

Transgender Health Care in Europe

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Being transgender is not only a personal matter. It also affects the transgender person's family and their community. Transgender individuals' legal, medical, mental health and bodily rights are issues of minority rights, the country's health policies, related legal regulations and the society's view of women and GLBT people (Lev 2004). More than 90% of Turkey's population is Muslim. The commitment to religion ranges widely in overall population. Family ties are always very important. So, I would like to start my presentation by giving you a picture of the general atmosphere of Turkey and how Turkish society views them. What I will present, of course, specific to Turkey, but I am certain that many of the experiences and lessons are relevant in considering transgender experiences in other countries. In particular, the Turkish experience is very likely to be of relevance in countries with Moslem immigrant communities, where similar dynamics are present.

According to the Turkish Republic's Constitution, in accordance with the Human Rights Declaration, nobody can be discriminated upon based on gender, race, ethnicity, language and political ideology. Over, the past few years, there have been attempts to add sexual orientation and gender identity to the related article. These attempts have been led by opposition political parties and NGO's that are working to stop discrimination faced by LGBT people. In recent constitutional law change in 2014, the ruling party rejected the expressions of "gender identity" and "sexual orientation" with the reason that they are not in accordance with the concept of "General Turkish moral values".

In Turkish society, matters of sexuality are taboo and gender roles and behaviors are separated with strict and clear rules. Behaviors that are not in accordance with a person's biological gender stand out and are generally not approved. Shortly, it's a culture where sexism and heterosexism are dominant. Let's look at the understanding/sensibilities of families existing in this climate (Polat et al. 2005).

Family:

Not only teenagers but transgender people of all ages struggles to obtain their family's consent and support during their transition process. In addition, they try to prevent their family from harming them. As to be expected, the most dominant theme in their individual and group therapy is family. Despite everything families do to prevent or postpone their coming out, being able to live in their desired gender role can become their major focus in life. The difficulties of coming out to family and disappointment and anger after coming out to the family are frequently expressed. Anxious statements such as "*how should I explain it to my family?*" "*Will they be very angry when they find out?*" are frequently mentioned. After finding out, some families cut financial support, some threaten to use violence and some actually do use violence in order to discourage their children from making the transition. Young transwomen from small towns leave their families and run to big cities because of threats to their lives and serious violence acts. Once in a big city, they face difficulties in finding work or they end up working in risky jobs without insurance or work as a sex worker (Yüksel et al 2015).

In our culture, parents usually make their children feel guilty in order to get what they want. For example; "*I have sacrificed so much*", "*if you upset me I won't give you my blessing*", "*I got sick because of you*" are statements used frequently. Some transgender people who blame themselves because they are TG and who think they shamed their family, might postpone their coming out until

the death of their parents. Especially if a parent has a disease they might serious guilty feeling, anxiety thinking that the parent got sick because of them (Şenyürekli, Detzner 2008).

The most important factors shaping the acceptance process of the family of a transgender person are their general acceptance of gender and how much they have internalized the binary/heteronormative gender system of society. Reactions within family may differ with the multifactorail such as age, education level, a conservative worldview, being religious, etc. We see that parents' acceptance is more difficult in families with strong religious convictions. But the degree of religious conviction does not determine acceptance alone. Middle class and highly educated families always don't accept more easily. Some middle class families tend to be more resistant towards the situation of their children. Particularly, health professionals such as nurses and teachers expect some scientific methods to cure trans people. Some families from low socio-economic status may show more tolerance since they see the situation as a medical condition that cannot be changed. In other terms, they accept their fates as a reality (Yüksel et al 2000, Basar, Yüksel et al 2015).

The first period of the acceptance process frequently creates crisis and is traumatizing for the whole family members. During the period, acceptance of the family might go through ups and downs and not all family members accept at the same rate. Some parents, who have accepted their child's sex change, might step back from their decision when relatives or friends criticize them (Zamboni 2006).

Professionals have to be careful about families who demand a breach of privacy as their right. One of family member of an adult transgender person with full mental capacity might come to us in secret in order to receive information and try to dictate us what to say to him/her. When it's explained to them that the sessions are confidential, they might threaten or file criminal complaint.

The Turkish family attaches enormous social value to male children. So, it is more difficult for families to accept their trans woman daughters and they might use much more pressure and violence towards them. Families have a well-developed gender hierarchy with codes of behavior for their male and female members. Male children are expected to provide protection and material support for their parents. On discovering that their child is transgender, parents experience an 'injury' to their honor and social status in society. The relatives of these people, who disturb social norms and are disapproved by society, are generally ignorant about the subject and unable to provide support (Kandiotti 2002).

Religion:

Religion is one of the most challenging issues for transgender individuals in Turkey. In Islam, all kinds of sexuality other than heterosexuality are considered shameful and sinful. Transgender people who have strong religious beliefs feel guilty about their identity. Those who themselves are very religious or have very religious families experience the difficulty of identifying themselves as sinners. Also, religious rules have major differences between men and women in clothing and in religious practices such as prayer. The religious transgender people practice religion according to the gender they would like to change into. Some religiously committed trans men, while always wearing pants and not wearing make-up in accordance with the male role have difficulty taking off the headscarf; which is an ambivalent behavior. In therapy process, some of them remove the headscarf only in selected safe environments like individual or group sessions and it takes a long time for them to remove the headscarf in other surroundings (Yüksel et al 2000, Yüksel 2007, Gattis et al 2014).

We see that some religious families are tolerant towards their trans male children. They might allow their trans male family member to wear pants and to remove the headscarf, transgressing the strict dress codes. Some families consult religious authorities. Some religious authorities gives permission that if they live a monogamous life sex resignation surgery is okay, and then it is not a sin.

We have also seen some trans men who want to prevent their desire to change themselves and showing different reactions. These biological women had started wearing the hijabs and exercising

religious tasks in order to put themselves off, even though they didn't have religious and covered families. They came to us when the "preventive measures" they have taken has not suppressed their gender dysphoria (Togay et al 2012).

Meaning given to disease:

We can accept that being transgender is an identity not pathology. There are transgender people in Turkey who see it that way. It is not wrong to say that these people are activists who are familiar with the concept of human rights.

We have to keep in mind that being transgender is connected to the social and political environment one lives in. A significant percentage of transgender people and almost all of their families see being transgender as a disease and they feel better if it is seen as such. They see the disease concept comforting as an excuse for the urge of sex change. The only cure for this disease is the sex change! In short, being stigmatized as ill or having an illness seems easier than being labeled as a pervert. Parents usually don't know how to explain their situation to their extended family members and neighbours and prefer to hide because of shame (Yüksel 2007, Wallece, Russell (2013)

Today, scientifically there is not any single factor explaining the etiology of transgender. We have to be careful while providing information to the families. Because, they think, if it is an illness, it has to be cured, if it is not an illness, it seems like a free choice and it can be renounced. It is a contradictory situation. On one hand they want to "come clean" by proving that their transgender identity is the result of a disease. On the other hand they want to prove that as sane, competent individuals they have the capacity to prove that they are transgender and they have the capacity to decide.

The right conditions have to be provided for transgender people when they can live as standard human beings without being as mentally ill, without being ostracized and they should be able to use their medical rights within the public health system. It is important that mental health workers take an important role in the individuals' lives, their families and the society during this transition and acceptance period.

Laws, regulations and documents:

In Turkey, in order for a transgender person to undergo surgery, a report must be written by three psychiatrists. People who apply to court with this document are given permission to undergo sex reassignment surgery if they satisfy proper conditions. The person then applies to the court a second time with a document proving that he/she has undergone the sex resignation surgery and then the gender is changed in the birth certificate. Only specialists working in teaching hospitals are authorized to give those reports. Specialists working in private sector cannot give reports. Until 1998, there were no legal regulations on this subject. There are problems with the change that was made in the 2002 Turkish Civil Code. The main problematic in the legal status of transgender persons in Turkey is the requirement of being permanently deprived of the capacity of reproduction for having Court's permission to undergo a sex reassignment surgery (Turkish Civil Law 2002, Yüksel, et al 2014).

Providing health services:

Trans individuals may experience problems with health services during the transition process. The number of experienced and educated mental health workers, endocrinologists and surgeons who might participate in the transition process is inadequate, especially within the public health sector as free. In the graduate and postgraduate specialist education, adequate and correct information is not given in all universities and other educational institutions. The individuals are in a way forced to see specialists in the private sectors.

Until now, I mostly talked about problems. But there are also positive developments about transgender. First of all, gay pride parades are being organized in Istanbul and other cities for the past

ten years. The attendance has increased rapidly. Last year fifty thousand or so people joined. Another important development is about the parents of LGBT people. In the recent years, their number increased and they are parading with open identities, without hiding themselves, carrying banners like “I am a transgender person’s father/mother” with pride (Kaptan 2013, Yetkin 2013).

There are three university transgender support groups in three cities and psychosocial support groups organized by an NGO. In addition, LGBT parent group meetings (LISTAG) are conducted in four cities. There is an award-winning documentary made by LISTAG parents (Candan 2013). Many parents watched this documentary and discussed it. The number of transexual people who accept themselves and live openly is increasing. But we still encounter examples of the opposite situation. We called on some people who had completed their identity change and with whom we have worked for years one year after their operation to evaluate their situation. Some of them refused to meet with us with the fear of “getting caught”, they were afraid of their transgender identity being revealed, others said they did not want to remember their past (Özata 2012).

Discrimination and human rights violations:

In the last eight years, 36 trans-people were killed, five of them in the year of 2014. What is really upsetting is that some of the killers received a sentence reduction because the victim was a trans-person (TGUE 2013, Tahaoğlu 2013).

Conclusion:

What are the main problems? To establish gender team there are limited number of professionals from different disciplines, the precondition for sex reassignment surgery report: the requirement of being permanently deprived of the capacity of reproduction for having Court’s permission to undergo a sex reassignment surgery, there are not enough specialists working in the public, specialists working with children and adolescents take it as a temporary situation and they don’t give the proper support, there are problems with prisoners, there are no precautions for hate crimes, urgent demands of change from those who are not ready to change

What is gained? Associations from different disciplines such as Turkish Medical Association (TTB), Psychiatric Association of Turkey (PAT), Sex Education, Research and Treatment Association (CETAD) are sensitive to the issue of gender identity, number of trained mental health professionals is increasing, the pioneering group working transpositive in these groups is increasing, LGBT organizations are getting widened, there are transmen and transsexuals separate from LGB groups, parents of LGBT people are raising their voices, transgender people and their families are more visible in media.

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