

Turkey - Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: 'women not equal to men'

"Our religion has defined a position for women : motherhood,"

Sunday 20 November 2016, by [AFP](#) (Date first published: 24 November 2014).

Turkish president also accuses feminists of not understanding special status attributed to mothers by Islam.

The Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has been accused of blatant sexism after declaring that women are not equal to men and claiming feminists in Turkey reject the idea of motherhood.

The devoutly Muslim president said biological differences meant women and men could not serve the same functions, adding that manual work was unsuitable for the "delicate nature" of women.

His comments ignited a firestorm of controversy on Twitter and one well-known female TV news anchor even took the unusual step of condemning the remarks during a bulletin.

"Our religion [Islam] has defined a position for women: motherhood," Erdoğan said at a summit in Istanbul on justice for women, speaking to an audience including his own daughter Sumeyye.

"Some people can understand this, while others can't. You cannot explain this to feminists because they don't accept the concept of motherhood."

He recalled: "I would kiss my mother's feet because they smelled of paradise. She would glance coyly and cry sometimes.

"Motherhood is something else," he said, claiming that it should be a woman's priority because Islam exalts women as mothers.

He went on to say that women and men could not be treated equally "because it goes against the laws of nature".

"Their characters, habits and physiques are different ... You cannot place a mother breastfeeding her baby on an equal footing with men.

"You cannot make women work in the same jobs as men do, as in communist regimes. You cannot give them a shovel and tell them to do their work. This is against their delicate nature."

Erdoğan was apparently referring to the practice during and after the second world war for women in communist states such as the USSR to do heavy manual work in factories or in roles such as tram drivers.

He complained that in previous decades in Turkey women in Anatolian villages had done the back-breaking work while their menfolk idled away the time.

"Wasn't it the case in Anatolia? Our poor mothers suffered immensely and got hunchbacks while the men were playing cards and rolling dice at teahouses," he said.

"What women need is to be able to be equivalent, rather than equal. Because equality turns the victim into an oppressor and vice versa."

Erdoğan, 60, has been married since 1978 to his wife Emine, with whom he has two sons and two daughters.

Aylin Nazliaka, an MP from the main opposition Republican People's party said Erdoğan "ostracised" women by portraying them as delicate, weak and powerless and limiting their role to motherhood.

"Erdoğan has publicly committed a hate crime ... But I will continue to fight this man who sees no difference between terrorists and feminists," she said in a written statement.

Sule Zeybek, an anchorwoman at the Turkish broadcaster Kanal D, hit back at Erdoğan's comments live on television during a news bulletin.

"I am a feminist and thank God I'm a mum. I wouldn't kiss my mother's feet but I have great respect for her," she said.

The Islamic-rooted government of Erdoğan has long been accused by critics of seeking to erode the country's secular principles and limiting the civil liberties of women.

Erdoğan has drawn the ire of feminist groups for declaring that every woman in Turkey should have three children and with proposals to limit abortion rights, the morning-after pill and caesarean sections.

Seen by critics as increasingly authoritarian, he has repeatedly lashed out personally at female journalists who displeased him.

But the government's attitude towards women came under even greater scrutiny after the deputy prime minister, Bülent Arınç, caused a furore in August by suggesting women should not laugh loudly in public.

Activists also say that government officials' remarks about women and how they should be treated leave them exposed to violence. According to non-governmental organisations, more than 200 women in Turkey died as a result of domestic violence in the first six months of 2014.

Agence France-Presse in Istanbul

P.S.

* The Guardian. Monday 24 November 2014 15.01 GMT Last modified on Sunday 17 July 2016 09.17 BST:

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