



The Light Millennium, in collaboration with the College of Arts and Letters at Stevens Institute of Technology, jointly presented – a panel discussion on:
Empowering Women and Gender Equality: Minority and Discrimination
For the 11th Anniversary Celebration of The Light Millennium Monday, Nov. 14, 2011
At Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey

HOW HAVE WE BECOME MARGINALIZED AND MINORITIZED...

Presentation by Bircan Unver, The Light Millennium

*His Excellency Ambassador Dr. Kohona,
Ms. Gassama of the UNDP
Dean Lisa Dolling,
Prof. Edward Foster,
Distinguished panelists,
And Friends,
Thank You to ALL,*

During a special briefing with the NGOs on October 26, 2011, Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon stated the following: “Women and girls are unfortunately marginalized groups of our society. Thus the UN gives the highest priority to elevate the status of the women such as founding the UN Women.” (1)

This led me to ask myself, we are a really marginalized group in society or a minority?

No, we do not fall under any definitions as minority or marginalized. However, girls and women at large are disadvantaged in benefiting from basic human and social rights... Therefore, yes: “women *are* marginalized” and they are a “minority”.

Women are not represented enough in politics, business and media except for times when they are represented as consumer target or for their body image. In particular, women in the world, only own 3% of the resources compared to men who own 97%. Therefore in real terms, we are a minority.

Even when some of us are drivers of economic development or creators of knowledge in universities, we are still treated by the mainstream media as a commodity for consumption.

The question I keep asking myself is “If we are a significant majority in the world, and if we are the creators of life through giving birth to the next generations; how did the system that incessantly undermines our place in the society emerge?”

H.E. António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees’s following statement might be a reason to this major concern:

“In many circumstances the state itself can be part of the problem instead of being part of the solution.” The centuries and decades long persistent problems and issues have been back-bond of the political, economic, religious and social systems. This applies to the developed countries’, and their “foreign policies” on the

developing countries. We often see that most regime change are conducted through women, which, in most cases undermine women rights and put women in a worse situation.” (2)

Connecting above ideas with tonight’s topic, and its focus area “minority and discrimination” on women that one of the key definition of the term “minority” is as follows:

“a relatively small group of people, especially one commonly discriminated against in a community, society, or nation, differing from others in race, religion, language, or political persuasion : representatives of ethnic minorities | [as adj.] *minority rights*.” (3)

Based upon above definition, women and men, girls and boys, most of us, are minority groups in the U.S. Turkish-American community in particular, is considered as one of the youngest immigrant community and “minority of minorities” in the U.S.

Some of you know that I am from Turkey, raised in Istanbul, and coming from a secular but traditional family as the eldest children of seven. We were four girls and three boys, and girls were majority in the house.

However we were (*girls*) not allowed to play ball in front of the door or ride bicycles. Or men always ate as first. In particular, when we had guests so that everyone fit n the table, the first meal set-up for men, the second one was for women. Today, in most families all around Turkey, girls have to do all the household chores but not the boys..

Nonetheless we had granted “*universal education*” before the word (*term*) even existed in 1936 during the Ataturk era. In 1940, “[Village Institutions](#)” (4) were formed to move the nation and country to a modern and democratic state that was Ataturk’s main vision. During the period of 1940-1946, it has reached its peak nation-wide. This schools picked the poorest girls and boys to educate and train them to be teachers of their villages and towns. From its formation 1940 to closing in 1954, through the “[village institutions](#)”, 1308 women and 15,943 men in total, then Turkey had gained **17,251** village teachers, who’ve been the key instruments in the coming decades for seeding a secular state.

Unfortunately, they were closed by the new government of the time, despite our progress to a more democratic system in multi-party era. Since then, religious schools and institutions rapidly increased and spread out, and have taken up their space that usually undermine the development of “girls” and “women”.

Further, we had one of the first archeology and linguistic universities in the region, and universities encouraged, girls to register starting in 1936 (5) (*example: 1935-1936, Ankara University*). Women have right to vote in Turkey since 1936, ahead of some of European countries. Despite constitutional rights and principle of the foundation of Turkey, awareness and empowering women have been deliberately suppressed by the traditions, political system and religious power, in particular, after Ataturk.

We’ve raised with Ataturk’s visions but it is been blocked within the system on multiple layers and many of his visions and principles were inactivated, cancelled and undermined in favor of certain groups (*or established powers*).

Based on our traditions and culture, girls have been restricted expressing their feelings or pursuing their goals **that was not the law or the constitution** but based on **tradition and effect of religious culture on all layers of societies**.

Girls and women are now more suppressed, controlled, and their basic rights to education and therefore a better life is politically tied in with religion. This has been the most troubling aspect for girls and women, who have been raised with the idealism and principles of secularism, modernism and democracy in Turkey. Unfortunately, “Islamization of

Turkey” has been directly targeted “*girls and women*” in the forms of changing the regime, life-style and human landscape of Turkey. And, it is backed-up, promoted and presented in the U.S., and west at large within the **pre-text “for more democratization of Turkey” and “freedom of religion” but not as a mandate empowering “girls and women rights”**. This also has been directly tied in some Turkish communities that “girls” required covering hair and have to wear hijab (*head-wear, head-scarves, or in Turkish usage: turban covering from the neck to front head*) starting five years old and on. This is also, as one of the elements of girls and women that open head and visibility of “hair” is prohibited and “sin” by the religion.

Based on above given fact, and what has been happening in Turkey that we can also see and better understand Mr. Guterres’s statement in this context, which is: women problem is mainly created and sustained by the state(s) and, political system(s) as well as part of the international politics and foreign policies of the west on the least and developing countries.

With that the UN and UN-Women in conjunction to the UNDP, are the main channels to bring in solution to protect girls and women and hoping that won’t allow that “religious goals and ambitions” won’t continuing shaping and determined today’s, and future girls and women of Turkey.

As conclusion, it is the time for each of us to work towards and claim our place and role as well as obtain it in every level of society.

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Lastly, I would like to thank to the keynote speakers, distinguished panelists, Prof. Edward Foster, co-organizer and moderator, and to Dean Lisa Dolling, for hosting this event as well as for her opening remarks. I also thank to Jennifer McBryan and Dave Silverstein for their contribution during the preparation process of the event.

Also, I would like to thank to Cem Zorlular and Cora Fernandez for their contribution in this.

References:

- 1) UN Secretary General Ban Ki-MOON: "Women and girls are unfortunately marginalized groups of our society."
http://www.lightmillennium.org/2011_27th/un_sg_moon_ngos_meeting.html
- 2) H.E. António GUTERRES: "There is 28 million people, who have been internally displaced due to natural disasters or internal conflicts such as Palestinians."
http://www.lightmillennium.org/2011_27th/antonio_guterres.html
- 3) New Oxford American Dictionary (*Electronic version*)
- 4) Village Institutes: <http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/TVillage/StirlingC12.html> “Village Institute , to train primary school teacher, 17 April 1940 by Law No. 3803 dated and opened schools. Completely unique to Turkey on December 28, 1938, these education projects in the national education minister, Hasan Ali Yücel personally directed by him.” Turkish Village (1965), Paul Stirling
- 5) Ankara University – History <http://www.ankara.edu.tr/english/history.php>
- 6) #2