

WOMEN FOR WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS REPORTS NO. 2

**A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENT(S) IN TURKEY
(AND THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL DISCOURSES)**

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(Please note that the publication date for this paper is September 1997, and therefore it may not always reflect the most recent developments in Turkish society.)

PREFACE

The question of the status of women and women's movements in Muslim communities has started to draw increasingly more attention in recent years. This booklet draws a picture of the status of the women's movement in Turkey, including its historical roots as well as present scope, taking a critical approach in describing the movement within the context of prevailing political discourses. It outlines an analysis of how these discourses constitute a continuation of the historical debates among Islam, nationalism and westernisation.

Moreover, it tries to identify possible problem areas like the current polarisation between women working within an Islamist framework and women working within a secular framework, as well as barriers and promoters to bridging the lack of dialogue between various women's groups. We emphasise that this lack of dialogue has had a negative impact on the women's movement. Ideological differences have prevented adherents of different political and philosophical orientations from combining their efforts to increase solidarity and collaboration in working towards advocating women's rights in Turkey.

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THE RECENT SITUATION IN TURKEY

Recent developments in Turkey, including the rise of a new feminist movement since the 80's and a parallel rise in Islamic fundamentalism supported by women Islamic activists, present a confusing picture of Turkish women not only to outsiders, but even to Turkish women themselves. Despite its vast potential, the women's movement in Turkey seems overwhelmed as it fights for better legal, economic and social rights with increasing radicalism on one hand and is confronted with the threat of spreading fundamentalism, ongoing militarism, nationalism and the violation of human rights on the other.

The rise of fundamentalism in Turkey includes elements such as: women's demonstrations to demand the right to cover their heads in universities and government offices; the victory of the Islamic Welfare Party in 37 provinces, including cities like Istanbul and Ankara, in the 1994 local elections and its triumph in the 1995 general election, based on a steady increase in its share of the popular vote, including many women.¹ On the other hand, the threat of the Welfare Party coming to power has also produced new tactics by many women and social democrats. Many of them voted, not for the parties for which they would normally vote, but for parties which were perceived as having the best chance of forming a majority and preventing the Welfare Party from coming to power. The slogan was "Let's block the Welfare Party by not dividing the vote."

Many in Turkey see the rise of fundamentalism and the Welfare Party as a shocking threat that needs to be vigorously opposed. But there are others who insist on understanding, tolerating and maintaining a dialogue with the Islamic movement and claim that it is part of democracy. The latter oppose any prohibitions related to religious freedom and exhibit post-modernist tendencies in their discourses.

The current situation and discourse become even more complex when one considers that there is no "one single Islam" and no "one single and homogeneous Islamic or fundamentalist movement" in Turkey, just as there is no one single Islam or a homogeneous fundamentalist movement in the rest of the world.

If we oversimplify the current debate in Turkey, we can say that the main themes of the present discourse are support for, or opposition to, Kemalism and different perspectives on gender roles. I believe that the present discourse has its roots in earlier discourses about modernism and westernisation, Islamism and nationalism of the nineteenth century and that the women's movement in Turkey has not yet succeeded in freeing itself from the hindering consequences of these discourses.

¹ *In the 1995 general elections the Welfare Party won 21.4% of the vote, a rise of 4% compared with the local elections in 1994. There are contradicting opinions about the evaluation of this increase. According to one opinion, this is the maximum of votes they can reach, whereas others argue that they can increase their votes further if the economic and social problems in Turkey remain further unresolved.*

In order to have a deeper understanding of this confusing picture, we need to examine the historical changes that have occurred since the nineteenth century.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Until the political reforms of Sultan Abdulmejid in 1839, which are known as the “Beneficial Reforms”, there was no unified legal code in the Ottoman Empire. The law was applied differently to different members of society, depending on their social status, gender, profession, religion or religious sect. The Quran formed the basis of the family law, which in turn determined the status of women. There was no civil marriage. A special contract between a man and a woman made in the presence of two witnesses was deemed sufficient to validify a marriage. For Muslims, it had become traditional for an *imam* or *kadı* (religious judge) to preside over the marriage ceremony because of the importance given to marriage; although their presence was not required by law. There was no age limit for marriage. The marriage contract took place between the man and the woman, or the woman’s guardian. The sole condition was that both the man and the woman gave their consent. The right of divorce was granted only to men, who could use it as they wished. The act of divorce was not dependent on any legal justification or framework. There was no need to seek the consent of the woman or the approval of a judge. In case of divorce the man automatically assumed all custodial rights over any children. An Islamic right, “tefviz-i talak”, which also made it possible for women to divorce, was neither known nor practiced by the majority of the population. It was used only for daughters of the sultan, to enable them to divorce their husbands easily, should they so wish. Theoretically, women had the right to use their property as they wished, but in practice it was normally their husbands who made such decisions. Women had fewer rights in terms of inheritance. For example, female children could inherit only half of what male children inherited. In courts of law, two female witnesses were considered to be equal to one male witness (Çakır, 1994).

In the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the status and role of “women” attracted the attention of the modernisation movement, which identified with Western universality. The elite of the westernisation movement claimed that the only way to attain Western universality was through the liberalisation of women and their liberation from Islamic tradition. Asım (1910), in his book “Türk Kadınlığının Tereddidi Yahut Karışmak” (The Degeneration of Turkish Women or Womanization), goes further to argue that the economic, social, educational and cultural problems of Ottoman society are based on the exclusion of women from social life and their reduction to mere sexual objects.

However, Islamic conservatives have viewed attempts to liberalise women and change their traditional roles with considerable skepticism.

In a way, the history of the modernisation movement in Turkey is the struggle between these two movements: the westernisation movement and the Islamic movement. Although the content of, and the actors in, this struggle have continued to change throughout history,

it is striking to note that the role of women in society is still one of the main subjects of debate in Turkey as we approach the twenty-first century.

With the initiation of social reforms during the Reform Period, there was an attempt to standardise and codify the legal system and to unify the law. There was also a heated debate on the status of women. During the period between the “Beneficial Reforms” and the second constitutional period in 1908, the modernists particularly criticised arranged marriages, polygamy and gender segregation; and advocated the free access of women to education and “free love”. The conservatives, on the other hand, saw these reforms as being influenced by western thought and a threat to the prevailing cultural identity; and they stressed the need to preserve the current status of women. The defenders of Islamic thought have subsequently attempted to limit the effects of modernisation to the technical, administrative and material domains, to build the future on the foundations of the past. They have constantly emphasised the importance of the cultural and the ethical legacy of Turkish society. They maintain that the dominant role of sharia, the Islamic law, in gender relationships is a precondition for the preservation of ethics and moral values. The defenders of modernisation, on the other hand, from the reformists of the nineteenth century to the Kemalists of the Republican Period, have taken a holistic approach to civilisation and sought to change traditions in an attempt to catch up with contemporary modern values. For them, education and the “liberalisation” of women have been preconditions for attaining this goal (Göle, 1992).

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT DURING THE OTTOMAN PERIOD

While the debate between modernists and Islamists dominated the discourse during the Reform Period, it is also worth examining the women's movement in the Ottoman Empire. In her book on the women's movement in the nineteenth century, Çakır (1994) mentions about 40 women's magazines which were published before the foundation of the Republic in 1923 as well as several women's associations and groups. Although there are vast differences between the perspectives and demands of these women's groups, the common demands of the progressive groups included: the right of divorce for women; the prohibition of polygamous and arranged marriages; the right to work and the creation of jobs for women; the reform of the educational system; and a woman's right to education.

Şeni (1990) argues that the dress code was also an important theme for the reformists and the conservatives during this period of modernisation. The dress code for women had become a symbol of support for, or opposition to, Westernisation. It is noteworthy that even the progressive women activists of the time felt it necessary to keep their demands about the dress code as modest as possible. They demanded a “national dress code for women which allows them to work, but which is modest and without ornaments” (Çakır, 1994). It seems that even the women activists had to make compromises in this area because of the sensitivity of the subject as regards the religious feelings of the public. They chose to compromise in order to maintain good relations with the public, preferring to work for women's rights in other areas (İlyasoğlu, 1994 and Çakır, 1994). Mert (1983) argues that women writers were affected by the nationalist movement of the time. Their demand

for a national dress code and the use of national products was also a way of resisting the impact of European fashions and creating a national identity.

Another interesting phenomenon is the use of the Islamic dress code (*çarşaf*) by women activists during the War of Independence between 1918-1923, even though it was far from being the fashion for the socio-economic classes to which these women belonged. İlyasoğlu (1994) concludes that this reflected an effort by the women activists to bridge the gap between themselves and the “women on the street”. Moreover, by wearing the *çarşaf*, women activists felt that they were able to establish equality with women of other classes and anonymity in the struggle for independence.

THE KEMALIST REVOLUTION

The Independence War ended with the victory of the reformists not only against foreign occupying armies but also against conservative forces at home. The foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 was followed by the introduction of several revolutionary changes for women. In 1926 the introduction of the Turkish Civil Code banned polygamy and granted women equal rights in matters of divorce and child custody. Women were finally enfranchised in 1934. The civil code in particular was an important victory over the advocates of sharia. If we look at other examples of Middle Eastern countries, such as Egypt or Iran of the Shah Period, we see that they underwent similar attempts at Westernisation but that these stopped short of reforming the code of family laws or introducing changes in the status of women in society. From this perspective, the early and uncompromising nature of the so-called “Kemalist revolution” becomes even more striking (Arat, 1994).

According to Tekeli (1982), the women’s rights granted by Kemalists were intended to destroy the links back to the Ottoman Empire and to strike at the foundations of the religious hegemony. Indeed, it seems that the official Kemalist position on the status of women is restricted to the framework of secularism and reform of the Islamic way of life instead of the actual liberalisation of women in real life. Thus, women were instrumentalised once more, this time in line with the Republican ideology, as the “protectors” of secularism and the “new Republic” just as they have been instrumentalised by the conservatives, for whom the women have served as the “protectors” of family values and the social status quo. Although women were granted many rights on paper, the mechanisms to facilitate the use of these rights were not realised. As a consequence, the women who were able to benefit from the granted rights constituted only a small minority: mostly women of higher socioeconomic classes in large cities such as Istanbul, Izmir and Ankara and the wives and daughters of the Kemalist bureaucracy who were the propagators of the new official ideology.

THE SITUATION AFTER THE KEMALIST REVOLUTION

Even several decades after the granting of women's rights by the Kemalist revolution little had changed in the lives of the majority of women living in Turkey. In 1955 the percentage of paid women workers was still only 3.8%. In 1975 51.8% of women were still illiterate although primary education has been mandatory ever since the Kemalist revolution (Özbudun, 1994).

The official discourse has been that the problem of the status of women has been solved and that Turkish women should consider themselves “lucky” because they were granted specific rights before their European counterparts. Unfortunately, this discourse has been internalised by many women who were able to benefit from the new possibilities of the young republic, such as professional women living in big cities or women of the bureaucratic elite. As a result, most of the women’s groups and associations formed during the post-republican era have concentrated on “helping” women living in the villages, instead of questioning the role that the Republic had determined for them. Moreover, the dichotomy they perceived between themselves and the rural women hindered their understanding of the problems and potentials of these women, whom they were supposedly trying to “help”.

Another development which took place after the death of Mustafa Kemal, was that radical secularism had began to lose momentum, particularly during the Democratic Party government of the 50’s. In order to win the votes of the rural population, the Democratic Party tolerated, even supported, the activities of religious orders. The number of Quran courses increased in all Anatolian cities and the “Imam Hatip Schools”² became a part of the official educational system.

In the legal domain, the first effort to reform the Turkish Civil Code of 1926 to the advantage of women took place in 1951. Since 1951 there have been numerous commissions formed by the Ministry of Justice and several proposals have been prepared by them. In brief, none of the proposals prepared by the various commissions over the last 45 years have even become a draft law, let alone being passed as a bill. The patriarchal system is at its most intractable in its resistance to reforming the institutions of marriage and the family. The only change in the framework of the Turkish Civil Code was the bill facilitating the act of divorce in 1988 (Ekren, 1993).

Despite the Turkish constitution’s guarantee that women and men are equal and enjoy equal rights, several laws, especially those in the marriage and family section of the Turkish Civil Code, reduce women to a subordinate position in the family. For example, the husband is defined as the head of the marriage union, thus granting him the final say over the choice of domicile as well as the final say concerning children. Adultery laws discriminate against women, making it easier for a man to initiate divorce based on his wife’s alleged adultery than vice versa. A married woman cannot procure an abortion without her husband's permission.

² *Imam Hatip Schools have the function of educating religious clergy.*

Although a proposal to amend these laws has been presented to the National Assembly since 1984, and various women's groups have also submitted several petitions to the National Assembly urging its acceptance, there has been no change to date.

Traditional and contemporary patriarchy also dominate other areas of life. Fifty percent of the Turkish population still lives in rural areas and women working in the agricultural sector are mostly unpaid family workers. The percentage of paid women workers is a mere 16.1% in urban areas (IVth World Women's Conference, Turkey National Report, 1994). Women who have migrated from rural areas normally become homemakers or do piecework at home without any social security. Equal pay for equal work exists on paper, but in practice women have the less well paid professions and jobs. Those women who enjoy access to higher education and have a profession are mostly from the upper classes or from bureaucratic families living in big cities. The majority of women living in cities still define themselves as homemakers.

The representation of women at the parliament is still as low as 2.3% despite the appointment of a female prime minister in 1993.³

Although primary education has been mandatory since 1924, 32% of the women living in Turkey are still illiterate, according to the population census of 1985. Most of the illiterate women are of Kurdish origin, either living in the Eastern and South-Eastern regions of Turkey or in large cities after having migrated from these regions.

Women have had free access to abortion, including in state hospitals, since 1983. But if they cannot provide proof of their husband's consent, the state hospitals are entitled to refuse to perform the abortion. Moreover, many women living in rural areas do not have any practical access to this right as health services in many regions are either absent or insufficient.

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT DURING THE 1980'S AS A NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENT

Political movements with right and left-wing ideologies dominated political debate and action in the 1960's and 1970's in Turkey as a reaction to strong state controls. In this environment, women's issues were consequently subsumed to Marxist discourses. This was also the case for women activists of the left movement.

In 1980 the military intervention, which was touted as the "the only way to put an end to the anarchic atmosphere" of the 70's, suppressed all kinds of social opposition by force, applied a systematic depoliticisation of the masses and formed the basis of neo-liberalist policies proposed by the IMF and capitalist forces. In this atmosphere of repression and fear, the first new social movement which demonstrated the courage to be in opposition and

³ *It might be interesting to note that this percentage is even lower than the percentage of women in the parliament in 1935, which was 4.6%, after the enfranchisement of women in 1934.*

articulate its demands was the women's movement. Several feminist magazines began publication, producing a lively debate on women's rights and the role of the state in supporting the patriarchal system. Women organized several campaigns and demonstrations to realise their demands. In the legal sphere, they succeeded in the cancellation of two articles of laws which discriminated against women. Article 438 of the Turkish Penal Code, which provided for reduced sentences for rape if the victims were sex workers, was repealed by the Turkish parliament after much public outcry. Article 159 of the Turkish Civil Code, which decreed that a married woman must have her husband's implicit or explicit consent to work, was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court as a result of a landmark case brought to court through the advocacy efforts of women's groups (Özbudun, 1994).

Another tangible success of the women's movement has been breaking the taboos about violence against women in the family. Several women's shelters were established in the 80's as a result of the efforts of the women's advocacy groups, but at the moment only two autonomous shelters remain. The existence of the shelter in Ankara was recently threatened by the local municipality, which is controlled by the Welfare Party. The others have been closed down by other parties, including the True Path Party of Tansu Çiller.

THE PRESENT SITUATION OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

At the beginning of the 90's, the women's movement in Turkey appeared to have lost its initial power of activism and influence in the restructuring of Turkish society⁴. This is the result of several factors. For a start, the main discourses of the nineteenth century, namely Modernism, which formed the foundation of Kemalism during the twentieth century, Islamism and Nationalism are still present. The women's movement has not yet managed to free itself from these discourses and to form its own discourse. Hence, it has been unable to develop a critical approach to all of them as elements of the patriarchal system. Instead, women's groups engage in the ongoing debates, investing their energies in becoming part of the established hegemonies and thus dividing their own power. At the beginning of the 90's, the women's movement appeared to be divided into three conflicting wings, namely: the secular or Kemalist feminists, the radical feminists and the so-called "Islamic feminists". The secular/Kemalist feminists perceive the rise of the Islamic movement as the main threat and are willing to cooperate with the state in order to try to head off this danger; and they perceive the women activists in the Islamic movement as their enemies or reduce them to ignorant beings "who are being used as instruments by the male activists of the Islamic movement." However, Göle, in her research on the women activists of the Islamic movement, concludes that women in the Islamic movement skillfully use the "space of opportunity" provided by Kemalism in restructuring the traditional gender roles and overcoming the Islamic prohibitions on women. According to Göle, "Islam is no longer

⁴ 1996-97 witnessed the emergence of new autonomous women's organizations such as KA-DER, which aims to increase the percentage of women in Parliament, EŞ-İZ (The Equality Watch Committee) and KA-MER (the Diyarbakır Women's Center, which is the first women's NGO in the South-eastern region of Turkey where an armed conflict is going on), as well as the feminist periodicals *Roza* and *Jujin* initiated and published by Kurdish women.

against modernism, it has rather become an instrument of life in coping with modern society” (Göle, 1992). The radical feminists are perceived as the ones who “dare” to criticise the present status of women in Turkey - a criticism beyond the issue of liberalism which Kemalism promised to realise. Specifically, the women involved in the anti-violence campaign and Duygu Asena, the first popular feminist journalist who has started a number of popular women’s magazines in Turkey, are perceived as being in this group. Unfortunately, the so-called radical feminists remain only a handful and are cited in the media as such. The Islamic feminists were the women writers of the fundamentalist movement who entered into polemics with the male members of the same movement at the end of the 80’s. This will be discussed in more detail in the latter sections of this paper. Unfortunately, aside from this much-cited polemic that has been taking place since 1987, there has not been any other obvious sign of an Islamic feminist movement. The women in this movement who are interested in women’s issues, or critical of the current status of women in society, seem to concentrate their critiques on the unfulfilled promises of Kemalism or capitalism for women rather than the role of women in Islam.

The Turkish women’s movement has also failed to bring a substantial critical approach to militarism and the on-going war in Eastern and South-eastern Turkey, the rise of a new nationalism and the official discourses of the state on Turkish identity, in which it claims that all the citizens living within the boundaries of Turkey are “Turks”. Aside from some initiatives condemning racism, there is almost no effort to solidarise and engage in networking with Kurdish women to bring solutions to their specific problems. The issues around sex, freedom of sex, critiques of the heterosexual model, the redefinition of female sexuality or lesbianism are still not on the agenda of the women’s movement.

Another problem of the women’s movement seems to be the lack of networking among different groups in order to ensure effective lobbying. Women for Women’s Human Rights (WWHR) has succeeded in laying the foundations of a network between women activists in the West and Kurdish women living in the Eastern and South-eastern regions of Turkey. Although this has been accomplished for the first time ever in Turkey, the establishment of a more widespread network has yet to be realised. This problem is not unique to the Turkish women’s movement. What is specific to Turkey, however, is the small number of autonomous women’s groups and the almost non-existent paid work places for women activists due to the shortage of funds and the lack of state support for NGOs. The concept of professional NGOs has only begun to develop in last few years, but there appears to be a long way to go before they reach a level where they are able to apply pressure to the state and other social institutions. As a result, networking efforts are often inconclusive. Moreover, the dichotomy between women of higher education and socioeconomic classes and women who live in rural areas or are less well educated continues to increase instead of diminishing. The women’s movement is still dominated by a small group of intellectual and/or academic women and reaching the masses is still not one of its aims.

Interestingly, women active in the Islamic movement seem to have overcome this problem. They are quite successful in utilising this potential by including in their networking women from rural areas and less well-educated women who have migrated to the cities.

WOMEN IN THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT

Women active in the Islamic movement are attracting increasingly more attention from the public and social researchers. Their motives for engaging in political Islamic activity after 70 years of secularism are undoubtedly quite complex. This section will outline some observations, and try to avoid the danger of over-simplification. The main change in the lives of women after the Kemalist revolution came through migration to the cities as a result of the mechanisation of agriculture, industrialisation, and the division of land among a rapidly growing population. The migrants formed shanty-town areas around Turkey's cities, creating their own sub-culture and dynamics. For women, the main effects of migration were leaving agricultural production and becoming a housewife, or starting to work in marginal sectors with no social security such as domestic services or piecework for manufacturing. The increase in the votes of the Welfare Party in the 90's cannot be understood without taking into consideration the huge rate of migration from the countryside to the cities.

MIGRATION, WOMEN AND THE RISE OF THE WELFARE PARTY

Migration to the cities has increased rapidly in the last decade, exacerbated by the military presence and human rights violations in Eastern and South-eastern Turkey. At the moment, a sizeable proportion of the population of Turkey has migrated from one place to another in the last ten years. The government provides hardly any social services or support programs for migrant women living on the outskirts of major cities. The number of women's NGOs in these areas is quite limited and they receive almost no financial support from the government. To a large extent, these women, who have even lost the advantages of agricultural production and their traditional network of support, are left alone to combat the effects of migration. They are now confronted with a new way of life and a new set of values, mostly worse economic conditions, failing sanitary and health services, a lack of educational opportunities and changing paradigms in their family life, such as being reduced to dependence on their husbands and subjected to their violence.

The often cited women's legal rights granted by the Kemalist revolution have very little or no meaning for these women, if any, as they are usually neither aware of these rights nor of ways of realising them in practice. Under these conditions, it is the Welfare Party with its excellent networking and organization that offers the migrant populations financial support, spiritual solidarity, political activity and a sense of identity. The women's branch of the Welfare Party works better than the women's branch of any other party in Turkey. Welfare Party activists go from door to door in areas inhabited by migrants distributing food, offering health services and social support. They invite and welcome the women to their local organization, thus also providing them with the opportunity for political participation. Contrary to the women activists of the feminist movement, the activists of the Welfare Party have developed strategies to analyse and respond to the needs of women of lower socioeconomic and educational levels. They not only respond to their material needs, such as food, health or child care, but also to non-material needs such as belonging to a group,

self-identity, empowerment and political participation. They hold regular meetings with them, listen to their problems (including problems resulting from being a woman) with a sympathetic ear, and give them the feeling that they belong to a group by inviting and making them feel welcome in their organization structures. This is especially important for women who have recently migrated to the cities, who have lost their traditional network of support and are confronted with a drastic change in value systems. Moreover, they invite and motivate them to join their political organization, which gives them a feeling of empowerment. They have the feeling that they might be able to influence the system with which they are unhappy. Turkish feminists appear to be neither sufficiently organized nor sufficiently motivated to reach out to these groups and include them in their discourses and structures.

Another interesting phenomenon is the efforts of the Welfare Party to portray a “liberal” image of itself in terms of the “women question”. One example was the recruitment of ex-porno stars or fashion models as members of the party, whose claims to have found the “right path” inevitably attracted considerable attention from the media. This strategy of the Welfare Party is an attempt to prove their ability to cope with the contemporary way of life in the cities. Thus, they aim to attract the votes of those who have internalised such values. Until the 1995 general elections, the party also generously promised to include women in their list of candidates. The 1995 elections came as a shock for many women activists in the party: when the list of candidates was announced, there was not a single woman among them. Yet, despite the extensive media coverage, there were only a few who openly expressed any protest. The majority tried to defend their party, explaining this open discrimination by saying that the party was trying to protect women as, according to the dress codes of the Republic, women are not allowed to cover their heads in parliament. The long-term effect of unfulfilled promises on women voters and party activists is still unclear.

What makes the “Turkish experiment” so interesting, however, is the fact that the women activists within the fundamentalist movement have also been influenced by the new women’s movement in Turkey, just like the other political discourses. Some women writers of the movement who have had the courage to engage in difficult polemics with their male counterparts have been met with strong reactions. Mualla Gülnaz writes in *Zaman*, a newspaper of the fundamentalist movement: “Yes! Feminism calls upon the women to stand up against male dominance. At home, at work, on the street. Why are people so afraid of that? Isn't it possible to think of giving up dominance instead of polemics? We must accept the fact that it is difficult to give up habits, especially such comforting habits” (*Zaman*, 1.9.1987, as cited by Göle (1992), p. 121).

Another woman writer, Yıldız Kavuncu, writes: “Why do Muslim men fear women who know and learn? Because it’s easy to have power over women who are solely busy with their husbands and are isolated from the outer world and to make them adore oneself. When women are able to receive education and realise themselves, and view their environment with a critical eye, they make men fear. Actually, the type of woman who is pleased with everything, namely the ‘sleeping beauty’ type is quite attractive” (*Zaman*, 29.29.1987, as cited by Göle (1992), p. 124).

It is worth noting here the perspective of the sociologist Şerif Mardin. Mardin (1983) argues that the gap between the Kemalist elitists and the others, as well as the failure of the Kemalist state to develop mechanisms to facilitate the realisation of granted rights for the majority, form the basis of a social dynamic in which people approach religion and religious groups in order to develop strategies to cope with life.

Women who have little access to formal education will continue to take advantage of education in religious schools provided by the Islamists. Women who have little access to participation in political life will instead seize the opportunity of engaging in Islamic women's groups with their excellent organization and networking. And women who receive no state support in social services will not, of course, reject the offers of support and financial help from religious groups and activists. There can be no doubt that for many this is a form of emancipation, even if it's not a "feminist" one as defined by many feminists.

Surely, the rise of the fundamentalist movement in Turkey and the large number of its women supporters cannot be solely explained by the material or social gains this movement is offering to certain groups. There is quite a large number of intellectual and educated women, even daughters of hard-core Kemalists, who support the fundamentalist movement. One representative of this group, Sibel Eraslan, was the head of the women's branch of the Welfare Party until 1994 and describes her father as a Kemalist military officer who traditionally voted for the DSP (Democratic Socialist Party). She describes his reaction when he became aware of her interest in the movement: "One day, someone had given me a book by Bediüzzaman⁵ as a present and I was reading it with a great interest. When my father saw it, he tore it into pieces. He said, 'I have spent all my life struggling against these people, now you bring them home. Should I have experienced such a thing, my God!'" Eraslan explains her motives behind her decision to become active in the fundamentalist movement as a longing for brother/sisterhood, equality and social peace, equality between people of different color or different economic status and a 'reactionary soul' against the present system. As a result, within four years she organized 18,000 women for the women's branch of the party and reached 200,000 women per month (Pazartesi, no. 6, September 1995). In an environment where there are large income differences, inadequate health and social services, a lack of security and the violation of women's and human rights; a dysfunctional justice system and insecurity about the future, all aggravated by a strong tension of traditional versus modern values, Islam seems able to promise a system of justice, equality, security, peace and unity. With the struggle to enter the European Union on one hand, and the victory of the Welfare Party on the other hand, Turkey seems again to be at the crossroads of traditionalism versus modernism, secularism versus fundamentalism, East versus West. As has been traditionally the case, the vast differences in future projections by different individuals and groups include the role and status of women.

⁵ The name given to Said-i Nursi (1876-1960) by his students. Said-i Nursi has been the founder and the leader of the "Nurculuk" movement, one of the strongest fundamentalist movements in Turkey.

The discourses of westernisation, secularism, the Islamic movement, nationalism or left or right-wing ideologies have traditionally instrumentalised women or the “status and role of women in the society”; but none has really included women’s rights as one of their objectives. The current women’s movement is confronted with the task of making its own analysis beyond the present national and international discourses and including in this analysis women who do not have any access to the prevailing political and power system or information channels. Establishing of solidarity with these women and their empowerment would strengthen the women’s movement and provide the opportunity to define and realise our demands through triggering social changes despite the strong patriarchal resistance. The advantage of the current situation is the opportunity it provides for re-evaluating perspectives that have become obsolete, and for increased creativity in redefining the present dynamics and our course of action.

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