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IDE DISCUSSION PAPER No. 198

**Constructing Female Subject: Narratives
on Family and Life Security among the
Urban Poor in Turkey**

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Abstract

This paper examines people's everyday acts, decisions, and narratives about livelihood and poverty. By doing so, it elucidates the way that family norms produce these acts, decisions, and narratives, and how female subjects are constructed as the result of the effects of family norms, focusing on norms of sexual honor. It shows that people's sense of belonging is deeply grounded on kinship and it does not just disappear, even if monetary exchange declines and/or conjugal love is idealized. In fact, the value of sexual honor seems to be embedded within the concept of love. Agreeing with the current argument for the necessity of reorganizing the social security system based on citizenship, in order to respond to the changing nature of poverty, this paper argues nonetheless that it would be misleading to suppose that these formal legal institutions would directly shape the citizen subject.

Keywords: poverty, sense of belonging, kinship, female subject, Turkey

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Constructing Female Subject: Narratives on Family and Life Security among the Urban Poor in Turkey

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Introduction

The changing nature of urban poverty, or the emergence of “new poverty”, has been claimed by scholars and media to have been a developing issue in Turkey since the latter half of the 1990s. It is now believed that the mutual help, based on real and imagined kinship ties, which had previously functioned as a safety net, has been steadily eroding. This dissolution has, in turn, led to the impoverishment and isolation of each family household among the urban poor. Scholars who advocate this view claim that it is imperative to now introduce a formal institutional safety net for the poor who have been left outside of the currently recognized system. The main point of their argument is that there is a necessity to reorganize the social security system based on citizenship, rather than relying only on insecure personal ties, and to integrate these people to establish social solidarity within Turkish society as a whole (Bugra 2001, Bugra and Keyder 2003).

While agreeing with the importance of focusing on the changing nature of poverty, I find it crucial to dwell more on kinship as being the normative and cultural entity and that this should be used to gain insights into the possible forms of citizen subject, when the reorganization of social solidarity is at stake. The current debate is misleading in two ways. First, the declination of mutual help based on kinship ties is identified with the declination of the relationship or value of kinship as the grounds for social solidarity among the urban poor. Will the relations and value of kinship disappear when it loses its material ground? Second, the debate seems to premise that any solidarity based on kinship ties among the lower classes is something that contrasts with the alleged citizenship-based solidarity among the middle-upper classes. However, citizenship has never been neutral, either in theory or in practice. In Turkey, as in other societies, citizenship has been gendered, and even defined by the value of kinship (Kogacioglu 2005). Besides, as I will discuss in detail later, in the Turkish case, kinship relationships are still important in the social life of the upper-middle classes. This is apparent, despite the fact that the nuclear family based on love-marriage has been introduced as the basic unit of society, to replace kinship, in the course of modernizing reforms. What

is needed at present is an exploration of the ways by which both kinship values and modern family values have been embedded into current Turkish society (Cf. Lo and Bettinger 2001, Sirman 2005).

The aim of this paper is to explore family norms and their effects on the construction of female subjects in the context of increasing difficulty in keeping life security. The paper is based on results from my fieldwork conducted during 2006-2007 in a low income district of Istanbul. I will examine women's everyday acts, decisions, and narratives in relation to livelihood and poverty. Through this, I will elucidate the ways by which family norms produce these acts, decisions, and narratives, and how female subjects (agents) are constructed as the result of these types of effects of family norms. As will be mentioned later, the norm of sexual honor was acutely related to the issue of women's poverty among the people I interviewed.

When locating a women's agency first came into focus, the debates regarding gender in non-Western societies were expanded beyond the simplistic registers of submission and patriarchy. In the study on gender in Middle East, the attention to women's agency provided a crucial corrective that restored the absent voice of women, portraying women as active agents (Mahmood 2005: 6). However as Lila Abu-Lughod points out, these studies have often been too preoccupied with "expanding resistance and finding resisters", at the expense of understanding the workings of power (Abu-Lughod 1990). As Judith Butler argues, power (institutions and norms) is not simply a social imposition on the subject; rather, it constitutes the very substance of his/her intimate, valorized interiority. Although an individual is largely regulated and defined by power at the same time, there are always possibilities for him/her to reread and change the institution and norms as an agent (Butler 1990,1997). Saba Mahmood, who expanded Butler's argument to avoid a liberalistic view of freedom, argues that we should look at how norms are lived by people, instead of categorizing people's agency into the simple binary of reinforcement/subversion or subordination/resistance (Mahmood 2005). This is the approach that I will follow in this paper.

1. Issues, Scope and Fieldwork

Kinship and Sexual Honor (*Namus*)

In the process of nation building in Europe, it was essential to infuse the ideal of the modern family in order to create a modern state-society relationship. The nuclear family based on love-marriage was assumed to be a basic unit of the polity as well as the

basis of fostering national identity. In Turkey, nation building was promoted by the modernist-reformist elite, beginning at the end of the Ottoman period, and resulted in legislation of the secular civil code etc. While the ideal of the modern family seems to have had considerable penetration, the communal relations based on real and imagined kinship beyond the nuclear family have continued to be the grounds for solidarity.

In the dichotomous thinking of modernity in Turkey, as well as elsewhere in other postcolonial settings¹, nuclear families, and women active in the public sphere and dressed in the European fashion, have become signs of Turkey's modernity. In contrast, kinship relations and the concept of honor have assumed a position of being traditional and, in that sense, backward. For this reason, kinship relations often remain unnamed and hidden when the elites are concerned, and are cast as traditional when the lower classes are in question. Although they are few in number, the existing studies suggest that we might understand relations and values of kinship as something reconstructed in the course of people's encountering the modernizing project, rather than as something pre-modern or essential.

Sirman argues that in the course of modernization, love, which was fostered in the conjugal family, was to produce an autonomous self-monitoring subject who acts according to his/her individual attachment. This was to replace *namus*, the bondage of kinship. However, what actually happened was that "love, rather than displacing honour by producing the presumably free subject who chooses to act according to his or her own personal emotional attachments, serves to replace the kin group or the house with nation and family, the two imaginaries constitutive of the nation-state, in the operation of honour (Sirman 2004:54)". As is shown in the engendered understanding of

¹ Following Stuart Hall(1996) quoted in Sirman(2004), I use the term 'post-colonial' to refer to a social and political context in which social relationships and the cultural concepts, through which they are understood and interpreted, are saturated with comparisons to societies and cultures deemed to be more developed. Defining the colonial both as a system of rule and power, and exploitation, and as a system of knowledge and representation, Hall refuses to locate the post-colonial in a particular space; that is, in societies that have been colonized. Instead, he proposes that the term should be used to cover global relations after the time of colonization, when all localities start to produce their own identity in relation to others and according to the measure of civilization/development. Thus, despite the fact that Turkey has never been formally colonized, it can be argued that social practices are assessed and rendered meaningful only in relation to those in the developed West (Sirman2004:40).

love produced through nationalist discourses, notions of honor are still operative in the regulation of feminine identity in Turkey. “Under modern conditions, a woman will not feel honourable if her love does not include sacrifice, while a man will demonstrate his love by providing for his family. A woman will show her love for family and country by controlling her own sexuality while a man will do so by being prepared to die for family, country and honour”(Sirman 2004:54).

At this point, studies on *namus* in Turkey are primarily theoretical and consist of discourse analysis². Feminist activists have recorded concrete cases, but almost exclusively in the context of honor-related killings³, with indifference shown to honor-related restrictions in the everyday life of people who would not go as far as killing a woman to punish her. In fact, the code of *namus* includes various rules and limitations – how to dress, with whom to socialize, or where a woman can go on her own, etc. – regarding everyday lives. The significance of the present paper will be that it will explore how people actually live these rules under specific material conditions.

The Urban Poor

Turkey has been experiencing a rapid rural-to-urban migration since the 1950s. In the big cities like Istanbul, the urban lower classes have been mainly composed of these migrants, who live in unauthorized houses (*gecekondu*) on the periphery of the city. Nonetheless, since its inception, the migrant society has been neither homogenous nor static. Prior to the 1980s, the dynamics of social mobility among the migrants was closely related with the state’s development strategy at the time. During the period of state-led development, it was common for migrants to access public resources (public-owned land and employment in the public sector), using connections of real and imagined kinship. However, since the 1980s, Turkey has replaced its state-led development strategy with a neo-liberalist one. The consequences for the urban poor are that they can no longer enjoy the informal provision of public land or public sector employment. This change in development strategy is said to have also affected

² Among them Kovacioglu(2005) and Parla(2001) argue how honor-related crimes have actually been tolerated and even utilized by the state. Kovacioglu (2004) argues how the category of “honor crimes” is discursively framed in Turkey.

³ According to Sirman, this is the effect of the dominance of the developmentalist perspective that sees both the honor code and the social relations it regulates as an anachronism in the modern society they hope to be living in(Sirman 2004:40).

communal relationships, such that they have ceased to be reliable as a basis for mutual help (Bugra 2001).

Bora (2000) argues that the dissolution of mutual help based on communal relationships have been experienced differently between men and women. Among the lower classes, a woman's gender identity is constructed on taking responsibility for homemaking and child care as a mother/wife. As people tend to socialize with those of the same sex, the dissolution of mutual help results in her losing network with other women which. This means that she loses the basis of day-to-day mutual help and thus she has more difficulty in serving decent meal or preparing supplies for her children. These are an experience that makes her identity as mother/wife vulnerable. Her husband also gets his prides hurt because he cannot carry out his responsibility for earning a livelihood. Yet the effect is more serious for women because they blame themselves, while men blame either politicians or politics, or someone else outside of their world.

Based on field research in a newly developed low-income district in Istanbul, Isik and Pinarcioglu (2001) argue that it was the increasing competition for urban resources under neo-liberalist politics that affected the nature of the solidarity networks of migrants. According to these authors, solidarity networks – where old-timers help newcomers, who in turn would help future newcomers – changed from an egalitarian system to a more hierarchical one as the competition for resources (land and housing) intensified. These networks eventually disappeared when the neo-liberalist economic policy was further reinforced. The then newcomers, consisting of the bottom of the hierarchy of the migrants, now fell into hopeless poverty, having nobody from whom to get help.

On the other hand, Keyder (2005) claims it is the changing character of migration, coupled with various political and economic factors, that fundamentally affects the nature of poverty. The older generation of migrants, who had headed to the city searching for better life with some property, had a place to which they could return should they have failed to establish new life. In contrast, after the 1990s, the migrants who moved to the city did so under quite different conditions. This migrant population consisted primarily of Kurdish people from the eastern part of the country, who had moved to the city either because they had been forced to leave, or had escaped from their villages with only the clothes on their backs, because of warfare. Arriving in the

city with no property and no one upon whom they could rely for help, they fell into hopeless poverty with no options to go back to their home villages. They flowed into the *gecekondu* area of the city, where the first generation migrants who by now had succeeded in building up a stable life through benefits available from the urban development policy that had allowed them to make easy profits moved out.

According to Keyder, what is new for today's impoverished population is that poverty now also is accompanied by social exclusion. In the West, social inclusion was realized through the social safety net provided by the welfare state. In developing countries such as Turkey, where a welfare state has never been established in a full scale, informal social inclusion through an informal safety net (mutual help based on communal relations) has been critical, especially for people who were left outside of the social security system. Whereas, in the West, social exclusion was experienced as a failure of the welfare state, in Turkey it was the dissolution of the informal safety net that caused social exclusion of the urban poor. In the end, it was Kurdish migrants who suffered much severer social exclusion. Firstly, they could not even attain informal social inclusion as the first comer migrants had (Cf.Şen 2000). In addition, they had often been treated as dangerous and harmful people by society as they were an ethnic minority and hailed from a region where internal warfare had been ongoing.

Since the second half of the 1990s, the Turkish government has been eagerly utilizing The Solidarity Fund, established in 1986, as an almost sole institution for universal social assistance, to provide for needy citizens who have remained outside the social insurance system. However, the effectiveness of the Fund remains controversial (Şenses 1999)⁴.

S District in Context

My field research, upon which this paper is based, was conducted in the S-district of

⁴ If we look at the picture from the state's viewpoint, informal provision of public resources enabled the state to integrate the urban poor, who had been excluded from the formal routes to make claim to the state as national citizens and who had been marginalized from the fruits of economic development. Under the neo-liberal development strategy, the integration of the urban poor into the nation state was now achieved through the social assistance system (the Solidarity Fund), which directly linked each family to the institutions of the state (Üstündağ 2005).

Istanbul from December 2006 – September 2007. The S-district is located in the Asian side of the city, and is almost entirely composed of unauthorized houses whose population grew at an unprecedented rate after 1980. The population was around 80,000 in the year 1990 and has swollen to over 270,000 at the time of this research. The population consists predominantly of rural-to-urban migrants, including a recent massive inflow of ethnic Kurdish people. Migrants who hail from the same district tend to live in the same neighborhoods, and relatives often live in the same buildings. Most of the residents that I interviewed were first generation migrants, who had been born in villages in various parts of Anatolia and then moved to the S-district to work (for men) or to join other family members. Most do not own houses, automobiles, or other property and live on close to the minimum wage, without social insurance, although the whole population of the district has never been homogeneous in terms of income level.

As in other low-income districts in Istanbul, institutions of social assistance and mostly Islamist philanthropic NGOs are active in the district. The major institution is the Solidarity Fund. Municipalities (S-district and Metropolitan City of Istanbul) follow it. Distribution of coal, food and clothing, free health care, and school uniforms and supplies for children are among the activities of the municipalities. The cumulative number of household files held by the Solidarity Fund was around 20,000 at the time of this research. Most of interviewees were receiving or had had applied for help from one of these agencies.

The district is known as a stronghold of Islamic conservatism. Pro-Islamist parties have been successively been voted into municipality governments since it obtained its municipality status in 1987. However, few interviewees said that they were happy to live there as Muslims. They came to the district simply because rent was inexpensive compared to other parts of Istanbul. According to these interviewees, the district had expanded too fast and had attracted people of a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and that was why people were so suspicious each other. The rumors about sexual misconduct, such as prostitution and adultery, seemed to indicate their anxiety about the social order of the district. “Here, you cannot know what people really are under the mask of pious Muslim. A woman in a black mantle(*carsaf*)⁵ can engage in prostitution” was among the common phrases I often heard during the course of the

⁵ A black mantle for women that covers from the top to the toe. Wearing this indicates that she is religiously very conservative.

interviews. As will be mentioned later, people's anxiety over social order seems to revolve upon women's sexuality.

In addition to being suspicious of each other, I also noticed that people tended to position themselves in regard to the people living on "the other side (*karşı*)", namely the European side of the city across the Bosphorus. The European side and people living there were symbolized as economically and socially more developed, although the people of S-district had ambivalent feelings about them. While admiring the European side and the people as being more educated, well off and never bigoted about religious and moral issues like those in S-district, at the same time, the S-district residents would describe the European-side people as being cold and distanced, and lax in terms of sexual morals. This ambivalent attitude of the people toward the European side can be understood as a representation of their ambivalent attitude toward the modernity (Cf. Üstündağ).

In the course of research, in-depth interviews with over 50 of women from low-income families were conducted. Most of the women were married but some of them were divorced or widowed. Interviewees were chosen by applying a snowball sampling method. I preferred to interview women because, first, they are responsible for managing everyday livelihoods. Second, it was women who made contact with institutions of social assistance. Women's growing appearance in the public sphere and their mobility seemed to contradict with the existing family norms that strictly restricted women's mobility. Interviews with their families, relatives and neighbors, officers of the Solidarity Fund, schoolteachers, members of philanthropic NGOs, members of political parties, the district mayor, the district governor, and mukhtars in the district were also conducted.

2. Narratives and Practices of Family

Supporting Women

One of the topics of women's narratives on poverty concerned the difficulty of getting support from those who are supposed to support them. When I started an interview, I began by asking them to tell their life story, saying that I wanted to see women in need because I was interested in how they strive to make ends meet, getting support here and there, as mothers and wives. At first, I expected that their narratives would cover primarily their material lives. However, I soon realized that they were talking about something more, something we may term the politics of giving and taking support.

Nuray⁶ was a widow, age 40, who lived with her daughter. Nuray suffered the aftereffects of an injury she got from a traffic accident and could not go to work. Her daughter was making a living at the minimum wage. Nuray told me, “My younger brother never asks me if I am pinched for money. I myself cannot tell him. He must notice how I am desperately trying to pay rent and make ends meet with survivor’s pension. If I tell him, there is no meaning of being siblings. I feel so alone. Whenever he calls me, the only thing he asks me is who I am socializing with, or who I met last weekend. He controls me but would not support me. This is not fair. If he cares about my *namus*, then he must support me. If he does not, then he has no right to say “You should not go out”. If I get an offer to support from a rich man, I might not reject it, even if he is a married man. This is because my brother does not support me. And my brother would have no right to say “Don’t do that”.

Ayten was in her late thirties and lived with her husband and five still small sons. She was unhappy because her husband was a lazy poor provider and never cared about her and their children. “I have never been loved by anybody. I grew up like an orphan. When I got married, my family sold me, receiving a bride price. My mom did not arrange a hope chest for me. (An omission) I have siblings living in S-district, but I have nobody. I have a husband, but I have no husband. He is so lazy. We manage to get by on help that I get here and there. (An omission) I have thought to divorce or kill myself. I attempted to kill myself. This is because I have never received love or understanding from my husband. I have never been loved by my parents, my husband, or my siblings. I gave love but have never received love. When my eldest son was small, I looked for food in garbage. My younger brothers helped me a few times, only to make sarcastic remarks from time to time. If my husband were working, I would not rely on others for help, but he was sleeping at home. Men are either thieves or shameless. (An omission) I had no one to look after me. Well, I tried to resist him. I terminated my pregnancy five times! But as I could not get money, I could not do more. I got birth-control pills but they stopped giving them to me eight months later. My husband did not want to wear a condom, saying it is harmful for his health. (An omission) It is all the same. It is me who enrolls kids in a class and takes them to hospital. It is me who terminates pregnancy and who pays electric bills. My husband never cares about *namus* when I go finding food, but cares about it when we are in bed. He asks me where I went, what I did on the day. (An

⁶ The names of interviewees are all pseudonym.

omission) When a man got a wrong number and I answered it, he became furious and almost stabbed me. [Was it because he was jealous?] No, he was not jealous. He would be jealous if he loves me but he doesn't."

These cases tell us that for a woman, support means more than securing her livelihood. It means to care about and pay attention to her, and underneath to protect her body, sexuality and her *namus*, by preventing her from resorting to other men at the same time. Women I interviewed often told me about support or help, dividing it into two: "looking after morally/psychologically (*manevi olarak bakmak*)" and "looking after materially (*maddi olarak bakmak*)". The former includes various things, from protecting her sexuality to caring about her or giving affection, while the latter meant providing her. Although women expected to get support in a full scale, in reality it would happen that they got protection only of their sexuality and could not get material support, as seen in Nuray and Ayten's cases.

Among the people in the district, a woman was thought primarily to be supported by her husband and, if he could not afford it, by her male relatives⁷. Women are responsible for homemaking and childcare, and men for earning a livelihood. It was also a widely shared idea that a woman could not go out to work unless she was educated enough to be able to protect herself from the harmful environment⁸. The following narrative shows how women's mobility is restricted and how it is related with her schooling experience

⁷ Children are supposed to be supported by their father, and then by their father's male relatives. Their mother's relatives generally do not want to support them, because they are supposed to belong to their father's side. During the course of the interviews, supporting parents seldom became a topic compared to supporting children and wives. Some of the elderly were living in villages with or without their children. Some stayed in their children's homes for several months, in rotation. The elderly who were living in S-district without family to support them were cared for by various institutions of assistance like the Social Fund and also by neighbors.

⁸ Most women I interviewed had finished elementary school at most and some of them were illiterate. They, in fact, had no wage labor experiences outside the home except for a small number of women who had taken cleaning jobs at offices and houses of wealthy families in neighboring districts. However, this does not mean those women did not engage in revenue-raising activities. Engaging in piecework, like embroidery and lacemaking, at home was very common.

and educational level, which are the symbols of being modern in a Turkish context.

Bahattin(38) was working in his elder brother's factory and living with his wife and two daughters. We met at his home with his wife and daughters. "People from the lower classes should have one's own trade. This is true not just for men but for women. That's why I want my daughters be educated. I want them to become a nurse or a doctor. Here, in S-district, it is difficult to secure your family's *namus* because the surroundings are bad. We have heroin-addicted boys around here. (That's why) I do not let my wife go to work, in order to secure her *namus*. (In case I die) if she becomes a barber, she would open her own workplace and won't have to rely on others for money. For women to become dependent on others is the worst thing to do. You may fall into such situation if your husband is lazy and does not work. There are a lot of people who are up to something. Not everybody is, but you cannot tell who is that kind of person in this vast Istanbul. If someone gives you something, he will ask you to pay for it. But it is difficult for women to meet it since they cannot engage in physical labor." After I finished interview, he gave me a lift to the bus stop. On the way, he began talking about his wife again, but this time in a manner that was a bit scornful. "My wife is ignorant and naïve. It is impossible for her to go to work because she has no ability. She cannot even go to the market by herself. She does not know how to go there. I am sure she would get lost."

In this context, unless she is sufficiently educated to hold a decent job, if a woman fails to get support from her husband or male relatives, people would be worried that she has no choice but to resort to other men for a living. This means that she goes astray and loses her *namus* and, accordingly, her husband's and relative's *namus*. This was why there was a deep anxiety about sexuality of women who were in need, though the term *namus* was seldom uttered⁹.

Ayten's neighbor Selma told me she had broken off with Ayten because Ayten had tried to seduce her husband. Selma was critical and even afraid of her desperate attitudes, although she was sorry about her situation. "Ayten has never been loved by anybody and that's why she lives a bodily life. She should have had affairs with a

⁹ This was perhaps because the act of mentioning itself could damage *namus*. To have one's *namus* damaged was often expressed as "*adin cıkar*", which literally means "your name would be mentioned".

number of men. Otherwise, how can she always get money to bring food home? Her husband cannot be unaware of what she is doing, but he just passes over it. Recently, he has started having their sons go out to earn besides his wife!”

A woman who does not have a provider therefore can be seen as being under threat of getting her *namus* stained¹⁰. In fact, as the following episode indicates, widows are typical cases.

A woman in her forties, whose husband had gone abroad to work and abandoned her almost twenty years ago, was desperate because she could not get any help either from her sons nor her husband’s relatives living nearby. I asked her if she had applied to the Social Fund or NGO’s for assistance, saying that they were considerate toward widows and would treat her as a virtual widow. But she said “I hesitate to apply to the Fund office because there are male officers and they would misunderstand when women come and ask for help. They would understand that I am there to ask them to do me a favor and that they can take advantage of it.” When I asked her how they would take advantage of it, she said it means they would ask her to have sexual relations.

Constructing the Female Subject

Whereas for men it seemed that to protect women’s sexuality should be given high priority, the women themselves often told me that they could protect their *namus* by themselves and they just wanted monetary support and more attention and affection from their husbands and/or relatives. Let us return to the narratives of Ayten and Nuray. For each of these women, if their husband or relatives only control her sexuality to protect *namus* and do not support her materially and do not care how she and their children survive everyday life, that means her husband is indifferent and not giving affection to her. The feelings of being unattended and belonging to nobody as a woman, which we can read in Ayten and Nuray’s narratives, tell us how women’s sense of

¹⁰ A widow explained to me how she behaved carefully not to be taken advantage of being without a husband to protect her. “It is hard to be a widow. People gossip about widows, saying she has nobody (*sahipsiz*: I will mention this expression later). What does it mean to have nobody? Look, if a woman who has husband is an upper floor, a woman who does not have husband is a ground floor. People hesitate to climb to the upper floor but never hesitate to get into ground floor. You see?!”

belonging are deeply grounded in their position in kinship relationships. Those narratives show how hard an experience it is for them not to be able to construct the female subject of “a woman looked after by someone, a woman who has a man to support her.”

It should be noted that neither Ayten nor Nuray rejected their sexuality being protected. Especially for Ayten, the important thing was that control over her sexuality should be accompanied by affection or should be done in the name of love to her. If not, it was meaningless, at least for her. (I will return to the different ways in which women accept controls imposed by husbands and by others later.) My point is that women seemed to accept being controlled by their male and senior female family members and relatives to varying degrees, as far as such control accompanies affection. “*Sahip çıkmak*” (and also “*sahiplemek*”) is the common expression used by the interviewees when I asked who they relied on for support, and indicates this complex mixture of seemingly positive feelings (receiving affection, being supported economically) and negative feelings (being controlled). “*Sahip çıkmak*” literally means (1) to claim to be the owner of something, and, by further extension, (2) to attend to, look after someone, (3) to get someone/something under control, and (4) to support, back, help someone (Redhouse Turkish-English dictionary). “*Sahip*” means “owner” or “master”. An expression “*sahibim yok*” or “*sahipsiz*”, which was often used by Ayten and also by other women to that express she had nobody to support her, literally means “I am not owned by anybody” or “I have no master.” Ayten and Nuray were not just trying to bargain or negotiate over securing livelihood, in exchange for restriction, but were trying to secure an appropriate position as a woman in their life world.

In contrast to the women’s narrative, for men it seemed somewhat embarrassing to confess that they wanted someone to protect them, except for a few who said they wanted support from the state or their seniors (father, uncles and big brothers).

One night I accompanied my friend to visit a political party’s office of an election campaign. In the room, there were around twenty people, all men, but three of us got together. As everybody was curious about what I was doing, I explained myself and my research and told them I wondered if men also wanted to be supported like the women I had met. A man said hesitantly “that’s possible” but the rest were in silence. Another man told me, in an unpleasant manner, “that is a question one cannot answer in this occasion (*boyle ortamda cevap verilmez*)”. Then some

chorused they did not want support because “it is not appropriate (*yakismaz*) for men to ask for it”.

This episode indicates that it is a matter of manliness to ask others (usually men) to protect him. Let us see my interview with Mehmet. Mehmet was a man in his forties and was a factory worker living with his wife Ayşe and two sons.

[Does a man also want to be protected?]

Mehmet: How a wife can support her husband? She can never do it, because men never listen to what their wives say. Men won't accept what their wives say.

[Then, to support (*sahiplemek*) means protection (*korumak*) and at the same time making him/her listen to (*sozunu dinletmek*), am I right ?]

Mehmet: Yes.

[And, you won't listen to what Ayşe says, will you?]

Mehmet: Sometimes I listen to her but sometimes I don't. It depends.

[Does Ayşe support you?]

Mehmet: Sure. When I get sick, she supports me. We also make decisions together when we are going to buy something. We may have an argument but never quarrel or fight. It is better to support each other.

This case shows that being under someone's protection was understood as being obedient to him (and her). It was common for both men and women to hesitate to ask for help from others because they thought people would scorn and avoid them. However for men, it was a matter of hurting his pride(*gurur*) to confess that he is in need and wants support, while a woman seldom mentioned her pride. If there was something more that embarrasses women, it would be being taken advantage of, in her situation, by other men. As I mentioned, this was generally the case for widows. It seems that it is more the confession that he cannot support and protect his family (wife and children) than to confess he is in need, that hurts his manliness.

Enclaving the Relationship with the Husband

It was noticeable that while those who, like Mehmet, assumed a hierarchical relationship between wife and husband and thought a wife cannot support her husband, some women idealized a more egalitarian dyad relationship with their husbands.

Ayşe, the wife of Mehmet, was an outgoing woman in her early forties. She had

served as PTA president of their sons' school. They were a runaway couple and she often told me how they were still attached each other. She was listening to my conversation with Mehmet that I quoted above, but started talking in a manner of affirming Mehmet.

Ayşe: For husband and wife, to support means to help each other, but most women cannot do this. For instance, they cannot pay expenses for light and fuel, or they cannot enroll their kids in a class. This is because they lack self-confidence.

[Do you also think supporting someone means to make him/her listen to you?]

Ayşe: Of course. You must listen to him/her (*sozunu dinleyeceksin*).

It is interesting that she used the same expression of “to make him/her listen to you” to explain the seemingly different nature of the relationship between husband and wife. Mehmet talked about a more hierarchical relationship between husband and wife and used the expression to mean “to make someone obey,” although he actually changed his tone later, to mention that they support each other for certain matters like doing shopping. Ayşe used the expression to mean to pay serious attention to what she says. A woman should be confident enough to discuss with her husband to decide how she can help him as a mother/wife, and thus make him treat her as a capable partner. For Ayşe, the ideal relationship seemed to be more on equal terms (in fact “equal but different” terms, as she supposes matters related to domesticity as the area women could be of help) than that of Mehmet, and also that of Ayten.

Comparing herself with her neighbor Ayten, Selma explained to me how she had succeeded in changing her husband and establishing a better relationship with him. “If you are not confident, you cannot make others trust you. You have to approach your husband to gain trust from him. This has nothing to do with jealousy. Jealousy is a good thing. It is a proof of love. If a husband restricts his wife without understanding her, it is not out of jealousy, but distrust. That is the case for women in my neighborhood.”

Ayşe and Selma's relationships with their husbands were grounded more on equal terms facing each other. This kind of relationship seems to resemble that of a conjugal relationship that is supposed to be tied in with love and to be independent of kinship, yet both Ayşe and Selma said they had very close relationships with their siblings and helped each other. Here, I would like only to suggest that the intimate world built up between wives and husbands seemed to be more independent from their relatives, when

they were on the side of being controlled by them.

Ezgi was a woman in her late thirties who had three children. Her husband's relatives (father and his second wife, brothers and cousins and their wives and children) lived in the same building and adjacent buildings. Ezgi's husband lived in the downtown district on the European side, having escaped the draft and searching for better job. When I met her, he had stopped coming back home and had not given her money for some time. He took out heavy loans to buy a mobile phone and their house was going to be in foreclosure unless he paid back the debt. Ezgi asked her husband's relatives for help. However, they were indifferent to her troubles. She explained this was because his father had divorced her husband's mother when he was still baby and this broke up the family. Her parents and brothers living on the European side told her to divorce, saying they would look after her, but not "his children", which she could not accept. "Anyway", she said smiling cynically, "my husband's family would not allow me to divorce, because I am their *namus (onlarin namusuyum ya)*!" Indeed, she was frustrated by their attitude. "I was not covering my head, but began covering because everybody from my husband's family covers. I tried to comply with their way. Recently they started annoying me, saying not to wear pants, but this time, I wore pants and made them accept it. You should resist them a little! If they do not look after me economically when I am in need, they have no right to look after me morally (*dar gunde maddi olarak bakimiyorsa manevi olarak bakmaya da hakki yok*)". After spending uneasy days, she decided to visit her husband to ask him to pay back a debt and to give her some money to make a living at the moment. She was going to wait for him, no matter how many days it took. She left her children in the care of her sister-in-law and came on her own to my apartment, which by chance was close to her husband's place. On the day she came to me, we happened to meet him on the street. He was polite to me, but did not asked me where I was from (despite my Asian looks and accent) or what I was doing in Turkey (this attitude was quite different from that of other people I met in S-district). Ezgi told him she would not go home until he gave her some money. He did not answer her, but just said he would ask them to prolong the term of the mortgage and asked her to figure out a way. When he left, she said to me disappointedly. "See? My husband never cares where I am going to stay tonight, or who I am seeing. I wish he were jealous of me a little. It has always been the same since we got married. Once I asked him why he was not jealous of me. He said he trusted me. Don't trust me at

least once! ”

For Ezgi, while the control put on her sexuality by her husband’s family was nothing but restriction and could not be acceptable unless they helped her, control put on her by her husband was not to be a restriction any more. It was to be a proof of jealousy and thus a proof of love and affection.

Sevilay was a woman in her thirties who lived with her husband and daughter. Her husband had been running a small factory for some time. However, his parents and brothers tricked him and took it over. They were left with a debt. However, Sevilay’s parents did not help her because they resented his not asking them permission if he could try to run the factory. According to Sevilay, he did not want to ask permission, being afraid of getting his pride hurt in case they denied it. When I met her, she was worrying about how to make a living, as they were deeply in debt. I told her that most women I met had said if her husband loved her, he would provide for her. She said that she was against the idea, saying she was different in many ways from most women living in S-district. “I am not dependent on a man for my living (*erkege muhtac degilim*). If I divorced, I could make a living for myself. I would move to the other side of the city and work there. I can do it because I am confident. To love someone is a totally different issue. (An omission) My mother suggested me to divorce when my husband lost his factory. I told her that I love him and that it is alright for me if we cannot afford to buy our own house or that we eat only bread for dinner. But she did not understand me. She believes that to love me means not to let me rely on others (*kimseye muhtac ettirmemek*). So when we got married, my parents said ‘work hard’ instead of ‘love our daughter’ to my husband! Their understanding of love is totally different from mine.”

These episodes indicate that connotation of the act of support varies from hierarchical relation of obedience to more equal one. Conjugal relations were the main locus where those narratives on “equal but different” relationship were produced.

Rereading Norms

So far, I have examined how women complied with the norms on *namus*, through which process their female subjects were to be constructed. I also examined how some wives tried to foster conjugal relationships that were something more special – egalitarian or autonomous from relatives-- in the name of love. What if, then, a woman could neither

find her place in hierarchical conjugal and kinship relations nor establish facing-each-other types of relationships with her husband? What if she was unable to endure a life with no one to care about her, and she then finds someone alleged to be against the norm? Let us see Nuray and Ayten's cases again.

When I met with Nuray again, a month later, she had a boyfriend living far from Istanbul, whom she could only talk with over telephone, but could not see. She kept this secret and shared it with few widowed and divorced women who might understand her needs—financial, emotional and sexual. She said she liked him because he always asked her if she was happy and that he cared about her. However, she was looking for a new boyfriend who would be rich enough to support her and who lived in Istanbul so that they could go out and make love. According to her, she would not lose her *namus* unless she saw more than one man at the same time. She could also associate with married men. She would not lose her *namus* unless her boy friend failed to support his wife and this wrecked their marriage.

Ayten was so excited when I visited her for the last time before I left Istanbul. She told me she had been seeing someone for a year and she had just talked with him over the phone. She showed me clothes he had given as gifts to her and said she was going to wear them on the coming Ramadan holidays. “Neither my parents or my siblings or my husband loved me, though I took good care of them. I was feeling gloomy about the result of a check-up, but I feel better having talked with him over the phone. He told me that he would look after me both materially and mentally and would take me to the hospital tomorrow. I wish my husband would have said these words. (An omission) People need someone to pour out ones troubles. He told me he was not loved by his wife, either. He got run-down and cannot have an erection due to the depression pills he takes. He helps me economically and mentally. So do I. I mean I help him mentally. He takes me out to treat me with ice cream and cigarettes, and to listen to my problems. [So he helps you economically as well?] Yes. [Doesn't your husband get suspicious?] No, but if he was to become aware of our relationship, it would be serious. (An omission) My neighbors look at me weirdly, noticing I come back home from an odd direction. But I do not feel like sleeping with someone, due to my illness. He is an honest man and has never put his hand you-know-where. He just makes me laugh, to cheer me up. I like that about him. Whenever I call him to say I have worries, he comes to me at once. [Is your *namus* alright?] It is not damaged. This is because I have been loved neither

by my parents or my husband. Relationships are scalable. I help him and he helps me. [In case you have sexual relationship with him, what will happen to your *namus*?] In that case, my *namus* will be gone. Being without *namus* (*namussuz*) means you are not canonically lawful (*helal*). It is a sin (*gunah*). But who cares? Nobody has loved me.

Both Nuray and Ayten were seeing married men, but they neither denied the norm of *namus* nor denied themselves on the grounds that they could not comply with it. What they did instead was to reread the norm, to justify what they were doing. According to Nuray, to a woman to keep *namus*, it was required to have a relationship only with one man, and for a man, it was to take responsibility to support his wife. For Ayten, the imperative of the norm was that only those who care about her have a right to punish her because of her sexual misconduct.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I examined people's everyday acts, decisions, and narratives about livelihood and poverty. Through this analysis, I was able to elucidate how the family norms produce those acts, decisions and narratives, and how female subjects (agents) are constructed as the result of these effects of family norms, focusing on norms of *namus*.

In the context of the S-district, where the uneducated woman is not supposed to be able to make a living on her own, the act of supporting her denotes more than securing her livelihood. It means delving underneath to protect her body, her sexuality, and her *namus* by preventing her from having to resort to other men. It seems that a woman's sense of belonging is deeply grounded in her position in kinship relations. Yet, control over her sexuality by kinsmen would be not enough to construct a female subject of "a woman who is protected by her kinsmen". Control over her sexuality is acceptable for her when it is conducted in the name of love or affection, although in reality, this is often not always the case. The value of sexual honor seems to be embedded within the concept of love for women, whereas men seem to still value it in different ways. The idea is also supported by the fact that relationships outside of marriage can be justifiable on the grounds of the need for care and love, even if only women who involved in it think in that way. The fact that some women prefer a more egalitarian loving dyad relationship with their husbands is seemingly the sign of consolidation of the idea of the modern family, yet the relationship with their relatives remain important in their social lives.

It seems legitimate and timely to claim the necessity of reorganizing the social security system based on citizenship, when we face the changing nature of poverty. Yet, as we have examined in this paper, people's sense of belonging based on kinship would not just disappear, even if monetary exchange were to decline and/or conjugal love is idealized. Nor, I argue, would it be replaced by relationships defined by formal legal institutions. What remains to be done, then, is to examine the strained interaction between these formal institutions and people, in order to get insights into the construction of the citizen subject.

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