

# **Feminism in Turkey**

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2000

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**IN STUDYING the women's liberation movement and feminism in Turkey, it is worthwhile to browse through the recent past. Why did feminism materialise in Turkey in the 1980s and not in the 1960s when the second fad of feminism rose in the West? In trying to answer these questions, I shall elaborate more on the political developments as far as the nature of the article allows me. I shall also look at the main changes in the women's movement of the 1990s in relation to the past.**

The women's movement in Turkey has, in fact, very deep historical roots. It is known for a fact that at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially during the Second Constitutional regime period (1908), there were several women's associations and they published daily papers. During this period when the Ottoman bourgeoisie promoted modernist movements, it would be futile to comment that Ottoman middle class women were unaware of the Suffragette movement influential in the West.

Following the National War, the privileges granted to women (Civil Law 1926; the right to vote 1934; equal rights with men in public life 1935) from those in power pursuant to the Kemalist reforms, which were initiated with the establishment of the new state (1923) and which promoted westernisation, had placed women on the same footing in legal terms. The Turkish Women Association with its roots in the women's movements of the Ottoman period and based on women's free will, though it was promoted by middle class women, had acknowledged Kemalism because of the rights awarded to women until then by Kemalism. It considered "state feminism" satisfactory and abolished itself to be replaced by certain women's associations administered directly by the Kemalist state. In other words, educated working women were symbols of modern Turkey for Kemalist republicans.

The privileges enjoyed by the middle class women of the Republican period were not enjoyed by women of other classes and sections of the society. Pastoralism and patriarchal relationships were dominant and those who enjoyed these rights in any real sense formed only a small percentage of the urban minority. Naturally, this minority compromised with Kemalism, due to the privileges they acquired, and questioned neither the sexism of Civil Law (man is the head of family; woman is deprived of her rights of inheritance; woman may not work without her husband's permission; woman who commits adultery is subject to more severe punishments etc.) nor patriarchal relationships. They did not wear the veil and they were "liberated" women who could become pilots, doctors, or teachers. With this point of view, they must have thought that others too would be liberated through secularism, civilisation, education, and westernization on the path Kemalism advised. As a result of all these and as a negative development, the liberal women's movement that had begun at the Ottoman period and based on the initiative of women ended due to the Kemalist intervention.

On the other hand, the privileges Kemalism had awarded, although they were simply granted with no strife, had the following advantage as far as the liberal feminist movement which would develop later on was concerned: the fact that Kemalism, as distinct from other Middle Eastern and Arab countries, granted equal rights to women paved the way for the feminist movement in Turkey, which emerged in the 1980s and enabled the movement to attack patriarchal man-woman relationships and patriarchal establishments directly. This development led feminism in Turkey after the 1980s to formulate a universal language on ideal platforms.

## **Turkey of the 1960s and 1970s**

The 1968 student movement in the West was a general attack on conventional establishments and institutions including orthodox Marxist organisations, ideology, and institutions, as well as being against the rising new capitalist market economy and imperialism. It is because of this that this movement bore in its nature the black movement and the second fad feminist movement (Women's Liberation Movement).

In Turkey, however, although the student movement bore significant resemblance with the student movement of the West, it had certain basic differences. The main theme of the student movement in Turkey was anti-imperialism. When the youth counting on the Kemalist past and the Kemalist military intervention of 27 May 1960 took a stance against the hegemony of American imperialism over Turkey, it joined forces with Kemalism and certain State institutions that it could utilise against imperialism (the slogan of "army and youth hand in hand") rather than attacking all establishment and ideologies that exist in society. It was natural that such a heavily nationalist movement which viewed women as "mothers of the nation" would not accommodate feminism within itself.

However, at the dawn of the 1970s, a radical Left owing its roots and its leaders to the '68 movement started forming apart from the Workers' Party of Turkey (TIP) and the Republican People's Party (CHP). This Leftist movement based its ideology on Marxism-Leninism. Even though it was divided into several fractions and organisations, this was the common basis. The movement had significant ideological influence in the society in general. Even the military coup d'état of 12 March 1971 could not terminate this development. Due to the ideological influence of the Left effective even after 1974 and losing effect with the intervention of 12 September 1980, women took part in this Leftist movement and became militants of various Leftist organisations. Both due to the conventional anti-feminist character of Marxism and due to the "class problem" being adopted by Marxist organisations as the essential problem and diffusing all other problems into the class problem by linking all conflicts to the former, "secondary problems like the women issue" were never brought to the fore. Women who individually voiced this problem were suspected of insufficient "faith and devotion in the revolution" and were excommunicated. Some of the Marxist-Leninist organisations did of course delve into certain formations under the name "women's studies," but the main aim of these studies was to make the concerned organisations appealing to women. During the same period, the Leftist movement had conformed with patriarchal ideologies and establishments in order to "unite with the people."

## **Feminism in the 1980s**

After the military coup of 12 September 1980, the ideological hegemony of Marxism was broken and the idea of making a revolution with leading Leftist organisations lost its attraction. This situation caused the people who had fought for these organisations until then partly to retrieve and partly to strive for new goals. While these new struggles were relatively satisfied by the civil socialism that emerged in the medium of ideological conflict of the times, we women, who could not place our second rate status on the agenda and our restraints in the organisations before 1980 regardless of how strongly we felt about it, started questioning our female status first individually and then by forming small groups. We realised during our discussions together that the situations

we had assumed to have experienced and sensed personally were in fact consequences of our common female status. We were militants in the Leftist organisations of the 1970s and could only survive in these organisations by leaving our female identity behind. "... because woman is considered 'hazardous' just like alcoholic drinks, gambling and drugs, the Left has imposed the 'sister' (bacı) cliché as a solution to protect itself from this danger. 'Sister' was the type of 'female comrade' whose sexuality and individuality was suppressed. With the formulation of 'all my love is to my people, all women are my sisters,' male militants tried to avoid the 'discord' element called 'woman,' who could disrupt the revolutionist union and solidarity."

Especially we, women having a Leftist background, refrained from calling ourselves feminist openly. This is probably because we still had some sort of a relationship with our organisational circles and we were not very clear on this subject. However, we felt close to feminism and this consciousness gradually developed at each stage. On the other hand, a group of women who called themselves feminist spoke out for the first time in public with the symposium on "feminism," organised by Yazko and that took place at the Journalists' Association. The women's page in the Somut magazine followed this in 1983. This formation called itself the Women's Group by 1984. In addition, the feminist literature had been published since 1981. By the middle of the 1980s, other women's associations were formed. The Thursday Group in Ankara, the Women's Association against Discrimination-Sexism in Istanbul, the Kaktüs (Cactus) magazine, the Feminist magazine and a group of women in İzmir... Women joined together in these groups on the basis of heartfelt solidarity, and they began organising themselves in opposition to the practices of centralisation and individual leadership. They were exercising an autonomous style that did not agree with the centralised and hierarchical habits of the Left they had adopted until then. This was a radical, pluralist, movement from below. Women organised themselves on their own initiative and without the manipulation of any organisation or party. For example, some of us questioned violence in the family, while some joined in solidarity with the striking women in a leather factory in Kazlıçeşme. It was observed in practice that these two different actions, rather than being obstructive, reinforced each other.

## **The Other World**

The feminist movement had started voicing itself widely in all fragments of society. One of the main subjects of in-house gatherings and visits was feminism. Men tried to dismiss the topic with jokes, saying in a semi-embarrassed tone that they helped with housework. It was possible to see articles and discussions on feminism in the media during those times, even though these were usually somewhat critical.

Leftist and intellectual men agreed that there was indeed a "woman problem." But this did not concern them. Certain "backward elements" did make mistakes like this. And was it not Marx and Engels who brought the matter up for the first time anyway? What was the explanation of this separatism, this segregation in following different goals? It was especially dangerous to pursue bourgeois trends like feminism. The matter should have been taken in its entirety and should not have caused separation within the proletarian class. Why did women organise separately? It was their fault if women did not attend organisation meetings, although they were invited to them. And was it not yet another discrimination not to allow men in women's associations and meetings? What was the explanation of this "harem" attitude? The working

women never had a problem. A Leftist group attending the 8 March demonstrations in 1989 tried to suppress our voice with the slogan “Men and women together, for a free future.”

The discussion that took place upon women in Leftist organisations, their being influenced by feminism and their bringing the topic on the agenda forced the Left to surrender to the “feminism trouble.” However, to compensate for this, it was hoped that the path of the women’s movement under the name of “women’s liberation studies” could be diverted and the movement could be taken under control. It was important not to divert from the real objective, and thus we were invited to an association which encompassed the women’s strife but took the struggle for socialism as its basis. Organisations tried to contextualise this with the formula that claims “the prerequisite for women’s liberation is socialism.” However, it seemed that due to these crucial struggles, our turn would never come. They had the wisdom of everything and everything had to be under their control. Like the mayor of Ankara, Mr. Tandoan who said that “communism can rule this country only through us,” they claimed that feminism would come through Marxists. These Leftist organisations are able to give any kind of self-criticism. Yet they are so male dominated in nature that they are unaware of the methods they use to suppress and oppress women within themselves.

## **Women on the Streets**

The coup d’état of 12<sup>th</sup> September 1980 meant silencing all mass organisations and institutions as well as the Marxist Left. In those days, one could not see a single person who was involved with the Leftist movement and was not subjected to the rage of the military regime. Of course, as in all wars, women paid a heavy price. As well as being prosecuted as individual political subjects, they also carried the secondary burden of being mothers, wives, lovers and sisters. It was quite common to see women’s silent protests outside prison gates or court doors. Women of every age group came together as a result of our common destiny. Daughters, sons, or lovers were persecuted or lost. Consequently, women were the anonymous heroines of the fight for freedom and the leading platoon against torture and oppression. They were harassed and abused just for hoping for some news at court doors and prison visits. On the other hand, life was not at all easy for us at home. In police raids (with or without permit) even our dowry chests were searched and as if that was not enough, we were blamed for our fertility. Because we were the mothers of the “communist/anarchist villains.” Even the wombs of the mothers of these separatist enemies of the State were guilty.

One of these women was Didar Pensoy, who lost her life because of a police officer’s kick in front of the National Assembly during the boycotts and hunger strikes against the fascist regime. In later years, the eleven feminist women were arrested when protesting over the deaths at Nide Prison. The fact that the Left in Turkey preferred not to notice these struggles and the women who formed the women’s liberation movement and who took part in these struggles that they called the feminism after 1980 “Eylülist” shows how narrow-minded they were. “...on looking back at the start of 1982, it could be argued that the feminist movement formed the most democratic and the leading-in many aspects-wing of the democratic opposition against the military intervention of 1980 and that they served an essential function in the society’s search for democracy.”

In 1986, the petition campaign requesting that the International Agreement on Women, which was also confirmed by the Turkish Republic as well be put into force brought women of various levels of the society together again. This was followed in 1987 by the Solidarity Campaign Against Beating after an order by a judge in Çankırı legitimised a husband beating his wife, claiming “Kids and smacks are what every woman needs regularly.” A demonstration protesting against beating women took place on 17 May 1987, called by the Women’s Association Against Discrimination, Socialist-Feminist Women, and Feminist Magazine. More than a thousand women took part.

Even though the demonstration took place on a Sunday, it attracted many people’s attention who were watching besides the journalists’. A group of about thirty Leftist men who wanted to walk with us followed a few metres behind the walking convoy with their children on their shoulders, expressing their support. It was possible to see women from every section of society in the demonstration. The subject of beating within the family had united us. There was not a single woman among us who did not get her share of beating. Our signs and mottos were very colourful and the colour purple formed the main theme. As we walked singing songs we composed, the sight of women who clapped at us as they watched us from their balconies was quite sad. Because it was Sunday, fathers and husbands were at home and women who could not attend the walk, although they were very enthusiastic to do so, could still wave at us behind their husbands who lathered shaving cream on their faces as they closed the windows. We were addressing them with slogans like “women gather here, for solidarity,” “we don’t want a heaven of beating,” “harassment to one is harassment to all.” The fury that had silently accumulated for many years was expressed in the song “We are rising for the unjust centuries gone by, say it loud and clear we are women.”

The campaign was one of the first examples of various groups of women acting together, even though they were very diverse and were not centrally organised. This was followed by the Kariye Museum Fest. Later on, there were the small meetings and 8 March demonstrations at the kahve’s of Istanbul which we called Feminist picnics. Meanwhile, following the demonstration against beating, women had found the courage to voice this subject out loud. The biggest need of women attending the meetings and joining the associations was that they had nowhere to go. Because of this, many women still had to go back to the cradle of violence. Due to this immediate need, the subject of a women’s shelter was brought on the agenda. However, there were various obstacles standing in the way of this project:

1. The societal and the legal structure where beating and especially beating in the family was considered legitimate.
2. The fact that we women made up the lowest group financially in income distribution and the hierarchical division of labour in a male-dominated society.

By 1989, the feminist movement was split within itself as well as at war with the outside world. A three-day Feminist Weekend meeting at which more than a hundred women attended took place in Ankara in 1989. Different problems of feminism were discussed and at the end of this meeting, a declaration of the “Our Bodies Belong to Us” campaign was published. In the spring of the same year, the First Women’s Congress took place where feminists and women from various Leftist organisations met. Again in the autumn of 1989, protests regarding article 438 which was inspired by Mussolini’s Italy and exercised without question were brought on the agenda. The said article gives a punishment discount to the abusing male at the rate of 2/3 if the

raped women is a prostitute. I believe the fact that the 11 male Judges of Constitutional Court did not consider this article to contravene the equality principle of the Constitution reveals yet another example of the standards of universal male justice.

## **Feminism in the 1990s**

The radical emergence of the women's liberation movement in the 1980s began to bear fruit in the early 1990s: the "purple shelter" campaign was initiated in order to provide refuge to women who were being subjected to violence. Also there were clear victories such as the establishment of the Library of Works by Women. More importantly, although in one sense the women's movement was fragmenting, feminist ideas did continue to spread to wider sections of the society. Feminists identified men's violence against women at home as a crime and challenged the Islamic values. These issues were discussed publicly for the first time.

Women who play prominent roles in today's social and political struggles are able to retain their position only because of the influence of the women's liberation movement of the 1980s. However, it seems as if some of them, instead of trying to take the women's movement forward, are more content to stagnate, and delute the radical ideas of the past into mainstream reformist politics. For example, they call women to join political parties in the name of women's politics. But in the past, even if somebody involved herself in a Leftist organisation or party, she was not considered to be a true feminist. In the past women in the movement rejected to establish links with any political parties. But today some feminists of position are very willing to join them. Are not political parties male dominated and sexist, authoritarian and patriarchal? Do they not exclude women from positions of decision-making? Are not they the champions of patriarchal laws? Are not they the representatives of the system which makes legal all forms of violence, discrimination, and oppression against women? In the past we rejected all forms of representation. Now do we cherish the hope that the corrupt parliamentary system will change our lives? In the past when we cried out "we don't want a heaven of beating," our voice was loud and clear. Now we remain silent when the "Saturday Mothers" gather around the Galatasaray avenue to protest against the police violence; we remain silent when Kurdish women are oppressed under the double burden of sexism and racism; and we remain silent when the secular nationalist-Kemalist dictatorship allows the police to beat Muslim female students, who are excluded from university education because they choose to veil themselves. In the past we always took the side of women who were beaten, discriminated against, and excluded etc., regardless of their social background and nationality, political and religious beliefs, and so on. Now they take the side of women candidates for parliamentary elections, regardless of their political affiliations. Those women who rise to power on a feminist platform became sucked into the system, and fail to use their position to the advantage of other women.

Many of us will remember George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. At the end of the book, we read: "the creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which." If we compare the women's movement in the past-what we intended to achieve in the 1980s-with what is happening today, it is impossible to see any connection. It is inevitable that one who decides to join in a political game becomes like his/her opponents.



## **“No Votes Thank You”**

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