

## **Is Masculinity Really An Exceptional Condition in Turkey?**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper the current problems of gender issues are examined through selected photographs from the exhibition named 'Masculinity is an Exceptional Condition' organized by Volunteers of Society NGO in Turkey. The artists of the presented works are university students, whose aspects of gender consciousness are significant as much as the audience opinion. This study is based on 5 groups of thematic photographs reflecting the issues of masculine emotionality, fatherhood, gender discrimination and harassment, and employment of women. Examples of gender policies, governmental programs, customs and practice of daily life are given to display that gender problems come not only from incompetent policies and actions, but also arise because of public opinion and historical traditions of patriarchy. Contrasts are drawn between the future aims and everyday life by the photographs, concluding with an assessment of how gender action can contribute to the solution of equality.

This year, the NGO named 'Volunteers of Society' organized a national exhibition allegorically named as 'Masculinity Is An Exceptional Condition', which displayed eighty photographs of university students to draw attention to gender inequality. The works took place concurrently in 14 different cities and 29 different locations- most being university campuses- and besides online, as part of International Women's Day events in Turkey. The concept of online exhibition also contributes to the decentralizing of the subject. More importantly, online exhibition concept unfolds a different social space, one open to new patterns of audience behavior and interaction (Bulbeck, 1998: 37). Hereby, the target audience is not limited by university students; the organization of wide public access is also notable.

Both the works and their elucidations are incisive by pointing out the inequality in various conditions such as male domination in tradition, employment and the role of gender identities in family. Moreover, the fragmental descriptions added by the artists were also remarkable, as well as the works, which underlines the gender issues by its crystal clear emphasis on the role of women and the restrictions in their daily life according to the patriarchy (Young 1997:63,64,98).

According to the actuality of the exhibition, this paper intends to analyze the medium of the selected works and elucidations of works written by their own photographers. Intertwined with the gender issues, these can also be perceived as the attitude of conscious group of young generation Turkish artists. In this manner, the paper will portray one side of the current gender problems in Turkey, which partially reflects perspectives of university students.

### **Masked Injury of Masculinity; Boys don't cry**

The males often learn to hide and conceal their emotional wounds as part of proving their masculinity as a result of Western and Eastern culture. Within an Enlightenment culture of modernity, it is hard for men to acknowledge the injuries that they carry. Since 'boys don't cry' males learnt to carry their wounds within themselves (Seidler 1997: 110,111).

However, Freudian psychoanalytic tradition mentions if human beings are to grow up and develop their individuality they have to face and acknowledge their emotional wounds, ergo it is a false sign of manhood to think that males verify their masculinity by eradicating their inner emotions. Yet this is a harsh standpoint of the identification of masculinity with reason that has structured dominant Western visions of modernity.

Such a cultural characteristic is even more common in Turkish tradition, and the photographs of young generation artists are remarkable in providing evidence in favor of this . In her own words, the explanation of the artist (Coplan Erdem) for her work (photo no 2) is "Masculinity is really an exceptional condition, because he has to find a hidden shelter to cry". In another saying, the photos stress that, even though the sufferings of men can in no way be compared with what women have had to suffer from patriarchy, they also experienced the negative effects of a patriarchal culture, which have continuity from past to present. (Seidler 1997: 67) This is commonly true, within a moral culture that is constantly teaching males to ignore their own emotions, despite contradictions of different cultures of societies.



Photo 1 by Ilker Bulbul



Photo 2 by Colpan Erdem

## **Fathering with Love**

Women's position in the family in general is still inferior. Women are still expected to carry out the household tasks even in cases where they have paid work outside home. Most of the women themselves still perceive that care for children and looking after the house are their natural duties. Men also perceive the woman in the same manner. Yet it is gratifying to notice that especially in roughly the last decade, young generation has begun to view women in a more realistic perspective. Through technical developments in mass-media and the globalization of culture, it was possible for women in Turkey to see their counterparts' lives in other countries, which resulted in a crucial awakening for them.

The Freudian perspective doesn't appreciate how important fathers can be in the emotional lives of their children. The danger is that mothers will hold on emotionally and will not allow their children to have emotional autonomy and independence. In this Freud agrees with Kant that the notion of independence comes as movement from dependence, therefore the need of dependence becomes a sign of immaturity. At this critical stage, it is the identification of masculinity with independence and self-sufficiency that gives males the authority and distance to separate mothers from their children.

The identification between children and father is abstract in Freudian perspective because it doesn't grow from an ongoing relationship, since fathers are so taken up with their work. In Turkey, for the same reason, the children can't know their fathers in the way they know their mothers who care for them everyday. This can face children with an un-idealized role model of fathers and an underestimating notion of their mothers, accordingly, the lack of balance that exists in the relationship between the mother and the father shapes the childhood of the person through the observation of the roles of his/her parents (Guignard 1999: 95, 96).

Besides, spending time with young babies can also be difficult, as it involves learning to live a different timing. Babies and children have their own needs and time and if fathers wish to respect them they have to attune their daily routine and timing. Traditionally, this is difficult for men who are used to getting things done and who have inherited fear of wasting time. Ironically, the artist of the photo number 3 named as 'Old Fetus' tries to show that, if pregnancy had been a part of male nature, they might never have time and courage to give

birth, by taking an imaginary picture of a shadow fetus inside the male body (Raphael-Leff 1991: 22).

The woman, associated only with childbearing and child nursing because of her familial and social roles, is being exposed to continuous contempt even in the 21st century despite the stand of the women's right movements especially in the last two centuries. However, it is clear that, this contempt has had a devastating effect on the welfare of children, boys and girls alike.

On the other hand photos 4,5 and 6 call attention to the fact that if males learn to appreciate the time they spend with young babies and infants it can be a way of accepting love and interaction that they sometimes too easily reject from adults. This kind of relationship is part of an initiation into manhood, for it potentially awakens them to qualities of love and care that they might not think themselves capable of (Chasseguet-Smirgel 1986: 18).



Photo 3 'Old Fetus' Gokce Degirmencioglu



Photo 4 Gulen Toker



Photo 5 Volkan Pirincci

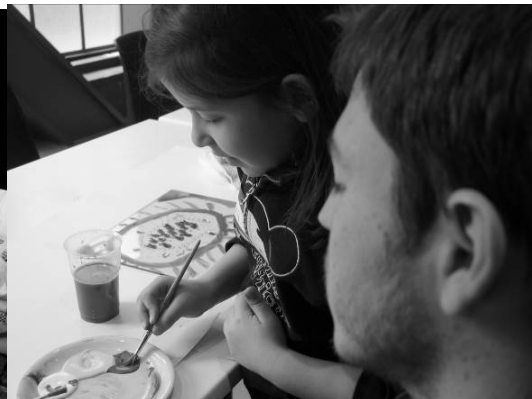


Photo 6 Nevra Taslidan

As a whole in this group, the photos remind the audience that through spending time with children men can learn to bond with them. This is something that women have traditionally had to learn for themselves, for there is nothing natural or automatic about it. If fathers are learning these skills from the beginning, then there is fluency and naturalness of their touch and contact. This must be the way of their masculinity has to form, for it teaches them that they can love and care (Butler 1990: 58).

### **Action Now**

The gender issues and feminism play a vital role in navigating cultural development within politics in European societies. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the ‘first-wave’ feminists had demanded civil and political equality. In the 1970’s, ‘second-wave’ feminism concentrated on, and gave great prominence to, sexual and family rights for woman. It is these demands now, that have become the main target of reaction (Walters 2005: 137). However, in the acceptance of the feminist changes with the second wave of the movement in the 1970s within the process of modernization, there was no room to redeploy the values of politicized feminism with a new form of gender equality culture that may be accepted by the political organizations of Turkey such as, social democratic party or liberal party, which was in contrast with the support of politicization of feminism during the Mitterrand period in France and the Labor party government in the United Kingdom. In accordance with this historical fact, the Turkish feminist movement was slower than the other European countries and the political agenda of gender issues delayed for a decade (Akis, Ozakın, Sancar 2009: 253-257).

The Turkish Government, which has adopted “The Agreement on the Prevention of All Discrimination Against Women” and “1985 Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Development of Women” as its basic principles, has made significant accomplishments towards improving the status of Turkish Women and its efforts regarding women’s issues in the world. Nevertheless, one can always argue that Turkey is still at an early stage in its struggle against accepting violence towards women as a basic violation of human rights. However, it can not be claimed that this recognition has become ingrained in the public opinion, both men and women and the state institutions. Furthermore, the activities of the women’s movement which enhanced the sensitivity of the public in the past have gradually decreased. Almost all of the women’s solidarity groups which were established during 1987-1988 “Campaigns against Violence” have disintegrated in 1991-1992, which underlines the difficulty involved in forming and developing an independent movement to deal with the

various aspects of the issues of gender and violence in Turkey (The statues of women in Turkey -National Report 1994: 40).

Consequently, the actions of NGOs have a vital role in the development of the movement to draw public attention in Turkey. The actions of NGOs and volunteer organizations are not only the voice of gender equality, but also the supporting force of alternative, queer and trans identities, as well as forming a political agenda. The photos number 7 and 8, aim to display one of the latest of the woman rights parade protesting against gender inequality and the comprehension of infidelity in the society (Aksu & Gunal 2002: 43).

Depending on customs and religion, Turkish women who are not virgins can be branded as prostitutes. As an outstanding example, this protest's message was on the sexual harassment, the rights of the individual, and the meaning of masculine attitude toward the issue. Hard-hitting, outspoken, and controversial, the protest was a call to arms for the emancipation of women from a brutal cultural oppression and from an outdated cult of virginity and raping (Aksu & Gunal 2002: 247). As can be read clearly from the banners of the protest in the photos, the slogans carried by male participants are 'if we are the guards of virginity of women, we are not man', 'if rape is a part of manhood, we are not man' and the other one is 'if murder is masculine, we are not'.



Photo 7 Uygur Kurtcu

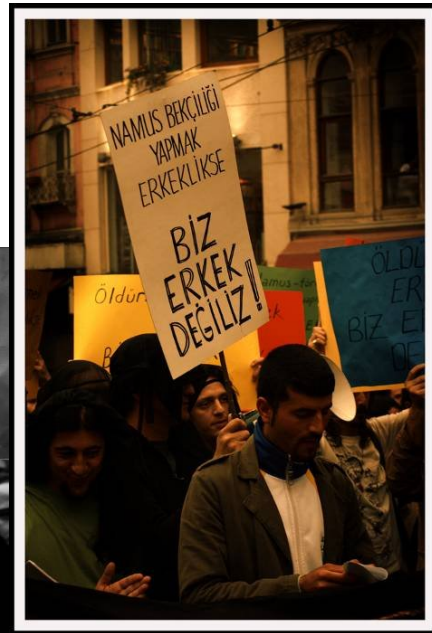


Photo 8 Uygur Kurtcu

## **Make up for Men or Making up Gender Myths**

The attempt to identify the interests of all classes of women as a sex takes one of its most insidious forms in the field of female beauty. The bourgeois myth has arisen that since all women want to be beautiful, they all have the same interests in cosmetics and fashions, which are currently identified with beauty globally (Lax 1998: 65). To buttress this myth, it is claimed that make up and fashion beauty has prevailed throughout all ages of history and for all classes of woman. However, in the primitive society where there were no classes and social competition between genders, the bodies of both women and men were painted and decorated not for the sake of beauty but as a necessity born of certain ancient conditions and religion (Morgan 1986: 59).

It seems there's been a revival in recent years that makes men in makeup more acceptable. Men are spending more and more time refining their grooming habits. In Turkey, this type of grooming is more common for the male celebrities or the members of young generation, but still, the men with make up or trimmed eyebrows as in the photo 9, evoking new mass media term, 'Metro-sexual' which has a degrading meaning for the masculinity. In photos 10 and 11, the artists express that even personal activities of body care are socially constructed by gender stereotyping (Holmberg 1998: 16).



Photo 9 Ilker Bulbul



Photo 10 Christina Cattaneo



Photo 11 Gulen Toker

### **Blame It on Custom**

Turkish traditions and customs have always been, and still are, extremely important for women especially outside the metropolises. Historically, it is a fact that among the Shaman Turks, women had an equal status to men. Mostly, they even had a superior position over men in some cases, playing an advisory role in the family and social life, until the Ottoman Empire period. Today, the rates of uneducated women are higher in the East and Southeast regions of Turkey, which causes difficulties for an adoption process of gender equality. Schroeder Kırca, 2007: 181,183). They are often advised not to compete with her husband and it has also generally been recommended that a woman does not have an independent position in social and even in daily life. This is also widely true for the immigrant families from those regions in the cities. For instance, according to the one of the limited studies on the issue by government (1988), 45% men believe that men have absolute authority at home and women have to obey them. 54% of men are convinced that men are more clever and superior than women, 64% claim that wives must accept their opinions in case of dispute (The statuses of women in Turkey -National Report 1994: 63).

Definitely, increasing women's access to critical resources is an important means to enable their effective participation in daily life and in the process of gender equality (Butler 1993: 24). Reaching this target requires first and foremost raising levels of consciousness to overcome handicaps originating from customs and traditions, otherwise society have to face the contradictions of the issue day by day as it is mentioned in the photo12, which ironically displays a man and his wife walking behind him, in front of an 'I love you' graffiti written on the wall. In this case, the audience perceives the patriarchal system does not only dominate the tradition, but also is able directly to manipulate the gender awareness of daily life, by reproducing itself in practice of everyday life. By the underlined action in the photograph, audiences experience the clear infusion of gender discrimination in the standard acts of society.





Photo 12 Ismet Danyeli

### **Working Girls**

The author of 'The Woman in Turkey and the New Millenium' Emel Dođramaci states that there is a threefold fear about working woman in Turkey, which includes destruction of family life at home, possibility of having an affair with colleagues and threat of a professional job on the economic dominance of the male (2000:166).

On the other hand, the 'Development of Women's Employment' Project as a part of 'Employment and Education Project', scheduled and financed by The Turkish Government and the World Bank with the aim of providing prestigious career plans to the women and suppressing the male dominance in certain sectors. This was a research project covering a wide range of gender related topics, such as the condition of women in professional life, present opportunities in various fields for female employment, private sector policy requirements on gender equality and the dissemination of the research results to effect the public opinion with a total cost of 1.4 million dollars spent during the 4 years between 1994-1998. Additionally, 'Small Business Project' financed by Japanese Grant Foundation, co-operation with UN organizations, UNICEF and local projects by governments can be listed for the other supportive programs during the last decade for the employment of women and elimination of the gender discrimination (The statues of women in Turkey -National Report 1994: 58).

In another saying, the support of international co-operations are milestones which have been used effectively in order to contribute to the activities of national institutions established by the government, especially for strengthening the mechanism and building up a public

consciousness. Comparing to the past, current conditions are expanded and well improved by the formation of the institutional infrastructure and the policies on the subject.

Although all the positive changes on the issue, the photos 13 and 14 imply the other reality still remains with cults of custom, apart from the increasing of woman employment statistics. Despite this general scheme gender-based clichés and prejudices are very usual in the categorization of jobs (Wright 2000: 38). As an example in photo 13, even night street-selling is an unqualified type of work it is masculine in Turkey, as well as the management of coffeehouses where men go to play backgammon or card games, shown in photo 14.



Photo 13 Ilker Bekgen



Photo 14 Guney Cicek

### **Conclusive Remarks**

A surprising number of amount narrative space in photographs devoted to descriptions of daily traditions which are specifically of representing our gender perception for ourselves. Even though there isn't emerge of action or solution medium carried out by the works in the exhibition, it constitutes a warning system, a set of cautionary moral tales, alerting us to the dangers of gender inequality in our daily life and traditional discourse.

The works stand as reminders to discern the harmful effects of sexism on our gender perceptions. The exhibition is also concerned with gender identities, which is not necessarily based on the person's sexual orientation including various identities.

With a view to escaping domination by the patriarchal ideology and stereotypical interpretation of gender perception, the narration of the photographs points out that we must attempt to achieve a space for the survival of gender equality in our gender perception, but it

does not address all the current cultural needs of society and does not deal with such serious problems as violence and gender harassment deeply, which are a destructive force on gender identities in Turkey.

In other words, each work in the exhibition spotlights a nexus where the culture, tradition, and the present intersect, alerting us the ways in which this nexus is embedded in both practical and social spaces including entertainment, gender, art and the built environment.

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