

# Woman's Condition in Turkey

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## Introduction



Turkey, which is in the process of the membership talks with European Union, is a different country than ten or even five years before. It's commonly known that among Muslim nations, Turkey distinguishes herself by comprehensive reforms with respect to the emancipation of women. But the women's life in Turkey still differs from the western women's live. This is particularly so for those Turkish women who live in the provinces located in the South East, East and Central Anatolia.

Situation of Turkish women is inextricably related with religion though some cases of discrimination or violence towards women are rather results of social norms rather than of

real knowledge of Islam. This paper aims to look into the issue of the role of women in family, social, economic and political life, give a historical account and present the current situation of women in Turkey.

## Historical Background

Woman issue has been questioned for centuries in Turkish society. Before the Islamic period, Turkish women had played an active role in the community. After conversion to Islam it had radically changed. It was not necessarily related to the Islamic religion but to the Arab culture from which

Islam came. Arab and Turkish societies were male-dominated and degraded women and women's social status as the Ottoman Empire grew more powerful. The regression of the Ottoman Empire led to an increase in Iranian and Byzantine influence which gradually had predominated Turkish traditions. In consequence, some new sorts of inequalities in male-female relations arose and the social roles previously given to women in society were gradually taken back, especially in the cities. It caused that Ottoman-Turkish women had to live in very harsh conditions, which mainly meant living in separate groups. The result was that the belief in the important contribution that women make to the community was lost.

The crucial moment for the question of women was Tanzimat reform period in the year between 1839 and 1876. Tanzimat meant changes in the military, judicial and educational systems, and in the economic and social structure. This was the first moment when the woman's question came up on the political agenda. There was awareness about need for improving women's social, cultural and economic status in the family and society. It was obvious that without changes in those spheres the westernization, which was a priority for reformists, could not be possibly realized. First step to take was a decision to educate women also beyond primary school level. The Declaration of Tanzimat, promulgated by Sultan Abdulmecid, didn't contain any article which was concerned directly with the field of education. However, it was obvious that the success of the reform movements could only be made possible through educated people. In this plan women weren't neglected. Through the Regulation of General Education, which was issued in 1869, middle schools (*inas rushdies*) were opened for women while Article 9 made primary education in the Ottoman Empire compulsory.

It is known that female slaves were taught manners, politeness and the rules of respect to the elderly, as well as reading, writing and, in particular, reading of the Qur'an in the women's department of the palace (the Harem) by servants (*kalfas*). Besides, the daughters of the sultans were also taught reading and writing. Before 1859, some rich and modern families hired private tutors for their daughters to teach them literature, religion and ethics. The main reformist like Namik Kemal, Ziya Paşa, Münif Paşa and Saffet Paşa realized that the education of women was very important to the development of Turkey. Even though some of the professors in medrasas (*Islamic schools*) were struggling against the reform, most of the Ottoman intellectualists supported the advance in women's education. They believed that the changes in women's conditions would benefit the "health" of society as a whole.

The chances given to women were milestones in the women's education. However other dimensions of their life were ignored. Turkish family structure was still patriarchal; life for women outside the home was limited. Young men and women were not able to see or get to know one another, nor to choose the person they were to marry. The choice of a bride was the prerogative of the man's mother, and if the girl's family agreed, the

matter would be settled by the parents among themselves. However in the following years women's status was evaluated according to western experiences and values. Female presence in the labor force increased. The imperial decree issued in 1915 allowed women to discard their veil during office hours. However they were often forced by the police to return home if their skirts were shorter than officially prescribed length. At that time woman rights defenders and pro-woman press raised demands for the right for women to go out into the street and the places of entertainment. They also defended the right to work with freedom from police harassment. Women had to fight for freedom in all aspects of their life.

Much more liberalization occurred after the establishment of Turkish Republic. Despite significant changes in the legal arena, efforts to liberate women weren't so easy to implement even during the Republican era. Reformists had to struggle against Islamists who wanted the revision of unadulterated application of Shari'ah and the establishment of a pan-Islamic empire consolidated around the institution of Caliphate. Islamists regarded the decline of Ottoman Empire as a result of departure from Islamic institutions and laws. Western culture and technology were deemed as contaminations threatening the values of Islam.

The main proponents of conservatives Mustafa Sabri and Musa Kazim insisted that the government punished all violators of the Islamic rule of veiling. The apologists of women equality were accused for distorting the true and treason Islam by them. Their opponents -Westernists- held Islam for obscurantism and debased condition of women which regarded as a major symptom of empire's backwardness. They wanted to replace Islamic thought with western rationalism and positivist outlook to prevent further degeneration of womanhood arguing that children born of enslaved women would lead to the degeneration of the race.

On October 29, 1923, the Turkish Republic was established thank to one statesman who will be remembered by generations as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The charismatic founder of the Turkish Republic and its first President stands as a towering figure of the 20th Century. Among the great leaders of history, few have achieved so much in so short period, transformed the life of a nation as decisively, and given such profound inspiration to the world at large. His achievements in Turkey are enduring monuments to Turkish nation. Emerging nations admire him as a pioneer of national liberation. The world honors his memory as a foremost peacemaker who upheld the principles of humanism and the vision of a united humanity. As the President of Turkish Republic for 15 years, until his death in 1938, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk introduced a broad range of swift and sweeping reforms - in the political, social, legal, economic, and cultural spheres - virtually unparalleled in any other country. Atatürk's reforms meant blast these centuries-old traditions to smithereens and a complete liberation foe women so they could participate in every aspect of society equally with men. Atatürk's attitude to women's condition could be encapsulated by his

utterance: "Everything we see in the world is the creative work of women." In November 1915, Mustafa Kemal wrote in his diary that "Social change can come by (1) educating capable mothers who are knowledgeable about life; (2) giving freedom to women; (3) a man can change his morals, thoughts, and feelings by leading a common life with a woman; as there is an inborn tendency towards the attraction of mutual affection." He declared that "there was no logical explanation for the political disenfranchisement of women. Any hesitation and negative mentality on this subject is nothing more than a fading social phenomenon of the past. Women must have the right to vote and to be elected; because democracy dictates that, because there are interests that women must defend, and because there are social duties that women must perform."<sup>1</sup>

With abiding faith in the vital importance of women in society, Atatürk launched many reforms to give Turkish women equal rights and opportunities. The new Civil Code, adopted in 1926, abolished polygamy and recognized the equal rights of women in divorce, custody, and inheritance. The entire educational system from the grade school to the university became coeducational, meaning that men and women get their modern education in the same schools and classes. Atatürk greatly admired the support that the national liberation struggle received from women and praised their many contributions: "In Turkish society, women have not lagged behind men in science, scholarship, and culture. Perhaps they have even gone further ahead." He gave women the same opportunities as men, including full political rights. In the mid-1930s, 18 women, among them a villager, were elected to the national parliament. Later, Turkey had the world's first women Supreme Court justice. In all walks of life, Atatürk's Turkey has produced tens of thousands of well-educated women who participate in socio-economic life as doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, writers, administrators, executives, and creative artists. Thus, since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in the 1920s, women have had equal status with men in Turkish society, at least in law.

But Turkish society was ruled by Shari'a and a body of medieval social custom for 500 years during the Ottoman Empire, and significant cultural change does not come overnight. Though these reforms introduced by Atatürk were dramatically effective, society does not change easily or quickly, and even Atatürk's bold, foresight measures could not change everyone's thinking all at once.

### **Current Condition and Status of Women in Turkey**

Nowadays woman's condition seems much better. However changing of mentality is not so easy as changing laws. The transformation of human minds is extremely difficult. And this mentality tends to shape the everyday

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.mideastweb.org/Middle-East-Encyclopedia/kemal-ataturk.htm>

live more than the law. Arranged marriages are still common in the countryside and among the more traditional and religious families. Yet, in the cities modern ideas of girl-boy courtship, love and marriage are not uncommon. Female virginity upon marriage is valued (and often expected), though it is not universal anymore.

One can say the government makes all efforts to promote gender equality and empowering women. The main base of the reforms is education. According to enrollment data about the children of primary school age, today approximately 10 % of primary-school age children are currently excluded from primary education. 80 % of those who were not enrolled in the primary schools were girls in 2005. In Turkey a significant increase in enrolment rates for both boys and girls was observed between 1997 and 2001 compared to the 1990-1996 period. After 1997, the net enrollment ratio increased by 11% for girls and 6% for boys. The literacy rate of 15-24 age groups on the other hand reached 96.6% in 2003. The existing differences between genders show that females require more attention. The Turkish Ministry of Education however has past and continuing initiatives regarding the issue. The "Come on Girls to School" (*Haydi Kizlar Okula*) campaign was initiated in 2003 and targeted the 10 most disadvantaged provinces located in South-east Turkey. The campaign enlarged to 33 provinces in 2004 and to 53 provinces in 2005.

Although Turkey has almost reached its goal of eliminating gender differences in primary school education, gender is still an issue that requires attention. The share of girls not taking part in secondary education is striking for the country. As regards to literacy rates, although there has been a significant increase in overall literacy in Turkey in 2000, 19.4% of women were illiterate compared to the 6.1 % of men.

Turkey is also still far from claiming gender equality in politics where there is a major problem of gender representation. Although the representation of women parliamentarians doubled from being 24 in November 2002 to 50 in July 2007, this figure is still very low for a 550-member parliament. According to UNDP 2003 data Turkey ranked 96th among 175 countries in this respect.<sup>2</sup>

Since the 1960's, Turkish governments have put into effects a series of reforms in order to improve the status of women in employment. Social laws provided equal pay for equal work, selection, retention, promotion, and discharge on the bases of knowledge, qualifications and skills (Sallan G l and G l, 1996-1997). Labor Law from 1971 guarantees provisions for women during their pregnancy and securing them from losing their posts. Yet, like in other countries, the women's employment policy which supposed to improve their situation works in the opposite way- it diminishes the areas in which women can find employment. According to the 2002 Household Budget Survey, there are 1.7 million salaried women, compared with 7.4 million

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.undp.org.tr/Gozlem2.aspx?WebSayfaNo=1123>

salaried men. In terms of division of labour, only one fifth of women had wage employment in non-agricultural sectors. Moreover, men's purchasing power per capita is more than twice as high as women. The shaky economic conditions in the 1990's along with persistent cultural barriers hinder women's participation in the job market.

Some of Turkish scholars critically tackle the modernization paradigm. It was argued that the reforms were unsuccessful because the modernization ideology defined women primarily as mothers and homemakers of the modern nation. The rural economic change and concomitant urbanization from the 1950's onwards diminished the patriarchal authority, but it did not provide women with autonomy in everyday life. Moreover, despite modernization reforms created opportunities that skilled women's participation in education, labour force and politics, it is argued that patriarchy continued to define women's conditions. The mainly domestic definition of women's role and the strict control over women's sexuality remain unchanged even for urban middle-class women. Since the 1970s, the concept of patriarchy has been used as a diagnostic framework in Turkey and elsewhere to explain gender inequality and women's disadvantages. The concept is used in the Middle Eastern context to defy the understanding that Islam is the primary source of the subordination of women. Studies show that Islam, just like Christianity and Judaism, emerged in agricultural societies where property, descent and residence were passed down through the male lineage and set the conditions of women's subordination.

The modernization paradigm assumed that education and urbanization would loosen the religious beliefs and finally lead to a secular society. The increasing number of Islamist university students posed a dilemma to social scientist in Turkey about why and how urban educated women support an Islamic order that justifies patriarchy. One can easily notice that most of Turkish female students, despite of secular nature of universities, strictly comply with veiling rule. However Turkish students have to get rid of their *hijabs* (head-scarfs) inside of the universities. The ban of wearing *hijabs* on the universities' site obliges from the 1980's and is strictly executed since 1997. It was implemented by the Turkish Army as a part of secular order of the state. Yet, Turkish women seem not to be glad about this rule. They gave voice to their discontent in June 2008 during the demonstration against the sentence of Constitutional Tribunal making *hijabs* on universities illegal. Yet, the judiciary based its decision about the ban of *hijabs* on the Constitution which says the Turkish Republic is a secular state. Hundreds of women demonstrated against this decision, screaming: "Damned those who are behind the judges" and "The God law can't be stopped".

According to recent researches around two third of Turkish women wear *hijabs*. On the other side are those women who are afraid that restoring headscarves on universities will be a first step to forcing all women to wear it as it has been the case in some other Islamic countries such as Iran. A big number of proponents of *hijab* is one of the signs of increasing position of

traditional Muslims in Turkey. On the other side there are also Turkish people who are afraid of losing the secular nature of the state. Turkish society seems to be divided on this issue and producing a solution in the short run do not seem easy.

Thus, some Turkish women after leaving university put her *hijab* and cover her body strictly at once no matter there's 40 degrees outside. Cultural and religious norms and family honor seem more important than weather conditions and a person's comfort. In Turkey female sexuality is still only respected within marriage and initiation of womanhood is identified with the loss of virginity and the majority posits marriage as the rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood. From observations of Turkish women and conversations which I had with them it comes up a specific picture of Turkish women. She should be very careful about her behavior and behave with dignity. Freedom of behavior and expression of a girl's feelings are out of the question. Sex is an absolute taboo. At the end of the day, when there is a quarrel at home, a man can slam the door and go out to drink a beer. He is a man. If a woman does the same thing it would be a shame, where could she go? Those places which are regarded as an entertainment places like pubs or clubs while in Western countries are equally available for both gender, in Turkey those places are visited mostly by men. The women's presence in the place where you can have alcohol is regarded as inappropriate.

There is one specific custom in Turkey, and according to that custom men pay for women in public places. As far as in Western culture according to the old custom men pay for women on the dates, in Turkey men pay not only for the women who are in the closer relations with but for all acquaintance women. Some would be delighted for it, but for others this kind of treatment is rather a manifestation of man superiority and women's dependence upon men. This kind of treatment reminds one treating a baby. One takes care of babies and pays for them but also make all decisions for them. Yet, it doesn't remind treating grown up women at all. If woman pays in restaurant it is regarded as a shame for man.

Women are covering strictly their body and head mostly not due to Koran but simply because of social norms. The *hijab* is a sign of dignity, while uncovered head and body are considered as a provocation. Insult or even rape is regarded as a result of woman provocation. "It's your fault, because you had too big neckline, it's your fault, because you were smiling to him". On the travels website you can find some of advices about behavior in Turkey: "Dress neatly and act reserved. Be pleasant, but don't smile readily at men you don't know, even when conducting business (registering at a hotel, taking a taxi ride, etc). Be correct and formal, even on the third and fourth encounter. If a man responds by being overly friendly, you should be overly formal. Keep control of the situation; keep it on *your* terms."<sup>3</sup> While for western women smiling readily at anyone is a simply good manner,

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.turkeytravelplanner.com/details/WomenTravelers/>

Turkish women don't smile at anybody until they make sure their smile won't be misinterpreted as a come-on. In Turkish social norm, smiling woman is perceived as willingness to be friendlier. It's a calculated escalation of interest, not just part of a cheerful attitude. Thus Turkish women are required to reproduce the social norms that restrict their mobility, control their sexuality and limit their future prospects.

In Turkey, there is a close link between the family's honor and women's chastity. Chastity is ultimately identified with, virginity and fundamental to judge young women's respectability. It is common for young women to think that maintaining sexual purity is important for fulfilling their family's expectations, and maintaining their trustworthiness and self-worth. A majority of young women comply with the norm of virginity before marriage, but for many, this does not entail full sexual abstinence. While doing so, they moderate their acts carefully to maintain the respect of others and the protection of their families. Depending on one's emotional and economic dependency, the family also exerts varying degrees of control over their bodies, sexuality and practices in everyday life. All insubordination and voices of resistance can lead to tragedy. Every year thousands of Turkish women are dying from their husband's, brother's and father's hands. In Muslim countries thereby in Turkey those murders are called "honorable" ones or ones required by "Töre" (*strict traditional customs*), with which a western perception of honor has nothing to do. Victims to those murders fall mostly wives under suspicions of infidelity, unmarried daughters who lost their virginity or those who wanted to live after the western fashion. A Turkish feminist, Zeynep Oral points out that:

"In our country the cause of the honourable murder can be everything: the fact that the girl started working out of her home, the fact she was caught with boyfriend or even she was listening to music".

Not so long ago perpetrators got two or three year sentences because courts recognized they were provoked by victims. The scale of the occurrences is hard to value. The notices about the honourable murders appear in the Turkish press once or two per month, or more sometimes, and noted in the same way in Europe car accidents. According to state statistics in Turkey there are around forty honor murders annually but non-governmental organizations say that the real number reaches over 200-300 cases. Some of the cases are not noted due to the fact that families often force children to commit suicide or simulate accident. In the same way as the man from Kurdish Batman who shot his sister for wearing trousers and then threw her body away through the window. Turkish governments, despite their efforts to become a member in European Union throughout many years, have swept the problem under the carpet as a simple social pathology or as a product of poverty. It is particularly difficult problem in the south eastern



parts of country where a lack of schools, Islamic traditions and war with Kurdish separatists through the last 30 years hinder any reforms in this realm. Turkey awoke to this problem when a 14 year old girl was killed by her family in one of the Istanbul's suburbs in 2004. She had been kidnapped before by a madman who had raped her for 4 days. The perpetrator was caught but Nuran was already dishonored because she lost virginity. Father with the help of her brothers strangled her with cable in order to clean her and her family's honor.

The obsession about virginity -unfamiliar to big Turkish cities- is a norm on the countryside. It doesn't matter how the virginity was lost. When the fact becomes public the dishonour stretch on hole family. If family doesn't want to live with a stamp it has to choices: Marry dishonored daughter to some relevant or kill her.

Officially marriage is legal after 16 years old but in the south east of Turkey Muslim clergymen grant marriage even for 13 years old. Government doesn't recognize those marriages but it doesn't do much to prevent them as well. A rape victim can regain her honour by marrying the rapist. In 2002 in Turkey there were over 500 this kind of marriages. In Turkey, the courts have just started to change their decisions on such cases. Until recently perpetrators were treated very gently. After one of the trails man who beat her wife and cause her paralysis was sentenced for 1.200 \$ penalty, other who in January of 2004 killed his wife with knife was sentenced for 2,5 years in prison. It was enough that he showed to judge a photo of his wife with other men. Those sentences through years were shaping the civil awareness. For all these years the penalties were lower for perpetrators of honorable murders so it has been legalized in the civil awareness. But the opposition against honorable murders is stronger and stronger mostly due to the fact Turkey is fighting for her membership in the European Union and can't neglect human right organizations. According to the new penal code (obligated since 1<sup>st</sup> of June 2005) defense of honour is not an extenuating circumstance anymore.

Despite this change in the civic code, honorable murders are still a big problem in Turkey. Organizations like KADER are fighting with bloody traditions. They hide women escaping from their families, strive for harsher sentences and endeavor to increase awareness in the society. In the areas where half of the marriages are associated by family and where a lot of women don't have even a primary education there's even no way to make those women aware. Women from those families where murders take place have nothing to say and sometimes as Naciye Altuhan, who forced her pregnant daughter to commit suicide, take side of their sisters' and daughters' murderers. Leyla Pervizat, the author of many publications about women rights says:

"Turkish people have to change their way of thinking in order to domestic violence and honourable murders became regard as a breaking of human rights".

This time the very perspective of membership in the European Union forces government to take further steps in social reforms. Most of the Turkish people who condemn these bloody traditions don't want to be ashamed of their country anymore and don't want to be regarded by western countries as a fanatic Muslim country next door.

### **Last Words: Discussions on the Role of Women in Socio-economic Life?**

A woman's role in public life is subject to many hot discussions. In contemporary debates conservatives emphasize a woman's saint role as a mother and homemaker and put pressure on the protection of their private life. Propagators of secularism argue that "the role of women is in close parallel with the role of women in Kemalist project of nation building, development of a concept of citizenship and secularization" (Sallan Gül and Gül, 2000). Meanwhile conservatives accuse western values, feminism and other modern movements of destroying Muslim woman's sacredness and alienating her from the roles of wife and mother. These are seen as the reasons for Turkish woman's unhappiness. They exhort women to trust in familial traditions as well as in Islam. Women have to look for happiness only in the Islam, maternity and practicing traditions in the family. "The Magazine of Women and Family" goes even further saying when woman lets men look at her she commits a sin or that woman and men are equal but only before God. In social life no one can say about equality between women and men thus men superiority can't be criticized. These kinds of utterances feed the honourable murders and violence towards women.

Yet to improve the Turkish women's situation they have to change their way of thinking by their own. In opinion polls made by a university in Ankara, over 39 % of women answered that husbands have some reasonable right to violence.

Respect for basic human rights, thereby women's right is a basic condition of membership in European Union. In report of European Parliament, member Emine Bozkurt declares:

"Parliamentarians are accepting with joy the new part of active membership negotiations with Turkey but they deplore slowdown of the reforms in Turkey within last year and retaining problems related with women's rights. Despite the new penal code from 2005 which significantly strengthens the basic women's rights, the directives

regarding equality of women and men didn't become transferred in whole to the domestic law."<sup>4</sup>

As Turkey continues to tackle the barriers to gender equality in economic, social and political life, the most important lesson of recent decades is simple: *Any substantial progress depends above all on the quality and inclusiveness of Turkish democracy.*

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.lgeringer.pl/arch26.htm>

