

The feminist struggle and the 1924 Constitution: feminists as constitutionalists*

di Bertil Emrah Oder

Abstract: *La lotta femminista e la costituzione del 1924: femministe come costituzionaliste* - To what extent did the republican feminists influence republican constitutionalism? What were their roles and strategies in terms of feminist advocacy during the early republican era (1923–1934)? How did they frame their claims and actions? What were their challenges and achievements vis-a-vis feminist constitutionalization? This article intends to answer these questions. To do so, it delineates the strategies, responses, and allies of republican feminism against patriarchal constitutional politics. It also attempts to demonstrate how the misogynist resistance of regressive actors and exclusionary modernization marginalized republican feminists and their strategies. The article concludes with an analysis of gender-based tensions in the constitutional polity of contemporary Turkey considering both early republican and contemporary feminist struggles.

Keywords: Turkey, gender equality, patriarchy, Kemalism, constitutional strategies.

3513

1. Introduction

The first decade of republican constitutionalism in Turkey between 1923–1934 was marked by various power struggles, demonstrating the inner workings of the country's political institutions, elite behavior, and social movements of the era. Regarding republican transformation, scholarly analysis has primarily focused on the consolidation of modernization by the Kemalist leadership, and studies have emphasized institutionalization, laicism, and republican citizenry. However, including women in these processes was associated and justified with laicism and citizenry without political pre-commitment to gender equality in the constitutional debate. Women's inclusion was regarded as an outcome of a socio-political modernization primarily fostered by legalism incorporating gender equality.¹ Accordingly, republican modernism dismantled gender hierarchies and women's subordination through legal reforms focused on formal equality but prioritized civil matters. Legal reforms concerning civil marriage, the prohibition of polygamy, the restructuring of divorce proceedings and alimonies, the various rights of women in family affairs, and

¹ Ş. Tekeli, *Women in Turkish Politics*, in N. Abadan-Unat, M. Kıray (Eds.), *Women in Turkish Society*, Leiden, 1981, 293–294; S. Sancar, *Türk Modernleşmesinin Cinsiyeti, Erkekler Devlet Kadınlar Aile Kurar*, İstanbul, 2012.

inheritance rights were considered sufficient. Including girls in the right to education under addressees of mandatory primary education was the only gender-responsive provision in the 1924 Constitution. Although civil law reform in 1925 allowed some improvement in women's civil status, their public and political participation was not enshrined at the constitutional or statutory level. Women's autonomy was normatively enhanced through formal equality but done selectively, with a focus on civil law and a constitutional right to education. The political citizenry of women, one that could have ultimately served substantive equality, was ignored during the making of the 1924 Constitution. Women's suffrage remained a point of denial and resistance for the republican patriarchy until the statutory changes in the local elections of 1930. Subsequently, the 1924 Constitution was amended in 1934 to recognize women's political right to elect and be elected.

Still, there is a limited account of scholarship regarding the constitutional engagement of republican feminism. To what extent did the republican feminists influence republican constitutionalism? What were their roles and strategies in terms of feminist advocacy during the early republican era (1923–1934)? How did they frame their claims and actions? What were their challenges and achievements vis-a-vis feminist constitutionalization? This article intends to answer these questions. To do so, it delineates the strategies, responses, and allies of republican feminism against patriarchal constitutional politics. It also attempts to demonstrate how the misogynist resistance of regressive actors and exclusionary modernization marginalized republican feminists and their strategies. The article concludes with an analysis of gender-based tensions in the constitutional polity of contemporary Turkey considering both early republican and contemporary feminist struggles.

2. The Late Ottoman Women's Movement: The Publicization of Women and Political Demands

The claims of feminist intellectuals became visible after the 1908 constitutional amendments that progressive movements enacted during late-Ottoman modernization.² Towards the end of Sultan Abdulhamid's oppressive rule, there were vibrant discussions on civil rights and liberties for a new age of Ottoman society. Against this backdrop, women's political activism increasingly came to the forefront. Women's demands for recognition as equal citizens were progressively voiced through different means and occasions. Emphatically, a group of women applied directly to the *Ittihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti* (Association of Unification and Progress) in

² S. Çakır, *Feminist Tarih Yazımı: Tarihin Kadınlar İçin, Kadınlar Tarafından Yeniden İnşası*, in S. Sancar (Ed.), *Birkaç Arpa Boyu, 21. Yüzyıla Girerken Türkiye'de Feminist Çalışmalar*, Prof. Dr. Nermin Abadan Unat'a Armağan, 1, İstanbul, 2011, 516 ff.

1908, explicitly demanding to attend the opening ceremony of the lower chamber of parliament in a segregated area as observers.³

The liberating political landscape fostered by the 1908 constitutional amendments increased the number of periodicals and associations, including women's publications and organizations. *Kadınlar Dünyası* (The World of Women) was a reputable journal with feminist content published by the Ottoman Association for the Defence of Women's Rights (*Osmanlı Müdafaa-i Hukuk-ı Nisvan Cemiyeti*).⁴ This association received the support of middle-class women and was considered a feminist organization.⁵ It integrated the electoral right of women in its program in 1921 through an amendment. In general, feminist publications, associations, and conferences contributed to a growing interest in public debate on women's status in society.⁶ Many feminists strongly manifested their claims, demonstrated below in the public call from *Kadınlar Dünyası*:

“Women, women! Liberty is not granted to our men—they earned it. They say, ‘the right is to be seized but not to be granted’... We, the women, let's invoke our natural and civil rights, let's seize them forcefully in case they deny delivering them. Long live liberty!”⁷

Women's rights were a subject of reform claims in the works of male Ottoman intellectuals from the early to late Ottoman modernization period.⁸ Beginning in 1867, leading authors, such as Namık Kemal, Şemsettin Sami, Celal Nuri, and Ahmet Mithat Efendi, argued for the advancement of women in society.⁹ *Terrakki* (“Progress”) was the first daily focusing on women's rights.¹⁰ Contrary to Islamists, nationalist Ottoman intellectuals, particularly Ziya Gökalp, praised feminism as a Turkic characteristic and

³ S. Çakır, *Osmanlı Kadın Hareketi*, İstanbul, 1994, 125-126; N. Yurdsever Ateş, *Yeni Harflerle Kadın Yolu / Türk Kadın Yolu (1921-1927)*, *Kadın Eserleri Kütüphanesi ve Bilgi Merkezi Vakfı 20. Yıl Özel Yayını*, İstanbul, 2009, 22.

⁴ Çakır, *Osmanlı Kadın Hareketi*, 154-155.

⁵ Toprak describes Osmanlı Müdafaa-i Hukuk-I Nisvan Cemiyeti as a radical organization that demanded gender equality and the socialization of women; for more detail, see Z. Toprak, *Türkiye’de Siyaset ve Kadın: Kadınlar Halk Fırkası’ndan Arsulusal Kadınlar Birliği Kongresine (1923-1935)*, in *2 Kadın Araştırmaları Dergisi* (1994) 5; Yurdsever Ateş, *Yeni Harflerle Kadın Yolu / Türk Kadın Yolu (1921-1927)*, 28; for other organizations, see also Z. Toprak, *İttihat ve Terakki ve Teâlî-i Vatan Osmanlı Hanımlar Cemiyeti*, in 43-44 *Toplum ve Bilim*, (1988-1989) 183-190; For an analysis of Muslim, Turkish, Kurdish, Turkish-Armenian, and Armenian women associations, see S. Çakır, *Osmanlı Kadın Dernekleri*, in 53 *Toplum ve Bilim* (1991) 139-141.

⁶ S. Çakır, *Osmanlı Kadını Bilinçlenme Yolunda - Beyaz Konferanslar*, in 123 *Tarih ve Toplum* (1994) 28-31; A. Demirbilek, *In Pursuit of Ottoman Women's Movement*, in Z.F. Arat (Ed.), *Deconstructing Images of the Turkish Woman*, New York, 1998, 65-81; Yurdsever Ateş, *Yeni Harflerle Kadın Yolu / Türk Kadın Yolu (1921-1927)*, 28-29.

⁷ Çakır, *Osmanlı Kadın Hareketi*, 208.

⁸ B. Tanör, *Osmanlı-Türk Anayasal Gelişmeleri*, İstanbul, 2007, 168.

⁹ Sancar, *Türk Modernleşmesinin Cinsiyeti, Erkekler Devlet Kadınlar Aile Kurar*, 84-88.

¹⁰ Y. Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap, Kadınlar Halk Fırkası Birliği*, 5th Ed., İstanbul, 2022, 20; Sancar, *Türk Modernleşmesinin Cinsiyeti*, 92.

defended equal rights for women in family and political affairs.¹¹ Other progressive thinkers critically assessed the unequal status of women and various cultural forms of subjugation. For instance, Abdullah Cevdet openly expressed his views against polygamy and veiling.¹²

Ottoman male reformists were not indifferent to women's suffrage. Proponents for women's education also explicitly called for prioritizing women's political rights. Tunalı Hilmi Bey was a progressive intellectual figure committed to gender equality known for his 1902 constitutional work titled "Report on People's Sovereignty and Constitutional Draft." Article 42 of this constitutional draft stated that a "woman is equal to a man and free."¹³ Similar support was also expressed by Muslihiddin Âdil, a law professor known as a defender of women's political participation, specifically in his writings on economics.¹⁴ The Ottoman male intellectuals' support of women's rights was similar to the support from men in France, Britain, and the United States.¹⁵ In the early 1900s, male feminism among Ottoman intellectuals could be described as being part of their opposition to the status quo, characterized by both autocratic suppression and patriarchy. Their support was a political demand for the liberation of both men and women.¹⁶ Their political stand, accepting gender equality, was interconnected with other demands, such as abolishing absolute monarchy, developing individual rights, and pushing for a modern understanding of citizenship based on egalitarian tenets.

3. The Women's People Party: Feminist Strategies and Exclusionary Politics

Following World War I, Turkish civic resistance against the Allied Forces resulted in a national victory in 1922. In the aftermath of the resistance years, a surge in feminist activism was evident. This may be explained by the changing role of women during years of war and conflict. Women were socially, economically, and politically engaged during the Turkish resistance

¹¹ Z. Gökalp, *Türkçülüğün Esasları*, İstanbul, 2010; for details, also see Ş. Kurnaz, *II. Meşrutiyet Döneminde Türk Kadını*, İstanbul, 1986; for Yusuf Akçura and other Turkish authors writing about women's rights, see S. Bulut, *Türkçülerin Penceresinden Osmanlı'da Kadın Meselesi ve Orta Asya Referansı*, in *Tarihin Peşinde, Uluslararası Tarih ve Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 10, 2013, 328.

¹² T. Taşkıran, *Cumhuriyetin 50. Yılında Türk Kadın Hakları*, Ankara, 1973, 62; Sancar, *Türk Modernleşmesinin Cinsiyeti*, 89; for Abdullah Cevdet, also see M.Ş. Hanoğlu, *Bir Siyasal Düşünür Olarak Doktor Abdullah Cevdet*, İstanbul, 1981.

¹³ T. Hilmi, *Halk Hâkimiyeti Risalesi ve Anayasa Tasarısı*, in 3 *Tarih ve Toplum* (1984) 24-30; also see Yurdsever Ateş, *Yeni Harflerle Kadın Yolu / Türk Kadın Yolu (1921-1927)*, 23.

¹⁴ Z. Toprak, *Muslihiddin Âdil'in Görüşleri, Kadın ve Hukuk-ı Nisvan*, in 75 *Toplumsal Tarih* (2000) 14-17.

¹⁵ F. Berktaş, *Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Feminizm in Cumhuriyet'e Devreden Düşünce Mirası: Tanzimat ve Meşrutiyet'in Düşünce Birikimi*, 1, 1st Ed., İstanbul, 2001, 350.

¹⁶ D. Kandiyoti, *Cariyeler, Bacılar, Yurttaşlar, Kimlikler ve Toplumsal Dönüşümler*, İstanbul, 2013, 190-191.

(1919–1922), serving as combatants, workers, caregivers, and public figures.¹⁷ Indeed, their increased engagement during the resistance years empowered women and increased the capacity of women's networks. At the same time, the claims of the late Ottoman feminists were not only perpetuated but diversified and focused on political rights. This represented a turning point in the first-wave feminism of Turkey, which could be defined as republican feminism developing an agenda for women's political agency as active citizens. Accordingly, republican feminists adopted a two-pronged strategy: communication and institutionalization.

First, feminist communication included meetings, lobbying efforts, and active participation in the public debate (e.g., op-eds by leading feminists in newspapers). Republican feminists applied these strategies in the field using experiences from late Ottoman feminism based on issue-specific gatherings, publications, and protests. In terms of public engagement, the feminist leaders played a crucial role in pushing social criticism of women's inferior role within society. Additionally, they developed content for anti-patriarchal discursive politics. This was based on gendered identity claims to change the power arrangements that maintained the subordination of women. Although republican feminism did not directly challenge women's reproductive and caregiver roles, it articulated an alternative political vision of democracy against male domination.

Second, institutionalization as a strategy was the most remarkable feature of republican feminism. The organizational modes of early republican feminism were developed from informal networks to structured ones. The formal institutionalization of the feminist struggle as a structured organizational type was the key strategy adopted between 1923–1927. Regarding this strategy, political institutionalization in the form of a political party was the republican feminists' first strategic attempt. The Women's Council, convened on 15 June 1923, resolved to establish the Women's People Party (WPP) to defend and promote women's social, economic, and political empowerment through political ownership. After an extended period of silence (8 months), the republican government voiced its negative stance against the WPP in 1924 by denying its establishment.

Both the entrenched patriarchy of Ottoman-Turkish society and the emerging nationalism of the young Turkish Republic played a decisive role in the exclusion of the WPP from the political sphere. As it pertains to the role of patriarchal politics against the WPP, the misogynist actors in the parliament are worth mentioning here. When the WPP entered the scene in 1923, these actors were dominant and influential in politics. The proceedings of the parliamentary debate demonstrate that two factions of the Grand National Assembly, namely the Kemalist republicans (First Group) and the anti-Kemalists (Second Group), were indifferent to gender equality; total ignorance and a hostile attitude against women's rights were their common

¹⁷ H. Edip, *Conflict of East and West in Turkey*, Lahore, 1935, 199; A. İnan, *Anadolu Kadınları Müdafaa-i Vatan Cemiyeti*, in *Büyük Zaferin 50. Yıldönümüne Armağan*, İstanbul, 1972; for more on the active involvement of women in the military between 1919–1917, also see Y.S. Karakışla, *Osmanlı Ordusunda Kadın Askerler, Birinci Kadın İşçi Taburu*, 1917–1919, İstanbul, 2015.

standpoint.¹⁸ Several interventions, mainly those pushing for gender equality, were subject to intense protest.¹⁹

Remarkably, the debate on amendments in the Law on Elections revealed the policy preference regarding women's inferior and subordinated status as citizens. There was a consensus between the dominant forces in parliament on perpetuating patriarchal politics. The relevant amendment of the Law of Elections increased the number of parliamentarians by lowering the representative number of male citizens. This means that 20,000 male citizens were to be represented by a single parliamentarian, replacing the previous representative male population rate of 50,000 male citizens. The amendment was introduced because of the decline in the male population caused by World War I. During a parliamentary debate, Hüseyin Avni Bey (Ulaş), a deputy from Erzurum, stated that the status of women should be considered as a factor changing the representation ratio. Yet, this was not a direct consideration respecting women's citizenry. Women were regarded as too immature for political representation and participation. The parliamentary debate shows the clear positioning of the political elite regarding the underdevelopment of women and their indirect representation by men. Until women were fully developed and reached a fundamental right to vote, it should be assumed that they delivered their votes to the head of the family—the *paterfamilias*.²⁰ During the discussions, deputy Tunalı Hilmi Bey was remonstrated and ridiculed for his egalitarian views about women's population and representation rates.²¹ He was called 'effeminate', 'a feminist', and an opponent of Sharia.²²

Against this backdrop of patriarchal politics, the WPP was regarded as a confrontational and threatening organization. The institutional strategy of republican feminists to form an autonomous political party prompted an exclusion strategy from the state elite. It seems that both an autonomous political party based on identity and its feminist political agenda claiming women's rights bothered the elite. The WPP was not a government-mandated or party-aligned institution; it was formed as an independent organization preceding the People's Republican Party (PRP). The WPP was founded in June 1923, and the PRP was established in September 1923. The

¹⁸ Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 121; Y. Demir, R.F. Yüksel, *Kemalist İdeolojide Kadın İmgesi: Kadınlara Seçme ve Seçilme Hakkının Verilmesi Bir Lütfü Mu Yoksa Kazanılmış Bir Hak Mı?*, in 2 *The Journal of International Lingual, Social and Educational Sciences* (2017) 232.

¹⁹ Taşkiran, *Cumhuriyetin 50. Yılında Türk Kadın Hakları*, 96-103; M.Ö. Alkan, *Türkiye'de Seçim Sistemi Tercihinin Misyona Boyutu ve Demokratik Gelişime Etkileri*, in 23 *Anayasa Yargısı Dergisi* (2006) 145-146; Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 121.

²⁰ TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi [Minutes of the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye (GNAT)], 1923, Devre [Term] 1, İçtima [Session] 4, XXVII, 326; as cited in Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 121-122; Alkan, *Türkiye'de Seçim Sistemi Tercihinin Misyona Boyutu ve Demokratik Gelişime Etkileri*, 145-146.

²¹ Minutes of the GNAT, Term 1, Volume: 28, İçtima Senesi [Year of Session]: 4, On Yedinci İçtima [Seventeenth Session], 3 Nisan 1339 Salı [3 April 1920 Tuesday], 328-329.

²² Minutes of the GNAT, Term 1, Volume: 28, Session Year: 4th, Seventeenth Session, 3 April 1920 Tuesday, 341.

former represented a self-standing project for women's political identity by presenting a challenge against the PRP and its single-identity politics.²³ The PRP, the governing actor of the Kemalist regime—under single-party rule until 1946—defended a homogenous Turkish identity for the nation-building of the young republic. By its very nature, a group of female political actors with a gendered agenda contradicted the fundamental tenet of the PRP's governing ideology—i.e., a unified and single Turkish identity. The WPP's feminist identity claims were viewed as a separatist threat that would weaken the PRP and its dominance over the entire system. In fact, some key WPP figures, such as Nezihe Muhiddin, stated that the WPP would be aligned with the PRP and establish a women's network around it. Yet, this commitment did not survive the WPP.²⁴ The exclusion of the WPP was part of a series of preventive and unifying state policies that identified pluralism, and its requests were not allowed. Despite eliminating the WPP from the political sphere, Muhiddin and other suffragettes did not give up on their struggle; instead, they changed their feminist strategy considering the severe political backlash.²⁵

A few essential characteristics of the WPP feminists need mentioning here. Notably, they were loyal to the republican ideology of the state elite but positioned themselves outside the state; they did not possess enough insider positioning to campaign for women's rights by establishing political coalitions with other state actors. Outsider strategies were the only possible actions they could use to advance their goals. The feminists proceeded with a potent form of outsider advocacy by establishing a political party because they possibly thought it was the right time for such a strategy. The constitutional debate on popular sovereignty, the people's will, self-determination, and the republicanism of 1921–1923 gave them the hope and courage to become organized for feminist advocacy. They regarded themselves as feminist interpreters and advocates of republican political principles.²⁶ Yet, these feminists claimed that they had realized republican principles not as subordinated subjects but as equal citizens of the new republic. They attempted to complement the “people” using feminist aspirations that challenged the subjugation of women in the family, society, and politics. For instance, Nezihe Muhiddin linked the strong commitment of the republican feminists to the founding leadership of Mustafa Kemal, the republic's governing ideology, and the PRP.²⁷ She argued that republican feminists respected the extraordinary mission of the PRP and referred to the “people” part of the PRP's name as a feminist political party, as well.²⁸

²³ Toprak, *Türkiye’de Siyaset ve Kadın: Kadınlar Halk Fırkası’ndan Arzulusal Kadınlar Birliği Kongresine (1923-1935)*, 8.

²⁴ Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 148.

²⁵ For Muhiddin's intellectual contributions, including her novels and political essays, see N. Muhiddin, *Bütün Eserleri I, II, III*, İstanbul, 2006; B. Ötüş Baskett, A. Baykan, *Nezihe Muhiddin ve Türk Kadını 1931, Türk Feminizminin Düşünsel Kökenleri ve Feminist Tarih Yazıcılığından Bir Örnek*, İstanbul, 1999.

²⁶ For the views of these feminists, see Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 120–121, 123.

²⁷ Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 128.

²⁸ Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 129.

However, the “people” of the PRP’s governing ideology was based on collectivism and homogeneity that denied not only class and identity claims but struggles for changes in gendered political power structures. Institutional feminist engagement as a political party was considered against social cohesion in the post-conflict political landscape. Republican feminism was regarded as risky by the nationalist republicans in terms of socio-political political reforms based on nation-building and centralization of political power.²⁹ This is the reason why the feminist critique of Turkish modernization emphasizes the patriarchal and paternalist features of the republican nationalism led by modernist male figures.³⁰

On the other hand, several developments in 1923 showed that there was support for women’s political rights in the public arena. As soon as parliament announced the new elections, women’s mobilization increased, aiming to organize meetings and a congress. A survey on women’s electoral rights conducted by a reputable daily, *Vakit*, attracted such massive interest that potential female candidates for the elections were also proposed.³¹ In the 1923 parliamentary elections, an incident of civil disobedience occurred that supported women’s political rights. The ballots were cast in favor of two women (in İzmir and Şarki Karahisar), although they were not even considered eligible candidates because of their gender. These two public figures were Halide Edip and Latife Uşakî. Uşakî (Latife Hanım) was respected as Atatürk’s wife but also known as a women’s rights defender.³² Edip was a leading public figure in the Turkish National Resistance (1919–1922); she was famous for being a nationalist activist, novelist, and, later, member of parliament (1950–1954).³³ Such symbolic disobedience signaled public support for women’s political representation by using the public impact of two well-known women. Considering the short period between the announcement of the WPP (15 June 1923) and the parliamentary elections (28 June 1923), the “ballot incident” demonstrated the public response to feminist claims. This courageous attempt from the voter base—albeit limited—should have also worried the state elites.

Along with excluding the WPP, the political forces were not responsive to claims for an egalitarian political landscape for women in 1923–1924. The political parties of the dominant forces, namely the People’s

²⁹ For data on control and/or containment of independent feminist movements in the nation-building processes as a policy, see N. Çağatay, Y.N. Soysal, *Uluslaşma Süreci ve Feminizm Üzerine Karşılaştırmalı Düşünceler*, in *1980’ler Türkiye’nde Kadın Bakış Açısından Kadınlar*, 6th Ed., İstanbul, 2015, 296; Sancar, *Türk Modernleşmesinin Cinsiyeti*, 113.

³⁰ A. Durakbaşa, *Türk Modernleşmesinin Kamusal Alanı ve “Kadın Yurttaş”*, in S. Sancar (Ed.), *Birkaç Arpa Boyu, 21. Yüzyıla Girerken Türkiye’de Feminist Çalışmalar*, Prof. Dr. Nermin Abadan Unat’a Armağan, Cilt I, İstanbul, 2011, 463; Y. Arat, *Türkiye’de Modernleşme Projesi ve Kadınlar*, in S. Bozdoğan, R. Kasaba (Eds.), *Türkiye’de Modernleşme ve Ulusal Kimlik*, İstanbul, 2005, 82–98.

³¹ Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 122–123.

³² İ. Çalışlar, *Madam Atatürk: The First Lady of Modern Turkey*, F. Howell (Trans.), London, 2019.

³³ For a feminist study on Halip Edip and Turkish modernization, see A. Durakbaşa, *Halide Edip, Türk Modernleşmesi ve Feminizm*, İstanbul, 2012.

Republican Party (1923) of the Kemalists and the Pro-Progressive Republican Party (1924), did not include women's rights in their respective programs.³⁴ This also demonstrates the entrenched nature of patriarchy in Turkey's early republican-era politics. The feminist agenda of the WPP was not even regarded as complementary to the governing ideology and party politics.

4. Constitution Making and Republican Patriarchy in 1924: Gendered Discussions

Women's political rights came to the forefront of parliamentary discussion in making the 1924 Constitution. The Constitutional Committee that provided the constitutional draft stipulated the right to elect and to be elected in gender-neutral terms. It referred to citizenship in a neutral sense only—as “a Turk”—the addressee of the electoral right. The right to elect was adopted unanimously with the same gender-neutral formulation and without question. However, recognizing women's right to be elected became a matter of dispute during the discussions. Refik Bey and Feridun Bey, the members of the Constitutional Committee, said that the term “Turk” included men and women and that women would be entitled to vote accordingly.³⁵ Recep Bey, Kütahya's representative, stated that he approved the provision on the right to elect with the assumption that it included women. He defended Turkish women's abilities to undertake and realize everything using their “biological abilities and the abilities related to their nature” just as men could (“kabiliyeti tabiiye ve kabiliyeti fitriye”). There was a discussion on legitimizing women's political exclusion because the Law on Parliamentary Elections only referred to the male population. The specific nature of this legislation and the general nature of constitutional norms were also discussed. Finally, the Committee's draft was subject to different motions and included both pro-women and anti-women-related revisions.

As the discussions proceeded, the Constitutional Committee could not preserve its cohesion for a pro-women stance regarding electoral rights. This revealed the presence of a progressive but hesitant and fragmented political elite in the Constitutional Committee. Celal Nuri Bey, a member of the Constitutional Committee, indicated that he did not share the views of Refik Bey and Feridun Fikri Bey, the two pro-women members of the Committee. He claimed that women were not constitutionally included in the draft to receive political rights since the Law on Parliamentary Elections excluded them. On behalf of the Committee, he suggested a motion that excluded women from political rights. The motion was adopted accordingly, and there was applause during the rejection of the inclusionary motion for

³⁴ For programs, see T. Z. Tunaya, *Türkiye'de Siyasi Partiler 1859-1952*, İstanbul, 1952.

³⁵ For complete discussions and motions, see Ş. Gözübüyük, Z. Sezgin, *1924 Anayasası Hakkındaki Meclis Görüşmeleri*, Ankara, 1957, 109-114. The Constitutional Committee was composed of the following members: Celal Nuri Bey, İlyas Sami Bey, Feridun Fikri Bey, Yunus Nadi Bey, Ağaoğlu Ahmet Bey, Refik Bey, Rasih Efendi, Refet Bey, İbrahim Süreyya Bey, Mahmud Bey, Ali Rıza Bey, Necati Bey, Hazım Bey, Ahmet Süreyya Bey, and Münir Hüsrev Bey.

women's rights. Recep Bey's response to these cheers from the regressive majority was remarkable: "You did not recognize the right of women. At least don't applaud!". During the discussions, Recep Bey resembled an activist defending the equal rights of women. He defined gender equality in electoral rights as "the most fundamental matter in the given project," namely republican modernization.

Although the 1924 Constitution denied the recognition of women's suffrage after the parliamentary debate, constitutional scholars adopted a critical position against this preference. Ahmed Ağaoğlu, a professor of public law at Ankara University and a member of the Constitutional Committee (1924), described the denial of women's suffrage as a constitutional contradiction.³⁶ The Constitution defined the ownership of sovereignty by the "nation" without limitation and condition (Article 3 of the 1924 Constitution). Yet, gender (being male) as a condition was against the principle of national sovereignty. Referring to the low levels of education among women but also to the need to remove this obstacle, Ağaoğlu argued that the constitutional deprivation of women's electoral rights could have only been "temporary."

5. State-Led Modernization and Feminist Agendas: Intersections and Struggles

Beginning in 1924, gender egalitarian policies started to be owned and implemented by the state elite but without input from the feminists. The WPP was banned in January 1924 before the adoption of the Constitution in April 1924. Nevertheless, the 1924 Constitution prescribed a gender-responsive norm despite its ignorance of women's political rights. This was for primary education, which was mandatory for boys and girls. The constitution was adopted shortly after, safeguarding secular education and state control by reformist legislation (the Law on Unification of Education). Notably, the government indirectly hampered the WPP's attempt to organize a congress on education in 1923. The governing elite, prioritizing education as a policy of republican transformation and human development, organized a state-led conference at the same time. Subsequently, the WPP issued a declaration to draw attention to including women and girls in prospective education policies.³⁷ The declaration promoted the integration of gender perspective into societal problems and reformative policies. The adoption of the gender lens in the 1924 Constitution for primary education could be regarded as a constitutional output of the WPP's claims and the tensions surrounding girls' and women's education.

Furthermore, the state elite's ownership of women's rights as a part of modernization gradually manifested between 1926–1934. The 1926 Civil

³⁶ *Ahmet Ağaoğlu ve Hukuk-ı Esasiye Ders Notları (1926-1927)*, Boğaç Erozan (Ed.), İstanbul, 2012, 194-195. Süreyya Ağaoğlu, Ahmed Ağaoğlu's daughter, was the first female attorney-at-law of Turkey. She was later known as a committed lawyer for women's rights and enrolled at Istanbul University's College of Law as the first female student in 1921.

³⁷ Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 140-141.

Code, which promoted the equal status of women in marriage, upon divorce, and in terms of inheritance and property rights, was a critical piece of legislation promoting women's rights. Developments after 1926, such as the recognition of maternity leave (1930) and women's political rights in local elections (1930) and, after that, in parliamentary elections (1934), rendered the feminist agenda in more concrete terms. However, these progressive steps were not undertaken by recognizing feminists as legitimate actors in the political sphere.

Despite modernization and its intersection with women's rights, the agendas of the republican feminists represented a challenge against patriarchal power relations. Some modernization attempts adopted feminists' prospects for egalitarian projects, but feminist agendas were more developed, progressive, and critical than the state-led socio-legal transformation. In fact, the first agenda was based on the Women's Congress in 1923, organized by a Steering Committee that included 13 feminists.³⁸ They were described as the "leaders of the women's movement" by the press.³⁹ The Committee was made up of educated women and several relatives of high-ranking Ottoman bureaucrats. The members were the representatives of women's associations in Istanbul and all female graduates of the city's high schools and vocational schools. The Congress convened at Istanbul University to frame the WPP's program and regulations. Nezihe Muhiddin, the key figure at this meeting, expressed her views for a strong form of feminist advocacy by developing a rights-based discourse: "Even if they don't grant (women's rights) to us, we will take them. Undoubtedly, the right is deserved through determination, action, and merit."⁴⁰ On various occasions, she reiterated that women deserved their rights through their intellectual involvement in the public debate and active contributions to the National Resistance. She argued that social and political modernization served as a base for equal citizenship for women.⁴¹

Following Muhiddin's rights-based discourse, the WPP's Founding Declaration declared a commitment to the direct involvement of women in social, economic, and political issues.⁴² The Declaration also referred to women's collective and structured action according to a political program. In this respect, the WPP's Regulation framed nine principles to organize women; it adopted an inclusive approach by proposing policies for women of diverse backgrounds, such as mothers, married women, women in the household, widows, orphans, and farmers and workers.⁴³ The WPP's solidarity with rural women ("Anatolian sisters") was also emphasized.

³⁸ For additional details, see Zihnioğlu, *Kadinsız İnkılap*, 122-127.

³⁹ Zihnioğlu, *Kadinsız İnkılap*, 122.

⁴⁰ In her interviews, Muhiddin regarded the right to vote as a priority: "*None of us (founders of the WPP) claim to be a representative or a deputy. Nonetheless, we claim to have a right to vote like civilized member of humanity (...)*"; for more, see Zihnioğlu, *Kadinsız İnkılap*, 126-127.

⁴¹ Zihnioğlu, *Kadinsız İnkılap*, 125, 130.

⁴² For the declarations and other documents of the WPP on the basis of the press archives, see Zihnioğlu, *Kadinsız İnkılap*, 132.

⁴³ Zihnioğlu, *Kadinsız İnkılap*, 132-135.

The guiding principle (Article 1) of the WPP's Regulation stressed that women could convoke as a political party for active engagement. It referred to the participatory action of women in matters associated directly with womanhood. Furthermore, the Regulation adopted strong wording for three issues: women's economic enhancement, the education of girls and women, and the militarization of women. It highlighted women's employment and control over financial matters vis-a-vis housework (Article 4). In addition, it referred to policy preferences for increasing domestic production and consumption, capital investment, and enterprises that profited from women's labor. Emphatically, the Regulation prescribed that necessary measures would be taken to enable military service for women in case of war (Article 7). The modernization of education for girls and women was a priority for the WPP through a variety of claims, including the prevention of early motherhood, the strong involvement of female teachers in primary education, the appointment of a woman consultant at the Ministry of Education, and specific programs helping vulnerable women (widows and orphans) (Article 6).

Regarding the right to elect and be elected, the WPP's Regulation seems to have followed a tactical approach to deflect any patriarchal backlash. The Regulation declared its commitment to work on women's participation in local elections (Article 3). However, it offered a gradual progression instead of an abrupt change for women's political rights. The entitlement to political rights was defined as a matter of "merit and deserving." Accordingly, this issue would be regulated as an additional principle of the WPP, contingent upon women proving themselves effectively in the country's political, social, and economic development (Article 2).

Indeed, the principle of political rights in the Regulation was inserted cautiously, among other points, but it was necessary against patriarchal pressure. The developments until and after the banning of the WPP show the significance of the political rights issue. The subject of political rights attracted the anti-feminist and pro-feminist press, with which the founders of the WPP had interviews to explain their stances.⁴⁴ In general, the claims about women's political participation played a central role in the engagements of republican feminists between 1924–1927. These demonstrate that political rights were the core content of the WPP's agenda and public discussion even though they were subject to soft formulations as a policy preference in the WPP's Regulation. Remarkably, the Turkish Women's Union formally proposed Nezihe Muhiddin and Halide Edip in 1925 as female candidates for a vacant seat in parliament.⁴⁵

Until the dismissal of the WPP's application as a political party in 1924, the founding feminists worked on their principles, as defined in the Regulation portrayed above. They organized a conference on family law (*Hukuk-i Aile İçtimai*) regarding the secondary status of women as it

⁴⁴ Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 136–139.

⁴⁵ Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 156–157.

pertained to the bond of marriage, divorce, and inheritance.⁴⁶ The conference put the feminist agenda on family law in concrete terms. During the conference, Nezihe Muhiddin criticized polygamy, early marriage, and *talaq*, which is the husband's unilateral annulment of a marriage.⁴⁷ With a powerful claim for women's rights, she associated the equal status of women as citizens with the secular ideals of the Republic. The conference was publicly impactful due to its feminist claims against women's subordination in the family. Since the subjugation of women in marriage was a matter of egalitarian claims raised by Ottoman feminists and the modernist elite, the conference stimulated the debate regarding reforms in family law. Receiving the support of Istanbul feminists, Mustafa Kemal canceled a study by the Islamic and Justice Commission on family law. Instead, he established a commission to prepare the Civil Code based on secular principles defying Islamic law and traditional practices.⁴⁸

The new Civil Code was adopted in 1926 and remained in effect until the current Civil Code of 2001 was adopted. Abrogating polygamy, the Civil Code of 1926 made civil marriage mandatory and recognized gender equality regarding the right to divorce and inherit; it also increased the minimum age of marriage to 18 for men and 17 for women. These vital changes denied Islamic law and customary practices. However, male domination within the family continued through various norms, such as the husband's leadership role in family affairs, including the family surname, family residence, and the husband's authority over his wife's occupation. The early republican feminists supported the egalitarian changes. The Civil Code's progressive norms showed the overlap between feminist claims and secularist modernization.⁴⁹ However, there was also feminist criticism of WPP affiliates against the clauses of the Civil Code that did not change gender hierarchies and subordination of women.⁵⁰ The Civil Code, as a piece of social reform, was confined to the legal progress and social trends that prevailed in the modernization of European states; however, feminist critics were not fully satisfied with such a Westernization benchmark because it perpetuated the status of the "second sex" in many respects.⁵¹

⁴⁶ N. Özkay, *Nezihe Muhiddin ve Türk Kadın Yolu Dergisi*, İstanbul University Institute of Social Sciences M.A. Thesis, 2017, 166.

⁴⁷ Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 143; *Türk Ocağı'nda İlk Kadın İçtimarında Nezihe Muhiddin Hanımefendi Tarafından İrad Edilen Hitabe Aynen*, in *Süs Hukuk-ı Aile Nüsha-i Mahsusası*, 23 January 1924, 3 (cited by Özkay, *Nezihe Muhiddin ve Türk Kadın Yolu Dergisi*, 166).

⁴⁸ N. Abadan Unat, *The Modernization of Turkish Women*, in 3 *Middle East Journal* (1978) 294.

⁴⁹ For an overlapping viewpoint between Kemalist reform process and the demands of women's groups, see C. Diner, Ş. Toktaş, *Waves of feminism in Turkey: Kemalist, Islamist and Kurdish women's movements in an era of globalization*, in 1 *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* (2010), 4.

⁵⁰ Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 183-184.

⁵¹ S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, H.M. Parshley (Ed., Trans.), 1953; for the limited intentions of Turkish modernization of women as better wives and mothers within the Republican patriarchy, see Z.F. Arat's *Kemalism and Turkish Women*, in 1 *Women & Politics* (1994) 57-80.

In general, women's rights being part of a state-led political agenda fostered the legal system's secularist development and served the modernization project. Significantly, the civil marriage clause of the Civil Code (1926) is still under constitutional protection, assisting the interpretation of the secular state (Article 174 of the Constitution). The debate on women's rights has shaped the power struggles over the role of religion in Turkey's political system throughout the republican era. More recently, when the Turkish parliament adopted new legislation in 2017 allowing Muftis—religious civil servants—to perform civil marriages, this led to concerns about both secularism and women's rights.⁵²

An analysis of the press between 1923–1924 shows that the WPP was at the epicenter of the public debate on recognizing women as equal citizens in the new Republic. The WPP asserted that women's rights belonged within the framework of socio-economic development and republican ideals, such as popular sovereignty and republican egalitarianism. The WPP's mobilization took on various forms of civic engagement. The collective actions of the WPP focused on structured conferences, reflective declarations, policy recommendations, and coalition building with pro-feminist male figures (such as journalists Ahmet Emin, Mehmet Emin, and Suphi Nuri). Feminist public figures became vocal and highly visible, explaining and disseminating the WPP's political goals. Individual expressions from the feminist leadership attracted public attention; these women clearly expressed their well-informed and articulated claims for the legitimacy of women's rights.⁵³ Despite the WPP's complementary role in the country's modernization and its constructive criticism, it represented an oppositional force within the overall republican project. In the first months of 1924, the WPP announced the decision that its application was rejected because of the content of several aspects of its party program.

6. The Turkish Women's Union: Women's Engagement as Civic Society Actors

Following the government's rejection of the WPP, republican feminists organized themselves by establishing a traditional association, the Turkish Women's Union (TWU). The TWU adhered to institutionalization but adopted an attenuated strategy for women's rights to eliminate the risk of potential rejection. Significantly, the political rights clauses of the WPP Regulation (Articles 2 and 3) were not part of the TWU's Regulation. The TWU was expressly defined as a non-political organization that did not involve itself in politics (Article 3).⁵⁴ The WPP's policy goals about social rights, egalitarian family law, and women's military service were not

⁵² G. İlhan, *İzmirli Kadınlar "Muftülere Nikah Yetkisine Hayır" Dedi*, 18.10.2017, *Bianet*, at <https://bianet.org/bianet/kadin/190713-izmirli-kadinlar-muftulere-nikah-yetkisine-hayir-dedi>.

⁵³ For several interviews and opinions by Nezihe Muhiddin, Şukufe Nihal, Güzide Osman, Efzayiş Yusuf, Fatma Aliye, Sabiha Zekeriya, and Nebiye Necmeddin, see Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 135–147.

⁵⁴ Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 151–152.

included in the TWU's Regulation. Instead, general clauses were introduced that concerned women's intellectual and societal advancement, motherhood, children, women's economic productivity, and the encouragement to consume domestic products.

Nonetheless, the TWU's activities between 1923–1927 demonstrated that republican feminists did not give up their goal to realize women's political rights. They acted strategically by changing the TWU's Regulation to coordinate their actions under a civic organization. Between 1923–1925, the TWU focused on motherhood, family, children, and the economic productivity of women and girls through its philanthropic activities. These activities included social projects such as establishing an orphanage submitted to the Ministry of Education, supported by Latife Hanım, Atatürk's spouse.⁵⁵ At the same time, the TWU's leading figures voiced their demands in the press and at conferences for women's advancement in education, working life, and high-quality occupations. Accordingly, the TWU seemingly mobilized its base through philanthropic or low-risk claims (such as girls' education and women's economic participation) to deflect any negative attention from the ruling elite. Concurrently, it strengthened its organizational structure; a press analysis of the period demonstrates that the TWU operated with various committees by actively involving its female and male members.

In 1925, the TWU's strategy started actively addressing women's participatory rights in various ways. Internationalization was one used to promote the voting rights of women. The TWU developed its ties with international women's alliances, such as the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, to act in a coordinated manner.⁵⁶ *Kadın Yolu* (Woman's Path) was released as a journal under the editorial leadership of Nezihe Muhittin (1925–1927). This publication was influential in disseminating the views of the TWU after some initial editions. It informed the public and the state elite about policies promoting women's inclusion in society.

As the TWU systematically defended women's rights between 1925–1926 through different actions, social policies towards the realization of the equal status of women were progressively adopted. The adoption of the new Civil Code on egalitarian terms, the liberalization of women's attires, and the abrogation of gender segregation in public transportation were among these policies. It was remarkable that the new Civil Code was also critically assessed in *Women's Path* from a gender perspective. There was even a call for parliament to overcome its shortcomings by effectuating changes that would be more woman-friendly.⁵⁷

Reformist activism for female enfranchisement began with the work of the TWU in 1925. When a parliamentary seat became vacant, the TWU nominated two women as candidates. These candidates were two republican intellectuals and public figures of women's engagement: Halide Edip and Nezihe Muhittin; the latter was the TWU's chairperson. Such a change in

⁵⁵ Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 154, 155–156.

⁵⁶ Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 171–172.

⁵⁷ Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 184.

the TWU's strategy—demanding women's political participation with concrete nominations—was the first example of an activist campaign after a period of silence from republican feminists. This development also attracted the interest of the foreign press by increasing hope about forcing action on women's suffrage.⁵⁸

The TWU's reformist activism was again manifested in June 1927. First, women's suffrage was included in the TWU's regulation.⁵⁹ Second, the TWU nominated female candidates for the upcoming election through the PRP. Initially, the TWU proposed four women candidates. However, the republican elite objected to the TWU's attempt, referring to the constitutional clause reserving political rights for men only. Considering this constitutional barrier, the TWU visited the president, Mustafa Kemal Pasha, to demand a constitutional amendment.⁶⁰ Moreover, it prepared an electoral declaration that can be defined as a feminist manifesto for women's suffrage.⁶¹ This declaration expressed the significance of the new Civil Code for recognition of the equal status of women before the law. It called for equal rights for women and men in the political field and public administration based on indifference regarding their educational status and skills. The declaration was supported by a campaign promoting both women's suffrage and male candidates supporting women's rights. Furthermore, the TWU adopted a draft for a statutory amendment (an additional clause) regarding women's political rights in municipal elections.⁶² However, the TWU's electoral strategy changed its course regarding women candidates. Muhittin announced that the TWU would nominate male candidates who supported women-friendly policies in their electoral programs. She described the campaign as mobilizing the feminist wave publicly and among parliamentarians.⁶³

In 1927, The TWU's feminist campaign significantly impacted the parliamentary debate on women's political participation. The deliberations on the legislation regarding military duty included references to the demands of the TWU for women's suffrage. The positive and supportive views were expressed for future changes in the Constitution that would secure women's political rights as a matter of democratic maturity.⁶⁴ Yet, there was also a reactionary and undermining tone inviting women to do

⁵⁸ *Turkish Women Nominated: Two Run for Assembly in the Hope of Forcing Action on Suffrage*, 2 March 1924, *The New York Times (Archive)*, 4; for the reference in The Chicago Tribune, see Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 158

⁵⁹ M. Balcı, M. Tuzak, *Cumhuriyetin İlk Yıllarında Nezihe Muhiddin Özelinde Türk Kadınlarının Siyasal Hakları İçin Mücadelesi*, in 1 *Marmara Üniversitesi Kadın ve Toplumsal Cinsiyet Araştırmaları Dergisi* (2017) 47.

⁶⁰ Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 208-209.

⁶¹ Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 209.

⁶² Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 208-209.

⁶³ Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 210.

⁶⁴ Yunus Nadi's intervention and comparison with Recep Peker's and Hakkı Tarık Us' interventions, Minutes of the GNAT, Term 2, Volume 33, Year of Session: 4, Seventy Ninth Session, 21 June 1927, 385-386.

their military duty, reminding them that there were more honorable services to the motherland than political involvement.⁶⁵

The TWU's feminist campaign, based on an open and activist approach in 1927, also created societal momentum. The campaign was developed by institutionalized (e.g., congress and committee work), discursive (e.g., press contributions and interviews), informative (e.g., the Women's Path, declarations, and drafts), and coalition-building strategies (e.g., partnerships with male feminists). Press archives confirm that the TWU opened local branches, and its membership reached high levels—700–800 members.⁶⁶ Notably, *İkdam* (Effort), one of the leading dailies of the early republican era, supported the feminist struggle for women's political rights by defining these rights as “the most legitimate demand.”⁶⁷ However, the TWU's autonomous, discursive, and influence-seeking involvement between 1925–1927 triggered a patriarchal backlash again.⁶⁸ The TWU and its leading figures, particularly Nezihe Muhittin, were ridiculed, disdained, and criticized in the mainstream press as nervous propagandists. Critics were similar to anti-suffragette reactions in the UK that labeled British suffragettes hysterical fanatics.⁶⁹

Significantly, the TWU's activism revealed the cleavages in the women's movement that also became obvious after the constitutional adoption of women's political rights. Some public figures of the republican era did not support the TWU's political demands for female enfranchisement. For instance, Muallim Nakiye, who served both in educational institutions and women's organizations as a well-known teacher, opposed the TWU's suffragette campaigns by praising the republican government and its policies.⁷⁰ Her views represented an alignment with the positioning of the ruling elite. Strikingly, she was nominated by the ruling elite of the PRP in the 1935 elections shortly after the constitutional amendments on women's political participation.⁷¹ Muallim Nakiye served as one of the first female deputies in the Turkish Parliament but without the support of any feminist activist group. Additionally, Halide Edip did not

⁶⁵ See particularly Recep Peker's interventions, Minutes of the GNAT, Term 2, Volume 33, Year of Session: 4, Seventy Ninth Session, 21 June 1927, 385.

⁶⁶ For additional data on news found in Cumhuriyet, see Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 219.

⁶⁷ For *İkdam*, see Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 158.

⁶⁸ For discursive evidence of political backlash, see Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 158–165, 188–189.

⁶⁹ For examples of more aggressive and harsh stances in the British context, see L. Boyce, *The Bristol Suffragettes*, Bristol, 2013.

⁷⁰ Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 158; for active involvement of Muallim Nakiye in civil society and educational matters as a public figure and teacher, see Ş. Kurnaz, *Milli Mücadelede Türk Kadını*, in 34 *Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Dergisi* (1996) 261; Y. Pustu, *Muallimler Cemiyetinden İstanbul Muallimler Birliğine Bir Meslek Örgütünün Serencamı (1918-1936)*, in 71 *Ankara Üniversitesi Türk İnkılâp Tarihi Enstitüsü Atatürk Yolu Dergisi/Journal of Atatürk Yolu* (2022) 237.

⁷¹ A. Sezer, *Türkiye'de İlk Kadın Milletvekilleri ve Meclisteki Çalışmaları*, in 42 *Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Dergisi* (1998) 898, 903–904.

directly support the TWU's suffragette actions, and she refused her nomination by the TWU in the parliamentary elections.⁷²

The suffrage campaign made the TWU a significant actor in the public forum. However, it was still perceived by the ruling elite as a "group" or "delegation" claiming to be the representative of womanhood.⁷³ Women's political rights were not a priority for the government but rather an issue that could be discussed during democratic developments. The PRP's programs did not adopt any provisions regarding women's rights in 1923 or 1927. The party explicitly adopted the principle of gender equality for political rights in its program in 1931 to realize the changes for local and parliamentary elections.⁷⁴ This also shows that the TWU's demand was more progressive than the political preferences of the ruling elite. As the TWU's suffrage campaign gained momentum, the government initiated investigations against the TWU and Nezihe Muhiddin in July-August 1927 because of financial irregularities and fraudulence. Muhiddin was tried on various grounds and ousted from the TWU. She was also subject to degrading treatment in the press during the judicial proceedings. The charges against her were later dropped in legislation on general amnesty. The republican feminists supporting Muhiddin were eliminated from the TWU by a new group of women who did not pursue women's political rights, devoting themselves instead to philanthropic projects (1927–1935).⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the recognition of women's political rights was still regarded as an achievement of the republican feminists in the public conscience.⁷⁶ This was women's suffrage recognized by the state elite at the expense of exclusion and silencing of feminists represented by Muhiddin and her colleagues.

7. Women's Political Rights without Feminists: Constitutional Amendments of 1934

⁷² Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 157. Halide Edip was elected in 1950 as the deputy of İzmir from the list of the Democrat Party that was the opposition of the CHP between 1946-1950. Edip was known with her support for liberal constitutionalism in her writings. She was also a strong proponent of an effective constitutional court to limit the parliamentary supremacy, see H.E. Adivar, *Türkiye'de Şark-Garp ve Amerikan Tesirleri*, İstanbul, 2009, 293; İ. Enginün, *Halide Edip Adivar'ın Eserlerinde Doğu ve Batı Meselesi*, İstanbul, 1978, 450.

⁷³ See Recep Peker, who did not mention the TWU explicitly but referred to it as a claimant group and delegation, Minutes of the GNAT, Session 2, Volume 33, Year of Session: IV, Seventy Ninth Session, 21 June 1927.

⁷⁴ *CHF Nizamnamesi ve Programı*, Ankara, 1931, TBMM Matbaası, Program Birinci Kısım/4 Amme Hukuku, 30; E. Tuncer, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi Programları, 1923-1976*, 50; T. Parla, *Türkiye'de Siyasal Kültürün Resmi Kaynakları: Kemalist Tek Parti İdeolojisi ve CHP'nin Altı Ok'u / III*, İstanbul, 1992, 29; Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 221, 256.

⁷⁵ For the leadership of Latife Bekir, see E. Öztürk, *Türk Kadınının Feminizme Bakışı*, İstanbul, 2007, 176.

⁷⁶ Zihnioğlu, *Kadınsız İnkılap*, 254.

In 1934, a constitutional amendment led to women's electoral rights in the most complete sense. However, the first step for women's suffrage was taken in 1930. The legislative changes of that year secured the political rights of women during municipal elections. The changes were enacted on the same day (3 April 1930), and Afet İnan organized a conference on women's political rights before the ruling elite in Ankara.⁷⁷ İnan was an educator (later a professor of history) and one of Atatürk's adopted daughters. This conference was very effective, with its strong claims and comparative references on women's suffrage.⁷⁸ The move was interpreted as a strategy of communication implemented by Atatürk to convince parliament to enact legislative changes.⁷⁹ İsmet İnönü, a leading political figure of republican modernism and the prime minister at the time, made an influential speech on the significance of the political rights of women during constitutional deliberations in 1934.⁸⁰ He justified women's electoral rights by mentioning equality and their right to serve the motherland. İnönü described the recognition of women's electoral rights as a new phase in the nation's life and a reflection of Turkish reformism. These communicative and discursive elements in the constitutional politics manifest that the women's suffrage was owned and realized by the state elite as a part of republican modernization.

The TWU was dissolved by an internal decision in 1935 on the grounds that women's rights and gender equality are finally guaranteed for everyone at the constitutional level.⁸¹ In a series of interviews with women from different segments of society in the newspaper *Cumhuriyet* in 1935, similar views were also discernible.⁸² In the 1935 parliamentary elections, 17 female deputies from diverse geographical areas—from Istanbul to Diyarbakır—comprised 4.5% of parliament. The presence of rural women like Satı Çırpan among these deputies was regarded as a symbol of

⁷⁷ Z. Toprak, *Türkiye'de Kadın Özgürlüğü ve Feminizm (1908-1935)*, İstanbul, 2022, 374.

⁷⁸ For the full text of the conference, see Toprak, *Türkiye'de Kadın Özgürlüğü ve Feminizm (1908-1935)*, 375-380.

⁷⁹ Toprak, *Türkiye'de Kadın Özgürlüğü ve Feminizm (1908-1935)*, 369. Afet İnan's writings, considered textbooks on constitutional law, had already defended women's suffrage in 1930; for more, see A. İnan, *İntihap: Yurt Bilgisi Notlarımdan*, İstanbul, 1930.

⁸⁰ 5 Kânunuevvel 1934 Çarşamba [5 December 1934 Wednesday], *Malatya Mebusu General İsmet İnönü ve 191 Arkadaşının Teşkilatı Esasiye Kanunun 10 ve 11 inci Maddeler ile İntihabı Mebusan Kanunun Bazı Maddelerinin Değiştirilmesi ve Bu Kanuna bir Madde Eklenmesi Hakkında Kanun Teklifi Dolayısıyla Yaptığı Konuşma (Türk Kadınlarına Milletvekili Seçme ve Seçilme Hakkının Tanınması)* [Recognition of Women's Rights to Vote and to Be Elected as a Member of Parliament], in İ. Neziroğlu, T. Yılmaz (Eds.), *Başbakanlarımız ve Genel Kurul Konuşmaları*, 2, Ankara, 2014, 208-210.

⁸¹ For more in the newspapers *Cumhuriyet* and *Akşam*, see Yurdsever Ateş, *Yeni Harflerle Kadın Yolu / Türk Kadın Yolu (1921-1927)*, 48; for a more detailed account, see G. Bozkır, *Türk Kadınının Siyasi Haklarını Kazanması ve Türk Kadınlar Birliği*, in *75 Toplumsal Tarih* (2000) 21.

⁸² See the views of Semahat Beydeş (teacher) in *Kadın Saylav Olursa*, *Cumhuriyet*, 1 February 1935; for an opposite view in favor of the Union, see Nebahat Hamide (teacher) in *Kadın Saylav Olursa*, *Cumhuriyet*, 29 January 1935 (from the archive of *Cumhuriyet*).

republican ideals—the realization of both the “women’s revolution” and social inclusion.⁸³ In 1936, the interval election increased the number of women in parliament to 18. The female representation rate observed following the 1935 elections was the highest rate of the republican era until 2007; it was exceeded only in 2007 with a rate of 8.85% and reached 20% by 2023.

8. Conclusion

The republican feminists were politically mobilized agents of the early republican era, employing structured, institutional, and progressive visions for Turkish modernization. They deployed diverse feminist strategies—from establishing a political party to constitutional claims. However, they were ultimately excluded from both constitutional politics and the political sphere. The constitutional discussions, modernization policies, and state interventions between 1924–1934 demonstrate that a combination of structural and political factors led to their exclusion. These include the entrenched patriarchal power structures, republican policies rejecting identity claims, and the incorporation of women’s rights into modernization through state-led reforms. However, republican feminism significantly impacted the public debate by improving policies on women’s rights. Yet, the governing elite delivered the final decision that the republican feminist movement would be excluded from the public and political spheres.

The achievement of women’s rights as an integral part of modernization also marked the end of first-wave feminism in Turkey, which began in the late Ottoman era and continued until the 1934 amendments. The feminist revival actively emerged in the political scene again in the 1980s after the coup as an independent social movement. The second wave feminism of 1980s flourished through its identity politics that created an arena of contestation both against authoritarianism and patriarchal structures within other social movements. Until now, the feminist advocacy has manifested itself vividly in various associations, local networks, and/or issue-specific platforms. The feminist structures have effectively provided collaborative actions in crucial matters despite the ideological, ethnic, and religious divides.

Male hegemony is the defining feature of Turkish politics in terms of women’s representation and participation. The lack of equal recognition of women in constitutional politics strongly reinforces male power structures at the institutional and policy level.⁸⁴ The constitutional amendments on gender equality in 2001 (equality of spouses), 2004 (*de facto* gender equality), and 2010 (constitutionality of positive actions for the underrepresented sex) were put forth by parliamentary majorities in which women deputies made up less than 15%. However, the extra-parliamentary feminist groups and their coalition-building strategies with women’s parliamentarians

⁸³ S. Çakır, *Erkek Kulübünde Siyaset, Kadın Parlamenterlerle Sözlü Tarih*, İstanbul, 2013, 125.

⁸⁴ For institutionalization of male supremacy and women’s political participation in general, see C.A. Mackinnon, *Gender in Constitutions*, in M. Rosenfeld, A. Sajó (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Constitutional Law*, Oxford, 2012, 16.

influenced the political debate and outcomes.⁸⁵ The reinforcement of male political hegemony has taken on different forms in recent years and is accompanied by gender backlash policies, including the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and suppression of feminist organizations.⁸⁶ The current challenge the feminists face is not only to protect the past achievements of women's rights groups but also their institutional survival against the regressive attacks of state-led policies simultaneously imposing autocratic measures. Despite the containment policies, the feminist advocacy is an ever resilience and vibrant agent of Turkish civic society in many ways. Its multiple modes of institutionalization and strategies at the local and national level represent its strength. Besides preventive strategies challenging the anti-gender agendas of autocratization and survival strategies against the suppression, the feminist advocacy is still the key actor for developing a constitutional agenda of women's rights for equal citizenship that opens a space for democratization. This feminist capacity is the hardship of the anti-gender and autocratic politics at present.

Bertil Emrah Oder
Koc University Law School
Rumelifeneri Yolu 34450, Sarıyer/Istanbul, Turkey
boder@ku.edu.tr

⁸⁵ B.E. Oder, *Women and Constitution-Making in Turkey: From Ottoman Modernism to a Constitutionalism of Women's Platform* in R. Rubio-Marín, H. Irving (Eds.), *Women as Constitution-Makers: Case Studies from the New Democratic Era*, Cambridge, 2019, 270-313.

⁸⁶ Ö. Altan-Olcay, B.E. Oder, Why Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention is a global problem, 2 June 2021, *Open Democracy*, at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/why-turkeys-withdrawal-from-the-istanbul-convention-is-a-global-problem/>; Ç. Tahaoğlu, *The Closure Case Against the We Will Stop Femicides Platform Has Been Adjourned Until September*, 5 April 2023, at <https://www.mlsaturkey.com/en/the-closure-case-against-the-we-will-stop-femicides-platform-has-been-adjourned-until-september/>.

