



# Women's Education and Social Transformation in the Ottoman Press: The Example of the Second Constitutional Era

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## Abstract

This study explores the discourse on women's education and social transformation in the Ottoman press during the Second Constitutional Period, focusing on how women's roles were conceptualized and debated in the context of national modernization efforts. Utilizing qualitative content analysis of periodicals from 1908 to 1918, the research examines the narratives presented in women's magazines and broader journalistic outputs that addressed the themes of education, social participation, and gender norms. The findings highlight the press's dual role as both a reflector and a shaper of public opinion and policy concerning women's roles in society. Notably, the period saw an increased advocacy for women's rights, education, and participation in the public sphere, reflecting a significant shift towards feminist ideologies within the Ottoman intellectual community. The study concludes that the Second Constitutional Period was crucial in redefining women's societal roles, with the press playing a key role in promoting educational reforms and advocating for gender equality. This period set the stage for future advancements in women's rights in Turkey, making it a foundational era for the subsequent feminist movements in the Turkish Republic.

**Keywords:** Ottoman Empire, Second Constitutional Period, women's education, social transformation, feminist movements, Ottoman press

## 1.Introduction

In the labyrinth of social reform and political upheaval characteristic of the Ottoman Empire's Second Constitutional Era, the issue of women's education emerged as both a catalyst and a reflection of broader societal transformation. This period, marked by the re-establishment of the

constitutional monarchy in 1908, opened a vigorous public discourse on gender roles, modernity, and the nation's future. The Ottoman press, a burgeoning force for societal influence, played a pivotal role in this discourse, portraying and often shaping the evolving dialogues around women's rights and educational reform. This study explores how women's education was represented in the Ottoman press during the Second Constitutional Era and how these representations were intertwined with the era's ambitious modernization and social reform agendas<sup>1</sup>.

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the depiction of women's education in the Ottoman press during the Second Constitutional Era and to understand how these portrayals contributed to or reflected the social transformations of the time. By examining various newspapers and periodicals, this paper seeks to uncover the narratives that shaped public opinion and policy regarding women's roles in Ottoman society.

This study is significant as it sheds light on the pivotal role of media in shaping social perceptions and policies during critical periods of societal change. Understanding the press's portrayal of women's education during the Second Constitutional Era provides valuable insights into the complex interplay between media, education, and social reform movements<sup>2</sup>. The findings have implications not only for historical analysis but also for contemporary discussions on media's role in gender and educational reforms.

This research is delimited by the scope of newspapers and magazines available from the period, which are primarily in Ottoman Turkish. The translation and interpretation challenges inherent in dealing with historical texts may affect the comprehension and analysis of these sources. Moreover, the focus on publicly available media excludes potentially influential private or lesser-known writings that could offer additional insights into the period's socio-educational dynamics<sup>3</sup>.

The theoretical underpinnings of this study draw from media theory and social transformation theory, exploring how print media has historically influenced public perceptions and acted as a tool for societal education. This framework assists in analyzing the extent to which the Ottoman

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<sup>1</sup> Kurnaz, Ş. (1996). II. Meşrutiyet Döneminde Türk Kadını. İstanbul: MEB Yayınları. Şefika Kurnaz, Cumhuriyet Öncesinde Türk Kadını..., pp. 139-191

<sup>2</sup> Yılmaz, A. (2010). Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e: Kadın Kimliğinin Biçimlendirilmesi. *Çağdaş Türkiye Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 2010, pp. 198-200

<sup>3</sup> Türeyen, N. (t.y.). II. Meşrutiyet Dönemi Basınında Kadın Dergileri. Kastamonu Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Yayınlanmamış Yüksek Lisans Tezi, pp.24-25.

press influenced emerging notions about gender roles, education, and modernization during the Second Constitutional Era.

## **2. Research Methodology and Analysis**

This study investigates the discussions surrounding women's education within the Ottoman press during the Second Constitutional Era, utilizing a qualitative research approach. Qualitative methodology is particularly suited for an in-depth understanding of social and cultural phenomena. This research adopts a historical analysis and document review model, systematically collecting, classifying, and analyzing press materials from the era. Primary sources, including newspapers, magazines, official reports, and archival documents, form the backbone of this investigation. The historical analysis aims to elucidate the narratives of women's education during this period and their societal impacts.

The scope of this research encompasses the press publications of the Ottoman Empire during the Second Constitutional Era, a time rich in discussions about women's education and gender roles. These debates were prominently featured across the era's press outlets, which played a crucial role in elevating awareness of women's education across different societal segments. The sample consists of key newspapers and magazines focused on women's education during this period. Women's magazines, in particular, are evaluated as vital resources offering broad perspectives on women's educational rights, social roles, and the processes of modernization. Articles, reader letters, and editorials within these magazines comprehensively address various viewpoints and debates concerning women's education.

The data collection process involved an extensive review of the period's press publications. A broad literature review was conducted, including sources in Ottoman Turkish. The research utilized diverse sources such as newspapers, magazines, official reports, archival documents, and literary works from the era. Specifically, women's magazines and the articles published therein served as primary sources for discussions on women's education. These magazines featured articles on women's education written by female writers and activists of the time, as well as reader letters, editorials, and other relevant materials, which were examined in detail.

The collected data were analyzed using the content analysis method, which facilitates the systematic categorization and coding of data. This analysis method was employed to identify key themes such as women's education, gender roles, modernization, and traditionalism. During the analysis process, data gathered around these themes were evaluated within the socio-cultural and political context of the era. The presentation of data meticulously explored the various perspectives on women's education, their reflections in the press, and their impact on societal perceptions. The discussions found in the period's newspapers and magazines highlighted general trends and transformations regarding women's educational rights and social roles. The interpretation of these data considered the period's social structure and modernization processes to analyze how narratives on women's education were shaped and how they influenced societal perceptions. This analysis demonstrates how the debates on women's education in the press reflected and shaped the efforts to redefine women's social roles within the Ottoman Empire's modernization trajectory.

### **3. Findings and Discussion**

#### **3.1. The Second Constitutional Era: Women's Magazines, Authors, and Agendas**

Following the proclamation of the Second Constitutional Era, the necessity for women's societal participation and the women's movement in the Ottoman Empire became a frequent subject of discussion in various newspapers and magazines. These publications, often inspired by the efforts of Western women to adapt to modern life, served as a source of inspiration for Ottoman women and addressed the women's issue from various angles such as education, social participation, and encountered injustices<sup>4</sup>.

Post-proclamation, women's magazines can be categorized generally into two main groups based on their editorial policies and worldviews: Western-oriented and Turkist. The Western-oriented women's magazines, influenced by Western ideas of modernization and equality, included publications like "Mefharet," "Demet," "Mehasin," "Kadınlar Dünyası," "Hanımlar Âlemi," "Osmanlı Kadınlar Alemi," "Kadın," "Genç Kadın," and "Hanımlara Özel Gazete." These

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<sup>4</sup> Şefika Kurnaz, *Cumhuriyet Öncesinde Türk Kadını...*, pp. 139-191

magazines addressed the challenges faced by women in the modernization process and proposed solutions. On the other hand, Turkist women's magazines emphasized national values and the unique aspects of Turkish culture, represented by "Kadınlık Hayatı," "Kadınlık," "Kadın Duygusu," "Seyyale," "Türk Kadını," "Siyanet," "Bilgi Yurdu Işığ," "Bilgi Yurdu," and "Bilgi Mecmuası." This group supported women's societal participation while prioritizing the preservation of national identity and cultural values<sup>5</sup>.

Both groups contributed to the development of the Ottoman women's social position, documenting the challenges and successes faced during this process. Through these publications, women's issues began to be discussed by a broader audience, laying the groundwork for social change.

After the declaration of the Second Constitutional Era, the role of women in Ottoman society and their participation in social life became significant topics of discussion. The necessity of women's education and their active role in social progress were extensively discussed by intellectuals and writers from various currents of the era. Women-related issues were debated from different perspectives among Islamist, Westernist, and Turkist currents.

Islamists viewed women's movements as imitations of the West, while Westernists advocated for the revision of women's traditional roles in modern society. Turkists emphasized that gender equality was essential for societal change and economic progress, often citing pre-Islamic Turkish society where gender equality was prevalent and arguing that legal and social reforms were necessary to restore this equality.

Westernist views also focused on the need for women to have more rights and the removal of oppressive Islamic rules on women. Figures like Selahattin Asım argued that religious oppressions relegated women to a second-class status, while Abdullah Cevdet maintained a more conservative approach, emphasizing the role of women within the family.

The Islamist current advocated for a return to Islamic rules in society, arguing that women's education should align more with religious and moral values and focus on raising devout generations rather than active societal participation.

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<sup>5</sup> Arslaner, Özkiraz, *ibid*, pp..6

### **3.2. Women Writers of the Second Constitutional Era**

The Second Constitutional Era was a significant period for the Ottoman Empire, characterized by the emergence of women's movements and prominent female writers. Between 1908 and 1918, Ottoman women began assuming more active roles in education and politics, marking this era as a turning point in the development of women's rights<sup>6</sup>.

During this time, educated and socially active women found opportunities to express themselves through women's magazines, discussing gender roles and women's rights. These magazines, managed by women writers, not only tackled women's issues but also covered literature, health, and fashion, reflecting the diverse interests and intellectual engagements of Ottoman women<sup>7</sup>.

Women also fought for their educational rights. The period saw an increase in women accessing university education and the establishment of more educational institutions for girls. Women believed that education would strengthen their position in society and enhance their economic independence.

In the political arena, women campaigned for suffrage rights. However, these rights were only granted after the establishment of the Republic in 1934, allowing women to vote and be elected. The women's movements during the Second Constitutional Era played crucial roles in improving the social, educational, and political standings of Ottoman women. These efforts were further advanced with the establishment of the Turkish Republic, symbolizing the initial steps in the struggle for gender equality and playing a critical role in the modernization process of Turkish women.

Emine Seher Ali was an influential writer active during the late Ottoman Empire and early years of the Turkish Republic. Known for highlighting societal issues in her works, particularly focusing on strengthening the position of women in society, her articles on family structure and ignorance

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<sup>6</sup> Şefika Kurnaz, *Cumhuriyet Öncesinde Türk Kadını...*, pp. 139-191

<sup>7</sup> Emel Aşa, *1869-1923 Yılları Arasında Yayımlanan Türk Kadın ve Aile Dergileri*, Sosyo Kültürel Değişme Sürecinde Türk Ailesi, C. 3, Ankara, 1992, pp.968-978

shed light on significant societal problems of her time and played a critical role in redefining gender roles<sup>8</sup>.

Emine Seher Ali made notable observations, such as the lack of domestic products in local bookstores, with all stationery imported from Europe, suggesting a disregard for domestic products. She emphasized the importance of increasing interest in domestic products for the national economy<sup>9</sup>.

Furthermore, Emine linked domestic conflicts to ignorance, pointing out that a family structure rife with constant disputes was unacceptable. She highlighted that parents' ignorance and its negative impact on children were among the major obstacles to a healthy family structure, thereby affecting the broader society. She stressed the need to address these negative influences on streets, which she believed set the stage for moral decay and prevented the youth from contributing positively to their families and society.

The writings of Emine Seher Ali continue to offer valuable insights into the gender roles and societal changes of her time, and her advocacy for education and economic independence for women marks her as a pivotal figure in the history of women's rights in Turkey. Her legacy offers a robust framework for understanding the transformative roles women played during the Second Constitutional Era and their continuing impact on modern debates regarding gender equality and societal progress.

### **3.3. Women's Topics in Second Constitutional Period Magazines**

During the Second Constitutional Period, the Committee of Union and Progress placed significant emphasis on the integration of women into societal life, reflecting a transformative phase in Ottoman intellectual circles. This era, marked by the influence of Young Turks, regarded women's issues as integral to the nation's economic and cultural development. Consequently, discussions on

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<sup>8</sup> Emine Seher Ali, *İstihlâka Doğru*, Kadınlar Dünyâsı, S. 8, (11 Nisân 1329), pp. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Emine Seher Ali, "Çocuklarımız", S. 29, 2 Mayıs 1329, pp.1.

women's societal participation became pivotal, suggesting that women's involvement was a marker of the country's overall progress<sup>10</sup>.

Ottoman women were often viewed as less educated compared to their European counterparts. This perception led to criticisms of the intellectual capabilities of Turkish women, encapsulated in the rhetorical question: "How sound can the decisions of an uneducated, uninformed mind be?" Science and knowledge were seen as ornaments of the human mind, essentials that were particularly lacking among women in the Ottoman Empire. Many intellectuals of the time argued that emancipation from superstition and ignorance through education was crucial for women<sup>11</sup>.

Women's magazines during this period frequently emphasized that the advancement and civilization of a nation were achievable only by raising the educational standards and improving the societal roles of women. The content was geared towards enlightening women, consolidating them around common values, and fostering their roles as knowledgeable and cultured members of society. The importance of women's existence was underscored with the notion that "women are the sources of morals and upbringing due to their influence on the human soul."

Aziz Haydar's article, "The Education of Our Daughters," laid bare the state of female education in society. He criticized the practice of withdrawing girls from school at age 12, attributing the responsibility to both mothers and, more significantly, fathers—the latter having benefited from more educational opportunities and hence possessing a clearer understanding. However, the common practice of limiting girls' education to basic literacy and religious studies, then confining them to the home, was seen as a primary source of societal discord. Haydar argued that subjects like sewing, home management, and hygiene should be comprehended at a more mature age<sup>12</sup>.

The political, economic, and ideological instabilities within the state and society determined the adequacy of measures implemented during this period, which was fraught with ideological turmoil, economic downturns, and protracted wars. The effort to establish new educational institutions, especially for women, was a frequent subject of debate in the period's press<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Nilüfer Mazlum, "Dimanın Vazife-yi Fizyolojisi", *Kadınlar Dünyası*, S.125, (5 Kanun-i Sani, 1329), pp.3

<sup>11</sup> M.Raik, "Kadınlar Terbiye ve Ahlak Üzerine Olan Tesirleri Münasebetiyle Ruhu Beşerin Menbaalarıdır", *Kadınlar Âlemi*, S.5, (18 Haziran 1330), pp.10.

<sup>12</sup> Aziz Haydar, "Bizde Kız Evlâtlarının Tahsîli", *Kadınlar Dünyâsı*, S. 13, (16 Nisân 1329), pp. 3

<sup>13</sup> Azîze Haydar, "Yine Mekteplerimiz", *Kadınlar Dünyâsı*, S. 22, (25 Nisân 1329), pp. 1



According to Necmeddin Sadık, schools should teach girls the skills necessary to be good mothers and wives, but the current curricula were not fit for this purpose. Sadık advocated for an educational focus on home management and manners for girls, emphasizing that, "What we neglect most now are our daughters. In the age of ignorance, we had closed the doors of schools to our daughters, yet they could still manage their homes satisfactorily. Now we have opened schools, but we have done so without knowing what to teach them"<sup>14</sup>.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The investigation into women's education and social transformation in the Ottoman press during the Second Constitutional Period unveils significant insights into the evolving roles of women in late Ottoman society. This era, marked by profound socio-political changes under the Committee of Union and Progress, witnessed a heightened emphasis on women's participation as a cornerstone of national progress and modernization.

The discourse surrounding women's issues during this period was extensively articulated through the press, which played a crucial role in shaping public opinion and policy directions. Women's magazines, in particular, emerged as platforms for advocating educational reforms and broader societal participation for women. These publications not only highlighted the deficiencies in women's education but also championed the cause for their economic independence and cultural enlightenment.

Key findings from this study underscore the dual narrative of women's roles as both agents of cultural transmission and active participants in the public domain. The press campaigns not only reflected but also influenced the shifting paradigms, suggesting that intellectual enlightenment of women was seen as directly proportional to societal advancement. Moreover, the periodicals of the time significantly contributed to a burgeoning feminist consciousness that sought to redefine traditional gender roles within the Ottoman Empire.

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<sup>14</sup> Necmeddin Sadık, "İçtimâîyyât: Kızların Terbiyesi", pp. 82-83

However, the reforms in women's education and their representation in media also encountered numerous challenges, including ideological resistance and the structural limitations of the period's educational infrastructure. Despite these hurdles, the persistent advocacy and intellectual labor of female journalists and writers laid foundational stones for future generations.

In conclusion, the Second Constitutional Period was a pivotal era for the redefinition of women's roles in Ottoman society. The press served not only as a mirror reflecting the ongoing changes but also as a catalyst for social reform and gender equality. This study reaffirms the importance of media as a tool for social change, particularly in contexts of significant political and cultural transformation. The legacy of this period, with its intense focus on women's rights and education, continues to resonate in the contemporary discourse on gender equality and empowerment.

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