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## **The Under-representation of Women in the Turkish Media Sector**

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### ***Abstract***

Women's rights in general — as well as the specific gender issues they face — have been studied in relation to the role of women in both social and employment contexts. Across the world in recent years, women have been increasingly entering employment in the media sector as professionals and managers; however, the general societal prejudices against women are also present in the media sector. This study discusses the particular problems women face in their working lives with special reference to women's representation problems in the Turkish media sector. It aims to present solutions to the issues arising from this gender-based discrimination against Turkish female media employees by evaluating feminist theoretical approaches. To this end, it reviews official websites of leading Turkish media organisations and investigates the status of women's representation: specifically, the roles in which they are employed. To this end, the present study aims to examine the views of female media employees and managers, who are frequently emphasised in feminist media studies as being relegated to positions of less importance compared to males. The results suggest that women's low rate of employment in the Turkish media sector should be treated as more than simply a superficial problem. In addition to the low representation of women in media organisations, existing female managers also pursue careers in the magazine, travel, beauty, fashion, health, food, and entertainment sectors, which are also governed by the gendered division of labour. To mitigate the effects of these gender-based inequalities in the Turkish media sector, there is a need to develop a holistic inclusion strategy to replace traditional gender-based values.

*Keywords:* Gender, Gender-based division of labour, Women's representation in media, Feminist approaches

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## 1. Introduction

Women's rights in general, as well as the gender issues that affect them, have long been investigated in relation to the role of women in both society and employment. In parallel with economic and social development — and especially in terms of human rights — the need for adequate representation of women in social and economic contexts has become a key subject of debate (Heise et al., 2018). Historically, female employees have long been preferred due to the lower rates of pay they attract compared to men, not only in agriculture but also in the industrial and service sectors, where women most often tend to find employment. The focus of the present study is on the underrepresentation of women in the Turkish media sector, which began primarily due to their exploitation as sexualised “objects” featuring in advertising; however, women's acceptance into the media sector as professional employees and managers has gained momentum, especially in recent years. The general social prejudices against women are also present in the Turkish media sector and continue to affect their representation and participation in managerial positions.

This study discusses the issues faced by women in working life, in general, and with particular reference to women's underrepresentation in the Turkish media sector. Ultimately, it aims to present solutions by evaluating the capacity to explain this discrimination and the related gender-related problems women employees face in the Turkish media sector by employing feminist theoretical approaches.

In this context, this study seeks to address the following research questions (RQs):

1. How can the situation of women in the Turkish media sector be characterized in general? In particular, are women's roles in media organisations concentrated in primary or secondary areas?
2. Is there any evidence that women in the Turkish media sector are underrepresented?
3. If underrepresentation is evident, how can this issue be addressed in the Turkish media sector? What are the responsibilities of the relevant stakeholders in this regard?
4. How can the capacity of feminist approaches to women's underrepresentation (that claim to offer solutions to the problems of gender-based discrimination to solve the mentioned problems) be assessed given Turkey's current social and employment conditions?

To address the above RQs, the study offers a critical review of the literature upon which the researcher selected an appropriate research framework. Specifically, a qualitative field study approach was selected to investigate the underrepresentation of women in the Turkish media sector. This involved investigating the positions occupied by women in leading Turkish media organisations in relation to their representation in the roles in which they are employed. In this way, the study aims to investigate the experiences of this cohort in terms of the gender discrimination they face.

Data gathered from statistics and information from the websites of relevant Turkish media organisations reveal the numbers of female employees in executive positions in each media organisation and the required qualifications of the positions in which they are employed. In this way, the managerial positions to which women can seek promotion in the Turkish media sector will be determined; the possible reasons for this situation will be analysed, and solutions to address them will be proposed. An important consideration here is to reveal the extent to which the view that women in the Turkish media sector are only “allowed” to seek promotion in “gender-appropriate” areas such as fashion, health, magazines, etc. (which are mostly considered to be feminine domains and of secondary importance) is evident, in accordance with the gender-based division of labour, as stated in the literature (e.g. Kreimer, 2004).

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Women in working life

The participation of women in the Turkish media sector has been primarily governed by strict gender roles that exist in wider Turkish society; this situation continues to exist today. Many assessments of women's entry into working life in Turkey are influenced by the country's strict patriarchal system: women's main roles are generally considered to be the providers of domestic labour, such as housework and raising children; women's economic activities outside of the domestic sphere are largely considered to be of secondary importance (Bugra & Yakut-Cakar, 2010). In this way, the underrepresentation of Turkish women in employment is related to the intensity of their expected behaviour arising from their traditional familial roles. Considering the problems resulting from this socially determined positioning and the prioritisation of patriarchal relations is inevitable (Moghadam, 2004). Although a range of feminist approaches to women's underrepresentation in employment exists, the following sections will mainly focus on women's representation in the media sector; specifically, at the executive level.

Women have historically been excluded from social, economic, and cultural positions; the perceived weakness of women's position in relation to men's is evident in many areas, from family relationships and role-sharing at home to economic relationships (Littlewood et al., 2017). Women have long been relegated to lower status roles — not only in social life but also in employment. However, due to recent developments in the understanding of human rights and increased awareness of sexual equality, both the state and media have begun to focus more on such issues. As a result of global social and economic developments, women's participation in the Turkish labour force is steadily increasing. Nevertheless, women arguably remain disadvantaged in terms of securing an equal share of this economic prosperity (Klasen, 2019). Some argue that the state should provide supportive measures and develop educational services for women to increase their participation in the labour market; this also means that women can play a more active role in social and political spheres (Kabeer, 2005). In parallel with the importance of education in this context, society and the state should mainly perform a supporting role both in law as well as principles and policies. In the face of the fact that women have to balance work-life with family life, equality of opportunity in education and flexible career practices are becoming increasingly important (Kardam & Toksöz, 2004).

The issue of women's employment is recognised as a reflection of recent global social, economic, and cultural developments. The increasing proportion of women participating in the employment market has its roots in women wishing to support their families economically and gain independence and job satisfaction (Pekkurnaz, 2020). However, in many countries, women's employment rates fall well below the desired levels due to several social, economic, and cultural factors, as it is difficult for women to balance their work and family lives compared to men due to the unequal division of labour (McKenzie, 2017). Although the employment rates of women in EU countries have increased in recent years, this rate depends on the development level of the country in question. An increase in the level of education among women is one of the main reasons for this increase in their participation in the job market. Women need to improve their education level to increase their participation in the labour force and enable them to seek better-paid jobs. According to the modernisation approach, there is a positive relationship between women's education and labour force participation rates and economic growth (Suh, 2017).

## 2.2 Gender discrimination in working life

Gender inequality is dominated primarily by the classification of jobs based on sex, social norms or traditions around “masculine” and “feminine jobs”, and the notion that women are somehow inferior to men in certain roles (Priola, 2004). With the emergence of gender-based work departments due to gender discrimination, women's participation in employment remains low — while men tend to work in higher-level and higher-paid jobs in general (Mannila, 2017). In the media sector, discriminatory employment practices can begin at the job application stage; these practices also affect issues such as promotion, wages, education, and social rights (Tonoyan et al., 2020). In job interviews, female candidates may be asked their marital status, number of children, or plans to have children — all of which can lead to discriminatory hiring practices. Accordingly, for example, choosing a male candidate over a female one, offering women lower rates of pay for doing the same work as males or dismissing pregnant women is rife in certain contexts (Rivera, 2017).

Especially in some developing countries, women are considered to be particularly unsuitable for managerial positions, which can lead to career problems for women (Ryan and Haslam, 2007). Women are less likely to rise to managerial positions at the international level than men (Linehan et al., 2001:10). In response to these problems, there is a need for women to counter such discrimination, stand in solidarity with one another, and participate in trade unions and informal support networks. At the heart of gender discrimination in the workplace lies understanding the sexual division of labour in patriarchal contexts. As a result of modern women's improved educational opportunities and the development of better social conditions, including social inclusion and social justice, early marriage rates have decreased, and women's gender roles have changed for the better (Kim et al., 2019). Developing social conditions has increased women's status in the traditional family system, which has revealed gender roles based on social agreement (Froehlich et al., 2020).

Despite these developments, the problems women face in terms of gender discrimination in the employment market, remain. This affects women both on an individual level and in terms of business processes. It is suggested that the reasons that women tend not to be promoted to managerial positions include women's responsibility for childcare, problems establishing a work-life balance and that many successful women have already started their own businesses (Trzebiatowski & del Carmen Triana, 2020).

## 2.3 The Representation problem of women in the media sector

Women have long been a presence in developed countries' media sectors; their participation especially increased after the 1960s (Lavie and Lehman-Wilzig, 2003). Later, in the 1990s when liberal employment policies were introduced, the total proportion of women journalists in the UK rose to almost 40% (Delano, 2003); meanwhile, in the 2000s, the proportion of women journalists reached 47% in Sweden (Djerf-Pierre and Lofgren-Nilsson, 2001). The number of women graduating at university-level in communications and related subjects such as film and television and media studies is also increasing. In developed countries, women have constituted the majority of media-related graduates since the 1970s (Delano, 2003).

Gender discrimination in the media sector highlights that, for women, being regarded as professionals remains problematic (Van Zoonen, 2002). Male colleagues often alienate women working in different positions in the media sector, and the difficulties of being a female media employee have been expressed in many studies (e.g. Kim & Kim, 2020). In the male-dominated media sector, male employees tend to occupy more senior positions while women tend to be employed in roles of secondary importance to those of men (Prescott and Bogg, 2011).

While media coverage of the female form occurs in many different ways, attractive women tend to be represented in the media to raise interest as a marketing technique (de Freitas et al., 2018). However, feminist media researchers consider that achieving equality for women in terms of how they are represented is critical (McLaughlin & Carter, 2018). However, women are not passive actors in the media; they are also consumers who are the target for certain products (e.g. cosmetics) (Kizgin et al., 2020). In summary, women's under-representation in the media and the discrimination working women face is a key source of gender inequality in the media sector (Hafeez & Zahid, 2021).

Today, gender discrimination continues to exert a strong influence on the media sector (Williams, 2017; Padovani, 2020). Regarding the (under)representation of women in different sub-sectors of the media, the proportion of women in decision-making roles remains low due to the male-dominated work culture at higher levels. Some of the factors that prevent women's participation in the labour market include direct and indirect discrimination, lack of adequate support at the institutional and social levels, as well as horizontal and vertical discrimination, i.e. discrimination at the management and executive levels and by colleagues at the same level. An interesting situation has arisen in the media sector in the UK: women tend to be drawn from the media sector after middle-age; this suggests that after getting married and having children in their 20s, women tend to leave the sector (Skillset, 2009).

Women are increasingly participating in labour markets (Klasen, 2019). Along with the social norms that arise and are perpetuated by gender discrimination, inequality occurs between men and women; this inequality tends to be reproduced over time. Looking at examples of gender-based discrimination, inequalities arise from women's status as a result of gender sexism. Gender tends to reduce the foundations of inequality between men and women to anatomical differences or capabilities; in this way, gender can legitimise discriminatory practices (Amis et al., 2020). Gender inequality is at the core of gender-based discrimination. Gender inequality and the unequal gender roles of women and men due to social, economic, political, and legal rights concerning the use of and access to resources can lead to unfair treatment (Kleven & Landais, 2017).

Three main approaches claim to explain gender discrimination (Pompper, 2017). First, the naturalist or biological approach is based on Freud's notion that "anatomy is destiny", which attributes the primary source of gender differences to the innate biological characteristics between men and women (Rae, 2019). Second, gender differences are posited to be based on socialisation processes (Eccles et al., 1990) where gender norms are culturally transferred to individuals and reproduced. Third, gender is theorised to be shaped by individual preferences as well as social processes (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004); this is the dual role theory. This approach claims to explain gender discrimination as due to the difficulty women experience in balancing their work-home responsibilities, which leaves women with little time and opportunity to develop themselves (Darley, 1976).

Feminist approaches fundamentally reject gender and gender-based division of labour, stereotypical judgments about women, and social gender-based inequalities (Acker, 2006). Different strategies are proposed to resolve social inequalities against women. To analyse the problem of women's representation in the media sector and the discrimination that women are subjected to, it is necessary to provide an analysis based on a theoretical basis, as follows.

In the media sector, it appears that a sexist approach prevails in general (Lobo et al., 2017). The myth that women are most successful at domestic duties — and therefore, are best-suited for roles such as housewives and mothers — continues to be perpetuated. Another aspect of women's presence in the media sector is the widespread depiction of women as sexual objects (Erzurum, 2013). The media, news, advertising, and social media tend to be obsessed with covering issues related to women's bodies, and specifically promoting the "ideal" female form. On another note, shockingly, women often secure the opportunity to work in the media

sector based on their appearance alone (Gauntlett, 2008). It is also worth noting that female newscasters are usually chosen from a selection of candidates who are considered to meet general socially accepted attractiveness norms. When considering the depiction of women in the media from a broader perspective, it is evident that the media not only creates its own curated image of women but also has a formative influence on determining how women are perceived by society (Van Dijk, 1996; Len-Rios et al., 2005).

Feminist theories that question women's social status have also produced frameworks relating to media and communication (Van Zoonen, 2002). The most prominent feminist media approaches are liberal feminist, radical feminist, and socialist feminist critical theories. Feminist criticism focuses on sexual discrimination against women and social inequalities, patriarchal social structures, and how these are constructed (Gill, 2014). Assessments of the media sector through feminist theory highlight that women are oppressed due to the familial and traditional roles that patriarchal social orders have imposed on men and women, which are depicted as "natural". A critical study on women's representation in the media states that women's representation in the media tends to follow certain sexist stereotypes (Collins, 2011). For example, although there are differences in sophistication between countries, women tend to be similarly portrayed either as mothers and wives, as sexual objects, or as victims of violence (Lips, 2020).

### 3. Material and method

Although female employment rates have increased in recent years, widespread sexual discrimination continues in the media sector. This study aims to examine the status and positions of women in economic life in terms of their representation in the media sector; it will compare the findings with propositions on women's inequality in the literature. Finally, this study seeks to propose solutions to overcome the issues of women's underrepresentation in the Turkish media sector by evaluating the capacity of feminist theoretical approaches to explain this discrimination and the similar gender-related problems women face.

#### 3.1 Methodology

The above critical literature review has revealed that while women's experiences of gender discrimination tend to be subjective, it is structural factors that tend to influence the discrimination against them. Therefore, the current study adopts qualitative content analysis to investigate and evaluate the representation of women in the Turkish media sector. Data gathered from the websites of Turkish media organisations reveal that the number of female employees in executive positions in each organisation and their respective qualifications.

Next, to investigate the subjective factors involved in gender discrimination in the Turkish media sector, content analysis (CA) will be performed both qualitatively and quantitatively; the former focuses on the meaning of the data, while the latter evaluates trends in the numerical data (Collins, 2011). Both frequency analysis and significance analysis will be performed by subjecting the resultant themes to CA, in line with other comparable media-related studies (e.g. Macnamara, 2005). Both written and oral data will undergo CA in terms of specific categories, which reveals the frequency with which these themes arise (Neuendorf & Kumar, 2015). CA was selected as it is widely used to analyse media content such as newspapers, television, radio, magazines, videos, movies, and speeches (Lombard et al., 2002).

The current 10 best-selling newspapers in Turkey constitute the qualitative research sample for this study (see Table 1 below).

**Table 1.** Research sample

Paper Circulations and web addresses		
Newspaper	Circulation	Web address
Sabah	200264	<a href="https://www.sabah.com.tr/kunye">https://www.sabah.com.tr/kunye</a>
Sözcü	181941	<a href="https://www.sozcu.com.tr/sozcu-kunye/">https://www.sozcu.com.tr/sozcu-kunye/</a>
Hürriyet	181800	<a href="http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/kunye/">http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/kunye/</a>
Posta	125491	<a href="https://www.posta.com.tr/kunye">https://www.posta.com.tr/kunye</a>
Milliyet	121843	<a href="http://www.milliyet.com.tr/kunye/default.htm">http://www.milliyet.com.tr/kunye/default.htm</a>
Y. Şafak	102244	<a href="https://www.yenisafak.com/kurumsal/kunye">https://www.yenisafak.com/kurumsal/kunye</a>
Akşam	99300	<a href="http://www.aksam.com.tr/kunye/">http://www.aksam.com.tr/kunye/</a>
Takvim	88951	<a href="https://www.takvim.com.tr/statik/kunye">https://www.takvim.com.tr/statik/kunye</a>
Yeni Akit	55860	<a href="https://www.yeniakit.com.tr/kunye.html">https://www.yeniakit.com.tr/kunye.html</a>
Korkusuz	52328	<a href="https://www.korkusuz.com.tr/kunye">https://www.korkusuz.com.tr/kunye</a>

Source: <https://www.medyaradar.com/tirajlar> (08.04.2020)

### 3.2 Research findings

The 10 best-selling Turkish national newspapers were analysed (as accessed on 08/04/2020); the number of female personnel and managers were identified to gain information about the general characteristics of this cohort's positions in the Turkish media organisation sample. The findings are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Findings on the number of women employees in the Turkish media sector and their status

Newspaper	Number of personnel on the website	Number of women employees and their status
Sabah	29	4 2 Deputy General Manager 1 Editor-In-Chief 1 General Manager of Print Media Sales
Sözcü	5	0 (No information available)
Hürriyet	8	3 1 Advertising 1 Magazine 1 Editor-In-Chief
Posta	6	3 1 Advertising 1 Editor-In-Chief 1 Publishing Coordinator
Milliyet	31	10 4 Magazine 4 Culture & Art 1 Advertising 1 Reader Representative
Yeni Şafak	24	4 1 Magazine 1 Foreign News 1 Editor-In-Chief 1 English Editor
Akşam	17	2 1 Advertising 1 Advertising Sales
Takvim	16	3 1 Deputy General Manager

		1 Magazine	Printed Media	Sales	General Manager
Yeni Akit	12	0			
Korkusuz	1	0	(No information available)		
<b>Total</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>19%</b>		

As can be seen from Table 2, although female employment in journalism, especially for reporters is noticeably high, the number of female managers is low at only 19%. In newspapers, women managers are employed in positions that are perceived to be typically stereotypical “feminine” areas: advertising/sales, magazines, culture and art, health, and other tasks. Nevertheless, the proportions of women at senior-management levels are low: the number of women who have achieved promotion to higher-status positions (including a small number of editors, editors-in-chief, foreign news directors, news directors, deputy general managers) is relatively small, only 4%. This, in turn, confirms the initial hypothesis: unequal gender roles and gender inequality imposed by patriarchal society is a key issue in the media sector.

## 4. Discussion and conclusion

### 4.1 Discussion

Research on women's representation in the media is generally focused on three main areas: (i) the presence of women in the media sector; (ii) how women are represented in the media; (iii) and how women use/consume media content. Besides, the media's portrayal of the female form is a justified area of criticism; the use of women as a commodity in media constitutes a separate area of study. This study examined the underrepresentation of women in the Turkish media sector as employees: in particular, their capacity to be promoted to senior career roles. Therefore, the current situation in the Turkish media sector is characterised by the under-representation of women in senior roles in general (Hortacsu & Ertürk, 2003; Kardam & Toksöz, 2004; Erzurum, 2013). Women's roles in media organisations are primarily concentrated in secondary areas, as illustrated by the CA results.

Female employees' representation in the Turkish media sector was examined based on the ten best-selling Turkish print newspapers. The CA findings revealed the total number of female personnel and managers employed by the newspapers sampled and the proportion of which that were female. Specifically, women were significantly underrepresented in senior media management positions compared to men. In other words, the management-level positions of Turkish national newspapers are mostly occupied by men (81%). It is worth noting that many female managers can achieve promotion in a limited number of areas: advertising/sales magazines, culture and art, health, and relatively lower-level positions, such as publication editors, publication consultants, editors, and reader-representatives, which are perceived as more stereotypically “feminine” areas. These roles occupy a lower status in terms of careers in journalism, in line with gender-based discourse and the gender-based division of labour in male-dominated cultures.

In contrast, women are under-represented in more prestigious positions within the Turkish media sector. The number of women who have achieved promotion to high-status career roles such as general director, editor-in-chief, foreign news director, news director, and deputy general manager is relatively small (only 4%). This finding concurs with the existing literature (e.g., Hortacsu & Ertürk, 2003; Tienari et al., 2009; Ross & Padovani, 2016; Burul & Eslen-Ziya, 2018). As of the end of 2019, it is worth noting that although

37% of employees in newspapers/magazines were women, the proportion of female managers, especially in roles and areas considered to be high-status, lagged far behind that of men (tuik.gov.tr, 2019).

## 4.2 Conclusion

Many different methods of combating gender discrimination and inequality have been suggested (Collins, 2011). While some work to understand and overcome the problem of women's under-representation in the media at its source has been forthcoming; others claim to have solved the issue without investigating the true causes of the problem. Feminist thought can contribute to the solution of gender inequality in the representation of women; feminist approaches adopt different principles and pre-acceptance to address the issue of women's under- and misrepresentation in the media sector (Steeves, 1987; Gill and Gill, 2007).

Feminist approaches have grappled with this issue since the 1970s. Efforts to battle gender inequality are also increasing alongside consideration of the social factors that drive women into secondary-status positions in society. Along with the number of feminist media studies conducted in this area, the social influence of feminist approaches is also increasing in influence (Harvey, 2019). Different segments try to contribute theoretically and in practice to the problem of women's representation.

Women's employment and under-representation in the Turkish media sector remains associated with the perpetuation of gender-based labour division in the media sector more broadly. The media plays a profound role in portraying women as objects of popular culture and representing them as secondary to men. Feminist media researchers assert that this adverse situation can be overcome if more women are afforded participation in senior roles in the media industry, which is expected to have an active role in dissolving the negative stereotypes to which women are subject (O'Brien, 2019). Equality can be achieved — especially if more women are promoted to decision-making positions in the Turkish media sector. In this context, a causal link between female employment in the media and female representation in the media is mentioned in the literature. In other words, how women are presented in the media and the proportion of women employed in senior roles in the media appear to be strongly interconnected.

To mitigate the perpetuation of gender-based inequalities in the Turkish media sector, instead of implementing inclusion-based strategies (positive discrimination), a more holistic system is needed to instil values that celebrate and strengthen gender equality in society more broadly. NGOs, the state, and the media should collaborate on addressing this issue. Also, the education system is crucial to solving women's under-representation in the Turkish media sector. Teachers and role models who actively perpetuate the dissemination of male-dominated roles in socialisation at the school level need to be re-educated. In this regard, individuals, families, society, NGOs, and the state have essential roles to play. In Turkey, the necessary legal infrastructure for gender equality has already been prepared; both the state and other stakeholders have supported key solutions to this fundamental problem. Many international foundations and organisations, including the UN, also provide the necessary support and infrastructure in this regard. To conclude, it is clear that the main issue preventing gender equality in the Turkish media sector problem is the predominant patriarchal mindset and long-expired social norms; these elements require immediate attention. Future studies could address how these issues can be tackled in practical ways as well as examining the success of such initiatives.

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