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Turkish Women

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WHAT TURKISH WOMEN SAY ABOUT
THEMSELVES

EVOLUTION IN OUR STATUS

By EMEL ESIN

Painter and wife of the Turkish Ambassador to the United Nations



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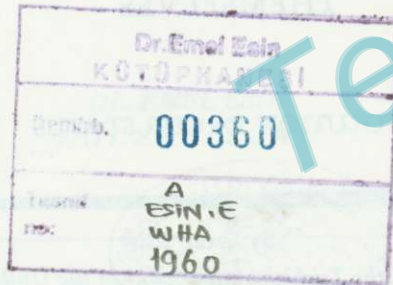
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History seems to meet the Turkish woman in Central Asia, following the way of her nomadic tribe in the course of an adventurous life. Pre-Islamic Turkish lore tells us of feminine knights errant, daughters of warriors who eventually became the mothers of many sturdy sons. In the history of people of Turkish stock, one also meets queens, *Hatuns*, who reigned in their own right, even in such famous cities as Bokhara.

When Turks migrated west and south, particularly after the embrace of Islam, they came in contact with Byzantine and Arab civilizations which both, though in different degrees, secluded women from public life. It took a long time, though, for Turks to segregate their women. In the early period of their reign in Egypt, the Turkish *Mameluks* caused a scandal in the then Islamic world by electing a woman, Shejeret-el Dur, to be their queen. However, one must confess that Shejeret-el-Dur was a particularly strong-minded woman.

Formidable Amazon that she was up to the time the Turks adopted others' customs, the Turkish woman did not entirely relinquish her rights by being veiled and secluded. In the villages she kept on sharing the hardy life of men. In towns and palaces she had her say behind curtains and sometimes dedicated her talents to politics, religion or literature. A few of the energetic and sometimes cruel figures of Ottoman history were women. There were also Ottoman ladies who, by becoming religious devotees or poetesses, enjoyed lively correspondence with talented men.



Among them were the famous poetesses Hubbî and Fitnat of the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Indeed, such was the importance of women in Ottoman days that the *Karagöz*, a marionette theater playing comedies which closely described contemporary life, had great respect for the lady, the "*hanım*." To emphasize her prestige, it represented her twice as large as ordinary male figures.

With the advent of the nineteenth century and the westernization of Turkey called the *Tanzimat*, the ladies who lived on the Bosphorous and in some of the towns and who had been scholarly in Persian, started to read French literature. Under Western influence they threw away the graceful stringed instrument, the *ut*, and began playing the piano. As they learned more about the way of Europe, the desire grew in them to take part in the life outside their homes. That was when Pierre Loti met them.

The twentieth century found the town women, who by then had had the advantage of education in high school and normal school, ready for the great upheaval that was approaching. With the coming of the 1914 war, the men went away and the women had to do their jobs. Women teachers took charge in schools and nurses in hospitals. After the university opened its doors to women, women doctors followed.

The village women were still leading their life of hard work, but in their way they were also ready for the future. When Atatürk started the War of Independence against the invader, he found the village woman behind him, steadily carrying arms to the front. It was the spirit shown by women in this ordeal that made Atatürk say: "A nation in which woman is not the equal of men loses half its strength."

Today the Constitution of the Turkish Republic gives Turkish women rights equal to those of men. Women vote, they are elected to Parliament, they receive equal pay with men. They are free, unveiled, and full of spirit and initiative. They fill the ranks of society with workers of every profession. Because they are interested in their work and because modern economic conditions call for it, they go on working after marriage. Their children are looked after either by grandmothers or by elderly members of the family, or, less frequently, by day nurseries. But the nucleus of Turkish society is still the family.

In the field of education, the percentage of women in schools and in universities steadily increases, and co-education is general. As to the less educated masses, ways and means have been thought out to provide them with technical knowledge. In the village institutes, girls and boys, who have already had the usual primary school curriculum, are trained to teach in their own village schools. In these institutes they are given all kinds of practical knowledge to assist them in raising the standard of life of the villages. Besides these institutes, in the main centers there are girls' vocational training institutes where girls holding merely primary school certificates are taught housekeeping, dressmaking, embroidery, millinery, cooking or artificial flower making. Thus they acquire a craft which will be useful to them either in earning a living or at home. Technical schools have evening courses which give girls the necessary training to become artisans of every description, and women's private charity organizations also teach crafts to girls and provide them with work.

Among the women's organizations are the *Kadınlar Birliği*, an association helping women to live up to the rights given them in the Constitution, and the Soroptimist Club of professional women.

Generally speaking, the introduction of women into public life has been a success. It is now the task of the cultured women of Turkey to help their sisters in villages along the road to education and hygiene and to disclose to them the mechanical devices by which life is made easier. The village woman already knows how to get results by collaboration. She is used to sharing in community work through, for example, a time-honored tradition by which winter food-stuffs are prepared by all the women of a village working together.

I would like to end this with a description of the village woman. She is weatherbeaten, strong and graceful. She wears trousers because they are commodious. Her little hands are hard with the corns acquired from working in the fields. Her voice is soft, and her eyes smile with intelligence. She is animated with the spirit of fortitude, helpfulness and courage common among the people of Turkey.

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