



PICTURE STORY

A Century of Feminism in Turkey

June 2007

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The women's movement in Turkey has its roots in the 19th century Ottoman society when educated urban women started to discuss and write about women's rights. At the time Islamic law was the source of family law. Ottoman women activists such as Fatma Aliye questioned patriarchal interpretations of Islam. In 1911 the call to embrace feminism came from the so-called White Conferences in Istanbul. The Ottoman Empire adapted its first codified family law in 1917.

Women and their status in society were central to the reform agenda of the Turkish Republic which emerged in 1923. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk defended women's rights and replaced Islamic family law with a Civil Code taken from Switzerland and a Penal Code taken from Italy. His adoptive daughter, Afet Inan, popularised the story of these reforms.

At the same time, tensions arose between republican leaders and women activists. Novelist Halide Edip, who played a prominent role in the war of independence, left Turkey when the Republic became an authoritarian one-party state in the 1920s and only returned in 1939 after the death of Ataturk. Nezihe Muhiddin, leader of the Turkish Women's Union, an association demanding political equality and the right to vote for women was prosecuted and forced to leave her position. In 1935 the Turkish Women's Union dissolved.

It took more than 40 years before a new grass roots women's movement emerged again in Turkey. Led by academics and writers, the new movement of the 1980s was inspired by the experience of feminism in other countries. Among others, Sirin Tekeli, Duygu Asena and Zeynep Oral played an important role. Activists like Pinar Ilkcaracan and Hulya Gulbahar led campaigns for legal equality. Necla Arat helped set up the first women's research centre at Istanbul university. Religious women such as Hidayet Tuksal began to set up associations. In the late 1990s women in South-Eastern Anatolia also began to organise. In Diyarbakir the Woman's Center (KAMER) run by Nebahat Akkoc has been instrumental in fighting against domestic violence and honour crimes.



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OTTOMAN ORIGINS



Sharia and Ottoman Family Law

The traditional Islamic legal code, the Sharia, was at the heart of Ottoman family law.

The Sharia governs marriage, divorce and inheritance. The core of marriage is a contract between two parties. The content of this contract is left to the parties to determine, but traditionally includes a dowry – a sum of money that is given from the groom to the bride, which remains her property throughout marriage. The husband is required to provide housing for the family, which remains his individual property. The woman is required to obey her husband. Economic responsibilities fall on the husband, who must provide for the wife and children according to specific rules. A child born to a married couple is considered to be the husband's child.

Islamic law permits a man to have up to four wives. The relevant passage of the Koran states that a man is required to treat all of his wives equally. Some theologians argue that treating four wives equally is beyond human ability, and therefore implicitly forbidden to men other than the Prophet himself. Others argue that the context of the passage makes it clear that the purpose of polygamy is to care for widows and orphans in time of war.

The Sharia permits the dissolution of failing marriages. While the husband only needs to say "I divorce you" three times, a wife seeking for divorce is required to ask her husband to dissolve the marriage. If he refuses, she must go to court and request a judge to do so. Rules on divorce vary in different Islamic legal schools.

Family relations in Turkey were governed by the Sharia until the first codified family law was promulgated in the Ottoman Empire in 1917. Yet, this new family law was still largely based on the Sharia. Some of the changes included raising the female minimum age of marriage to 17. It legalised polygamy, but gave the wife a right to sue for divorce if her husband took another wife.

Recommended reading:

Knut S. Vikor, *Between God and Sultan – A History of Islamic Law*

Erik Zürcher, *Turkey - A Modern History*

Reza Aslan, *No God but God – The Origins, Evolution and Future of Islam*

EARLY FEMINISTS

The Ottoman Women's Movement



Early feminists

“Pay attention to every corner of the world, we are the eve of a revolution. Be assured, this revolution is not going to be bloody and savage like a man’s revolution. On the contrary, it will be pleasant and relatively quiet, but definitely productive. You must believe this, ladies!”

(Fatma Nesibe, Istanbul 1911)

In late 19th-century Ottoman society a small circle of educated women started to become involved in public debates about women’s rights. Women graduating from the first secondary schools for girls or educated by private tutors fought for greater access to education. Arguments were presented in utilitarian terms: since the family was the foundation of the country, and the mother the foundation of the family, her intellectual development was key to the development of the country.¹

Women’s journals emerged to provide a public forum for the discussion of women’s issues. In *Terakki-i Muhadderat* (Progress of Muslim Women, 1869-1870), writers discussed female education, polygamy and problems of discrimination. Other journals followed: *Vakit yahud Murebbi-i Muhadderat* (Time or the Training of Muslim Women, 1875), *Ayna* (Mirror, 1875 – 1876), *Aile* (Family, 1880), *Insaniyet* (Humanity, 1883).

Following the 1908 Young Turk Revolution, a new magazine, *Kadinlar Dunyasi* (1913-1921) clearly stated its purpose as “promoting women’s legal rights.” It was outspoken:

¹ Tulay Keskin, *Feminist /Nationalist Discourse in the First Year of the Ottoman Revolutionary Press (1908-1909)*, Institute of Economics and Social Sciences, Bilkent University, p 54 ff.

“Let us confess: today a woman lacks the rights to live and be free ... her life is dominated by a father, a maternal or paternal uncle, a husband or a brother who takes advantage of traditions and customs. It is impossible for her to set a goal or an ideal for herself.”² (1914)

Educated women from the middle and upper classes also organised conferences such as the ten ‘white conferences’ held in 1911 in Istanbul. These ‘white conferences’, named after the white interiors of the mansion where they took place, involved some 300 women. The proceedings were reported in journals of the time. The keynote speaker, Fatma Nesibe, stated in one of the meetings:

“We should look for the causes of our disasters in our stupid mothers. They had pity, they were tender and peaceful, and they did not like noise. Such a blind politics is this... Women are nothing more than a tool of pleasure.”

Aynur Demirdirek describes Fatma Nesibe:

“Fatma Nesibe, in her detailed discussion of Stuart Mill in one of her lectures, reveals her considerable knowledge about the women’s movement in the West. ... Fatma Nesibe defines women as the oppressed sex and as a group whose existence should be developed for the happiness of society. This approach shapes her demands; she is one of those rare women who do not compromise in formulating policies exclusively for women.”

In 1921 Nimet Cemil published an article under the title *Yine feminism, daima feminism* (*Again feminism, always feminism*). She summed up a sense of growing impatience:

“Although, due to the feminist movement of the last five or ten years, some rights were acquired, we were not able to reach our goal. There are still some important rights to acquire. Especially in marriage, women’s legal rights are far behind men’s legal rights. How can a woman who does not even have the right to see and meet her prospective husband be an equal of a man who can divorce his wife any time he wants or who is completely free to take another wife while already married to one? If you approach this issue from a woman’s perspective, you can easily understand how tragic it is.”

Recommended Reading:

Aynur Demirdirek, *In pursuit of the Ottoman Women’s Movement*, in *Deconstructing Images of ‘The Turkish Woman’*, ed. Zehra F. Arat, 1999

² Aynur Demirdirek, *In Pursuit of the Ottoman Women’s Movement*, in Zehra F. Arat, *Deconstructing Images of the Turkish Woman* (1999), p.74.

An Ottoman Feminist



Fatma Aliye

“Since Cenab-i Allah (the Almighty), who is the possessor of virtue and knowledge bestowed to all of its subjects, male and female, (then) is it within the power of men to deny it to women?” (Fatma Aliye)

One prominent Ottoman women’s activist and writer was Fatma Aliye (1862-1936), daughter of the reformer Cevdet Pasha. Aliye argued that the oppression women faced when participating in civil life, including the strict dress codes, stemmed from social customs and traditions, not from Islam itself. Fatma Aliye also wrote a book, *Namdaran-i Zenan-i Islamiyan* (Famous Muslim Women, 1892) about women who played an important role in Ottoman history, the first history book in the Ottoman Empire written by a woman. On the issue of polygamy she engaged in a lively polemic with a conservative writer at the time, Mahmut Esat Efendi.

“If we believe that Islam has universally valid principles, we ought to declare that the monogamous marriage is the one enjoyed by Islam and that the verse of the Kur’an enjoining man to remain with one wife is in accordance with civilisation.”³

Recommended reading:

Reina Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism – Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem*

³ Reina Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism – Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem*, London 2004, p 61, citing Fatma Aliye, *Nivsan-I Islam (The Women of Islam)*, Istanbul 1891.

THE EARLY REPUBLIC



Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

Ataturk on Women

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was born in 1881 in Thessaloniki in what was then the Ottoman Empire. When Atatürk was 12, he was sent to military school and then to the military academy in Istanbul, graduating in 1905. In 1911, he served against the Italians in Libya and then in the Balkan Wars (1912-13). Atatürk made his military reputation repelling the Allied invasion at the Dardanelles in 1915.

In May 1919, Atatürk began a revolution in Anatolia organising resistance to the victorious Allies. In 1921, Atatürk established a provisional government in Ankara. The following year the Ottoman Sultanate was formally abolished and, in 1923, Turkey became a republic with Atatürk as its first president. He established a single party regime that lasted almost without interruption until 1945. In 1935, when surnames were introduced in Turkey, he was given the name Atatürk, meaning Father of the Turks. He died on 10 November 1938.

The reforms of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk included a new Civil and a new Penal Code adopted in 1926. This put an end to Family Law based on the Sharia. Atatürk also encouraged women to enter professions. His vision was reflected in numerous speeches which are still widely quoted in Turkey today.

“Our nation has made up its mind to be a powerful nation. One of the requirements of today is that we should ensure the advance of our women in all respects. Therefore, our women, like our men, will be enlightened and well-educated. Furthermore, having an equal share in social life, Turkish women will walk side by side with Turkish men, each helping and supporting the other.”
(1923)

“There can be no logical reason for disqualifying women from political life. The hesitance and the negative mental attitude in this respect are the doomed remnants of a social order already buried in the past.”
(1930)

“Our enemies accuse us of having remained under the influence of religion; it is to this that they attribute our regression and our fall. This is wrong. Never has our religion demanded that women fall behind men.”
(1923)

“I must only add that as I knew the Turkish race to be the most beautiful in the world, I took it for granted that a Turkish woman would be selected Miss World.”
(1932)

Recommended reading:

- Andrew Mango, Ataturk The Biography of the Founder of Modern Turkey (2002)
- Emel Dogramaci, Women in Turkey and the New Millenium

Ataturk's Daughter



Afet Inan

“Afet, who was later given by Ataturk the surname Inan (meaning ‘Believe!’), became Mustafa Kemal’s lifelong favourite woman companion. She was content to serve as his amanuensis, working to his dictation, amplifying his theories, and falling in with all his views.”

Andrew Mango, *Ataturk*, p.439

After Mustafa Kemal Ataturk divorced his wife Latife in 1925, he adopted five daughters. One of them was Afet Inan (1908 – 1985), born in 1908 in Thessaloniki. Inan graduated from the Bursa Teachers College for Girls in 1925, and worked as a primary school teacher in Izmir.

Writing a new national history was seen as central to the nation-building project of the Turkish Republic. In 1931 a ‘Committee for the Investigation of Turkish History’ was set up upon the initiative of Afet Inan. In the same year she wrote *Vatandas icin Medeni ilgiler* (Civic Instructions for Citizens) which became part of the school curriculum. In 1937, Afet Inan went to Geneva to study sociology. Her doctoral thesis was published as *The Anthropological Characteristics of the Turkish people and History* (1947). It argued that there was a pure Turkish race in Central Asia since before Christ. In 1962, she wrote *The Emancipation of the Turkish Woman* (Paris, UNESCO 1962), which argues that Turkish women lost their rights due to Islam. In another book *What I wrote down from Ataturk* (1971), she described discussions with Ataturk on extending the right to vote to women. Inan died on 8 June 1985 in Ankara.

A Disillusioned Revolutionary



Halide Edip

“My nation has earned her independence by an ordeal which will stand out as one of the hardest and the noblest in the world’s history. But she has another ordeal to pass through [...] the Ordeal for Freedom.”

(Memoires of Halide Edip)

Born in Istanbul, Halide Edip (1884 – 1964) lost her mother early and was raised by her grandmother. Her family sent her to a Christian kindergarten and later to the American College for girls in Uskudar, where she was the first Muslim graduate in 1901. She married her tutor but divorced in 1910 after he took a second wife.

Her novels describe the emotional conflict arising from traditional attitudes towards women. A common theme of her work is strong, independent women who succeed in reaching their goals against strong opposition. She also examines arranged marriages, suppressed sexuality and the limits set by traditional notions of “honour”.⁴ Halide Edip established the Society for the Elevation of Women in 1908.

Edip addressed public demonstrations after the Greek landing at Izmir of 23 May 1919. In 1920, when the British deported members of the last Ottoman parliament to Malta,

⁴ See Hulya Adak, in Halidé Adivar Edip, *Memoirs of Halidé Edip*, Introduction to the Reprint, p. ix.

Edip and her second husband Adnan Adivar joined Ataturk's troops. They played a role in Ataturk's inner circle during the war of independence. Edip even received the honorary rank of corporal.

Among Ataturk's closest associates resistance to his autocratic rule led to the establishment of the Progressive Republican Party in November 1924. One of the founders of this party was Edip's second husband, who was also vice-president of the National Assembly. The party was abolished by cabinet decree on 5 June 1925. Six of its 29 deputies were executed. Adnan Adivar and Halide Edip fled to England.

In exile, Halide Edip published her 'Memoirs of Halide Edip' (1926). She also published a book on the 'Turkish Ordeal' in English. Halide and her husband only returned to Turkey in 1939, after Ataturk's death. In 1962, when the 'Turkish Ordeal' was translated into Turkish, most criticism of Mustafa Kemal was cut by Halide Edip herself. Thus, while the English original challenged myths about the origins of the Republic, the Turkish version endorsed them thirty years later."⁵

Halide Edip became head of the English Language and Literature Department at Istanbul University. She served as independent parliamentarian in the Turkish Parliament between 1950 and 1954. After that, she devoted herself entirely to writing and translating, including George Orwell's *Animal Farm* in 1952.

Recommended reading:

The Memoirs of Halide Edib (1926), memoir, published in English

The Turkish Ordeal (1928), memoir, published in English

⁵

Hulya Adak, in Halidé Adivar Edip, *Memoirs of Halidé Edip*, Introduction to the Reprint, p. xiv.

A Republican Rebel



Nezihe Muhiddin

“Why is it that the Turkish woman is equal in the eyes of the law and like any other citizen must pay taxes, yet does not have the right to vote and be elected to office?”⁶

Nezihe Muhiddin (1889-1958) was, like most educated women of her time, the daughter of a government official. She wrote 20 novels and was chief editor of the weekly *Kadin Yolu* (Woman’s Path, 1924-1927) magazine. She advocated the repeal of legal codes governing Islamic divorce and polygamy. She demanded that all barriers to education and working life be removed. To ask whether women were capable of assuming social positions was a “disgrace to women”.

In May 1923 Muhiddin and a group of activists applied to establish a Women’s Party, to pursue the political and social rights of women. Their application was refused. Thus the Turkish Women’s Union, a non-governmental association under Muhiddin’s leadership, was set up and continued to press for political equality. In 1927 the Union decided to promote a feminist male candidate to champion women’s rights in parliament. As Muhiddin told *Cumhuriyet* on 20 June 1927, the aim was to “steer public opinion.”

⁶ Quoted in Yaprak Zihnioglu, 1998, p 159.

It was a risky strategy: by that time, Turkey had become a one-party state with no organised political opposition. After a meeting with Ataturk in July 1927, the Union's tentative candidate Kenan Bey withdrew his candidacy. In August 1927, the regional governor issued a search warrant against the Women's Union, and brought charges of corruption against its leader. The Women's Union was suspended, and its documents seized.⁷ When Muhiddin called the Union's members to an extraordinary congress, the police commissioner prevented it from going ahead. Muhiddin and others resigned. Muhiddin was to stand trial for violating the law of associations.

In 1935, the association led by Muhiddin disbanded 'voluntarily' after it had hosted an international congress on women's issues. In the parliamentary session granting suffrage to women in 1934, speakers pointed to "suffrage as important for democracy, since only non-democratic regimes withheld women's suffrage."⁸ In fact, Turkey in 1934 was a one-party state, in which very few decisions were taken in the Grand National Assembly.⁹ The women who were chosen as members of the Assembly were selected, not elected. As Turkish scholar Yesim Arat noted:

"The Kemalists felt that the public realm belonged to the modernizing state and neither autonomous woman's organizations nor other similar organizations could be tolerated. The women, satisfied with the new rights they had been bestowed, acquiesced."¹⁰

In the official history written by Afet Inan – *Ataturk ve Turk Kadin Haklarinin Kazanilmasi* (Ataturk and the attainment of Women's rights) – Muhiddin is absent. A recent study concluded:

"Through the initiative of Nezihe Muhiddin, women did fight for their rights, including political rights, and sought full equality. Women's struggle was suppressed, Nezihe Muhiddin was silenced and the founding fathers could claim a tabula rasa – over which they could rewrite women's history as the granters of women's rights."¹¹

Nezihe Muhiddin ended her days as an unknown figure in a mental institution in 1958.

Recommended reading:

Yaprak Zihnioglu, *Nezihe Muhiddin – An Ottoman Turkish Women's Rights Defender*
(this PhD Thesis can be found in the Istanbul Women's Library)

⁷ ibid, p 180.

⁸ Yesim Arat, *From Emancipation to Liberation: the Changing Role of Women in Turkey's Public Realm*, *Journal of International Affairs*, Fall 2000, p. 111.

⁹ Erik Zurcher, *Turkey – A Modern History*, p. 184.

¹⁰ Yesim Arat, *From Emancipation to Liberation: the Changing Role of Women in Turkey's Public Realm*, *Journal of International Affairs*, fall 2000, 54. Nr. 1, p. 111.

¹¹ Yaprak Zihnioglu, *Nezihe Muhiddin – An Ottoman Turkish Women's Rights Defender*, Master Thesis Bogazici University, 1998, p. iii.

FEMINISM SINCE THE 80s



Istanbul University

A Liberal Feminist

One of the leading feminist activists of recent decades was Sirin Tekeli. Tekeli resigned as associate professor in the Faculty of Economics at Istanbul University in protest against the Board of Higher Education established after the 1980 military coup to control academic life.

In her writing Sirin Tekeli stressed the historical roots of feminism in Turkey: “The 1980s was not the first time that feminism came onto the agenda in Turkey. On the contrary, this was a century old movement, with its roots in late nineteenth-century Ottoman society.” She also analysed “state feminism”:

“Once equal suffrage was achieved the state claimed that ‘gender equality being a reality in Turkey’, women did not need an organization of their own ... Our mother’s generation – both because they got some important rights and were given new opportunities, and because they were forced to do so by repression – identified with Kemalism rather than with feminism.”¹²

Kemalist women were expected to conform to a new ideal of modesty:

“It is therefore not wrong to say that, despite the existence of an exceptional Kemalist elite, the “Kemalist revolution” had not transformed millennial

¹² Sirin Tekeli, *Women in Turkey in the 1980s*, p.12, in *Women in Modern Turkish Society*, ed. Sirin Tekeli, 1995.

patriarchal traditions in Turkey. On the contrary, it had reproduced them while modernising them. So, women's main role, whatever their social environment, was still limited to the one they had in the family, as mother and wife. Almost all modern institutions, the primary and secondary schools, and particularly technical schools designed for them, aimed to produce modern housewives.”

Besides creating a new vocabulary, the women's movement of the 1980s also gave rise to new institutions. Tekeli was one of the founders of the Women's Library and Information Centre in April 1990 in Istanbul. She was also a founder of the Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation. Such organisations became part of a new democratic civil society:

“For the first time in Turkish history, the tradition of the powerful centralized state – inherited and restructured anew by the republic and consolidated three times by military rule, the last being the most radical – has lost its glamour.”¹³

In 1997 Tekeli participated in the founding of *Ka-Der*¹⁴ (Association for Supporting and Training Women Candidates). *Ka-Der*'s main endeavour continues to be to raise the presence of women in Turkish politics.

Recommended reading:

Sirin Tekeli ed., *Women in Modern Turkish Society – A Reader*

Sirin Tekeli, *The Rise and Change of the New Women's Movement*, in Drude Dahlerup ed., *The New Women's Movement* (1986)

¹³ ibid, p.8.

¹⁴ Kadın Adaylari Destekleme ve Eğitim Derneği, www.ka-der.org.tr; Tekeli served as its president between 1997 and 1999. Ka-Der has 11 branches, 1000 registered politically active members across the country and members who do not belong to political parties.

‘The woman has no name’



Duygu Asena

“Escape the vicious circle. Fight for your equal rights, and get a job as a first step to make equal rights and freedom possible... We've come a long way but there's still a long way to go.” (Asena, 1994)

Duygu Asena (1946-2006) was born in Istanbul as the grandchild of Ataturk’s aide and CHP parliamentarian Ali Sevket Ondersev. She finished her studies in pedagogy at Istanbul University and became one of Turkey’s best known writers on women’s issues. In 1978, she became editor-in-chief of a publishing house. In this position she was responsible for the creation of several women’s magazines such as *Kadinca*.

In the 1980s *Kadinca* grew into a popular symbol of new attitudes to life. Asena saw it as a publication calling “on women to be daring and aggressively energetic, exhorting them to discover themselves, especially their feelings, capabilities and sexuality.”¹⁵ It stressed women’s economic independence. It drew attention to feminist issues with headlines such as “Equal Rights in Marriage”, “Women must become District Governors” or “A Ministry of Women’s Affairs must be established.”

Asena’s first novel *Kadinin Adi Yok* (“Woman Has No Name”), published in 1987, was described by Sirin Tekeli as a “feminist manifesto”.¹⁶ It is the story of a woman who

¹⁵ Ayse Saktanber, *Women in the Media in Turkey: the Free, Available Woman or the Good Wife and Selfless Mother*, in Sirin Tekeli, *Women in Modern Turkish Society*, 1995, p 160

¹⁶ http://www.radikal.com.tr/ek_haber.php?ek=r2&haberno=6833

fighters to share the freedoms enjoyed by men in Turkish society as well as a bleak portrayal of marriage without love. It became a bestseller, but it was eventually banned at its 40th print run in 1998, found to be obscene and dangerous to the institution of marriage.¹⁷ After a two-year trial, the publication of her book was again permitted. The book was also made into a film. Asena died in July 2006. Her coffin was carried only by women.

Recommended reading:

Arzu Ozturkmen, A Short History of Kadinca Magazine and its Feminism, in Deconstructing Images of “The Turkish Woman” (2000)

Ayşe Saktanber, Women in the Media in Turkey: the Free, Available Woman or the Good Wife and Selfless Mother, in Sirin Tekeli, Women in Modern Turkish Society, 1995

¹⁷ http://www.duyguasena.net/kitap_detay8.php

A Religious Feminist



Hidayet Tuksal

Hidayet Tuksal, born in 1963, holds a PhD in Islamic theology from Ankara University. She is author of a book on the *hadith* (accounts of the words and deeds of the Prophet) and describes herself as a ‘religious feminist’. She is thus part of a new generation of Islamic feminists advocating gender equality. She was also one of the founders of the Capital Women’s Platform (*Baskent Kadin Platform*) in 1994 in Ankara. The platform draws attention to the injustice and discrimination that religious women suffer in secular circles. It challenges the religious basis of traditions that discriminate against women. As she told ESI “religion has been interpreted differently by different people throughout history, leading to male-dominated interpretations.”

Tuksal sees progress in terms of collaboration among different women’s groups.

“Many women opposing the headscarf are academics who come from university women’s research departments. But even they reached the point saying ‘Come and let us talk about the headscarf in a closed meeting.’ They never said that before. Socialist feminists and women with headscarves sit next to each other ...”¹⁸

Recommended reading:

Yesim Arat, *Political Islam in Turkey and Women’s Organisations* (1999)

Nilufer Gole, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling*, University of Michigan Press, 1996

¹⁸ Yeni Safak newspaper, interview on 9 May 2005.

Feminism in Diyarbakir



Nebahat Akkoc

Nebahat Akkoc (born in 1955) was a primary school teacher in Diyarbakir. In 1993, at the height of the conflict between the terrorist PKK and the Turkish military, Akkoc's husband, a teacher and union activist, was gunned down by unidentified assailants. After this incident, Akkoc was arrested and tortured by police. She took her case to the European Court of Human Rights, which eventually ordered the Turkish state to pay her compensation.¹⁹

As a result of her personal experience and having listened to many similar stories from women in South Eastern Turkey, Akkoc set up Ka-Mer as an independent women's centre to support victims of violence

“I began thinking about torture and how one person could inflict that on another. Only someone who had been exposed to violence as a child could do that. I realized that domestic violence was behind all violence.”²⁰

“As it goes for all the wars in the world, those who formed organizations and took decisions were men. Women faced the most violence. Our bodies were used to punish men. While men were on the mountains, under detention or on the run, their wives and daughters were punished.”²¹

Ka-Mer began with one centre in Diyarbakir. Today there are similar centres in 18 provinces, offering hotlines for abused women, legal and professional training courses and day-care facilities.

¹⁹ <http://www.echr.coe.int/Eng/Press/2000/Oct/akkoc%20jud%20epr.htm>; Art 2: Everyone's right to life shall be protected by law.

²⁰ Time Europe, April 20, 2003.

²¹ BIA News Center 17 March 2006.

A CHP Parliamentarian



Gaye Erbatur

“I often feel very lonely as a woman in politics... We have to have more women. We have to have a quota system... It will never happen without quota system, it never happened otherwise elsewhere.”

(ESI Interview with Gaye Erbatur)

A chemical engineer, Nevin Gaye Erbatur (born in 1950) started working on women’s issues in 1988. In 1994 she helped to establish the Women’s Research and Implementation Centre at Cukurova University in Adana. Elected to Parliament in 2002 Erbatur played a crucial role during the reform of the Penal Code. Although not a member of the Justice Commission, Erbatur attended its discussions to lobby on women’s issues. Her reports to women’s NGOs enabled them to conduct an effective campaign. As she told ESI:

“When they appointed the sub-commission, I attended the first meeting. I was the only woman at the meeting ... Every day I went to sub-committee meetings and figured out what was being discussed. I kept members of the committee informed about women’s issues. I told them stories about women – virginity test, domestic violence, rape. For each legal article, I gave them examples. I told my NGO friends what was discussed.”

(ESI interview, June 2006)

On 5 December 2006, when women in Turkey celebrated the 71st anniversary of universal adult suffrage, Erbatur stated: “Today, we are fighting a mentality trying to push women back into the home rather than integrating them into society.”

A Radical Feminist



Hulya Gulbahar

“In Turkey, there is this strange situation. At first we have to make efforts to have a law passed. Then we have to devote just as much efforts to have it implemented.” (Hulya Gulbahar in an interview with ESI)

Hulya Gulbahar, a lawyer and human rights activist, began to work on women’s issues in 1978 in the women’s wing of the Turkish Worker’s Party. She went on to set up the Women’s Solidarity Foundation (WSF) and the Women’s Platform - two organisations that lobbied intensively to reform the Civil and Penal codes. She is today president of Kader, the Association for the Education and Support of Women Candidates.

In recent years, when travelling through Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and India, Gulbahar noted the similarities in lifestyles among rural women, who continued to be constrained by patriarchy and a quasi-feudal society:

“We have learnt a lot from feminists in the West especially about legal issues. But only recently did we realize that culturally and socially we have much more in common with traditional societies like India.”

(Mehru Jaffer, *Looking East for Inspiration*,
<http://www.boloji.com/wfs5/wfs834.htm>)

In the 1990s, she helped organise women to fight domestic violence and to lobby for a law on domestic violence which was adopted in January 1998. She was also a driving force behind the campaign to respond to the problem of honour killings.

“It is wrong to see honour only in terms of murder. It is about girls allowed to go to school, a woman being allowed to visit her sister, to dress the way she wants, to work.” (ESI interview)

Women for Women's Human Rights



Pinar Ilkcaracan

“We don't want roses, we want rights”
(Pinar Ilkcaracan during the Civil Code campaign 2001)

Pinar Ilkcaracan, a researcher, activist, trainer and psychotherapist, is one of the founders of Women for Women's Human Rights (WWHR), a leading women's advocacy organisation in Turkey established in 1993. WWHR lobbies for women's human rights at national, regional and international levels, and conducts human rights training programs.

Ilkcaracan also co-founded the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies, an international network of NGOs and academics in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia.

Ilkcaracan has published extensively on women and law, sexuality and religion, sexual and reproductive rights, human rights education and violence against women. She edited the book *Women and Sexuality in Muslim Societies* and co-authored the *Human Rights and Legal Literacy Training Manual*, which is used in community centres throughout Turkey to raise awareness of women's reproductive rights.

In 1999, WWHR was awarded the AWID Leading Solutions Award by the Association for Women's Rights in Development in recognition of its contributions to advancing gender equality and social justice. Ilkcaracan and WWHR played a central role in the campaigns of the 1990s and in the reform of the Civil Code (2001) and the Penal Code (2004).

“Being a woman”²²



Zeynep Oral

“Not long ago, if you had told me I was going to write a book called “ to be a woman” I would not have believed you... Yes, I am a woman. And yes my job is writing. But, writing a book on women... ‘Not my business,’ I would have said... Me, who was trying to ‘be a human’ would have nothing to say about ‘being a woman’.”²³

Before starting to work as a journalist, Zeynep Oral (born in 1946) spent several years studying in Paris. After returning to Turkey, she worked from 1968 to 2001 for the daily *Milliyet* as columnist and theatre critic. Since then, she has been working for the Kemalist *Cumhuriyet* daily.

Oral is the author of 15 books. She became famous for her first novel *To Be a Woman* (Kadin Olmak) which was published in December 1985. Earlier that year, Zeynep Oral set out for Nairobi in Kenya, which at the time hosted the UN World Conference on Women. It was a visit that was to transform her views on society, inspire a bestselling book and mark a turning point in the debate on women’s rights in Turkey.

“I was the only Turkish journalist invited to that conference in Nairobi. There, my whole approach changed. At the time of the Nairobi conference, there was the official conference for a week, and then a week or ten days for NGOs. This opened up the whole world of feminism, the whole women’s world for me.”²⁴

CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women), the document at the heart of the conference, was adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly. It required its signatory states to “ensure a legal framework, including all laws, policies, and practices that provide protection against discrimination and embody

²² Biographical information taken from :
<http://www.zeyneporal.com/english/zeyneporal/ozgecmis.htm>

²³ Introduction of “Kadin Olmak”.

²⁴ ESI Interview with Zeynep Oral 28.4.2006

the principle of equality”.²⁵ It was the holding of the Nairobi conference that had convinced Turkey to ratify CEDAW in June 1985.

However, interest in the event in Turkey was limited. In Nairobi, Oral noted, there were no participants from Turkish NGOs.

“There were some professors from Ankara who had never worked on women’s issues. There was an official delegation from Turkey. There wasn’t anybody from NGOs, except for the women from IKD who had run away to Europe, and had all come to the conference.”²⁶

Nor was there much interest in the Turkish media at the time. After Oral returned she tried to convince *Milliyet*’s editor that she had a story to tell.

“I came back to my newspaper with 3 suitcases of information, material, pictures. I was very excited... At the time the editor was Cetin Emec. He had recently arrived. He said: “Mrs. Oral, prepare a synopsis and we’ll discuss it tomorrow”. That evening, I prepared a synopsis. I was going to write about women in politics, in the economy, in the house, in education, in the world, in Turkey, compare statistics. ...

The next morning, there was the big newspaper meeting... I looked around the table and noticed for the first time that they were all men. They were the directors of each section of the newspaper. They discussed the subject, enjoyed it all. Then Cetin Emec said “wonderful work, very nice, but women’s affairs don’t interest our readers, and I myself I have no interest for what is happening in Africa.” He said, “Why don’t you write us one or two articles about your time in Africa, talking about safaris.”²⁷

Instead Oral wrote her first book on Turkish women’s issues. It is still being reprinted many decades later. Oral has also received awards both for her literary work and her NGO activities, including the Mothers for Peace award by UNESCO Greece in 2000.

²⁵ Convention on the Elimination of All Discrimination against Women, adopted by the United Nations on December 18, 1979

²⁶ ESI Interview with Zeynep Oral

²⁷ ESI Interview with Zeynep Oral.

A Kemalist Feminist



Necla Arat

“Westerners say we should give up on Kemalism and become moderate Muslims. This is a shame. Kemalists defend equality and social justice... One never knows when moderate Islam will become radical Islam if it is intertwined with state affairs.”

(Necla Arat in an interview with ESI)

Necla Arat (born in 1940), a social science professor and director of the Faculty for Systematic Philosophy, Istanbul University, is the founder of the Centre for Women’s Research and Education at Istanbul University. She was active in the campaign for reform of the Civil Code, initiating an effort in 1993 which collected more than 100,000 signatures from across Turkey.

She is also a leading defender of Kemalist feminism. For Arat the main divisions among women’s group are ideological in nature, based around the Islamist/secular divide. According to her “there is no dialogue about the headscarf among women’s groups. Each one is stubborn and strict on this matter.”

In April 2007 Arat claimed that the Justice and Development Party (AKP) had ambitions to install a “religious” regime in Turkey. She supported the Turkish military’s warning published on 27 April 2007 arguing that “soldiers can express their opinions as freely as other members of society, just as business people or intellectuals do.” Soon afterwards she was invited by the Republican People’s Party (CHP) to be a parliamentary candidate in the July 2007 elections.