

Adaptation Problem of Rumelian Immigrant Women to Turkish Politics

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Abstract: In many countries, women face so many problems on dealing with political matters. These problems can occur as a result of late participation to political crises. From past to present, women have not taken part in the power struggle, furthermore, they have been blended into background in election events especially in the III. World countries like Turkey. Duverger, on his study about women in politics is being concluded in two results. The first is “*women’s participation tendency in the election*” and the second one is “*vote’s directions*”. According to Duverger women participation tendency is less than men tendency. (Tekelli,1998: 87) Studies show that immigrant women have to struggle harder to take part in the migrated country. In Turkey for instance especially, women who immigrated from Rumelia to big cities such as İstanbul have to overcome though difficulties and barriers because of the political oligarchy in metropolis. As one participant from Rumelianimmigrants states, “*We got a job in factory. Then they took us to Taksim for strike. On those days, syndicates were in everywhere. You could not refuse them. We sit a side in strikes. People warn us that did not meddle in politics.*” In this paper, 17 immigrant women from Rumelia who had difficulty adopting to the political life of Turkey, are being reviewed. The women immigrants’ political struggle and their evaluations on Turkish political life will be discussed throughout the in-depth reviews made with the participants.

Keywords: Immigration, Rumelian immigrant women, politics, conflict resolution, political identity.

1. Introduction: Place of Women in the Political Sphere

Political participation is an indicator of the attitudes/behaviors of men and women in a given society. Politics is a man’s business in the eyes of the societies in numerous underdeveloped countries notable for their patriarchal structures. As women have not been in the struggle for power throughout the history, they have also been set back in terms of the recognition of their right to elect and be elected. Thus, they were pushed into the background in the political sphere.

In social psychology research in every society, “*masculine*” and “*feminine*” behavior categories are investigated. In studies conducted in various countries, societies have been found to associate “*masculine*” roles with sub-categories such as “*education, success, hard-work, controlled aggressiveness, assertiveness.*” These aspects mark a masculine approach which governs social relations based on its effects outside the family and home environment. Therefore, aspects that are described as “*feminine*” are integrative ones such as “*family, home, relations.*” This way, the aspects of the female social entity which “*are not oriented towards professional success and not related to the outside world*” are emphasized (Kalaycıoğlu, 1984: 19). Additionally, it should not be forgotten that societal/religious/moral values also contribute to promotion and/or obstruction of women’s participation in the political sphere. The fact that both genders have equal legal rights before the law does not mean that they have equal opportunities for representation (Negiz:35).

2. Historical Process: From pre-Islam to the Republic

The state of women’s set back position in the political sphere gains continuity because men are the decisive factors on the balance in the political and even the social spheres. In order for women to be more active in the field of politics, in addition to the existing laws, they also need measures and even incentives in the societal-social and political spheres. Only after such solutions will women be able to reach a means of political participation as equal or very close to men. With this aim, some countries resort to “*quota*” implementations in order for women to participate in politics effectively (Sitembölükbaşı,2007:14). Undeniably, the inactivity of women in the political sphere is not caused by their deficiency in mind/intelligence/skills. It is known that sex does not have a direct and binding relationship with the power of mind or intelligence. The roles attributed to men or women arise as a result of the person’s societal preferences and individual perception/curiosity (Kanbir, 2001:81). It should be remembered that improvement of the society and changes in societal perceptions will lead to changes in the roles attributed to women. On the other hand, there are protests especially against the quota implementations. Some sociologists, who state that women are not interested in politics enough because of the established perception called “*learned helplessness*” especially in some underdeveloped countries like Turkey,

argue that quota implementations without any changes in the political culture in such countries may lead to an rise in political crises and result in dysfunctional political spheres.

2.1. Turkish Modernization and Women's Rights

Nowadays, it is aimed to increase representation of women in politics in many places around the world. Especially the increased significance of human rights and democracy led to the emergence of incentives towards protection of women's rights. The increased trust in gender equality brought about the abundance of developments in this area (Bozatay-Kutlu, 2014:134). Participation of women in political-social life has not been achieved easily; the process which was set back and improved in different times reached the dimensions in our time. While a complete equality could not be achieved, significant steps were taken towards the inclusion of women. The situation of Turkish women is not so different from the rest of the world. Despite the early recognition the right of women to elect and be elected, societal developments affected Turkish women's attitudes towards politics.

When the place of women in the pre-Islamic politics is considered, it stands out that they were right in the middle of politics as vice presidents. There are statements supporting the complete inclusion of women in politics even in the Orkhon Inscriptions. Additionally, this was also supported in social life and women existed equally with men in all aspects of life. As Turks started to get under the influence of Islam in the 7th century, women started to fall behind in both social and political aspects. Another view is that women started to fall behind with the start of permanent settlement. While the reason is debated, the fact is that women's position has been changing starting with that period (Coşkun, 2013:36-37). Regaining lost rights lead to start of women's movements. Turkish women have participated in the struggle to claim/regain the right to be included in the social-political life simultaneously with the rest of the world. The place of women in society started to be debated with the Tanzimat Reform Era. Liberation or women and their inclusion in society were being seen equivalent to leaving "conservatism" and reaching "modernization."

Being "Western" meant women acting freely in the society (Terkan, 2010:118). Göle also saw modernity as similar to being Western. "She stated that it is shaped by Western values such as enlightenment, Industrial Revolution, individualism, equality and secularism. That Western values constituted the basis of being modern, led to an approach that claims non-Western societies should follow the West as an example for modernization. Therefore, she argued that modernity imposes the changes experienced by Western societies on other societies" (Yücedağ, 2010:70). Because of the socialization movement of women which started with Tanzimat and continued in a growing fashion, Turkish women have participated in the struggle to claim/regain the right to be included in the social-political life simultaneously with the rest of the world. This corresponds approximately to 1900s.

2.2. Women as Political Agents

Women started to be a part of social life outside their homes, partly with the influence of the constitutional monarchy (Gökçimen, 2008:9). "Women, who were trained in the magazines and societies of the Second Constitutional Monarchy, established the People's Party of Women in 15 June 1923 after the War of Independence. At the time, the first political establishment under the Republican People's Party was not in existence. Women established their own party two months before the Republican People's Party" (Coşkun: 58).

In addition to all these, legal and societal developments were experienced towards women's inclusion in the political sphere starting with the Republic. Plans were accelerated to reach the "modern women" in order to keep up with the level of contemporary civilizations. In the heart of the plans towards women's rights in the period were the ideas of the governing politicians, especially Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, that real development in the country may be achieved with coexistence and collaboration of men and women. This was emphasized both before and after the establishment of the Republic (Sağ, 2001:21). Finally, Turkish women voted for the first time with the right provided by the Municipality Law passed on 3 April 1939 (Usta-Baki, 2016:230). Following this development, they gained the right to elect and be elected for "community councils and neighborhood units" in 1933, and "members of parliament" in 1934. The Prime Minister of the period İsmet İnönü described this development as the return of old Turkish traditions. "Recognizing all political right of women did not achieve anything other than providing them with their previous authority. Separating women from where they deserve to be and putting them aside like an ornament, like a being that has nothing to do with matters of the land, is incompatible with the Turkish tradition and approach. This view is one of the most significant ones among the disasters we witnessed for centuries" (Gürel, 2013).

However, it would not be a mistake to say that the women who gained the right to representation in the parliament as a result of the elections in 1935 were determined and appointed by Mustafa Kemal, İnönü and their associates under the semi-authoritarian single party regime, instead of as a result of organized struggles. Thus, the qualifications of the women "found suitable" for membership of parliament in the leadership of the

CHP (Republican People's Party) show that the women to enter the parliament come into prominence with their "educational" functions to set an example for Turkish women. Afet İnan, emphasizing that the majority of the elected women came from the staff of the National Education system, suggests that few women doctors and women who work simultaneously as village heads and for agricultural production were elected in addition to school principals and managers from esteemed schools in the country (İnan,2012:350). As opposed to the women who were included in the list of the CHP in the first elections with the method of party appointment, it is known that activist-thinker woman leaders who were prominent regarding women's rights during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire were not included in the parliament. İnan, reporting that representation of women in the parliament during the multi-party system never reached the desired levels but women became increasingly conscious about political participation, emphasizes the following: "*Number of woman members of parliament, however, gradually decreased. On the other hand, women are in the position to vote and be elected as members of parliament, they are closely interested in the political life and government*" (İnan: 351). It may be argued that the interpretations İnan made in the 60s are still valid today.

Turkish women, who gained their legal rights in the earliest periods of the Republic of Turkey, and their right to elect and be elected much earlier than the women of countries that one might call developed today, have experienced a much slower evolution in active political life. As opposed to the claims of some researchers that Turkish women gained the right to elect and be elected without a struggle and therefore they do not embrace or pay importance to these rights, it should not be forgotten that Turkish women started to claim their rights especially after the decrease of population of men because of wars and women becoming active in the economy (Terzi, 2015: 119-120). Considering that around 1 million women were widowed in the mentioned period, the inclusion of women in social, economic and therefore political life was inevitable (Bakacak, 2009:635).

3. Political Position of Balkan Immigrant Women

All processes mentioned above affected the adaptation of Rumelian women to Turkish politics directly or indirectly. In the conducted study, it was aimed to investigate the general attitude of women voters in all periods of Rumelian immigration starting with women whose families immigrated from Rumelia in early 1900 and to the immigration movement in 1989.

In the interviews with participants whose families immigrated to Turkey in the first years of the Republic, it was observed that woman voters show participatory attitudes and they do not find it difficult to express their political views. A participant whose family came from Thessaloniki in 1921 stated that "*I support the CHP. As a women, of course it would be right to say CHP*" and added "*looking at my grandmother's photos, women are not that modern, even today. I think it may be argued that Turkish women gained representation with the secular Republic.*" The participant, who interprets the adventure of Turkish women over the concept of "grandmother", in other words, the first generation that immigrated, expresses her fascination with the modernity and women's lives in that period.



Picture-I: The First Woman Member of Parliament (Tınc, 2012)

It is possible to say that the period of the years 1930-1950 in the single-party era was rather stagnant in terms of the political development of Turkish women (Gürçü, 2015). However, the place of women in politics did not change a lot in the single-party period. Especially in the period starting with the initial years of the Republic up to the period of the Democratic Party, it is clear that immigrant Turkish women were more active in the political sense and they found it easier to express their views. A participant whose family immigrated from Kardzhali in 1927 emphasized the importance of political participation by saying: "*if I had the means and were*

educated, I would join the parties. Even now, I individually participate in women's branches. One of my daughters is in college now, and I always encourage her. A person who does not participate in politics reaches nowhere."

It may be said that immigrant women coming to Turkey starting with the multi-party period after the year 1950 have been in a political mobility since the years they immigrated. The years they would be included in Turkish politics cover the "multi-party period" entirely. Rumelian women who encountered many fluctuations in the political life and the 1960 military coup right after their immigration became afraid of politics. Both women who voted in this period and the first generation of women who were too young to vote at the time of immigration kept their distance from politics. Politics descending from "the elites to the people" made it easier for immigrants to participate in politics, but the coup interrupted this process.

3.1 The Women Stuck between the Roles of Spouse and Voter

It is possible to say that the mentioned period was one with limited active participation of or encouragement for women. The conservative nature of the DP was influential for women to take up roles of "mother" or "spouse". A researcher who investigated women's magazines in this period describes how women were trapped in their homes: "Considering the ratios of articles about professional life as 0.14%, articles about education as 0.03% and articles about politics as 0.89%, it is understood that women's magazines followed a consistent policy to keep women at home and make them spend their times with romance novels" (Koçer, 2009:138).

Because of the reasons mentioned above, woman participants who immigrated in this period and are middle-aged or old are being reluctant in even expressing their party preference. When they were asked about the party they supported, they either responded with "right-wing parties" or "left-wing parties" in general, or expressed no views saying "I can respond to different questions", or "you may discuss politics with my husband." On the other hand, it was observed that young participants who did not experience these periods and were born in Turkey expressed party names and political views directly.

In this sense, a general indifference to politics is observed in middle-aged or old participant women, especially if they represent the first generation to immigrate. When they are asked about this indifference or reluctance, they provide responses that may be deemed common. A participant who came from Stip in the year 1962 describes this indifference of immigrant women to politics: "I was never interested in politics. We went to work and came home. We got jobs in the factory, and they would take us to Taksim for strikes. There were many unions back then. You could not say no, and would be bound to attend. We would go there and stand in a corner. We were immigrants, and the first advice we received was to stay away from politics." The demand from families to "stay away from politics" led immigrant women in the period to keep their distance and even be afraid of politics. This indifference lasted through time.

A result of the existing indifference is the tendency to have a common political alignment with the person in the family who is trusted about politics. The trusted person is usually the husband or the father. Therefore, almost all participants interviewed about their political preferences responded to the question "what do you consider while voting?" as "my husband supports this party" or "my husband would provide a better answer for this section." It is striking that the respondents show political preferences based on those of the male individual in the family.

3.2 Political Participation Model Articulated by Power

Comments about dependence on male individuals regarding political issues by a participant who immigrated from Kumanovo in 1959 may explain the indifference of immigrant women to politics. She expressed her political stance by saying "we are all voting for the AKP, as a family." She then described her voting behavior by responding to the question "who were you supporting before the AKP?" as "my father was supporting Ecevit, and I was voting for him in those times. I voted for Demirel after getting married." It is seen that the male individual at home is influential in the voting behavior. The fact that almost all of these individuals are working or retired shows that their dependence on a man is related to their indifference to politics, rather than their economic independence. A participant who immigrated from Prilep in 1955: "We heard from our friends while working at the factory. They were voting for Ecevit. I came home, and told my father to vote for Ecevit, as he was protecting workers' rights. He asked me if I was going to be a communist. I thought I would never vote for Ecevit when there is Demirel, even if you cut me. I thought there must be something he knew and voted for Demirel." The trust in the male individual in the family regarding politics prevents women from even doing research about the parties. The main reason for this is reported to be their own indifference to politics, rather than the pressure of the male individuals. "He (talking about her husband) never tells me to vote for this party or the other. He leaves it to me, but I trust him in this issue."

Although immigrants usually represent working women and they are economically independent to some extent, they stand with their families in terms of politics. *"I was 13-14 when we arrived. My father [and our family] loved Menderes. Menderes by hanged after we arrived. It was a trauma for us. We did not understand what happened, not did we question it. My father [and our family] loved Menderes so much, but they saw the army as a sacred entity. They said 'we cannot know better than the army, we just arrived, they must have a reason.' Then he turned to us, said, 'we took refuge here by many difficulties, mind your own business, and stay away from politics.' We always worked, took jobs but never participated in politics..."*

3.3 Decisiveness of the Headscarf Issue

When woman participants who may be categorized as young are observed, it is seen that they feel no hesitation to talk about who they vote for and mention party names directly, they show political tendencies regardless of their education levels, and they can act independently from their husbands or other male individuals in their families, as well as having their own political views.

The issue of headscarves that has been a part of the public sphere since 1990 started to influence women's participation in politics. Göle interprets this situation as *"the debates on the headscarf issue revealed the borders of the existing public sphere."* A participant whose family came from Thessaloniki in 1960 responds to the question *"Which party do you support?"* as *"AKP"* and adds, *"I am not wearing a headscarf. There is no covered woman in our family and my husband is a CHP supporter. However, in addition to health, freedom of women to wear headscarves makes the AKP different in my eyes."* It is seen that the participant woman who is 35 years old and a secondary school graduate is not hesitant to show political tendencies different from her husband's and mention the political party she supports. Another participant woman emphasizes the criteria for her voting behavior by saying: *"My family supports the AKP, but I support the MHP. My family cares about the economy and health, but my reasons for voting are more abstract. Terrorism increased in the AKP period and there does not seem to be a solid step against it. This is why I would not vote for them no matter how much the economy is improved."*

Conclusion: between Settling and Hanging on

It is evident that women who immigrated in the year 1989 are very active politically. There were right in the middle of politics because of the conflicts in the Jivkov regime and the conflicts since 1984 had been the most important thing that prevented them from staying behind political issues (Eseler, 2016:93). Moreover, women's rights supported not only by the laws but also by the press beginning with the period they immigrated, led to their easier participation in the social-political life in comparison to earlier periods (Yaraman, 2016). This is why they preferred to be included in the political sphere after immigrating to Turkey. A high school graduate participant who came from Targovishte in 1989 responding to a question about her political preference as *"the MHP"* shows that she acts independently from her family in politics by saying: *"My husband and children support the CHP and my views are closer to those of the CHP. However, after what I experienced in Bulgaria, the possibility of no nationalist party in the Grand National Assembly (TBMM) disturbs me."* The same issue is also seen in a college graduate participant who came from Kardzhali in 1989. After saying *"I am voting for the CHP,"* she adds, *"my husband is of Arab descent and he supports the AKP. He is insistent that I should support the AKP, but my views are not compatible with those of the AKP. I want freedom in my country."*

The period of immigration has major significance in active influence of immigrant women on Turkish politics. The political nature of the reasons for immigration or the political developments in the reached destination is fundamental reasons for the attitudes of women towards politics. In addition to all these, participation of women in politics is directly influenced by whether they were the first generation arriving in Turkey or were born in Turkey. In this case, the process of adaptation to the living place is undeniable influential. Education and age are also factors that directly affect the attitudes towards politics. Women with higher levels of education are more likely to warm up or pay attention to politics.

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