



**Submission to the United Nations
Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
53rd Session, Geneva, 1-19 October 2012**

**Review of Turkmenistan under
the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of
Discrimination against Women**

Preface

The Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) welcomes the opportunity to provide information to the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in advance of its review of Turkmenistan under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The review of Turkmenistan will take place at the 53rd session of the Committee on 1-19 October 2012. The current document, which is primarily based on information obtained through monitoring undertaken by TIHR, highlights major concerns in nine areas of the Convention.

The Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) is the successor organisation of the Helsinki Group of Turkmenistan and was registered as an independent association in Vienna in November 2004. Through a network of local experts and activists inside Turkmenistan, the organisation monitors and reports on the human rights situation in the country. It also disseminates independent news, comments and analysis from and about the country.

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Introduction

The death of the first Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov, also known as “Turkmenbashi”, nurtured hopes that the human rights situation in Turkmenistan might improve. Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, Minister of Health under Niyazov, was inaugurated as the new president in 2007. Despite of a number of legal amendments, pledges before international human rights bodies and the recent creation of a new political party, which will very likely only turn into an extension of the pro-presidential Democratic Party of Turkmenistan, which is, as of now, the only political party in Turkmenistan, no substantial changes have taken place. President Berdymukhamedov enjoys unlimited powers, while the Turkmen government dominates all its branches. Following his re-election in February 2012, with none of the presidential candidates being a serious contender, it is most likely that no substantial improvements will take place soon.

The recently launched publications and TV channels remain under strict state control; an independent civil society is inexistent due to the rights to freedom of association and freedom of assembly being suppressed. The “black list” with names of persons forbidden to leave or enter Turkmenistan has become significantly longer than during Niyazov’s time. It is therefore not surprising that all major concerns raised by the international human rights review bodies will remain in place.

One of the main changes in the society since 1991 is that women have become the main bread winners of their families. After Turkmenistan’s independence, many enterprises were closed triggering a high unemployment rate that had negative consequences for men and forced women to replace them. This, however, did not contribute to the women’s emancipation, mainly because of different state policies which caused a slow decay of national foundations and social institutions.

In the early 1990’s many men started importing various goods from abroad selling them at the local markets. The Turkmen custom officers soon realized that they can easily misuse their position and plunder the goods from the new businessmen without fearing any legal consequences. As the Turkmen mentality did not allow officials to search women, offend them or raise hand against them, the private entrepreneurship e.g. import of different products from abroad, was overtaken by women. Consequently, many men decided to look for job opportunities abroad – mainly in Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and the Russian Federation.

The misuse of narcotics has caused a serious decline of the male population in Turkmenistan since the 1990s. Although there are no concrete numbers, one can assume that thousands of them died because of drug abuse and criminal activities surrounding drug usage.

Many women wishing to create families were left with no other option than to agree to become the second or even the third wife of a successful businessmen or state official. Some even had to accept having children without any kind of marital status. Although some 20 years ago the Turkmen society did not look favourably upon the phenomenon, the perception has changed and polygamy is even supported by relatives of single women as an option for these women to secure their existence.

An additional burden for many women are the numerous state holidays and official events organised by the Turkmen authorities. All of them affect women more than men, as they mostly work in educational, public health and cultural establishments, which are usually entrusted with the organisation of such events. Women have no choice but to attend these events, often from the early morning until the late in the evening, regardless whether it is a working day or not and irrespective of the weather conditions. Due to all these and many more burdens, women have no time to take care of their families and children let alone to find time for themselves.

Prohibition of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and Gender Roles and Stereotypes (articles 2 and 5)

Strong patriarchal attitudes and deeply rooted stereotypes about the role and the responsibilities of women and men in the family and society continue to persist. Although many of them had to become the main breadwinners, women continue to be stereotyped as mothers and caregivers, and can mainly obtain educational and employment choices which are considered suitable for them. The role of a woman as mother has also been referred to in the newest State party's report (point 85) and in some state-sponsored celebrations. The recent festivities following the International Women's Day, a state holiday in Turkmenistan, included number of events all held under the slogan "Mothers of the country wish well to Arkadag (Protector)", which is the name under which President Berdymukhamedov is known in the country.¹

The appearance of a woman in public life plays an important role and is often used for state propaganda purposes: women must be modest and beautiful thereby highlighting the superiority of the Turkmen nation. As reported by Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR), less attractive women and children have been excluded from participation in rehearsals for the Turkmenistan's Independence Day in 2011:

- The preparation of festivities for the 20th anniversary of the country's independence has been declared as the top priority at all state and public levels. Marching and crowd scenes started early in the morning and lasted until late in the evening. The children from Dashoguz who are short, overweight and have developmental defects were exempted by school administrations from participating in the everyday rehearsals and remained in schools, supervised by teachers who were either pregnant or breastfeeding mothers.²

There is no reliable information on the incidence of violence against women. The government has only slowly started to address the issue and to work on some legislative framework. Although rape, including marital rape, is illegal, articles from the Criminal Code and the Marriage and Family Code are not enforced effectively, with penalties for rape depending on the extent of injury and whether the rapist was a recidivist or not. Domestic violence is common, but most of the women keep silent, mostly because they are unaware of their rights or fear repercussions if they report the domestic violence. Only a few cases were brought before the court and state-controlled media refer to the problem only occasionally.

Despite of point 48 in the State report, which assures the Turkmen customs do not permit oppression of women, a recent case reported by TIHR shows a different picture:

- On 21 July 2012 women arriving from Istanbul were extremely rudely forced by a customs officer from Ashgabat airport to leave their belongings and go into a room without getting any explanations. Upon entering the room, they were ordered to undress completely and crouch ten times, a practice used for drug smugglers. Many women cried and tried to protest, but were threatened that they would be included in "the black list" and prevented from leaving the country ever again. Those who continued rebelling were threatened by the officials with "finding what they were looking for" e.g. to claim that the women were smuggling drugs.³

¹TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Women's Day events devoted to the President", 4 March 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/368>

²TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Better not to be born pretty", 30 October 2011, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/144>

³TIHR, „Chronicles of Turkmenistan“: "Females subjected to humiliating screening checks", 26 July 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/569>

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women should call on the Turkmen authorities to:

- increase awareness raising activities and measures about the meaning and scope of direct and indirect discrimination against women; formal and substantive equality among men and women, as well as women's awareness about their rights;
- undertake measures to assist victims of all forms of violence against women, implement existing legislation effectively and ensure that those forms of violence that are not legally regulated get an appropriate legal framework to protect victims and punish perpetrators.

Elimination of Trafficking and of Exploitation of Prostitution of Women (article 6)

Though prostitution is illegal, it remains a problem throughout the country mainly due to impoverishment in general and insufficient educational and employment opportunities for women. The Turkmen Criminal Code prohibits prostitution, involvement of minors in prostitution and activities related to prostitution, including pimping, and provides prison sentences or hard labour for such acts. Although the Turkmen authorities claim that they actively monitor prostitution, they do not counter it efficiently.

The increase of prostitution in Turkmenistan dates back to Saparmurat Niyazov's presidency, while the governance of the current president is marked with an increase in the number of sexual minorities as well as in the sexual exploitation of minors.⁴ The TIHR reported in 2008 and 2011 about the practice among politicians and businessmen⁵ to facilitate prostitution, another practice introduced under the Niyazov presidency.

- Selected by female employees of the local authorities' offices, young and beautiful women are sent from the provinces to the capital to entertain high-ranking officials. The women are usually told that they will continue their education in Ashgabat or will get a prestigious job there. They are required to be good looking, additionally their height and weight must be perfect, also the quality of their teeth, skin and hair density. During Niyazov's time ethnicity did not play a role, but nowadays only girls with the Turkmen ethnicity are eligible. Many have tried to refuse, but they were promised a residence permit for themselves and their parents in Ashgabat, enrolment at universities of their choice and good jobs. Some of them managed to escape, but many were subjected to intimidation or even experienced lethal accidents.⁶

Although the Law on the Battle against Trafficking in Persons was adopted in December 2007 and the Criminal Code prohibits all forms of trafficking in persons, the Turkmen authorities did not undertake significant steps to combat it. There is still lack of official information about the extent of trafficking in women and measures taken to handle the issue. Approximately 80% of the trafficking cases involve young women who were either trafficked for sexual exploitation or for forced labour in Turkey. As most of the women live illegally, they refrain to contact official authorities. Many of those who worked in Turkish households were subjected to sexual abuse and some of them were even infected with sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV/AIDS.⁷

⁴ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Times have changed", 14 October 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1175>; "Children kidnappers detained", 14 May 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/436>

⁵ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Kim? The story continued", 14 October 2011 <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/116>

⁶ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "It is better not to be born beautiful", 29 November 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1027>

⁷ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "From Turkey with dollars and AIDS", 25 December 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=627>

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women should call on the Turkmen authorities to:

- actively monitor prostitution, counter it and curtail all attempts and hidden practices of facilitating prostitution by businessmen and state officials;
- publicly acknowledge trafficking as a problem, increase efforts to raise awareness on the issue, undertake measures to prevent trafficking and prosecute traffickers;
- remove obstacles for the establishment of anti-trafficking organizations and provide them with the financial assistance to assist victims and conduct anti-trafficking awareness campaigns.

Elimination of Discrimination in Political and Public Life and Elimination of Discrimination in Representation at the Level of International Organizations (articles 7 and 8)

Women in Turkmenistan have the right to vote and may be elected as members of the Turkmen parliament (Mejlis). Out of 50 parliament members in 2006, 26% were women. Since 2007, the number of parliamentarians has risen to 125 and 17% of them are women. Following the presidential election in February 2012, three women were entrusted with ministerial positions in the new government: Gulshat Mammedova as Minister of Education; Ainabat Babaeva as Minister of Textile Industry; and Guncha Mammedova as Minister of Culture. Ainabat Babaeva and Guncha Mammedova were re-appointed to their positions. Four more women were officially nominated as deputies and chairpersons: Byagul Nurmyradova as Deputy Chairperson of the Cabinet of Ministers in charge of culture; Ogulkhadjat Ishangulyeva as Chairperson of the Joint Stock Company "Turkmenkhaly"; Gyzylgul Nurgheldieva as Chairperson of the Turkmen State Publishing Service and Maya Mollaeva as Chairperson of the Chief Record Keeping Office under the Cabinet of Ministers. All of them have been politically active since Niyazov's time.⁸

Although many women were actively involved as local observers and members of election commissions in the presidential election in February 2012, many more were selling food and beverages in front of the polling stations⁹. No information in the State report indicates whether a woman can stand as president. Out of eight presidential nominees¹⁰, not a single one was a woman.

- Ayna Abayeva, a teacher from Ashgabat, who was backed by an unregistered nongovernmental organization, was denied to run for president. The "Civil Society Movement" was informed that they need to register at the Ministry of Justice and only after, they could nominate a candidate for a public office. Abayeva sent letters to the Turkmen Prosecutor-General's Office and the Supreme Court, but she did not receive any reply. She had several ideas how to improve Turkmenistan's education system bringing it in line with international standards. Soon after the attempt to register her, Abayeva faced problems at work.¹¹

In the report the State party claims that women also hold positions as chief-editors. To TIHR's knowledge only the weekly "Rysgal" appointed such a position to a woman. The weekly "Rysgal" is the first privately-owned publication in Turkmenistan and was launched at the initiative of the Association of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs in Autumn 2010. Although not independent, the

⁸TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Meet the new government", 12 March 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/661>

⁹TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Presidential elections. First-hand experience", 13 February 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/351>

¹⁰Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL): "Primer: Turkmenistan's Presidential Election", 12 February 2012, http://www.rferl.org/content/turkmenistan_presidential_election_primer/24481274.html

¹¹Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL): "Turkmen Schoolteacher Says Presidential Candidacy Rejected", 10 January 2012, http://www.rferl.org/content/turkmenistan_teacher_candidacy_presidential_bid_rejected/24447751.html

publication has become quite popular among readers with a weekly circulation of 51.000 copies. In January 2011 the chief-editor Akhmed Divanov was fired and was replaced by a woman who has no journalistic experience and previously worked at the Associations' human resources department and also organized exhibitions. One can assume that after "Rysgal" started generating revenue, the weekly sparked the interest of influential persons who wanted to keep it under control.¹²

Although usually denied by the Turkmen authorities, the dress code for women continues to be an issue. Several articles and reports by the TIHR indicate that regardless of their ethnicity, women working in public institutions are expected to wear the long national dress and the same is expected of female students¹³. The authorities, law enforcement agents and educational institutions encourage the image of a decent Turkmen woman. In February 2010 the General Committee of Turkmenistan's Academy of Sciences instructed all women attending the Academy sessions to exclusively wear Turkmen national dress.¹⁴ While keeping the tenure as Deputy Khyakim (deputy representative of local government) in Dashoguz velayat in 2011, Byagul Nurmyradova required that all women, regardless of their ethnicity, wear national traditional trousers (balaks).¹⁵ The Turkmen Minister of Education Guncha Mammedova also required that teachers attending the celebrations following the 2011 presidential visit to Lebap velayat must wear the red national dress. Those women who had no such dress had to buy it at their own expense.¹⁶

With regard to the representation of women in international organisations nothing has changed since the 2006 report was published. H. E. Aksoltan A. Atayeva still has the post as Turkmenistan's representative at the United Nations (UN) and no further appointments have been made since.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women should call on the Turkmen authorities to:

- abandon requirement of the dress code for women working in the public sphere of life.

Elimination of Discrimination in the Field of Education (article 10)

On several occasions during the election campaign in January 2007 Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov addressed "international educational standards". Upon being elected as president, he signed a number of decrees and laws, which resulted in slight improvements, such as the re-establishment of the ten-year secondary education, abolished by the late President Niyazov¹⁷, and the prolongation of the university education to five years. Although Niyazov's book "Rukhnama" has lost its omnipresence, its 10th anniversary was still celebrated in 2011¹⁸ and it continues to remain the main subject during the entrance exams to all universities¹⁹.

¹² TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "The editor has done his work, the editor may go", 10 February 2011, <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1604>

¹³ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Turkmen students: 5 year maximum security confinement", 28 March 2011, <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1637>; "Seize the prostitutes!", 30 May 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=551>

¹⁴ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "The nation's academics", 25 February 2010, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1300>:

¹⁵ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Look who has come to power", 27 February 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/365>

¹⁶ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "The Minister's weird initiative", 29 September 2011, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/94>

¹⁷ From the newspaper Neitral'niy Turkmenistan of 4 January 2007 and 16 February 2007

¹⁸ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Turkmenistan Clings to 'Holy' Book", 21 September 2011, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/81>

¹⁹ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Entrance exams: video cameras, skullcaps and the Rukhnama", 12 August 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/592>

The institutions implementing the reform lack a precise plan, strategic goals and clearly worded objectives to carry it out. Syllabi, new curriculae and textbooks are either inexistent or were developed hastily and unsystematically. No qualified teachers are available for the new subject “Basics of a Healthy Life Style”. The subject is devoted to hygiene, basics on the reproduction system and harmful aspects of life and is taught by the teachers who previously instructed art²⁰. Despite the government’s claims that it can provide all necessary textbooks²¹, the supply of the books is rather unsatisfactory and English classes are taught from the translation of “Rukhnama”.²² The grading of students is not based on their real knowledge. Eager to highlight the accomplishments of the President’s reform(s), the Ministry of Education ordered teachers to refrain from giving C and D marks and teachers were also forbidden to make students repeat a year. Schoolchildren therefore completely lack any motivation to learn.²³

Pupils from most minority groups cannot obtain instruction in their mother tongue, while teachers who used to teach in these languages, many of them women, are often unemployed. In order to enroll their children in Russian-language classes, parents have to pay significant bribes to the school administration or local education boards²⁴.

The number of students admitted to national and foreign universities has increased²⁵, but most of the students show poor knowledge when applying. The number of applicants exceeds the number of vacancies: in 2008 more than 20.000 applications were submitted for the 4000 available vacancies.²⁶ The high number of applicants and the insufficient number of vacancies encourage corruption, which has already penetrated all spheres of life.²⁷

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women should call on the Turkmen authorities to:

- provide gender-expertise of textbooks to identify and eliminate gender discriminative stereotypes still abundant in text books and in education curricula in general;
- asses implications of the reforms in education on girls and women and its impact on the employment.

Elimination of Discrimination in the Field of Employment (article 11)

The Labour Code is overly protective of the picture of women as mothers and thereby restricts women’s economic opportunities in a number of employment areas. Employers often give preference to men to avoid potential productivity losses due to pregnancy or child care. There are no precise data on women’s participation in the labour force, their unemployment rate, situation in the

²⁰ TIHR, “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”: “On a new course in the school curriculum”, 21 December 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=907>

²¹ Turkmenistan.ru: “International book fair opens in Ashgabat”, 24 September 2010, at http://www.turkmenistan.ru/?page_id=3&lang_id=en&elem_id=17937&type=event&sort=date_desc

²² TIHR Report: “Turkmen Education: Reform and Regress”, January 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/uploaded/1671390621977742.pdf>

²³ TIHR, “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”: “Schoolchildren improve academic performance”, 24 September 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1161>

²⁴ TIHR, “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”: “Seeking admission to the Russian class? Present a fridge!”, 10 August 2011, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/43>

²⁵ TIHR Report, “Turkmenistan. Human rights in the era of the great Renaissance”, February 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/uploaded/5905833640537837.pdf>

²⁶ TIHR Report: “Turkmen Education: Reform and Regress”, January 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/uploaded/1671390621977742.pdf>

²⁷ “Turkmenistan-Russia: training young human resources”, at <http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/?idr=9&id=081208a>; TIHR, “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”: “I to want Russian speaking”, 5 September 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=902>

formal and informal labour markets as well as the ability of women to benefit from new economic opportunities.

In order to obtain a job, women occasionally need to fulfil specific standards conceived by the Turkmen officials who are often women themselves. Turkmenistan's Education Minister Gulshat Mamedova demanded, for example, that the principals of schools and kindergartens hire only single young women as secretaries following her visit to one of the local offices in September 2011. On the other hand all female applicants for technical positions at the local government's office in one of the Turkmen provinces were required to be married.²⁸

"Extra-curricular" activities are often imposed on women and they are forced to join cotton harvesting during the weekends. They try to avoid the requirement by sending their students, whom they promise money and good marks.²⁹ Teachers, who are mainly women, are often required to ensure 100% attendance of their pupils during different rehearsals for state festivities. Some of the rehearsals took place in the wintertime with temperatures below zero and many students got ill. Fearing to be fired, the teachers put pressure on parents to send the children back to the stadium.³⁰

- Rehearsals for the 20th anniversary of Turkmenistan's independence in October 2011 were held after working hours and during the weekends. Women were required to wear the Turkmen national dress bought at their own expense. During numerous lining ups, one of the organisers noticed that among the crowd of people, fair haired and older women stand out. They were asked to leave the column and were informed that they would not participate in the parade. The Turkmen population is mainly dark-haired and the few fair-haired are mainly to be found among the ethnic minorities. All those who were sent home did not receive any compensation for the hours spent at preparations, even though this was promised by the authorities.³¹

Although the TIHR could not provide specific gender disaggregated data, its survey shows that unemployment is one of the most severe issues facing present-day Turkmenistan. Unemployment in the urban areas amounts to 45,8%, while the situation in the rural areas is even worse, with 60,4% of respondents having neither job nor possibilities to study. Therefore many families from rural areas live on the pension of a retiree in their household. Women often knit woollen socks with national emblems and sell them at the local bazaars. The unemployment impacts women disproportionately more than men. Additionally they often suffer from the consequences of the men's unemployment, such as drug-addiction. Following President Berdymukhamedov's battle against narcotics³², many men became alcoholics. The addictions forced many women to divorce and return to their parents³³.

Many women travel to Turkey in order to find a job. Turkey is more convenient than Russia, as there are no visa requirements for Turkmen citizens. Most enter the country as tourists and stay there illegally. Women mainly work as cleaning ladies, baby sitters and maids.³⁴ The wages are quite low by

²⁸ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "The Minister's weird initiative", 29 September 2011, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/94>; "\$1000 fee for a cleaner's position in the khyakimlik's office", 7 November 2011, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/165>

²⁹ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Familiar autumn sight", 19 October 2011, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/128>

³⁰ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Another holiday", 16 December 2011, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/243>

³¹ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Everybody wants to march", 14 October 2011, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/118>; "Fair haired eliminated", 2 October 2011, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/97>

³² TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Drug addiction: Preventive fight", 9 December 2012, <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1544>

³³ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Turkmenistan. Unemployment in numbers", 7 April 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=659>

³⁴ TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Turkmen migrant workers divide Istanbul", 14 October 2007, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=437>

Turkish standards, but they cannot report any job irregularities, as they fear to be deported. Migrant workers usually succeed in sending 150-200 US\$ per month to their relatives at home.

Representatives of ethnic minorities continue to face two-fold discrimination. Not only that they are not entitled to gain education in their native languages, but they are often sacked from work, due to their “non-Turkmen” background.³⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women should call on the Turkmen authorities to:

- take concrete measures to eliminate occupational segregation and ensure equal opportunities for, and equal treatment of, women and men in the labour market;
- conduct research and monitor the situation of women, and especially young women, at risk of exploitation in employment abroad;
- avoid requirements for all women in Turkmenistan, regardless of their national background, to wear the national Turkmen dress.

Elimination of Discrimination in the Field of Health Care (article 12)

The horrific situation in the Turkmen health sector is the legacy of late President Niyazov, who at some point decided that “health care system should be profitable and must bring revenue into the state budget”. The current authorities have not undertaken significant steps to improve this: allocation of funds is more than imbalanced; knowledge and the number of health care personnel continues to decrease; and most hospitals lack basic medications and medical supplies. Knowledge of general practitioners is very modest and they often prescribe wrong medication. Indications for *Caesarian* sections are poorly understood and surgical techniques are out-dated. Medical staff regularly receives verbal orders from higher authorities to manipulate data and keep mortality rate and diagnostic results of sexually transmitted infections (STI) within (low) quotas.³⁶

Pregnant women are, theoretically, entitled to free post-natal care services, but numerous user fees impede the care for many women. The TIHR reported that delivering women must take to the delivery wards not only clothing and bedding, but also basic supplies (such as light bulbs, cotton, antiseptics ...). Despite the obligatory bribes, most of the staff does not even pretend to do their job.³⁷ Well-running hospitals, such as the Ashgabat hospital known as the “Red Cross”, are closed and their staff is fired following presidential orders³⁸. During the recent construction boom, several new medical centres were built and provided with the newest equipment, which staff does not know how to use.

The Turkmen media have never reported on any pandemic disease since the country's independence, as the Turkmen authorities wish to preserve a picture of a healthy nation³⁹. Articles in national and international media are closely monitored, as epidemic diseases fall within “classified”

³⁵ TIHR, “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”: „From Turkey with dollars and AIDS”, 25 December 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=627>

³⁶ Medecins sans Frontieres: “Turkmenistan’s Opaque Health Care System”, 12 April 2010, at <http://www.chrono-tm.org/uploaded/1271126892.pdf>

³⁷ TIHR, “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”: “Maternity hospitals on self service”, 6 January 2010, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1251>

³⁸ TIHR, “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”: “Dismantling old Ashgabat”, 16 April 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/403>; Medecins sans Frontieres: “Turkmenistan’s Opaque Health Care System”, 12 April 2010, at <http://www.chrono-tm.org/uploaded/1271126892.pdf>

³⁹ TIHR, “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”: “Beauty knows no pain”, 13 February 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=888>

information and cannot be reported via mass media.⁴⁰ But diseases like HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis (TBC) and STI are more prevalent than officially reported⁴¹. Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF) warned that the Turkmen authorities do not address public health risks effectively and argued that prevention mechanisms neither exist nor are taken seriously.⁴² Outbreaks of typhoid fever and viral hepatitis in 2008⁴³, swine flu (A/H1N1), bird flu and pernicious pneumonia in 2009⁴⁴ as well as the recent cases of measles⁴⁵ were not reported at all. With the lacking supply of medications and flourishing corruption in the field situation is even more serious.⁴⁶

Information about the status of HIV in Turkmenistan is more than limited and the authorities continue to refuse to acknowledge the exact number of affected persons. Some of the state officials even claim that there are no HIV/AIDS cases in the country. In 2007 the TIHR reported that symptoms which cause death and are unfamiliar to physicians should not be recorded as HIV.⁴⁷ In 2010 the National Centre for AIDS Prevention in Ashgabat was closed and replaced with the Board for Centres of Viral Diseases⁴⁸.

The overall conditions in prisons and the health care situation in particular is alarming. In addition to short supply on personal hygiene products, many cases of various (infectious) diseases, among them tuberculosis, were recorded in the colony DZK-8 for women in Dashoguz. Inmates with mental disorders are usually placed among the healthy inmates. Pregnant women are only taken to the city hospital if they cannot give birth on their own and many women died because of such a dangerous practice. Drug abuse also poses a serious problem, while the mortality rate in the Dashoguz prison totals 15 persons on average.⁴⁹

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women should call on the Turkmen authorities to:

- conduct up-to-date trainings for the medical staff in order to familiarize them with developments in the medical field and to enable them in using the available equipment in the newly established health care centres;
- stop manipulating data of infectious and sexually transmitted diseases and conduct comprehensive awareness raising campaigns to prevent their spread among the population;
- take decisive steps in combating HIV/AIDS through educational and awareness-raising programmes;
- take measure to improve the health care situation in Turkmen prisons in order to stop spreading of infectious diseases and decrease mortality rate within the prisons.

⁴⁰TIHR Report: "On the state of freedom of the mass media, the right to freedom of speech and free access to information in Turkmenistan", September 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/uploaded/1261840123.pdf>

⁴¹TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "In Turkmenistan one can buy off AIDS", 19 January 2010, <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1264>

⁴²Medecins sans Frontieres: "Turkmenistan's Opaque Health Care System", 12 April 2010 at http://www.msf.org/source/countries/asia/turkmenistan/2010/turkmenistan_health_system.pdf

⁴³TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Typhoid fever is rampant in the eastern Turkmenistan", 14 July 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=566>

⁴⁴TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Swine flu has crossed the Turkmen border", 2 November 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1200>; „Comments", 2 December 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1228>

⁴⁵TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Measles outbreak", 17 July 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/532>

⁴⁶TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Pharmaceuticals bazaar", 10 May 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=671>

⁴⁷TIHR, "Chronicles of Turkmenistan": "Steps are taken, results are not visible", 28 April 2007, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=343>; "In Turkmenistan one can buy off AIDS", 19 January 2010, <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1264>

⁴⁸Medecins sans Frontieres: "Turkmenistan's Opaque Health Care System", 12 April 2010 at http://www.msf.org/source/countries/asia/turkmenistan/2010/turkmenistan_health_system.pdf

⁴⁹TIHR Report: "Women in Turkmen Prisons", 25 February 2007, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=318>; TIHR and the Turkmenistan's Independent Lawyers Association's Report: „Turkmenistan's Penitentiary Facilities", February 2010, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/uploaded/1266867677.pdf>

Elimination of Discrimination in Matters Related to Marriage and Family Relations (article 16)

About 17 years ago large families were common in Turkmenistan, while nowadays the phenomenon is rather seldom and it could even be said that the country is facing a population decline. The government tries to encourage higher birth rates through different initiatives. In 2008 all women who gave birth to and raised eight and more children were awarded with the honorary title of “Ene Mahri” (“Maternal Happiness”). They were entitled to an amount of 351 US\$ and a number of benefits, but only if the eighth child reached the first year of life and all the other children remained alive.⁵⁰ Many women refuse to have more than two children as the maternity monthly allowance is not more than 16 US\$, which is insufficient, especially following the recent increase of food prices.⁵¹

Due to the abuse of addictive substances many men are not able to take care of their families. The number of men is also declining and women must search for alternative solutions. Although illegal, a growing number of citizens are now regarding polygamy as almost normal. Women mostly agree to such marriage for material benefits and for social security reasons. High-ranking officials and successful businessmen often have several wives and provide for their accommodation and other material needs. No information is available whether a woman has left a polygamous marriage.⁵²

Legally there are not obstacles for a Turkmen citizen to marry a foreigner. Marriages between residents of ex-Soviet republics were common during Soviet times. However due to the lack of legal framework such marriages face serious problem since the independence of Turkmenistan. Officials from the foreign citizens’ registration service often deport the spouses with foreign passports – often Uzbek women - back to their countries.

- In 2010 police and the Turkmen Migration Service officers conducted raids across the entire Sakaretrap of the Lebapvelayat in order to identify people illegally residing in Turkmenistan, which are mainly Uzbek women. Many of them had lived for several years without proper documentation. During the raid some 30 women with children were deported back to Uzbekistan.⁵³

Many young women apply to become candidates in Turkish TV shows, which follow the pattern of the Russian programme “Let’s get married!”. The main reasoning behind these applications is to find way to stay in Turkey in order to escape the desperate socio-economic situation in Turkmenistan.⁵⁴

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women should call on the Turkmen authorities to:

- take measures to eliminate root causes for polygamy and enforce the legal provisions efficiently.

⁵⁰ TIHR, “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”: “Large families are uncommon in today’s Turkmenistan”, 25 March 2008, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1054>

⁵¹ TIHR, “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”: “Flour allowances abolished for the residents”, 17 July 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/524>; “Turkmen-style shock therapy”, 19 July 2012, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/archives/540>

⁵² TIHR, “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”: “Polygamy in Turkmenistan”, 30 November 2006, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=300>

⁵³ TIHR, “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”: “Turkmenistan: broken families”, 14 June 2010, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1393>

⁵⁴ TIHR, “Chronicles of Turkmenistan”: “Tourists or Gastarbeiters?”, 25 March 2009, at <http://archive.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1073>