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Different lives and shared practices: Sociology of women in Turkey[1, 2]

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Abstract
Although there have been various studies on women and feminism since 1960s, gender inequalities are still experienced in the modern era. Paradigmatic changes have been experienced in western societies and communities that have been affected by these western theories and practices. However, women still undergo hard times in social and business lives. This study aims to focus on social practices of women that have different experiences. The study is descriptive and exploratory in nature. A semi-structured interview was administered. The participants (N=17) were involved in the study at a Turkish university. Thus, this study intended to bring theory and practice together at the university. Each of the participants had different socio-economic backgrounds. The study was carried out in four sessions. In each session women received training from different experts. The results of the study show that the participants developed positive attitudes towards training regarding women ranging from art to law and that these educational practices should be sustained in the society.
Keywords: Sociology of women; women studies; gender; feminism; female education

1. Introduction

Development of a critical approach towards structuralism and modernism has produced revolutionary paradigms regarding women because structuralism was based on binary relations that perceived genders only as men and women. Emergence of feminist movements dating back to late 19th century has launched debates about the rights of women in social, political and economic arena (Butler, 1990; Jaggar, 1998; Nicholson, 2010; Weedon, 1987). In the first wave of feminism, women gained significant legal rights to vote, which affected not only western countries but also other developing nations as well (Franceschet, 2004). However, until 1960s women were still deprived of certain rights and equalities in various spheres of life. The second wave of feminism was related to what women meant in social and political arena (Thompson, 2002). Therefore, inequality was emphasized in the second wave. Gender discrimination was largely negotiated and prioritized (Mann & Huffman, 2005). Women were involved in different movements such as civil rights and student rights, all of which were related to the absence of equality. Thus, significant social changes have been made since then. The third wave aimed to avoid explanations that contained essentialist categories regarding women because in the wave of feminism, women were defined only within certain frameworks that reinforced the binary relations that have needed to be exposed to a critical

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process because women were defined in relation to only men (Gillis, Howie & Munford, 2007; Mann & Huffman, 2005).). Micro-politics of women was reinforced in the third wave by putting essentialist categories aside. Another theory that involved women was standpoint theory which aimed to address global issues that included cultural politics of women in different cultures such as African and Middle Eastern ones (Hekman, 1997). With the advent of social media, women aimed to express their problems through social media, which has entailed education of digital literacy of women. Another theory that has emerged in recent decades is that postmodern feminism that involves rejection of essentialist perspectives by supporting varieties of discourses and subjectivity (Kenney, 1995). In addition, the importance of language used and discourses is also emphasized because gender/sex is formed through linguistic meaning as well, which may lead to ambiguous definitions and re-interpretations (Butler, 2004; Flax, 1987; Foucault, 1978; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Schippers (2007) offers multiple and different femininities by trying to discuss gender issues within a pluralistic frame.

Certain discourses created by traditions, patriarchy, capitalism and neoliberalism regulate our everyday life and social practices (Ingraham, 1994). Therefore, this specific order of discourse constituted against women can be deconstructed and criticized because women can feel empowered by going against this specific order of discourse (Abbott, 1992). Women are still predominantly placed in a hierarchy and binary relations even in western countries. Providing only political rights for women are still insufficient because social inequality in the community of women still remains a pivotal problem that needs to be solved. Post-structuralism and critical postmodernism have successfully theorized the problem of women (Ingraham, 1994). However, practically the problem is still before us. Social totalities arising from neoliberalism, an extension of capitalism or state capitalism and even dominance of patriarchy frame and manipulate women in certain directions because women are still actively exploited in the world of patriarchy and neoliberalism because it is still men that exclude women from various social spheres. Therefore, it is vital to constitute feminist sociology that has criticized ideologies constituted by men (Smith, 1974, 1975). In line with this idea, placing women into a larger social framework is important because involving women in different social practices that men often dominate seems to liberate women from fixed ideologies and specific discourses.

In line with the theoretical perspectives mentioned above, the situation of women in Turkey is also worth addressing because women in Turkey gained their voting rights in 1930s (Diner & Toktaş, 2010). However, representation of women in Turkey is still an enigma because of traditional perspectives towards women. Although Turkish Republic established in 1923 gave some rights for women, the effect of Ottoman thinking and the ideals of Turkish Republic on women are still reserved and partially maintained (Diner & Toktaş, 2010). One of the possible reasons for this situation is that religion and traditions might be limiting women in social, political and economic arena (Altuntaş & Karaçay, 2009; Durakbaşa, 2000). Women have been often represented and perceived as domestic and housewives who are obliged to take care of their children and are hindered from being involved in economic arena (Aktaş, 2013). In addition, political discourses also frame women in a traditional way. Problems of literacy, representation in politics and strict binary relations are still largely felt in Turkey. It can be said that women have been paralyzed owing to the effect of traditions and some tenets of religion. This study aims to bring women together at a Turkish university by providing them with training about art, law and their sociological position in their lives.

Research questions

1. What do women think about the training sessions offered to them?
2. What topics do women negotiate regarding their lives in social, political and economic arena?

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2. Methodology

This study is descriptive and exploratory in nature. It is also idiographic since the results of this study cannot be generalizable. Exploratory research is conducted to understand a problem that has not been clearly defined (Neuman, 2004). In addition, exploratory research is seldom based on certain and major theories. Problems unfold in the process of research. Besides, exploratory research seeks to understand how individuals make meaning in a certain context when they encounter certain problems (Hayes, 1942). Thus, it is experience-based and meaning-making. Although the sessions in this study are well-structured, a theory-based approach has not been adopted. The main aim of this exploratory study was to explore what the women participants experienced in their daily lives so that the following stages could be identified so as to deepen the problem of the study.

2.1. Participants

The participants were initially composed of 20 women that had different socio-economic backgrounds. However, in each session only 17 women were able to participate in training because of some unexpected problems that they experienced in their own daily lives. The participants were told that the only concern that brought them together in this study was their gender, being woman.

Table 1
Distributional Statistics of Participants

Jobs	Number of women
Teachers	5
Housewives	4
Self-employed	3
Civil officers	2
Employees	2
Retired teacher	1
Total	17

2.2. Procedure and Sessions

The study was composed of three stages. In the first stage, the researcher made face to face interviews with 40 women from different backgrounds. However, only 20 women volunteered to participate in the study. However, only 17 women were able to join the sessions. In the second stage, the researcher made some interviews with some experts from different disciplines. Only four experts were involved in the study. The first expert was a lawyer majoring in women rights. The second expert was a professor in sociology who specialized in women studies. The third expert was a professor in arts who specialized in the relation between art and women. The fourth expert was a drama leader that helped women expresses their problems through drama. In the third stage, each expert was invited to the university to raise awareness of topics that they specialize in to the participants. After the experts introduced their topics, certain discussions were followed. At the end of each session, the participants were given an interview form to express their ideas about the training given to them. In addition, the researcher made focus group interviews with the participants.

2.3. Findings

The overall findings show that all of the participants developed a positive attitude towards the training sessions because they noted that this kind of training was not given to them before. In addition, the women were never invited to the university before. Thus, they found this invitation meaningful. In addition, they stated that they expressed their experiences better in the course of time as they shared their ideas and feelings with each other. Besides, the participants noted that there were serious problems regarding the sociology of women that were not addressed in their

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social practices. Therefore, they stated that more research and solutions need to be done in this field.

Findings related to the first session (drama)

The first session was allocated to drama that provided spontaneity and warmth in the participants. Drama activity helped the participants to express themselves about different topics. The drama leader used different activities to introduce the participants themselves and mention their experiences in their daily lives. Drama also played an important role as a warm-up activity. This first session covered different topics such as social practices, identity, gender roles, social roles and daily problems of women. Excerpts from some of the participants are as follows:

I think this drama activity was a good start for all of us because we did not know and meet each other before. We were very anxious about what we were going to do and who our partners and friends would be in the next sessions. Therefore, I believe that drama activities contributed to us a lot in that we managed to talk about different topics, even if they were short. (P1)

The activities we did during this session were useful and practical. We got to know each other better in a short time. Instead of passively sitting and waiting, being active was much better. I think this session was informative. In addition, we developed positive feelings about the next sessions. We started to learn to trust each other as women thanks to drama session. (P4)

The views of the participants show that drama could be used as an ice-breaker in enabling the participants to orient themselves to each other. Thus, it can be said that inviting a drama leader for these kinds of studies or events might help women participants express themselves in a more comfortable fashion.

Findings related to the second session (law and women rights)

The second session involved women rights. The expert mentioned the procedures and processes that women should follow when they encounter a problem as a woman in their lives. Each participant talked about their previous problems and explained why they did not choose the legal method for justice to take place. The lawyer also broached her experiences about the legal cases of the women that she defended before. Excerpts from some of the participants are as follows:

I realized that one of my biggest mistakes that I made in my life was that I never consulted a lawyer in my life. I experienced big problems in my life. However, I was never aware of my rights as a woman because we were never taught anything about women rights in the school. (P5)

This session was interesting because we learned a lot about rights. It is very seldom for us to visit a lawyer because of some lack of information. (P7)

The ideas regarding the law session show that women should be trained about their rights because they should be familiar with legal processes that they should follow. Therefore, this session provided them with some clues and ideas about how to behave in case of any problem that they encounter in their social and business life. However, it was also emphasized that this kind of consciousness-raising training should be sustained so that they can feel empowered.

Findings related to the third session (art and women)

The reason why art was chosen as a topic for the women was that it could open a new window in their lives because art is rarely taught in Turkey. The relation between art and women could help them develop different perspectives in terms of the representation of women in paintings. This session presented a brief of history of women in art and paintings. Some famous paintings regarding women were discussed.

This is the first in my life that I saw paintings about women. The professor explained the situation of women very well. I learned a lot from this session. I realized that we and even our children are never taught art or paintings. Art is far away from us. In Turkey women are not exposed to art, paintings and women. (P5)

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I studied art in high school before. I think art is very important. The relationship between women and paintings taught me a lot. I have not studied or learned about women and art before. The professor explained it perfectly. I am very happy that I met this professor. I learned about the disadvantages of women in art through paintings. (P8)

The participants of the study noted that art is rarely taught effectively in Turkey because other subjects are prioritized in the school system and family negotiations. Therefore, this session was meaningful for them. It was also stressed that art evoked different emotions in them because they gained awareness of how women were depicted in the history of art. In addition, they revealed that the content of the session was appropriate for them

Findings related to the fourth session (the industry of weddings in Turkey)

Since this study was mainly sociological in nature, a topic about the sociology of women would be interesting. Since weddings represent the importance of traditions and customs, the role of women in wedding was discussed in the last session because women are often forced to follow some procedures even if they do not wish to be involved in some processes such as weddings. In Turkey, weddings are often represented by framing women. Men are seen as secondary in these events because it is women that are dressed and designed by the society. This session developed a critical perspective towards this understanding.

I think the professor mentioned the topic we all experienced during our weddings. What she said was really true because I did what was expected from me during the wedding. I could not develop a strong will. Things arose and developed without my control. This situation shows that we are still living in the world of dominant men. (P15)

Weddings are pivotal in Turkey. However, as a woman I suffered a lot during my wedding because any event or activity around me was invisible. Although I wanted a simple wedding ceremony, I was drifted into a complex system of the wedding. After this session, I learned that women are shaped by men. This affects women very negatively. (P16)

The findings of this session indicate that most of the participants experienced similar problems during their weddings since their femininity is shaped by masculinity. They note that women have secondary roles in weddings and that it is women that are dressed and given roles about their identities. The participants emphasized that the session addressed a pivotal topic and problem hardly negotiated in social and business life. In addition, the participants said that they gained awareness of the industrialization of weddings that put women at a disadvantage.

3. Discussion

This study shows that the women gained awareness of different topics such as women rights, art and women as well as representation of women in a social event. However, most of the participants noted that these activities should be sustained in the society and that universities and public, particularly women and children, should work more often to raise consciousness and interact with each other. Giuliano (2015) notes that traditional roles of women have affected the role of women in the modern age and that cultural beliefs are more difficult to change in a certain society. Singh (2014) also mentions that women should be empowered in the global society if we are to overcome gender discrimination and other problems that affect women adversely. Cinar & Kose (2018) also note that men-based cultural system and neoliberal practices render women less empowered because disadvantages around women on a historical, political and cultural level dominate their daily lives (Altan-Olcay, 2016). Based on the negative emphasis of these studies, this study can provide a good model to strengthen women because unless education and awareness studies are carried out, it seems unlikely to empower and emancipate them (Altan-Olcay, 2014; Özar, Ş. & Yakut-Cakar, 2013). O'Neill & Guler (2009) emphasize that even if women receive schooling, they face serious problems because of traditional roles that they have and that although the ideals of Turkish Republic have been partially fulfilled, egalitarian roles of women have been undermined because of the dominance of masculinity in the society they live in. In line with this

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idea, Ecevit (1995) also says that women have been unable to develop active roles in shaping economies. Therefore, women are still at a disadvantage in urban economy.

Arat (1998) also notes that women are faced with framed stereotypes in Turkish society because women are often given certain identities and roles that are hard to be deconstructed because women are often placed into certain frames and are expected to behave in particular ways. The findings of this present study also support this idea because the participants complained about taking secondary roles in their social and business life. What is more surprising is that the participants received little or no training about their legal rights. The mixture of nationalism and Islamic religion frame women in certain directions. The third and fourth waves of feminism seem to have been insufficiently negotiated in Turkey. In addition, newly established universities in Turkey rarely invite women to express their problems and ideas, which would help them to take different and transformative roles in the society they are in.

Alemdaroğlu (2015) also states that families and males exert control over women, their bodies and sexuality and that young women strive to lead more individualistic lifestyles, although they do not behave collectively because of social dynamics. Bourdieu (1985) also emphasizes that society is formed based on distributional shares of economy, culture and social resources which may appear unequal in social spheres. In this study as well, since the participants are perceived on a binary gender role, they encounter gender discrimination in the society because they are confronted with inequalities such as schooling, equal salary and social roles. Women from different socio-economic backgrounds may form a common goal around femininity because even if these women receive quality education and have a job, they tend to face hardships in social space and practices because of overall inequalities imposed by the tenets of masculinity (Alemdaroğlu, 2015). Therefore, multiple perspectives and multiple femininities need to be re-interpreted by considering new frameworks and paradigms that have started to be dominant in the new era, when neoliberalism has started to reinforce certain identities in an enigmatic fashion. Ramazanoglu (1989) also note that it is important to take feminist standpoint in order to understand the problems of women in the male-dominant context in Turkey. Baloglu (2003) also addresses the problem of economic disadvantage of women in Turkey because excluding women from economic world poses a serious risk for women. Therefore, on an economic and social level, it is pivotal to involve women into wider social contexts so that women can express themselves more freely and critically. By creating new platforms for women, they can feel empowered.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to bring women together at a Turkish university so that women could gain awareness of certain topics. Each session allowed women to express themselves about any topic they wished. The overall findings of the study show that women had a positive attitude towards these training sessions. Future studies should focus on more sustainable training so that more women can express themselves to academics at universities. Universities should open their doors to women, which entails rigorous field studies. Isolation of universities from women in daily lives poses a serious problem to the society. In addition, centers for women studies should enable women at a disadvantage to take active roles and to develop critical thinking skills so that they can emancipate themselves from disadvantageous conditions that cause them to experience difficulties in social and business life. Universities, civil organizations and other institutions ought to develop social projects that include women to help them take action in every sphere of life.

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