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Introduction: Reimagining Gender Equality Struggles towards a More Inclusive History

On 18 April 1923, a few months before the founding of the Republic of Turkey, the newspaper *Time* (*Vakit*) published the results of a survey. The survey was about what men would think of women having a political vote.¹ The majority of respondents supported the idea. A group of women active in various organisations took this result as an inspiration and founded the Women's Party (*Kadınlar Halk Fırkası*), under the leadership of the journalist Nezihe Muhiddin (1898–1958),² on 15 June 1923. Shortly thereafter, the party was accused by the governor of Istanbul for separatist intrigue. Public pressure became so intense that the party's members distanced themselves from the demand for political rights in their press statements, later dissolved the party, and realigned their activities under a new association, the Union of Turkish Women (*Türk Kadınlar Birliği*, est. 1924). The full civil rights of women, which were in the statute of the Women's Party, were completely removed from the statutes of the new association.³ Instead, members announced that the goal of the association was to raise Turkish women through education to a level where they could take responsibility for the 'fatherland' (*vatan*).⁴

With the foundation of the Republic of Turkey, an era of democracy and freedom seemed to be dawning. This era was, however, short-lived for the small group of feminists organised around Muhiddin. Yet, the foundation of the Republic gave a direction to the development of the women's movement, which from then on focused on the equality between men and women in both public and private spheres. In the course of a century, the struggles for gender equality have expanded in scope to include a myriad of issues that not only form the core of gender relations but also lie at the intersection of gender and class, ethnicity/race, religion, sexuality, and the environment. Women and feminist and queer people⁵ involved in these struggles have generated a diverse repertoire of action to challenge and transform the legal systems and cultural practices that maintained gender-based oppression, violence, and discrimination.

In recent years, the field of feminist history in/on Turkey proliferated as an increasing number of researchers investigated previously unexplored topics, destabilised

1 Vakit 18 April 1923; 19 April 1923.

2 Zihnioğlu 2003, 36–7.

3 Toprak 1988, 30–1.

4 Süs 23 June 1923, 3.

5 We use feminist and queer people as an inclusive term that refers to LGBTIQ+ as well as cisgender and heterosexual people who are invested in gender equality struggles in various ways.

established paradigms, and utilised new sources and methodologies. However, new contributions have not yet been subject to systematic attention in anthologies, edited volumes, or journal issues. The implications of these contributions for feminist history and historiography in Turkey are also yet to be discussed.

On the occasion of the centenary of the Republic, this special issue takes a first step to bring together some of the novel research to rethink feminist history through the prism of a century of gender equality struggles in Turkey. Our aim is to initiate discussions on new perspectives, and conceptual and methodological advances in the feminist history of Turkey and to think established paradigms in feminist historiography anew. In Turkey, as elsewhere in the world, the contested notion of ‘gender equality’ has been shaped by various actors over time. Different political projects existing side by side, such as feminist and antifeminist movements, competed over its definition.⁶ With the term ‘gender equality struggles,’ we refer to all kinds of social and political activism – formal and informal, collective and individual – with an agenda to ensure equal access of women and LGBTI+ people to the realms of economy, society, politics as well as cultural practices. Taking gender as a cross-cutting category of historical analysis, this special issue develops inclusive definitions of feminism and activism and contributes with new insights to social, political, and cultural histories of modern Turkey.

As editors, we also view this special issue as a timely attempt in the face of developments that have been negatively affecting feminist knowledge production for more than a decade. The rise of authoritarian modes of governance in Turkey since the 2010s has marginalised feminist theories and methodologies in scientific research.⁷ Institutional and financial support for critical women’s and gender studies is increasingly restricted. Moreover, a forced academic exile led to the emigration of many feminist and queer scholars from Turkey. These developments not only compromise future academic knowledge production but also render the past and current advances in women’s and gender history invisible. At a time when gender equality and sexual rights are under attack and feminist research is jeopardised in Turkey and globally, a reassessment of feminist history is necessary to show the multiplicity of gender equality struggles throughout Turkey’s history. By demonstrating some of this multiplicity in this special issue, we wish to foster imaginations in scholarly communities towards more democratic futures.

1. Emerging Research Directions in Feminist Historiography

Women’s history has emerged parallel to the inclusion of women in the political sphere, not only to provide evidence that women have always been part of the history, but also to construct a feminist memory on which further activism could be built.⁸

6 Kandiyoti 2011; Özcan 2020.

7 Dayan 2019.

8 Çakır 2007.

International women's organisations, for example, started very early as part of their activities to collect memories and to build women's archives.⁹ In the context of Turkey, works by Fatma Aliye (Topuz) (1862–1936) on women in Islam¹⁰ and articles on women in history published in the journal *Women's World* (*Kadınlar Dünyası*, 1913–1920) are initial examples of women's attempts to construct their history. Importantly, these examples also show that the founding of the Republic of Turkey was not the zero hour of feminist activism; gender struggles of the republican period were waged against the background of women's quest for equality since at least the late nineteenth century. At the same time, women's greater participation in the public sphere in the republican period generated a more systematic engagement in women's history. For example, Zehra Celasun's 1946 book *Women in History* (*Tarih Boyunca Kadınlık*) included a chapter on associations founded by women and offered an account of their activities.¹¹ In 1959, the Organisation for the Investigation of Women's Social Life (*Kadının Sosyal Hayatını Tetkik Kurumu*, est. 1953) published a bibliography of publications on women in Turkey.¹² In the introduction to the bibliography, the librarian Neriman Duranoğlu wrote:

There are many women's associations that have been founded in the past and are still being established today. Numerous women are active in these associations. It is up to them to publish about their activities and to carry their histories beyond formal decisions and reports to make them more affirmative and useful.¹³

Despite Duranoğlu's call for women to note down their activism in history, however, much of the women's organisations that existed throughout the republican time and earlier have their histories largely unwritten.

Within academic literature, women's inclusion in the field of history started in the 1970s. Early contributions came by Kemalist scholars, who historicised the achievements in women's rights and women's struggles for gender equality, such as Tezer Taşkıran's book published on the fiftieth anniversary of the Republic of Turkey.¹⁴ Later in the 1970s a younger generation of scholars began to criticise the hegemonic patterns in academic knowledge production, especially in national historiography, which was dominated by men and shaped by the official state ideology.¹⁵ This young, ground-breaking scholarship stimulated further critical discussions on the dominance of the Kemalist doctrine in Turkish historiography and opened new fields of research, such as those on minorities and everyday life experiences. Perhaps we can call this the zero hour of feminist historiography in Turkey.

9 de Haan 2004.

10 Aliye 1891.

11 Celasun 1946.

12 Kadının Sosyal Hayatını Tetkik Kurumu 1959.

13 Kadının Sosyal Hayatını Tetkik Kurumu 1959, 24. Translation by the authors.

14 Taşkıran 1973.

15 Abadan-Unat 1981; Kağıtçıbaşı 1982; Tekeli 1982. See also Çakır 2007.

The development of feminist historical research has been closely connected with the emerging feminist movement and its impact on gender equality struggles in Turkey, Western feminisms' epistemological and analytical critique of androcentric institutions, and the United Nations-led global gender equality agenda.¹⁶ Institutionalised first in universities in Istanbul and Ankara in the 1990s, women's and gender studies spread across the country over the past three decades, reaching up to about a hundred research centres by 2017.¹⁷ During this time, the field of women's and gender history grew continuously. A vast literature addressed topics including, but not limited to: women's activism in the late-Ottoman and early-republican periods,¹⁸ Kemalism and gendered nation-building processes,¹⁹ modernisation and sociological change,²⁰ women's political participation,²¹ sexuality and reproductive rights,²² women's labour and employment,²³ feminist and women's movements in the post-1980 period,²⁴ and gender politics in the 2000s.²⁵ Feminist researchers have also documented the emergence of an antifeminist movement from the 1980s onwards and the central role gender played for Islamist and conservative movements in their quest for integration in the capitalist economy through patterns of consumption and spending leisure time.²⁶

This literature immensely contributed to gendering modern Turkey's history and establishing methodologies in feminist historical research. Yet, scholars also noted the limitations of this literature by pointing at Turkish exceptionalism and methodological nationalism as its characteristics.²⁷ In 2010, Deniz Kandiyoti argued that the field of women's and gender studies in Turkey was restricted by its focus on the binaries of secularism vs. Islam, democratisation vs. authoritarianism, modernity vs. alternative modernity. It has, therefore, been 'relatively inward-looking despite ... the fact that [it has] drawn upon the canons of Western academia.'²⁸ We agree that the Turkish case has often been treated as exceptional in women's and gender history due to Turkey's unique status as a Muslim-majority country with a secular legal system in a non-Western context. At the same time, the past decade brought new contributions that go beyond these limitations and provide new accounts of gender equality struggles in the late-Ottoman Empire and republican Turkey. A new generation of feminist histo-

16 Çakır 2007; Kandiyoti 2010; Yelsalı Parmaksız 2019.

17 Karakaşoğlu 2019.

18 Altay and Clark 2013; Çakır 1994; Demirdirek 2011; Ekmekçioğlu and Bilal 2006; Zihnioğlu 2003.

19 Altınay 2004; Durakbaşa 2000; Sancar 2012; Yeğenoğlu 1998.

20 Adak 2014; 2022; Kandiyoti 1987; Sirman 1990; Tekeli 1991.

21 Arat 2005; Yaraman 1999.

22 Balsoy 2016.

23 Akgöz 2020; Makal 2012.

24 Akal 2003; Akkaya 2011; Arat 2005; Çaha 2013; Çağatay 2017; 2018; Çağatay et al. 2022; Çağlayan 2007; Işık 2020; İlyasoğlu 1994; Yılmaz 2015.

25 Aldıkaçtı-Marshall 2013; Çağlayan 2007; Kandiyoti 2016; Karam 2005.

26 Göle 2002; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Sandıkçı and Ger 2007.

27 Çağatay 2017; Fırat 2006; Kandiyoti 2010; Sancar and Akşit 2011.

28 Kandiyoti 2010, 173.

rians, to which we belong, utilised new sources such as ego documents, photographs, oral history, and legal papers. They studied different forms of activism and resistance and explored women's participation in ideological and political movements alongside feminism such as Kemalism, socialism, and Islamism.²⁹ Other research focused on ordinary women and women workers, revealing the political impacts of their struggles that have hitherto been deemed apolitical.³⁰ New journals emerged, such as *Fe Dergi* and *Feminist Tabayyül*, disseminating these fresh perspectives in the local context. All in all, this emerging body of research urges us to rethink different gender equality struggles in terms of continuities and, by developing more inclusive definitions of feminism activism, to expand our view on what counts as a 'gender equality struggle.'

As we consider this new literature systematically in terms of its impact on feminist history, we draw on the recent approaches developed by feminist scholars that inspire critical reflection about dominant tendencies in feminist historiography, such as the privileging of certain struggles over others as object of inquiry based on narrow definitions of feminism and activism.³¹ For example, Dorothy Sue Cobble reflects:

Feminism, in my view, need not require an unwavering single focus on gender, nor does gender-conscious reform reside only in all-female organizations. Mixed-gender institutions such as the church or the union can be sites for feminist reform. ... For a reform agenda can be quite feminist in its conception and impact without being gender-specific.³²

Importantly, these recent approaches challenge the reading of the history of women's activism based on rigid periodisations closely linked to the metaphor of waves.³³ Although the waves-critical literature comes mostly from the U.S. context,³⁴ a similar adherence to the idea of first and second wave of feminisms with a long gap in between (1935–1980) has been prevalent in Turkish feminist historiography.³⁵

Against the background of these new approaches, we observe that recent research on Turkey has been developing in three complementary directions to engender a more diverse, inclusive field of feminist history. First, new studies document a plethora of cross-border activism, influence, and exchange between activists in Turkey and elsewhere. Going beyond Turkish exceptionalism and methodological nationalism, they show the entanglement of transnational and global developments with local social, political, economic, and cultural dynamics in the making of gender equality strug-

29 Azak and de Smaele 2016; Çağatay 2017; 2020; Çakır Kılınçoğlu 2019; Davaz 2014; Per van 2013; Satı 2021.

30 Balsøy 2009; Karakışla 2015; Metinsoy 2016; Tuncer 2018.

31 Canning 2006; Cobble 2005; de Haan 2010; Hunt 2009; Laughlin et al. 2010; Motta et al. 2011; Orr and Braithwaite 2011; Roy 2016; Sangster and Luxton 2013.

32 Cobble 2005, 8.

33 Cobble 2005; Laughlin et al. 2010; Orr and Braithwaite 2011; Sangster and Luxton 2013.

34 See, for example, Hewitt 2010.

35 Adak and Çağatay 2023.

gles.³⁶ For instance, women's access to political rights in the 1930s was not only an imperative of the Kemalist modernisation project. It was also determined by international feminist organisations that strived to spread their emancipatory agenda beyond the Western world and to define women's status as an indicator of the degree of civilisation in the non-Western world.³⁷ In the post-World War II period, representing women of the 'East' was of fundamental importance for the International Council of Women (ICW), a leading feminist organisation affiliated to the UN. In 1973, the affiliation of the National Council of Turkish Women (*Türk Kadınlar Konseyi Derneği*, est. 1959) as the ICW's branch in Turkey gave political legitimacy to both the ICW and local women's associations whose activities were formally limited to philanthropy and charity.³⁸ Cross-border relations were not only limited to middle class women's organisations but have also shaped working class women's politics. For example, Büşra Satı's research on the union organisation of women textile workers in the 1970s shows the transnational influences on the transformation of gender politics in the union movement in Turkey.³⁹

Second, new studies on Turkey mark the inclusion of the so far understudied groups, time periods, and forms of activism in feminist historiography. Research on the struggles of women belonging to marginalised groups challenges the idea of feminism as a bourgeois ideology upheld by dominant women's groups and highlights the importance of intersectionality as an analytical lens in understanding the diversity of gender equality struggles.⁴⁰ In contrast to the disproportionate attention a previous generation of researchers paid to the pre-1935 and post-1980 periods, commonly known as the two 'waves' of feminism, the younger generation of researchers turned their attention to the activism between 1935 and 1980.⁴¹ They have found plenty of women's activism taking place in between the 'waves,' notably by Kemalist and socialist women who raised demands for gender equality and women's rights. These demands have paved the way for the self-identified feminist politics of the post-1980 era. Similarly, the histories of community-oriented activism and resistance strategies at the community level that were previously undermined by the prioritisation of collective, institutional, and contentious forms of activism are now being brought to light. For example, research by Toktaş and Cindoğlu on women who graduated from the Girls' Institutes in 1960s and Tuncer's research women's experiences of entering the urban public sphere in Ankara between the 1950s and 1980s show the benefits of microhistorical approaches combined with oral history to reconstruct the empow-

36 Azak and de Smaele 2016; Biçer-Deveci 2016; Çağatay 2017; Davaz 2014; Satı 2021.

37 Biçer-Deveci 2016; 2017.

38 Azak and de Smaele 2016.

39 Satı 2021.

40 See for instance Çaha 2011; Ekmekçioğlu and Bilal 2006; Mojab and Hassanpour 2021; Özmen 2013; Toumarkine 2013.

41 For example, see Adak and Çağatay 2023; Azak and de Smaele 2016; Çakır Kılınçoğlu 2019; Satı 2021.

erment and resistance strategies of ordinary people and individuals within smaller communities.⁴²

Third, new studies offer cross-cultural and comparative analyses that critically reflect on the concepts that have been employed in the study of gender equality struggles in Turkey. Based on the use of sources produced in different local, national, and regional contexts, cross-cultural and comparative analyses in feminist history help to reconsider the established paradigms within which researchers interpret gender equality struggles in a given locale. In the Turkish case, Aslı Davaz focused on the international relations of the Turkish Women's Union in the early republican period through the archival sources created by European and Egyptian feminists spread across Amsterdam, London, and Paris, and reconstructed the exchange between Turkish and Balkan feminists at the 1930 and 1933 Balkan conferences.⁴³ Sevil Çakır Kılınçoğlu conducted oral history interviews with women involved in radical left movements in Turkey and Iran in the long 1970s and compared the dynamics behind women's repertoires of contention in each context.⁴⁴ Selin Çağatay examined feminist and queer struggles in the contemporary counterpublic sphere and situated the case of Turkey vis-à-vis those of Russia and Scandinavia.⁴⁵ Together, these research position Turkey within and beyond the Middle Eastern context and enable the rethinking of concepts that shaped gender equality struggles such as feminism, modernity, and laicism (secularity), and women's rights.

2. Organisation of the Special Issue

Contributions in this special issue form dialogue with and further advance the three emerging research directions we have identified above. Authors of the following articles came together in Zurich, on 8–9 June 2022, at a workshop to discuss the recent developments in feminist historiography of Turkey with a focus on the mobilisation of new methods, sources, and approaches and their impact on established paradigms.⁴⁶ The result of this discussion is the expansion of the field of feminist history to new paradigms and methodologies. Articles in this special issue reflect this expansion in four specific ways. First, they provide case studies with cross-cultural and comparative analyses. Their approach encourages us to think about the discourses on women's rights and women's activism under Turkish modernisation beyond national borders. Second, they bridge the early republican and post-1980 periods of women's activism by reflecting on the struggles of women with different political belongings during the

42 Toktaş and Cindoğlu 2002; Tuncer 2018.

43 Davaz 2014; 2020.

44 Çakır Kılınçoğlu 2019; See also Ahmed 1982, Pekesen 2020.

45 Çağatay, Liinason and Sasunkevich 2022. For comparisons between Turkey and Eastern Europe see Çağatay 2021; Doğançün 2019.

46 The workshop 'A Century of Gender Equality Struggles' was supported by funding from the Scientific Exchange scheme of the Swiss National Science Foundation and the University of Bern.

years that have long been considered as the ‘barren period.’⁴⁷ Third, they pose new research questions about women’s participation in civil society and bring in fresh perspectives on gender struggles that have been subject to previous research. Fourth, they offer methodological advancements in feminist history by combining different methods and disciplinary approaches to arrive at unconventional findings.

The special issue opens with a comparative analysis by Sevil Çakır Kılınçoğlu of women’s activities, writings and publications in Turkey and Iran at the turn of the 20th century. Highlighting the pragmatism in the loyalty to the regime in both contexts as part of a strategy to gain political rights and recognition, Çakır Kılınçoğlu experiments with the concept of ‘reciprocal gain’ to examine the relationship between women’s activism and authoritarian states under Mustafa Kemal’s and Reza Shah’s leadership that are known for suppressing the independent women’s movements to replace them with more ‘complicit’ groups of activists. Against the orientalist perspective that views women as passive recipients of regime change, Çakır Kılınçoğlu emphasises the agency of women who used the spaces of emancipation that opened with political change.

The next two articles concern and advance the history of social movements during the period between the 1950s and 1980s. Ezgi Sarıtaş and Yelda Şahin Akıllı critically engage with the notion of ‘barren period’ by showing not only the many instances of women’s activism in the 1950s and 1960s but also the dynamism of the women’s movement that took shape parallel to the emergence of new social movements and political identities. They unpack what they call the ‘discourse of indebtedness’ by women who adhered to Kemalism’s gender project and explore how this discourse has been modified and, eventually, became unsustainable in the 1960s as Islamist and socialist movements emerged in the political field. Mobilizing a rich variety of primary sources from women activists’ publications, Sarıtaş and Şahin Akıllı analyze how the ‘indebted women’ pursued anti-veil and anti-communist politics through a selective process of forgetting and remembering the past struggles for gender equality. In so doing, the authors develop an original approach to feminist historiography where they understand the transformation of the ‘discourse of indebtedness’ in terms of intergenerational conflict between women with different political belongings.

Moving further in the ‘barren period,’ Sercan Çınar’s contribution focuses on the transnational dynamics of left feminists – an understudied group in feminist history – in the 1970s and builds on the previous research on the Association of Progressive Women (*İlerici Kadınlar Derneği*, IKD, est. 1975) with fresh findings.⁴⁸ Exploring IKD’s relations with the Women’s International Democratic Federation and its ties with the Turkish Communist Party (*Türkiye Komünist Partisi*, est. 1920), Çınar situates the years 1974–1979 in the context of the 1975 United Nations International Women’s Year, a turning point in the global history of left feminism. Çınar’s study contributes to the established historiography in a double manner. First, by going beyond the national boundaries and employing a transnational perspective when contextualising

47 Tekeli 1998, 337.

48 For previous research, see Akal 2003; Pervan 2013.

women's activism in Turkey, it shows that 'women's movements have always been simultaneously national and global.'⁴⁹ Second, it develops an innovative notion of left feminism by highlighting convergences instead of divergences between communism and feminist activism in the Turkish context.

Next in line is the contribution by Merve Akyel who develops a methodology to study the interaction between art and activism by bringing art history together with feminist history. Conceptualising art as a form of feminist activism, Akyel tells us the story of how gender-based violence and the critique of a 'patriarchal mindset' in Turkey has reflected in the works of selected women artists from the 1980s until the present day. Engaging a wide range of sources including artist interviews, artist books, archival material from artists, news articles, exhibition catalogues, and art periodicals, Akyel examines whether and how feminist art has the power of fore fronting, awareness raising, reframing and thus transforming existing knowledge and commonly held beliefs concerning gender relations in a society. Akyel thereby expands feminist historical approaches into the field of art history, a field that has rarely been considered in relation to gender equality struggles.

Drawing our attention to the changes in women's political participation in the 21st century, Aslı Karaca poses the question of what happens to political identities once the common cause that unites a social movement is resolved. Islamic women's activism has for long been studied in relation to the headscarf issue and the development of women's religio-political identity. Karaca goes beyond this one-sided focus and shows in her contribution the progressive broadening of Islamic women's agenda to include the 'rights of others' since the gradual liberalisation of the headscarf in Turkey from 2008 onwards. Focusing on one group of activist women, Women who Get Together (*Buluşan Kadınlar*, est. 2003) and their various activities and campaigns during 2003–2013, she shows that in the new phase Islamic women's movements, women's adoption of a larger human rights advocacy agenda has led to the diversification of these movements and produced new alliances as well as conflicts among Islamic women. Karaca's study sheds lights onto an era where the headscarf, serving as a symbol of backwardness in the early years of the Republic and a sign of the emancipated Muslim woman in the post-1980 period, has its symbolic function diminishing.

The special issue closes with an article by Elif Ekin Akşit who initiates a unique methodological discussion on the use of computerised tools in studying literary texts and women's history. Taking an unconventional path to read into gender and ethnic relations through the legend of Battal Ghazi, a popular figure in Ottoman and Turkish history who is said to have lived in the 8th century, Akşit explores the potential of digitised methods in widening our understanding of the impacts of gender equality struggles on the framings of men's and women's identities in national myths with a focus on Christian Greek women and Muslim men. Bringing in examples from various texts of Battal Ghazi, especially books written in the early 1940s and 1970s, Akşit

49 Roy 2016, 290.

argues that computerised data is only meaningful when in direct dialogue with textual and historical analysis of gender.

All in all, articles in this issue expand the field of feminist history by providing fresh insights into the complex relationship between women's rights, modernisation, nation-building, and collective mobilisation in Turkey beyond the limited frameworks of secularism vs. religion, modernity vs. tradition, and West vs. non-West. Together, they offer an analysis of gender equality struggles with regards to the achievements, obstacles, and ambivalences, and reflect the hundred-year history of Turkey from the point of view of feminist historiography. At the same time, this special issue offers only a glimpse into the many histories of major and minor, individual and collective, and central and peripheral struggles that still wait to be recovered. Much research is needed to uncover the histories of Kurdish, Christian, Jewish, Alevi, Arab, Roma, Dom, migrant, and working-class women, to name but a few. Histories of struggles of LGBTI+ individuals and queer communities as well as of sex workers are yet to be written. Equally important are the struggles around sexual and reproductive rights. The task of recovering these histories become even more crucial when it comes to understanding strategies of resistance and empowerment in smaller communities (e.g. family, work-place, village, province) that are often co-constructed by supra-national and global processes. We hope that this special issue encourages researchers to generate new research questions that will further bring to light the complexities of gender politics and relations in modern Turkey. We anticipate that this work will be done in the upcoming years and involve an ever-growing number of researchers as new methods, sources, and methodological advancements become available to them. Our aim to foster imaginations in scholarly communities towards more democratic futures can be fulfilled through creative narrations of the past for which, to speak with Walter Benjamin's words, the hour of full satisfaction has not yet come.⁵⁰

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50 Benjamin 1939, 500.

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