TURKISH WOMEN: FROM PAST TO PRESENT

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The Light Millennium associated with the Department of Public Information of the United Nations is an initiative which aims to improve understanding and cooperative relations among nations and peoples across cultures, and to help counter the forces that fuel polarization and extremism.

Working in partnership with international and regional organizations, civil society groups, foundations, and the private sector, the LM is supporting a wide range of projects and initiatives aimed at building bridges among a diversity of cultures and communities pertaining to the goals of the Millennium as set forth by the Founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

Within this context, this paper will focus on the Turkish women from past to present starting with the Turkish societies in Central Asia and will study the status of women using a time line to come to the present day. Why do we, the educated women in Turkey who received our emancipation long before our counterparts in many of the western states feel so concerned about where our Country is being led to and why should there be attempts to deviate from the reforms achieved by the Turkish nation under the leadership of the architect and the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal ATATÜRK?

In the legends and stories pertaining to the early history of the Turkish people while the ancient Turkish tribes migrated from Central Asia crossed the great land mass between China and the Middle East and finally settled in Anatolia, the men and women were of more or less equal status, enjoying equal rights and equal privileges and sharing duties and responsibilities. Even in the creation legends of these tribes we find that the female impulse is strong that it was the White Mother who inspired the god to create the universe.
From the Orhun inscriptions of the eighth century, it is possible to obtain quite a clear picture of the social life of the times and the women are seen to enjoy a position of esteem, and the freedom and opportunity to develop their talents. Contrary to the custom among many early peoples, the birth of a baby girl was greeted with great joy, and it is on record that people appealed to the Oguz princesses to mediate for them and pray for the gift of a baby girl. At this period husband and wife stood together and shared their responsibilities. This was noticeably true in the case of the King and the Queen. In affairs of state the phrase "the Sovereign who continues the State" was always accompanied by the phrase "...and the Queen who knows the State". To be binding, all orders had to come jointly from the King and Queen, and foreign diplomatic envoys were always received by the King and Queen together. This equality, or condition of shared responsibility reflected the character of the way of life of the people. In a family, for instance, mother and father shared the guardianship of their children, and in the event of the mother being widowed, the young children were entirely under her guardianship and she became the sole manager of her household.

It was after the Turkish people embraced the Islamic faith that the position of Turkish women began to deteriorate, for along with Islam, they were obliged to accept Islamic laws. Compared with the past, the social life of the Turkish women under Islam was very restricted. This was due not so much to Islam itself as to the influence of the customs of other nations upon Islam. As a result while the situation of men improved within the framework of Islamic culture, women lost most of the privileges that their ancestors had possessed. The question of "veiling" may be given as an instance of this influence. During the reign of Omar the Caliph, the use of the short veil worn only by society women, was practiced. Later, with the Abbasid Dynasty, it was used even more extensively than before because of the removal of social classes and the increase in the number of devotees. In the big towns, where "medreses" (educational institutions) influenced the life of the people
through their religious teachings, the use of the veil was still more common. The Persians accepted Islam before the Turkish people, and their influence on the Muslim Woman's way of life was as great as that of Greece or Rome on the European way of life. In the Persian civilization, the family was based on a patriarchal system and this found its way into other Muslim societies including the Turkish.

According to the Zerduhst, Persia's national religion prior to Islam, woman was a symbol of filth and evil, and all wicked deities were represented as females. Far from condoning this state of affairs, Prophet Mohammed himself actively opposed it, saying: "Woman is the equal of Man and the other half of the society", "He who respects his wife's rights is a good Muslim", and "Paradise lies under the feet of mothers".

The habitual attitude of centuries, however, was not easy to change and the effect of Persian traditions upon Islam and consequently upon all nations embracing Islam was enormous. The patriarchal family system of the Persians has in fact been mainly responsible for the secluded life of Muslim women in Turkey as in the rest of Islam.

The arrival in Anatolia of great numbers of Turkish Muslims began in the tenth century and their men and women were equally active. Muslim Turkish women of this period were not confined to their homes or harems. The Seljuks came from Central Asia and set up Muslim States in Persia and the Middle East. In Anatolia, they began by setting up small principalities, later formed one large state, and finally split again into small principalities from among which emerged the Ottoman State (1299 A.D.). The Seljuk women, although under different legal systems and under various outside influences, still managed to preserve most of their old Turkish customs.

But from the fourteenth century (1299) until early in the twentieth century
PIONEER OF THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS: ATATÜRK (1918), Turkish women were the subjects of a Muslim Empire. The Ottoman State expanded very rapidly into a powerful empire but while the theocratic state was extending its boundaries, the social position of women deteriorated. The expansion of the Ottoman Empire introduced the influence of Persia and Byzantium, and old Turkish customs were slowly forgotten. During this period new distinctions between the sexes were accepted. In the beginning, the teachings of the "medreses" enabled the women to enjoy some social standing in their religious society, but gradually even this was taken away from them and eventually, especially in the cities, they were subjected to strict living conditions as a separate group. The harem life of Persia and Byzantium was introduced into the Turkish palace, and in the fifteenth century, on an order from the Sultan, the palace was divided into the Harem (Women's Section) and the Selamlik (Men's Section). The 'vezirs' and 'beys' were not slow in introducing this system into their own homes until in a short time, harem life and polygamy spread, at least among a certain class of people, and became an established custom.

Islam accepts polygamy provided absolute equality among the wives can be maintained, and the number of wives any one man can marry is restricted to four. But as it is obviously extremely difficult to ensure absolute equality, polygamy was practiced by only a very limited number of wealthy persons. Even though limited, however, the practice was generally condemned by public opinion. The actual laws of Islam, in general, valued women more and conceded them more rights than did the old Arabic and perhaps even the Roman laws, but unfortunately these laws were grossly misinterpreted.

The Islamic family laws adopted by the Ottomans were related to marriage, inheritance and minorities. As regards marriage, woman had no say in choosing their husbands who were selected by the parents of the girl or an older member of her family. Engagement was not legally recognized, and if it took place at all, it was by private arrangement between the two families.
According to Islamic laws, a marriage may be contracted in the presence of witnesses, consisting either of two men or one man and two women or with the consent of both parties. During the marriage ceremony the woman was not supposed to be seen by any man, not even by the man she was marrying, and had therefore to remain behind closed doors. The husband had the right to divorce his wife whenever he wished merely by informing her orally or in writing, “I hereby divorce thee.” A man could even take an oath in respect of something that did not concern his wife saying that his marriage would be deemed to have come to an end if things did not develop in a certain way, and if things did not develop in that way, his marriage would in fact end. Although this kind of divorce was very exceptional, it shows the extent of the man's privilege in these matters. It should be pointed out here, however, that divorce was not favored by the Prophet Mohammed and was not in accord with Turkish customs so these rights were not used extensively in Anatolia; even so, women had no protection against divorce.

The Turkish family of the Ottoman period was in line with the patriarchal family system with the man as the sole head! The family consisted of grandparents, wife, children's spouses, grandchildren and some close relatives. All were required to accept the absolute authority of the head of the family. In matters of inheritance women always received less than men. Architecture reflected the Ottoman way of life and houses were built in two sections, namely the Harem and the Selamlik. The only men allowed into the Harem were the husbands and very close relatives of the women who, by Islamic law, could not marry, such as uncles and brothers. Thus Turkish women of the Ottoman era, especially in the cities, spent their lives in the complete seclusion of the harem. Their occupation consisted mainly of doing or supervising the housework, looking after the children or embroidering. Their social life was restricted to family gatherings.
In literature, especially in the Divan literature of the fifteenth and following
centuries, women who had formerly held a high and sacred place in Dede
Korkut's tales were at this period presented as omens of evil and associated
with the scorpion, the snake, the devil incarnate and regarded as disloyal,
cunning, deceitful and treacherous and described as being "long of hair but
short of wit". This attitude finds one of its expressions in early examples of
Islamic literature such as Kutadgu Bilig by Yusuf Has Hacip of Uygur
descent, in the eleventh century. He says, "It is preferable not to give birth
to a baby girl, but if it happens then it is just as well for the girl not to live."
He further advises men not to let their womenfolk go out, because if they do
so, they are bound to go astray. He adds that all women are unfaithful; and
even if they look at you, their hearts are elsewhere. He concludes his words
by blaming women for destroying the lives of many a man. Even so the real
spirit of Islam sometimes comes through and we find Mevlana, the well-
known Turkish mystic poet, in the thirteenth century saying:

Woman is the light of God,
Not an object of sensuality
She is creator
Not the thing created.

When the Ottoman Empire was still at its height, the women of Turkey
suffered from being regarded as belonging to an inferior race. Strangely
enough, the women themselves seemed to accept the position that was
thrust upon them and were apparently reasonably satisfied with the function
afforded them within the harem walls.

Such a set up, however, was basically amicable to the Turkish temperament
and "Reorganization" or "Westernization Movement" began actually as early
as the end of the 18th century. In fact history dates the movement to Selim
III in 1789, that is the date of the storming of the Bastille and the start of
the French Revolution; in other words, an age in which grievances were being aired and reforms demanded.

To start with, the Westernization Movement in Turkey affected external matters only, modifying the machinery of the administration and revolutionizing titles and costumes as a result of political and commercial relations and greater facilities of communication with Western States. Gradually its influence penetrated the thick walls of the Sultan's palace and the "konaks" and "yalis" of all classes. European fashions of dressing, manners and customs received a warm welcome, especially from Turkish women, who, having for centuries lived modestly between the four walls of their houses, began to imitate the European women in their outlook and ways. This imitation of the West had first started among men and only later affected the world of the women in harems. Its affects, as can well be imagined, were not wholly good. To start with at least, there was too much imitation of externals and a regrettable disregard of fundamentals.

Uriel Heyd comments on the situation as follows:

One of their most serious deficiencies was that they did not fully understand Western civilization. Most of them derived their knowledge of it from their intercourse with the Levantine population of the Beyoglu (Pera) quarter of Constantinople. They, therefore, imitated mainly the external and often inferior, aspects of European civilization, without penetrating to its philosophical and scientific foundation. In the economic field they introduced a number of a new fashions in dress, food, building, furnishings and other articles of consumption, but did not adopt Western methods of production. The result was that the traditional crafts decayed without even the nucleus of modern industry being formed.

Nevertheless, the status of women in Turkey did in some measure begin to improve, in part by chance. It became fashionable, for instance, to allow
women a certain amount of education, and a number of cultured women of letters appeared. Inevitably the recognition of the right of women to be educated was born and by slow degrees this right was put into effect and in 1908 women's education was given a legal basis for the first time. It was about this time, too, that a group of Turkish women caused a great stir by trying to gain entrance to the Parliament building, with a view to observing proceedings. In the year 1916 the position of the Turkish woman received considerable attention together with the question of polygamy and divorce. No definite solution emerged but the very fact that the problem was recognized was reassuring and this was just one of many signs that the legal status of women would have to be reviewed.

So the positive changes in the status of Turkish women started as early as in 1857 with the new law that gave male and female children equal rights of inheritance. Also in the second half of the nineteenth century, the first midwifery school opened its doors and junior high schools for girls were established. Further education reforms allowed the opening of trade schools, teachers' training schools and the first institute of higher learning for women. The start of the "Turk Ocagi" (Turkish Hearth) clubs in 1912 helped to raise Turkish educational standards and encouraged social and economic progress. This program, in which Halide Edib also played a major role, included public lectures attended by men and women together, a great social innovation for the time. Soon, women columnists began appearing in newspapers and magazines, and numerous women's organizations were started including the "Society for the Elevation of Women" established by Halide Edib, who around this time had also published her famous novel Handan ("Family") about the problems of an educated woman. Finally, in 1917, a decree was issued granting women the right to initiate divorce proceedings and the right to refuse a polygamous marriage.

Following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire and its allies during World War
I, the attempt of the victorious allies to control the Anatolian territory led to the Turkish War of Independence. During the four years of this epic war, women fought with ardor for their national liberation alongside the men, not just by providing support for the battle front, but also taking such roles as press advisor, interpreter and spokesperson. There are countless documents today that convey the tremendous contribution of women during this great war, which ended with victory in 1923.

To put it differently, in Europe, World War I became the focus of attention and in Turkey this, in effect, led into the War of Independence (1919-1923). In this struggle the men and the women worked together and fought together and the role the women played was recognized and appreciated. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk stated, “The Turkish woman should be the most enlightened, most virtuous and most reserved woman of the world... The duty of the Turkish woman is raising generations that are capable of preserving and protecting the Turk with his mentality, strength and determination. The woman who is the source and social foundation of the nation can fulfill her duty only if she is virtuous.”

The construction of the ideal Turkish woman was an essential component of the Republican nation building project. Moreover, only through the deconstruction of these images can we challenge two common ironically opposite but equally simplistic views of contemporary Turkish women: one that sees them as a secluded and inert mass oppressed by the harsh patriarchal rules of Islam, and the other that perceives them as liberated by and living within Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s secular state. Arguing that women and their lives are culturally and historically constructed, however, does not assume that women are merely passive victims in these processes of construction. On the contrary, they are involved as active agents. They not only participate in constructing and sustaining their subordinate entity and roles but they also establish various forms of resistance even if they are
not always conscious and purposeful agents in either of these processes.

What change did occur has typically been attributed to Western contact, and the culture was believed to have been transformed into a new entity after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. This belief of course has also been the official line of the Republican regime and a widely accepted characterization (both popular and academic) of social change in Turkey.

With abiding faith in the vital importance of women in society, Atatürk launched many reforms to give Turkish women equal rights and opportunities. The new Civil Code, adopted in 1926, abolished polygamy and recognized the equal rights of women in divorce, custody, and inheritance. The entire educational system from the grade school to the university became coeducational.

Within the first three years of the young republic, passage of the law on the unification of the educational system, on general apparel and the civil code were all major steps in giving women greater freedom and opportunities in society. Primary education became free and compulsory for both men and women, further leveling the playing field between the sexes. They became equal in the eyes of the law on matters concerning marriage, divorce, guardianship and inheritance. Furthermore, the 1934 law granting Turkish women the right to elect and be elected to the national assembly gave them a higher status than was enjoyed by women in many other countries at the time. In comparison, French women gained the same rights in 1944, Italian women in 1945 and the Swiss in 1971. Halide Edib, then a professor of English literature at Istanbul University and married to politician Dr. Adnan Adivar, became one of the earlier members of the Turkish parliament. More recently, Turkey became one of only a few countries in the world to have a woman serve as a prime minister.
Atatürk greatly admired the support that the national liberation struggle received from women and praised their many contributions: "In Turkish society, women have not lagged behind men in science, scholarship, and culture. Perhaps they have even gone further ahead." He gave women the same opportunities as men, including full political rights. In the mid-1930s, 18 women, among them a villager, were elected to the national parliament. Later, Turkey had the world's first women supreme court justice.

We take pride in the higher percentage and the qualifications of our women in science, in the business sector and in engineering as compared to other countries. Currently, the rate of women taking university staff positions is 36 percent and the rate of women professors is 25 percent. A total of 31 percent of all architects, 29 percent of all doctors and surgeons and 26 percent of all lawyers are women. The Scientific and Technical Research Council of Turkey, for example is the leading institution to develop scientific and technological policies in Turkey, and is headed by a distinguished lady. In all walks of life, Atatürk's Turkey has produced tens of thousands of well-educated women who participate in national life as doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, writers, administrators, executives, and creative artists.

None of these could be possible without the "women's emancipation". If we consider the centuries-long discrimination, what Turkish women could achieve in just 85 years of the Republic, in my opinion, is a clear sign that they are as much if not more capable than men in any area we can name today. Literacy and professional-employment rates for Turkish women are higher than anywhere else in the Middle East and compare well against even the developed countries in Europe and America. In the fields of architecture, science, medicine, pharmacy, and law, at least one out of three employed is a woman. In colleges women constitute about 35 percent of the faculty. Almost 40 percent of all young traders at the Istanbul Stock Exchange are women. Even in the technical world of engineering, with a participation level
of 12 percent, Turkish women are slightly ahead of their American counterparts. Moreover, Turkey has an expanding list of women writers, actors, artists and musicians with international acclaim, such as the first woman ceramics professor Jale Yilmabasar and the opera diva Leyla Gencer.

After the foundation of the Turkish Republic 90 years ago, rapid and significant progress was made on women's rights, with great support from Ataturk, the founder and the first president of the republic. Ataturk had abiding faith in the vital importance of women in society and launched many reforms to change the religious-based social and legal structures of the former Ottoman Empire. Within the first three years of the young Republic, passage of the law on the unification of the educational system, on general apparel and the civil code were all major steps in giving women greater freedom and opportunities in society. Primary education became free and compulsory for both men and women, further leveling the playing field between the sexes. They became equal in the eyes of the law on matters concerning marriage, divorce, guardianship and inheritance. Furthermore, the 1934 law granting Turkish women the right to elect and be elected to the national assembly gave them a higher status than was enjoyed by women in many other countries at the time. In comparison, French women gained the same rights in 1944, Italian women in 1945 and the Swiss in 1971. Halide Edib, then a professor of English literature at Istanbul University and married to politician Dr. Adnan Adivar, became one of the earlier members of the Turkish parliament. More recently, Turkey became one of only a few countries in the world to have a woman serve as a prime minister.

Despite all the rights gained by law and the rosy pictures from public and professional life, Turkish women still face a long road in terms of closing the disparity with men and leading improved and more fulfilled lives. There are thousands of Turkish women who are denied education among other basic rights. Illiteracy remains a major problem, with a rate of nearly 30 percent
for women, which is almost three times higher than the rate for men. Even though overall female participation rate in the labor force is 35 percent (less than 20 percent in the cities), three out of every four women in the work force work in agriculture as unpaid family workers with no social security coverage. The representation of women in the national assembly today is less than three percent.

It is a commonly accepted fact that tradition dies hard, and attitudes of the common people, despite rights by law, sometimes pose the biggest obstacle in the way. However, on the brighter side, an increasing number of both volunteer-supported organizations and networks are taking the lead to create awareness as well as formulate solutions. Of these, the Directorate General on the Status of and Problems of Women (http://www.kssgm.gov.tr), which was established in 1990 and attached to the Ministry of State for Women's Affairs and Social Services, formulates policies in line with the provisions of the 1986 Convention on the elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAR) and the 1989 European Social Charter. "The National Action Plan of Turkey", prepared in the light of the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), declared women's education, training, health and their fight against domestic violence as its top critical areas of concern to take action. Turkey sent a large delegation, 31 people, to Beijing and was one of the four major sponsors of the Peace Train, a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) project featuring on-board training for women facing the challenges of democratization and economic liberation. Another major initiative, "The National Program for the Enhancement of Women's Integration in Development", also supported by UNDP, was established in 1992 and has been active in the areas of training, research, statistical publications, and pilot projects aiming at generating income for women. The program has been so successful since its inception that UNDP uses it as a model for other countries in similar positions. Among its numerous accomplishments is the
establishment of research centers in four universities, one of which also offers a graduate program. Among volunteer organizations, the Foundation for Women's Solidarity aims at raising public awareness about and fighting against violence towards women; the Association for Supporting and Educating Women Candidates works towards increasing the involvement of Turkish women in politics and their representation in the national assembly; and the Association for Supporting Contemporary Life organizes ongoing projects to improve the education, skills and social status of Turkish women.

CONCLUSION

If the West sincerely wants a true secular, democratic and independent Turkey that is a close follower of the principles of ATATURK, the founder, architect and the first president of the Turkish Republic, then we should abide by these reforms otherwise we fear a strong ally of the west, Turkey, which lies at the crossroads of civilizations, and is the one and only Moslem country that is a close follower of the western world, will be delineated from the west and be no different than Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan or Iran where religion dominates over the people. If the West interferes in our affairs, then just at the edge of Europe we fear a very fundamental change to take modern Turkey years even centuries back, will happen which would eventually imply the downfall of the modern Turkey. Graham Fuller in his book *The Future of Political Islam* says that in the authoritarian Islamist regimes like Afghanistan, Iran and Sudan, authoritarianism is not an outgrowth of Islam, but of these countries’ authoritarian past and their troubled present. He argues that the true judgment of Islam in politics can only come after an Islamic regime arises in a democratic state, and he points to Ataturk’s Turkey as an example.

Because secular principles form the core values of the Turkish nation, and in our era of globalization, which is, in Fuller’s words, an engine that needs to
be controlled at maximum advantage and at times rectified to avoid injustices it entails, This then comes to mean that Islam cannot be kept away from the impact of globalization. Fuller states an Islam that prohibits will be devoid of the creative energy to forge a synthesis between the west and Islam. That is why we are insisting on the fact that secular Turkey will never be sacrificed. To achieve this blend of cultures, the principles for modernization laid down by the greatest leader of not only Turkey but of the whole wide world, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk should never be forsaken. Otherwise, the west would have boundaries with a Turkey no different than Iran, Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia.

With the reforms implemented to bring the Turkish Republic to the level of Western civilized societies, we have trodden on a long route with our men and women working together for a brighter future. The women of Turkey will not sacrifice on the rights they have gained and go back to the days before the proclamation of the Republic. If the western states consider the headgear a religious symbol, than why would they not respect the Turkish values and laws that ban it as well. Turkey is the first democratic country where majority of the people are Muslim and yet achieved to bring modernization to the country long before the other Muslim countries. And we must also remember that the fact that Turkey is a secular democratic republic is written in the Constitution but the Constitution doesn’t state Turkey is predominantly a Muslim country. That is why we say Secularism is the dominant force that is existent in all the sectors of the country.

And why would everyone immediately start talking about the headgear when it comes to talking about the Turkish women. The Laws of Higher education also ban the head gear, no school teacher could go to class covered, and no woman wearing the turban would be allowed to attend the war academy nor the police force. When a similar situation happened in the United States, the woman was not allowed in to ROTC since their laws did not allow that. So
then countries can have their own laws and accession to the European Union should not come to mean that we Turks will give up on our principles set forth by the Principles and Reforms of our founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Even within the Union there are member states that ban the headgear, then why try to impose Turkey rules that would stop her progress and make us the Turkish women appear in an outfit that resembles her counterparts in Afghanistan or Iran or Saudi Arabia. Anatolian women did not and do not wear the turban but they cover their hair with a white cloth like a very thin cotton scarf so as to protect their hair from the sun since they work on the farm to help their husbands and family. Therefore let us not assert wrongly that the Turkish women were traditionally covered like the Arabs. No, absolutely no. Under Arab influence some were, especially the ones in Istanbul during the Ottoman times, but not in Anatolia.

Atatürk’s method of modernization depends on the principle of “carrying out many a great task in a short time.” The measure of time, according to Atatürk, must be envisaged “by taking into consideration the contemporary concept of speed and movement but not by following the benumbing mentality of the past centuries.” So, it is a principle in Atatürk’s concept of modernization to consider the steps taken in the path of modernization to be short and deficient, and to proceed by taking steps constantly growing longer and more fundamental. Atatürk’s thinking, which adopts that science is the best guide in life, shall remain valid also in the future as at the present time, on the way to modernization, since it highly esteems science and rationalism. As a matter of fact, the Great Leader pointed to us the path to be followed when he made the following statement: “Sciences are a torch kept in hand and mind by the Turkish nation in its march on the way to progress and civilization. “

A great distance has been taken in this respect, indeed. The country has been brought from an era to a new age. And this modernization is going on different areas today. However, the target has not yet been attained. And our ideal is
such that the Turkish nation shall definitely achieve its goal that Atatürk has shown it, in this illuminated path.

Any paper that focuses on the emancipation of the Turkish women would be incomplete without referring to the world’s first female combat pilot to fly a plane in combat, the first Turkish woman pilot, one of the eight adopted children of Atatürk--Sabıha Gökçen--who had attended the courses offered by the ‘Türk Kuşu’ (The Turkish Bird) and also those offered at the School of Military Aviation. Atatürk foresaw the future in the skies. And when we look at the scientific innovations in progress, is it not possible to understand the reasons for the ongoing space exploration? The founder of the Turkish Republic had in fact shown the way to proceed to the whole wide world. There is a lot to achieve but if we do not deviate from the path drawn for us by this great visionary MUSTAFA KEMAL ATATÜRK, we will not falter.

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