

Gender

EMINE ONARAN İNCİRLİOĞLU

# Village Women in Central Anatolia: Reality, Models, Anomalies<sup>1</sup>

A large body of literature on gender relations in rural transformation points out women's disadvantaged position in market production and in the mechanization process of agriculture, more specifically in capitalist transformation. Feminist literature concerning the concept of patriarchy is similarly extensive and focuses, amongst other issues, on the emergence of Semitic monotheisms stemming from Abraham (namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam), in which women's status rapidly declined. In both groups of literature, ethnographic descriptions run the risk of particularizing asymmetrical and exploitative gender relations in the studied communities, while in the case of Anatolia, for example, there is nothing particularly rural, Turkish or Muslim about these relations.

## A Sakaltutan family.

'Reality' is infinitely complex and full of contradictions. Models, whether they be descriptive or causal, are simplifications of that reality at different levels of abstraction, for different purposes, and to be used in different contexts. Models are meant to be efficiently expressive, straightforward, decidedly 'parsimonious,' and consistent representations of reality. In some ways, writing, including ethnographic writing, is like model production, as it is a selective process of simplification. The trouble, of course, is to account for the anomalies that are left out of our clear-cut models, yet are well and alive in 'reality'.

The case of village women in Turkey is a good example.<sup>2</sup> There seem to be two powerful models for 'village women'. Both make sense in different contexts; both leave out important elements of 'reality', and both may be (and are) used (and abused) for different purposes. One model portrays 'the village woman' as insightful, wise, powerful, and confident; the other as overworked, undervalued, ignorant, and submissive. The view of women as powerful stems from Kemalism, which focuses on village women's participation in the labour force since the Ottoman period when upper class urban women were confined to the 'private domain'. The view of village women as downtrodden is probably more common, not only in the media but also in social science literature. It is interesting to note that the same themes are used in the construction of both

## Anis Belik, Sakaltutan with daughter and neighbour.



PHOTO: EMINE ONARAN İNCİRLİOĞLU, 1992



PHOTO: EMINE ONARAN İNCİRLİOĞLU, 1992

images, albeit with different implications and consequences: gendered division of labour, illiteracy, separation of public-private domains, and Islam.

The two Kayseri villages where research was conducted for this study provide ample ethnographic evidence against both of these models. Although division of labour by gender defines what men and women are culturally expected to do, it is by no means rigid. Depending on the household composition, men and women may do each other's work, and villagers understand that the conditions override the norms. Moreover, the norms do not yield clear-cut explanatory models. Both men and women are involved in farm work, as long as they have rights over land, and the so-called public-private dichotomization does not explain the gender division of labour in the village. Other dichotomizations such as 'production versus reproduction' or 'paid versus unpaid' work for market exchange and subsistence, respectively, are not applicable to the situation either. It is perfectly acceptable for both men and women to be involved in paid work, and in the case of some households, carpet weaving, which is predominantly women's work, is the only source of income, making women the only bread-winners while men are involved in unpaid work in subsistence agriculture. Furthermore, long-term fieldwork has suggested that village women's work is not undervalued, contrary to arguments in the literature.

Illiteracy, used synonymously with ignorance, is usually considered as a major depravity in most social science literature, which holds that it incarcerates women into submission. Education, then, is seen as a consciousness-raising, liberating force. Simi-

larly, Islam is associated, whether it be implicit or explicit, with the 'backward' and 'traditional' image of village women, while it is implied that their urban sisters have surpassed those 'primitive' stages. Underdevelopment in Muslim societies, women's subordinate position, their covering and restricted formal education, are portrayed as functions of Islam. The irony is that, while the early Republican images of 'powerful village women' were linked with isolation from Islamic influence, those of 'subordinate village women' are associated with the persistence of Islamic influence in villages. It does not take long-term ethnographic fieldwork, however, to realize that there is more to both education and status than basic literacy and schooling. Likewise, what passes as Islam is highly diverse and negotiable, very much dependent on the bargaining power of those involved.

Numerous ethnographic accounts that focus on the relative power of 'the village woman' through division of labour and spatial segregation further her ambiguous image. Her informal power in the 'domestic sphere' and control over the household income are seen as evidence of her access to significant power resources. Her autonomous social organization outside of her husband's network is seen as countering the image of powerless village women.

The problem with these representations is their selective use of ethnographic evidence. Because the images created in these models present consistent patterns, they, at the same time, create anomalies, namely everything that remains outside the patterns. The exceptional cases, however, would not be labelled anomalous if there were no models that defined the norm. In other words, if statistically infrequent cases are excluded from

our models, those models will not represent a reality that is able to accommodate the so-called anomalies.

Unfortunately, these models of village women in Turkey, whether they portray powerless, helpless, subordinate images of women or emphasize 'women's power', are equally detrimental and disregard inequalities. They not only misrepresent village women in Turkey, but are also politically damaging. Neither ignoring nor dwelling on anomalies will alleviate gender inequalities. ◆

## Notes

1. Parts of this article are adapted from an earlier work by the author: 'Images of Village Women in Turkey: Models and Anomalies', pp. 199-223, in: Zehra F. Arat (ed.) (1998), *Deconstructing Images of 'The Turkish Woman'*, New York: St. Martin's Press.
2. The author's research in two agricultural villages in the Kayseri province began in January 1986, when the late Paul Stirling, British anthropologist, hired her as his research assistant to continue his longitudinal study of the villages since 1949. The author's native language, Turkish, facilitated her task of gaining an understanding of the local village women.

*Emine Onaran İncirlioğlu studied architecture at the Middle East Technical University of Ankara, Turkey; and anthropology at the University of Florida, USA. She conducted ethnographic fieldwork in two Anatolian villages, focusing on rural transformation, rural-urban migration and gender relations. She currently teaches space, culture, and identity-related courses and basic design at the Department of Landscape Architecture and Urban Design of the Bilkent University, Ankara. E-mail: Incirli@Bilkent.EDU.TR*