

# CURRENT ISSUES BULLETIN

## The Challenges of Promoting Independent Living in Türkiye

*Melike Ergün*

European Network on Independent Living (ENIL), Belgium

*Lilia Angelova-Mladenova*

European Network on Independent Living (ENIL), Belgium

*Bahar Yavuz*

Association of Women with Disabilities (ENG-KAD), Türkiye

Submission date: 14 October 2022; Acceptance date: 25 November 2022; Publication date: 21 April 2023

### ABSTRACT

**This commentary discusses the challenges faced by individuals and organisations promoting independent living in Türkiye. In addition to the dominant charity-based perspective towards disability, in recent years a key challenge has become the increasing and systemic attack on human rights and human rights defenders and delegitimising of the rights-based perspective. Additionally, the difficult political situation in the country positions disability issues at the bottom of the political agenda and makes it difficult to strengthen the independent living perspective.**

### KEYWORDS

**independent living, disability rights, human rights, civil society, Türkiye**

---

When it comes to human rights activism and social justice, Türkiye has been going through difficult times. The still dominant charity-based perspective and depoliticisation of disability, combined with the growing pressure on human rights defenders, has made the rights-based perspective and advocacy for independent living vulnerable. It is crucial to raise awareness and draw attention to urgent need for action to address these problems. This commentary considers the growing challenges and threats faced by the human rights defenders and independent living activists in

today's Türkiye, drawing on the authors' personal experience of promoting independent living in this country.

Even though Türkiye ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in March 2007 and in the following years significantly reformed its legal framework to promote a human rights perspective of disability and recognise the right of people with disabilities to live independently, there is a big gap between the existing legal framework and practices. People with disabilities continue to face discrimination in various fields of daily life and to be perceived as objects of pity. The solutions to the problems they experience are thus framed in terms of charity and benevolence. In addition, state policies, rather than supporting independent living, reinforce the dependence of people with disabilities on their families, for example by providing disability-related financial assistance ('cash for care') to family members, rather than to people with disabilities. Such policies are based on a medicalised understanding of disability and are in line with the characteristic for the Turkish welfare system of reliance on family to provide care and support (Bezmez & Porter, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have also reinforced cost-related considerations in favour of cheaper family care.

In this context, disabled people's organisations (DPOs) have a vital role to play in challenging the status quo and pushing for the implementation of the CRPD. DPOs in Türkiye are not, however, homogeneous and united in their rights-based advocacy. The majority of the organisations, including those which due to their large membership base are seen as representative organisations of people with disabilities, maintain a traditional understanding of disability. Although their rhetoric might have become more rights-oriented in the recent years, their demands and activities remain largely within the framework of the individual (medicalised) model of disability (Oliver, 1990). For example, one of the oldest and best-known disability associations, the Spinal Cord Paralytics Association of Türkiye (TOFD), runs an ongoing campaign to collect plastic bottles' caps, using the funds received from the recycling of the caps to buy electric wheelchairs for people with disabilities (<https://www.tofd.org.tr/plastik-kapak-projemiz>). Although the outcomes of such charity initiatives may be enabling of independent living, they reinforce the public perceptions of people with disabilities as objects of pity and victims of their impairments and not as citizens with a right to personal mobility aids.

The predominantly medicalised and charity views of most disability organisations weaken the understanding of independent living of policy-makers, people with disabilities, their families, and society in general. Although some progress has been made over the years as a result of the rights-based struggles of a small group of progressive DPOs and other human rights organisations, there is still, unfortunately, much to be done to ensure that the independent living approach is mainstreamed and embraced.

To be able to carry out activities and produce knowledge to empower the human rights perspective, DPOs make use of funding from foreign donors. Until recently, the main concern of such organisations was to ensure the sustainability of the organisations. However, over the last few years, survival rather than sustainability became the

crucial and most serious issue. One of the main reasons for that is the state's delegitimising and criminalising discourse against human rights and the 'systemic' attack on people and organisations aiming to promote human rights in Türkiye. Independent living advocacy also suffers from the economic crisis and decreased external funding for non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The potential of activists – including both individuals and organisations – to question and transform the existing social order has thus been weakened, leaving the charity perspective unchallenged.

The tension within the political arena in Türkiye created a climate of fear, which also had an impact on NGOs' ability and willingness to advocate for independent living. The notion of 'human rights' became objectionable and the defenders from various occupations began to be accused of being associated with terrorism, which damaged the reputation of rights-based work. Countries with authoritarian leaders and governments, like Türkiye, often seek to weaken democratisation by attacking those who speak the truth and criticise their policies. In Türkiye, it started with attacks on media, academia, civil society organisations, and the entire opposition (Sözen, 2022). According to a fact sheet published within the scope of the project 'Protecting and Supporting Human Rights Actors with a Grassroots Approach in the Post-Pandemic Period' run by the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (2022), 1,220 human rights defenders were subjected to one or more than one judicial and administrative harassment, threat, and retaliation between 1 September 2021 and 31 December 2021. The fact sheet notes that the advocacy potential of human rights defenders has been suppressed and civil society in general has been constricted. Due to judicial harassment and investigations, many rights defenders applied to European organisations for individual funds and left, or rather, fled the country.

NGOs, including DPOs, have been subjected to increased surveillance by the government. Those of the organisations that have a chance to access funds are monitored in terms of whether the sensitivities of the government are taken into account or not. What is meant by 'sensitivities' can be the expression of democratic and rights-based values that today's regime does not approve of, or critiques of current policies – for instance, drawing attention to the annulment of the Istanbul Convention and/or LGBTI+ rights, providing support to minority groups, or covering these issues in the written materials produced by the organisations (Front Line Defenders et al., 2020). NGOs that carry out rights-based work in the field of disability are exposed to similar treatment as they problematise existing policies and practices. EU-funded organisations and projects are also increasingly treated with suspicion and more closely monitored.

Disability is generally not seen as a 'sensitive' policy area, unlike, for example, gender and minority issues, which makes it easier for the government to introduce policies (rhetorically) promoting disability rights. Although this can be perceived as an advantage or an opportunity, it is also a challenge as disability becomes depoliticised, cementing its perception as an individual/medical matter. The disability community is thus seen as 'harmless' and not capable of having an agency, which makes the politicisation of the movement in Türkiye more difficult.

To counter the growing authoritarianism and the depoliticisation of disability issues, there is a need for the heterogeneous disability rights organisations to meet and collaborate in a rights-based direction. Together with this, to continue to work on mainstreaming the independent living perspective in Türkiye, DPOs and human rights defenders need better access to funds. It is important that funding is made available to organisations and networks dedicated to promoting disability rights, which may not have a large membership base, but which seek to challenge the status quo to ensure that disability is perceived politically, like other social issues in Türkiye, and that disability issues are not approached with compassion and pity. This is essential for the dissemination of the idea that disability has socio-political dimensions and that the system should be transformed in an inclusive way to enable disabled people to realise their rights.

## REFERENCES

- Bezmez, D. & Porter, T. 2022. Disabled women's care experiences in Turkey: intimacy, dependency, independent living. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 24(1), pp.54–67.
- Front Line Defenders, International Service for Human Rights, Truth Justice Memory Center, Kaos GL Cultural Research and Solidarity Association, Netherlands Helsinki Committee & Association for Monitoring Equal Rights. 2020. *The Situation of Human Rights Defenders in Turkey*. Available at: [https://hakikatadalethafiza.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/UPR\\_35\\_Turkey\\_text-converted.pdf](https://hakikatadalethafiza.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/UPR_35_Turkey_text-converted.pdf) (Accessed July 2022).
- Human Rights Foundation of Turkey. 2022. *Pressure, Barriers and Challenges Faced by Human Rights Defenders in Turkey (1 September–31 December 2021)*. Ankara. Available at: [https://tihv.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/ihs\\_bilginotu\\_ocak2022.pdf](https://tihv.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/ihs_bilginotu_ocak2022.pdf) (Accessed July 2022).
- Sözen, Ü. 2022. Civil society under siege in Turkey: authoritarianism, polarisation and counterstrategies. *Alternatives Humanitaires*, 20, pp.74–83. Available at: <https://www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2022/08/16/civil-society-under-siege-in-turkey-authoritarianism-polarisation-and-counterstrategies/> (Accessed December 2022).