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III.1.A. A central term and its perception in the field: Being-Woman

Charlotte Binder

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Since the beginning of the 1990s in particular, the homogenous, universal category of gender has been deconstructed or decentred (Kerner, 2007) with the help of critical interventions from queer feminist, postcolonial and post-structuralist theoreticians from English- and French-speaking scientific contexts, as well as by the identity policies of the New Social Movements, which emphasise particular identities, beyond that of solely being a woman. This also had a major influence on women’s and gender studies in the German-speaking world, in which theorisations of gender changed fundamentally during the course of the debates. With respect to the sex/gender debate and the discussion about differences and inequalities among women, the following questions are being formulated within feminist theory production: What are “women”? What are “genders”? Who is the “we” of feminist critique? (Knapp, 2008: 209)

This questioning of previous categories is also occurring within the feminist discourse in Turkey. The following excerpt from an interview with Handan Çağlayan, which was carried out in the context of this study, serves as an example. The scientist, who teaches at Ankara University and is involved in the union movement, refers to the issue of categorisations (2014: 22): “On the one hand we need a general […] category of ‘woman’ while doing this kind of research, but on the other hand we also know, as social scientists, that defining a general category of ‘woman’ is — just like all generalisations — problematic.”

In the light of subject-critical and intersectional objections, as well as the social constructivist change in the approach to women’s and gender studies in general, the previously single subject of women’s movements, “We women” and the connected concept of “sisterhood” have been subject to fundamental challenges (Lenz, 2002: 78). The theoretical critique of the concepts of identity, feminism and the women’s movement(s), which was first started by political activists through critical interventions, backfired on women’s and gender-political activists and created greater differentiation and pluralisation in women’s and gender movements.

Considering this background, it was of central importance to this study, in which these very processes of differentiation and pluralisation in Turkey were to be investigated, to ask the 76 experts about their personal understanding of “being woman” (kadın olmak).

The interviewees answered the question about the meaning of being woman very differently, and, based on the statements, it was not always possible to clearly identify the (theoretical) concept of gender to which each interviewee subscribed. Some interviewees even seemed to be irritated by the question and asked for an explanation (Acar, 2014: 15–16; Akkoç, 2015: 39–41; Başak, 2015: 16–21; Özkazanç, 2014: 9–17; Anonymous, 2014: 8–18; Anonymous, 2015: 9–16; Anonymous, 2014: 9). Most of the interviewees formulated an individual understanding of being woman and did not draw a distinction between individual and organisational/academic perspectives, even though the question was addressed to them during the interview.

The following conclusions were drawn based on an analysis of their answers, which help to clarify the understanding of being woman and the conceptualisation of gender from the perspective of women’s and gender politics in Turkey.

The definition of being woman depends on the person’s subjective understanding or the (feminist) field of discourse in question.

For Aksu Bora, scientist and publisher of the feminist magazine Amargi in Ankara, being woman can be understood in many different ways and can have a wide range of meanings, even for a single person (2014: 14). Reyhan Atasü-Topçuoğlu, who teaches at Hacettepe University in Ankara, emphasised the “subjective” (öznel) aspect of being woman; at the same time, however, she also noted that a “shared subjectivity” (paylaşılan bir öznellik) which was constantly visible (2014: 21).

Figan Erozan of Bodrum Women’s Solidarity Association (BKD) explained that she herself had the power to define what being being woman is, as well as the right to complete self-determination over her body (2015: 6): “I define it as existing the way I want to, living, thinking, acting the way I want to […] using my body the way I want to.” However, for Sara

Aktaş from Diyarbakır and for Nurcan Vayiç Aksu of the Socialist Women’s Assemblies (SKM) in Hopa, being woman is not determined by women themselves; on the contrary, it is, according to Vayiç Aksu, an identity determined externally by men, such as fathers and in-laws (2015: 13). Therefore, according to Aktaş, being woman cannot not yet be understood philosophically or ontologically. According to Aktaş, the development of the “women’s science” Jineolojî, which was started by the Kurdish Women’s Movement, is an attempt to redefine the term “being woman” through a female political perspective (2015: 9).

Alev Özkazanç, a professor at Ankara University, highlighted the influence of socialist and queer feminism on her understanding of gender. Using an intersectional perspective, she considers “women to be in complex relationship with other humans, men, and including those who are oppressed in […] complex relationships” (kadınları başka insanlarla, erkeklerle de, ezilenlerle de birlikte […] karmaşık ilişkiler içerisinde) and supports “joint liberation projects” (birlikte özgürleşme projeleri) (2014: 17).

During the interviews conducted in the Aegean region, academics such as Özlem Şahin Güngör described the importance of their study of feminist theory and practice in moulding their understanding of being woman. Through such a study during her time as a student, Şahin Güngör acquired a feminist awareness. She therefore feels that she is able to recognise the positive aspects of being woman by connecting being woman with certain abilities that she feels that contributes to social development, such as the ability to “create” (yaratmak), to “be resistant” (dayanıklı olmak), to “understand” (anlamak) and to “establish relationships” (ilişkiler kurmak) (2015: 16). Güngör therefore holds a rather difference theoretical[1] perspective on gender than that adopted through a queer feminist understanding.

In addition to subjective and feminist understandings of being woman, participants in the four research regions also held cross-ideological understandings which adopted a fundamental, gender equality-oriented perspective by appealing to the state of “being human” (insan olmak) (e.g. Ay Katırıcı, 2015: 14; Başak, 2014: 19; Bostan, 2015: 10; Uçar, 2015: 10; Varan, 2015: 17). For Nilüfer Akgün of Black Sea Women’s Solidarity Association

[1] According to Kerner, difference theoreticians approach “to attributes associated with femininity positively” and assume “gender differences on an anthropological level, or at least at the level of identity” (2007: 8).

KARKADDER, a woman is "a citizen, individual, worker, human who exists in social life, and who should be equal" (2015: 12). Mukaddes Alataş of the Kardelen Women's Centre in Diyarbakır stressed that men and women are both pre-emptively human and subsequently postulated on the equality of the genders (2015: 15). Özge Zeynep Arıcı of Artvin Women's (Solidarity) Platform also referred to woman and man primarily as humans, as "a form of existence" (Arıcı & Anonymous, 2015: 65).

Definitions of "being woman" highlight the differences between women.

For Räthzel, the concept of difference represents "an escape from a theoretical and political dead-end road", as it breaks "conception of women as a homogenous group" and "sets the task of placing the differences between women at the centre of analytical work and of political liberation strategies" (2010: 287). Kerner summarises the findings of historian Elsa Barkley Brown based on debates about race, class and gender as follows (2011: 133): "We have to acknowledge that being woman cannot be isolated from the context in which one is a woman — and this context is determined by 'race', class, time and space. We have to acknowledge that not all women are […] of the same gender".

In the interviews conducted in Turkey, academics in particular highlighted the differences between women. For Aksu Bora, for example, there is no "singular womanhood" (bir tane kadınlık) (2014: 14). In addition, Feride Acar expressed her awareness that "not every woman is born into the same position" (her kadın aynı konuma doğmuyor) (2014: 16). Hatice Kapusuz Kütküt, an activist in the Association for Supporting Women Candidates (KADER) in Ankara, noted that "women are not a homogenous group. […] Trans, lesbians, educated women, uneducated women —is a very diverse, heterogeneous group" (2014: 11).

While Şahinde Yavuz of Black Sea Technical University emphasised the importance of "class" as a differentiator (2015: 9), only the LGBTI activist Seçin Tuncel of the organisation KAOS GL discussed the idea of adopting an intersectional perspective[2] on being woman by linking

[2] Analyses of intersectional power examine the simultaneity and mechanisms of heterogeneous forms of discrimination and marginalisation, including the interconnectedness and interaction between various types of difference — such as gender, class and race — in social relations (Winker and Degele, 2007). The term

various differentiators:

> […] I am a homosexual woman. Therefore […] the reality of my daily life can actually change a lot of things. […] At the same time […] I am a homosexual woman living in a big city, so the problems faced by a homosexual woman living in a rural area may be quite different to mine. (Tuncel 2014: 16)

Based on her own social position — as a lesbian in the large city of Ankara — Tuncel refers in this excerpt to the different forms of discrimination experienced by women depending on their personal situation and therefore rejects the idea that certain experiences are common to all women.

Various theoretical understandings of gender are used to define the term.

According to Lenz, women’s and gender studies first discussed the concept of “woman”, followed by that of “gender”, and finally adopted a radical questioning and deconstruction of sex/gender (2014: 16–17). After reaching the understanding of gender as a “biological collective fate” and identifying the concept of equality/difference, the category of gender has finally been “pluralised and made fluid, most notably by detaching it from rigid norms of identity” (Lenz, 2014: 23–24) during the course of its deconstruction. Based on the expert interviews, different (theoretical) understandings of gender named by Lenz were articulated by the interviewees both explicitly and implicitly, which were not always clearly demarcated from one other. The different (theoretical) understandings of ‘gender stated by Lenz, which were -sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly- referred to by the participants, can be applied fort the research field of Turkey, where 65 expert interviews were carried out.

For example, Nurten Karakış, president of the Kemalist-oriented Association of Women’s Rights Protection in Denizli, expressed an essentialist, biological and difference-centric theoretical perspective on gender. During the interview, Karakış demanded equal rights for

“intersectionality” was developed in the late 1980s by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw for a text for the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Crenshaw, 1989: 149). Crenshaw uses a metaphor about a road junction in order to describe how “ways of power […], which determine the marginalisation of specific groups in various ways, cross, overlie and overlap” (Räthzel, 2010: 288–289).

women and men, in addition to women’s participation in all areas of society. She expressed a dichotomous idea of “woman” and “man”, based on both biological and religious concepts:

> We do not want biological equality, we are very happy with our own state of being. […] If a woman becomes a mother, if she can act as a mother, that means that God Almighty gave her something superior to men, gave her a gift, the maternal instinct […] (2015: 7).

The connection between being woman and motherhood described by Karakış was affirmed by other interviewees with even more diverse political and ideological opinions (e.g. Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2014: 21; Can, 2015: 14; Çiçek, 2015: 8; Sancar, 2014: 26; Anonymous, 2015: 43; Üst, 2015: 6).

Conversely, however, an activist from the Denizli Women’s Solidarity Platform criticised the definition of being woman as motherhood, which is a widespread social belief in Turkey: “It is not important that you are a woman, but it is important that you are a mother. […] So, the maturity of the woman is [only] attested by whether or not she is a mother” (Anonymous, 2015: 67).

For İlknür Üstün from the Women’s Coalition (Ankara), being woman is characterised by biological (sex) as well as social (gender) components:

> Biologically, being woman entails reproductive organs and breasts, , but of course it is […] also being obliged to carry a lot of things, including the place, the culture you live in and the people you live with. It means living with its pleasures, but, even more, fighting its difficulties (2014: 20).

Üstün understands being woman to mean a being that is biologically different from a man, which she first defines by reproductive organs.[3] At the same time, she highlights the general social conditions that define both the benefits and the problems of being woman in their own

[3] An activist from the Denizli Women’s Solidarity Platform described being woman as “beautiful” (güzel) and referred, in this context, to the existence of her clitoris, with its approximately 8.00 neurons, as a special feature of being woman (Anonymous, 2015: 67).

specific way.

An anonymous activist from the Muğla Vegan Feminists also adopted a social constructivist perspective on gender: “just like Beauvoir’s statement, that is, ‘One is not born a woman, one becomes a woman’ – that seems to be very accurate to me” (2015: 12). She relates explicitly to Simone de Beauvoir’s concept, which differentiates between biological — or rather, physical — sex and social gender (Kerner, 2007). Several interviewees emphasised the importance of learning processes in defining being woman in life in general or in specific contexts, such as the family (e.g. Çağlayan, 2014: 22; Çiçek, 2015: 8). Additionally, it is important to note that men as well as women are subject to socialisation within their gender roles (Acar, 2014: 16; Anonymous, 2015: 67).

Pelin Kalkan, a member of the Feminist Collective Ankara, also conceptualises being woman in the spirit of de Beauvoir as something that is socially produced and learned:

> Being woman is actually something that we have learnt. […] I am not sure if these sentences can belong to me – because […] all these states of being a woman, being a man and such appear to me to be highly fictional and, personally, […] if the current situation were not like this, I would not emphasise my identity as a woman, I would not get involved in women’s politics. Because, actually, it does not really suit my attitude; I love describing myself both as a woman and as a man, instead of merely as a woman or a man. But I repeatedly stress my identity as a woman because we live under horrible social conditions. Of course, I believe that this is a fight worth fighting. (2014: 13)

Owing up to the current social situation of women in Turkey, Kalkan feels obligated to play a role in women’s politics by emphasising her identity as a woman, despite the fact that she, as an LGBTI activist, personally rejects the dichotomous categorisation of “woman” and “man”, adopting instead a queer concept of gender.

Halil Kandok, an LGBTI activist from Denizli, questioned the categories of “womanhood” and

“manhood” to an even greater extent with regard to his self-image. He envisioned a society in which individuals were not forced into a certain gender identity, but rather gender categories were disposed of altogether:

> If gender and heterosexism did not have an influence, maybe I would not think of myself as anything in terms of gender, maybe in my literature there would be no such thing as womanhood or manhood. What is manhood and womanhood? First, we need to question this. […] Maybe I am both a man and a woman, but also, because of this gender compulsion, I might instead define myself as genderless. (2015: 22)

Both Kalkan and Kandok expressed their wish for more flexibility with regard to gender categorisations and criticised the “gender compulsion” in their approaches.

While differentiating between sex and gender helped to “debiologise gender”, Butler’s work since the 1990s eventually led also to the debiologisation — or rather the denaturalisation — of sex (Kerner, 2007: 11–12). Only LGBTI activists have adopted an explicitly deconstructivist or queer perspective on gender in the spirit of Judith Butler, who are frequently seen as men by the Turkish society. Arif, an activist in Hebun LGBT Association in Diyarbakır, therefore criticised both society and women’s movements for their descriptive and inflexible understanding of gender, which does not allow individuals to assign themselves the gender of their choosing:

> So, if we are to follow the view currently held by society, then being woman means a vagina; if you have a vagina, then you are a woman, if you have a penis, then you are a man. […] I can say the same about many women’s movements, but Hebun does not distinguish between women and men in that way. […]. If I say, I am a woman, my friends accept me as a woman; my looks, my penis and my […] organs are therefore unimportant (Arif et al. 2015: 19).[4]

[4] Also see Varyatan’s remarks 2015: 27.

Woman is described as a passive object and an active subject at the same time and there is demand for a “female consciousness” for a common political agency to be developed.

On the basis of the empirical material, in all regions and political/ideological groups, woman is simultaneously classified as both a passive object and an active subject, which (consciously) reacts to the experience of oppression. Interconnecting oppression and resistance are therefore seen as essential to defining being woman (Ay Katırcı, 2015: 16; Bora, 2014: 14; Gürdal, 2015: 19; Kapusuz Kütküt, 2014: 11; Semiz, 2014: 16). For example, Figen Aras from the Women’s Academy Association in Diyarbakır did not merely describe women as victims:

> We are talking about a being which, on the one hand, reproduces life and plays a key role in social relations, but which is also oppressed and exploited, thus resembling a composite of both subject and object. […] Not only with regard to their disadvantages (2015: 6).

The image of the oppressed woman, who must actively revolt against male oppression in order to change their social situation, was described by Nefise Yenigül from the Freedom and Solidarity Party (ÖDP) in Hopa (2015: 7): “To me, being woman means to be rebellious, to revolt against the rule of men, to fight for freedom. […] As long as these difficulties persist, we must continue our struggle.”

Many of the interviewees referred to the self-image of women and gender political experts as activists. Being woman was described using verbs such as “to struggle” (mücadele etmek), “to put up a fight” (savaşmak), “to resist” (direnmek), “to transform” (dönüştürmek) and “to exert oneself” (çaba sarf etmek), as well as adjectives such as “strong” (güçlü), “activist” (aktivist), “combative” (mücadeleci) and “impactful” (değiştiren). Sevinç Hocaoğulları from the Halkevci Women in Ankara explained her understanding of being woman in a similar way to Yenigül (2014: 12): “Being woman means […] to fight […]. […] Being woman means to resist. I think being woman means to expand the fight.” However, in other interviews, focus was placed instead on the discriminatory aspects of being woman (Eren, 2015: 8; Gedik,

2015: 7; Yavuz, 2015: 9).[5]

Both scientists such as Acar (2014: 16) and Şahin Güngör (2015: 14) and activists such as Akkoç (2015: 41), Başak (2014: 21) and Anonymous (2014: 9) highlight how important it was for the construction of being woman, and for the emergence of women and gender political activism, to have an awareness of the oppression of women. In describing the importance of such awareness, the interviewees used verbs such as “to question” (sorgulamak), “to notice” (fark etmek) and “to realise” (farkına varmak) (e.g. Çağlayan, 2014: 22; Cön, 2015: 10). This culminated with Reyhan Atasü-Topçuoğlu, who described a specific “awareness of womanhood” (kadınlık bilinci), which was of crucial importance “because this consciousness enables us to see just how interconnected these singular, disparate oppressions actually are, to the extent that one oppression is not even possible without the others, and […] it helps us to find the energy to live on and to fight again” (2014: 21). Gaye Cön from the KA-MER Foundation in Muğla also argued for the development of a (feminist) consciousness regarding the problems experienced by women in order to enable women to act collectively (2015: 10).

Conclusion

The analysis of the empirical material points to a diverse understanding of being woman and gender by women and gender political experts in Turkey.

When defining the terms, several interviewees referred to biological and religious determining factors, as well as to social pressures. Those who did not deconstruct the term “being woman”, but rather accepted it as being biologically and/or divinely determined, often elevated it in an essentialist manner. Among those who took a critical look at the social construction of gender, the views expressed ranged from a general acceptance of bipolar gender roles (man–woman) to the radical rejection of gender categories.

In reference to the understanding of being woman or gender, no differences could be

[5] A scientist stated that she had used a line of argument comparable to that used by Aras and Yenigül; however, after considering feminist theory, she questions critically the strategy of defining being woman through the “victimhood” (kurban vasfı) of the woman (Anonymous, 2015: 16).

identified between the respective research fields. In that connection, during her interview, Pelin Şirin from the Peoples’ Democratic Party HDP from Trabzon noted that “being woman comes in many different forms in Trabzon, just as in the rest of Turkey and everywhere else in the world” (2015: 15)[6]

Owing to the differences between women that result from their different experiences, Handan Çağlayan finds it problematic — as outlined above — to speak of “being woman”, that is, to generalise women during a specific historical period or time (2014: 22). Çağlayan highlighted in particular the changeability and permeability of “woman” as an identity (2014: 24): “Instead of [thinking of] being woman as an unmodifiable, absolute, abstract, […] solid identity, it is, rather, an identity that forms and transforms itself within the social struggle and is permeable”. She thus conceptualises being woman — on which she bases her academic work and activism — not as an essentialist natural category, but rather she emphasises the influence of society on the construction of the female/ woman identity, which is also guided largely by women and gender-based political activism.

Women’s studies and gender researcher Özlem Şahin Güngör described being woman during the interview as a “political concept” (politik bir kavram), via which academic knowledge must be produced and spread (2015: 18). Sara Aktaş sees the potential in the “women’s science” *Jineolojî*, which has been developed by the Kurdish Women’s Movement, to define this term theoretically by means of a female political perspective.

Instead of dealing with theoretical discussions about gender in an abstract manner based on theories, some of the experts spoke instead of their personal “womanhood experiences” (kadınlık deneyimleri) as the starting point and motivation for their preoccupation with female political questions (Akgün, 2015: 12; Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2014: 21; Aydın, 2015: 11; Karakuş, 2015: 19; Yavuz, 2015: 9). With this strategy, it seems possible to establish a basis for developing a common political agency without the need to precisely define “gender” or the collective subject of “we women”. However, this leads merely to the creation of yet another homogeneous horizon of women’s experiences based on structural and social

[6] With the exception of Ersöz et al. (2015: 42) and Tuncel (2014: 16), few interviewees made reference to the difference in living conditions experienced by women in the various regions of Turkey, however.

conditions.

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