

HIDDEN WAR AGAINST WOMEN

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Abstract

For the last couple of decades, there has been a dramatic regress in the women's economic, social and political positions in Turkey. The number of women participating in job market decreased from 34.1 percent in 1990 to 23.5 percent in 2009. Almost 85 percent of the working women are still stuck in traditional female jobs. A diminishing representation of women in politics and increasing violence against women have been other features of this regression. At the same time period, a transformation of Turkish media came with the boom of the number of commercial TV channels, radio stations, magazines and newspapers. This newly transformed media did manage traditional gender roles to infiltrate the thoughts of women, majority of whom stayed out of job market. The images of women created through the advertisements, TV serials, TV talk shows, and magazines have been more altruistic family oriented type than women questing for equal rights. Today, more and more women watch TV programs, support cosmetic industry, spend lots of money on clothing, and are very interested in their body, value traditional gender roles and do not ask for equality. Recently, the scholars began to discuss the rise of conservatism in Turkey without addressing the backward shift in women position in various spheres of life. All these problematical issues mentioned above need to be considered within a sociological framework that should be able to show us the current situation of women in Turkey. This presentation attempts to do this.

Key Words: *Woman, media, women employment, conservatism.*

JEL Classification: Z1

1. INTRODUCTION

In contrast to the existence of a strong feminist movement since the 1980s in Turkey, there has been a dramatic regress of women's social and political positions. The statistics have shown that there has been a sharp decreased of the number of women participating in job market as the number of the women facing violence in every sphere of life has increased. The most surprising issue is that

many women in Turkey are not interested in feminism or at least do not adopt feminist positions. These women are increasingly watching television providing them lots of day time reality shows as well as the soap operas in the prime time, supporting cosmetic industries, cosmetic surgery, very interested in their body, spending much on clothing, valuing traditional gender roles, and are crazy about getting married and having babies. If we look at the advertisements, books, magazines, day time reality shows, TV serials and soap operas, we see images of women are quite different from the image of women presented by feminist theory. Majority of women do not question or seem to be “restless” about the statistics showing only one out of four women are in the job market while four out of ten women face psychical and sexual violence in everyday life. The question this paper tries to find an answer is that why there has been a dramatic regress in the women social and political positions since the 1990s. In relation to this question the paper also examine why women do not question these statistics and support the feminist women aiming at fighting against mechanisms that push women out of social and political positions.

2. NUMBERS DO NOT LIE: THE STATISTICS ON WOMEN OF TURKEY

According to statistics, Turkey ranks and stands as the last nation regarding with the participation of women employment in between EU and OECD countries with the rate of 23.5 (as of January 2009). Turkey is ranked 101st among 109 countries on measures of gender empowerment and equally low on other international measurements of women’s status. This low ranking is due primarily to women’s extremely low and still declining labor participation rate (down from 34% in 1988) and the low numbers of women in public life. The number of women do employ in agriculture sector as 47.3%, 14.2% in industry, and 38.5% in the service sector. Among the several reasons for the low employment rate of women could be summarized in following: a tight labor market in which men are preferred; lack of infrastructure for child and elderly care ant this means women are busy with unpaid family labor (Turkey has the lowest expenditure for family benefits of OECD states, less than 2% of GDP compared with an average of 2.3%); harassment and violence against women on the streets, in the workplace and in the home; women’s economic and social dependence on husbands and their families that mean they have little choice, as the consequences of loss of family support and community-standing are severe; social pressure to stay at home at marriage, or at birth of a child. Women who are forced to stay at home make them subjects of *himaye*, a concept that means protection, taking under one’s wing, as well as control.

Why women are forced to stay at home could be explained by the statistics provided by the Turkish Statistical Institution. According to these statistics cooking, ironing, cleaning type of works do perform by women in 80% levels. According to the Turkish Statistics Institute 60% of men and 64% of women consider that the core duty of women does not go beyond child care and house works. These statistics have supported Irigaray's (2006) argument that women do not have any existence outside of motherhood. The most striking data is provided by the Kagider (Women's Entrepreneur Association); according to a 2008 poll conducted by this association, 45% of urban women believe economic independence for women is unnecessary. This is more pronounced in the younger generation: 58% of females age between 15-19 believe a woman's place is at home near her children. The generally accepted profile of an entrepreneur is male, age 25-34. Only 13% of urban women ever seriously considered starting a business, and nearly half who do quit later.

The statistics of violence against women is the most frightening among others. According to the statistics provided by the General Directorate of Women Status in 2009, 41.9% of women suffer from psychical or sexual violence as 39% of women suffered from psychical violence. As a matter of fact, 92% of women suffered from domestic violence do not apply to any authority. Women's economic fragility further reinforces this attitude the home is considered by many men and women to be the only safe place. The statistics show 42% of women experience physical and sexual violence from their husbands (Altınay and Arat 2008). Another 2008 survey showed that three out of four women not interested in politics. Only 6% are party members, and 17% supported a particular party. When asked what is most important in their lives, politics comes last. 28% equate politics with lies. In the Turkish Grand National Assembly, the 78 women make up 14 percent of the 550 deputies. Women are almost invisible in the local government (less than 1% mayors and 3% of provincial assemblies). Politics is the main sphere of challenging the existence inequalities and making statesman for the possible future. Thus, this low level of interest in politics and small numbers of women in the national and local governments have not promised a good future for the women of Turkey. If the woman wants to become an actor she needs to act in political sphere. Otherwise, women are pushed to stay at home and forced to perform their traditional roles. This is very harmful especially in Turkey which has been evaluated as "conservative" and getting "more and more conservative." If there is a discussion of conservatism any place, no doubt is the issue turning around woman.

3. FIGHTING AGAINST WOMEN

3.1. Fighting Against Women By The Rising Tide Of Conservatism

In 2008, Prof. Yilmaz Esmer at Bahçesehir University in Istanbul has conducted a survey, based on face-to-face interviews with 1,714 people in 34 cities all over Turkey. 71% respondents believe that the head of the household should be the man. 58% said a woman should always obey her husband. 35% believe that because “women are emotional,” a woman’s testimony as a witness in court should equal half of a man’s testimony. 59% believe that men make better political leaders than women. 64% said men deserved priority over women in employment in times of unemployment. 62% believed a Muslim woman must cover her hair when outdoors. 58% said that a woman walking on the beach in a swimsuit is a sin. Percent of respondents who does not want the following as neighbors: 84% gay neighbors, 72% don’t want neighbors that consume alcohol, 66% Jewish neighbors, 52% Christian neighbors, 66% neighbors who don’t belong to any religion, 75% neighbors who don’t believe in God, 26% neighbors of a different race or color, 43% an American family, 35% neighbors whose daughters wear shorts, 67% neighbors who are living together out of wedlock. The highest level of intolerance in this category (choice of neighbors) was found among those between the ages of 15 and 18.

In 2011, Prof. Yilmaz Esmer conducted another research under the auspices of the 2011 World Values Survey that has suggested important trends and changes in Turkish society. The survey finds that six out of ten people believe in the need for more religious facts instead of science, 61% consider wearing a swimming suit a sin, and nearly half of the respondents (44%) think that restaurants should be closed during the fasting periods of Ramadan. Still, religious preferences, race and sexual preference are significant factors in how people view their neighbors. The survey found, for instance, that 84% of citizens do not want gay neighbors, while 64%, 54%, and 48% do not wish to live next to an Atheist, Jew, and Christian, respectively. The most striking findings are observed in the case of woman social position. 57% of women agrees that “women always have to obey their husbands.” 69% of women accept that “in our society man must be the head of the family.” 68% of women agrees that “in general men are better politicians than women.” 20% of women agrees that “a man can have more than one spouses. In this case there has been an interesting backlash. In 1996, 10% of citizens agreed that “it is acceptable that a man can have more than one wife.” This percentage increased to 11% in 2009, and 23% in 2011. Another going back fastly can be observed in case of domestic violence. In 1996, only 10% of citizens supported

that “some women are deserve to be beaten by their husbands,” but the percentage of citizens supported to this statement sharply increased to 39% in 2011. The survey also shows the extent to which domestic violence is "internalized": 62% of the respondents -- men and women -- argue that women should obey men, while 30% say that some women deserve spousal abuse. The degree of women's internalising traditional roles—being mother and housewife- are very clear. Three out of four women thought that man must be the head of the family. 54% of women accept that “if people do not find job to work, man must have the right to work rather than women.” One out of five women accept “a man can have more than one wife.” 57% of women agree that “a woman should always obey her husband.” 69% of women accept “children whose mother working outside are damaged.” 68% agrees that “in general men are better political leaders than women.” 66% of woman agree “being a housewife is satisfying as much as working and earning money.” people agrees “university education is more important for male child than female child.” 39% accepts that “some women are deserved to be beaten by their husbands.”

The surveys results clearly show that Turkish society are getting more religious-conservative, patriarchal and open to violence (c.f. Toprak et all. 2009). It is not unknown that religious conservatism also has implications on women's social and political status, at least its strict rules of clothing and being mother and wife. Accepting men as a head of family and giving the right to work mainly to men clearly show the patriarchy and man's role as breadwinner. Being more open to violence is clear in the high percentage of accepting that women deserve to be beaten by husbands. Another example to show how Turkey is getting more open to violence is clear in the honor killings. From 2002-2009, which is the most recent data available, cases of women being murdered in Turkey has grown 1,400%. There were 66 known cases in 2002 and 953 in 2009. And the vast majority of these cases are related to male relatives punishing wives, daughters, or sisters for shaming their family. These issues of battered women or honor killings among the most attractive stories of Turkish soaps, TV serial as well as day time reality shows.

3.2. Fighting Against Women By Media

Although, popular and mass-mediated cultural understandings of how to perform gender identities, which clearly vary systematically across the different groupings, traditional gender values seem to dominate the media and cultural ideas about women. Just a brief look at the television channels providing a vast number of soaps, TV serials, reality shows and news, gives the idea that patriarchy is alive

and well. It is clear that women's attempts at self-definition and self-determination continue to be unorganized, silenced and stymied in myriad ways and popular culture and TV play key roles in that process (see Dow, 1996).

According to the recent research conducted by the Turkish Radio and Television Top Council on Women's TV Watching Trends 2, 60% of women watch television 2-5 hours in a day. The level of watching television is higher among married, primary school educated, unemployed, urban and house wives than among single, high school and upper educated, provincial, employed women. These results support Manga's (2003) statement that individuals from a poorer background were more likely to view the daily shows as a central activity practice. The most watched TV programs are "Deryalı Günler" (Days with Derya) (22.4%), "Doktorum" (My Doctor) (19.8%) and "Müge Anlı İle Tatlı Sert" (Sweet and Hard with Müge Anlı) (13.4%). Women define *Deryalı Günler* as "informative, educated and entertaining", *Doktorum* as "informative, educated and useful", and *Müge Anlı* as "informative, educating and realistic". If one looks at these programs in a realistic way easily sees that the story is different than what women say about these programs. For example, *Deryalı Günler* provide information on cooking, knitting, medical advices, child-care information, clothing and how to make home economy. *Müge Anlı*'s program is a kind of criminal reality show aiming at solving homicide and find murderers or searching for missings. *Doktorum* requiring a more close attention, is a TV health show, a recent phenomenon. The women's life course is the most highly overmedicalized one. Premenstrual syndrome, pregnancy, pregnancy depression, postpartum depression (actually every kind of depression is linked to women) menopause are among just a few example of overmedicalization of women life course. The *Doktorum* show is a kind of laboratory to observe how the various aspects of women's lives and bodies have become defined as medical problems requiring medical intervention. Another issue about health show is related to the women's portrait as housewives and mothers. As housewives and mothers women are main care giver in case of illnesses of people related to them. In sum, although the relationship between media and women is more complicated than it is seen, the reality is that media images of women constructed in a vast numbers of programs from the news to soaps might be implicated in the construction of masculinity and femininity.

Relationship between media and women can be examined in various ways: women in/as entertainment, images of women in news and magazines, women as audience and women and production. For example, in women in/as entertainment, they examine the representation of women in various genres, such as soaps,

crime-related themes, action movies and fantasy genres. As feminist scholars point out, one of the major critiques of soaps is that, through a particular metanarrative, women are represented to conform to traditional norms of femininity. Therefore “women reviewers are encouraged to empathize with characters who are rarely allowed to live a transgressive life outside the normative expectations of patriarchy” (Byerly and Ross, 2006: 23). As for women in news and magazines, Byerly and Ross argue that, through male centered frames, the structure and content of news helps maintain traditional gender roles in societies. For example, the Global Media Monitoring Project conducted a simultaneous monitoring of news media in 71 countries on one day. They found that women were only 19 percent of the individuals featured in the news. Furthermore, they were mostly represented as victims, mothers and wives (see, Byth 2004, Rivers 2008). Picturing women as victims is not limited to media representation, but also the government’s policies toward women as “deserving poor”.

3.3. Fighting Against Women By Social Aids

According to the recent statistics provided by the Directorate of Family and Social Research, women constitute 62.7% of citizens receiving social aid, as men constitute 37.3%. This makes clear that poverty is a greater threat to women than men. The Social Aid Report prepared by Buğra and Keyder (2010) for the United Nations Development Program demonstrates that poverty rates are higher for women in all age-groups. This greater threat of social exclusion to women is closely connected with the very low rates of female labor force participation, with the very limited opportunities of formal employment for women.

The scenes of humiliation that form an integral part of the general picture of social assistance prepare the ground for such statements as “assistance turns people into beggars”, “these people don’t work and have gotten used to asking for assistance” which have been reported by employees of various social aid institutions (Buğra and Keyder, 2010). One of the consequences of this attitude is impacted ways in which social assistance institutions function: They almost exclude men, especially young men. Women receive more sympathy in their request for assistance on the basis of conformity to traditional conceptions of “deserving poor”. They fill the social assistance space by spending huge amounts of time and bravely risk of humiliation. Men, on the other hand, are simply invisible. Women are preferred than men, because women traditionally need to be “protected”.

Although the government social aid program, favor women over men, the new social security law has brought several disadvantages to prison women at home. Women as the largest disadvantaged group in Turkey, has become more and more

disadvantaged group by the new social security law (Yeğenoğlu and Coşar, 2010). One example is the equalizing of the retirement age for men and women. The argument for a different retirement age of men and women is based on the disadvantaged position of women on the one hand, and the additional burden of unpaid domestic labor on the other. The difference is a kind of positive discrimination that serves to compensate the additional work done by women. This, the new law precludes. This too worked for the reproduction of the exploitative mechanisms of patriarchy and the dominance of capital. What is new is the deepening of the patriarchal setting of social life and the domination of capital under the liberal mask of equality and liberty, certainly defined in terms of the market. The current regulations, while treating women the same as men in the labor market—thus fulfilling the liberal resolution for gender equality—also force an increase in women’s domestic labor. This state of affairs amounts to a deepening of the double servitude of women rather than their emancipation.

The legislation entails coverage for those working in flexible employment: Upon their “request” and “wish,” and by paying the anticipated premiums, they can benefit from the security afforded by the system. In other words, the legislation entails theoretical inclusion but actual exclusion. Moreover, within a patriarchal family structure, it is the man who decides how the family spends its money and since the new legislation anticipates additional charges and payments upon receiving health services, it is more than likely that most women and many children will not receive medical services. Read in terms of the smooth synthesis between neoliberal economic preferences and conservative social/cultural ones, such policies clearly demonstrate the kind of society the ruling party--defines itself conservative-- has in mind, and testifies to how damaging conservative governments can be for the material conditions of women. Thus, the percentage of women participating in the workforce has steadily declined throughout the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi’s (Justice and Development Party (JDP) terms in government.

4. CONCLUSION

Although, I do not want to fall into trap of a feminism based on victimhood that hides women from opportunities and equality and am well aware of feminism’s new sensibility, preoccupied with men as victimizers and women as victims (see Batinder 2010), there is a strong need to understand woman social and political positions in a realistic way. These understandings of womanhood of course reenergizes old stereotypes of women as weak, defenseless and largely innocent, and men as violent, domineering and oppressing. The statistics have showed that there has been a dramatic decrease in women’s life options and social power.

Unemployment and informal employment are the two major problems for the Turkish economy in general and the social security system in particular. The situation is clearly dramatic: the combined rate of formal and informal employment is around 50 percent. A great proportion of families earn wages below the subsistence level, many having little or no access to social security. In this picture with the low level of employment and a high level of dependency on social aid, women are the most disadvantaged group in the neoliberal order of Turkey. Many speeches, JDP members emphasized that the protection afforded to women precluded their chances of employment. Even minor contributions, such as the opening of daycare centers in the workplace, are seen as unnecessary costs. It is not that the capitalists in Turkey do not want women to join the labor force. They just want them to be employed in particular ways (which also fit a patriarchal way of doing things), in short-term, flexible arrangements entailing no prestige, security, or benefits. It is no surprise that there are no arrangements within the legislation that establish incentives for women's employment: there are no quotas, no promotions. The legislation only serves to diminish the conditions of women, forcing them to accept whatever employment they can find, under whatever terms. In a patriarchal setting, forcing women into the labor market means accepting the exploitative conditions rather than helping them to free themselves of their dependent positions in their families. The combination of charitable work with market priorities has long been an asset of the new right. The JDP is not an exception in this respect, since works of charity, colored with Muslim sentiments, are both in line with the neoliberal mentality and more profitable politically (Yeğenoğlu and Coşar, 2010). Considering the low rates of women's employment in Turkey, it is clear that the regulation forces a large portion of the population out of the social security system. That women are no longer entitled to health security as the dependents of their families forces them either into marriage, to benefit from insurance as the dependent of a husband, or into accepting unfavorable working conditions.

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