

## IMMIGRANT WOMEN, IMMIGRANT MEN: A WAY TO CHANGING IDENTITY\*

### Göçmen Kadınlar, Göçmen Erkekler: Kimliğin Değişimi

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#### Abstract

Armenia is one of the countries which have given out-migration. After 1989 when Soviet Union collapsed out-migration has increased in Armenia as it does in other post-Soviet countries. Proportion of migrants who preferred migrating to Turkey is lower than who migrated to Russia, USA or European Countries but it has increased after the 2000.

Armenian migrants' main purpose, in general, in Turkey, is finding a job to make money to send to the relatives who stay in Armenia. However the migrants could be categorized as temporary and permanent migrants; they are all illegal workers and some of them are illegal migrants.

Most of the Armenian immigrants are women and gender roles and status are undergoing a change in host country, in Turkey, since women gain strength by making money. Therefore women and men give different responses and maintain an attitude in a society which is not as any other country considering political and historical relations with Armenia.

In this paper, it will be tried to analyze the relation between changing gender roles and national identity.

**Keywords:** National identity, Armenian immigrants, Gender

#### Özet

Ermenistan dış göç veren ülkelerden bir tanesidir. Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağılmasıyla 1989'dan sonra dış göç diğer eski Sovyet ülkelerinde olduğu gibi artmıştır. Türkiye'ye göç edenlerin oranı, Rusya, ABD ve Avrupa ülkelerine göç edenlerden daha az olmakla birlikte 2000lerden sonra artmıştır.

Ermenistanlı göçmenlerin, genel olarak, Türkiye'ye gelme amacı iş bularak para kazanmak ve Ermenistan'da kalan akrabalarına para göndermektir. Her ne kadar göçmenler geçici ve sürekli olarak kategorize edilebilirse de, hemen hepsi illegal işçilerdir ve büyük bölümü de illegal göçmenlerdir.

Göçmenlerin büyük oranı kadındır. Toplumsal cinsiyet ilişkileri göç edilen ülkede değişmektedir; kadınlar para kazanmaya başladıklarından sonra güçlenmektedirler. Bununla birlikte kadınlar ve erkekler, Ermenistan'la ilişkileri bakımından politik ve tarihsel olarak diğer ülkelerden farklılık gösteren bir ülkede farklı tepkiler vermekte ve farklı davranış tarzları geliştirmektedirler.

Bu çalışmada, toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri ve ulusal kimlik ilişkisi analiz edilmeye çalışılacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Ulusal kimlik, Ermenistanlı göçmenler, Toplumsal cinsiyet

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## National Identity

In this paper I will try to discuss whether labour force migration from Armenia to Turkey which increasingly continues since 2000 creates a differentiation in 'national identity' through gender.

However, I should mention that this research that I am going to present is a hypothetical study in progress rather than a concluded one.

The principle question of this paper is the following: Do the changing status and roles of women and men affect national identity during and after the migration process? If so, how and why?

In the first place, we need to elucidate how the concept of national identity is construed. Anthony Smith establishes the common features of national identity as "a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members" (Smith, 1991:14). In this paper, national identity will rather be taken in the context of culture and symbols although other categories will also be taken into consideration.

According to Poole, "the nation is a specific cultural object. It exists in and through the language we speak, the public symbols we acknowledge, the history and literature we were taught at school, the music we listen to, the currency we use, the sporting activities we enjoy, and the news bulletins on the television. These cultural artefacts enable us to recognise that our way of life has an objective external existence, and they constitute the social environment which we recognise as ours and in which we are 'at home'... We come to feel that our national identity is as natural and inescapable as our gender (another successful piece of Bildung). Our national culture provides a moment of self-recognition through which we both confirm our individual existence and become conscious of ourselves as having a collective existence (1999: 12).

On the other hand, symbols of national identity referring to gender are a different matter. Nira Yuval-Davis applies "deconstructionist analysis to the relationships between gender and nation, and includes the ideological and symbolic modes of locating women ... as vital components of cultural reproduction. Culture or 'cultural stuff', she argues, rather than being fixed and homogeneous, should be seen as a rich resource, usually full of internal contradictions, which is used selectively by different social agents in various social projects within specific power relations and political discourse in and outside the collectivity. Hegemonic nationalist symbols and narratives proclaim the need for men to defend both the 'Motherland' and the nation's women who symbolise and express its 'purity'. They call on men to sacrifice themselves for their women and children. In the home gender relations become constitutive of the 'essence' of cultures, which in turn are to be seen as intergenerational ways

of life that include such facets as family relations, ways of cooking and eating, domestic labour, play and bedtime stories” (Quoted from Yuval-Davis, 1997 Smith, 1998: 207).

“Since women are constructed both individually and collectively as the symbolic carriers of a society’s identity and honour, they are expected to carry this burden of representation.” (Yuval-Davis, 2007: 93-94). On the other hand, besides this mission imposed upon women, there are tasks cut out also for men. These tasks are mostly the ones that can be defined in terms of “public sphere”, such as fighting, protection, etc.

However, national identity is not static. Although common characteristics may be deduced and general definitions may be introduced, each individual re-constructs identity. Identification should be seen, not as an artefact or an outcome, but as a construction, a process never completed. Identities are “increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation” (Hall, 1996: 4). Therefore, it seems to the point to ask the question how immigrants, not only as Armenians but also as women and men as well as immigrants, etc., construct their ‘national identity’. What kind of a national identity do we see at the intersection point of being an immigrant, women/men and Armenian?

### **Migration from Armenia to Turkey**

At this point, it will be useful to pay attention primarily to the structure of migration on the route from Armenia to Turkey. After determining this structure, the ways of immigrants’ construction/reproduction of national identity will be scrutinized.

The field study I carried out includes 15 individual interviews and one group interview. Individual interviews were conducted with 7 Istanbul Armenians and 9 immigrant Armenians. In the group interview, 1 man and 5 women were interviewed. The following information that I am going to present was obtained from these interviews.

As it is known, Armenia is among the countries having the highest rate of immigrates. Especially the collapse of the Soviet Union, earthquake and Karabagh War has accelerated the immigration process. In the first years, the immigration wave from Armenia has flowed mostly to Russia, the United States and European countries. It was detected that the reason especially behind the migration wave to Russia was geographical, cultural and linguistic affinity. The migrations to the United States and Europe were related to the diasporic communities in these regions (Geverkyan, et al., 2006: 16-14). Although Turkey is geographically close to Armenia, border gates between Turkey and Armenia

are closed and there are historical and diplomatic problems between the two countries. Despite the fact that there are many Armenians living in Turkey, it did not emerge as a country as attractive as especially the United States and European countries in the first stage of immigrations. Immigrations to Turkey seem to gain speed only after 2000. The reason for this becomes somewhat clear by the elucidation of the structure of immigration from Armenia to Turkey.

Difficulties experienced by immigrants and the diminishing job opportunities in Russia, bureaucratic difficulties imposed by Europe and the United States such as getting a visa as well as the financial burden were the major obstructions for immigrants on the way to these countries. Thus, the people who immigrate to Turkey appear to be ones who generally have limited or no options regarding where to immigrate, and the ones with limited financial possibilities. On the other hand, it is also a factor that they still have ongoing relations in Turkey, or relations consisting merely of a name/address/telephone number. It should still be mentioned that people, who have no relations at all, yet somehow was informed about the possibility of finding a job in Turkey, are quite common among the ones who immigrate to this country. Women constitute the majority of people who immigrate to Turkey for work. Based on the information obtained from the field study, it is likely to state that while middle aged women above 40 years of age were immigrating especially in the stage, this age average is nowadays gradually decreasing. Men are outnumbered by women and they generally follow the women in their families who have immigrated to Turkey. Although the exact number of immigrants is unknown, officially declared number is approximately 40.000; and the number of academics, journalists and immigrants working in this field is not more than 10.000. Primary reason for this is that although immigrants enter Turkey legally, they eventually become illegal residents because they do not leave Turkey within the period they are legally permitted to stay. There are also the ones who immigrate through illegal ways, and it is quite difficult to know their exact number. Moreover, official information received from border check-points does not help in estimating this number, because it is obtained only from check-in and check-out records. For example, one person may check-in and check-out more than once in a year. It cannot be determined whether these check-ins and outs are by a single individual or different persons.

Immigration follows a difficult route especially by highway. The journey, which starts in Yerevan, continues through Georgia and Turkey's Black Sea coast line, and ends in Istanbul. It lasts approximately 36 hours. Although there are plane trips available for the last few years, this expensive travel option is not preferred at least in the immigrants' first entrance to the country. While the bus trip costs 50 USD<sup>1</sup>, the plane trip is four times expensive – that is 200 Euros.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 USD was 1,52 TL in June, 2009. 1 Euro was 2,17 TL.

Women mostly work at domestic jobs such as working as maids, caretakers for the sick/elderly/children. The number of other jobs including prostitution is quite low. Men, who want to take a job or succeed in finding one, work generally as workers at construction sites or take irregular painting and washing jobs. Men can find employment at much harder and temporary jobs compared to women. Therefore, women can have more and regular income, and support their people in the homeland to a greater extent.

Immigrants reside generally around the neighbourhood of Kumkapı, where all kinds of immigrants, fugitives and refugees live. Other than Kumkapı, these immigrants prefer residing in neighbourhoods occupied densely by Istanbul Armenians. Usually a few immigrants share the same house. Each room in the house is used as a separate house, and common spheres such as kitchen and bathroom are shared.

### **Immigrants and “Others”**

In this paper, the lives of immigrants will be discussed in the context of their relationship with themselves and the “others”. In this respect, “others” refer to the people whom the immigrants are in contact with and who are non-Armenian immigrants. In short, others are: Non-Armenian immigrants, Istanbul Armenians and Turks. I have to mention here that these “others” are not categories determined in the context of national identity. Nevertheless, it is possible to argue at the end of this paper whether the above mentioned others can also be considered as others in terms of national identity. Yet, in the first place, their perception of themselves and the process they experience should be evaluated.

Turkey is the last destination of preference for immigrants. They have immigrated to Turkey because they had no other choice.

*“I have never though in my life that I would one day come to Turkey. I haven’t even imagined it.”*

*“If someone had told me that I would one day go to Turkey and work and live there; I would have considered him crazy.”*

It is the last solution to the difficulties, poverty and hopelessness they go through in their homelands. Every immigrant expresses that they immigrated to survive like all other Armenian immigrants and to help their relatives they had left behind in Armenia; this expression is articulated both as a reason and a defence against the accusations they face or may face with. They explain their existence in Turkey by this justification. In the period they spend in Turkey, they emphasize that they do no “wrong or harm” to one another and try to show the others the process they go through. Their culture and customs are what the immigrants try to protect and maintain within their own community. Their references to culture and tradition will be dealt later. Yet, another significant

point is the fact that especially women do not work in prostitution sector unlike other immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Russia. Moreover, against the accusations of theft directed especially to women who work at domestic jobs, they specifically try to emphasize that they live an upright life and turn an honest penny.

*“We wouldn’t shelter such people among ourselves. We do not harbour thieves and prostitutes. There was once such a person whom I told “what do you think you are doing. What you are doing is disgraceful”. I slapped her in the face and sent her right back to Yerevan”.*

Their relationship with non-Armenian immigrants: Although they live in the same neighbourhood or street, or even in the same building, their relationship with immigrants from other countries is minimal. They do not initiate contact with other immigrants even in issues related to earning their living such as finding a job. And when they are asked about their relationship with immigrants from other countries, they generally just say “no, none” after a short pause. They mention that other immigrants also come to Turkey for the same reasons, and they build their relationship with the other immigrants on the common basis of coming to Turkey to earn money. And this empathy is not developed further. They leave the issue aside after identifying their status as “the fate of some people”. This identification also seems to be the justification for their existence in Turkey.

Their relationship with Istanbul Armenians: Most probably, the most complex relationship between the immigrants and other communities is the one they establish with Istanbul Armenians. Although Istanbul Armenians is the only group with whom their relationship is the most intense, it also appears to be the same group they “complain” the most and experience problems with.

When immigrants first come to Turkey, they generally contact an Istanbul Armenian and take a job at their work place or house. The primary reason for this is the fact that the only people they are able to reach in their network of relationship are the Armenians with whom they do not suffer from language problems.

They establish their relationship with Istanbul Armenians on the common ground of shared language and fatherland, and as a sort of continuation of their link with the past. On the other hand, however, issues like culture, language, being an Armenian, gender, inter-family relationships, education and money constitute a ground of differentiation and conflict.

Language is one of the most important issues. Although the spoken language in both groups is Armenian, dialect difference create tension among the groups. Although the Western Armenian spoken by Istanbul Armenians and the eastern Armenian spoken by the immigrants enable them to communicate and understand each other without much difficulty, each group reject and exclude the dialect spoken by the other group.

*“they speak another language, you see? It is indeed the same language, but different like Turkish and Azerbaijane!”*

### **Culture**

The category of “culture” emerges as a category covering different areas such as language, morals, inter-family relationships and so forth. The immigrants consider Istanbul Armenians as “degenerated”, because they do not live by the values of the Armenians back in Armenia and they follow a different life style.

*“I have an uncle here, and his family. They live in Sarıyer. When I first came here, I stayed with them for a few months. But they are very different. Their culture is different from ours. I see that the women do not care much for the family at home. There are no family values left. Then I moved to Kumkapı. Now I live there with my friends. I sometimes visit my uncle. But I feel better with my friends here.”*

### **Education**

They mention education as another area of conflict. The majority of immigrants are people with a profession who received their education before the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, they rarely find the opportunity to carry out their profession in Turkey. Besides, they believe that Armenians are different from and superior to Istanbul Armenians in fields of art such as music and theatre. But they work for Istanbul Armenians in their work places or houses. Istanbul Armenians are economically in a much better state and the immigrants have to work in order to make a living and earn the money necessary to support their relatives. The immigrants express their anger towards the fact that the education level of Istanbul Armenian women are low, while the immigrants they employ as maids in their houses are indeed well-educated. They believe this is why Istanbul Armenians humiliate them.

*“One day my lady was listening to Demis Roussos at home. When I said ‘oh! Demis Roussos’, she asked me ‘You know Demis Roussos?’. She thinks that we immigrants don’t know a thing. I went to a concert of Demis Roussos in 1970. She knew Demis Roussos only recently. She heard it from her friends.”*

Similarly, Istanbul Armenians define especially the first immigrants from Armenia as “rude”, “provincial” and “uncivilized” people.

*“The first comers were provincial and ignorant people, you see? They also did some mistakes. These are poor people. They come here to earn a living and send money to their relatives in Armenia”*

Here is another example: again an Istanbul Armenian, during the Grape Festival, said the following at the table in the presence of 3 Armenian immigrant women:

*"I have been visiting this neighbourhood for years. I know all the immigrants. There is no single house I haven't entered. Once I met L. (one of the immigrants living in the house), I stopped seeing them all. Now I only visit this place. L. is different from the others. She is intelligent and cultured."*

Their relationship with Turks: Immigrants live in Istanbul almost as "invisible" beings. Except for a few neighbourhoods occupied mostly by Armenians, they do not go to other places when they do not need to. Their relationship with Turks is mostly based on business. Yet, they mention Turks, especially Turkish women, with positive references. Their positive references depend mostly on the fact that they are not ill-treated by the Turkish people for their Armenian identity and that Turkish people are more traditional in their family relationships compared to Armenians.

*"I took a taxi. I was to go to Eminönü. Although the taxi driver noticed that I was a foreigner, he took the short way to Eminönü."*

*"My daughter was visiting me. Once she was very nervous in the bus since she didn't know which stop to get off, and she was continuously asking if that was the right stop. The people on the bus said 'Calm down, take it easy, we will let you know when you are supposed to get off' and they did so. My daughter was surprised. I told her that I had experienced the same thing and they also helped me in the same way."*

*"Turks [Turkish Women] are better than the Armenians [Istanbul Armenians]. They look after their families. They cook and serve meals to their husbands."*

However, these statements do not mean that they do not criticise Turks and Turkish women; only the dose and emphasis of their criticism is different.

A 29 year old immigrant says the following:

*"There are some men in the holding company I work. In the morning they come to work with shirts that need ironing. They have their breakfast at work with pastry. Their wives do not prepare breakfast. I can't relate to that."*

The reason behind the difference between their references to Turks and Armenians is their expectation that Istanbul Armenians would be more like them because of their Armenian identity and that Turks would be more different from them. Namely, Istanbul Armenians are criticised more for their "negative" characteristics, while Turks are given more credit for their "positive" characteristics. Norms, values and attitudes are evaluated from the lens of the nation. "I" and the "other" are determined over national identity. Istanbul Armenians are considered unsuccessful as carriers of cultural symbols and customs in their gender roles and attitudes as well as values and norms.



### **Conclusion: Perception of Women and Men**

As revealed by the above mentioned examples, women base all definitions, similarities and difference on the concept of women, family and household, while base theirs on areas outside household and family which we can refer to as "public sphere". It was more difficult to convince men for an interview, because they did not want to accept that I could talk to them about something other than history and politics because I was Turkish and they were Armenian. The ones who volunteered to be interviewed mostly talked about political and diplomatic issues such as the difficulties of finding a job in Turkey and the closed border gates between Armenia and Turkey, and in the context of Istanbul Armenians. A 25 year old male immigrant whom I interviewed stated that he would go back to Armenia in a year, because he felt uncomfortable about the excessive discussions and disputes in daily life and the media on Armenia and Armenians due to the arguments about the border gate between Armenia and Turkey.

While women defined alienation and transformation over men, men defined these concepts over Turks.

According to Poole, "like other identities, a national identity provides us with a specific moral agenda, ... as with the case of pride, the embarrassment or feeling of responsibility attests to a shared identity" (Poole,1999 :64). Comments made on immigrant Armenians and Istanbul Armenians comply with the moral content of national identity. While immoral behaviour of immigrants caused them to feel embarrassment, they are annoyed and disappointed by the unfulfilled family values and social gender roles.

How is the national identity of immigrant women and men shaped in the light of all these discussions? As a matter of fact, the answer emerges at the intersection point of women's and men's working conditions and their relationship with the above mentioned four groups. Although women are expected to experience double jeopardy due to their immigrant identity and gender roles, this is not observed to be the case, because women could open a working sphere for themselves and they lead an isolated life in the house they live and work. This isolated life, at the same time, provides them with the opportunity to maintain their traditional status and roles and construct their identity on these values. Although men spend more time in public sphere, they seem to construct their national identity and their notion of "I" and the "other" over history and politics rather than their personal experiences. Consequently, they reconstruct their identity and identify the "other" as the nationally different.

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