

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Women's Access to Public Space in the Late Ottoman, Early Republican Period: Istanbul Through a Woman Painter's Diary

Ceren Lordođlu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dr., Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Istanbul/Türkiye

ORCID: [0000-0002-2709-7661](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2709-7661)

E-Mail:

[ceren.lordoglu@msgsu.edu.tr](mailto:ceren.lordoglu@msgsu.edu.tr)

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**Abstract**

*This study examines women's experiences in public spaces and the restrictions they faced in late Ottoman and early Republican Istanbul. It aims to make visible the boundaries imposed on women in public spaces, despite the privileged positions of different social groups. Utilizing the methodologies offered by feminist history and geography, the study provides a gendered reinterpretation of urban history and analyzes the connections between related publications. The study focuses on the biography of painter Sabiha Bozcalı, based on her 1941 diary and personal archive, to explore how women experienced public spaces and mobility in early Republican Istanbul. It investigates how women's everyday lives were shaped by the complex interactions between gender norms, space, and social change. In this context, the study examines the opportunities and obstacles women encountered in urban spaces and analyzes the evolving and persistent aspects of these experiences throughout history. It evaluates how women living in different parts of Istanbul were constrained by spatial arrangements and social dynamics or created new spaces of movement. By adopting a historical perspective, this study aims to reveal the gendered structure of public spaces and the role of women in the city.*

**Keywords:** *Public Space, Late Ottoman- Early Republican Istanbul, Gender and Space Relations, Sabiha Rüştü Bozcalı*

**Öz**

*Bu çalışma, Geç Osmanlı ve Erken Cumhuriyet dönemi İstanbul'unda kadınların kamusal alan deneyimlerini ve karşılaştıkları kısıtlamaları incelemektedir. Toplumsal yapının farklı kesimlerinin ayrıcalıklı konumlarına rağmen, kadınların kamusal alandaki sınırlarını görünür kılmayı amaçlamaktadır. Feminist tarih ve coğrafyanın sunduğu yöntemlerle kent tarihi cinsiyet perspektifinden yeniden okunmakta, bu bağlamda yapılan yayınlar arasındaki ilişkiler analiz edilmektedir. Çalışmada, ressam Sabiha Bozcalı'nın 1941 yılı günlüğü ve kişisel arşivi temel alınarak, Erken Cumhuriyet döneminde İstanbul'da kadınların kamusal alanı nasıl deneyimlediği ve hareketliliklerinin nasıl şekillendiği ele alınmaktadır. Kadınların gündelik hayatlarının, toplumsal cinsiyet normları, mekân ve toplumsal değişim arasındaki etkileşimle nasıl belirlendiği araştırılmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, kadınların kentsel mekânda karşılaştıkları fırsatlar ve engeller ele alınarak, tarihsel süreçte bu deneyimlerin değişen ve değişmeyen yönleri analiz edilmektedir. İstanbul'un farklı bölgelerinde yaşayan kadınların, mekânsal düzenlemeler ve toplumsal dinamiklerle nasıl sınırlandırıldığı veya nasıl yeni hareket alanları oluşturduğu değerlendirilmektedir. Çalışma, kadınların kent içerisindeki varlığını tarihsel bir perspektifle ele alarak, kamusal alanın cinsiyetli yapısını ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Kamusal Alan, Sabiha Rüştü Bozcalı, Geç Osmanlı- Erken Cumhuriyet Dönemi İstanbulu, Cinsiyet Mekan İlişkileri*

## Introduction

Research into the constrained visibility of women in public spaces during the Late Ottoman and Early Republican eras in Istanbul is a significant field that necessitates a historical analysis of gender, class, and spatial relationships. This investigation seeks to explore the obstacles women encountered in accessing urban public spaces during these periods and the societal, political, and cultural factors behind these impediments. This study examines the personal archive and 1941 diary of Sabiha Bozcalı (1904 – 1998) a painter from the Early Republican Period and explores her relationship to the public sphere. Additionally, it aims to enhance the ongoing discussion about how women's restrictions in the public sphere persist in current times, albeit in altered forms.

In social sciences, for a long time, space has been treated only as a physical space, and its significant impacts on people's everyday lives have been ignored. This situation resulted in a lack in spatial studies, expressed as "social spatial blindness." Despite numerous theorists addressing the significance of social space (Lefebvre, 1991; De Certeau, 1980; Massey, 2005; Bourdieu, 1998), it is remarkable that limited studies in urban historiography highlights the constraints on women's access to public space. Conversely, scholars in feminist historiography and feminist geography significantly contribute to this subject.

Historiography, when viewed through a feminist lens, goes beyond mere analysis. Feminism stands for a political movement aimed at enacting change, which encompasses social transformations. "It seeks to create a basis for new social relations in the context of everyday relations. Change gradually as new patterns are realized and reproduced. As a result, the impact of feminism is often invisible, but at the same time unstoppable." (Mackenzie, 2002, p.21) According to Joan Scott, feminist historiography "will reveal a history in which old questions are asked anew to be answered in new terms, a history that will make women visible by identifying them as active agents, and a history that will create an analytical distance between the seemingly fixed language of the past and our own terminology." (Scott, 2013, p.96) Furthermore, this new history will open up

new avenues for thinking about feminist political strategies in the present and future because it suggests that gender must be redefined and reconfigured, along with a vision of political and social equality that includes not only gender but also class and race (Scott, 2013, p.97). Scott's proposal, which elucidates the relationship between feminist historiography and the concept of gender, might be linked with the intersectionality approach.

Collins and Bilge (2016) claim that intersectionality transcends the comprehension of various identities, necessitating consideration of social inequality, power relations, relationality, social context, complexity, and social justice (2016, p.29). In this context, comprehending the diverse experiences of women in public space over a specific timeframe might be accomplished through the various categories offered by intersectionality (Valentine, 2007). Nevertheless, an understanding of everyday life is essential for grasping the social context and complexities.

Lefebvre argues that everyday life defines a primary realm of meaning, serving as both a field and an intermediate station. It transcends mere conceptualisation and can be used as a key to comprehend the society (Lefebvre, 1998). The sociology of everyday life seeks to identify a coherence in the study of individuals within their environmental context and everyday social interactions. By analysing attitudes and behaviours in routine settings, it aims to illustrate the framework of social order and structure (Adler et al., 1987, p.219). Feminist scholars in the 1970s and 1980s questioned the narrow approach of historiography, which acknowledges the experiences of men while ignoring women (Caine, 2019, p.90). The emergence of new historiography enabled the writing of biographies to acquire a distinct significance alongside the significance of women's history and the history of everyday life.

Since the 1980s, feminist geographers have conducted extensive research on the social construction of space and its role in reflecting and reinforcing gendered inequalities. One of the main goals of feminist geography is to make visible and problematize the relationships between gender and spatial distinctions (McDowell and Sharp, 1997,

p.91). "Previous research in feminist urban geography has documented that women's experiences of urban space, employment opportunities, and the use and access to urban services are often different from those of men (for a review, see Pratt, 1990; McDowell, 1993). In their article, Liz Bondi and Mona Domosh (1998) focused on the experiences of three women from different historical periods (Early Modern England, 19th century New York, and late 20th century Edinburgh) to discuss how public and private space has changed in relation to gender and class in terms of women's access (Bondi and Domosh, 1998, p.283). In the article, they highlight that while women have faced restrictions in accessing the public sphere throughout history, these constraints have evolved and taken different forms over time.

This article seeks to investigate the relations between women's experiences and public space in Istanbul throughout the Late Ottoman and Early Republican periods. After outlining the study's methodology in the first section, the second section will explore conceptual ideas and the distinctions between the public sphere and urban public space. The subsequent discussion will focus on the relationship between women and public space in late Ottoman Istanbul, followed by an exploration of public space experiences in Istanbul through the life of Sabiha Rüşti Bozcalı, an Early Republican Period painter, utilising her personal archive and diary from 1941. The discussion part will ultimately examine the alterations and continuities in women's relationship with public space today.

## Method and Methodology

Micro-historical studies reveal substantial information about everyday life, details obscured in grand narratives. In this regard, biographies serve as crucial sources due to their capacity to unveil otherwise unattainable facets and details about the environments in which individuals lived. In contrast to conventional biography, feminist biography examines the subject not as an isolated person but in relation with the social context and the others who interact with them. Both what the subject of the investigation does and does not do in their everyday existence and how they do it are

taken into account (Ware, 2010, p.417). This is consistent with the concept of intersectionality, which highlights the importance of social context. This study employs a feminist methodology, as highlighted by feminist historiography and geography, positioning women as subjects and rendering their difficulties visible, while allowing the analysis of dynamic and multiple categories.

A primary concern in biographical writing is the scrutiny of the researcher's neutrality, as highlighted by feminist methodology (Harding, 1995). Currently, biographies are written not to provide unvarnished facts, but rather to reflect the author's subjective view, interpretation, and the emotional response they seek to get from the reader (Gökpinar, 2015, p.37). The information from personal archives is both multifaceted and constrained.

Prior to writing the current work with an emphasis and focus on public space, I wrote a biography of Bozcalı and examine her life (Lordoğlu, 2022). In examining Bozcalı's life, I attempted to interpret the analysed material not as a representation of the women of the era, but in relation to Bozcalı's life and the characteristics of her time, emphasising the social context, a feature of intersectionality highlighted by Collins and Bilge (2016). In a geography where access to personal historical materials is notably challenging, Bozcalı's personal archive and diaries hold significant value, particularly for researchers employing feminist methodologies. Bridget Brereton states that diaries encompass the activities, feelings, and relationships considered significant by women; they serve as a repository of experiential content (Brereton, 1998, p.146). Thus, the passages and the information provided from the diary ought to be regarded as an attempt to comprehend Bozcalı's imprints within the public sphere. Instead of trying to generalise the relationship between women and public space in Bozcalı's time through her diary, I concentrated on examining how she interacted with Istanbul and developed relationships within her social context of the period.

While examining Bozcalı's life, I used her personal archive at SALT, documents about her at Taha Toros Archive, published interviews and an interview that I conducted with one her relatives.

In her personal archive at SALT there is a range of documents, including account notes, drawings, photographs, diaries, museum entrance cards, newspaper clippings, letters, and cards of her family and herself. The archive at SALT contains just the diaries regarding the years 1941, 1985, 1986, and 1990. She had routinely kept her 1941 year diary within these diaries. Moreover, there is a consistency in her writing discipline, form, and style pointing out that she had a long-standing practice of keeping a diary.

The diary's narrative approach is similar to agenda notes than to emotional expression, intellectual discourse, or narrative storytelling. The reason behind this remains ambiguous; it could either be a strategy to prevent her diary from being read or linked to her unique style of diary writing. Therefore, you may notice some incomplete sentences or merely notes. The notebook is presented in an agenda format as well. It is very interesting that she did not sketch in her diary. In her diary, she occasionally used old Turkish words alongside terms from Western languages.

As a result, a part of this article attempts to explain the experiences of the public sphere and urban public space as obtained in her archive and diary from 1941.

### Women's Trials with Public Space

Although the concepts of public sphere and public space are often used synonymously, they have different meanings. While the public sphere refers to a collective set of meanings and the production process of these meanings, it is also sometimes used to describe the physical spaces where this meaning production occurs (Özbek, 2004, p.40). Although the term "public space" is generally preferred in the context of physical space, the concept of "public sphere" comes to the fore again to express the collectivity formed by the effect of space. This article will use the term "public space" to refer exclusively to physical space, while "public sphere" will denote contexts that highlight collective meaning and experience.

In many parts of the world, urban public space is regarded as an essential component of citizens' everyday lives, facilitating interactions with

strangers and serving as an important venue for civic expression and participatory democracy. Urban public spaces, including parks, plazas, squares, marketplaces, and streets, have traditionally served as places for collective identity and belonging. In these areas, citizens have articulated solidarity and resistance, redefined their notions of citizenship, and asserted their demands for rights (Peake, 2020, p.289). Urban spaces such as parks, plazas, squares, marketplaces, and streets have historically been spaces of collective identity and belonging where citizens have expressed solidarity and resistance, reshaped their definitions of citizenship, and voiced their demands for rights (Peake, 2020, p.289). Feminist researchers have highlighted the restricted access of marginalised groups, such as women, the poor, the mentally ill, and the homeless, to these spaces, emphasizing the absence of a homogenous public sphere (Wilson, 1992; Fraser, 2004).

The gendered division of labour and gender roles restrict women's ability to participate in public life, with the majority of caregiving carried out at home. This not only excludes women from political activities and decision-making processes but also reproduces wider social inequality. The idea of "the personal is political," promoted by second-wave feminism, demonstrates that private relations and roles within the home are linked to the public sphere and are not independent of power relations (Okin, 1998, p.124). Feminist theorists emphasize that the public-private distinction is based on patriarchal cultural and social practices and that the patriarchal order cannot end without changing this distinction (Bondi and Rose, 2003; Fraser, 2004). In this context, women's access to the public sphere and their demands for the shift of gender roles hold significant importance.

Elizabeth Wilson's *The Sphinx in the City* (1992) has a foundational position in feminist analyses of urban public space. Wilson argued that cities have historically been designed to control women's lives and freedom. This study presents the question of who the public sphere is intended for and who it excludes, highlighting the ways in which urban space may be both liberating and oppressive for women. Wilson emphasizes the differences in the use of public space by women of different classes,

especially by addressing the changes in the public space experiences of middle- and working-class women in the 19th century. While Wilson does not explicitly employ the term intersectionality, her work points out the importance of examining women through several categories, recognising the relevance of social context, and addressing this complexity by intersectionality.

In light of the mutually constitutive relationship between social and space, we should also consider the potential for bringing together multiple categories to think about women's experiences in the public sphere. According to Selda Tuncer (2018) "It is instead necessary to develop a more comprehensive understanding that highlights the mutually constitutive processes of constructing gendered identities and spaces without neglecting the materiality and particularity of urban space. This requires that socio-spatial formations of gender, class, race, etc. are considered. Such a perspective would enable an exploration not only of the different ways women are situated in urban public space but also more importantly how they participate in urban public life and culture through everyday practice" (2018, p.23) The emancipation of women during the Early Republican Period serves as a notable example regarding education and employment, alongside the persistence of social control in their lives (Tuncer, 2018, p.28).

Women's access to urban public space encounters different obstacles, depending on historical and geographical contexts. Today, in different geographies, women's presence in public space is constrained by factors including fear of male violence, inadequate transportation, gender role-related care labour responsibilities, and economic limitations (Kern, 2020). In Turkey, in addition to these, women's need to justify the time they spend outside the home, moral questioning and cultural patriarchal norms make it even more difficult for them to access public space (Lordoğlu, 2018; Çelik & Sayan, 2023; Geniş & Akkırman, 2020).

Women's presence in public space can be analyzed through two key contexts: first, their demands for rights in the public sphere, including education, political participation, and legal equality; and second, their relations with urban public space, the constraints they encounter, and their

struggles to overcome these constraints. Public sphere is a space of contested meanings, symbols and identities. It is constituted by difference and fluidity, which by its very nature is not fixed. Everyday life practices provide an important foundation for examining the public sphere. In the following sections of this study, women's relationship with public space in Istanbul during the Late Ottoman and Early Republican periods and the differentiation of this relationship will be evaluated from the perspective of gender and space. The changes in Istanbul's social history are crucial for comprehending the interrelationship between women's everyday lives and their presence in urban public space.

### **Women's relationship to the public sphere in late Ottoman Istanbul**

The presentation of women in the public sphere during the Late Ottoman and Early Republican eras has been predominantly fragmented and constrained in scholarly works. Therefore, it is difficult to create a holistic image. As Uğur Tanyeli points out, one reason for this may be that a holistic narrative in the historiography of Istanbul is often treated with a nostalgic or generalizing approach (Tanyeli, 2010). On the other hand, the everyday lives of women, especially women from different classes, has not been adequately addressed in historiography for a long time. However, details of everyday life have been extensively examined since the 1980s with the advent of the new historiographical approach. Thanks to the efforts of social and feminist historians, greater insights into women's everyday experiences in the public space have emerged (İleri, 2016; Telci, 2012; Balsoy, 2015; Mak-sudyan, 2014, Tuncer 2018). Personal archives and periodicals are important sources for understanding women's relationships with the public sphere in this period.

From the mid-19th century, the declaration of the Tanzimat Edict, the conclusion of the Crimean War, and heightened engagement with Western nations caused significant changes within Ottoman society, particularly in Istanbul (Tekeli, 2009; Toprak, 1999). Ottoman intellectuals and bureau-

crats, influenced by social changes in the West, began discussions regarding the position of women in society. However, in late Ottoman society, women's issues were still determined by Islamic law, which was dominated by Sharia and complemented by the customary law of the sultan (Berktaş, 2011, p.30). According to Fatmagül Berktaş, discriminatory laws on issues such as family, property, inheritance, marriage and divorce; spatial regulations enforcing gender segregation; and rules regulating women's presence in the public sphere were key factors shaping social life (Berktaş, 2011, pp.30-31).

During this period, women's demands for their rights in the public sphere became partially heard with the support of male intellectuals, and women's initiatives in education, work, and organization became evident. After the Second Constitutional Monarchy, women sought to broaden their educational opportunities by challenging the restrictions of the Islamic law, engaging in the labour market, and enhancing their presence in the public sphere (Berktaş, 2011, p.32). Women's associations and magazines served as both the platform and the memory of these struggles. As an important source of light on the feminist movements of the period, *Kadın* magazine, like the White Conferences, conveys an organized struggle for women's rights (Kasap, 2020, p.27). These conferences, attended by approximately 300 women, aimed to raise awareness regarding women's roles in social life, motherhood, and family dynamics, as well as issues related to male-dominated society and politics, women's rights to education, visibility in the public sphere, and acts of rebellion. The events took place in a mansion. Due of its continued relevance, I choose to share a portion of Fatma Nesibe Hanım's speech:

*"First of all, there is a serious mistake in our upbringing: We think that silence and endurance in the face of these miserable rapes is a requirement of honor; we think that men's immorality is a right and our silence is a duty. No, ladies, the current generation of future mothers will consider this mentality to be nothing more than idiocy. We are obliged to defend our law with our fortitude and defend rape with our fists. Why should*

*our silence be the duty of honor? Why should our womanhood be insulted and we are obliged to endure it? We are not in the mountains, ladies!" (Kasap, 2020, p.30)*

### Women's Everyday Life and Public Space

Women's use of public space was constrained by the social and cultural norms of that period. Promenades, public baths, boat trips, and neighbour visits are the main activities that take place in these constrained areas. But rather than going alone, women would go there with their families or other relatives. Houses in which women predominantly occupied were locations where a spatial gender divide was most distinctly evident. The architectural design of the houses, characterised by doors facing the street and window lattices, symbolically and physically delineated the boundaries women created with the outside world. (Işın 1995, p.89). Since women in the late Ottoman period were not part of a working life as we know it in modern times, sharp spatial gender segregation was observed in the city (Berktaş, 2011, p.31). However women have established various out-of-home spaces and strategies to assert their presence in the public space of the city (Ambros et al. 2016; Maksudyan, 2014). Some of the public spaces throughout the city where women may establish a place for themselves are marketplaces, houses of worship, promenades, and public baths. Moreover, considering multiple categories reveals that the boundaries of public space in the city are influenced by class differences. Women engaged in various professions, including merchants, midwives, artisans, teachers, and factory workers, alongside those from wealthy families involved in charitable organisations (Ianeva, 2016).

The neighbourhood was utilised as a significant socialising space for women. Neighbour visits enhanced relationships and reinforced social support. Women would often go to each other's houses with small gifts or food, spend time together, and discuss their current events. These gatherings strengthened community ties and provided a space for women to share their everyday lives and concerns (Fleet & Boyar, 2016). However, women's presence on the streets at night, even in their own neighborhoods, required certain precautions to be

taken. For instance, they were able to move more easily on the street by pretending as elderly women or carrying bundles with them at night (İleri, 2016). These tactics highlight women's concerns regarding safety in public spaces, particularly during nighttime, as well as the precautions they adopt within their own neighbourhoods.

Münevver Ay's statement, who born in 1888, helps us to imagine the neighborhood in the late Ottoman period:

*"...all the inhabitants of a neighborhood, a district, from every stratum, every class, poor, rich, middle class, tradesmen, clerks, officers, were each other's neighbors."* (Sezer and Özyalçiner, 2005, p.34).

This expression points to a period when modern and traditional structures had not yet differentiated significantly, new social classes were in the process of formation, and this situation was not reflected in class differentiation in residential areas (Tekeli 2009; Toprak 1999). It has been observed that these structures have changed over time, with differentiation and segregation processes emerging alongside social dynamics.

### **Promenade, Hammams, Boat Trips**

The promenade served as public space where women could strengthen their social ties and meet individuals from different social segments. Sezer and Özyalçiner express that these places were differentiated for different social classes with the following words: "These wretches, most of whom made a living as cooks, would wear their beads and gold, and come there wearing their clean abayas, colorful abayas, halva, and dolma. Adorning the meadow like flowers, these Arabs in red abaya would leave the impression of poppy flowers with their bright black eyes peeking through the white abaya" (Sezer and Özyalçiner, 2005, p.259). However, even the use of these places was occasionally restricted to women by regulations and prohibitions. A regulation dated 1752 prohibited women from going to distant promenades and stated that those who violated these prohibitions would be banished from Istanbul (Sezer & Özyalçiner, 2005, p.150).

Hammams was another important place in which women socialized in the neighborhood. For women in Istanbul, the hammam was much more than just a place to clean (Boyar and Fleet 2014, p.273). In addition to functioning as a hairdresser or beauty salon, it also plays an important role as a treatment center, a place to meet friends and have a pleasant time, and a place to host celebrations and invitations. Moreover, the hammam is also a platform for women to display their financial status and neatness, and to show off their social status. It also stands out as a place for the selection of prospective brides. Moreover, according to Reşat Ekrem Koçu, during the reign of Abdülhamid II, "morning baths", which were used not only for cleaning but also for shelter and remained open until the morning, became a place where the poor of the period, who had housing problems, stayed overnight (Sezer and Özyalçiner, 2005, pp.124-131).

In Abdülhak Şinasi Hisar's *Bosphorus Yalıları Past Time Mansions* (1997), it is possible to come across striking details about the places where women and men encounter each other on the Bosphorus, especially about boat rides where women from the privileged class are visible outside the home. Borned in 1887, Hisar's observations reflect the period of his childhood and youth. During this period, boats belonging to men and women were designed in different colors and with a distinct aesthetic understanding. Şinasi describes how women create a visual feast while participating in these excursions with the following words:

*"...Before the ladies take off their velvet or atlas abayas, their white abayas, and the colorful shawls like peacock tails hanging from the back of their boats into the water disappear, before the rowers let go of their oars and the boats disappear from the water, the market boats..."* (Şinasi, 1997, p.12).

Women's presence in public space was not only limited to the physical sphere; their clothes were also regulated and restricted. In addition to being a sign of identity, clothing has been used as a tool for social control. The fabrics and shapes of the feracas that women wore when going out were controlled by strict rules, and both the women who did

not comply with these rules and the tailors who sewed them were punished (Sezer and Özyalçiner, 2005, pp.53-58).

In the late Ottoman period, women's presence in public space was shaped by gender, class, and cultural norms, and these spaces were tightly controlled. The increasing mobility of women in the following decades reflects not only changes in the social context but also the transformation of urban space. The late Ottoman period exhibited women's presence in public spaces significantly influenced by a complex interplay of gender roles, social class distinctions, and cultural expectations. The interplay of these factors established a system in which women held significant control over public spaces, successfully creating territories for themselves amid the wider societal constraints. This control was often subtle but powerful, with women establishing and maintaining social norms that governed behavior in these spaces. The nature and extent of this control varied depending on the specific urban context, the social standing of the women involved, and the public space in question.

As the Ottoman Empire moved into the modern era, there was a gradual yet notable change in women's mobility within public spaces. This change was not just a reflection of shifting social attitudes regarding gender roles; it was also a consequence of the physical and functional transformation of urban spaces themselves. Cities started to evolve, introducing new forms of public spaces while rethinking the existing ones. This urban transformation allowed women to explore and move into public spaces in manners that were once inaccessible or regarded socially inappropriate. The increasing presence of women in diverse public settings - from parks and markets to educational institutions and workplaces - both reflected and contributed to broader societal changes, marking a shift in the relationship between gender, space, and urban life in the late-Ottoman period.

### **İstanbul through a women's diary of the Early Republican Era**

The Early Republican Era signified starting point of swift changes and distinctions in the everyday lives of women. The primary factor driving this

transformation was the recognition of women as citizens with rights to education, political participation, and employment in the public sphere (Berktaş 2011, p.35). During the late Ottoman period, daughters of elite families experienced specific privileges. These young women had the chance to receive private education at home and access various opportunities; however, they were not able to freely use urban public spaces. In this section, I focus on Sabiha Rüşti Bozcalı's presence in the public sphere and her relationship with urban space based on her personal documents in the SALT Archive, especially her diary from 1941 (Lordođlu, 2022).

The involvement of women in the public sphere was considered as a significant sign of Westernisation and modernisation. During the Early Republican Era, women like Sabiha Rüşti Bozcalı emerged as prominent figures in social life. It is important to note that women across different societal segments experience various situations. Kandiyoti asserts that urban bourgeois women were the primary beneficiaries of Kemalist reforms (Kandiyoti, 1987, p.322). Gülhan Balsoy's research on working women in the Ottoman Empire highlights the varied experiences of women across different social classes during this period, presenting a significant finding as follows: *"While middle-class professionals saw work as a duty toward the nation and emphasized their passion for their occupations, the lower-class manual workers were more expressive of the conditions that necessitated them to work and the class differences they were subject to."* (2024, p.810). However, in order to understand the nuances of the time, it is crucial to address what these privileged women made achievable in the urban public sphere and in which areas they were restricted. It is essential to recognise and analyse the public space experiences of a figure such as Bozcalı through her personal archive.

One of the main issues to be emphasized about the Early Republican Era is that it was no longer only religion or tradition that determined the correct behavioral patterns for women, but to a significant extent, the nation-state itself. Therefore, the nation-state's projects regulating women's lives have become an important component of state loyalty and official ideology (Berktaş, 2011,p.35). The



pulling down of spatial walls is balanced by the pulling up of spiritual walls, which is called nation-state patriarchy (Berktaş, 2011, p.38).

Bozcalı grew up during the First World War, the Committee of Union and Progress, and the Ottoman era of the Second Constitutional Monarchy. Born in 1903 in Kuruçeşme, Bozcalı was raised in a household of Ottoman military bureaucrats. From the early 1910s onwards, she lived with her family in the Memduh Pasha Mansion, named as after her grandfather, in Kireçburnu. During this period, the Bosphorus districts of Istanbul were at the center of the Ottoman elite's social life. Bozcalı's childhood and youth years were spent in such a privileged environment.

The photographs and postcards sent by Sabiha Bozcalı's mother Handan Hanım from her travels in Europe between 1912 and 1913 reveal that she was often abroad with her husband and that she resembled a Western woman in clothing style. In the early 1900s, the consumption patterns, entertainment, and daily routines of some circles in Istanbul mirrored the Westernisation movement, which had a growing impact on the Ottoman social structure with Tanzimat. In Istanbul, the capital of the Empire, a privileged and elite stratum trying to adapt to the innovations, while the poverty of the people deepened due to ongoing wars. Being one of the elite groups in Istanbul at the time, the Bozcalı family led a prosperous existence. Their social milieu and lifestyle closely resemble Abdülhak Şinasi Hisar's descriptions of Bosphorus neighbourhoods and their inhabitants. While the Bosphorus stood out as the center of wealth and privileged life at the time, the picture was different in other parts of Istanbul. There was a severe housing crisis for the middle and lower classes as a result of the fires that destroyed the housing stock and the surge of immigrants into the city following the war (Kaynar, 2012:99). This circumstance resulted in every enclosed area being considered as a possible residence. Among the interviews compiled in Suat Derviş's book *Collapsing Istanbul* (2021), especially "Where Do the People of Istanbul Live?", published between May 25 and June 9, 1935, is an important interview series on housing problems in

Istanbul, revealing the living conditions of people in a striking way. The Bozcalı family was affected by the crisis, like many other families with similar profiles, their economic situation changed, and everything was sold and consumed over time. The family's Kireçburnu residence was sold, and at the last period of her life Sabiha Bozcalı lived in a tiny rental flat that she said she "could not fit" with her paintings.

Her talent and interest in art were motivated by her mother's love of painting, and she began taking private painting classes at home at an early age. Bozcalı, like her older brother, was sent to study in Europe at the age of 15-16, disregarding societal expectations of girls. This indicates her family's inclination towards modernisation as well as dedication to education. Sabiha Bozcalı took her painting studies in Germany during the early 1920s, continued in France throughout the 1930s, and furthered her education in Italy in the latter half of the 1940s, working in the studios of notable artists of that era. The educational opportunities she obtained during these decades had a significant effect on her artistic career, allowing her to identify as a "oil portrait painter" in interviews (Özberki, 1984).

An important effect of being in the public sphere was that women and girls could receive formal education. With the proclamation of Tanzimat and Westernization, secondary schools opened for girls, followed by the girls' teacher's school founded in 1870 and the Academy of Fine Arts, which was first exclusively for women and then became co-educational. It has become possible for art education to become public for women. Sabiha Bozcalı has photographs of the Academy's workshops and docks from the years 1929-1930. The notes in her diary reveal that she remained friends with the names in these photographs.

Over time, Sabiha Rüştü Bozcalı's career shifted from oil portrait painting to advertising graphics and newspaper illustrators, and traces of the drawings she made in the advertising sector before 1950 were found only after her personal archive became accessible<sup>1</sup>. This is also due to the absence of her signature on most of these works. Thanks to the

<sup>1</sup> <https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/2565?locale=tr>

documents in the Salt Archive and exhibitions organized in parallel to this archive, Bozcalı was revealed to be one of Turkey's first graphic designers (Durmaz, 2016). Bozcalı participated in the advertising sector in the 1930s after being invited by her cousin, Memduh Moran, a pioneer in the field. Her art education and talents enabled Bozcalı to find a place for herself in different fields of work and take advantage of the opportunities available.

In the 1950s, Bozcalı worked as a newspaper illustrator for many newspapers, such as Yeni Sabah, Milliyet, Hergün, Havadis, and Ulus. During this period, she met Reşat Ekrem Koçu through Ali Naci Karacan, the founder of Milliyet newspaper. When Bozcalı was suggested that she draw for the Istanbul Encyclopedia, Koçu initially displayed a clear prejudice by saying "I do not work with women", but Bozcalı ignored this negative reaction and continued to draw for the encyclopedia and Koçu's other publications for nearly 22 years. Although women's presence in working life was legally recognized, social norms did not change at the same pace, and this incident shows Bozcalı's determination and motivation to work in different fields.

In the next part of the article, it becomes possible to imagine public spaces in Istanbul based on Sabiha Rüştü Bozcalı's diary from 1941. This diary reveals in detail how Sabiha moved from place to place, with intense mobility in the city for a year. Several locations were documented in her journal, including meetings with friends and relatives, visits to the Academy, films, restaurants, tailors, and exhibitions of the time, as well as shopping and professional meetings. Beyođlu is one of the neighborhoods that Bozcalı visited most frequently. She was around Eminönü and Sirkeci for her official business and frequently visited official institutions, such as the Ministry of Finance, Land Registry Office, and Treasurer's Office. Although infrequently, she visited Kadıköy and Caddebostan and made visits to the Princess Islands where her friends and relatives lived. Apart from this, during her stay in Kireçburnu, she took care of small errands and walked around Tarabya, Sarıyer, and Büyükdere.

Which means of transportation did she use for this mobility? Although Bozcalı's family owned an

automobile, it was observed that she used this vehicle only on special occasions, such as holidays and patient visits during her time in Kireçburnu. She generally preferred public transportation in her daily life. Early in the morning, she would take the ferry to the city center, and on her way back, she would sometimes take the bus back to Kireçburnu. These details allow us to understand both the transportation habits in Istanbul during the period and how Bozcalı used public spaces.

*"This morning, we went to Istanbul with my brother-in-law on the 8-10 ferry, and from there to Heybeli Island to have lunch with Nazlı and [Fatma Zehra] Aunt. We left at 5 and returned home. With my brother-in-law." (May 15)*

*"This morning I went to the city by bus to Tokatlıyan, to Fahrünnisa (Zeid). We had lunch at the hotel. I took the painting equipment to her and left her at 7. I came home at quarter past 8. Daddy came from Antakya." (September 2)*

A significant development enabling women from various social strata to engage more actively in the public realm was the diversification of public transportation. In particular, new means of transportation, such as trams and ferries, enabled women to meet men outside the promenades and gain more space in the public space. However, it is clear that these encounters were not happened in sudden or direct changes. In public transportation vehicles and public spaces, such as cinemas, separate places were reserved for men and women as a continuation of the haremlık-selamlık order at home. This separation was even concretized with physical barriers such as curtains, boards or screens (Kaynar, 2012, pp.63-64). An exception to these practices was the presence and flexibility of non-Muslim and foreign women in the public space. Over time, these distinctions disappeared and public transportation not only increased women's presence in the public sphere, but also had the effect of transforming the social structure and relations between men and women in the city. Women's mobility increased their visibility in the public space and triggered changes in gender relations (Kaynar 2012, p.55).

Going to cinema was one of Sabiha Hanım's frequent activities in the city. Sometimes she went to

cinema with her friends, most of the time alone. Almost all of the cinemas mentioned in the diary were in Beyoğlu: Sümen Cinema, Etoile Cinema, Tulip Cinema, Artistik Cinema (Osmanbey), Saray Cinema, Elhamra, Luxembourg Cinema, Sümer, Küçük Cinema, Eclair. She sometimes wrote short notes about the movies she went to.

*"I went to the city this morning. Abravayaya pose 7, I saw a very nice movie<sup>2</sup> of Mary Stuart, Sarah Leander, at Old Luxemburg cinema. I bought the painter Fahri Arkunlar m." (May 24)*

*"Ali Nurcuk went to Ankara. I landed in Istanbul this morning with the children. They gave me my second Calendar job at İnhisar. Lunch. I visited apartment buildings with my mother. We went to the Sumer movie theater. It was bad. Meeting at half past 5 with painters in Taksim, rainy weather at night. Night at Fulik." (September 15)*

Hakan Kaynar mentioned that cinema creates an important venue for women to get out of the house and be visible and seen in the public spaces of the city (2012, p.167).

Sabiha Hanım sleeps over evenings at her friends' houses. Both the fact that Kireçburnu was not a central neighborhood and the fact that public transportation was incomparably less frequent and the types of vehicles were fewer than today must have been effective in this regard. However, can one also think of the uneasiness and uncanny feelings of returning home late at night? Was Sabiha Bozcalı on the streets for her profession in addition to her daily life? Although we have a significant idea from the Salt Archive, we do not have holistic knowledge of where and who owns Bozcalı's works. Therefore, we do not have a detailed answer to the question of how much and how she was found on the street in her paintings. As a woman painter, was she able to paint on the street in different parts of Istanbul? In one of her interviews, we learn that her mother accompanied her on some days when she was drawing on the street (Özberki, 1984). This points to the possibilities of a woman artist painting on the street in her own

time, although not alone, but it does not provide comprehensive information.

## Conclusion and Discussion

This study aimed to compare women's experiences of public space in different historical periods of Istanbul and examine the changing and unchanging features. For this purpose, urban public space where women were visible in the Late Ottoman and Early Republican Periods, which are prominent in the existing literature, were examined. Women's relationship to public space changed from the Late Ottoman to Early Republican era, with increased access to education, employment, and political participation. However, social norms and state control continued to shape and constrain women's presence in public. Additionally, an increasing amount of research by feminist historians emphasizes the active roles of women, depicting them not just as victims or passive figures, but also as activists and agents of change.

Initially, this study attempted to summarize discussions on two distinct contexts regarding women's relationships with public space. The first examines women's advocacy for equal rights in the public sphere, while the second addresses their access to urban public spaces. Secondly, the focus shifted to women's relation with urban public space in the late Ottoman period. The third section of the study investigates Sabiha Bozcalı's mobility and relations within Istanbul's public space during the Early Republican Era, with a particular emphasis on her 1941 diary, through an analysis of personal archival materials.

Sabiha Bozcalı's education and her subsequent interest in another branch of painting, and her choice to earn a living from it, led her into a fast-paced and intense working life. The intensity continues to persist alongside the acceleration and mobility within the city's public space. At this point 1941 was undoubtedly a year filled with movement for Bozcalı, both personally and professionally. Bozcalı's activities in 1941 can be traced

<sup>2</sup> The movie the two artists starred in together in those years was probably *Das Herz der Königin*, <https://www.kino.de/film/das-herz-der-koenigin-1940/>

through her diary, which details her regular use of public transit, interactions with colleagues, professional visits for her works in progress, going to the cinema, and mealtimes at restaurants. The growing utilisation of public space is observed alongside the intensity of her interactions within her social environment, her professional connections, and her aspiration to leverage social opportunities in the city.

What is striking and worthy of discussion at this point is the lack of assertiveness and invisibility of Bozcalı's, which does not parallel her important network of personal relations, education, and career. Despite her talent and hard work, Bozcalı maintained an invisible presence in the field of advertising and newspaper illustrations for years.

Upon analyzing women's access to the public sphere across diverse backgrounds today, it is evident that a singular categorization for women is insufficient. Current research highlights two major issues that restrict women's access to public spaces: the burden of care labour and fear of male violence (IPA, 2025). As women, today we are more numerous in many different areas, such as work, education, politics, and the use of urban public space. However, there are still constraints in the use of urban public space, and we have internalized borders of the city for ourselves. The persistent burden of care labour remains disproportionately on women, who continue to engage in unpaid domestic and caregiving tasks. This heavy workload restricts their ability to leave the home, and even when they do, care labour remains their primary obligation (Geniř and Akkırman, 2020). In instances where privileged groups acquire care services, the responsibility of arranging such tasks is once more assigned to women. Currently, the other significant factor constraining women's participation in the public space is the matter of security. It is obvious where and when women should be or should not be due to the fear of male violence. Urban public space still has restrictions for women from different social strata. As Lelie Kern states for male violence "For most of us, however, the message comes in the form of a serum, slowly accumulating in our system until it is totally in our blood. It is now natural, rational, and immanent." (Kern, 2020, p.163) We must continue to conduct

new studies with various discipline to ensure that the possibilities of thinking in relation to space and gender do not fall off the agenda of public and feminist politics.

By examining archives akin to Bozcalı's personal collection, researchers from various fields will identify both commonalities and differences in the experiences of women during the same era. This analysis will help reveal previously overlooked insights about these periods through a feminist lens. This approach allows for a rewriting of history, positioning women as active participants while bridging the knowledge of the past with the present.

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