

Veiling reality

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As soon as Abdullah Gül's candidacy for the presidential election was announced, the press, in Turkey and abroad, turned its focus on his wife's headscarf. The türban is once again making the headlines and looks set to remain the subject of a heated controversy in the coming weeks.

Personally, I wish the debate could move beyond the piece of cloth that some women choose to wear in accordance to their faith and address more pressing issues of gender discrimination.

Many secular women see the türban as a threat because they blame religion for the low position of women in public life. It is a fact that women in many Muslim societies today are constrained by social mores and male diktat. Religion, in various parts of the world, is used — and often abused — to limit women's role in public life. As soon as it is no longer a woman's own choice to cover her hair, it becomes an issue of individual liberties.

I lived in Iran in the mid-1980s, during the Khomeini era, at a time when all women had to be fully covered at all times. Wearing layers of long dark clothes in the stifling heat of summer was uncomfortable, as was the presence of "Islamic guidance" squads, which were patrolling the streets to ensure that women would not laugh out loud or allow a lock of hair to show.

But this is not the situation we have in Turkey today. Using one form of intolerance and discrimination to prevent another is not the solution. Objecting to women with headscarves getting access to higher education, or to Çankaya, seems very counterproductive. Aren't educated women and men precisely what this country needs?

While the türban hogs the headlines, other stories generate only a brief flurry of interest but little momentum for change. In Malatya, a dispute between related families over a "berdel" agreement — an exchange of brides — has just caused the deaths of three people. The victims were men, but it was young women, casually bartered away by their fathers, who were at the center of the fight, which erupted when one party to the agreement changed his mind and refused to give his 14-year-old daughter in marriage because she was too young and wanted to finish school. The YTL 5,000 he paid in compensation (is this the going rate for a young girl's life?) failed to satisfy his relatives, who felt cheated because they had already "given" their own girl to his son.

The Turkish civil code, introduced in 2002, clearly states that marriage can only be concluded between people age 18 and over and only with their full consent. Yet deals involving underage girls are still taking place in all impunity. Had there not been a dispute and fatalities, this exchange of young girls would have gone unnoticed.

Because this young couple could not have married legally, their union would have to have been an "imam nikah," a religious union not recognized unless accompanied by a legal marriage. Without the cover of legality, young women are deprived of the rights and protections that the civil code grants them, particularly in cases of divorce.

These issues have remained largely unaddressed in Turkey for decades. Perhaps if some of the energy spent opposing the headscarf could focus instead on tackling perennial social problems that still blight the lives of young people, gender discrimination would really decrease. And in a more gender-equal society, the headscarf would no longer be seen as such a divisive issue.