

Women's movement in Turkey since 1980: achievements and limitations

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Women's movement in Turkey emerged as an independent women's movement after September 12, 1980 military *coup*. It has got relatively autonomous movement when Turkish military takeover to the civilian government. During this period, military regime banned all political parties, social organizations and those all activities who were affecting to the Turkish society. Under these circumstances, a lively women's movement under very critical situation has succeeded in questioning authoritarian regime. Women started to bring about their personal problem like domestic violence against women on the political agenda with their Western counterpart's famous slogan "Personal is political". They wanted to find out a solution of their problems on the legal basis. Though, debates regarding the position of women in Turkish society have occupied a central place in the political and ideological agendas of the Ottoman and Turkish states at three crucial phases. First phase was during the period of Ottoman reforms which instituted through the activities of the young Ottomans in the middle of the nineteenth century. At this juncture, they were reformists' men whose main concerns were to find ways of reviving a floundering empire, who were concerned about the position of women in Turkish society. A second phase of debate defining the role of women, by extension the meaning of womanhood took place in the early years of the establishment of the Turkish Republic and, culminated in the enfranchisement of Turkish women in 1934. Although, the elite women were more vociferous in stating their own positions during this second phase. First and second phases of debates on the 'woman question' culminated in what various observers have called 'state feminism'. The third phase that feminism and women have occupied an important space in the public gaze in Turkey was after the military coup of 1980.¹ However, the history of Turkish women's movement can be divided into three different phases. First phase has begun with the Ottoman Turkish society with the several reforms policy by the Ottoman Empire. Second phase started with the Republican period, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's Modernization/Westernization policy. He granted certain rights to the Turkish women. Third phase began with the after September 12, 1980 military *coup*.

A diverse social movement seeking equal rights and opportunities for women in public sphere as well as in their personal lives, women's movement originated in the West. However especially the United States during the last decade of the 19th century, and peaked in the 1960s and 1970s as it touched on every area of women's experience including family and sexuality.² With the mass diffusion of feminist consciousness in the following decades, women's lives and thinking have changed in

ways that are not likely to be reversed. However, gender equality, particularly in family and personal relations is not yet achieved. In many parts of the world, the women's liberation and consciousness raising groups continue to mobilise against the patriarchal values and culturally determined identities as before.³ Despite the proliferation of feminist activism, the contemporary women's movement is torn apart by factionalism and intense ideological conflicts. Differences in priorities among radical feminists, liberals and conservatives, and disagreement over issues affecting the status of women in private life have progressively undermined the movement's potential for affirmative action. The study is an attempt to examine the achievements as well as the limitations of the Turkish women's movement since the country's third military coup of September 1980 in terms of addressing inequality of the sexes in both public and private spheres.

The Ottoman women's movement:

The history of women's movement in Turkey is quite old. It goes back to the mid-19th century *Tanzimat* (reorganization) period⁴ when the Ottoman elites carried out major changes in all areas of Ottoman state and society, notably in the fields of administration, legislation and in regard to education.⁵ The process of modernization provided the context within which the issue of women was debated. The most significant development in this period was the publication of women's journals and magazines addressing women issues, which was followed by the formation of the Ottoman Welfare Organization of Women, the first women association in Turkey in 1908.⁶ This women organization became partially involved in the Young Turk⁷ Movement, which was the driving force in the emergence of the modern Turkish Republic in 1923 from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. During this period, we can identify over forty publications oriented towards women. Starting in 1868 with *Terakki Muhadderat* (*progress of women*), the supplement of Terakki newspaper, these publications include *Ayine* (*Mirror*) (1875), *Aile* (*Family*) (1880), *‘ukufezar* (*Flower Garden*) (1883-4), *Hanýmlara Mahsus Gazete* (*Newspaper Particularly for Women*) (1895-1909), *Demet* (*Bouquet*) (1908-9), *Mehasin* (*Things Beautiful*) (1908-9), *Kadýn* (*Woman*) (1908), *Kadýnlar Dunyasý*⁸ (*Women's World*) (1913-21), *Kadýnlýk* (*Womanhood*) (1914), *Türk Kadýny* (*Turkish Women*) (1918-19), *İnci* (*Pearl*) (1918-22) and *Sus* (*Ornament*) (1923).⁹ Most of these journals were owned and published by men but some of them had male owners but actually published by women. A few were owned by women and had only women writers. Some of these publications, reflecting the influence of the westernized lifestyle, focused on important topics that were assumed to be interest of women by attempting to educate women readers in these areas. They pursued the goals of serving both women and society. Another group, rather than enlightening Turkish women about their traditional activities, aimed at putting women's conditions and demands on the public agenda. Among these, one of very famous was *Kadinlar Dunyasi*, which held the purpose of promoting women's legal rights. This group of journalists not only constituted an important source of information about the pre-republican women's movement but also served as the existence of a group of Muslim women who opposed their treatment as the second sex.¹⁰

The defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War, and the occupation of the country by the Allied Forces, made the visibility of women clear in the public sphere. It also accelerated the mass participation of the Turkish women into the national struggle. When the war of independence started, Turkish women took very active part in the war. Women, along with men, became ardent nationalists and actively participated in a series of activities outside their traditional roles. They organized public meetings, addressed the masses, founded Defense of Rights associations and fought actively in the war.¹¹ During this period, the battle became more vigorous and women's experience in the Balkan wars politicized the women's movement. It was during the war, Turkish women obtained some of the rights they had fought for, and they were admitted to universities in 1914.¹² They were allowed to work in factories and the public service in 1915. In 1917, the family act recognized the right to limit polygamy to Muslim women, as well as women of other religions of the Ottoman Empire. But the activities of this

period did not continue for long. When the war ended, without showing any reluctance, the women returned to their home and resumed their traditional roles. In 1919, suffrage became the issue on which women launched a campaign.¹³

The women's movement and Ataturk's Modernization Policy :

At the same time, the drastic reforms which modified the structure of the state, including the foundation of a republic to replace the old monarchy and the acceptance of secularism, the government was preparing the most radical women's revolution ever attempted in Muslim Mediterranean societies. Although, the history of modernization in Turkey goes back to the eighteenth century of the Ottoman Empire, most critical and important reforms took place between 1926 and 1930 after the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923.¹⁴ The main goal of the new republic was to develop the country along the lines of Western civilization and to reach the stage civilized nations had achieved. In the early Republican period of 1923, the new reformist, namely Mustafa Kemal, who was later bestowed the name Ataturk as an honor, and his cadets wanted to create a new Turkish identity, who opposed to the ottoman identity with its roots in Islam. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, founder of the Republic, made the emancipation of Turkish women an integral part of his reforms policy which aimed at creating a modern/Western nation. During the Ataturk's period, republican state determined the characteristics of the ideal women. It established a monopolistic system to propagate this ideal in a population that often held quite different values and perceptions of the ideal women's behavior. Zahra Arat stated in her book *Deconstructing Images of the Turkish Woman*, and asked to Ataturk, 'What should the Turkish woman be like? He answered:

"The Turkish women should be the most enlightened, most reversed women of the world ... the duty of the Turkish women 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 if she is virtuous."¹⁵

Since, the new Republican woman represented the modern, secular, Westernized state. She was expected to behave and dress in what the state defined as a modern, secular, Western manner. At the same time, women felt that their religious beliefs required them to dress modestly and cover their heads. Women also maintained older customs and excluded from this republican sisterhood. However, this was not the first time when women were becoming visible in the public sphere. Even reformists of the late Ottoman period were concerned with striking a balance between Islam and modernization. Meanwhile, the educated bureaucrats were not compatible with the Islamic way of life that was why they sought to weaken the power of Islam in social life; however, the *Caliphate*¹⁶ was abolished in 1924, along with the office of *Seyh-ul-Islam*¹⁷ and the Ministry of *Sharia*. The *fez*¹⁸ was also outlawed. The abolition of the *fez* was a great symbolic revolution in Turkey. According to Bernard lewis, it was an important symbol of Muslim identity. In the 1924 constitution of Turkey, Islam was designated the religion of the state.¹⁹ The most important reforms of the republic concerning women's status were the testamentary reform of 1925. It prohibited the wearing of the *Charshaf* and the *veil*, known as symbols of religious oppression what Bernard lewis calls Ataturk's 'great symbolic revolution'. He abolished the *fez* and made the wearing of hats by all men a legal requirement. However, the hat was the symbol of Western civilization and progress. It was perceived as the greatest threat to the Muslim identity of the masses.²⁰

Further one of the most significant developments on women's rights and status during Ataturk's period was the adoption of a new Civil Law in 1926, which not only guaranteed equality before law but also resolved the problem of polygamy once and for all. Together with the enactment of Turkish Civil Code, granting of suffrage to in December 1934 paved the way for women emancipation.²¹ However, the Kemalist approach to the woman issue pursuit of 'state feminism' and the centralized, authoritarian nature of the Republican regime undermined the prospects for the development of independent

feminist organizations in the country.²² The Turkish Women's Association, which played the role of a bridge between the Ottoman and the Republican women's movement, was, for instance, dissolved in 1935 on the grounds that equality in all respects had been achieved by the Kemalist state. Consequently, there were no women's organizations in Turkey to raise the issue of gender inequality or challenge the state regarding its "full equality claim." Some of those leftist groups like the Progressive Women's Organisation (PWO) active in the mid-1970s fighting for the rights of the working-class women were crushed along with all political groups of the pre-coup period by the September 12, 1980 military coup.²³

The 1980 Military Coup and the Women's Movement :

Indeed, the military intervention followed by a three-year interim regime (1980-1983) was marked by a process of de-politicisation.²⁴ While political organizations representing the ideological attachments of the previous decades were banned from politics,²⁵ Kemalism, as the official ideology, underwent a re-interpretation as expressed in the "Turkish-Islamic synthesis."²⁶ It was in such a period of political vacuum and transition that women's movement found the grounds for a relatively autonomous organization partly because of the absence of the Kemalist, Islamist or leftist ideological monopoly over women issue and partly, the influence of the new wave of Western feminism in the form of consciousness-raising organizations.²⁷ Consequently, inspired by the Western feminist slogan of "the private is political",²⁸ some of these groups initiated campaign against what they called the "patriarchal state", questioning the egalitarian claims of the 1926 Civil Law and discriminatory nature of the Penal Code.²⁹ Reflecting of this, over 3000 women marched on the streets of Istanbul in 1987 in protest against a court decision to refuse the divorce application of a pregnant woman, and a mother of two children, who had been subjected to violence of her husband.³⁰ The demonstration represented the start of a campaign which lasted until the first shelter was opened for battered wives. The march of around 3000 women in Istanbul on 17th May, 1987 was an important step in the movement. Tekeli states about it:

"In 1987, when refusing the divorce application of a pregnant woman with three children already, who was regularly beaten by her husband, a judge referred to a proverb saying: 'you should never leave a women's back without a stick and her womb without a colt.' This court decision was the last straw and gave us a legitimate argument to organize the first street demonstration in order to protect against the hypocrisy of both society and state."³¹

At that time, this demonstration was a turning point in Turkish history, because it was the first time that women were on the streets to fight for women's rights. The street demonstration against domestic violence was the first public protest in the aftermath of the 1980 coup followed by the submission of a women's petition with 7000 signatures to the Turkish Parliament on March 8, 1988, the World Women's Day, demanding the implementation of the UN Convention for the Elimination of All Kinds of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).³² Likewise, the feminist action took place in January 1989 as a reaction against a decision by the Constitutional Court on Article 438 of the Penal Code. This Article stated that "if a woman involved in a rape case was a prostitute, then the rapist's sentence could be reduced by up to two-thirds".³³ A rape case was brought before the Supreme Court which decided that the rape article did not contravene Article 10 of the Constitution which regulates equality between the sexes. The Court supported its judgment by claiming that Article 10 was designed to protect the rights of 'honest women' only. In response, feminists caused a 'scandal' by declaring 'we are all prostitutes'. In the end, the National Assembly abolished Article 438. This period of intensive discussions and actions culminated in 1989, when the first Feminist Congress held in Ankara, and ending with a manifesto which summarizes ten years of feminist thinking, and an official ideological divorce between feminism and socialism.³⁴ These public actions are not only the result of a broad-based women's movement, but also of a revolution in ideas.³⁵ Thus the court case of a raped

woman who was presented by the defense as a prostitute in order to get a reduction in the rapist's sentence provoked the women protest in 1989 against the discriminatory nature of the 1926 Penal Code.

Similar to their Western counterparts, leading Turkish Women Rights Organisations (WROs) namely KADER, Women for Women's Human Rights (WWHR), Turkish Women's Union (TMU), Progressive Women's Organisation (PWO), Flying Broom (NGOs) focused in the post-1980 era primarily, but not exclusively, on the private sphere issues not spoken before, such as control over women's bodies, sexual harassment, battering of women, and discrimination at the workplace.³⁶ In explaining that, the personal was political and state had to respect the private sphere, they sought to politicise inequality in private life. Throughout the 1980s, however, the Turkish WROs refused to cooperate with the state because of their perceptions of state as the main guardian of the patriarchal system.³⁷ The negative attitude was gradually replaced in the 1990s by a tendency to engage the state constructively to achieve gender equality both private and public spheres. Indicative of this change was the establishment in 1990 of the Directorate General on the Status of Women, affiliated to the Prime Minister's Office with the stated aim of addressing the issues raised by the women activist groups.³⁸ The latter's involvement in public policymaking subsequently facilitated the passage of the Protection of Family Law in 1998, institutionalising state responsibility to intervene in cases of domestic violence.³⁹ Likewise, the 2001 revision of the Civil Code expanding gender equality with the loss of man's privileged status as 'head of the family', and the 2004 reforms of the Penal Code abolishing discriminatory articles against women's revealing the successful record of the Turkish women's movement in the last 20 years.⁴⁰

These accomplishments of the movement, however, need to be seen in the context of changing socio-political structure in the aftermath of the 1980 military coup spawned by the liberalisation of economy giving greater social recognition to the entrepreneurial class and progressive democratization of the Turkish polity since the restoration of civilian government under Prime Minister Turgut Ozal in 1983.⁴¹ Together they contributed to an unusual spurt in civil societal activism. They raised the issue of women subordination in Turkish society. Civil society created a platform for women to discuss their problems in the Turkish society.⁴² However, along with this the development of civil society in Turkey brought a new era in Turkish politics. The roles of civil society have become prevalent in Turkey in fact sometimes, they determined the political agendas. During this period, such developments like the privatization programs of the center-right parties, the partial delegation of authority to the local government, the advent of free market economy, and the emergence of different social groups in the public sphere strengthened civil society,⁴³ especially in the latter half of the 1990s, which paved the way for a constructive engagement between the state authorities and the women's organizations.

With the onset of the process of Turkey's accession to the European Union (EU) following its decision to accept Turkey's candidacy for membership in 1999 and the rise of the newly-formed Justice and Development Party (AKP by its Turkish acronym) with an Islamist background to power in 2002, women's movement in Turkey acquired significant leverage in bargaining with the government. Not only did the women organizations voice their demands forcefully through EU funded projects, they also increasingly played a pro-active role by taking advantage of the AKP's commitment to the EU-driven reform process aimed at transforming Turkey into a liberal democracy.⁴⁴

In addition to the EU-inspired reform process, the strengthening of the Turkish women's movement in the past decades is also related to the rise of transnational cooperation among WROs worldwide. The UN initiatives, as part of the 'international women's regime' have, for instance, encouraged Turkish WROs to become more visible and assertive in domestic political scene,⁴⁵ so much so that a group of women has formed an association, KADER (Association for Supporting and Training Women Candidates) to fight for an increased representation of women in the political system.⁴⁶ Demanding at least 30 per cent quota for women in the Parliament⁴⁷ and Local Governments to break the male

domination in the political decision-making mechanism, *KADER* has launched a campaign entitled “Gender Quota: From Male Democracy to Real Democracy.”⁴⁸ Interestingly, the quota debate has divided women’s movement, with the radical feminist groups pressing for the inclusion of positive discrimination for women in the government’s reform policy for comprehensive gender equality while the women’s organizations supported the Islamist AKP reject the quota as “an insult to women.”⁴⁹

Similarly, the AKP government’s attempt to criminalize adultery (sex out of the wedlock) in 2004, which had been annulled by the Constitutional Court in 1998, provoked bitter debates between the women groups resisting the official move and the Islamic feminists supporting it on the grounds that punishing adultery would “protect the rights of women who suffer from the infidelity of their husbands.” Thus, while analysing women’s movement in Turkey, one cannot forget the most intractable issue related to the religious attire. Along with the other issues related to the women, the issue of headscarf has a symbolic significance in the Turkish acronym.⁵⁰ The most enduring source of division in the contemporary Turkish women’s movement is the ‘Islamists versus secularists’ cleavage, as reflected in the headscarf controversy triggered by the AKP government’s decision to end the decade-old ban on female students wearing headscarves in educational institutions.⁵¹ The liberals and conservatives who support the AKP government’s Constitutional amendments to lift the ban see the headscarf as a form of expression of individuals’ religious identity and the necessity of its representation in the public sphere. For them, the issue is more a matter of freedom and equality than a collective, counter-hegemonic identity. Moreover, wearing headscarf is the private matter, which needs no state regulations as such. The women, who demand to be admitted to universities with headscarves, view this as exercise of their citizenship rights as referred in the article 24 of the 1982 Constitution. They also insist on their right to education guaranteed by the Constitution, and the state should not deny them access on the ground that they wear headscarves.⁵² While the Islamist woman sees the headscarf as a way to own her body and sexuality and the uncovered woman is a sexual object in the eyes of the men, her secular feminist counterpart would argue that a covered woman is completely subservient to her husband or other male members of the family rather than being in control over her own body and sexuality.⁵³ It proclaimed a very radical discourse, equating all relations between man and woman with men’s domination over women and rejecting this strongly:

“We feminist women want to control our own bodies, our identity, our labor, and our future by using the right that we naturally have in order to shape our fate. We invite all women to be aware of their oppression, and call them to stand against that oppression and to obtain solidarity with us in struggling for our interest.”⁵⁴

In contrast, secularist women argue that wearing the headscarf signifies a desire to bring about Islamic rule. For many feminists, head covering has been an issue which revealed the backwardness of Islamist ideology. They feared the consequences of Islamic head covering. They worried that if Islamists women achieved their aims, they may force all women to wear headscarf. Thus, the Secularists/Islamists cleavages among Turkish women on the freedom of choice in the Turkish society forced to women’s movement in its peak. As much like the Islamic feminists, who in the name of preserving culture attach moral values and religious sentiments to women, the Kurdish feminists are more concerned with the Turkish government’s refusal to recognize the Kurds’ distinct ethnic identity than striving for equality in a heavily patriarchal society.⁵⁵

In a nut shell, despite many reforms which were granted to the Turkish women such as legal, social, political rights in the 1920s, they are still far from emancipation, Deniz Kandiyoti has used term for the Turkish women’s emancipation, “Emancipated but Un-liberated?” One cannot deny that the process of Turkish modernization provided women their rights at least on the legal grounds, but in reality this created an illusion that Turkish women are emancipated. As a result, Turkish women who were educated, professional and produced by the great efforts of Kemalist reform policy were not organized under the women’s movement until the 1980s. Nevertheless, with the help of consciousness

raising groups, the role of Turkish women's movement was remarkable in the nation building process, and to bringing democratization process in Turkey also. Women's movement in post-1980 Turkey remains ideologically fragmented despite having achieved remarkable success in its struggle against patriarchal values by attaining the legal basis through amendments to the Civil Code and Penal Code to end discrimination and inequality of the sexes. Last but not least, women's struggle was about the changing mindset and about forcing to the Turkish society to recognize the dignity of women as individuals human beings.

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