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Nezihe Muhiddin and the Struggle for Women's Franchise. The Defeat of Feminism by Nationalism in Early Republican Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on Nezihe Muhiddin, a pioneering figure in Turkish–Ottoman first-wave feminism, who sought to secure women's political rights by attempting to establish the *Women's People Party* in 1923, over a decade before women gained suffrage. After the party's rejection, she founded the Turkish Women's Union in 1924 to continue her endeavour. However, internal conflicts and a smear campaign led to her expulsion, the end of her political career, and her eventual oblivion. This paper interprets Muhiddin's marginalization as a watershed moment in the struggle between feminism and nationalism, contributing to the establishment of a nationalist and patriarchal Turkish state. Drawing on Jill Vickers' concepts of 'women-friendly democracies' and 'getting on the ground floor', it contends that Muhiddin's exclusion from the Republic's founding moment had enduring consequences for women's political participation and continues to significantly impact the low level of female political participation in contemporary Turkey.

1 | Introduction

Turkish women have some of the lowest political representation in Parliament worldwide, according to the Global Gender Gap Index Report (World Economic Forum 2024 online). Turkey ranks 114th out of 146 countries in terms of Political Empowerment and finished last in the regional grouping of Central Asia in 2023, preceding only Azerbaijan and Tajikistan. In 2024, as part of the 'Europe' subgroup, it outperformed Hungary, which is at the bottom of the rankings. On a scale of 0–100, where scores are understood as the distance travelled toward parity (i.e., the percentage of the gender gap closed), Turkey's Political Empowerment Gender Rank score is 0.118. This means that Turkish women have attained only 11.8% equality compared to Turkish men as political subjects.

How can this be possible in a relatively young democratic country founded in 1923 by an enlightened, laic, and modern man like Mustafa Kemal Atatürk? Many critics have attributed the fault to the present administration and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP [*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*]), which has been in power for more than 20 years, claiming that their 'conservative, pro-Islamic' family policies have 'diminished women's public role and driven them back into domestic roles' (Santos Fernandes n.d.). Fernandes talks of a 'gendering de-democratization' that has witnessed its most visible moment in Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021.

A multitude of studies have confirmed the AKP's conservative and patriarchal approach to gender issues (Coşar and Yeğenoğlu 2011; Yazıcı 2012; Acar and Altunok 2013;

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Cindoğlu and Ünal 2016; Güneş-Ayata and Doğangün 2017; Akkan 2018; Aksoy 2018; Doyle 2018; Koyuncu and Özman 2019; Doğangün 2020; Yarar 2020; Arat 2021; Eroler 2023) and labelled it in various ways: 'neoliberal patriarchy' (Coşar and Yeğenoğlu 2011), 'masculinist restoration' (Kandiyoti 2016), 'religio-conservative gender climate' (Güneş-Ayata and Doğangün 2017) and 'neoconservative feminism' (Yarar 2020).

Nobody can deny that gender equality practices and regulations have regressed since the AKP came to power in 2002. However, when we examine Turkish women's political representation in the decades preceding the AKP's government, dating back to the Kemalist and Republican eras, we do not see a significantly different picture of women's political empowerment. In 1982, Şirin Tekeli stated that women's presence in Turkish politics was so low that it would be more accurate to discuss their absence than their underrepresentation (Tekeli 1982: 287). As confirmed by Drechselová:

> 'To get a sense of the absence of women from politics throughout the Republican era, it is enough to browse the booklets of the National Assembly ('TBMM Albümü' n.d.). These brochures feature all elected deputies with pictures and short biographies. It is a parade of black and white male faces in which women's photographs are extremely rare. This reflects the very low levels of women's representation during the decades following the acquisition of political rights.'
>
> (2020: 49)

There seems to be quite a paradox in the Turkish political representation of women. With 18 women (4.5% of the Assembly) in the 1935 Parliament, Turkey had the largest percentage of female deputies in Europe at the time and was the first sovereign nation in the Middle East to grant women the right to vote (Jayawardena 1986:38). However, in 1946 this proportion went down to 0.3% and did not exceed 4.4% until 2007 when it reached 9.1%. This percentage has increased to 17.6% in 2015 and has reached 20.1% in 2023, with 121 women MPs among 600 total deputies. Looking at the figures, we can see that while women's political representation is lower than in most Western countries, it has never been greater in Turkish history. It appears that women's political representation has increased in tandem with the rise of authoritarian control, and there is no inherent link between democracy and the share of women in electoral politics.

If we look closer at AKP's policies pertaining to women, we see that they are grounded in religion, nationalism and neoliberalism (Coşar and Yeğenoğlu 2011: 557; Coşar and Özkan-Kerestecioğlu 2017:2). Women are considered cornerstones of the institution of the family (Insel 2003: 304), and this view is not very different from the paternalistic logic of the Kemalist regime (Parmaksız 2016: 40). It appears evident that despite a century as a republic, the Turkish government's perception of women and of their role in society has remained largely unchanged. As summarized by Drechselová, 'The symbolic significance of women's inclusion in politics and its instrumentalization appear clearly in these first republican decades and can be traced until today' (2020:42).

To interpret the current underrepresentation of women in Turkish politics, we need to go back to the origins of the Republic, to its founding moment, and to the struggle between feminism and nationalism that, also in Turkey, as in many young democracies, has taken place and whose final result is still deeply ingrained in the patriarchal DNA of the country. The analysis and recognition of this missed opportunity are, however, important for today's Turkish women's empowerment as it offers a new perspective on the agency of Ottoman Turkish women within the founding moment of the Republic and establishes a legacy between yesterday's and today's demand for women's rights.

2 | Scope and Theoretical Framework

Building on Jill Vickers's research on 'women-friendly democracies' (2006a, 2006b, 2013, 2018), this paper examines Nezihe Muhiddin's unsuccessful efforts within the broader context of nationalism and feminism and their implications for contemporary Turkish democracy. Vickers posits that women's participation in the founding of nation–states correlates with more inclusive democracies. This article argues that the marginalisation of Muhiddin and other feminist activists[1] was not a minor or necessary compromise for national unity but a foundational perception of Turkish nationalism as a masculine domain, led by a paternal figure, relegating women to supportive roles as mothers, wives, and daughters. Such male-dominated nationalism suppressed early feminist efforts, replacing them with a state-controlled feminism that created a benevolent myth of women's inclusion, which does not reflect the historical reality of Ottoman Turkish women's active engagement in the suffrage movement.

This article is aimed at providing a nuanced perspective on Nezihe Muhiddin's engagement with the national project, focusing not only on the reasons behind her failure but also on her complete erasure from the official history of the Turkish Republic. It is widely acknowledged that, at the inception of the republic, women who were vocal about women's issues were isolated and forced out of political life, while female candidates loyal to the regime were selected. Mustafa Kemal and his close circle handpicked the 18 female deputies for the 1935 national elections (Drechselová 2020:49). Arat describes this as a pact between the Republican state and women: 'In exchange for docile allegiance to the state, women received opportunities to expand their role in society' (Arat 2008:395).

While these facts are accepted by mainstream critics, the reasons and consequences of this top–down manoeuvre on women's subordinate position in political and public life remain controversial. A common stance among mainstream researchers is to dismiss feminists' struggle for political rights, justifying it with the claim that conditions were not 'not yet favourable' (Yürük 2023:744). Emre Yürük summarizes this view, noting that although Turkey was among the first countries to grant women the right to vote and run for office, the absence of other political formations besides the ruling party meant that Turkish women did not engage in an organized struggle for political

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rights, which is considered normal given the political circumstances of the time (748).

The symbolic significance of women 'being granted' the right to vote by the regime as they 'did not engage' in an organized struggle cannot be underestimated, nor can the legacy of this exclusion on women's current low participation in political life. As Vickers affirms, the extent to which women's rights and gender equality are accepted as fundamental principles during nation building is decisive in creating a women-friendly nation:

> If women achieve citizenship when men do, and if when they help create founding discourses, and achieve an earlier and higher 'presence' in state and political institutions, the resulting democracy will be more 'women-friendly'.
>
> (Vickers 2006b:2)

Her comparative analysis of 10 Western democracies shows that in countries where men monopolized institutions for generations (as in the United States, United Kingdom, France and Italy, for example), resistance to women's entry persisted after democratization. Conversely, in countries where women and men became citizens together (as in Finland, Norway and New Zealand), women's inclusion became a core element of the new nation, leading to higher female participation in politics and state institutions (15). Thus, male-dominated parties are often resistant to change; however, when women are involved from the outset—when they 'get on the ground floor', during the formation of the new nation–states—it can be the key factor distinguishing 'women-friendly' democracies from enduring 'male bastions' (21).

Following these premises, the nonintegration of Muhiddin's endeavours into the construction of the Turkish Republic and her absence from its foundational moments are central in the current male-dominated political scene and continue to impact modern Turkey's low political participation. The defeat of Muhiddin's feminist arguments for women's self-earned right to suffrage and her complete removal from Republican history, substituted by a deferred paternalistic and benevolent inclusion of women, has conferred upon Turkish politics the 'natural' justification of women's exclusion from political power, except as men's protégés.

Moreover, Muhiddin's attempt to found a political party and secure voting rights for women, though unsuccessful, demonstrates the existence of a group of enlightened feminist intellectuals active before the War of Independence and the proclamation of the Republic. However, their role in acquiring the franchise has been erased by Republican Turkey, with the Kemalist position maintaining that women never struggled for their rights and that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk granted them civil and political rights.

This article proposes a critical reading of this partial 'myth of the origin' (Wright 2004), focusing on Nezihe Muhiddin's attempt to 'get on the ground floor' (Vickers 2006b:4) of the newly formed Turkish Republic, with a special focus on the years 1923–1927, and analysing the reasons for her failure. Her exclusion from the Republic's founding is viewed as emblematic of the struggle between feminism and nationalism, resulting in a nationalist and patriarchal Turkish state.

Additionally, it seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on nationalism and feminism by examining women's involvement in nationalist movements beyond the Euro-American context, highlighting not only these women's feminist ideologies but also the influence of patriarchal norms on the documentation, narration, and reinterpretation of history.

After a brief overview of the complex relationship between feminism and nationalism, this study will examine Nezihe Muhiddin's failed attempt to establish the Women's People Party and her expulsion from the Turkish Women's Union (WU) (TWU), analyse the government's refusal to recognise the party and recount the events leading to her resignation from the Union's presidency in September 1927 and to her erasure from official Turkish history.

3 | The Difficult Relation Between Feminism and Nationalism in the Nation-Building Process

Early feminist theorists examining women's roles in national construction—such as Enloe (1989), McClintock (1996), Moghadam (1994), Nelson and Chowdhury (1994), Parker et al. (1992) and West (1997)—contend that while nationalist movements often mobilise women, they simultaneously reinforce traditional gender roles, limiting women's agency. Jayawardena (1986) notes that women's participation in anticolonial struggles can be empowering; however, postindependence nationalist agendas frequently marginalise women's rights. Similarly, Moghadam (1994), Kaplan (1997) and Mayer (2000) highlight that nationalism often confines women to idealised roles like mothers and wives, viewing challenges to these roles as threats to national unity. Yuval-Davis (1997) further contends that gender relations are integral to national projects, affecting citizenship and cultural reproduction. Overall, these theorists emphasise the tension between feminist and nationalist objectives, with nationalism often subordinating gender equality to national cohesion.

In the past two decades, scholarship on nationalism and feminism has shifted from generalizations about nationalism's impact on women's rights to nuanced analyses of specific historical and empirical contexts (Cockburn 2000, 2007; Walby 2000; Herr 2003; O'Keefe 2013). Recent studies explore intersections between nationalism and feminism or queer movements, sometimes co-opted for Islamophobic agendas. Farris (2017) introduces 'femonationalism', describing the appropriation of feminist themes by nationalists and neoliberals in anti-Islam campaigns, often involving feminists and femocrats in stigmatizing Muslim men under the guise of gender equality. Puar (2007, 2013) discusses 'homonationalism', the alignment of LGBTQ+ rights with nationalist ideologies. Other concepts include 'queer nationalism', 'sexual nationalism' (Fassin 2011) or 'enlightened fundamentalism' (Fekete 2006).

In Turkey, gendered analyses of nationalism began in the 1990s, primarily by female scholars from sociology,

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political science, anthropology, and literature, focusing on gender issues and the origins of Turkish feminism. Pioneering works by Abadan-Unat (1978), Şirin Tekeli (1982), Ayşe Durakbaşa (1988), Fatmagül Berktay (1990), Yeşim Arat (1991), Nilüfer Göle (1991), Zehra Arat (1998) and Deniz Kandiyoti (1988, 1991) laid the foundation for subsequent research. Second-generation scholars in the 2000s, including Serpil Çakır, Serpil Sancar, Nükhet Sirman, Zihnioğlu Yaprak, Ayşe Gül Altinay, Ayşegül Baykan, Necla Akgökçe, Aynur İlyasoğlu and Elif Ekin Akşit,[2] have expanded upon these studies.

A notable development in Turkish scholarship in the last decades has been the critical reassessment of gender, ethnicity, and nationalism's interplay with the nation–state. This reevaluation has led to investigations of women's roles across ethnic and religious lines, both historically and contemporaneously.[3] Vibrant research has emerged on Kurdish (Al-Ali and Tas, 2018; Al-Ali and Pratt 2011; Çaha 2011; Çağlayan, 2007; Yuksel, 2006; Çaglayan, 2024; Weiss 2010), Armenian (Rowe 2008; Ekmekçioğlu and Bilal 2010; Avakian 2010) and Circassian (Doğan 2010) feminist nationalisms. Scholars have critiqued the 'secularist bias' in Turkish feminism (Keskin 2002; Keskin-Kozat 2003) and the influence of 'methodological nationalism', which assumes the normative claims of nationalism as socio-ontological given (Beck and Sznaider 2006). This perspective has led to conflating republican citizenship with an ethnicized nationhood, establishing the '(ethnically) Turkish-Sunni Muslim' identity as the normative standard (Adak and Altınay 2010: 15). Additionally, the homogenisation of Ottoman women's experience has often centred solely on urban Muslim Turkish women, overlooking the diverse contribution of women from other religious and ethnic communities (Berktay 2003). Recent literature has begun to address these gaps by examining feminist Ottoman women from various *millets* involved in women's movements and associations (Ekmekçioğlu 2004; Altınay 2014; Öztürkmen 2013; Köksal and Falierou 2013; Faroqhi 2023).

Concurrently, analyses of Ottoman–Turkish women's political inclusion patterns are aimed at providing new insights into the complex relationship between the Kemalist regime and feminist activists. These studies strive to reconstruct a less polarised historical narrative and understand the roots of women's underrepresentation in Republican political life, a topic that will be further explored in the following section.

4 | Nezihe Muhiddin: A Rediscovered Intellectual and Feminist Leader

Nezihe Muhiddin is a very special figure, one of the leading personalities of the transition period from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic, an Ottoman–Turkish women's rights defender and a thinker who started her first social activities at the age of 20 in 1909, in the first year of the Second Constitution. She was not only an activist but also a sociologist, a very good orator, a charismatic personality and, in today's terms, a feminist and a writer at the same time. A 'full-fledged intellectual' in Zorlu and Doğangün's definition (2024), whose specific intellectual lens was 'the product of a combination of enlightenment progressivism, Comtean positivism and Romantic nationalism' (126).

Her early engagement with European and Ottoman literature informed her progressive ideals. In *Türk Kadını* (1931), she reflects on formative discussions about womanhood and societal issues with enlightened women, including her cousin Nakiye Hanım, whom she calls 'my first tutor.' At 20, she began teaching science and later became the director of Selçuk Hatun Lycée. Her first novel, *Şebab-ı Tebah*, was published in 1911, and she went on to author approximately 20 novels. Between 1909 and 1930, Muhiddin became increasingly active in advocating for women's civil and political rights.

In May 1923, before Mustafa Kemal established the first group in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey [*Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi*], she initiated the formation of the Woman's People Party (WPP) to gain political and social rights for women. However, this demand was considered too bold for the time, and in February 1924, permission was denied. She went on to found the TWU, whose presidency she held until 1927. In September 1927, she was outcasted and accused of being an 'extremist' and later of corruption. Her reputation was destroyed, and she gradually abandoned the public scene. In 1931, she published her bibliographic book *Türk Kadını*, which is now the center of new studies and renewed interest, even if the tone of the book seems much more apologetic and remissive compared to her bold magazine articles from previous years. She spent her last days, forgotten, in a mental hospital where she died in 1958.

After the 1930s, the name of Nezihe Muhiddin and her role within the question of the franchise for women in Turkey were completely deleted by Republican Turkey. Afet Inan, the adopted daughter of Mustafa Kemal and the symbol of the modern Republican Turkish woman, does not refer to Muhiddin in her book *Atatürk ve Türk Kadın Haklarının Kazanılması* (Atatürk and the Attainment of Women's rights] (1970) even if *Türk Kadını* is listed in the source list. She is also ignored by other official historians such as Tezer Taşkıran and Hamide Topçuğlu. The scholarship of the 1980s, such as the works by Şirin Tekeli and Yeşim Arat, drew on these studies and ignored Muhiddin's role. It is not a surprise, then, that Kemalist State feminists,[4] like Necla Arat, though recognising the existence of an Ottoman woman movement, affirm that 'If it wasn't for Atatürk … women would not have obtained the franchise' (Bora 2017:762).

Official history tells us that on April 3, 1930, women gained the right to vote and stand for election in municipal elections. In 1935, 18 Turkish women sat in the National Assembly. However, when the TWU disappeared on May 10, 1935, Latife Bekir, the last president appointed by the government, contributed to the writing of this official history by declaring that the emancipation of women in Turkey had had as its sole cause the beneficent will of Atatürk. She added that men and women would from now on work together for the country and that women had obtained all the rights; there was no need anymore for a WU: '*Sevinç içinde kapatiyoruz*' [We close the Union with happiness] (Bora 2017:760). This event is today considered the end of the first wave Ottoman–Turkish feminism and the birth of the so-called *Devlet Feminism*, State feminism as defined by Şirin Tekeli (Tekeli and Koray 1991), or *Ailesel feminism*, Family feminism in the words of Nicole Van Os (2001).

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However, her attempt to found the WWP represents an important milestone within the history of women's franchise in Turkey, and it opens the way also to a revision of the origins of the feminist movement in Turkey. We will now investigate the steps taken by Muhiddin in 1923 to found the WPP and retrace the reasons for its rejection.

5 | Nezihe Muhiddin's Attempt to Found the WPP in 1923

In May 1923, following a favourable response to a women's suffrage inquiry by the newspaper V*akit*, Nezihe Muhiddin and 12 women convened a council to establish the WPP. The meeting took place on 15 June 1923 at the Darülfünün conference hall, where consensus was reached to form the party. The next day, the press announced that *Kadınlar Halk Firkası* [*Women's People Party*] had been founded, stating its aim to defend women's rights and elevate their status. According to V*akit*, the founders included Nezihe Muhiddin (president), Nimet Rumeyde (second president), Şukufe Nihal (general secretary), Seniyye Izzeddin (accountant), Muhsine Salih (secretary) and Matlube Omer (cashier).

In the same article, Muhiddin emphasized the party's goal to secure women's right to vote and hold office, asserting that these had become essential needs. She declared their intent to pursue every position for which women were qualified. In a 4 June article titled 'The rights of the Turkish woman' [*Türk Kadının Hakkı*], she argues that women did not require permission from Islam or societal norms; rather, the demands of modern life sufficed. When questioned about potential governmental non-recognition of the movement, Muhiddin responded:

> Even if they don't give them to us, we will take them. Undoubtedly, truth is the result of determination, action and merit. The ideas and activities that our women have shown for the last fifteen years have granted us the right to occupy those positions. 'The real needs of the country dictate that we hold those positions'[5].
>
> (Vakit: 4 June 1967)

This answer shows the boldness and determination of Muhiddin and reveals her confidence in asking for rights that, in her view, women had already earned on the ground. Moreover, she emphasises the continuity of a 15-year battle, dating the Second Constitution as the starting point of women's action, linking the present endeavour to the near past.

In an article dated 16 June 1923, Muhiddin clarifies her vision for the Women's People's Party as the women's branch of the People's Party, aiming to collaborate in securing political and social rights for women. Six months earlier, on 6 December 1922, Mustafa Kemal had announced plans to establish the People's Party (*Halk Fırkası)*, and Muhiddin envisioned the women's party not as a rival but as a complementary entity. The WPP's primary objective was to obtain political rights for women, and Muhiddin called upon all enlightened, prowomen's rights individuals to join the struggle.

Despite submitting an application, the Interior Ministry in Ankara did not respond. On 1 February 1924, the newspaper *Tanin* reported that the government had not approved the Party's program. Consequently, the founding committee revised the program, removing references to women's suffrage and introducing a clause stating that 'the union has no connection with politics' (Çakır 1994: 340–1). The organization was permitted and established on 15 February 1924 as the WU, later renamed TWU *(Türk Kadın Birliği).*

Although officially disassociated from politics, Muhiddin continued to advocate for women's political rights through the periodical *Kadın Yolu* (Woman's Way), which she founded in 1925 and which became the official organ of the TWU, releasing 30 issues published between 1925 and 1927. Muhiddin's July 1925 editorial served as a manifesto for women's political rights, articulating principles she would reiterate in subsequent articles and interviews. First of all, she emphasized that women were not merely passive participants in the new societal direction but active agents of change:

> '*Kadın Yolu* will serve as a guide, leading Turkish women to the ideal goal that the nation's interests call them toward, and the fact that this path is being paved by *women's own hands* will make its value even more profound.'[6]
>
> (Yurdsever 2009 [*Kadın Yolu*: 16 July 1925]:122)

She acknowledged that while women had become increasingly visible across the country, their participation remained largely indirect. She argued for the necessity of women assuming direct roles, beginning with legal and civic responsibilities:

> 'The principles of democratic administrations have established as a fundamental rule that participation in the right to vote requires compliance with the law and the obligation to pay taxes. Why, then, should Turkish women—who, like every other citizen, are required to comply with the laws and pay taxes—be deprived of the right to elect the lawmakers who establish these laws?'[7]
>
> (123)

Muhiddin also referenced the global context, noting that numerous countries—including the United Kingdom, Denmark, Iceland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Czechoslovakia, Poland and cities in India like Madras, Bombay, and Cochin—had extended political rights to women. By situating Turkey within this international framework, she underscored the urgency of the issue. Her argument was clear: Turkish women, having achieved legal and educational advancements and actively pursued political rights, should be recognized as full citizens rather than 'parasites'.[8] (124).

5.1 | Possible Reasons Behind the Refusal

The reasons for not granting permission to the Women's People Party appear to be quite evident today. The problem cannot be

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reduced to the strong relationship between the WPP's name and the People's Party, as Zafer Toprak initially claimed. In his 1986 article, Toprak stated that a party with a similar name could create confusion. However, the actual issue does not appear to be the name, but the programme's content, which was completely changed in 1924, removing the political essence of the original WPP in the planned TWU.

According to Zihnioğlu's research (2003), Mustafa Kemal and his entourage were opposed to establishing the WPP for two reasons. The first reason was the need to keep the movement for women's rights within the confines established by the state. In 1925, the enemies of the regime began to pose a serious threat to the nascent Republic. After defeating 'foreign' enemies, the regime faced internal threats such as the Şeyh Sayd revolt, the failed attempt to kill Mustafa Atatürk, and closure of the Progressive Republican Party [*Terakkiperver Cumhuriyet Fırkası*]. These events marked a period of 'cleansing' and highlighted the importance of a 'one-leader, one-party' system. No internal divisions were tolerated; opposition was labelled as seductive, separatist, and motivated by personal interests ('*kişisel çıkarlara dayalı, iğfalci ve bölücü*'; Parla 1991). Even the division between men and women could not be accepted; the second reason was that Kemalists could not leave to anyone else the prerogative of obtaining the franchise for women; they wanted the appanage of the 'we gave the vote to women' statement (Zihnioglu 2003:149). As affirmed by Iffet Halum Oruz in 1933, '*Türk Kadın Birliği bir Cumhuriyet çocuğudur, fakat Türkiye Cumhuriyeti çocuğu değildir*' (225) [The Union of Turkish Women was a child of the Republic but was not the child of the Turkish Republic]. As we have evidenced earlier on, Nezihe Mudiddin refers in her speeches and articles to the previous years of fights, to the *Kadınlık Mefküresını* [ideal of womanhood] started in the previous 15 years. Moreover, she foresees a Turkish woman who will participate in the making of the Republic as an active and equal agent, just like men. However, for the Kemalists, the main task of the Turkish woman was to be a mother; in public and social life, she should act more as an observer than a full actor. As made clear by Zihnioğlu, for the Kemalists, the new woman followed the model of a 'child'; she was not the loud-voice woman represented by Muhiddin: '*Kemalistlerin (...) yeni kadını "çocuk kadın" modeli, Nezihe Muhiddin gibi "sesi gür çıkan" kadınları kapsamıyordu*' (227).

As defined by Yeşim Arat, the first women of Parliament were the daughters of the Republic, '*Cumhuriyetin kız çocukları*' (Arat 1989). Kemalists have erased not only Muhiddin but the whole culture connected to the Ottoman Era. In the first years of the Republic, they chose young, smart and successful women, sent them abroad for education and made them the symbol of the new Turkish woman. The same Afet Inan, the adopted daughter of Mustafa Kemal, was sent to Switzerland to become the best representative of this new woman in opposition to the Istanbul woman. She was chosen in 1930, when she was only 22 years old, as the President of the *Türk Tarih Kurumu*, the Turkish History Association, with the task of writing the history of the Turkish Republic. She never mentioned Muhiddin in her books (Zihnioglu 2003: 229). After the refusal of the WPP, in February 1924, Nezihe Muhiddin founded the WU, renamed TWU in 1925. However, in 1927, she was forced to leave it. The reasons for this departure are also important to further understand the history of the women's franchise.

6 | Nezihe Muhiddin's Eviction From the TWU

In September 1927, Muhiddin was compelled to resign from the direction of the TWU following allegations of financial mismanagement. These accusations coincided with her attempt to reintroduce political rights into the TWU's agenda. After the rejection of the WPP application, the TWU's founding committee altered the second article concerning political rights. During the TWU Congress held on 25 March 1927, Muhiddin successfully advocated for reinstating this article, and she was re-elected as president.

However, after the Party Congress, a member of the Union, Saime Eraslan, accused her of voting irregularities, prompting an investigation. The commission dismissed the charges, and the article remained (Zihnioğlu: 201). On 5 June 1927, the TWU selected Kenan Bey as a parliamentary candidate, as women were ineligible. Following a meeting with Mustafa Kemal on 3 July, Kenan Bey resigned, and the TWU ceased its suffrage campaign. It was clear that both external and internal opposition were building up against this political revamp of the TWU. Subsequently, the TWU was denied permission to operate a girl's camp on *Büyükada* (Princess Island), which internal opposition attributed to Muhiddin's leadership. During the 26 September 1927 Congress, calls for her resignation intensified. Although it is unclear if she resigned voluntarily, further allegations were made by Saime Eraslan, accusing her of misusing 500 Lira for publishing her newspaper, *Kadın Yolu*, which was in effect the main press organ of the Union. Some members of the TWU claimed that Muhiddin 'acted arbitrarily, operated without consulting the administrative committee', and filed a complaint with the governor. Muhiddin, together with a group of women, resigned from the Union (Zihnioğlu: 236–237). In October 1927, a court case ensued, lasting until 13 May 192; she was not acquitted but released under general amnesty. Thereafter, she withdrew from public life,

Analysing her exclusion reveals that Muhiddin's autonomous stance was at odds with the prevailing regime. The period between 1925 and 1931 is marked by a complex political climate, necessitating further research, especially concerning women's history. Between 1908 and 1925, the 'woman question' was at the center of a wide debate that we could define as 'democratic' in the sense of being characterized by eclectic and broad participation, in which both men and women seemed to discuss the future of women in a liberal pluralistic political milieu.

With the proclamation of the Republic in October 1923 and the confronting threats of dissolution and cultural colonization, the 'woman question' is appropriated and integrated into the Kemalist ideology. Ziya Gökalp, the ideologue of Republican Turkey and one of the main influences on Mustafa Kemal affirmed that 'Turks are both populists and feminists, and this is not only because of the importance attributed to these two ideals in our century; The most decisive factor derives from the essential place that democracy and feminism had in the old Turkish society' (1990: 8). So, according to the Kemalist regime, the new Turkey was already feminist; it

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did not need women like Muhiddin who did not seem to be easily domesticated. Tahil Bora summarizes ironically, but to the point, the main problem the Kemalist regime had with Nezihe:

> 'There was no anti-regime element in Nezihe Muhiddin's ideas and demands. However, the fact that hers represented an autonomous women's movement, and she was an autonomous woman's voice, would be considered dangerous as it could turn women's rights into a political cause. Regarding women's full citizenship rights, she even dared to say: 'If they don't give to us, we will take them' ... this was the problem.'[9]
>
> (2017: 755)

Moreover, as highlighted earlier, the new Turkish Republic would not have accepted anyone else taking the credit for championing women's rights. Even more, sharing the task with a group of activists and intellectual women who would eventually demand a share in the political and social power structure.

Having said that, we must realise that Muhiddin faced opposition both within and outside of the TWU. To comprehend this aspect, we must first acknowledge the existence, since the late nineteenth century, of a group of women and activists active in the social life of the time, most of whom worked inside various associations. Out of 51 associations that participated in the National Council, founded in 1918 to coordinate the national forces for the War of Independence, 16 were women's associations. The number of associations reached 25 before the proclamation of the Republic in 1923. Women were not passive spectators, but they were making their voices heard in these associations and the press.

When Muhiddin founded the TWU on 7 February 1924, after the rejection of the petition for the WPP, there was a very large group of about 50 women activists supporting her and sharing her ideas. These women had different views and thoughts concerning womanhood. Within the TWU there were two opposing factions of women: women like Nezihe Muhiddin, Nimet Rumeyde, and Şükufe Nihal, demanding political rights, and others who were more prone to limit the role of the union to only philanthropy, so accepting the more 'maternal' role society assigned to them. Within these different souls, Muhiddin represented the radical faction, as she was bold in her statements and was known to be a very direct interlocutor, utilizing strong language to defend her ideas. As described by Zihnioğlu, Muhiddin was not only an 'extremist' in her defence of women's rights, but she was ambitious, full of initiative, and a charismatic leader (263–264).

The more conservative women, making up the internal opposition, could not share her radical positions and preferred to ostracize her. These women constituted for Muhiddin, probably, the biggest disappointment in her political life. We could speculate, and further research should be done on this point, that her complete withdrawal from political life was not due only to the political and social ostracism of the press and of the Kemalist regime but also to the cold-shouldering, or this could be interpreted as a political and personal 'betrayal' she experienced from other women of the Union. At the end of the day, also among women, as among men, it was not gender the element that could keep them together, nor class, but, as in any developed party, breakups and alliances are based on differences or similarities in the political strategy to follow. The moderate line of the TWU prevailed over the radical one, and the consequences of this episode are still alive in the genetic mould of the Republic and of the republican parties. If Muhiddin found the best support among women, she also found her worst adversaries among them. It was probably this 'betrayal' that was the reason for her full disappearance from public life in the 1930s.

7 | Conclusion

Re-examining the interplay between nationalism and feminism during the early Republic is crucial for understanding Turkey's historical trajectory and current sociopolitical dynamics. Denying the continuity between late Ottoman and Republican women's history has severed feminist women from their past, overlooking Ottoman women's struggle for equal rights and misrepresenting gains as benevolent 'gifts' from the Kemalist leaders.

Furthermore, exploring these tensions elucidates the origins of Turkey's parliamentary system, while understanding the founders of the Republic's idea of women as 'daughters' may help us better understand the persistent underrepresentation of women in politics.

Recent scholarship highlights Muhiddin's pivotal role in advocating for women's equality. However, it is essential to view her not as an exceptional, isolated figure but as part of a broader network of enlightened women ready to share the political task of building a new modern Turkey but also ostracise her politically when considered too radical. This could happen because, as we are well aware today, late-Ottoman women participated actively in the feminist struggle for equal rights and were particularly active after the Second Constitution of 1908, demonstrating political consciousness well before suffrage was granted in 1934.

Muhiddin represents an example of one of these ladies, a bridge between the late-Ottoman and the Republican first-wave feminism, embodying elements of late-Ottoman feminist thought while aligning with the new Republican ideal of nation-building. Analysing her life and the reasons for her marginalisation requires situating her within a complex network of women with varying strategies for emancipation. We can call them today feminists, even if we need to contextualise their actions within a very complex historical background that needs to be further studied.

Building upon the scholarship by Yaprak Zihnioğlu and Serpil Çakır, we can locate Muhiddin within the first wave of Ottoman–Turkish feminism (1868–1935), encompassing three distinct phases: the 'Early Period Ottoman Movement' [*Erken Dönem Osmanlı hareket-i nisvanı*] from 1868 to 1908; the 'Second Constitution Ottoman Feminism' [*II. Meşrutiyet Dönemi Osmanlı feminizmi*] from 1908 to 1922; and the 'first wave Republican feminism' [*Birinci Dalga Cumhuriyetçi feminizmi*] from 1923 to 1935 (Zihnioğlu 2003:21; Çakır 1994).

If we consider these three phases as successive generations of women who often knew and influenced one another, setting

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the stage for Muhiddin's activist and political struggles between 1923 and 1927, we can place Muhiddin at the maturity stage of an indigenous Ottoman–Turkish feminist movement that began in the preceding five decades, reached its full maturity and spread following the Second Constitution, and that was entirely eradicated post-1935 and rediscovered only in the late 1980s. We know that Ottoman–Turkish women fought to be part of the new republican political scene that was replacing the defunct Ottoman Empire. However, the nationalist regime that characterised the Republic's founding years denied women an equal role in the political sphere, and the failure of feminism at this historical moment is a major reason why women's equal political representation in political institutions has become the most pressing issue left unresolved to the present day.

The fact that women obtained the right to vote only in 1934, more than 10 years after the founding of the Republic, at a time when the authoritarian political regime of the one party was gradually established, did not give feminist women the chance to be on the 'ground floor' of the new regime. As a matter of fact, the legacy of nationalism's preference for the nation's interests over feminism's call for equal rights for women is deeply embedded in Turkey's patriotic stance, as is its contempt for women, which persists to this day, as being limited in their capacity to participate in women's voices as citizens.

The nationalist ideology in Turkey, since its origin, presents a strong masculine character that has denied women an equal contribution to the founding of the nation and has excluded the women of the National Struggle, such as Nezihe Muhiddin and Halide Edip, from the administration level of the new nation. New, younger women were trained in their place and presented as public role models. Although their numbers were not very large, they were effective because they had state support. They were the daughters of the Republic, a kind of 'child–woman' model, the most famous of which is Afet Inan. Following the suppression of the TWU and women's demands for political rights, the view that women's rights were not obtained through activism, as in other countries, but were granted by the government without struggle, became widespread. As a politician and journalist of the time, Ağaoğlu (1934) affirms in the newspaper *Cumhuriyet*: 'The superiority of Turkish women over Western women is that they do not take part in the political arena as militantly as Western women'.[10] Within a nationalistic perspective, feminism is framed as separatist and anarchist.

In subsequent years, women's rights discourse in international forums transitioned from feminism to nationalism. Women's previous demands regarding political rights were being withdrawn. The women of the 'East' did not find it right to be close to the policies of the Western feminists and did not demand that women be equal citizens, but that they be educated as mothers who raise patriotic generations (Weber 2008:86). From then on, discussions on women's rights started to be shaped by political dilemmas and conflict policies between the 'colonialist West' and the 'oppressed East' within the discourse of struggle between the East and West. Feminism was perceived as foreign to the realities of the country, as an imported view, as the view of the colonialists. A deep fracture divided the women who fought in the 1920s for women's rights, as Nezihe Muhiddin, from the new women of the republic. The new women were called after the founding of the new nation to be modern wives and mothers. In the atmosphere of the period, the discourse of 'women's backwardness', their need to gain experience and be educated before being ready to vote was accepted by the majority of women. Speaking within this nationalist discourse, women's defenders of women's rights believed that the women's problem could not be solved by suffragism but by education.

This ideological pattern persists today, with urban, educated women often tasked with modernising their rural counterparts, emphasising societal advancement over political engagement. Initiatives that will advance society rather than get involved in the murky world of politics.

Drawing on Vickers' concepts of 'women-friendliness' and 'getting to the ground floor', this article has reexamined Muhiddin's failed attempts to integrate feminism into the Republic's framework, exploring the reasons and long-term implications.

This paper has posited that the nonintegration of Muhiddin's feminist endeavour into the construction of the Turkish Republic—and the broader marginalisation of women from decision-making roles during the early nationalist project—bears its legacy in the present male-dominated political scene and has contributed to the persistent underrepresentation of women in Turkish politics.

As previously highlighted, ideological patterns established in the early Republican era continue to influence modern Turkey. Nationalist Republican critiques of feminism often framed the pursuit of gender equality as self-serving, fanatical, or excessively Western-oriented. Such narratives posited a dichotomy between national interests and women's rights, suggesting that the latter should be subordinated when deemed necessary for the nation's benefit. This perspective promoted the ideal of women as selfless contributors to family and nation, discouraging individualistic aspirations and aligning female identity with collective national goals.

The legacy of the failure of feminism by nationalism in the founding years of the Republic has produced what Serpil Sancar has defined as "family-focused modernization" [*Aile Odaklı Modernleşme*] (2012:191) wherein women's roles are confined to those of wife, mothers and teachers under the tutelage of men and the State. Their roles were the result of a social construction, as they undertook duties as the founding element of the nation and became conscious of these duties. In this sense, modern womanhood in early Republican Turkey was not an organic evolution but a state-engineered identity designed to align with nationalist objectives while suppressing feminist ideologies. Modern Turkish women were created in a nationalistic discursive process that was opposed to the feminist female identity and the 'extremism' of women such as Nezihe Muhiddin. The revolution that led to the Turkish Republic has been defined as a 'revolution without women' (Zihnioğlu 2003), but we know today that women were ready to share the task of building the new country with men as equals. Had their involvement been embraced, it is plausible that Turkey would have evolved into a more inclusive and women-friendly democracy.

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Endnotes

[1] While this article focuses on Nezihe Muhiddin, it is important to remember that the late Ottoman and early Republican periods witnessed a diverse spectrum of indigenous feminist movements encompassing various ideological currents and multiethnic and multireligious collaborations. Prominent figures such as Latife Bekir (Çeyrekbaşı), Sabiha Zekeriya Sertel, Şüküfe Nihal, and Mükerrem Belkis actively pursued political rights, advocating for suffrage and broader civic participation. In contrast, others like Emine Semiye Önasya focused on social reform and education, emphasizing the importance of women's access to learning and professional opportunities. Nakiye Elgün, for instance, dedicated her efforts to advancing girls' education and played a significant role in establishing educational institutions for women. Armenian and Greek women also made substantial contributions to the feminist discourse. Notably, Srpouhi Dussap and Zabel Yesayan, both prominent Armenian writers, addressed women's rights issues in their works, highlighting the intersection of gender and national identity.

[2] The breadth of scholarship of these critics is so wide that it precludes an exhaustive bibliographical account here. However, for a comprehensive overview of women's history research in Turkey, Serpil Çakır (2021) *Kadın Tarihi Araştırmaları Türkiye Bibliyografyası* (A Bibliography of Women's History Research in Turkey) serves as an invaluable resource. For foundational texts on feminism and feminist historiography in Turkey, Serpil Çakır's *Osmanlı Kadın Hareketi* (1994) and Feminism and Feminist History-Writing in Turkey: *The Discovery of Ottoman Feminism* (2007), along with Serpil Sancar's *Türk Modernleşmesinin Cinsiyeti: Erkekler Devlet, Kadınlar Aile Kurar* (2012), are essential readings. Additional introductory works include Emine Hoşoğlu Doğan's *A Brief History of the Scholarship of the Late Ottoman Muslim Women of Letters and Gender as a Category of Analysis in the Field'* (2017), Yeşim Arat's chapter 'Contestation and collaboration: women's struggles for empowerment in Turkey' (2008) and Elif Ekin Akşit's articles 'Kadın Hareketi; Halidenin Salihi ve Hatıralar Kimin Tarihi' (2002) and 'Osmanlı Feminizmi, Uluslararası Feminizm ve Doğu Kadınları' (2008).

[3] See, for instance, Adak, H. and Altınay, A.G. 'Dossier on Gender, Ethnicity, and the Nation-State' in *New Perspectives on Turkey*, vol. 42, Spring 2010.

[4] State feminism, or *Devlet feminizmi*, is a term introduced by Şirin Tekeli in the 1980s to critique the dominant national discourse in Turkey, which equated the granting of civil and political rights to women with the achievement of gender equality. Tekeli argued that this perspective overlooked women's own agency and activism in securing their rights. Subsequent historical research revealed the existence of significant women's movements during the late Ottoman and early Republican periods, prompting Tekeli to revise her earlier stance and acknowledge the vital contributions of these movements to the struggle for gender equality (see Tekeli 1990; Tekeli and Koray 1991).

[5] "Onları bize vermeseler bile, biz onları alacağız. Hiç şüphesiz hak, azmin, fiilin ve liyakatin ürünüdür. Kadınlarımızın, şu on beş seneden beri ibraz ettigi fikr-i teşebbüs ve faaliyeti, o mevkilere oturmak için bize bir hak bahşetmiştir. Memleketin ihtiyaç-ı hakkiyesi de o mevkilere bizim sahip olmamızı emrediyor."

[6] "*Kadın Yolu*, Türk Kadını, memleket menâfiinin kendisini davet ettiği mefkûrevî hedefe îsal edecek bir şerâh olacak ve bu yolun yine kadın elleriyle açılması, bunun kıymetini tebellüğ ettirecektir."

[7] "Demokratik idarelerin prensipleri, hak-ı intihaba iştirak için efradından kanuna mutâba ve vergi itâsına tâbiiyet şartlarını esas ittihaz eylemiştir. Kavânîn-i mevzûa'ya aynı şerâit dahilinde mutâbaatkar ve vergi itâsına her vatandaş gibi mecbur olan Türk kadını, niçin vâzı-ı kanunları intihâb etmek hakkından mahrum olmalıdır?"

[8] "Yirmi sene evvel uzak diyarların bazı hareketlerini gazete havadisleri verirken, bizler bunları gulyabanî efsânesi gibi dinlerdik. Fakat bugün müdrikiz ki, rey sahibi olmayan tufeylidir, sicilde sayılı bir ferd-i vatan değildir. Türk kadını, şüphesiz vatan camiası arasında kıymeti olmayan bir kemiyet hâlinde kalmayacak ve mevcudiyetini tasdik ettirecektir."

[9] "Nezihe Muhiddin'in fikrinde ve taleplerinde rejim karşıtı bir unsur yoktu. Ne var ki özerk bir kadın hareketini, özerk bir kadın sözünü temsil ediyor olması; kadın haklarını bir politik davaya dönüştürmesi, tehlikeli bulunacaktı. Kadınların tam vatandaşlık haklarıyla ilgili, 'Onlar bize vermeseler bile, biz onları alacağız' diyordu ya... Sorun buradaydı."

[10] "Türk kadını'nın Batılı kadından üstün yanı, Batılı kadın gibi siyaset sahnesinde militanca yer almayışıdır."

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