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**“FEMINISM AND ROLE OF WOMEN IN TURKEY”**

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**Research Question:** What is the process of historical development of the role of women in the Turkish society and feminism in Turkey between the years 1923-1945

**Abstract:**

To become an improved country, revolutions, social life, education of people and the economy of the country have an important role. First of all, equality among people is the key of a modern and happy society. Therefore, women and men should be equal in every aspect of life. When Ottoman fell and new Turkish Republic founded, Atatürk made many revolutions for Turkish women to make them equal with men.

The very aim of this study is to investigate the process of development of women in Turkey between the years 1923-1945. Second World War was done between the years 1939-1945. Therefore Second World War and its social effects are analyzed, especially its effects on women in Turkey and in the world. To make the development of Turkish women more understandable; women in Ottoman and in early Turkish Republic are analyzed. The research of the essay has been carried out with using different sources like newspapers, women magazines, which are published in these years, and essays. Feminism and feminist movements in Turkey are investigated. Due to the importance of education in revolutions education of women in Turkey is analyzed.

*(Word Count:187)*

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**Introduction:**

Second World War changed the world in social economical and political aspects. World divided into two groups Allies and Axis, and in this chaos, Turkey the new Republic that was early founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was trying to improve itself. To make the new Republic a modern and improved country Atatürk gave importance to the equality among men and women. To make the revolution for women, they should be equal with men in every aspects of social life. They should join to life not be captured in house. Also they should be educated because without education, a consciousness about the revolutions and new rights that women gained would not occur and all revolutions will be useless.

Making a research about women process in Turkey includes Ottoman and Middle Age understandings and also the new modern understandings. There was a big clash of these two and still there is. This subject is very deep but can be understood and investigated from magazines and newspapers of those years. With these tools, process of historical development of women in Turkey can be researched well. Feminism and feminist movements in Turkey was started in Ottoman and continued in Turkish Republic. Atatürk made many revolutions for women and suppression of the revolutions are being done by the country.

## **Second World War and Its Social Effects in the World**

World War II was a global war lasting from 1939 to 1945. It was forming two opposing military alliances, the Allies and the Axis. The war ended with the victory of the Allies over Germany and Japan in 1945. In this war the major participants placed their entire economic, industrial and scientific capabilities. They erased the distinction between civilian and military resources. Therefore World War II altered the countries political alignment, social structure, economy. Most countries whose industries had been damaged moved toward economic recovery. Political integration emerged as an effort to stabilize postwar relations.

One of the most important social effects of World War II is women movements that occurred in many countries. For centuries women had no choice and opinion in any aspect of life. They were like the servants of their husband. Their duties were looking after their child, dealing with the housework and making their husband happy. However with World War II women's lives were changed in many ways because, their husbands went to war and women had to take their responsibilities. They worked at factories and shops; they started to do something besides housework. Women realized that they could do what their husbands did. Many women started their working career during war years. Therefore it is a turning point in women's history. Many of them started to become an individual, they earned the right to attend the schools, work at significant jobs.

Women's social lives totally changed. They drove the cars, go to night clubs, and wore pantaloons but not dresses and skirts. They wore pants and different from typical house dress. Eventually they allowed getting involved in politics and that is the greatest success of the movement. They became equal with men in many aspects. Turkey did not get involved World War II. The most important reason was Turkey was a newly founded country and made many wars to found the republic. Therefore due to the destructions that occurred in last years they had to straighten up again.

They followed a balance policy among Allies and Axis. However to take measure for the safety of the society, government enlisted 1.300.000 people. Due to the fact that men were enlisted economical problems occurred.

### **Revolution of Women in Turkish Republic**

In the years between 1919-23, there was an Independence War of Turkey and women's status raised more with this war. War causes some important change in the roles of women in society because men were at war so women had to do their husbands duties. Also women contribute to the army like they transport ammunitions to the soldiers. Moreover, in the fall of Istanbul, women made demonstrations to activate the people against the enemy. In Anadolu women founded a community for defence the country. After these events it was obvious that women could not be "nothing" as they were in Ottoman again. In Ottomans women were imprison in houses. Due to the laws of Sharia which is the sacred law of Islam; they had no rights, they were like slaves. After the wars and foundation of new Turkish country, Atatürk who has the Eastern mentality was influenced by French Revolution made an Industry Revolution in Turkish Republic. By materializing this revolution, women started to make same jobs with men. Atatürk helped women to become educated and support them like Sabiha Gökçen (the first woman pilot in Turkey). By supporting women, women started to believe in themselves and they started to gain their self-confidence.

All the political rights considered to be the foundation of citizenship rights were recognized for women in Turkey in a short period of time. Women obtained the right to vote and be elected in municipal elections in 1930 and in parliamentary elections in 1934. Prior to that date, the number of countries where women had the right to vote and be elected as members of parliament was 28 and the number of countries where women actually were elected as members of parliament was 17.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [www.worldpress.org/Europe/2457.cfm](http://www.worldpress.org/Europe/2457.cfm)

The right to vote and be elected was a turning point for women in Turkey. After gaining this right, they started to be counted as a person like men. They were given equal rights with men about education, divorcing, inheritance. Polygamy was prohibited. Clothes of women changed.

Many revolutions were done for women in that time of a period. In 1935, 12. International Women Conference, made in the Palace of Beylerbeyi, in leadership of Atatürk. Moreover first elections were, in which women used their right to vote and be elected done. In 1936, some arrangements were done about business and business life of women. In 1937, the agreement which is an ILO (International Labor Organization) agreement numbered 45 those prohibits women to work in underground or dangerous and tough jobs. In 1945, first UNO (The United Nations Organization) document that determines the principles of women and men equality was accepted. In addition, technical high schools for girls were opened. Also maternity insurance was arranged by 4772 numbered law.

### **Women Magazines in Early Republic**

New regime of Turkish government, Republic, created a new women figure in the society. Revolutions that were made changed the life of Turkish people, especially women. Women had no social life in Ottoman. With the new laws that is made influence of westernization which was a movement in Ottoman and continued in Turkish Republic, inequality between women and men was tried to be prevented. On the other hand, a big effort had been spent on women to make them become the place that they deserve in the society. One of the important magazines that was started to be published in 1934 “ Republican Woman Magazine” includes an introduction that is written to summarize the qualities of a Republican woman: “ A Republican woman is not a narrow minded person. She can deal with her business life as well as her private, entertainment life. She is a woman who is interested in both her beauty and her intelligence.

A republican woman is a perfect woman who is concerning with debating, literature movements, and sports and also being a housewife, a mother and a wife.(2) .

As it is understood from this statement, a Republican woman should be successful in her private life and social life. She should be reconciled with herself and the world.

Therefore, women got involved in social life. For instance, beauty competitions were made. Keriman Halis was selected by Turkey and participated in Miss World beauty pageant which she won in 1932. This was an important point because Muslim women can not even open her face in front of people. Keriman Halis wearied a swimsuit. (3) With the “new” Turkey, a new women image created. Women got involved in social life and changed their clothes, wearied modern clothes. Clothing of women was according to Islamic beliefs and moral issues of Turkey. Therefore changing the clothes and opening the hairs, giving up using veils was not that easy.

In contrast to the opening up of women’s clothing, limitations on femininity in dress became an issue of morality and decency and were an ongoing topic of discussion in the magazines of the time. It became a strict etiquette rule that others should not see one’s underclothing.(4) A revealing dress, however, might not be a sign of frivolity as those women who covered up all their bodies might also be immoral. (5)

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2. (Davaz Mardin, 1998:15-16, [www.chaoticgonderiler.blogspot.com/kadin-devrimi-cumhuriyetle-balad.html](http://www.chaoticgonderiler.blogspot.com/kadin-devrimi-cumhuriyetle-balad.html))

3. [www.defineyolu.com/modern-islamcılık-ya-da-peygambersizleştirme-t50168.html?](http://www.defineyolu.com/modern-islamcılık-ya-da-peygambersizleştirme-t50168.html?)

4. “Muaşeret,” *Aile Dostu* (March, 1931), 29.,

[http://www.ata.boun.edu.tr/grad/Issue\\_3/Mahir,%20Elif\\_Etiquette%20Rules%20in%20the%20Early%20Republican%20Period.pdf](http://www.ata.boun.edu.tr/grad/Issue_3/Mahir,%20Elif_Etiquette%20Rules%20in%20the%20Early%20Republican%20Period.pdf)

5. “Namus Telâkkileri ve Kadın Kıyafeti,” *Salon* (August 15, 1949), 729.

[http://www.ata.boun.edu.tr/grad/Issue\\_3/Mahir,%20Elif\\_Etiquette%20Rules%20in%20the%20Early%20Republican%20Period.pdf](http://www.ata.boun.edu.tr/grad/Issue_3/Mahir,%20Elif_Etiquette%20Rules%20in%20the%20Early%20Republican%20Period.pdf)



Nevertheless, women who were fond of adorning themselves were looked down on and the women of Anatolian villages who worked for the good of their families were idealized. (6) Thus, opening up went hand in hand with modesty, adding to the dualities that Turkish women encountered.

To reach the equality between men and women, women must join to every part of life. Their role in the society shouldn't be limited only as a mother but they should also take part in every aspect of the life such as a teacher, worker, gineeren president as well. Rights and rules in the society were planned for men because they were the ones that live a social life and having economic power. Women were in houses so they had rights in their house, they were not doing a job outside; there was no need to put some rules or rights for women.

One of the most important attributions of women magazines in years among 1939-1945 was, provoking women to join in business life. In these years there was World War II. Turkey was not in war but effected from it economically.

For instance, to prove women join the business life, an American working woman's life was written in an encourage style and especially about her elegance with these words: "...From these words, do not think that Miss Sponts is a rude person that became mannish and do not like elegance things or can not deal with elegance works...She has an elegance of women, all virtues, is a real woman. (7)

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6. See "Süs Kadını," *Salon* (October 1, 1949), 785; and "Salon Süslerine Rağmen Asıl ve Asıl Kadınlarımız," *Salon* (December 15, 1949), 880-881.

[http://www.ata.boun.edu.tr/grad/Issue\\_3/Mahir,%20Elif\\_Etiquette%20Rules%20in%20the%20Early%20Republican%20Period.pdf](http://www.ata.boun.edu.tr/grad/Issue_3/Mahir,%20Elif_Etiquette%20Rules%20in%20the%20Early%20Republican%20Period.pdf)

7. [www.becerikli.net/threads/78564-Atatürk-ve-Cumhuriyet-Kadınları](http://www.becerikli.net/threads/78564-Atatürk-ve-Cumhuriyet-Kadınları)

### **Feminism and Feminism in Turkey**

Throughout the history, women are not equal with men and seen as second class person .The conscious of feminism, includes the awareness of women that they are not equal with men, so they are exposed to injustice and the concept of the injustice is not a fact that is natural but social and cultural. In other words; it is the activist movement, its purpose is to improve and widen women's rights and the role of them in the society<sup>(8)</sup>

Also a systematic rebellion to this inequality did not occur in every century and in every country. Since, women should have economical independence and women should be educated to create a feminist conscious, to gain equal rights.

New regime of the government, republic is better than sultanate for development of feminism and women rights, new government made revolutions in women rights and changed the role of women and acted careful about the independence of feminism. 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 Penalty Code taken from Italy. Feminist movements improved from that point. Since Turkey was trying to become modern and there were transformations towards Europeanization of Turkish cultural life.

First feminist movement gaining (End of 18<sup>th</sup> century – 1930's) are right to vote and be elected, equal pay for equal work and right to work in every type of work. Also they gained right to be educated and legislative reform (especially about family law, marriage and divorce).

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* (newspaper of Republic) on 20 June 1927, the aim was to "steer public opinion." It was a risky strategy: by that time, Turkey had become a one-party state with no organized political.

By the way "Türk Kadınlar Birliđi" (Turkish Women Union) was closed after a congress about peace and disarmament that is made in 1935 with IAW (International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship). (9).

"Türk Kadınlar Birliđi" followed the feminist conferences before. In the conference that was made in 18-22 March 1933 in Marseille, there were representatives of 26 countries and included Turkish women like Seniha Sami and Lamia Refik.(10)

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9. (Libal 2008:32-34, Baltacıođlu 1935:2) ([www.80.25140.59/politics.ankara.edu.tr/aksit/dođudan.html](http://www.80.25140.59/politics.ankara.edu.tr/aksit/dođudan.html))

10. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacifism>

Turkish Women Union that was founded by Nezihe Muhiddin was closed because women gained the same rights with men so they became equal and such association was unnecessary. However independent women movement finished by closing this Union.(11) By change in regime and new Republic regime women gained many rights but it was accepted that the problem finished by giving them same rights with men.

“Türk Kadınlar Birliđi” struggled to gain political rights and deserved it. However they can not use this right enough. Since in the society there is a belief that political issues are the issues of men. Women’s duties actually are based on responsibilities about family. To be successful in active political life, women should have the consciousness of these rights. Women should not be an accessory in the parliament. Patriarchal beliefs and understandings of the society should change and legal obstacles should be abolished. Also women in parliament should work for this.

### **Importance of Education**

After the year 1908 women who were seen in magazines and newspapers, especially Halide Nusret Zorlutuna, İffet Halim Oruz, Necibe Kızılay, Şukufe Nihal and Yaşar Nezihe have a common point. They were educated in official schools after they were opened. Most of the women that went to university were graduated from different sections of Literature Faculty. They did their jobs and worked in different associations.

İffet Halim Oruz, Şukufe Nihal and Yaşar Nezihe took place in many associations effectively. Also their articles about women problem and social issues were published in various magazines and newspapers. Their articles were published in women magazines.

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

For example; Halide Nusret Zorlutuna's articles were published in Genç Kadın (Young Woman), Kadınlar Dünyası ( World of Women) and Türk Kadını ( Turkish Woman);Şukufe Nihal's Kadın Yolu ( Woman Path), Türk kadını ( Turkish Woman) and Süs ( Ornament); Yaşar Nezihe's Kadın (Woman), Kadınlar Dünyası ( World of Women) and Türk Kadını Yolu ( Pathway of Turkish Woman). (12).Nezihe Muhiddin another important women figure tried to found a political party "Kadın Halk Fırkası" but it can not be founded. Then an association called "Türk Kadınlar Birliği "(Turkish Women Union) was founded. They fought for political rights of women and they closed themselves in 1935. To sum up, to become a modern society, traditional Turkish society was being changed into a modern society; in this case women were given some social roles. Role of women in the society changed. In addition women, who were educated struggle with women problems in Turkey, wrote articles in women magazines and tried to make women become aware of them. Also they were a good model for other women.

### **New Women**

The image of "new women" that was created by upper class men was free when compared with women in Ottoman but independent on men." New women" was an educated woman, a person who has a job, an elegant, chaste and a proper wife, mother and housewife to a man who has a patriarchal understanding.

Upper class women accepted the "new women" term and became the representative of this women image.

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12. [www.thesis.bilkent.edu.tr/0002820.pdf](http://www.thesis.bilkent.edu.tr/0002820.pdf)

However some women challenged to “new women” term. For instance Nezihe Muhittin who published her book *Türk Kadını* (Turkish Women) in 1936: “Rising of women and resemble to men doe not mean equality among men and women. On the contrary, it is correcting the differences and dicipline them. (13)

The Civil Code that is accepted in 1926 was not enough to make women free. Since while women were gaining rights as legally, they faced with obstacles about tradition structural. In Turkish society there is patriarchal understanding among people. Patriarchal system connotes dominance of men. Men are more powerful than women and women are in a secondary state. Men control women’s fertility, production, sexuality, freedom, ownership and other economic sources with familial, social, cultural and religious behavioral rules. In this regard, when women had political rights, every of them can not gain their freedom due to familial, social, financial boundaries. To summarize “new women” have equal rights with men in inheritance, divorce, marriage, do not wear veil and hair scarf. They have the right to be educated and work in a job, to vote and be elected. However, in 1935-1945 conditions, women who were rich and had military, bureaucrat families used these rights. Since women who were living in Anadolu did not know about their rights because they did not know how to read and wright in the first place. Therefore, education is so important in equality of men and women. Women should be educated and have consciousness about their rights, themselves and events that is happening around them, in their country and in the world. After that they will use their rights and become equal with men.

We can not say that giving rights to women is enough. In spite of the improvement of women from Ottoman to Republic still in education and business life women and men are not equal. To awaken women and give them some information about their rights and capabilities women magazines worked a lot.

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13. (Baykan ve Ötüş-Baskett, *Nezihe Muhittin ve Türk Kadını 1936* ) [www.thesis.bilkent.edu.tr/0002820.pdf](http://www.thesis.bilkent.edu.tr/0002820.pdf)

In an article in the women magazine *Muhit*, it was stated that women who did not give birth to children were demonstrated miserable human beings. Especially women married to wealthy men and who spent their time in entertainment and refused to have children been portrayed as victims. Their husbands told them that they could not have a child unless they could give their children the necessary education, which was expensive. In the article, women of this type in their forties were depicted as bored, oftentimes cheated on by their husbands with younger women. (14)

There were many reasons behind the decisions that would tie women to their homes and make them housewives. One reason was the decrease in population after the long years of continuous wars. The new Republic needed women to bear and raise children. Accordingly, Selim Sırrı in *Aile Dostu* argued that although women had been given the chance to show their competence in science, literature and industry, but that their true responsibility was at home, because women first of all were mothers and governesses. While Republican Turkey had given women the rights that made them free, equal in the family, with access to education, and had permitted them to put aside their veils, what was necessary first were enlightened mothers. To become one of these exalted beings, a woman had to study hard. (15) Families were seen by the Republican elites as the most important unit of modernization. The organization of the daily life at home was the first step in organizing the nation in line with modernity. According to Navaro-Yaşın, in the 1930s and 1940s doing housework and raising children were of the utmost concern of the Turkish nationalists, who were working to create the modern nation state. (16)

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14. "Anne Olmak Bahtiyarlığı: Dünyada Anne Olmak Bahtiyarlığı Kadar Devamlı, Onun Kadar Tatlı, Onun Kadar Değerli Hiçbir Zevk Yoktur," *Muhit* (April, 1929), 408-414.

15. *Aile Dostu* (February, 1931), 6-7.

16. Yael Navaro-Yaşın, "Evde Taylorizm: Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin ilk yıllarında evişinin rasyonelleşmesi (1928-40)," *Toplum ve Bilim*, no. 84 (Spring 2000), 51.

For this purpose, girl's institutes to teach home economics were founded by the state. According to the elites, everything should be done in a practical way, with the least effort, and in minimum time.

In the magazines, housekeeping tricks and child rearing lessons were given to women. One example to these can be found at the “*Ev Hanımı Sahifesi*” (Housewife's Page) in *Muhit*. In this page, instructions for washing the dishes were given in detail so they would lose minimum time and would regard the work as less disgusting, thus much easier. The article gives description of the best soaps, the equipment needed, and the best height for the kitchen table on which to wash dishes for medium height women. (17)

Women were seen as housewives. Magazines were giving advices about being a good woman. A good woman means that a woman who is in house and dealing with housework and children. New Turkish Government tried to create a new family life but women were not free again. They were housewife but not a teacher or doctor or a pilot.

The housewife page also offered practical hints for cleaning woolen clothes, gloves, shoes, other clothing or household goods, renewing clothes, repairing furniture, making economical soups and peeling onions without tears.(18) Perfect cleanliness of the houses was obligatory. In articles translated from European writers or anecdotes by American gentlemen about the importance of the comfort and cleanness of the house, how to meet these standards were effectively demonstrated. (19)

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17. *Muhit* (December, 1929), 1114-1115.

18. See *Muhit* (July, 1931), p.71; *Muhit* (December, 1931), 67;and *Muhit* (February, 1932), 69.

19. *Muhit* (December, 1931), 48.



**Conclusion:**

To create a modern and improved country women and men must be equal to ensure the peace, good economical life in the country. To reach this equality woman must join to every part of life. Their role in the society shouldn't be limited. If this revolution happens for every single woman in the society, Republic will become improved. Social life will be easier.

To sum up we can not say that giving rights to women that are equal with men's is not enough. Women should be educated and have the consciousness of their rights. Also men should except the equality and be educated to get rid of the Middle Age understandings.

Second World War has many results and it affected women in social life too. In the absence of men women got involved in life and became freer. It is a big force that leaded women join into life and started the equality.

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