

# **TURKISH WOMEN: A CENTURY OF CHANGE**

*This article aims to present a few of the individuals who have shaped this movement, to make some voices heard, and to inspire curiosity that will lead the reader to want to explore the work of Turkish women historians and women activists themselves. The colorful differences which enrich the women's movement in Turkey are depicted with references to their work and their opinions.*

**Katharina Knaus •**

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• Katharina Knaus is an analyst and researcher based in İstanbul.

In the 1970s the international women's history movement was launched. Books –such as “Hidden from History” or “Becoming Visible”– had titles that were in themselves a program. They had a clear purpose: To produce “new knowledge” about women and their often forgotten role in history.<sup>1</sup> And they had a political agenda: as Gerda Lerner once wrote, “women's history is the primary tool for women's emancipation.”<sup>2</sup>

Since the 1980s a generation of Turkish historians embarked on a similar quest to rediscover the voices of women who had fought for women's rights in the past. As one of them put it:

“We, as women involved in the new feminist movement in Turkey, pondered the conditions of womanhood and the mechanisms that sustain male dominance. We scrutinized and questioned everything that had been taught to us, including Turkish history. As a member of a feminist group, I was compelled to search for similar women's groups in Turkish history.”<sup>3</sup>

The process of women's legal and social emancipation in Turkey has its roots in the Ottoman Empire of the 19th century. Thus, the Turkish women's movement is as old as the women's movements in other Mediterranean or European countries such as Greece, Spain or Italy, where some women started to lobby for their rights about the same time.

In recent years the Turkish women's movement has been one of the most influential players within civil society on the Turkish political scene. This has not always been the case. Nor has the women's movement ever been as diverse as it is today: There are Kemalist women, Kurdish women's rights activists, religious (Islamic) feminists, and liberal or radical feminists.

This article aims to present a few of the individuals who have shaped this movement, to make some voices heard, and to inspire curiosity that will lead the reader to want to read more of the books written by Turkish women historians and women activists. As Nezihe Muhiddin wrote in her book *Türk Kadını* in the 1930s about the first Ottoman feminists: “These exceptional individuals paved the way for today's great and precious reform.”<sup>4</sup> Aynur Demirdirek, a scholar of a later generation, explained that “my own work had this purpose of getting to know and bringing into the sunlight” prominent women of the past.

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). On a less theoretical note see Rosalind Miles, *Who Cooked the Last Supper? The Women's History of the World*, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Katherine L. French and Allyson M. Poska, *Women and Gender in the Western Past* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company 2007), p. xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Aynur Demirdirek, *In Pursuit of the Ottoman Women's Movement*, in Zehra F. Arat (ed.) *Deconstructing Images of the Turkish Woman* (New York: Palgrave 1999), p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> Nezihe Muhiddin, *Türk Kadını* (1931) p. 2

## *Fatma Aliye (1862-1936) – Ottoman Feminist*

During the early 1990s Turkey witnessed an increase in the number of studies based on primary sources about the Ottoman women's movement. The reasons for the silence in the first half century of the Republic were both political and linguistic.

The adoption of the Latin script in 1928 had the effect of creating an additional obstacle for succeeding generations to study the pre-Republican past. Scholars raised after the establishment of the Republic were unable to read Ottoman texts. On the other hand, "nationalist history, in depreciating all that was linked with the immediate pre-republican past, denied the agency of Ottoman women, picturing them as helpless slaves to Sultanic and religious despotism."<sup>5</sup>

In fact, the early republican women's movement of the 1920s had its roots in late nineteenth-century Ottoman society,<sup>6</sup> when women were involved in public debates about women's rights and about broader economic and political problems of the declining state.<sup>7</sup> Since 1869, when the first women's journals emerged,<sup>8</sup> women's daily problems in society were discussed in journals and in the press. Various women's journals appeared: these include *Terakki-i Muhadderat* (Progress of Muslim Women, 1869-1870) where women discussed education, Islam, polygamy and the daily problems of discrimination.<sup>9</sup> Writers also complained about bad conditions for women in segregated ferry transportation, although they paid the same amount of money as men. Other journals followed: *Vakit yahud Mürebbe-i Muhadderat* (Time or the Training of Muslim Women, 1875), *Ayna* (Mirror, 1875-1876), *Aile* (Family, 1880), *Insaniyet* (Humanity, 1883), *Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete* (1895). During the 1908 revolution new periodicals were set up, such as *Mefharet* (Pride, 1908) and *Demet* (A Bunch, 1908).

*Kadınlar Dünyası* even had the stated purpose of "promoting women's legal rights." The first issue was in 1913, the last issue in 1921 (it did not appear during WW I, 1914-1918). It also included news, photographs and opinions about women from all around the world. The first 100 issues were dailies, later it became a weekly. It pointed out that men held an attitude that was oppressive towards women:

"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."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Reina Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism – Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem*, (London, New York: I.B.Tauris, 2004) p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Şirin Tekeli, *Women in Turkey in the 1980s*, in Şirin Tekeli (ed.), *Women in Modern Turkish Society, A Reader* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1995) p.11

<sup>7</sup> Şirin Tekeli, *Women's Library and Information Center in Women's Memory, Proceedings of the International Symposium of Women's Libraries*, (Istanbul 1991), p 262

<sup>8</sup> "Terakki-i Muhadderat" (1869-1870) was the first women's journal in the Ottoman Empire as a supplement of Terakki Newspaper.

<sup>9</sup> Terakki-i Muhadderet No. 31, in 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 36 ff; in the *Kadın* magazine a woman complained that 'throughout the winter women froze out in the open on the Kadıköy ferryboats.' Havadisçi, *Kadın Haberleri in Kadın*, Istanbul, No. 6, 7 April 1328, p. 19

<sup>10</sup> Demirdirek, p.74.

Ottoman feminists were generally educated elite women from the major cities of the Empire. In 1886 there existed several secondary schools for girls with an increasing number of students. Women graduates from new schools for girls or educated at home by private tutors argued for more access for women to education. They complained about statesmen who originally supported women's education but later lost interest. Their argument was often 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 a primary factor in determining the development of the country.<sup>11</sup> They wanted the number of schools for girls to increase and the number of publications for women to multiply. Aziz Haynar (contributor to *Kadınlar Dnyasi*) donated her jewelry to have a school for girls open in Erenköy Istanbul.<sup>12</sup>

One of these late Ottoman activists was Fatma Aliye. Fatma Aliye was an intellectual novelist and contributor to the women's press. She was the daughter of the Tanzimat cleric and reformer Cevdet Paşa and was herself a proponent of a moderate Islamic approach of feminism. She asked the rhetorical question: "Since Cenab-ı 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?"<sup>13</sup>

Fatma Aliye also wrote a book *Namdaran-ı Zenan-i İslamyân* (Famous Muslim Women, 1892) about women who played an important role in Ottoman history. It was the first history book written by a woman. She also wrote novels: *Muhâderât* (Virtuous Ladies, 1892), *Refet* (Refet, 1898), *Udî* (the Ud Player, 1898; new edition, 2002), *Enin* (Enin, incomplete novel, 1898), *Hayal ve Hakikât* (Dream and Reality).

Aliye argued that the oppression women faced when participating in civil life, as well as strict dress codes, stemmed from social customs and traditions – not from Islam itself.<sup>14</sup>

"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 civilization. It is only then that we can justify our position."<sup>15</sup>

On this issue Aliye engaged in a lively polemic with a conservative writer at the time, Mahmut Esat Efendi. As Demirdirek has written:

"Ottoman women's demands were parallel to the struggle for women's rights in the West. They followed women's movements around the world but underlined the fact that living in an Islamic society set different conditions for them. When they discussed their demands within the framework of Islam,

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<sup>11</sup> 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

<sup>12</sup> Demirdirek, p. 69

<sup>13</sup> ibid

<sup>14</sup> Yaprak Zihnioğlu, *Nezihe Muhiddin, An Ottoman Turkish Rights Defender*, (Master Thesis, Boğaziçi University, 1998), p 41

<sup>15</sup> Lewis (2004), p 61, citing Fatma Aliye, *Nivsan-I Islam (The Women of Islam)*, Istanbul 1891

they provided supportive examples from “asri saadet”, the “undistorted” days of Islam, but they refused to compromise.”<sup>16</sup>

The impact of the writings of these early feminists was noticeable. When Nimet Cemil published an article in 1921 under the title “Yine feminism, daima feminism” (*Again feminism, always feminism*) she sums up both a sense of urgency that more needed to change and an understanding that something had been achieved in the “last five or ten years”:

“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.”<sup>17</sup>

### ***Nezihe Muhiddin (1898-1958) – Early Republican Feminist***

The headline in June 1923 in an Istanbul paper announced: “A New Movement among Women of Istanbul, Our Women who demand political rights.”<sup>18</sup> Behind this new movement was one of the seminal figures in the transition of the women’s movement from the Ottoman to the early Republican era: Nezihe Muhiddin.

Nezihe Muhiddin (1889-1958) was one of the most prominent of the Ottoman Turkish feminist activists rediscovered during the late 1980s. Like most educated women of her time, she was born into the elite, daughter of a government official. In her long career as teacher, writer and editor, she was a strong advocate for women’s rights – both during the Ottoman period and in the early years of the Republic. She wrote 20 novels, all of them published in newspapers and journals. She was chief-editor of the weekly *Kadın Yolu* (Woman’s Path, 1924-1927) magazine, the most sophisticated woman’s journal of that period. In her book *Türk Kadını* (Turkish Woman, 1931) she praised Ottoman women who took part in the women’s movement.<sup>19</sup>

Muhiddin advocated for the repeal of the legal codes governing Islamic divorce and polygamy. She stressed that even to ask whether women were capable of assuming social positions was a “disgrace to women”. All barriers to education, professional and working life had to be removed. Muhiddin posed the question:

“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?”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Demirdirek, p. 79.

<sup>17</sup> IBID, p. 76.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Zihnioglu (1998), p. 106.

<sup>19</sup> Zihnioglu (1998), p 60

<sup>20</sup> IBID, p 159.

In May 1923, even before the founding of the Republic, 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. Then the Turkish Women's Union, a non-governmental association under Muhiddin's leadership, was set up and continued to press for political equality. As Yaprak Zihnioğlu described the process:

“On the 5<sup>th</sup> June 1927 the central committee of the Women's Union met under Nezihe Muhiddin's presidency and debated on how women should participate in the upcoming election and the majority reached the decision that such an attempt would be beneficial to women.”

The Union thus decided to promote a feminist male candidate to champion women's rights in parliament. This was widely discussed in the Turkish press. As Muhiddin told *Cumhuriyet* on 20 June 1927, the aim was to “steer public opinion.” This was daring: by that time Turkey had become a one-party state with no organised political opposition. In fact, after a meeting with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in July 1927 the Women's Union's tentative candidate, Kenan Bey, resigned from the Union on 9 July, withdrew his candidacy, and the Union announced that it would not field any other candidate. The Women's Union's campaign for “rights to suffrage” came to an end.<sup>21</sup>

This was not yet the end for Nezihe Muddidin. In August 1927 the regional governor issued a search order against the Women's Union, with the charge of corruption against its leader: “On the 19<sup>th</sup> September all Women's Union's activities were temporarily suspended and ‘all records, financial and other documents’ were placed under court order.”<sup>22</sup> And when Muhiddin called the Union's members to an extraordinary congress the police commissioner suspended this congress. Muhiddin and others resigned and the Union distanced itself from direct political involvement. Muhiddin was to stand trial for violating the law of associations.

In the parliamentary session discussing the granting of the suffrage to women in 1934, speakers from the governing party pointed to the old Turkic heritage and to “suffrage as important for democracy, since only non-democratic regimes withheld women's suffrage.”<sup>23</sup> In fact, Turkey in 1934 was not a democracy: it was a one-party state, in which very few decisions were actually taken in the Grand National Assembly.<sup>24</sup> Women who were chosen as members of the Assembly were selected, not elected. And though Muhiddin had been highly influential in putting the case for political rights, she was to remain largely absent from official history books. In the official history written by Atatürk's adoptive daughter Afet Inan –*Atatürk ve Türk Kadın Haklarının Kazanılması (Ataturk and The Attainment of Women's Rights)*– Muhiddin's role is not discussed.

In 1935 the association which Muhiddin had previously led was disbanded ‘voluntarily’ after it had hosted an international congress on women's issues. The

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<sup>21</sup> IBID, p 178.

<sup>22</sup> IBID, p 180.

<sup>23</sup> Yeşim Arat, “From Emancipation to Liberation: The Changing Role of Women in Turkey's Public Realm”, *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 54. No 1, Fall 2000, p. 111.

<sup>24</sup> Erik Zürcher, *Turkey – A Modern History* (London, New York I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1997), p. 184.

background was an effort by the regime to suppress “those independent social and cultural organizations that had survived.”<sup>25</sup> As Turkish scholar Yeşim Arat has written in 2000:

“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.”<sup>26</sup>

A recent study of Muhiddin concluded:

“It has long been claimed that women were given their rights by the Kemalists and that they did not need to fight for them... 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.”<sup>27</sup>

Nezihe Muhiddin, forgotten in a mental institution in Istanbul, died in 1958.

### ***Deniz Kandiyoti – Feminist Scholar***

Deniz Kandiyoti is one of the leading modern feminist scholars in Turkey. A sociologist and former member of the Social Science Departments of the Middle East Technical University in Ankara and Boğaziçi University in Istanbul, she was also chairperson of the research committee on women and society of the International Sociology Association from 1982 to 1986. Her research focused on comparative perspectives on gender, household formation and development, Islam and state policies in the Middle East.

In the early 1970s Kandiyoti described the changes in family life underway in a village near Ankara and underlined the ‘complete withdrawal of freedoms upon marriage.’ A growing number of young men were leaving the village for education and employment, creating a new social mobility. For young women, however, life offered no such choices and Kandiyoti underlines the continuous inequality between men and women.<sup>28</sup>

“After her brief spell of sheltered maidenhood, a village bride takes her place in her new household as a subordinate to all males and older females... as things stand, one can confidently state that sex roles and especially conjugal roles are least likely to change.”

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<sup>25</sup> Eric Zürcher, *Turkey – A Modern History*, p. 187.

<sup>26</sup> Yeşim Arat (2000), p. 111

<sup>27</sup> Yaprak Zihnioğlu, (1998), p. iii.

<sup>28</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, *Social Change and Family Structure in a Turkish Village*, in J. Peristany (ed.), *Kinship and Modernization in Mediterranean Society*, 1976, p.67 .

Kandiyoti then wrote *Emancipated but Unliberated, Reflections on the Turkish Case* (Feminist Studies, 1987). Analyzing the history of the Turkish women's movement she noted:

“[S]ingling out women as the group most visibly oppressed by religion, through practices such as veiling, seclusion, and polygamy, was absolutely central to Ataturk's onslaught on the theological state”<sup>29</sup>

She highlighted some of the limitations of the early reforms:

“Kemalist reforms remained a dead issue for a long time, especially in those rural areas most weakly integrated in to the national economy. The avoidance of civil marriage in favor of the religious ceremony, with the related possibility of polygamy, repudiation, and illegitimacy; the marriage of underage girls; the denial of girls' rights to education; and the emphasis on women's fertility were continuing signs of the uneven socioeconomic development of the country.”<sup>30</sup>

In her essay *From Empire to Nation State: Transformations of the Women Question in Turkey* (1990) Kandiyoti illustrated how feminism and nationalism became linked in official Turkish discourse. Kandiyoti charted the emergence of a “Turkist” feminism, which distanced itself from the Islamist traditional views and used Western influences in a specific form.

“The necessity of women's equality now became grounded in a new morality dictated by the Turkish nation.”<sup>31</sup>

While significant numbers of Turkish women entered professional life in the new republic Kandiyoti speculated that one reason for this was the elitism of the early Republican elite to whom “women might have posed less of a threat than upwardly mobile men from humbler origins.”<sup>32</sup>

“The case of Turkey illustrates both the potentials and the limitations of reforms instigated by a political vanguard in the absence of a significant women's movement ... The changes in Turkey have left the most crucial areas of gender relations, such as the double standard of sexuality and a primarily domestic definition of the female role, virtually untouched.”<sup>33</sup>

### **Şirin Tekeli – Liberal Feminist**

One of the leading women activists of recent decades was Şirin Tekeli, a political scientist, feminist author and activist. Şirin Tekeli resigned as associate professor in

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<sup>29</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, “Emancipated but Unliberated, Reflections on the Turkish Case”, *Feminist Studies*, (1987), p. 321.

<sup>30</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, 1987, p 322

<sup>31</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, *From Empire to Nation State: Transformations of the Women Question in Turkey*, (1990), p.222

<sup>32</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, 1987, p. 323.

<sup>33</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, 1987, p. 324.

the Faculty of Economics at Istanbul University, in protest of the Board of Higher Education established in 1981. She was one of the most perceptive analysts of the concept and limitations of “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, banning the Women’s Association, which had formed a bridge between the old feminist movement and the new era. Thus 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.”<sup>34</sup>

Şirin Tekeli stressed the historical tradition of feminism: “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.”

In the 1980s, however, the women’s movement was in the first democratic opposition to the military rule. It was thus of fundamental importance not just for women but for Turkish society as a whole:

“The most dramatic change being the fact that the state does not now dominate civil society, as it did for many centuries. Civil society has gained some autonomy and become more powerful ... 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.”<sup>35</sup>

In 1982, Tekeli published a book “Kadınlar ve Siyasal-Toplumsal Hayat (*Women and Sociopolitical Life*)” on women's political participation. It discussed women's marginalization in sociopolitical life and included interviews with Turkish women parliamentarians, exposed their striking marginality and problems in political life. The book was widely read, reaching beyond a narrow academic circle. Tekeli wrote “Women in Turkish Politics” (1981). One decade later she edited “Women in Modern Turkish Society” (1994).

As Tekeli put it:

“The Kemalist message became ambiguous and even paradoxical: in order to glorify the maternal role, it called not just upon the well entrenched traditions, but also tried to reinforce them through speeches and ideological practices. The women who were encouraged to go beyond their traditional roles should have little ambition in their work, in order to remain one step behind the men. Femininity and altruism were therefore encouraged in women, because it was believed that women put harmony and family happiness before everything else. The woman had to sacrifice herself for her own as well as for the nation.”

Women were also expected to be modest in their dress style and “negate their sexuality.”

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<sup>34</sup> Şirin Tekeli (1995), p.12

<sup>35</sup>IBID, p.8,

“It is therefore not wrong to say that, despite the existence of an exceptional Kemalist elite, the “Kemalist revolution” has not transformed millennial 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 intellectual framework and vocabulary, the women’s movement of the 1980s also gave rise to the realization that there was a need to institutionalize the quest for better status. Thus, Tekeli was one of the founders of the *Kadın Eserleri Kütüphanesi ve Bilgi Merkezi* (Women's Library and Information Center)<sup>36</sup> as a nongovernmental foundation in April 1990 in Istanbul with the objective to preserve the documents of the feminist movement in Turkey. She was one of the founders of the *Mor Çatı Kadın Sığınağı* (Purple Roof Women's Shelter) Foundation. In 1997, Tekeli also participated in the foundation of KA-DER<sup>37</sup> (Association for Supporting and Training Women Candidates).

KA-DER was established to develop gender awareness in society to combat the domination of men in Turkey's social and political culture. It pursued and pursues this goal by preparing women to participate in political parties and by working to get political parties to accept and welcome women in their decision-making processes. Maintaining an equal distance from all political parties, KA-DER's main endeavor is to raise the presence of women in Turkish politics through training, networking, publications, campaigning, and education through the media.

### **Necla Arat – Kemalist Feminist**

Necla Arat is a social science professor and director of the Faculty for Systematic Philosophy, Istanbul University and founder of the *Center for Women’s Research and Education* (Kadın Sorunları Araştırma ve Uygulama Merkezi). She is co-author of *Chances and Risks of Migration* (1998) and author of *Susmayan Yazılar: Eğitim, Laiklik, Kadın ve Siyaset Üzerine* (Unsilenced Writings: On Education, Laicism, Women and Politics) (1997).<sup>38</sup> She is also a leading Kemalist feminist.

Kemalist (state) feminism encourages women to play an active public role as long as they respect the strict laicist state ideology. For Kemalist Feminists, the rise of political Islam continued to be the most serious threat facing Turkish women ever since the Republic was founded. In a recent interview with ESI Necla Arat criticises the West which seems to propose to Turkey to

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<sup>36</sup> Besides Şirin Tekeli, the founding members are Füsün Akatlı, Jale Baysal, Aslı Davaz and Füsün Yaraş. [www.kadineserleri.org](http://www.kadineserleri.org)

<sup>37</sup> Kadın Adayları Destekleme ve Eğitim Derneği, [www.ka-der.org.tr](http://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.

<sup>38</sup> Opened in 1989 at the Istanbul University

“[...] give up on Kemalism and become moderate Muslim. This is a shame. The Kemalists defend equality and social justice...one never knows when moderate Islam will become radical Islam if it is intertwined with state affairs.”<sup>39</sup>

Arat sees the modern Turkish women’s movement as divided between those devoted to the ideals of laicism and secularism on the one hand and those who support the ideas of Islamist women on the other. “There is no dialogue about the headscarf among women’s groups. Each one is stubborn and strict on this matter.”<sup>40</sup>

Necla Arat was an early activist supporting the reform of the 1926 Civil Code. In order to put pressure on the parliament to change the Civil Code, Necla Arat, together with others, initiated a campaign in 1993, collecting more than 100.000 signatures. 22 women’s organizations were involved. However, the effort to achieve a change during the 1990s failed and it was to take until 2001 for the Civil Code to change.

“Most women came from the secular women’s groups. Even though it was on behalf of all women, groups not sympathetic to secular groups also helped after they saw how strong the campaign was.”<sup>41</sup>

Recently, following the warning by the military and its critique directed towards Abdullah Gül’s (AKP) candidacy for the Presidency in April 2007 Arat stated “that soldiers could express their opinions as freely as other members of society, just as business-people or intellectuals do.”<sup>42</sup> In April 2007, she co-organized the “Republican Rallies”, demonstrations against the government of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), based on the claim that AKP has ambitions to install a “religious” regime in Turkey. She was then invited by the Republican People’s Party (CHP) to run as a parliamentary candidate in the upcoming elections of summer 2007.

### ***Nebahat Akkoç – Kurdish Feminist Activist***

In recent years women’s movements have also spread towards the East of Turkey. One of the leading personalities there is Nebahat Akkoç, a Kurdish primary school teacher who set up Ka-Mer as an independent women’s center to support women victims of violence or other gender discrimination.

At the height of a war between the terrorist PKK and the Turkish military, Akkoç’s husband, a teacher and union activist, was gunned down by unidentified assailants in 1993. Soon after this incident Akkoç was arrested and tortured by Turkish police.

After her release she took her case and the one of her late husband’s to the European Court of Human Rights, which eventually ordered Turkey to pay her compensation. The Judgment in the Case of Akkoç v. Turkey on 10.10.2000 notes:

“The Court concluded that in the circumstances of this case the authorities failed to take reasonable measures available to them to prevent a real and

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<sup>39</sup> Necla Arat in an interview with ESI.

<sup>40</sup> IBID

<sup>41</sup> IBID

<sup>42</sup> [www.observercyprus.com](http://www.observercyprus.com), 11 May 2007, Yeşim Erden Holland, *Who Are the Bigots of Turkey?*

immediate risk to the life of Zübeyir Akkoç and, accordingly, there had been a violation of Article 2.<sup>43</sup>

After her personal experience with violence, and having listened to many similar stories of violence against women in and around Diyarbakır, Akkoç began her struggle against violence and domestic violence against women.

“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.”<sup>44</sup>

“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.”<sup>45</sup>

She also recognized the need to support women in danger of becoming victims of honor killing. Akkoç started campaigns against domestic violence and honor killings.

Ka-Mer began with one center in Diyarbakır, offering legal and psychological counseling for abused women, selling food and handicrafts to meet costs. Today there are centers in 18 provinces, offering abuse hotlines and day-care centers. Ka-Mer activists lobby local and regional politicians to find solutions for individual cases. Ka-Mer also supports women to get employment, and runs small enterprises where women can be employed. It is a positive example of independent and institutionalized support for mainly Kurdish women in one of the least developed regions of the country.

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<sup>43</sup> Article 2: “Everyone's Right to Life Shall Be Protected by Law”  
<http://www.echr.coe.int/Eng/Press/2000/Oct/akkoc%20jud%20epress.htm>

<sup>44</sup> Pelin Turgut, “A Stone in the Eye of Brute Force”, TIME Europe,  
<http://www.time.com/time/europe/hero/akkoc.html>, 20 April 2003

<sup>45</sup> Gokce Susam, “*Independence Basic for Women Liberation*”, BIANET, BIA News Center 17 March 2006, [www.bianet.org](http://www.bianet.org)