

## A CLOSER LOOK AT BEING A WOMAN IN TURKISH ACADEMIA: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

*In this descriptive study, women's professional lives with a focus on what it means to be a woman in Turkish academia and on whether being a woman differs from being a man in an academic context was put under scrutiny. For this purpose, a questionnaire was conducted among 41 women academics currently working at the Faculties of Education in Turkish Universities. Participants were chosen from a broad variety of backgrounds in terms of age and discipline, and ranged from research assistants to full professors. The reliability of the instrument was calculated to be .705, signifying moderate reliability. The results show that women academics reveal clashing opinions about their positions and professional success in connection with gender related issues.*

**Key Words:** *women, academia, Turkey, Turkish, faculty, education.*

### 1. Introduction

Turkish women have made great strides with respect to their recruitment to positions at all the levels in higher education institutions although they are increasingly beset by conflicts between their professional and familial roles [1]. The proportion of women professors in Turkey is estimated to be 23%, a figure which is relatively high compared to Western Europe and the United States [2].

Women academics in Turkey do not report having faced any discrimination during their university education and academic lives although this may stem from the fact that many women academics are not knowledgeable about covert discrimination experienced in society [3]. Or another line of reading this fact

might be that, from the 1930s onwards it has been the official state policy to educate and promote women as part of the westernization project, thus women feel encouraged rather than discouraged in their education and in their attempts to position themselves in academia. However, this line of reading the issue becomes even more intricate as, on the one hand they are encouraged; on the other hand they might feel stuck in their traditional familial roles which might pose a challenge to their professional life. Hence, much has still to be done to explore and give a realistic picture of women's status as academics working in Turkish universities. Similarly, although there is a growing body of work on gender related issues in higher education in general and the experience of mothers as academics in particular, there is little research on non-mothers and work relationship [4].

This paper aims to give a hearing to women's professional lives against the background of gender related issues with a special focus on what it means to be a woman in academia and how being a woman differs, as women themselves experience and come to believe, from being a man. With this focus in mind, a questionnaire was prepared and filled in by 41

women academics currently working at the Faculties of Education in Turkish universities.

### 1.1. Research Questions

The research questions concentrate on the following foci:

1. Do women academics think that they could be more successful if they were men?
2. Which aspects of their gender identity pose challenges for them in their professional life?

## 2. Methods

This study followed a descriptive study method which made use of quantitative data collected as a cross-sectional survey from selected individuals at a single point in time [5]. The questionnaire used in this study was developed by the researchers after a thorough analysis of the relevant literature, a process which was followed by constant discussions on selecting the most to-the-point questions to capture a panoramic view of the issue.

In the preparation of the questionnaire items, 9 demographic questions and 15 Likert-type scale questions of 5 choices were decided to be used. In this present report, these 5 choices were reduced to 3 : "I agree", "I am not sure", and "I disagree." In reporting the demographics, the raw figures were rounded to the nearest upper or lower number. The Cronbach's alpha reliability of the scale was found to be .705 suggesting moderate, but acceptable reliability. This moderate figure can be explained by the relatively small number of the items and the participants. Hence, with a larger sample and more number of items, a higher reliability coefficient could have been achieved.

Since this research study can be considered as a small-scale descriptive study, the findings should be taken as givens for a general view; they don't test or correlate factors affecting multitude of issues surrounding and affecting women academics' gender related professional problems. In the selection of the participants, nonrandom sampling procedure employing convenience sampling was used to gather the

most realistic data from the most available group within the reach of the researchers. To do that, the researchers started from their immediate work environment and gradually reached other participants who were contacted by the first group participants.

The study was concluded in the Spring semester of 2008-2009 academic year; and the participants' anonymity was strictly guaranteed. Ninety percent of the participants lived and worked in Ankara and only 10% of the rest lived in either Istanbul or Izmir, two metropolitan Turkish cities with highly prestigious universities.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1. Demographics

Eighty-five percent of the participants lived in cities in the first 15 years of their lives and 66% of the participants describe their parental socio-economic background as middle class (here one should bear in mind that the term "middle class" is used in quite a different sense than in the Continental Europe and Britain. In Turkish context it refers mostly to the financial positioning of the individuals, rather than their moral/political/cultural constitution. Although 30% of them claim to have parents who are tradesmen/businessmen, it is noteworthy that none of the participants identifies herself as coming from financially under-privileged segments. Concerning their main reason for choosing to work in academia, 58.5% of them refer to their family or their immediate social surroundings as a factor that inspired their decision, followed by 32% of them who state that working in academia was not their primary choice but was a decision which had to be made in the absence of better alternatives.

Those who are happy with working as an academic make up 54% of the participants in contrast to 22% of those who want to switch into other jobs outside academia. Those who claim to be unsure or indecisive about switching into another professional field make up 24% of the participants. These results suggest that almost half of these women academics are likely to reveal some sort of dissatisfaction with their work in academia.

In terms of their marital status and age, 56% of the participants are married, and 71% of all the participants are between 26 and 45 years of age. When the parental education of the participants are considered, it is observed that mothers of the participants have received mostly lower education (only 37% of them being university graduates) than their fathers (56% of them with a university diploma).

### 3.2. Opinions

Work related problems of the participants are as follows: More than 46% of the participants

complain about their teaching load; and those who claim that the need for publishing articles and books for promotion is burning them out make up 41.5% of the whole sample. However, as the results show, the biggest problem this group of academics faces is their low salary since 61% of the whole group claim that their salary rate affects their professional success negatively.

As can be seen in the Table, 82.9% of the participants support the idea of increasing the number of courses on women's problems in higher education.

<i>Table. Results of the questionnaire study</i>	<i>Agree (%)</i>	<i>Not sure (%)</i>	<i>Disagree (%)</i>
<b>1. Number of courses on women's problems must be increased in higher education.</b>	82.9	7.3	9.8
<b>2. Women, compared to men, must work harder to succeed in academia.</b>	53.7	19.5	26.8
<b>3. My teaching load is burning me out.</b>	46.3	17.1	36.6
<b>4. The need for publishing articles and books for promotion is burning me out.</b>	41.5	19.5	39
<b>5. There is no relationship between my house chores and professional productivity.</b>	31.7	19.5	48.8
<b>6. Being married affects the success of a woman academic negatively.</b>	22	36.6	41.5
<b>7. I would be more successful if I were a man.</b>	34.1	14.6	51.2
<b>8. My low salary affects my professional success negatively.</b>	61	14.6	24.4
<b>9. It is easier for a woman to succeed and to get promoted in academia, compared to a man.</b>	-	19.5	80.5
<b>10. I would publish more if I had less house chores.</b>	46.3	22	31.7
<b>11. Raising children affects a woman's research output negatively.</b>	48.8	26.8	24.4
<b>12. Compared to men, women are more suitable to being an academic.</b>	24.4	34.1	41.5
<b>13. Compared to men, it is easier for women to stay abroad for research purposes.</b>	53.7	14.6	31.7
<b>14. Women in academia are supportive of each other.</b>	17.1	39	43.9
<b>15. The proportion of women in Turkish academia is satisfactory.</b>	17.1	17.1	65.9

This implies, they recognize the fact that women have distinct problems in society which have to be tackled as a separate issue in the curriculum.

As academics, 53.7% of them believe that they, compared to men, must work harder in academia to succeed and to get promoted.

Although this particular result is not as high as the previous one, item 9 might shed light on how they compare themselves to men in academia since none of the participants agrees with the statement that it is easier for women, compared to men, to succeed in academia. In contrast, 80.5% of the participants reject this statement which implies that women's job is not easier than men's, if not more difficult.

The majority of the participants also reject the notion that women's qualities match with the demands posed by academia more than men's qualities do. Furthermore, only 24.4% of the participants believe that women make better academics than men, and 53.7% of them believe that it is easier for women to stay abroad for research purposes. These results suggest that the participants from whom we collected data do not see themselves under pressure compared to their male counterparts.

Do women academics find other women supportive of their work in academia? Interestingly, results don't suggest the affirmative: Only 17.1% of the participants claim that women in academia are supportive of each other. However, 65.9% of the participants think that the proportion of women

In Turkish academia is not satisfactory, thus, it can be inferred that women themselves see their gender underrepresented although they do not find their women friends very supportive of their endeavors in Turkish academia.

Nearly half of the participants reject the notion that they would be more successful if they were men (51.2% of the participants being negative towards this statement). However, the proportion of women who claim otherwise is not low (34.1% of the participants claiming that they would be more successful if they were men.) These results point at the problematic nature of women's place in

academia which can be understood better when the rest of the results are considered.

How do these women define their gender related problems in their profession as academics? The results point at the complicated nature of these women academics' gender related problems which are difficult to generalize. Only 31.7% of the participants believe that there is a correlation between house chores and their professional productivity. However, 46.3% of the participants agree that they could publish more if they had less house chores, implying that they see a correlation between their house chores and professional promotion.

Marital status in relation to professional life reveals another problematic and confusing message. Those who agree that being married has a negative effect on their success in academia make up 22% of the participants.

Hence, it can be inferred that marriage is not taken as a setback in professional life for the participants. However, it should also be noted that 36.6% of the participants answer this question by filling in the choice "not sure." This signals the possible uncertainty of the participants on the correlation between marriage and their professional life.

Lastly, 48.8% of the participants claim that they have observed and come to believe that raising children affects a woman's research output negatively, a result which implies that almost half of these women academics hold the view that raising children might pose a challenge to them.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study aimed to present a descriptive study of women academics' professional lives in relation to gender related challenges they face as members of Turkish academia and of how being a woman academic differs from being a man academic in the same context. The results of the study suggest that there are clashing results although women academics clearly state that being a woman academic in Turkey poses challenges to them in their profession.

The nature of this study was that of a quantitative study employing a questionnaire prepared and applied by the researchers themselves. However, just as these clashing results show, detailed accounts of the participants must be studied to shed more light on what it means to be a woman academic and how one's gender affects one's professional life.

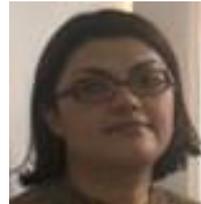
Hence, future studies must employ quantitative research methods with large samples and qualitative methods with more specific foci. Until then, such small scale studies will only provide us with a brief look at the research problem identified.

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