Leaving Footprints in Houston: Answers to Questions on Women and the Gülen Movement

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Abstract

Feminists question the extent to which M. Fethullah Gülen, the Gülen movement, and individuals inspired by the movement promote women's status, self-determination, and equal professional opportunity with men in Turkish culture characterized by patriarchal gender norms. Two major critiques are that gender norms in the Gülen movement reflect limits on women's professional equality found in wider Turkish culture and that most women comply with little questioning of these norms. This article offers practice theory-based interpretations of life histories from Turkish women inspired by Mr. Gülen living in Houston, Texas during 2004. These provide examples of women in the movement who question cultural and religious beliefs about gender, if informally, and seek to expand possibilities for themselves in professional and personal life. Although one of Mr. Gülen's most influential ideas is that individuals contribute to changing society by their everyday lives, continued study will show whether the life choices of women affect wide-spread gender norms in the movement's future.

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Feminists are questioning whether M. Fethullah Gülen, the Gülen movement, and individuals inspired by the movement promote advancement of women's status in family and public life by enabling women to hold power in public positions and have an equal role with men in developing social and religious worldviews, or whether they perpetuate limits on women in professional leadership roles and dissuade them from challenging status quo gender beliefs (Göle, 2003; Turam, 2000; White 2002). This concern is part of a broader examination of the extent to which the Turkish government's top-down modernizing reforms over the past 100 years as well as Muslim intellectuals' efforts to apply Turkish Islamism in contemporary society have increased women's status, self-determination, and equal opportunity in a culture characterized by patriarchal gender norms (Arat, 1996; Arat, 1997; Arat, 1998; Kagitcibasi, 1986; Kandiyoti, 1998). Women's contributions to society through family life, volunteerism, and lower paying professions should never be discounted. However, feminists focus on equal

opportunity in public professions and thought leadership on the premise that these are essential for women to gain and maintain status in both public society and family life (Kagitcibasi, 1986). Also, as the Gülen movement is increasingly important in "defining the contemporary global Islamic experience" (Voll 2003, 238), it has a duty to exemplify women's equal opportunity at all levels to use their talents for economic security, professional achievement, and thought leadership in developing an Islamic worldview.

Feminists analyze the Gülen movement as a whole as well as according to lives of individual women living in Turkey and in the movement's philanthropic communities in developing countries. They find the status and roles of these middle- and upper-class moderate Turkish Islamists (those seeking to influence society through social versus political means) reflect freedoms as well as limits on women that have developed in the Turkish state's and moderate Islamism's modernizing efforts (Turam, 2000; White, 2002; Yavuz 2003). Turam (2000) offers two major critiques. First, Mr. Gülen's ideas encourage women to hold professional or volunteer positions outside their homes in accord with legal reforms. However, his thoughts on gender roles also can lead to limits found in wider Turkish culture on women's professional and leadership equality with men. Second, women inspired by Gülen's moderate Islamism are widely complicit with these limiting gender norms.

This article adds to the discussion of these two critiques by offering my qualitative research into and interpretations of life histories from Turkish women inspired by Mr. Gülen living in Houston, Texas during 2004 (Stephenson, 2005). Interpreting life histories brings to light examples of women's perspectives on social issues as demonstrated in their everyday practices and major life decisions (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Allport, 1965; Coles, 2001; Vandsemb, 1995). I interpreted life histories in the framework of practice theory, which views cultures, norms, and worldviews from the perspective of being experienced and lived out in everyday practices by individuals acting for their own benefit (Bourdieu, 1977; de Certeau, 1984; Ortner, 1996). Practice theory is especially relevant in today's world where the speed at which a myriad of possible beliefs and life ways are shared around the globe expands the possible life choices for many people (Appadurai, 1996; Ong, 1999). Individuals' consciousness of influencing culture from what has previously been thought of as the "bottom-up" is still being questioned as is their actual power to improve their life chances (Lamphere, Ragoné, & Zavella, 1997; Ong, 1999; Ortner, 1996).

One of Mr. Gülen's most influential ideas is that individuals contribute by their everyday lives to social discourses on Turkish identity, Islamism, and remedies for social problems. They can model disciplined and moral lives, be financially and intellectually successful, give time and money to support development projects nationwide and worldwide, and raise an ethical and well-rounded generation that

can be part of national and international leadership (Gülen, 1999; Ünal & Williams, 2000; Yavuz, 2003). The movement's emphasis on media and transnationalism (see Ong, 1999; Schiller, Basch, & Blanc, 1994) also promotes global sharing of worldviews and possible life choices (Yavuz & Esposito, 2003). As life histories from Houston's Gülen community demonstrate, women in the movement practice this informal process of creating social change through everyday life to make a place for themselves in public society as moderate Islamists and to influence limiting gender norms. Women who do not formally resist limitations may do so informally both verbally and in their life choices (Abu-Lughod, 1998; Lamphere et al., 1997; Ortner, 1996).

In the context of socially acceptable life possibilities available to Turkish women inspired by Gülen, what do the following examples of choices and concerns tell about their views on gender norms in the Gülen movement and Turkish culture? Is achieving leadership roles in formal religious interpretation and the movement's public activities important to them at this time? What limitations are important to them now? In what ways do they negotiate, legitimize, question, and even resist limitations? Although this qualitative research into individual lives does not tell everything about women in the movement, it does present some ways women think about and negotiate gender norms.

Gender Norms in Turkish Society and the Gülen Movement

In order to interpret women's choices, comments, and the answers these provide to feminist critiques we must know the basic ideas about gender and possible lives for women that have developed along with all other aspects of the Gülen movement in the context of Turkish history (Turam, 2000; Yavuz & Esposito, 2003). Encouraging women's equal rights and visibility in public positions has enabled both the Turkish government and the Gülen movement to demonstrate they are modern in Europe-oriented definitions (Bozdoğan & Kasaba, 1997; Turam, 2000; White, 2002). Turkey's 1926 institution of a civil code and continuing reforms emphasized women's rights in court, suffrage, inheritance of property, education, employment, and family life (Arat, 1998). M. K. Atatürk, head of state in the newly formed republic, stated, "Turkish women shall be free, enjoy education, and occupy a position equal to that of men as they are entitled to" (as cited in Turam, 2000, 258). Especially for women in upwardly mobile classes, the republican revolution ". . . ma[d]e for a liberal aura and allowed women to enter public life as professionals, writers, and activists" (Arat, 1998, 8). Gülen's vision for women is based in Islam and shares similarities with that of Atatürk (Turam 2000). Gülen's support of Islamist women's education, employment, and world travel encourages the possibility for them to attain the best education and go on to public professions.

However, women's education and visibility in professional positions can be merely a token of equality rather than an outcome of true equal opportunity to use their talents toward personal growth and economic security as well as leadership in developing an Islamic worldview. Other beliefs in the Gülen movement and Turkish society that women's primary role is as nurturers cause women dilemmas in taking advantage of professional employment or being in leadership. For example, Atatürk also said the following:

> The duty of the Turkish woman is raising generations that are capable of preserving and protecting the Turk with his mentality, strength and determination. The woman who is the source and social foundation of the nation can fulfill her duty only if she is virtuous. (as cited in Arat, 1998, 1)

Based on interpretations of the *Qur'an*, and the *Hadith*, Gülen also speaks of women's God-given role as compassionate, educated mothers who rear the next generation of a strong Turkish nation.

> Women train and educate children, and establish order, peace, and harmony in the home. They are the first teachers in the school of humanity. At a time when some are in search of a new place for them in society, we would like to remind them once again of the unique position God bestowed upon them. (Gülen, 2000, 52)

On the other hand, men are considered intrinsically suited to leadership. The ideal for men in Turkey and the movement often remains as the professionally employed financial providers and keepers of the worldview who display authority, intelligence, and less emotional personalities. Women in the Gülen movement as well as secularist (non-religious or privately religious) women in Turkey have experienced the following limits (Durakbasa, A. & Ilyasoglu, A., 2001; Turam, 2000; White, 2002).

Many women inspired by the Gülen movement feel they can best serve their nation and God in low-paid or non-paid roles such as mothers, foundation volunteers, and teachers (Turam, 2000). Even so, they do often enjoy the level of status common for women in upwardly-mobile social classes rather than the subservice more common in lower-class, fundamental Islamist homes (White, 2002). Yet statistics show opportunities through professional work are essential for women's true and sustained status (Kagitcibasi, 1986). As experienced by women around the world, attempting to fulfill both expectations as primary nurturers and as professionals can lead to the burden of the "superwoman syndrome." As a woman in Turkey associated with the Gülen movement explained to me:

> Society has an attitude that no matter what your accomplishments are in life you are to care for your house as a beloved wife and caring mother. You get your education and then marry

not too late or too early. You work outside the home, but be home before your husband to have a clean house and good hot meals. This is superwoman!

Projects of building modern nations around the world have often called for, ". . . both women's greater participation in the public world – through education, unveiling, and political participation – and women's enormous responsibility for the domestic sphere" (Abu-Lughod, 1998, 8).

Inequality also arises when women who chose to work professionally do not have power in public places. Although women do work in the movement's media, business, and education enterprises, they do not necessarily share equally in high positions, generally do not take part in official religious interpretation, and often look to men's authority (Turam, 2000). (Many men in the Gülen movement also work in beneficial but lower paying professions as philanthropists and teachers and are not in a position to contribute at a high level to the movement's worldview. Further study is needed to understand the relationship between men's and women's status in the movement.)

Women and men in the Gülen movement often maintain a level of separation for purity, which can result in absence of women from men's leadership activities (Turam, 2000). Separation can also entail the option of veiling (wearing a headscarf and modest dress) for women. Serious resistance from secularists and fundamental Islamists to veiled women holding positions in public places has further limited women who choose to veil from taking professional or powerful positions in society. Moderate Islamist women who opt to veil have resisted this limitation by informal methods with some success (Göle, 2003).

In conclusion, many middle- and upper-class women in Turkey, including those of the Gülen movement, are able to obtain highest education. Many are visible in professions. However, ambivalences in gender beliefs and norms lead to the conclusion that the Turkish state and the Gülen movement still " . . . equat[e] women's equality and liberation with women's public visibility instead of creating specific channels to women's equality and emancipation" (Turam, 2000, 275). According to Turam's research, most women in the movement rationalize and support their "subordinated agency" instead of questioning and challenging it (289).

Women in Houston Question and Legitimize Gender Norms

In Houston's Gülen community similar beliefs of gender separation, men's role as leaders and financial providers, and women's primary role as nurturers had led to similar outcomes. Men were largely recognized as leaders of the community's educational endeavors, cultural foundation, and interfaith dialogue institute. Women were active as students, mothers, volunteers, teachers, or in professions outside the movement's cooperative activities. In response to the critique that women in the movement support limits to professional goals and leadership opportunities, life histories from Houston's Gülen community give examples of those who informally resisted limiting potential of some gender beliefs while they rationalized others. Their awareness of limitations was primarily informed by sources outside the movement such as personal experiences, media, university attendance, and examples of women they look up to in society. Their ways of negotiating around limits were informed by sources outside as well as inside the movement. In the following examples I highlight stories from early adulthood when identity-defining decisions such as education, marriage, and career were made. I edited the following stories for clarity and conciseness. Contributors reviewed them to ensure my representations reflected their realities, as an important aspect of qualitative methodology.

 One informant had lived in Houston for two years. Her home in Turkey embraced "traditional" Muslim (old-fashioned versus "progressive" moderate Islamist) gender beliefs, but gradually accepted some liberal ideas evolving in middle-class society toward women. For example, she was the first woman in her family to attend university, as were most of my informants.

> I wanted to go to university because I wanted to be free; to move out of my small town, to make my own money. It was never my aim to be rich or to buy whatever I want, but I didn't want to be dependent on my parents or worry in the future. I didn't want to have to be dependent on my husband for finances, either. I saw how relationships sometimes don't work out and women aren't free to change the situation.

She recognized problems arise from gender norms in which women are financially dependent on parents or a husband. Her motivations for education were social mobility, material security, and independence. After being influenced by Mr. Gülen's moderate Islamism she, ". . . realized we should leave "footprints" behind us in this life; do something that makes an improvement. Not just live for yourself, to be rich, have a bachelor or master's degree to your name." Helping others as a use of her talents appealed to this informant. However, she did not renounce her goals of self-actualization and independence. She fulfilled all of these motives by traveling outside Turkey and working in the movement. Later she continued to fulfill them by moving from teaching at a Gülen-inspired school in Eastern Europe to studying in a graduate program in Houston.

After four years, teaching high school became monotonous and I wanted a change of location. I was ready to get my master's degree, and my husband was encouraging me. We decided to apply in America, because it's obvious this is the best place to have a masters or any graduate level study. My husband came to America before we were together and he loved it. Besides, it's not logical for me to live in Turkey now. There is the problem of wearing a scarf and working.

She described her motives for moving as, first, simply not being satisfied as a high school teacher. Second, she had the option to obtain high quality education and took that opportunity. Third, she could become a university professor; in other words, she could move to the next level in her career where she could be more intellectually challenged (and incidentally have access to higher economic gain and contribution to the world of ideas as an academic). Pre-established networks and a supportive husband informed and facilitated her choice to move to Houston to continue her career path.

In Houston, with a husband who is very busy in community work, responsibility for home life rested on her. She purposely attempted to avoid this dilemma by choosing a husband open-minded to sharing responsibility for home care and childcare while both parents held careers. However, life cannot always be predicted. In Houston she did not have access to quality childcare or domestic help as she would have in Turkey or at the school where she used to work. She relied on a friend to watch her child, but it was not a permanent arrangement and created ongoing concern. Childcare was an important factor in her decision to go on for her Ph.D. or not at that time.

I looked at daycares, but I didn't like what was available in my financial range. I don't want to be a stay at home mom, but making money is not worth it for me to put a child in a day care of low standards. I could stay at home until my child goes to school and then continue my education. But it might be difficult to get started in a program again.

Yet, she sought the best childcare possible in order to satisfy her intellectual interests by going on for a Ph.D. In her work at the university she discovered another opportunity to leave her footprints behind in professional work.

Now that I am lecturing at university, I can show that as a Muslim woman, choosing to cover my head with a scarf doesn't mean that I'm not modern or capable as a professional. For example my students didn't know what to think of me at the beginning of this semester because they have never had a teacher wearing a scarf. But some of them ended up appreciating my teaching so much that I believe I changed their negative opinions about Muslims. I believe more and more that what I do is really important. I am leaving footprints behind me in this world, and I hope they get bigger as time passes.

In summary, this informant was conscious of limits to her self-determination and career goals that could be caused not only by stereotypes of veiled Muslim women but also by the view that men are leaders and financial providers while women are nurturers. She attempted to negotiate limits to her career and independence by partnering with a husband open-minded to sharing home responsibilities and professional aspirations, studying and working in the United States, having a small family, keeping a modest home, and utilizing childcare. She also interpreted Mr. Gülen's ideas in ways that supported her goals and identity. She said, "Mr. Gülen says women must get educated, work, and have power in society" as opposed to focusing on life as a stay at home mom or volunteer. She was motivated to resist and negotiate limits by desire to set an example for the benefit of public Islamism and create positive change in society as well as by her identity as a modern, intellectual, and independent woman.

A second informant had lived in Houston for almost a decade. She grew up in a secular home where her mother influenced her desire for a career, which to her was an important part of being a modern woman.

> My mother . . . is a very outgoing and strong person and liked working outside the home. I got my ambition from her. I was a very modern girl. I wanted to work, and I was planning to do lots of things. Attending class was not enough for me in business school. I made an internship for myself, which was not common in Turkey. I could do things in my field better than most other colleagues, because I worked to be competitive. I was planning to have my master's degree in Europe or the United States. In Turkey parents pay for education. Mine couldn't, so I applied for scholarships and worked.

Studying in the United States was a goal; however, it was an unexpected family need for medical treatment that actually brought her to Houston. During that hard time she became interested in religion to make sense of life. She also met a moderate Islamist Turkish man studying at a Houston university who became her husband. He was on a path toward material success and was supportive of her goals to pursue a master's degree and a career in business. At that time she also chose to make a substantial change to her public identity by veiling. She knew this invited career limits but believed society's negative perception of veiled women would change over time.

She went on to pursue a master's degree in finance in Houston and returned with her family to Turkey. Through these experiences, the superwoman syndrome began to take its toll on her.

> I thought my time in the U.S. was limited, so I pushed to finish my master's degree even through a high-risk pregnancy. After we finished our degrees and returned to Turkey, I took care of everything at home while my husband served his military duty. I really wanted to work, but I

couldn't work in my field, tourism, because I was now wearing a scarf. No one in that field would hire someone wearing a scarf. Also, it was hard to find someone who would take care of the children.

Another family member's illness brought her back to Houston where she would have likely been able to move forward in her desired career.

> I was still very frustrated about not working, even though I was putting so much energy into helping with my child's treatment. I expected so much from my life, I think. A psychologist thought I should continue working at all costs. But after some time, trying to do it all didn't make me happy. Now, I don't have that much energy for performance. I used to ask, "Why does Islam suggest women not work outside as much?" But now I ask, "What did I do all those years?"

She was very conscientious about benefiting society after becoming inspired by Mr. Gülen's ideas. However, her identity and life expectations were still oriented toward having a professional career, which social discourses link with prestige and modernity. Self-expectations can become overwhelming when professional goals are added to being a highly involved mother and community volunteer. She was concerned about this problem for her daughter in the future. However, she felt having experiences outside the home are important to developing self-esteem and future opportunities.

> I want my daughter to experience many things. I want her to believe in herself and feel strong for herself. I take her to gymnastics, computer camp, basketball camp, and art school. But after she gets married, she may not have that many opportunities to be out all the time [due to responsibilities in the home]. She will still expect to be outside the home because she got used to it. She has to know there are different situations. So I'm not sure what is the balance.

This informant recognized a problem in the outcome but did not find fault in the Gülen movement's gender beliefs that contributed to the dilemma.

On the other hand, she was aware that there is a problem with men's lack of nurturing involvement in the family beyond financial provision. She accepted much responsibility for raising their children, but still worked seriously in everyday encounters to increase her husband's involvement in a nurturing role.

He doesn't have a tendency to spend a lot of time with kids because his father didn't. But I could tell the children needed him. I told him when they asked about him or what they said about him every day. We would visit him at work every day, even for five minutes. One day when we couldn't visit, he asked, "Where were you? I missed you." So he has become more and more involved with them. And he is happier too. When you have felt close to your children, you always want to keep that good feeling.

She felt men's nurturing input in family life is important to raise a psychologically sound generation and provide a new model for family relationships in the next generation. Life experiences also taught her that sharing more home duties with their husbands could make it easier for women to be engaged professionally.

Not all women inspired by the Gülen movement feel their best work is done in volunteer, low-paid, or low-profile positions. However, burn-out can keep them from fulfilling their career dreams and their identity as intellectual, professional women. The two informants whose stories are written above were involved in a formal group discussion in which I heard several women question ideas about gender resulting in the superwoman syndrome. Participants highly valued the role of "mother," yet they explored variations in the importance of their ability to pursue career goals and fathers' roles in raising families. Career-minded women dealt with this dilemma by having few children, finding flexible jobs such as teaching, or waiting to marry while pursuing a career and volunteer work. Many consciously sought marriage with a man willing to assist in household duties and childcare while both husband and wife fulfill career ambitions. Like other women in Turkey, they saw gender roles more and more as including men and women working together in careers and family life. Others stayed home when children were small then went back to work later.

The discussion revolved around the question of, "What can women contribute to society?" The first comment was, "Being a good mother to raise a good generation is women's major contribution to society. This has a chain reaction to affect all other aspects of society." A working woman countered with, "It doesn't matter whether a person is a man or a woman. Just being a good person is the most important thing anyone can do to affect society and help people."

Others brought up the problem of building a career and being solely responsible for duties at home. One woman said:

> If I lived at Muhammad's time, I wouldn't worry about being in a career and taking care of everything in the house, because he was sharing in house responsibilities and was never demanding. Everyone is responsible for each other's happiness.

Another also attributed the problem to culture instead of religion; "There is no problem in Islam with men and women doing equal work [in the house]. It is in Turkish culture that the inequality arises." Another woman reported that her husband said, "The female bird builds the nest." She thought, "No, you share building of the home." She has successfully worked to get him involved in nurturing their children. All agreed that women create problems for themselves because they want freedom from the stereotypical dominant husband but also are attracted to a "man's man" idealized in culture (stable, not emotional, strong, more intelligent than those around him, hardworking, and financially successful).

These women viewed society and religious texts as supportive of women in professional roles as well as men in nurturing roles. However, they also agreed on the need to justify their working outside the home. Those who worked in fields such as medicine, academia, and technology said utilizing their talent, fulfilling personal dreams, and contributing to society motivated them. They did not speak of being motivated primarily by financial gain or by hopes of contributing to development of a moderate Islamist worldview. In this way women legitimized gender beliefs when negotiating possible limitations. They worked professionally, even in well-paying or prestigious careers, without challenging men's role as primary providers and natural leaders. Also, not working primarily for financial gain and working in white-collar professions did not go against the vision of pious women who keep themselves from materialistic dealings or rough environments.

Conclusions and Ongoing Questions

Gender beliefs and norms in Houston's Gülen community were consistent with wider cultural and religious ambivalence toward women's equal opportunities in professional and leadership roles. My informants' stories and comments provide examples of women who rationalized some limiting norms and did not necessarily seek leadership in the community's cooperative endeavors or in development of an Islamic worldview. However, their comments and stories also show they recognized, discussed, negotiated, and explored alternatives to some limiting status quo gender beliefs. They did so even if selectively and informally rather than by methodical analysis or official calls for change. They did not find limiting gender beliefs originated in Islamism but rather saw the trouble coming from incorrect religious interpretations or old-fashioned Turkish cultural norms. This is a common answer to the Gülen Movement's other concerns. They interpreted Mr. Gülen's writings, the *Qur'an*, and the *Hadith* as

promoting women's use of their talents professionally and in leadership, sharing home responsibilities with men, and men's potential for nurturing.

Women demonstrated awareness of limits due to gender beliefs but were often conflicted as to whether and how to overcome them. They considered informal private action an important means to bring about change in society at large as advocated in the Gülen movement. This approach was applied consciously and unconsciously when negotiating gender stereotypes in personal and professional life choices, as well. They were motivated to do so by self-actualization, the movement's mission to show Islamism as applicable in modern society, and in some cases by a desire to see changes in gender norms.

Ongoing research can monitor the affects of women's informal resistance to limits. More stories from women who are equipped intellectually and spiritually for leadership but also see nurturing of family and philanthropic volunteerism as important means to benefit society may yield insight into the balance of maximizing talents that is being sought by women around the world. Interpretation of men's life histories can also provide deeper insight into gender issues affecting the movement. Further study within Gülen communities in the United States may demonstrate whether gender beliefs are affected by American discourses on gender norms, marriage with Americans, more prestigious career options for veiled women, and the multicultural setting where Islamism can be reinforced as part of Turkish identity.

Houston's growing Gülen community is a part of the movement's inspiring humanitarian efforts to bring tolerance and understanding to our shared world. However, because the movement is becoming a global example of moderate Islamism applied in modern society, it will continue to be scrutinized concerning women's equal opportunity in professional, social, and religious leadership. Although this complex issue has not been entirely resolved even in supposedly progressive societies, feminists and other social scientists will examine the movement not only for the token numbers of women in leadership and professions but also for attitudes and gender norms that make women's equal status and contribution at all levels a natural and obvious occurrence. Contributors to my research believed the movement is now young and attitudes toward gender are still emerging, therefore current increased educational and professional expectations of women will lead to consistent leadership roles for them within the movement and wider society. However, they can expect studies to also look for women themselves to formally insist on changes.

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