

Women Against Women: The Limits of Public Visibility in the Early Republican Period

Kadınlar Kadınlara Karşı: Erken Cumhuriyet Döneminde Kamusal Görünürlüğün Sınırları

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Abstract

It is evident that the modernization process in the early period of the Republic can best be observed through women who undoubtedly had been the main actors of the modern lifestyle that the Republic aimed to create. The changes made in many areas such as law, education, and clothing intended to increase women's "public visibility". In the Ottoman period, the existence of women was confined to the private sphere; yet, with the foundation of the Republic, women were now everywhere in society, taking on professional roles as "lawyers, doctors, teachers, pilots, bankers and members of the parliament". This study will examine an article series titled "Women in Business Life" published in *Vakit* newspaper in 1929 involving women who were a part of the professional life of the respective period, most of whom were publicly known. The aim of this study is to make an analysis of the women's movement in the Early Republican period within the framework of the concepts used by the women whose views were shared in the series, their personal experiences, and the relationship they established with women's rights and nationalism. This study will focus on the points where the basic demands of first-wave feminism and the Republic's approach to women's issues/rights in the process of modernization and nation-statehood meet and/or diverge. The document analysis method was used in this study. The *Vakit* newspaper was scanned and analyzed for the period between March 1929 and May 1929 when the article series was published.

Keywords: Early Republican Period, Women's rights, Public visibility, Politics, family

Öz

Erken dönem Cumhuriyet tarihinde modernleşme sürecinin en iyi kadın üzerinden izlenebileceği söylenebilir. Kuşkusuz Cumhuriyetin yaratmayı hedeflediği modern yaşam tarzının, temel aktörü "kadın" olmuştur. Hukuk, eğitim, kıyafet ve daha birçok alanda yapılan değişimler kadının "kamusal görünürlüğünü" artırmayı amaçlamıştır. Osmanlı'da özel alanla sınırlı olan kadın varlığı, Cumhuriyetle beraber "avukat, doktor, öğretmen, pilot, bankacı, milletvekili" gibi mesleklerle artık toplumda, her yerdedir. Bu çalışmada, 1929 yılında *Vakit* gazetesinde dönemin çalışma hayatında yer alan, çoğunluğu kamuoyu tarafından tanınan kadınlarla yapılan "İş hayatında kadın" başlıklı yazı dizisi incelenecektir. Çalışmanın amacı yazı dizisinde görüşleri paylaşılan kadınların, kullandıkları kavramlar, kişisel deneyimler, kadın hakları ve milliyetçilik ile kurdukları ilişki çerçevesinde Erken Cumhuriyet dönemi kadın hareketinin bir okumasını yapmaktır. Çalışmanın kapsamı dahilinde birinci dalga feminizmin temel talepleri ile Cumhuriyetin modernleşme ve ulus devlet sürecinde kadın meselesine/haklarına yaklaşımının bulunduğu ve/veya ayrıldığı noktalara odaklanacaktır. Çalışmada doküman analizi yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Yazı dizisinin yayınlandığı Mart 1929-Mayıs 1929 tarihleri arasındaki *Vakit* gazetesi taranarak analiz edilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Erken Cumhuriyet Dönemi, Kadın hakları, Kamusal görünürlük, Siyaset, Aile

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Our goal in feminism is the equality of duties and rights before the law. In her village, the Turkish woman does all the work that men do without discrimination. In the cities, schools and all kinds of positions are open for her. She is a teacher, a judge, an aviator, a high agriculturalist, a doctor, a chemist, a professor, an engineer, an artist, an influential member in municipal affairs, a member of parliament, and finally, she is the mother who raises the saviors and protectors of the Turkish homeland and a great being who works and is willing to work to serve the country (İnan, February 14, 1937; 5).

Introduction

The Tanzimat was an important threshold in the change of women's social position. Beginning with the Ottoman modernization movements, the regulations, innovations, and changes in every field included women as well. Within the context of the 19th-century modernization philosophy, Turkish intellectuals, and bureaucrats started discussing women's education, clothing, outside activities, and social position, including, primarily, their legal status. Women's education became one of the main topics. New schools opened which changed women's traditional place in the society as well as their social life. During this period, teacher training schools were established, which pioneered women's entry into the workforce, i.e., public life, and conferences were organized to "educate women and ensure their participation in social life" (Kurnaz, 2016, 61).

Although America and Europe suffered great devastation after the First World War, this led to new and important developments in the social position of women. In the absence of men, the working woman, who found a place for herself in every field vacated by men, stepped out of traditional role patterns and experienced a new life that was quite free compared to her old one. Women who entered the workforce did almost every job that men did. However, as the war ended, women left the places they had gained in professional life to men and returned to their homes. These social changes during the war caused significant transformation in the women's movement, resulting in women gaining their long-fought political rights in many countries due to their "services" at the time of war. The new political environment that emerged in the post-war period led the women's movement to take on a "nationalist outlook" (Metinsoy, 2010: 23). In this context, the most fundamental ideology of the Late Ottoman and Early Republican periods was "nationalism" (Akşit, 2005; Çakır, 1996; Durakbaşa, 1988; Sancar, 2012; Berktaş, 2002; Arat, 1998; Kandiyoti, 2007). Within the scope of nationalism, women were seen as "cultural symbols and carriers" of society, and also considered as "symbols" of progress and modernism (Yuval-Davis, 2016, 132; Kandiyoti, 2007, 236; Akşit, 2005, 146; Altınay, 2016, 291).

Women became an important subject of the great transformation that began with the proclamation of the Republic. The new women of the Republic, who had equal rights in the fields of education and law, started to discuss their rights on a social and political ground through which political rights would also be obtained (Caporal, 1982, 326). With the Republic -especially with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's decisive stance on this issue- the public sphere, which had been defined for men, was opened to women as well. Indeed, women's public visibility, its nature, and limits constituted one of the most debated issues.

This study will examine an article series titled "Women in Business Life" published in Vakit newspaper in 1929 involving women who were a part of the professional life of

the respective period, most of whom were publicly known. The aim of this study is to make an analysis of the women's movement in the Early Republican period within the framework of the concepts used by the women whose views were shared in the series, their personal experiences, and the relationship they established with women's rights and nationalism. This study will focus on the points where the basic demands of first-wave feminism and the Republic's approach to women's issues/rights in the process of modernization and nation-statehood meet and/or diverge. The document analysis method was used in this study. The *Vakit* newspaper was scanned and analyzed for the period between March 1929 and May 1929 when the article series was published.

Twenty-eight women's opinions were included in the article series published in *Vakit*¹ between March 31 and May 9, 1929.² Journalist Agah Sırrı prepared the article series and interviewed the women. The series included the following questions: "How do you evaluate married women working?", "Would a working woman's position in the family be strong?", "Was it a necessity or a preference for you to start a career?", "How do you evaluate the necessity for women to enter the workforce?", "Should women work or not?", "Are you satisfied with your professional life?", "When, how, and why did you start a career?", "What is the future you aspire for in womanhood?", "It is claimed that working women will gradually lose their beauty and become ugly in the face of the struggles of labor?", "What do you think about political rights?".

Such interviews were a frequent practice of *Vakit* newspaper for the purpose of informing the public.³ By posing questions to the leading male and female writers, journalists, and literary figures of the period about the issues on the political agenda, it was aimed to both discuss ideas and familiarize the public with these new topics. *Vakit* practiced this on many issues that were unfamiliar to the public, such as austerity, beauty contests, and the new alphabet. On the women's rights front, the newspaper started this article series at a time when women's participation in municipal elections was under discussion, in other words, when suffrage was on the agenda. Although the series included the opinions of women from different social segments, the majority were urban, educated, upper-income women who had been abroad and spoke foreign languages. The occupational groups were distributed as follows: six teachers, four teachers, two doctors, three literary figures, one dentist, two clerks, two artists, two workers, one journalist, two managers, three civil servants, and one seamstress. Most of them were members of various associations such as the Turkish Women's Union and the Union of Teachers.

This article series was about women in professional life. In other words, it related to the public visibility of women. The questions included discussions on women's public visibility and the limits and nature thereof. As another interesting aspect, this article series provides an understanding of the main goals of first-wave feminism as well as the view

1 *Vakit* was owned by Mehmet Asım Us, a Republican People's Party deputy. It was one of the most popular newspapers of the respective period.

2 Ms. Nakiye, Güzide, Seniha Nafiz, Mehlika, Zehra Müfit, Sabiha Zekeriya, Güzide, Cazibe Mualla, Suat Rasim, Emine Talat, Latife Bekir, Beyhan Hüsamettin, Semiha Hatice, Suat Derviş, Türkan, Semiramis Ekrem, Muazzez, Hadiye, Refet Süreyya, Şüküfe Nihal, Halide Nusret, Şüküfe, Ayşe, Sâra Cemil, Nazlı, Hüviyet Bekir, Nebahat Hamit, and İclal.

3 Zafer Toprak mentions that newspapers in this period frequently published series of survey-type articles in order to disseminate them in society (Toprak, 2017, 119).

on women's issues from the Second Constitutional Monarchy period onwards and the thoughts and goals of the women of the Early Republican period. These interviews are illustrative in terms of revealing the basic problems of women, and allowing women and their rights to be viewed/accessed through their own eyes, rather than through the lens of men as was customary.

Is work a need or obligation or an ideal and pleasure?

Having been a dream since her childhood and supported by her family, to work was "independence, a desire to live in her own existence, a spiritual need" for Ms. İclal⁴, a lawyer, whereas it became an "ideal" for Ms. Nakiye⁵, who convinced her prohibiting family and became a teacher. Ms. Güzide, a seamstress, was motivated by "a matter of ability and enthusiasm" rather than the necessity of earning a living, when venturing into business life (Vakit, May 9, 1929; March 31, 1929; April 1, 1929). Seniha Nafiz⁶, the principal of a girls' teacher training school, explained her entry into business life as a "matter of taste"; Ms. Mehlika, a clerk at the American Young Girls' Training Home, explained it as "a prevailing feeling of experiencing new things" (Vakit, April 2, 1929; April 3, 1929). Ms. Zehra Müfit⁷, the director of an embroidery workshop, stated that the more she saw men working, the more she felt the urge to work, and that she started working after experiencing financial difficulties during the War of Independence and enjoyed it immensely (Vakit, April 4, 1929).

Ms. Sabiha Zekeriya⁸, a journalist who published the magazine "Resimli Ay" with her husband Mr. Zekeriya, stated that at first, she entered the workforce with the intention of working casually, but later her thoughts changed, and working became a necessity for her as she had "sick nerves" on her off days. According to her, a person who lives as a "parasite" cannot have any rights in society. Only children, the sick, and the elderly can remain as parasites. According to her, "every human being has the ability to produce, create, and discover. Unproductive women have no place in society (Vakit, April 5, 1929). Ms. Nazlı, a clerk at the Straits Commission, emphasized the necessity for women to work and stated that she entered the workforce because she could not tolerate the view of womanhood as a "parasitic element" (Vakit, April 28, 1929).

Ms. Cazibe Mualla, a sales clerk in a company, stated that she entered the workforce out of the necessity of making a living and that she was happy to earn money and be away from the "famous daily house visits of some women and the annoying gossip and noise" (Vakit, April 7, 1929). Ms. Semiha Hatice, who worked at the switchboard of a telephone company, stated that she started working by chance and although she was in favor of women working, she was not satisfied with her professional life. According to her, women should work for pleasure, not out of obligation (Vakit, April 14, 1929).

4 She is also a member of the Turkish Women's Union.

5 Nakiye Elgün is one of the first female parliamentarians to enter the Turkish Grand National Assembly in 1935. She is a deputy of Erzurum.

6 Seniha Hızal. She was elected as a Trabzon deputy in 1935.

7 Zehra Müfit Saner. She is an artist who makes rag dolls.

8 Sabiha Sertel is one of the leading journalists of the Early Republican period. She is the wife of journalist Zekeriya Sertel.

Ms. Hadiye, who worked in a tobacco factory, stated that she was not satisfied with her professional life. She had started working out of necessity, but work life was filled with hardship. She was in favor of women working provided that they chose a good profession, with the note that it was a shame for beautiful women and those with rich husbands to work (Vakit, April 20, 1929). Underlining that women were obliged to work, literary figure Ms. Őükûfe Nihal⁹ explained that she started a career as an ideal and pleasure, with the desire to gain social status and not to remain under anyone's patronage or domination (Vakit, April 22, 1929). Literary figure and teacher Ms. Halide Nusret¹⁰ stated that being a teacher had been her childhood dream, but her entry into the workforce was a matter of necessity - since her father had died- and she loved her profession, but being forced to work was not a pleasurable thing for a woman (Vakit, April 23, 1929).

Ms. AyŐe, a clerk at a telephone company, stated that her entry into the labor force started as a whim, but later became a necessity in order to support her family, and she believed that women should work in order to be freed from the domination of living on men's money (Vakit, April 25, 1929). Ms. Emine Talat, a teacher, wanted to avoid being a burden on her family and to think about her own future, while Dr. Semiramis Ekrem¹¹ started a career for "pleasure" with the encouragement of her family (Vakit, April 17, 1929; April 11, 1929).

Most of the women who answered the questions in this article series explained their venture into professional life as "a pleasure, an ideal, gaining social status, being productive, escaping from male domination, and being independent". These answers were given by educated women with professions belonging to the upper-income group. Women who stated that they compulsorily participated in the workforce due to the difficulty of making a living were uneducated, low-income women from the lower class. The stance that was unsupportive of the presence of women in professional life drew attention to the risk that women might neglect their families and forget their basic responsibilities while working.

What Do You Think About the Need for Women to Enter the Workforce? Should Women Work?

The reasons for women's participation in the labor force included "men's earnings being insufficient to support the household", "the economic crisis" caused by the First World War, "the cost of living", and "a man's inability to take good care of his woman". Ms. Sabiha Zekeriya stated that "a woman and many children on a man's shoulders has turned life into hell for him. Today's family must become a material and spiritual corporation in order to provide a happy home for both men and women and all women and grown children, except small children and old people, must bring something to the household." The loss of the family's former function made women's labor, above all, an economic necessity (Vakit, April 5, 1929). According to Ms. Mehlika, a professional career gave people the opportunity to develop their ideas, make decisions on their own, and get to know those around them better (Vakit, April 3, 1929).

9 Őükûfe Nihal BaŐar. She is among the founders of the Turkish Women's Union.

10 Halide Nusret Zorlutuna.

11 Semiramis Ekrem Tezel. She is a pediatrician.

Lawyer Ms. Güzide¹² explained the progress of the nation by associating it with the labor of individuals. Seeing the right to work and professional career as privileges of men causes women to “remain idle and parasitic” (Vakit, April 6, 1929). Ms. Beyhan Hüsamettin, a lawyer, considered labor as a “patriotic duty” but did not find it obligatory (Vakit, April 13, 1929). Ms. Zehra Müfid stated that the period when the man was the sole breadwinner of the family was now over and that women’s labor was a necessity in this sense. One of the principles of the modern family should be joint labor (Vakit, April 4, 1929). According to Ms. Güzide, a seamstress, idleness, and unproductivity made people lose their identity, and “women were not created for men’s pleasure”, and therefore, contrary to Ms. Zehra Müfid, women’s participation in business life was not an obligation but a “social responsibility” (Vakit, April 1, 1929).

Ms. Seniha Nafiz described women’s participation in professional life as a necessity, provided that they “do not become so immersed in the passion for a career that they leave their children to maids and nannies and neglect their upbringing and education” (Vakit, April 2, 1929). Suat Derviş argued that by working, a woman was “freed from being a parasite” and would no longer suffer the oppression of men (Vakit, April 15, 1929). Dr. Semiramis Ekrem, in a firm stance, stated the following: “(...) Women are not cats. They were not born to spend their lives by the stove. Needs increase every day. That is why they should work. It is extremely wrong to separate a whole half of humanity on the basis of gender and consider it as a housekeeper.” (April 17, 1929). Ms. İclal also reacted to the question “Should women work or not?” and emphasized that it was the entire humanity, not men or women, that was subject to social laws (Vakit, May 9, 1929).

According to Ms. Enise Muammer Azmi, who was a dentist and a teacher, it was not correct to evaluate professional life on the basis of gender. “Why should the necessities that drive men to work for a living leave women irrelevant? How can men and women, who are raised with the same ideas at the age of education, be separated in the field of duty?” It is wrong to think that a career will disrupt the family. The harmony between spouses would solve these problems (Vakit, May 7, 1929). Ms. Emine Talat, a teacher, said, “There is nothing more natural than a woman starting a career and working alongside men. Today I believe that it is an absolute necessity for a woman to provide financial support for her family before marriage and her own home upon marriage.” (Vakit, April 11, 1929). Ms. Nazlı emphasized that the distinction of “domestic women vs. career women” did not make any sense: “A woman is a woman.” Women’s labor does not harm family life (Vakit, April 28, 1929).

Ms. Nebahat Hamit¹³, a teacher, stated that she did not find the question “should women work?” to be appropriate, as there would be no discrimination between men and women in terms of labor. She sometimes encountered opinions such as “we love flowers, birds and women”, which, she considered, were fundamentally against personal freedoms. Labor was a “social obligation.” Domestic life would not be affected by women working outside. “Family kitchens” could be set up for working women where they could get food, and similarly, dormitories could be established where women could leave their children for care. Workplaces should give maternity leave which is a human right. Men

12 Güzide Lütü is among the first lawyers of the Republic.

13 She worked actively in the Turkish Women’s Union.

could leave their jobs for a while for military service, and this could also be the case for women. Accordingly, Ms. Nebahat suggested solutions to the problems women faced in their professional lives.

In opposition to these views, Ms. Nebahat said, “Are housewives always busy at home? Do you think that, for example, Şişli ladies are only busy with housework? I see them going to the movies. They visit each other, go to the hairdresser... They are busy with idle activities and of course gossip. Can these women be accused of gossiping, no, a woman with nothing to do will eventually gossip.” Ms. Nebahat considered marriage as a social participation and need, and emphasized that working women should also get married (Vakit, May 8, 1929). For Ms. Suat Rasim¹⁴, a woman was a necessity in order not to be dependent on someone (a man) and a “national duty” for the rise of the country (Vakit, April 8, 1929).

The egalitarian discourses of the period and encouraging of women’s participation and advancement in public life form the background of these discussions (Duben and Behar, 2013, 235). The view that defended women’s right to work criticized the opposite view that entitled only men to the right to work and saw such right not only as an economic necessity but also as a social responsibility. Only through labor would women become productive, thoughtful, and responsible, and thus be free from dependence on men. Essentially, the view that was unsupportive of women’s labor was opposed to the idea that women could do everything that men did in social life. There was a natural division of labor between men and women. If women stepped out of this cycle, it could lead to the breakdown of the family, which would cause a social collapse. Women should work in fields that did not prevent them from fulfilling their duties whereas unmarried women could work in any job.

Can a Working Woman Build a Good Family? Does a Career Spoil Domestic Bliss?

Ms. Sâra Cemil was not in favor of women working, as she thought it would harm domestic life. As much as she appreciated her friends who worked, she also pitied them:

(...) I think of a lawyer with a 3-month-old baby, a doctor performing a long operation with a baby waiting to be breastfed, or an 8-month pregnant lady who is a train driver. If women work, what will happen to their children? How can she succeed in business life if she leaves her children to strangers? I was going to enroll my child in a school in Germany, but no school accepted him. When I asked why, they said, “A child gets inspiration from his home, and his parents undertake his upbringing whereas the school accustoms him to life and gives him an education.” Every woman should take care of her child herself. Germans made women train drivers only during mobilization (Vakit, April 26, 1929).

Although she admitted that her ideas might be found “a bit old and outdated”, Ms. Cemil stated that women would not be “miserable” if they made a budget according to their husbands’ earnings, thus domestic harmony would not be disrupted. Şükûfe Nihal criticized Ms. Sâra Cemil for her unawareness of the economic conditions and the respective changing circumstances. The living conditions had destroyed the idea of “a happy home with flowers, and offspring in tranquility and bliss”. There was almost no woman who was “married and able to make a living”: “(...) There are unmarried

¹⁴ Suat Rasim Giz. She is the first female surgeon of the Republic.

or divorced women or widows with no income. What will these women do? You will probably suggest they should earn their living. This idea is wrong. How can a woman start working at a time of need, if she has no previous knowledge or preparation?”. Expecting women, who make up half of a nation, to remain idle and unproductive means “not seeing the waves of revolution that are turning the world upside down”. Nihal stated that she could not understand the objection to women becoming train drivers and that if a woman is enthusiastic about it, she will find the time to work (Vakit, April 30, 1929).

Ms. Sâra Cemil responded to Ms. Şükûfe Nihal. A woman was created as a female by nature. Her first duty was to be a mother. If the conditions of life separated women from this basic duty, it would be the homeland that would suffer the most. The dominating attitude of working women towards their husbands has disrupted domestic harmony. First, the children, then the whole nation would be affected by it. In Europe, there were institutions where working women could leave their children for care, which did not exist in Turkey. When a poor woman got employed, her children would be left hungry and uncared for on the streets. Therefore, women should not work. “In such a case, educated and rich women will not extend a hand to those youngsters. Wouldn't it be better if those who attend unions and associations did something positive in this field instead? Let us expect from women in good circumstances such charity and compassion, rather than building a career in any other way.” Hence, she presented a point of view that advised women to turn to “charity organizations”, which was indeed a common argument that women would often encounter against their demands for political rights (Vakit, May 2, 1929).

Ms. Refet Süreyya, a musician and a dancer, was satisfied with her art but not with her career. Women's participation in the workforce has diminished “domestic bliss, the harmony of the world, and the value of men”. The morality of working and earning women has changed, as they have become haughty and developed an aversion toward their husbands. Now quarrels, fatigue, and boredom prevailed in the family. She was aware that her ideas would be objected to and criticized, but “women's aspiration for being like men and their entry into the workforce have put family life in trouble. Nature has a way of working: “A woman is a woman, and a man is a man. Imagine the ridiculousness of a pregnant woman in business life. I beg you. Now women will refuse to have children in order not to look ridiculous, and indeed, they have actually started to do so.” Hence, Ms. Süreyya drew attention to population, one of the most pressing problems of the Early Republican period, and claimed that this process would harm population growth (Vakit, April 21, 1929).¹⁵

Şükufe Nihal emphasized that women were obliged to work and be active in every field: “Even in politics! If women can be lawyers, doctors, teachers, why not MPs!” While answering Ağâh Sırrı's questions, Nihal was accompanied by Halide Nusret, who

¹⁵ During this period, the press also covered definitions of feminism. Such definitions first included the rights/gains granted to women and then underlined the basic duties expected of women outside the public sphere. It was emphasized that feminism should not be perceived as “masculinization”: “It is feminism to sit in the same row here with men, to start a career and serve as men do, and to become a lawyer, a doctor or a member of the municipal council. But it is also feminism to smile at your husband when he comes home tired from work, to take care of the house, to make your children comfortable, to organize the budget, not to waste, to be hospitable, to obey your husband, and to use the maid well. To the extent that women are feminists when they demand to be equal to men, they are much more feminist when they fulfill their rights as women, mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters. This should always be kept in mind” (Vakit, December 24, 1933).

asked, “(laughing) Imagine how a woman can be a train driver?” Nihal replied, “Why not? We can’t put women in a vase like flowers.” She rejected the claim that working women were/would be unhappy and stated that on the contrary, they would feel confident (Vakit, April 22, 1929).

Ms. řükûfe Nihal expressed her discomfort about the fact that women would remain unemployed and dependent on men, and she added that she did not reject the idea of a family, but believed that women should have careers. Halide Nusret stated, “It is the woman who builds the home. A woman’s labor at home is heavier than a man’s labor outside. The most sacred duty of a woman is motherhood. The laws of nature have separated the labor of men and women. This should not be resisted.” Accordingly, she supported the idea that women should leave their professional life/public sphere and return to their homes/private sphere as the economy improved (Vakit, April 23, 1929). Ms. Güzide, a lawyer, supported the idea of professional work for single women but advocated for women to quit their jobs after marriage in order to establish unity in the family (Vakit, April 6, 1929). Ms. Latife Bekir, a teacher and the president of the Turkish Women’s Union, did not completely agree with the claim that a working woman could not build a good family, but stated that a self-employed woman could devote time to both her home and work, however, it would be better for her to stay at home rather than work under harsh conditions (Vakit, April 12, 1929).

Women who did not support professional work for married women emphasized the importance of education for women but expressed that a woman’s priority should be her family and the upbringing of her children. In this context, participating in the workforce should not outweigh women’s domestic duties. A professional life that neglects the family will have dire consequences than women remaining idle/unproductive. The dominant tone in the women’s views was the importance of women’s “inherent sense of duty”. Women would not advance by leaving the family behind. On the contrary, this would lead to the moral decline of the society. These women’s views were in harmony with the Republic’s family-oriented policy, which equated the continuity of the family with that of the society (řerifsoy, 2016, 170; akır, 1996, 316, Berktaş, 2006, 108).

Does a Working Woman Lose Her Beauty?

Agâh Sırrı asked a question regarding the argument that women participating in the workforce would “gradually lose their beauty and become ugly”. Those women who did not accept this view agreed that the understanding of beauty has changed. The era of “doll-like beauty” in women has passed, and in its place has come a new understanding of beauty that was “dynamic, meaningful, interesting and lively” accentuating the invisible rather than visual traits. According to Semiramis Ekrem, a career would enhance both physical and spiritual beauty (Vakit, April 17, 1929). According to Ms. Nazlı, who stated that she could not make sense of the relationship between professional life and beauty, this view could be true if one talked about the beauty of a “puppet doll” that spent all day in front of the mirror. However, today’s working woman had no time to strive to “gather in herself the color, shape, and charm that she did not inherently have” (Vakit, April 28, 1929). Hüviyet Bekir did not think that professional life had an effect on beauty, unless one engaged in extremely hard labor (Vakit, May 5, 1929).

Ms. Nebahat Hamit was critical of this view and stated that this gender-based question was extremely improper and women were not “the guardians of beauty” (Vakit, May 8, 1929). Ms. İclal also expressed that just as men had the opportunity to shave while working, working women could also spare time for personal grooming, and shared her own experience: “For example, they say to me, ‘Now that you are a lawyer, you have nothing to do with tailoring. What a strange mentality, isn’t it? Working women are not men, are they? Why should they sacrifice their toilette? Do men do that?’” (Vakit, May 9, 1929). Şükufe Nihal, who held a similar view, responded to the question “Does a working woman lose her beauty?” with the question “Why does this not apply to men, don’t men become ugly?” Agâh Sırrı said, “Women’s beauty is considered essential,” to which she responded, “If professional life makes people ugly, then one should ask whether men also become ugly” (Vakit, April 22, 1929).

For Suat Derviş, it was true that working women endured various difficulties. However, it was not true that these difficulties made her ugly. On the contrary, labor would render a woman lively and dynamic: “Imagine the old type of coy ladies, for example, a fat, fair -skinned woman running after a tram and not being able to catch up. What a funny scene that is, isn’t it?” (Vakit, April 15, 1929). Ms. Semiha Hatice was among those who thought that working life spoiled women’s beauty (Vakit, April 14, 1929). Ms. Muazzez stated that “beauty” had no meaning in the face of “the struggle to make a living”, but that the “pale faces and angry moods” of the women and girls working in the tobacco factory constituted ample evidence that women were worn out and disfigured by labor (Vakit, April 18, 1929).

In the background of the claim that professional work spoils women’s beauty, there was a reference to the idea that women should be visually appealing, beautiful, and well-groomed. This question about the beauty of working women, included in the article series, pointed to a shallow discourse that was far from addressing the problems faced by lower-class women in the labor force. This discourse opposed the idea that women could do any job that men did and emphasized the danger of “masculinization” of women who entered the workforce. One of the pillars of this masculinization concern was the risk of women who monopolized “beauty” becoming ugly, thereby masculinized. It would not be misleading to think that the articulation of this risk was a warning against the danger of women, who were defined as the “guardians of beauty”, neglecting their responsibilities -being beautiful and well-groomed- for the sake of their careers.

What Do You Think About Political Rights?

Those Who Supported Political Rights

In 1929, the hottest topic regarding women was political rights. This was an “unforgotten” issue that had also been voiced in the Ottoman women’s movement and demanded by the Women’s People Union and Nezihe Muhittin in 1924. In 1929, the background of the right to vote in municipal elections, which was to be granted in 1930, was the scene of heated debates. The main basis for those who favored political rights was the belief that the “government of the Republic, which did not hesitate to implement modern views when the time came” would soon grant political rights to women. Both Ms.

Seniha and Ms. Nakiye shared this belief. Ms. Nakiye, who considered that women had enough intelligence and ability to receive this right, said, “There is no need for a struggle regarding this issue. We gained neither the Civil Code nor equality in education as a result of a struggle; they were given to us, and there is nothing that will not be given as long as we can do it” (Vakit, March 31, 1929; April 2, 1929). Ms. Beyhan Hüsamettin agreed with this opinion. Women would obtain their political rights, and at this point again the “statesmen” had a say in this (Vakit, April 13, 1929).

Ms. Suat Rasim, who advocated equality of rights, emphasized the “imminence” of obtaining political rights (Vakit, April 8, 1929). Expressing women’s desire and struggle for political rights, Ms. Latife Bekir argued that it was wrong to think that “the level of women had not risen, and that womanhood was defined only by urban women”, because the level of women was sufficient, and as urban women rose, rural women would follow them (Vakit, April 12, 1929). According to Ms. Muazzez, who stated that she believed in the equality of women and men, there was no obstacle to the recognition of political rights and they would be granted “in the near future” (Vakit, April 18, 1929). Ms. Hadiye was among those who answered the question of political rights in a broader way. Women “could do anything”. For this, men should treat women with more respect and accept them as friends (Vakit, April 20, 1929). What is undoubtedly emphasized by these words is the idea of equality between men and women.

Ms. Şükûfe Nihal, who thought that there was no reason why a woman who worked in all areas of life should not be a member of parliament, rejected the claim that women were “very sensitive and impressionable, therefore would often change their minds”, hence were unsuitable for politics. This was entirely a matter of women’s upbringing and will (Vakit, April 22, 1929). Ms. Hüviyet Bekir did not find it right to make such a generalization about women. “This is a matter of character, upbringing, and morality” (Vakit, May 5, 1929). Ms. Nebahat Hamit stated that those who considered women too sensitive were ignorant about history and life, because there have been many women who went to war, served as train drivers, and did the heaviest work in the face of necessity (Vakit, May 8, 1929). Ms. Ayşe was among those who opposed this claim. She expressed her astonishment at the approach of “Participation in education, labor and punishment! Exception in politics!” (April 25, 1929).

Suat Derviş had a very sharp discourse against the debate on whether women should be granted political rights which she defined as “our most precious right”: “Women are the majority in the country. So how can only the minority rule the nation? After all, we are not treated as exceptional, are we? If we kill a man or steal, we are punished the same. They wouldn’t exempt us just because we are women.” Thus, she referred to the understanding that did not see women as equal. Derviş also criticized the idea that women must reach a certain “level” in order to receive political rights: “As for the argument about the level of women, this is a lie, I mean, it is false... A civil servant has more or less the same education as his wife. A grocer’s wife is not inferior to her husband in accounting and administration. A peasant woman is just as enlightened as her man. Especially in big cities.” She argued that women should have a voice in the Parliament in order to prevent injustices against them (Vakit, April 15, 1929).

Ms. Şükûfe stated that Turkish women were in a better position than the majority of their European counterparts and that it was “only a matter of time” before they

received their political rights (Vakit, April 24, 1929). Ms. İclal argued that political rights constituted a general human right and could not be separated in terms of gender (Vakit, May 9, 1929). Ms. Nebahat Hamit was among those who believed that the granting of rights was “imminent”. It was common among the proponents of rights to assert the “legitimacy of women”: “A woman is also an organism that can see, think and distinguish good from evil, and she is half of humanity. Decisions taken with the participation of women will be more productive. There may be issues that do not directly concern us. But there are many things that can be accomplished through the eyes and words of women in the Parliament and the Municipality, in accordance with the division of labor.” (Vakit, May 8, 1929). According to Ms. Sabiha Zekeriya, suffrage was the most sacred right of every individual in democracies, regardless of gender. In order for women to obtain not only suffrage but also other rights, they needed to organize. Only working women could form this kind of organization (Vakit, April 5, 1929).

Those who Considered the Demand for Political Rights “Premature”

In reply to the discussions on “demanding” or “granting” political rights, those women who expressed that “the time has not yet come” mainly argued that women needed to reach a certain “level” in order to exercise this right and become “enlightened”. Ms. Güzide, Ms. Mehlika and Ms. Güzide, who stressed the need for a certain level of “social upbringing and perception”, claimed that it was necessary to wait for political rights (Vakit, April 6, 1929; April 3, 1929; April 1, 1929).

Ms. Cazibe Mualla considered it premature to talk about political rights and emphasized both the condition of “level” and the condition of “enlightenment”, that is, “education”: “When the number of female intellectuals approaches half of male intellectuals, then maybe it will be time” (Vakit, April 7, 1929). According to Ms. Emine Talat, another woman who emphasized both conditions, one should not think only of women living in big cities and forget those living in Anatolian villages. Women should become conscious through education for political rights to be considered (Vakit, April 11, 1929). Ms. Zehra Müfit, who did not support the idea of equality between men and women in all areas and believed that the time had not yet come for women to “participate in political life”, stated that she was “on the side that preferred family life” for women (Vakit, April 4, 1929). Ms. Semiha Hatice was also not in favor of political rights, as she thought that women could not do the work that men did (Vakit, April 14, 1929).

Ms. Refet Süreyya, who was “absolutely not in favor” of political rights, explained her reasoning as follows: “Women can only enter a field related to fine arts, but not politics... Because a woman is a very sensitive creature who is easily overcome by her emotions. Her soul changes every moment, she does not stick to her argument like a man. A small emotional crisis affects her completely and causes her to change her opinion instantly. So, women and politics... Wouldn’t that be a very strange thing? Unfortunately, that’s how it is. These things cannot be denied. This is how we are.” (Vakit, April 21, 1929).¹⁶ Ms.

¹⁶ The patriarchal point of view, which considered women’s “temperament” unsuitable for politics, frequently manifested itself in the newspaper articles of this period. Ms. Zekiye Halil, who applied for membership to the Republican People’s Party, was asked, “Being a party member requires privacy (secrecy) in many cases. I wonder if our women will be able to adapt to this important requirement.” This question directed to Ms. Zekiye Halil referred to the “nature” of women, who were considered “unable to keep secrets, extremely talkative and loose-tongued”. In reply to this question, Ms. Zekiye Halil expressed that the women who were

Sâra Cemil stated that she could not yet see “a personality who could occupy a political position” among Turkish women and that women could serve the country by “extending a hand of humanity and compassion to the poor, the hungry and the sick” instead of running after political rights (Vakit, April 26, 1929). Ms. Enise Muammer Azmi, who did not find the demand for equal rights for men and women natural, asked “women to keep calm and not hurry” regarding political rights (Vakit, May 7, 1929). Ms. Türkan also found women “in a hurry” on this issue.¹⁷ According to her, if women reached a level where they could take their destiny into their own hands, nothing would stand in their way. However, if they were not at this level, they would exhaust themselves in vain and be mistaken (Vakit, April 16, 1929).

The first reason given by women who did not look favorably on women’s demand for political rights was the emphasis on a certain “level”, followed by the unsuitability of women for politics. Politics was a field reserved for men, meaning that women were incapable of leading a political life due to their inherent characteristics -sensitivity, emotionality, irritability, mood swings, etc. This idea has led to an understanding that saw parliament to be under the monopoly of men and “determined/limited the issues that women could be interested in”. Women’s duty to be “good wives and mothers” was emphasized. Women who supported the demand for political rights adopted a discourse based on equality of rights. They wanted to have a say in the future of the country together with men by exercising their political rights as citizens (Mitchel and Oakley, 1998: 174).

What Kind of Future Do You Aspire for Women?

Ms. Nazlı emphasized the universality of the women’s movement’s demand for rights, stating that this was not only a problem for Turkish women but all women around the world (Vakit, April 28, 1929). Ms. Seniha Nafiz wished women to be equipped to be “good companions of ideas” to their husband and a “compassionate and knowledgeable” mother to her children so that they could be raised as “loyal citizens devoted to their country and the republic”, and Ms. Mehlika wished women to play a greater role in the social life of the country (Vakit, April 2, 1929; April 3, 1929). Ms. Suat Rasim wished that Turkish women, who worked at least as hard as men, would have every right that men had; Ms. Suat Derviş wished for a future in which women had the professional, personal, economic, and political freedom they desired, working women were protected, and equality between men and women was ensured (Vakit, April 8, 1929; April 15, 1929). Ms. Emine Talat aspired a level of cognizance which would enable women to be aware of their “national, social and moral duties” (Vakit, April 11, 1929).

According to Ms. Sabiha Zekeriya, the future of women would be determined by the role they would play in economic life. The greatest cause of “slavery, poverty and misery” was “neediness and being parasitic”. “A woman cannot be happy as long as the family is only a table for her to eat and a walking stick for her man to walk on.” Women and men should have equal rights at every stage of social life. “Every woman who shows equal ability with a man should be treated equally. It is an exploitation of women to

members of the Association for the Defence of Rights of Anatolia and Rumelia, including herself, showed “no less ability than men” in terms of “privacy” (Vakit, April 4, 1930).

17 Türkan Başbuđ Fezyiati, Director of the Girls’ Section of Bođaziçi High School

keep them underpaid and overworked. Working pregnant women will be best protected by establishing nursing homes for their children.” (Vakit, April 5, 1929). Women’s emancipation was related to their productivity. This was how a modern woman was made. A parasitic woman, on the other hand, was a woman who did not participate in the production process nor felt uncomfortable about it and who had no desire to break from this bondage. The women’s struggle would be led by not the “parasitic woman” but the “oppressed woman”. Ms. Sabiha Zekeriya approached women’s issues within the context of socialist thought, viewing them as a social problem influenced by the economic order. According to her, feminism would not be a struggle between men and women, but a struggle that women, together with other oppressed segments of the society, would wage against the society and the social, economic and moral institutions (Özman and Bulut, 2003: 200-202).

Why shouldn’t women have a say in the laws they obey? A woman who has reached a position to demand this right cannot be told to stop there. It is very strange to say to women, “Don’t go into politics”. Those who oppose feminism which is the idea that women should be equal to men in civil, social, and political rights, argue that women cannot be equal to men because they are more sensitive, weaker, and less intelligent. But are these deficiencies inherent or acquired? I wonder if men had been exposed to the life that women have lived for hundreds of years, would they have come out as successful as women?” (Müfide Ferit, April 1919, 531-532).

This was penned by Müfide Ferit¹⁸ in 1919, who was an important figure in the Ottoman women’s movement. In the Ottoman Empire, women had already obtained the right to education, and they were primarily concerned with the right to work, but political rights were also frequently discussed. With the Republic, having achieved the goals of the first-wave of feminism, namely the right to education and the right to work, the new goal for women, who already had equal rights with men in many areas and whose presence and visibility in public life increased rapidly, was political rights - the suffrage. In late 1929, as the rumors about the grant of political rights grew louder, the agenda focused on the relationship between politics and women. In general, it is observed that the views on the relations between men and women did not change. Male journalists, writers, and intellectuals supported this initiative in order not to go against Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s decisive and strong stance on women’s rights, especially suffrage, yet they voiced certain criticisms.

These criticisms included the idea that politics and women’s nature were incompatible, that those who demanded suffrage -which can also be interpreted as a demand for full equality with men- should also serve in the military, and that matters regarding women’s nature such as fashion, toilette, and beauty were incompatible with the harsh political environment.¹⁹ The male perspective rejecting the rights-based understanding of equality in Müfide Ferit’s 1919 article can also be observed in the views of women who did not support suffrage in 1929. Those women who supported political rights emphasized two main points. First, they rejected the view on women’s “political incapacity”, and hence did not “seek legitimacy” for women’s suffrage: Men and women were equal and suffrage

18 Müfide Ferit Tek.

19 For a study that sheds light on this period of debates regarding the process of granting political rights to women, see Serpil Çakır (2019). *Erkek Kulübünde Siyaset*. İstanbul: Sel Basım Dağıtım.

was a fundamental right. Secondly, while rejecting the argument on women’s political incompetence, they emphasized with examples that women had sufficient “legitimacy” to obtain this right. In this respect, the sacrifices made by women during the War of Independence constituted ample evidence for women’s interest in national affairs.

Conclusion

The “new woman” created by the Republic attained many rights including education, legal equality, and suffrage thanks to the changes made in her social, legal, and political status. As a result of legal regulations, particularly the Civil Code, which was designed to create a social space for women outside the private sphere, women, as the new public subject, gained a position equal to men in the public sphere. The main topics of the Ottoman women’s movement and the debates regarding women that emerged in the Second Constitutional Monarchy period related to “women’s public visibility, their participation in the public sphere, the limits of their public visibility and their presence in the workplace”. These main topics were also inherited by the Republic, which granted women the right to participate in all spheres of public life and the opportunity to make themselves visible.

It is observed that the women interviewed in this article series did not have similar attitudes on issues that concerned them. Some of them, e.g., Őukufe Nihal and Suat DerviŐ, adopted a strong rights-based discourse that had a libertarian tone and rejected any limitation on public visibility, while Sabiha Zekeriya emphasized the inequality between classes and the oppression of women; whereas Halide Nusret, Refet Sũreyya and Hũviyet Bekir were influenced by a male-dominated view that saw the public sphere as belonging to men and advocated women to return home and embrace their natural traits. It can be said that the view that relegated women to the private sphere under the themes of family, motherhood, morality, duty, and responsibility was positioned along nationalist and conservative lines. Undoubtedly, the movement that emerged during the post-war period, particularly in Europe, advocating a pro-natalist and male-dominated family structure and suggesting the child and the family as the priority for women, also influenced the Republic and created a decisive effect on this point of view.

The views expressed in this series provide clues for understanding how women regarded feminism, productivity, nationalism, political rights, public visibility, and patriarchy. The article series brought the basic demands for rights and the agenda of the feminist movement of the respective period into its questions. The idea was that it was too early for rights and there should be no hurry focused on education. Women would be worthy of rights as they became “enlightened”. This perspective opened the door to an elitist view that excluded uneducated lower-class women from the process. The views of women who did not support and wanted to limit women’s public visibility, as in the case of political rights, were blended with nationalism. This outlook considered the public sphere as an area belonging to men, and aimed to keep women in the private sphere by integrating them with “family and children”, which were seen as women’s national duties, and wanted to limit their presence in the public sphere to participation in charitable organizations. The view that aimed to limit women’s public visibility did not accept a change in gender roles. On the contrary, it emphasized that these roles originated from

nature and were inherent, and criticized the opposite as “masculinization”. On the other hand, the view that accepted the public presence of women at any and all levels argued that to be freed from male domination, first and foremost, women had to change their gender roles by stepping out of an idle and “parasitic” state, switch to a productive role and remove the obstacles to emancipation.

The Early republican period can also be interpreted as a historical era that witnessed tensions among the “values of modernity”, “feminism” and “nationalism”. The idea of women’s participation in business life during this period can shed light on this tension. The emphasis in the article series on the existence of women’s labor beyond necessity also reveals the dichotomy between women’s domestic roles and their participation in public life. For example, the word “feminism” was used only once throughout the series although it heavily dwelled on the discourses regarding women’s rights. It was often the case that the women’s opinions entailed confusion between modernity and conservatism, or nationalism and feminism. Therefore, the opinions expressed by the women who participated in this article series constitute a valuable source for evaluating such tension.

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