

ATTITUDES OF FEMALE PRISONERS TOWARDS GENDER BASED DISCRIMINATION and FAMILY HONOR

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ABSTRACT

Based on a field research, this paper examines female prisoners' attitudes towards gender discrimination and the family honor. This research was conducted with female prisoners hold at Ankara Sincan Women's Closed Prison. During the field study, a survey was implemented with 134 female prisoners out of total 287 prisoners. It was explored from this study that female offenders were in tendency to reproduce gendered division of labor at home by assigning traditional stereotypic domestic female roles to women and male roles to men, while they were more egalitarian towards gender equality in the labor market by assigning different occupations to both men and women. On the other side, it was observed during the field study that while female prisoners tend to describe the concept of honor through female sexuality by attributing a great value to it, they mostly related man's honor with appropriately fulfillment of his male roles.

Keywords: Female prisoners, gender roles, gender discrimination, family honor, female sexuality

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The main purpose of this study is to explore the gender discrimination in the eyes of female prisoners, on the basis of the feminist argument asserting that gender discrimination is socially constructed and have been reproduced at home and in the labor market in patriarchal societies. In analyzing gender discrimination, understanding female prisoners' perspectives on gender related issues is important as they somehow *violated* their traditional gender roles by committing a crime, different from women outside the prison. Another aim of this study is to explore female prisoners' perspectives on the family honor, which is also socially constructed and closely related to female sexuality in honor-based societies, such as Turkey. Therefore, exploring female prisoners' attitudes towards the concept of honor is also crucial in analyzing socially constructed ideology of family honor. To understand female prisoners' perspectives on gender discrimination and family honor, a field study was conducted in Ankara Sincan Women's Closed Prison by distributing a questionnaire to 134 female prisoners.

I. LITERATURE REVIEW

To analyze the gender based discrimination, it would be better to understand gender related issues. According to the feminist understanding, **gender** is important as it expresses a *hierarchy*, in which men usually dominate women and *patriarchy* refers to this hierarchical system, which oppresses and exploits women and legitimizes male domination.¹ While *sex* refers to the biological characteristics distinguishing female and male bodies, *gender* refers to socially constructed categories of masculine and feminine and the socially imposed behaviors, which are assigned to these categories in a context of unequal power relationships.² The distinction between **sex and gender** leads sociological theory to question the meaning of *natural* as gender relations are usually regarded as natural rather than as socially constructed and gender roles are tended to be perceived as derived from inherent biological properties.³ **Gender and sexuality** are closely related to sociology as both are socially constructed. The *traditional naturalist understanding* of masculinity and femininity considers that natural differences are arising from biological reproduction, thus, women are seen as 'naturally' suited to childrearing and domesticity. Within many cultures, to this traditional understanding, there is a *hierarchy of*

gender, in which men are regarded as superior to women, especially in the sexual realm. Thus, inequalities between women and men are regarded as natural and inevitable.⁴

Sexuality and morality have highly different meanings for femininity and masculinity. For women, their respectability has always been closely related to their sexuality. Being 'appropriate' women means being respectable and in order to be regarded as respectable, women have to be sexually innocent, shy or modest. Therefore, sexual morality is central to women's standing. Asexuality and chastity are key virtues, which indicate respectable femininity, while sexual activity and having multiple sexual partners are immorality, which make women unrespectable. On the other hand, sexual morality is not central to men's standing. Men can have multiple sexual partners and still have a high moral and social standing, which may make them even more masculine.⁵

Gender roles are ascribed roles, which have been informally learnt by individuals throughout their lives and they shape and restrict women and men's behaviors, experiences, responsibilities, fields of interest, and choices. Even though individuals seem to be free to respect or reject traditional gender roles, gender roles are a powerful means in affecting many aspects of society. Therefore, men as well as women inevitably internalize stereotypic gender roles and women and men reproduce gender roles by conforming to society's expectations.⁶

Gender division of labor refers to the public-private division, where men and women share paid and unpaid work in order to maintain the household. Paid work refers to work outside the home, in exchange for a wage, while unpaid work includes domestic works and care and maintenance of other family members.⁷ According to the gendered division of labor, husbands are engaged in paid employment to support their families financially, while wives are engaged in the unpaid labor of childcare and other domestic works.⁸ In the public-private division, women are expected to meet family members' everyday needs such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children; on the other hand, men are expected to carry out outdoor tasks such as gardening, taking care of cars, and home repairs.⁹

4 M. Rahman and S. Jackson. *Gender and Sexuality, Sociological Approaches* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010), 4.

5 K. Milestone and Anneke Meyer. *Gender and Popular Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012), 107-108.

6 J. L. Johnson and R. Repta. *Designing and Conducting Gender, Sex, and Health Research*, Chapter 2. "Sex and Gender, Beyond the Binaries" (London: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2012), 23.

7 C. Lyonette. "The Sexual Division of Labor" in M. Evans and C. H. Williams, *Gender, The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 198.

8 Milestone and Meyer, op. cit., 99-100.

9 P. Eckert and S. McConnel-Ginet. *Language and Gender*, Second Edition (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 34-36.

1 J. Marchbank and G. Letherbay. *Introduction to Gender: Social Science Perspectives* (England, Pearson Education Limited, 2007), 8-10.

2 L. L. Lindsey. *Gender Roles: A Sociological Perspective* (Prentice Hall: Pearson, 2011), 4.

3 H. M. Lips. *Sex and Gender: An Introduction*, 5th Edition (NY: McGraw Hill Companies, 2005), 6.

In 1970s, feminism has fought against the assumption that the man should be the chief bread winner and the woman should be the homemaker, which significantly disadvantaged women by making them financially dependent on their husbands and by confining them to domestic duties. Therefore, women's participation in the labor market with better jobs has been at the heart of the feminist struggle.¹⁰ However, even if women have started to move into the paid labor in large numbers and to share breadwinner role with their husbands, they continue to undertake most of the domestic roles.¹¹ Furthermore, although most women have increasingly been participating in the labor market, many of their occupations are *extensions* of their domestic roles. Traditional women's jobs are in service sector often involve nurturing, service, and supportive roles such as, teachers, nurses, secretaries, hostesses,¹² thus many occupations remain heavily dominated by one gender or another.¹³

In summary, despite a significant increase in opportunities for women, the gendered division of labor in the *household* in many societies still relies heavily on the allocation of women to the domestic realm and men to the public realm and in the *labor market* on the allocation of women in low-paid and low status 'women's jobs' and men in higher positions within 'men's jobs'.¹⁴ Therefore, the situation of women in the labor market has not improved as much as feminists had hoped for.¹⁵

In honor-based societies, society's view of the concept of honor is closely related to women's sexuality and thus women's acts, especially female chastity, are representing the **family honor**. Female chastity does not represent only female virginity but even flirting may destroy the family honor.¹⁶ In many underdeveloped countries, arranged marriages place a high value on a young girl's virginity until her marriage. Until a girl's control passes from her father to her husband, her sexual 'purity' is disciplined by her family members and her behaviors may be narrowly restricted.¹⁷

In this part, how gender and sexuality and gender division of labor are socially constructed

and reproduced in patriarchal societies is summarized. Besides, how family honor is closely related to female sexuality in honor-based societies is given in summary. In analyzing gender based discrimination and family honor from the female prisoners' perspectives, all above arguments would give us an idea about how gender discrimination and family honor are legitimized in many traditional patriarchal societies.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study is primarily related to two sociological concerns, the gender discrimination and the family honor. In analyzing these social concerns, female prisoners' perspectives to these issues were tried to be explored through the field study. During the field study, a questionnaire was distributed to 134 female prisoners out of total 287 prisoners at Ankara Sincan Prison and collected data was analyzed through SPSS. This research was designed as a *descriptive* study but not a comparative one, thus, this study was conducted within the framework of a *case study* and does not intend to generalize collected data to all female prisoners in Turkey.

III. STUDY FINDINGS

During the questionnaire study, female prisoners' perceptions about traditional **gender roles at home** were tried to be understood by posing them traditional domestic roles at home. While 36.4 % of female prisoners think that only men should be the *breadwinner*, more than half of the respondents (58.3 %) believe that both men and women should be responsible for supporting the family financially. These findings indicate that three out of ten female prisoners still think that the chief breadwinner of the household should only be the man but on the other hand, more than half of respondents exhibit an egalitarian attitude in terms of gender distribution in earning money outside for supporting the household. Besides, 74.4 % think that only men should undertake *repairing* works at home, while 23.3 % consider that both men and women should be responsible for repairing issues. As also seen outside the prison, most of female prisoners think that repairing is the men's job, not women's. Furthermore, while 26.4 % think that both men and women should *cook* at home, 73.6 % said that only women should be responsible for cooking. Furthermore, respectively 73.8 % and 75.2 % of female offenders

10 Milestone and Meyer, op. cit., 99-100.

11 Lips, op. cit., 444-445.

12 Eckert and McConnel-Ginet, op. cit., 34-36.

13 M. Holmes. *What is Gender? Sociological Approaches* (London: SAGE Publications, 2007), 8.

14 C. West and D. H. Zimmerman. *Doing Gender, Gender and Society*, vol. 1, no. 2 (New York: SAGE Publications, 1987), 143.

15 Milestone and Meyer, op. cit., 100.

16 L. A. Fontes and K. A. McCloskey. "Cultural Issues in Violence Against Women" in C. M. Renzetti and J. L. Edleson and R. K. Bergen (Eds.) *Sourcebook on Violence Against Women*, second ed. (New York: SAGE Publications, 2011), 156.

17 Ibid, 156.

think that only women should be responsible for ironing and cleaning. In respect of childcare, while 51.5 % believe that only women should undertake childcare, 47.7 % think both men and women should be responsible for childcare at home. All results above indicate that female prisoners, likewise many people outside the prison, show tendency to *reproduce traditional gendered division of labor at home*.

To understand female prisoners' perceptions about **gender segregation at work**, various occupations were posed them during the questionnaire study. Female prisoners exhibited highly egalitarian attitudes towards gender distribution in different occupations such as doctor, teacher, school manager, gynecologist, lawyer, police, hairdresser, cook, and tailor. The proportion of female prisoners who think that these jobs are *both* male and female jobs ranges between 72 % and 91.6 %. The striking point here is, while 73.6 % respondents think that *cooking* should be women's job *at home*, when this job is a *paid labor*, 78.9 % of women said that both women and men can be a *cook* in the *labor market*. Likewise cooking, while most of respondents (73.8 %) think that *cleaning* should be undertaken only by women *at home*, when cleaning is a *paid labor*, 61.8 % of respondents think that cleaning may be both men's and women's job. On the other hand, for *dustman* and *soldier*, respectively 68.9 % and 61.1 % of respondents think that these jobs should only be the men's jobs. Concerning the *secretary* occupation, compared to other occupations, the proportion of prisoners thinking that it is a unisex job decreased. While 55.8 % consider that both men and women might be a secretary, 41.9 % think it should be only women's job but nevertheless, more than half of female prisoners are egalitarian about this occupation. From the general table, it can be concluded that compared to female prisoners' attitudes towards gendered division of labor at home; their approach to gender segregation in the labor market sounds more promising, as they tend to be more egalitarian about gender distribution in the labor force.

As mentioned in the previous section, although many women have increasingly been participating in the labor market, many of their occupations are extensions of their domestic roles such as childcare, eldercare, patient care, nursing, and secretary. In Sincan Women's Closed Prison, employers outside the prison can employ female prisoners for a daily wage, if female prisoners want to be employed during their imprisonment and if they are qualified for that job. In order to see whether there is gender segregation at the prison, female and male prisoners' occupations were questioned during the field study. According to the expressions of social experts employed at women's prison, extension of women's domestic roles can also be seen at Sincan prison, in which female prisoners have been making Turkish ravioli, sewing

sacks and duvet cover in exchange for a daily wage, while male prisoners are dealing with *male jobs* such as, woodworking, making stringed instrument, leather, and silver processing. This picture shows us that although female prisoners seem to be egalitarian towards gender distribution in the labor market, *employers* outside the prison have still been imposing female prisoners to do *female jobs*.

As also mentioned in the previous part, gender discrimination is closely related to female sexuality and in honor-based societies; the concept of honor and **the family honor** are closely linked to female sexuality. To see what types of meanings female prisoners attributed to the concept of 'honor' they were asked the meaning of honor. From the findings, it seems that 31.4 % of respondents put a great value on the concept of honor by mentioning that 'it is much more important than everything, I die for my honor, it means everything, and it is breath of life', while 31.3 % related honor to the individual characteristics such as, being honest, proud, and honorable. However, 10.2 %, on the other side, described honor through chastity and 9.3 % linked honor to wife's loyalty to her husband.

From the general picture, it is clearly seen that female prisoners tend to describe the concept of honor through *female sexuality* by attributing a great value to it. Female prisoners' perception of honor is closely related to socio-cultural values arising from honor codes within our traditional patriarchal society. To support the findings above and to see how female prisoners overvalue the concept of honor, a parallel statement was directed to the female prisoners: 'a person should live for her/his honor'. The result is not surprising as nearly 80 % of respondents, who mostly defined honor through female sexuality, agreed with this statement. This means that most of female prisoners put a great value on their honor, thus on their chastity. Besides, female prisoners were asked the meaning of honorable woman. A large part of respondents (44.2 %) defined *honorable woman* as woman faithful to her husband and 9.7 % described honorable woman as woman, who is sitting at home, dressing appropriately, and covering her hair, while 34.5 % defined honorable woman through individual characteristics such as, being honest, hardworking, and well-mannered. This finding shows that female prisoners mostly evaluate a woman's honor according to her sexual conducts and the ideology of restricting female sexuality has been reproduced by female prisoners. On the other side, regarding the definition of *honorable man*, 40.5 % of respondents believe that man, who saves his family and who brings home the bread, is honorable, while according to 33.3 %, man's honor depends on his loyalty to his wife. From the general picture, it is clearly understood that

while female prisoners are in tendency to define woman's honor through her *sexual behaviors*, a great deal of respondents tend to relate man's honor with appropriately *fulfillment of his male roles*, which are being head of household and breadwinner. These findings indicate that men's social status or their respectability is not primarily determined by their sexual conducts due to socially constructed relation between *gender* and *female sexuality* and *female sexuality* and *morality*, as argued in the previous section.

CONCLUSION

In order to assess the social inequalities between men and women, gender relations are required to be identified, and for this, it is necessary to look at the attribution of roles, responsibilities, and values attached to women and men. Based on this idea, this study is an attempt to understand gender-based discrimination and family honor in the eyes of female prisoners, who already 'violated' their gender roles by committing a crime. In analyzing female prisoners' attitudes, this study is grounded on the feminist perspective arguing that gender discrimination rooted in gender inequality is socially constructed and has been reproduced in traditional patriarchal societies.

With regard to female prisoners' attitudes towards gender discrimination *at home*, it is explored from the study findings that female prisoners' perspectives on traditional gender roles at home are not much different from outside the prison, considering the traditional patriarchal structure of our society. Female prisoners mostly exhibited typically *conservative* attitudes towards traditional female roles *at home*. However, on the other side, while female prisoners are reproducing gendered division of labor at home, they exhibited an *egalitarian* attitude towards gender distribution *at work*.

Regarding the female prisoners' perspectives on the family honor, it is clearly seen from the findings that an important part of female prisoners tend to overvalue the concept of honor by linking the honor to female sexuality especially to female chastity. Female prisoners' approach to the family honor can also be explored through their description of honorable woman and honorable man. While they described honorable woman mostly through woman's sexual conducts, they tended to link man's honor to appropriately *fulfillment of his male roles*. This stereotypical approach to honor is not much different from the widespread traditional approach towards the family honor and female sexuality in our honor-based patriarchal society.

It can be concluded from this study that socially constructed gender based discrimination at home and close relation between the family honor and female sexuality have still been reproduced even by female offenders, who already violated their traditional gender roles by committing a crime and who are the disadvantaged gender group within the patriarchal society. The main reason for female offenders' traditional and conservative approach to gender discrimination at home and the concept of honor might be their socialization with traditional gender roles, thus internalization of their secondary position within the patriarchal society.

Even if the gender relations have been changing as a result of economic, political or environmental conditions, traditional gender roles are reflected and reproduced within both private and public spheres thus; attempts to change gender relations to improve gender equality are often perceived as threats to traditions and culture. Therefore, achieving gender equality may be more difficult than thought as traditional gender relations, in which women's status is inferior to men's, are often presented as a part of cultural identity. Consequently, in order to promote gender equality in both private and public spheres positive steps, such as new legal arrangements should be taken by considering the cultural structure of the society.

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