

The Turkish Women's Movement: A Brief History of Success

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For Duygu¹

You might find the title too pretentious, especially for a short paper. Yet, I believe that it is a good reflection of most of my basic observations and findings. My interest in women's issues was originally academic and I wrote a thesis on "women's political participation" in the late 1970s. This comparative study was published in 1982.² After the military coup of 1980, I believed that academic freedom was suppressed by the new law on higher education and so I resigned from the university and spent about 20 years of my life as an activist in the "new women's movement". This paper is based on these two different sources of knowledge.

The reason for my reference to the women's movement of recent years as the "new movement" is to underline the fact that in Turkey the history of the women's movement is quite old, since it goes back to Ottoman

times. Indeed, more than a century ago, from 1870 onwards, our grandmothers started to question their subordinate status. They wrote books, published journals, formed associations, launched protest actions and engaged in heated debate with both the traditionalist and reformist men of the era. The most important issues for them were "polygamy" and "repudiation", rights given to men by sharia, the Islamic law.

At the turn of the last century, the battle became more vigorous and women's experience in the Balkan Wars and the First World War politicized the movement. It was during the war years that women obtained some of the rights they had fought for: they were admitted to universities in 1914; they were allowed to work in factories and the public service in 1915; and in 1917, the "family act" recognized the right to limit polygamy to Muslim women, as well as women of other religions of the Empire. Though this act was never applied because of the war conditions, it was very important as it was the first step in

1. Duygu Asena was one of the most prominent figures in the Turkish feminist movement. She was the editor of *Kadınca* and other women's magazines and the author of the best selling book: *Woman Does Not Have A Name* (1987). She propagated feminist ideas among millions of middle-class women. She died of cancer on 31 July 2006, when she was just 60 years old.

2. Cf. Article in English based on this book in Nermin Abadan-Unat, *Women in Turkish Society*, Leiden, Brill, 1981.

the Islamic world. In 1919, suffrage became “the” issue on which women launched a campaign. Hence it is no exaggeration to say that the Ottoman women were in step with their Western sisters, with whom they were in contact, carefully following what they were doing.

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It is not erroneous, therefore, to claim that the women's revolution accomplished by the young Turkish Republic was in fact the result of these 50 years of activism by Ottoman women. The most important reforms of the Republic concerning women's status were the adoption of the Civil Law in 1926, and the recognition of the rights of voting and eligibility for women in 1934. The new Civil Law, a translation of the Swiss Civil Code, was a secular text and resolved the problem of polygamy once and for all. Women became the most fervent supporters of secularism in Turkey as a consequence. In 1935, 18 women representatives were elected to the National Assembly. As a percentage, they accounted for 4.5% of all the seats in the Assembly, one of the highest proportions in the world at that time. Of course, women felt deeply indebted to the founding father of the republic, Kemal Atatürk. But they also paid quite a heavy price, which historians usually forget to mention. Indeed the new republic evolved into a centralised, authoritarian, single-party regime with a leadership that would not tolerate the legitimate existence of any civil-society organization. In 1935, the Turkish Woman's Union (TWU), which played the role of a bridge between the Ottoman women's movement and republican women, was invited to shut down. Ankara claimed that as women had “full equal

status with men”, there was no need for a women's organization such as TWU. That was the end of the women's movement for 40 years to come.

We had to wait until 1975 to see a women's organization raise the issue of “gender inequality”. In the context of the 1970s, when the Progressive Women's Organization (PWO) questioned the “official ideology” of the state regarding the “full equality claim”, these women were not acting as feminists; in fact they were “anti-feminist” in their outlook. Their action concerned only the difficult conditions of working-class women. The 1980 military coup crushed all political parties and particularly leftist organizations. The members of the PWO had to leave for exile.

After the coup, a feminist women's movement developed on the basis of a completely revised analysis. A new generation of middle-class, left-wing, intellectual women, who were in touch with the ideas of the new wave of feminism in Western countries, proposed that the “paternalist Turkish state” was in fact a “patriarchal state”, defending the interests of men. This new movement started in Istanbul with small awareness-raising groups that had discovered the famous slogan of Western feminists: “The private is political”. Hence the issues raised had to do mainly with relations between men and women, not in the public field but in personal relationships. Feminist women put forward the iconoclastic idea that the family arrangements of the 1926 Civil Law were not “egalitarian”. On the contrary, married woman lost equal status, as the law recognized the husband's status as the “head” of the household and established a hierarchical relationship between the two. The woman lost her name, her identity and even her freedom to work, as the authorization of the husband was required for her to work in a paid job outside the home. Her status was defined as that of a “dependant housewife”. This critical re-read-

ing led the women's movement to launch a campaign from 1985 onwards calling for reform of the Civil Law.

In the same period, feminist women discovered that the female body was a target of male aggression and assault. The so called "virginity tests" required from single female job seekers in the public sector and widespread sexual harassment cases in the public space were some of the flagrant signs of male domination of women's bodies. Yet, the most dramatic issue of violence against women was wife-beating, which we discovered to be quite widespread, even among educated middle-class wives.

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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 woman'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 protest against the hypocrisy of both society and the state. Only 3,000 women marched on the streets of Istanbul on 17 May 1987, but public opinion was alerted and from then on the attitude of the press changed with regard to feminism. In 1989, during another court case of a raped woman who was presented by the defence as a prostitute in order to get a reduction in the rapist's sentence, we discov-

ered the extremely discriminatory nature of the Penal Code. This law was approved, like the Civil Law, in 1926 but it was borrowed from fascist Italy, not from a democratic society like Switzerland. The campaign against this famous – infamous – article 438 drew so much attention³ that the Constitutional Court had to intervene to repeal it. By this time, however, the women's movement had decided that it was necessary to change not only the old Civil Law but also the Penal Code.

Fifteen years of continuous and fierce fighting in various forms such as lobbying, public debates, petition campaigns and more striking actions had to be waged in order to achieve success. Finally, we achieved some important results. In 1998, the state recognized the need to protect women's bodies against violent husbands by adopting the so-called "Protection of the Family Act".

In 2001, the Civil Law was reformed. With this reform the husband lost his privileged status as "head of the household". Moreover, the property ownership system changed. The women's movement succeeded in asserting the idea that in the case of divorce, the housewife, who makes an invisible but important contribution to the family's income and wealth, should have an equal share of the property acquired during marriage. There is one important point where the women's movement failed, however, and this is one of the issues on which we continue to battle. The new Civil Law was to be applied from January 2002 onwards and stipulated that the property regulations would be valid only for the couples married after this date. This law created a new discrimination, this time among women themselves. About 17 million women who married under the old property regime – the separa-

3. A group of feminist women visited the prostitutes in Galata and while marching on the streets shouted: "We are all prostitutes".

tion of property – did not benefit from the progressive steps taken by the legislature for future generations.

Finally in 2004, the Penal Code was reformed, abolishing most of the discriminatory articles against women and providing heavy penalties for cases of “honour crimes”. This last tragedy was widespread in regions where “tribal structures” survived, and the killing of a woman to protect the family’s honour was not punishable under the old Code. Now, however, it is regarded as a crime like any other and is punishable by the heaviest penalty: life imprisonment.

Changing laws is an important part of the struggle, but it is not enough to end discrimination. With regard to changes in the law, however, the women’s movement has been one of the most successful movements in civil society in the last 20 years. And it is still vigilant, with more than 350 organizations working on different issues (the number of women’s organizations rose from fewer than a hundred in the 1980s to this number in the 1990s). No field of interest to women is left untouched: women’s studies sections in universities, women’s committees in most of the bars, organizations of professional women and all sorts of associations working on violence, poverty, education, birth control etc., scattered all over Turkey, get together on larger platforms especially for lobbying purposes. I estimate that these platforms can mobilize more than half a million women when a critical issue is on the agenda.

But there is still a long way to go. For instance, it is not enough to have a law against domestic violence; we also need specialized institutions such as help lines and shelters, and we also need to educate the police and judges. The women’s movement is now working on these issues.

Creating jobs for women and hence providing adequate education and training for

them is a huge problem that remains to be tackled in the coming years. There is a significant group of well-educated elite women in professions such as law, medicine, education (including universities), architecture, arts, the media, etc. But they represent only 6% of women in employment. In contrast, from the 1950s onwards, there were large population shifts to towns and cities as a result of agricultural modernization, and the proportion of women in work fell steadily as part of this process. This means that peasant women, who were part of the active population – though working as unpaid help in family enterprises – and who formed 50% of the workforce in the 1950s, lost their jobs in cities, becoming dependant “housewives”. In 2000, fewer than 30% of women were in employment, a figure that fell below 25% in 2005. It is also worth noting that women’s share in property ownership is only 8%.

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Another important issue is political representation. Turkey, a pioneer in the 1930s, lost her position in this field after the 1950s and the transition to multi-party democracy. For many decades, the percentage of women in the National Assembly remained unchanged at around 2%. Twenty years of struggle made it clear that we needed more women representatives sensitive to women’s issues. In 1997, I and a group of women formed an association, KADER (Association for Supporting and Training Women Candidates) to fight against discrimination against women in politics. In the light of my experience, I can say that the political system, with its sexist rules and the “men’s club” culture shared by male politi-

cians in practically all political parties, is one of the last bastions of male power in this society. In the 1999 and 2002 elections, KADER was not successful in achieving its stated aim of 10%, since the percentage of women representatives only doubled (4.5%). Hence we came to the conclusion that without “positive discrimination measures”, this deadlock may last forever. KADER’s proposal is to impose by law a “quota” of at least 30% for each gender among the candidates standing for election. For the time being, none of the leading political parties seems to be convinced, in spite of the

fact that public opinion is now in favour of more women in politics.⁴

Last but not least, the feminist struggle is about changing mindsets and cultural values and about forcing society to recognize the dignity of women as individual human beings. And here, I wonder if the real difficulty that we face in Turkey is related to the strength of a very old culture (much older than Islam) specific to the Mediterranean region, which stretches from “Gibraltar to Constantinople” — to quote Germaine Tillon⁵ — and which seems to find it difficult to cope with modernity.

4. For a more detailed analysis of the deadlock in politics, I refer the readers to my *Women’s Political Representation in Turkey*, a paper (unpublished) presented to the NEWR meeting in Sofia, 4-6 March 2004. I would also like to suggest to readers interested in women in Turkey, another of my recent articles: “Les femmes : le genre mal-aimé de la République”, in Semih Vaner (ed.), *La Turquie*, Paris, Fayard, 2005.

5. *Le Harem et les Cousins*, Paris, Seuil, 1966, which I have translated into Turkish (Metis, 2006).

