

The Girls' Institutes and Women's Education in Turkey, 1927-1940

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Abstract: The Girls' Institutes, a single-sex educational school system established in 1927, played an important role in the modernization program in the early period of Turkish Republic. With a well-designed curriculum intensified to train ideal housewives and mothers who adopted a modern and westernized lifestyle, the Girls' Institutes although to some extent contributed to women's education, still became an integral part of Turkish state feminism with the gendered nationalism and reinforced inequality and disequilibrium in educational opportunities.

Keywords: education, The Girls' Institutes, Turkey

Introduction

After the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the new regime initiated various reforms in social, cultural, economic, and legal areas, with the goal of establishing a national, modern, and secular society. Education as one of the most important social institutions also became a major domain of modernization. Turkish feminists in the 1980s started to criticize the modernization program of Kemalist elites through the adoption of "state feminism" discourse. They believe that education provided to women aimed at preparing them to become good homemakers and mothers, who would raise the future generations according to the ideals of the state^[1]. In addition, the Kemalist elites designed a special line of educational institutions to ensure that this ideal type of woman was consistent with the state's modern image. The Girls' Institutes was an important part of these educational institutions, which was a single-sex educational school system established in 1927.

Literature on Turkish state feminism is plentiful in general. Scholars examined changes in social practice, the eugenic policies, the spatial division between public and private as well as educational institutions to analyze the state-determined characteristics of an ideal woman.^{[2][3][4]} Existing literature on Kemalist reforms in education system mainly criticized its nature as "an ideological tool and an instrument of control" of the whole population^[5], while rare attention was paid to women's education. Some scholars have studied the Girls' Institutes to analyze the educational experience of middle-class schoolgirls^[6], while women from rural areas or lower-class who had little access to education again became invisible.

By examining the development, objectives, and curriculum of Girls' Institutes, comparing two Institutes located in different cities of Turkey, this article will argue that firstly, the education system was developed according to the gendered nationalism ideology, through which women's roles were confined to "nurturing mothers with a diploma" and "ambassadors of the state ideology". Secondly, the educational policies indicated the social class bias and elite-dominated essence of the modernization program.

1. Development and objectives of Girls' Institutes

The establishment of Girls' Institutes as part of the public educational system was inspired by a Belgian thinker, Dr. Omar Buyse, one of the educational specialists invited by Turkish Republic to help set up a modern educational system.^[7] The first Girls' Institute was founded in 1928 in Ankara, the capital of Turkey, followed by other large cities such as Istanbul, Izmir and Bursa. Gradually in every city one Institute was established and the number increased to 26 in 1937 and to 43 in 1947, with a total of 27,389 students (Ministry of National Education, 1947). In the initial years of the republic, the Girls' Institutes educated more girls than all mixed schools. The Girls' Institutes were single-sex educational schools at the high school level. Although over time the school structure had changed to emphasize vocational education in line with industrialization since the 1950s, and eventually changed to Girls' Vocational High Schools in 1974, during the initial years of establishment, the Girls' Institutes mainly focused on raising good housewives and mothers as well as good citizens who were going to represent the state in their homes.

The objectives of the establishment of the Girls' Institutes were threefold. Firstly, it helped to bring order into family life. By teaching efficient and rational ways to take care of children and organize space within a house, the Girls' Institutes contributed to rationalizing women's function in housekeeping and childcare. Secondly, through education, the first generation of young women in the Republic not only internalized the new ideologies and values of the state, but also helped to spread it to their family and neighbors, thus playing a significant role in the creation of a distinct Turkish national identity. Lastly, the gender roles of these girl students, which were compatible with modernization and westernization project could also act as "visible ambassadors to challenge the backward image of Muslim women in the world as well as in Turkey"^[8].

2. The curriculum: State definitions of gender roles

The state definitions of modern gender roles were well represented through the curriculum of Girls' Institutes. Taking the 1932–33 curriculum of Selçuk Girls' Institute as example, besides basic classes such as mathematics, physics, history, geography and social sciences, everything of domestic duties, from food preparation, home management, interior decoration, nutrition, childcare to fashion design and embroidery constituted a strict and well-defined curriculum.

In courses such as Fashion design and Hat making, students were taught to make Western-style hats. In other classes, the ways of managing dinner sets and serving food at a western-style table were also presented to these girls from urbanized middle-class background, while many rural families at that time kept on using wooden spoons and eating on the floor. These students were also taught how to make artificial flowers and how to welcome guests according to the etiquette of the West.^[8] Through these subjects, graduates became the agents of modernization and westernization. In the classes of Childcare and Hygiene, students were equipped with medical knowledge to bring up the future generation scientifically. Child development, pastry baking and nutrition, and family economics were also intensified to "train future housewives and mothers", again demonstrated the gendered nationalism characteristics of women's empowerment in the Kemalist modernization program.

Through the curriculum, the author argues that firstly, education provided to women was not necessarily to prepare them to join the labor market, instead, an ideal woman was still restricted to "nurturing mother and skillful housewife". Secondly, through a modernized form of education with western values and contents, the state aimed at the exclusion of the traditional in the name of the modern. However, neither traditional gender roles nor the patriarchal core was questioned.

3. İzmir and Elazığ Girls' Institutes: Disequilibrium in Education

The Girls' Institutes also exemplified the unbalanced nature of modernization program. The western civilization represented by a middle-class family was unfit for the lower-class girls, not mention those who lived in Anatolian inner lands with no access to an educational institute. Two Girl's Institutes would be mentioned to demonstrate this opinion, one in İzmir, a city located in the west coast of Turkey and one in Elazığ, eastern Anatolia. The former one had both day classes for mostly middle-class girls and the evening schools for those "who were already married, or either too old or too poor for schooling".^[6] Full-time students were taught both the general courses and vocational skills, and by attending the teacher school or furthering their studies elsewhere after graduation, they had the chance to become teachers or state officials.

While evening school students were mainly taught to “avoid practicing what they would call sloppiness” in the house.

In comparison, the Elazığ institute brought together the daughters of state officials and Kurdish village girls with no knowledge of Turkish. While the daughters of officials were taught how to treat maids, the curriculum of Kurdish girls was intensified by modern Turkish. It is fair to argue that the evening students of lower-class origins and the Kurdish students who did not yet know Turkish were not able to fully practice what they had learned in the Institutes. Thus, the geographical differences and the divisions between day and evening schools reinforced inequality and disequilibrium in educational opportunities. Students from various classes and ethnicities, although succeeded in obtaining education, still faced incapability in averting the hierarchy formations.

4. Conclusion

As a single-sex educational school system aimed at bringing up “republican girls”, The Girls’ Institutes educated more girls than all mixed schools in the early years of establishment. The well-designed curriculum demonstrated the State’s definition of women’s gender roles, namely “nurturing mothers and skillful housewives” in domestic and “ambassador of modernization and westernization” in public. However, the State’s intervention in private sphere did not necessarily change women’s secondary roles in the families. In addition, while the urban elite women in Turkey were fully encouraged to take part in higher education and become successful professionals, women from undeveloped rural areas were hindered by economic conditions, conservative values as well as the very limit educational opportunities provided by the State.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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