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## Feminist Movement in Turkey in the 1990s

### Ruch feministyczny w Turcji w latach 90. XX wieku

#### • Abstract •

According to a feminism worldview, women should have economic, social, civil, political, and cultural rights. For this, women need to go a long, controversial and interesting path. On the one hand, they are aware of their place in society, in the state, and on the other hand, they are trying to change the cultural norms that cause oppression.

Turkey is the only country in which the majority of the population is Muslim, and at the same time, it is a candidate for EU membership. Turkey has managed to create a progress-oriented state. This is a well-planned and calculated path with predetermined steps, paved with the reforms of the founder of the republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938).

The problem of feminism is one of the most lively topics in republican Turkey. The processes taking place in the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century prepared a solid ground for further development of the feminist movement. On October 29, 1923, after Turkey was declared a republic, the feminist movement took a new direction.

The feminist movement in Turkey went through three periods. The first period includes

#### • Abstrakt •

Zgodnie ze światopoglądem feministycznym kobiecie przynależne są prawa gospodarcze, społeczne, obywatelskie, polityczne i kulturalne. Ścieżka, która ku nim wiedzie, jest jednak długa, intrygująca i pełna kontrowersji. Z jednej strony kobiety są świadome swojego miejsca w społeczeństwie i w państwie, z drugiej – starają się zmieniać opresyjne normy kulturowe.

Turcja jest jedynym krajem kandydującym do członkostwa w UE, w którym większość ludności stanowią muzułmanie. Turcji udało się stworzyć państwo nastawione na postęp. Kraj podąża dobrze zaplanowaną, podzieloną na konkretne etapy drogą, której fundamentem są reformy założyciela republiki, Mustafy Kemala Atatürka (1881–1938).

Problem feminizmu jest jednym z najbardziej żywo dyskutowanych tematów w republikańskiej Turcji. Procesy zachodzące w Imperium Osmańskim pod koniec XIX i na początku XX wieku przygotowały grunt pod dalszy rozwój ruchu feministycznego. Po ogłoszeniu Turcji republiką, 29 października 1923 roku, ruch feministyczny obrał nowy kierunek.

Ruch feministyczny w Turcji przeszedł trzy okresy. Pierwszy okres obejmuje procesy upadku

the processes of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and “Europeanization”, which led to the advancement of the women’s problems to the fore and the active struggle for the rights and place of educated Ottoman women in society. The second period was determined by the civil law on the participation of women in elections, adopted in republican Turkey in 1926. And the third one was the period of the 1990s, when the feminist movement became more widespread and active. Feminist policies have been founded and carried out, the role of women in government structures has increased; feminist organizations were created in Istanbul, Ankara and Antalya, etc.

In the 1990s, the movement of Muslim feminists, Islamist women, known as “Islamic feminism”, became active in Turkey. After the creation of the republic in Turkey, religious associations came under the direct subordination and control of the state. There have been prepared various projects to solve women’s problems. Centers for the study of women’s issues have been opened at universities. For the first time, women spoke openly about sexual freedom, etc.

**Keywords:** feminism; Turkey; Women’s Issues Research Center

Imperium Osmańskiego i „europeizacji”, które doprowadziły do wysunięcia na pierwszy plan kwestii kobiet oraz aktywnej walki o prawa i miejsce wykształconych osmańskich kobiet w społeczeństwie. Drugą fazę wyznaczało prawo cywilne dotyczące udziału kobiet w wyborach, przyjęte w republikańskiej Turcji w 1926 r. Trzeci zaś okres przypadł na lata 90. XX w., kiedy ruch feministyczny stał się bardziej powszechny i aktywny. Powstała i zaczęła być realizowana feministyczna polityka, wzrosła rola kobiet w strukturach rządowych. W Stambule, Ankarze, Antalyi i w innych miejscach powstawały organizacje feministyczne.

W latach 90. XX wieku w Turcji uaktywnił się ruch muzułmańskich feministek znany jako „feminizm islamski”. Po utworzeniu republiki w Turcji związki wyznaniowe znalazły się pod zwierzchnictwem i kontrolą państwa. Przygotowano różnorodne projekty mające na celu rozwiązywanie kwestii kobiet. Na uniwersytetach zaczęto otwierać ośrodki zajmujące się problematyką kobiecą. Po raz pierwszy kobiety zaczęły otwarcie mówić między innymi o wolności seksualnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** feminizm; Turcja; Centrum Badań nad Problematyką Kobiet

The Republic of Turkey is one of the countries where 97% of the population is Muslim, at the same time the country is also a candidate for EU membership. Turkey managed to create a state focused on democracy and progress, which were carried out by the reforms of the founder of the republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938).

The problem of feminism is one of the most lively topics in republican Turkey. The processes taking place in the Ottoman Empire already at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century prepared a solid ground for further development of the feminist movement. On October 29, 1923, after Turkey was declared a republic, the feminist movement took a new direction.

Since the 1990s, there has been an active growth of the feminist movement in Republican Turkey. The ongoing processes opened the way for the further development of the feminist movement in the Ottoman Empire.

The feminist movement in Turkey can be divided into three periods. The first period includes the processes of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and “Europeanization”, which led to the advancement of women’s problems to the fore and the active struggle for the rights and place of educated Ottoman women in society (Tekeli, 1986, p. 313). The second period belongs to the newly formed feminist movement in republican Turkey. The Civil Code, adopted in 1926, legally defined the status of women in the 1934 elections (Kandiyoti, 2010, p. 332). The third period began in the 1990s, when the feminist movement got widespread publicity. During this period, the foundations were laid for feminist politics, dialogue between the state and women; the Main Directorate for Determining the Status and Problems of Women was created, and women’s organizations appeared in Istanbul, Ankara, Antalya and other cities. In 1990, the Kadın Eserleri Kütüphanesi ve Bilgi Merkezi [Women’s Works Library and Information Center] was founded; it brought together the works and personal archives of women writers, poets, artists, musicians, directors. During this period, the feminist movement of Kurdish women emerged as well as Islamic feminism, creating a more complex mosaic of the feminist movement. Various projects began to be prepared to solve the problems of women. Centers for the study of women’s issues have been opened at universities. Women have been vocal about sexual freedom and other similar issues.

The existence of feminism has also made a great contribution to the development of Turkish civil society. Equality, diversity and independence are concepts that feminism actively uses. Women not only defend their rights, but also play an important role in the formation of modern civil society (Paker, 1991, p. 73).

The question is, what was the reason for the emergence of the feminist movement in Turkey? However, there is no single answer to it. Whether it is proximity to Europe, urbanization, economic situation, liberation war or many other views, the fact is that Turkish feminism exists and it is a movement adapted to organic problems and needs, which does not directly convey feminist ideas, but corresponds to Turkish sociocultural reality.

In the early 1990s, the active dissemination of feminist ideas in Turkey and the publishing of magazines by various feminist movements provided a solid foundation for the creation of research centers of women’s problems at universities (Tekeli, 2010, p. 93).

Globalization has contributed to the study of the women’s issues since the 1990s. The dissemination of educational programs and projects on women’s problems began in Western Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. This created an opportunity to meet and exchange information. As a result, international summer schools have

been established, international conferences have been held, master's and doctoral programs have been created (Buskivadze, 2013, p. 92).

Turkish universities work in the field of feminism research in two directions. The first group includes research centers that bring together representatives of different disciplines and scientific fields. They work on gender issues, as well as problems related to the economic and social status of women, education, health. The second group includes areas related to the social sphere.

Centers for feminist studies in Turkey originally existed only at the universities of Ankara and Istanbul. In the 1990s, there were opened the following centers: Center for Research and Study of Women's Issues at the Çukurova University; Center for Research and Study of Women's Issues at Gaziantep University; Women's Research Center at Chiang Kai University; Women's Research Center at the University of Mersin; Center for the Study of Women's Issues at Eskişehir University; Center for Research and Study of Women's Issues at Hacettepe University and others. In addition to the development of various projects related to women's problems, these centers hold conferences and symposia. On the one hand, they tried to transfer and discuss the problems of women in the academic space; they even held debates and discussions on active issues against the background of theories and forms of thinking.

In 1992, Marmara University opened the Center for Research of the Use of Female Labor Force, which investigated the problems of women's employment. Numerous conferences and seminars were devoted to these issues.

It is worth mentioning the opening of the Center for Research and Study of Women's Issues at the University of Ankara in 1993, the main goal of which was to raise awareness and understanding of the problem of sex in society.

In 1996, the Aegean University established the Center for Research and Study of Women's Issues, the goal of which was to publicly declare the equality between women and men in civil society (Bukuri, 2012, p. 113).

Similarly to European countries, feminist movements of radical, liberal and socialist tendencies emerged in Turkey in the 1990s.

Representatives of radical feminism demand a reassessment of patriarchal values and a unity around women's issues. According to radical feminists, patriarchal ideology discriminates against women in the following areas: 1. at home, which is considered a woman's personal sphere; 2. in places of public gatherings and in an alarming environment on the streets (Ottoman women also focus on the problems associated with the appearance of women on the streets, in situations when the offensive look of men makes them feel uncomfortable); 3. in an offensive situation in sexual relations; 4. marginalization in professional life; 5. neglect of the involvement of women in the economy, politics, culture and other areas of public life.

The slogan of radical feminists is: “If the future is ours, then the future belongs to women”; unlike other feminists, they highlight the female body, voice, beauty, tenderness and other similar qualities. Their followers rally around the magazine *Feminist Hafta Sonu* [Feminist Weekend].

Liberal feminists stress the equality of women and men in all spheres. In their opinion, the ultimate goal is not to surpass men, but to be equal to them. Taking a place in the public sphere is a necessary condition for women’s freedom. Work for a woman is equal to success, but most women need economic freedom, because it means freedom of speech and life. A woman’s freedom of speech frees her from dependence on men, the functions of women and men in the family should be equal, and a woman should be able to make decisions on her own. Divorce rules should be simplified to avoid unwanted marriages. Liberal feminists’ politics is an egalitarian one. Their concept of freedom also implies sexual freedom. The problem of virginity limits a woman’s personal freedom. According to liberal feminists, a woman has the right to have a relationship with the man she wants, even if she is married. We believe that liberal feminists are very similar to radical feminists in this respect. In terms of radicalizing their position, they even surpass radical feminists. Turkish liberal feminism publishes the magazine *Kadınca* [Women’s].

Representatives of radical feminism associate discrimination against women with the patriarchal factor, while socialist-feminists connect it with the economic factor. They usually oppose capitalism because they believe it has shown a place for men in the public sphere, and for women – in the family sphere. Feminist socialists began an active struggle for the economic freedom of women with the slogan “Personal is political”. They call for breaking family stereotypes, which is only possible in a socialist society. According to socialist feminists, re-evaluating gender norms in Turkish culture is a prerequisite for achieving women’s freedom. They are united around the socialist-feminist magazine *Kaktüs* [Cactus (Buskivadze, 2013, p. 90)].

In the 1990s, the Muslim feminist movement, known as Islamic feminism, became active in Turkey (İngün, 2005, p. 5). After Turkey became republican, religious associations came under the direct subordination and control of the state. The reason for this is the laicism of the state (*Laiklik* – comes from the French word *laïcité* – ‘secular character’, it implies the separation of religion from the state) (Makaradze, 2019, p. 25), which along with democracy, exists in the state.

In the late 1980s, the Turkish state itself sought to strengthen religious groups. They were granted financial independence, which allowed them to create organizations aimed at spreading Islamic values and traditions. Religious lessons have become compulsory in educational institutions. The Ministry of Education has launched Quranic study courses. In such a situation, the role of women in the Islamic

movement has undoubtedly increased. The number of wearers of headscarves (*hijabs*) has increased significantly, thereby highlighting the need for Islamic traditions in life. At the university, peaceful demonstrations began for the right to wear a hijab during studies. All this strengthened the Islamic movement in society and made it a powerful force.

One group of women representing Islamic feminism has actively argued about the place of women in Islam. They attributed the discrimination against women in the Muslim community to a misconception of men. Adapting Islamic ideology, as well as concepts of equality between women and men, is a complex issue for feminism. For example, the polygamy is justified by the fact that a woman is financially secure in this way, or the monetary benefits received by a woman after marriage become a reason not to talk about equality between men and women under Islamic law. “The most scientific commentaries of the Quran say not about the equality of women and men, but about the fact that they complement each other” (Arat, 2010, p. 94).

The Islamist movement is still an alternative to Turkey’s current social and political life. It actively responds to women’s issues and tries to attract as many supporters as possible. The problem of women on the agenda of the Islamist movement is interesting in several ways. Islam is a religion that takes into account the women’s problems in society, women’s rights and other similar topics. It pays great attention to the relationship between the genders, family planning and education of youth according to the principles of Islam. The secular principles of the country’s modernization contradict the ones of Islam. The problem of women has become a kind of a “battlefield” of the republican and Islamist ideologies. In today’s Turkey, Islamist thought considers the two most important achievements of modern life – laicism and modernization – as a form of humiliation and discrimination against women (Tekeli, 1986, p. 25).

Representatives of Islamic feminism in the Turkish Republic have shared their views with the public mainly through magazines and newspapers. These are the most important magazines such as *Kadın ve Aile* [Woman and Family], *Bizim Ailemiz* [Our Family], and *Mektup* [Letter]. These magazines clearly set out the principles that determine the status and place of women.

In Turkey, Islamic feminism has many followers among the younger generation, university and high school (lyceum) students. Young women adhere to and share all the principles of Islam. For some of them, wearing a hijab is a form of protection from prying eyes. Most find it difficult to adapt to society and therefore view religion as a way of “salvation”; they study in high schools, but after marriage they do not go to work. Polygamy is considered the norm, and they believe that “Allah knows better than them what the secret of their happiness is” (Acar, 2010, p. 86).

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As we can see, the problem of feminism has become more lively in Turkey since the 1990s. Both in Turkey and around the world, women's societies, magazines, newspapers, libraries are being created, women's conferences are being held, and Turkish women actively participate in them.

Based on the current reality, Turkish women are gradually emerging from closed home life and increasingly appear in society, while in many countries of the world women are locked at home. A Turkish woman is actively involved in the reconstruction of the country, a prime example of which is the appointment of Mrs. Tansu Çiller as Prime Minister of the country in 1993.

The level of female participation in society in Turkey is much lower than European indicators. The status of a woman here is also characterized by its specific development. We can conclude that the feminist movement has created a new political movement in Turkey that has raised the problem of gender equality as a serious issue. The women's struggle for emancipation has played an important role in shaping modern Turkish society.

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