

Equality And Difference: Are They Mutually Exclusive?

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The question of equality and difference has been on the agenda of feminist movements and scholarship for a long time now. While some feminists advocate for equal rights for women, others emphasize the significance of acknowledging the sexual differences of women in relation to men. Sare Aydın Yılmaz, in her article “A New Momentum: Gender Justice in the Women’s Movement,” contributes to this discussion and presents the concept of “gender justice” as an alternative to “gender equality.” Similar to the previous critiques of the concept of equality, Yılmaz also debates the indispensability of recognizing women’s difference. In her critique of equality, Yılmaz underlines how the demand for equality resulted in a masculinization of women rather than a recognition of women’s distinct features. According to Yılmaz, advocates of equality are asking women to act like men in the public sphere and leave their private selves at home, thus creating a “discordance” between their public and private selves. This kind of a division between public and private lives of women is far from ensuring women any privilege compared to men and in fact it creates a “fracture” in female identity, according to Yılmaz’s reasoning.



Identifying the major flaws of the equality discourse, Yılmaz proposes to adopt the discourse of “gender justice” instead. According to Yılmaz, the justice approach requires acknowledging “the different features and characteristics of men and women by nature” and “different liabilities between men and women attributed by society and culture” without constructing “any hierarchical superiority or inferiority between sexes.”¹ Her conception of justice situates the sexual difference within the context of the complementarity argument, which sees women and men as “two equivalent entities with the same essence complementing each other.”² Yılmaz thinks that this

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1 Sare Aydın Yılmaz, “A New Momentum: Gender Justice in the Women’s Movement,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Winter 2015), p. 113.

2 Yılmaz (Winter 2015), p. 112.

idea of “gender justice” doesn’t necessarily establish hierarchies between the natures of men and women but distinguishes them based on their functions and duties.

To what extent is Yılmaz’s argument persuasive? Although I find Yılmaz’s discussion very productive and thought provoking, I am going to raise my objections to her approach based on three counterarguments. First, I will offer my thoughts on the dangers of abandoning the equality demand as a whole. Second, I will try to address the contested nature of the concept of justice, which renders every attempt to define it a failed one. Third, I will try to discuss the problems of limiting the issue of sexual difference to a difference between men and women and fixing particular characteristics to these gender identities. In conclusion, I am going to argue that equality and difference aren’t necessarily mutually exclusive and they can actually complement each other in a productive way.

Yılmaz argues that the principle of equality failed in eliminating “the oppression of women with regard to political participation in political life and the public sphere.”³ I think such a dismissal of the principle of equality would be a disservice to the achievements – gaining social and political rights such as access to voting, education, inheritance, divorce, etc. – that women have realized in the name of equality so far. Additionally, the argument which limits equality to a mere formal equality⁴ is also partial. Contrary to Yılmaz who defines the suffragist movement as a movement of formal gender equality, Carole Pateman in her article “Equality, Difference, Subordination” argues that it would be a misunderstanding to portray this movement as “simply a campaign for equality.”⁵ Pateman suggests, “From at least, 1792, when Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was published, women have demanded both equal civil and political rights, and that their difference from men should be acknowledged in their citizenship.”⁶ Pateman also indicates what is presented as a clear division between the proponents of difference and the proponents of equal rights, was more complicated. She gives historical examples where the two movements were intertwined in many ways. Thus, rather than abandoning the concept of equality as a whole, I think we need to acknowledge its historically contingent nature and try to look for ways that can create a productive dialogue between demands of equality and demands of difference. As Pateman suggests: “‘Equality,’ like other central political categories, is a contested term: but whereas ‘equality’ in some of its possible meanings can encompass ‘difference,’

3 Yılmaz (Winter 2015), p. 110.

4 By formal equality I refer to a conception of equality that emphasizes equal treatment of all people without paying attention to their circumstances. This idea of equality relies on same rights and entitlements as the key to fight inequalities but at the end doesn’t necessarily generate change.

5 Carole Pateman, “Equality, Difference, Subordination: The Politics of Motherhood and Women’s Citizenship,” in *Beyond Equality and Difference*, eds. Gisela Bock and Susan James (London: Routledge Press, 1992), p. 17.

6 Pateman (1992), p. 18.

no sense of ‘equality’ compatible with a genuinely democratic citizenship can accommodate subordination.”⁷

Like equality, justice is a historically contingent and always contested concept. Concepts like these are hard to fix. Moreover, the success of a particular definition is a matter of politics and power struggle.⁸ “Undecidability,” as Butler asserts, is inherent to such universals.⁹ Thus, while we are addressing the power relations that shape the concept of equality in the Western context, we also need to question our conceptions of equality and justice acknowledging our complicity with certain power relations. Presenting particular notions of justice and equality as truth-claims will always exclude other understandings of these notions. Yılmaz’s presentation of the Islamic understanding of justice as an alternative to the Western notion of equality is productive. However, it still leaves some questions regarding the author’s positionality (i.e., one’s own placement within the many contexts, layers, power structures, identities, and subjectivities of the viewpoint), her investment in religion, and her conception of her audience, unanswered. Is the author addressing a pious Muslim as her reader or is she proposing an Islamic understanding of justice for everyone? Although both of them are legitimate in the scope of this paper, the answer itself would change the way the paper is engaged by the reader. Only then will it become clear – while criticizing unities and universals in Western feminism – whether Yılmaz provides space for pluralities and diversities in her own substitute or instead she creates her own universals.

The third counterargument I want to make here is on the binary nature of Yılmaz’s conception of sexual difference. Yılmaz’s article raises fair questions about the limits of the concept of equality and presents difference as the blind spot of equality. However, there are two problems with the way she engages with the problem of sexual difference. First, her understanding of sexual difference is limited to two opposing sexes and avoids engaging with different configurations of sex and sexual identities. Second, she takes sexual difference in very essentialist terms that it undermines the emancipatory promise she makes at the beginning of her paper. Yılmaz argues that an understanding of justice has to take “differences and inherent characteristics of the two sexes” into consideration.¹⁰

But how? Yılmaz takes the conception of sexual difference and social and cultural meanings given to these differences for granted. Thus, her approach doesn’t ask for

7 Pateman (1992), p. 28.

8 Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996).

9 Judith Butler, “The end of sexual difference?,” in *Feminist consequences: Theory for the new century*, eds. Elisabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 430 quoted in Debra Bergoffen, “February 22, 2001: Toward a Politics of the Vulnerable Body,” *Hypatia*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Winter 2003), p. 125.

10 Yılmaz (Winter 2015), p.113.

any critical engagement with them. Although, she makes it clear that the society she has in mind isn't a patriarchal one, it isn't clear how her understanding of justice that depends on liabilities of women and men based on their inherent characteristics promises anything more than a patriarchal society. Yılmaz states "God's word (kalam), which holds that women and men complement each other in terms of duties and responsibilities, doesn't demand obedience to men, but to the order."¹¹ According to her conception, the emphasis on duties rather than on "natural" capacities ceases the question of hierarchy between men and women. Even if the duties of men can also grant some privileges to them, Yılmaz finds these privileges insignificant since they come with burdens. It is difficult to understand what kind of an emancipatory framework will be provided by such an approach. Yılmaz's approach reduces both men and women to their sexual difference and this reduction doesn't guarantee a liberating framework. It isn't clear how a conception of justice that defines rigid roles for women and men can bring justice in terms of gender relations. Yılmaz argues that the privileges men bear come with duties and burdens but how will this work in the real world in a just manner? What is Yılmaz's solution for women who aren't very interested in care work but have very different interests instead of that? What is her just solution to men who are really interested in childcare and elderly care? Can we really rely on rigid definitions of womanhood and manhood in our search for justice? Also, what is Yılmaz's solution for the gay, lesbian, intersex, and trans individuals who don't necessarily conform to these binaries she suggests? How can we talk about the complementarity of men and women given the fact that these identities themselves are very fluid and changeable?

In conclusion, although Yılmaz's suggestion of going back to Islamic roots for the search for justice is a valuable one, her argument has many flaws and inconsistencies. I believe that it opens a valuable discussion in terms of looking for sources and references for women's empowerment in the geographies we lived in. But I also believe that we shouldn't lose our critical lenses towards these sources as well. I believe a critique of Western feminism and their notions of equality can only be possible with – as Joan Scott beautifully puts it – "a refusal, however, not in the name of an equality that implies sameness or identity but rather (and this is the second move) in the name of an equality that rests on differences; differences that confound, disrupt and render ambiguous the meaning of any fixed binary opposition."¹² I am afraid presenting equality and difference as mutually exclusive will bring us to a deadlock rather than opening new windows. We need to acknowledge that concepts like equality and justice are always contested and that in order for us to define them in favor of subordinated individuals or collectives we need boundless critique: a critique of not only others but also of ourselves.

¹¹ Yılmaz (Winter 2015), p. 114.

¹² Joan W. Scott, "Deconstructing Equality-versus-Difference: Or, the Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1988), p. 48.