

TCA Exclusive Interview with Fatma Aytac

Turkish Coalition of America (TCA) intern Pelin Ensari, a Political Science major at the University of California, Berkeley, had the opportunity to interview Fatma Aytac, a Founding Deputy of the Kadin Partisi (Women's Party) in Turkey and Chairwoman at the Red Pepper Association based in Istanbul. Ms. Aytac discussed the challenges faced by women in Turkey and the U.S. as well as their need for more political engagement.

An industrial engineer by trade, Fatma Aytac worked in the private sector for international companies for 25 years in Turkey before she slowly transitioned her focus to civil society. In 2009, Fatma first joined KA.DER, a civic society organization focused on addressing Turkish women's political inequalities through election campaigns, advocacy, volunteering, and lobbying.

Through her volunteer work at KA.DER, Fatma and several other members decided that it was time to start a women's party in Turkey, "With KA.DER, we were doing election campaigns to send more women to positions in governments, but there were a lot of frustrations and losses. Then, we discussed the possibility of a women's party, so that we could work for ourselves." And so, in 2014, the Kadin Partisi was established as the first women's political party in Turkey.

The existence of the Kadin Partisi is a significant political achievement for Turkish women; however, Fatma explains there is more to still be done, "There are no political laws favoring women, no gender quotas. Since there are four big parties in the Turkish Parliament, you cannot find a seat as a woman into these parties unless you have a familial connection, some sort of fame/popularity, or a civic society group chooses you as a "makbul Kadin," or "favorable woman" as a type of symbolic representation."

The Kadin Partisi has broken down barriers for Turkish women in politics, and it has successfully proven wrong the traditional stereotypes and stigmas surrounding women in Turkish society. Although they have not gotten past the 10% threshold of votes to achieve a seat in Parliament, Fatma describes, "At least we were able to get our voices heard with the Kadin Partisi. We can still participate in politics outside of Parliament, we got recognition and enacted change outside of it."

Although Fatma left Turkey to settle in America for her daughters' education, she did not believe her political and societal work was done. In fact, Fatma states, "I want to be a bridge between the United States and Turkey for Turkish women in politics and civil society. Whatever happens in Turkey, affects me. Whatever happens in the United States, affects me. Whatever happens in the United States, greatly affects Turkey. Therefore, I believe that Turkish American

women should be in higher positions - it is greatly beneficial to raise our unique voices regarding international relations between Turkey and America, and regarding issues related to women's rights, human rights.”

Thus, Fatma continues to be a co-chair of the Kadin Partisi, and since moving to America, she has become a chairwoman of the Red Pepper Association, or “Kirmizi Biber Dernegi,” and has also joined Bridge to Turkiye/Turkey. With the Red Pepper Association, Fatma is a UN Representative and she has worked to have around 20 delegates represent the Association at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women meetings. In addition to continuing her civil society work in the US, Fatma has been active with TCA's Turkish American Women's Leadership Initiative and attended the First Annual Turkish American Women Leadership Forum in March 2019.

Regarding the Forum, Fatma explains how the trip enriched her experience as a Turkish American woman in politics, “We came together, and every woman told her story about her career, business, and politics. We shared everything, and we continue that communication today, which is especially important. First, we got to know each other, and now we can help each other.”

The political experiences of Turkish American women versus Turkish women hold stark differences, and Fatma believes that TCA's work with supporting the campaigns of Aylin Acikalin, Aycha Sawa, Leah Ersoylu, and Ceylan Rowe is a crucial difference. In Turkey, women who aspire for political office face impossible challenges with fundraising and elections. Even with the work of organizations like KA.DER and Kadin Partisi, Fatma states that “Proving oneself as a woman in Turkey is so difficult. Most Turkish women who are in politics come from a lineage, and women outside of these circles have to overcome so many cultural, political, and financial barriers.” However, Turkish American women can use their multicultural background and language skills as unique and vital assets to bring to the political arena.

Fatma Aytac's work and volunteerism in Turkey and America represents the future of globalization and politics. When citizens work to foster connections, whether cultural, political, or economic, between their nations, the world turns into a “global village,” as Fatma describes. These networks can transform the future for the better, and it is vital that women are included in this work.

“Pelin, now is the time for women. The world is in a terrible position, the world is burning, and we need more women leaders to help with important decisions. We need women's solidarity, we need to encourage and train young women leaders into the world of politics, and the work of the Turkish Coalition of America supports this goal.”

For more information on the Women's Party (Kadin Partisi) click here:

<https://www.kadinpartisi.org.tr/>

For more information on the Red Pepper Association (Kirmizi Biber Dernegi) click here:

<http://www.kirmizibiberdernegi.org/>