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Historical determinants of the situation of women in Turkey

Introduction

Turkey is a country with population of over 71.5 million people, of which women constitute 49.8%¹. The perspective of joining the European Union has been the subject of the ongoing debate that has been dominated by the arguments against integration, such as the large informal sector of economy, disregard to the rights of ethnic minorities and human rights. There is also mentioned a significant cultural distinction due to a domination of Islam.

One of the issue which is the most frequently presented in Turkish as well as European Union media is the situation of women in this country. In the article we analyse the historical determinants and the role of Turkish women in creation of their own lives in non-supporting and difficult cultural conditions.

The article is divided into four parts: the first is about the situation of women in the Ottoman Empire, the second describes the period of Mustafa Kemal Pasha activities and his successors influence, while the third one – the period of political diversity (after the military coup of 1980). The fourth part is a very short description of the present situation of women from the point of view of multinational organizations.

Women in the Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman Empire was founded by Ottoman I in 1299 and lasted until 1922. Its character was expansive, while the economic welfare depended to a large extent on the subduing of the new territories and controlling the commerce routes connecting Europe and Asia.

The ruling idea in the Ottoman Empire was *din u devlet*, namely the unity of religion and state. The most respected and educated representatives of *umma*² were also the state officials. They were

engaged in administration, jurisdiction and administration of schools. Mutual interdependence of the state and religion did influence people's life. Muslim women were doubly obliged to comply with the Koran law. While on the one hand, they belonged to the religious community, on the other – they were subjects of the Ottoman Empire.

Women exercised legal personality and could appear in court. However, „the testimony of two women was required as the substitute for that of a single man”³. In the Ottoman Empire the court was recognized as a protector of women. In XVII and XVIII century, women won 77% legal cases where their opponents were men⁴. Ottoman women had the right to acquire, control and dispose of their own property as they saw fit, without interference from male relatives including their husband⁵. Overall women's property did not equal the men's one. Women usually did not work or earn money outside their households. According to the Koran law, a woman inherited a half of the property due to a man who was equally related to a deceased person.

Ottoman women were particularly active in the area of buying, selling and leasing real estate, which provided them with a significant source of financial security⁶. Their property often included elements of house furnishings. The confirmation of the fact that women were able to gather significant financial assets is their participation in donations for religious causes: according to registrations in Constantinople (currently Istanbul) in 1546, 36% of the foundations were established by women⁷.

Gender separation is very important in the Muslim society. Women and men rarely (beside the circle of the closest family) stay in the same rooms. The public sphere reserved almost exclusively for men. Social manifestation of the gender separation is the tradition of covering body (including face)⁸ by women. It is worth to know that legal practice in the Ottoman Empire made distinction between women who

observed gender separation (*muhaddere*⁹) and those who did not comply with segregation. According to the sultan's law, non-*muhaddere* women were considered responsible for their behaviour and its consequences, while in case of *muhaddere* women the husband was publicly accountable for her actions and who was publicly dishonoured by her transgressions¹⁰. The higher the public and material status of a woman was the more often she was *muhaddere*, as she was able to observe gender separation (she did not have to work or deal with matters outside her household). Therefore, for husbands belonging to the elites of the Ottoman Empire guarding their wives was not only a private but also a public matter, as unlawful behaviour of a wife had a negative impact on the social status and material situation of her husband. The example may be the following situation: the husband who had not divorced his wife who had committed adultery, was obliged to pay special fine depending on his material status¹¹.

Islamic law almost never places women on the position equal to men¹², which is particularly visible in family and marriage. In the Muslim society husband is responsible for the family economic status and representing family members outside, while a wife deals with the households tasks. „According to the Muslim contract of marriage, obedience to her husband was a principal duty of the wife”¹³.

Despite these all restraints some women were present in public sphere. In agricultural areas women had to work on fields to support their families. In the cities some women were educated and tried to improve the situation of other women. The magazine “Hanımlara Malisus Gazete”¹⁴, which was edited from 1895 to 1909 under the patronage of Sultan, aimed at improving the Empire by making possible to women be better mothers, wives and Muslims. Most of people working for that magazine where women from the elite – wives and daughters of bureaucrats, educated at home or in a palace school. Fatma Aliye was one of them. Firstly she had published under a male name, but than she decided to uncover her real identity. She was practicing Muslim, but she thought that women and men should together benefit from knowledge and education. However, she never considered European women as a role model for Turkish women. According to her, Muslim women should have found their own way to participating in public life.¹⁵ Nevertheless, many claim that she was one of the first Turkish feminists.

The important factor that influenced the situation of women in Turkey, was the Young Turks ideology. The movement was initiated in the second half of the XIX century by the cadets of military schools and in 1908 resulted in transformation of the Ottoman

Empire into the constitutional monarchy. The movement was strongly influenced by the French idea of freedom, equality and brotherhood. The Young Turks believed that the best way to propagate new ideas led through universal education, and promoting nuclear family based on partnership.

World War I brought most radical changes causing the huge human losses and creating strong demand for labour. Following the shortage of manpower, women entered the occupations previously considered to be exclusively male. They were employed as national governmental and municipal clerks, as factory workers, street cleaners, or even as barbers in many districts in Istanbul¹⁶. A special organization of Muslim women was established helping them to find employment. After the war, many women left paid work and returned to their household responsibilities, although some of them kept their former positions. Nevertheless, the fact that women are able to perform successfully traditionally male jobs stayed in people's memory.

Women in the early years of the Republic of Turkey

During the War of Independence (1919–1922), the leader of the Young Turks was Mustafa Kemal (later known as Atatürk – the Father of Turks). Both: the political movement, as well as the historical period in Turkey were named “Kemalism” after him. In his speeches Kemal often stressed the necessity to break with all that was old and traditional. For the Kemalists, uneducated women covering their faces embodied a symbol of old-fashionedness. They believed that in a modern society women should be emancipated and participate in public life alongside men. However, the introduction of radical changes in the traditional Muslim society was very hard to put into effect. Especially that at the same time, Kemalists underlined the importance of a role of women as mothers bringing up the sons of the nation. The often repeated argument supporting education of women was the need to rear children in a conscious and modern way. In practice women liberation was mostly ostensible and took place only in public sphere.

In the early years of the Republic of Turkey, paid work of women was still not taken for granted. It was tolerated providing that it was enforced by economic necessity; nevertheless, a wife had to obtain the husband's consent for working outside home. Very often women resigned from paid work after getting married, following the social expectations. At the same time, the first women became entering many prestigious and male occupations. Some of them were personal protégés of Kemal Mustafa (or even his adoptive daughters). Their names later became famous in

Turkey. They were used by the Young Turks to promote “state feminism”. Süreyya Ağaoğlu was the first woman who graduated from law studies (she became a lawyer), Ferdane Bozdoğan Erbek – the first dentist, Sabiha Gökçen – the first in the world woman-military pilot, Sun Kan – a famous violinist, doctor Sema Aran – the first woman-officer in the Turkish army. Those professional women, even though they were only few, provided the real role model for the younger generations Turkish women.

A decided majority of women worked because of economic reasons, in order to provide means of maintenance for themselves and their families. Most of them worked in agriculture (which did not provide social security), other were employed in low paid, low-qualified jobs that did not require formal education. The situation on the labour market in 1959 illustrate data presented in table 1.

Table 1. Employment of women and men in Turkey in particular occupational groups in 1959

Occupational group	Total	Men (%)	Women (%)
Professionals	167 000	83	17
Entrepreneurs, officials	226 000	89	11
Salesmen and saleswomen	276 000	98	2
Transport and communication	186 000	99	1
Mining	85 000	99	1
Skilled manual workers	277 000	94	6
Service	262 000	90	10
Agriculture	9 800 000	48	52
Non-classified	3 853 000	47	53
Total	15 132 000	52	48

Source: own elaboration based on: Nermin Abadan, *Social Change and Turkish Women*, Faculty in Political Science of University of Ankara, Ankara 1963, s. 29.

The legal situation of women in the Republic of Turkey improved after adoption of the Civil Code in 1926, but they had to wait for their obtained voting rights (both active and passive) until 5 December 1934 when the amendment to the Constitution was introduced¹⁷. In most cases wives voted according to their husbands’ decision. Very few women decided to enter politics (usually convinced by men, not on their own initiative). Even those who were elected to Parliament, usually were barely visible and did not represent the women’s interests¹⁸.

The Kemalists regarded marriage as a civic duty, and motherhood as the most important objective of women. They promoted nuclear family as the one where children could be brought up to become good citizens. In urban areas small families basically became a norm; however, very often an elderly person might also live in household (taking care of the elderly was not regarded as the state responsibility, it was to be provided by family). Dominant position of the father in family was maintained both formally and in practice.

During the early years of the Republic of Turkey, women became visible in the places and occupations hitherto unavailable to them. Also, the image of women changed and “was basically a combination of conflicting images: ‘an educated-professional woman’ at work, ‘a socially active organizing woman’ as a member of social clubs, associations, etcetera, ‘a biologically functioning woman’ in the family fulfilling reproductive responsibilities as a mother and wife, ‘a feminine woman’ entertaining men at the balls and parties”¹⁹. It is worth to notice that while the first three images had already appeared during the Ottoman era, the fourth one was entirely new, it was related to the presence of women in the public life and was a cultural pattern drawn from the western world.

Turkish women during the period of political diversity

In 1980 the military coup took place – officers decided to take over the reins, because they were preoccupied with prolonging instability of the country and democracy. What is very interesting, it was the time when women in Turkey organized first feminist organizations. The reason for that was ban of most of political parties and some space for free social movements appeared. The feminist in Turkey are considered first democratic opposition, what is evidence of their determination. It is possible to say that they started the era of political diversity.

Paradoxically, despite economic development female employment was systematically decreasing. While in 1959, almost a half of the population of women worked outside home, in 1970 – 38%, while in 2008 only 27% (see Table 2). It is quite common phenomenon in the developing countries that women often work in the informal economy and are not registered as “working”. What is more, together with the development of advancing technology, the demand for labour force in agriculture diminishes (this kind of work is traditionally connected with women).

Table 2. Employment women in Turkey in the years 1970–2008

Year	Total	Women	Women as % of the total number of the employed
1970	9 306 000	5 813 000	38%
1975	11 180 000	6 204 000	36%
1980	12 284 000	6 928 000	36%
1985	13 933 000	7 647 000	35%
1990	14 418 000	6 728 000	32%
1995	15 944 000	6 956 000	31%
2006	20 969 500	5 456 500	26%
2007	21 207 100	5 531 600	26%
2008	21 565 600	5 731 000	27%

Source: Own elaboration based on: Işık Urla Zeytinoğlu, *Constructed Images as Employment Restrictions: Determinants of Female Labour in Turkey*, w: *Deconstructing Images of the Turkish Women*, ed. by Zehra Arat, McMillan Press Ltd, London 1998 and Eurostat data for the years 2006–2008.

Over the last few years, unemployment rate of women has equalled unemployment rate of men (see tab. 3). According to that data as well as the employment's presented above women who lost a job were looking for work much less often than men in the same situation.

Table 3. Unemployment rate in Turkey in the years 2006–2008 by sex

Year	Total	Men	Women
2006	8.4	8.4	8.4
2007	8.5	8.5	8.5
2008	9.4	9.4	9.4

Source: Eurostat data.

Women employed outside the agricultural sector are concentrated in occupations perceived as appropriate for them, i.e. in medical professions and education, or in some other branches of industry as elementary occupations workers because of their assumed manual skills (tobacco or textile industry). Women are almost never employed in traditionally male occupations requiring physical work, e.g. construction or mining; they also rarely find employment in trade because of the exposure to frequent, direct contacts with men. Employment of women in “female” branches reaches even up to 57% of the total (tobacco industry), whereas in the automobile industry it comprises only 2%²⁰.

Undoubtedly, a relatively high number of women in two prestigious professions – medicine and law deserves some attention. In 1970, women constituted

almost 25% among the medical school graduates and 19% among the students of law. The reason for this may be fact that contrary to the western societies, in developing countries these occupations were not associated with men from the upper classes. The character of these countries' modernisation was dynamic. The modernization process accompanied extending women's rights. Therefore, “women from elite background were considered as more acceptable and less threatening to the social order than upwardly mobile men”²¹. Moreover, law and medicine are usually associated with responsibilities traditionally attributed to women involving care taking and protecting the weak. Working as a doctor or lawyer correlates with flexible working time in relatively comfortable conditions. All these factors determine frequent choice of these professions by women²².

Occupational segregation in Turkey is partially caused by legal regulations: the Turkish constitution of 1982 states that “minors, women and persons with disabilities shall enjoy special protection with regard to working conditions”²³. The law prohibits employing women in work underground, night work, or in jobs requiring hard physical efforts. The provision is intended to protect them, but its effect is exclusion of women from a few well paid occupations (for example in mining or building industry).

Moreover, the principle of “equal pay for work of equal value” is not guaranteed by law. While on the one hand, women may enjoy substantial allowances due to pregnancy, on the other hand, the universal practice is dismissing them after they got married or had a child. In practice, they are discriminated against even in case of access to training²⁴.

Family life has been slowly changing. The model of a nuclear family is general in urban areas. Increasingly larger number of families based on relation close to partnership. When a man ceases to be the main breadwinner, his traditionally dominant position is threatened. Many young women employed full-time expect their husbands to participate in household responsibilities, particularly regarding bringing up children²⁵. However, negotiating a higher position in family is a difficult skill requiring a very delicate approach in order to leave the husband's sense of dignity intact. Also the “value” associated with daughters has been slowly growing – increasingly more parents consider having a girl as a cause for happiness, many people begin to associate daughters with future security and provision of care in their elderly age.

One of the huge problems in Turkey poses domestic violence. For centuries, it used to be the taboo topic not to be openly spoken about. In May 1987 a march was organized by feminists from various social groups. For the first time Turkish women voiced a demand related exclusively to themselves and their bodies and

protested against domestic violence²⁶. A direct reason for organization of the march (3000 women participated in the march, i.e. a lot more than expected) was the court sentence in which the judge decided that wife beating by a husband could not be a cause for divorce²⁷.

According to the research of 1988, as many as 45% of men in Turkey believe that a husband has a right to beat up a disobedient wife. Other surveys carried out in 1991 indicated that 49% women believed that there is possible a situation when a wife would deserve flogging, 40% of the married women admitted to being beaten by a husband, while 2/3 among them declared experiencing it regularly. Therefore, violence in family comprises a part of everyday life of the Turkish women²⁸. In some extreme cases a woman has been killed by her husband /father/brother/cousin, usually for "staining the family honour".

Politics continues to be the sphere most prohibited for women, particularly if they present feminist views. Nevertheless, the number of women in parliament increased evidently over the last decade – from 10 to 50 (over 9% of the total number of the MPs)²⁹.

Islam is still the dominant religion in Turkey. Women are visible, distinguishing part of Islamists movement. Islam gives women the sense of safety and "reduces the anxiety and guilt that these women feel for being unemployed against the background of ever-increasing competition in large metropolitan centers"³⁰. Islam women are visible in the public sphere. Some of them consider themselves just Muslim women, other identify themselves as feminists, then yet some other prefer "not to identify themselves". All of them demand the right to wear a headscarf in public places. The protests "of women wearing headscarves culminated during exam periods and during graduation ceremonies and, at times, ended at courts"³¹. The Supreme Court ruled that wearing headscarves in public places is illegal and punishable.

Women's rights in Turkey and international organizations

The European Union granted Turkey the status of the associated country already in 1963. However, officially Turkey applied for the membership in 1987, whereas full negotiations started in 2005. Despite the very slow pace of the accessions process, it visibly influences the situation of female Turks. This is due to the fact that one of the priority objectives of the European Union is complete liquidation of gender inequality³². Therefore, in 1992, the law ruling that married women had to have their husband's consent to be employed was abolished in Turkey. In 1998, provision penalizing domestic violence were adopted.

The provision stating that a husband is the "head of family" was removed in 2002.

Since 1998, the European Commission has been preparing annual reports concerning the situation in Turkey. The 2005 report shows that the main problems of Turkish women are: domestic violence, continuation of honour killings, high illiteracy rate of women, low share of women in Parliament, local authorities and in employment³³. The Commission stresses that regardless the fact that "honour killings" still happen, the Turkish Supreme Court for the first time in history sentenced the culprits to the highest possible punishment, i.e. life imprisonment.

In 2004, the Human Rights Watch organization wrote that "the constitutional changes in May 2004 did remove gender discriminative language from the constitution and the new Penal Code recognized marital rape as an offence and removed reductions of sentence for rapists who marry their victims"³⁴.

Recapitulation

The Turkish history huge efforts aimed at modernization and determination to equal Western European countries in the field of respecting human rights. The secularisation process carried out during the Mustafa Kemal Pasha resulted in Turkey being the only Muslim country, where the principle of separation of religion from the state is obligatory (at least formally). The last military coup (in 1980), activities of non-governmental organizations and the influence of the European Union in relation to the accession process resulted in gradual improvement of the situation of women in Turkey. The European Union indirectly supported opposition feminist's movement which emerged in new political situation. Nevertheless, gender segregation is still visible on the streets of Istanbul and in the workplaces – women are employed in places less exposed to social contacts, they are paid lower pay, and they often work in the informal sector without a benefit of social security.

Finally, it is worth to point out some similarities between Poland and Turkey. At the beginning of XX century agriculture and monotheistic religion dominated in both countries. Both countries, albeit for different reasons, reclaimed independence after World War I. In both countries strong leaders took over, reforming and modernizing the country. Both leaders, Józef Piłsudski and Mustafa Kemal sympathised with the postulates of female organizations in respect to voting rights and access to education³⁵. For many years, in both countries the dominant role model for women was a mother (also mother of the nation) or a virgin. However, following different ideologies, equality of women in employment was promoted. In Poland and in Turkey gender inequality in

marriage has never been opposed, while the phenomenon of domestic violence was concealed. Moreover, in the eighties and nineties of the XX century, both countries: Turkey and Poland underwent liberalizing political changes. Women have become their beneficiaries, but they also have been their motive power. Many feminist organizations loudly voiced their opinions concerning issues vital for women.

¹ Eurostat, http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/population/data/main_tables, 3. sierpnia 2010.

² Umma is the word used for Muslim community, disregarding the frontiers. Sometimes it is said that umma extends from Mauretania to Pakistan,

³ Peirce Leslie, *The Law Shall not Languish: Social Class and Public Conduct in Sixteenth-century Ottoman Legal Discourse*, w: *Hermeneutics and honor: negotiating female 'public' space in Islamic/late societies*, ed. By Asma Afsaruddin, Cambridge, Distributed for the Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University by Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 149.

⁴ Aslı Sancar, *Ottoman Women; Myth and Reality*, The Light, New Jersey, 2007, p. 139.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 162.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 63.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 163.

⁸ The habit reaches Assyria in 1200 B.C. So it is not exclusively connected to Islam. Nowadays women rarely cover their faces.

⁹ The term was used to woman who did not uncover herself in front of people other than her family and did not represent her interests.

¹⁰ Peirce Leslie, *The Law Shall not Languish: Social Class and Public Conduct in Sixteenth-century Ottoman Legal Discourse*, p. 143.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 146.

¹² Nermin Abadan, *Social Change and Turkish Women*, Faculty in Political Science of University of Ankara, Ankara 1963, p. 3.

¹³ Peirce Leslie, *The Law Shall not Languish: Social Class and Public Conduct in Sixteenth-century Ottoman Legal Discourse*, op.cit., p. 145.

¹⁴ The Ladies' Own Gazette.

¹⁵ Frierson Elizabeth, *Unimagined Communities: Women and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire 1876–1909*, *Critical Matrix*, "The Princeton Journal of Women, Gender and Culture", Vol. 9, No.2, 1995, s. 72–74.

¹⁶ Zafer Toprak, *The Family, Feminism, and the State During the Young Turk Period, 1908–1918*, "Vana Turcica", No 13, 1991, p. 448.

¹⁷ http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/english/about_tgna.htm, 28th September 2010.

¹⁸ Nermin Abadan, *Social Change and Turkish Women*, op. cit., p. 10 ("not limited to specific so-called interests, but representing the nation as a whole").

¹⁹ Ayşe Durakbaşa, *Kemalism as identity Politics in Turkey*, w: *Deconstructing Images of the Turkish Women*, ed. by Zehra Arat, McMillan Press Ltd, London 1998, p. 147.

²⁰ See: Gültan Kazgan, *Labour Force Participation, Occupational Distribution, Educational Attainment and the Socio-Economic Status of Women in the Turkish Economy*, in: *Women in Turkish Society*, ed. by Nermin Abadan-Unat, E. J. Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1981.

²¹ Ayşe Oncü, *Turkish Women in the Professions: Why So Many?* w: *Women in Turkish Society*... op. cit., p. 189.

²² Ibidem.

²³ Işık Urla Zeytinoğlu, *Constructed Images as Employment Restrictions: Determinants of Female Labour in Turkey*, w: *Deconstructing Images of the Turkish Women* ..., op. cit..

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Hale Cihan Bolak, *Towards a Conceptualization of Marital Power Dynamics: Women Breadwinners and Working-class Households in Turkey*, w: *Women in Modern Turkish Society*, ed. by Sirin Tekeli, Zed Book Ltd, London and New Jersey 1995, p. 179.

²⁶ Şahika Yüksel, *A Comparison of Violent and Non-Violent Families*, w: *Women in Modern Turkish Society; A Reader*, ed. by Sirin Tekeli, Zed Book Ltd, London and New Jersey, 1995, p. 281.

²⁷ The decision was concluded: *kadının sırtından sopayı, karnından sıpayı esik etmemek gerek* („One should not leave a woman's back without a stick, her womb without a foal”).

²⁸ Zob.: Yeşim Arat, *Feminist Institutions and Democratic Aspirations: the Case of The Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation*, w: *Deconstructing Images of the Turkish Women*, ed. by Zehra Arat, McMillan Press Ltd, London 1998, p. 298–301.

²⁹ From the website: <http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=245> (04.01.2010)

³⁰ Ayşe Kadioğlu, *Women's Subordination in Turkey: Is Islam Really Villain?*, "Middle East Journal", Vol. 48, No. 4, Autumn 1994; p. 659.

³¹ Yeşim Arat, *From Emancipation to liberation: The Changing Role of Women in Turkey's Public Realm*, "Journal of International Affairs", Vol. 54, No.1, Fall 2000; p. 107–123.

³² Zob.: Zuhâl Yefilyurt Gunduz, *The Women's Movement in Turkey: From Tanzimat towards European Union Membership*, "Journal of International Affairs", Volume IX, March–May 2004, Turkey, p. 120.

³³ *Turkey 2005 Progress Report*, COM (2005) 561 final, European Commission, November 2005, Brussels, p. 32.

³⁴ Human Rights Watch, *Advisory Note to Journalists Covering the Release of Regular Report on Turkey and Recommendations*, October 2004.

³⁵ For information concerning Poland see: Ewa Lisowska, *Równouprawienie kobiet i mężczyzn w społeczeństwie [Equal rights of women and men in the society]*, Warsaw School of Economics, Warsaw 2008, p. 39.