

# **The Impact of Women's Movements in the Early Turkish Republic**

## **Introduction**

In the early years of the Turkish Republic, many profound reforms took place, and the Republic also witnessed the significant evolution of women's movements. As the nation transitioned from the Ottoman Empire to a modern republic under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, women's roles and rights emerged as a very important area of change. They profoundly impacted how society and politics worked in Turkey. They fought for equal rights, especially in politics. The granting of suffrage rights to women in 1934 and the subsequent election of women deputies to the Great National Assembly are highlighted as key milestones. These developments not only symbolized the progressive ethos of the new republic but also positioned Turkey at the forefront of women's rights in comparison to many contemporary nations. By examining these movements' origins, achievements, and the challenges they faced, this paper seeks to illuminate their enduring influence on the Turkish Republic's socio-political fabric.

## **Historical Context**

The status of women in the late Ottoman Empire was indeed deeply embedded in traditional societal norms, with their public roles and rights being limited. Women's participation in social and political life was substantially restricted, reflecting the broader conservative values of that era. The Ottoman legal system, influenced by religious and customary laws, did not provide equal status to women, especially in matters of civil rights and family law. This system was governed by a mix of semi-secular laws (qanun) enacted by Ottoman sultans and religious scriptures, predominantly the Quran and Hadith as interpreted by Islamic jurists (sharia). Women in urban areas experienced a degree of sex segregation, with upper-class women often veiling in public. In contrast, rural women faced fewer restrictions. Moreover, women's rights were opposed politically and religiously until influenced by developments in women's rights in Europe and North America. Despite some rights like property ownership and participation in financial activities, women in the Ottoman Empire were largely absent from the political sphere and were subject to different legal codes and procedures than men. For instance, women's ability to testify in court was severely limited, and they had little say over their marriages. While women could inherit property, they often received lesser shares than male relatives, and there were instances where women were disinherited contrary to Islamic law.

The transition to the Turkish Republic, however, marked a milestone moment in the history of women's rights in the Turkish Republic. The foundation of the Republic in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk initiated a series of radical reforms that transformed the Turkish society, including the status of women. Atatürk's vision of a modern and a secular nation included a redefinition of gender roles and an emphasis on women's participation in the public space.

This period saw significant legal reforms that impacted women's lives. The abolition of the caliphate, the adoption of a new civil code inspired by the Swiss model, and the replacement of religious law with secular legal systems created a framework for enhancing women's legal status. These reforms were not only about granting rights but were also instrumental in symbolizing the modernizing ethos of the new Republic. The push towards secularization and modernization reflected a broader ambition to align Turkey with contemporary Western societies, both in terms of legal structures and social norms.

The early Republican period, therefore, set the stage for the emergence of women's movements. These movements, which gained momentum in this transformative context, were not just a response to the new republic's policies but also an assertion of women's agency in shaping their own destinies. As such, they formed an integral part of the Republic's modernization narrative, seeking to redefine women's roles in a rapidly changing society.

## **The Rise of Women's Movements**

The early years of the Turkish Republic were fertile ground for the rise of women's movements. Sirman (1989) provides an insightful historical overview, noting the diverse aims of these movements, from educational reforms to political participation and legal equality. The momentum gained by these movements culminated in a landmark achievement: the right to vote and stand for election, which was not only significant within Turkey but also among the world nations. (Sirman, 1989, pp. 1-34).

One of the central organizations in this era was the Türk Kadınlar Birliği (Turkish Women's Union), created in 1924. Initially founded by women who were active in the national resistance movement, this organization became a crucial platform for advocating women's rights in Turkey. Its activities included campaigning for educational opportunities for women, advocating for legal reforms, and raising awareness about women's issues.

The reforms initiated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk gave significant support for these movements. Atatürk's vision for a modernized Turkey included the emancipation of women and their active participation in the public sphere. His reforms, such as the adoption of the Swiss Civil Code, which replaced the Islamic family law, and the introduction of coeducation, helped dismantle many legal, institutional and societal barriers to women's equality.

The momentum gained by these movements culminated in a landmark achievement: the right to vote and stand for election, granted to Turkish women on December 5, 1934. This was a significant step forward, not only for Turkey but also in the context of global women's rights, as it placed Turkey ahead of many Western nations in terms of women's suffrage. The subsequent election of 18 women deputies to the Great National Assembly in 1935 was a testament to the efficacy of these movements and the government's commitment to women's rights.

However, these developments were not without challenges. The movements often faced resistance from conservative segments of society, and there were internal debates about the best ways to achieve their goals. The dissolution of the Türk Kadınlar Birliği in 1935, following the achievement of its primary objective, marked a significant turn in the trajectory of women's movements in Turkey.

Overall, the rise of women's movements in the early Turkish Republic was instrumental in advancing gender equality and reshaping the social fabric of the nation. Their legacy is evident in the significant strides made towards women's participation and representation in various spheres of Turkish life.

## **Milestone Achievements**

The journey of women's movements in the early Turkish Republic is marked by a series of significant accomplishments, with the most notable being the enfranchisement of women in 1934. This monumental change was not only a victory for the women's movements but also a progressive step for the nation, aligning Turkey with the vanguard of women's rights globally.

Kandiyoti (1987) critically examines this period, noting that while legal reforms such as granting women the right to vote and to be elected in 1934 were groundbreaking, they also highlighted the complexities and contradictions in the process of women's emancipation in Turkey. The election of 18 women deputies to the Great National Assembly in 1935, as Zürcher documents, was a testament to these reforms (Zürcher, n.d., p. 178; Kandiyoti, 1987, pp. 317-338).

The election of these women deputies was not merely symbolic; it represented a fundamental shift in the political landscape. These women brought diverse perspectives and championed various causes, including women's rights, social welfare, and education. Their presence in the legislature challenged the traditional gender norms and demonstrated the potential of women's contributions to public life.

This achievement, however, was met with its share of challenges. The traditional societal structure and conservative views still posed significant barriers to women's full participation in public life. Additionally, the closure of the *Türk Kadınlar Birliği* in 1935, following the achievement of its primary aim, signaled a new phase in the women's movement. The disbanding of this influential organization, which had been a driving force for women's rights, marked a moment of transition and reflection for the movement.

Despite these challenges, the enfranchisement of women and their entry into the political arena marked a significant step forward for gender equality in Turkey. It laid the groundwork for further advancements and set a precedent for women's active participation in shaping the future of the nation.

## Challenges and Limitations

While the early Turkish Republic witnessed remarkable strides in women's rights, the journey of women's movements was not devoid of challenges and limitations. The period was marked by a complex interplay of progressive reforms and societal resistance, reflecting the diverse attitudes towards women's emancipation in Turkey.

One of the main challenges was the entrenched traditional and conservative views within Turkish society. Despite legal reforms, many segments of society continued to hold onto patriarchal norms and were resistant to the rapidly changing role of women. This resistance manifested in various forms, from reluctance to accept women in political roles to societal pressures that maintained traditional gender roles.

Despite these significant legal strides, challenges persisted. Kandiyoti (1987) reflects on the societal resistance to women's new roles, emphasizing the ongoing struggle for a more comprehensive understanding and acceptance of gender equality in Turkey. The dissolution of the *Türk Kadınlar Birliği* in 1935, though seen as a milestone, also exemplified these challenges (Zürcher, n.d., p. 178; Kandiyoti, 1987, pp. 317-338).

Furthermore, the integration of women into the political sphere was a gradual process, and their representation in decision-making roles remained limited. Although the election of women deputies in 1935 was a groundbreaking development, it took time for women's political participation to become fully normalized and influential in shaping national policies.

Additionally, the women's movements in Turkey during this period were predominantly led by elite women, which sometimes limited the broader reach and representation within the movement. The focus on legal rights, while crucial, did not always address the socio-economic disparities and challenges faced by women from different backgrounds.

In conclusion, while the early Turkish Republic era was a time of significant progress in women's rights, it was also a period marked by challenges and limitations. These hurdles were reflective of the broader socio-cultural dynamics of Turkey at the time and underscored the complexity of the struggle for gender equality.

## Conclusion

The exploration of women's movements in the early Turkish Republic reveals a period of significant transformation and enduring impact. The legal reforms that granted women the right to vote and be

elected, symbolized by the election of women deputies to the Great National Assembly in 1935, were milestones in the journey towards gender equality in Turkey. These developments were not only significant within the national context but also placed Turkey ahead of many other countries in terms of women's political rights.

However, the achievements of these movements were met with challenges. The resistance from conservative elements of society and the limitations in the broader societal acceptance of women's new roles highlighted the complexities of enacting social change. The dissolution of key organizations like the Türk Kadınlar Birliği, while marking a perceived achievement of goals, also underscored the nuanced and ongoing nature of the struggle for women's rights.

This paper has demonstrated that the early women's movements in Turkey were instrumental in initiating a paradigm shift in the social and political landscape. While they navigated a terrain of significant obstacles, their legacy is evident in the gradual but undeniable progress towards gender equality in the Turkish Republic.

In conclusion, the women's movements of the early Turkish Republic era were a critical force in shaping the modern Turkish state. Their efforts and achievements laid the groundwork for future generations and continue to inspire the ongoing pursuit of gender equality in Turkey and beyond.

## References

- E. J. Zürcher. (1994). Review of Turkey. A modern history. *Studia Diplomatica*, 47(5) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44837098>
- Sirman, N. (1989). Feminism in Turkey: A Short History. *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 3, 1-34. doi: 10.15184/S0896634600000704
- Kandiyoti, D. A., & Kandiyoti, D. (1987). Emancipated but Unliberated? Reflections on the Turkish Case. *Feminist Studies*, 13(2), 317–338. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177804>