

# Emine Erdoğan: The Woman Power Behind Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

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**Abstract** In the last 13 years, Turkey's economic and political sphere has been transformed. The leader of this transformation was Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was our Prime Minister before becoming the first directly elected President of our Republic. There is a very fascinating story behind his success from his childhood until today. There is no doubt that his wife, Emine Erdoğan, has played a most crucial role in his political life and transformation of society. Although she was never more visible than her husband, her lifestyle and vision has been a role model for most Turkish women. This chapter is dedicated to Emine Erdoğan who composed her unique and honorable written interview particularly for this book.

**Keywords** Recep Tayyip Erdoğan • Emine Erdoğan • AK Party

Women are quiet and powerful; women are deep and intense; women are modest and wise. Emine Erdoğan is a very important actor who has embodied all of these virtues. She has had a major impact on the achievements of the AK Party (Justice and Development Party) by being the compelling voice of this epic raucous movement.

Emine Erdoğan is the last child of a family originally from Siirt, which is located in the South East of Turkey and well known for its multicultural population. She was born in 1955 in İstanbul. Since the early days of her childhood, she has been persistent in social and political activities. A few examples are: The Women's Union and organizations and The Idealist Association of Science and Culture which are said to constitute the starting point to Emine Erdoğan's social and political activities.

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Indeed, while carrying out the work of this organization that shall form the starting point of Emine Erdoğan's social and political life, she will meet the most important leader in the history of Turkish politics, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and this shall be the first step to a new and harder life shoulder to shoulder with him.

First Lady Emine Erdoğan both in Turkey and around the world is perceived with great admiration and respected by many women as a "role model and a leader" when it comes to being a woman, a wife and a mother. Mrs. Erdoğan is the wife of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who has won 9 elections in the last 13 years. On the 10th of August 2014, he was elected by 51.8 % of the people's votes to become the president of the Republic and so Emine Erdoğan became the 12th first lady of the Republic of Turkey.

Emine Erdoğan, with the love of her convictions, her patriotism and loyalty to Turkey, to women and women's rights, has adopted an attitude supporting her spouse calmly and confidently, even in difficult times. Be it the already small number of events attended deliberately because of the restriction of the headscarf and despite all the outrageous behaviors, she has never entered any discussion or participated in any disturbing behaviors. Those who witnessed the protests, be it other supposedly male or female who do not share her opinions, have seen her as tolerant and never deviating from her constant politeness.

The sections of this book contributed to the first female leaders in this book, written with great modesty and to which she agreed to give an interview, is dedicated to First Lady Emine Erdoğan. Though she has participated in many different studies, Mrs. Erdoğan gave and shared with us a written and unique interview that left a mark on this topic.

First Lady Emine Erdoğan, during the written interview, shared with the readers her valuable views and opinions on works related to the Idealist Women's Union. The author Şule Yüksel Şenler, contributed various components of the impact of the work of marriage and, the happiest and the most difficult time, women's social movement and involvement in political life, projects and how the lives of women changed during the AK Party period.

## **1 Honorable First Lady, as Idealist Women's Union, What Would You Say About the Output in Terms of Civil Society Organizations that Take Place? How Do You Assess the Impact on Women of Such Institutions to Be Included in the Social and Political Life in Turkey?**

As you know, we are part of a civilization; life is not only about or between men and women with a perspective that separates each other with sharp borders.

For us life is shared with the sweet and the bitter sides. Men and women in harmony with each other, cooperating and shouldering the burden of life. For

example, ‘working woman’ became more widespread during the post-industrial revolution because women in the traditional World were also an essential part of the production cycle, like men were. In the garden, the farm, the family members worked in the studio together, sweated together. I mean woman was a natural part of the social life. Both women, as well as men associated to certain principles and had manners. But the conditions that modernity brought to us disturbed the balance between men and women. Men became relieved from almost all the domestic roles, and women were forced to work in factory and at home. Her workload was increased. Private-public distinction appeared in the area during this period. Formal conditions imposed to exist in the public domain, particularly for veiled women were utterly compelling. Religious women who wish to be visible in social life while having certain values faced obstacles in public sphere. Women were isolated from social life. Wearing the veil did cause great controversy in the public sphere. When you browse through the Turkish press archive, you will see how much of this issue was such a controversy. Living in accordance to the principles of Islam in a modern world has been a very large part of particularly religious and conservative movements. Great intellectual activity in conservative communities occurred since the 1960s. Names such as Şule Yüksel Şenler played an instrumental part in the intellectual development of women. Periodicals, conversation circles made up an important part of our social and intellectual life. These activities, as in the world of politics and media, have shaped the civil society. Already-in-motion associations such as Idealist Women’s Association consisted of women with such problems. These associations and wisdom centers they had religious identity drawing strength from each other to the exclusion of women from public area. On the one hand while fighting impositions and on the other hand, they promoted the spirit of solidarity and culture from the foundation.

Today, especially those gains made in the first nucleus of the religious women would say it is a very important place. Currently, we have seen many women in the political arena or in different tasks themselves raised here. Social experience gained in this process was prepared to speed up new tasks. The opportunity was there to introduce oneself to the community.

## **2 Şule Yüksel Şenler, Who Has a Leading Role Among Religious Women Writers, What Is Her Impact in Your Life?**

I met with Şule Yüksel Şenler during my teenage years. She was a role model for religious women during that period. Educated, urban, cultural and a unique religious identity, she did create a synthesis in herself. From Headscarf to the courtesy to match the form of her accumulation on religious and social issues to the oratory was the model for us. Her model of wearing headscarf was both stylish and modern,

both owned entity. Lectures she gave in Anatolia, were instrumental in realizing the traditional Anatolian women.

All the salons of the cities that she went to were overcrowded. But the religious issue has been discussed behind closed doors for decades, the identity of a society deprived, courageously voiced the core issues in our public auditorium. Moreover, she did it as a woman. But what the essentially interesting part was that the audience of Şule Yüksel Şenler was not just women who had distinguished themselves with religious identity as women, but also men were. Şenler was also a charismatic character for conservative men. This is not a very common condition in the history of the Republic of Turkey. The number of women that have affected the masses in this way does not exceed the fingers of a hand when counted altogether.

Şenler had an impact on three generations. A leading role in the understanding of the authentic religious comment under the shadow of some of the traditional understanding, and while doing this, tools such as art was effectively used. In 1977, she wrote the novel 'Huzur Sokağı' (Peace Street) which influenced into the lives of people whether or not they liked the literature. Indeed, the novel was such that even the women who had never read a novel in their lifetime started reading the novel. Many parents gave their offspring the name of the main character. She was inspired from the sincere and friendly ties that exist in Islamic culture and traditions. One of the most impressive sides of Şule Yüksel was her using of the poetry and scientific knowledge with religious references in her speeches. The portrait of this religious women writer maintains its influence since that day.

In my personal life, it has had a significant impact on me that I could find the courage to use headscarf in a modern and urban lifestyle. Indeed, considering the cultural conditions of the period to render, as a faithful regular prayer as a young girl like me, even as a religious duty to wear headscarf in the city life was quite difficult.

### **3 How Have the Social Activities that You Carry Out Been Affected by Your Marriage with the President?**

My husband's life is a life dedicated to the cause. He made this commitment and also had his family as companion. Being the wife of a leader, of course, also has important responsibilities on me. While trying to enhance myself intellectually and in faith, also I tried to make an extra effort in the fields where I can contribute to the society. Intellectually and after all, we were never such people who pursued only their own personal wellbeing.

It was in fact this sense of togetherness that made me and Tayyip Bey come together. Therefore, my marriage, the social awareness that I brought from my family, altruism and other resembling feelings helped to nurture brand new environments that I came across. I had the opportunity to meet with different social

circles, which has enriched my human experiences. Tayyip Bey's politics and life experience have always been enlightening for me.

He always gave value to my conscience and he has always expressed himself in this subject. Certainly, the changes in the political activities of my husband have had an impact on my life. For example, during the period of his mayorship, I had to leave the woman branch of political party organization where I used to serve with great enthusiasm. In fact, the tasks in the party organization were like a social laboratory and we made sure that we took all the responsibilities to act as required. During this period, our lives were not only ours anymore; and they were shaped with duties and responsibilities from the public.

We burdened ourselves with the burdens of the society. As if we were responsible for the snow that falls on the people and for the rain that falls on them too. We didn't put distance ourselves from the society. During our service at İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality and the Prime Ministry we used to live in Kasımpaşa, İstanbul, and in Keçiören a modest neighborhood in Ankara, which was intertwined with the public in an ordinary apartment. We were in touch with each other and with the people going and coming out of the neighborhood. We didn't isolate ourselves from the society. This style of leadership was an example to our children. Intertwined with the society, on the side of Righteous.... Each of our individual lives is filled with effort that flows to the same river. Besides it is a big chance for us that our children also have those shared awareness.

#### **4 It Is Known that You Are the Biggest and Most Courageous Friend and Supporter of Your Spouse. What Are the Happiest and Saddest Times You Had to Live with as a Wife of the World Leader?**

Of course, we have had many happy and difficult times. Mankind in general tend to forget about the pain and sadness and try to remember the happy memories. Even though we accumulate, joyful moments in life, hardships can leave a bigger trail on our souls. I can say that there is an issue primarily in hard times that I am still touched when I called upon.

If you remember, in 2012, a huge humanitarian crisis in Myanmar occurred. The Muslim people were under pressure to a point that would cause harm to their dignity. Thousands of people were being killed, their homes were attacked, they faced with the risk of deportation. Indeed, more than 1000 Muslim lives were lost, 100 thousands of people were left homeless. At the time, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu, my daughter Sümeyye and I went to Arakan (Muslim populated territory of Myanmar). Despite the very serious security risks that we had seen in the media, we would not do anything to stand in the face of what we had heard and seen. Indeed, we encountered such views when we got there—People were thinking

that death is the only way to emancipate. Which is not really possible to forget the persecution caused by man.

The feelings of pain and sadness got entangled in this trip. People of Arakan were on the streets while welcoming us as descendants of the Ottoman State. Our convoy was stopped often, small letters were thrown in through the windows of our cars showing their trust and gladness but in fact even if not everything was written and told, their tears were telling us everything.

The real painful thing was not only in their material poverty but also rather by the lack of ID, passports and right to movement, that means they were not considered as citizens. All these are still difficult to witness and have left deep scars in my soul. From that visit if it had any consolation; we contributed in the opening of a humanitarian aid corridor and we were able to make ourselves heard by the rest of the world. Likewise, Somalia had a similar effect on me. In 2011, during the presidency time of Tayyip Bey and some businessmen went on a trip to Somalia and we were able to witness the hunger, drought, epidemics that affected the people there. We were all very affected. Fortunately, this visit, both in Turkey and in our close geography led to the start of major aid campaigns.

If you are sensitive to the suffering of human beings, no matter where in the world you are, their pain will be like yours.

However the difficulty and the sadness that people live in their own country touch the human being in a harder way. The prison days of my husband were not only hard for me but also for my children. But the real thing that really makes us upset was not the separation of an elder from the family but rather the elimination of a person who aims were nothing more than to serve his country with political maneuvers. Although the verdict given under unfair and arbitrary reasons, broke our hopes for a democratic Turkey. The post period would be the start of a better era for the country. Public confidence during this process was reinforced by Tayyip Bey and he came out even stronger from every election. Our nation realized the games that were played on the country. Therefore it opened a new page in our history of democracy. To the one who said ‘You cannot even be “muhtar” (the smallest elected representative of the local government)’; he won one out of every two votes to make history and be the first elected President.

We, as Muslims, believe that there is a blessing in everything that happens. Therefore, all I can say about happiness is together with the difficulties, we are thankful for the blessings that Allah gives us. Despite all the problems that we experienced, to see what his political movement during his leadership brought to Turkey was the biggest happiness that I lived.

## **5 What Are Your Thoughts About the Challenges and Hard Times When the Most Serious and Dense Problems Related to the Participation of Women in the Social and Political Life of Turkey?**

The biggest obstacle towards the participation of women to the social life is, as I mentioned in the beginning, the conditions developed against the women after the industrial revolution. However, this was not happening only in Turkey, the same conditions could be seen all over the world. The main problem of Turkey was the top to down model of modernization process.

The Turkish modernization is connected to specific modal conditions. Turkish society is formatted so to say by cutting it off from its tradition and culture. This, of course brought a restless modernization story to open. Some parts of the society were debarred from their rights. For example, the rights of election and being elected by women were recognized in 1934. However, this right was kept deficient for some woman in one dimension, head scarfed women who constitute the 60 % of the community were able to gain the right of being elected in 2014, 80 years after independence.

Turkey has been through very serious democratic problems for 90 years as it was not easy to break the hegemony created by a very small minority in the nation. The most problematic periods of course were the coup d'état periods during this time being. Each military coup took Turkey back. Especially on the 28th of February (it is still known as the postmodern coup d'état that oppressed the whole segments of society and prevented access from basic rights). This process, of huge injustice was done against the head scarfed women. The education rights of these women were taken and some of them were fired from their jobs. The young girls, who were admitted into the universities through passing the same exam with their other mates, were sent back from the university. The first ranking students were sent back from the stage by closing their mouths during the diploma ceremonies. Those periods were indeed the most offended periods for Turkey. The only gain of this whole process was that some of our head scarfed daughters turned these disadvantages into advantages. They learned foreign languages and improved themselves. The living example of 'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger', was that they learned to struggle and brought a mature challenging character out. Other than that, these girls started changing their families too. If some of the conservative families are not against the educating their daughters abroad today, the role of 28th Feb experience is undeniable.

Fortunately, the AK Party has arranged a lot of democratic rights during the last 13 years and literally closed arena and recreated a new Turkey. Today, we have veiled women in the parliament as well as they possess important jobs in the public sphere.

## **6 What Has the Role of Women in the AK Party Been like in the Last 13 Years for the Social, Political and Economic Transformation? In the Same Way, What Has AK Party Changed in the Women's Life?**

Women in the AK Party have achieved a big and an incomparable success. They have played a big role in the transformation of the Turkish politics and the society at large. They have contributed a lot to the general political success of the AK Party and reached to the families by knocking door to door. Reaching the women also means reaching the men and the children or the community. I personally give importance to the family visits these women used to pay. These visits have ensured the access of community to the politics. During this process, on one side new social meetings have happened, while on the other hand the politics changed into the determination of the problems and the solutions on the spot.

The activities of women in AK Party have strengthened women in various aspects; the biggest one is a new status of the woman in the family. Especially in the rural areas the perception on women and conservatism has changed in a good way. Normally the husbands who don't let their wives to participate in social activities did not interfere in their participation with the AK Party due to the fact that these activities were in accordance with their values.

Thus, the perception of woman in their minds was broken. Even many men started to take advice from their wives about politics regarding their experience in the women's branch. This change in the life of individual men and women, family and community once led to the change in the structure of society. This process gained a new dimension together with the women policies of AK Party.

In this context, I would like to mention about the importance of the role of vocational courses in the AK Party municipalities. In brief, these courses also known as İSMEK are taken as models even from abroad and are an important initiative. The purpose of these courses was to train women as artisans and craftsmen and make them have a profession. In 1996, during the time of mayorship of İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality, Tayyip Bey organized free courses as part of a social project. During the education period of 2014–2015, the İSMEK Project reached 2 million trainers in more than 412 different branches in 235 training centers in İstanbul's 38 districts. İSMEK have direct employment of idle labor force, has been instrumental in the contribution of women in the family budget, but has seen the most important function for our women's rehabilitation center. Our women have gained the space to breathe among the problems within the family; they have expanded their social environment and responsibility.

The AK Party government always made the female subject a priority. First and foremost, important steps were taken in the legal field. In 2009, laws in the Parliament to analyze the angle of view of gender equality of "women and men equal opportunity act" was established. On the other hand, women especially developed policies that increased girls' enrollment rate in schools. For instance, girls' enrollment rate in primary education in 2002–2003, while being 87 %, in



2014–2015 rose to 96 % in primary school level, secondary level rose to 94 %. Similarly, women in higher education institutions enrollment rate went from 13 to 40 %.

The participation of women in political life increased in the same way. In 2002 the number of women deputies rose from 24 to 98 in the general elections of June 2015. It reached the highest in the history of the Republic of Turkey with 17.82 %. The presence of women in academia is worth noting since it is a number well above the world average; As from January 2015, the percentage of female university faculty members rose to 43 %.

In recent years, the AK Party government has been developing policies that will balance private and business life of women. During the period of unpaid leave due to birth, it can result in the protection of the personal rights of the officer.

Birth connected to part-time work facilities, kindergartens and other steps such as the expansion of day-care centers also ease the burden of women.

A very serious problem all over the World is the issue ‘Violence Against Women’ and in the preparation of a national action plan, all of the stakeholders of the issue have been called and mobilized. For women who are victims of violence, the Ministry of Family and social welfare opened guest houses, municipalities of more than a certain number of people were obliged to open a women’s shelter. ‘Domestic violence emergency helpline’ was set up with a system that can apply to all family members who are victims of violence. Combating violence against women is still ‘violence against women is also against humanity’ is saying that I follow-up with the President.

To sum up, the AK Party has made revolutions for women. By mobilizing women power, their social problems were made aware and this helped to boost and sensitize women’s movements. Women showed considerable efforts on their way to make the subject of their own life. But of course the things to be done were not over. Great works fall to our government. We need to increase the number of women in politics and the number of managers in the business world. The success rates of the board of companies where women are present are higher. We are at a good point at the academic level. But here we have the glass ceiling disability. Our women cannot move further up the ladder when they have arrived at a certain point. There is a lot more work to be done to lift up those barriers.

## **7 Could You Talk About the Many Social Projects that Have Been Realized During Your Leadership?**

I have been leading a lot of projects, which cover the education, health and social policies. My priority is the education of our young daughters because education is a key in many problems from the root and provides strong future to the women. In this scope, I have supported projects like ‘Girls, let’s go to school’, ‘Mother-Daughter in the School’, ‘7 is too late’. We have had attempts for

expanding the pre-school education. On the other side, we have led farming projects for natural life and took steps for the children to have a friendly relationship with the nature.

The ‘Protecting my Future’ project for children is an attempt for their awareness about being friendly with the natural environment. The same way, ‘Forest of Abundance’ is a campaign to create forests in the 81 provinces of Turkey. These projects are still running. We have made the wives of governors in the 81 provinces the part of a movement under the title of ‘Envoys of the heart’. Now they are taking care of the problems of disadvantaged ones in their cities.

Social Development Centre, that is TOGEM, began as a modest movement in İstanbul. Today, TOGEM is actively working on education, health and social issues in every corner of Turkey.

Another area that I support with a special attention in recent years is to promote natural and healthy lifestyle awareness in the society. Order food and drink from all the world’s pharmaceutical industry on this issue, I think the world needs a new paradigm. Chemicals surround us. We need ancient knowledge in the field of health.

In this context, I have promoted the establishment of ‘Traditional, Complementary and Alternative Medicinal Practices’ department within the Ministry of Health.

I care about our country’s wealth in their attempts to bring up the plant health sector. Turkey is a very lucky country in terms of plant richness. In the whole of Europe while thirteen thousand varieties of plant species are present, twelve thousand species of them are available in our country. Some steps were taken in my patronage for institutions to carry out scientific studies in the field of phytotherapy. Hopefully this will continue.

## **8 What Is Your Most Important Message that You Want to Deliver to Women and Young Girls in Turkey and the World?**

Primarily, I would advise women and young girls to be aware of their power and potential. Self-confidence is very important. Especially, I would like to address mothers and fathers.

They should support their daughters to realize their self-confidence. Families should give them the vision that exceeds today’s boundaries while connecting our tradition and understand our balance of society.

I think that Muslim women in all around the world should develop their own language. I think search for women’s rights in the viewpoint that makes men and women competitors is a wrong attitude. Today, even feminism is looking for an exit points to overcome itself. I think peace can be provided in a society where every

human is known as equal in front of Allah and the government, women and men completed each other.

I would like to say to young girls in our country, they have a very wide horizon. Turkey is geopolitically important country and has a very important heritage. They have to invest in themselves and represent it in the international area to sustain themselves well. I wish they would protect and take care of social sensitivities like the welfare of the family and society while they realize their individual goals because individual happiness is only possible in the social welfare.

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