

ATINER CONFERENCE PRESENTATION SERIES No: LIT2021-0232

**ATINER's Conference Paper Proceedings Series**

LIT2021-0232

Athens, 11 February 2022

**Significant Developments in Women's Rights during  
the Atatürk Period (1920-1938)**

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Athens, 11 February 2022

ISSN: 2529-167X

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**ABSTRACT**

Turkish woman, who stood side by side with men under equal conditions throughout history, started wearing the hijab, were entrapped in their houses with their rights revoked during the Ottoman Empire. Turkish women also struggled for independency under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in saving the lands of the country occupied by the imperialists. Many legal arrangements, especially the Civil Law, were desired for Turkish woman with their rights secured and liberated during the period of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who closely followed the modern world, knew various languages, paid special visits to European countries, read a lot of books, was fluent in French, German and English. Particular emphasis was placed on the education of women in the society, educators from abroad were introduced and a new education system was established, students were sent abroad for education. In a very short time, women had many rights before their contemporaries.

**Keywords:** Atatürk, women's rights, education, law

## **Introduction**

The aim of our study, which we dealt with in the historical process by using 1st and 2nd hand sources, is to reveal the developments in women's rights in the Atatürk Period. Because the rights of Turkish women have undergone significant changes in the historical process.

There have been important changes in the position of the Turkish woman during the history. The profile of women before the acceptance of Islam, where we can talk about the equality of men and women, is a horse riding, an arrow shooting, a warrior; a woman is also the guardian of the castle, the governor and the infidel (Doğramacı 1997: 3). Public authority was equally gathered in "hakan" and "hatun", they sat together in feasts, worshipping in congresses and ceremonies in war and peace congresses. With the transition to a settled order and the influence of Islamic culture, significant changes occurred in the position and social life of the Turkish woman, women started to move away from social life (Arat 1986: 73).

With the conquest of Istanbul and the effect of social life of the Byzantine Empire, linen and veil of women became widespread garments. This style of clothing and curfew had been made a rule throughout the country and implemented with edicts. Another factor that separated women from social life was the psycho-social problem brought by polygamy. Divorce in social life, which was organized entirely in accordance with the principles of Islamic law, did not depend on women's consent neither was marriage. However, the situation of women living in the countryside was different. They contributed to production by working in the field and were involved in economic life.

Women in the Ottoman Empire, In the II. Constitutional period, mad demands by taking the developments in Europe as an example. These demands, which were to be liberated, to be accepted as the second half of the society, to get the status they deserve in the society, to take part in political and working life, were only met with reforms made by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk after the War of Independence. In order for all these demands to be fulfilled, the struggle for independence had to be won under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Kaymaz 2010: 333-366). Therefore, the role of women was very important in winning the War of Independence. Women who established associations that collected money and aid materials for the Kuvayı Milliye (people's army) by summoning for help from the people. In addition, the sultan, the government, were organized to protest telegrams to the representatives of the Collusion States and some international organizations (Kurnaz 1992: 155-157). The most active of these were established by Sivas Governor Reşit Pasha's wife Melek after the Sivas Congress and Kayseri, Niğde, Bolu, Amasya, Erzincan, Burdur, Anatolian Women's Defense Association, which opened branches in hubs such as Kangal and Pınarhisar, another one is the Asri Women's Association (Caporal 1982: 17).

Women from the nearby towns belonging to the middle class used to produce all kinds of clothing materials for the soldiers at the front as well as preparing food for the soldiers. The women in the villages who were soldier-military officer

wives and daughters carried food, bullets, water and ammunition to the front, also working as care givers to the wounded soldiers where the facades were located. Another of the most important contributions of women to the War of Independence was that they fought against the enemy, mostly villager women and military-officer wives. Fatma Onbaşı, Kara Fatma, Elifçik, Fatma Seher, Tayyar Rahmiye, Hatice Hatun, Gördesli Makbule, Asker Salme Hanım, Ayşe Hanım, Yemine Vardarlı, Adile Onbaşı, Nezahat... are some of them. Mustafa Kemal Pasha said that "*I worked more than Anatolian women, I worked as much as Anatolian women to lead my nation to liberation and victory*" to the contribution of women in the War of Independence (TBMM 1984: 1-55). Due to the success of the Turkish woman in the War of Independence, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk said, "*The Turkish woman provided great help to the country during the war; she suffered like everyone else. She must be free today; must be educated, schools should be established, and have an equal position in the country as men. She has the right to do this*" (Velidedeoğlu 2010). He signaled what needs to be done to get women to the places they deserve.

### **The Female Population in the newly established Republic of Turkey**

The first census was conducted in 1927 in the new Turkish state, which was established after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Then, censuses were carried out in 1935 and 1940, once every 5 years.

**Table 1.** *Total Population, Female Population and Women's Population by Age Group*

Years	Total	Women	Womens Population by Age Group				
			5-9	10-14	15-19	25-29	30-34
1927	13.648.270	7.084.391	-	-	-	-	-
1935	16.158.018	8.221.248	1.127.759	745.981	485.865	640.153	721.286
1940	17.820.950	8.922.038	1.264.599	989.707	698.268	517.900	704.888

Source: Self created from TUIK data.

As can be seen in Table 1, in the 1927 census, no distinction was made according to age groups. In addition, it has been observed that there had been an increase in the war related recession of male population after the wars were won.

In the newly established state, where the literacy rate in the population was 10%, the elimination of this rate, which was much lower in women, had been determined as the main target. With this goal, it was ensured to switch to "Latin Letters" on November 1, 1928. For this purpose, mobilization was declared in the country in order to teach new letters to all citizens, men and women, and Millet Mektepleri were opened on January 1, 1929. In order to make the people literate, literacy courses had been organized in Turkish Quarries, Community Centers and Public Rooms. Between 1928 and 1937,

1,451,759 people graduated from Millet Mektepleri. 73% of them were men and 26.85% were women (Bozdemir, 2020: 1-27).

### **Women's Rights in Legal Regulations**

During the independence struggle against the ones occupying Anatolia, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey discussed the new state constitution where the foundation of the Law of Fundamental Organization on January 20, 1921 was adopted. It remained intact until 1924, together with the Kanun-i Esasi of the Ottoman Empire, which was adopted in 1876 and provided the transition to Constitutional Monarchy (Tanör 2006: 250).

The Teşkilat-ı Esasiye Law did not bring any innovation in terms of individual rights and freedoms. Because the constitution in question was designed under extraordinary conditions in a war conditions, it was prepared by the majority with aspirations of freedom, independence and public administration. However, in the 1st article of the Constitution, the expression “Sovereignty belongs to the nation unconditionally” (Karpat, 2007: 35), emphasized that sovereignty belongs to the whole nation without any discrimination between men and women This basic principle was included as the third article in the 1924 Constitution. Another important development is the elimination of the weight and bride token application, which was applied in marriage and which was aimed at women, that was adopted in 1921 (Gürkan 1980: 382-396). With the adoption of the constitution adopted on April 20, 1924 and implemented for 37 years, the constitutions of 1876 and 1921 were abolished. Under the title of the Law on Turks, which is one of the articles 68 and 88 of the 1924 Constitution; “Every Turk is born free and lives free. Freedom makes all kinds of savings that will not be harmful to anyone else. The limit of freedom of natural rights for everyone is the limit of freedom of others” (Tanör 2006: 308). All individuals were accepted as equal. This article was prepared as an individualist and libertarian by making use of the 1789 Declaration of Human and Citizen Rights (Bozkurt 2005: 73-93). It also includes classical rights and freedoms in the constitution; equality before the law, person immunity, conscience, thinking, speech, publication, travel, contract, work, property acquisition, right and freedom of assembly, association, association and partnership were all listed without much detail (Erkul, Kara, Yirmibeşoğlu 2009: 7-30).

Meanwhile, women had made various attempts to take part in political and social life. One of these activities was the establishment of the "Women's People's Party" in 1923, which was headed by Nezihe Muhuttin. When the governorship did not approve of the activity of Fırka, the name of the Turkish Women's Association was changed with a regulation change and the purpose of its establishment was; This time, the governorship gave approval to continue its existence as an association when it stated that “raising femininity in the intellectual and social areas and reaching a modern and mature level Turkish Women's Union will try to reach a level that will prove all kinds of

obligations and interests of the Turkish woman against social and political rights". Although the laws did not allow for an interim election to be held in Istanbul after the members of the Turkish Women's Union, they also applied for candidacy, but this was not possible (Yüceer 2008: 131-148).. Women had to wait until the 1930s to get this right.

With the dissolution of the Mebusan, which was under the occupation of the enemy, the 1st Assembly (TBMM) opened on April 23, 1920 at the end of the elections in Anatolia where there was no development related to women directly. During the election law discussions in 1923, Emin Bey and Tunalı Hilmi Bey initiated efforts to fulfill women's equality aspirations through legal regulations, but were not successful. Because, according to the election law, it was envisaged that a deputy would be elected in a place with a population of 50,000 men. However, these debates regarding the decrease in the male population in wars and the counting of women only to form the number of deputies in that region, could not be concluded (Turan 2005: 246).

In the constitution of 1924, which was amended seven times, women gained the right to choose and be elected with the important changes made in the articles 10 and 11 on behalf of women. One of the women's attempts to get involved in social and political life had been changed to "every Turkish man who has reached the age of 18 has the right to be elected as a deputy, every male who has completed the age of 30 has the right to be elected as a deputy". However, the age of deputy election has been increased to 22 with the women getting the right to vote. Thus, women participated in political life in the form of new management based on populism. With a law enacted prior to this, Women were given the right to vote in the municipal elections in 1930 with a series of laws, and to be elected to village headmen and delegations in 1933. In the parliamentary elections held on December 5, 1934, 18 women were elected. (Başgil 1956: 67).

The most important legal reform to add to the modern world is the Civil Code, which was adopted on February 17, 1926, which allowed women to be individualized and liberated (Hendrich; Kreiser, 2020, p.32). This law created important changes in the life of society with its secular, populist character, the Turkish woman had taken the place they deserved in the society equally. Also Jews living within the borders of Turkey with the adoption of the Civil Code, Orthodox, Catholic and Apostolic congregations had given up their rights provided in the Treaty of Lausanne to benefit from the provisions of the Civil Code (Ateş 2010: 240). The reason for this is that the Civil Code had adopted the principle of freedom.

The law also brought about equality between men and women in the marriage union, although there are restrictions against some women within the framework of benefiting from civil rights. "The husband is the head of the marriage union", that is, the family union is represented by the husband, whereas the woman had the power to represent the daily needs of the house. While they had the right to use custody rights over children during marriage, parents had agreed to the superiority of the father in the event of disagreement, and decided the validity of the game "(Gürkan 1981: 381-396) . Since the

separation of property was not adopted as the law regime of the marriage union, the woman became very victimized as a result of the divorce of the spouses. In terms of innovations, official marriage, single marriage and judge's divorce are important developments. (Ataay 2020: 1-58). The Law on Obligations, which came into force with the Civil Code, gave women the right to enter into any debt and obligation on an equal basis with men (Kaymaz 2010: 332-366).

With this constitution and some new laws, it was aimed to create a classless, privileged and fused society by raising body, mental and mental health, free and scientific thinking power, respectful to human rights, entrepreneurial, responsible for society, constructive, creative people. Thus, it is aimed to increase the welfare level of the Turkish society and to make the Turkish people a constructive existence and distinguished member of the civilized world in national unity and integrity (Tezcan 1985: 54). In line with this goal, the Turkish woman, who became the symbol of the War of Independence, was turned into the symbol of the modern regime and they were asked to give themselves a new identity. In this direction, many rights have been brought to Turkish women who would raise new generations. The woman, who is a part of the labor force, had acquired these rights before many countries in Europe and in the world to take part in social life and to make decision-making mechanisms. At first, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, including the Republic of Turkey's founders, gave great importance to training for the new state to be trained according to the requirements of the modern era of the individual and the regime in a healthy way aiming to ensure the executions order and continuity.

### **Developements in Education**

During the pre-establishment period of the regime, where education was considered as a vital issue, a struggle was made to save the country from the occupation, and on the other hand, the "Congress of Education" was held in Ankara on July 15, 1921. In the congress, where more than 250 female and male teachers came together, primary and secondary education programs, training of village teachers were discussed, but due to the war, the congress ended early (Akyüz 2001: 292-293).

After the Congress of Education, the "Tevhid-i Tedrisat" law, which was adopted in the Parliament with the number 430, dated March 3, 1924, aimed at achieving the innovation education unity, that was carried out in the first stage for the purpose of accelerated studies in the field of education after the Congress. Affiliated to the Ministry of Education and the madrasahs and the religious schools in the Ottoman Empire; There were secondary education institutions such as Sultanı, Rüşdiye, İdadiye and primary education institutions such as İptidai. In addition, the increasing number of minority and missionary schools were the institutions that were included in this system. People were educated differently from different schools, they did not

understand each other and their desires to live together did not develop. All scientific and educational institutions in the country, which are affiliated to the Ministry of Education had been provided from a single source. Thus, the secularized education has been made available to all citizens without any discrimination between men and women. This egalitarian approach in the 1924 Constitution was “compulsory for all Turks public schools are free of charge ” (Doyran 2004: 1-113).

**Table 2.** *Public and Private Elementary Schools total in Turkey, Students, Female Students & Women Teachers and the Number of Teachers (1923-1938)*

<b>Education Years</b>	<b>Total Schools</b>	<b>Total Students</b>	<b>Female Students</b>	<b>Total Teachers</b>	<b>Female Teachers</b>
1923-1924	4.894	341.941	62.954	10.238	1.217
1927-1928	6.043	461.985	133.969	15.194	4.246
1937-1938	6.700	764.691	254.742	15.775	5.292

*Source:* Self created TUIK data

As seen in the table above, the ratio of girls and female teachers in basic education has been raised to a very high level with the educational policies carried out. Similarly, girls were enrolled in general high school.

In 1926, after the Civil Code, high schools were opened in line with the principle of co education, since women and men became equal before the law. In the period of Ataturk, all of the illiterate people whose education was more than 90% literate, lived in the villages; “Boarding District Schools” were given priority for the scattered villages in order to include the education system of village children without schools and teachers.

The biggest problem in education since the foundation of the republic was that the teacher shortage could not be closed. The first boys and girls schools were opened for the teacher candidates who understood the republic's qualities, were open to contemporary innovations and educating future generations. The main problem was the training of village children, where the majority of the population (about 80% with the data of 1935) lived. For this purpose, 2 “Village Teachers' Schools” were opened in 1927-1928 academic year as a policy of training teachers for the village. The most radical solution for training teachers for the village, which was a major problem, was the continuation of this project and the Village Institutes project implementation in 1940. The Village Institute, which had opened all around Turkey on large plots were organized as an independent economic structures in the center of agricultural enterprises, teachers and students themselves had met all the requirements. The aim was to train 40,000 teachers to illiterate village in Turkey. For this reason, as we mentioned in the above developments, in 1927, only 10.6% of the population was literate, the size of the problem was revealed. In the largest part of the educational program of the institutes, theoretical and applied agriculture, carpentry, blacksmithing, construction



beekeeping, silk vieling, etc opened within the ten-year plan for solution according to the needs of the region. Lessons took place. (Arayıcı 1999: 221). With the establishment of the Republic, an education system had been developed in educational institutions by considering human relations based on national principles and modern world methods as well as social life rules. With this system, it was aimed to create a modern society without making a distinction between women and men in the equipment that will ensure the continuation of the new state. All social policies, including education, were geared towards this goal. With this understanding, since 1933, girls and boys were trained together in Vocational Technical Schools to train technical staff needed by industry and agriculture. Industrial schools to train skilled workforce for the needs of Konya and Bolu interposer industry was opened within various cities such as Edirne, Istanbul, Adana, Ankara, Bursa, Sivas and Kastamonu. (Akyüz 2001: 301).

**Table 3.** *Total Number Of Schools, Students, Teachers, Female Students And Female teachers in General High Schools (1923-1938)*

Öğretim Yılları	Toplam Okul	Toplam Öğrenci	Kız Öğrenci	Toplam Öğretmen	Kadın Öğretmen
1923-1924	23	1.241	-	513	-
1927-1928	29	3.819	1.071	594	-
1937-1938	68	20.916	4.787	1.164	240

Source: Self created TUIK data

In the table above, the number of female students and female teachers in the 1923-1924 academic year and the number of female teachers in the 1927-1928 period are given in total numbers. However, as seen in the table, the enrollment rate of girls has increased significantly in general high schools.

With these breakthroughs, women started to take part in education life even more. On the one hand, since the foundation of the Republic, policies aimed at providing holistic development with the Turkish education system having been implemented, and on the other hand, policies had been created for a new human profile in order to be added to the modern world. Despite limited possibilities, an important share of the state budget has always been allocated to the Ministry of Education during the Atatürk period. Students from this budget could go abroad for science, political-social sciences, fine arts, etc. for education. They were sent abroad to study in a wide range of fields. In addition, experts from abroad also were invited to Turkey with the purpose of trying to resolve the deficiencies in this area. Professors fleeing Germany were invited to the country and took part in Istanbul University, which opened in 1933. Despite the environmental pressure, the number of female students had increased gradually at the university level where female students continued with male students. While 760 of 5,255 students were female students in the 1932-1933 academic year, only 1 of 502 faculty members were female. While

1782 of 10,213 students were female students in the academic year of 1938-1939, 99 of 855 academic members in the same academic year were women (Katoğlu 2000:417-520).

### **Women's Right to Work**

In the period of Atatürk, Turkish women hosted the "International Women Congress" on April 22, 1935 with the privilege of having many rights that women in the Western world did not yet have. The world's well-known intellectuals of our women who entertained men and women by creating a work environment in Turkey with other countries, the presence of women in peace and brotherhood with global developments in international organizations began to be talked about (Kaymaz 2010: 333-336).

In the Civil Code, enacted in 1926, the provision of "the work of women depends on the leave of the husband" was a violation of both the right to freedom of work and the principle of equality. The working area of the woman, who has been working since the existence of humanity, was made to serve her husband, family and relatives. The Western woman was able to catch a work space outside the house with the Industrial Revolution. French Jean Jaques Rousseau, one of the 18th century intellectuals, thought that she should have her family and children in her house. Whereas British intellectual William Thomson was against the woman being imprisoned at home and not having any other option for women except marriage (Başçı 1999: 67-78). In 1789, Turkey also adopted the Constitutional Civil selecting Law and accepted after experiencing significant improvements in women's lives with voting rights and their reflection in work life, though with different opinions and discourses from all over the world.

In the Public Health Law No. 1593 issued in 1930, which concerns women closely, it was forbidden to work more than eight hours a day in night jobs and underground jobs by working more than eight hours a day between the ages of 12-16 (T.C. Resmi Gazete 1930: 8903). Within this law that was ratified by Turkey there was place for the The International Labor Organization which mentions the operating conditions described by substance containmen. In these articles, protective provisions for children were introduced, although the lower limit for working age was not specified, boys and girls of all ages and women under the age of 18 were prohibited from working in mines, underground, heavy and dangerous jobs. (T.C. Resmi Gazete 1937: 3859). However, it is prohibited by law to employ pregnant women three month before and after birth, and after the end of this period, a half-hour leave is required twice a day to breastfeed her child for the first six months. (T.C. Resmi Gazete 1930: 8903).

With the introduction of planned industrial investments since 1932, especially the three black "iron, coal and oil"; The three white "sugar, paper and cotton" slogan led to an increase in employment rates within the industrial plans. The state, which is in the position of employer, had made new regulations because it needed a new working order. The Labor Law, numbered

3008, was enacted until 1967 (Kocacık, B. Gökkaya 2005: 195-219). Among the features of the Labor Law No. 3008, we can count the improvement of working conditions, the regulation of the relations between the worker and the employer, and the protection of worker health. In addition, the law for the establishment of social insurance in Western standards had been targeted for the first time (Kara 2008: 1-230).

## **Conclusion**

The Ottoman Empire which had land on 3 continents (Asia, Europe and Africa) was conquered and torn apart by imperialists after the 1st World War. The opposition for independancy was given by Gazi Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his friends in the capital Istanbul that was under siege at that time. During the years where the war took place heavily, Atatük had given importance to national education of a society where there was only 10% literacy. This gave way to the National Schools Project that opened in every town and village as a result of the work that was done for every city. Soldiers, literate people, teachers all took place in this campaign. Especially the Community Homes and Community Rooms were up for the education campaign. Atatürk who was aware of the significance of educated mothers raising future generations, freed half the society, not finding it correct to leave the other half excluded from education, thereby presenting his idea that men-women solidarity was key in developing civilizations with his revolution. By taking the example of the Swiss Civilization Law, the Turkish Civilization Law accepted women as individuals, giving them the chance to partake in society in equal conditions as their male counterparts. This chance was legally reinforced with international agreements and law for womens work life. Women, who became the symbol of the Independancy struggle, obtained many working rights as male population had declined due to warfare. Woman gained the titles of first female pilot, first Miss World, first on stage during the Atatürk period. Along with that, students that were sent abroad for higher education included women, for the pupose of eventually returning so as to serve their country. Yet again, women who were ahead of their european country contemporaries with obtaining the first ever political presentation, they were allowed to have a say in local governing and parliaments. Finally, in the year 1935 18 woman for the first time ever were choosen as members of parliament in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, having a say in the countries governing. Successful women as doctors, teachers, business woman, diplomats within the Republic period the society as a result came to being what it is today with the social policies implied by Atatürk having an immense role in it. It has been a model for the women of many countries who are deprived of these rights that Turkish women have acquired. Studies in this direction will shed light on historical developments regarding women's rights in the world.

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