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Erdogan walks out of the session at the World Economic Forum in 2009, vows never to return.

HE LOVES YOU BEATS YOU

Turkish President dismisses the idea of gender equality

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At an international conference on justice and rights for women President Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently declared that women should not be regarded as equal to men and that pregnancy presented an obstacle to equal opportunity in the workplace.

"You cannot put women and men on an equal footing," Erdogan said "It is against her nature—because her nature is different, her bodily constitution is different."

It's the latest in a series of outrageous and provocative statements by the outspoken Turkish leader. Being a mother is a woman's primary role in society, he also said.

Human rights activists and advocates for gender equality stormed social media networks with furious responses to the address. "The Constitution, international agreements have all been crushed," Fatma

Aytac, a member of KA-DER, a women's group, posted on Twitter. Others see it as an effort to make changes to the labour law to keep women indoors and hence, not to be taken lightly.

This is why.

Erdogan is popular, and, as Turkey's leader since 2003, he has been riding a wave of economic success. But he is also a populist, who has slowly and steadily tightened his grip on the state and the media, demonising all critics. The problem with populist leaders is that they claim only they truly represent the people, thus dismissing views and opinions that challenge their authority. When women rights activists protested, he condemned them for "rejecting motherhood."

Before the presidential election this summer, then-Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc advised women not to laugh loudly in front of others

and "preserve their decency at all times." The ridiculous remark sparked social media protests, with women posting pictures of themselves laughing.

Activists feel that these comments are offensive and dangerous, given the country's record on women's rights issues. "Such comments by state officials, which disregard equality between men and women, play an important role in the rise of violence against women," Hulya Gulbahar, a lawyer and activist, told the AP. "Such comments aim to make women's presence in public life — from politics to arts, from science to sports — debatable."

Turkey ranked 120 out of 136 on the World Economic Forum's 2013 gender gap index, which includes economic, political and educational measures.

In a May 2011 report titled "He Loves You, He Beats You: Family Violence in Turkey and Access to Protection" The Human Rights Watch documents "brutal and long-lasting violence against women and girls by husbands, partners, and family members and the survivors' struggle to seek protection."

The report also says that "Turkey has strong protection laws, setting out requirements for shelters for abused women and protection orders. However, gaps in the law and implementation failures by police, prosecutors, judges, and other officials make the protection system unpredictable at best, and at times downright dangerous."

In 2008 Erdogan advised women to have at least three children, preferably five, for the sake of the economy.

He has, however, expressed "his highest respect for women" by saying people like him kiss their mothers' feet because they smell of heaven, which prompted this comment from *The Guardian's* Alev Scott on November 25: "Perhaps he is unaware that the more children a couple has, the more expensive family life becomes, especially in an increasingly urbanised Turkey. Motherhood becomes less about having one's heavenly smelling feet kissed and more about the strains of impoverished domesticity."

The Turkish President is not alone in making such derogatory comments toward women. In 2005 Harvard President Lawrence H. Summers triggered criticism by saying that the underrepresentation of female scientists at elite universities in the US may stem in part from "innate" differences between men and women.

Like Erdogan, Summers is also a serious man who has held many coveted positions including Harvard Economics Professor, commerce secretary in Clinton's cabinet and Director of National Economic Council in the Obama administration.

The difference is Summers had to resign his position as the Harvard President— partly for his outrageous comment. No one, however powerful, has the right to suppress, silence or dominate any other person.

The reality of gender equality may be complex and diverse, even more so in the developing world. But countries that have invested in women development are advancing faster than others. That's for everyone to see. An increasing number of companies recognise that a healthier gender mix enhances innovation and speeds up growth. It is a good sign that so many Bangladeshi rural women now have access to education, skills and therefore, jobs. As a result, we see women from villages in Bangladesh becoming engineers, doctors and even civil servants, which was unthinkable a few decades ago.

Once a woman is able to earn her livelihood, she becomes economically and psychologically



PHOTO COURTESY: WIKIPEDIA

Çağla Kubat, Turkish model and windsurfer.

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independent. And once she gains better control over the family's finances, she acquires stronger decision-making powers.

The benefits of creating equal opportunities for women are many and not hard to understand. But all said, women are not equal to men.

Women are better and stronger.