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Being a Businesswoman in a Muslim Country

Turkey is a unique country with its almost 98% of Muslim population and secular regime. There are many women working in different sectors and at all levels of hierarchy. I have been in the business

world for 28 years myself, for 13 of which I have been working for my own company. There is a saying based on a story in the Mathnawi¹ that fishes are not aware of being in the water until they come out of it. Living and working in Turkey, I have never felt that I am coming from a different gender group. Even if the business world is known to be dominated by men, I have always felt accepted, respected, and even privileged from time to time. I was not aware of that until I had business relations with the European working environment. I have indeed had interesting experiences with my European colleagues.

Once, I was invited to an interview for a position as trainer for the Turkish branch of a multinational automobile company. It went very well and they thought I was qualified for this position. At the end of the meeting, the manager who was conducting the interview told me hesitantly that he had a final question. He asked: «This is a hard core sector and the product is very masculine. Most probably participants of the seminar will be 100% males. Do you think you can maintain control over the group? Will they listen and respect your words as woman trainer?» I had been a trainer for almost 15 years then. I remember being shocked with that question because until that time I had given hundreds of trainings, to all kinds of groups; to only male groups, to sales people of very masculine product or heavy industry manufacturers etc. and I had never come across such a question or felt any concern about being a woman trainer or giving training to groups of men. As the years passed, I

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encountered similar questions, reactions etc. many times in my contacts with European companies, as did my other female colleagues.

According to the Global Gender Equality

Report of 2006, among the 115 OECD member countries, Turkey is in the 57th position in terms of possibility of promotion to leadership positions for women. According to the same research, Turkey comes before many European countries like Switzerland, Netherlands, Austria, Germany and France.

The CEOs of Vodafone, Shell, BMW, Tuborg, PepsiCo, HSBC, Levi's, and P&G are women. Thus I can easily say that there is no such thing as a glass ceiling in the Turkish corporate environment.

Another piece of research, done by TÜİK (Turkish Statistical Institute) in 2007 in Turkey, indicates that

36 % of university faculty

25 % of professors

31 % of architects

29 % of doctors

26 % of lawyers are women.

Turkey is a rich mosaic with lots of different colors and shapes. Since it has a very young population, being very energetic and impatient to grow, the working environment at first sight may look macho and agitated with many masculine attributes. But looking at it more closely, one can see the effects of Islamic *tasawwuf* (Sufism) on our daily lives and our society. In Islamic theology, God is accepted as being absolute perfection (*kamâl*) with both gentle (feminine) and stern (masculine) attributes. But in the Sufi tradition, God's attributes are said to be more «feminine». We Muslims start every action with the Islamic testimony of faith «Bismillâh ar-rahmân ar-rahîm». The interpretation of *bismillâh ar-rahmân ar-rahîm* is a very good

example of that. *Rahmân* and *rahîm* come from the same root, «womb», meaning mercy, nurturing, care, love, and warmth as in the mother's womb. It can be translated as «In the name of God, the All-mothering, the Ever-mothering». The very well known hadith (saying of the Prophet Mohammed) also supports this thesis: «God's mercy takes precedence over his wrath». This means that even if the Creator has two qualities, majesty (*jalâl*) and beauty (*jamâl*), God's motherliness – feminine, gentle, nurturing features –, predominates over God's fatherliness – masculine, severe and disciplining features.

Born and raised in such a culture, living in an environment hearing the sayings of great scholars of Islam which have penetrated into our daily language, to me it seems natural that society would be softer and feminine at a deeper level.

When people look at the Wahhabi sect of today's Saudi Arabia, they imagine that theirs is the Islamic way of treating women. This is not true. In the Prophet Mohammed's days, there was a great respect towards women. Hz. Fatma, Hz. Mohammed's daughter, was said to be the only person He stood up for to show His respect when She entered the room. Sources say that in the days of the Caliph Hz. Omer, during a sermon, a woman with white hair asked a question.

We understand from this statement that women were not covered and that not only were they listening to the sermon together with men, but she was moreover confident enough to ask a question.

Also, it is said in a verse of the Koran that the responsibilities of women and men are equal. The only duty expected from a woman is to be virtuous and honest towards her husband. Her role as woman did not imply doing housework, or looking after her children. Women were free to be active in trade. As many of you may know, Hz. Hatice, Hz. Mohammed's first wife, was a very successful business woman in those days. Many more examples could be given.

In conclusion, I can say that contrary to widespread ideas, being a businesswoman is accepted in Turkey. My experience even shows that we enjoy an advantage over our European counterparts. On the other hand, different practices and experiences may exist when it comes to the situation of women in general in Turkey. Statistics say that schooling, unemployment, and segregation are still crucial issues to be dealt with. I personally believe that we all should work hard to educate both males and females on women's issues.

1 Editor's note: The Mathnawi, written by by Jalal al-Din Rumi, the celebrated XIIIth century Sufi master and poet, is one of the most influential works of Sufi and Persian literature

Extracts from the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey

Article 17. (As amended on May 22, 2004)

Everyone has the right to life and the right to protect and develop his material and spiritual entity.

The physical integrity of the individual shall not be violated except under medical necessity and in cases prescribed by law; and shall not be subjected to scientific or medical experiments without his or her consent.

No one shall be subjected to torture or ill-treatment; no one shall be subjected to penalties or treatment incompatible with human dignity.

Article 40. (As amended on October 17, 2001)

Everyone whose constitutional rights and freedoms have been violated has the right to request prompt access to the competent authorities.