The Formation of a Counter Public Through Women’s Press in the Late Ottoman Empire

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Abstract

Since the mid-nineteenth century the printed press had become a platform for Ottoman men to discuss their plans to build the “ideal society”, which entailed creating the “ideal woman,” since women constituted half the population and raised the new generations. The male intellectuals and bureaucrats had argued, for decades in the pages of newspapers, about what women’s status and roles in family and in society should be. However, the male monopoly on the “woman question” in the public discourse came to an end with the 1908 Revolution, as educated, upper-middle and middle class Ottoman women in urban areas created their own, independent, and free press. In this article, through an extensive study of their writings from the post-revolutionary period, I will explore how women developed an alternative discourse on “the woman question” by formulating a new language based on equality, and constituted a counter-public by propagating their ideas to tens of thousands of people as well as mobilizing public opinion to improve women’s lives and rights.

Keywords: Women’s press, Ottoman women, 1908 Revolution, Ottoman public sphere, women’s rights
Since the mid-nineteenth century the printed press had become a platform for Ottoman men from different worldviews to discuss and promote their plans to build the society that they desired, which entailed creating the “ideal woman,” as women constituted half the population and raised the new generations. Using both the mainstream press and the newly emerging women’s journals, the male intellectuals and bureaucrats had argued, for decades, about what women’s status and roles in family and in society should be. Nevertheless, the male domination of public discourse on the “woman question” (mesele-i nisvan or kadınlık meselesi) came to an end with the 1908 Revolution. The reason behind this change was that increasing numbers of educated, upper-middle and middle class Ottoman women in urban areas started creating their own, independent, and free press, and propagating an alternative view of the “new woman” and consequently the “new society.”

Women’s publications of the post-revolutionary period not only served to promote certain ideas to a large number of people. They also rallied people in support of improving women’s lives and rights by raising funds to establish women’s schools and businesses, publicizing the activities of women’s organizations, printing the stories of successful women around the world, and creating venues for their readers to be active in social, economic, and political arena. Thus, the women’s press became an important vehicle for the advocates of women’s rights (hukuk-u nisvan) in mobilizing public opinion, and ultimately forming what Nancy Fraser calls a “subaltern counter public.” As defined by
Fraser, this term refers to “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.” (Fraser, 1990:67).

In this article, I will argue that as a subordinated group, Ottoman women developed and disseminated a counter discourse on issues concerning themselves in accordance with their own interests and needs, and thus helped the “widening of discursive contestation” (Fraser: 67) in the post-revolutionary period. Through an extensive study of their writings on three specific topics –women’s education, employment, and political rights-, I will discuss the ways in which they both provided alternative views on existing matters and caused many “assumptions that had been previously exempt from contestation to be publicly argued out.” (Fraser: 67). I will illustrate how some women, “in the absence of formal political incorporation through suffrage” employed the press to formulate a new language as well as to push for policy change on “the woman question” based on equality (müsavat). With this paper, I hope to contribute to the growing scholarship on public sphere in the late Ottoman Empire, which has not paid much attention to women until very recently.2

**Historical Background**

The “woman question” first appeared in the Ottoman press in the nineteenth century as Young Ottomans denounced the state of
ignorance in which Ottoman women were kept. Considering women’s education an Islamic right as well as the first step towards the elevation of women’s status, the Young Ottomans argued in the newspapers they published that educated women would be able to participate in public activities and make many contributions to mankind apart from just propagating children. (Doğramacı, 1991: 20).

While the Young Ottomans framed women’s education mainly in Islamic terms, the top ranking statesmen of the Tanzimat Period regarded the issue as part of a widely based westernization movement that could save the state. In an attempt to create a new civilization based on western principles, such as science, reason, liberalism, and secularism, these statesmen implemented a series of state-sponsored reforms, one of which was the establishment of the first secular girls’ schools in the empire. These schools were expected to transform girls into sophisticated ladies who were knowledgeable in western languages, literature, and fine arts as well as into ‘scientific housewives’ who were trained in child-raising and household management.

Even though the “politically liberal, but socially conservative” (Hanioğlu, 1995: 13) Young Ottomans and the westernist statesmen of the Tanzimat Period could not agree on the style of education women should receive, both groups believed in the necessity of higher education for women. However, there were also conservative intellectuals and certain members of the ulema, who believed that Muslim women should only worry about being good mothers and wives. Therefore, they argued that women’s education should be Islamic, limited to primary school, and focused on their domestic roles.

Even though the debate on the “woman question” in the press started and mostly continued under the monopoly of men, a few Ottoman women also expressed their views on the subject through their writings in the newly emerging women’s journals of the nineteenth century, the most prominent of which was Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete (Ladies’ Own Gazette, 1895-1908). These women
generally voiced their demands for access to higher institutions of learning, and often justified these demands by emphasizing their roles as mothers of the nation or wives of modern Ottoman subjects.

The “woman question” which mostly revolved, in the nineteenth century, around women’s education and consequently the elevation of women’s status, came to entail women’s employment, political rights, clothing, and marriage in the early twentieth century, as a result of the radical political and social transformation Ottoman society underwent with the 1908 Revolution, the Balkan Wars (1912-1913), and World War I (1914). (Atamaz-Hazar, 2010). As the ban on clubs and the censorship on the press were lifted, the opportunities for women to get involved in national affairs and economic life increased, women’s journals and organizations proliferated, and employment opportunities for women grew, the dynamics of the debate on the woman question changed dramatically. 

Women’s Education

Women’s education (terbiye-i nisvan), one of the most popular issues of the post-revolutionary period, was discussed both in mainstream media and the women’s press. Unlike the nineteenth century, most people thought that women needed to be educated, but they could not agree on why and how. The most accepted reason for educating women was the belief that educated mothers would elevate the nation. Since the nation’s destiny was in the hands of new generations and it was women who raised them, it was possible to turn them into knowledgeable, talented, and patriotic people that would be beneficial to the nation by educating their mothers. This view was also expressed by the female intellectuals of the time, some of whom wholeheartedly believed in it while some saw it as the perfect justification for advocating women’s education.

Adviye Sitki, who wrote for Kadınlık (Womanhood), agreed that the country and the nation would greatly benefit from educating their women. She declared:
This nation will live with the lively and knowledgeable children who are raised on the blessed bosoms of the enlightened mothers of tomorrow... The ignorance and fanaticism that have exerted influence on the dark minds of womanhood...will from now on become silent . . . and knowledge, glory, and safety will rule. (17 May 1330/1914: 3-4).

Adviye Sıtkı hoped that mothers would start adorning their daughters with science and education rather than with diamonds and silk clothes, and give them conscience, a mind full of knowledge, and a strong faith instead of chests full of trousseau. Thus, when they got married, they could work to elevate their country with the children they would raise, who were equipped with talent and knowledge.

Arguing that it was women who elevated or degraded a nation, Sacide Hanım tried to explain how closely women’s education and nation’s progress were related to each other. Believing that establishing a good girls’ school meant opening a school in every family, Sacide Hanım asserted:

A nation that neglects its girls’ schools and female teachers, even if it opens the latest model factories, practices the latest laws of Europe and America, and procures the newest battle ships, would not yield any results, because factories, law, and battle ships cannot assure wealth, justice, and safety by themselves. We need men who will manage and maintain them and it is women who are insulted every day that will raise them. (3 August 1329/1913: 10).

The second argument for the necessity of education for women was that it would enable women to perform their traditional duties properly. This meant that education had the power to transform women into good mothers and wives, providing them with the necessary skills to raise their children in a “scientific way” and elevating their level of knowledge to make them more compatible with their husbands. İffet Hanım, who emphasized the importance of women’s domestic roles, wrote that learning about such topics as household management, hygiene, and ethics was essential for women to manage their house, to protect their children’s health, to raise them well, and thus to form happy families. (4 June 1914: 10).
İsmet Hakkı preferred to discuss women’s education in terms of women’s relationship with their husbands. Complaining about the lack of communication between married couples, she stated that women could not talk to their husbands, because they did not share the same interests. “The lady of the house talks about home economics, the rug she wove and the embroidery she did,” İsmet Hakkı wrote, “and if the man talks about politics, his job as a government official, the assembly of representatives, and the philosophy of Nietzsche, how does that house differ from the tower of Babel?” meaning that women and men did not speak the same language. Explaining this problem by the difference in their level of education, İsmet Hakkı envisioned a family in which women could share their husbands’ thoughts and exchange ideas with them. (24 September 1324/1908: 24-27).

Atıfet Celal was another person who drew attention to the problems women’s ignorance was causing in marriages. She thought that if men could study, learn, and generate ideas, while women remained ignorant, foolish and unreasonable, husbands and wives could neither understand each other nor have any common thoughts or feelings. She asked, “How can anyone accept such a great inequality between these two types of creatures that are inherently compelled and condemned to live together?” (24 September 1324/1908: 27-28).

The third and the final argument that was presented in favor of women’s education was that women had a right to education just as men did and that it was only through education that women could become a part of public life and achieve equality with men. Considering education a human right (hukuk-u insaniye), Atıfet Celal emphasized the fact that humanity did not only consist of men, and if women, too, were worthy of this title, their level of knowledge had to be equal to that of men. According to Atıfet Celal, as men advanced in scientific and intellectual education, they had to elevate women to their level so that the education of humankind would be complete. “Since we are human, too” she said, “I guess that this demand is very rightful.” (27).

Hamide Hanım, writing from Üsküp, described education as the first step towards women’s emancipation and argued that an educated
A woman could avoid the beatings of her father, escape the exploitation of her husband, get away from the restraints that prevented her from going outside, and to reclaim the rights that were taken away from her. (August 1909: 625-26). She stated that women could advance to higher degrees, only after they learn how to read and write and study humanity as well as the realities of the world. In an article about girls’ schooling, Şükufe Nihal declared that women, just like men, had a strong desire to increase their brainpower. “There is no demand for property and wealth any more,” she explained; “most of us find life and happiness only in education.” (September 1909: 732-33).

Likewise, Fehime Çerkes Cemal emphasized that contemporary women wanted to know about their environment, follow the intellectual movements, determine and defend the status of women in society, learn the real meaning of family, and thus be happy. (8 May 1329/1913: 3). Feriha Kamuran claimed that women in the civilized countries of the west played successful roles in social sciences, intellectual matters, and even political affairs, because of the education they received. “If we want the same thing,” she said, “we should give our women the education that the western women possess.” (17 July 1330/1914:1-2).

The second main issue of debate was the type of education women should receive. Focusing on women’s domestic roles, many people wanted the schools to teach young girls and women how to be good mothers and wives. That is why they thought that the women’s education had to be distinct from men’s.

However, there were others like Pakize Seni, who believed that women should learn a little bit of everything:

"If a young girl takes a step towards the world of marriage as an enlightened and somewhat knowledgeable person, the problems regarding forming a family seen in public life and the unhappiness that emerge because of these problems will be removed and great happiness will generate in all fields of life."

Pakize Seni wrote that the most important topics that women needed to know about were philosophy, natural history, psychology,
pedagogy, hygiene, and anatomy. Regarding reading as a necessity for everyone, she recommended that women have a library of their own, spend many hours reading books, and allocate at least one hour every day to newspapers to learn about international affairs. (3 November 1908: 1-4).

The third group that described what type of education women should receive demanded that women be as knowledgeable as men. Halide Edip argued that women, like men, were in need of learning everything and that the subjects they would learn did not need to be related to womanhood. (February 1909: 418-21). Like Halide Edip, İsmet Hakkı asserted that women’s education had to be as strong and comprehensive as that of men. Recommending that women study and learn every branch of science, she declared that women should learn the basic principles of chemistry, be cognizant of geometry, and gain an idea about the course of events on earth, even if they did not work as professionals in these fields. (25).

Another issue that was discussed by the female intellectuals of the time was the obstacles confronted in women’s education. The biggest and most persistent problem that people complained about was narrow mindedness, which caused families not to send their girls to school. Feride İzzet Selim decried the parents’ excuse for not educating their girls. “Ignorance, fanaticism, and enslavement . . . it is these three ruling hells that are crushing and killing our souls,” she wrote:

We always hear with astonishment and sadness that . . . if they [girls] are taught how to write, they will write love letters, which will cause immorality . . . People who tumble down the cliff of immorality are those who could not get their share from the light of education . . . A young girl who is educated knows that chastity and the feeling of dignity are sublime and worthy of appreciation and does not hesitate to sacrifice her life to protect these valuable treasures if necessary. (10 January 1330/1914: 4-5).

A female reader shared the same view. In her letter to Mehtap (Moonlight), she wrote:
Even though we are as talented as the non-Muslim girls, they are sent [to Europe] and not us. Our religious morality does not constitute an obstacle to this like you think. We can protect our religion and morals in European universities, too. Our covers don’t prevent us from being human and becoming a part of civilization and humanity. But you, men, are depriving us of everything in the name of Islam. (29 August 1327/1911: 91).

The most significant obstacles to women’s education besides narrow-mindedness were the inadequacy of curricula and the shortage of schools, qualified teachers and teaching equipment. These deficiencies resulted mostly from economic difficulties, although some accused the government of not paying enough attention to the issue. “The ministry of education does not take the mothers of the future seriously and does not attempt to do any reforms in this field,” wrote one columnist; “since the declaration of the constitution, we did not see any systematic changes or renovations. There is at least one girls’ school in most of our cities, but as long as their condition remains the same, it is useless to expect to benefit from them.” Even though the government did not have the means to increase the number of schools, it needed at least to reform and repair the ones that existed. (Anonymous, 15 February 1324/1908: 6-7).

According to Refia Şükran, it was useless to expect anything from the government and if people wanted women to receive a good education in decent schools, they had to take initiative and either make or collect donations to establish new institutions of learning for girls. (15 February 1324/1908: 5-6). Like Refia Şükran, Cahide Cevdet invited individuals to take more responsibility and recommended the foundation of an organization to send lecturers to different corners of the empire to educate women and bring girls without means to Istanbul for schooling. (10 May 1330/1914: 5-6).

It should be clear from these examples that after the Revolution of 1908 more and more women expressed their desire to be active members of the society. Regarding education as the first step towards achieving that goal, they wrote countless articles about the issue and pressured the government to provide them with the same opportunities
as men. Like their counterparts in other parts of the world, Ottoman women first employed the general discourse of progress and civilization and the notion of women’s roles as educated mothers, wives, and household managers, as a starting point for demands for further equality with men. (Najmabadi, 1998: 107-108). They believed, “If the backward nation could catch up with European civilized nations through the acquiring of modern sciences and education . . . the backward woman could catch up with the modern man in a similar move.” (Najmabadi, 108). In other words, educated women would help the nation join the path of modern nations. (Afary, 1996: 208).

However, while the hegemonic discourse created by their male counterparts focused on the role of education in creating “the ideal woman” and consequently the “ideal society,” women’s rights advocates also developed a counter discourse that defined education a basic right, which allowed women to exist as independent individuals. (Demirdirek, 1998: 70). The arguments provided by women in the public debate on education was noteworthy, because it forced the government, which promised its citizens freedom and equality, to extend women’s opportunities for higher education. As women assumed new roles and responsibilities in social, economic, and political life through education, they posed a bigger challenge to the traditional gender relations in Ottoman society.

**Women’s Employment**

The demands for women’s right to work (hürriyet-i mesai), like women’s right to education, appeared in public discourse in the second half of the nineteenth century, but remained limited to “feminine professions,” such as teaching, nursing, and midwifery. As political, social and economic circumstances changed in early twentieth century with the Revolution of 1908 and the wars that followed, women’s employment came to be one of the most popular topics in women’s journals as well as the subject of an intense debate.

The arguments against women’s employment (kadınların say’e istiraki) was that women did not need to work as it was man’s job to provide for the women in his family; that working outside home
would cause women to fail in performing their “main” duties, meaning raising children and taking care of their husbands; that it was against nature because it would alter the established gender roles; and finally that it was not to the benefit of women as work life would subject them to competition, hardship, and exhaustion. (Musa Kazım, August 1324/1908: 36-37; Galip Bahtiyar, 2 June 1329/1913: 4-5; Zühre, March 1909: 469; Reina Lewis, 1999:77).

The female columnists in the post-revolutionary women’s press disputed each one of these arguments and offered counter arguments in favor of women’s employment. Among these columnists was Zekiye Hanım, who complained that some fanatics found it appropriate for women to be cooped up like chickens and didn’t want them to deal with anything except their duties at home. Zekiye Hanım suggested that women were active and competent enough to work outside home without neglecting their domestic duties. (November 1324/1908: 14).

Using their views against them, Aziz Haydar, one of the most outspoken woman about this issue, criticized men for being hypocrites, because they wanted their wives to have some sort of wealth but did not want them to work. She wrote:

Whichever young man you ask, they would want the girl they would marry to have some property, at least an allowance; they even lay it down as a condition. Then, when we say women shall work, become merchants, officials, and artists, we are subjected to strong objections and protests. How [they say], can Turkish women become officials and artists? [They say] Women should know their femaleness. . . . What should be said about our men demanding that women, too, have financial means, contribute to the family budget, and spend [their] money for their family? Not all women are lucky enough to gain an inheritance. Since this is what men want, then they should not object to women’s employment. Our men who want women to make a financial contribution should not say anything about our participation in working life; quite the opposite, they should be pleased. (14 June 1330/1914: 4).

Those who thought that the main reason many people opposed women’s employment was religion, felt the need to remind everyone
that Islam did not constitute an obstacle to progress, but strongly dictated that women should work just like men, since God did not like lazy people. They also declared that it was possible to obtain a religious decree, stating that women were allowed to engage in trade. (Kadınlar Dünyası, 21 April 1329/1913: 1).

The female intellectuals and activists, who were in favor of making women an essential part of economic life, explained the different ways in which workingwomen could advance the society, the nation, family life, and womanhood. The first argument they voiced to support women’s employment was that it was a necessity. Women had to work, because they needed the money. There were thousands of women in the Ottoman Empire who did not have any means of support, since they were single, widowed, or had sent their husbands off to war. The main issue of womanhood was the issue of livelihood.

“The Manifestation of Womanhood in the Ottoman State” was an article which drew attention to the suicides committed by Muslim women in Istanbul due to poverty. The writer of the article claimed that no one would die of hunger in the past, because no matter how poor a person was, s/he would be able to find a place to sleep and a bite to eat with the help of people who were better off. In a similar way, women in the East did not feel the need to work before, as they could easily find a husband who would provide for them. “Since life was cheap, everybody was getting married young and easily,” the author argued; “however, for the last few years, the number of marriages has decreased.” As life became extraordinarily expensive, men had to postpone marriage for several years to earn enough money to be able to feed a family. But in the meantime they would get older and realize they could not face the difficulties of the marriage that they could easily handle ten years ago. Even if a man decided to marry, he would expect his wife to have some sort of income in order to secure his economic condition. Because wealthy women in the Ottoman State were rare and they set their standards really high, many men gave up on the idea of marriage, which caused the number of marriages to drop significantly. Despite the fact that young girls gave up on the idea of a romantic marriage and
started marrying whoever could provide for them, many of them could not find a husband for themselves and fell into a life of poverty. Believing that the only solution for women to get out of this life was to work, the writer of the article cited the example of French girls, who could delay getting married until they found a man they actually liked, since they had both financial security and the confidence that came with it. (Kadınlar Dünyası, 23 May 1330/1914: 8-10).

Women’s employment was not only a matter of financial but also of practical necessity, particularly for women’s health. Many women, both columnists and readers, expressed the need for female health personnel in the newspapers and periodicals of the time. One reader demanded that women be allowed to become doctors, dentists, and nurse’s attendants. “We cannot tell our complaints about gynecological problems to our spouses, let alone to the doctors,” she explained. (F.N.: 58-62).

Another woman told the story of a male doctor who was called to see a female patient whose husband had hidden her under a pile of covers, so that the doctor could not see her. The husband told the doctor who wanted to examine his wife to figure out her problem by asking questions, upon which the doctor became very angry and left the room, saying that he would not be able to do his job under those circumstances. Two months later, the doctor heard that the patient had died. Whether this story was based on a true incident or not, it was reflective of what was going on in many Muslim families. Ulviye Mevlan stated:

In these columns, we mentioned many times the misfortunes that Muslim women were subjected to due to the lack of female doctors. We witness every day how Muslim women are sacrificed to their husbands’ ignorant fanaticism and cruel selfishness, and become victims of diseases that are easy to cure. (8 March 1330/1914: 2).

What motivated these women to write this article was the growing number of female physicians among the Muslims in Russia, whom they admired and envied for attaining both scientific and spiritual achievements despite the difficulties they faced under the rule of an “oppressive” and “hostile” government. Complaining about the lack of
female physicians among Ottoman women, the writers of *Kadınlar Dünyası (Women’s World)* asked the government to start accepting girls into medical school, so that thousands of innocent and helpless women as well as their children could be saved from death and misery.

The second argument in favor of women’s employment was that it would benefit families by both increasing their income and consolidating the relationship between the husband and wife. “A union between a man and a woman means that they are committed to working together in every field,” the publishers of *Women’s World* said.

Then why should a man work and woman not? Why should a man be a part of all aspects of life while a woman idly sits at home? Considering that these two sexes decided to share a life, they should be partners in everything. And just as the man of the house is working outside, in society, to earn his livelihood by performing a job, in the same way, a woman should assist her husband by being involved in social life. . . . Certainly, it would be better if a man works on one side and a woman on the other side and then they combine their daily earnings. (14 June 1330/1914: 4).

The publishers of *Women’s World* did not think it was fair to oblige a man to work alone to feed and clothe a family of seven or eight people, or to sentence these seven or eight people to laziness, gossip and immorality because of unemployment. Comparing each family to a company, they argued that all of its members, old and young, should work to make a contribution to its budget in proportion to their strength and capacity. (4 May 1329/1913: 1). “We are in favor of becoming partners in working life with the men in our families, because the happiness of a family can be achieved through partnership in life and work,” they wrote. (Kadınlar Dünyası, 9 May 1329/1913: 1).

Atiye Şükran, who shared the same view, suggested that if a husband was working and struggling to bring bread to his home, while his life partner was sitting at home doing nothing, misery instead of happiness would prevail in that family, since the foundation of happiness was partnership in life and business. (14 May 1329/1913: 2).
The proponents of women’s employment also argued that by increasing wealth and productivity as well as alleviating immorality and misery, women’s entrance into work force would advance the society and the nation. The transformation of almost half the population from consumers to producers would pave the way for the economy to regenerate, which would allow both individuals and the society in general to lead a decent life.

In an article entitled, “It is the Binding Duty of Every Muslim, Male and Female, to Pursue their Daily Living,” the publishers of Women’s World argued that both commerce and women were essential to the survival of a nation. Just as a nation without commerce was doomed to fail, a nation whose women suffered from laziness was destined to decline. On the other hand, nations that valued commerce and women, like the ones in the West, had progressed and achieved prosperity. Complaining that neither commerce nor women had received the respect and the attention that they deserved in the

Ottoman Empire, they suggested that this problem caused the empire to fall behind the civilized world, damaging both its internal affairs and international relations. These women declared, “Commerce is, for every nation and the women and men of every nation, a binding duty, the main way of endurance.” (Ulviye Mevlan, 18 January 1330/1914: 1-2).

It was also argued that if womanhood joined work life, money would accumulate and the economy would revitalize. People who wanted to work could find jobs and thus would be able to support themselves and educate their children. With the ideas of invention that could develop among womanhood, even industry would advance. (Kadınlar Dünyası, 23 April 1329/1913: 1). Moreover, many women believed that women’s involvement in economic life would solve the social problems caused by poverty. They believed that the only reason for women to be subjected to such misery, disgrace, and prostitution was utter poverty, a result of their lack of participation in work life. (Meliha Cenan, 27 June 1329/1913: 2-3). Ottoman womanhood was in
need of freedom to work in order to eliminate these social problems and lead a happy, decent, and prosperous life. (Ulviye Mevlan, 18 January 1330/1914:1-2).

Another argument that the supporters of women’s employment made was that working was a human right and an issue of equality. “Why should a woman not be allowed to work in order to live honorably?” Naciye Hanım asked:

It is not political rights that we demand, for now, it is basic human rights like this. The most important right of all on earth is the right to live. Every creature created by God wants to live...[and] it is necessary to work in order to live... Do our men not see the millions of women in Europe and America, contributing to the national production by working side by side with their men? (10 April 1329/1913: 3).

Ulviye Mevlan wrote, “Women, too, are human and have human rights. This should be acknowledged.” Hoping that women would be soon given the freedom that was necessary for them to be able to work in all fields as men did, she asserted that if women’s rights were recognized as part of common law and it was acknowledged that they had the right to all the human rights, a balance would emerge among humanity and humanity would be uplifted. (14 June 1330/1914: 2).

Likewise, Aziz Haydar proclaimed:

I, too, am a human. I, too have personal rights. I, too, am an active member of this nation... I, too, am working; the law does not grant you any privileges, we are equal in everything... If we want to live humanly, we shall work together... Real happiness lies in working as partners. (19 July 1330/1914: 4).

In order to emphasize the equality between men and women, these women stated that people’s duties and activities did not differ according to gender, but in accordance with their character, education, and development. They also noted that the precondition for women to achieve equality with men in civil and human rights was to participate in work life. They said that if women and men could work together,
women’s rights would be acknowledged as a natural consequence. (Kadınlar Dünyası, 7 June 1329/1913: 1).

The last argument in favor of women’s employment was that it was vital to women’s emancipation. Thankful that people came to understand that women were not created to idly sit and lead a secluded life in their homes or to dress up and go on excursions, Aziz Haydar declared:

With a bitter grudge against idleness, I am saying: We are now trampling upon you. You will not be able to wear us down any more . . . Yes, we have been oppressed until now . . . And the main cause of this oppression is that it is only man who earns the bread. If we could work and earn [money], we would not be so helpless. (19 July 1330/1914: 4).

Aziz Haydar, who explained women’s helplessness and men’s domination in Ottoman society as resulting from women’s dependency on men for their livelihood, stated that even women who had money or property needed a man to manage it, because either they did not know enough about the law or nobody would listen to them. Therefore, in order to live, every woman, young and old, relied on the bread that was brought by men and had to put up with a lot of torments, often more than they could tolerate. Aziz Haydar complained that since no one had taught women the necessary skills to earn a living, those who wanted to escape from their fathers’ or husbands’ oppression, whether they were from the upper or lower class, saw the solution in working as a maid, which only added to their suffering. (25 April 1330/1914: 4).

Women’s World’s other columnists expressed the same view. Arguing that women became victims of men’s pleasures, because their right to work had not been recognized, they emphasized that woman needed to work both to earn their livelihood and to gain their personal freedom. (Ulviye Mevlan, 14 June 1330/1914: 2). They could escape from the misery of marrying whoever came along only by earning their own money. If a woman did not want to lose her self-esteem, she had to earn her own bread with her own effort. (Kadınlar Dünyası, 30 May 1330/1914: 2).
The proponents of women’s employment not only voiced a series of arguments to demand and justify women’s participation in working life, but also made several suggestions to increase the number of working women in Ottoman society. While some, like Fatma Aliye, encouraged wealthy people to open textile factories and hire female workers, others, like Rabia Hanım, called people to contribute financially or physically, depending on their means, to the establishment of trade companies that would provide an opportunity for girls and women in need to sell their products. (Fatma Aliye, September 1909: 738-42; Rabia, 4 November 1324/1908: 12).

There were also those who expected women to take initiative, not wanting to leave this issue to men. For instance, Nimet Cemil suggested that rich women, for free, and women in need, for a small fee, could offer sewing lessons to their fellow women to teach them the necessary skills to open tailor shops in the long run. Nimet Cemil believed that these enterprises, established by Muslim women, should sell everything that a woman would need and had to be advertised in newspapers. Criticizing the view that women should not participate in economic life before they were prepared to do so, she argued, “One learns how to swim only after s/he gets in the sea. . . . [and] those who don’t show the courage to get in the sea can never learn how to swim.” (14 June 1330/1914: 6).

Even though it did not have as many supporters as women’s education in public, women’s employment was one of the main issues of debate in the constitutional period. While conservative circles argued that women’s employment would lead to the downfall of the gendered order and of Islamic community, its advocates -mostly female intellectuals- developed an alternative discourse, which claimed that women’s integration into economic life could cure the ills of society, such as poverty, immorality, laziness, and inefficiency. Apart from being a matter of financial, social, and moral necessity, employment was regarded by women as a way to escape men’s oppression and cruelty as it granted them the freedom to take control of their own lives. Just as they did with the debate on education, some
Ottoman women used the debate on employment to develop a language of equality of rights and to put pressure on the government to take action in this matter. The increasing numbers of women participating in work life in the post-revolutionary period was a result of not only the immediate needs of the empire but also this pressure.

**Women’s Political Rights**

Compared to women’s education and employment, women’s political rights (*hukuk-u siyasiye*) was a trivial issue in the Ottoman Empire that only a small number of people wrote and talked about. The first “champions” of women’s political rights, at least in principle, were the Unionists, who not only accepted female members, but also put them on an equal footing with men. (Akşin, 2007: 46-47). As the first political organization that opened its doors to women, the CUP included the following statements in its program: “Ottomans, both women and men, can become members of the organization”; and “female members have the same rights and responsibilities as male members.” (Tunaya, 1984: 44-45). Accordingly, the first Ottoman women to be actively involved in politics were members of the CUP.6

However, the principle of equality among the male and female members did not necessarily translate into practice, as the roles and responsibilities of the latter remained limited to the women’s section of the party. Apart from not being able to hold an influential position within the party, women were excluded from the electoral process altogether, since the constitutional regime, established and to a great extent controlled by the CUP, failed to grant them political rights. Despite their shortcomings, the Unionists’ inclusion of women in their ranks as well as in their program was noteworthy, because through these actions, they both acknowledged women’s right to engage in politics and helped women to be more active in the political arena.

The discussion on women’s political rights was different from the debates on women’s right to education and employment in many ways. First of all, not many people took an interest in the topic, since they did not consider it relevant to the society and the time in which
they lived. Men were just getting used to having a say in how the government was run and women were still fighting for their basic rights. There were also those who believed that women had no place in politics. Because they did not think that women’s political rights was an issue, most intellectuals had nothing to say about it.

Second, no one, even those who were in favor of granting women the right to vote (hakk-ı intihab) and to be elected to public office, actually demanded these rights, claiming that it was too early for Ottoman women to acquire them, for one reason or another. Third, the issue of women’s political rights was discussed not within the context of the Ottoman Empire, but mostly through what was happening in Europe. While male intellectuals preferred translating the works of European thinkers rather than explaining their own views on the issue, female intellectuals often used examples from the suffrage movements in the West to justify their other demands and to stir up a public debate about women’s role in politics.

Due to the reasons mentioned above, the discussion on women’s political rights in the post-revolutionary Ottoman society revolved around a couple of themes; the reasons for which women should be given political rights and the methods women did or could employ to acquire these rights. The first argument used to justify women’s involvement in politics, which meant anything from suffrage rights to serving on legislative and administrative councils, was that they were equally as well qualified as men. While a female reader wrote, “It should be acknowledged that women are not less capable than men in industry, trade, or even in the management of the affairs of people” (Kadınlar Dünyası, 11 May 1329/1913: 1). Fatma Nesibe quoted Kant, Rousseau, and Mill in her “White Conferences” to establish that women and men had the same abilities and responsibilities, and therefore deserved equal rights:

Kant and Rousseau say that women can feel and think as men do. For this reason, it is necessary for women, like men, to have political rights. ... Stuart Mill says that women endure all kinds of burdens that are laid down as a condition to benefit from all kinds of rights. They fulfill all the
duties demanded by law and still are deprived of their rights. Why is that? Women, like men, are obligated to pay taxes. They participate in the burdens of society just as men do. They are the head of a family or they have a craft. They are engaged in a trade. Also, they are the mothers and governesses of our future. Most women are much smarter than men who have political rights. (March 1912: 2-7).

Mükerrem Belkıs considered women’s involvement in politics a matter of equality as well, but the way she approached the issue was different. According to her, women and men were equal but not the same, and that was exactly why women had to be represented in political life. (16 November 1329/1913: 2-4). Men could not substitute for women, because their thoughts, feelings, and souls were different. Mükerrem Belkıs believed that in order for a nation to be successful, all the groups that constituted that nation had to have the right to vote. Since rulers and legislators in history had always been men, and women had been consistently denied this right, all states that had come into existence had declined. “Think about it! What is the reason that none of the nations could last?” Mükerrem Belkıs asked.

The whole world should be sure that the only reason is the [low] status that is given to women. The Swedish government has long granted women the right to vote. There, women and men are equal. We shall pay attention to how different and great the life of this nation is. It could be easily said that the Swedish are the most decent and reliable nation in the world. (2-4).

In addition to the principle of equality, the defenders of women’s political rights employed the argument that women’s participation in politics would benefit both the political system and the society in general. It would not only force male politicians to be more civil, but also advance political life. An article entitled “Women and the Right to Vote” mentioned that the election of the first female deputy to the Norwegian parliament led to a sharp decrease in the exchange of ugly words between male deputies as well as in the number of regrettable events that used to take place among them. (Ulviye Mevlan, 1 March 1330/1914: 2).
Similarly, Mükerrem Belkis, who declared Sweden to be the “most decent and reliable nation in the world” because it gave women the right to vote, suggested:

Compare the morality of the nations in which women are given all the rights and granted the principle of equality and that of the nations in which women’s rights are usurped like our country. It is futile to look for the cause of the silence of our morality. . . . The cause of the silence of our morality is denying women the social rank that is granted by nature. It is clearly seen that it is the hands of women that will improve the morality of a nation. And this requires equality. We should understand that only men cannot elevate a nation. They can elevate it only by working together with women, who are equal to them. (16 November 1329/1913: 3).

In her letter to Women’s World, a female student named Muhlise proudly told the readers of the journal that even high-ranking officials in Europe had begun to acknowledge women’s positive influence on society and public morality. (10 April 1329/1913: 7). She stated that the French Minister of Internal Affairs had sent an official letter to all the governors and recommended that they accept large numbers of women into the executive assembly of public charity institutions, because it was essential for the nation to duly benefit from the application of new social laws as well as for the laws to be applied properly. Muhlise asserted, “The reason for this is, of course, the fact that women perform their duties much better than men in these fields. . . . Officials in Europe have recognized it and started doing what is needed.” (7).

Its defenders believed that, in addition to improving political life, elevating morality, and helping to solve problems of the society, women’s involvement in politics would ultimately benefit men, as well. Apart from explaining why women should be granted political rights, those who wrote about the issue reported on what women were doing to gain these rights in different parts of the world, both to inspire women in the Ottoman Empire and to encourage a public debate on women’s participation in politics. In an article entitled “How Do Women Work?” Meliha Zekeriya asserted:
Especially in a country where womanhood is not valued at all, there is a great need for understanding what women can actually do. This way, our women will comprehend their value and importance even better and find the courage in themselves to embark on a struggle. Particularly the suffragette movement in England needs to be followed carefully because of its extraordinary nature. That is the reason we want to inform our amazing sisters of the women’s movements in Europe. (9 April 1329/1913: 2-3).

Most of the discussion revolved around the methods British and French women employed to acquire the right to vote. A series of articles in Women’s World emphasized that the suffragette movements in Britain and France first tried to achieve their goals by peaceful and silent means, such as distributing pamphlets, publishing newspapers, giving lectures, submitting petitions, and organizing rallies. However, as time passed and their demands were not realized, the suffragists started losing their patience and resorted to loud and violent actions, which included insulting the ministers who opposed their right to vote, planting bombs in their houses, blowing up train stations and bridges, and disrupting social order by throwing themselves at the feet of horses during horse races. “They started using more violence in proportion to the time they waited,” the editors of Women’s World wrote.

They went this far, but could not achieve their demands. Because of the strong measures taken against them by the government, they have been recently silent. But we are sure that it is the silence before the storm and their fight will continue.” (Ulviye Mevlan, 1 March 1330: 2).

Ottoman female intellectuals were quite hopeful about the outcome of women’s movements in Europe. Fatma Nesibe said that European women were taking solid and victorious steps, which would no doubt lead them to gain the same political rights as men had. (March 1912: 6). Naciye Hanım shared the same view:

Did our men not hear about the demonstrations that have recently started in England and left all Europe in awe? Do they not know that Europe will soon grant women political rights? This way... the voices of women will
be heard in the assembly of representatives; women will be present in courts and municipalities; they will, too, become governors and head officials of districts. As a result of this everything will change...there will be women in every profession. (10 April 1329/1913: 3).

Although all the people who chose to be a part of the discussion about women’s political rights approached the suffragette movements favorably and expressed their support for European women in one way or another, they did not think that Ottoman women were ready to acquire these rights, because they had not yet been fully integrated into social and economic life, which they considered a precondition for gaining the right to vote. The editor of *Women's World* declared,

Women’s right to suffrage or whether women will be given suffrage rights is still not mentioned in our country. The controversy has not even started yet. There is no action among us women...either. Our silence is not because we don’t want suffrage rights, but because we believe that its time has not come yet. Women in those countries that demand women’s suffrage are working in the mines, factories, big trade stores, small shops, and as vendors on streets. Since the laws made by the legislative assembly apply to all the people who constitute the society, the goal of national sovereignty is the administration of a nation by their own laws and women work as much as men, they are right in their demand. Our womanhood, unfortunately, has not yet been able to partake in social life. It has not yet been able to participate in work life. Therefore, we cannot yet mention obtaining this right. In fact, this right is sacred and dignified. It is the only sign of maturity and development. . . . And the way to deserve it is to participate in work life as the women of other countries do. Considering the liberal awakening that we have witnessed among our women in recent years, we believe that really soon, women will become social individuals in our country, too. And only after that, we will think about demanding suffrage rights. (1 March 1330/1914).

The same view was conveyed by other people, both men and women, in different occasions. While Fatma Nesibe told her audience during one of her lectures that Ottoman women were not as active as their counterparts in the western world to demand political rights, Naciye Hanım wrote in her letter to *Women's World*:
Because we know about the theory of evolution, we do not go as far [as to demand suffrage rights]. But, do we not even have the right to demand our human rights? Why would men harass us on the streets? Why would a woman not be allowed to work in order to lead a decent life? What we want is not political rights for now, but human rights such as these. (Naciye, 10 April 1329/1913.3).

Even the Ottoman Society for the Defense of Women’s Rights (Osmanlı Müdafa-i Hukuk-u Nisvan Cemiyeti), which was the most progressive women’s organization of the time, did not include the issue of women’s suffrage in its program until 1921. (Çakır, 1996: 311). Nevertheless, this did not prevent Ottoman women from dreaming about the day on which they would be granted full equality with men. In an article dated May 1, 1913, Berika Suad expressed her hope that on the 1st of May in 1920, women, having gained all of their rights, including the right to vote, would organize festivities at the office of Women’s World to celebrate their victory. Proving themselves to be worthy of these rights, they would make speeches to thank everyone who joined the struggle for women’s rights, and shout “Long Live the Defense of Women’s Rights!” (20 July 1329/1913: 6-7).

Even though Ottoman women, unlike their counterparts in Iran, did not actually demand the right to vote, their writings and actions made it clear that they considered women’s participation in political life both necessary and inevitable. The facts that they brought up the issue, kept it on the public agenda, and discussed the suffrage movement in Europe in a favorable way when most people chose to ignore it revealed not only their genuine interest in taking part in the administration of the empire, but also their deliberate attempt to lay the groundwork required to accomplish this goal. The efforts of female activists of the constitutional period to stir up a debate on women’s political rights was all the more important since most men either remained silent about the issue or failed to express their opinions directly. Voicing various arguments to justify women’s involvement in politics and enlightening their sisters about the tactics used by Western women for the same purpose, Ottoman women played an influential
role in developing and shaping the discourse on women’s political rights, which was one of the major requirements for achieving gender equality.

**Conclusion**

As these examples demonstrate, taking full advantage of the atmosphere of freedom of the post-revolutionary period, educated and urban women from upper middle and middle classes created “a parallel discursive arena” through women’s press to demand and affect fundamental changes in gender relations. They “constructed access routes to public political life despite their exclusion from the official public sphere” and constituted an alternative public. (Fraser: 61-67). Becoming active participants in the public debate on the “woman question” and altering its parameters by developing a discourse of equality, Ottoman women challenged the dominant public discourse that accorded them a greater, but still inferior, role in society. In order to change the inequitable gender relations that governed their lives, they not only developed solid arguments to gain educational, employment, and political rights, but also dared to tackle traditional practices like marriage, veiling, and seclusion, the discussions of which had been denounced as morally corrupt or irreligious. Through their resistance against practices and institutions that had been traditionally shaped by the state, male intellectuals, and religious forces, the female activists of the post-revolutionary era challenged the patriarchal order in significant ways and took major steps towards creating a more equal, diverse, and inclusive public sphere.
References

Primary Sources


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Secondary Sources


Endnotes

1 For information on the women’s journals of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Serpil Atamaz-Hazar, “Reconstructing the History of the Constitutional Era in Ottoman Turkey through Women’s Periodicals,” Aspasia: The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, Southeastern European Women’s and Gender History 5 (June, 2011): 92-111.


4 The number of women’s journals in the post-revolutionary period numbered around twenty whereas women’s organizations numbered around fifty. For a discussion on how the 1908 Revolution constituted a turning point in terms of women’s rights and gender relations in Ottoman Turkey, see Şefika Kurnaz (1996), II.Meşrutiyet Döneminde Türk Kadını, Ankara: M.E.B. Yayınları, and Serpil Atamaz-Hazar (2010), “The Hands that Rock the Cradle will Rise: Woman, Gender, and Revolution in Ottoman Turkey, 1908-1918,” Ph.D. diss., University of Arizona.

5 Most of the publications in the Ottoman Empire used the Rumi calendar at the time. The Rumi calendar is based on the Gregorian calendar, but starts with the year 622. In this article, the Rumi dates are used along with Gregorian dates.

6 Selma Rıza, Seniye Hanım, Zilşad Hanım and Emine Semiye.