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# STAGING TURKISH WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION: ISTANBUL, 1935

KATHRYN LIBAL



## ABSTRACT

*This article examines debates over Turkish women's emancipation and women's independent organizing in Turkey during the 1930s. It traces the troubled history of Turkey's most prominent independent women's organization, the Turkish Women's Union (Türk Kadın Birliği), focusing especially on the Twelfth Congress of the International Alliance of Women (IAW) held in Istanbul in 1935. Despite the renown of the Women's Union, it was forced to disband shortly after the Istanbul Congress. Drawing upon popular press accounts, official records of the Istanbul Congress, and correspondence between the Women's Union and IAW members, this analysis underscores how deeply contested the question of women's emancipation was, not only within urban elite society, but also among those in municipal and state office. It also provides insights into how actively Turkish feminists engaged questions of peace, disarmament, and Turkey's role in geopolitics, challenging the view that women were best suited to contribute to social and family policies rather than foreign policy.*

Who would have guessed? If you had said this to someone fifteen years ago, who wouldn't have died of laughter? The Turkish woman, who had been imprisoned in harem life, mysterious and unapproachable, now she is holding the "crown of world feminism." Among those of her

sex, the Turkish woman is the first one to escape from guardianship and advance the cause of women's laws (rights).<sup>1</sup>

One doesn't just need to know calculus to be a feminist. One must also make some effort with her hands, feet, and whole being. Feminism is a movement. Its true character is not based on thought, but rather revolution. Those meetings under the name of women's unions aren't feminist meetings. They are philosophical gatherings. (Baltacıoğlu 1935)

These passages depict two viewpoints on women's emancipation and activism in Turkey during the 1930s. The first reflects both incredulity and recognition of changing views of women among Turkish urban elites. The narrator was presumably a Greek observer writing for a Greek audience in Athens. For the Greek writer, Turkish women had been among the most oppressed in the world and, remarkably, they had been accorded political and civil rights yet to be realized in many European countries, including Greece. The editors of *Cumhuriyet*, one of Turkey's most popular newspapers, reprinted the article to document international acclaim for the "new Turkish woman."

Social reformer and pedagogue İsmail Hakkı Baltacıoğlu authored the second passage. He signaled his skepticism about women's organizations such as the Turkish Women's Union (Türk Kadın Birliği, TWU) and its international counterpart, the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (IAW), in his commentary, "Why I Am Against Women's Unions." Baltacıoğlu indicted elite women's organizing as divisive and distracting from concerns of the majority of women in Turkish society who labored in fields or homes, worked long hours in factories, or struggled as war widows to provide for their families.

These portrayals of the meaning of Turkish women's experiences and their emancipation reflect a dynamic debate about the appropriate roles for women to play in republican Turkish society. At the center of this debate was a question about the usefulness of women's organizations in pushing for the fuller realization of women's rights. Baltacıoğlu cited the TWU in his critique of bourgeois feminism, for it was the largest and most influential women's organization in the early republic. Between the mid-1920s and the mid-1930s, the TWU actively advocated for women's suffrage and other civil, political, and social rights. Recognition of the TWU transcended the borders of Istanbul and the halls of

government in Ankara; the organization gained international acclaim through its affiliation with the IAW. When the TWU hosted the IAW's Twelfth Congress in 1935, it drew even greater international attention to the legal and social reforms women had enjoyed in the wake of Turkish independence in 1923. In both the lead up to and the aftermath of the 1935 congress, however, an outpouring of criticism of feminism and the TWU flooded the print media in Istanbul, Ankara, and other parts of Turkey. Immediately following the congress, the Turkish Women's Union disbanded.

The closure of the TWU illustrates an important contradiction between the Turkish state's public support of women's emancipation as a key aspect of Turkish modernity, and the social and political pressure that entailed the demise of independent women's organizing. On the one hand, Turkish women were valorized as a model of women's emancipation by Turkey's national elites and by women's rights activists from the United States, Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia. The organization provided evidence to the West that Turkey's national transformation deserved recognition; it signaled the seriousness of Turkish reforms and Turkey's commitment to participation in international institutions and processes. On the other hand, writers for Turkey's lively satirical press criticized Turkish feminists and women's organizations for being divisive and "out of touch" with the realities faced by most Turkish women. The TWU and its activities came to symbolize elite women's selfish and even destructive interests in securing "rights" to the detriment of men and the broader society. These critics challenged more than the efficacy of the TWU; they called into question its cultural "authenticity" and posited that the association undermined solidarist values necessary for national strength.

Attending to how notions of Turkish women's emancipation were deployed by Turkish reformist elites and by international actors, such as journalists, diplomats, and feminists involved in the international women's movement, reveals that despite an official governmental stance on according women their rights, the meaning of "women's emancipation" was deeply contested. In an even broader sense, examining debates over the "woman question" offers insights into struggles over defining and constructing "modern" yet culturally authentic social expectations regarding gender and the family. Such discourses on women's eman-

icipation, feminism, and the Turkish family and nation underscore the challenge of creating social change in the name of “progress” and “modernity” that were at once “Turkish” and yet also universally recognized as “modern.”

While recent feminist historiography has more fully traced women’s organizing in the Ottoman and early republican periods,<sup>2</sup> we have yet to look carefully at the politics of Turkish feminism as it linked with international women’s rights movements.<sup>3</sup> This article outlines the participation of Turkish feminists in hosting the Istanbul Congress, underscoring how the congress offered an opportunity for Turkish women to help shape national and international debates on questions of colonialism, disarmament, war and peace, as well as “social questions” of women’s rights within the workplace and the household. Turkish feminists engaged with other feminists on the most intractable questions of peace, disarmament, and Turkey’s roles in geopolitics, thus challenging the view that women were best suited to contribute to social and family policies. I argue that despite operating in a national environment where feminism remained suspect and the state increasingly limited associational work, the TWU contributed to a fruitful, if nascent, dialogue—both at home and abroad—which challenged the boundaries of gender, nationalism, and state and imperial power. Through the lens of the Istanbul Congress of 1935, I illustrate the simultaneous possibilities and tenuousness of such dialogue.

### THE “WOMAN QUESTION” IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC

The Turkish Republic was founded in 1923 following an intense period of conflict that resulted in the shrinking of the former Ottoman Empire, the occupation of Istanbul and other parts of Western Anatolia (predominantly by the British), and a war for independence fought against Greece. Following independence, republican leaders endeavored to strengthen the nation-state and secure sovereignty. Elite reformers, led by Turkey’s president, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, promoted rapid modernization and secularization of daily life as a means to establish Turkey’s legitimacy, both domestically and internationally. As in other parts of the Middle East in the 1930s, the “woman question” dominated public and political discourses (Amin 2002; Fleischmann 2003; Russell 2004;

Baron 2007). It formed an important part of nationalist ideology that stressed women's importance to the nation-state-building endeavor, particularly through their reproductive roles within society.<sup>4</sup> The lives of women, the relative status they held within society, and the question of what role they should appropriately play in public life became central matters of debate.<sup>5</sup>

National reformers promoted education for girls and women in cities, abolished polygyny and replaced Islamic family law with the Turkish civil code, and promoted urban middle- and upper-class women's fuller involvement in public life through work and public service (Duben and Behar 1991).<sup>6</sup> In 1930 women were granted the right to vote in local elections and run for local office, and in 1934 those rights were extended to the national level (Göle 1996, 63–78). By making formal, legal changes to expand women's civil and political rights, republican reformers sought to elevate women's status and promote their fuller participation in nation-state making. In an influential essay published in the mid-1980s, Şirin Tekeli initially framed these gains as due to "state feminism."<sup>7</sup> While the state undoubtedly played a major role in shaping the contours of policies and discourses on the woman question, recent feminist scholarship has revealed that women (and men) did struggle to implement more far-reaching goals than mere "formal" equality. The most prominent women's organization, the TWU, openly advocated for broader social transformations, or to realize *de facto* equality, through the fullest implementation and enforcement of the civil and political laws (Türk Kadın Birliği 1934; Zihnioğlu 2003). Members of the TWU challenged constraints imposed by both local and national state officials as well as social limits imposed by elite society. Thus, while political elites instituted many civil and political reforms concerning women and family life for instrumental reasons, the TWU and other women's groups in urban centers actively advocated even deeper changes to benefit women. Alongside the more visible efforts of Muslim Turkish women, recent scholarship on Armenian and Kurdish feminism in the late Ottoman and early republican periods reveals that crosscurrents, influences, and at times contention existed between the ethnically diverse elites (Alakom 1998; Ekmekçioğlu and Bilal 2006). Further research is needed to explore these lines of cross-fertilization and contention to develop a richer history of the diverse feminisms within the early Turkish Republic.

## THE TWU AND THE IAW

The Turkish Women's Union was founded in 1924 by Nezihe Muhiddin, already a central figure in the women's movement of the late Ottoman Empire (Zihnioğlu 2003; Tezcan 2004). Muhiddin was instrumental in forming the short-lived Women's Popular Party (Kadınlar Halk Fırkası) in 1923. When republican leadership balked at having a separate women's party, Muhiddin created the TWU, hoping to press for women's political participation through a voluntary association. Under her leadership, the group quickly became the most prominent women's organization in Turkey. Based in Istanbul, the TWU was made up of writers, doctors, lawyers, and educators. Resembling liberal feminist organizations worldwide, its members came from the elite ranks of society.

Muhiddin and other leaders within the TWU sought to join the International Alliance of Women in the mid-1920s, hoping to build connections to other women's groups and to the leadership of the international organization (Zihnioğlu 2003). Turkish delegates attended the IAW Congress in Paris in 1926, where they joined the IAW. Nicole Van Os (2005) notes that a number of Istanbul feminists attended various international meetings in the 1910s–1930s, underscoring how cosmopolitan and active the connections between Istanbul elites and Europeans were. For example, Seniha Rauf and Lâmia Tevfik, two prominent members in the TWU leadership, attended IAW meetings in Marseilles in 1933. Records of TWU members seeking passports and visas are held in the Başbakanlık Cumhuriyet Arşivi (Turkish Prime Ministry National Archives) in Ankara. Rauf and Tevfik reported to the office of the Minister of the Interior concerning the congress, informing the office of plans to have the next IAW congress in Istanbul.<sup>8</sup>

According to the TWU's mission and statutes, its primary aim was to achieve "social and political rights" for women.<sup>9</sup> In Istanbul the organization mobilized for political rights at the municipal level. Muhiddin's public calls for women's suffrage angered some local politicians. In 1927 the Istanbul municipal government targeted her for mismanagement of TWU funds. She was attacked in the press and brought up on charges several times in 1927 and 1928, only to have the cases thrown out of court on evidentiary issues. Yaprak Zihnioğlu regards the arrests and charges against Muhiddin as deliberate attempts by leaders of the Re-

publican People's Party to silence her and warn others in the TWU that they too could become targets if their cries for change were too radical or insistent.<sup>10</sup>

Following Muhiddin's resignation in 1927, the TWU retreated somewhat from highly visible calls for suffrage rights (Zihnioglu 2003; Van Os 2005). Latife Bekir, the new president, shifted the mission to promoting women's involvement in public life through education and philanthropy. The organization provided charitable relief to poor women and children, sponsored educational events on mothering, and encouraged members to participate in other forms of voluntarism (Türk Kadın Birliği 1934). The TWU continued to mobilize for women's suffrage at the municipal level and played an important role in securing the right to participate in municipal elections in 1930 and to vote and serve in parliament at the national level in 1934. TWU activism contributed to the climate in which women's rights were entertained publicly, but primary and secondary sources also point to other more instrumental reasons for the state to enfranchise women. As is often the case with legal rights gains today, international interest in the upcoming IAW Congress may have influenced the suffrage question. Rumors circulated that Atatürk rushed to give women the vote in late 1934 in order to influence world public opinion of Turkey. Having women in parliament when the IAW Congress convened in Istanbul a few months later would contribute to Turkey's image as a "progressive" and "modern" country. An official IAW historical account claims that Corbett Ashby met with the mayor of Istanbul prior to the congress and said to him, "What a pity that women will come from all over the world to modern Turkey, and find Turkish women still without the vote" (as quoted in Schreiber and Mathieson 1955, 44). According to the account, Ashby's idea was passed on to Atatürk, who then moved to grant women suffrage and the right to serve in national office.

## TURKISH WOMEN AND THE STATE IN THE GLOBAL SPOTLIGHT

According to IAW leaders, Turkey was chosen as the site for the 1935 congress as a gesture of the Alliance's desire to create greater East-West cooperation and extend the transnational organizing network to more



non-Western regions of the world.<sup>11</sup> The location played an instrumental role not only for the IAW, but also for the Turkish state. Atatürk and other leaders portrayed the Istanbul Congress as a sign of the world's endorsement of Turkey's recent legal reforms related to women's status.

Turkish women and the TWU were held up by international feminists as exemplars in both the "West" and the "East." Former IAW president Carrie Chapman Catt stated in an interview in the United States,

The fact that the Congress is to assemble in Turkey... is of great significance and is a commentary on the advance that women have made. There has never before been an international women's meeting in a Mohammedan country. Not only that—the government has joined in the invitation and provided the place of meeting, a thing that has not happened in a Christian country.<sup>12</sup>

Turkish and international newspaper accounts almost universally heralded Atatürk as Turkish women's "savior," and IAW leaders both before and during the congress marveled over women being accorded such rights without much struggle.<sup>13</sup> Egyptian feminist Huda Shaarawi reportedly asserted that Mustafa Kemal was not "Father of the Turks" (Atatürk), but rather "Father of the East" (Ataşark), underscoring that Turkey offered a model to other Middle Eastern territories and countries.<sup>14</sup> Reinforcing this paternalist image of benevolence, one of the Turkish commemorative stamps for the congress bore Atatürk's likeness. It was the only stamp in a series of fifteen to depict a male figure, and under his portrait the caption read "Liberator of Turkish Women."<sup>15</sup>

#### DEBATING PEACE, IMPERIALISM, AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The Twelfth IAW Congress took place on the grounds of Yıldız Palace on April 18–25, 1935.<sup>16</sup> It was preceded by specialized meetings of committees charged with amending the IAW platform and, after the congress closed, thirty delegates traveled to Ankara with Atatürk and other Turkish leaders.<sup>17</sup> Two hundred and twenty-five official delegates from more than thirty countries attended the congress, and more than two hundred others participated as alternative delegates, members of candidate organizations seeking official affiliation with the IAW, or independent activists. From the Middle East, women's organizations from Syria, Palestine, and

Iran were invited to join the IAW during the congress, reflecting IAW interests in expanding its membership in the region.<sup>18</sup>

The work of the congress was divided between debating and passing resolutions on the civil status of women, trafficking of women and prostitution, working conditions, nationality and citizenship rights, suffrage, and peace. While each topic received attention, discussions of promoting disarmament and securing world peace dominated the meeting. Former IAW president Carrie Chapman Catt signaled the theme in an interview before the congress. When asked what were the most pressing issues that women could address, Catt asserted, "The greatest thing they can do is to further the peace movement. The leaders of the Alliance recognize this and a big meeting for peace will be held in Istanbul during the Congress...."<sup>19</sup> A few months later IAW President Corbett Ashby opened the congress asserting, "We women of 30 countries assembled here, pledge ourselves anew to our double task; (1) Freedom for women, (2) Peace for mankind."<sup>20</sup>

The question of how women's organizations might promote world peace through national and international campaigns extended deliberations from earlier IAW congresses. The Berlin Congress in 1929 had sparked heated debate about reconstruction, imperialism, and nationalism (Rupp 1997). German and Italian member organizations of the IAW withdrew in the early 1930s, which IAW leadership regarded as a great loss and a sign of impending conflict. Corbett Ashby served as a British delegate to the League of Nations Disarmament Conference in 1932 and became a prominent spokesperson for disarmament in the 1930s. She utilized the Istanbul Congress as a forum to highlight the work of the IAW Committee for Peace and the League of Nations. The committee members authored a "Manifesto," which was circulated at the Istanbul Congress, promoting disarmament and challenging nationalism. The "Manifesto" asserted, "We must be ready to sacrifice the doctrine of national sovereignty (based on artificially exaggerated national pride) to the extent that is essential to prevent the outbreak of a calamity...."<sup>21</sup>

IAW leaders had hoped to solicit widespread support for the "Manifesto" among Eastern delegates. Turkish speeches and newspaper accounts reveal how fraught this process was. The internationalist ideals expressed in the "Manifesto" were received with skepticism and even anger by many delegates from colonized or formerly colonized coun-

tries in the Middle East and South Asia. A Syrian participant asserted that peace could only be realized by achieving self-rule and challenging Western imperialism.

What we women of the Arabic world would have to learn and to carry home from this congress to the daughters of our countries will be of great value to both them and us, but I am afraid, on the other hand it will also increase, unwillingly, within us the revolutionary spirit... While a single nation is oppressed, all sacrifices for peace will be of no avail. No amount of effort on your part will ever achieve your high aims while imperialism reigns in any corner of the world.<sup>22</sup>

Tensions over the right to self-determination surfaced often and Turkish observers reported these exchanges in the Istanbul press. Commentators editorialized about the importance of national sovereignty and military strength to preserve the nation. Ahmet Ağaoğlu called for overcoming internal divisions to secure national futures, citing a heated exchange between an Indian and a British delegate. The Indian charged, "You have been talking about democracy and saying that England is democratic, but in India you oppress us; you don't give us the chance to be free." The Brit reportedly responded, "That's because you aren't ready!" For Ağaoğlu, British rule in India underscored the danger of being perceived as "weak" and in need of European tutelage. It also offered him an opportunity to highlight Turkey's relative power within the pantheon of newly emerging states.<sup>23</sup>

The TWU struggled to find a space between the IAW's deeply pacifist platform and its own government's nationalizing projects and preparations for what many considered to be an inevitable war (Toprak 1986). Turkey's independence had been secured a short decade earlier and national elites remained wary of European imperialism. While some Turkish delegates embraced the pacifist stance, other speeches contributed by Turkish attendees and the press reveal how contentious the peace platform was.

Mihri Pektaş, newly elected as one of the first women deputies to the Turkish Parliament, addressing a packed forum on peace, tempered her speech with political realism. She affirmed a belief in striving for peace, even as she encouraged IAW leaders to pressure their own governments to reverse expansionist policies.<sup>24</sup>

[A]ll efforts are bound to be fruitless unless a new conception of Peace is understood and respected by all.... To put forward a policy of Peace just for the purpose of stabilizing or protecting the hegemony of a certain nation or group of nations or to wish it for the purpose of assuring the success of one group of nations at the expense of the other, is very far from a true love of Peace....

Pektaş's words underscored a common Turkish perception that Western powers were expanding territorial control throughout the world in the name of making or keeping the peace (Toprak 1986). Her vision, however, emphasized the universality of the goals of peace and social justice for all humanity. Peace must be promoted as an "end," not a "means," and all humans should be treated fairly and equally. Many Turkish women following the meeting, however, remained skeptical and questioned the wisdom of promoting pacifism at a time of rising militarization and European exercise of colonial rule in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

The debate over disarmament incited anger in a range of national elites, including many feminists. Public discourse in the media overwhelmingly stressed the need to protect the Turkish nation-state. Suad Derviş, one of Turkey's most prominent leftist journalists, wrote a series of articles based on interviews with delegates and Turkish feminists about whether or not women were suited for combat roles in war. While most of the international delegates interviewed stressed that women's "nature" precluded them from participating in such destruction, a number of Turkish women affirmed that they could readily fight again—as they had already done alongside men in previous years. Less than a week after the congress, *Cumhuriyet* published a front-page article on Atatürk's position regarding women and war. The president's words were likely intended to counter the pacifist thrust of IAW resolutions. Atatürk declared, "We are a people who want to distance ourselves from war even for our men, but if we are forced to make war, our women will find themselves again alongside our men in the national struggle."<sup>25</sup>

#### TARGETING "FEMINISM" IN THE ISTANBUL PRESS

The Istanbul Congress helped to publicize, both nationally and internationally, Turkey's commitment to women's rights. Turkish women

and the TWU were heralded as exemplars in both the Western and the non-Western worlds. These portrayals relied upon orientalist stereotypes of Ottoman womanhood to illustrate “Turkish progress.” The *New York Times* highlighted the Istanbul meetings as a “natural consequence and tribute to the evolution of Turkish women during the last fifteen years. No longer veiled dolls in harems, whose only occupation was to please their lords, the women of Turkey today enjoy equal civic rights with men.”<sup>26</sup> In a radio address in the United States following her return from Istanbul, feminist and peace activist Josephine Schain expressed astonishment at the pace of change she had witnessed in Turkey since her first visits in 1926 and 1928. She marveled that “a new force” had been “liberated,” and predicted that “the generation of young women who are coming up through the schools and colleges” would be very different from their mothers. Schain acknowledged the role of the state in advancing “the feminist question,” underscoring its importance in the struggle between republican reformers and those troubled by the pace of change. As an example, she told a story of an old palace guard who “complained bitterly” about the “evil days that have befallen Turkey.” The guard bemoaned changes that had made it “possible for the delegation to a feminist Congress to use the old harem for committee meetings.”<sup>27</sup>

The Istanbul Congress was not universally received as a positive platform for Turkish women or the new republic. In fact, the TWU was subjected to an outpouring of criticism and ridicule. Political cartoons lampooned the international congress and the TWU, underscoring anxieties about who was participating, the goals of the meeting, and especially the “suitability” of women mobilizing for demilitarization and “world peace.” The high profile given to peace advocacy at the congress also spurred an extended discussion in the Turkish print media on the implications of women pressing for world peace and whether or not women were “naturally” inclined to seek peace over war. One cartoonist poked fun at the gathered feminists addressing such weighty issues. In the caricature, the figure of a “woman” rests on “man’s” shoulders, while the man bears the weight of both the woman and the world. An inscription on the globe reads “life’s burden,” and the caption claims this represents the “unity” between men and women.<sup>28</sup> In another cartoon published in *Akbaba*, two Istanbul gentlemen out for a stroll ruminate on the women’s congress. One says, “Women want peace!”

The other responds, “What, I thought they wanted clothing from their husbands?!”<sup>29</sup>

Socialist writer and activist Sabiha Zekeriya Sertel complained that Turkish feminists who participated in organizations like the IAW were “out of touch” with the realities of everyday Turkish life. They failed to recognize the people’s real material needs—men and women alike—and wasted their time pursuing a “peace agenda” that would have little impact on world powers. Even Nezihe Muhiddin, the founder and former president of the TWU, expressed exasperation over “empty ideas” like calls for women to spur peace.<sup>30</sup> “One of the most ridiculous ideas of the Women’s Congress was that we are going to make peace!” She continued, “When you journalists asked ‘How are you going to create peace?’ the answer was, ‘We’ll sing peace lullabies to our children.’” In Muhiddin’s view, making babies into pacifists—even if it were possible—would be a dangerous enterprise. “Look, we are Turkish women. We are obligated to raise our children as defenders (*koruyucu*) of the country.... I am a feminist, but women should not meddle in such important affairs.”

What lay behind the ridicule directed at women and the Turkish Women’s Union in the satirical press in the 1930s? Had members of this organization merely tread on terrain ordinarily considered the province of men? The prominence given to the comments of several female parliamentarians and the seriousness with which the question of militarization and peace-building was debated support this interpretation. The IAW delegates had broadened their platform from attaining suffrage or tackling “social” or maternalist concerns to include larger questions of the impact of colonialism and perceived rampant militarization. Delegates from “the East” attending the congress continually raised the specter of colonialism and highlighted their desires to achieve independence and secure their rights through a legitimate and fully recognized national body.

Even if Turkey’s delegates had inserted themselves into a political debate that the Turkish state did not support, as Zafer Toprak argues (1986), this does not fully explain the avalanche of criticism the TWU had been facing for a number of years. It is important to note the means by which Turkish women’s activism was challenged within the public sphere. The satirical press was replete with imagery of men as “cuckolds” and women as “over-sexed” and dissatisfied in their monogamous relationships. Newly attained rights to vote and to serve in local and nation-

al political office and other civil liberties related to marriage and family life were portrayed as a threat to the stability of society. Feminists were caricatured as “tyrants” and their male family members were portrayed as being so oppressed by their incessant demands that they were driven to form men’s rights organizations. A cartoon in *Akbaba*, for example, depicted a young married couple clad in contemporary Western evening attire. The wife asks, “Why are women gathering in Yıldız Palace?” The husband responds, “Because they are tyrants, my wife.”<sup>31</sup> Another cartoon showed two men considering renting the TWU building in Istanbul, which would soon be available due to the union’s impending closure. The men imagine establishing a “men’s union” in its stead.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the criticism signaled anxieties about women challenging prevailing gender norms, even in middle- and upper-class urban circles. For many among Istanbul’s elite, offering women the right to vote and to serve in political office within a decade after men had earned the same right was premature, at best. Some in the press pointed to women’s lesser capacities for reason, their likely trivialization of politics with “women’s concerns,” and women’s “natural” inclination for domestic duties as rationales for preserving political office as a male domain. Beyond the question of political participation, women’s visibility in the workplace also worried some commentators.

The sheer volume of criticism also indicates state intolerance of women organizing too independently. For the Kemalist leadership, extending formal political and civil rights to women was a sufficient step to achieve modernity and strengthen the nation-state. Within a fortnight of the congress ending, Turkish newspapers were filled with news of the TWU’s dissolution. On May 10, 1935, the organization announced that it would disband. Its president, Latife Bekir, told the press that members voted to dissolve because their goal of achieving political rights for women had been realized.<sup>33</sup> The TWU leadership publicized this official view—that because women had been accorded civil and political rights equal to those of men, an independent association was no longer necessary. Because women’s legal and political rights had been secured, *de facto* equality would follow as a consequence of state-directed modernization programs and policies. Bekir portrayed the move as a natural step and asserted that women would continue their work as members of charitable organizations or the ruling Republican People’s Party. Her

formal statement mirrored many of the calls for closure in the Turkish press. In the words of one writer in *Son Posta*, “The Women’s Union is not a political organization, because no political struggle remains” (as cited in Tezcan 2004, 23).

As Zafer Toprak (1986) notes, this step coincided with the closure of other autonomous or semi-autonomous organizations in the 1930s. The Kemalist regime asserted that corporatist solidarity would provide the basis for a strong society and, within this worldview, all sources of “division,” whether based on gender, class, ethnicity, or religion, would not be tolerated by the state. Bekir herself cited a need for women and men to work together to achieve national goals, indirectly acknowledging the mounting critique of women’s organizing and the Women’s Union as being out of touch with Turkish social realities and the needs of the young country.

Despite this supposedly “voluntary” move, at least one TWU source points to opposition to the closure among its leaders. The TWU’s 1934 report tackled the question directly, acknowledging “official and unofficial views that inequalities between women and men would not even be apparent in a short period of time” and therefore a “special women’s organizational body would not be needed” (Türk Kadın Birliği 1934, 9). The report asserted that a separate women’s organization remained necessary for women to “learn how to use” the “eternal rights” granted to women and to learn how to “succeed in work.” Thus, the TWU balanced increasingly repressive regulations on independent organizing with goals to promote broader realization of women’s rights. The 1934 report reveals how aware the organization’s leaders were of pressures to disband even before the Istanbul Congress. They argued that despite the legal and political gains that had been achieved, fundamental changes in social values had yet to take hold even among Istanbul elites and therefore the union still had a constructive role to play.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the national prominence and international respect accorded to the Turkish Women’s Union, its leadership ultimately acquiesced to governmental pressure and ceased political organizing and advocacy. The TWU represented enough of a challenge to the Kemalist regime to



merit being closed rather than absorbed into the state as would happen with the Children's Protection Society (Çocuk Esirgeme Kurumu). Once the Istanbul Congress was over, Atatürk and other Kemalists seeking to solidify party power could "request" closure of the TWU with little fear of visible backlash or loss of face internationally.

The TWU's leaders encouraged members to direct their energies toward charitable efforts that would help strengthen the nation-state. This type of work was deemed more constructive than "divisive lobbying" for women's issues and anti-war activism during an era of heightened nationalisms and militarization. Criticized for having been "used" by Western powers or for narrowly espousing liberal, elitist goals for "women's rights," TWU members were charged to work "alongside" men to shore up the nation's defenses and prepare for the war that many anticipated. Thus, collectivist, nationalist imperatives trumped internationalist visions of peace or the realization of women's rights.

The ten-year history of the Turkish Women's Union demonstrates the struggle of a group of Istanbul-based women to maintain a measure of autonomy for their organization, but ultimately not at the cost of personal reputations, careers, and elite networks. In the end, even the prominence accorded the Women's Union because of its status as the first "Muslim" and non-Western national organization to host a major IAW congress was not sufficient to save it—indeed, in the wake of the Istanbul Congress, it may very well have justified its closure. While feminist scholars have asserted for more than a decade that women's activism must be recognized as having played an important role in early republican Turkey, an examination of the staging of Turkish women's "progress" at the Istanbul Congress reveals more fully how fraught this process of gaining formal rights was. Fuller analysis of documents, letters, and unpublished memoirs held in private collections in Turkey or abroad would likely yield an even more nuanced view of the tensions between the TWU and the Turkish state. Unfortunately, as Zihniöglü (2003) has found, locating such records remains a significant challenge.

Şirin Tekeli (1991) has pointed to the closing of the Women's Union in 1935 as a decisive turning point in the nascent women's movement, arguing that feminist political activism more or less ceased until after World War II.<sup>34</sup> I have yet to locate threads of ongoing communication between the IAW leadership and former TWU members after the con-

gress. Several TWU members continued their professional pursuits as lawyers, doctors, and sometimes took up municipal or national office. They were also active in the Children's Protection Society and associated Mothers' Union (Anneler Birliđi), as well as various charities supporting poor and orphaned children or widowed women. While IAW leaders expressed concern about losing contact with their Turkish counterparts,<sup>35</sup> it remains to be discovered whether lasting correspondences and relationships were maintained between IAW members and members of the disbanded TWU.

In the broader view, however, we cannot forget that the TWU activated transnational connections and established a brief period of dynamic exchange with delegates of organizations from around the world. These relationships transcended East-West cooperation, as women of so-called colonized and developing nations learned from each other as well. Discourses on nationhood, sovereignty, and securing peace dominated discussions, much to the discomfort of many Turkish elites who variously ridiculed and questioned the credentials of the TWU and IAW delegates to speak on matters of global politics. Even so, the seeds of participation in this movement would yield fruit in the post-World War II era, when Turkey gradually democratized and women participated widely in voluntary, non-governmental associations and governmental institutions.

## NOTES

1. Translated into Turkish and reprinted in *Cumhuriyet*, from the Greek newspaper *Acropolis*. "Dünya Kadınları Bugün Yıldız Sarayında Toplanıyorlar!" *Cumhuriyet*, April 18, 1935, 1, 8. This and the other translations from Turkish into English are my own.

2. A number of scholars have analyzed various aspects of the "woman question" in Turkey during this era (see, e.g., Kandiyoti 1991; 1997; Arat 1993; Demirdirek 1993; Arat 1998; Altınay 2000; Berktaş 2001; White 2003; Shissler 2004; 2007; Ekmekçiođlu and Bilal 2006).

3. See Van Os (2005) for an important step in this direction.

4. The politics of maternalism and reproduction during the first half of the twentieth century have been increasingly scrutinized in Middle Eastern cases (El Shakry 2005; Kashani-Sabet 2006).

5. The "woman question" emerged in the nineteenth century. Women's organizations flourished from the 1880s onward and women organized to achieve political and legal rights and to support the cause of national independence (Kandiyoti 1991; Çakır 1993; Demirdirek 1993; 1998; Van Os 2005).

6. While Atatürk regarded women's liberation as an important step in national development, early republican political leaders did not aim to radically transform or equalize gender relations, but rather to educate women so that they might contribute to the "public good." Zehra Arat (1994) argues that Atatürk's vision did not extend from a liberal notion of human rights, but rather that he saw women as instrumental in supporting a modern patriarchal state.

7. Tekeli (1986) developed this critique in the 1980s as feminists challenged the powerful national discourse that equated gaining civil and political rights with realization of gender equality. She revised this point after historical research revealed the existence of vital late Ottoman and early republican women's movements (1991; 1998).

8. Report of Turkish Women's Union representatives Seniha Rauf and Lâmia Tefvik on the Marseilles Women's Congress, BMGMK 030.10/229.541.11, May 24, 1933.

9. As reprinted in Zihnioğlu 2006, 381.

10. I base this outline of the TWU's work in the 1920s on Zihnioğlu's excellent analysis (2003). My archival research focuses on the period after Muhiddin's resignation and, in particular, the 1935 Congress. In this article I draw upon IAW and BCA archival sources, newspapers, letters, and published memoirs.

11. Charlotte Weber's work on the IAW and its efforts to inculcate relationships with women's organizations in "the East" productively points to intersections between feminism and orientalism. Weber argues that feminist orientalism "forestalled the development of a more radical critique of Western patriarchy" and "prevented an expanded definition of feminism as well" (2001, 152).

12. Interview with Carrie Chapman Catt by Annabel Parker McCann, Associated Press, January 1935, Vera Beggs Papers, box 1 (SSC).

13. A Turkish ambassador in Iraq reported that during a regional women's congress in Baghdad in 1932, American delegate Emily Faber Reider asserted that Atatürk was like an "idol in the eyes of the women of the whole world." Report of Turkey's Baghdad Ambassador on the Women's Congress held in Baghdad, BMGMK 030.10/229.541.9, September 11, 1932.

14. "Mısır Kadınları ve Atatürk: 'Siz Büyük Şefinize Atatürk Diyorsunuz. Biz Onu Ataşark Diye Anarız!'" *Cumhuriyet*, April 28, 1935, 1, 6.

15. Jane Addams, Carrie Chapman Catt, and Nobel Prize laureates Grazia Deladda, Selma Lagerlöf, Mme. Curie, and Sigrid Undset were also depicted.

16. International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (IAW), *Report of the Twelfth Congress*, Istanbul, IAW Papers, box 2 (SSC).

17. "Atatürk Kadın Delegeleri Kabul Etti," *Tan*, April 27, 1935, 1.

18. IAW, *Report of the Twelfth Congress*, 14. See Charlotte Weber's dissertation (2003) on Middle Eastern feminists and the international women's movement, especially chapter 4 where she addresses broader questions of East-West exchange between feminists, imperialism, and nationalism.

19. Interview with Chapman Catt by Parker McCann.

20. IAW, *Report of the Twelfth Congress*, 9.

21. "Manifesto" signed by Margery I. Corbett Ashby, IAW President, Jose-

phine Schain, Chairman, Dr. C. C. Bakker van Bosse, Vice-Chairman, and Rosa Manus, Secretary, IAW Papers, box 1 (SSC).

22. Unsigned, undated letter from the Middle East Arab Syrian delegation addressed to Mme Chairman, IAW Papers, box 1 (SSC).

23. Ahmet Ağaoğlu, "Hadiseler Karşısında: İki Bayan Arasında," *Cumhuriyet*, May 6, 1935, 3.

24. Speech by Mihri Pektaş, Deputy to the Turkish Grand National Assembly, IAW Papers, box 1 (SSC).

25. "Türk Kadını, Harb Olursa Erkeğiyle Beraberdır!" *Cumhuriyet*, April 30, 1935.

26. J. W. Kernick, "Turkey Welcomes Women's Congress," *New York Times*, April 14, 1935, E5.

27. Text of radio address, July 3, 1935, Josephine Schain Papers, box 5 (SSC).

28. *Cumhuriyet*, April 19, 1935, 1.

29. Cartoon by Ramiz, *Akbaba* 13:70 (May 2, 1935), 2.

30. Suad Derviş, "Nelere Sinirlenirsiniz?" *Cumhuriyet*, May 2, 1935.

31. *Akbaba* 13:68 (April 18, 1935), 11.

32. Cartoon by Orhan Ural, *Akbaba* 13:70 (May 2, 1935), 8.

33. A *New York Times* correspondent reported, "The Union of Turkish Women is to be dissolved on the ground that Turkish women have acquired an equal political status with men so the union has no further reason to continue. This step is in keeping with the government's desire to have no political organization in Turkey other than the Republican People's Party." "Turkish Women Curbed," *New York Times*, April 29, 1935, 8.

34. Further research is needed to see how women activists continued to operate within and at the margins of the Kemalist project between the mid-1930s and the 1970s.

35. See Letter to Mrs. Johnstone, July 3, 1935, IAW Papers, box 1 (SSC).

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