Negotiating Citizenship under Republican State Feminism: Women's Political Agency and the Boundaries of Emancipation in Turkey (1923–1935)

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Abstract: The establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 reshaped women's legal, educational and political status. Reforms in education, family law and political rights created new opportunities for women's participation in public life. This study examines Republican state feminism and its impact on women's citizenship and political agency between 1923 and 1935 using a qualitative historical approach informed by historical and feminist institutionalism. Focusing on legal reforms, state policies and women's organisations, particularly the Women's People's Party and the Turkish Women's Union, the study argues that state feminism expanded women's formal citizenship while also creating institutional and social boundaries that shaped their participation. Women were not merely recipients of reform; they actively shaped the meaning and practice of citizenship. The Turkish case shows that state feminism emerged through the interaction of state institutions, social structures and women's agency, creating both expanded opportunities and persistent limitations.

Keywords: State Feminism, Women's Citizenship, Political Agency, Republican Turkey, Gender Reform.

Introduction

The Turkish Republic was established in 1923, marking a significant shift in the political, social and institutional development of Turkish society. A central feature of the new Republican order was the redefinition of women's position within social and political spheres. Through reforms in education, family law and political rights, the Republican state expanded women's formal rights and created new opportunities for participation in public life. These reforms were closely connected with broader projects of modernisation, secularisation and nation-building.

However, the relationship between state reform and women's emancipation was more complex than a straightforward process of liberation. Although Republican institutions expanded women's legal and political rights, these reforms did not necessarily

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eliminate existing social inequalities or ensure complete political autonomy. Republican institutions therefore became both sources of new opportunities and frameworks that shaped the conditions under which women experienced and practiced citizenship. Examining women's citizenship in early Republican Turkey requires attention not only to legal reforms but also to the political and social structures through which these rights were negotiated and experienced.

This article examines early Republican Turkey through the framework of state feminism, focusing on the relationship between institutional reform and women's political agency. Rather than viewing state feminism solely as either emancipation or state control, this study approaches it as a negotiated process in which state institutions expanded women's rights while also defining the boundaries of political participation. Republican gender reforms therefore involved both the expansion and regulation of women's citizenship.

The expansion of women's rights represented a significant transformation, but these reforms were also connected with a broader state project aimed at creating a modern Republican society. This tension raises an important question: should women's emancipation be understood primarily as a feminist achievement or as part of a broader state-directed process shaped by political and national objectives? This article examines this tension by analysing how women experienced, negotiated and sometimes challenged the citizenship framework created by the Republic.

Existing scholarship has extensively examined the impact of Republican reforms on women's legal and social status. Kandiyoti (1987) argues that women's rights during the Kemalist period were largely advanced through a modernising state rather than emerging solely from autonomous women's organisations. Kandiyoti, D. A., & Kandiyoti, D. (1987)[1] Previous studies have examined the relationship between state feminism, nationalism and women's social position, emphasising the role of political institutions in shaping gender reforms. Adak, S., & Çağatay, S. (2023)[2] However, less attention has been given to how institutional initiatives and women's own political agency interacted in producing negotiated forms of citizenship during the early Republican period.

This article addresses this gap by analysing the relationship between institutional change, political structures and women's activism in shaping the meaning and practice of citizenship in Republican Turkey. It focuses on the period between 1923 and 1935, when significant developments occurred in women's education, legal status and

political rights alongside the activities of organisations such as the Women's People's Party and the Turkish Women's Union.

This study examines how Republican state feminism expanded women's citizenship while simultaneously shaping the boundaries of their political agency in early Republican Turkey (1923–1935).

To answer this question, the article examines both the expansion of women's formal rights and the institutional conditions that influenced women's political participation and collective organisation. It argues that Republican state feminism operated through a dual process: extending women's formal inclusion while also defining the institutional and social limits within which citizenship was exercised. Women's citizenship was therefore not simply the outcome of state reforms; rather, it developed through continuous interaction between political institutions, social structures and women's own agency.

2. Historical background: Ottoman Modernisation to Kemalist Gender Reform

The transformation of gender relations in the Ottoman Empire and later Republican Turkey emerged from a longer process of modernisation, women's activism and debates on social change that began in the nineteenth century. The reforms introduced after 1923 did not develop in isolation; rather, they built upon earlier Ottoman discussions of women's education, social participation and civic identity, which had already created spaces for women's collective engagement and reform-oriented activism. Abadan-Unat, N. (1978)[3]

In the Ottoman Empire, women's lives were shaped by family structures, legal arrangements and prevailing social expectations regarding gender roles. However, women were not simply passive subjects within these structures. With the expansion of print culture, modern education and reform debates in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, new spaces emerged in which women discussed education, employment, marriage and social roles. Zihnioğlu, Y. (2003)[4] These developments were further encouraged by the Tanzimat reforms (1839–1876), which increased discussion of social improvement and education. Although these reforms did not fundamentally transform existing gender relations, they expanded women's access to knowledge and increased their visibility in public debates. This period demonstrated how institutional changes could create new opportunities for women without necessarily challenging wider structures of inequality. Öztürkmen, A. (2013)[5]

Women's publications and organisations also played an important role in this transformation. Through journals such as Terakki-i Muhadderat (1869) and Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete (1895), women discussed education, employment and social recognition. These platforms allowed women to develop forms of collective identity and participate in broader debates on reform and social change. Öztürkmen (2013)[6]

During the Second Constitutional Period (1908–1918), women's organisations became increasingly visible and active in debates on education, employment and social participation. In a changing political environment, these organisations created opportunities for women to articulate their own demands and engage with wider discussions of reform. Adak & Çağatay (2023)[7]

These late Ottoman experiences continued to influence Republican women activists, who carried earlier reform aspirations into the new political context of secularism, citizenship and nation-building. Kemalist reforms of the 1920s and 1930s transformed women's formal citizenship position through changes in education, law and political participation. Tekeli, Ş. (1995)[8] These reforms were also connected to the construction of a new Republican identity in which women became symbols of modernity and national progress. Bilgic, E. E. (2020)[9] However, these changes did not benefit all women equally. Although women became more visible in public life, their opportunities continued to be shaped by gender and socio-economic inequalities.

Building on these earlier experiences, Republican women activists adapted existing reform aspirations within a new framework of citizenship, secularism and nation-building. This process emerged through the interaction between women's demands, state reforms and institutional structures that created new opportunities while also defining the limits of women's citizenship. Recent scholarship further highlights the diversity of women's organisational experiences, showing that women played an active role in negotiating their political positions across different historical periods. Adak & Çağatay (2023)[10]

3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

3.1 State Feminism and Republican Gender Reform

The relationship between women's emancipation and state power has been a major topic in feminist studies. Studies of state feminism examine how states can advance women's rights while also shaping the political and institutional conditions through which those rights are experienced and exercised. This perspective is particularly useful for understanding the position of women in early Republican Turkey and its connection with nation-building, secularisation and social modernisation.

Rather than treating state feminism as a single, fixed model, this study draws on Tekeli's analysis of Turkish gender reform to examine how state institutions can expand women's legal and political rights while simultaneously creating institutional boundaries for women's participation. In the Turkish case, women's formal citizenship rights were expanded through state-sponsored reforms, while women's political agency continued to develop within institutional structures influnced by the state. This illustrates the tension and interaction between emancipation and regulation. Tekeli, Ş. (1995)[11]

Previous studies on the impact of Republican institutions on women's empowerment have emphasised the significant role of these institutions in transforming women's legal, educational and political status. Changes in areas such as secular family law, education and political rights created new opportunities for women's participation in public life and established them as formal citizens of the Republic. White, J. B. (2003)[12] White (2003) further highlights the role of the state in Republican gender reforms and shows how women's advancement was connected to modernisation and the creation of new forms of female citizenship within the Republican system. White, J. B. (2003)[13]

These institutional changes were also linked to the development of a new Republican identity. Kadıoğlu (1996) demonstrates how women became associated with secularism, national progress and the image of the modern citizen. Kadıoğlu, A. (1996)[14] Yılmaz (2022) further shows that ideals of education, public visibility and social participation shaped the modern Republican woman. Figures such as Latife Hanım became associated with Republican modernity, demonstrating that women's emancipation was not only a legal reform but also a cultural project connected with the secular nation-state.Yılmaz, E. (2022)[15]

However, Republican reforms also generated debates about whether women's emancipation should be understood as liberation or as part of a wider state-led modernisation project. Kandiyoti (1987) highlights the distinction between legal equality and women's lived experiences. Although reforms expanded women's citizenship, opportunities continued to be shaped by factors such as class, education, family structures and social expectations. Kandiyoti (1987)[16] Saktanber (2001) further argues that Kemalist women's rights discourse constructed emancipation within the broader project of creating a modern and secular Republican society. Therefore, women's rights were understood not only as legal changes but also through ideas about women's social status and expected role within the Republican order. Saktanber, A. N. (2001)[17]

This study therefore approaches state feminism as a framework for analysing the relationship between institutional reform and women's political agency. In Republican

Turkey, state-led reforms expanded women's citizenship through legal and institutional changes while also influencing the conditions under which political participation developed.

3.2 Women's Agency in the Negotiation of Citizenship

Recent scholarship on Turkish gender reform has moved beyond portraying women as passive recipients of Republican reforms. Instead, it highlights women's own political actions, organisations and demands in shaping the meaning of citizenship. Women entered the Republican period with earlier experiences of collective organisation and debates on education, employment and political participation. These experiences shaped their efforts to develop a broader understanding of citizenship within the Republican order. Zihnioğlu, Y. (2003)[18] Zihnioğlu's study of the Women's People's Party, associated with Nezihe Muhiddin and the Turkish Women's Union demonstrates that women did not simply receive political rights from the state but actively negotiated their political position. Their efforts to establish independent organisations and seek political representation show that women's activism contributed to the formation of citizenship claims beyond state-led reforms. Zihnioğlu, Y. (2003)[19] Arat (2009) further argues that women's empowerment in Turkey developed through a complex relationship with the modernising state. Republican reforms created new institutional opportunities for women, while women also challenged restrictions on their independent political participation. Women's activism therefore developed through both cooperation with and contestation of state structures. Arat, Y. (2008)[20] Ercan-Bilgiç (2020) challenges the idea that women's rights in Republican Turkey were simply granted by the state. By emphasising women's historical agency, this perspective highlights that women were not only beneficiaries of state policies but also active participants in constructing citizenship claims. Bilgiç, E. E. (2020)[21]

Together, these studies demonstrate that women's citizenship in Republican Turkey was not solely the outcome of state reform. While interaction with state institutions shaped citizenship formation, women's political agency extended beyond their relationship with the state. Women also created independent spaces of political expression through associations, publications, intellectual discussions and collective organising. These activities demonstrate that women were not simply responding to state reforms; they were also developing their own interpretations of citizenship and actively influencing debates about their position within the Republican order. Thus, women's citizenship can be understood as developing through the interaction between institutional reforms, women's organisations and political activism.

3.3 Historical Institutionalism and Feminist Institutionalism

This study uses historical institutionalism and feminist institutionalism together to examine the relationship between state reforms, institutions and women's agency in the construction of citizenship in Republican Turkey. Historical institutionalism explains how institutional structures formed during particular historical moments influence later political and social developments. The establishment of the Turkish Republic represented such a critical juncture, in which legal systems, educational frameworks and political institutions were reorganised around new ideas of citizenship and modernity. According to Collier and Collier (1991), critical junctures can create institutional trajectories with lasting effects. Collier, R. B., & Collier, D. (1991)[22] Pierson (2000) further explains that early institutional decisions can generate path-dependent processes and self-reinforcing patterns that influence future political possibilities. Pierson, P. (2000)[23] In Turkey, Republican reforms created institutional structures that continued to shape women's citizenship and political participation.

However, institutional change alone cannot fully explain the different ways women experienced and negotiated these reforms. Feminist institutionalism focuses on the relationship between formal institutions, informal norms, social expectations and gendered power relations. Mackay et al. (2010) argue that institutions are not neutral; they embody particular ideas about appropriate roles, behaviour and political participation. Political rights are therefore shaped not only by formal rules but also by the social norms through which they are understood, negotiated and exercised. Mackay, F., Kenny, M., & Chappell, L. (2010)[24]

Taken together, these approaches show that Republican state feminism was a negotiated process. It expanded women's formal citizenship through changes in law, education and politics while also defining the boundaries of women's political agency. Women's emancipation therefore emerged through the interaction between the state, institutions and women's own actions.

4. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative historical approach to examine the relationship between institutional change and women's political agency in early Republican Turkey. It draws on an analysis of legal reforms, state policies, historical scholarship and research on women's organisations. Particular attention is given to reforms in education, family law and political rights, as well as the activities of organisations such as the Women's People's Party and the Turkish Women's Union.

The analysis focuses on three main areas. First, women's formal citizenship is

examined through legal and institutional developments in family law, education and political participation. These developments are considered alongside women's experiences of exercising and negotiating citizenship within changing social and political contexts. Second, these developments are interpreted in light of scholarship on Turkish feminism, citizenship and state feminism. Third, the history of women's organisations is examined to understand women's political participation, their interaction with state institutions and their efforts to create independent spaces for political organisation.

The period from 1923 to 1935 was selected because it covers the formative years of Republican gender reform, from the establishment of the Republic to the extension of national political rights to women and the subsequent transformation of women's organisations.

These developments are analysed not only as institutional achievements but also in terms of how women experienced and negotiated them. This approach allows the study to examine both the expansion of women's citizenship and the institutional constraints that shaped how those rights were experienced and exercised

5. Republican State Feminism: Citizenship, Reform and Negotiating Empowerment

With the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, a broad programme of institutional transformation reshaped the formal position of women in society. Gender reform was implemented through changes in education, law and political institutions, transforming women's formal relationship with citizenship and public life. Abadan-Unat (1978)[25]

These reforms, however should be understood first as transformations in the formal structure of citizenship rather than as complete transformations of women's lived experiences. Although legal and institutional arrangements changed significantly, the everyday consequences of these reforms continued to be shaped by the wider political and social conditions of the Republic. The following sections examine the main areas through which the Republican state expanded women's formal citizenship.

5.1 The Modern Woman Citizen and the Role of Education Reform

Education was one of the central areas through which the Republican state sought to transform women's social position. The Law on the Unification of Education (1924) represented an important step towards establishing a secular education system and strengthened the institutional basis for women's participation in education. Education

was understood not only as a means of individual development but also as a foundation for creating a modern Republican society. Kandiyoti, D. A., & Kandiyoti, D. (1987)[26]

Greater access to education opened new opportunities for women's participation in professional and public life. Educated women increasingly entered fields such as teaching, healthcare, administration and other professions. In this way, education contributed to the emergence of a new model of female citizenship based on knowledge, public responsibility and participation beyond the domestic sphere.

At the same time, Republican educational policies reflected wider state objectives. Women's education was closely associated with the creation of modern families and a secular national identity. Therefore, education expanded women's opportunities while also linking women's public participation to the broader social aims of the Republic.

5.2 Civil Code and the Transformation of Women's Legal Status

The adoption of the Civil Code in 1926 marked a significant transformation in women's legal status. Based on secular principles of marriage and family relations, the Civil Code replaced earlier legal arrangements and incorporated women into the modern legal framework of the Republic. White, J. B. (2003)[27] The reform reshaped the relationship between women, family and the state. By reorganising marriage and family relations according to secular legal principles, it recognised women as legal individuals within the new secular legal order of the Republic. This represented an important step towards the Republican goal of establishing a modern legal order based on secular institutions.

However, legal reform did not automatically transform social relationships. The meaning of legal equality continued to be influenced by factors such as education, economic resources and institutional access. Therefore, while the Civil Code expanded women's formal rights, the lived experience of equality remained dependent on broader social conditions. Kandiyoti, D. A., & Kandiyoti, D. (1987)[28]

5.3 Political Rights and the Expansion of Formal Citizenship

The extension of women's political rights represented another important stage in the institutionalisation of women's citizenship. Women gained the right to vote and stand for election in municipal elections in 1930, to participate in village-level elections as muhtars and members of village councils in 1933 and to vote and stand for election in national parliamentary elections in 1934. Arat, Y. (1989)[29] The first parliamentary elections in which women voted and stood as candidates were held on 8 February 1935. These reforms incorporated women into the formal political system of the Republic and became a significant symbol of Republican modernity. Within official

discourse, women's political inclusion was portrayed as evidence of Turkey's transformation into a modern political order. Kandiyoti, D. (1997)[30]

However, these political rights were introduced within a highly centralised political system. Although women gained formal opportunities to participate in elections, their ability to engage in independent political activity remained shaped by the institutional and political conditions of the Republic. The tension between political inclusion and institutional limitations became an important feature of women's early Republican political experience. This tension was particularly visible in debates surrounding women's attempts to establish independent political organisations, including the Women's People's Party.

Thus, although Republican reforms established the formal structure of women's citizenship, they did not fully determine the meaning and practice of citizenship. Women were also active participants in the political life of the new Republican order, negotiating their position within its institutions.

6. Republican State Feminism: Negotiating Citizenship

Women's citizenship in early Republican Turkey was shaped not only by institutional reform but also by women's own political engagement. Republican institutions transformed women's legal and social position, while women activists brought earlier experiences of organisation and reform debates into the new political environment. Their activities demonstrate how women negotiated the opportunities and limitations created by the Republican system.

Women's demands were not limited to education and legal recognition. They also sought greater political representation, collective organisation and participation in public life. These demands, however, developed within a political setting in which women's advancement was closely linked to the goals of Republican modernisation. Women were encouraged to participate in public life as representatives of Republican progress, while the institutional framework of the new state limited the scope for independent political mobilisation. Dell'Abate Çelebi, B. (2025)[31] Beyond formal political rights, women activists also sought greater autonomy in defining their social roles and collective interests. Their demands reflected concerns with meaningful participation, independent organisation and a broader understanding of equality that extended beyond the legal recognition granted by the state.

Women of the early Republic therefore did not simply acquire citizenship as a consequence of state reform; they also negotiated its meaning and boundaries. Through engagement with Republican institutions, they sought to widen the scope of political participation and representation.

6.1 Women's Movements and the Negotiation of Republican Citizenship

In the early years of the Republic of Turkey, women's political activism was shaped by intellectual and organisational experiences developed during the late Ottoman period. Women's journals, associations and reform discussions provided important forums for debates about women's social status, education and employment. Consequently, Republican women activists did not merely react to state initiatives; they entered the new political environment with their own objectives and demands. Zihnioğlu (2003)[32] A central concern for these activists was the meaning and practice of citizenship. They understood citizenship as extending beyond formal rights to include participation in political decision-making and representation of women's collective interests.

This created a tension between two forms of inclusion. The Republican state promoted women's participation in national development and social modernisation, while women activists sought a greater role in defining the terms of their political participation. Citizenship therefore became not only a legal status created by reform but also a political space in which women organised, expressed demands and negotiated their position. Kandiyoti, D. A., & Kandiyoti, D. (1987)[33]

6.2 Nezihe Muhiddin and the Demand for Political Representation

Nezihe Muhiddin was one of the leading women activists of the early Republican era. As a writer, educator and organiser, she insisted that women should take an active role in politics rather than serve merely as symbols of modernisation. Her activism demonstrates that claims to political citizenship preceded the formal recognition of women's voting rights. Zihnioğlu (2003)[34] In 1923, Muhiddin and her colleagues sought to establish the Women's People's Party (Kadınlar Halk Fırkası) as an organised political party representing women's interests. The party was not officially recognised within the prevailing political system. The episode revealed a contradiction within Republican state feminism: women's advancement was encouraged as a symbol of the Republic's success but attempts to establish an independent political organisation were restricted. The significance of the Women's People's Party therefore extends beyond its lack of formal recognition; it demonstrated women's efforts to move beyond the role of beneficiaries of reform and participate actively in shaping the political order of the Republic.

6.3 The Turkish Women's Union: Cooperation and Autonomy

After the unsuccessful attempt to establish a political party, Muhiddin and other activists formed the Turkish Women's Union (Türk Kadınlar Birliği) in 1924. The organisation became an important platform for discussing women's rights, education, social issues and political engagement.

The relationship between the Union and the Republican state was complex. Many of its objectives, particularly those concerning education and legal equality were compatible with state reforms. At the same time, the organisation faced difficulties in mobilising politically because the political system was highly centralised and independent organisations had limited room for autonomous activity. The Union contributed to campaigns for women's political rights, including municipal suffrage in 1930 and national political suffrage in 1934. After women obtained national political rights and participated in the 1935 parliamentary elections, the organisation ceased its activities in 1935. Some interpretations view this as the achievement of its principal objectives, while others understand it as evidence of the limited institutional space available to autonomous women's organisations under the Republican regime. Dell'Abate Çelebi (2025)[35]

The experiences of Nezihe Muhiddin, the Women's People's Party and the Turkish Women's Union demonstrate that women became more active in political life by engaging with Republican institutions, organisations and broader debates on citizenship. The Women's People's Party initiative showed that women's political demands existed before the formal recognition of political rights and challenged the idea that citizenship was simply granted from above. Zihnioğlu (2003)[36] Women reformers supported aspects of the Republican reform process but also sought to broaden the scope of the political roles available to them. They were not merely beneficiaries of state reforms; they were active participants in shaping the politics of reform within a framework that provided opportunities while imposing limitations. The Turkish case therefore reveals that citizenship was produced through the interaction of institutional reforms, women's organisations, competing ideas about political belonging and women's own activism. Women reformers were not merely beneficiaries of state reforms; they actively shaped the politics of reform within a framework that provided opportunities while imposing limitations.

7. Formal Equality and Uneven Emancipation: Republican Citizenship and Women's Differentiated Experiences

Republican reforms brought significant changes to women's formal position in law, education and political life. However, assessing these reforms requires a distinction between formal citizenship and the actual conditions in which women experienced and exercised their rights. Although legal reforms recognised women as equal citizens, the ability to benefit from these rights was influenced by wider social conditions. Differences in education, class position, geographical location and access to institutions

shaped women's everyday experiences of citizenship. Therefore, legal equality did not automatically create equal opportunities for political participation or social autonomy, as women's ability to exercise newly acquired rights varied according to their economic resources and social circumstances. White, J. B. (2003)[37]

Women's citizenship in the Republican period was therefore shaped by more than legal recognition alone. While reforms established important rights and expanded women's formal status, the exercise of those rights continued to depend on broader social conditions. The gap between legal equality and lived experience shows that changes in law did not completely remove existing social inequalities.

Women's emancipation during the Republican era was therefore both significant and uneven. Institutional reforms created new opportunities for women's participation but the extent to which these opportunities could be realised remained influenced by existing social and economic structures.

7.1 Civic Engagement of Women in Urban Areas

Urban educated women were among the groups that gained greater access to opportunities created by Republican reforms. Expanded access to secular education and public-sector employment enabled many women to enter professions such as teaching, healthcare, administration and other public services. Abadan-Unat (1978)[38] For these women, education became a means of developing professional identities, achieving social mobility and participating more actively in public life. Their presence in professional spaces contributed to the image of the modern Republican woman, associated with education, social responsibility and public engagement. However, their experiences also reveal that access to these opportunities was closely connected to social advantage. Women with greater educational and economic resources were better positioned to pursue formal education and professional careers. Kandiyoti, D. A., & Kandiyoti, D. (1987)[39]As a result, the achievements of Republican gender reform were not equally available to all women.

7.2 Rural and Working-Class Women: Differentiated Experiences of Reform

The effects of Republican reforms were experienced differently by women living in rural and economically disadvantaged contexts. Although women gained formal legal rights, many continued to face obstacles to education and public participation, including geographical distance, financial limitations, family responsibilities and established social expectations. White, J. B. (2003)[40] These differences do not indicate that reform had no impact; rather, they demonstrate that citizenship was shaped by particular social and economic circumstances. Rural women were formally recognised

as equal citizens but their ability to access and use new rights depended heavily on local resources, institutions and social conditions.

The relationship between reform and empowerment was also complex for working-class women. Greater participation in the labour market expanded women's involvement in economic and public life but employment did not always result in greater independence. For many women, paid work continued alongside domestic responsibilities, limiting the extent to which economic participation transformed their everyday autonomy.

7.3 Reconsidering Republican Emancipation: Rights and Everyday Experience

The difference between equality in law and equality in practice is central to understanding Republican gender reform. Through educational, legal and political reforms, the Republic significantly changed women's relationship with citizenship. Tekeli, Ş. (1995)[41] These developments represented an important transformation in women's formal status.

Nevertheless, the meaning and impact of these rights varied according to women's social circumstances. Access to education, economic resources, geographical location and institutional support influenced how women experienced Republican reforms. Republican gender reform therefore involved both expansion and constraint. It extended women's formal citizenship and created new possibilities for participation, while the exercise of these rights remained shaped by unequal social conditions. The Turkish case shows that citizenship was shaped not only through legal reforms but also through the social contexts in which women experienced and negotiated their rights.

8. Discussion: Rethinking the Republican Turkish Experience of State Feminism

The Turkish Republican experience shows that state feminism developed through a complex process shaped by both the expansion of women's citizenship and the institutional regulation of political participation. Republican reforms transformed women's legal, educational and political status, creating new possibilities for engagement in public life. However, these opportunities were experienced unevenly, as access to new forms of participation was influenced by social and economic differences. While urban and relatively privileged women benefited more directly from educational and professional reforms, women from less privileged backgrounds continued to experience limitations shaped by existing social structures. Therefore, women's citizenship in early Republican Turkey cannot be understood only through formal reforms; it must also be examined through the ways women encountered,

negotiated and responded to the institutional framework created by the Republic. In this context, state feminism represented a negotiation between expanded citizenship rights and institutional regulation rather than a simple process of liberation or control.

The institutionalisation of women's citizenship was a central feature of Republican gender reform. Changes in education, family law and political rights created new spaces for women's participation and contributed to the development of a new model of Republican womanhood based on education, social responsibility and public engagement. However, these reforms were closely connected with broader objectives of secularisation, modernisation and nation-building. The Republican state did not simply formalise rights; it also established institutional frameworks that influenced how those rights could be accessed, understood and exercised. From a historical-institutionalist perspective, these reforms represented a significant transformation of existing political and social arrangements, while feminist institutionalism highlights how prevailing gender norms and social expectations continued to shape women's experiences of citizenship. Thus, the expansion of formal rights did not automatically remove structural limitations but created new institutional contexts in which women negotiated their roles within Republican society.

The Turkish case also contributes to broader discussions on state feminism by demonstrating the relationship between women's emancipation, nationalism and state-led modernisation. Women's advancement was associated not only with increased access to education, employment and political participation but also with the symbolic representation of Republican identity. Educated, unveiled and publicly active women were presented as representatives of the modern and secular nation, giving women's emancipation both social and symbolic significance. At the same time, the idea of emancipation without full liberation captures the tension between formal equality and the enduring social and institutional disadvantages faced by women. Kandiyoti, D. A., & Kandiyoti, D. (1987)[42] Women's organisations, particularly the Women's People's Party and the Turkish Women's Union, provided spaces through which women engaged in political activity and negotiated the meaning of citizenship. Similar connections between women's rights and broader projects of social and political transformation have been identified in different historical contexts. Badran, M. (1995)[43] The Turkish case therefore suggests that the relationship between empowerment and domination was more complex than a simple binary. Instead, it reveals that state feminism operated through continuous interaction among institutional reforms, social expectations and women's political agency. Basu, A. (1992)[44] Citizenship consequently developed through negotiations between Republican state structures and women's efforts to define

their place within the social and political order.

Conclusion

During the early Republican era, the Turkish state introduced a gender reform programme that transformed women's access to education, legal status and political rights. These reforms created new opportunities for women by expanding educational possibilities, providing legal recognition and enabling greater participation in political life. However, Republican gender reform was not a simple or linear process of emancipation. Women's citizenship developed through an ongoing process of During the early Republican era, gender reforms introduced by the Turkish state brought significant changes to women's access to education, legal rights and political participation. However, these reforms should not be understood as a simple or complete process of emancipation. Women's citizenship developed through a continuous process of negotiation, where new opportunities existed alongside institutional expectations and social limitations. Women were not merely passive recipients of state reforms; activists and organisations such as Nezihe Muhiddin, the Women's People's Party (Kadınlar Halk Fırkası) and the Turkish Women's Union actively participated in shaping the meaning and practice of Republican citizenship through political engagement and collective efforts.

The Turkish experience also shows that the impact of gender reform was not uniform among all women. While many urban and relatively privileged women gained greater access to education, employment and public life, rural women and those facing social and economic disadvantages continued to experience significant barriers. This distinction between formal equality and lived equality is essential for understanding the limits and possibilities of Republican reform. The Turkish case therefore suggests that women's emancipation was neither simply granted by the state nor achieved independently of it; rather, it emerged through the interaction between state institutions, social structures and women's own political agency. State feminism expanded women's citizenship while also shaping the conditions within which that citizenship was experienced and exercised.

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