Women's Rights and Gender Equality in Turkey: Struggles Over Media Representations and Discourses in the Past and Present

Introduction

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"Women's rights" and "gender equality" are not straightforward or neutral terms. Competing political projects define them in different ways. The articles in this Special Section show how the struggle to define gender equality and women's rights has played out in different moments and in different types of media during the past hundred years in Turkey. The articles cover a range of historical and contemporary issues about women's rights and gender equality. This Special Section contributes to our understanding of institutional structures, actors and relationships, and media texts that shape the landscape of women's rights and gender equality in Turkey. In this introduction, I present the contributions and provide a summary of debates on gender and media in Turkey today.

Keywords: Turkish media, social media activism, women's rights, authoritarianism, religion, feminism, violence against women, LGBT

This Special Section presents diverse theoretical, methodological, and subdisciplinary perspectives to research on gender, communication, and the media in Turkey. By offering these diverse perspectives, we hope to foster a conversation on a series of timely issues that might engage not just readers interested in Turkey but also those who observe similar issues and dynamics elsewhere. The Turkish case helps us underline the controversies and challenges that scholars of gender and media increasingly feel compelled to address. These challenges include the rise of authoritarianism and the accompanying loss of rights and democracy, the rise of right-wing populism and xenophobia, and the increasing wealth gap and other adverse effects of neoliberal economy. These larger political-economic transformations have direct implications for women's rights and gender equality.

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"Women's rights" and "gender equality" are not straightforward or neutral terms. Different political projects define and fill them in differently. Feminist and antifeminist movements have existed side by side in Turkey, struggling to define the meaning of these terms and shape the policies of gender. The media have provided the arena for the struggle for control over discourse. The articles in this Special Section show how the struggle to define gender equality and women's rights has played out in different moments during the past hundred years in Turkey, from the 1920s to 2020 (the proclamation of the republic in 1923 marks the establishment of modern Turkey). The articles span a century, with more focus on the present. The contributions emerged out of two panels in two conferences: the International Communication Association's (ICA) San Diego, California, Conference in 2017 and the European Communication Research and Education Association's (ECREA) conference in Lugano, Switzerland, in 2018. Our point of departure was to explore the impact of structural changes in Turkish politics and media on women's rights.

During the 1990s, sociologists, journalists, and political scientists saw Turkey as a democratic country with some flaws in the system. Advocates of democracy were concerned about the influence of the military on politics, ethnic discrimination suffered by the Kurds in Turkey, and the suppression of the religious right. Despite these shortcomings, Turkey's secular political class had succeeded in establishing the checks and balances of a democratic system and was committed to respect for the principle of separation of powers. When the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) came to power in 2002, the majority in Turkey had a firm trust in the democratic institutions and their capacity to prevent an antidemocratic turn. Yet, the AKP's right-wing populist leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan gradually succeeded in concentrating power in his hands and changed the system from a parliamentary democracy to a restricted version of a presidential system that gave him control over the three branches of the government. This accompanied a sharp decline in freedom of press and growing restrictions on all forms of media (for the latest discussions on Turkish media, see Akser & McCollum, 2019; Dönmez-Colin, 2020; Kaptan & Algan, 2020).

Gender essentialism characterizes the AKP's policies on gender. According to this viewpoint, men and women are different by their nature and belong to separate spheres that call for different abilities and perspectives. According to Erdoğan, equality of men and women means injustice for both; it means pushing men and women into areas that may not emphasize their natural strengths ("Turkey President Erdoğan," 2014). According to this perspective, justice is established not through equality but complementarity (i.e., women as wives and mothers in the family and men as breadwinners". Secular and feminist opposition to the AKP have been working hard to push back on this conservative pressure, yet they face significant challenges in an uneven playing field and in a restricted media environment.

The articles in this Special Section cover a range of historical and contemporary issues about women's rights and gender equality in different types of media in Turkey: women's representation in early modern Turkish newspapers; women's films; the promotion of a neo-liberal gender ideology in Islamized self-help books; the media coverage of violence against women and LGBTQ+ communities; and social media activism against violence and gender stereotypes. The Special Section also covers specific controversies, such as the debate over alimony legislation or the case of a sexist commercial, and explores ways to push back gender conservatism in an authoritarian climate. We are happy to contribute to the growing body of research on women's rights and gender equality in Turkey (Çavdar & Yaşar, 2019; Çınar, 2019; Doğangün, 2019; Keysan, 2019; Yenilmez & Çelik, 2019) from the angle of communication and media studies. This Special Section

contributes to our understanding of contemporary institutional structures, actors and relationships, and media texts that shape the landscape for women's rights and gender equality in Turkey.

In the Special Section's first article, "The Image of Turkish Women as the Antithesis of the Ottoman Past," Esra Ercan Bilgiç investigates the relationship between gender and nationalism by analyzing the images of women in mainstream newspapers between 1934 and 1937, a critical phase of nation building in Turkey. The author explains how the project of Turkish nationalism aimed to create a unified "Turkish" identity out of a diverse population with a complex history. She argues that the representations of "Turkish women" present a "discursive subtheme" strengthening other discursive strategies used in nation building and in justifying modernization, Westernization, and Europeanization processes. Turkish newspapers played a crucial role in manufacturing the consent of the people in adopting a new idea of womanhood. She shows how newspapers defined the meaning of "Turkish women" as an abstract concept without necessarily depicting the real-life stories of women. The representations of "Turkish women" also functioned to counter the orientalist claims that women in Muslim societies are victims of men and tradition. To this end, the newspapers depicted Turkish women in a much-advanced position relative to their European counterparts, but the ideal of Westernized feminine beauty remained the main yardstick in measuring advancement and Westernization.

While Turkish modernizers well deserve the criticisms that Bilgiç underlines, they also deserve credit for structural changes that led to huge improvements in women's lives in Turkey in the 20th century. A primary example is the requirement for compulsory elementary coeducation of boys and girls in 1924. Probably the modernizers' biggest achievement, compulsory elementary coeducation opened the doors of literacy and social mobility for all girls, while socializing young boys to recognize girls as their equals, sitting with them side by side in the same classroom and studying and playing together. The opportunities Turkish modernizers provided for girls in terms of basic schooling benefited even women on the religious right who would later become the harshest critics of the Turkish political system because of the headscarf ban at universities. In other words, Turkish modernization became largely successful in improving women's lives despite its numerous shortcomings. During the 1970s, modernist women themselves actively debated these shortcomings and discussed whether feminism would be necessary for women in Turkey or not. They believed the system only needed small corrections to accomplish full equality between men and women, and they actively worked toward that goal (Abadan Unat, Kandiyoti, & Kıray, 1981). These debates took a new turn following the military coup of September 12, 1980, as feminist activism on the left gained ground to dissociate itself from the modernist and nationalist perspectives on women's emancipation.

In "Cinema Has Split the Girl's Soul Into Pieces," Esin Paça Cengiz focuses on five movies produced during the 1980s, a unique decade in terms of women's movements in Turkey. The military coup of 1980 was a defining moment for feminist activism. As Cengiz emphasizes, the coup leadership did not find feminism "politically significant," which in turn created an opening for the movement. She shows us a rich picture underlining the contributions of women in the production of movies in this particular decade, either by bolstering or undermining the fixed roles that had been scripted for them. These movies are celebrated by scholars as "women's films" for featuring "authentic" and "realistic" female characters beyond binaries and stereotypes. Cengiz points out that this new wave employed stereotypical representations of women while doing it in a way that called attention to cinematic representations as constructs. Instead of bringing forth "realistic" depictions of women, their primary function was to problematize representation itself. She also

highlights the role of dubbing in Turkish cinema as an ideological tool that reinforces the stereotypical roles assigned to female characters. She focuses on two legendary actresses and shows us how they used their screen personas to problematize the categorical representation of women in Turkish cinema. Interestingly, one of these actresses, the legendary Türkan Şoray, had actively contributed to the creation of these categories herself during her early career.

During the 1980s and 1990s, an antifeminist movement accompanied the popularization of feminism. This movement, advocated by the religious right, questioned feminist gains and branded them as antifamily. The Welfare Party, predecessor of the AKP, was on the rise during the 1990s, and the burgeoning Islamist media, with its newspapers, books, magazines, television stations, and movies, created a "counterpublic" (Türkmen, 2012) espousing traditional gender roles yet simultaneously adapting them to the needs of a consumerist, capitalist economy. The integration of the Islamist movements into the capitalist economy, and the central place of gender in this integration, is well documented in the vast body of literature on Islamist fashion and other Islamized consumption patterns: Islamist coffeehouses, beaches, swimsuits, and novels, among others (Çayır, 2007; Göle, 2002; Navaro-Yashin, 2002; Sandıkçı & Ger 2007).

Feyda Sayan-Cengiz investigates the contemporary manifestations of the Islamist popular culture and shows how the gender ideology promoted in Islamic self-help books is in tune with the individualist logic of neoliberalism. In her article "Gender in Turkey's Islamic-Oriented Self-Help Literature," she draws attention to the contradictions of gender ideology promoted by Islamized self-help literature. On the one hand, the authors of these books construe women as active agents responsible for their own and their families' happiness. But on the other hand, women are invited to submit themselves fully to God, family, and marriage because the happiness promised in these books is achievable only through women's unconditional submission. Sayan-Cengiz demonstrates that in Turkey's current moment, political and economic incentives are not the only means through which women are encouraged to live their lives within the boundaries of marriage and family; popular culture also encourages them to perform the role of ideal wife and mother. Sayan-Cengiz argues that, while promising happiness to women, Islamized popular psychology books make gender inequalities unrecognizable to readers and reproduce those very inequalities by mystifying power relations.

As the popularity of Islamic self-help books demonstrates, the vision of gender relations based on marriage and family continues to appeal a considerable segment of women in a neoliberal economic system. In a world organized by the logic of profit, women work very hard for long hours for little wages, and the idea of getting into a hopefully functioning marriage feels like a desirable prospect and a viable option for many women. The feminist ideals of women's economic independence and individuality promise little to poor women because economic independence remains unattainable to them in an exploitative capitalist economy.

While many women look for a haven in marriage and family, they find violence and abuse instead. Two articles in this Special Section focus on violence against women, and a third article focuses on violence faced by the LGBTQ+ communities. These articles analyze news coverage of violence and online media campaigns against violence, exploring the potential of social media activism to push the tide of violence back. As of October 2020, an intense struggle has been going on about the future of the Istanbul Convention in Turkey. Women's rights advocates in Turkey see the convention as a landmark document to end violence against women. The AKP government signed the convention in 2011, at a time when it still felt the need to

respond to the demands of different constituents. Conservative critiques of the convention frame it as a measure to destroy the family and Turkish society by granting rights to LGBTQ+ individuals. The critics of the convention systematically spread hate against LGBTQ+ communities, and they are encouraged by the AKP government's perspective on LGBTQ+ that aligns with theirs.

Eser Selen, in "'The Public Immoralist': Discourses of Queer Subjectification in Contemporary Turkey," argues that the violence against LGBTQ+ communities is based not only on religious but also on secular discourses. By analyzing the statements of journalists and politicians between 2002 and 2018, she shows how moral panics about homosexuality designated LBGTQ+ citizens as "immoral" and how such panics eventually led to the disappearance of LGBTQ+ rights. Selen points to the ills of the nation-building process in Turkey that, as elsewhere, was based on the exclusion of racial, ethnic, religious, or sexual differences as one of the sources of contemporary violence. She also points to the nonlinear progression of the LGBTQ+ struggle for rights in Turkey and evaluates the potential of existing LGBTQ+-friendly discourses, some among religious and nationalist constituents, in the fight against homophobia.

In "Politicization of Rape as a Consequence of Western Modernity and Religious Conservatism," Ece Algan analyzes the media coverage of the murder and attempted rape of Özgecan Aslan (1995–2015), a case of violence that brought the entire country together and prompted social media campaigns that spurred thousands of women to tell their experiences of sexual harassment. Algan argues that both pro- and anti-AKP commentaries instrumentalized Özgecan's murder. On the one hand, the commentaries critical of the government instrumentalized her murder to condemn the AKP and its conservative gender policies. Pro-AKP commentaries, on the other hand, placed the blame on secularism and Western modernity and instrumentalized the case to promote their own "moral tale about the importance of a devout, humble life devoid of consumerism and other temptations of modern life." In other words, partisan politics prevented a meaningful discussion of "structural sexism" and "the multiple modes of patriarchy" that are the root causes of Özgecan Aslan's murder and attempted rape.

Christine L. Ogan and Ozen Bas explore the chances whether the social media activism about violence against women, including the campaign protesting Özgecan Aslan's murder, could translate into collective action for social change. In "Use of Social Media in the Struggle Surrounding Violence Against Turkish Women," they analyze "the shared tweets about six different acts of violence against women in Turkey that occurred between 2015 and 2019." They report that even though both men and women have raised their voices demanding justice for women who are victims of violence, these voices did not translate into collective action for social change. The social media protests remained episodic campaigns rather than creating a trend connecting different cases together and holding the government accountable. Ogan and Bas also point to the lack of organized leadership, which would have given these separate campaigns a direction. The authors cite the Turkish government's heavy surveillance of social media as a significant factor that prevents the establishment of collective action by the protestors through engagement with social media.

Özden Melis Uluğ, Özen Odağ, and Nevin Solak's article, "Voices Against Misogyny in Turkey," complements Ogan and Bas's study from a different angle. Their study indicates that even though challenging misogyny emanating from government policies involves risks whether online or offline, there are still venues to successfully challenge gender stereotypes reproduced by advertising. The authors analyze a social media

campaign initiated by Uluğ, the lead coauthor of the study. Her online campaign succeeded in bringing down a tea commercial identified as sexist by the authors and prompted an apology from the company. Their case shows that consumer activism still functions as a motivator for companies to reconsider their advertising campaigns based on gender stereotypes. The authors challenge the distinction between online and offline collective action and argue that contrary to the criticisms of slacktivism, online action is an equally powerful venue for political change.

In my concluding article, "Framing the Alimony Debates in Turkey," I draw attention to women as active agents contesting and shaping policies. I focus on the political divisions within women as crystallized over the controversy about alimony. Since 2014, profamily groups have pushed for changes in alimony legislation, an issue that mostly affects poor women and men. In the article, I analyze opposing campaigns about the proposed changes in legislation and argue that feminist campaigns might be more successful if they could address the structural factors that push both women and men into poverty in Turkey. I point to the risks of men-blaming language that inadvertently antagonizes poor and disadvantaged men against feminism. I argue that in its marginalized position, the success of feminism depends on its ability to construe poor men as feminist allies, not as antagonists, and help them see their own interest in supporting women's rights.

There are, of course, numerous issues that we were not able to cover in this Special Section. For example, masculinity studies is flourishing in Turkey, and many men actively work to secure a world where men and women are fully equal (Kalafat, 2018). Kurdish women also actively resist the patriarchy and ethnic discrimination. Syrian women and men who came to Turkey as refugees have encountered anti-Arab racism in Turkey and remain a group whose voices are not heard. Pro-AKP women, though, contributed greatly to the success of the party and the loss of democracy through their commitment and hard work. Despite the restrictions we document in this Special Section, women from different political persuasions or religious or ethnic backgrounds have been active in shaping the future of the country and its institutions in line with their own vision. They sometimes challenge, other times reinforce, the patriarchy. They defy all stereotypes about "oriental" women: victimized, submissive, and lacking a voice of their own. It is a humbling experience to study this diverse and complex population and the creative ways that they deal with power and discrimination.

Women are not just being passively acted on by the government, the neoliberal economy, media representations, or popular culture. Women actively make choices and political decisions. They are active participants of the struggle for legitimacy. Women's relationship to power is complex, and power corrupts women as quickly as it corrupts men. I believe our task as scholars of gender and communication is to bring complexity into these debates, analyze the intricacies of power, and underline the diversity within women, men, and nonbinary genders with an emphasis on the common ground that makes us all human and fallible. It is with this understanding that I would like to present this Special Section to you.

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