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Turkmenistan's Ban On Beauty Services

By: Samantha Lauring



In an act that further restricts the rights of women in Turkmenistan, the Turkmen government has imposed a ban on beauty services and limitations on what women can wear.[1] The ban prohibits women from receiving beauty services from salons, including eyelash and nail extensions, tattoos, injections, and hair bleaching.[2] “Sexy” outfits, tight-fitting clothes, and Western-inspired garments are also prohibited under this new mandate.[3]

The restrictions were enacted in April 2022, shortly after the new President Serdar Berdimukhammedov took office in a sham election.[4] These new policing measures are reportedly the wishes of the new president, which may be surprising for some, as he declared, “The main goal of all my concerns will always be happy life of our people, the transformation of our state into a progressive country of a new era.”[5] However, Berdimukhammedov. has enacted policies that restrict women’s autonomy.

Female-identifying employees of state institutions of the Mary region are now forced to write a pledge in which they vow to stop using cosmetics and hair dyes, refrain from getting manicures and using injectables, and stop wearing form-fitting clothes.[6] Women must also pledge that they will wear traditional dresses paired with pants.[7] Failure to follow these

pledges will result in dismissal.[8] The pledge is reported to include a line that states, “If I embarrass my organization by not following these requirements -- both at work and outside work -- I agree that I should be dismissed from my job.”[9]

Turkmenistan is using its women to return to a more “traditional” society, starting with policing dress and appearance. While under Soviet control, Turkmenistan followed the Soviet Union’s campaign of “women’s emancipation.”[10] However, after gaining independence, Turkmenistan is embracing its national identity by a return to tradition and re-traditionalizing society, which includes women’s appearances.[11] In Turkmenistan, women’s dress, appearance, and demeanor are related to the concepts of purity and male honor.[12] Women’s shame is equated to the family’s shame and appearances can have a large impact.[13]

Article 29 of Turkmenistan’s constitution states, “Men and women in Turkmenistan shall have equal rights and freedoms, and equal opportunities for their realization”[14] and the country has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).[15] Despite these factors, Turkmenistan has a poor human rights record with women being treated as “second class citizens.”[16] The beauty services ban is the latest mandate to come from the Turkmen government that aims to control women’s bodily autonomy. In April 2022, the government restricted abortion access from twelve weeks to five weeks.[17] Women cannot sit in the front seat of private cars or obtain drivers licenses and male taxi drivers are prohibited from offering to drive women.[18] Women are also subject to gender-based violence, forced marriages, and virginity tests.[19]

The ban is informal and has not been explicitly written anywhere, but it has been enforced through police raids and crack downs on beauty salons.[20] Police have taken women wearing fake eyelashes and nails.[21] Law enforcement officials acting as a morality police have cracked down on beauty salons, demanding that they stop providing beauty services.[22] Salon owners defying the ban can be put in jail and women receiving beauty services can be fined[23] and women have allegedly lost their jobs for having breast implants or lip fillers.[24] Officers have also been reported to have stopped women in public to check if they have lip filler.[25] As soon as women leave their homes, their clothing and appearance are observed by strangers and adjudged as to whether their appearances are appropriate.[26]

The order has not been discussed openly and there has been no state media coverage on the issue. However, secret orders like this one are strictly followed and obeyed.[27] Schools and universities have held disciplinary meetings where the morality police have instructed women and girls to “wear modest clothing, dye their hair black, remove nails and lash extensions and stop getting tattoos.”[28] Punishment for transgressions include public shaming for students as well as fines and detainment.[29]

Not only does the ban restrict the rights of women, but it also hinders Turkmenistan’s economy and limits job opportunities for women. Operating a beauty salon was one of the few ways for women to earn money in small towns.[30] Salon owners would also train young girls who could then become hired as employees, but now the only services beauty salons can offer are haircuts.[31] Now, this progress is being hindered as women are being controlled and objectified by the state.

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- [1] Akja Kepderi, *Turkmenistan Takes Policing Women's Bodies to the Next Level*, The Diplomat (May 3, 2022), <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/turkmenistan-takes-policing-womens-bodies-to-the-next-level/> [<https://perma.cc/FXQ9-3M83>].
- [2] *Id.*
- [3] *Id.*
- [4] Francis Najibullah, *Beauty Ban: Turkmenistan Puts Severe Restrictions on Women's Appearance, Ability to Travel*, Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty (May 4, 2022), <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-restrictions-women-appearance-travel/31834476.html> [<https://perma.cc/S45J-4X8U>].
- [5] *Serdar Berdimuhamedov Nominated as Candidate for the Post of President of Turkmenistan*, TurkmenPortal (February 14, 2022), <https://turkmenportal.com/en/blog/44307/serdar-berdymuhamedov-vydvinut-v-kandidaty-na-post-prezidenta-turkmenistana> [<https://perma.cc/ZF4U-BXPZ>].
- [6] Kepderi, *supra* note 1.
- [7] *Id.*
- [8] *Id.*
- [9] Najibullah, *supra* note 4.
- [10] Kepderi, *supra* note 1.
- [11] *Id.*
- [12] *Id.*
- [13] *Id.*
- [14] Turkmenistan Const. art XXIX, available at https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Turkmenistan_2016?lang=en [<https://perma.cc/UH5N-YAMT>].
- [15] Kepderi, *supra* note 1.
- [16] *Turkmenistan ramps up policing of women's bodies*, International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) European Network (May 12, 2022) <https://europe.ippf.org/news/turkmenistan-ramps-policing-womens-bodies> [<https://perma.cc/E93T-8VEQ>].
- [17] Aynabat Yaylymova, *Turkmenistan cut our abortion rights overnight. Our 'allies' did nothing*, Open Democracy (May 4, 2022) <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/turkmenistan-abortion-rights-five-weeks-un-eu/> [<https://perma.cc/XWR2-T79X>].
- [18] Yaylymova, *supra* note 17.
- [19] *Id.*
- [20] Najibullah, *supra* note 4.
- [21] *Id.*
- [22] Kepderi, *supra* note 1.
- [23] *Id.*
- [24] Najibullah, *supra* note 4.
- [25] *Id.*
- [26] Kepderi, *supra* note 1.
- [27] *Id.*
- [28] *Id.*
- [29] *Id.*
- [30] *Taboo on "foreign object". Turkmenistan bans most services of beauty salons*, Turkmen News (April 19, 2022)

<https://turkmen.news/turkmenistan-salony-krasoty/> [<https://perma.cc/5ADE-QUVT>].

[31] *Id.*