

Turkey: Women and the Nation - An overview

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In Turkey, nationalist dogma and women's subordination go hand in hand.

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In early August 2017, two women in the Turkish city of Izmir sought help from police after being harassed on the street by a motorcyclist. One officer responded to the women's plea by informing them: "That's what they deserved, considering the outfits they had on." When the shocked and angered women said he no right to question their clothing, officers beat the victims.

It was hardly an isolated incident. Assaults on women in public spaces — often justified by conservative polemics about women's appearance — have grown more common in recent years, even in relatively liberal cities like Izmir. More ominously, female homicides have increased fourteen-fold since 2002 [1], while reports of domestic violence and archaic patriarchal practices like child brides [2] and so-called honor killings (of gay men as well as women [3]) have also grown dramatically. Turkey now ranks 130 out of 145 countries in terms of gender equality according to the *World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report* of 2016 [4].

This dire situation comes at a contradictory political moment for Turkey. In May, a referendum granted vastly expanded powers to President Tayyip Recep Erdoğan, head of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Held under a state of emergency and in an atmosphere of severe intimidation, the vote was likely fraudulent [5]. Yet despite the coercive climate, it passed with only a slim majority — showing that there's still room in Turkey for an opposition, despite Erdoğan's tightening grip on the state. But any such opposition will have to champion a radical movement for women's liberation if it wants to succeed, let alone achieve a broader social transformation.

This isn't just a generic truth, applying to movements everywhere; it's arises from the way political and social power in Turkey are bound up with women's rights.

In the early 2000s, for example, the AKP won over liberals by presenting themselves as humanitarian opponents of a traditional secular elite that denied women's freedom to wear a headscarf. Though generally committed to neoliberal economic policies, AKP politicians also criticize Western society in an anti-imperialist and anticapitalist rhetoric that claims to privilege and protect women. A distinctive Turkish nationalism, infused with a socially conservative view of gender relations, is an elemental feature of AKP ideology, with alien Western ideals allegedly constituting the primary barrier to the remaking of a neo-Ottomanist "strong Turkey." [6]

Delinking women's rights from nationalist mythologies is of paramount importance — and a monumental challenge. The challenge is immense because both hardline defenders of secularist

Turkey and religious supporters of the AKP invariably frame the issue of women's position in society as part of a nationalistic battle for the country's soul. Emancipation for women in Turkey will only come once the movement for equality is seen as part of a universal struggle for human liberation from oppression and exploitation.

The Republican Feminine Ideal

Turkey's recent dismal record on gender equality is ironic considering the Republic's progressive history. Women in Turkey obtained the vote in 1930, followed by the right to run for office in 1934; in 1935 eighteen women were elected to the Turkish parliament. To put these numbers in perspective, in 1935 just eight women served in the US congress, while nine sat in the British parliament. In France and Italy, women didn't gain the franchise until 1945 — more than a decade after women in Turkey.

Yet in Turkey, men in power viewed women's rights as part of a modernizing national project — what Jenny White has called “state feminism” [7] — rather than as a question of human rights. After winning a war of independence against Britain, France, and Greece between 1919 and 1923, the Turkish Republic under Mustafa Kemal initiated a revolution from above that transformed society, from the Latinization of the alphabet to an attempted Turkification of minority populations. Republican women, like men, were expected to modernize for the sake of the nation. Their own views weren't part of the equation.

By 1938, 10 percent of all university graduates in Turkey were women, and there were female professionals in law, medicine, engineering, and the social and natural sciences. Yet these opportunities weren't equally available to all. Though not banned outright, the headscarf was strongly discouraged and women who wore one were unable to find work as teachers, lawyers, or civil servants. The benefits of state-led modernization thus went to a minority of wealthy urban women with the economic and social capital to embody the republican ideal.

Even for those privileged few, the right to vote, serve in office, and access education didn't bring equality. Very few women became high-level members of the ruling People's Republican Party (CHP), and in 1935 the Turkish Women's Union, like many other press, labor, and political organizations, was shut down by the state [8]. This was part of a broader totalitarian trend in 1930s Europe, as the state came to subsume civil society in the interests of extreme nationalism, racial purity, and corporatism.

Modernizers also put women's reproductive power at the center of their vision. “A woman's highest duty,” Mustafa Kemal declared, “is motherhood.” [9] While some privileged women were able to get an education and become professionals, all were still expected to perform traditionally gendered labor like childrearing, cooking, and cleaning (except those who hired working-class women to perform such tasks). Family and nation were fused; being a modern, liberated woman meant being a mother as much as it did being educated, employed, and secular.

Ironies of the “Second Wave”

A 1960 coup birthed a new, relatively liberal constitution, allowing the growth of a leftist intelligentsia. The decade was also a period of industrial development and witnessed the emergence of a trade union movement. Though women's issues weren't prominent among the new Turkish left (notoriously sectarian radicals preferred to debate Turkey's proper path to revolution) it's

noteworthy that the first female leader of a Turkish political party was Behice Boran, president of the Workers Party of Turkey (TİP), founded in 1961. Boran, a Marxist-feminist sociologist, writer, and activist, epitomized the contradictions of Turkish state feminism. Boran benefited from the educational opportunities newly available to women in the 1930s, and received a PhD from the University of Michigan in 1939.

Yet Boran was denied an academic post because of her political views and was repeatedly arrested during a wave of anticommunist hysteria in the 1950s. After another military coup in 1971, Boran was sentenced to fifteen years in prison, though after receiving amnesty she re-founded TİP in 1975. After yet another military putsch in 1980, Boran was forced to flee the country; seven years later she announced the merger of TİP and the Turkish Communist Party from exile in Belgium. When Boran died in Brussels in 1987, her Istanbul funeral turned into a mass demonstration — the largest left demonstration in Turkey since the coup.

The “second wave” of Turkish feminism occurred in the post-coup period of the 1980s and ’90s [10]. Movements like the Purple Needle Campaign combatted violence against women, more than a hundred women’s magazines and periodicals were founded, and women’s studies departments were created in universities. Yet, as in the West, Turkey’s 1980s-90s feminist movement was liberal rather than radical, and mainstream women’s groups adhered to the secular and Kemalist feminist tradition.

If Boran symbolized the unrealized radical potential of socialist feminism, Tansu Çiller represented the nationalist neoliberal version of the republican feminine ideal. In 1993, Çiller, a wealthy US-trained economist and economics minister, became Turkey’s first female prime minister. An admirer of Margaret Thatcher and the European Union, Çiller was a neoliberal apostle who ran a notoriously corrupt administration.

Under her administration, land grabs benefitted her political and mafia allies. She also escalated a war against the Kurdish population in the southeast [11], whom she called “mountain Turks.” This epithet dates to the 1920s and ’30s following uprisings in the Kurdish provinces, when the Turkish state resettled many Kurdish children among ethnic Turks and attempted to eliminate Kurdish language, dress, and place names.

In 1996 the *New Internationalist* accused Çiller of war crimes and ethnic cleansing [12] for destroying more than a thousand Kurdish villages and denying Kurdish ethnic identity. As a representative of the worst of the republican feminine ideal, it’s perhaps unsurprising that Çiller is rumored to be on Erdoğan’s list of vice-presidential candidates for the 2019 elections [13].

Women in the New Turkey

In the early 2000s, many Western pundits, enamored by the AKP’s ostensible commitment to liberal democracy and free market orthodoxy, celebrated the new party as a democratizing force in the “Islamic world.” Party leaders like Erdoğan deployed a liberal human-rights discourse, obsessively polemicizing the issue of women’s headscarves — and at the same time supporting measures like Article 301, which makes insulting “Turkishness” a crime.

Erdoğan has publicly lamented the recent growth in gendered violence, stating in 2015 that “violence against women is a bleeding wound of Turkey.” [14] Meanwhile, critics argue that the AKP’s rhetorical fixation on the family and socially conservative policies contributes to that violence. A culture of impunity for abusers and a refusal to recognize women’s equality testify to the government’s regressive position on women.

Since coming to power in 2002, the AKP have directed a number of social policies at women. The 2005 “My Family Turkey” project or the more recent “Becoming a Family” initiative stress the importance of the traditional family in a nationalist idiom. The party’s opposition to feminism and women’s equality was perhaps best symbolized by the 2011 replacement of the Ministry of Women and Family Affairs with a “Ministry of Family and Social Policies.” These reforms have instrumentalized the family to create the ideal setting for the implementation of the AKP’s conservative agenda [15].

Erdoğan has characterized birth control as treason, and claimed with typical conspiratorial bombast that doctors who perform abortions and caesarians aim to “wipe Turkey off the stage by decreasing our population.” His repeated calls for women to have at least three children are widely known — and ridiculed — in the country; during a recent row with Europe he called on Turkish immigrants in Europe to have five children to multiply their presence and be the “future of Europe.” [16]

Marxist-feminist writers have explored the relationship between the AKP’s religious familialism and its commitment to neoliberal economic principles. According to Özlem İlyas Tolunay [17], the marriage of neoliberal economics and Sunni Islamic principles in Turkey has created “the worst of all worlds for women.” Women are paid less than men for the same work, many are relegated to low-wage and precarious employment in agriculture and industry, and more than half don’t have an independent income.

Though in most places neoliberal orthodoxy encourages women’s participation in the labor market, Turkey’s position in the global economic order is largely premised on its role as a provider of cheap labor and natural resources. Tolunay argues that in a context of high unemployment and precarious (and often deadly [18]) labor conditions, women’s economic function in neoliberal Turkey is to reproduce labor power while exerting downward pressure on wages. It’s here that “the neoliberal model and the conservative Islamic mindset come together,” as the subordination of women compliments the needs of international capital.

Despite the AKP’s neoliberal policies, its paternalist rhetoric has allowed it to position itself as the protector of women (with an emphasis on women’s bodies) from the ravages of capitalist modernity. Erdoğan has justified his attacks on women who pursue a career by claiming that modern secular ideas alienate women from “the nature of their creation.” [19] Motherhood is presented as a special realm, protecting vulnerable women from the capitalist world of individual competition. According to Youth and Sports Minister Akif Çağatay Kılıç, it is those who assert women’s equality who “make capitalism live over a woman’s body in the cruelest way.” [20]

Crucially, the AKP’s criticisms of capitalism aren’t directed at the industries that exploit female workers in the agricultural or industrial sectors; they’re reserved for women who pursue professional careers and deny their “nature” by choosing not to have children. This discourse reinforces traditional class and religious cleavages in Turkey, with the AKP ostensibly defending the common people from the hegemony of Westernized elites.

Breaking the Iron Cage of State Feminism

The AKP’s familialism has met with some resistance. As early as 2004, the government was unable to make adultery a criminal offense after a public outcry against the measure [21]. More recently, a motion that would have relaxed persecution of marital rape was withdrawn after widespread outrage. This past March, for International Women’s Day, tens of thousands braved the threat of police violence to march on Istanbul in opposition to the government’s policies.

Traditionally, mainstream women's groups have been the most vocal opponents of the government's familialist policies. But in recent years, the most radical feminist agenda in Turkey has been advanced by the recently formed People's Democracy Party (HDP). The party, whose roots lie in the Kurdish movement, has a gender equality platform that mandates equal representation for men and women [22]. Thanks in large part to the HDP, a record number of women entered the Turkish parliament in 2015.

The state quickly recognized the threat the HDP posed to its power, and has made the leftist party its primary target in the campaign to eliminate any and all opposition. Party offices and rallies were regular objects of nationalist and racist violence before the 2015 election; attacks have continued since. In the past year, thirteen HDP members of parliament have been jailed on charges of terrorism (including party co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ) [23]; the central government has taken control of eighty-two municipalities controlled by the DBP in the Kurdish southeast region; and a push to expel HDP lawmakers in parliament is ongoing [24].

It would be logical for liberal feminists to make common cause with the HDP on women's rights. Yet longstanding suspicion of Kurdish activism among mainstream liberals, perpetuated by the government's — and a pliant media's — attempts to portray the HDP as terrorist pawns of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), has made such an alliance difficult.

There are signs this may be changing, however. In early October, female MPs from the CHP and HDP joined forces to protest a parliamentary proposal to allow muftis — religious civil servants in the employ of the Directorate of Religious Affairs — to conduct marriages [25]. (Marriages in the Republic are conducted by state registrars). Critics fear the law will further “prepare a legal ground for child sexual abuse and underage marriage.”

This kind of progressive alliance will be crucial as the Turkish government pursues its familialist agenda, particularly in the educational and cultural spheres. Yet resistance, while necessary, can only ever be reactive. For women in Turkey, true liberation will only occur when nationalist dogmas are abandoned and a universalist emancipatory vision is articulated and put into practice. Under current conditions, radical democratic forces are highly circumscribed in their ability to go on the offensive. That doesn't make them any less essential.

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P.S.

* Jacobin. 11.01.2017:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/11/turkey-womens-rights-feminism-erdogan-akp-hdp>

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Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 42367), [Number of Women Murders in Turkey Increased by 1400 Percent](#).

[2] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/almost-200000-child-brides-in-turkey-female-la>

wyer-claims-a6765181.html

- [3] ESSF (article 42368), [Honor killings haunt Turkey's gay community](#).
- [4] <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2015/economies/#economy=TUR>
- [5] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/18/world/europe/turkey-referendum-is-haunted-by-allegations-of-voter-fraud.html?mcubz=0>
- [6] <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/04/sultan-erdogan-turkeys-rebranding-into-the-new-old-ottoman-empire/274724/>
- [7] <https://turkishsociology.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/state-feminism.pdf>
- [8] <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/230203>
- [9] <https://turkishsociology.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/state-feminism.pdf>
- [10] ESSF (article 42369), [A Brief History of the Feminist Movements in Turkey \(1923-2011\)](#).
- [11] <https://newint.org/features/1996/01/05/tansu/>
- [12] Idem
- [13] <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-allegedly-to-choose-surprise-names-as-vice-presidents-for-2019-elections.aspx?pageID=238&nID=117644&NewsCatID=338>
- [14] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31709887>
- [15] http://cins.ankara.edu.tr/15_12.pdf
- [16] <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/three-children-not-enough-have-five-erdogan-to-turks-in-eu.aspx?pageID=238&nID=110942&NewsCatID=510>
- [17] <http://newpol.org/category/authors/tolunay-özlem-ilyas>
- [18] <https://www.birgun.net/haber-detay/occupational-fatalities-in-turkey-reached-a-record-high-number-of-nearly-2000-last-year-145380.html>
- [19] <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-sparks-outrage-again-after-declaring-childless-women-to-be-deficient.aspx?pageID=238&nID=100142&NewsCatID=338>
- [20] <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/womens-most-significant-trait-is-motherhood-turkish-minister.aspx?pageID=238&nID=104431&NewsCatID=338>
- [21] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/sep/06/turkey.helenasmith>
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- [23] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/20/turkey-crackdown-kurdish-opposition>

[24] <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/07/two-hdp-parliament-members-lose-seats-turkey.html>

[25] <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/womens-rights-groups-opposition-mps-protest-bill-allowing-mufti-marriage-120317>