Blaming Women, Helping Women: Medicalization of Sexuality in Menopause

Medicalization of female sexuality takes different forms for women in different life stages. Sexuality in menopause presents an intersection for discussing both medicalization of female sexuality, and that of midlife sexuality. Pointing to the specifics of cultural constructions in this juncture contributes to a better understanding of the process of medicalization.

In this paper, I analyze the constructions of Turkish women’s sexuality after menopause in late 1990s and early 2000s, a period that coincides with medicalization of menopause in Turkey. The empirical base of the paper draws on ethnographic research I have done in Istanbul, Turkey between June 2006 and March 2007, which involved participant observation in gynecology clinics and interviews with clinicians and menopausal women as well as archival research on the representations of menopause in the Turkish media between 1999 and 2006.

I argue that the medicalization of menopause in Turkey contributed to framing sexual problems a middle-aged couple might experience as the woman’s responsibility, offering hormone replacement therapy (HRT) as a solution. Both interview data and media analysis suggests that menopausal women’s sexuality is mainly defined in relation to their partner’s sexuality in a monogamous heterosexual marriage, and remaining sexually active during and after menopause is described within the context of fulfilling one’s duty as a woman to her husband.

Biography
Maral Erol is a lecturing fellow in Thompson Writing Program at Duke University. She has a BA in Political Science and International Relations from Bogazici University, an MA in the same discipline from Yildiz University, and a PhD in Science and Technology Studies from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Her research interests are gender and technology relations with a focus on reproductive technologies. Her doctoral dissertation investigated postmenopausal hormone replacement therapy in Turkey in relation to the professional and gender identities shaped by the Kemalist modernization project; with the argument that the medicalization of menopause in Turkey is related to the meanings attributed to awareness and consciousness in healthcare and responsibility towards one’s body. This shift in meaning happened with privatization/globalization that took place after 1980s, changing the emphasis from being a conscious citizen recognizing medical authority to neoliberal ideas of being a conscious consumer of healthcare.

She has published an article in the journal Medical Anthropology entitled “Second Spring: Menopause in Turkey Through the Narratives of Women and Gynecologists” in 2009, and has an article currently under review titled “Melting Bones: Social Construction of Postmenopausal Osteoporosis in Turkey” on discourses of osteoporosis in the menopause awareness campaigns in Turkey in the journal Social Studies of Science. She is teaching a writing intensive course called “Reading Gender, Writing Technoscience” for the Fall 2010 semester and preparing another course on medicalization of life stages for the Spring 2011 semester.