



Received: 4 January 2021  
Accepted: 30 May 2022  
Published: 1 July 2022

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How to cite this article:  
Malekzadeh, Elham (2022).  
Social Status of Women in Iran  
and Turkey (Case Study: Reigns  
of Reza Shah and Atatürk), *The  
International Journal of  
Humanities* (2022) Vol. 29 (3): (1-  
9).

<https://ejih.modares.ac.ir/article-27-63895-en.html>

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Social Status of Women in Iran and Turkey (Case Study: Reigns of Reza Shah and Atatürk)

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**Abstract:** Developments and accomplishments of the newly founded Republic of Turkey in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had long been the focus of Reza Khan, the Pahlavi ruler of Iran. He considered Atatürk and his actions to be a good model for modern life. After ascending the throne, in parallel with the implementation of Western models, he applied the dominant thinking of Turkey about people's way of life. Emphasis on the role of women, believing that the backwardness of social organization is the reason for the humiliation of women in the society, was closely pursued by Reza Shah as an important policy and as an ideology of his governance. Among special features and components of women's issues are their presence in the social fields, clothing, health, work and financial independence, and their education, which are addressed comparatively. The main question of this article is that despite the policies of Reza Shah's government regarding women, following the example of Atatürk, what similar achievement was made? If not, what were the reasons for this? The present article tries to identify different aspects of Iran and Turkey by using archival documents, newspapers, written sources, historical researches, and descriptive-analytical methods in examining instances of modernization by imitating Turkey. The result confirms the main point that it is not correct to equate the social modernization activities of Reza Shah and Atatürk. The personality structure, the level of knowledge and awareness, and how the two came to power had a different process, and finally, the society's approach to their position in power was also different. Reza Shah's perspective with Atatürk on women's issues and the actions taken by each of them to change the position of women followed different conditions, reactions, and consequences, which in this article is highlighted using a grounded theory and a background study on issues and finally an appropriate analysis is made based on the author's perception.

**Keywords:** Women; Policy; Sovereignty Ideology; Iran; Turkey; Reza Shah; Atatürk.

## Introduction

Autarchy, lack of security, and disregard for the public interest and the country are among the factors that have continued to weaken Iran over the past two centuries. Since the early twentieth century, the structure of the world economy was based on the security approach; Reza Shah tried to create and expand security in society, support the establishment of a powerful government, and consider himself the savior of the Iranian society and its developer (Mosallanejad, 1934: 239). He was trying to rebuild a society for which neither politicians nor intellectuals had yet thought of effective solutions for its fundamental transformation.

Iran was influenced by the international process of extensive changes in the power structure, which provided the grounds for political change in the country. With this approach, Reza Shah modeled the social, political, and economic reforms bases on countries in the region, such as Turkey, which at the same time was experiencing extensive and profound changes under Atatürk's leadership. An examination of the ideas and goals implicit in the Shah's words, whether in the form of speeches or interviews and writings that have quoted his thoughts, shows the extent to which these patterns met the needs of the society in Turkey. Reza Shah believed that in order to turn Iran into a modern country, a lot

of new activities needed to be introduced and done. Sometimes, he even considered violence necessary. Given the situation of his time, he continued to use the capacity of accepting an authoritarian government by the people, which was considered a long-standing matter in the Iranian system of government, without ignoring the experiences outside Iran and considered the recent developments in Turkey and the newly established government there as a good example (Avari, *Bitā*, vol. 1: 59-60).

Many years before Reza Shah's official visit to Turkey, and based on a series of actions initiated with the intention of familiarizing women with developments in other countries, including Turkey, newspaper articles such as *the Women's World* frequently highlighted the advancement of women in other countries, especially in Turkey. The content of the articles was presented in a way that while reporting on the work done for women in Turkey, the reasons for the success and progress were related to the ideologies of the government. An example of these writings states: "... In Istanbul, a large statue has been erected to commemorate the progress of Turkish women, which on the one hand shows the movement of the victorious warriors. From both ends, one is a woman wrapped in her veil and the other is a woman with her head open

and her hands and feet free from the chains of hijab, while the wind of the veil has taken her away from her (Women's World Newspaper, Q7, No. 6, Year 1927: 210).

The result of these actions was that in the process of being influenced by the developments in Turkey, Reza Shah, together with his supporters, in an immature and hasty action, regardless of social conditions and inappropriate time, raised the issue of republicanism in Iran and fueled the chaotic situation in Iran.

Reza Khan, who considered Atatürk a good model for imitating modern life, tried to follow the pattern of nation-building or more precisely, state-building following what Atatürk did (Ahmadi, 1990: 209). After reaching the monarchy, he continued to consider the developments in Turkey and resolved all border disputes between the two countries with tolerance (Safaei, undated: 64).

The commonalities between Iran and Turkey on the one hand and its leaders Reza Shah and Atatürk on the other can be explored. Both countries had no experience of colonization and had a strong traditional and religious background, the main challenges and impetus for modernization were external, and the end of the transition from political power to modern forces took several years without

foreign invasions which were based on the actions of internal elite groups.

The leaders of these two countries also had common aspects. The most important commonality between Reza Shah and Atatürk should be considered their military nature, which used force in proportion to their goals, as Reza Khan himself used to commandeer the Cossack squadron of Hamedan (Kronin, 2004: 105) and came to power and entered politics after the coup that took place in 1920. While concepts such as Reza Shah's nationalism were among the programs that received special attention, concerns about foreign problems that could have targeted his reign overshadowed this. Hence, by supporting nationalism and taking advantage of the element of nationalism, while not considering the Islamic past of the country as the ideal of Iran, he tried to provoke the emotions of the people by relying on the sanctities and greatness of pre-Islamic Iran. In a two-pronged move, while emphasizing the preservation of Iran's ancient heritage, the tools and benefits of the new Western civilization were eagerly considered. European technology, law, and economics were used by the Iranians, and nationalist cultural tools were exploited in a way that would be in line with government policies, equal to those of Western nations. The direct and logical result of nationalism and the

emphasis on its material aspects was the creation of a secular ideology that pursued the separation of religion from politics. The same issue in the two societies of Iran and Turkey had different results regarding the confinement of religion. Atatürk inherited a centralized government, while Reza Shah had to establish it first.

In Turkey, the course of action by Atatürk was accepted as a secular system. But in Iran during Reza Shah, Shiite Islam was introduced based on the constitution, the monarchy, and the official religion. The king was considered the defender of faith and religion based on these laws. Reza Shah never violated these laws, and although his practical behavior undermined the status of religion and led to the weakening of the clergy and their sanctity, it was a different matter compared to the Turkish system of government with the official removal of the Ottoman Islamic Caliphate by Atatürk who declared religion apart from politics. Naturally, the way the people reacted to the government's behavior in Iran was quite different from the reactions of the Turkish people. During social structural programs, Reza Shah placed the focus on economic power, the central and national government. The desire to support this national movement could not be achieved unless the rapid adaptation to the progress and

achievements of the West. While the policy of modern Turkey was to industrialize the country, as Atatürk paid close attention to Western lifestyles and the spread of science and technical principles among them, most efforts were made to eliminate the country's need for economic complications. For this reason, Atatürk adopted trade and agricultural laws from Western countries, including Germany, France and Italy (Narsi, 1941: 25).

This approach led to the construction of factories in Turkey, which Reza Shah implemented in Iran with the same approach. Atatürk's economic policy was based on etatism (a policy in which the government intervened in all matters and took the necessary measures to develop the economic sphere). Reza Shah also implemented these policies despite facing major problems, including the fall in the value of the rial (Avari, vol. 1, 118-119). While paper, cellulose, silk, glass, bottle, porcelain, and many other industrial factories were established in Turkey as a result of this policy, Iran not only did not achieve significant results, but the situation worsened. The root of this failure was the different methods that Reza Shah used in comparison with Atatürk. Atatürk dealt with issues radically and principally, and his cultural background changed the way he acted. In contrast, the military and inflexible cultural spirit of Reza Shah, in spite of all the

measures that were taken to bring about change and efforts for the progress of the country, produced different results. During the reign of Reza Shah, Iran implemented the policy of modernization in a situation where for the first time it was necessary to create new institutions and structures in Iran, whereas Atatürk had at least the chance to take advantage of the achievements of the Young Turk era that had given rise to the modern organizations. He was handed over an already established infrastructure and used the infrastructure that Reza Shah was to build for the first time in Iran. (Asgari, 2020: 202; Atabaki, 2011: 212).

Pre-Atatürk political organizations provided the ground for Turkey to cultivate people with political experience and familiarity with modern concepts, which resulted in Atatürk's efforts to use party organizations and fundamental government structures to implement modernization policies, while Reza Shah's lack of these effective forces handed over all of the activities based on the transformation and modernization of the country to the military and the army, which led to completely different results. At the same time, in essence, there were fundamental differences between Iran and Turkey, both in terms of social conditions and its leaders, namely Reza Shah and Atatürk. Among them is the prevailing thinking in

Turkey about the status of women in society, which was followed by Reza Shah. Belief in the fact that the backwardness of social organization is the result of women's humiliation in society (Huntington, 1991: 150). The reforms that Atatürk brought about in the way of life of the people, with an emphasis on the role of women, were closely followed as an important policy during the reign of Reza Shah.

Turkey's developments in the acceptance of Western civilization by the cultural policymakers of Reza Shah's government had created a kind of envy among Iranian officials (Nouri Esfandiari, 1956: 774). At the end of his visit to Turkey, Reza Shah visited various economic and social facilities and sectors in Turkey. Returning to Iran with the experiences of Atatürk's reforms, he gained extra morale to carry out his plans, which accelerated the pace of social and economic change in Iran. The importance of this trip was not felt only in Iran and Turkey, but it became the headlines of European and American newspapers for several weeks (Basirat Manesh, 1999: 61). The reports left by the Iranian government officials report a series of fundamental changes in the field of social conditions after this trip (Azam al-Wazarah, 1963, vol. 2: 78-81; Hayat Yahya, vol. 4: 431).

Developments such as the change of the European brimmed hat (Safaei: 346), the unveiling of the hijab, and welfare and development measures took place (Hayat Yahya, 4: 431). Other outcomes of this trip were observing the conversations between men and women and the employment of Turkish women in industrial centers and various sectors of daily occupations, as reported by Reza Shah, who was affected by this issue during the same trip. According to the ambassador of Iran in Istanbul: "... In educating girls and women, we must immediately work with all our might for the rapid progress of the people, especially women" (Siddiq, 1966, vol. 2: 301-305).

Foreign publications after this date, whenever they mentioned the Iranian modernization movement, referred to the influence of Turkey and Atatürk's actions. *The Birmingham Post*, dated May 29, 1935, states: "The Shah of Iran, following Turkey, has begun modernization and reform in his country" (Nouri Esfandiari, 1956: 716; Basirat Manesh, 1999: 62).

### Conclusion

A comparative study of the politics and ideology of Iran and Turkey during the reigns of Reza Shah and Atatürk shows that it is fundamentally wrong to equate the activities of the two. Because the personality, the level of

awareness, and how they came to power were completely different. Although both had military backgrounds, Reza Shah held a moderate position, while Atatürk was a high-ranking military official during the Ottoman rule, having served several missions and military courses in Europe. At the same time, he gained all the military ranks during the long post-World War I independence wars.

People remembered Atatürk as a national hero who had won victories against the forces of European countries, while Reza Shah became the king from the command of the Cossack squadron of Hamedan.

Perhaps Reza Shah followed Atatürk only in the matter of unveiling the hijab. However, the consequences were different in Iran and were accompanied by many dissatisfactions. Reza Shah emphasized the establishment of administrative institutions and avoided paying attention to political issues and civic activities. In Turkey, however, many political parties, including the Communist Party and the Socialist Party, operated freely, and Atatürk himself was a member of the People's Party.

In Atatürk's mentality and the ideology of Kemalism, women had to play a new role in the family, society, and politics by breaking their former traditional roles and religious traditions. This new role was an undeniable



necessity for Ataturk's social revolution. Reforms in the field of women's rights and issues such as divorce, marriage, women's education, the right to be elected as a member of parliament and other political and social issues pursued by the government, in the direction of Westernization and modernization of Turkish society and revolution in the position of the Turkish woman took place. These movements sometimes took on an extremist and radical face, which provoked reactions and opposition in traditional Turkish society. It was natural that the change in women's rights and the definition of a new role for them, which was in line with the institutionalization of the ruling ideology and the secularization of Turkish society, would be seen as a break from the history of traditional Turkish Muslim society. Despite the great changes that have taken place in the life of Turkish women, especially in the large and modern cities of Turkey, it seems that a

significant part of traditional Turkish society in villages and small towns, especially in central and eastern Turkey, which were far from the center of government, did not cooperate with these changes.

This was while in Iran, in general, Reza Shah was not as successful compared to Ataturk. The difference between the institution of religion in these two countries and the protest capacities in Shiism that overshadowed the actions of the government should be taken into account. At the same time, the differences in the social contexts of Iran and Turkey were fundamentally different from each other. In the Ottoman Empire, the defeat of this empire was thought to be done because of the caliphate and the defeat of the caliphate was thought to be done for religion, but in Iran, people saw no reason to flee religion. The clergy was always with the people.

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تاریخ دریافت: ۱۴۰۰/۱۰/۱۵

تاریخ پذیرش: ۱۴۰۱/۳/۹

تاریخ انتشار: ۱۴۰۱/۴/۱۰

## وضعیت اجتماعی زنان در ایران و ترکیه مطالعه موردی: دوران حکومت رضاشاه و آتاتورک

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**چکیده:** تحولات و تجربه جمهوری نو بنیاد ترکیه، از مدت‌ها پیشتر، مورد توجه رضاخان قرار گرفته بود. او، آتاتورک و مجموعه اقداماتش را الگوی مناسبی برای زندگی نوین می‌دانست. پس از رسیدن به سلطنت نیز، به موازات اجرای مدل‌های غربی، تفکر حاکم بر ترکیه در خصوص شیوه زندگی مردم را به کار بست. تأکید بر نقش زنان با این اعتقاد که عقب ماندگی سازمان اجتماعی، معلول خواری زنان جامعه است، از سوی رضا شاه به عنوان سیاستی مهم و به منزله ایدئولوژی حاکمیت مورد پیگیری دقیق قرار گرفت. از جمله شاخصه‌ها و مؤلفه‌های ویژه مسائل زنان، حضور ایشان در عرصه‌های اجتماعی، پوشش، بهداشت، استقلال کاری و مالی و تحصیل ایشان است که به صورت تطبیقی بدان پرداخته می‌شود. سؤال اصلی این مقاله عبارت است از اینکه با وجود سیاست‌های حکومت رضا شاه در مورد زنان به تبعیت از الگوی اجرایی آتاتورک در ترکیه، چه دستاوردهای مشابهی حاصل شد؟ در صورتی که این اتفاق نیفتاد چه دلایلی در این مورد دخیل بودند؟ مقاله حاضر با بهره‌گیری از اسناد آرشیوی، روزنامه‌ها و منابع مکتوب، بر آن است با روش تحقیق تاریخی و شیوه توصیفی-تحلیلی، به شناسایی وجوه مختلف تفاوت دو کشور ایران و ترکیه، مصادیق نو سازی و تحول به تاسی از ترکیه را مورد بررسی و مطالعه تطبیقی قرار دهد. نتیجه حاصل از این پژوهش، مؤید این نکته اصلی است که برابر دانستن فعالیت‌های نوین سازی اجتماعی رضا شاه و آتاتورک، صحیح نیست. ساختار شخصیتی، سطح دانش و آگاهی و چگونگی ورود این دو به قدرت روندی متفاوت داشت و مآلاً رویکرد جامعه نسبت به جایگاه ایشان در مسند قدرت نیز متفاوت بود. منظر رضا شاه با آتاتورک، نسبت به مسائل زنان و نحوه اقداماتی که به زعم هریک برای تغییر و تحول در موقعیت زنان در جامعه انجام یافت، از شرایط، واکنش‌ها و تبعات مختلفی تبعیت کرده که در این مقاله، با بهره‌گیری از روش‌های تئوری و مطالعه زمینه‌ای، در خصوص مسائل مرتبط با موضوع پژوهش، تأمل و تحلیل‌های مناسب با توجه به دریافت نگارنده، استخراج، مورد تحلیل و استنتاج قرار خواهد گرفت.

**واژه‌های کلیدی:** زنان، ایدئولوژی حاکمیت، ایران، ترکیه، رضاشاه، آتاتورک.