The Women’s Movement in Turkey
From the Tanzimat Towards: Atatürk’s Reforms

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Abstract

This article gives an overview of the women’s movement in Turkey between the Tanzimat and the Republic periods. Throughout history, women have been considered behind men as companions. However, with the rise of the civil rights movement, women began to have their place in both social and the political arena. In old Turkish states of Central Asia, women were equal with men; but with the adoption of Islam by Turkish people women, who had been equal with men, lost their status both in the society and family life. Women in Ottoman society could participate in social life only under some circumstances. Tanzimat era is basically the period of modernization of the Ottoman Empire that has also addressed issues about women’s rights. After the victory of Ataturk and Turkish people, Turkish Republic was officially established by M. K. Ataturk on 29 October 1923. Ataturk launched reforms to give Turkish women equal rights and opportunities. With his reforms, Turkish women, who had been neglected for centuries, were given new rights (including full political rights). Later, Turkey had the world’s first women Supreme Court justice. Ataturk believed that he and his family needed to be a good example for the society. Therefore, he started a family to which the entire society looked up. The notions of the French Revolution (1789) had a strong affect on the women’s suffrage movement in Europe. During the 1800s, European women began to push for the right to vote and take part in government. Since women in Muslim countries, still continue to face human rights abuses, because of male-dominated customs and religious practices; gender issues in the Muslim world need urgent attention. One of the factors that have been causing violence against women in the Muslim World is the idea of obedience. In short, Ataturk’s reforms based on the idea of solving problems such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, violence against women. Since the civil code is changed in favor of women’s rights and the society has become more open-minded, Turkish women are much stronger than before, especially thanks to recent reforms. Therefore, nowadays, women in Turkey are more active both politically and in professional life.

Introduction

It has been twenty-three centuries since Plato gave to the world his magnificent treatise on the State. The dream of the Greek philosopher of equal rights for all intelligent citizens, among whom he includes women, has in large part been realized; but much is yet wanting to bring society to the standard of the Ideal Republic. However, throughout history, women have been considered behind men as companions. Women were to be the property of their husbands. Since women were viewed as socially and politically inferior and unable to function at the same level as a man; they had the roles only as the bearer of their children. However, with the rise of the civil rights movement, women began to have their place in both social and the political arena. First, we should take a trip in the history of Turkish societies to understand life conditions of Turkish women in

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1 A Short History of Women's Rights, Eugene A. Hecker, p. 86.
2 Latife Kabaklı Çimen, Türk Töresinde Kadın ve Aile, İstanbul: IQ Kültür Sanat Yayıncılık,
which they lived throughout the centuries.

**Turkish Women’s Rights in Central Asia**

In old Turkish states of Central Asia women were equal with men and had many important roles in the society. Turkish women were not only independent but also respected by the society. They had rights for ownership and inheritance. Most importantly some women had an impact on politics, sometimes they had governed the country with their husband. So especially those women in social life were much apparent than their contemporaries in other societies.

The birth of a daughter was a very happy incident for Turkish families. There was no difference between having sons or having daughters. Daughters were just as valuable and cherished as sons and they had also the right of inheritance equally.²

It is a fact that women in pre-Islamic Turkish society were equal participants with men in the family and in almost all parts of social life: mother at home, farmer on the ground, merchant in the market and even soldier in the war. Furthermore, the influence of women over social and political life was so apparent.³

**Women’s Position in Society After the adoption of Islam**

After adoption of Islam by Turkish people, Islamic Law became the main element for the structure of social life. The new religion made many changes in the society and these changes affected women and their status in the society. However, the changes were not striking the status of women. In the Karakhanid state, founded in 840 by the Turkish tribes and in the Seljuk Empire, a Turkish-Islamic state has ruled over the parts of Central Asia, Middle East and Asia Minor between 11th and 14th centuries, women have maintained their role in social and cultural life even though their participation and influence on social life has considerably eroded.⁴

Although Islam advises monogamy, it also approves polygamy in the cases of illness, infertility. This meant a loss of status for the Turkish women who had been equal with men and had not taken part in polygamous household.

Women in Ottoman society were generally participant in social life. Although they were active in commercial life, they were able to sell their goods only under some conditions. Their goods can only be sold by their husbands or sons. However, there are a few rules to protect women in commercial life. One of them is, if the

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⁴ Ceren Aygül, CHANGE IN THE STATUS OF TURKISH WOMEN DURING THE OTTOMAN MODERNIZATION AND SELF-EVALUATION OF WOMEN IN KADINLAR, Ankara p.14
estates of women were sold by their husbands or sons without their consent; the sale could be cancelled. In fact, up to the 19th century, women could not get educated. Since art was forbidden by religion and the schools which teach sciences didn’t exist, neither girls nor boys were educated. They could get only religious education. Additionally, women lost their equal status of inheritance. Daughters’ right of inheritance was half of the sons and testimony of women in courts were not equal with the men. This put women in a weak position both in family life and law system of Ottoman Empire.

**Modernizing Reforms in Ottoman Empire**

Tanzimath era is basically the period of modernization of Ottoman Empire which was also addressed issues about women’s rights. The Ottoman state had structural transitions with the Tanzimath reforms. These changes which had appeared in the life of Ottoman women began in the Second Constitutional and the Ottoman women were also negatively affected by these changes.

The idea of women’s having roles as only a good wife and mother was changed by modern Tanzimath reforms. Therefore, Tanzimath era can be accepted as the turning point especially in terms of raising consciousness of Turkish women’s movement.

With the education of women, a "civilized" population would emerge. In this more liberal atmosphere, the very well organized movement of Ottoman women questioned the patriarchal system and demanded women’s rights. The women published women’s journals, discussing "women's questions" and built women’s groups to help each other. The Tanzimath era was also the period in which women became more apparent especially in literature.

At the end of 18th century, Ottoman’s education system was behind Western education systems. The foundation of the vocational schools for women started with the Tanzimath Era. The initiation of training courses provided in 1842 by foreign teachers to educate women as midwives at Tibbiye Mektebi (Medical School) was the first attempt for vocational women education. Vocational schools were basically the first step of Turkish women’s educational movement.

With the influences of Vocational schools, some women, who openly took big roles, appeared in the society and became leaders for all women to follow. Halide Edip, the first Turkish graduate of the American School for Girls in Istanbul, a

5 Ceren Aygul, Change in The Status of Turkish Women During The Ottoman Modernization and Self-evaluation of Women in Kadinlar Dunyasi of 1913, Ankara
novelist, an outspoken and respected woman, and a voice of inspiration for the Nationalist Movement was the only female officer in the Resistance Army. She later wrote a memoir of that war experience and perilous time entitled, The Turkish Ordeal. It was published in the US and England in 1928. The Contribution of Turkish Women to the Modernization of Turkey.\(^9\)

**Women’s Rights in Republic Era**

After the victory of Ataturk and Turkish people, Turkish Republic was officially founded by M. K. Ataturk on 29 October 1923. Until that moment (the republic was formally established; the Ottoman Empire was still in existence with its heritage and religious authority. Although Ankara Government repealed Ottoman Empire’s authority; its traditions continued to affect people’s lives. Ataturk’s political reforms were carefully planned institutional changes that would see the end of these traditions which have been effective in Ottoman society.

Ataturk’s dreams for this nation and country were not completed. According to him, the first step was to create an independent nation and the second step was to modernize the country. With abiding faith in the vital importance of women in society, Ataturk launched reforms to give Turkish women equal rights and opportunities. Ataturk initiated a series of radical reforms of the country’s political, social, and economic life which were aimed at rapidly transforming Turkey into a modern state. A secular legal code, modeled along European lines, was introduced that completely altered laws affecting women, marriage, and family relations.\(^10\) With his reforms, Turkish women, who had been neglected for centuries, were given new rights.

He abolished the Sultanate and the Caliphate, ended sharia law in 1926, and adopted the Swiss Civil Code. The new laws, adopted in 1926, forbade polygamy, instituted civil marriage, allowed the initiation of divorce proceedings by either partner, and guaranteed equality of women before the law.\(^11\) The monogamy principle and equal rights for women instantly positively affected the society. With the new Civil Code the entire educational system from the grade school to university became coeducational and that is the best way to recognize the equal rights of women.

He gave women the same opportunities as men, including full political rights. On December 5\(^{th}\), 1934 Turkish women became entitled to vote. He mentioned how important for him to make the country modern by saying “At present, our most urgent task is to catch up with the modern world. We shall not catch up with the modern world if we only modernize half of the population.” After these

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\(^9\) [http://www.ataturksociety.org The Contribution of Turkish Women to the Modernization of Turkey, Judy Ayyildiz, (Online: 08.03.2013)]

\(^10\) [www.country-data.com, Ataturk’s Reforms, (online: 08.04.2013)]

legislations, in the mid 1930s, 18 women were elected to the national parliament. Later, Turkey had the world’s first women supreme court justice.\(^{12}\)

Ataturk’s wife, Mrs. Ataturk, was one of the best representative of Turkish women. Ataturk believed that he and his family needed to be a good example for the society. Therefore he started a family to which the entire society looked up. He had a wife who was a genius in politics, he had an adopted daughter who was the first woman combat pilot and he raised his other children for the sake of the society. Afet Inan, who is Ataturk’s other adopted daughter and also the first woman to enroll in the People’s Party, may also be called in this case as an example since later, she became an active speech-maker. He explained how important it is for him to create an ideal Turkish family by saying: “I am not getting married in order to get married. In order to create a new family life in our fatherland, I must set a good example myself. Are women to remain eternal servants?” asked Ataturk.

**Ms. Latife Ussaki (First Lady of Republic of Turkey)**

She was born in 1898 in Izmir. She completed her high school studies in Izmir and in 1919 she went to Europe to study Law in Paris and London. Since she was a highly-educated woman who was also able to speak many languages; Ataturk valued her ideas on modernizing Turkey. Even before their marriage, Ms. Latife Hanım took care of some of his political tasks, such as writing a diplomatic missive to the English navy. It soon became clear that Ms. Latife Hanım stood by Ataturk in the politically crucial phase.\(^{13}\)

Their wedding ceremony was another way to stand up against the old traditions which had been pulling back Turkish people throughout centuries. Ms. Latife Hanım, rather than a guardian, sat at the table, and Ataturk paid the negligible sum of ten Dirham as a bride price, symbolizing the equality of men and women.\(^{14}\)

In addition, since she hardly ever wore a veil and she often spoke about women’s rights at public occasions; in Ataturk’s eyes, Ms. Latife Hanım represented the woman of the future. Ataturk was able to access to the rest of the world thanks to Ms. Latife Hanım’s language skills. She had contacts with foreign journalists and helped shape Ataturk’s ideas about civil laws which would prohibit polygamy, which was permitted under Islamic Law. These were, undoubtedly, the revolutions in gender relations in Turkish society.

**Sabiha Gokcen**

Sabiha was born in 1913 in Bursa. She lost her parents when she was a little child. She had the chance to talk to Ataturk when he visited Bursa. Sabiha told

\(^{12}\) [http://ataturk.twoday.net](http://ataturk.twoday.net), Women’s Rights. (Online: 09.04.2013)


Ataturk about her wish for the future. She wanted to go to a boarding school for further education. After that conversation, Mustafa Kemal adopted Sabiha and she started to live in Ataturk’s house, in the capital city, Ankara. She got educated in the Presidential House from private tutor.

When Sabiha attended the opening ceremony of the aviation society; she realized her interest in aviation. First, she started with parachuting; from that moment on, her future was in the skies. First, she became a pilot, later she joined the Turkish Air Force. She learned how to fly combat planes when she was 24 years old. She is not only Turkey’s first women military pilot; but she is also known as the world’s first woman combat pilot.

European Women’s Rights

In order to clarify what Ataturk has given to Turkish women and how much it is important; we should look at what steps European and Muslim women took to get the rights which they own today.

The notions of the French Revolution (1789) had a strong affect on the women's suffrage movement in Europe. The ideology of the revolution based on the beliefs that women and men shared rights equally and had both the right and the obligation for political participation.

What the French Revolution of 1789 aimed to do was to improve the society by giving women right to vote, to serve in the military, to marry and divorce, and to seek an education. Even though these changes seem to be radical; there were controversies about women needed education to only fulfill their role as mothers and housewives.

During the 1800s, women began to push for the right to vote and to take part in government. Throughout the Western world, women began to receive the legal rights to participate in government. Exact dates when European women received the right to vote can prove how important Ataturk's reforms are. European countries are considered the most democratic countries however; Finland (1906), Norway (1913), and Denmark and Iceland (1915) granted women to vote early in the 20th century. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Netherlands granted suffrage in 1917; Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Sweden in 1918; and Germany and Luxembourg in 1919. Spain extended the ballot to women in 1931, but France waited until 1944 and Belgium, Italy, Romania, and Yugoslavia until 1946. Switzerland finally gave women to vote in 1971, and women remained disenfranchised in Liechtenstein until 1984.

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15 The Myth of The Military- Nation, Militarism, Gender and Education in Turkey, Ayse Gul Altinay, p. 34.
16 http://www.ehow.com, Jason Chavis, A History of Women’s rights, online: 01.04.2013
17 http://teacher.scholastic.com, Women's Suffrage
**Muslim Women’s Rights**

Since women in Muslim countries, still continue to face human rights abuses, because of male-dominated customs and religious practices; gender issues in the Muslim world need urgent attention. The main abuses which are caused by male-dominated customs and religious practices are inadequate resources, lack of opportunities to participate in politics and economic empowerment. Especially Muslim women have issues with poor access to education and this causes limited career opportunities, domestic and external violence; forced marriages; restricted participation in public life and unequal inheritance rights.

One of the factors which has been causing violence against women in the Muslim World is the idea of obedience. In the Muslim faith, men and women have different responsibilities, despite being equal in the eyes of God (Allah). Even though home is the first area in which women’s rights have to be secured; the inequality becomes more apparent in domesticity. Women owe to men to justify men's physical and emotional violence against women in order to hold the family together. Also women are not entitled to leave home unless they get the permission of their husbands. Over the years, women’s obedience and men’s duty of guardianship became part of the legal system. In case a woman breaches of obedience duty, her husband, who is also considered as the head of the family, is entitled to cut the financial support and hurt her in many ways. Shortly, with all the pressure of traditions, religion and the legal system; women remain in violent relationships.

**Conclusion**

Briefly, Ataturk’s reforms are based on the idea of solving problems such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, violence against women. Even though Turkish women gained rights much earlier than women who live in Western countries, women in Turkey never got the chance to use those rights which were given by Ataturk without their desire. Since the majority of Turkish women were not able to take advantage of those new rights; most of them still worked the land; most remained under the social pressure and control of men.

To sum up, since the civil code is changed in favor of women’s rights and the society today is more open-minded, Turkish women are much stronger than before, especially thanks to recent reforms. Therefore, nowadays, women in Turkey are more active both politically and in professional life. In the pictures, you can find professional women who have different jobs in Gaziantep, Turkey.

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Professional women who have different jobs in Gaziantep, Turkey.
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