

## A discourse analysis of parents' attitudes towards their children's gender in Turkey

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### Abstract

Children's gender is a very sensitive issue intertwined with a myriad of psychophysiological and sociopolitical parameters. It plays an important role in determining women's status in the household and men's status within the male community at large. In some societies, there is a stigma attached to female children. Giving birth to a baby girl or not having a son can lead to the feelings of shame, embarrassment, disillusionment and ignominy on the side of the parents, specially for the mothers who have to see having sons as the signs of prestige, popularity and glory. Strangely enough, the male-dominated society treats sonless fathers as impotent! This study has been an attempt to shed some light on the interplay between love, gender, discourse, emotions and identity. The whole process of the interrelation between love, gender and behavioural patterns is surrounded by prejudice, hegemonic patriarchal discourse and cultural beliefs and value systems.

**Keywords:** Motherhood, gender, fatherhood, love, discourse, patriarchal attitude, identity, preference for male children.

## 1. Introduction

Different factors affect the status of male and female parents at home. Social factors such as education, occupation and ethnicity can influence the image of parents. A very effective parameter in formation and perception of parents' image by the people is the gender of their children. This has led to some gender inequality and preferences at homes with repercussions and manifestations in parents' attitudes and discourse on and towards their male and female children. It may be pointed out, however, that the situation is entirely different in different countries based upon their technological educational and scientific advancements. Male dominated societies have been fraught with patriarchal norms and values rendering female children as a sign of misery, disgrace and weakness. The stigma attached to having female children has affected parents' behaviour towards girls and boys.

As stated by Moore (1988), gender relations are central to any sustained analysis of class and historical relations.<sup>a</sup> The division of labour based on gender has been universal since the time of hunters and gatherers. This division by creating its own hierarchies led to other inequalities in other areas of life. Inequality among children based on their gender is also a reflection of the secondary status of women in most cultures.

The development of feminine and masculine personalities and the hierarchy among genders were claimed to be affected by the universal role of women's role of mothering.<sup>b</sup> That is, women's physical features in reproductive process are seen as the primary reason of this gender division and inequalities arising from that.

In addition to that, kinship relations, rituals and production activities based on land and agriculture created borders difficult to cross for all individuals in religious, small scale societies. The marriage of science and industry created a shift in production relations, which allowed individuals to achieve status free from previous traditional status descriptions.<sup>c</sup>

Although women found an opportunity to benefit from the facilities and newly emerged production modes in complex societies and participated in labour force, improvements in education and labour of women did not have a direct influence on reducing inequalities among genders. According to Gupta, these changes led by industry proved no evidence in the equality of household allocation of food and health care, which could also be observed in the female children's status in the household.<sup>d</sup>

Rogers (1962) in tandem with this idea saw the non-farm employment as the main source of the son preference in China and India.<sup>e</sup> Through this process, new generations obtained new forms and ways of livelihood that freed people from social and familial constraints. When industrialisation sped up, a large number of people migrated to the urban areas where they created a new way of thinking.

The intensity and severity of this gender bias have proved to be different in different countries like India, South Korea, China, Bangladesh, Arabian countries, North African countries and Sri-Lanka, as supported by various studies. Son preference over daughters is prevalent in many Asian countries like China, India and South Korea.<sup>f</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> Moore, H. L. (1988). *Feminist anthropology: what difference does it make?* (p. 193). London, UK: John Wiley and Sons Ltd.

<sup>b</sup> Chodorow, N. (1974). Family structure and feminine personality. In M. Z. Rosaldo (Ed.), *Woman, culture and society* (pp. 43–66). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

<sup>c</sup> McClelland, D. C. (1961). *The achieving society* (p. 144). Princeton, NJ: D. Van Nostran.

<sup>d</sup> Gupta, M. D. (1987). Selective discrimination against female children in rural Punjab, India. *Population and Development Review*, 13(1), 77–100.

<sup>e</sup> Rogers, E. M. (1962). *Diffusion of innovation* (p. 117). New York, NY: Free Press.

<sup>f</sup> Edlund, L. (1999). Son preference, sex ratios, and marriage patterns. *Journal of Political Economy*, 1275–1305.

Higher mortality rate of female children is another dimension of the gender inequality among children and is evidenced by the study conducted in Bangladesh.<sup>g</sup> In this study, females showed higher life expectancy than males except in neonatal period of 1–29 days in Bangladesh. The findings of Ruzicka and Chowdhury are developed with that study, as well. The ratio of prenatal mortality was higher among male children whereas postnatal mortality rate of female children aged between 1 and 4 exceeds males. In addition, in the terms of crisis like famine or war, an increase in child mortality was higher among female children of the same age group.

By the same token, the inequality reflected in the parents' habits of nourishing their children was analysed with an empirical field work of Sen and Sengupta (1983). Children under age 5 in two villages named Sahjapur and Kuchi were examined and it was found out that parents in Kuchi having relatively more overall nutritional record had a higher tendency to favour male children during nourishment. The researchers also stated that Kuchi had land and economic reforms most of which was benefitted by male children.<sup>h</sup>

Some other scholars pointed out the difference between the actual intensity of son preference felt by individuals and their manifestation in statistics.<sup>i</sup> Another study focuses on this distinction and states that the status about son preference decline might be deceptive as it is a lot easier to manipulate sex before the child of birth via new sex technologies.<sup>j</sup>

## 2. The Turkish context

Following the various dimensions of son preference in various countries, it would be useful to examine the reflections of this phenomenon in Turkey where it seems difficult to analyse the current picture apart from certain historical shifts which could be divided into certain periods. Thus, it becomes a necessity for a meaningful analysis of the findings.

Turkish cultural background in Central Asia is a significant period where Turkic peoples used to have Shamanist belief according to which women and men were considered to be different but complementary of each other. Thus, giving birth to baby girls was not considered as something for parents to be sad about.<sup>k</sup> The names of women rulers in the ancient tablets of Turks evidence the high status of women in social life and their participation in ruling the country those days. According to these epitaphs, ambassadors of other counties could be accepted for diplomatic meetings, only on condition that women rulers existed.<sup>l</sup>

During the Great Medieval Migration, most Turkic tribes migrated to Central Anatolia where they met their Arabian neighbours and Islamic belief in the 10th century. The settlement in Anatolia gave rise to establishment of their state and converting into Islam. This could be viewed as shift as there was a fundamental change in the perspective towards the status of women in social and public life. Women were ignored for a long time in the history of the empire. To illustrate, census data only included male residents. The educational regulations in Ottoman State permitted girls to attend only primary schools, which was only benefitted by some part of the female population until 1869.<sup>m</sup> Women were allowed to attend primary and secondary schools in 1858. Even the law of compulsory education for all children which could be an effort to improve the level of women had some age

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<sup>g</sup> D'Souza, S. & Chen, L. (1980). Sex differentials in mortality. *Population and Development Review*, 257–270.

<sup>h</sup> Sen, A. & Sengupta, S. (1983). Malnutrition of rural children and the sex bias. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18, 855–857.

<sup>i</sup> Gupta, M. D. & Mari Bhat, P. N. (1997). Fertility decline and increased manifestation of sex bias in India. *Population Studies*, 51(3), 307–315.

<sup>j</sup> Chung W. & Gupta, M. D. (2007). The decline of son preference in South Korea: the roles of development and public policy. *Population Council*, 759.

<sup>k</sup> Tezer, S. (1972). *Ataturk'un Hatira Defteri*. Ankara, Turkey: T.T.K. Basımevi.

<sup>l</sup> Dogramaci, E. (1989). *Turkiye'de Kadinin Dunu ve Bugunu* (pp. 1–2). Ankara, Turkey: Turkiye Is Bankasi Yayinlari.

<sup>m</sup> Dogramaci, 102.

requirements. The Basic Constitution in 1876 contained some items for egalitarian educational opportunities for women.<sup>n</sup> Some Ottoman scholars like Namik Kemal, Munif and Saffet Pashas underlined the role of women and criticised the lack of it in social development. The lack of industrial period in Ottoman history was pointed out as the primary reason for the sex ratios at educational institutions and in public life.<sup>o</sup> In 1910s, there was an increase in efforts to improve women's contribution in the economic life and women's level of education.<sup>p</sup>

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire as one of the consequences of First World War and the foundation of the Turkish Republic could be listed as a golden period in the history of women's status in Turkey. The reforms brought by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in those days for women's participation in all areas of life promoted Turkish women nationally and internationally.<sup>q</sup> By adopting daughters and sending them to reputable schools, he tried to put himself as a role model. Another reason for women's increasing participation in labour force during those years was due to lack of male population. In the 1927 census, productive male population was still 18% less than females of the same age.<sup>r</sup> In 1935, 18 members of parliament were women.<sup>s</sup> However, as Seven and Engin (2007) borrowing from Akyuz<sup>t</sup> stated that these sorts of regulations and encouragement did not last long after him.<sup>u</sup>

As an extension of the worldwide rising liberalist movements of women in 1980s, women's struggle in Turkey mostly aimed at patriarchal values. These movements are taken as different from the previous ones in which women aimed at improving their conditions in labour, educational and political areas in life. Despite the rising awareness, researches show that it is still difficult for females in Turkey to overcome certain cultural challenges.

Kongar (1997) takes honour killings or murdering women as a clear expression of discrimination against women<sup>v</sup> as the patriarchal cultural understanding against women leads to worse familial tragedies and more cruel scenarios in less developed parts of Turkey. When daughters leave home to marry men they choose or get pregnant, or raped by elder members of the family or kidnapped, they are executed by the same elders in the family and killed by their brothers are some tragic consequences. According to the Human Rights Presidency Report in 2007, honour killings are mostly executed in metropolitan cities of Turkey.<sup>w</sup> Thus, this study has been an endeavour to illuminate the interface between cultural practices and parents' love towards their children regarding gender and identity in the Turkish context.

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<sup>n</sup> Kurnaz, C. (1999). *Türkiye-Orta Asya Edebi İlişkileri* (pp. 99–100). Ankara, Turkey: Akcag Yayınları.

<sup>o</sup> Kurnaz, S. (1991). *Cumhuriyet Öncesinde Türk Kadını, 1839–1923*. No. 4. Ankara, Turkey: TC Başbakanlık Aile Araştırma Kurumu Başkanlığı.

<sup>p</sup> Goksel, B. (1998). *Çağlar Boyunca Türk Kadını ve Atatürk*. Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Dergisi.

<sup>q</sup> Kurnaz, S. *Cumhuriyet Öncesinde Türk Kadını, 1839–1923*.

<sup>r</sup> Yenil, O. (2010). *Cumhuriyet'in İktisat Tarihi* (pp. 7–8). İstanbul, Turkey: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları.

<sup>s</sup> 2011. *Millîyetkili Genel Seçimleri 1923–2011* (p. 11). Ankara, Turkey: Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu Raporu.

<sup>t</sup> Akyuz, Y. (2000). *Türk Eğitim Tarihi* (p. 2931). Ankara, Turkey: Milli Eğitim Yayınları.

<sup>u</sup> Seven, M. A. & Engin, A. O. (2007). *Türkiyede Kadının Eğitimi Alanındaki Esitsizlikler* (p. 187). Erzurum, Turkey: Atatürk Üniversitesi Dergisi.

<sup>v</sup> Kongar, E. (1997). *Demokrasimizle Yüzleşmek* (85). İstanbul, Turkey: Remzi Kitabevi.

<sup>w</sup> Fendoglu, H. T. & Başkanlığı, B. I. H. (2007). *Töre ve Namus Cinayetleri Raporu*. Ankara, Turkey: Başbakanlık İnsan Hakları Başkanlığı.

### **3. Method**

A focus group including five women aged 20–65 have been randomly selected as the participants to provide some awareness on the unfairness and inequality of these attitudes towards love and gender in some families in Turkey. In-depth interviews with a father of a son and a mother of two daughters have been conducted to come up with the answer to the research questions.

The interpretation of the transcribed narrations has been carried out through qualitative research processes. Direct observation of the discourse utilised by the participants has also been profoundly analysed to gain the necessary insight relevant to the objectives of the study.

### **4. Discourse analysis**

#### ***4.1. Discourse analysis 1***

The 31-year-old father is beside himself with joy for having a son. His patriarchal tendencies are glaringly manifested from the very start of his discourse: 'First of all, I feel proud to have a son'. To him, having a son is tantamount to the feelings of pride, grace or even probably complacency and hubris.

This discourse is also indicative of gender stereotypes such as sports and driving associated with boys and not girls. He proceeds this patriarchal attitude: 'When I hear about things my son did at school and listened to stories about my son's being a leader or pioneer in games, I feel proud as well' again associating power, glory, grace and athletic achievements with the male individuals and he is under the impression that a baby girl cannot bring him pride and dignity specifically in terms of sports, athletic prowess etc.

#### ***4.2. Discourse analysis 2***

The discourse of this father is very interesting and replete with contradictions. He claims not to be affected by his kids' gender, stating he has no gender preference or bias whatsoever. Vey ironically though, he proceeds: 'But I prefer the elder one of my children to be a male to get his sister under control and protect her.'

Much to our chagrin and disappointment, he categorically clearly states his propensity to having baby sons. Into the bargain, to his opinion, the son has got the competency and potential to protect and control the weak sister from harm. The term control is utilised by him to cling to another discursive structure of female denigration, manipulation and constraints in families and this is indubitably exercised by male members towards female members. He continues his male dominated discourse by saying: 'If something bad happens to me, he would be the one to support his mother, lead the family.' He firmly believes in the son's ability in effectively helping the parents at the time of trouble, the one to support another weak member of the family, that is, his mother. Hence, he is under the impression that female individuals are vulnerable and susceptible to failure irrespective of their age and must be protected by even much younger inexperienced boy.

Moreover, he feels that maleness is synonymous with leadership and managerial potentials as the son can 'lead the family'. This is another opinionated attitude attesting to his preference for baby sons and his detestation towards baby girls who are just at the mercy of boys following their commands, whims and desires. This is another example of a father's tendency to his daughters' subjugation and degradation indeed.

#### ***4.3. Discourse analysis 3***

This father's discourse plays a good sample of patriarchal discursive structures. The terms like protecting, control, prideful, challenge, intervention, forbidding etc are ideologically laden and are

indications of a patriarchal attitude. He claims that maleness brings about robustness, fidelity and toughness. He says, 'He could challenge anyone in his life.' This utterance or speech act unequivocally depicts a father's unrealistic implausible faith in his son's colossal power to defeat everybody in his life.

This hyperbole is clearly employed by this father to show his delusional trust in his son's extreme powers. He proceeds, 'I would like him to be a man protecting and supporting his wife and kids and be a prideful man.' Again, the son takes the male specific role of protection or support while the wife and kids are assigned to one category of hopeless individuals appealing for a man's patronage and reassurance.

To lucidly show his patriarchal values of pride, control, intervention, and obtrusion, he continues his discourse, 'I would like the idea of his intervention about his mother's clothing style, forbidding his mom to wear certain clothes and accompanying his mom in public areas.' Bitterly ironically, he likes his son to specify and regulate his mom's dress codes and follow her in public places shielding his weak mother from the probable sexual harassment made by male powerful and lustful members of the community, another blatant instance of his massively patriarchal prejudice attitude. To him, characteristics such as toughness, robustness, fidelity, faithfulness belong to his baby kid while unfaithfulness, sexual attraction, voluptuousness, lasciviousness and flirtation are women's idiosyncratic arsenal.

#### **4.4. Discourse analysis 4**

The father states 'If I did not have a son, our family line would not continue', strangely enough, he believes having a son guarantees the perpetuation and acknowledgement of his name and genealogy. He will be happy to secure the endorsement of his family's genealogical information in regard with the ancestors and progenitors. He feels that if he cannot have a baby son, his name, pedigree and sobriquet are ruined and obliterated from the face of human generation, a kind of generation loss.

Baby daughter is a catastrophic pathetic phenomenon inflicting anonymity, nothingness and limbo. He continues his rapture, enchantment and infatuation at having a son like this: 'After the birth of my son, I entirely forgot about my wife when I saw him for the first time'. He is so dazzled by the scene of a baby son so much so that he is unaware of even the presence or existence of the mother. She is simply eclipsed by the shiny figure of the sun that has filled the all admiring father with ecstasy, hysteria and what not.

Afterwards, when the excitement and mania of having a son dwindles, he says 'I bought a necklace for my wife as a gift and I told her to be proud of being a mom of a son'. He has given his wife a gift as a sign of gratitude for her impressive accomplishment of giving birth to a baby son and asks her to be proud of her feat and probably warding off the stigma of producing a girl who would lead to their anonymity and identity effacement. Hence, the mothers' worth is assessed not by something inherent in her but rather in relation to the gender of the child she manages or fails to manufacture.

He continues his patriarchal discourse by referring to a religious or cultural event which has gained the significance and vitality of a rite or ritual. He says: 'This week my son is having circumcision. I have pride inside me. Now I am a complete father. I am organizing his ceremony'. The son's circumcision is the epitome of all his fatherly smugness, megalomania and vanity.

Furthermore, the father points out 'Now I am a complete father', as if his son's phallic image or tool is an essential element completing his transcendental journey to manhood, a condition which cannot be materialised by female erogenous zones or womanly tools. This is doubtless a Freudian phallocentrist approach to the perfection of a man's identity; baby daughter turns out to be a dent or lacunae in a father's character nonetheless.

#### **4.5. Discourse analysis 5**

Here, we see the unfair and biased treatment of siblings by a grandma: 'We felt my elder brother was more precious to her. She used to adore sons. She would spoil my brother and call him 'my pasha' (my commander). She always spoke to us in Turkish.' She would cherish the baby sons by addressing them with endearing Turkish terms like: 'my pasha'. Showering the male kids with lavish praise and denying female kids any kind nice word is another clear manifestation of the parents' feelings of frustration and disillusionment at having daughters. They try to compensate for this feeling of complexity by unfair incongruent manner and language used to address them. The disharmony and asymmetry in parents' discourse attest to their internal affective and psychological feelings of shame, and even disgust at having baby girls.

#### **5. Other findings**

Like the other areas of life in Turkey, gender issues have been at the intersection of the two constantly clashing trends; Islamic perspective that is inspired by the Ottoman Emperorship versus the secular perspective which is based on nation state history and the regulations to improve gender equality. In addition to these conflicts, local, ethnic cultural values are also added as determiners of women's status, labour division, basic human rights and access to sources. Thus, the desire for having a son or a daughter becomes a reflection of women's status in that region.

The deep critical discourse analysis of the parents has revealed their ideological political religious ideologies shown in their biased and unfair mentalities in terms of feminist praxis. They have disseminated inculcated and naturalised this patriarchal preference for male children basically through their ideologically religiously laden language despite they manifested treating their children equal. The derogation employed by parents while talking about their daughters and euphemisation used to talk about their sons has been explicitly observed.

#### **6. Concluding remarks**

Based upon the interpretation of the in-depth interview with the focus group revolving around the main issues of love, gender, inequality, patriarchy, feminism and motherhood, the idea of shame, stigma and vulnerability attached to female children was dramatically noticed in some Turkish families. The feelings of frustration, disillusionment, resentment and melancholy were the byproducts and of giving birth to female children in some families under analysis. Conversely, the positive pompous feelings of delight, pride, excitement, clout, support and security turned out to be encouraging results of upbringing male children. Some parents viewed the sons as supporter, guide, family line carrier and aids in their old age of weakness and senility. The parents' beliefs on secularism, fundamentalism, agnosticism, etc can directly affect their discourse and treatment of their children with different genders.

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