



Turkish Association For Secularism and Kemalism (PSU-TASK) International Women's Day Bulletin



"You cannot catch up with the modern world by modernizing only half the population"
M. Kemal Atatürk.

Democracy, Secularism, and Modern Turkish Women

We are a group of Turkish women and we want to be free to have an education, a career, and dress as we choose. We would like to tell you our opinions and express our concerns about protecting our right to life as free women and individuals in Turkey in this decade.

Turkey is the first country with a majority of Moslem population, to become a secular Republic. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder and first president of Turkish Republic has been one of the most revolutionary leaders in the world in bringing Turkey to modern times. "As President for 15 years, until his death in 1938, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk introduced a broad range of swift and sweeping reforms - in the political, social, legal, economic, and cultural spheres - virtually unparalleled in any other country particularly in the Middle East" (<http://www.ataturk.org/founder.htm>). (<http://www.ataturk.org/index2.html>).

Atatürk elevated the place of women in traditional Turkish society with major reforms in order to provide equal rights and opportunities for women. In 1926, he abolished the polygamy, and women were given equal rights in divorce, custody and inheritance. All levels of education become co-educational. Atatürk, pressed the importance of women in achieving the Turkish independence: "In Turkish society, women have not lagged behind men in science, scholarship, and culture. Perhaps they have even gone further ahead". Atatürk gave same equal rights to women in all spheres of life including 'full political rights': "In the mid-1930s, 18 women, among them a villager, were elected to the national parliament. Later, Turkey had the world's first women supreme court justice" (<http://www.ataturk.org/women.htm>).

We have come a long way towards democracy and personal freedoms with Atatürk's leadership who believed strongly that religious affairs and state needed to be kept apart. Some are puzzled about the religious tension that exists in Turkey and go as far as claiming that Turkey does not respect religious expression. No analysis is complete when it is taken out of the context. Turkey has a 98 % Moslem population, but embraces secularism. Anybody is allowed to practice their religion in the private space of their homes in Turkey or in their temples. However, the symbolism of headscarf, which is used as a manifestation of political act where religious law aims to replace the secularism is not tolerable simply because it calls for a dark era to re-emerge before nation state had been created and threatens modern Turkish women. As well known, USA and other western countries tolerate various religious manifestations, however, they don't have the threat of a major political group aiming to overturn their nation state into a religious state.

As a group of women who respect others' beliefs and life styles we at the same time want to have freedom of speech, career, and dress anyway we choose without feeling any threat to our life, or any social and psychological pressures. We want the same respect shown to us as we are expected to show to religious traditional way of life. We would like to know who will protect our rights (even our right to live) if the people who cover themselves as modern Islamic group with political intentions achieve political power by using the democratic system we live in and turn it into a religious state?

As TASK, we believe that the only way to protect freedom of women who believe in the freedom of expression for different religious and political opinions could be possible under the guarantee of secularism which calls for the separation of religious affairs and the state.

In Turkey, Kemalist Women Organizations vow to further develop their rights in all areas of social life and political administration and voice their demands to protect their legal rights in secular Turkey.



Bahriye Üçok was an academic in religious affairs, a senator in the 1970s, and Social Democratic Populist Party member of parliament in the 1980s.

Bahriye Uçok

She had frequently spoken and written against the wearing of headscarves in educational establishments and government offices. Because of her public statements on this and related issues, she received death threats. On October 6, 1990, she was killed by a **mail-bomb by a religious terrorist group.**



Do You Know That?

In 2006, women still do 2/3 of the world's work, yet earn only 10% of the income and own 1% of the land

<http://www.internationalwomensday.com/messages.asp>

Statistics on Women's Issues in Turkey**

- 14.2 % of women are illiterate
- Only 25.9 % of the women chose their marriage partner themselves
- 7.5 % of women had Religious Marriage instead of civil marriage which protects their rights
- In cities, 40.2 % of Women use modern contraception
- In year 1995, only 2.4% of parliamentarians were women

"International Women's Day is an opportunity to work with women's rights groups to change the perception of violence against women from a private matter to one public concern. It is an opportunity to work towards changing laws that discriminate against women."

MALAYSIA: Amnesty International - www.aimalaysia.org

www.clubs.psu.edu/up/task

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*<http://hrw.org/backgrounder/eca/turkey/2004/6.htm>

**http://www.un.org.tr/undp/docs/women_turkey.pdf