



Researcher: Social Science Studies

(2017) Cilt 5, Sayı 8, s. 235-246

RSSS

ISSN:2148-2691

EVALUATION OF THE CONCEPT OF GENDER IN TURKISH SOCIETY WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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“Gender” is considered to be among the most important research fields of cultural anthropology. Numerous studies have been carried out on this subject in order to illustrate the impacts of social forces and cultural notions on the development and perception of this concept. Thus, the present study focuses on the approaches to the issue of gender within the Turkish context by means of the comparison of examples from the Turkish culture with the examples selected from American culture. In the first place, anthropological perspective has been enriched through theoretical background information on sex and gender. Then the specific examples selected from the Turkish culture have been compared to the equivalent or similar practices in the American culture. By means of this analysis, it is aimed to demonstrate the general tendencies and preferences of Turkish people in the acknowledgement of the role assignments between two genders. At the end of the study, it has been concluded that the notions of sex and gender cannot be alienated from the culture and tradition of societies. Through the analysis of the examples provided in the study, it has been seen that negative discrimination is still practiced against women in Turkish society. Accordingly, it has been emphasized that discriminating actions against female gender should be eliminated regardless of their positions in Turkish society since human rights and freedoms are much more significant than strict beliefs and traditions.

Cultural Anthropology
Sex
Gender
Turkish Society
Turkish Culture

TÜRK TOPLUMUNDAKİ TOPLUMSAL CİNSİYET KAVRAMININ KÜLTÜREL ANTROPOLOJİ BAĞLAMINDA DEĞERLENDİRİLMESİ

Özet

“Toplumsal Cinsiyet”, kültürel antropolojinin en önemli araştırma konularından bir tanesidir. Toplumsal cinsiyet algısının gelişiminde sosyal güçlerin ve kültürel yaklaşımların etkilerini göz önüne sermek amacıyla birçok çalışma yürütülmüştür. Bu çalışma ise Türk kültüründen alınan örnekleri Amerikan kültüründeki eşdeğerleriyle karşılaştırmak suretiyle Türk toplumunda toplumsal cinsiyet

Anahtar Kelimeler

Kültürel Antropoloji
Cinsiyet
Toplumsal Cinsiyet
Türk Toplum
Türk Kültürü

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konusuna yönelik yaklaşımlara odaklanmıştır. Öncelikle, bu çalışma kapsamında antropolojik bakış açısı, cinsiyet ve toplumsal cinsiyet konularına ilişkin artalan bilgileriyle zenginleştirilmiştir. Sonraki aşamada Türk kültüründen seçilen örnekler Amerikan kültüründeki eşdeğer ya da benzer uygulamalarla karşılaştırılmıştır. Bu analiz yoluyla, Türk halkının toplumsal cinsiyetlere atfedilen rolleri benimseme konusundaki genel eğilimlerini ve tercihlerini ortaya koymak amaçlanmıştır. Çalışmanın sonunda, cinsiyet ve toplumsal cinsiyet kavramlarının, toplumların kültür ve geleneklerinden soyutlanamayacağı tespit edilmiştir. Çalışma kapsamında yer verilen örneklerin incelenmesi sonucunda, Türk toplumunda hala kadınlara karşı negatif ayrımcılığın uygulandığı görülmüştür. Bu bağlamda, kadınların toplumsal cinsiyetine yönelik ayırıcı eylemlerin, kültür içerisindeki konumlarına bakılmaksızın ortadan kaldırılması gerektiği savunulmaktadır; zira insan hak ve özgürlükleri, katı inançlardan ve geleneklerden daha fazla önem arz etmektedir.

INTRODUCTION

Anthropology is a broad field of study consisting of numerous subfields and taking the human beings as its basis of research. Since it mainly focuses on the different aspects of human behavior within the scope of social and cultural contexts, it may be asserted that cultures and persons are the main items of anthropology. For this reason, numerous analyses have been carried out on the nature and the characteristics of human beings especially within the limits of specific societies and cultures. Subsequent to the emergence of the subfield of anthropology entitled "Cultural Anthropology", a close correlation has been established between the culture and the gendered status of people. The concepts of sex and gender have been analyzed in detail in order to understand the motives of existence and the characteristic development of human beings as unique persons under the cultural influences. These studies have been required to be limited to the boundaries of a given society since divergences or alterations can be observed among different societies as a result of distinctive traditional practices, geographical conditions, religions or other similar factors.

From this perspective, Turkish society and Turkish culture offer numerous items and subjects which are worth being analyzed within the framework of cultural anthropology because tradition, religion and gender are critical research topics in the social context of Turkey.

Accordingly, the present study will firstly introduce theoretical background information regarding the concepts of sex and gender within the scope of cultural anthropology. Then this information will be enriched through numerous examples selected from Turkish society and their comparison with equivalent examples from different societies. By means of this analysis, it is aimed to define the status of the genders in the society and the culture from an academic and anthropological point of view.

Cultural Anthropology and Gender Issue in Turkey

Gender from Anthropological Perspective

Both human beings and animals have been divided into two basic categories according to their physical and anatomical differences: male and female. This distinction has been called “sexual dimorphism”, and this notion is defined as “the occurrence of two physically distinct form of a species, based on sexual characteristics as well as non-sexual ones such as body size” (Eller, 2016: 89). However, sexual dimorphism is not easily determined by simple rules contrary to the general perception. The physical traits that are utilized for the determination of the sex may not always provide clear results since the distinctive features of both sexes are mostly specified through generalizations (such as skeletal size, body mass etc.) (Arsdale, 2012). Nevertheless, scientists have acknowledged that the concept of “sex” is related to the natural structure of body features and the characteristics of the genitalia.

“Gender”, on the other hand, was misperceived and misinterpreted by the people for many years as an alternative term for “sex”. In the past, the expressions “sex” and “gender” were alternatively used within the same context. However, recent studies on the issue of gender and popular feminist approaches have illustrated the main differences between these two concepts. Accordingly, it has been understood that sex is based on natural and biological divergences of human beings while gender is determined through social assignments of the roles specified for each sex. Okely has given the following details in this subject:

“Thanks to the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1970s, a younger generation of women began to question the masculinist orthodoxies in social anthropology, both in the traditions in fieldwork and the literature. An important distinction which began to be made was that between sex as a biological given and gender as culturally variable. In this way, it was argued that divisions of labor and different roles assigned on the basis of gender were no longer accepted as biologically inevitable. Whilst sex at birth is relatively fixed, the meanings and behavior associated with physical, sexual differences were seen as fluid and varied across cultures. In the 1990s, the dichotomy is held to be less clear, but even in the 1970s it was always recognized that human biology could also be culturally transformed and manipulated.” (2017).

Similarly, Antrosio states that social beliefs and expectations of the societies have dramatic effects on the social status and general perception of the gender types, which places the gender studies in a more central and culture-oriented position (2012). Therefore, gender is believed to be a ‘social construction’ in which the roles of the individuals from both sexes were predetermined and commonly accepted. On the other hand, the afore-said predetermination and acceptance have been widely criticized by different groups of people, especially feminists, since the role assignments of male and female genders show fundamental differences due to the overestimation of male gender. Accordingly, these roles have started to be discussed in detail subsequent to the emergence of feminist approaches and the rise of feminist anthropology. In the following part, the field of feminist anthropology will be analyzed from a chronological perspective in order to provide a solid basis for the evaluation of the existing role assignments of genders especially in Turkish society.

Feminist Anthropology

In almost every culture, female gender has been associated with the household and daily chores while male gender is perceived as a more active and social entity assuming more significant roles as the dominant sex. Women were also considered to be inferior to men since they took part in the domestic environment as a result of their responsibilities in child care and reproduction whilst men were believed to have a higher profile because of their active participation in the social life (Moore, 1994: 10). A similar tendency was also observed in the anthropology since the early studies in this field were mostly carried out by men on the male-biased issues while women and their roles in the society were generally underestimated. This underestimation continued to be seen in the anthropological studies until the end of 19th century. Nevertheless, changing economic status of the societies, easier access to information and social reactions against the male-dominated perception led to the emergence of more female-oriented approaches both in anthropology and other research fields. This change has been defined as 'the first wave' of feminist anthropology by Dominguez, Franks and Boschma. They have also mentioned two more waves contributing to the development of feminist anthropology. The second wave has been associated with the realization of the differences between sex and gender as it is stated below:

"The second wave, from 1920 to 1980, moved into academic spheres and separated the notion of sex from that of gender, both of which previously had been used interchangeably. Gender was used to refer to both the male and the female, the cultural construction of these categories, and the relationship between them (Pine 1996:253). The definition of gender may vary from culture to culture, and this realization has led feminist anthropologists away from broad generalizations (Lamphere 1996:488)." (Dominguez, Franks and Boschma, 2009).

The realization of the divergences between these two concepts encouraged the feminist anthropologists to reject the social roles imposed upon female gender such as daily chores or childcare. It was seen that gender was a socially constructed structure which was not a strict law of the nature and which could be changed according to the needs and demands of the societies. In line with this development, women started to take part in the social life more actively and more prominently. However, the greatest rise of feminist anthropology was seen at the moment of the third wave which began in the 1980s. After the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s, female gender gained significant popularity and power in the society. This trend led women to question the masculinity in all aspects of life, and it also resulted in fundamental changes in feminist anthropology. The scope of this research field was extended to the issues of race, social class, culture etc. At that point, it has been understood that gender is a much more complicated issue influenced by numerous factors as well as general impositions of the societies. Feminist anthropology has shed light on these factors and their temporariness. It has also showed that women are not doomed to take care of household, daily chores or childcare. The recent studies have demonstrated that women can actively participate in the social or professional life. Nevertheless, there are still certain deficiencies or denials in accepting the changing status of women in many societies. Although equality is tried to be provided between male and female genders, the application of equal rules cannot be guaranteed in most of the countries in the world. Masculinity is still perceived as the symbol of power due to the physical features of men. In the following section, the gender issue and

the perception of masculinity will be elaborated within the Turkish context by means of selected examples from well-known advertisements in Turkey and their comparison with similar advertisements in the United States in order to understand the approaches toward female gender in Turkish society.

Gender Issue in Turkish Society

“Gender” has been a fragile issue in Turkish society since the date of its distinction from the concept of “sex”. The sensitivity of this matter is mostly based on the role assignments between males and females in accordance with patriarchal rules. Turkish society, by its nature, has always been a male-oriented and male-biased social structure. Religious beliefs, traditional practices and social habits have resulted in the formation of a clear gender-based segregation in the afore-said structure. A “gender culture”, as defined by Ersoy (2009: 211), has been constructed within the society in order to “determine the limits of the gender-oriented values, attitudes and behaviors”. Thus, Turkish women have been required to assume the responsibilities of the household while Turkish men have become a part of the professional and intellectual life in a higher status compared to women. In fact, this distribution is mostly the result of a social and cultural order which has been predetermined and imposed on the people. Nevertheless, Turkish society has effectively used this distribution for a long time just like a natural phenomenon which cannot be prevented or avoided. Such perception has led to a low rate of women’s participation in the professional life in Turkey. Immigration, changeable economic conditions and cultural factors have influenced the women’s initiatives in taking part in the society as independent individuals benefiting from their own incomes. Additionally, it has been seen in a report drawn up by “Flying Broom” that discrimination against women is still prominent especially in certain sectors such as engineering, construction, mining etc. (Dedeoğlu, 2009: 49). For this reason, numerous regulations have been implemented in order to eliminate any kind of gender-based discrimination. The provisions containing different discriminating expressions against women were abolished from the Civil Code which entered into force in 2002 (Dedeoğlu, 2009: 48). The concept of “the head of a family” was removed from the legal documents, and equal rights and responsibilities of the couples were guaranteed by the law for the benefit of women.

However, negative discrimination against women is still present in the social and professional life in Turkey in spite of all these initiatives in favor of women. Although women constitute 49.8% of the Turkish population, their professional and educational levels are still below the expected rate compared to the rates observed in the male population. In the report drawn up by TUIK (Turkish Statistical Institute) in 2014, the rate of illiteracy was found to be 1.8% in men while this rate was recorded as 9.2% in women. In the same report, the rate of employment was reported to be 45.5% in the male population at or over the age of 15, and 26.7% in the female population within the same age range. According to the results of the Research on Incomes and Living Conditions carried out in 2014, it has been observed that a female employee is paid lower than a male employee having the same educational background at the rate of 1.3% (TUIK, 2016).

These data have shown that the domestic roles of women still influence their rate of education and employment. In Turkish society, it is currently believed that women should assume all of the domestic responsibilities no matter what their professions are or what their social status let them be. These discriminating tendencies can be observed in each part of the

daily life in Turkey. The advertisements in Turkey, on the other hand, provide illuminating examples in this issue since they illustrate the way of living of Turkish people. Therefore, certain examples selected from well-known advertisements are given below in order to show more effectively the social status of women in Turkey. These Turkish advertisements are compared to the equivalent ads broadcasted or published in the U.S. so as to emphasize the differences between the gender-based approaches of these two different societies.

Example 1. Coca-Cola



Figure 1. Coca-Cola advertisements from Turkey (Coca-Cola, 2014) and the U.S. (Birkner, 2016), respectively.

The pictures given above are taken from the advertisements of Coca-Cola Company broadcasted in Turkey and in the U.S. respectively. As seen in the picture on the left, the woman, who is most probably the owner of the house, is the last one sitting at the table since she has served the meal to her guests and other family members including her husband. This is a typical image of Turkish tradition in meal services and table manners. The other picture, which is on the right, illustrates a quite different approach to women. At that point, it must be stated that this advertisement was specifically designed for the Olympics as it can be understood from the Olympic rings used in the background and on the t-shirt. The significant matter which must be emphasized here is that the woman in the advertisement represents an athlete competing for the Olympics although sports are mostly associated with men. She is in the same status with the male character, and no inferiority or superiority can be observed between these two persons.

These two images show that the Coca-Cola Company, an American brand, designs its advertisements according to the needs and demands of different cultures in order to reach higher sales figures in the target societies. However, the basic point is that even international brands create a female image suitable for the patriarchal structure of Turkish society, which demonstrates that the patriarchy is a solid and settled perception difficult to change in Turkey.

Example 2. Knorr



Figure 2. Knorr advertisements from Turkey (Knorr, 2015) and the U.S. (Knorr, 2011), respectively.

Knorr, a product of Unilever which is a British-Dutch brand, has designed two different advertisements for two different cultures. In the first picture selected from the Turkish context, the meal is again made and served by young female members of a family while the elder woman and the men, whose ages do not have importance, are already sitting at the table and waiting for being served. Again, a typical family structure of Turkish culture was represented in this advertisement. In the second picture, on the other hand, the same brand has used the image of a professional male cook in the American context. This image illustrates that cooking is not an activity only performed by women; it can also be done by men as a daily practice or in a professional environment. The difference between these two pictures is the proof of the different mentalities in the above-mentioned two societies and the predetermined status of women in Turkish society.

Example 3. Detergents



Figure 3. Detergent advertisements from Turkey (ABC, 2016) and the U.S. (Persil, 2015), respectively.

In the first advertisement published in Turkey, the woman holding the detergent is self-confident about the effectiveness of the product that she will use while the man, probably her husband, is looking at her with a suspicious expression possibly because of his lack of information about laundry. In the second advertisement, on the other hand, a man has the same self-confidence about the quality of the product. The dressing styles of the main characters in the advertisements also give important clues about their social status. In the first advertisement, for example, the woman is well-groomed and she has put on make-up. Her style is commonly seen in the women participating in professional life. This character gives a

specific message to the society: ‘no matter what your profession is, you have to do the cleaning as a woman’.

However, the second advertisement published in the U.S. creates a perception among the society about men’s potential in doing chores. Again, there is a clear distinction between these two advertisements in terms of gender status in the relevant society. The illustrations provided in the examples impose a general image about the roles of genders upon the people of the relevant societies. Individuals living in these countries adopt these roles unwittingly as a result of their subconscious mechanisms.

Example 4. Baby Products



Figure 4. Advertisements of baby products from Turkey (E-Bebek, 2017), and the U.S. (Huggies, 2012), respectively.

As it can be easily understood from these examples, childcare has been attributed to mothers in the first advertisement, on which a motto has been written “mother’s care, expert’s advice” (our translation). It may be inferred from this statement that children are under the responsibility and care of their mothers. In fact, this example summarizes the general belief and approach to childcare in Turkish society.

Nevertheless, the second advertisement shows a different aspect of the role assignments between couples. The man in the second image wears a suit, which indicates that he has just come back from work. Although he is working, he also takes care of his child when he gets home, and the message given through this advertisement demonstrates that not only women but also men should assume the responsibility for their children whether they take part in the professional life or not.

Example 5. Automobiles

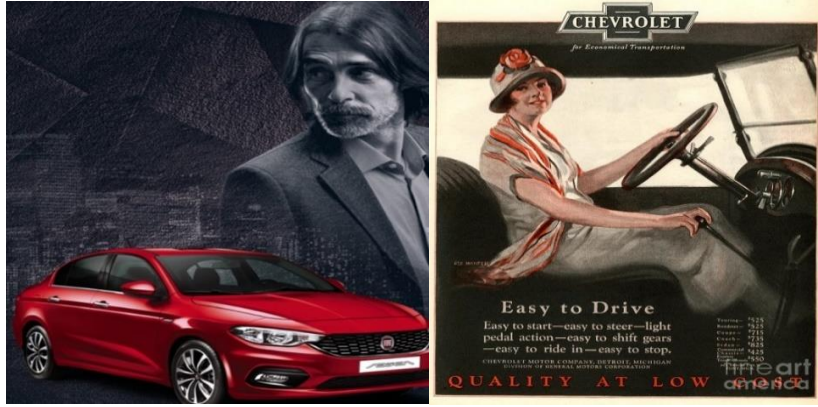


Figure 5. Advertisements of automobiles from Turkey (Fiat Egea, 2015) and the U.S. (Chevrolet, 1923), respectively.

Automobiles are most generally associated with men because they can be used through motor skills which are more apparent in males, and they symbolize the economic and physical power that attracts men more than women. Nevertheless, these natural tendencies have become a subject of discrimination against women, and females have most generally taken part in automobile advertisements as another object of attraction for men while dominant and masculine male characters have become the leading actors in such projects. A similar discriminating practice is also observed in the first advertisement broadcasted in Turkey since one of the most masculine characters in Turkish society has performed the leading role.

However, the second advertisement was designed for the brand Chevrolet in 1920s in the United States. It is quite surprising that a female figure was preferred to be used in an automobile advertisement published in the first half of the 20th century. Of course, it cannot be asserted that female population benefited from all kinds of rights and freedoms at that period or they were kept out of all types of discrimination in the United States. However, this advertisement demonstrates that women were acknowledged by American citizens as an inseparable part of the social life.

Example 6. Construction / Engineering



Figure 7. Advertisements of construction and engineering from Turkey (Özçelebi, 2010) and the U.S. (Regan, 2015), respectively.

Just like automobiles, the concepts of “construction” and “engineering” are attributed to men since female nature is believed to be too “weak” to handle these kinds of professions. Therefore, the advertisements related to construction or engineering are generally presented

by male actors, engineers or constructors, which is the case in the first advertisement. Ali Ağaoğlu, the owner of Ağaoğlu Construction Company, used his own image for advertising his constructions and buildings. Such male-oriented publications are quite prominent in Turkish society.

The second advertisement, on the other hand, was published as a reaction to the discrimination against women in the profession of engineering in the United States. By means of this action, it has been aimed to prove that women can become successful engineers regardless of their sexes, social status or natural and physical characteristics.

As it can be understood from all these examples, Turkish women still encounter different types of discrimination throughout their lives. The comparison of Turkish advertisements with their American versions does not mean that there is no discrimination against women in American society. There are numerous advertisements and publications discriminating the female population in the United States, as well. The only reason for this comparison is to demonstrate the cultural and traditional differences between Turkish and American societies in terms of gender issues. Moreover, these differences are resulted from religious and demographic factors as well as economic or financial conditions.

Conclusion

The issues of sex and gender, basic research topics of cultural anthropology, are too broad to be analyzed within a limited scope with limited examples. Yet, this study has strived to underline the impacts of culture and social structure on the perception of gender of a specific society. For this reason, Turkish context has been chosen as a sample point for the analysis of gender discrimination. Accordingly, it has been seen that traditions play a significant role in Turkish people's perception of gender. At this point, it can be asserted that numerous factors influence the attitudes towards the gender issue in Turkish society. Apart from religious practices, old traditions and social pressures result in the underestimation of women. From anthropological point of view, gender-based role assignments are mostly in favor of the male population in Turkey since the country has patriarchal social structure. Although globalization and international relations have enhanced women's status within the society, women's participation in social and professional life is still below the expected rates, as proved above by means of the data obtained from TUIK. When the male domination is combined with female compliance to the social pressures and expectations, it is indispensable that women are doomed to the underestimation or inferiority in comparison with men.

In fact, imposition of the predetermined roles and responsibilities upon women is a common phenomenon in almost all societies. In Turkey, on the other hand, this situation is more frequently observed because of the traditions and the cultural beliefs. Therefore, certain actions should be taken in order that women can go beyond the social boundaries restricting their freedoms and rights. For this purpose, the present study has illustrated the common perception about female gender in Turkish society through different examples of advertisements in order to create awareness on the current position and situation of women in Turkey. In this way, this study has aimed to provide a scientific and anthropological basis for further studies that will be carried out in favor of women's empowerment.

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