

Chapter 1

Women of the Republic and Islam: Between the Private and the Political

This chapter examines the ramifications of being an Islamist woman in Turkey, where women's rights and feminism have a historically unique context. Islamist women of the Refah Party were citizens of a secular state that prided itself on the opportunities it extended to women. Women had long been the most ardent supporters of the Republican regime, because it radically expanded the civil and political rights they could have as citizens. Against this background, the political configuration of the 1980s and the emergence of a feminist oppositionary discourse shaped the political experiences of the Islamist women who were moving into the public space. It is to this context of women and women's rights to which this chapter turns attention.

SIGNIFICANCE OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE TURKISH CONTEXT

Women were crucial in the Republican project of modernity. The founding fathers expanded the opportunities women had, because improvement of women's status was intimately linked to the success of the civilizational transformation that was the object of their project of modernity. The project itself was rooted in a radical secularization of the state and society. Islamists opposed to this transformation without much success. The secular 1926 civil code replaced the Islamic legal code and abolished polygamy, unilateral divorce, women's unequal rights in inheritance or custody over children, and unequal opportunities to become witnesses. The new code, with some minor defects, recognized

formal male-female equality in society. Thus, improving women's position was a drastic blow to the Islamist opposition. The founding fathers weakened the Islamist opposition at the same time as they improved women's position through a new secular legal framework.

The minister of justice, who presented the rationale of the draft bill of the new civil code to Parliament in 1926, primarily argued that religious law was irreconcilable with the dictates and demands of contemporary civilization. There was need to discard the religious code in order to progress and catch up with the new civilization. The minister argued, "Not to change is a necessity for religions. For this reason, that religions should remain only matters of conscience is one of the principles of the civilization of the present century and one of the most important elements that distinguish the new civilization from the old. . . . It should not be doubted that our laws that receive their inspiration from the immutable judgements of religions and still linked to divine law are the most powerful factor in tying the Turkish nation's destiny to the stipulations and rules of the Middle Ages, even during the present century."¹ Unlike other countries, such as Tunisia, that have expanded civil liberties for men and women within an Islamic paradigm, the Republican founding fathers argued that religions could not be changed to accommodate new laws. Instead, and, for many Islamists ironically, these leaders initiated a far more radical change regarding what Islam was by redefining its place in communal life. They restricted the realm in which Islam could have authority, and they brought in secular laws. Islam was expected to "remain only a matter of conscience." Expanding women's opportunities and relative power in relation to men served the goals of secularizing the regime.

To the extent that the new republic did not merely seek to secularize the polity but also to create a national state, expanding women's status bolstered the efforts to improve nationalist consciousness. In the Turkish case, invention of tradition to cultivate Turkish nationalism involved harking back to the pre-Islamic and pre-Ottoman Turkic past in Central Asia. Ziya Gökalp, who provided the ideological underpinnings of Turkish nationalism, fervently argued that women were considered men's equals in pre-Islamic Turkish past. He elaborated at length how women could become rulers, commanders, governors, and ambassadors and how official decrees were cosigned by the "hakan" (male ruler) and the "hatun" (his wife).² Secularization measures, which expanded opportunities for women, could thus be defended as dictates of national tradition. Reference to national tradition, in turn, legitimized adoption of Western notions of male-female equality to replace Islamic ones.

Expanding women's rights helped the single-party regime of the new republic to curb its authoritarian image. Kemal Atatürk, who founded the republic and initiated the modernizing reforms, could claim, "Republic means democracy, and recognition of women's rights is a dictate of democracy; hence women's rights will be recognized."³ He was quite clear about the instrumental nature of expanding women's rights in this case to promote a democratic image. In 1934, women were granted suffrage. İsmet İnönü, who presented the draft bill on suffrage to parliament, explained at length how the Turkish nation prospered and shaped the world when the women of the nation participated in the affairs of the country along with men. In short, expanding women's rights and women's role in the public realm was not merely a symbolic act on the part of the founding fathers but a functional move in promoting the project of modernity.

LIMITS TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Because expansion of women's rights was a dictate of the Republican project of modernity, it was permitted to the extent the founding fathers judged it to be serving the interests of the project. The founding fathers knew the best interests of the nation as well as the best interests of the women. Women's activism, accordingly, was circumscribed by the dictates of an autocratic, westernizing state. There was a tradition, going back to pre-Republican Ottoman regime, of female activists demanding rights for themselves and expressing the struggles of women,⁴ but an independent women's movement was not allowed to emerge. When the prominent feminist activist Nezihe Muhittin sought permission in 1923 to establish a party named Women's People's Party, she was denied permission. She was advised to form a women's federation instead. In due time, the federation was closed, because it seemed to be making independent moves, autonomous of the state.⁵

Women were permitted to claim equality with men in the public realm primarily through education and as professionals. Working for the good of the country, many women who could have access to these educational opportunities assumed their new professional roles with a vengeance. They worked in public life to realize the goals of the modernizing state, because expansion of their opportunities was organically linked to the project of modernization. Hamide Topçuoğlu, a vanguard woman of the Kemalist generation, recalled that being a professional "was not 'to earn one's living.' It was to be of use, to fulfill a service, to show success. Atatürk liberated woman by making her responsible."⁶ This generation of women believed that they owed

their existence to the Kemalist reforms and Kemalism. Their explicit goal was to fight tradition and custom, which were considered to be obstacles in pursuit of the goals of modernization. This intensely emotional allegiance to Atatürk and his reforms had ramifications for contemporary women and their politics. Secular women who were threatened by the Islamist resurgence claimed to be against the Islamists in defense of these reforms.

In their public life, the Kemalist women of the first generation identified themselves with the Turkish "woman" in the singular. In the homogenizing mission of the project of modernity, differences among women were also glossed over. Educated women professionals, mostly women of the middle class, spoke in the name of other women with ease, without regard to differences in ethnicity, religious proclivities, or class.⁷ Those women who happened to be different would be integrated into the project of modernity through education and proper exposure to the Kemalist ideals. It was assumed that the expansion of opportunities offered by the Kemalist reforms would allow women to realize all their aspirations.

In private life, patriarchal norms continued to be practiced, perpetuated, and legitimized, despite the formal equality granted under the civil code. Patriarchal norms might not have been eradicated from the public domain, but at least the civil code and women's suffrage undermined the legitimacy given to traditional forms of patriarchal inequality that were practiced in the public realm.⁸ In the private domain, however, differences between men and women were rearticulated, and the hierarchic relationship that had traditionally defined male-female relationships reproduced. Even though women were encouraged to be educated and assume professional roles, they were encouraged to play traditional roles as well. After all, women continued to play traditional roles in the West that was emulated. Vocational and technical schools for girls such as Girls Institutes and "evening art schools for girls" (Akşam Kız Sanat Okulları) mobilized women to become good housewives. If women would become housewives under the modernizing Republic, they would have to become modern housewives. Taylorism was adopted in housework, during the early republican era so that women could transform family life in line with the dictates of efficiency, rationality, or westernization.⁹ By the second decade of the Republic, about two-thirds of women enrolled in secondary schools were in vocational and technical schools. Housewives continued to constitute the majority of the non-student female population.¹⁰

Yet, a very significant group of women in the society was educated to become important professional elites. There was a strikingly

high percentage of women doctors (even in the 1960s, a quarter of medical school graduates were women) and lawyers (in the seventies in Istanbul, about one-third, and in Turkey about one-fifth of the lawyers were women),¹¹ a strikingly high number of women (roughly, about one-third) in academic jobs¹² much before the second wave of feminism had its impact in women's education in the West. The Turkish state as well as Turkish men and women prided themselves with how Kemalist reforms emancipated women in Turkey.¹³ A tradition of pride with state feminism was invented and institutionalized. Walls were kept between the private and the public realm even though the harem system collapsed and women assumed important positions within the public domain.

There were few women in politics. Even as late as the 1980s, the percentage of women parliamentarians did not surpass the 4.6 percent level of 1935, when women were granted suffrage during the single-party era and when they were practically appointed as representatives on Atatürk's orders. Since the 1960s, Turkey had had a proportional representation system of elections that could better promote women representatives than could majoritarian systems. There were professional women who could potentially be promoted as candidates for parliamentary seats. Female politicians complained that even when structural problems such as economic need and the demands of social roles such as responsibilities of motherhood and marriage were met, it was difficult for women to be nominated as candidates for politically secure parliamentary seats, because men were biased against them.¹⁴ It was only in the 1980s that women took a critical stance when it came to the secular reforms and the project of modernity in the country.

FEMINISTS AND THE STATE TRADITION

The consensus that was formed in the society regarding state feminism and women's emancipation by the Kemalist reforms was broken in the 1980s. From the early 1980s onwards, a younger generation of educated middle-class professionals who called themselves feminists contested the liberating nature of the reforms.¹⁵ These were the daughters of mostly first-generation, educated professionals whose lives had changed due to the opportunities the Kemalist reforms offered. Unlike their mothers, the daughters could take the opportunities as given and focus on the shortcomings of the system and the instrumental nature of the reforms. In the context of a globalizing world and permeable borders, second-wave feminism began to trickle down. After the 1980 military intervention, the military elite aimed to create a depolitized society in which the

right-left cleavages would be obliterated. In this context, women began voicing women's struggles and politicizing women's concerns.¹⁶ Despite the apolitical atmosphere of the 1980s, feminists could voice their issues. The legacy of secular reforms, which altered women's predicament and the legitimacy regarding women's rights discourse in Turkish republican history, facilitated women's endeavors.

Feminists were important in Turkish politics, neither necessarily because of the infrastructural changes they could bring about to improve women's health or education, though they did precipitate significant legal reforms in a legal system that had been untouched since the 1920s, nor because they could politically mobilize the large numbers of women that Islamist women could. Yet, feminists generated a critical discourse that gained legitimacy and influence, if not widespread approval, in the Turkish context. Feminist discourse had its varying impact on Islamist women as well. Important shortcomings of the Republican tradition were analyzed and criticized by these amorphous groups of female activists, novelists, editors, columnists, and media personnel. One of the important criticisms that feminists levied against Republican modernization was regarding the illiberal communitarian nature of the modernizing reforms. Feminists claimed that the instrumental nature of the reforms bridled respect for women's individuality. The leaders and the women of the earlier generation endorsed reforms to the extent that they served communal goals. The new generation demanded respect for their individualism and individual rights, including expression of their sexuality and protection against sexual harassment or domestic violence. The critical engagement of at least some feminists with the modernizing reforms allowed them to support some Islamist women who criticized the confining nature of Turkish secularism.

The younger generation of secular feminists made demands for individualism and individual rights when they voiced the problems they had because they were women. They began from the personal, from what concerned them immediately, to what other women might share in articulating their problems.¹⁷ In this particular process, there was no mission, no explicit goal to save others the way the founding fathers of the Republic had had when they undertook the reforms they did. The feminists confronted the Republican reforms squarely and explicitly discussed not merely how important the reforms concerning women had been for women but rather how important they had been for the project of modernity itself. They explored the conditions in which the reforms were undertaken and argued that the Republican elite reserved the privilege of articulating the best interests of

women at the cost of suppressing autonomous feminist initiatives. Contemporary feminists wanted to speak up in their own names and personally articulate the struggles of women, not leave that to men who thought they knew women's interests better than women themselves did. The founding fathers had heralded westernization without liberalism; the contemporary feminists who came up onto the public arena in a context of increasing integration with the West voiced the need for liberal values. Primarily, unlike many of their counterparts of the second-wave feminism in the West, they spoke up in defense of individualism and against communitarian values. In the context of Turkish society, where women were liberated by men who thought they knew women's best interests, feminist demands to speak up in their own voices were refreshing. For secular feminists, individualism did not necessarily mean selfish indulgence in one's pursuit of happiness, as the term connoted in the Turkish cultural context, but rather the ability to speak up in one's own name and express one's own ideas in one's own voice. As such, theirs was a radical cultural and political critique. Issues of domestic violence, sexual harassment in public, sexual repression, and controls over virginity thus surfaced as important items of public agenda.

ISLAMIST WOMEN

Along with secular feminists, women who had a renewed interest in practicing Islam as they thought it should be practiced challenged the state in Turkey. This broad category of women included self-conscious Muslims who expected the state to respect public expressions of religiosity, some who were ready to fight for these beliefs and others who did not want any confrontation with the state, some who were influenced by feminists and others who rejected them. Their backgrounds varied as well. Although assertion of Islamic identities were most visible among lower and lower-middle-class groups, middle- and upper-middle-class women also sought new identities through Islam. During the past two decades, the high upward mobility within the Islamists circles and the emergence of an Islamist bourgeoisie¹⁸ meant that many Islamist women moved toward the upper classes. Among Islamist women, there were opinion-makers, journalists, professionals, students, and housewives, as well as active members of the Islamist Refah Party. Over time, since the early 1980s when their presence began to be felt, their ideas developed and changed, mostly to become more moderate.¹⁹

Islamist women, along with Islamist men, presented a radical critique of the Republic. The mere presence of women with their

headscarves covering their hair and shoulders in public institutions, particularly universities, was an implicit challenge to Republican attempts to confine religion to the private realm. The more vocal opinion-makers and writers, similar to men, elaborated on how the Republican reforms betrayed Islam and imitated the West, but, unlike most male writers, focused on the predicament of women. Writing in the mid-1980s, Cihan Aktaş, perhaps the most prominent Islamist woman critic, believed that westernization meant adoption of superficial, if not immoral modes of behavior that were accompanied with women's victimization through demeaning, low-paying jobs in the labor market. Aktaş argued that "some privileges granted to some women as rights, could mean injustice to others."²⁰ She elaborated that the process of westernization gave women the right to go to Europe to follow fashion closely, to snuggle in their furs in winter and wear bikinis in summer. For others, it was the right to become prostitutes and dancers to exhibit their bodies without control. Still others gained the right to work double shifts with meager wages as secretaries, cleaners, and nurses and to come home late at night to do their housework and forego their right to educate their children.²¹ Ironically, Aktaş's criticisms are reminiscent of feminist criticisms of capitalist usurpation of women's needs and labor.

Yet, Aktaş, like many other Islamist men and women, did write against "feminism" and "feminists"²² before she adopted a more mellow and favorable attitude toward feminism. In her earlier writing, feminists conjured up negative images of superficial aping of the West. Feminists, according to Aktaş, included "the psychologically sick, those in search of adventure who run after fantasies, dumb socialites who aspire to give color to their lives, and finally those who consider being a feminist is being enlightened, elite, progressive, and Westernist."²³ Feminists are the "other" to which Aktaş liberally attributes immoral characteristics in order to create a foil against and cultivate the contrasting image of moral Islamist women. Liberation, again according to Aktaş who does not define the term but equates it with feminism, could not make women happy and "satisfy their hunger." Aktaş also insists that feminists could not go beyond a narrow circle, could not reach large masses, and, as a reaction to their imitative culture, could not find a base for themselves. Islam, instead, could bring happiness and reach large numbers of women who were discontented with the imitation of the West. Interestingly, in an interview given to a secular journalist by the end of the 1990s, Aktaş conceded that "feminism was a positive contribution to human history" and that "patriarchy revealed itself whether Islamic or Christian, in all traditions."²⁴

Feminist values such as respect for the individual woman, rights of self-determination, and criticism of patriarchal culture had repercussions among women who professed Islam even when they did not want to call themselves feminists.²⁵ Even though Aktaş was widely read among Islamist women, there were other Islamist women who were less famous but more sympathetic to feminism and feminists as early as the mid-1980s. A group of women writing for the Islamist daily *Zaman* initiated a polemic with the prominent male opinion-makers in the newspaper when they defended secular or radical feminists. The Islamist intellectual Ali Bulaç ridiculed pro-feminist Islamist women with an article entitled "Feminist Women Have Small Brains," which triggered the polemic and ended up with the women having to leave the newspaper.²⁶

These women who did not actually call themselves feminists were ready to engage in another polemic, this time not with Islamist men but with radical feminists in the journal *Sosyalist Feminist Kaktiis*. This feminist journal published an article analyzing some of the arguments expressed by the Muslim women in the newspaper *Zaman* that argued for a more egalitarian Islam.²⁷ The concerned Muslim women responded with a letter to the editor. "A group of Muslim women from Ankara," as they called themselves and signed individually in their letter to *Kaktiis*, argued that the feminists were being elitist and displaying a disparaging attitude, which assumed that they, the secular feminists, and not others, knew the best interests of women. These Muslim women insisted that they saw no contradiction between their religiosity and their refusal to be victimized as women. They argued that whether or not their headscarves imprisoned them to their femininity and procreativity was their own concern.²⁸ The feminist response denied elitism and drew attention to the significant restrictions that Islam posed on women.²⁹

THE HEADSCARF DEBATE

The different groups of Islamist women—political, apolitical, activist, passivist, professional, student, profeminist, antifeminist—united in their insistence to wear their headscarves, which they declared was a dictate of Islam. The headscarves of the Islamist women were different from those of traditional Turkish women, both in terms of their larger size and in the way they were tied to cover completely the hair as well as the shoulders. The traditional headscarves were smaller in size, and loosely tied with one knot under the chin, which usually allowed hair to show in front.

There were different reasons, different stories, and different interpretations of why women covered. The "rise of Islam," or more specifically, increasing public visibility and influence of Islamist teachings, groups, Quranic schools, sects, and the Refah Party influenced women to cover their heads. Increasing numbers of women in the Prayer Leader and Preacher schools, which grew in strength during the 1980s, and the increasing numbers of women who were accepted to universities, after they finished these schools contributed to the spread of the Islamist headscarves.³⁰ The orthodox seculars believed and used arguments of how women were manipulated, brainwashed, or paid to cover their heads. Some social scientists argued that the decision to cover one's head according to professed Islamic dictates was a quest for identity or a reaction to the superficial understandings of modernism.³¹ Others pointed out that there could be mystical elements, or factors related to social upbringing, in the radical decision to cover one's head.³²

In response to increasing numbers of covered women in public institutions and universities, the Council of Ministers approved a statute that required female employees and students to dress without head covers.³³ Following this decision, in 1982, the Council of Higher Education banned the use of headscarves in universities. Islamist groups and women with headscarves protested the decision. Under increasing pressure from the Islamists, in 1984, the Council of Higher Education allowed women to cover their hair with a turban, a scarf tied at the back and covering only the hair. The Council deemed turbans as opposed to headscarves to be in line with contemporary dress codes. This time, the secular groups reacted. Ex-Chief of Staff, then-President Kenan Evren took the initiative to ban the turban and, in early 1987, the Council withdrew the article allowing the turbans. The students were, once again, expected to dress according to contemporary dress codes (which meant Western dress codes). The decision was again relaxed in the spring of the same year in a meeting of the university rectors. In 1989, the Council of Higher Education reversed its previous stance and withdrew the article which prohibited the use of turbans indoors in the universities.

Politicians and the judiciary also joined the controversy, with their own internal cleavages over the issue. The Social Democrats that claimed the heritage of Republican secularism were against headcovering. The center right parties were inclined to ignore the issue and let women dress as they would. In 1987, Prime Minister Turgut Özal of the center right Motherland Party tried to pass a law to relax the dress code in the universities. President Evren vetoed the initiative.

The judiciary declared headcovering in the universities unlawful. Some decisions given by lower courts were favorable to those who were for headcovering, but the higher courts of the Council of State and the Constitutional Court rejected these verdicts. In 1984, the Council of State rejected an appeal to withdraw the 1982 statute of the Council of Higher Education that banned headcovering. In 1987, the Council of State again rejected a similar court case. In 1989, the Constitutional Court decided that the statute of the Council of Higher Education allowing the use of the turban in the universities was unconstitutional and annulled it.

The issue was carried to the European Human Rights Commission as well. When a university administration refused to prepare the diplomas of two graduating students who insisted that their pictures with headcovers be used in their diplomas, the students sued the latter and eventually took the case to the European Human Rights Commission. The Commission rejected the case as well.

With their protests against the ban, the Islamist women did not merely criticize Republican secularism but, in a widespread act of civil disobedience, presented a radical challenge to state authority. The protest was costly both for the state, which had difficulty enforcing its decisions, as well as the many women involved who had to abandon ambitions for professional careers and even plans to complete their university education. By the 1990s, women who were subject to overt state intervention in attending universities and being employed in state institutions with their heads covered began narrating their stories of victimization. They wrote books and novels about the injustices perpetrated against women with head covers.³⁴ By the end of the 1990s, organizations such as Özgür-Der and Ak-Der were established to defend the rights of the Islamist women against the regulations of the state, which prohibited headcovering.

The Case for Headscarves

Women who demanded to be admitted to universities with headscarves argued that it was their basic civil liberty. They referred to Article 24 of the 1982 Constitution, which guarantees freedom of religious expression, and Article 10, which prohibits discrimination before law due to religious belief and differences in language, ethnicity, gender. They insisted on their right to education protected by Article 42 of the Constitution.

Women with headscarves who were not admitted to universities were discriminated against not merely because of religious belief, but

also because they are women. Men who shared the same beliefs with women and thought that women's headcovering was a dictate of religion were admitted to universities; their heads were uncovered.

The women who covered their heads had a different reading of Islam than the state was willing to accommodate. They believed that, according to Islam, women have to be covered at all times in public spaces. Ironically, the Directorate of Religious Affairs under the Prime Minister did not ever publicly refute the Islamic dictate that women cover in public. However, the statist understanding of Islam assumed that Muslim women could be uncovered in the public domain and still be good Muslims. The Islamist women were ready to protest, in defense of their understanding of Islam, in opposition to what was enforced on them. They could be seen as perforating the boundaries of the narrowly defined freedom of action for religious individuals.

The Case for the Ban

The higher courts gave the most decisive arguments against the headscarf. In response to the argument for the headscarf as a dictate of political liberalism, the courts argued that it would obstruct the latter. The courts and those opposed to the ban made various arguments.³⁵ One argument that was frequently used was that headcovering restricted women's liberties: The Council of State explicitly argued that headcovering was opposed to women's liberation. Many others, including some but not all feminists, opposed the headscarf, because they saw it as a means of controlling women. Among secular groups, the headscarf had long been associated with limiting women's options in self expression and with Islamic law where women are deemed to have unequal rights to men regarding marriage, inheritance, and divorce (because Islamic law allows for polygamy, unilateral divorce, and a greater share of inheritance to men).

Another important argument focused on headcovering as a symbol of opposition to the Republic, namely, secularism. The Council of State argued that "rather than an innocent custom, it (the headscarf) has become a symbol of a worldview opposed to the fundamental principles of the Republic."³⁶ The Constitutional Court explained that it was a symbol opposed to secularism and defended the statist conception of secularism: "In a laicist order, religion is prevented from politicization and becoming an administrative device and kept in its real respectable place in people's consciences."³⁷ Headscarves, thus it was deduced, could not be recognized within the limits of religious freedom (Article 24 of the Constitution).

It was further argued that headcovering would lead to unequal treatment among students. The constitutional court argued that allowing the headcover would not only be a privilege given to Islamist students but it would generate the circumstances for their unequal treatment by differentiating them from others. Contrary to the claims of the Islamists, the court argued that the headscarf was against the principle of equal treatment before law (Article 10 of the 1982 Constitution). The argument was similar to those used in France where religious differences were expected to be neutralized in public schools.³⁸ When the headscarf issue was taken to the European Human Rights Commission, the commission acknowledged the right of a secular state to restrict religious practices and maintained that this restriction would allow students of different beliefs to coexist. It was further argued that "particularly in countries where the vast majority of the population belong to a particular religion, exhibition of the rituals and symbols of this religion without regard to any restrictions of place and form can cause pressure on students who do not practice this religion or instead belong to an other religion."³⁹

Finally, it was argued that headcovering insinuated the threat of organizing the state according to the dictates of Islam. The principle of religious freedom, as stated in the Constitution, explicitly precluded organizing state's social, economic, political, or legal order, even partially, according to religious dictates. Instituting the dress code according to religious dictates would be in contradiction with this requirement. Thus, the state aimed to draw its "boundaries of freedom of action vis-à-vis religious dictates" outside the domain of headscarves, to protect itself from encroachment of Islamic law.

The headscarf debate was a complicated issue involving at times simplistic, even essentialist, assumptions on both sides. It was at the heart of Islamist politics in Turkey. After the Refah Party was closed, the support Fazilet Party members gave to legitimize headscarves precipitated the closing of the party and the banning of two of its female members from politics.⁴⁰ After the Adalet ve Kalkınma Party came to power, a number of headscarf crises took place, though the government contained them. While the struggle between Islamist women with headscarves and the state continues, it was the context in which the Refah Party attracted Muslim women into its ranks in the early 1990s.

FEMINISTS AND ISLAMISTS

The Islamist challenge to the republic had its repercussions. Within the secular feminist ranks, demands evolved over time, particularly in response to Islamist groups. An older group of women who called

themselves Kemalist feminists began to organize in the late 1980s in response to what they perceived as the Islamist threat in society. They were concerned that the rising tide of Islamism would undermine women's rights that had been secured by Kemalist reforms. They argued that Islam restricted women's rights: It allowed polygamy, unilateral divorce by men, unequal share of inheritance for women, if not other restrictions. Politicized Islam could threaten the secular legal framework, including the civil code, which insured that restrictions of the Islamic code became irrelevant for women in Turkey.

Rather than issues of sexual harassment or sexual repression, the Kemalist feminists prioritized fighting illiteracy and expanding the secular educational opportunities for women that the Republican reforms had initiated. They argued that increasing literacy would undermine the appeal of Islam. Unlike the more radical feminists, and ironically more similar to Islamists, the Kemalist feminists felt comfortable with the communitarian as opposed to individualistic values in society. As was an earlier generation, they were imbued with fervor to uphold the reforms. As one of their prominent members put it: "If we could rid ourselves of that individualism, I wonder if we have the right to be individual feminists?"⁴¹ Even when there was tolerance for individualism, it was endorsed with skepticism and with a condition.

Kemalist feminists believed that Islamist women had been misguided and needed help. The same feminist who was skeptical of individualistic feminism explained as such, "I do not believe it is her free choice [to cover her head]. I am angry with those who have captured her brains. The way they have put her forward like a flag without showing and offering her options and manipulating some material interests, this has caused me grief."⁴² When they were organized to establish a foundation (Çağdaş Yaşamı Destekleme Derneği—Association to Promote Contemporary Life), the president of the organization explained their engagement as follows:

For some time now, we have been confronted by a serious and surreptitious reactionary movement that hides behind the curtain of "woman to dress as she wishes" but in reality struggles to return our society to the darkness of the Middle Ages. We do not doubt that this reactionary movement, led by a handful of dogmatic diehard Islamists who have roots outside [the country] and who deceive many of our well-meaning, innocent people, sees the destruction of the secular republic as its first goal and pursues the establishment of a Shariat order. We came together with the awareness of

this danger and the authority that Atatürk's reforms have given us in order to protect the Atatürk reforms, the secular republic and our rights which are an inalienable part of these [reforms and the secular republic].⁴³

Other feminists, particularly among the younger generation, were not as intimidated by the Islamists nor did they all argue that Islamist women covered because they were brainwashed. They felt that questioning women's decision to cover their heads would be analogous to questioning their agency. After all, women had historically been denied access to many opportunities, because their ability to make choices was questioned.⁴⁴ They knew that their main enemy was sexism, and sexism existed in Islam as well. They thus could see a common denominator of solidarity with Islamist women. The radical feminists who gathered around the journal *Pazartesi* explicitly supported Islamist women who were fighting for the permission to attend universities with their heads covered. When the secular constituency of the journal reacted to the support given to Islamist women, *Pazartesi* did not back down. To the contrary, editorials were issued in defense of the journal's position and on why it supported Islamist women. The editorials criticized the Kemalist understanding of secularism, which prohibited Islamist women from attending universities with their headscarves, and argued that their understanding of feminism was critical of the Kemalist discourse on women, which decided what was in the best interest of women rather than allowing women to decide for themselves.⁴⁵ They argued that "to fight political Islam as women, they had to expose its sexism, contest the sexist undertakings of the Refah Party government without concession, explain how the Shariat was against women, rather than house-arresting women who covered their heads."⁴⁶

Expansion of women's rights had defined the parameters within which the Republic chose to assert its newly acquired autonomy and priorities. The secular identity of the Republic was organically linked to the question of women's rights. By the 1980s when the Republican project was critically reviewed, Islamist women, along with secular feminists, were important contributors to this critical enterprise. They defined themselves in opposition to as well as in relation to the secular modernization project and its secular feminist critics. They were products of the history that they explicitly rejected. Islamist women shaped their identity within this unique configuration of politics. It was under these conditions that the Refah Party Ladies' Commissions organized and recruited Islamist women into its ranks.