



Early Republican Period Sports Policies and Turkish Sports Institution Journal

Erken Cumhuriyet Dönemi Spor Politikaları ve Türk Spor Kurumu Dergisi

ABSTRACT

This study examines the position of women in sports policies during the Early Republican Era through document analysis of the Turkish Sports Institution Journal, an important publication of the time. In the early years of the Republic, sports were considered a crucial tool for both individual development and the construction of national identity. The Turkish Sports Institution Journal is significant for reflecting the policies of the period. In the study, 25 issues of the Turkish Sports Institution Journal, published between June and December 1936, were analyzed. The findings reveal that the journal's articles focused on encouraging women to participate in sports, although with recommendations to avoid sports like football, which were deemed contrary to traditional notions of femininity. Moreover, it was found that women were encouraged to engage in sports as part of Republican policies aimed at raising a "healthy generation."

Keywords: Early Republican Period, Sports policies, Turkish Sports Institution Journal, Women's participation in sports, National identity construction.

ÖZET

Bu çalışmada, Erken Cumhuriyet Dönemi'nde uygulanan spor politikalarında kadının konumu dönemin önemli bir yayını olan Türk Spor Kurumu Dergisi aracılığıyla doküman analizi yöntemiyle incelenmiştir. Cumhuriyet'in ilk yıllarında, sporun hem bireysel gelişim hem de ulusal kimlik inşasında önemli bir araç olarak görülmektedir. Türk Spor Kurumu Dergisi de dönemin politikalarını yansıtmaları bakımından önemlidir. Çalışmada Türk Spor Kurumu Dergisi'nin 1936 yılında Haziran ayından Aralık ayına kadar çıkan 25 sayısı incelenmiştir. Çalışma sonucunda Türk Spor Kurumu Dergisi'nde yer alan kadınlarla ilgili haberlerin odak noktasında kadınların spora yönlendirilmesinin yer aldığı tespit edilmiştir. Ancak bu yönlendirme futbol gibi güzellik algısına ters olduğu düşünülen sporlardan uzak durulması yönünde tavsiyeler eşliğinde yapılmıştır. Ayrıca kadınların Cumhuriyet politikalarıyla uyumlu da olarak spor yapmaları "sağlıklı bir nesil" yetiştirmek için yönlendirildiği tespit edilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Erken Cumhuriyet Dönemi, Spor politikaları, Türk Spor Kurumu Dergisi, Kadınların spora katılımı, Ulusal kimlik inşası.

INTRODUCTION

The reforms introduced by Atatürk to Turkish society were markedly different from the "reforms" or "modernization" of the Ottoman era. Atatürk pursued a radical transformation rather than a gradual one. For this transformation to succeed, he emphasized the necessity of evaluating women's role in society from a modern and scientific perspective. Atatürk was one of the few world leaders who recognized the crucial role women play in a nation's progress. His primary goal was to establish a democracy grounded in human rights and freedoms. To achieve this, he introduced several principles, beginning with secularism. His aim was to liberate minds from dark, irrational superstitions and blind adherence to dogmas, while also freeing both men and women, without distinction, physically and intellectually. In this regard, Atatürk viewed women's participation in sports not merely as a matter of physical development but as a fundamental aspect of building a national consciousness of equal citizens, both men and women (Atalay, 2007: 28).

During the Republican era, with the implementation of various reforms, sports gained significant importance in education, the socio-cultural structure, and institutional arrangements. In the 1932-33 academic year, a three-year "Physical Education Department" was established at the "Gazi Middle School and Teachers' Training Institute" in Ankara to train physical education teachers for middle schools. Furthermore, under Atatürk's directives, People's Houses (Halk Evleri) were transformed into major sports centers, alongside their cultural activities. Institutionally, the Turkish Sports Institution (Türk Spor Kurumu) was founded, and in 1936, two female athletes qualified to represent their country in fencing at the Berlin Olympic Games in Germany. These developments highlight the significant role sports played during this period. Traditional Turkish sports and modern sports were integrated in

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line with common goals during this time. The culture of sports became one of the progressive philosophies of the new Turkish State and the Republic (Bayazit & Boz, 2017: 224).

In this study, the image of women, which held a crucial position in the sports policies of the Early Republican Era, will be examined. Women held a significant role in the policies of the Early Republican Period. This prominent position was attributed to women as they were seen as essential for fulfilling certain conditions deemed necessary for both nation-building and Westernization. As a product of nation-building, women were regarded as the creators of future generations and as mothers, while, as an element of Westernization, they were positioned as representatives of modernization. This study will analyze the *Turkish Sports Institution Journal*, the official publication of the Turkish Sports Institution, which emerged as an institution reflecting the sports policies of the Early Republican Era. The focus of the study will be on the context of the news related to women in the journal and its connection to Republican policies.

Women in Early Republican Era Sports Policies

During the foundation of the Republic, the new civilization project reflected a comprehensive effort to create a fully Western society. The core philosophy of the new Republic aimed to adopt secular policies in place of religious values. In this context, women played a central role in Turkey's modernization process. As pioneers of the modernization movement initiated in the 1920s, women's presence in the public sphere, their clothing styles, and social behaviors emerged as extensions of the Turkish revolution. These changes were seen as symbols of modernization within Turkish society. Thus, the role and position of women became crucial in the construction of the secular and modern social structure envisioned by the Republic (Canşen, 2015: 39). During this period, in addition to institutions like education, culture, and arts, sports were also regarded as functional institutions in constructing new public spaces where women gained representational significance (Zelyurt, 2024: 176).

Sports play a decisive role in the construction of national identities and in the modernization processes of nations. Turkey's body politics and the social positioning of sports offer valuable insights into the dynamics and peculiarities of the modernization process. Under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, efforts by the founding elite to regulate both private and public spheres, including sports, were part of a broader objective to transform Turkish society into a "citizen" identity. The organization of sports at an elite level and under state control was seen as an extension of this policy. In official discourse, sports were assigned two primary functions: first, the promotion of elite sports and athletes to enhance Turkey's recognition on the international stage, and second, as a leisure activity fostering the development of healthy, dynamic, and aesthetically refined individuals. The representation of the female body, with its inherent meanings, provides important clues for understanding these ideological processes (Şenol Cantek & Yarar, 2009: 202).

After the establishment of the Republic, various strategies emerged to direct women towards sports under the belief that healthy bodies would build strong nations. The policies of the Early Republican Era emphasized that raising healthy generations could only be achieved through women's physical education and participation in sports. However, this approach primarily served traditional roles for women, particularly the idea of being a good wife and mother. In this context, women's involvement in sports was shaped around the belief that strong mothers would raise strong children. Starting in the early 1930s, the media increasingly highlighted the performances of female athletes and interviews promoting modern lifestyles. The effects of sports on health, aesthetics, and beauty were emphasized, focusing attention on individuals who did not align with the new model of womanhood. During this period, the emphasis on beauty queens shaping their bodies through exercise and the impact of sports on weight loss reinforced the association of women with sports. Policies encouraging women's participation in sports, and thus in public spaces, were supported by highlighting their roles as mothers, contributors to national defense, and their influence on the health of future generations. Consequently, sports became a tool contributing to the mental transformation of both women and society. As a cornerstone of this transformation, participation in the Olympic Games, an important step toward achieving the ideal of Western modernism, provides a tangible example of this function. In particular, the participation of two female athletes in the 1936 Olympics, held symbolic significance in introducing the modern Turkish woman to Western countries (Kavasoglu & Yildiran, 2016: 98-99).

The 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics marked a critical turning point for the young Turkish Republic in consolidating its international identity and showcasing the modern Turkish woman. These Olympics were the first international sports event in which female Turkish athletes participated. Turkey was represented by 59 athletes, including two female and 57 male athletes. Halet Çambel and Suat Fetgeri Aşeni made history as the first women to represent Turkey at the Olympics. This participation not only had a significant impact on the sports field but also increased the visibility of modern Turkish women on an international level, contributing to the reshaping of women's roles in sports and public life (Bozkuş, 2024: 198).

In the early years of the Republic, women involved in sports in Turkey mostly belonged to an elite minority. However, the Çapa Girls' Teacher School in Istanbul and the Gazi Teacher Training Institute in Ankara were exceptions to this trend. Many successful female physical education teachers trained in Istanbul came from middle-class urban families or wealthy provincial aristocratic families. Students admitted to the Gazi Teacher Training Institute, which began accepting female students in 1936, were also observed to have similar social backgrounds. Unlike previous generations of female athletes, these students had to support themselves while practicing their chosen sports. These two educational institutions provided these women with both career opportunities and the chance to excel in various sports disciplines. As a result, sports became a tool that strengthened these women's social standing and economic independence (Yarar, 2014: 314).

Gender equality, one of the key issues in Turkish modernization, was also reflected in the field of sports. Starting in the 1930s, alongside political rights granted to women, an increase in their public representation in social arenas was observed. Sports became one of the platforms reflecting women's pursuit of equality. In this context, figures such as Keriman Halis and Sabiha Gökçen became prominent role models, even in the field of sports. One of the primary goals of the Turkish Sports Institution was to make women more visible in public life. During this process, the integration of women as part of a collective social body became an important aspect. Sports were used not only as an individual activity but also as a tool for building social identity based on equality. The physical activities encouraged for women were those that did not conflict with aesthetic and gender-specific norms, such as gymnastics, athletics, tennis, and swimming. In conclusion, the influence of Western sports ideals is evident in the image of the secular Turkish woman. This approach can be evaluated as a policy aimed at strengthening women's social position through sports (Zelyurt, 2023: 91).

Turning Point: The Era of the Turkish Sports Institution

The Turkish Athletic Associations Alliance (Türkiye İdman Cemiyetleri İttifakı, TİCİ), which was recognized as a public welfare association in 1924, aimed "to develop physical education and sports in Turkey based on scientific principles and to represent Turkish sports both domestically and internationally," according to its statute. In line with its founding purpose, TİCİ believed that reviving the national spirit in sports would strengthen the sense of Turkish identity emphasized by the Republic and that national representation would motivate athletes. To achieve these goals, TİCİ adopted a two-tiered organizational model consisting of central and provincial branches. The central organization comprised the general congress, the general center, and federations, while the provincial organization included regional central committees, regional athletic committees, regional congresses, and clubs (Turkay & Aydın, 2017: 182).

As the first national sports organization operating throughout the country during the Republic's formative years, TİCİ managed sports activities between 1922 and 1936. However, the desired results were not achieved during this period. Like to global economic transformations, Turkey experienced a transition from a free-market economy to a state-controlled system, which was also reflected in the field of sports. Although TİCİ operated as a federative structure where clubs were self-governed, it failed to implement the idea of "mass sports." The inclusion of state control and reformism principle within the "six arrows" (Kemalist ideology) in the early 1930s revealed the paradigm that Kemalist ideology would adopt in economic, social, and cultural spheres. Just as the Izmir Economic Congress demonstrated the insufficiency of TİCİ, a civilian entrepreneurial structure, in promoting sports to the masses, it became evident that the organization was inadequate. TİCİ, which adopted the sports management style of Western bourgeois societies based on individuals and social classes, was organized around clubs. However, this structure gave way to the state-controlled Turkish Sports Institution (Türkiye Spor Kurumu, TSK), which aligned with the official ideology of the era that emphasized "no individual, only society." During this period, sports were considered too important a function to be left to the initiative of individuals or specific social groups. For Kemalist bureaucrats and intellectuals, sports represented a critical social practice in the construction of a new society and a new human. As with the economy, the state took on the responsibility of promoting sports to the public. Statism (devletçilik) became the main pillar supporting Kemalism's efforts toward Westernization and modernization (Zelyurt, 2024: 175).

Following the dissolution of TİCİ due to its perceived inability to sufficiently organize Turkish sports, a new sports policy was shaped around the concept of "sports for all." Within this framework, the Turkish Sports Institution was established with the leadership of the Republican People's Party (RPP) and played a key role in implementing the new sports policy. The institution's regulations outlined its purpose as promoting and developing sports in Turkey on national and scientific foundations, as well as representing Turkish athletes both domestically and internationally. The institution also aimed to cultivate a youth population that was morally upright, of high character, physically strong, fully confident in themselves and their nation, and ready to sacrifice everything for the protection of the Turkish Revolution, the Republic, and the homeland (Bal & Şentürk, 2023: 52).

The Turkish Athletic Associations Alliance (TİCİ) was transformed into the Turkish Sports Institution during its eighth and final congress held from February 13-18, 1936. The Turkish Sports Institution Journal, which reflected the views of this institution, was published 122 times between June 26, 1936, and November 7, 1938. Unlike other sports journals, this publication not only promoted sports activities but also served as a platform for sharing the state's (and the party's) views on sports policies with the public. Examining the journal is particularly important for understanding the transition from TİCİ's autonomous structure to the Directorate of Physical Education (Beden Terbiyesi Genel Müdürlüğü), which was brought under state control by Law No. 3530 on July 16, 1938. Given that sports affairs during this transition period were managed under the control of the ruling party (and its subsidiary, the People's Houses, or Halkevleri), the journal is also a valuable source for illuminating the perspectives on women during this time (Eken, 2020: 2540).

METHODOLOGY

This study examines the relationship between women and sports policies during the Early Republican Era. Document analysis is used as the main research method. Document analysis is a systematic approach to examining and evaluating any form of documentation, including printed and digital materials. Like other qualitative research methods, document analysis involves the examination and interpretation of data. This process is undertaken to generate meaning, develop insights, and obtain empirical knowledge about a particular topic (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In this study, the Turkish Sports Institution Journal, an important sports source from the Early Republican Era, will be analyzed to explore its perspectives on women. The journal, which was directly influenced by the ruling CHP, not only produced sports content but also served as a tool for disseminating and reflecting the ideological views of the period. In this regard, examining the journal's perspectives on women is significant as it also reflects the era's broader views on women. Twenty-five issues of the Turkish Sports Institution Journal published in June and December of 1936 were analyzed. Access to these issues was obtained through the National Library.

Findings

The *Turkish Sports Institution Journal* primarily emphasizes sports as a necessity for raising a "strong" and "healthy" generation. This point was also highlighted in an article by General Ali Hikmet Ayerdem, the President of the Turkish Sports Institution, in the June 1936 issue. Ayerdem stated, "Ultimately, sports are genuine patriotism. Because athletes, by strengthening and empowering themselves, primarily serve the development and progress of our generation in terms of physical strength and power." In his remarks about young girls, he commented, "These young people, who find military service unsuited to their delicate dispositions, resort to every means to avoid it and, while still in their youth, marry at an early age, bringing forth frail offspring just like themselves without hesitation. Similarly, those village boys, with stagnant blood, who fill the schoolrooms to avoid military service and spend their lives in idleness and sloth, marry impoverished and insignificant village girls long before reaching the age of twenty and, from the union of these fragile youths, a weak generation fills our country" (Ayerdem, 1936: 5).

Another notable article, titled "Women and Sports," appeared in the same June issue of the *Turkish Sports Institution Journal*. It begins by stating, "Turkish girls and women are still mere spectators of sports" and provides recommendations regarding which sports women should participate in (Image 1). The article states, "Which sports can women engage in? Aside from certain combat sports such as football, which, though once fashionable in Europe, was later banned by its federations as it was deemed incompatible with feminine grace, women can participate in almost every sport." This suggests that while women were unofficially prohibited from sports like football, which were considered unsuitable for "grace," they were encouraged to engage in sports such as "tennis and swimming" (Turkish Sports Institution Journal, 1936: 9).



Image 1: Women and Sports.

Source: Turkish Sports Institution Journal (1936). 1-26, 1, p. 9.

In another article providing information about different sports in the *Turkish Sports Institution Journal*, swimming is discussed (Image 2). What stands out in this article is the language used to emphasize swimming as a sport suitable for women: “Swimming is more recommendable for women than all other sports. It is the sport that brings a woman closest to a male physique, without disturbing her beauty, bodily harmony, or delicacy. Swimming enhances one's self-confidence, strengthens willpower, and fosters composure.” (Turkish Sports Institution Journal, 1936: 13). Additionally, this article includes photographs of women engaged in the sport of swimming.



Image 2: Swimming

Source: Turkish Sports Institution Journal (1936). 1-26, 2, p. 12.

The *Turkish Sports Institution Journal* made a significant effort to encourage women to participate in swimming, in particular. In one article, the statement, “The British newspapers these days mention Miss Gosen, a well-known female athlete from southern England. Despite being 82 years old, Miss Gosen still participates in swimming activities alongside young athletes” (Turkish Sports Institution Journal, 1936: 12), was used to emphasize that swimming is a sport suitable for women of all ages.

The push for women to engage in sports was also built around the idea of reminding them of the importance that had been previously overlooked. By stating, “Turkish women, who possess the same rights as men, have asserted their presence in every aspect of life and demonstrated their strength,” the article emphasizes women's equal rights with men. The continuation of the article encourages women to participate in sports: “Although individual sports activities among our women are gradually developing, there is still no movement at a mass level as desired. Yet, today, sports have entered the realm of noble and contemporary pleasures and have become a necessary condition for good performance, healthy living, and achieving success. Today, sports are never overlooked when considering the advanced qualities of nations” (Turkish Sports Institution Journal, 1936: 13).

The *Turkish Sports Institution Journal* featured photographs of female athletes participating in the Berlin Olympics on the cover page of its 7th issue dated August 10, 1936 (Image 3). The accompanying caption read, “At the Berlin Olympics: Young girls from the German high gymnastics school performing various physical exercises.” However, the magazine’s inner pages did not provide any information about Halet Çambel and Suat Fetgeri Aşeni, who were part of the Turkish contingent. Despite the journal’s efforts to encourage women to participate in sports, it chose to overlook the first Turkish female athletes to compete in the Olympics.



Image 3: Gymnast Girls

Source: Turkish Sports Institution Journal (1936). 1-26, 7, p. 1.

In the 9th issue dated August 24, the article titled “Women and Sports” by Fuat Pura emphasized, “History shows that Turkish women have walked side by side with Turkish men in every great national endeavor. The Turkish woman is as brave, determined, and successful as the Turkish man. This strong and enjoyable companionship with her man has been carried out by the Turkish woman naturally and voluntarily since ancient times, even before the advent of modern civilization. The Turkish woman will stand by the Turkish man in the national sports development” (Pura, 1936: 6).

Additionally, the article highlighted the necessity of sports for women’s enhancement: “The most reliable way to lead women to vitality, health, and beauty is physical education. Physical education is as valuable for our women as it is for our men. This value develops women in every aspect and brings them high achievement.”

In another article titled “Women and Sports,” women were called to participate in sports with the phrase, “Turkish Girls, Sports Are Waiting for You!” (Image 4). This piece argued, “If only men engage in sports while women neglect it, it would be considered useless from a mass sports perspective. Especially in a country like Turkey, which has accepted equality between men and women in all fields, it is noteworthy that while half of those in their active years engage in sports to some extent, the other half remain mostly as mere spectators. All over the world, young girls are engaged in various sports just like men. The 11th Modern Olympics held in Berlin has declared the victory of the modern woman in the field of sports. Examine the photographs we’ve included in these pages and believe that the time is very near when Turkish girls, like their European counterparts, will demonstrate their competence and capability in the sports arenas” (Turkish Sports Institution Journal, 1936: 6).



Image 4: Women and Sports

Source: Turkish Sports Institution Journal (1936). 1-26, 12, p. 6.

CONCLUSION

The new female figure that the Republic aimed to create during this period granted women various “freedoms” and a range of social and legal rights while simultaneously placing greater emphasis on their domestic role, with “motherhood” being brought to the forefront. This new female figure was primarily aimed at urban women, leaving the image of the Anatolian or “peasant” woman outside its scope (Bakacak, 2009: 627).

In this study, news articles about women from the Turkish Sports Institution Journal, which served as an ideological tool of the ruling government of the Early Republican Era, were analyzed to evaluate the relationship between women and sports. Although only a few articles related to women were found in the 25 issues examined, it was determined that these articles provide significant insights into the period's perspective on women. Beyond their role as mothers in raising an ideal generation, the young Republican woman was also valued as an individual. It was not enough for women to merely serve as exemplary figures for society; they were also expected to be physically and mentally healthy (Eken, 2020: 2543).

The Turkish Sports Institution Journal viewed women's participation in sports as essential for national development, but this was primarily seen as a requirement for raising healthy generations. The journal suggested that for “weak” and “unhealthy” women to be replaced by healthy and beautiful ones, sports were considered a necessity. Furthermore, opinions were expressed regarding which sports women should or should not engage in. Women were especially discouraged from participating in sports such as football, wrestling, or boxing, which emphasized physical strength, and were instead encouraged to take up sports like swimming and tennis, which were deemed more appropriate for their “beauty” and “health.” This perspective is consistent with the policies of the Early Republican Era. Although the status of women was given importance in the newly established nation-state, their role in fulfilling motherhood duties was also emphasized. The articles in the journal stressed that women should engage in sports to raise healthy generations.

In conclusion, the Turkish Sports Institution Journal, as one of the primary ideological apparatuses of the state, reported on and reflected the relationship between women and sports in accordance with the policies of the Early Republican Era.

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