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στην Ελλάδα και σε άλλες Ευρωπαϊκές Χώρες

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Women's Studies in Turkish Academic Life

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If one wants to inquire into the current status of women in higher education in Turkey, a short profile in numbers might be ice-breaking for any uninformed reader. It is quite evident that unequal sexual division within higher education in Turkey still prevails, as it is in some other countries. Enrolled population to higher education is quite low. But, what is specifically striking is the percentage of female academic scholars, which is one of the highest among European countries. The total number of academics is 77 000, and 30 000 of those are women, which makes 38.9% of the academic positions for the academic year 2003-4.¹ In relation to the gender based differences within disciplines, one sees that female students are accumulated mostly in feminised disciplines like linguistics, agriculture and social sciences, but at the same time their percentage of enrollment in natural sciences, health and medicine, and also in technical sciences like engineering and architecture, is relatively high compared to many countries in the world.

Brief history and current situation of Women's Studies in Turkey

Women's Studies (WS) in academic institutions had a long history in Turkey and traces back to the early 1950s. This presence continues today within the framework of the paradigm of traditional or classical social science disciplinary divisions. That is to say, WS could only become one subdivision of one of the classical academic disciplines, with unavoidable subjection to the main-discipline's methodological and epistemological capacity. Since the introduction of WS to academic life, its recognised and specified academic topics were family sociology, women's role in history, female participation to labour market, women's social role in societal development, reproductive health or female psychiatry, and the like. The first appearance of WS in 'scientific circles'

1. For gender based data of Turkey see: www.kssgm.gov.tr

can be characterised as ‘first wave of Women’s Studies’ in Turkish academia. During this first period, undergraduate or graduate courses including women’s issues became visible in the curricula of various universities, especially during the 1960s when significant progress in the field of social sciences was witnessed.

This first paradigmatic context had dominated and allowed women’s issues to be discussed and researched from the perspective of economic development, national integration and modernisation of family and society. These years were very fundamental for WS in that it was the first time that scholars in social sciences became sensitive to gender-based issues while collecting and interpreting social data, conducting research and creating statistical files. Due to this fact, knowledge about the female population’s educational, reproductive, familial and civic aspects was accumulated within some academic circles and respective public institutions, like planning and research offices of governmental bodies.² The most popular topics of discussions of that period in WS circles were women’s transitory experiences from traditional-extended families to the modern nuclear family type, measures for reducing the birth-rates to minimum for healthier child rearing, emancipation of women through economic/financial independence from men/family, opportunities for women to reach education and waged-worked and so on.

By the end of the 1970s, the ongoing situation concerning the status of women had been largely criticised by some cornerstone feminist researchers and they started publishing articles which attracted the attention of some academic circles. Needless to say, this problematisation of women’s issues at the initial stages was not actually constructed from the perspective of elimination of gendered power relations in the society as a whole. The main concern of the period was the consequences of the dominant modernisation paradigm which characteristically was gender blind and which also embodied a non-critical perspective towards masculinity that was generated by the modernist nation-state understanding. With this approach, for example, some aspects of gender inequalities supported by any kinship system or any local cultural identity might be blamed as being patriarchally oppressive. But it was not the same for women’s identities instrumentalised by the gender asymmetrical citizenship politics of state-based modernist politics. Dominating nation building policies

2. For some statistical data related to women see: www.die.gov.tr

aiming to integrate the remote areas and social groups into the 'center' were coinciding with some sort of modernist 'state-feminism' that was opening spaces for a certain type of gender equality policies, but not criticising the masculine aspects of nationalism, authoritarianism and militarism of its own founding political context.

The second stage of WS with a more critical perspective against masculine domination of modern family and state systems emerged as late as the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. In fact, it was the succeeding years after the 1980s when the feminist movement had gained a strong impetus and reached its peak. As a radical political movement, the feminism of the 1980s had proved a very transformative performance in Turkey through new devoted activists from different parts of society, despite the very dark years of military regime of those days. New associations and institutions, such as autonomous groups for political initiatives, women shelters, libraries, women's centers, journals and newspapers, were founded. Former activists of the feminist movement were now founders of new feminist institutions and they were also in the need of creating new epistemological and theoretical paths for knowledge and policy oriented studies, which would be paving the way for new spaces. Efforts of former feminist activists and later WS scholars led to establishment of new research centers, producing new curricula, publications and programmes for the enrollment of students, backed by the advantages of respected voices raised from the successful feminist agenda. This time it was again the WS' footing inside the academia with more critical feminist perspectives and with an interdisciplinary approach suggesting to be a new part of the present administrative and institutional academic structure.

This second wave of WS' inclusion in the 'scientific' processes in academia in terms of feminist theory, methodology and critiques of male dominated power relations, was quite powerful but nevertheless it was able to survive only in the main universities of metropolitan areas, like Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. Besides these new feminist academic circles it was not indeed possible to come across many academic initiatives working on critical feminist studies that went beyond the old-fashioned developmentalist and modernist perspectives. Since the last two decades one can find academic courses and research all over the country, but it can still be said that only four universities have been successfully continuing to conduct special MA programmes on Women's and Gender Studies: two in Ankara, one in Istanbul and one in Izmir. All others

became quite ineffective within a short time, because they had no academic staff for the curriculum and no positive environment. There are still no PhD programmes on Women's Studies, but in contrast to this, a lot of PhD theses have already been produced (some are ongoing) on women's issues in related disciplines; some of these really enlighten our understanding of current gender regimes.

In addition, a number of undergraduate courses at different universities are available. Undergraduate courses, such as media studies, cultural studies, economic and social policies, law and jurisdiction, family issues, divinity studies, history, political studies, literature studies, etc. can be found in the curricula of different departments in social sciences. But it is still not very common to see undergraduate or graduate courses in medical departments, in engineering and architectural studies or in natural sciences. It must also be added that the existing courses are very much targeted to describe the current issues of gender regimes, and so, it is still quite exceptional to find courses like 'Sociology of Gender', 'Feminist Methodology of Social Research', 'Gender of Culture' or 'Gender of History' conducted from a feminist perspective. Unfortunately, such topics are only available in programmes which are being realised by some feminist scholars of few main universities. It is also evident that the number of students in these programmes and courses is increasing, but is not yet in great numbers (namely only in hundreds but not in thousands). It should be also stressed that of the 13 Women's Studies Centers at different universities only a few are really engaged in feminist research.

Shifting paradigms within Women's Studies

It is clear that these two periods of WS match two different epistemologies, which define references that make it possible to speak about women and gender issues. Both have contextualised women's issues as one of the modernisation issues focused on the transitory processes of women and their search for independence from the control of their families, communities or kinship systems towards their strive to be counted as individuals and as citizens of a modern democratic nation. As everybody acknowledges from the recent history, 'modernisation processes' did enable women to become free from the prevailing patriarchy at subnational and local levels of the institutional and social structure. Those women who participated in social life as 'equal citizens'

could no longer stay non-articulated by any power discourse but, by this time, they inevitably became a symbol of 'modern' or a symbol of 'nation'. This paradigm had matched an 'orientalist' point of modernist views based on the east-west dichotomy anticipating to move from backward-traditional ways of life to a modern-civilised one. It was, and still is, one of the effective ways of thinking in Turkish society since the beginning of modernisation period that goes back to the mid-18th century.

The dominant paradigm of the second wave feminism and the present approach to WS is a feminist context which can be considered to be an outcome of recent social movements for equality, freedom and human rights, and the respective civic resistance practices against all kind of authoritarianism. The new feminist movement of the 1990s is the other consequence of the period of social criticism.

As far as women's resistance to male control of power structures is concerned, these two diverging historical heritages of women's rights movements in Turkey have been found to both cooperate from time to time against male dominated practices and to clash. For example, when urgent strategic steps needed to be taken against domestic violence, i.e. important legislative decisions to be passed from the Parliament, most of women's associations succeeded in getting into the same line. Such actions took place several times among women's NGOs in the near past when it deemed necessary. Well-known instances to create a common agenda on gender equality causes have been, e.g., lobbying for gender equality legislation, actions against clear cases of sexual discrimination or against attacks on women's human rights. But from time to time, women's organisations get in conflict with each other or take different approaches when strong criticism becomes necessary on issues of freedom related to identity politics of nationalist, Kurdish or Islamic movements. If the issue of women's rights derives from identity politics that chose to present its case as a gendered one (like wearing head-scarves), it is not so easy to find a common ground for action in solidarity with women's rights causes. But despite differing ideological affiliations a common agenda politics of the feminist movement in Turkey is going to gain more ground and power, especially through points of convergence between academic feminism and feminist movements, as has been the case in the last decade. This new type of feminist politics will be presenting new solutions to the problems of persistent gender inequality issues, and at the same time, to the problems of religious, ethnic or

race based discrimination. I suggest that these experiences of new solutions will be of benefit to the supporters of a new 'living together' democracy who are looking for models for European and Middle Eastern peoples and political groups that are still confronting each other.

Current institutional and administrative location of Women's Studies

WS' current positioning in Turkey's academic life has still a double path to walk: staying as a subdiscipline of classical disciplines vs. becoming a new interdisciplinary area of academic life. By now, these two paths of WS are not troubling each other; instead a close collaboration between them can be observed. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the second path for WS became clear, as new Women's Studies' MA programmes started to be established as interdisciplinary academic divisions and graduate courses in Turkey's prominent universities. These new graduate programmes have been scheduled in academia as a result of ongoing discussions on women's issues and have coincided with other Women's Studies undergraduate and graduate courses that were already being carried under the classical division of social sciences, just like sociology, political science, literary studies, law, communication sciences, etc. In the course of time, this new institutional settlement of Women's Studies, as an interdisciplinary academic area, separate and independent from discipline-divided traditional academic structure, did win recognised but poorly financed ground that is still not well-equipped and stable. In the last ten years, this model did not spread enough to other universities over the country; it has been copied only by a few universities that had already a feminist scholars' circle engaged in WS.

The reason for this weak flourishing of the new WS in universities lies in the traditional structure of academia which welcomes disciplinary divided scholarship but not an interdisciplinary one. Unfortunately, interdisciplinary WS graduate programmes are still living under uncertain conditions, in terms of possessing necessary administrative and institutional authority, receiving adequate academic resources and independent budgets. Since the beginning of WS interdisciplinary graduate programmes, it is mostly feminist scholars who are interested in WS and voluntarily teach the scheduled courses. This means that most of these scholars who are already employed by the different faculties and hold positions introduced according to the classical academic subdivi-

sions, teach these courses as extra work in addition to their normal teaching load. This makes the MA programmes in WS fragile and unstable, with transient staff that comes and goes for only few courses, and so such programmes can stand only by the efforts of devotedly working feminist scholars.

Due to this in-between position of interdisciplinary WS, nobody can claim that an enduring area for interdisciplinary Women's Studies in Turkish academia has already been created. Despite the exhausting efforts of quite a number of founding feminist scholars of WS courses all over the country, I am afraid that these conditions of fragility will remain in the near future. Nevertheless, we have to say that all these causalities are not consequences of the weakness of Women's Studies but derive from current epistemological perceptions and ideological definitions of what is academia today. WS has proved its capacity to create a specific ground for its own academic activities in a symbiosis with traditional academic disciplinarity. It has to be stressed that WS has still a lot of students, with growing numbers in time, and scholars who widen and deepen their understanding in various aspects of WS.

Another weakness of the WS' position within academia is the division between major and minor area of academic expertise and the absence of WS within major areas (as a consequence of epistemologically defined borders driven by disciplinary separation of 'science'). As is well known, this definition of what is major and what is minor is the basis of gaining academic status and moving vertically in academic hierarchy. The recent designation of WS as one of the minor areas of academic expertise, and not as a major one, implies that every academic who wants to hold a position in WS will have to couple her/his qualification in WS with an expertise in one of the major areas of classical scientific disciplines, like sociology, law, political science, etc.

Touching women's experiences and cooperation with feminist organisations

Another issue is that Women's Studies' teaching and research activities, in both disciplinary-divided or interdisciplinary areas, are designed through interaction with women's experiences that directly or indirectly lead to transformation in women's lives. This is very crucial indeed since it is closely connected to the existence of feminist studies in academia and to the effort to build an academic area of knowledge on women's invisible or ignored ex-

periences. But we have to admit that this is not always the case in Women's Studies in Turkey. On the contrary, one can observe academic power structures which always have a few positions to offer to a few WS scholars that are well-integrated in the elite academic structures with gender-blind perspectives and with no sensitivity to the experiences of lower class, grassroots or women who are excluded from society and therefore try to transform their lives for empowerment. Despite this fact, a large number of feminist scholars conduct research studies to make the unequally institutionalised structures and power relations that lead to women's exclusion visible. I believe that the mission of feminist studies in academia is mainly to make women's experiences recognised and represented as the subject of 'scientific' knowledge. At present, many creative questions are already asked: women's ways of resisting male domination, informal networks of women's circles, women's invisible interests in collaborating with male power structure, rewriting Turkey's history from a gendered perspective, critiques of nationalism and militarism from a gender perspective and so on.

Recent efforts of feminist scholars concentrate on understanding the conditions that cause gender inequalities by means of the new feminist research methodologies and theories. In this manner, the efforts put forth in the field of WS are mainly targeted to make women's social and political experiences more visible and understandable. Such studies open new ways of understanding some societal aspects of masculine hegemony which remained disclosed in the dark side of social life up to the present. In this line, some WS scholars and Women's Studies Centers (WSC) at a few universities, just like Ankara University's WSC, have been closely following the feminist activities of women's associations and working in close cooperation with them. Projects for training and empowerment of women are designed in collaboration with women's associations and feminist scholars of academic circles and centers. Through such projects—especially with the participation of feminist activists, feminist scholars and women, who are the victims of domestic violence, sexual discrimination and repression—a new model for acting together is becoming more clear, and women of excluded groups start to have more insight into their rights. Most of these projects are focused on a few main problems, the most prominent being: preventing sexual violence, promoting positive conditions for increasing women's political participation and supporting financial capabilities of women's productive activities.

Most of WS circles are doing some cooperative work, like consulting for need assessments and project design, participating in activities and also evaluating the results, with these projects. What is worth mentioning here is the efforts of academic feminism to collect data from these performances that try to transform the unequal conditions between the sexes. As of recently, one can observe an increasing number of studies that focus on women's experiences with the aim to understand the internal mechanisms of these transformative processes and to register the aspects of occurrences that will be useful when analytic studies are needed. It should also be added that one of the progressive developments in the field has been the increasing number of publications, including compilation of writings of feminist activists that deal with evaluations of women's own perspectives on the ongoing transformation of conditions on sexual inequalities.³

'Gender blind' academic perspectives in social science?

From the perspective outlined above, one can think that the situation and outcomes of WS in Turkey are close to non-academic activities of women's associations but still quite distant from mainstream academia. We have to admit that WS needs a more visible and recognised academic place which could be made possible by more path breaking and pioneering research leading to innovative methodologies and critical knowledge. It is clear that WS has already won a small but recognised niche in academia. This place let feminist academics work within specific and autonomous academic circles. More than that, every prestigious academic journal is now used to include feminist articles, even though at the back pages. Furthermore, every prestigious academic conference or congress includes a special session on Women's Studies, but not in the main sessions or as keynote themes. All these have of course positive and negative aspects in relation to Women's Studies. Indeed, there is a small and autonomous space for WS, but, at the same time, this space is segregated, separated and, as a consequence, marginalised. What is worth worrying about is that, despite Women's Studies' visible existence as an academic area main scholars are still unaware of its content or do not care

3. For more information about women's associations, WS programmes and projects see: www.ucansupurge.org, www.kader.org.tr, www.kasuum.ankara.edu.tr, www.wgs.metu.edu.tr

much about it. It is considered as a new sub-discipline and has nothing in common with other main and prestigious areas of scientific knowledge, like social theory, history and politics. So, it is not recognised that Women's Studies is not only for restricted topics of women's life, but represents an insight to all other social/humanitarian fields of knowledge. Prominent social scientists have still a stand of reluctance to connect social sciences with Women's and Gender Studies. What can be observed at present is that they have no critiques about Women's Studies. And it would be right to say that, on one hand, they have no interest and knowledge about the field, but also no resistance to it, on the other. So paradoxically enough, this fact is both an advantage and a disadvantage for WS, representing a solid threat to Women and Gender Studies in academia, since it may lead to the marginalisation of the field by forcing it to stay as a sub-discipline of social sciences. In fact, the expectation and the suggestion of WS scholars is to become an interdisciplinary part of academic interests serving all other areas of academic discussions in terms of interconnectedness and cooperation for more in-depth inclusion of the realities of the 'social'. What remains a very significant point for the near future is to find a proper strategy to eliminate this gender blindness of the main academic circles and make them more receptive to interactive effects of WS's academic and political activities. We should suggest that this needs a kind of epistemological transformation from the dominating 'masculine gaze' which represents itself as science standing as a neutral, natural, objective and disciplinarily divided in professional expertise, to a new stage of sensitivity that will be conducive to create knowledge on gendered aspects of people's daily lives.