

From Emancipation To Liberation: The Changing Role of Women in Turkey's Public Realm

YEŞİM ARAT

"Even though women have not altered the fundamental understandings of secularism and nationalism in the country, they have exposed the limitations of these concepts. Women have developed a language with which they can now redefine their relationship to the state as individual women..."

The relationship between the state and women in Republican Turkey has changed substantively since the early decades of the Republic. It has been argued that women in Turkey were "emancipated but unliberated"¹ in the aftermath of the reforms initiated by the founding fathers of the Republic.² While women were given civil and political rights equal to men in the 1920s and 1930s, they remained confined by communal norms and customs. By the 1980s and thereafter, defiant daughters of the older generation demanded liberation: they sought autonomy from tradition and the right to speak up as individuals. Their calls for liberation took many shapes and helped liberate the public realm from the yoke of the state.

After the establishment of the Republic, the founding fathers

¹ Binnaz Toprak, "Emancipated but Unliberated Women in Turkey: The Impact of Islam," in F. Özbay, ed., *Women Family and Social Change in Turkey* (Bangkok: UNESCO, 1990) pp. 39-50; Deniz Kandiyoti, "Emancipated but Unliberated? Reflections on the Turkish Case," *Feminist Studies*, 13, no. 2 (Summer 1987) pp. 317-38.

² In this essay, I use the terms "founding fathers," "Kemalists" and "Republican modernists" interchangeably to refer to the political elite who initiated a series of reforms to Westernize Turkey after the Republic was proclaimed in 1923. Mustafa Kemal founded the Turkish Republic, presided over the country from 1923 to 1938 and led the reforms. There was opposition against him from those who sought to preserve the Ottoman, Muslim and traditional elements of the previous regime, but the Kemalists maintained control over these groups.

set out to modernize Turkey and to raise traditional society to the "level it deserved in the civilized world."³ I. Sunar states that the process of modernization led to the "monopolization of the public domain by the regime... and a fusion of the official and public domains."⁴ As the modernization process bore fruit and the country became more integrated with the Western world, different types of women contested this monopoly. The reformist, albeit still dominating, state enabled women to become educated and enlightened, and in turn, to challenge the boundaries that the state had drawn. Women's demands allowed for the emergence of a new public space where the traditional bifurcation of private and public realms had to be redefined. Western institutions, values and norms were adopted, transformed and at times rejected as women became emancipated and later demanded to be liberated.

This paper introduces the historical context of women's emancipation in the Republic of Turkey and then discusses how different women's groups expanded, transformed or perpetuated the parameters of the public realm with their different, at times seemingly contradictory, discourses for liberation. The focus of this article is on issues and concerns around which women voiced their differences from the founding fathers who "emancipated women," and not on politics in formal political institutions, such as political parties or parliament.

THE CONTEXT OF WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION

Turkey's movement toward modernity, which brought with it the emancipation of women, was different from modernization in other developing countries. Partha Chatterjee argues that in post-colonial nation-states, a national community is created to be different from that which is traditional, as well as unique from that which is Western.⁵ The "traditional" is selectively adapted and transformed to be modern, but not Western. In the Turkish

³ Kemal Atatürk, *Nutuk: Vefatı 2* (Istanbul: Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 1973) p. 697; on the Turkish project of modernity, see Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba, eds., *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997).

⁴ İlkay Sunar, "State, Society and Democracy in Turkey," in Vojtech Mastný and R. C. Nation, eds., *Turkey between East and West: New Challenges for a Rising Regional Power* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996) p. 142; on state-society relationships, see Metin Heper, *The State Tradition in Turkey*, (Wilmington: Eothen, 1985).

⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993) p. 6.

case, however, the founding fathers of the Republic sought to become Western as well as modern. Furthermore, the founding fathers exhibited creativity in "imagining" the national state by rejecting Islam, the traditional religion of the majority, and seeking to legitimize their project with a reference to the pre-Islamic Turkish past. This period was idealized, if not invented, to legitimize the Western values of secularism, equality and nationalism that the Turkish project of modernity sought to adopt. The modernity project was unique and indigenous, not because it revolted against the cultural hegemony of the West, but rather because it claimed that those Western values were actually Turkish. This was done, furthermore, in the context of a predominantly Islamic society.

Women were crucial in this claim and in the reinvention of the national culture.⁶ The Turkish intellectual Ziya Gökalp, who provided the ideological underpinnings of Turkish reforms following the founding of the Republic in 1923, argued that women had been considered equal to men among the pre-Islamic Turks in Central Asia, unlike during the Islamic-Ottoman period. According to Gökalp:

Old Turks were both democratic and feminist... In every business meeting woman and man had to be present together... For any verdict to be obeyed both *hakan* (male leader) and *haticin* (female leader) had to sign the decree... Women were not forced to cover up... A man could have only one wife... Women could become a ruler, a commander of a fort, a governor and an ambassador.⁷

This argument allowed the Republican reformers, who readily identified modernization with Westernization, to make claims for improving women's status and defend it as a Turkish tradition. Efforts to improve women's status were used as a means to cultivate Turkish nationalism and adopt Western notions of equality and secularism.

For the Republican modernist elite, improving women's status meant formalizing gender equality irrespective of religious

⁶ Deniz Kandiyoti, "The End of Empire: Islam, Nationalism and Women in Turkey" in Deniz Kandiyoti, ed., *Women, Islam and the State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991) pp. 23-47.

⁷ Ziya Gökalp, *Türkçülüğün Esasları* (Istanbul: Vartik Yayınları, 1968) pp. 147-48.

tradition. Islamic tradition, as practiced by the Ottomans, excluded women from the public realm and used concepts of male-female complementarity rather than equality. Under the Kemalist Republican regime, opportunities for women's education and professionalism expanded.⁸ The new regime replaced the Islamic civil code, which included formal inequalities between men and women in marriage, divorce, inheritance and custody over children, with a secular code adopted from the Swiss. This new secular code granted women formal equality in these areas. Minister of Justice Mahmut Esat, who presented the rationale of the draft bill of the Turkish civil code to Parliament in 1926 argued:

Not to change is a necessity for religions. For this reason, that religions should remain only matters of conscience is one of the principles of the civilization of the present century and one of the most important elements that distinguish the new civilization from the old. Laws that derive their principles from religions... constitute one of the major factors and reasons impeding progress... As a matter of fact, the stipulations of the religious Ottoman code are doubtlessly irreconcilable with contemporary civilization. But it is also obvious that the Ottoman code and similar other religious regulations are not reconcilable with Turkish national life.⁹

The Kemalists readily discarded the traditional, religious legal framework to meet the demands of "contemporary civilization"—a term they used to describe their goals of Western civilization and modernity. In this attempt they adopted a Western legal code as a cornerstone of their modernity project, which they hoped would ensure political victory over the Islamist opposition to the Kemalist modernists. Considering how difficult it has been to make even minor adjustments in Islamic law to improve women's status in other Middle Eastern countries, it was a radical move to adopt the Swiss civil code and formally try to make women equal to men.¹⁰

Another crucial change was the granting of suffrage to women in 1934. The prime minister at the time, İnönü—who presented the draft bill to parliament—claimed that "the Turkish nation prospered

⁸ See footnote 2.

⁹ Translated by and cited in Andrew Davison, *Secularism and Revivalism in Turkey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) pp. 197-99.

¹⁰ Margot Badran, "Independent Women" in Judith Tucker, ed., *Arab Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) p. 142; Ghada Hashem Talhami, *The Mobilization of Muslim Women in Egypt* (Florida: University of Florida Press, 1996) pp. 102-22.

and pervaded the whole world with its power and civilization only when its women had occupied their just and prestigious place along with men and worked together with men in the complicated and difficult tasks of their country."¹¹ In the same session of parliament, Sadri Maksudi referred to the old Turkic heritage of women's rights and pointed to suffrage as important for democracy, since only non-democratic regimes withheld women's suffrage.¹² In short, many held that suffrage was good for the country and it was Turkish tradition to engage women in state affairs.

These critical transformations in the emancipation of women took place under the strict discretion and monopoly of the Kemalist elites. Women were not allowed to organize on their own or lobby for their own rights. Even though women had been demanding civil and political rights for themselves since Ottoman times (without much success), an independent women's movement was not allowed to emerge during the Republican regime.¹³ In 1923, Nezihe Muhittin, a leading feminist at the time, initiated a Women's People's Party, but was denied permission to open it, thereby preventing her party from competing with the Republican People's Party that the Kemalist elite had simultaneously founded. She was advised instead to form a women's union. This organization, which hosted the Congress of the International Federation of Women, was soon perceived as having too much of an independent voice in the public realm and was subsequently closed in 1935, due to pressures from Ankara.¹⁴ The Kemalists felt that the public realm belonged to the modernizing state and neither autonomous women's organizations nor other similar organizations could be tolerated. The women, satisfied with the new rights they had been bestowed, acquiesced.

In Turkey's jealously guarded public space, women were emancipated, but only to the degree that the founding fathers saw fit. Gender equality was granted in the public realm and women's

¹¹ *Büyük Millet Meclisi Zabıt Ceridesi* (Parliamentary Records) Term IV, 2 (Ankara: Başbakanlık Basimevi, 1934) p. 82.

¹² *Parliamentary Records*, p. 84.

¹³ Serpil Çakır, *Osmanlı Kadın Hareketi* (Istanbul: Metis, 1994); Aynur Demirdirek, *Osmanlı Kadınlarının Hayat Hukki Arayışının bir Hikayesi* (Ankara: İmge yayınları, 1993).

¹⁴ Ayşegül Baykan, "Nezihe Muhittin'de Feminizm'in Düşünsel Kökenleri" in Ayşegül Baykan and Belma Ötüş-Baskett, eds., *Nezihe Muhittin ve Türk Kadını* (Istanbul: Değişim Yayınları, 1999) pp. 15-38; Yaprak Zihnioglu, "Nezihe Muhittin: An Ottoman Turkish Women's Rights Defender" unpublished Master Thesis (Istanbul: Boğaziçi University, 1998).

professionalism was supported at the same time as patriarchal norms continued to be practiced and replicated in the private realm.¹⁵ The Kemalists' concern was primarily to mobilize women "for the good of the country"—that is, with some limits—in their project of modernity. A striking number of women left their imprint in the professional world and, at least until the 1980s, these women continued to respect the Kemalist reforms which emancipated them.¹⁶

CHALLENGES FOR CONTEMPORARY WOMEN

Until the 1980s, Turkey prided itself on the women's emancipation that the Kemalists had delivered. But in the past two decades, women have become critical of the Kemalist project of modernity and its effects on women. The military intervention of September 1980 repressed both the radical Left as well as the radical Right in Turkey as it aimed to de-politicize society. Despite the domestic repression of the early 1980s, Turkey was increasingly tied to the outside world as a result of globalization. The increasingly intensifying links with the Western world allowed a second wave of feminism to trickle into the country. Meanwhile, domestically, an opportunity opened for those who began to call themselves feminists, when pre-1980 political actors on the Left and the Right were persecuted.¹⁷ These women encroached upon the public space that had been monopolized by

the state as they organized to expand their opportunities and solve their gender-based problems. They demanded substantive equality beyond formal equality, expressed their needs to be in control of their own sexuality and protested domestic violence. In the process, they expanded and strengthened Turkey's nascent civil society.

The women who helped liberate the public realm in the post-1980s were mostly a heterogeneous group of middle-aged, middle-class professionals who were influenced by one another as they positioned and defined themselves in relation to one another. A fundamental cleavage among the women of this period was between secular and Islamist women. Over time, both groups were separated into numerous other divisions. Within the secular camp, the most prominent division grew between the women who called themselves radical feminists and those who considered themselves Kemalist feminists.

Among this heterogeneous group of women, those who called themselves feminists were the first to have a public voice. They began organizing and wrote a regular column for the literary journal *Somut*. A younger group within this initial circle of feminists split off because they identified more with radical feminists who traced causes of women's suppression to the patriarchy that existed at all levels of society. This younger and more radical group began publishing the journal *Feminist* in 1987. Another group that formed identified with socialist feminism and called for an end to the capitalist economic system as a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for women's liberation. This group printed the journal *Kaktüs*. Even though these journals only circulated for about three years, they contributed important lasting concepts to Turkish feminist discourse.

Meanwhile, during the late 1980s, Islam increased its public profile in Turkish political life. Women who called themselves Kemalist feminists perceived the rising power of Islam as a serious threat to women's rights and began organizing to curtail it. *Çağdaş Yaşamı Destekleme Derneği* (The Association to Promote Contemporary Life) was the most important organization involved in addressing this threat. Islamist women were most active in the Welfare Party and as individuals who fought to have women admitted to universities with their Islamic headcovers. By the 1990s, as the Kurdish conflict permeated the political

¹⁵ Ayşe Durakbaşa, "Kemalism as Identity Politics in Turkey" in Zehra Arat, ed., *Deconstructing Images of 'The Turkish Woman'* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998) pp. 139-57; Zehra Arat, "Turkish Women and the Republican Reconstruction of Tradition," in Müge Göçek and Shiva Balaghi, eds., *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: Power, Identity and Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) pp. 57-78.

¹⁶ Ayşe Öncü, "Turkish Women in the Professions: Why So Many?" in Nermin Abadan-Unat, ed., *Women in Turkish Society* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981) pp. 180-93; Feride Acar, "Turkish Women in Academia: Roles and Careers" *METU Studies in Development*, 10 (1983) pp. 409-46.

¹⁷ Şirin İrkekli, "Emergence of the New Feminist Movement in Turkey," in Drude Dahlerup, ed., *The New Women's Movement* (London: Sage Publications, 1986) pp. 179-99; for other articles on women's activism during this period, see, Nükket Sirman, "Feminism in Turkey: A Short History," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 3, no. 1 (Fall 1989) pp. 1-34; Yeşim Arat, "The Project of Modernity and Women in Turkey," in Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba, eds., *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997); Yeşim Arat, "Toward a Democratic Society: The Women's Movement in Turkey in the 1980s" *Women's Studies International Forum*, 17, nos. 2/3 (1994) pp. 241-48; Yeşim Arat, "Feminists, Islamists and Political Change in Turkey" *Political Psychology*, 19, no. 1 (March 1998) pp. 117-32; on Islamist women, see Nilüfer Göle, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); Aynur İlyasoğlu, "Islamist Women in Turkey: Their Identity and Self-Image," in Zehra Arat, ed., *Deconstructing Images of 'The Turkish Woman'* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998) pp. 241-62.

agenda in Turkey, Kurdish women and Kurdish feminists began voicing their own discontent.

But, rather than focusing on the different women's groups, I shall study the impact of these different women's groups on the public realm by examining how they challenged the core concepts with which the Republican founding fathers defined and monopolized the public realm. Women developed a new language of individualism and autonomy. In this context, they could challenge the traditional definition of secularism and attempt to distance themselves from Kemalist nationalism.

THE INDIVIDUAL

As previously stated, the Republican regime granted rights to women in the context of the project of modernity and "for the good of the community." While the founding fathers might have had the interests of the community in mind, individual women radically benefited from these reforms. The "for the people despite the people" attitude of the regime defined the relationship between the women and the state and vice-versa.

In the early 1980s, self-declared feminists started to emerge on the political scene. Feminists insisted on speaking in their own name, with their own voice rather than be spoken about by the officials of the state or other women. In the feminist column of the weekly journal *Semut*, Stella Ovadia wrote, "We tried to say 'I' or 'we'; not 'those women,' but 'we women.' Not 'woman questions' (*kadin sorunlari*), but questions of being women (*kadinlik*), becoming women (*kadin olma*) and attempts to become subjects. To tell about ourselves and speak in our name."¹⁸ This individualistic standpoint was a radical challenge to the traditional paradigm within which women related to the state and to themselves. It was liberating in the Turkish context, because the polity had long been dictated from the top down with the elite speaking in the name of others—whether it be women, peasants or workers—for the good of the community or society. Women began writing their own novels, narrating their own stories and defining their problems as they wished in their own voice. They even addressed problems of sexuality and domestic violence.

The challenge of individualism did not find voice merely among the secular feminists. There were keen individualists among women

¹⁸ Stella Ovadia, "Bu Yazı Son Yazı mi Olacak," *Semut* (27 May 1983).

who began practicing Islam by the 1980s. Ironically, even though Islam is a religion that perpetuated communalistic norms and opted for the welfare of the Islamic community rather than the individual, some Muslim women brought up in the secular context of the Republic stood up for their individual rights. Sibel Eraslan, who chaired the Istanbul Welfare Party Women's Commission for five years, called herself a "feminist with faith." She explained that in the organization's attempt to mobilize women, it tried to propagate a sense of self-worth. It strove to make these women "recognize their own power" and speak up for themselves.¹⁹ Even when Islamist women did not call themselves feminist, some still struggled to balance individual authority and independence with the structural limitations that faith in religious precepts imposed on individualism in general and women in particular. Within this particular group, women argued that there was no power over them except God, which is an implicit criticism of the patriarchal underpinnings of religious dictates where men rule over women.

EQUALITY AND DIFFERENCE

The Kemalist Republican framework for women's rights formally, as well as substantively, expanded opportunities for women and made them equal to men. However, the primary political concern was to equalize women to men in the public domain. Differences between men and women, especially in the private domain, were ignored. Without any recognition of the problem in the private realm, I. Baltacıoğlu, one of the leading intellectuals of the day, argued that the issue of male-female equality in the polity was resolved.

In Turkey, male-female distinction ostensibly does not exist anymore and distinctions between masculinity and femininity are not those that the nation pays attention to or labors over. Instead, they belong to the private existence of a single man. "What we need are people, regardless of their gender, who uphold national values and national techniques."²⁰

According to the Kemalist reformers, the question of male-female equality had been resolved through the new legal framework. In the 1980s, the Kemalist concept of equality was

¹⁹ *Pazartesi* (September 1995) p. 5.

²⁰ Quoted in Ayşe Durakbaşı, "Cumhuriyet Döneminde Kemalist Kadın Kimliğinin Oluşumu" in *Tarih ve Toplum* (March 1988) p. 43.

challenged from several different perspectives. Those who called themselves Kemalist feminists maintained that existing women's problems could be solved within the framework provided by the founding fathers.²¹ This group had organized itself in response to the Islamists they considered to be threatening the prevailing secular framework. As such, they aimed to defend the framework that had been established against Islamist threats and amend it to make it more egalitarian. They led the women's initiative on amending the civil code. Even though the civil code had been radically progressive in 1926, by the 1980s there were articles (declaring the husband the head of the family, obliging him to provide for the family, expecting the wife to be his helper) that needed to be amended to reflect more modern attitudes.

The younger generation of feminists, who began organizing earlier and independent of the Kemalist feminists, articulated a critique of the Kemalist concept of women's rights and the legal equality it offered. They argued that the Kemalists' focus on formal equality of men and women was insufficient to meet their needs. They initiated a quest for substantive equality as they focused on the private domain and prioritized the issue of domestic violence. Beyond organizing protest movements and opening shelters for battered women, they urged the state to initiate special measures such as training special nurses and police officers and having special courts adjudicate domestic violence cases.²² They brought to the public's attention the need to treat the particular vulnerability of women to domestic violence with "unequal" care.

SEXUALITY, VIOLENCE AND DIFFERENCE

It has long been argued that the parameters of the Kemalist project of modernity were drawn around puritanical sexual morality regarding women.²³ Although women were expected to exhibit their modern femininity (at balls and parties) with their décolleté evening dresses, they were proscribed from being

²¹Nermin Abadan Unat, "Söylemden Protestoya: Türkiye'de Kadın Hareketlerinin Dönüşümü," Ayşe Berkay Hacimirzaoglu, *75 Yılda Kadınlık ve Erkeklik* (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yayınları, 1998) pp. 323-36.

²²Canan Arın, "Kadına Yönelik Sıddet Açısından Türk Hukuku'nun Kadına Yaklaşımı" *Evdaki Terör* (İstanbul: Mor Çatı Yayınları, 1996) pp.130-39.

²³Ayşe Durakbaşı, "Cumhuriyet Döneminde Kemalist Kadın Kimliğinin Oluşumu," *Tarih ve Toplum* (March 1988) p. 39-43.

feminine in their professional lives. A strict morality which linked male honor to women's control over their own sexuality prevailed. Radical feminists of the post-1980s introduced the issue of women's sexuality into public debate through their criticism of Kemalist feminism. The feminist Şule Torun's protest in the journal *Somut*—in which she stated that "I can not think about sexuality and write, because it will be considered a shame"²⁴—launched the discussion of sexuality in the public domain in 1983. In 1987, Duygu Asena wrote the important book *Kadının Adı Yok* (*The Woman Has No Name*) which gave public voice to women's sexual selves.²⁵ Feminists tried to liberate sexuality from the domain of pornography and identified themselves as having a stake in its public expression without interference from the state, even though the process was controversial and contested. The feminist monthly *Pazartesi*, which commenced publication in April 1995, ran a regular column called "Corner of Shame" on women's sexual fantasies and illicit relationships. The reactions to the column were varied. The journal was taken to court for promoting pornography,²⁶ a woman journalist who wrote for a major daily newspaper criticized the column for banality and others defended it as an expression of women's sexuality.²⁷

Sexuality became a public issue, not necessarily because it was widely celebrated, but because feminists had to defend it against assaults. In 1989, a campaign against sexual harassment was organized. Feminists drew attention to widespread sexual harassment that had not previously been expressed, as it was deemed either insignificant or legitimate. Feminists sold purple ribbons in public places to encourage women to defend themselves against sexual harassment. The campaign underlined both the violence involved in sexual harassment and the will of women to respond to it with violence.

Feminists also tried to transform the cultural and political stigma attached to sexual harassment by defending the right of women to express their sexuality in individual cases of sexual harassment. The Kumkapi case was an example of this. Zeynep Uludağ, her

²⁴Şule Torun, "Genel bir Değerlendirme," *Somut* (27 May 1983).

²⁵Duygu Asena, *Kadının Adı Yok* (İstanbul: Afa Yayınları, 1987).

²⁶In its November 1997 issue, *Pazartesi* reported that they had been acquitted in five of the cases they were tried for promoting pornography and punished in one. *Pazartesi* (November 1997) p. 10.

²⁷Gülşay Göktürk, "Kadın İşi porno," *Yeni Yüzyıl* (31 July 1995).

mother, sister and a female friend were sexually harassed in a Kumkapi restaurant. A fight ensued, and Zeynep fatally stabbed a man with a knife that she picked up in self-defense. The court case that followed was widely publicized and gave feminists the opportunity to emphasize a woman's right to go out alone at night, and to protest sexual assault. In the process, women created for themselves an unprecedented feminist standpoint, this time against a man who assaulted women and the state, which was seeking justice for his death.²⁸

As the feminists emerged in the public arena, public discussion of rape cases was also transformed. Rape cases, which had long been viewed as the trespass of communal norms, began to be seen as acts of violence committed against individuals. Feminists became participants with vested interests in defending the rights of women to protect their own bodies. When Güneş K., a young middle-class woman, was raped and beaten by her novelist ex-boyfriend on 29 January 1995, and when Zeynep A. was raped by the police while in custody on 24 November 1996,²⁹ feminists showed up in courts to demonstrate public solidarity with these female victims.

Sexuality was problematized in the political and public domains not merely by the more radical secular feminists but, perhaps inadvertently, by Islamist women as well. Fadime Şahin, who divulged her sexual relationships with Muslim *tarikats* (sect) leaders after she was caught with one, expanded the parameters of public debate on sexuality and morality in both the secular and Islamist ranks.³⁰ What would have been a melodramatic story of seduction and desertion was transformed into a heated public debate on religious morality and sexuality within religious parameters.

When Şahin presented her story as a case of sexual harassment to major television channels, she took the radical step of defending herself with conviction and pride against public blame for illicit relationships. She blamed the two men for exploiting religion and luring her into sexual relationships. Her revelations were deemed

²⁸Tüten Ateş, "Zeynep Katil Değil," *Pazarı* (November 1995) pp. 2-3; *Yeni Yüzyıl* (17 December 1997).

²⁹Serpil Çakır and Hülya Gülbahar, "Türkiye'de Kadın Hareketinin Yüz Yılı Kronolojisi" *Ajandası Kadın Eserleri Kütüphanesi ve Bilgi Merkezi Vakfı*, (Istanbul, 2000) pp. 262, 268.

³⁰Defne Suman, "Feminizm, İslam ve Kamusal Alan," in Nilüfer Göle, ed., *İslamın Yeni Kamusal Yüzleri* (Istanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2000).

earth-shattering by one major daily³¹ and she gained celebrity status.³² The case became the cover story for several major weeklies.³³ With a self-confident attitude and the help of a female lawyer, she took the two *tarikats* leaders to court for exploiting religion and causing her harm. She also sued the Ministry of Internal Affairs for encroachment of her personal rights, because the police tried to expose her face when she was caught with Müslüm Gündüz, the *tarikat* leader. While all this might seem ordinary in the West, Şahin's temerity in seeking her rights and exposing her sexual life was unprecedented in Turkey, especially because she was a religious woman who wore a headcover and there are severe sanctions against the breach of sexual norms in Islam. She had defied being classified as a weak female Muslim victim by courageously facing up to the "shame" to which society would have condemned her. By revealing herself as she deemed appropriate, and attracting respect for her courage and power, she exposed allegedly religious men and their *tarikats*, as well as the duplicity of public morality in Turkey. This incident showed that some Islamist women were also seeking liberation.

SECULARISM AND WOMEN

The Republican reforms, which expanded women's rights, had done so in defiance of Islamic law and custom. While the state took pride in not forcing women to uncover themselves the way the Shah of Iran had done, it had undermined the religious legal framework which restricted women's rights. Republican secularism was suspicious of religion and demanded that it be closely guarded.

After the 1980s, women challenged the Republican concept of secularism with their demands to expand the public space allowed to Islam. A heterogeneous group of women, some calling themselves feminist Muslims, others simply Muslims and some preferring not to identify themselves, insisted that they be allowed to work in public service and attend universities with their heads covered. This became the major controversy between women and the state. Protests of women wearing headscarves culminated during exam periods and during graduation ceremonies and, at times, ended in the courts. While there were some cases of local

³¹*Milliyet* (24 January 1997).

³²*Yeni Yüzyıl* (8 January 1997).

³³*Tempo* (5 February 1997).

courts accepting the students' desire to be admitted to universities with their headscarves, higher courts found the local court decisions unconstitutional. In cases where students with headscarves took the Turkish state to European courts, they did not receive the support they expected. When an elected female member of the parliament from the Islamist Virtue Party tried to take her oath in the Grand National Assembly with her head covered, she was forbidden to do so. The Islamist women had exposed the restrictive nature of Kemalist secularism, but had not succeeded in transforming it.

The relationship of secular feminists to Islamist women with headscarves varied. While Kemalist feminists opposed the women with headscarves as a threat to the secular foundations of the Republic, some groups of secular feminists supported Islamist women's right to wear them.³⁴ By 1999, the state had been able to contain, if not undermine, the will of women to wear headscarves as public protest. Yet state control over religion continues to be contested and women with headscarves continue to make themselves visible in the public realm.

NATIONALISM AND THE STATE

While expansion of women's rights had been an important tool for cultivating Turkish nationalism, by the 1980s, women activists had shed the Turkish nationalist stigma attached to women's issues. Ironically, feminists who splintered into radical, socialist or other types of feminist groups did not differentiate themselves radically from feminists in the West, or identify themselves as Turkish feminists. Feminism in Turkey exhibited many different faces and molded itself in response to local priorities—such as domestic violence or the amendment of the civil code—as opposed to abortion rights, which were so important in the West and which women in Turkey already had. There were discussions and some initiatives about defining Turkish feminism, but women's activism was primarily issue-oriented and universalist in its discourse.³⁵

While Turkish women in Turkey might have ignored their national identities in their activism, Kurdish women began

organizing separately. Similar to other minority groups dominated by the feminism of the majority, Kurdish feminists felt that their particular predicament could not be recognized within Turkish women's groups. They organized around the journal *Rosa*, which began publication in March 1996, and then the journal *Fijun*, which began publication in December 1996, in order to make themselves independent from the Kurdish nationalist movement, from men and from Turkish women. In an interview with the feminist journal *Pazartesi*, the editor of *Rosa* argued that within the Kurdish nationalist movement, women had to become like men to be taken seriously, which as feminists, was not what they wanted.³⁶

The evolving relationship between Kurdish women, the state and Turkish feminists was complicated. The Turkish state initiated the foundation of educational centers called ÇATOMs (Çok Amaçlı Toplum Merkezleri—Multi Purpose Social Centers) in predominantly Kurdish regions of southeastern Anatolia to offer programs in literacy, hygiene, child care, nutrition, home economics and some training courses (for instance, in carpet weaving) to women and girls. Even though these centers were organized under the direction of the Southeastern Anatolia Project Regional Development Administration, the Turkish Development Foundation, a civil society NGO, and various local organizations collaborated in their operation. The centers stated that their aims were to encourage women to define their problems and help women to solve them.

The response of the Turkish feminists to these centers was mixed. Some argued that the centers were founded to assimilate Kurdish women by teaching them Turkish, encouraging them to forget their mother tongue and training them to make cheap labor available to emerging industries in the region.³⁷ Others criticized the judgmental and dismissive attitude of the anti-ÇATOM feminists. Karayazgan pointed out that the responses and reactions of women who actually attended ÇATOMs should be the criteria to evaluate these centers. She questioned how appropriate it was for Turkish feminists to decide, in the name of Kurdish women who benefited from these centers, that these

³⁴ Cülnur Savran and Nesrin Tura, "Çağdaşlaşma' söylemine teslim olmayız," *Pazartesi* (September 1996) p. 11.

³⁵ Ayşe Düzkan, "Yerli bir feminizm," *Pazartesi* (September 1997) pp. 2-4.

³⁶ Nesrin Tura, "İlk Kürt kadın dergisi," *Pazartesi* (April 1996) pp. 8-9.

³⁷ Ayşe Düzkan, "Kürt Kadınlara Hizmet," *Pazartesi* (April 1998) pp. 2-3.

centers were detrimental to the Kurdish women's interests. Karayazgan's criticisms brought to focus the trap that the Turkish feminists could fall into. Turkish feminists had defined themselves in reaction to the state and then had defied the state feminism of the Kemalist founding fathers who claimed to know the interests of women better than women did. Yet, when women secured their own voice, they committed the same error towards other women that the Kemalists men had to women.³⁸

CONCLUSION

In the past two decades, women from different corners of Turkish civil society have challenged the patriarchal underpinnings of the Turkish state and its monopoly over the public realm from different perspectives. The challenges have predominantly focused on the way the Republican state related to its citizens in general and to women in particular. It had implications for the Republican concept of secularism and nationalism. Even though women have not altered the fundamental understandings of secularism and nationalism in the country, they have exposed the limitations of these concepts. Women have developed a language with which they can now redefine their relationship to the state as individual women who want to articulate their needs and priorities, independent of the state.

Consequently, women have emerged onto the public scene as different kinds of feminists, including Islamist or Kurdish feminists, or simply as women who want to defend their right to their own sexuality or protection from violence. Despite these advances, there remains much to be changed substantively insofar as opportunities for the majority of women are concerned. Women remain less educated, less informed and poorer than men; in short, they are still less capable of using their rights of citizenship than men.

What remains is to vocalize feminist demands through political channels where they can be translated into outcomes. With this goal in mind, and the self-confidence that their activism gave them, women have been organizing since 1997 through KADER, the Association to Support and Train Candidates (for Parliament), to have their voices heard in the realm of orthodox politics.

³⁸ Ayşegül Karayazgan, "Biz kadınlar diyemedik bir türlü," *Pazartesi* (May 1998) pp. 8-10.