Feminism in Turkey

Turkey occupies a unique position in the world, occupying land in two continents. It acts as a bridge between the Muslim world and Europe. This geographic position, along with the political position outside of the first world but not in the third world makes the situation of women in Turkey particularly interesting. In this case as in all, knowledge of the past is necessary in understanding the present.

Women’s issues first became public issues in the mid 1800’s, when the Ottoman Empire was trying to modernize itself. The state decided to promote women’s education, with the goal of widening the labor pool in some areas (Arat: 7). This education was very gender specific, though, educating women in things like midwifery, crafts, and teaching. In this same time period, women made other small gains like equal inheritance rights to male siblings.

As Arat explains in the introduction to her book, women gained even more once the constitutional monarchy was in place in 1908, to the point where they were starting women’s groups for both popular issues and issues specific to women. These groups, though, were made up of educated upper class women who were admittedly detached from the issues of the majority. The issues that they addressed were women’s rights within Islam, inequalities within the family, education, the right to work, and to participate in the public life (Arat: 10).

In 1923 Mustafa Kemel Atatürk created the Republic of Turkey. Atatürk wanted to create a modern secularist state where all people were equal. Free education was implemented for all people, and primary school was mandatory for both sexes. In 1926 the Family Law was passed. This code abolished polygamy, set a minimum age for marriage, gave women the right
to choose their spouses, initiate divorce, and have equal rights to men in some areas, like inheriting and maintaining property and testifying in court, and only a few years later had the right to hold political office (Arat:15). Women received the right to vote in 1934, ahead of many fully western countries (National Library of Turkey). Despite all these changes in official policy that to a large extent satisfied the upper-class women, actual changes have only happened very slowly for most women since then.

The reasons that the changes had such little effect are the same reasons that we’ve seen in many other countries: women don’t live in a vacuum. Turkey’s tradition of patriarchy was not to be so easily overcome, and the common people themselves are one of the main obstacles to women’s equality. Women still marry early, and this often cuts short their education, if they hadn’t stopped it already to prevent being unmarriageable based on having more education than her potential spouses (Özbay: 103). It is also still common practice to force lesbians to marry (Burn: 85). Also as in many other countries (including the U.S.) the practice of men working outside of the home placed more burdens on the woman- the food production, all the household chores, and child-care, which the husbands would have helped with for the sons. More emphasis is placed on the woman as the reproducer of values.

In the 1970’s some leftist groups admitted that there was a women’s problem, but they didn’t want to divert any of their energy to it. Women of this time wouldn’t admit to being feminists because of the general disdain for feminism within the movement. On 1980, a military regime took power and martial law was declared (Ege). Within the next three years, the government took many people prisoner, and women protested based on their relationship to those taken, as we have seen in Latin American Countries. Women were even blamed for producing enemies of the state (Ege).
In the 1980’s women’s groups started coming to the surface again. In 1984, an organization called the Women's Group was formed, and soon after that the Thursday Group, the Women's Association against Discrimination-Sexism, the Kaktüs (Cactus) Magazine, the Feminist Magazine (Ege). Some examples of newer feminist groups in Turkey, according to e-start Turkey, are

“Foundation for Women's Solidarity aims at raising public awareness about and fighting against violence towards women; the Association for Supporting and Educating Women Candidates works towards increasing the involvement of Turkish women in politics and their representation in the national assembly; and the Association for Supporting Contemporary Life organizes ongoing projects to improve the education, skills and social status of Turkish women”(e-start).

That these groups show that more and more people are willing to identify themselves as feminists.

One of the newer groups, Peace Mothers Initiative, is a group of Kurdish women who are politically active in the issues and separatism of this ethnic minority in Turkey (AKIN). These women, as well as other political prisoners in Turkey, are subject to torture in prison. Amnesty International reports that women are subject to rape, electroshocks, and beatings (Amnesty Int.).

This group put together one of the many conferences that Turkish feminists have participated in- the International Women's Conference for Peace that took place in Istanbul in 1996 that had the aim of bring to light and trying to end the “dirty war” against Kurds in Turkey (AKIN). Other conferences that Turkish women have participated in include 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), where they pronounced their main issues to be
women's education, training, health and the fight against domestic violence, which is very widespread, and was in fact legitimized by a judge in 1987 (e-start).

Other issues that Turkish women deal with are the ability to express their sexuality, the ability to express their Muslim identities through veil wearing in government (which is currently illegal), and some issues that should sound familiar to American women. These other issues are the so-called “double shift” in which women who work outside the home are responsible for both their jobs and all or most of the domestic tasks, and the multiple conflicting ideals of motherhood and freedom, sex-object and virgin. This last issue has been of recent importance because in 2001 the Health Minister reinstated virginity tests for some female high-school students and some women prisoners (Amnesty Int.). Virginity is seen as very important to personal and familial honor, and there are still cases of honor-killings in Turkey when women are raped or have sex outside of marriage.

Things are changing for the better though, and one sign of was the election of Tansu Ciller in 1993 as Prime Minister of Turkey. Though she was not much liked, just the fact that a woman could get elected to such a high office is indicative of positive change (Burn, 203).

Women in Turkey also are involved in the labor force more and more- in 1981, women were 18.7% of Turkeys lawyers and 16% of doctors, compared to 3% and 6% respectively in the U.S. (Erturk: 141). With information like this, the growing number of women involved in groups and in politics, it looks like things will only continue to get better for women in Turkey.
Bibliography


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