypical behavioural roles of men and women". CEDAW, which came into force on January 16th 1986 in Turkey, is the first UN convention that focuses on human rights to which Turkey became a party. The main idea underlying CEDAW is the hypothesis that women's rights are a part of universal human rights.

Turkey has made a series of changes to its national laws within the scope of obligations imposed by the Convention on state parties since

the day it became a party to CEDAW and continues to do so. However, unfortunately, the patriarchal social structure that operates on the conception that men are superior and the established traditional social roles constantly pose obstacles to the work carried out to eliminate discrimination against women and ensure equality between women and men. For women in particular and all related actors to achieve the goals of changing the said patterns of meaning, understanding and perception and achieving gender equality, they need to dauntlessly continue working and developing new strategies, as they have done so far.

CEDAW is the most comprehensive international document that has been prepared meticulously and elaborately to elevate the status of women and ensure gender equality. The concept of “human rights” introduces a distinction between civil society and the state and strengthens participation mechanisms in civil society. Generally accepted to be one of the strongest participation mechanisms in local administration, city councils aim to allow all disadvantaged groups living in a city such as women, youth, people with disabilities and children to participate in city management. City council women’s assemblies are one of the platforms where participation is the highest.

Although the decisions of city councils are only advisory and do not directly affect the decisions of municipal councils, the decisions taken and the work carried out by women’s assemblies are important due to their effects on city management. For this reason, it is necessary to conduct work aimed at informing and raising awareness of women regarding their legal rights to strengthen women’s participation in cities. It is also important to increase the number of women and their active participation in the city council women’s assemblies to strengthen local democracy. This is because the city council women’s assemblies are important platforms for women to find a place for themselves to participate in a city’s management. In addition, the decisions of city councils are important since city councils are institutions that are above political party lines and their decisions are taken into account by all institutions and organisations. Suggestions that focus on raising awareness of women and children and eliminating paternalist infringements on civili-

an initiative appear predominantly when it comes to disseminating the issues which constitute the main agenda of women to all segments of society as an initiative. In addition, the use of social media is considered a viable tool to reach all segments of society. Within this context, the city council women assemblies need to take steps to raise the awareness of society by increasing the effectiveness of NGOs. *It has been identified that currently civil society organisations are failing to develop enough demands aimed at city council women’s assemblies. Within this context, the efficiency of the city councils and particularly of women’s assemblies is directly related to establishment of strong relations with civil society.*

SUMMARY OF STUDY FINDINGS

Within the scope of the study, three district municipalities from Istanbul were designated as the research universe, selected according to the different prevalent political party typology. These are Kağıthane, Silivri and Şişli municipalities.

A meeting was held with *the Chairperson of the Silivri City Council Women's Assembly and the Women Producers' Platform within the Silivri City Council Women's Assembly*. During the meetings, it was observed that women considered the city council as a platform where they can come together to sell the products they produce. Interviews were held with *CSOs, the former chairperson of the city council, mukhtarlar [neighbourhood forepersons] and district representatives of political parties at the Silivri Municipality*. A meeting of the *Silivri Municipality Council Meeting* was observed. An interview with *the deputy mayor*, an interview with *the former chairperson of the Silivri City Council Women's Assembly*, interviews with *sitting members of the Silivri City Council Women's Assembly*, a survey of and interviews with people who have knowledge and experience regarding city councils and one-and-a-half-hour-long interview sessions were held with 15 women.

An event was held where women from various assemblies of *the Şişli City Council* and civil society organisations sold their products. Topics such as “commercial concerns, abortion and alimony” stood out during the event rather than participation and women's effectiveness in decision making bodies. It was identified that observations valid for the *Silivri Municipality City Council* also applied to *Şişli Municipality*. As part of the study, there was participation in a session of the *Şişli Municipality City Councils Women's Assembly* and the decisions taken by the City Council were examined. 12 interviews were held at the City Council Women's Assembly with women on a voluntary basis and a survey study was conducted with 15 women.

During the examinations carried out at the *Silivri and Şişli Municipality City Councils Women's Assemblies*, it was observed that the mechanisms aimed to establish equality of opportunity for women and men lack legal bases, the activities of the city councils at the local level are largely maintained through the initiative of administrators and since city councils do not have budgets of their own, the initiative may be lost when administrators change. A broad assessment of the findings of the study reveals the first conclusion that the city councils, which were established as instruments of participation, and the assemblies within the body of city councils that aim to create a shared mind-set understanding are considered to be platforms where economic activities take place rather than instruments of participation by their members. Participant responses to whether they agree with the statement “**City Councils contribute to the formation of a shared mind-set by enabling women to participate in city administration**” were mainly positive.

Comparing the municipalities, the ratio of the “somewhat agree” response is higher at *the Silivri City Council* while that of the “somewhat undecided” response was higher at *the Şişli City Council*. Participants shared positive opinions regarding the city councils' executive boards. For both municipalities, it may be said that “**city council executive boards noticeably take into account the assembly and workgroups**”. 50 per cent of the participants agreed with the statement “**women's work led by the city council do not get enough attention at the municipal administration**”, 25 per cent remained neutral and 25 per cent did not agree. Disaggregated by municipality, these ratios approximately map-out. However, participants from *the Şişli City Council* were found to state that **women's work does not receive much support** compared to *the Silivri City Council*.

Participants consider the city councils beneficial in terms of their contribution to the democratic culture and their contributory effect on participation and governance. However, since city councils do not have an autonomous position in political, administrative and financial terms, some participants called city councils “the backyard of the municipality”. Most of the participants agreed with the statement “I believe that city councils increase the capacity for representation by enabling local

participation”. Cross-analysis between the municipalities revealed that the participants in the Silivri City Council reacted more positively to this statement and in terms of the distribution of other answers, participants in the Şişli City Council were observed to be more neutral. It is worth noting that 19 per cent of the participants answered “I do not agree” in response to the above statement at the Silivri City Council.

Participants largely consider women’s assemblies as beneficial organisations since they can address women’s economic independence, participation in administration and social issues. However, city council general assemblies, municipal assemblies, municipal administration and national public administration not taking the decisions of these assemblies adequately into account is seen as an obstacle against the active and efficient operation of women’s assemblies. The reason for this is that both the municipalities and the provincial branches of the central government have substitutes a substitution for what women’s assemblies can accomplish in provincial organisations. *“Women’s assemblies contribute to combating discrimination against women”* is another statement that received a high positive response. However, contrary to other questions, the number of people who answered “I agree” at **the Silivri City Council** remained below the average and those who answered ‘I am neutral’ and ‘I do not agree’ numbered higher than the average; while the situation was the exact opposite in **the Şişli City Council**. The municipality city councils and women’s assemblies gain **functionality** to the extent they receive financial and in-kind support, and this dependence on municipalities poses an obstacle to these assemblies becoming supra-political institutions.

Legal regulations regarding the city councils and women’s assemblies are considered to be in accordance with CEDAW by the participants who are knowledgeable about the topic. However, the success in regulatory accordance does not apply in implementation. The answers obtained from the participants revealed that there were significant differences between the two city councils. Majority of the participants at the Silivri City Council stated that they were hearing about the convention for the first time. Meanwhile, the majority of the participants at the Şişli City Council stated that they already knew about convention. The participants were aware of the convention stated they consider it quite

important for the representation of women in political life and that the legislation in Turkey was compatible with the convention. *They also stated that the convention was important for setting the ground for multiple developments regarding women, such as the Istanbul Convention.*

Participants did not present a shared opinion regarding the statement **“the city council acts in line with the policies/decisions of the municipal administration”**. 45.5 per cent of the responses were “I agree”, 20 per cent were “I am neutral” and 37.5 per cent were “I do not agree”. Analysing the responses by municipality, it can be seen that most responses at **the Silivri City Council** were “I agree” and those who remained neutral or did not agree were distributed equally; meanwhile at the **Şişli City Council**, people who stated “I don’t agree” constituted the majority with a ratio of 52.6 per cent.

65 per cent of the participants answered the statement on the *“accessibility of women’s assemblies”* positively. The distribution of other responses was mostly “I am neutral” at **the Silivri City Council** while most of the participants at **the Şişli City Council** answered “I don’t agree”. The majority of participants agreed that the city councils offer opportunities for achieving gender equality in the municipal administration and the number of people who disagree is higher than those who remained neutral. Again, responses by municipality are in keeping with the overall distribution. When asked about the city councils’ role in participation in city management, 60 per cent of the participants answered positively, 27.5 per cent remained neutral while 12.5 per cent stated that they do not agree. By municipality, the statement “I agree” was higher than average at the **Silivri City Council** while the ratio of people who remained neutral or did not agree was higher than the average at the **Şişli City Council**.

47.5 per cent of the participants stated that the ideas brought forward in the decision making mechanisms they were a part of were implemented by the municipality. Examining the responses by municipality, the proportion affirming this statement was higher at the **Silivri City Council** at 57.5 per cent, while responses at the **Şişli City Council** were equally distributed. In Silivri, the ratio of people who do not agree with this statement is higher when compared to both the people who

do not agree in Şişli and the number of people who remained neutral in Silivri. There were no participants who stated that women's assemblies did not contribute to gender equality in the Şişli **City Council**, where participants draw a connection between gender equality and the women's assembly. ***There are some factors that negatively affect participation.*** These were identified to be "political characteristics of the city council", "changes in -municipal- administration" and "heavy personal working hours". The reasons for the organisational structure remaining weak were argued to be administrative and political paternalistic infringement on these councils. Bureaucratic processes and the non-transparent attitude of the municipality regarding its financial resources were stated as some of the problems regarding financial support. There are visible obstacles such as *political influence over the city councils, financial autonomy, lack of strong civil initiative and the fact that the city councils within the body of municipalities are not units that can conduct their activities by themselves.* In case these obstacles can be overcome, participants consider it possible for the city councils to perform their mission. There are some suggestions such as *including men in women's assemblies, independent budgets, training and quota applications* to increase visibility.

The fact that both the members of the city council and the general public are not fully aware of what the city councils exactly are and the main purpose for their establishment was an issue commonly expressed by the participants. There are also some suggestions about raising the awareness of women and children and eliminating paternalistic infringement on civilian initiative. In addition, social media use is considered a viable tool for reaching all segments of society. **Participants responded quite positively to women becoming decision makers at the local level.** Women are believed to be generally *free from discriminatory, political and ideological concerns, more egalitarian, supportive of team spirit and aim to achieve order.* In addition, it was emphasised that women make decisions relying on their emotions as well as their logic. Participants think that all these will *prevent* violence, fighting and conflict in the political sphere.

As for assessments regarding Turkey, some argued that positive de-

velopments remained on paper and the desired level regarding implementation could not be achieved. There were even failures in putting legally regulated mechanisms into practice. At this juncture, the problem is about the level of awareness. The perception is widespread that "me first", personal interests and political struggles are of determining weight and social interests are not adequately favoured. It is essential to send shadow reports to the Convention to which Turkey is a signatory. In addition to the government reports, shadow reports to be prepared jointly by civil society organisations that can put pressure for implementation on the government are especially important for the CEDAW Committee. For the progress of gender equality and women's human rights in Turkey, the establishment of democracy in real terms and sustainable, human-based development, the Conventions should be adopted by every segment of society. The outputs of shadow reports should be taken into account to ensure that women can claim rights and the problems of women are more visible. Within this context, it is important to conduct monitoring and evaluation activities at municipalities to increase their effect on ensuring gender equality. *It is necessary to disseminate monitoring and evaluation work in city councils related to monitoring, implementation and work on CEDAW at the local level and for preparing shadow reports.*

It was identified that *the decisions taken by women's assemblies and city councils are not adequately taken into account in municipal councils, but on the other hand, they have effects on implementation.* It is important for the city council women's assemblies and CSOs to cooperate. Women's assemblies should be able to make decisions and develop projects independent of municipality projects. The municipality should particularly encourage voluntary participation. Local administration assembly meetings should be open to the public and information should be provided regularly regarding budget use and balance sheets. In fact, these mechanisms already exist; they only need to be used effectively. Minutes of the meetings of the city council women's assemblies and their decisions should be published. Use of technology in information and service interactions should be encouraged. A suggestion is to make city councils more common throughout the country, help them become more

active, maintain their pluralistic structure and increase their effects on decision-making. City councils are not considered adequate at present: It is reported that women are given opportunities to carry out their activities, but there is no work on increasing the number of activities, evaluation work and their overall effectiveness. **It is commonly expressed that positive developments remain on paper and the desired level of implementation cannot be achieved. Participation of women with disabilities should also be increased:** Organisations of people with disabilities are more easily accepted by local administrations and public institutions, mainly thanks to the government's policies and the effects of the EU adjustment process. Efforts should be made to speed up the services aimed at people with disabilities and cooperation of women's organisations with CSOs should be increased.

The main points in focus should be having more members in city council assemblies and ensuring greater participation, carrying out more projects, better understanding and explaining the city councils, turning city councils into institutions that are transparent, democratic, accountable, inclusive and supra-political, strengthening civil initiative, increasing participatory awareness, ensuring that the city councils are free from the administrative and political paternalist infringement of the central administration and municipalities, authorising the city councils rather than simply offering them a right to speak and avoiding viewing city councils as the backyards of municipalities. With these issues solved, it is believed that city councils will become more democratic institutions in terms of variables such as participation, inclusiveness, effectiveness etc.

Generally, city councils are important institutions that include local actors who remain outside the traditional political processes in decision making processes. It is quite clear that city councils strengthen local governance and democracy in terms of their structure, functions, duties and the opportunities they offer. It is worth noting that the number of city councils in Turkey increased particularly during the 2000s and that they operate at a local level. Women's assemblies, an important component of the city council structure, particularly stand out within this context. In a country where gender inequality is relatively high in political,

social and institutional domains, city councils and women's assemblies offer significant opportunities. Based on this idea an assessment of the activities of city council women's assemblies in two Istanbul districts (Şişli and Silivri) and their work related to gender equality in line with the principles of CEDAW was conducted in this study. It can be seen that the general structural issues of city councils are also reflected on women's assemblies. On the other hand, women's assemblies' increasing number, effectiveness and influence on the institutional environment is considered to be a significant development towards establishing gender equality. Within this framework, it is suggested to strengthen the interaction of both the municipalities and other civilian actors at the local level with women's assemblies.



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