

# Gender Equality vs. Gender Justice

Ayça K. Güralp\*

In E. Sare Aydin Yilmaz's article in Turkish Policy Quarterly's (TPQ) Winter 2015 issue titled "A New Momentum: Gender Justice in the Women's Movement," the author attempts to argue as her main thesis that societies must move beyond the classic Western notion of "gender equality", which she finds insufficient in regards to addressing women's role as mothers. Yilmaz points to the continued existence of female-targeted oppression as proof that as a concept "gender equality" is not working. Although she provides no causal link between the two, she goes on to argue that in addition to "gender equality", we must ascribe to the notion of "gender justice." While I personally respect Yilmaz's overall intention in wanting to improve women's lives, I find several areas of concern and ambiguity in her piece.



Firstly, I do not follow one of Yilmaz's main points – that existent female oppression is a sure sign that the notion of "gender equality" is faulty. Perhaps the problem of why women are still being oppressed today lies not with any fundamental flaw with the principle of equality but rather with poor implementation. For instance, I believe the concept of democracy is the ideal system in which political orders and societies should structure themselves, yet across the world democratic systems are flawed because they are implemented incorrectly. This does not mean we should give up on democracy; it means we should continue to work, even harder, on improving democracy as much as we can. I ardently believe the same goes for "gender equality". It will not be accomplished in a day, so women and men together should fully commit to building societies where neither gender is limited.

Secondly, Yilmaz fails to clearly demonstrate how the "gender equality" notion is harming women. Yilmaz claims that "gender equality" masculinizes women and damages their feminine identity, but she gives no explanation of what this means or how this is being done, and it is certainly not very apparent to me how giving women the right to vote, for example, hurts their femininity. There is not much

\* Ayça K. Güralp received her MA degree in Conflict Resolution from Georgetown University and is currently working as a freelance researcher in Istanbul.

substance provided by her reasoning regarding this issue, and I would love to learn more about not only how females have become detached from their identities, as she claims, but also what those female identities even look like because I do not believe there is one monolith “female identity” which can describe all women.

Thirdly, Yilmaz mistakes the genuine meaning behind equality. She holds it to mean being the same, which is certainly not the case. The struggle for “gender equality” is a struggle for everyone to have the same political, economic, and social rights. It does not mean women are the same in likeness to men, just as any one man is not the same in likeness as any other man, yet they are still considered equal. “Gender equality” means *everyone* – no matter their gender identity – is of equal human worth and value, not that they are the same. Furthermore, “gender equality” does not mean that women are equal *to men*, rather women and men are equal; therefore, women are not masculinized by defining themselves in relation to men.

Moreover, by emphasizing the differences which exist between women and men, Yilmaz divides them into their own gender spheres, which I believe sets society down a dangerous path of gender segregation. Why is this dangerous? The segregation of society is rarely a good thing. Whites of colonial Europe and the United States used to point to the physical differences that existed between whites and blacks in order to justify the enslavement, oppression, and segregation of blacks. We also know that Nazis even used physical trait differences as one reason to prove that Jews were inferior. Therefore, I think we should tread lightly when we begin to focus attention on inherent physical differences, and we should especially make sure to avoid going down the road Yilmaz has started lest we use gender differences to justify gender segregation (socially or physically). This is already a contentious issue in Muslim societies and leads me to my next point.

The principle of “gender equality” is *universal*, meaning aspects of culture or religion (which, by the way, can be heavily patriarchal) do not in any way diminish the power of equality. Therefore, I do not find it academically relevant or democratically coherent to refer to the Koran, as Yilmaz does multiple times in her article, as a way to build an argument for building a modern society. Furthermore, I do not agree that her arguments based on the Koran are correct in providing justice to women or in placing them in better social standing. Yilmaz quotes An-Nisa 4/34 which states “men are in charge of women” to argue that men and women have their different “duties and burdens” and “division of labor.” However, no argument could be more detrimental to women because by making this argument Yilmaz reinforces the gender roles women and men are socialized into accepting. She even argues that the concept of men being in charge of the family does not construct a hierarchical

order within the family. I believe she is gravely incorrect because if the man governs the family and manages the decisions, the man is the head and therefore at the top of the family order. In the same passage of the Koran that Yılmaz quotes from, it is also stated that men have the right to strike their wives if they are regularly disobedient. Therefore, I do not find it fruitful to bring in passages from the Koran to argue for “gender equality” or justice, especially if we are hoping to move beyond oppression resulting from traditional values, which Yılmaz herself states is greatly important.

Finally, what does she mean by “gender justice”? She does not define the inherent differences between men and women, to which she refers several times in her article as her reasoning to develop this concept of “gender justice.” Which differences between men and women must society take into account for there to be justice? I am only left to assume she means that women have the ability to bear children and men do not. In a meeting of Turkey’s Women and Democracy Association (KADEM) last November, of which Yılmaz is likely aware since she is the founding president of KADEM, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan gave a speech in which he stated “gender equality” is against women’s nature, stressing how women are “delicate” and have the main role of bearing children.<sup>1</sup> This sounds somewhat similar to Yılmaz’s discussions of the female nature, so I wonder what Yılmaz’s thoughts on Erdoğan’s statements are. And what kinds of policies do Erdoğan and Yılmaz suggest to assist women in regards to bearing children while also eliminating oppression? How could we translate her ideas into action and what would Turkish society look like if we did? How would female oppression be resolved? Since I found several areas needing further in-depth explanations, it is my hope that Yılmaz finds the opportunity to develop them and share her case for “gender justice.”

I wanted to write this response to Yılmaz’s piece because “gender equality” is an issue I care deeply about, and I believe great injustices occur when we choose to remain silent or indifferent. I wanted to speak out and provide more substance to the debate on “gender equality” because the more voices involved, the healthier our democratic society becomes. As a Turkish citizen I believe it is my duty, as it is everyone’s duty *no matter their gender*, to help improve our society.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lizzie Dearden, “Turkish President: ‘Equality between men and women is against nature’,” *independent.co.uk*, 24 November 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkish-president-equality-between-men-and-women-is-against-nature-9879993.html>