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**Intervention at the OSCE Human Dimensional Meeting:
Gender and Religious Freedom (Session 7)**
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In Turkey, the headscarf is banned in universities, hospitals, government buildings, even law courts. This effectively excludes an entire class of women from much of public life.

They can't study. They can't be doctors. They can't even appear in court.

One of the women we have represented in our law practice, Merve Kavacki, was democratically elected to parliament only to be physically dragged out of the parliament when she appeared wearing her headscarf.

Let's think about this for a moment. There are hundreds of Turkish women studying and working *abroad* today because of the ban. Meanwhile, there is a generation of doctors, lawyers, jurists and professors in Turkey who have completed their degrees but can't actually put their expertise into practice because they are barred from their professions.

And we're not talking about women who necessarily are acting out of protest. We're talking about women who love their country, love their culture, and want to contribute to society. But the stress and social prejudice alone that is created by the normative effects of the ban have created an environment of discrimination and intimidation for women who choose to wear the headscarf.

Even worse, these girls also face severe institutional discrimination. Thousands of women are barred from attending schools or fulfilling certain occupations not because they are incompetent or because they are terrorists or because they are not patriotic enough. But only because they don't want to show their hair.

There are some women who risk it and attend school with their headscarf or wearing hats, but having met with some of these women myself, they are scared out of their minds every night before an exam because of fear that they will be turned away at the door.

To be quite frank, I don't understand why more women do not take up their cause and speak for them. I have heard that some women are embarrassed because the headscarf suggests subservience or because they regard it as a sign of backwardness, or because they worry that

they will themselves feel pressured to wear it if other women around them wear it. But for almost all of the women who wear headscarves, it is merely a simple act of piety and faith.

And despite all the anthropology, sociology and politics, at the end of the day this is about a woman with a conscience who is unable to live her life because everyone else wants to tell her what she thinks and means. Isn't it ironic that people think they are liberating her from subservience by not letting her to make her own wardrobe selections?

Now I've been giving Turkey a hard time about this ban, but I would be remiss not to mention that other OSCE countries like France have similar bans on religious attire that result in gender discrimination. Beyond its current ban on "conspicuous religious attire" in primary and secondary schools, France is now considering a ban of the burqa not just in schools but everywhere. Now I understand this is a really foreign look in the French streets alongside Hermes and Yves Saint Laurent but I am curious how the French are planning to enforce this burqa ban. Are you really going to go around and when a woman is wearing too many clothes force her to take them off in the streets?

I realize that this statement isn't necessarily going to change your policies. But I hope that I will rouse you to think a little. To act with principle and individual freedom in mind, instead of imposing your own thinking onto a woman's outward expression of inward conscience. After all, it's not your understanding of what the headscarf means that counts, rather, it's her reasons that count, it's her conscience, and it's her ability to live as an integrated person instead of having to choose daily between her conscience and a normal life.