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Abstract Only – Work in Progress

“Islam, Reform and Turkish Women”

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From the time Turkey adopted a new identity as a “modern Islamic nation” there has emerged a seemingly controversial image and identity for Turks. Such paradoxical existence or double-consciousness raised in the majority of Turkish souls, manifests itself within the state of their existence as a “modern Muslim,” which is a unique experience. Actually the controversy dictates itself both as a blessing and a curse, depending on the political and moral preferences of certain groups of people. During Kemal Ataturk’s presidency and in the years following his death, when the Republic was still young and enthusiastic about the victory gained after the Independence War, (1919-1922) this duality was considered a positively invigorating experience. Women came to be the direct benefactors of it because reform and modernization efforts were aimed to improve their status not only at home but also in the workplace. To this effect, these reforms need to be analyzed in a historical perspective with a particular emphasis on their impact on today’s Turkish women. Turkish women have been fully emancipated since the proclamation of the Turkish Republic on October 29, 1923 which had already started and gained momentum during the decline of the Ottoman Empire. The reforms introduced a radical break with Ottoman Islam and its ancient institutions. The reforms were not easy achievements; they took considerable time and strenuous effort. However it should be noted that with reference to women’s status, changes were already taking place in the mid 1800s. Three major ideologies that emerged in those days preoccupied the minds of Ottoman intellectuals in the second half of the nineteenth century. The first group advocated adoption of a European civil code and abolition of polygamy. The second group which identified themselves with Turkish nationalists also disfavored polygamy and the veil. It is noteworthy, however, that this group strongly opposed European education. Still there was another group who can be referred to as Islamic traditionalists, while advocating segregation, they seemed willing to concede women the right to dispose of their own property and to attend primary and secondary schools. These are some of the issues that will be discussed further in this paper.