

Rural women's status and problems in forest villages (Ayseki village case study)

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Abstract

Defining the problems and recommending suggestions for increasing social and economic status of rural women have been studied in this paper. Ayseki Village places in Cankiri province in the middle of Turkey. General characteristics of the region are continental climate, barren lands and degraded forests. Accordingly to the rough mountainous areas in the village the soil is scarce and infertile and therefore the rural people here are poor. Little scale agriculture and livestock raising have been the base for the income source. In addition forest workmanship is a limited source of seasonal income. There is a migration inclination in the village for construction workmanship outside of Turkey due to the scarce livelihood source in the village.

Rural women in the village have not been able to have the benefits of social and economic opportunities. Literacy rate among women is less than men. Marriage between relative people is spread extensively. Relationship between economic life and the women is poor. Courses are not sufficient to create economically productive women. Contrarily the women who live in the village are keen on joining in the courses. In order to increase social status of the rural women and their economical productivity, educational opportunities should be better and enabled working capability courses should be extended.

Keywords: rural women, socio-economic development, poverty reduction, Cankiri, Turkey

Introduction

Women's status in the Turkish society underwent dramatic changes in history. Shamanism, the dominant belief of the ancient Turkish tribes, dictated that women were equal to, even sometimes superior to men. Shamanism is system of belief consisting of gods and goddesses. The most worshipped of them was Mother Goddess. Shamanism symbolizes all good things like rightness, goodness, birth, love etc. with a goddess, and all bad things like disease, death, and war, etc. with a god. Shamanism dictates that the basic rule is the equality of the sexes. Women are strong, of honour and efficient in social life, and always stand by their husbands.

New cultures to which the Turks were introduced after they had immigrated to the west played an important role in determining the women's status. The most important of them is the Ottoman culture, which existed for a long time under the influence of Islam. It is known that in the theocratic Ottoman society, women were ousted from both social and economic lives.

A number of reforms made in the early 20th century in Turkey caused the women's status in social life to undergo a process of fast change. The Ottoman women whose basic function was to bring up children and to work for agricultural production were replaced with the urban Turkish Republic women who work at all jobs.

Civil Law, enacted in 1926, granted legal rights for the first time to the Turkish women. Said law also prohibited polygamy. Thereafter, a law enacted in 1934 granted the women suffrage and the right to be elected to official positions. Thanks to said law, the general elections held in 1937 saw that 4.5% of the members of the Parliament were female (Dogramaci 1989). However, the reforms in question had an impact on rather the urban women than the rural women, most of the latter did not even notice the tremendous

changes. Female population of the village of Ayseki, located outside the city of Cankiri, on which this study focuses, still could not catch up with the above-mentioned evolution.

Ayseki village is located in the Central Anatolia of Turkey. The village is 38 km to the city. Its drinking and irrigation water supplies are insufficient. There is only one fountain for the villagers to get drinking water. The village is located within a forest, so that it suffers the lack of sufficient agricultural fields. Limited agricultural production is led by barley and wheat. Furthermore, such products as lentil, bean, potato and onion are cultivated. The lack of sufficient agricultural fields caused the villagers to husbandry. The latest figures indicate that there are 1500 heads of cattle, 360 heads of sheep, and 70 beehives in the village. The village is a rich environment for wild life including wolves, foxes, rabbits, martens, and hogs (Anonymous 1996). Furthermore, some of the male villagers moved to France to work as construction workers.

Although Ayseki is a forest village, its habitants can benefit from the forest only at a limited level, because by law almost all forests are owned by the State, so that forestry works are subject to obtaining a prior consent. Thus the villagers are allowed only to pick up firewood and to work as wood-cutters during the timber season. They also enjoy limited benefit from the by-products of the forest. Women pick up mushroom, berries and other vegetables not for commercial purposes, but for domestic consumption.

Method

Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) techniques were employed in this study, so that collective and individual interviews were conducted with the female population. An interview form was prepared for the purpose of determining the local women's conditions and preferences, by way of face-to-face interviews.

This study, based on fieldwork carried out in the Ayseki village in years of 2000-2001. The geographic area from which the sample was drawn is a rural county in Central Anatolia Region of Turkey. The population of the village is under 550 people. Total females population is 286 people and 85 of the female population are under the age of 18. The participants were selected in the village, using villager lists and a list of random numbers. So thirty participants were selected for interviewing.

Of the 21 participants, the youngest women were 18 (four women) and the eldest was 74. Of the remaining women, 5 were in their 60s, 1 was aged 50, 6 were in their 40s, 4 were in their 30s and 9 were in their 20s. 3 of them were graduated from secondary school 19 of them graduated from primary school and 8 of them were illiterate. None of them had jobs or professions outside their homes. All of them work in their agricultural lands. Of the 23 participants who were currently married, 11 had been married for 20 years or more. The 2 widowed women in the sample were the only minority women represented. There is no divorced woman in the sample area.

Turkish women's status in economic and social life

In 1965, Turkey's economically active female population was 56% of total female population, 94% of them worked for the agricultural sector, 1,5% of them worked for the industrial sector, and 2,5% of them worked for the service sector. Said ratios were 58%, 10%, and 16,5% respectively for the economically active male population (92%) (Anonymous 1976). In 1990 the picture in question greatly improved in favour of the males, but remained almost unchanged for the females: the ratio of the males working for the agricultural sector dropped to 37,6%, but the ratio of the females dropped to 82,1% only (Anonymous 2001). The table given below indicates the change in question.

TABLE 1: In Turkey Percentage Of Employed Population In Agriculture (Forestry, Fishery, Hunting)

Census Year	Male %	Female %
1965	58	94
1970	63,6	90,5
1975	52,8	87,5
1980	43,9	87,1
1985	42,9	86,3
1990	37,6	82,1

Source: Anonymous 2001

Women were always ignored in terms of education. Contrarily, universal education is the pathway to "human improvement," and that sending women to school is a particularly sound social policy because of women's presumed role in the rearing of children. Schooling, particularly that of females, has beneficial effects, and more schooling brings more benefits to individuals, families, and society at large (Le Vine et al. 2001).

In the Ottoman period, girls were not schooled until 1869. The republic period saw considerable improvement in schooling of the girls, but the illiteracy ratio of the female population could only be reduced from 90% to 28% in 80 years.

TABLE 2: Illiteracy Rate By Census Years And Sexes (Population 6 Years Of Age And Over)

Census Year	Turkey Illiteracy Rate (%)			Central Anatolia Illiteracy Rate (%)			Cankiri Illiteracy Rate (%)		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
1935	80,8	70,7	90,2	82,5	71,4	92,6	87,7	79	94,6
1940	75,5	63,8	87,1	76,5	63,4	89	82,7	71	92,5
1945	69,8	56,3	83,2	69,1	54	84,2	76,3	61,4	89,5
1950	67,5	54,5	80,6	67	52,5	81,6	73,1	59,2	85,5
1955	59	44,1	74,4	58,7	41,5	76,4	66,7	51,5	80,5
1960	60,5	46,4	75,2	58,3	42,5	74,7	69,8	56,2	82,3
1965	51,2	35,9	67,2	47,6	30,7	64,8	59,7	44,1	73,7
1970	43,8	29,7	58,2	39,7	25,3	54,1	49,6	35,3	62,8
1975	36,3	23,8	49,5	31,7	19,3	44,6	38,3	26,3	50,1
1980	32,5	20	45,3	27,6	15,8	39,3	36,4	24,4	47,5
1985	22,6	13,5	31,8	18,3	10,4	26,3	23,5	15,9	30,8
1990	19,5	11,2	28	15,5	8,3	22,7	20	12,5	27,5

Source: Anonymous 2001

As Table 2 shows, 80,8% of the Turkish population was illiterate in 1935, but the difference between the sexes was dramatic: 70,7% for the males, over 90% for the females. In 1990, the former rate dropped to a level as low as 10%, but the latter could only drop to 28%. Furthermore, in the Central Anatolia region, where the village of Ayseki is located, illiteracy ratio of both males and females was higher than the national average in 1935. Said ratio lowered below the national average in 1990. However, the situation is somewhat different in the city of Cankiri: illiteracy ratio had been above the national average in 1935, it was approximately the same as the national average in 1990.

Findings

77% of the working female population of the village are married. Their average age of marriage is 18. There was only one woman who was below age 15 when she got married, but none of the males married at such early age. 33% of the local women got married at age 16 or 17, but said ratio is just 3% for the males. 4% of the married women are below age 16. Data collected indicate that 44% of the women got married at age 16 or 17, 52% of them got married before they reach age 21. None of the women got married after age 22. Two women were widowed because their husbands died. The tendency not to divorce, being a common factor in all rural areas of Turkey (Ozden 2000), is alive and well here too. In fact, women refrain from living in the same area after they had a divorce, preferring to return to their parents' house or move to a city.

The biggest social problem of the village is intermarriage. 52% of the women interviewed for this study married a relative of them. This is a cultural problem which must carefully studied and for which appropriate measures must be taken. None of the male population is polygamist. Husbands of all the women interviewed are monogamist.

Average number of children per married woman is 3,24. Women above age 35 have generally over four children; the maximum number of children is eight. Women who want to have maximum two children rate as high as 73.3%. The factor leading to said want is the limited agricultural production, because most of the families who want to have as much children as possible, especially sons, aim to use them as free manpower.

21% of the female population of the village is illiterate, 65% of them finished elementary school. Literate women who have no diploma at all rate 13%. The remaining 1% of them comprises two graduates of junior high school, one graduate of high school, and one graduate of university. As this table indicates, most of the women have only elementary school education, and then discontinue. The situation is not so different for the males. 19% of the male population is illiterate, 72% of them finished elementary school. The major reason of this situation is that there is only an elementary school in the village. Students have to travel 25 km to the nearest junior high school.

A great majority (87%) of the women gave birth to their babies at home. Only the remaining 13% of them

delivered their babies at hospital. None of the woman who gave birth to their babies at home got medical assistance from a midwife; all of them were helped by their neighbours. 75% of the women interviewed for this study had suffered at least one miscarriage. 56% of the married women stated they were applying birth control, a majority of them (80%) use the calendar or coitus interrupts method. 14% of their husbands use a condom, only 6% of the women use an intrauterine device.

In general, the local women are not employed at paid basis. They help agricultural and husbandry production, but the household incomes are managed by their husbands. Since the women have no economic independence, social decisions are made by their husbands in general. As in other rural areas of Turkey, this village has a patriarchal family structure. Most of the women declared that they would attend a vocational course if they had one, pointing out that such a course must be taught by a female teacher.

Although they are not exactly happy in their present lives, all of them have high hopes for the future. In parallel with this tendency, 64% of them stated that they would prefer to live in a city. This factor indicates that they intend to move.

Conclusion

The rate of growth of urbanization in Turkish society reached a peak during the 1950s, but the process of urbanization still continues. Less than 19% of the Turkish population lived in urban settings in 1950. This proportion doubled in less than 25 years, and reached 56.3% in 1990 (Aykan 2000). However, it is a known fact that rural people's move to urban areas caused many social problems, ramshackle and unlicensed suburbs were built around the cities. On the other hand, many rural settlements were deserted; some rural cultures are on the verge of extinction. Disadvantages of moving from rural settlements to urban areas are well known. Therefore, the basic policy must be to develop the rural people locally. As this study indicates, two-third of the rural women want to live in an urban area, not because they dislike their villages, but they suffer many economic problems there. It is known that education of women living in the rural areas of Turkey is a problem. Uneducated women have an important impact on the society's future, because their basic function is considered to bring up children. It is obvious that educated women would bring up their children in a more conscious manner. Therefore, that education starting within the family will positively contribute to the society's development.

In order to improve the rural women's social status, it is an obligation to ensure them to be productive in economic terms. And this necessity requires activating the presently inactive female manpower. For this purpose they must be taught of handicrafts, cottage industry must be encouraged to process raw materials into semi-finished or finished products, or to produce organic food stuff. Furthermore, jobs can be created for women by enabling them to work at home. Given that the handcraft and textile sectors still commission women to make piecework at home in spite of all modern technologic facilities, the system in question looks important in terms of the female manpower's future (Lordoglu 1990).

Unlike most industrialized societies, developing countries generally lack the resources to provide such essential social services as free elementary schools, much less offer welfare payments to the poor. Instead of poverty maintenance-the welfare prototype in the U.S. and Europe-economic development programs in developing countries have had to seek ways to increase the income, productivity, and assets of the poor. Increasingly, the focus has been on assisting small and micro businesses, an approach overlooked in the U.S. until recently (Tinker 2000)

Awareness campaigns must be held to solve the problem of intermarriage. On the other hand, courses must be held to teach the women of birth control methods, and males must be allowed to attend said courses.

Vocational courses must be held in the village, and female teachers must be employed in order to ensure maximum attendance to them, because most of the female population of the village stated that they would not attend such a course unless it is taught by a female teacher.

Although the fact that some of the male villagers go abroad to work looks to create a relative welfare, we do not suggest it on the grounds that it causes the families to break away. Instead, males must be enabled to participate in the local production means. Since the area does not suffer pollution, it has the opportunity to develop organic agricultural production projects for which demand increases day after day. It is obvious that the more the society develops in economic terms, the higher the women's status will raise.

Acknowledgements

I thank Miss Nese Selimoğlu for her valuable assistance in the sample area during research. I also thank Prof. Dr. İlhami Koksal for his considerable supporting in preparing process of this article. Special thanks go to the women of the Ayseki village for their generosity and for sharing their thoughts.

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