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## TURKISH WOMEN TODAY

by

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Before anything can be said about the status and opportunities of Turkish women today, two ancient theories, that survive in the west, must be exploded. One is that women in the east are kept hidden. The word "harem" which leaps to the western mind the moment the other words, "Turkish women" are spoken, is obsolete. It has simply disappeared from the life of Turkey today. The other theory is that the east moves slowly and that ancient customs persist, regardless of outside pressure. The case of Turkey is the exception that proves the rule. Emancipation, westernization, in a word, progress, has been so rapid in that young republic, which is not yet <sup>25</sup> twenty years old, that the accomplishment is unique. No other country in modern times has changed so fast or so fundamentally in the space of a few years.

It is not Turkey that is backward today, but western ideas about it, which are behind the times. People in America cling, in what might be called the proverbially oriental manner, to the notion that glamor and mystery surround the life of Turkish women, that they spend romantic hours behind the lattices that cover the windows of their houses and the veils that cover their faces. All these ideas must be scrapped before there can be any appraisal of the present situation. The Turkish people have been scrapping them since 1923, when, under the inspired leadership of Kamal Atatürk, they founded their republic.

It is true that, not very long ago, Turkish women lived under many disadvantages, just as the Turkish people as a whole lived under disadvantages. The opportunities offered to women today are the fruit of a complete remodelling in the status of the country. The whole scene has changed; so greatly changed that it can be called a rebirth. In order to show how profound the changes have been, it will be necessary to go back in time; to



every Turk today knows them. Every school book is full of them. Such a fire has run through the country, such an enthusiasm for the new opportunities for the pursuit of life and happiness, that they must be seen to be believed.

History will praise Kamal Atatürk more for his constructive statesmanship than for his brilliant military achievements. How seldom is a clever general, a level-headed reformer. Atatürk was both to a remarkable degree. When his republic was finally established and recognised, he found the following situation. The laws were still those of the Sheriat or Islamic code, founded upon the Koran. The religious foundations were rich, powerful and reactionary. There had been corruption in high places for years. The educational system was in the hands of the clergy. It was feeble, and illiteracy was wide-spread. Roads and railroads in Asia Minor were few and poorly managed. The Turkish language was written in the difficult Arabic script. The people wore distinctive clothes, that proclaimed their Islamic faith--the men wearing, with their western suits, red fezes, sometimes wrapped round with turbans in the case of ecclesiastics; the women, old-fashioned Tcharshafs (literally sheets) and black veils over their faces. The banking system was largely in the hands of foreigners, as were many business enterprises. Foreigners enjoyed special privileges called capitulations, which dated from the fifteenth century when the Turks were strong, but which now had become very disadvantageous to those who had granted them. The country was poor and exhausted.

Atatürk was imbued with the idea that Turkey, in order to be aligned with the western nations, must westernize herself. And how cleverly, how diplomatically, he went about doing it. By speaking, by personal example, by a magnetic enthusiasm, which communicated itself to his people, he was able to accomplish miracles in the fifteen years, which was the short time fate allotted him for his task. The capitulations were abolished by the Treaty of Lausanne. The capital was removed from the shores of the Bosphorus, on the edge of Europe, to Ankara in the heart of Asia Minor, the true center of the new nation. Beginning in 1924 and continuing firmly and



rapidly, a long series of reforms was instituted. The old religious laws were superceded by new civil codes; church and state were separated; the banks were put into the hands of Turks; railroads were built, roads, houses, bridges. Education received a tremendous new impetus. The religious foundations which had had all the education in their hands, were denuded of their wealth, which went into the coffers of the state. The army and navy were reconstructed and improved. The nation was placed on a wholly democratic basis and deputies for the assembly were elected by the people. Ankara, which to begin with, had the simplest kind of provincial life, was embellished with parks, roads, modern drainage, new houses and fine governmental buildings.

On two matters, Atatürk showed himself a master of psychology and farsightedness. One was the change he decreed in the distinctive wearing apparel, and the other was his latinization of the alphabet. No one, who has not seen the effect of these seemingly insignificant but none the less, complete changes, can realize their importance. In the past it had taken seven years to learn the Arabic script, so that a book or newspaper could be read with ease. By Latinizing the alphabet and making it phonetic, the written language could be quickly acquired. Illiteracy was to be stamped out. A favorite picture in modern Turkish books and on the walls of Turkish homes, is that of the great leader himself, demonstrating on a blackboard set up in a village square, the simplicities of the latin alphabet. The change of apparel was even more drastic. Up till the new regime, their clothes had marked the Turks as different. Women should now dress like western women, in dresses, coats and hats. And men should discard the fez for the soft hat and cap of other nations. As may be imagined, the very look of the country changed, almost over night.

Along with these new orders, the indefatigable president endeavored to industrialize his country to a greater extent than had ever been thought possible. He encouraged the building of factories, the exploitation of the mines and other wealth of Asia Minor. As well, he tried to show the Turkish



farmers a new and better way of getting results from the fertile earth. There was nothing, it seemed, that he did not think of, for the benefit of his nation.

One of the changes which came about by reason of the separation of church and state was that statues and pictures were permitted in public places. Up till 1923, it was considered irreligious to hang pictures of persons on the walls of homes and offices, the Koran forbidding the reproduction of the human form as leading to the dangers of idolatry. But Ataturk changed the whole outlook of the nation on these points. Statues of himself, as well as symbolic sculpture, stand in nearly every town in Asia Minor. He encouraged the study of art, as it is understood in the west. He reiterated over and over again, that secular and religious matters must not be confused.

The list of changes, as may be seen, was a long one. It would not be human to suppose that there was no opposition. The conservative elements of the population murmured and balked. But the prestige of their leader was such that the dynamic quality of his personality won for him the respect and cooperation even of the people who still clung, sentimentally at least, to the old order.

How did all these new precepts and new laws affect the women of the country? So much that their whole lives were changed and a new code of living has emerged. Ataturk put women on an equality with men. Their veils were taken away; education was to be as free for them as for men; marriage and divorce laws were to work both ways equally; monogamy was to be the law of the land; women could vote as well as men. It is ironic that the benefits before the law, which women in England and America had to fight for, for years, were granted to Turkish women over night--handed to them on a platter, so to speak, before they had begun to demand their "rights" as a sex.

What then is the position, what are the opportunities for Turkish women after eighteen years of the "new" country? The answer should be--the same as those in any western civilized country. Now they go to



school, just as their brothers do. They attend coeducational higher schools and universities. No career is barred to them only because of their sex. The result is that there are today women doctors, lawyers, air-pilots, nurses, teachers, secretaries--in short, they can do anything for which they have an aptitude and for which they train. More than a dozen women are deputies in the Grand National Assembly. The army of trained workers grows daily, as teachers and trained craftsmen are greatly needed, so that Turkey can "catch up" so to speak, with those nations who have had a start of her.

What strikes the westerner, when he contemplates the new kind of Existence which the Turkish nation is living, is the dignity which they bring to all their pursuits. The Turks are a grave and sober people. They are restrained in the expression of their emotions and have an innate respect for law and order. It would be quite understandable if the young women of this vigorous new republic, enjoying very suddenly advantages absolutely unknown to their own mothers, should abuse their new position by arrogance or vulgarity. It is amazingly true that they do nothing of the kind. They take great delight in the educational opportunities open to them; they work hard. And as the young have a way of doing, they take for granted the good things that come their way. But hand in hand with this attitude, is one of service. Those who are fortunate enough to take full advantage of the many new doors open to them, have a <sup>growing</sup> ~~real~~ sense of responsibility. They must use their knowledge for the benefit of their country. The national policy is to exploit this feeling. For instance, young girls from humbler homes, are given free board and tuition at normal schools and on graduation are bound to work for the government for a certain period of time. If they wish to marry and discontinue their work, they must first pay the equivalent of what it has cost the government to train them. This system keeps live in their minds the necessity of working for a nation that still has much to do to carry out the great plans laid down by her first president.

A visit to some of the new institutions of Turkey, that are run by women or are training women, is a most rewarding adventure. In Ankara there



are several excellent large schools and among them a trade school for girls, absolutely free, as well as a training school for teachers. In Istanbul, in a picturesque quarter of the city, is a splendid training school for nurses, named after the wife of the great Law Giver, Suleiman, who lived in the sixteenth century. She founded at that time, a lying-in hospital, the ruins of which are hard by. On the great square of Bayazid in Stamboul, under an arch, which used to lead to the War Office, now pass hundreds of students, men and women, every day. The buildings which used to house the War Office have been taken over by the University of Istanbul.

It is no longer remarkable in Turkey, that young women work in factories, that they serve as stenographers, that they travel alone in all parts of Asia Minor, that they pursue any educational course that they desire. What seems remarkable to them is the fact that the rest of the world, and particularly the Anglo-Saxon world, has taken so long to comprehend the great reconstruction that is going on in their country. Forget the word, "harem," they seem to say; forget the traditional ideas about the east; forget the adjective, "oriental". Turkey now faces west and her women are in the vanguard, helping to build up a well educated, modern, healthy nation, which stands honorably on her own merits among the forward looking countries of the world.

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