



# Exploring gender roles' effects of Turkish women teachers on their teaching practices

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate how gender roles of women teachers affect their practices in the classrooms. Participants in the study were 75 female teachers working in elementary schools in Adana, Turkey. Findings indicated that gender roles of women teachers have important effects on their educational practices. Women teachers explained how their gender roles affect their profession mostly in terms of “also being a mother” in both positive and negative directions. The main points in teachers' explanations were “being a mother and a spouse”, “stress”, “close relationships with students and parents” and “lack of authority and issues of confidence”.

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## 1. Introduction

Characterized by gender imbalances, teaching profession, especially teaching of young children has long been dominated by women in many countries in the world. According to Drudy (2008) this global phenomenon is firmly rooted in issues relating to economic development, urbanization, the position of women in society, cultural definitions of masculinity and the value of children and childcare. Literature on women teachers, offers limited data on the relative levels of competence of male and female teachers. However, Calabrese (1987) asserted that female teachers experienced higher levels of stress than males, and indicated that societal, personal, and that organizational factors all negatively influence the female teachers. As stated by Griffiths (2006), feminization, in the sense of a high proportion of women in teaching, seems to be a women's problem rather than society's. According to Griffiths, society is fortunate that women go on working in essential jobs for less pay, worse conditions, and lower status than their brothers; however, the situation is not good for the women—nor for any men who work alongside them (as opposed to being swiftly promoted over them). How gender is perceived in economic, cultural, political and educational spheres, which roles are seen appropriate for different genders in different classes, to what extent the genders are considered equal in the social, personal, and professional lives of people and so forth, give us important clues about the gender regime of a society. Beyond the legal regulations, these kinds of questions can be answered only through deeply investigations the relationships of people

with others, and the cultural, economic, and political norms, which shape these relationships. On the other hand, cultural, economic, and political norms ingrained in a society can be clearly seen in the patterns of people's relationships. Kessler et al. (1985), defined gender regime as “the pattern of practices that constructs various kinds of masculinity and femininity among staff and students, orders them in terms of prestige and power, and constructs a sexual division of labor within the institution”. According to them, the school is an institution that is characterized at any given time by a particular gender regime. As Connell (2002, p. 54) noted, when we look at a set of gender arrangements, whether the gender regime of an institution or the gender order of a whole society, we are basically looking at a set of relationships—ways that people, groups and organizations are connected and divided.

There are plenty of theoretical and empirical researches done about gender inequalities in the educational landscapes. In a recent study for example, Moreau et al. (2007) stated that three main gender imbalances are generally identified within the teaching workforce: gender imbalance across education phases (women concentrate in the nursery and primary sectors, overall less valued and rewarded), across subjects taught (there is a lower proportion of women in math and science, compared with other subjects), and across positions (women are under represented in promoted posts, across all education phases). A common point in the research body is that teaching is a feminized profession. Brehmer (1987, cited in Basten, 1997) stated that there are three parts to the definition of the feminization of the teaching profession: (1) the relative increase of women in the teaching profession in the twentieth century, (2) the extremely high proportion of women in the teaching profession, in certain sorts of schools, in relation to the total female population and, (3) the reduction of social prestige of the teaching profession, due to the high proportion of women

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employed in it. Acker (1994, pp. 80–85) considered this last point as a shortcoming of the women studies literature. She asserted that one of the shortcomings of most conventional sociological writing on the influence of gender on teacher careers and on teaching as a profession is a 'deficit model' of women that leads to a blame-the-victim approach as well as conceptual confusion. Nevertheless, not all of the authors who indicated that teaching, especially in the elementary schools, as a low-status occupation because it is mostly women who do it blamed the women themselves for the low status of teaching profession. Rather, they emphasize the historically ongoing process of points of view towards women and men in cultural, political, economical, and educational spheres. Apple said that femininity needs to be connected to masculinity (2001) for example, and pointed out many reasons to help us understand why teaching has become a women-dominant job (but just in the teachers' numbers not in administrative positions) with a relatively low-status (Apple, 1984, 1985, 1988). According to Apple (1985), one of the reasons for why teaching became a women's work and why it has a low status is that the historical connections between elementary school teaching and the ideologies surrounding domesticity and the definition of "women's proper place"; teaching was an extension of the productive and reproductive labor women did at home. Since the Declaration of the Turkish Republic till today, women who continue their education beyond the basic level generally choose the branches of study oriented to 'feminine' occupations (Citci, 1990, p. 105), such as teaching; an occupation that has a gendered historical background.

In Ottoman society, the girls had no right to attend schools apart from primary school called *sibyan mektebi*, giving only the very basic level of religious knowledge (Tumer-Erdem, 2007, p. 24). The roots of Turkish women's official educational background are located in the final period of the Ottoman Empire (1839–1918) (Kurnaz, 1991, p. 27). Significant changes about education of the Ottoman women started with the proclamation of the Tanzimat in 1839, and accelerated with the declaration of The Second Constitution in 1908. In this era, educational facilities for girls were extended and while primary education was made compulsory for girls between the ages 7 and 11; secondary schools called *Rüştiye* and some vocational schools for girls were opened (Kurnaz, 1999). The most important vocational school opened in this period was the first women teacher training school called *Darülmuallimat* established on April 26, 1870 with the purpose of training women teachers for the girls' schools (Kurnaz, 1991, p. 23; Kocer, 1972). Although the main objective was to have totally women teachers in *Darülmuallimat*, only music and decoration classes were taught by women teachers until 1882 simply because there were no women teachers to teach other classes. However, in the course of time, with the *Darülmuallimat* graduates—the pioneers of Turkish women teachers—began to teach, the rate of women teachers gradually increased and outnumbered the men teachers after 1882 in this institution (Kurnaz, 1991, p. 27). In 1881, the first woman principal of *Darülmuallimat* was appointed even alongside a man principal (Kurnaz, 2011, p. 59). *Darülmuallimat* was the best educational opportunity for Turkish women until opening of the *Inas Darülfünunu* (the first higher education institution for women) in 1915 and its graduates were the first women public servants in the country; in transition to the Republic era in 1923–1924 there were 1081 women and 9121 men teachers (Kurnaz, 1991, p. 58).

However, because of the reason that they had to work together with men, Turkish women's working life as official clerks in other areas could not start until 1913–1914 (Kurnaz, 1991, p. 96). In the Second Constitution period, especially in line with the consecutive wars (War of Trablusgarp, Balkan Wars, and First World War), many developments in economic, social and political life influenced women's liberation movements. In this era, since many

men were away fighting, women began to take on roles in civil service positions. Also, some women associations were established while with the helps of women journals and newspapers the "women's case" had a broad repercussion in press (Kocer, 1972). However, the initial social reforms of Tanzimat period were radically formulated and were put into practice only after the establishment of the Republic under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal (Ozbay, 1990, p. 1). Despite the objections from the conservative wing of the first parliament (Abadan-Unat, 1990, p. 14), during 1920s and 1930s, many laws that affected women status directly were put into action; such as The Law of Unification of Instruction in 1924, Dress Code in 1925, Turkish Civil Code in 1926, enfranchisement of women in 1930 and 1934 (Gurkan, 1997, pp. 13–14). Despite lots of legal regulations about ameliorating women's status since the Declaration of the Turkish Republic, it has been argued that women in Turkey were 'emancipated but unliberated' (Y. Arat, 2000). According to Toprak (1990, p. 40), emancipation is a legal issue and an important prerequisite to the liberation of women, but changes in legal structure are seldom paralleled by unidirectional social change. Undeniably, Turkish women, especially educated urban women have achieved a great deal of emancipation since the Republican era. However, since they are still captive in a society that teaches them to be docile, economically dependent on men, and geared to housework and childrearing, neither the minority of women who have benefited from the reforms nor the great majority who have been unaffected by them has escaped the bonds of tradition (Toprak, 1990, pp. 43–44). Now, after more than 80 years of the Republican reforms we might re-ask Abadan-Unat's (1986, pp. 153–154) questions: To what extent can 'revolutions of legal systems' change the traditional lifestyle of the majority of women in a given country? Which major economic, social or political factors are directly or indirectly responsible for accelerating or retarding this process? In fact, these are not the questions that can be shortly answered and they are not in the scope of this study. The studies; however, indicate that women in Turkey still remain secondary to men, they still do not sufficiently exercise their new legal rights, their participation in the workforce remains low, and the division of labor in the private sphere does not favor women (Gelgec-Gurpinar, 2006, p. iv).

In contemporary research done in Turkey, it is still emphasized that patriarchal characteristics of the society have crucial influences on the daily life of women. For example, Gök (1994) who emphasized that men still hold the major decision-making power in Turkish society stated that according to intrinsic value judgments of the society, having a decision-making status, which is considered as a male characteristic, is incongruous for women. What is not found odd is getting married and grappling with difficulties of abrasive works at home (Gök, 1994). About Turkish culture, Altınay and Arat (2009) stated that every step a woman takes, from going shopping to visiting her family, is subject to her husband's control. Only one out of every 10 women is able to go to out of town without her husband's permission, while three out of every 10 are able to visit their families or go shopping, and four out of every 10 are able to visit friends/neighbors without their husbands' permission. According to Bayrakceken-Tuzel (2004, p. 2), women, via participating in working life, have an opportunity to maintain the channels of emancipation and—even partly—to escape their subordinated position that caused by the patriarchal content of the social system; however, since patriarchal practices condition women's work, women are obstructed from being able to benefit from those channels, making women's liberation through work becomes very problematic. Teaching, as an occupation that historically gendered and labeled as a "female profession", is one of the occupations in which societal patriarchal properties and women-based stereotypes (motherliness, emotional, empathetic,

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