

# THE ROLE OF SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS AND PERIODICALS IN TRANSFORMATION OF WOMEN'S SOCIAL STATUS IN THE REPUBLIC OF TURKISH IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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## ABSTRACT

The topicality of the issue in question is conditioned by the fact that women's emancipation in Muslim countries and in countries where Islam has had a strong impact during many years is an issue which is significant in both scientific and practical terms within a context of yet existing stereotypic view on women's role in Muslim society. The purpose of this article lies in studying the transformation of Turkish women's position in society, changes in her roles that were conditioned by social, regulatory, religious and cultural transformations in the Republic of Turkey in the 20th century, caused by the activity of women's social organizations, newspapers, and magazines. The leading role in studying of this issue belongs to historical-comparative method that allows tracking the development of "women's question" in the Republic of Turkey on the base of activity of societies and organizations, taking decisions about changes in women's status in terms of legislation, as well as exemplified by the development of women's education, solving issues that are connected with women's employment and their participation in political life of the country. This article demonstrates the results that give evidence to strengthening of such phenomenon as Islamic feminism, as part of which women, having voluntarily estimated all "pros" and "cons" of progressive freedom and total equality with men, yet still give preference to Islamic values, regardless of growing secularization of the society. The materials of the article may be used in studies, dedicated to gender problems of Islamic societies, as well as in modern public dialogues about the place and role of women in these secular state, in which Islam keeps taking up the supreme positions.

**Keywords:** *feminism, Islamic feminism, women's social organizations, emancipation.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background

Starting from the 18th century, the Ottoman society has been casting its glance at the West. Yet in the 19th century European tendencies, especially French Revolution found a fertile ground in the Ottoman Empire, which started feeling an urge in the changes. The first carriers of bourgeois-democratic ideas were Young Turks. Surely, these tendencies could not leave "women's question" aside, among other issues (Berktaş, 2004).

The Ottoman society that has lived according to Sharia law, considered "the secondary" role of women to be a normal thing, although Sharia does not declare this, of course. Men did not use the right for polygamy nationwide (most often because of economic reasons), however, its presence by itself served the proof of their supremacy. Everyone seemed to be OK with this situation until Young Turks brought the issue of women's position in the Ottoman society to the agenda. Probably, such interest of Young Turks in this question is in many ways explained by the fact that for middle-class men who fought for

modernization of the Ottoman society, their own wives who did not understand the situation and could not share progressive ideas with their husbands, became strangers for them. Such tendencies are reflected in the literature works of that period, in which men expressed their sincere discontent with traditional relations between men and women, as well as the traditional practice of marriage brokerage (Berkay, 2004). The results of revision of these traditions became the modernization of the society, an obligatory part of which was a modernization of gender relations and their democratization. Just like any transformations in terms of roles of men and women, emancipation and feminization processes are perceived as something alien and dangerous by Muslim society (Lebedeva, 2012). An important role in necessary infringement on the inviolability of traditions in Muslim society was played by women's societies and organizations, at the head of which were the most progressive women of their day.

## 1.2. Status of a Problem

It should be noted that in the first part of the 20th century almost all Soviet researches, dedicated to Muslim women's position, were of a critical character, and as a rule, they depicted a hard life of women under the religious oppression (Venta, 2012).

During the 80-s and 90-s of the 20th century, Soviet Orientalists published a large number of works, dedicated to the analysis of an important role of Islamic factor in social and political processes that took place in the East. These studies demonstrated an interest in women's position in Muslim society as well. Published articles actively considered the role of women in various spheres of social life, however often many facts that were taken out of the context were kept being used as a base for vulgar and sociological critics in order to please the Soviet ideology (Salimov, 1990).

In the 20th century, experts on Islamic studies came to the conclusion that the image of the oppressed Muslim woman was still dominating in the public consciousness.

Now we may observe growing interest to the topic of woman's role in the Muslim society, and here we cannot do without some Turkish examples. Increasingly greater attention is explained by the achievement of the Turkish Republic inside the country, as well as its active integration into international relations.

## 2. Methodological Framework

### 2.1. The Objectives of the Research

In the course of the research, we solved the following tasks: 1) studying the role of women's societies and organizations in development of "women's question" in the Turkish Republic and in taking decisions regarding changes in women's status legislatively; 2) studying the role of women's societies and organizations in development of women's education during the 20th century; 3) studying the role of women's societies and organizations in solving the issue connected with women's employment in Turkey; 4) detection of push factors that drive changes in Turkish women's position in family and society; 5) studying the process of consistent occupation of places in political life of the country by the Turkish women.

### 2.2. Theoretical and Empirical Methods

In the course of the research, general scientific theoretical methods of analysis, synthesis, as well as historic-comparative methods were used.

### 2.3. The Basis of the Research

The basis of the research was represented by women's social organizations, Turkish newspapers and magazines that were issued in the 20th century, as well as biographies and works of the foundresses of these organizations and other progressive women of their days, who served as an illustration of ideas that were fundamentally new for yet deeply patriarchal society, targeted at the struggle with "minor" position of Turkish women in Turkish society .

#### 2.4. The Stages of the Research

The research was implemented in three stages:

At the first stage, we have marked the most successful women's social organizations and magazines, such as "Women's world" ('Kadınlar Dünyası'), "Women's rights protection society" ('Müdafaa-i Hukuk-i Nisvan Cemiyeti'), "Advancement of women" society" ('Türk Kadınlar Birliği') in Turkey of the period in question.

At the second stage, we have studied the published sources, programs of organizations, we have detected the targets, put at the fundament of union and magazine's activity, and we have defined key ideological figures such as Nuriye Ulviye Mevlyan Jivilek, Khalide Edib Adyvar, Nezikhe Mukhiddin, Latife Bekir (Cheyrekbashy), Sabikha Zekeriye (Sertel), Makbule Dyblan, Mebrure Axoley, Kamile Erym, Neriman Sirer, Nedzhile Bilen etc.

The third stage was the analysis of achievements of these organizations .

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1. Achievements in the political and legal sphere.

In accordance with the Civil Code, adopted in 1926, a woman obtained the status of a personality and the possibility to speak in the capacity of a witness in court, and in 1930 women's electoral right was constitutionally enshrined, although at municipal elections so far. Finally, in 1934 women stood upon their right for coming into the Great National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM).

In 1935, the Union of Turkish women hosted a reception to the first congress of the World Women's Union. In 1935 according to the results of the elections to Mejlis, eighteen women were elected as officials of the fifth calling, and the Union of Turkish women decided to dissolve because all set goals were achieved.

Since 1986, Turkey has been the participant country of CEDAW (Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women), adopted in 1979.

#### 3.2. Achievements in the sphere of women's education and employment .

In 1897 women, who had been gradually striving for an increased role in social life, were accepted for paid jobs for the first time in the history. In 1914, when seven Muslim women were hired to a telephone company (Salimov, 1990), they were also allowed to employ at government services. Bedra Osman, the member of "Women's rights protection society" («Müdafaa-i Hukuk-i Nisvan Cemiyeti»), was among those women. She started working not because she wanted to earn money, but in order to provide an example to Turkish women, the majority of which could not even consider the words "job", "profession" or "career" something that can be applicable to their lives. The history with difficulties, associated with those women's employment, vividly reflects the situation of that times. In the circumstances concerned, the active position was taken by the press organ of "Women's rights protection society" – "Women's

world” magazine, which demanded that telephone company offered an apology; they also asked The Post Office and Telephony department to provide the clarifications, Thanks to active propaganda of the magazine, the company was forced to offer an apology, and The Post Office and Telephony department gave the public explanation after all the proceedings taken. As a result of this “battle”, women were accepted for employment, and Bedra Osman later even became an inspector (Arslan, 2006).

On September 12, 1914, an official opening of ‘Women’s University’ («İnas Darülfünun») took place. The creation of the Women’s University was preceded by the organization of free lectures for women, which were initiated on the 7th of February, 1914 (Arslan, 2005).

On November 1, 1914, “School of Fine Arts for Women” (İnas Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi) was opened in the building of Istanbul University .

A special fatwa prohibited co-education of girls and boys; however, in spite of this, the dean of Literary faculty of Istanbul University issued an order about co-education (Rustamov, 1980). In 1921, seven girls were granted admission to study at medicine faculty at Istanbul University. They attended classes in hijabs .

As for the women’s employment, in spite of all transformations in the 20th century and programs, aimed at their inoculation into all social strata, by the end of the 21st century, shares of men and women within labor power were still out of proportion, and they still greatly differ these days .

### 3.3..Achievements in the sphere of family and matrimonial relations.

Women’s organizations required reconsideration of women’s isolation in the society, provision of possibility to study in educational establishments, cancellation of polygamy and marrying young girls off, the introduction of civil matrimonial code, cancellation of “talaq” as a symbol of man’s absolute power over a woman. In 1917 Decree about Family law (Hukuk-u Aile Kararnamesi) introduced marriage into a legal sphere provided women with rights for initiation of divorce and made the first wife’s consent a precondition for polygamy. All these transformations did not have any actual force in most cases, however, the fact of this acceptance meant a significant step forward .

In 1926, a new Civil Code was adopted, which was meant to implement in practice the idea of women and men’s equality, proclaimed by Atatürk. The law on family and matrimonial relations that based upon the provisions of the civil code prohibited polygamy, introduced civil marriage instead of a religious one, validated equal rights for children’s upbringing for fathers and mothers, as well as equality of spouses in matters of inheritance. The number of early marriages was significantly cut: the new law provided minimal matrimonial age to be 19 years for men and 16 years for women (Abadan-Unat, 1979).

Turkish constitution, adopted in 1934, proclaimed the principles of men and women’s equality. Maternity was recognized as a social function. The state undertook the family welfare function, creation of social institutions that were meant to protect maternity and infancy (Kadınlara, 1974).

It is interesting that up till 1996 adultery was considered to be a breach of law. In 1996, Constitutional Court amended the Article 441 of the Civil Code, and starting from that moment, men’s adultery was not considered a matter of criminal responsibility. The similar amendment in regards to women was managed to be achieved by female activists 2 years later, in 1998.

## 4. .DISCUSSIONS

The fullest coverage of unique for Muslim East experience of Turkish Republic on the constitutional provision of equal legal status to men and women is contained in the works of imam khatib of Moscow

cathedral mosque, Ph.D. in Philosophy, Mustafa Kiutiuchkiu. However, in his work, the primary focus is given to the philosophical and cultural analysis of women's position in family, society, and state in countries and regions, where Islam is traditionally expanded. We would like to emphasize the special value of the works of Nermin Abadan-Unat – the writer, translator, lawyer and sociologist, former chairperson in the Turkish society of social science, Deputy Head of the Commission on the issues of men and women's equality of the European Council, quoted Member of Parliament, representing republican people's party (1978–1980), the award winner of the prize named after Vekhbi Koch for a weighty contribution into the educational sphere (2012), who highlighted the “women's questions” most comprehensively. The significant contribution into the development of this topic was made by the researcher Yusif Rustamov, the president of the gender studies Emel Dogramadzhy, professor of Istanbul University Fatmagiul Bertkai, professor of the Institute of modern history if Turkey named after Atatiurk Zafer Toprak, PhD. in political sciences Serpil Chakyr et al .

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The complexity of “women's question” in Turkey lied in the fact that although according to the law, new possibilities for women were opened year upon year, in reality, they did not feel that their life changed significantly. Powerful traditional attitudes towards women hampered women's appointments to higher posts, deprived them of the opportunity of professional advancement; the majority of women did not have any chance to get the job outside the frameworks of traditional women's jobs. Women's rights were violated not only at job employment, but also at remuneration for labor (Women, 1985).

On the base of performed work we may conclude that in spite of devoted striving of the progressive women of their days and their work within the frameworks of societies and organizations, Kemalist reforms were still limited by some public household activities without touching the base of social relations. That's why active work on provision of real rights and opportunities to women is still relevant. Turkey, being the participant of Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (since 1986), takes all relevant measures that concern marriage and family relations on the basis of equality of men and women (Sixth, 2008).

In this connection, in 2002 a new Civil Code was adopted, which provided equal rights for marriage by law, as well as the equal laws and responsibilities during the marriage period and its dissolution, equal rights for men and women as parents, equal rights of husband and wife, including the right to choose surname, profession and occupation, equal rights of spouses in regards to possession, acquisition, management, usage and disposition of property etc. According to the applicable Civil Code of Turkey, registration of marriage by means of the religious ceremony without proper legal procedure is subject to criminal prosecution.

Among the countries with predominating Muslim population, nowadays Turkey is perhaps the most successful one in terms of overcoming gender inequality, and women's social organizations of the last decades of the Ottoman Empire and the earliest periods of the republican Turkey, deserve some credit for it. In spite of the men's hegemony that reigns in every sphere of life, regardless of the lack of understanding and support of their ideas even by female part of the population, progressive women took the responsibility of breaking stereotypes upon themselves; they battled the world order of those times. By means of their example, they raised women against the existing position in family and society, emancipated them and turned them to the architects of their own fortunes. When the key tasks posed by women's societies were resolved, the activity of feminist movement declined. Nowadays the law implies that Turkish women are protected from any forms of sex discriminations, and they have the same rights as the European women have. In this connection, the activity of feministic organizations is now directed at informing rural women about these rights, and also to help women to get an education if they didn't receive one for some reason .

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