Atatürk and Women's Rights in Turkey Lesson Plan

**Central Historical Question:**
Did Atatürk’s reforms actually improve the status of women in Turkey?

**Materials:**
- PowerPoint
- Copies of Documents A-E
- Copies of Guiding Questions

**Note:** This lesson may take multiple class periods.

**Plan of Instruction:**

1. Introduction: Use the PowerPoint to provide background on Mustafa Kemal “Atatürk” and the reforms he carried out in Turkey from 1923-1938.
   a. Slide 1: Title Slide. Introduce the day’s lesson
   b. Slide 2: Center of the Ottoman Empire. *Present-day Turkey was at the center of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire was led by its Sultan, who was also Caliph, the religious leader of all of Islam.*
   c. Slide 3: Laws and social norms: *Laws and social norms discriminated against women, who were subjected to*
      - Forced and early marriages (as young as age 9 for girls)
      - Limited rights within marriage
      - Polygyny
      - Strict rules about dress
      - No educational opportunities
      - No political rights
      - Unpaid or very low-paid work
   d. Slide 4: The Creation of Turkey. *The Ottoman Empire along with Germany and Austria-Hungary lost WWI.*
      - After the war, Greece, Italy, France, Great Britain and others moved to take land from what is now Turkey. As a result, it lost most of its remaining lands in the Arab world.
   e. Slide 5: The Creation of Turkey
      - After the Ottoman Empire was split, Turks fought to create the state of Turkey.
      - Many Turks admired General Mustafa Kemal for his successes in World War I.
      - In 1919, he called on Turks to resist foreign efforts to divide up Turkey.
      - He led Turkey in the War of Independence (1919-1923).
      - It ended with Turkey winning its independence.
      - Mustafa Kemal took the title "Atatürk," which means "Father Turk."
f. Slide 6: Atatürk’s Reforms. Atatürk led Turkey through an era of major reform during his presidency from 1923 to his death in 1938. He was the first president of Turkey.

- In constructing the Turkish state, Atatürk looked towards the power and prosperity of the West and considered the failures of the Ottoman Empire. He and other Turkish reformers decided that Westernizing Turkish society, both culturally and politically, was necessary in order for Turkey to become a modern nation-state.
- To this end, Atatürk stressed education, industrial development, and limits on the role of Islam in Turkish society.
- In 1924, Atatürk abolished the office of Caliph.
- Atatürk set up an elected parliament, but kept nearly all political power to himself. Despite efforts of his to transition to a multiparty democracy, he banned parties who criticized him or who he disagreed with, including the Turkish Women’s Association.
- He introduced Western legal codes, calendar, and alphabet, by replacing the Arabic script with a Latin one. He required men to adopt Western styles of dress, and banned women from wearing religious veils.

g. Slide 7: Reforms for Women. For decades, the Turkish women’s movement had demanded political rights for women. Reforms for women fit with Atatürk’s goal of creating a secular, united, and modern Turkish state.

- Polygamy was banned.
- Gave women more rights to divorce and inherit property.
- Women were granted the right to vote and run for public office in 1934.
- Encouraged women’s involvement in public life.
- Promoted education for girls.
- Ended gender segregation in many public areas.
- Men were still the legal heads of households. By law, women needed the head of household’s position to travel abroad.

h. Slide 8: Central Historical Question. Although Atatürk gave women more legal rights, we are going to consider the actual impact of these reforms on women’s status in society. Explain that students’ main task will be to answer the lesson’s Central Historical Question: Did Atatürk’s reforms actually improve the status of women in Turkey?

2. Hand out Document A. If students are unfamiliar with secondary sources, tell them secondary sources are accounts of the past based on primary sources. They are not the primary source evidence itself. Textbooks are one kind of secondary source. Then explain that they will read a secondary source passage by an author from the time of Atatürk.

- In pairs, students read the passage and answer the Guiding Questions.
b. Share out and discuss responses. Explain to students that this account reflects how women’s status under Atatürk’s rule has often been portrayed. Tell students that they will be examining documents to determine whether this portrayal is accurate.

3. Hand out Documents B and C. Explain that these two sources are both passages from Atatürk in 1923. Point out that they are from speeches he gave at the very start of his rule over an independent Turkey.
   a. In pairs, students read these documents and answer the Guiding Questions for each.
   b. Share out and discuss responses.
   c. Ask students: Do these two documents back up the views expressed in the secondary source passage? Why or why not?

4. Hand out Documents D and E. Explain that these two sources are both from Turkish women who believe strongly in equal rights for women. The second source was written after Atatürk's rule.
   a. In pairs, students read these documents and answer the Guiding Questions for each.
   b. Share out and discuss responses.
   c. Ask students: Do these two documents back up the views expressed in the secondary source passage? Why or why not?

5. Discussion. Ask students as a group to discuss the following:
   Based on the evidence in all the sources, what was the role of women in Turkey during Atatürk’s rule?

6. Final Claims: Have students make a final claim regarding the Central Historical Question using evidence from the documents.

Citations:

Document A

Document B & C

Document D
Sabiha Sertel, “If You Ask Me”: Sabiha Sertel's Advice Column, Gender Equity, and Social Engineering in the Early Turkish Republic,” Ada Holland Shissler, Journal of Middle East
Document E
This passage is from The Turkish Transformation by Henry Elisha Allen. Allen was an American writer who based his account on secondary sources and several visits to Turkey during the time of Atatürk. Allen’s book was published in 1935, at a time when Atatürk was still ruling in Turkey. In this passage, Allen provides his own description of the overall results of Atatürk’s reforms.

In few spheres of Turkish life have the changed viewpoints had greater effect than on the position and status of women in family and public life. . . . The seclusion and inequality of women, so long considered as characteristic of Islam, have lost their popularity, and one finds women forging to the front most rapidly in the last twenty years. In cities particularly came an abandonment of the veil. Schools for girls became more numerous. During the World War women received their opportunity to enter positions in industry and commerce which had been left vacant by men at the front. The story of woman’s emancipation in Turkey would alone furnish material for many books.


Vocabulary

forge: creating a new identity
emancipation: to set free from legal or social restrictions
Document B: Atatürk, Speech 1 (Modified)

In 1923, Atatürk’s Turkish forces won Turkey’s War of Independence (1919-1923). The excerpts below come from two different speeches that Atatürk delivered in 1923 at a time when his independence movement was just setting up a government to rule a newly unified Turkish state.

The reason for the lack of success of our society lies in the indifference towards our women. . . . [If one part] of a society acts while the other lies idle, then it means that society is paralyzed. A society must accept all the conditions and necessities on which its success in life depends. So, if science and technology are necessary for our society, our men and women must equally master them. As you know, division of labor is necessary in social life as it is in all the other fields. In the general division of labor, women should not only carry out their duties, but they should also take part in efforts for the prosperity and welfare of the society.

Document C: Atatürk, Speech 2 (Modified)

Our great ancestors and their mothers have always had high virtues. The highest and most important one of these virtues is the fact that they’ve brought up valuable sons and daughters. I would like to stress that, along with their share in general duties, the most important, virtuous and beneficial duty of all for them is to be good mothers. For today’s mothers, to bring up sons and daughters that have the necessary virtues as the active members of today’s life, depends on having many high attributes in them as mothers. For that reason, our women must be more enlightened, more intellectual and more learned than men if they really want to be the mother of the nation.

Source: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, 1923.

Vocabulary

indifference: lack of interest or concern
division of labor: different people are assigned to carry out different types of tasks
attribute: a quality or characteristic of someone
Document D: Sabiha Sertel

Sabiha Sertel was a prominent Turkish feminist, writer, journalist, activist, and socialist. She wrote an advice column in her journal Resimli Ay (The Illustrated Monthly). Under the name Cici Anne, or “sweet mother,” she would respond to letters from women asking her views on various subjects. In 1929, one woman wrote to ask why she should ever marry given that, in her view, 80% of all married couples were unhappy. This passage is part of Cici Anne’s reply.

The chances of unhappiness for an unmarried woman are one hundred percent. I may agree with you, society will not. I may applaud you, but they will stone you. Do you think you can live single and free like a man? That’s a bigger fantasy than your romantic dreams. People at work will always see you as a woman and focus on your sexuality. The minute you walk down the street arm-in-arm with a man you like, the neighborhood kids will stone you, the door of every house will be closed to you, and everywhere you go, people will judge you. Any man you live with will see you as simply a plaything he has temporarily made his own. Eventually the police will hound you.

Source: Sabiha Sertel, Resimli Ay, 1929.
Document E: Şirin Tekeli (Modified)

Şirin Tekeli is a well-known Turkish author who began her career as a professor in political science at Istanbul University. She later resigned to become a feminist writer and activist. She is quoted here in an article published in 2007.

[According to Atatürk's message, women] should have little ambition in their work, in order to remain one step behind the men. Femininity and altruism were therefore encouraged in women, because it was believed that women put harmony and family happiness before everything else. The woman had to sacrifice herself for her own as well as for the nation. . . . So, women’s main role, whatever their social environment, was still limited to the one they had in the family, as mother and wife. Almost all modern institutions, the primary and secondary schools, and particularly technical schools designed for them, aimed to produce modern housewives.


Vocabulary

altruism: unselfish concern for others.
Guiding Questions: Atatürk and Women’s Rights

Document A: Henry Allen

1. a) What kind of document is this?
   b) When was it written?

2. Allen says the emancipation of women has occurred in Atatürk’s Turkey. What specific changes does he see as evidence of their emancipation?

3. According to Allen, did Atatürk’s reforms actually improve the status of women in Turkey? Explain.

Document B: Atatürk Speech 1

1. a) What kind of document is this?
   b) When was it written?

2. According to Atatürk, how has Turkish society treated women? What does he see as the possible problems with this type of treatment?

3. What was happening in Turkey in 1923?

4. How might this historical context help explain why Atatürk spoke about science, technology, and the division of labor?

5. According to Atatürk, what status should women have in Turkish society?
Document C: Atatürk Speech 2

1. a) What kind of document is this?

   b) When was it written?

2. According to Atatürk, why had being a good mother always been the most important virtue for Turkish women?

3. Compare Atatürk’s views about motherhood here with what he says about women’s equality in Document B. Do you think his views in the two documents match? Why or why not?

Document D: Sabiha Sertel

1. a) What kind of document is this?

   b) When was it written?

   c) Who is the author?

2. According to Sertel, did Atatürk’s reforms actually improve the status of women in Turkey? Explain.

3. Why is this a useful piece of evidence for understanding the status of women in Turkey during Atatürk’s rule?

4. This is a reply to a single letter to a woman’s magazine in Turkey. How might that affect its reliability as evidence about women’s status in Turkey during Atatürk’s rule?
5. Compare Sertel’s advice column to Documents A-C. How are they similar in regard to the status of women and how are they different?

Document E: Şirin Tekeli

1. a) What kind of document is this?

b) When was it written?

c) Who is the author?

2. Why might this be a useful piece of evidence for understanding the status of women in Turkey under Atatürk’s rule?

3. Why might this be a less useful piece of evidence for understanding the status of women in Turkey under Atatürk’s rule?

4. According to Tekell, did Atatürk’s reforms actually improve the status of women in Turkey? Explain.

5. In what ways do Şirin Tekeli and Sabiha Sertel seem to agree about the status of women in Turkey under Atatürk?

6. Are there differences between Tekeli’s and Sertel’s points of view?
Final Claim

Using evidence from these documents, write a paragraph that addresses the question: 

*Did Atatürk’s reforms actually improve the status of women in Turkey?*