

## **The Reproduction of The Image of Traditional Turkish Women's Role in Commercial Television:**

Cansu Alaçam, Hitit University, Turkey  
Hülya Akkaş, Hitit University, Turkey  
Onur Dursun, Hitit University, Turkey

The European Conference on Media & Mass Communication 2014  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

The national television channels strengthen the current perception about Turkish women. Gender discrimination can be observed when the presenters of a variety of television programs are examined on the basis of gender. When programs are examined in detail, it is notable that women are generally hired to present programs based on magazine press such as dating games and cooking programs while men present programs on more serious issues such as discussion programs, quiz shows and news. It is considered that the reasons for this attitude stem from the general perception about women in Turkey. The channels employ female presenters for some certain programs, aiming to increase the ratings. This situation reproduces and reinforces the current perception about the women and their traditional positions in Turkish society. In this study, the presenters of all genres of programs on Show TV, ATV, Star TV, Fox TV, Kanal D, Samanyolu TV, Kanal 7, NTV, Haber Türk, CNN Türk ve TRT 1 with the highest ratings among the other channels will be investigated in terms of gender. Moreover, the study will scrutinize what kind of image of femininity the channels try to represent. In summary, the study will try to explain the reasons for preferring female labour in media. The necessary information will be collected by analysing the TV channels between 12-25 May.

Keywords: gender, discrimination, programs, television, roles

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## Introduction

From the ancient eras to modern times, all people have lived according to the norms which were determined and reinforced by the society. It is perceived that disregarding these patterns and behaving accordingly is almost impossible and the society does not generally allow the individuals to question them. The society teaches the individuals how to behave at different ages and ambiances. It becomes almost impossible to get out of these patterns as the people perceive them based on religion, traditions and customs since people disregarding the codes and behave in this way are thought to have immorality and disharmony. The people are sometimes excluded from the society when they get out of the patterns. Therefore, people prefer to comply with them instead of being excluded. However, it is not true to remark these codes are unchangeable. They do change but this evolution necessitates a quite long historical process.

The process in question is a profound sociologic question of debate. In this study the relationship between the determined social norms and codes members of a society have in their minds, the sexist view against women and the reflections of this view in media in the use of women as a workforce in media are going to be emphasized.

## Gender and the Society

The society is a strict teacher who teaches how to behave or treat other people, what to do in some certain conditions. There is no doubt that the policies of the leading authority and media have a deep influence on constructing the gender roles, too. As Fiske argues, characters on television are not just representations of individual people but are encodings of ideology (Fiske, 1987). Media is a tool for transmitting the rules and values of the governments. The norms and ideas of the hegemonic cultural discourse teach how to be good “girls, boys, men and women” with some social codes to the individuals. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler asks a basic question related to the role and influence of the society on gender as follows:

Is there “a” gender which persons are said to have, or is it an essential attribute that a person is said to be, as implied in the question “What gender are you?” When feminist theorists claim that gender is the cultural interpretation of sex or that gender is culturally constructed, what is the manner or mechanism of this construction? If gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently, or does its constructedness imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing the possibility of agency and transformation? (Butler, 1999, p. 11).

Therefore, the role of social power and its impact on constructing the gender roles should be examined. It is a well-known fact that culture has an enormous effect on shaping the social norms. Does it have the same perpetual influence on determining the gender roles? Simone de Beauvoir suggests in *The Second Sex* “one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one.” For Beauvoir, gender is “constructed. According to her, one “becomes” a woman, but always under a cultural compulsion to become one and the compulsion does not come from “sex” (Butler, 1999, p. 12).

There are a great many structures and reasons determining the gender roles. However, the most basic ones are religion and customs in oriental societies. These two concepts

are seen as interrelated. The roles are sometimes identified by holy texts while being set by cultural traditions. The society generally does not allow its members to interrogate these values and make them long lasting components of the society, maintaining its strong structure. Gender roles- in some oriental countries such as Turkey- will be examined in this title.

In societies with dominant oriental norms, women are attributed some traditional roles as follows: Dealing with domestic work, making their husbands happy, not being interested in politics and economics, not participating in business life, looking good etc. These are the features of an ideal woman according to most of the people living in oriental societies. In our era, not only society but also the mass media determine and impose these patterns upon women. Mass media also affect the preferences of women with the contents of the programs addressing to the traditional women. A study carried out by Radio and Television Supreme Council researched for the programs watched most by women. Its results were in line with the gender roles attributed to the women, %59 of the participants reported that they watched television dramas which include examples of daily lives of typical women. Programs about education and documentaries were the programs preferred least. Consequently, traditional stereotypes are both generated and regenerated by the society and the mass media.

### **The Representation of Women In Media**

Television fictionalises and creates its own social reality and transmits it to every segment of the society. In time, fiction can be transformed into social reality or vice versa. People can be persuaded that the world in which they live is very similar to the fictionalised world. Audience can have difficulty in distinguishing the fictional world from real life. Heavy viewers of television tend to perceive the real world like the one they see on the screen.

As George Gerbner states television is a centralized system of story-telling. Its drama, commercials, news and other programs bring a coherent system of images and messages into every home (Gerbner, 2000, pp. 43-67). It also influences the way how we perceive the reality and evaluate it.

In media, we encounter women with the traditional roles set by patriarchal values. In most contexts reinforcing the man dominant norms women are presented as the people who are deceived, exposed to violence, sex objects especially in eastern societies. The occupations, their education level and academic careers are not the popular topics accommodated on the screen.

According to the report on Women and Media prepared by General Directorate on the Status of Women (2008), women are generally confined to two roles: bad woman and a good housewife. Women seen on the screen generally are busy with cleaning the houses, cooking meals, taking care of their children, gossiping, chatting on daily issues. It is noteworthy that various lifestyles of women are not commonly included. Conversely, women who do not stick to the limited codes are marginalized by the society or the persons around. They are accused of not being an “ideal” woman.

Even the participation of the women into business life is so limited and it is presented with a suitable basis for the gender roles such as giving them the role of nurses,

secretaries, babysitters etc. Hence, the existing perception about the women in social structure is reproduced and strengthened by mass media.

Gencel Bek and Binark (2000) argue that the generation of gender discrimination in the representation of women by media is related to the fact that people preparing these contents are generally men (Gencel Bek & Binark, 2000). Men are generally employed in administrative parts of media companies and the division of labour is formed according to the gender roles. Although the number of women working in media has started to increase after 1980's, only one of five workers is women. They also assert that the circumstances under which women work are more challenging since companies are operated according to patriarchal values. The authors scrutinized how media present the women under four main categories as follows: Women as a mother and a spouse (1), Women as a sex object (2), Women as the target of the violence (3), gathering different personalities of women on the basis of femininity (4). However, and the first three categories will be examined.

In the first category researchers put the emphasis on media's taking the existing values as granted without questioning, conveying and reproducing them. The most common roles given to women by man dominant society are being **a mother and a spouse**, which is a very widespread phenomena observed in almost every domain of social life. Advertisements, dramas, shows are full of examples of these "typical women". The work women do are usually cleaning, cooking and taking care of the children (Bek Gencel, Binark , 2000, p. 7). However, it is very difficult to find any illustration of unequal labour division, conflicts within the family. All the members of the family seem so happy and the agents realizing this happiness are usually women. As a result, the audience is prevented from questioning about these roles.

In sum, even if family structures change according to the social classes they belong to, in dramas and advertisements, family as an institution is praised and protected (Çelenk & Timisi, 2000, p.40).

The second title of the subject is **women as a sex object**.

Television channels need to attract as many audiences as they can in order to achieve their survival amongst other counterparts. They use some means such as making use of woman body in dramas, talk shows, quiz shows to achieve their aims. It is such a common phenomenon that most people are not disturbed by the way media uses the woman body and their sexist representations.

As John Fiske (1987) articulated in *Television Culture* the fragmentation of the female body into a fetish object is commonplace in commercials, particularly those for cosmetic products. The mobilization of masculine desire in the female viewer and the construction for her of a masculine reading position is an obvious economic strategy of the industry (Fiske, 1987).

Gencel Bek and Binark (2000) also argue that some real aims of using woman in these contents are to address the intended people -mostly women- who generally go shopping and to display the woman body to attract the audience. Another important point the authors made is that time spent for displaying the woman's "beautiful, attractive and seductive" body is longer than the time allocated for showing the

product. As Patel (1995) argues the body of a woman is constructed on the screen from the eyes of the male gaze that objectifies her as a commodity (Patel, 1995). Therefore, ironically, women are demonstrated as both the consumers of a product and the objects that advertise it.

Fiske also pointed out the representations of the female body as an object of the masculine gaze and a producer of the voyeuristic pleasure. The models decorating the prizes in game shows, or providing the “scenery” in shows are clear evidence of this pleasure. He also remarked television has a tendency to confine women to the sexuality and physical types conforming to the patriarchal sense of attractiveness. The television creates, reinforces and circulates its own perceptions, images and a fictional world which heavy viewers tends to see as real.

Apart from using the body of the woman like a commodity, media exhibit the woman depriving her of intellect and mental abilities of human beings. The commonest type of advertisement is for products to improve the sexual power of the female body - losing weight, enlarging breasts, improving skin. Women in these ads are generally discontent with their outlooks and try to feel better by using them. This leads the lack of self-esteem the patriarchal system produces in women.

Another item that the authors dwelled on is presentation of the **women as the target of the violence**. The assertion mass media has a central role in increasing the violence within the society has been discussed since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Gerbner states, crime and violence also play a prominent role in TV entertainment. He adds that images of choreographed brutality at home and half a world of away drench our homes (1976, p. 340).

We can say that dramas and advertisements need violence as a constituent element. If the conflict based on violence between the characters comes to an end, the audience is no more attracted. In other words, forming an intriguing atmosphere is the key to survive for some programs.

The representation of violence on television is a very controversial issue since some researchers argue that its intensive demonstration incites the possibility of resorting to violence while some claim that it decreases the occurrence of violence as watching it causes a catharsis on the part of the audience. At the beginning, the focus of the discussion was on the feelings of the people after being exposed to the violence however after a while focus shifted from this question to another one: Do media have a fostering function on the occurrence of violence? Most of the channels utilize the same methods for broadcasting violence contents. According to Gerbner (1976) scenes of violence occur an average 3 to 5 times per hour in prime-time dramatic fiction. Gerbner states that heavy viewers have a tendency to perceive the world as a more dangerous and violent place than it is (Gerbner, 1976).. As to the object of the violence, it is very obvious that the screen is full of examples of women subjected to violence from husbands, partners etc.

As Gencel Bek and Binark states, many channels represent the news of violence, sexual harassment, rape and abuse in a way to sanitize these actions of men on the grounds that women are provocative or men are unable to control their sexual urge.

While the stories of the women subjected to violence are editorialised, the emphasis is put on their beauty, youth and their roles as a wife and a mother rather than talking about the women's identities or jobs (Gencil Bek & Binark, 2008, p. 12). It can be concluded that the identity of the woman is disregarded because of the focus on the sensational news attracting the attention of the audience more. The violence is justified by putting forward some excuses which men use for resorting to violence. Violent actions of perpetrators and the patriarchal values of the society are not questioned. Media present these events as if they were the slight conflicts within the family (Gencil Bek & Binark, 2008, p. 12). That is to say, the problems of women are conceived as individual since it occurs generally within the family. However, it does not only concern the subject of the violence but rather it is a social problem which is reinforced by the contents of the media and social norms and values. The examples of violence are so common in media that people watching it may get used to the concept of violence and view it as an ordinary issue of the daily life. As Dursun quoted from Williams especially the conclusion deduced from the critical media theories inspired by Marxist society critics was that the society fostered the violent behaviour and this behaviour is presented in the chief communication tool, television (Dursun, 2013).

In short, the roles women have in television are very correspondent to the traditional ones set by the society. Likewise, in printed press, the situation is not so different. Woman body is used in programs about fashion, beauty, kitchen products or the news including the examples of violence against women. Therefore displaying woman as an object, violence as an ordinary part of women's lives intensify the perception about the traditional roles assigned to the women in Turkish society. Dağtaş (2005) gives some illustrations about the use of woman body in tabloids. The covers of tabloids are prepared in order to attract more readers or increase the circulation. In the study some tabloids were examined such as Şamdan, Süper Galaxy. All of them used photographs of naked women.

Some of the editors of the tabloids claim that photographs of naked women give an aesthetic appearance and they use a photograph of a celebrity about whom news are made continuously to appeal the men.

After stating the ways woman body is used in advertisements, dramas, the reasons of this situation should be considered. There lies a chief reason of this vigorous effort of the television: Money. The only source of income of the television is advertisements. The fees of advertisements are decided by the ratings. Television channels have to appeal more audience to have higher ratings. This means addressing to low and middle class of the society. As television channels are conscious of the people's choices, they form their broadcast schedule and choose the presenters accordingly. Since the low and middle class people are more adhered to the traditional values, channels prefer to hire women based on the gender roles to which these people attribute meaning. It leads the reinforcement and continuity of the gender roles because of the means televisions apply.

### **The Employment of Women as Workforce in Mass Media**

When magazines, newspapers, radios and television are probed, the analogy between the traditional roles in society and the representation of women is so apparent. Similarly, employment of women is in the similar manner which serves to reinforce

the gender roles. To put it clearly, women are usually employed to present news, programs about the lives of celebrities, cooking, fashion or dating programs in other words less serious issues of life. Nevertheless, men generally are the producers and presenters of discussion programs, quiz shows, columnists of political and historical magazines. According to the results of a study performed by Global Media Monitoring Project, %93 of the producers and the presenters of the news programs about politics and governmental issues were men while the proportion of the women employees constituted only %7 of the workforce in 1995 (Gencil Bek and Binark, 2008, p. 9).

The International Women's Media Foundation carried out a study about the Status of Women in the News Media between 2008 and 2010. The IWMF believes that a free flow of information is an essential ingredient of open and democratic societies and there can be no full freedom of the press until women have an equal voice in the news-gathering and news dissemination processes (Byerly, 2011, p .7).

The IWMF Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media aims to submit robust data on gender positions in news organizations around the world. The institution put the emphasis on questions as follows:

- What is the role of women in determining and shaping the news agenda?
- Who decides how many stories are by women and represent women as pivotal subjects in news?
- Are media companies currently organized to promote gender equity within their organizational structures or to take women's voices into consideration as well as men's perspectives in coverage?

The findings of the report, conducted over a two-year period, offer an overall picture to date of women's status globally in news media ownership, publishing, reporting, editing, broadcast production and other media jobs. More than 150 researchers interviewed executives at more than 500 companies in 59 nations using a 12-page questionnaire. Both face-to-face and online survey methods were used. The results suggest that men occupy the vast majority of the management jobs and news-gathering positions in most nations. Another important finding is that 73% of the top management jobs are occupied by men. However, among senior professionals, women are nearing parity with 41% of the newsgathering, editing and writing jobs (Byerly, 2011, p. 9). A similar finding comes from a research run by Turkish Statistical Institute in 2005. According to the General Directorate On The Status Of Women (2008), the top positions such as editor-in-chief, editorial directors, and managing directors were mostly held by men and the number of women who worked in other positions was also less than the men. It can be concluded that if the position is higher or requires a high level of education, companies hire men more than the women.

### **An Analysis about Women Employment in Turkish Television Channels**

In this title, some graphics about the social roles of women, their employment rates or numbers in media, the programs women watch most will be given.

In 2005 Global Media Monitoring Project carried out a study which analysed 13.000 news on television, radio and newspapers about how often women and men are presented. The results demonstrated that women were presented with a ratio of %21. While they were shown in television and newspapers with the percentages of %22 and %21 respectively, only %17 of the workers in radio stations were women (Gencil Bek and Binark, 2008, p. 8). Since television is a highly visual medium of communication and a very suitable source of representing the body of a woman, it can attract a lot of audiences with the help of this feature.

Another study was performed by Turkish Statistical Institute in Turkey in 2007 and the participants were women. They were asked what they thought about how media present the women and categorized the subjects about women into seven groups. The subjects were as follows: Woman as a mother, woman as a sexual object, woman as a spouse, successful woman, and woman subjected to violence, woman with problems, no idea.

%40 of the women reported that women were represented as mother, %19.9 as a sexual object, %10 as a spouse, %8.9 as successful, %0.8 object of the violence, %0.3 as problematic, %19.9 reported that they had no idea. What is so gripping is that in an age which violence can be seen in real life and media almost every day, only %0.8 of the participants remarked that women were represented as the subject of the violence. It may be because some women take the violence for granted and conceive it as an ordinary part of their lives.

Another study by Turkish Statistical Institute (2008) investigated the qualities and genders of the workers in some commercial channels. The annual number of the workers on average in all types of broadcast were 14.849, 9851 of which were men and 4999 of workers were women. In executives positions men outnumbered women in all types of broadcasts. The number of women and men were successively 3594 and 2120

In this study ten channels were examined. They are ATV, Fox TV, Haber Türk, Kanal 7, Kanal D, Samanyolu TV, Show TV, Star TV, TRT 1, TV 8, which have the highest rating among the others. In total there were 147 programs (different genres) and information about 83 presenters could be found. The programs were analyzed under 9 main categories with some subcategories, too. The categories are as follows:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Newscast               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. News</li> <li>2. Sport</li> <li>3. Weather</li> </ol> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shows/Games               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Quiz Shows</li> <li>2. Talent Shows</li> <li>3. Dating Games</li> <li>4. Decoration Shows</li> <li>5. Cooking Shows</li> </ol> </li> </ul>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Discussion/Opinion Programs</li> <li>2. Documentary Programs</li> <li>3. Health Programs</li> </ol>

1. Kids Programs
2. Cooking Programs
3. Magazine Show
4. Music Programs

### The Analysis of the Graphics

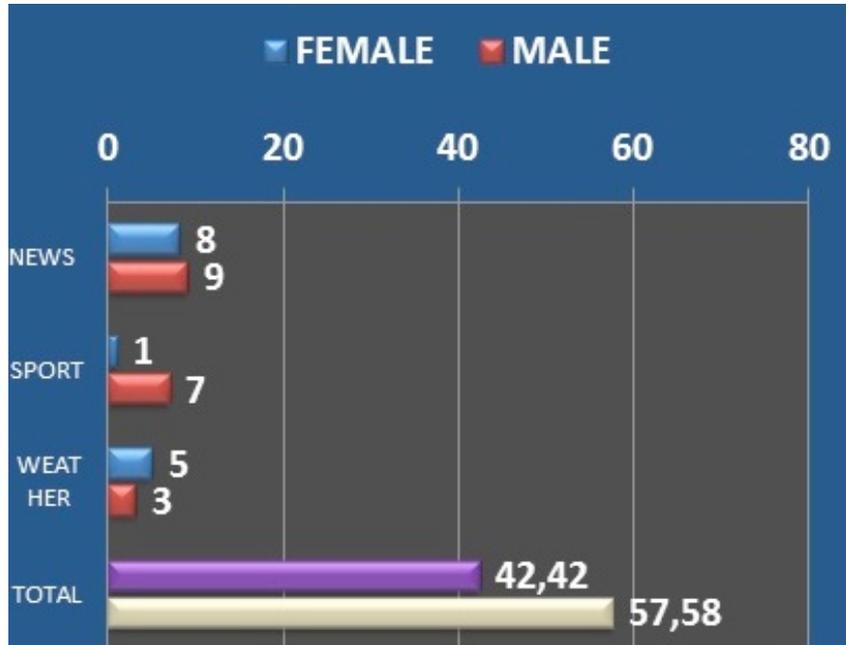


Figure 1: Category of News, Sport and Weather

In the category of news, men are in the first place. While 9 of the presenters are men, 8 of them are women. In this category the rates of men and women are close to each other. It can be stated that commercial channels prefer women for the presentation of news or the features of gender are taken into consideration.

There is a meaningful difference between the numbers of men (7) and women (1) in the category of sport news. It is generally thought that sport press is a man dominant field. The perception that the sport is for men and their entertainment affected the preferences of the producers while employing the newscasters.

When all categories are evaluated, the dominance of men is very clear even not an overwhelming one. News programs are the serious part of the daily life and the fact that men generally occupy these positions partly reinforce the idea that men should deal with serious matters.

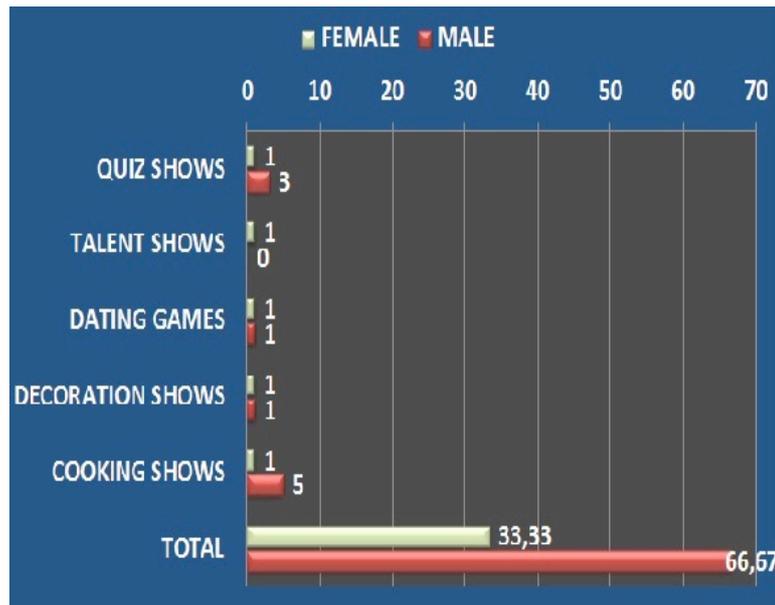


Figure 2: Category of Show and Game Programs

There are 15 presenters in this category. 5 (% 33,33) of 15 presenters are men while the rest 10 (%66,67) are women. When the subcategories are examined, the unequal division that is shaped by the gender roles is very obvious. To illustrate, the category of quiz shows demonstrates the dominance of men (3 men and 1 woman). In his book *Television Culture* Fiske(1978), states that the ambiance of the quiz shows is similar to the one at school. He argues that men are chosen for these kinds of programs on purpose because they are seen as the authority figure ( Fiske, 1987).

In cooking show category, the choices for presenters are affected by the perception that gender roles created. There are 6 presenters, 5 (% 83,33) of which are women. It reinforces and reproduces the idea that domestic works are the chief responsibility of women within the society. This is also supported with the commercials in which women are usually in the kitchen.

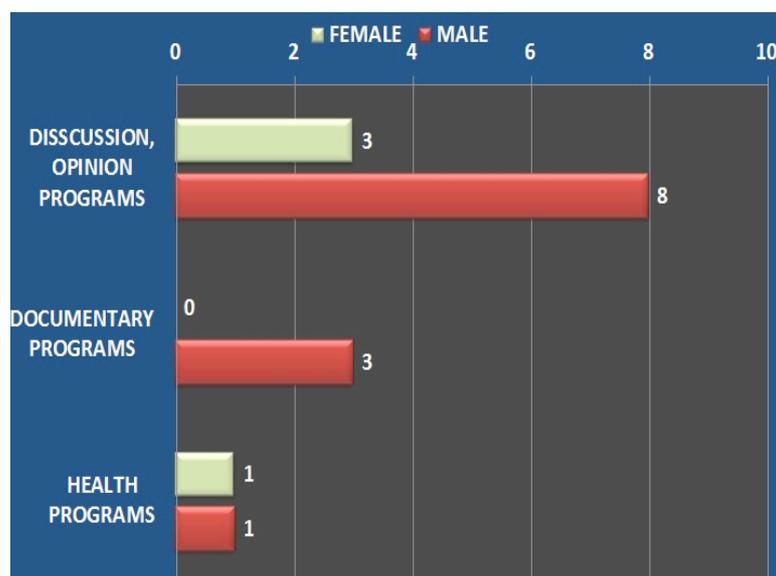


Figure 3: Category of Health, Documentary and Discussion/Opinion Programs

The dominance of men is very remarkable in this category. The programs belonging to this category have 16 presenters in total. While 12 (% 75) of all presenters are men, only four (% 25) of them are women. It can be stated that women are not included in the programs that are perceived as “serious” or “difficult to understand” by evaluating the results of this graphic.

The overwhelming majority of men in the categories of discussion, opinion programs and documentaries reinforce the perception that men should deal with serious issues in life. Women generally are excluded from these kinds of jobs.

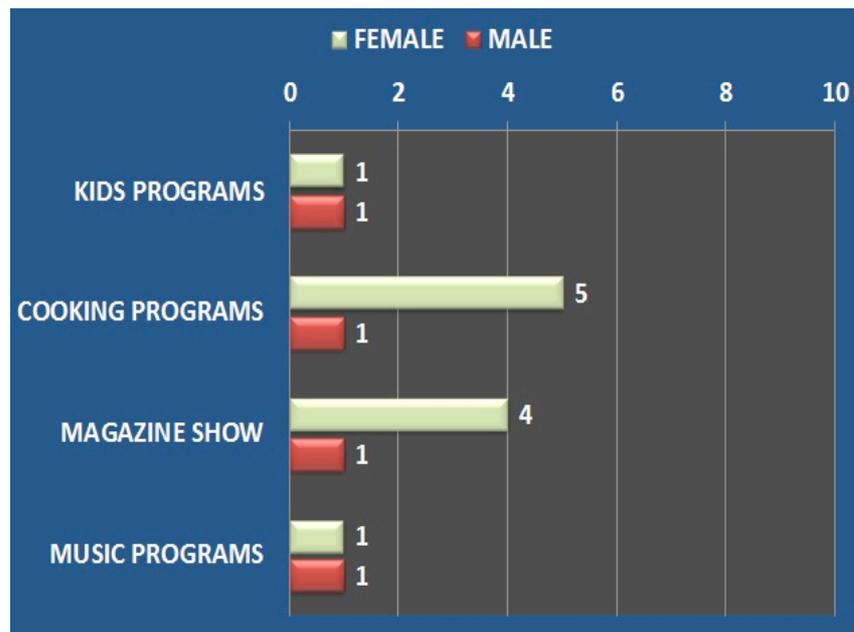


Figure 4: Category of Music, Magazine, Cooking, Kids Programs

Entertainment programs are divided into four subcategories with 15 presenters. 11 of the presenters (% 73,33) are women while only 4 (% 26,67) men are employed. Likewise, women are generally employed to work in magazine shows (4 women and 1 man). In cooking shows presenters are mostly women since it is perceived as the women’s responsibility in most culture.

### Conclusion

In this study, the focus is on the reflections of gender roles and gender discrimination in television. Television channels may reinforce the existing ethnic, religious and gender discrimination. Their only income source is advertisements and they try to address as many people as they can to increase their income. The rate of lower and middle class is generally higher than the upper class in most societies and Turkey is one of these countries. As commercial channels try to address these people, they shape their content according to the meaning to which the audience attribute meaning. In other words, the channels produce, reproduce and reinforce the gender roles consciously. The results of the study are in line with the thoughts expressed above.

When the graphics are scrutinized, it is very clear that men are employed for the programs based on management, politics, economics which are fields that men should be dealing with while women are the presenters of the dating programs, cooking shows etc. Moreover, it is very plausible to state that the physical features of the women is a crucial factor for the program producers. The fact that the winners of the beauty contests were hired as the newscasters in Turkey in 1990s is the clear evidence and result of this perception.

Television prepares and circulates some content which make use of woman body and strengthens the gender discrimination within the society. To say it more specifically, not only the meanings attributed to gender roles but also the wrongly patterned social norms and values are reinforced by the television and other mass media tools with the policies and methods they utilize.

## References

- Butler, Judith (1999). *The Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*  
London: Routledge.
- Byerly, Carolyn M. (2011). *Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media*, Washington: District Creative Printing Inc
- Çelenk, Sevilay; Timisi, Nilüfer (2000), “*The Representation of Women in National Television Dramas and Violence*”, in *Television, Woman and Violence*, (edt.) Çelik, Betül Nur , Ankara: Kiv Yayınları, pp 23-64.
- Dursun, Çiler (2013). *İletişim Kuram Kritik*, Ankara: İmge Kitabevi Yayınları.
- Dağtaş, Erdal (2005) .*The reflections of Consumer Culture in Tabloids*, *İletişim* 2005/21
- Fiske, John. (1987). *Television Culture*, Padstow, Cornwall: TJ International Ltd.
- Gencil Bek, Mine and Binark, Mutlu (2000) . *Medya ve Cinsiyetçilik*, Ankara: KASAUM
- Gerbner, George (2003) “Television Violence: At a Time of Turmoil and Terror”, in *Gender, Race and Class in Media: A Text-Reader*, Gail Dines and Lean Humez (eds), London: Sage: 339-348.
- Gerbner, George (1998). “Cultivation Analysis: an Overview”, *Mass Communication and Society*, 3-4, 174-195.
- Gerbner, George, Gross, Larry, Morgan, Michael, Signorielli, Nancy, Shanahan, James (2002). Growing Up with Television: The Cultivation Processes, Media effects: Advances in Theory and Research, 43 – 67, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- General Directorate On The Status Of Women (2008). *Policy Document: Women and Media*, Ankara: Fersa Ofset.
- Patel, Ila (1995). *Representation of Women in Mass Media*, Anand: Institute of Rural Management.
- Özer, Ömer (2005). *The Cultivation Role of Television: Ankara Çevik Kuvvet Örneği* *İletişim*, 2005 / 20.