

POLITICAL RIGHTS OF WOMEN

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The role of women in political and social life had been limited until the beginning of the 20th century. Today it can easily be seen that in the mass democracies and in democratic-pluralistic societies which have been dominated by different powerful groups, the women have played an important rôle in all spheres of social life. The feministic ideas which were started in the 18th century and become influential in the 19th century and which were combined with the constitutional movements have firmly strengthened the rights and status of women. This, in fact, is the result of a long political and historical development. We would like, in this paper, to discuss the political rights, the social position and the developing status of women in East and West, but especially, in the modern Turkish Republic. (1)

Political Rights in the West :

It can not be easily asserted that there was a progressist understanding about women in Europe before Christianity. On the contrary, women were considered as an ornament, an object or a pleasure tool in Teuton-Cermen tribes. It was the tradition in primitive-conservative societies to give the women a low social status compared with men. The German tribes were not very different from this conception.

Christianity, contrary to what is believed, did not bring about an important new conception in the social and political rights of women. According to the religious principles which had been influenced by St. Augustinus and the other Saints, woman was a sinner. Woman was the reason for the expulsion of mankind from

(1) This paper has been presented in RCD conference for women rights held in Ankara from October 12 to 14, 1968.

heaven because she had eaten the «forbidden apple». This «original sin» had to be expiated. Woman had to be isolated and covered, and to clean her soul. The most important thing for her was to save her virginity and purity.

The Catholic Church, by its religious commands, was trying to prevent woman from leaving her insulated position. The feudal structure of the Middle Ages, completing the spiritual commands of the Church from the social aspect, revived and idealized woman as a romantic type who lives in castles like some woman of our imagination.

It can be said that the Renaissance movement was the first reaction against the religious taboo which had prevented woman from being seen in the eyes of people. Painters, such as Botticelli, tried to reveal the body of woman in their paintings, and the sculptors playing with their marble, presented the woman as a wife, a mother or a darling.

In this subject, the Reformation also affected the changing conception of woman. Especially the puritanist movement brought about a new understanding to the conception of woman. It was accepted that the woman could possess civil rights. But political rights which were given to men were considered as prohibited area to woman.

In the 19th century, the Victorian age remained faithful to this Puritan conception. The specimen of the period was a lady type, but as far as the social and political status of woman is concerned, the policy was quite conservative.

The most important development in the political rights of woman and in the understanding of woman were caused by the industrial revolution. The discovery of steam, the use of machinery power in the industrial life, the starting of factory life and the beginning of woman to go work in factories like a man, gave the consequences of introducing rights which had been kept away from woman till that time.

Another achievement in this field was introduced by the French Revolution. The Declaration of Human Rights pledged equal rights to men and women without any distinction. This message was sympathically accepted among women. In fact, women joined the July Revolution and helped the victory of the tricolor. The painting of Delacroix which presented woman among the crowds who at-

tacked the Bastille on 14 th July, presented the women as pretenders of rights.

It must be mentioned that «The Subjection of Women» which was written and published by J. S. Mill in 1869, gave a new impetus to the feminist movements.

But it can be said that in this matter the most severe critics came from the anarchists and utopian socialists. However these critics were becoming too extremist in accepting the right of free sexual life for woman and shaking the very foundations of family life. According to this new conception, woman as she possesses every right, could also use her body freely, she was completely free, and nobody could intervene in her business.

The feminist ideas in the 20 th century led to the emancipation and the freedom of woman in western world. Modern constitutions and laws have extended, under the effect of these feminist ideas, a great amount of rights to woman. These rights are as follows : the right to vote and to be elected, the right of education, the right of appointment to the civil service (e.g. to be a government employee or a judge), equality in the rights of inheritance and property. It must be emphasized that among all these rights the last given ones were the political rights. The entry of women into the political life, which was begun in the years of 1900 in North European countries (e.g. Finland, Norway, Denmark), passed over the U.S. after the First World War by the amendment of the Constitution, (amendment 19) American women have also succeeded in having the political rights. (1). Equally in England women begun to enjoy their political rights at the end of the First World War.

Extreme Liberal Views and Their Reactions :

After reviewing the general development of woman's rights in the West another point must be examined : Nowadays women are not content with civil and social rights, but they step forward and assert equal rights in physiological and physical matters. It is interesting to see the support of the philosophers,

(1) In the U. S. the women had the rights of education in 1833, that is before the amendment of the constitution. As far as the right to work is concerned, American women who possessed this right completely, were using it in less proportion than the men in practice.

such as Bertrand Russell and H.G. Wells to this idea which is contrary to the accepted principles in the society.

The research which was made in the field of medicine and psychoanalysis explored new developments; the friendship marriage which could voluntarily be dissolved by the suggestion of either woman or man and the free sexual life like the visiting marriage which was suggested by Fannie Hurst, was asserted on behalf of the equality of woman. This movement was also supported by certain intellectual medical doctors and judges. All this has been made on behalf of the nineteenth-twenties «lost woman» type and in the nineteenth-sixties, in the name of representative of the modern jazz generation that is the «rebel woman». In the short term these views created some negative consequences and vacuum in social life. For example in the U.S., after the Civil War the number of divorces increased suddenly and the importance of virginity before the marriage became less important. The continuing wars also increased this process.

The 1917 Russian Revolution considered divorce and abortion, under the influence of the extreme feminist movements, as an everyday business. But the revolutionary «a glass of water» theory in sexual life and the efforts of pushing the principle of the equality of the men and women to the extreme sides had even frightened Lenin.

These extreme liberal-anarchist views in the field of women's rights were resisted by the fascist and the national socialist doctrines. In contradiction to the leftist movements the right dictatorships went to the other side and tried to limit the rights of women.

National Socialism tried to revive the old famous three principles of ancient Germans, «Kirche, Küche, Kinder», these are namely: the Church, the kitchen and children. It did not like women to take a place in the political life. (The odd thing is this; in 1933 when Hitler came to power, he had a great amount of support from women.)

Fascism, as Nazism, assumed an anti-feminist tendency. Mussolini prevented women from entering into certain branches of the university, especially the Philosophy Department.

After the First World War, the victory of the democracies and the foundation of the United Nations opened a new period

in the field of women's rights. The United Nations Charter proclaimed the equality of men and women and it also combined in itself the institutions which develops the social status of woman.

As the result of these developments, today in the Western world there has been reached a reasonable and balanced view, which could be separated from the extreme views. In the industrial societies as well as in the new independent developing societies, women get involved in society more and more each day, and also the status of woman becomes more advanced than it used to be. This is an event which must be applauded for the sake of the principle of equality. But it is also a march that cannot be stopped.

II. The Development of the Political and the Social Rights of the Turkish Woman :

Before Islam :

Before Islam the social and political position of the Turkish woman was very strong. There was no distinction between women and men in the affairs of the society. The same respect was given to the daughter as it was given to the son. The woman was free to choose her partner. The wife and the husband were equal in their family life. The common marriage was monogamy. The woman had rights in bringing up her children and she did not use veils.

In Islamic Society :

In this period it is known that the (Hatun) wife of a Khan could join in the administration of state affairs, and sometimes she herself governed the state. The firmans were not only written on behalf of Khan but also written on behalf of his wife. IBN-I BATUTA pointed this out in his book of travels. According to the laws of Cengiz, the woman attended the annual conventions.

Women who had a high position in the ancient Turkish society had lost her position when Turks entered into the sphere of Islam civilization. The conception of woman among Arabs influenced heavily Turkish society. The result of the misleading interpretation of the Islamic rules compelled woman to stay at home. The equality between the wife and husband disappeared, woman

begun to use veils. She was disregarded in society. The woman who stayed at home was deprived of her social, cultural and political rights.

In this period women had no social and cultural and as well as the political rights. She had no right to vote or to be elected in the public assemblies. It used to be said that a woman had not sufficient intelligence or ability therefore she could not be a governor or ruler.

The patriarchal family type was the essence of the society and the institution disregarding the freedom of the human rights of the woman went on for many years. Mecelle and Şeriat did not say much about the freedom of the woman.

In Ottoman Empire

In the Ottoman Empire, from time to time, some women entered into the social life, some of them were poets, as Nigar Hanım was, some others were involved in the political intrigues of the Palace, as Hurrem and Kösem Sultan were. But the majority of women were not aware of their slavery for centuries. They accepted their position with a mystical resignation which could be called numbness.

Atatürk's Reforms :

This situation went on until the War of Independence. In the war women took their place near the men at front and proved their existence. But the inequality of woman and men had become so very fixed that the Turkish women could not be able to claim their rights. And as the result of this fact it inevitably became certain that the reforms had to be made by Atatürk for the accomplishment for women's rights.

Today the Turkish woman has reached a high level in the social and political field. This achievement can be admired even by many developed countries. (For example in Switzerland, in some cantons, political rights for women were recognized only a few years go.)

As far as the Turkish Constitution, the Turkish Civil Law, and the election laws are concerned, the Turkish woman possesses the most complete social, cultural and political rights.

Let us summarize briefly these achievements :

After the proclamation of the Republic, the first step for the emancipation of women was the acceptance of the Civil Law in 1926.

Under the Civil Law, the Turkish woman possessed equal social rights. At that time the arguments were taking place about the political rights of the woman in the Grand National Assembly. The deputy of Bolu, Mr. Tunalı Hilmi talked in favour of woman possessing political rights. On the other hand, Mr. Hüseyin Avni suggested that the rights could not be given to woman, it had to be taken by them.

After these arguments, in 1930, the right to vote and to be elected were recognized in the municipal elections. On the 5th December 1934, the rights of women to vote and to be elected deputy became a law. At that time, Atatürk said that this right was not given to woman as a favour but he said that the Turkish women proved their ability to have political rights by their efforts in the years of the War of Independence. For that reason, the emancipation of the woman coincided with the Turkish Revolution.

The first Turkish woman representatives were elected to the Grand National Assembly in 1935. Atatürk did not find it enough to introduce only the social and political rights but he tried hard to apply these rights in practice.

The Rights of Women After 1960 :

Women's rights, as in many fields, have seen new developments after 1960.

According to the Deputy Election Law (2nd May, 1961, number 306) *Every citizen*, who possesses a right to vote, has also a right to be elected (article 10). Again according to the article 24 of the Municipal Law, woman possesses the right to vote and to be elected.

In addition to this, the 1961 Constitution includes new provisions about the equality of the man and woman.

In the Preamble of the Constitution, it was written «*All individuals, in their faith, pleasure and anxiety, combine together*». Article 12 of the Constitution says : Everybody is equal before the law without the distinction of religion and sect, race, sex,

political thinking and philosophical creed or language. Therefore, the equality of sexes is officialy recognized by the Constitution.

Article 54 of the Constitution did not make a discrimination between the sexes. Articles 55, 68, 71, 72 of the Constitution which were concerned with the right to vote and to be elected did not make any distinction between men and women.

SUMMARY :

Today, the Turkish woman, in accordance with our laws has a high place but rather in theory. Though many years have passed since the acceptance of women's rights, there are many problems waiting for a solution. Our women could not generally use their rights which were given to them by the laws. A certain group of women who live in big cities have really enjoyed their rights. We can call this group the «happy minority». But the situation for the large part of women who represent almost 80 % of the female population is different.

In the east part of Turkey and in the rural areas, the social and family life are governed by the traditional principles and usages. Many provisions which were accepted by the Constitution, have no application because of illiteracy. Article 50 of the Constitution states that primary education is compulsory for girls. However, compulsory education for girls has been regarded unnecessary by the villagers, probably mainly for economic considerations, so the girls are not sent to school. On the other hand, when the level of the education increases the number of girls decreases.

Turkish society, as a whole, is not sufficiently aware of the positive role of an educated mother over the following generations. Illiteracy, traditional habits, misunderstanding of religious principles, the selfishness of men are the main motives that prevent woman from becoming aware of her rights. Turkish women generally do not practice their rights. Though these rights are concerned the situation is not very different from the social aspect. The Turkish women are not aware of their rights to intervene in political matters. For that reason our women for years have been unable to fight for their political role.

It is asserted that the reason for this was the introduction of the political rights to women without waiting for their struggle

to gain them. But in our ancient society it was impossible for the women to enter into such a struggle because until the end of the Ottoman Empire, the dominating customs and usages of our society gave a very low place to women, compared with men, and forbade them from such activities. The only struggle which was joined by women near the men, perhaps without anticipating its deep consequences, was the War of Independence.

It has been suggested from time to time in Turkey that women have no political education, so it is unnecessary to give them political rights. Now 35 years have passed since the acquisition of political rights by our women. In these years Turkish women have founded several associations and joined the political parties. Actually there are some women deputies and senators in the Turkish Parliament. But today the most important problem which faces the intellectual women in Turkey is the situation of Turkish women who are living in rural areas. To be realistic, we have to confess that the situation for 80 % of Turkish women is not very different from the old times. In addition to the semi-conservative structure of the society, the economic dependence of woman, the selfishness of man and the domination of woman by their fathers, or husbands' ideas are the reasons for this situation. In the elections the political beliefs and behavior of Turkish women have been heavily dominated by men, especially in rural areas.

If the Turkish Revolution means the beginning of the emancipation of woman and even though clear provisions of our Constitution and laws helps such liberation, the social emancipation of woman has not been achieved in a perfect sense. And in the field of political participation there is a large apathy. To solve this problem the education of women is vital.

But in our opinion this problem can not be solved only by education. In addition to this the men must support women's rights.

CONCLUSION :

At the end of this paper we would like to point out that many promising efforts have been made, especially in the recent years, to realize women rights in practice. Some woman associations, namely The Turkish Women's Association, The Turkish Association of University-graduated Women, and the Turkish-American Women's

Cultural Association opened the gateway to many positive developments. Once it was said by a Turkish poet. «Mankind is humiliated if women are unesteemed». The intellectual Turkish woman knows that a modern society depends on enlightened women. This is our hope and pride for the future.