

# NEZİHE MUHİDDİN’İN STRUGGLE FOR WOMEN’S POLITICAL RIGHTS: MUSTAFA KEMAL ATATÜRK’ÜN STANDE AND THE OBSTACLES TO CHANGE

Emre YÜRÜK\*

## ABSTRACT

In this study, the development of Turkish women’s interest in politics from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the advent of the Republic is evaluated by taking into account the activism of Nezihe Muhiddin, one of the prominent figures of the period. The article explores Nezihe Muhiddin’s attempts to establish a political party, her organization of conferences and her contributions to articles in magazines advocating for women’s suffrage. It also delves into the challenges she faced at the administrative level as a result of these efforts. The primary focus of this article centers around the conflict between Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the republican leadership’s desire to pave the way for Turkish women in politics through social reforms, as opposed to Nezihe Muhiddin’s urgent drive to secure political rights for women as quickly as possible. During the early years of the Republic, Nezihe Muhiddin and her associates played a pivotal role in advocating for women’s suffrage and put forth significant efforts to mature societal attitudes towards granting women the right to vote and be elected. As a necessary element of establishing a modern nation-state, the article examines Atatürk and the republican leadership’s reactions to these efforts and the conflicts that arose as a result of their responses, drawing upon archival documents and newspapers from the period.

**Keywords:** Nezihe Muhiddin, Turkish Women, Elections in Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Political Rights, Feminism in Turkey.

## NEZİHE MUHİDDİN’İN KADINLARIN SİYASİ HAKLARI İÇİN MÜCADELESİ: MUSTAFA KEMAL ATATÜRK’ÜN TUTUMU VE DEĞİŞİMİN ÖNÜNDEKİ ENGELLER

### ÖZ

Bu çalışmada 19. yüzyılın sonlarından itibaren Türk kadınının siyasete olan ilgisinin cumhuriyetle birlikte nasıl geliştiği dönemin aktivistlerinden Nezihe Muhiddin’in mücadelesi dikkate alınarak değerlendirilmiştir. Nezihe Muhiddin’in parti kurma girişimi, kadınların seçme ve seçilme hakkı üzerine konferanslar düzenleyip dergilerde yazılar yazması ve bunlara bağlı olarak yönetim kademesiyle yaşadığı sorunlar ortaya koyulmaya çalışılmıştır. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk ve cumhuriyet kadrolarının önce toplumsal reformlarla Türk kadınına siyaset yolu açacak hamleleri yapma arzusunun ve Nezihe Muhiddin’in kadınlara bir an önce siyasi haklarının verilmesi yönündeki ivedi isteğinin meydana getirdiği çatışma, makalenin ana konusunu teşkil etmektedir. Erken cumhuriyet döneminde Nezihe Muhiddin ve arkadaşları, kadınlara siyasal hakların tanınması konusunda bir kilometre taşı olup mücadeleleriyle toplumda bir zihniyetin olgunlaşmasına katkı sağlayarak kadınların seçme ve seçilme hakkının elde edilmesinde büyük çabalar göstermişlerdir. Modern ulus-devlet oluşturmanın bir gereği olarak Atatürk ve cumhuriyet kadrolarının bu çabalara tepkileri ve tepkilerinin yarattığı çatışma alanları, arşiv belgeleri ve dönemin gazeteleri ışığında tartışılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Nezihe Muhiddin, Türk Kadını, Türkiye’de Seçimler, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Siyasal Haklar, Türkiye’de Feminizm.

**Citation:** YÜRÜK, E. (2023). “Nezihe Muhiddin’s Struggle For Women’s Political Rights: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s Stance And The Obstacles To Change”, İMGELEM, 7 (13): 735-752.

**Atıf:** YÜRÜK, E. (2023). “Nezihe Muhiddin’in Kadınların Siyasi Hakları İçin Mücadelesi: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’ün Tutumu ve Değişimin Önündeki Engeller”, İMGELEM, 7 (13): 735-752.

Başvuru / Received: 19 Eylül 2023 / 19 September 2023

Kabul / Accepted: 16 Kasım 2023 / 16 November 2023

Derleme Makale / Review Article.

\* Dr. Karadeniz Teknik Üniversitesi, İİBF., Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü, Trabzon/Türkiye, E-mail: [emre.yuruk@ktu.edu.tr](mailto:emre.yuruk@ktu.edu.tr), ORCID Number: 0000-0002-6798-1048

## INTRODUCTION

The participation of women in social life increased with the need for a female workforce witnessing an upward trend after the Industrial Revolution in Europe. Over time, women formed organizations and advocated for improved working conditions, higher wages, and the rights men already enjoyed. This movement was known as “First Wave Feminism” and was considered the first stage of the feminist movement. This wave of feminism took different forms in each country (Krolokke & Sorensen 2006: 1-7).

Similarly, the developments in Europe diffused across the border and had an impact on Ottoman women. As the Ottoman Empire underwent significant political changes, women’s demands for political and public rights increased. Taking advantage of the modernization efforts that started with the Tanzimat Era (1839-1876), women attempted to make their voices heard and secure their rights. This eventually led to the start of the First Wave Feminism movement in the Ottoman Empire. This movement can be divided into three periods in the history of the Ottoman and Turkish Republics:

- I. Early Ottoman Movement-i Nisvanî (Woman) (1868-1908),
- II. Ottoman Feminism in the Second Constitutional Era (1908-1922),
- III. First Wave Republican Feminism (1923-1935) (Zihnioglu 2003: 21).

During that era, many women emerged as influencers and advocated for women’s rights in the Ottoman Empire. Fatma Aliye, the daughter of Ottoman statesman Ahmet Cevdet Pasha and the first female novelist in Turkish literature, led the initial period of the First Wave Feminism movement. Aliye’s strong personality and knowledge had marked a significant impact on Ottoman women. Her sister, Emine Semiye Hanım, was the other prominent advocate for women’s rights and had more radical ideas. Emine Semiye believed women should reclaim their femininity, previously ignored and devalued, through education and enlightenment. During this period, the *Women’s World* journal, printed by the women writers of the Müdafaa-i Hukuk-i Nisvan Society (the Ottoman Society for the Defence of Women’s Rights, hereafter OSDWR) under Nuriye Ulviye Mevlan, emerged as an important platform to voice their issues towards achieving their rights. This laid the ideological foundation for Ottoman feminism and raised awareness about women’s rights. As a result, changes in women’s daily lives became apparent.

The second period of the First Wave Feminism movement saw the emergence of two influential women: Halide Edip Hanım and Nuriye Ulviye Mevlan. Halide Edip founded the

## **Nezihe Muhiddin's Struggle For Women's Political Rights: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's Stance and The Obstacles To Change**

---

Teali-i Nisvan Society (Society for the Advancement of Women) in 1908-1909 to raise consciousness about women's rights and to create a strong female identity. Nuriye Ulviye Mevlan established the OSDWR in 1913, which was the first real women's association and helped to educate women through the "*Women's World*" magazine (Tunaya 1988: 480-482).

Fatma Aliye, Emine Semiye, Halide Edip, and Nuriye Ulviye Mevlan were role models for many Turkish women, including Nezihe Muhiddin, a prominent feminist of the First Wave Republican Feminism period. During this period, Nezihe greatly strived for the political and social rights of Turkish women. She organized women through the Women's People Party (WPP) and the Turkish Women's Union (TWU) to participate in political life. She even established the WPP to secure the women's right to vote and be elected just before Atatürk's Republican People's Party (RPP) was founded. Nezihe faced difficulties and accusations despite her efforts and achievements, leading to her retreat and eventual obscurity.

Among the works on Nezihe Muhiddin, Yaprak Zihnioğlu's (2003) "Revolution Without Women: Nezihe Muhiddin, Women's People Party, Women's Union" is the most comprehensive study. It explores Nezihe's ideological precepts and her efforts for women's rights. However, a major gap in the research about Nezihe Muhiddin is the lack of examination of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's views on women's rights and obstacles. In this framework, this study explores the acquisition of women's rights in Turkey through Nezihe Muhiddin and her struggles. It will examine Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's stance on granting women's political rights and address whether the delayed granting of these rights was due to a patriarchal society or a lack of priority in a newly established republic in the light of first hand sources like contemporary newspapers, the Turkish parliament's records, archival documents and Nezihe Muhiddin's essays.

### **From the Empire to the Republic: Turkish Women and Their Political Rights**

Through the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the Ottoman Empire, reforms and innovations were imposed by the state rather than being a result of public demand, as was seen in the French Revolution (Oran 2009: 23). The state made changes in political and social areas, particularly in the military, but women's rights were often neglected and were achieved only after a struggle by women activists. In order to analyse Turkish women's right to vote and be elected, it requires examining the pre-republican period. The reforms initiated during the Tanzimat Era provided a path for women to gradually gain a presence in society and politics. Intellectuals, who mainly

focused on women's education, became a noteworthy part in this quest for the rights of Ottoman women in line with their European counterparts. They argued that Islam gave women more rights than those in the West and hence should be materialized. Meanwhile, conservatives believed it was too early to allow political rights to women by emphasising that a woman's place was in the home (Konan 2011: 163).

Tanzimat period did not result in significant gains for women's rights, but it marked a shift in the discussion of women's status compared to previous periods. For instance, the 1858 Land Code granting the right of inheritance to girls was a significant step in this direction (Kenanoğlu 2006: 113). During the Constitutional Monarchy, women placed higher importance on defending their rights and received support from the Young Turks such as Fatma Aliye who was the most essential figure of Ottoman feminism because of her intellectual and activist pursuits (Bolat Salman 2014: 28). Aliye was among the first pioneers of the women's movement in Turkey and belonged to the intelligentsia. Other notable figures of this time include Makbule Leman, Emine Semiye, Fahrünnisa, Poet Nigar, and Mihrünnisa (Karabulut 2005: 187-188). These individuals are credited with laying the foundation for first-wave feminism in Turkey.

The Second Constitutional Monarchy period (1908-1920) was a period of significant progress regarding women's rights. Ottoman women started to gain more freedom and individuality during this time. Though the establishment of European-style educational institutions first sparked the movement, however, its impact was limited to a specific group. The pioneers of the Ottoman women's movement attempted to express themselves through the press. Consequently, between 1869 and 1927, 38 Turkish women's magazines were published (Aydin 2009: 148-149). Of these, *Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete* (Newspaper for Ladies) had a special significance as many of its writers were women and highlighted the difficulties faced by first-wave feminism and the significance of women's education and place in society. The fact that leading intellectuals of the period, like Fatma Aliye, also wrote in the magazine further emphasized its significance (Zihnioğlu 2003: 44).

In the Ottoman period, several leading feminists emerged, including Fatma Aliye, Halide Edip, who founded the *Teali-i Nisvan Society*, and Ulviye Mevlan, who founded the *Müdafa-i Hukuk-ı Nisvan Society*. The Ottoman Women's Employment Society and the First Female Worker Battalion in the First Army were significant in demonstrating the capability of women (Yüceer 2008: 134-135). While many women's organizations eventually became charitable organizations, the *Müdafa-i Hukuk-ı Nisvan Society* remained different and, in

## **Nezihe Muhiddin's Struggle For Women's Political Rights: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's Stance and The Obstacles To Change**

---

essence, was the first real women's association since it mainly dealt with the women rights. The society published a journal called *Women's World* that promoted equality between men and women and advocated for women's involvement in social and public spaces (Toprak 2015: 462).

The latter years of the Ottoman Empire had a significant impact on women's participation in society. The prolonged wars resulted in men being recruited for military duties, and women were employed to fill the vacancies (Çiçek et al. 2015: 279-280). As a result, women began working in hospitals, post offices, administration, laboratories, and other occupations (Gökçimen 2008: 11). Some writers of the period considered women's increased participation in the workforce to be a "women's revolution", while others saw it as the "collapse of family life" (Zihnioğlu 2003: 82-83). However, women's roles in business were short-lived as they returned to their homes after the war and surrendered the area to men.

### **Nezihe Muhiddin's Efforts During First Wave Republican Feminism (1923-1935)**

Turkish women actively participated in the Turkish Independence War (1919-1922) and demonstrated their ability to participate in social life when necessary (Taşkiran 1973: 67-68). After the war, the next step for women was gaining political rights with the republic's establishment. Nezihe Muhiddin, who pioneered advocating for women's political rights and fought for many years, feared that Turkish women might lose their hard-earned but limited participation in social life after the war. She believed that apart from taking care of their children Turkish women proved themselves by taking "rifles and running to the border, proving that they were loyal and true children of this country" (Muhiddin 1923). Since they sacrificed themselves without thinking any second, they deserved political rights and she continued that "even if men don't give them to us, we will take it" (Muhiddin 1923). In her writings in 1925, she thought that women would benefit more from the republican regime (Zihnioğlu 2006: 226).

In 1923, the election law changed and the possibility of women being counted as voters emerged due to a decrease in the male population and the inability of 50,000 men to elect a deputy. Despite opposition from other lawmakers, Tunalı Hilmi Bey brought this issue to the forefront of parliament (Kürkçüoğlu 1989: 135). Nezihe Muhiddin and her friends continued their efforts for women's rights and decided to organize. According to a May 31, 1923, news article in *Vakit* newspaper titled "Our Women Want the Law and Politics," Nezihe Muhiddin and her associates announced they would convene a women's council and start political

activities and declared that Turkish women would no longer remain passive spectators in the affairs of the country (Türk Kadınlar Şurası (Turkish Women's Council) 1923).

On June 15, 1923, Nezihe Muhiddin chaired the founding meeting of the WPP at the Darülfünun Conference Hall. The party's main objective was to fight for women's political rights honestly and efficiently (Şehrimizdeki Kadın Hareketi İlerliyor Kadınlar Halk Fırkası Bugün Resmen Teşekkül Edecektir (The Women's Movement in Our City Is Progressing. The Women's People's Party Will Formally Be Formed Today) 1923). In an interview, Nezihe Muhiddin stated that women wanted to have the right to vote like any civilized individual, but not necessarily to hold positions such as deputy or ambassador (Zihnioğlu 2003: 127). Despite the party not being officially recognized before Turkey's first general elections on June 28, 1923, Latife Hanım (Mustafa Kemal Pasha' wife) received one vote from Izmir, and Halide Edip Hanım received one vote from Izmir and two votes from Şarki Karahisar, demonstrating the desire of Nezihe Muhiddin and Turkish women to participate in the political arena ('Intihabatda İki Hanıma Dört Rey (Four Votes for Two Ladies)' 1923).

From a historical point of view, the WPP was established before the Anatolian and Rumelian Defense of Rights Association which fought during the Turkish Independence War and emerged as the People's Party (PP) at the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (GNA) in 1923. Although Nezihe Muhiddin tried establishing the WPP in 1923, the government did not allow it due to "some ideas" in the party's program. It was not considered appropriate for women who did not have political rights to form a party in a time of intense intellectual differences (Zihnioğlu 2003: 147-148). Additionally, as Mustafa Kemal Pasha was establishing the People's Party to represent the entire society, it was not possible to allow the use of that name for the Women's People Party and allow a party on a gender basis. The party was eventually renamed the Turkish Women's Union (TWU) on February 7, 1924, with the term "law and politics" removed from its charter and the phrase "unity has nothing to do with politics" added (Toprak 2015: 466). Despite obstacles, Nezihe continued her efforts to achieve the right to vote and to be elected for women, even as Zafer Toprak emphasized that the aim of the WPP was not to achieve political gains (Toprak 2015: 463).

Nezihe Hanım chaired the Turkish Women's Union (TWU) from 1924 to 1927, focusing on empowering women intellectually and socially, supporting widows and orphans, assisting impoverished children, and organizing scientific events to prepare women for public life. The TWU also launched a magazine, Kadın Yolu (Women's Way), in 1925 to amplify Women's Voices (Bolat Salman 2014: 30). Thanks to their significant contributions to society, the TWU

## **Nezihe Muhiddin's Struggle For Women's Political Rights: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's Stance and The Obstacles To Change**

---

was later recognized as a public beneficial association by the state (BCA, 30-18-1-1/14-42-6, n.d.).

Despite her commitment to beneficial social work, Nezihe Muhiddin remained politically active. In February 1925, the TWU offered Nezihe Muhiddin and Halide Edip for a vacant parliamentary position in Istanbul to promote women's right to vote and keep the issue in the public eye. However, this application did not receive support from Halide Edip, Nakiye Hanım, and other anti-feminists of the time, notably Yunus Nadi (Toprak 2015: 156-165). Halide Edip claimed that she was unaware of the application, while Nakiye Hanım expressed her opposition to the idea by insisting:

“I do not agree with the opinion of the TWU. Our woman has not reached that level yet. Yes, let's show ourselves by creating women's organizations, let's do a job and then demand this right. Those who were told that the union would show a good will, in fact, became the deputy (gaining merit). Why don't we show a female deputy candidate? The law is not available. So our time has not yet come. Our government has so far bestowed all kinds of laws that our womanhood deserves. Even more...” (Özdemir 2014a: 120).

The views of Nakiye Hanım, who was close to the government and was considered an “ideal Turkish woman,” were supported by newspapers of the time. Despite being rewarded and elected as a deputy in 1935, Nezihe Hanım faced allegations and criticism from Nakiye (Yildiz 2015: 58-59). Nezihe responded with a harsh statement, but eventually, the two softened their tone (Özdemir 2014a: 126-127). This development showed that Nezihe Muhiddin could be left alone even by women.

The political demands of Nezihe Hanım and TWU faced a setback with the Sheikh Said Rebellion in February 1925. The resulting Law of Reconciliation led to the closure of the Progressive Republican Party, which was opposed to Mustafa Kemal, and martial law was declared in the country. While the impact of martial law on the TWU was unclear, the women's political aspirations were temporarily postponed. In 1926, the TWU applied to become a member of the Republican People's Party (RPP), however, the RPP administration's response that it would be more beneficial for women to focus on children and Red Crescent affairs left the group's efforts inconclusive (Zihnioğlu 2003: 177-179).

The year 1927 was a turning point for the TWU and Nezihe Muhiddin. Despite the martial law, Nezihe continued to pursue her goal and opened branches in cities such as Denizli, Afyon, Aydın, Bakırköy, Üsküdar, and Diyarbakır (Zihnioğlu 2003: 188). At a congress held by the TWU on March 25, 1927, in Istanbul, Nezihe Muhiddin demanded women's right to

vote and participate in local elections. To achieve this goal, the association needed to amend its statute, but the governor of Istanbul refused, claiming that women's main duty was to bear and raise children. However, the government intervened and demanded the approval of the new statute (Caporal 1982: 691). The biggest challenge faced by the TWU was allegations of corruption in the election of the executive committee and the management of the association at the congress. An account review committee was formed, wherein it was found that there was no issue with the income and expenditure balance (Kadınlar Birliği'nde Hesaplara Bakıldı, Yeni Komisyonlar Yapıldı (Accounts Have Been Inspected in Women's Union, New Commissions Have Been Made) 1927).

In 1927, after the new charter was approved, the first goal of the Nezihe Muhiddin-led TWU aimed to bring attention to women's political rights. The issue of having a female parliamentary candidate for the upcoming general elections was discussed, as it was believed that having someone defend women's rights in parliament would help women gain their rights faster. Some women preferred to run for the People's Party, while others argued it would be unconstitutional. Ultimately, it was decided to nominate from the (RPP). However, with the RPP spokespersons declaring that "women's participation in elections is an immature issue" and, the group, after meeting with Mustafa Kemal, gave up on nominating candidates. The TWU request was unsuccessful as the election was close, and there was no time to amend the constitution to allow women to participate (Tekeli 1982: 211).

Despite the inability to nominate female candidates for the 1927 general elections, the Turkish Women's Union proposed to nominate a male candidate to defend women's rights. It was proposed, and as such publicized, to nominate Şükrü Nail Pertev Pasha, Deputy Minister of Education, Mustafa Necati Bey, and Director of Umur-ı Hukukiye Kenan Bey. However, Kenan Bey, known for his feminist views, denied the news (Özdemir 2014b: 178). Nezihe Muhiddin, chair of the TWU, stated that they would not give up on their goal of obtaining electoral rights and would continue to fight for women's political rights. She said, "We have not given up on our ideal of obtaining our electoral rights. Our association will have no reason to exist if we do. We will work until our deaths for the victory of our cause. If our lives aren't enough, at least we will pave the way for those who come after us" (Caporal 1982: 693).

At the end of 1927, following a disagreement between Nezihe Muhiddin and the governorship of Istanbul, opposition in the TWU accused her of causing the problem and demanded her resignation as president. The police directorate conducted a search and claimed that Nezihe had misused 500 Turkish lira for personal purposes (Zihnioğlu 2003: 234–236).



## Nezihe Muhiddin's Struggle For Women's Political Rights: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's Stance and The Obstacles To Change

---

Nezihe denied the allegations and refused to resign (*Nihayet İstifa Edecek Mi? (Will She Finally Resign?)* 1927). Dissatisfied members of the union held a presidential election and elected Sadiye Hanım, a more moderate principal of Selçuk Hatun Girls' Secondary School, as the new president (Bozkir 2000: 104–105). On September 26, 1927, the opposition within the TWU held an extraordinary congress with 51 signed motions. It expelled Nezihe Muhiddin and her supporters, who believed women could not participate in social life without achieving political rights. However, these events contributed to women's eventual gains in political rights. The event significantly impacted the male community, with Yunus Nadi, for instance, exclaiming that “we call the event Oh, oh we are saved!” (Nadi 1927), (*Kadınlar Nihayet Nezihe Hanım'dan Ayrıldılar (Women Finally Separated From Nezihe Hanım)* 1927). Nezihe faced multiple lawsuits between 1927 and 1929, but she could not win any of them. On May 13, 1929, an amnesty law passed by the GNA of Turkey ended the lawsuits until 1929 (*Nezihe Hanım Davası (The Case of Ms. Nezihe)* 1929).

In 1930, women's status in the Republican administration improved further when they were granted the right to participate in municipal elections. Turkish women were now recognized as full and equal citizens and were allowed to be members and hold positions in the municipality. The Law on Municipalities was amended in March 1930, changing the requirement for voting in municipal elections to Turkish, thus paving the way for women to vote (*TBMM ZC* 1930). Nezihe Muhiddin highlighted this recent progress in her 1931 published book, “Turkish Woman”. She emphasized that the Republic was making progress and continuously giving women gifts as they progressed:

“The Republic is marching on and it never neglects to give a gift to women as they grow older. The gift of the seventh year was the right to participate in the municipal elections... The Republic will continue to march and shine more lights on women's lives. The day we celebrate our political rights being granted is not far away” (Baykan & Ötüş-Baskett 1999: 121).

In 1930, Nezihe Muhiddin and Suat Derviş joined hands with the Free Republican Party and campaigned for the party through multiple conferences (*İntihap – Namzetler Yarın İlan Ediliyor (Election – Candidates Will Be Announced Tomorrow)* 1930). At a conference at the Kadıköy Süreyya Cinema, Nezihe Muhiddin spoke in favour of the party and emphasized the party's stance on equal rights for women (*Nezihe Muhiddin Gazeteciler Arasında (Nezihe Muhiddin Among Journalists)* 1930). Although both of them were nominated as candidates in

the municipal elections by the Free Republican Party, they were unsuccessful, and the party eventually closed due to political events (Haan et al. 2006: 358).

On December 5, 1934, the law granting women the right to vote and be elected came into effect. The assembly approved this right for Turkish women with 258 votes and decided to hold elections afresh to renew the assembly (*TBMM ZC 1934*). When women were granted political rights, Muhiddin applied to run as an independent candidate in the elections. However, even independent candidates had to have the support of the ruling RPP during the single-party regime. Nezihe Muhiddin was not given this support in spite of her long-standing efforts for women's political rights, and so she could not achieve her goal of becoming a parliamentary deputy. However, this issue did not stop her from fighting for her cause (Haan et al. 2006: 358).

In later years, Nezihe Muhiddin had a hard time making a living as a writer. Her mental health deteriorated, and she lost her life in a mental hospital in Istanbul on February 10, 1958. Despite facing many challenges and setbacks, Nezihe Muhiddin remained politically active throughout her life and is rightfully regarded as a trailblazer in the history of Turkey's women's suffrage movement during the first wave of feminism.

### **Mustafa Kemal Pasha and the Rights Given to Women**

The attitude of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk towards granting political rights to women was significant. He was a multi-dimensional thinker who understood that his reforms should complement each other. Although the Committee of Union and Progress tried to achieve this revolution, it could not be implemented due to the various problems it encountered (Tunaya 1988: 477-478). Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, on the other hand, was a leader who knew how to wait for the right moment and effectively read the conditions of the period. In a speech given to the public in Izmir in 1923, he stated that a new era for the Turkish people had started with the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, which required a new mentality in every aspect to be developed by Turkish women (Taşkiran 1973: 83-85). Thus, efforts were made to change the status of women in society and create a more active and comfortable environment. The right to vote granted to women was a result of this process. While the efforts of Nezihe Muhiddin and women who shared her views in obtaining the right to be elected cannot be overlooked, Mustafa Kemal established the republic, brought civil law and secularization efforts, and provided the environment and encouragement for women's rights.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk favoured granting women rights but believed the conditions were not yet favourable. Despite Tunalı Hilmi Bey's speech advocating for women's right to

## **Nezihe Muhiddin's Struggle For Women's Political Rights: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's Stance and The Obstacles To Change**

---

vote and run for election in the First Assembly, Atatürk remained silent and later explained to Afet Inan that the topic was unsuitable at that time, as “this subject could not have been settled in the mentality and atmosphere of the GNA that day” (Inan 1968: 157). The fact that women's rights were not granted shows that the prevailing mentality of the period was not yet ready for democracy. In contrast, in a speech in Konya in 1922, Atatürk emphasized the need to include women in all aspects of life, as “it is necessary to make the great Turkish woman common in our work, to carry on our life with her, to make the Turkish woman a partner for men in scientific, social and economic life” (Aydemir 2017: 241).

Atatürk's primary goal was to solidify his position and implement the desired reforms. Despite being a national hero and saviour, there was still significant opposition in parliament, making it difficult to grant women's rights. Therefore, as the leading chair, Atatürk dissolved the First Assembly and held general elections to gain support from like-minded individuals in the new assembly. The general election of 1923 saw individuals close to Atatürk being elected to parliament, enabling him to make the desired reforms.

During the second parliamentary period, the key event was to establish the new constitution of the Republic of Turkey. Article 10 of the constitution states, “Every Turkish citizen above the age of 18 has the right to vote”. This sparked controversy, and a group of deputies led by Recep Peker demanded that the term “every Turk” include women and that the article be amended to reflect this. Despite the debates, the article was not accepted due to pressure from the conservative section. Kütahya Deputy Recep Bey showed his dissatisfaction by stating, “You didn't give any rights to women, at least don't clap!” (*TBMM ZC* 1924). This showed that society did not favour granting women political rights. Mustafa Kemal Pasha recognized that society needed to be transformed before granting women political rights and implemented reforms such as the civil law and dress code to help women reach a higher status in society.

During the second term of the GNA (August 11, 1923 - August 2, 1927), a significant effort was made to improve women's rights through changes to the Civil Code. The existing legal system based on Ottoman Family Law and Mecelle was revised, and a new civil law draft was created. However, since the draft still contained elements of Sharia law, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk rejected it and instead created a new Turkish Civil Code based on the Swiss Civil Code in 1926 (Kartal 2005: 86). This new law was seen as a step towards westernization and provided women with equal rights before the law. Polygamy and marriage by proxy were prohibited, and

both men and women had equal rights in matters of divorce, marriage, and inheritance. The legal age of marriage for girls was set at 18 (Gökçimen 2008: 19). Atatürk described the Civil Code as “the law that secures women’s freedom and strengthens the family in our new laws, which provide fruitful results in our nation’s social, economic, and, in short, all civilization-related business and relations” (Şenşekerci 2014: 294). The enactment of the new Turkish Civil Code, which protected women’s rights and considered men and women equal before the law, was influenced by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the activities of the TWU. Although women did not have any political rights, the new Civil Code could be seen as a guarantee of their social rights.

Atatürk, who believed that society needed to be prepared before granting women political rights, also sought to improve the status of women in society through the dress code. In his Kastamonu Speech of August 30, 1925, he criticized the restrictive clothing imposed on women in society as reducing their self-confidence and limiting their participation in social life:

“In some places, I see women who throw a cloth or a loincloth or something similar on their heads, hide their eyes and turn their backs against the men who pass by, or sit on the ground. What is the meaning of this attitude? Gentlemen, would a civilized nation’s mother, nation’s daughter, enter this strange form, this savage state? This is a scene that makes the nation look ridiculous. It needs to be fixed immediately” (cited from Taşkıran 1973: 89-90).

During a visit to İnebolu on the same dates, Atatürk noticed how women covered their faces and eyes intensely and carefully, causing them agony in hot weather. Atatürk believed that Turkish women were confined to a specific type in society due to their clothing, reinforcing patriarchal social structures (Yılmaz 2008: 35). He proposed a change in women’s dress and attire to promote women's self-confidence and active participation in social life. As a result, Turkish women gained a higher status in society and paved the way for them to obtain their political rights. By making changes to women's dress and attire, Atatürk aimed to empower women and help them achieve a more prominent status in society. This was an important step towards their eventual political rights.

Another issue that President Atatürk paid attention to was the political changes happening in the world, where leaders such as Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany had seized power and were ruling as dictators. Claims that Kemalism was a copy of fascism prompted Atatürk to take democratic measures (Ahmad 2002: 65-67). To dispel the image of being a dictator like Mussolini and Hitler, Mustafa Kemal asked his friend Fethi Okyar to found

## **Nezihe Muhiddin's Struggle For Women's Political Rights: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's Stance and The Obstacles To Change**

---

the Free Republican Party (FRP). By giving women the right to vote and be elected, Atatürk demonstrated that he was a democratic leader rather than a dictator (Tekeli 1982: 214).

The right to vote and be elected for Turkish women was granted as a result of the amendments made to Articles 21 and 22 of the Law on Municipalities on March 20, 1930 (*TBMM ZC 1930*). This was due to the efforts of Nezihe Muhiddin and the democratic image that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk had established. Women voted for the first time in the municipal elections held in 1933 and were elected to the municipal council and mukhtars (Tekeli 1982: 212). In 1934, with the approval of 258 out of 317 deputies in the GNA of Turkey, "Every male and female Turk who has completed the age of 22 has the right to elect a deputy (Article 10), and every Turkish woman and man who has reached the age of 30 obtained the right to be elected as a member of parliament (Article 11) (*TBMM ZC 1934*). This made Turkey one of the first countries in the West and the Islamic world to grant women these rights. İsmet İnönü emphasized in his parliamentary speech that this was a continuation of the Turkish Revolution and that Turkish women had fought alongside men during the national struggle. He underlined that giving this right to Turkish women should not be perceived as a blessing, as Turkish women fought shoulder to shoulder with men during the national struggle (*TBMM ZC 1934*).

The granting of the right to vote and be elected to women was received with great excitement among women. On April 11, 1930, the Turkish Women's Union held a large rally in Sultanahmet ('Cumaya Kadınlar Miting Yapacaklar: İstanbul Kadınları Sultanahmet'te Toplanacaklar (Women Will Hold a Rally on Friday: İstanbul Women Will Gather in Sultanahmet)' 1930) to express gratitude to the state officials for the revolutionary reforms (BCA, 30-10-10/80-526-4, 1930). However, in 1935, the Union was dissolved as it was believed that women no longer needed to be politically active, having already gained the right to vote (Zihnioğlu 2003: 258).

### **CONCLUSION**

The first wave of feminism, which aimed to improve working conditions for women, emerged during the industrial revolution. This movement emerged at different times in different countries, and in the late period of the Ottoman Empire, Turkish women attempted to raise their voices through newspapers, magazines, and associations. With the formation of the Republic of Turkey, the struggle for the political rights of Turkish women became stronger, with figures such as Nezihe Muhiddin playing a crucial role in this effort.

Nezihe Muhiddin founded the Women's People Party and worked towards granting women the right to vote and be elected from the beginning. However, the establishment of a party based on gender was not accepted by the state during a time when unity was necessary. Nezihe Muhiddin continued her efforts by founding the Turkish Women's Union. Although she faced criticism for her hasty and persistent pursuit of political rights for women without considering the conditions of the time, her persistence kept the issue on the agenda.

On the other hand, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and state officials took a more calculated approach. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic, stressed the importance of women in a democratic and civilized society in many of his speeches. However, he realized that granting political rights to women was too soon and that society needed to be prepared for it first. The establishment of the Republic, adoption of secular state principles, implementation of the Civil Code, and introduction of the dress code helped improve the status of women in society. The culmination of these reforms was Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's granting women the right to vote and hold public office.

The grant of political rights to women in the Republican era was primarily a result of the modernization efforts of the Republican elite rather than a result of women's movements, as seen in Western countries. Ms. Nezihe Muhiddin pushed for women to receive political rights quickly without considering the state of society and the conditions of the time. On the other hand, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk believed that society should be ready, made reforms to this effect, and eventually, at the 'appropriate' time, ensured that women had the right to vote and be elected.

Turkey is one of the first countries to grant women the right to vote and run for office. In 1930, women were given the right to participate in local elections, and in 1934 they were granted the right to participate in general elections. This was relatively early compared to other countries around the world. However, it should be noted that other political formations were not allowed to exist besides the ruling party RPP. As a result, Turkish women did not engage in an organized struggle for political rights like women in the West. This should be considered normal, given the political circumstances of the time.

As Turkey aimed to westernize politically and culturally, the role of women became crucial in this modernization project. The westernization process started with changes in dress and writing, and this emphasis on women had a significant symbolic value in the westernization and modernization processes of the country. The project eventually impacted all other political

## Nezihe Muhiddin's Struggle For Women's Political Rights: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's Stance and The Obstacles To Change

and cultural institutions and envisioned a complete transformation. In conclusion, both Halide Edip Adıvar during the period of the Turkish War of Independence and Nezihe Muhiddin and her associates in the early years of the Republic created a milestone in the recognition of political rights for women. It is necessary to emphasize that their efforts contributed to the development of a societal mindset regarding women's rights, ultimately enabling women to obtain the right to vote and be elected.

### REFERENCES

- Ahmad, F. (2002). *The Making of Modern Turkey* (1st ed.), New York: Routledge.
- Aydemir, Ş. S. (2017). *Tek Adam, Mustafa Kemal 1922-1938* (One Man, Mustafa Kemal 1922-1938) (1-3), İstanbul: Remzi Printing House.
- Aydin, H. (2009). Kadın 1908-1909: Selanik'te Yayınlanan İlk Kadın Dergisi Üzerine Bir İnceleme (Kadın (1908-1909): A Study on the First Women's Magazine Published in Saloniki), *Selçuk Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, (22), 147-156.
- Baykan, A., Ötüş-Baskett, B. (1999). *Nezihe Muhittin Ve Türk Kadını, 1931: Türk Feminizminin Düşünsel Kökenleri Ve Feminist Tarih Yazıcılığında Bir Örnek* (Nezihe Muhittin and the Turkish Woman, 1931: The intellectual origins of Turkish feminism and an example from feminist historiography), İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları.
- BCA, 30-10-10/80-526-4. (1930). Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Cumhuriyet Arşivi (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of State Archives).
- BCA, 30-18-1-1/14-42-6. (n.d.). Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Cumhuriyet Arşivi (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of State Archives).
- Bolat Salman, B. (2014). 1930-Kadınlara İntihap (Seçme- Seçilme) Hakkı Verilmesine Yönelik Tutumlar (1930 Attitudes Towards Acquisition of the Right to Elect And to be Elected for The Women in Turkey in 1930), *Cumhuriyet Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 10(19), 27-50.
- Bozkır, G. (2000). Türk Kadın Birliği (Turkish Women's Union), *Çağdaş Türkiye Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 3(10), 99-115.
- Caporal, B. (1982). *Kemalizmde ve Kemalizm Sonrasında Türk Kadını: (1919-1970)* (Turkish Women in Kemalism and After Kemalism: (1919-1970), E. Eyüboğlu (Trans.), Ankara: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları.
- Çiçek, A. C., Aydın, S. & Yağci, B. (2015). Modernleşme Sürecinde Kadın: Osmanlı Dönemi Üzerine Bir İnceleme (Women in Modernisation Process: An Overview Over Ottoman Period), *Kafkas Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi*, 6(9), 269-284.
- Cumhuriyet, İntihap – Namzetler Yarın İlan Ediliyor (election – candidates will be Announced Tomorrow). (1930, October 4).
- Cumhuriyet, Kadınlar Birliği'nde Hesaplara Bakıldı, Yeni Komisyonlar Yapıldı (Accounts Have Been Inspected in Women's Union, New Commissions Have Been Made). (1927, April 2).
- Cumhuriyet, Nezihe Hanım Davası (The Case of Ms. Nezihe). (1929, May 30).

- Cumhuriyet, Nezihe Muhiddin Gazeteciler Arasında (Nezihe Muhiddin Among Journalists). (1930, October 5).
- Gökçimen, S. (2008). Ülkemizde Kadınların Siyasal Hayata Katılım Mücadelesi (The Struggle for Women's Participation in Political Life in Our Country), *Yasama Dergisi*, 10, 5-59.
- Haan, F. de, Daskalova, K. & Loutfi, A. (Eds.). (2006). Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms In Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe: 19th And 20th Centuries, New York: Central European University Press.
- Ileri, Intihabatda iki hanıma dört rey (four votes for two ladies). (1923, July 5).
- Inan, A. (1968). *Atatürk ve Türk Kadın Haklarının Kazanılması Tarih Boyunca Türk Kadınının Hak ve Görevleri* (Atatürk and the Acquisition of Turkish Women's Rights Rights and Duties of Turkish Women Throughout History), Ankara: MEB Printing House.
- Karabulut, S. Ç. (2005). Türk Basınında Kadın Gazetesi'nin Yeri (1947-1962) (The Place of Women's Newspaper in Turkish Press (1947-1962), *Çağdaş Türkiye Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 4(11), 187-200.
- Kartal, C. B. (2005). Türkiye'de Kadınların Siyasal Haklarını Kazanma Süreci ve 1930 Belediye Seçimleri (The Process of Gaining the Political Rights of Women in Turkey and the 1930 Municipal Elections), (Unpublished Master Thesis), İstanbul Üniversitesi-Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü.
- Kenanoğlu, M. M. (2006). 1858 Arazi Kanunnamesi ve Uygulanması (Land Code of 1858 and its Enforcement), *Türk Hukuk Tarihi Araştırmaları*, 1, 107-138.
- Konan, B. (2011). Türk Kadınının Siyasi Hakları Kazanma Süreci (The Process of Turkish Women's Gaining Their Political Rights), *Ankara Üniversitesi Hukuk Fakültesi Dergisi*, 60(1), 157-174.
- Krolokke, C., Sorensen, A. S. (2006). *Gender Communication Theories and Analyses*, California: Sage Publications.
- Milliyet, Cumaya kadınlar miting yapacaklar: İstanbul kadınları Sultanahmet'te toplanacaklar (Women will hold a rally on Friday: Istanbul women will gather in Sultanahmet). (1930, April 7).
- Milliyet, Kadınlar Nihayet Nezihe Hanım'dan Ayrıldılar (Women Finally Separated from Nezihe Hanım). (1927, September 27).
- Milliyet, Nihayet İstifa Edecek mi? (Will she finally resign?). (1927, September 3).
- Muhiddin, N. (1923, June 4). Türk Kadınının Hakkı. Vakit.
- Nadi, Y. (1927, September 28). Çok Şükür, Kurtulduk (Thank God, we are saved). Cumhuriyet.
- Oran B. (2009). Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar. 1. İstanbul: İletişim Press.
- Özdemir, N. (2014a). *Osmanlıdan Cumhuriyete Bir Cemiyet Kadını: Nakiye Elgün* (A Society Woman from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic: Nakiye Elgün), Ankara: Phoenix Publications.
- Özdemir, N. (2014b). Türk Kadınına Milletvekili Seçme ve Seçilme Hakkı Tanınması Üzerine Yapılan Kutlamalar (Celebrations for the Enfranchisement of Turkish Women), *History Studies International Journal of History*, 6(5), 177-191.



**Nezihe Muhiddin's Struggle For Women's Political Rights: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's  
Stance and The Obstacles To Change**

---

- Şenşekerçi, E. (Ed.). (2014). *Mustafa Kemal Atatürk Söylev (1919-1927) ve Demeçler (1928-1938)* (Mustafa Kemal Atatürk Discourse (1919-1927) and Statements (1928-1938) (2nd ed.), Bursa: Uludağ University Press.
- Taşkıran, T. (1973). *Cumhuriyetin 50. Yılında Türk Kadın Hakları* (Turkish Women's Rights in the 50th Anniversary of the Republic), Ankara: Başbakanlık Printing House.
- TBMM ZC, D.2/I.2, 7. (1924). TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi (Minutes of the Turkish Parliament), TBMM Printing House.
- TBMM ZC, D.3/I.3 17. (1930). TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi (Minutes of the Turkish Parliament), TBMM Printing House.
- TBMM ZC, D.4/I.4, 25 (1–25). (1934). TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi (Minutes of the Turkish Parliament), TBMM Printing House.
- Tekeli, Ş. (1982). *Kadınlar ve Siyasal Toplumsal Hayat* (Women and Political Social Life), İstanbul: Birikim Publications.
- Toprak, Z. (2015). *Türkiye'de Kadın Özgürlüğü ve Feminizm (1908-1935)* (Women's Freedom and Feminism in Turkey (1908-1935), İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Publications.
- Tunaya, T. Z. (1988). *Türkiye'de Siyasal Partiler* (Political Parties in Turkey) (1–1), İstanbul: Hürriyet Vakfı.
- Vakit, Şehrimizdeki Kadın Hareketi İlerliyor Kadınlar Halk Fırkası Bugün Resmen Teşekkül Edecektir (The Women's Movement in Our City Is Progressing. The Women's People's Party Will Formally Be Formed Today). (1923, June 16).
- Vakit, Türk Kadınlar Şurası (Turkish Women's Council). (1923, June 6).
- Yıldız, H. (2015). *Türkiye'de Kadınların Siyasi Haklar Mücadelesi ve Nakiye Elgün* (Women's Struggle for Political Rights in Turkey and Nakiye Elgün), (Unpublished Master Thesis), Ankara Üniversitesi-Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü.
- Yılmaz, M. S. (2008). *Arşiv Belgelerinde Mustafa Kemal Paşa'nın Kastamonu Gezisi*, Kastamonu: Töre Printing House.
- Yüceer, S. (2008). Demokrasi Yolunda Önemli Bir Aşama: Türk Kadınına Siyasal Haklarının Tanınması (An Important Milestone Towards Democracy: Acknowledging Turkish Women's Political Rights), *Uludağ Üniversitesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 9(14), 131-151.
- Zihniöğlü, Y. (2003). *Kadınsız İnkılap: Nezihe Muhiddin, Kadınlar Halk Fırkası, Kadın Birliği* (Revolution Without Women: Nezihe Muhiddin, Women's People's Party, Women's Union), İstanbul: Metis Press.
- Zihniöğlü, Y. (Ed.). (2006). *Nezihe Muhiddin Bütün Eserleri* (All the Works of Nezihe Muhiddin), Vol. 4, İstanbul: Kitap Yayınevi.

