

**THE STOMACHACHE OF TURKISH WOMEN: VIRGINITY, PREMARITAL
SEX AND RESPONSES TO ONGOING VIGILANCE OVER WOMEN'S
BODIES**

By

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ABSTRACT

KEY WORDS: Virginity; premarital sex; female sexuality; Turkey.

This research offers an ethnographic study of 17 young, single, professional metropolitan women, who represent a new sociological class in Turkey. In-depth interviews empirically depict the group's attitudes towards virginity loss and premarital sex, attitudes most particularly revealed in their narratives of sexual experiences. Women's discourses on virginity, premarital sexuality, single womanhood, as well as patriarchy and feminism underscore both their resistance towards ongoing vigilance over female virginity within a Turkish context and their struggle to challenge 'patriarchal' codes of modest demeanor. However, although the results make a strong case for the significance of women's 'relative' empowerment vis-à-vis gendered patterns of sexuality and show women's determination to re-define the boundaries of 'proper' sexuality, findings nonetheless suggest that women still negotiate the limits of sexual permissiveness on the basis of moral concerns/judgments. That is to say, young women predicate premarital sexual activity primarily on love and committed romantic relationships. The author argues that the 'legitimization of virginity loss' by single women points to a continued ambivalence on the part of Turkish women seeking to 'justify' and 'idealize' their premarital sexual experiences at the cost of social exclusion. She discusses how women frame premarital sexuality as a moral issue through recently formulated discourses/phrases that invent new definitions of 'rational' and 'conscientious' morality around female virginity. Interviews also reflect the social vulnerability these women face in this process, particularly in light of the pervasive

¹ "Stomachache" [*Karın ağrısı*] appropriates the expression women themselves commonly use in discourse to describe the pain of maintaining an ongoing vigilance over one's body and sexuality. (The significance of this term is explored in the thesis.)

stereotypes of single women, as selfish, career-driven women and/or as spinsters. Further exacerbating the situation for this group of single, sexually active women are negative attitudes towards the women's movement and, ironically, the women's own rejection of feminist ideology. Their annoyance at 'being seen as sexually available' by men increases their difficulty in negotiating female body boundaries. This difficulty is further compounded by this group's criticism of feminism as radical and extremist, instead of viewing feminism, as the author argues, as an empowering resource for these women to not only escape prejudices about single womanhood, but more importantly, to assert control over their bodies, thus liberating themselves from social criticism.

**TÜRK KADINLARININ KARIN AĞRISI²: BEKARET, EVLİLİK ÖNCESİ
SEKS VE KADIN BEDENLERİ ÜZERİNDEKİ İHTİYATA VERİLEN
YANITLAR**

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ÖZET

ANAHTAR KELİME: Bekaret, evlilik öncesi seks, kadın cinselliği, Türkiye.

Bu araştırma Türkiye’de yeni bir sosyolojik sınıfı temsil eden 17 genç, bekar, profesyonel metropol kadınlarıyla yapılmış etnografik bir çalışmayı sunuyor. Derinlemesine yapılan görüşmeler özellikle kadınların cinsel deneyim anlatılarında ortaya çıkan bekaret kaybı ve evlilik öncesi sekse karşı tutumlarını ampirik olarak inceliyor. Kadınların bekaret, evlilik öncesi cinsellik, bekar kadınlık halleri ve patriyarki ile feminizm ile ilgili diskurları hem onların Türkiye bağlamı içinde kadın bekaretinin üzerinde devam etmekte olan ihtiyata karşı olan dirençlerini artırıyor hem de patriyarkal namuslu/mütevazi davranış kodlarına karşı olan mücadelelerini destekliyor. Ancak sonuçlar ne kadar kadınların cinselliğın cinsiyetçi modellerine karşı nispeten güçlenmelerinin önemine işaret etse ve kadınların ‘uygun’ cinselliğın sınırlarını yeniden tanımlamadaki kararlılıklarını gösterse dahi tespitler her şeye rağmen kadınların halen cinsel hareket serbestilerinin limitlerini ahlaki endişeler üzerinden kurduklarını öne sürüyor. Yani genç kadınlar evlilik öncesi cinsel aktivitelerini esasen aşka ve karşılıklı adanılmış romantik ilişkilere dayandırıyorlar. Yazar bekar kadınların ‘bekaret kaybını meşrulaştırmalarının’ Türk kadınlarının, toplumsal dışlanma endişesiyle, süre gelen çelişkilerine ve evlilik öncesi cinsellik deneyimlerini haklı çıkarma ve idealleştirme/yüceleştirmelerine işaret ettiğini iddia ediyor. Yazar kadınların evlilik öncesi cinselliği, kadın bekareti etrafında yeni ‘rasyonel’ ve ‘vicdani’ tanımları üreten diskurlar aracılığıyla ahlaki bir mesele olarak nasıl tasarladıklarını tartışıyor. Görüşmeler aynı zamanda kadınların bu süreçte karşılaştıkları sosyal yaralanabilirliği ve kırılganlığı, bekar kadınların bencil, kariyer düşkünü ve/ya kız kurusu gibi stereotipler

² *Karın ağrısı* kadınların bedenleri ve cinsellikleri üzerindeki kontrolü sürdürmelerinden duydukları acıyı anlatırken kullandıkları bir ifadedir. (Bu terimin önemi tez içinde incelenmektedir.

üzerinden görülmelerinden duydukları sıkıntıyı yansıtıyor. Tez boyunca bekar ve cinsel olarak aktif kadınlar için durumu daha da ağırlaştırılan bir diğer unsur olarak ise bu kadınların hem kadın hareketini hem de, oldukça ironik bir biçimde, feminist ideolojiyi reddetmeleri gösteriliyor. Bu kadınların erkekler tarafından 'cinsel olarak müsait ve daima hazır görülmelerinden' duydukları kızgınlık ve sıkıntı kadınların beden sınırlarını müzakere etmelerini de zorlaştırıyor. Bu zorluk, yazarın da öne sürdüğü gibi, kadınların feminizmi güçlendirici bir kaynak olarak görmeleri yerine radikal ve aşırı olarak eleştirmeleriyle daha da katlanıyor. Yazar feminizmin bu kadınları sadece bekar kadınlık ile ilgili önyargılarından kurtarmayacağını aynı zamanda da bedenleri üzerinde kontrol hakkı iddia etmelerini ve böylece toplumsal eleştiriden kendilerini kurtarmalarını sağlayacağını savunuyor.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

“Would you eat a cookie someone had taken a bite out of?” asked a male friend in the middle of a conversation at a café one day. Completely stunned by this rhetorical question, I did not say a single word both because it was really unexpected, even unintelligible to me and because, with a restless curiosity, I wanted to observe others’ reactions. In response to the ‘biting metaphor,’ all of the other men present nodded their heads approvingly confirming my reluctant guess. As the only woman at the table, I found myself attacked for even daring to talk about such a volatile and intimate subject as female virginity. What was most disturbing was that none of the men seemed to understand what I was confused about. This single example standing among countless others was a routine part of my daily life throughout my adolescent years and, in time, has led me think about the ongoing vigilance over female virginity in Turkey. Since then I often find myself reflecting on the use of virginity as a marketable theme in the production and consumption of cultural outputs, such as soap operas, jokes, TV commercials, newspaper articles, and speculating on the question of which social, cultural, and political dynamics make virginity such a powerful slogan and a popular image of manipulation.

In late April of last year, I was reading the news online, when I again came across the same phrase about ‘the bitten cookie.’ The context this time was quite different. The news was talking about the failure of President Bush’s \$1 billion abstinence campaign in the U.S. This ‘don’t have sex until you’re married’ movement has been also prompted by various practices all over the world. Commitments made by teenagers and young adults to refrain from sexual intercourse until marriage, called virginity pledges, as well as abstinence-only curriculums and programs such as “True Love Waits” that encourage college students to avoid premarital sex for the sake of maintaining moral purity can be given as examples for ongoing (self) surveillance of sexual activity among young, unmarried people and, thus, point out the continued significance of virginity (and its loss) in many cultures worldwide. These practices, also, demonstrate the popularity of the subject area in the contemporary social and political agenda. I would

also like to note that, throughout this thesis, although I, particularly, look at a specific group of women in Turkey, I constantly seek to avoid framing virginity simply as a Turkish or Middle Eastern issue. Rather, by reflecting on various practices in different parts of the world, and by developing an appreciation of differences among women in the world and in Turkey, I try to escape any possible risks of reifying culture, and thus, any association of ‘concerns on women’s sexuality’ with Islam and/or any framing of such questions as ‘Turkish’ or ‘Middle Eastern’³.

Apart from the practices as abstinence programs, mentioned above, that seek and serve to control premarital sexual activity among the youth, there are ‘gendered’ ways of dealing with virginity. To give some examples, young women in the United States sign a pledge which commits them to a life of sexual abstinence before marriage at parties they attend with their fathers. These balls, as part of the evangelical Christian movement, are mainly organized to celebrate father-daughter bonding, and the main agenda is the following. Fathers vow to *protect* their *girls’ chastity* until they marry while the daughters promise to stay *pure*. The concept of having daughters sign a virginity pledge, or take vows with their fathers emerged in the early 1990s. Another example to reveal the exclusivity of certain practices around virginity and premarital sex, I would mention ‘born-again virgins.’ Women, who have had previous sexual experience, claim to recapture their lost virginity through choosing to abstain from sex until marriage. Born-again virgins identify themselves as renewed virgins, and give their first time a do-over through spiritual routes. These examples among many others suggest multiple interpretations of virginity. While gender-specific practices such as hymen repair surgeries⁴, in different parts of the world, as Turkey and Morocco, and

³ See Abu-Lughod’s piece on “Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others” for an elaborate discussion.

⁴ See Mernissi 1982; Cindoğlu 1997 for a detailed discussion on hymen repair surgeries in Turkey and Morocco. Hymen Repair surgery or “hymen reattachment” is the surgical restoration of the hymen, which is a thin piece of skin or membrane that covers the vagina opening (Koso-Thomas, O. 1987). Some women seek hymen repair surgeries to be ‘born again virgins’ to fake their virginity if they had sex before marriage, or if they divorce and want to be virgins again when they remarry.

virginity pledges point to different meanings of virginity as well as configurations of sexual control and behavior, more importantly, they indicate the impact of virginity discourse on the sexual experiences of young women.

When, in 1949, the prominent French author and philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir, published *The Second Sex*, while describing “the myth of virginity”, she wrote that the virgin, “now feared by the male, now desired or even demanded ... would seem to represent the most consummate form of the feminine mystery. She is therefore its most disturbing and at the same time its most fascinating aspect.” (152). De Beauvoir’s words are quite significant in terms of referring to the ‘femininity of the virginity concern,’ thus, the vulnerability of women vis-à-vis the virginity question. In 2007, fifty-eight years after *The Second Sex*, Hanne Blank, an American historian published *Virgin: The Untouched History*, as the first source ever to illuminating the history of virginity in western culture, and to answering the following question in a cultural-historical perspective. Why has ‘losing it’ the wrong way, or at the wrong time, had the ability to destroy women’s lives?

This question has paved the research inquiries that have motivated this work. What does virginity mean to women in Turkey? What makes female virginity a much more sensible/critical subject of discussion than male virginity? How do contemporary women perceive virginity loss⁵? What are their attitudes towards premarital sex? How does a young, unmarried woman deal with the society’s expectations about her sexuality in Turkey? These questions and others form the ground of this study. The reason I am interested in Turkey, besides my personal commitments as a young Turkish woman, is

⁵ The concept “losing one’s virginity”, exclusively used to refer to the first sexual experience of women, is problematic in the sense that it signifies that virginity is something of “value” that women ought to have kept. Coupling “losing” with “female virginity” also implies that women are not active agents to assert their sexuality but they are passively “losing” their hymens, having their hymens “taken away” from themselves, or linguistically giving someone the ability to do so. However, despite all the problematic aspects of the concept, throughout the thesis I popularise the phrase “virginity loss” in referring to women’s first sexual experience. The reasons for this are the nonavailability of an alternative, casual, and ‘innocent’ language that would replace “loss of virginity” and the meanings attached to it by women as well as the researcher’s motivation to employ expressions women themselves commonly use in discourse to define and portray their first sexual intercourse.

to look at well-educated, professional, single, metropolitan middle and upper class women's own perceptions of premarital sexuality in a "modern" country, as contemporary Turkey. Not to conflate my interest in Turkey with the more mainstream approaches to the issue that assume virginity is a Middle Eastern and Islamic problem, I contend that the examination of discourses and practices of professional, 'sexually liberated' women shows that virginity concern is not peculiar to 'other women' who live according to their "traditions". Rather, I argue that women with different histories, desires as well as social, cultural and economic capital, develop changing and diverse practices around virginity, and related issues not only in Turkey but all over the world.

My motivation, as a researcher to study virginity loss and premarital sex in the Turkish context, through women's narratives, has its deep roots in my personal commitments as well as academic interests. The literature on virginity and premarital sex in the world (Peristiany, 1966; Delaney, 1987; Mernissi, 2000; Carpenter, 2002) and in Turkey, (Cindođlu, 1997; İlkkaracan, 2000) mostly discuss these issues within an honor/shame complex. However, some others are critical of this assumption of the honor/shame model and their analytical frameworks shift from a focus on "tradition or "culture" to the effects of various institutions (and institutional practices) that explicitly or implicitly bear a "modern" identity (Kođaciođlu, 2004; Parla, 2001). What I seek to do in this study is to explore the perception of female virginity and premarital sex among a group who have never been studied before: well-educated, young, unmarried professional women living on their own in İstanbul. This particular group of women form a new sociological class in Turkey. These women, whose characteristics are discussed in the methodology section, are interviewed about their personal memories, considerations, and attitudes towards premarital sex. The main agenda is for these women to reflect upon their experiences of virginity loss, the 'society's expectations' of 'proper' single womanhood, as well as its implications for women's sexual behaviors, and to hear the women's interpretations of virginity loss and premarital sexual activity. To elucidate the term "female virginity" as used in this thesis, in consideration of the ambiguity of the term, it refers to the state of not having vaginal intercourse, with a man before.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter presents a literature review of female sexuality and virginity, primarily as it relates to the implications of patriarchy for gender ideology, and the social organization of female sexuality and

reproduction, in both Turkey and other parts of the world. This is followed by the methodology chapter that describes the context for the study, criteria for sample selection, research methods strategically chosen to engage women participants into the study. A discussion of the characteristics of this specific, newly emerged class of women is also discussed in this chapter. A basic question, such as ‘Who are these women?’, has been answered through the use of a Bourdieusian framework, and analyzed, particularly, by his quite popular concept of ‘capital.’

The third chapter mainly deals with women’s perceptions of premarital sexual experiences, and describes how single, professional metropolitan Turkish women challenge patriarchal ‘myths’ on female virginity as well as the stereotypes about the sexual life of an unmarried woman by taking initiatives to redefine the boundaries of proper womanhood and sexuality. This part also analyzes the different discourses developed by women themselves, on the meaning(s) of virginity and the justification of its loss. Lastly, the fourth chapter is devoted to women’s thoughts and reflections on feminism. It also contains single women’s vulnerability vis-à-vis cultural prescriptions regarding single womanhood.

It is hoped that, by presenting a comprehensive analysis of well-educated, young unmarried, metropolitan women’s perceptions of virginity loss and premarital sex, more popular and scholarly attention will be devoted to ongoing vigilance over female sexuality in Turkey, and its notable effects on single women’s lives. It is the sincere belief of the researcher that, with the devotion and growing interest of the young Turkish generation of the new millenium, many problems of the ‘vulnerable’ group of single women will be investigated and discussed as well as future contributions of young scholars will lead to a more articulate and liberated female population.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

First intercourse, especially for women, has traditionally been a landmark event surrounded by a welter of moral strictures and normative concerns about the meaning of virginity and the loss of innocence (Carpenter, 2002), and virginity has always been an asset for unmarried women in Chinese (Zhou, 1989), Mediterranean (Peristiany, 1966) and Islamic cultures amongst others (Basnayake, 1990). The utmost importance given to the virginity of unmarried women in many cultures has led to the reification of such social anxiety over a woman's "purity" through diverse cultural taboos about female sexuality and disciplinary practices monitoring women's bodies.

The Mediterranean culture is known for its honor and shame codes which embraces male superiority at the expense of women's oppression through society's rules of proper female behavior and the imposition of these rules by family structure, legal and medical practices, and cultural restrictions (Cindoğlu, 1997; Delaney, 1987; Peristiany, 1966). Researchers maintain that women in the region, although to varying degrees, are subject to a set of family laws which constrain female behavior (Delaney, 1987; Mernissi, 1975). The culturally defined modes of control are invested in traditions and social norms oppressing a woman's movement in the public sphere as well as regulating her conduct in the domestic one.

The ongoing vigilance over virginity is widely discussed, by scholars and lay people alike, as intrusive patriarchal notions of sexual purity. The Mediterranean family structure is based on male autonomy in relation to the sentimental image of chaste, maternal, and subordinate womanhood. Patriarchal control over women's bodies is reproduced through honor and shame codes that monitor female promiscuity in order to secure fatherhood (Müftüleri-Baç, 1999). Delaney has shown that in certain societies such as Turkey, women's wombs have been considered as soil and men as seed (1987). Therefore, social recognition of a woman's sexual purity lies in her virginity and chastity as the only guarantees where men can claim fatherhood. This standard explicitly implies that women are valuable, not as autonomous human beings, but as

“reproductive” agents in the society. Such way of argumentation is quite reductionist and essentialist in terms of grounding men-women relationships into the single sphere of reproductive sexuality.

Apart from studies attributing public concern with fatherhood to the ongoing vigilance over women’s sexuality, a great body of literature also linked this social phenomenon to kinship ties. What has been discussed, throughout the literature, is as follows. Mediterranean societies are mostly organized around kinship bonds which are described as socially defined groups that are not biologically defined. Based on Engels' view that the subordination of women is located in the mode of production called kinship systems, one can classify the Turkish society, along with other Mediterranean societies, as a kinship based society that always involves the exchanges between males and females, and recognizes the importance of sexuality and gender. Accordingly, Turkish society includes a set of patriarchal rules governing female sexuality which operate in all economic and social structures (Delaney, 1987; Millett, 1970; Saktanber, 1995). Not surprisingly, in the middle of such omnipresent patriarchal power, female virginity, considered as the most tangible form of women's oppression, stands as the first and foremost “mother lode” of the social body to be secured in Turkey. Here, I should say that my analytical framework diverts from the one(s) used in the studies above, but it nods to the literature that challenges this culturalist understanding of virginity and of the honor/shame complex in general.

The lines between first and second wave(s) of feminism in the United States cluster around the issues of virginity vis-à-vis reproductive rights. The second wave feminism takes at its starting point the politics of reproduction while sharing with first wave feminism's politics of legal, economic, and educational rights for women. That is, where first wave feminism focused on overturning legal (*de jure*) obstacles to equality, second wave feminism has addressed unofficial (*de facto*) inequalities as well. What they both share, however, is the recognition that woman's oppression is tied to her sexuality, and that the goal of feminist theory and politics is a full understanding of the effects of living in the category 'woman'. As sexuality as a broad range of issues, behavior and processes, including identity formation and attitude development for both sexes, feminist studies need always to reserve space for the implications of sexuality on

male-female relationships, and women's oppression. This work thus begins with a considerable emphasis on different values and attachments assigned, by different agents, to male and female sexuality.

During the decade after the second wave feminist movement which encouraged women to understand the psychological implications of sexist stereotypes, new discourses on sexuality arose. The main novelty was in the form of an advance in sexual permissiveness. The differentiation of female sexuality from reproduction, thanks to the development of reproductive technologies, and the public proliferation of sexual diversity are two basic elements that constituted the sexual revolution in the past three decades. They can both be framed in a narrative of sexual liberation. However, Western feminists claimed later that although they nonetheless benefited from its consequences to one extent or another, the so-called sexual revolution remained limited in terms of liberating female sexuality and subverting wider repressive structures of power. Rather, they argued that this supposedly sexual revolution has not been in itself gender-neutral, as Giddens (1992: 29) claims, and that it did not empower women in relationship to "her life decisions and status in society" (Cindoğlu, 1997: 256).

The permissive era permitted sex for women too. What it did not do was to defend women against the differential effects of permissiveness on men and women ... It was about the affirmation of young men's sexuality and promiscuity... The very affirmation of sexuality was a celebration of male sexuality.

(Beatrix Campbell, quoted in Gilfoyle *et al.*
1993: 184)

Many Western feminists contended that what constitutes for Giddens a revolution in "female sexual autonomy" is more the fulfillment of male fantasies about female sexual availability than an increase in sexual freedom for women. The rhetoric of sexual liberation thus legitimizes male control of women's sexuality, and thus, ironically subverts women with the very rhetoric meant to free them.

A similar situation occurred, in Turkey, after the 1980s, along with the liberalization of market-led macro economic policies, a different set of propositions for women which can be called "liberal gender ideology" came into being. Even though female sexual purity was no longer presented as an asset, "the sexuality of women was

still defined by men, and relative to men” (Cindoğlu 1997: 255-256). The seemingly advance in sexual permissiveness may not necessarily be a sign of women's emancipation in sexual terms.

2.1 Republican “Honor” at Stake: Women’s Sexuality and Female Citizenship in Turkey

The literature on premarital sexuality and virginity, both in Turkey and other parts of the world, indicate that female virginity is interwoven with personal or even family honor in many cultures, and idealized and hegemonic images of masculinity and femininity are heavily influenced by perceived gender roles (Lindisfarne, 1994; Scott, 1996). Notions of male virility and female virginity amount to the cultural construction of gender identity. There is a common consensus on the idea that a woman's modesty, that is an unmarried woman's virginity, legitimizes her final status as a “chaste woman” and places that household with its members in the social hierarchy that makes up the moral community (Sirman 1994). Stiritz & Schiller’s argument, below, can be seen as a universal claim about female virginity.

Notions of virginity as an unblemished state, the first penetration by a penis as an irrevocable transformation to womanhood, and defloration as a developmental milestone in female sexuality derive from male fantasies of female purity that translate into justifications for social structures of control and ownership (Stiritz & Schiller 2005).

In Turkey, the reflection of female chastity is identified with the term *namus* which can be roughly translated as family honor and sexual purity for women (Müftüler-Baç 1999). One aspect of sexual innocence for an unmarried woman in Turkey is that she must keep her virginity intact and wait for marriage, the benchmark of allowed sexual activity (Cindoğlu 1997). The basic difference between Turkish society and other Mediterranean societies is that the state in Turkey “is a party to women's sexual activities reflecting society's values vis-à-vis women's sexual purity” (Müftüler-Baç 1999: 309).

In different social classes *namus* would be threatened by different misdemeanors. What is common in all classes is that woman's chastity, fluid and vague in meaning, remains the most important regulatory mechanism over female freedom and behavior “to keep women under the control of their fathers, husbands, and brothers who assume responsibility for ensuring 'their' women retain their chastity” (İlkkaracan and Seral 2000: 189).

It is commonly acknowledged that among Muslim nations Turkey distinguishes herself by comprehensive, and as yet incomparable, reforms with respect to the emancipation of women. With the establishment of the Turkish Republic (October 29, 1923) new gender codes were introduced into women's lives. A body of civil and political reforms, enacted in the 1920s, included the introduction of co-education, with compulsory primary training, and the acceptance of a new Civil Code which outlawed polygamy. However, the 1926 Civil Code was unable to grant men and women equal rights and responsibilities in marriage, divorce, property ownership, and management. While Turkish nationalism -Kemalism- appropriated women's emancipation as an indigenous pattern it remained limited in terms of women's liberation and targeted only the urban and bureaucratic elite women who internalized the Kemalist message and forged new identities as professionals as well as patriots (Kandiyoti 1991).

In the early republican period, the status of women was considered as one important criterion determining the extent and success of modernization and Westernization of the country. The “new woman” became an explicit symbol of the break with the Ottoman past (Kandiyoti, 1987). Nonetheless, the republican regime defined the parameters of its “state-sponsored *feminism*” which reflected the world view of most men who envisioned an ideal in which women were virtuous good wives, dedicated mothers and modest homemakers. The utmost duty of Turkish women has been, under this early republican context, to be the guardians of tradition and the social and biological carriers of the community (Arat, 1989; Kandiyoti, 1982). The quote offered below is part of a conversation M. K. Atatürk, founder of the Turkish Republic, held with a female teacher candidate in 1925 in Teachers Training School for Girls, İzmir.

A female Teacher Candidate – What should be the Turkish woman like?

M. K. Atatürk – The Turkish woman should be the most enlightened, most virtuous, and most reserved woman of the world. ... The duty of Turkish woman is raising generations that are capable of preserving and protecting the Turk with his mentality, strength and determination. The woman who is the source and social foundation of the national can fulfill her duty only if she is virtuous.

Teachers Training School for Girls, İzmir, 1925⁶

The words of M. K. Atatürk image the gender approach of the Kemalist ideology which is basically “a synthesis of a puritan morality based on an Islamic principle of female modesty and a modernization goal framed by the ethics of nationalism and professionalism” (Arat 1998: 16). Women, at that time, were encouraged to participate in the public sphere of life only if they obeyed certain moral and behavioral codes as well as displayed modesty in their attire. That is, they needed to preserve the ‘respectability’ and ‘honor’ of their families and nation through their chastity. The Kemalist gender ideology along with patriotic feminism led to women's defeminization, and thus invisibility, in the public sphere (Durakbaşa, 1987, 1998; Berktaş, 2003; Kadioğlu, 1998; Kandiyoti, 1997; Sirman, 2000). The portrayal of the ideal woman as pure, honorable, and unreachable has kept Turkish women always prepared, on the verge of an omnipresent threat to her ‘virtue’ for many decades. As Cindoğlu puts it, modernization of women's lives has not diminished the highly charged value of female sexuality, and virginity, in Turkish society (1997: 255).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, scholars such as Yeşim Arat and Deniz Kandiyoti produced groundbreaking work critiquing the gendered nature of Turkish citizenship. They argued that female citizenship in the modern Turkish nation-state is inextricably linked to sexuality and reproduction. Their main emphasis has been on the inclusion of women into a new notion of “citizenship” dictated by the transition from a monarchy to a populist republic (Arat, 1989; Kandiyoti, 1991). Women, in the Turkish

⁶ *Atatürk'in Söylev ve Demeçleri*, 1989. Volume II, p. 242; translated by Yeşim Arat.

Republic, have been subject to a modernized form of patriarchy which considers women as political actors only to the extent that they perform sexual and reproductive roles, rather than social or political ones, in society. This reflects Pateman's understanding of modern patriarchy's allowing its female subjects to attain the formal standing of civil individuals" as embodied feminine beings but never as 'individuals' in the same sense as men (Pateman, quoted in Ruth Miller 2007: 351).

More recent scholarship on gender and political belonging in Turkey has tended to touch upon the biopolitical nature of citizenship in the modern Turkish nation-state while nullifying the delusion that the state, as an institution, has nothing to do with her modern woman citizen's body (Parla 2001). Parla, in her piece on virginity examinations in Turkey, discusses the gendered and sexualized citizenship in Turkey through state-enforced virginity examinations on women who transgress "public morality and rules of modesty" (2001, 66). By arguing that "virginity examinations must be viewed as a particularly modern form of institutionalized violence used to secure the sign of the modern and/but chaste woman, fashioned by the modernization project embarked on by the Turkish nationalist elite under the leadership of Kemal Atatürk" (2001, 66), Parla uncovers the illusion that Turkish women are not subject to sexual oppression as women are in many Islamic societies. In doing so, she reveals the "modern" state's ongoing vigilance over, and intrusion into, women citizen's bodies. Such works, focusing on the repercussions of different forms of (il)legal violence directed against vulnerable citizens, as the poor or women, are very essential in terms of showing the complexity of forces attacking female bodies and women's identities as parts of nations. Furthermore, these researches challenge any one-to-one correlation between Islam, tradition, and women's subalternity vis-à-vis men's authority.

2.2 The Stomachache⁷ of Turkish Women: Female Virginity as a 'Potent' Tool of Subjugation

Most studies on sexuality and virginity reveal the broad contours of virginity-related beliefs and behaviors, and discuss virginity, in contemporary Turkey, within the honor/shame complex (Bora, 2002; Cindoğlu, 1997; İlkaracan, 2000). Cultural taboos about virginity and honor are widely understood by scholars in Turkey as manifestations of a purely male preoccupation which take on diverse configurations in different classes (Cindoğlu, 2000; Müftüler-Baç, 1999). Cindoğlu discusses female virginity as the most visible form of control over women's bodies which has served as the battleground of modernization. The importance of virginity lies in its tangibility as an indicator of sexual activity or lack thereof, as well as its capacity to determine the woman's value in the marriage market and, therefore, her status in society. "Being a virgin bride signifies a woman's purity and her loyalty to her family. In a sense, the virginity of the bride is an asset for both her family and the groom's family" (Cindoğlu 1997: 253).

Many studies on virginity in Turkey have so far focused on the inner dynamics of virginity as well as the ways in which the attitudes towards virginity are shaped, produced and reproduced in the society (İlkaracan, 2000; Mernissi, 2000; Parla, 2001). To examine and interpret the on-going centrality of virginity in women's lives in Turkey, scholars have investigated the intricate connection among virginity, state politics, and sociocultural control mechanisms in the country in order both to get an idea of the community's or state's unrealistic virginity standards as well as to see the implications of this kind of body politics (Cindoğlu, 2000; Parla, 2001). They have elucidated how institutional mechanisms of surveillance operate in such a particular way that they serve to the reproduction of the rejection/restriction of the female body

⁷ "Stomachache" [*Karın ağrısı*] I have deliberately used this term in the title, as the words are those appropriated by Turkish women themselves in discourse. The expression describes the pain of maintaining an ongoing vigilance over one's body and sexuality.

together with the preservation of the status quo, its hierarchies, values and norms through the functioning of the gendered social system (Altınay, 2000; Parla, 2001).

Various studies have been done on the issue of virginity since the 1980s most of which mainly focused on the intricate connection between the body, state politics, and sociocultural perspectives on female sexuality in Turkey (Parla, 2001; Saktanber, 1995). Deriving from the symbolic guarantee of a woman's behavior and value system, that is virginity, they analyze the different mechanisms operated by various agencies such as the state, law, religion, media, etc. which do claim authority over women's bodies, whether explicitly or implicitly (Parla 2001; Koğacıoğlu, 2004).

Many scholars look at the deep impact of the popular discourses about female sexuality in general, virginity in particular, on women who attempt both to question and to deconstruct the effects of such body politics which define the parameters of an idealized standard version of the female body mainly based on the widely shared norm of honor. Many researchers identify the so-called honor motif, creating subjects who act through ideologies promoting the reproduction of patriarchy, which refers mainly to a range of institutional and cultural practices resulting in the subjection of women, as the major regulative mechanism predicated upon patriarchal notions of ownership and absolute control of women's bodies. Some scholars also mention the constant production of discourses around the issue of virginity based on the intentional regulation and controlling of the female body and sexuality under the name of 'tradition' and 'culture' (Altınay, 2000; Bora & Günal, 2002; Gül, 1992; Kandiyoti, 1987; Koğacıoğlu, 2004; Parla, 2001; Temelkuran, 1999). Koğacıoğlu, in her prominent article on honor crimes in Turkey⁸, argues that the centrality granted to culture in debates around the issue of honor violence seems to divert the attention from the role of 'modern' institutions in the perpetuation of honor violence, and the notions of honor and tradition that are reproduced in the discursive and practical realms of these

⁸ Koğacıoğlu, D. 2004. "The Tradition Effect: Framing Honor Crimes in Turkey." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 15(2): 118–51.

institutions (2004: 121). Koğacioğlu's discussions on "tradition effect" are taken up, in more detail, later in the paper.

Most of the existing literature on virginity in Turkey converge upon how female sexuality is regulated through highly gendered discourses and practices, what are the peculiarities of the changing attitudes towards female body and sexuality. The literature on the subjective aspects of virginity loss focus on women's experiences of premarital sexuality. These experiences, in turn, are vested in the culturally defined modes of control of female sexuality among which the so-called traditional insistence on female virginity stands as one of the major social norms that does serve as a moral yardstick in Turkish society.

The reflections of the second wave feminists in Turkey on the politics of sexuality and virginity have paved the way to this study. In particular, Bosphorus University Women's Group's work has been an impetus and inspiration for my research (1992⁹, 1993¹⁰). Their use of language as well as the organization of their campaigns on female sexuality and virginity provided new perspectives on the subject and led to critical openings in terms of research questions. Their emphasis on individual narratives along with their politicizing of female virginity in their own lives serve as pioneering attempts on the part of young, female university students at Bosphorus University to (self)-reflect on such a volatile and intimate subject as female virginity. To briefly look at what has been done in that era, one should ask 'How is female virginity encoded in a particular way that it comes to regulate proper womanhood in certain instances? This inquiry stands as the major question around which various discussions on the cultural connotations associated with women's premarital sexual relationships are attached. The main argument we can actually follow during those reflections circulates around the idea that virginity is the major obstacle for women to be the owners of their own bodies; that is, they see the dogma of virginity as the main regulative mechanism of the state and the society over women's body in terms of limiting, naming, labeling, and

⁹ Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Kadın Grubu. 1992. *Bekarete Dair...* İstanbul.

¹⁰ Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Kadın Grubu. 1993. *Cinselliğe Dair...* İstanbul.

categorizing it. These university women students think that in such a patriarchal system women cannot claim autonomy over their bodies. Women experience their sexuality in a society where even their agency does not easily allow them to break the existing structures that they cannot say 'my body belongs to me'. These "second-wave Turkish feminists" have all labeled male centered discursive practices and social meanings attributed to female virginity as strategic assaults imposed upon women's body.

As for virginity, Bosphorus University Women's Group contend that it is the sign, which shows us that our bodies do not actually belong to us as women but to men for whom we need to keep ourselves 'clean'. Virginity, as a product of the virility negotiated among men, serves and adds to the construction of a particular kind of sexuality where women are just the objects of men's desires. Women are encouraged to keep silent about their sexuality, never to disclose their sexual needs or to ask for any physical pleasure. Young Turkish feminists, who tried to open an alternative space for "sexuality discussions", argued that virginity has a sacred place in the understanding of 'honor' and 'chastity' since it serves to the rejection/restriction of the female body in a web of social relationships defined and sustained by men. They maintained that virginity, by guaranteeing the distinction between women who have had sexual intercourse before marriage and those who have not, stood for a powerful indicator of the monitoring of female body by different agents (Altınay, 2000). The last but not the least, their use of language as well as their grounding their reasoning on their own narratives make one think on the significance of such personal expression in terms of adding to the materiality of the academic concepts discussed and show how various issues carrying acquired meanings in a cultural context do actually touch individual lives and affect their inner well-beings. The projection of the feelings of guilty conscience, confusion, annoyance, and anger by the respondents into the discussions has brought a new dimension to the articulation of uneasiness about and the challenge against the silencing of women's bodies.

Virginity tests and reconstructive virginity surgeries are controversial yet common topics covered in the literature on virginity in Turkey (Cindoğlu 1997; Memissi, 2000; Şahinoğlu-Pelin, 1999). Since the 1990s, virginity tests, have been debated in the scholarly and public arena with women's groups fighting to have the

practice banned and criminalized – with the exception of sexual assault cases (Bora & Günel 2002; Gülbahar, 2004; Seral, 2004). The main contention is that the cohabitation of traditional and Islamic gender ideology along with liberal gender ideology is crystallized in virginity tests which are solely based on the “scientific” claim that the hymen is a reliable indicator of one's virginity.

The argument is posed from the studies mentioned above, that women facing the social anxiety over their hymen, withstand patriarchal expectations about the virginity of the bride by engaging in premarital sexual activities, then resist the norm by performing a patriarchal practice of modern medicine (reconstructive virginity surgery), which “not only re-establishes her assets in the social context but also in a sense empowers women within the patriarchal society and patriarchal relations” (Cindoğlu, 1997: 260). However, I disagree with this and argue, in the next chapter, that those practices stand for interventions to women’s bodily integrity, and in that sense, remain limited in terms of empowering women vis-à-vis the cult of female virginity and idealization of sexual purity. Rather, I contend that women, instead of accommodating themselves to male fantasies of how “proper women should be”, may actively challenge the existing gender stereotypes and categorizations of femininities through performances which would not intervene women’s bodily integrity.

In locating my present research vis-à-vis the literature on virginity and premarital sexuality in Turkey, it seeks to contribute to previous studies done on the effects of sexual norms imposed on women in Turkey. This study starts with a motivation to fill a gap in virginity and premarital sex studies in the Turkish context. Furthermore, it aims to offer a profile of young, single, professional metropolitan women, who stand as a new sociological class in Turkey, and their attitudes towards premarital sexual experience. Similarly, by taking personal narratives as points of departure and reference simultaneously, it aspires to contribute to previous research done by Bosphorus University Women’s Group.

Through my own findings I seek to advance past researches on the embeddedness on women’s identity with the patriarchal notion of honor. I reflect on how women, even though they develop resisting strategies against the ongoing vigilance over female virginity and sexuality in Turkey, continue to build their identities on

notions of proper femininity and womanhood which carry traces of patriarchy. Moreover, in this study, I seek to deepen our understanding of women's responses to, and ways of dealing with, the embracement of premarital female sexual abstinence. In doing so, I also look at women's perceptions of honor and modesty as well as their fantasies associated with feminism, sexual morality, single womanhood, and the loss of virginity.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

To investigate single women's attitudes towards premarital sex, in 2007 and 2008, I conducted in-depth interviews with 17 women from similar class backgrounds. Respondents ranged in age from 23 to 34. I chose to interview young adults, older than 17, rather than adolescents, to better situate virginity loss in the broader context of individuals' sexual histories, and to explore women's construction of femininity while in interaction with urban possibilities and class characteristics. All respondents lived and worked in Istanbul at the time of the study, 70 percent reported losing their virginity during adolescence, at age 18.1 on average.

To locate study participants, I used the purposive snowball sampling, or convenience, method. I began by identifying initial respondents through my own social network. Then, at the end of each interview, I asked my informant to recommend others who might also be willing to participate. Snowball technique facilitated my investigation of the subjective aspects of premarital sex and virginity loss in several ways. People are often less unwilling to participate in research on topics perceived as private, such as sexuality, when they are recruited through their own social networks (Sterk-Elifson 1994). Relying on personal referrals also helped me secure credibility and trust in my ability, as a researcher, to follow research ethics.

Because snowball samples are neither random nor statistically representative, they do not allow the researcher to set the overall distribution of specific beliefs and behaviors in a broader population. Yet sufficiently diverse snowball samples are well-suited for elucidating the range of ideas and experiences available in a given social group. As a way of ensuring a relatively diverse sample, and to compensate the potential for bias resulting from the relative homogeneity of most social networks, I started multiple snowballs in each of the four – family members, friends and acquaintances' relatives, Boğaziçi University graduates, and Sabancı University graduate students – sources of the interviewees and interviewed no more than five people in a given network. Four snowballs composed the sample; most contained five

members. As the interviewing progressed, I heard the same general themes repeated, again and again, by people from different social networks. This phenomenon, which Glaser and Strauss (1967) term “saturation,” gave me confidence that I had discovered the primary associations with virginity currently circulating among young, single, educated women living in the most metropolitan district in Turkey, İstanbul. I can say that, given the goals of my study, the benefits of convenience method outweighed any possible costs.

I personally interviewed every participant between April 2007 and March 2008. Questions were primarily semi-structured, enabling respondents to speak freely about what saw as the related issues of premarital sexuality among professional women, while also having their reflections on the specific matters revealed in the pre-formulated questions. I followed-up probes tailored to the responses to specific questions, then strategized throughout the interviews about how best to achieve the interview objectives while taking into account the interviewees' answers.

Given participants' backgrounds and the manner in which they were located, the arguments raised here may be specific to economically secure women living in metropolitan areas. The relatively small size precludes any but the most tentative conclusions about the ways class, education, age intersect with gender to determine attitudes towards premarital sex and virginity loss. About two-thirds of respondents told me that their perspectives on premarital sexuality had changed over the course of their sexual lives, most often in response to new experiences. Also, emphasis on reciprocation and “responsible” sex through love and commitment was typical. They saw commitment and affection as the keys to premarital sexuality, and ‘proper’ virginity loss.

Interviews were conducted face to face, in a place chosen by each participant. When the participants did not have any preference for the location, I invited them to my place, or to a café. My main motivation in the choice of the place of the interview was to provide an atmosphere of warmth, where we could talk comfortably, that is, without being disturbed. All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. They ranged from 45 minutes to 3 hours long, although most lasted 1 ½ hours. The interviews were semi-structured conversations and allowed space for participants to bring up issues they

found to be important. After each interview, I wrote field notes, including the main themes, my reflections, and emerging research questions. All of the interviews were completed in one session.

In terms of the question of self-reflexivity, my awareness about my own internal contradictions and hesitations vis-à-vis the issue of female virginity provided me with a better critical gaze in the field. Although I may have given some unconscious cues about my expectations from the study, I think I achieved a relatively fair acquisition of reliable data and its coding and interpretation. Thanks to our similar class affinities, educational backgrounds, and gender and age properties with the interviewees, I believe, I could break a very significant methodological constraint as the researcher vs. informant hierarchy.

During one-to-one conversations both the participants and me, as a researcher and a young Turkish woman, reflected on our sexual motivations, our taken-for-granted practices, and unconscious strategies circulating around the notion of virginity. My interviewees were really enthusiastic about knowing the tentative results of the research, and most indicated their will to read the final paper of the study. They spent a great deal of energy in answering the questions, and although they were reluctant to give detailed answers to some of the questions at the start of each interview, they felt much more relaxed in the later parts of the conversation. Most of them told me, at the end of the meeting, that the interview itself was very thought-provoking and informative for themselves. I did however encounter hardship in making my participants differentiate between narratives of virginity loss and, of premarital sex¹¹. Although at the very

¹¹ The term “premarital sex” referring to sexual activity of single people, women in this case, who have never been married before is widely used throughout the thesis. Although the category of “premarital sex” assumes ‘marriage’ as the final point of arrival and envisages ‘marriage’ as a quite normative boundary and/or stage in women’s (and men’s) lives and sexual encounters, both in order to harmonize the language of the thesis arguments with the interviewees’ narratives and to reflect how they presume ‘marriage’ as a phase on its own I have chosen to utilize the term in my work. Based on the indepth interviews and the narratives of women participants I believe that women see marriage, maybe unwittingly, as an ultimate destination, whether to be arrived at or not, and frame the meanings they attach to their sexuality and sexual experiences accordingly. However, as a researcher, I should note that I use the analytical category of

beginning I organized my research questions around the notion of female virginity in particular, and its associations for women, I widened the scope of my research so to include premarital sexual experiences; that is, based on the ease of disclosure of participants' responses and reflections, I decided to examine premarital sex and virginity loss narratives simultaneously.

The interview guide covered a range of themes related to female sexuality, virginity, gender relations, culture, feminism, and patriarchy. In the analysis that follows, using pseudonyms for my respondents, I examine several key issues that emerged during the interviews. First, to provide a context to situate my female participants, I discuss their class backgrounds and individual achievements.

3.1 A New Sociological Group in Turkey: “Metropolitan Women” in the Bourdieusian Framework

When I decided to make a research on women's attitudes towards virginity loss and premarital sex, I assumed that metropolitan women would be a best social group for my study to focus on. Both the absence of a study about these women, having a relatively new visibility in sociological terms, as well as my personal and academic curiosity about their conceptions on female sexuality, patriarchy, and feminism led me to this research.

Women participants are members of a new sociological class in Turkey. They are young, educated unmarried (at least university graduates) women. They work as professional managers, research assistants, engineers, and part-time project designers in transnational companies. These women speak at least one foreign language, many are fluent in several. They hold certificates and diplomas from formal institutions which image their educational credentials as well as sociocultural qualifications. All but one live apart from their families in İstanbul. In economic terms, they support themselves.

“premarital sex” for the purposes of convenience and efficiency, and that this analysis itself by no means posits “marriage” as the constitutive stage in women’s sexual lives.

These interviewees come from predominantly urban upper-middle class backgrounds. Most have high socioeconomic origins; their parents hold prestigious occupations, come from elite educational backgrounds, and have urban upbringing. These ascribed characteristics as being born to a family of high socioeconomic status provide them with qualifying resources and facilitate their access to higher education and, thus to the network of professional metropolitan women. The university education, as the prerequisite for entry into qualified jobs, is largely a function of the class inequalities in Turkey (Öncü 1981). Although there is no comprehensive or conclusive study about the exact number of women in professional positions in Turkey, it is certain that women's representation at the upper echelons of the hierarchy is on the rise since the 1980s (Kabasakal 1998: 225).

We can grasp women's daily experiences in the larger context of social practices. The metropolitan women I interviewed have a relatively free space for acting upon their sexual desires. Besides participating in the professions and enjoying the privileges of a university education, women feel themselves much less restricted socially compared to their counterparts in different social groups. They go out in the night, take holidays with their friends, visit foreign countries in summer, assist artistic and theatrical activities, and earn money to sustain their own lives. Although answering the question of whether these women hold these opportunities at the expense of other women and men is not feasible within the scope of this study, class acts as a facilitating mechanism in these women's social, physical, and cultural mobility. “(U)pper-middle class urban women in developing countries exercise a great number of choices and thus become much more “emancipated” than their counterparts (...) due to the existing overarching class inequalities” (Öncü 1981). By providing different opportunities and constraints, job-related social practices shape these women’s lives in ways that inflect their experiences of work, class, gender, community, patriarchy, and day-to-day social relations. Socioeconomic development provides women with better educational access and employment opportunities. Schooling and paid work act as key bases for women’s emancipation at the domestic and social front.

In a class society, all the products of a given agent, by an essential *overdetermination*, speak inseparably and simultaneously of his class – or, more, precisely, his position in the social structure and his rising or falling

trajectory – and of his (or her) body – or, more precisely, all the properties, always socially qualified, of which he or she is the bearer – sexual properties of course (Bourdieu 1977: 87).

Metropolitan women whom I talked to about virginity matters during my study come from similar family backgrounds. In a Bourdieusian framework, the habitus acquired in the family forms the foundation of school experiences which underlies the structuring of all subsequent experiences. Although in many developing countries, middle and upper class parents bring up their daughters to have high “achievement needs” and thus women have high aspirations, my main focus in this study is not to control the impact of family backgrounds on women's future status in the society. What I am trying to do, rather, is to locate these women in terms of their class specifics/lines. To put it otherwise, I seek to understand how different configurations of womanhood and femininity are constructed while in interaction with differences around diverse types of capital. As for these women, they have similar cultural commodities, linguistic skills, aesthetic tastes, and diplomas which, all, compose what Bourdieu terms “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1984). Class members share common preferences which turn into social divisions, as well as produce individual and collective practices and strategies (Bourdieu 1977: 82, 87). The body carries the traces of class conditions and lies at the source of multiple preferences.

During the ethnographic study, women narrated their sexual experiences while also reflecting on the limitations they themselves encountered. They claimed that when they gained an awareness about the oppressive nature of patriarchal tools restricting and rejecting the female body via a cacophony of discourses on sexuality – medical, religious, therapeutic, juridical dialogs telling us how to categorize our sex life, its pleasures, its problems and its prohibitions, they started to develop their own strategic tools to secure their sexual autonomy and enjoyment. Women's shifting attitudes throughout their sexual careers as well as their changing notions of proper femininity show the fact that gender is not a stable category but an experiential space. Moreover, the single women's determination in terms of resisting male hegemony over female bodies, and their feminine outlook giving clues about their sexual identities as well as their positive understanding of sexual pleasures deconstruct the images of the “defeminized” Turkish woman participating in the public sphere of life. While

abdicating their roles as “respectable mothers”, “modest wives”, “virtuous daughters” and “nationalist citizens”, these single women do not seem to fit Göle's definition of a recently emerging profile of Western “masculine women” who only choose to be successful in their careers, either (1991).

Class difference is not a predetermined, unchanging boundary set solely by economic capital, but rather a space of negotiation and clash of symbolic power. My women participants feel themselves much more powerful in terms of their financial and cultural resources. Following Bourdieu's argument, women's strategies against the ongoing vigilance of female virginity in Turkey, their empowerment practices regarding virginity loss, and their acting upon their own desires and preferences are framed within the possibilities engendered by their internalized habitus, that is, their internalised dispositions, and habitual expectations and relationships (Bourdieu, 1977). These 17 women's similar experiences, thoughts, and perceptions derive from the affinity of their “conditions of existence” as well as their earliest upbringing (ibid.).

The participants, endowed with a fair amount of cultural, economic, and social capital, possess the necessary tools to declare their adverse/nontraditional opinions about female virginity, and to maintain their well-being in the social hierarchy. Their class-ranged accepted ideals of womanhood and femininity serve as discursive strategic means for rising their symbolic power in the society. Metropolitan single, educated women, by affirming their own class-ranged womanhood experiences, seek to increase their symbolic capital and power in the society. The intra-women differentiations and classifications women imply point to intra-women's power relations and struggle to gain social recognition, and to the notion that the categories of 'woman' are fashioned and produced in interaction with other social determinants as class, age, urban/rural distinction, and so on. These women, as a group with similar sociological characteristics, strategies and practices for status struggle, put into action their sets of empowerment strategies, and regulations regarding “the virginity question” on the basis of their habitus, that is, their dispositions resulting in particular practices, improvisations, bodily attitudes, and gestures.

Educated, single, professional women claim autonomy over their bodies; that is, they have self-perceptions that are beyond the passive role that the society expects from

them. However, it would be important to indicate here that while analyzing this ethnographic data all expressions and statements were not regarded as pure reflections of the reality itself but as tools for interpreting and reproducing reality. In other words, while I tried to reveal women's specific attitudes towards premarital sexuality, and discursive practices on virginity (loss), I took into account the idea that these individual narratives cannot and should not be construed as reflections of real life since they cannot mirror or pattern the “real life” as it actually is. During my interpretation of the ethnographic raw data, I always kept in mind that each woman went over her experiences and strategies during the interview, and reconstructed, reframed, and recategorized in her own appropriate way.

3.2 Intra-Gender Judgments of Sexual Permissiveness: “True Womanhood” Redefined

When this ethnographic research began, I expected to analyze how women develop individual and collective incentives for premarital sexual abstinence. What I did not expect to encounter, however, was women's classifications among diverse women. This finding also led me to think about women's overall construction of gender, sexual identities, and their bodies vis-a-vis other women.

Metropolitan women differentiated themselves mainly from two groups of urban women, those they considered submissive, and those they claimed to be sexually promiscuous. Based on their notions of “proper” femininity and “ethical” sexuality, these women constructed their sexual identities in line with their class possibilities, and individual motivations. By keeping in mind the idea that women hold unconscious strategies, I tried to examine how they situate themselves vis-à-vis other women, by focusing on their discourses, and in-between line narratives about their womanhood.

A group of women, metropolitan women interviewees sought to distinguish themselves from, were conservative, less educated women who obeyed the patriarchal

rules imposed upon their bodies. My informants portrayed these women living in urban areas as docile, non resistant women lacking empowerment resources to enhance their status in the social hierarchy. Although in much more covert ways, the participants also accused those women as being hypocritical on these issues. The interviewees, implicitly, described these women living in İstanbul as less trained, less educated, less powerful, and more obedient. Moreover, they accused some of using virginity as an investment vehicle, and thus reproducing the idealization of “virgin bride” on the edge of marriage.

Chapter 4

THE COMPLEXITY OF WOMEN'S DISCOURSES AND PRACTICES ON VIRGINITY LOSS AND PREMARITAL SEX

The focus of this ethnographic research is the investigation of young, single, professional, metropolitan women's attitudes towards virginity loss and premarital sex. The results mainly point to an increasing trend in women's awareness towards the patriarchal codes of modest demeanor and moral sexuality. Building my arguments from women's narratives of virginity loss enables examination of the complexity of changing social norms around proper womanhood, virginity, and female sexuality. Later sections discuss women's own construction of a new sense of sexual morality on virginity which brings on novel forms of self-control.

I analyze women's own interpretations of premarital sexual experience, and their vigorous strategies to combat patriarchal 'myths' on female virginity. What I reflect on, throughout the paper, is the complexity of women's activities and discursive practices about premarital sex as simultaneously shaped and being shaped by the social world. I look at how young, single professional women living in İstanbul exercise agency and develop strategies against the so-called cultural norms about virginity, and stereotypes of proper female sexuality within existing social conventions, values, and sanctions. I think I should note that when I say "women's empowerment", I am aware of the fact that women do not create the world anew, but their behaviors and actions are socially constrained (Bourdieu, 1977). While attempting to reconcile empowerment and biopolitics, agency and structure, I insert Bourdieusian theoretical framework into my discussion of women's discourses and views of virginity loss and premarital sex.

In the first part of this chapter, I argue that metropolitan women's empowerment at the ideological level materializes in their attitudinal strategies to resist patriarchal regimes that police women's permissible gender roles and sexuality. I maintain that well-educated, young, unmarried women are taking initiatives and developing resistance

mechanisms against the traditional understanding of female sexuality in Turkey in their behaviors, speech, and sexual activity. Later, I analyze moral rationales and motivations women use for legitimating their sexual activities. These two major arguments, relative empowerment on the one hand, the ongoing (self) control of sexuality through different ways/forms, on the other, do not contradict each other but they reveal that social interactions and activities are influenced by social predispositions, conventions, rules. Furthermore, novel forms of control of sexuality and other related practices on the part of women, regarding virginity loss and premarital sexual activity, imply that the agency and activities of women as agents are shaped, if not restricted, by social structures and the larger parameters of power relations. What I should, also, like to do in this paper is to offer some observations on the possibilities and limitations of women's empowerment/liberation as a means of challenging male fantasies about "female honor" and "single womanhood".

4.1 Politicizing Virginity: Women's Discourses of Sexuality

Based on the motivational force behind De Beauvoir's famous motto, "the personal is political", well-educated, young, single, professional Turkish women are politicizing virginity. Instead of taking codifications around the notion of female virginity for granted, they reflect on their social and political implications. These women, as many other women from different social classes, do not readily accept the phenomenon of virginity examinations, or similar messages disseminated through diverse sources without any questioning. They question the existence of normative and moral restrictions imposed upon women's sexual experience, and destabilize the idealization of virginity. They complain about the concrete and objective ramifications of the sanctification of female virginity together with the criminalization of premarital sex for women.

Women, I have worked with in my ethnographic study, are well educated, employed middle-upper class women living in the most cosmopolitan and metropolitan center of Turkey, İstanbul. Their class values such as income and education compete as markers of social status, and thus, ease their struggle with highly gendered notions of morality. Their economic and cultural capital act as resources for their negotiation with cultural proscriptions around female sexuality. I argue that these women's various measures of personal worth such as education, success in the job market, access to cultural and economic resources empower them with respect to self-satisfaction and self-realization.

Moreover, their empowerment gives voice to their discontent about the prevalent notion that the bride's virginity may be conceived as a symbolic guarantee of a woman's behavioral and value system by the majority of the Turkish society. Their resistance to the traditional standards of modesty can be understood as the footprints/marks of a crucial transformation for women in Turkey. These women's violation of the 'conventional' moral code, which equates a girl's innocence and marriageability with her virginity, that is her hymen, and related challenge of the authority of those who represent the system and benefit from it, indicates a new resistance against the fully entrenched patriarchal power. Women resist idealized and hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity that embrace the model of male virility as opposed to female virginity. They harshly criticize these codings that amount to the cultural construction of gender identities.

Women with cultural and economic capital engage in the "moral economy"¹² of premarital sex, by which I refer to the various ways in which custom and social pressure coerce economic actors to conform to traditional norms even at the expense of profit. They renegotiate the meaning of virginity loss and say that women are extremely oppressed by various cultural practices as chastity belts and virginity examinations, and

¹² For a detailed analysis on "moral economy" see E. P. Thompson, 1971. He uses the term for discussing eighteenth-century government in his historical study of the British poor.

argue that they do not want to obey this social system, which constantly produces sexism and gender discrimination.

These women seek to set the shifting territories of female sexuality within their own schemes. In a sense, they modify and re-designate the boundaries of proper womanhood and gendered patterns of sexuality determined by the traditional approaches to gender. These 'career' women acting as a new sociological class in Turkey redefine and shift the territories which frame and order sexuality in the Turkish society by their attitudes and practices towards premarital sex. Their powerful resistance at the ideological and experiential level implies a transformation in terms of women's positions vis-à-vis the issue of virginity and various cultural discourses upon it.

The respondents do not feel very much confused about whether and how to act on sexual desires which I consider as a sign of empowerment for women's sexual lives. Although they have a number of criteria associated with premarital sex, which will be discussed in a while, women are all determined not to deprive themselves from such bodily pleasure and enjoyment. Furthermore, in this stance, they do not abandon up the traditional feminine concern for appearance, a concern which expresses their sexual identities as well as their positive understanding of sexual pleasures. In this array, they deconstruct the images of the "defeminized" Turkish woman participating in the public sphere of life. While abdicating their roles as "respectable mothers", and "modest wives", nor do these single women seem to fit Göle's definition of the recently emerging profile of Western "masculine women" who only choose career success over personal lives (1991). These women never frame their first sexual experience as a milestone marked in pain and blood. This conceptualization therefore challenges the traditional association with the loss of virginity, which tends to frame the initial sexual encounter (if it happens before and outside of marriage) as one of pain and future regret for women.

These women harshly challenge the inverted logic that sexuality is bad for women and that only 'bad' women are sexual. They oppose the division of Turkish women, at the representational level, "into those almost devoid of sexuality and those nothing but sexuality" (Saktanber 1995: 155). They protest the association of premarital sex with "loss of reputation" for young single women. They consider sexual experience

as a way to get satisfaction from the life itself. They turn this protest into a fulfillment of their physiological needs and erotic desires. Below is an interviewee's statement about premarital female sexuality.

Men are free to do what they please while women don't, right? Sorry, but it isn't fair at all. (*laughing*) I really don't care anybody, any established tradition or whatever. This is my life; I have the right to enjoy it. Taking and giving pleasure both give me a great joy. Therefore, if you ask me if I'm afraid of sexuality because people may think that I'm a little bit loose, my answer would be a simple no. (Elif, 30)¹³

Women participants do not seem to regret having premarital sex. They say that confident and safe sex enriches one's life and strengthens one's sense of personality. These conceptualizations refer to a positive understanding and construction of sexuality on the part of women while on the other hand, women also bring normative motives and standards to female sexuality that will be discussed later.

Throughout my analysis, I discuss the concept of gender not as a fixed identity but as a practice in the Bourdieusian sense. Accordingly, womanhood is not be regarded as a completed identity where women are merely passive receivers of the codes imposed by the objective structures. Rather, womanhood is to be understood as an organic entity where women play active roles in the construction of their subjectivity through the use of power strategies. This understanding also attempts to position women in processes of construction and resistance – how women perceive, enter into, react to the prevalent discourses of their time. To illustrate, the women I interviewed violate the boundaries delineated by the regulative mechanism of patriarchy, to use feminist terminology, whose core motivation is the control and monitoring of female identities. The respondents actively challenge the ideology that women on the edge of marriage must be virginal, sexually inexperienced, and naive. We cannot ignore the positive/enabling impact of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital on these women's initiatives on any kind of empowerment in terms of dealing/struggling with sexual inhibitions. It is also equally important to keep in mind that these women, with high cultural capital, strong

¹³ Unless otherwise stated, all the interview responses from Turkish sources have been translated into English by the researcher.

educational background, prestige and financial resources, have been socialized into the particular discourses to use to talk about themselves, their identities, their goals, and about their views of culture, sexuality, virginity, and men-women relationships which, in turn, provides them means for challenging the stereotypical patriarchal expectations.

4.2 Crossing Boundaries?: Resources, Reflections, and Accomplishments

Kabeer, the Indian social economist, in her brilliant article on women's empowerment¹⁴, mentions three interrelated dimensions, resources, agency, and achievements, which would enable individuals who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability. I use her framework for discussing women's empowerment vis-à-vis traditional approaches to female sexuality and virginity, while also acknowledging the limitations of this relative empowerment discussed in the later sections of this paper. The women I interviewed have access to and claims on both material, human and social resources. They have professional jobs to sustain their lives, and earn their own money that provides them a sense of self-reliance to some extent. They live far from their families which would provide them a wider space for individual action, and give them a feeling of relative independence from the familial ways of arranging a social life.

The participants have had an educational formation which would socialize them from an antagonistic as well as critical perspective with regard to the traditional approaches on the social organization of gender relations and sexuality. As young, single women living in İstanbul, they also have access to diverse sources of transformation in social, cultural, and artistic terms. They have friends, colleagues to talk to about their problems and to involve in an exchange of ideas. Most of them have been exposed to feminist ideology, even if only briefly. All these resources serve to enhance their ability to make choices and govern their lives in sexual terms. These

¹⁴ Kabeer, N. (1999) 'Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment', Development and Change 30: 435-464.

women, as a new sociological class, have similar strategies and practices for status struggle based on the limits and possibilities of their class lines/position. In this case, they put into action their sets of empowerment strategies, and regulations regarding “the virginity question” on the basis of their class lines and habitus.

Women interviewees have been involved in processes of decision-making in terms of their sexualities. They consider themselves as agents responsible for the shaping of their sexual lives. Rather than complying with the norms imposed upon their bodies without any question, they negotiate the meanings assigned to virginity loss and the affinity between premarital sex and female modesty. The agency of women working in favor of women's authority and control over their bodies and sexualities is very important in terms of transforming the actual dilemmas into possible individual attainments. Those achievements get materialized in well-being outcomes on the part of women such as self-confidence and self-esteem. Their primary goal is to avoid as much as possible, the “dues and assessments levied by the society”.

In the past, I was very confused. I felt myself stuck between my desires and values. I was tired to live with the fear that I would regret after having an affair. It was so stressful. Then I began to think about these stuff. I observed people's behaviors. ... After some time I said to myself, “it's your body, your life”. However, it wasn't easy at all. ... Now, whether I sleep with a man or no this isn't the issue. After all, I feel myself much more powerful and confident. My self-respect also increased dramatically (Ayşe, 26).

What realizes the process of empowerment is the individual action; that is, people need to act upon the challenges they are facing. I consider women's rejection of the taken-for-grantedness of various aspects of culture and tradition, and resistance against the sanctification of female sexuality as empowering active performances. Their using material and cultural possibilities in favor of their sexual liberalization shows women's moving from a position of submissiveness to the social order to having a critical perspective on it, and acting upon it with resistance.

The notion of women's empowerment as women having collective and individual power assigns them agency rather than as being passive victims of patriarchy. “Empowerment is ... a process, in which women struggle to negotiate with men to increase power over their sexuality” (Kabeer, 1999: 251). They also negotiate sexual

practices which are pleasurable to women as well as men. Women say that they want to enjoy what they are doing. This self-awareness is very significant in terms of showing how single young women reflect critically on their knowledge and experiences, and thus make decisions about the dynamics of present and future sexual encounters.

They say that they do not feel themselves restricted by cultural meanings and structural arrangements that, in times, act as inhibitors for any adverse intentionalized activity. They act in an antagonistic fashion vis-à-vis the established cultural paradigms once they think that norms touch their bodies, literally disembody them.

There is a fair consensus on women's absolute refusal of any male partner who “would dare to value or to disvalue her in terms of her past sexual history”. These women believe the idea that a self-confident woman may not lose any prestige or social status because of her premarital sexual involvement with a man. Some women say that they need sexual experience for freedom and empowerment. Sexuality here becomes an inalienable belonging of someone who should strive for reaching self-actualization.

I wanted to defend my awareness through my sexual performances. I wanted to show others that I'm a powerful woman. Although now I sometimes regret to have had my first relationship with such anger, I still think that I needed to prove myself my capacity for not being the slave of this society's male codes of honor (Yeliz, 26).

Education and employment enable them to live without any financial support from their families, as well as the lifestyle of an upper middle class citizen, access to adverse reflections on the patriarchal social order and, evaluative and critical discourses on the regulation of gender relations all may open new possibilities for women. However, it is important to note that the differences in individual histories and personal modes of conduct may also result in divergences among women's future actions. As Kabeer points out, structures shaping individual achievements and agency also “help to shape individual interests so that how people define their goals and what they value will reflect their social positioning as well as their individual histories, tastes and preferences” (Kabeer 1999: 461). What should be delineated in terms of the specifics of these women is the following. Metropolitan young women's access to educational opportunities and their wide participation in the public sector and social life that create a range of alternative ways of “being, doing, and living” which “allows a more

transformatory consciousness to come into play”, enhance these women's capacity for self-reliance. However, it is worth noting here that although these resources have a consequential significance in terms of women's strategic life choices and provide possibilities for considerable change on the ground, they cannot guarantee, by any means, the actualization of any (absolute) transformation at the structural level.

Women's mobility in the public domain, participation in the modern sector and the public action, freedom of movement, financial autonomy, and education level enable them to withstand the equation of premarital sexual abstinence with female chastity. Women say that they are irritated, nay angry, when “a man tries to show his dominance in sexual relationship”.

I really hate when he (her boyfriend) pretends that he is the one in our relationship who governs our sexual life. When we are in bed, he becomes the macho man ever. (...) He even thinks he takes much more pleasure than I do. It's really ridiculous (Deniz, 29).

When he behaves as if he is the boss of our sexuality, I become aggressive. I want him to understand that he is not alone in this relationship, and that I'm not supposed to act as he wishes me to act. I can say that I try hard for making him a courteous man when we make love (Güneş, 31).

From a feminist point of view, I could interpret these “contestations on the ‘superiority’ of men in sexual encounters” in which women seek to challenge what is taken for granted by men, as women's attempts to transform pressured sexual relationships between men and women into a space of encounter where partners share the tools of negotiation in an equal fashion. In addition, these efforts, not products of a continuous calculation according to explicit rational and economic criteria, refer to a quite significant transformation at the ideological level for many single, young, educated, metropolitan women.

However, it is crucial to note that women may not always show the same resistances in a totally equal manner. Although their attitudes towards premarital sex usually stay, more or less, the same, their occasional practices and behavior patterns in each sexual encounter may show minor differences. One very significant point I caught during the ethnography is the following. The women I interviewed are uneasy about

men's judgments about young single women's sexuality. They say that men think that since they have active sexual lives as single women living alone in Istanbul, they are 'always' sexually available. I argue, in the next chapter, that women often have the difficulty in negotiating their body boundaries. This issue is discussed in the context of feminist debates on the female body, women's empowerment, cultural mores, and women's reflections on feminist ideology.

The annoyance of women who hesitate to refuse occasional sex refers to two points in this paper. One is that they look for specific factors for engaging in premarital sexual activity, the other is that women's empowerment, as a contested process and product of human agency, struggle, and negotiation, remains limited/relative.

There are times that I ask myself "why couldn't you say no to him?" (referring to sex). When I come back to home, I start to accuse myself. I feel as if I couldn't show enough courage to refuse him. (Melis, 27).

4.3 The Insecure Bases of 'Relative' Empowerment: Women's 'Negotiation' of Honor

The personal anecdotes of women point to an attitude change they have experienced in their lives in terms of their reflective considerations of premarital sex. Interviewees' narratives suggest a transformative shift in their lives in terms of their attitudes and dispositions towards premarital sex. Most of them hold the view that virginity was the "icon of a woman's virtue" when they were 13 or 14.

When I was in the high school, I thought it was necessary to protect my virginity for my husband. For me, at that time, sexual intercourse meant a very deep threshold as women, we could just attain while in marriage. However, when I entered the university my ideas started to change. I began to think about the codes of modest demeanor also, about how they were constantly imposed upon women. ... Now, I think that it's not fair to avoid sex until marriage especially when you don't even know if you're going to get married one day or no (Ebru, 24).

This again shows that the notion of premarital sexual experience, in one way or another has been a tool of depression, boredom, and/or fear in most Turkish women's

lives during a certain time span. Yet now, after a process of struggle and thus a process of the redefinition of the self, women regard premarital sex as a fulfillment of pleasure where they can negotiate sexual boundaries with their partners.

Women's initiation with a relative sexual freedom is always situated into a narrative of self-struggle and negotiation. Having socialized in a patriarchal culture, they claim that deconstructing their own perceptions and dispositions towards premarital sexual experience has not been very straightforward. I can say that all the women I interviewed have had a process of struggle with their own criteria of proper womanhood. When I asked them about how they struggled to resist the society's expectations about an unmarried woman's sexuality, they mostly told me the same story in which their points of references have been their mothers and other women they saw around themselves. Those women's submissiveness to their husbands, to use interviewees' phrases, stood as examples to avoid. They said that their determination for not being oppressed by close male kins, and other men was empowered once they entered the university. What they read and learned in the university, they claimed, helped them deal with gender inequality. Women's struggle thus takes its initiatives from close observations, and from this beginning and in education women gain tools for dealing with the almost ossified modes of sexual conduct. Below are examples of interviewees' statements on this topic.

When I was a child, I was saying to myself that I would not repeat my mother's mistakes. It isn't that she is weak or lacks in skill or knowledge, but still she was always vulnerable to the attacks of my father. My mother was not the only one. Actually all women I saw around myself were similar to one another. ... When I grew up, I started to talk with my friends about these issues. Also I read many things about men-women relationships. I learned a lot about women's oppression (Hande, 29).

The university is a turning point in my life. I learned many things. I was sick of listening to the same story. All my female friends, even those who were considered insubordinate and disobedient, were submissive to their boyfriends. The books I read enlightened me. I understood better how the society not only sexually but also socially was oppressive to women (Elif, 30).

My mother was always saying me not to allowing men to *profit* from my body. She was saying that if I would sleep with a man he would never respect me. I grew up like this. ... I'm angry at my mom about saying such

things. It took a long time for me to overcome my prejudices (Nilay, 26) (emphasis mine).

As also mentioned earlier, one of the striking point encountered in this ethnographic study was the interviewees' aspirations to be chaste and respectable. Regardless of their age, social class, and/or educational background, women seek to achieve a status of virtue via their positionalities in their community. For some of these women, the most direct way to achieve this status is to comply with the particular cultural symbolizations and practices. The ethnographic data obtained suggests the following. Women who feel themselves empowered vis-a-vis the masculinist paradigms are discontented with the usage of virginity as symbol of exclusiveness and prestige by some of their fellow females.

The lack of supportive resources, which may lead women to self-restrict themselves in many cases, does not denote in any possible sense that these women do not design any critical strategies for dealing with the virulent phenomenon of the control of female sexual purity. Actually, they do. Women who possess various forms of capital, in the Bourdieusian sense, have access to developing empowering strategies which let them negotiate and redefine the boundaries of sexuality rather than complying with the normative prescriptions imposed upon the female body. The failure to comply with the codes is disciplined by the potential risk of losing status.

Although the non-availability of supportive resources, together with the existing social structures as conditions of possibility per se (Bourdieu, 1977), strengthens the assurance of compliance with premarital sexual abstinence on the part of single young women, the most prevalent reason behind women's conformist attitudes is the likelihood of getting delayed gratification at the end of the bargain. As virginity is regarded as the symbol of inaccessibility, selectiveness, and refinement, a virgin is mostly seen as an elite female among females, "withheld, untouched, exclusive" (Ortner 1978: 32). Unmarried women want to be, or at least to seem, as good girls to get the chance of personal status mobility. In our case, professional women standing as a new sociological class in Turkey claim that some other women come to secure their virginity as a future investment that could contribute to their individual reputation. On that point, based on their statements, women's strategic planning for standing "higher" in public

estimation and gaining prestige unwittingly actively reproduces the so-called determining patterns of female innocence, and associations between virginity and decency.

However, powerful associations with virginity and the implications of its prevalent ideology on women's bodies start to dissolve once women realize that they leave them disempowered relative to men. Metropolitan women start to develop strategies by virtue of pushing a reaction against this “ideological indoctrination”. Women, I interviewed, challenge a certain kind of sexual script when saying that they have the same rights as men in sexual terms. They excommunicate men who would dare to judge their sense of morality over their sexual past; that is, they do not tolerate men who may judge their moral or chastity standards through their sexual status. All of them reactively say that they can never let a man criticize or humiliate them because of their sexual pasts.

I never take a man who attaches high value to virginity seriously. Such a man cannot be a part of my life. I mean, there is no place in my life for a man with such a state of mind. If he would just evaluate me based on my sexual ethics, I would just say bye to him! It's that easy. I mean, really, after this age I cannot deal with such nonsense (Elif, 30).

Individual narratives show that women in my sample mostly act upon the power-structured relationships and arrangements where they are supposed to obey the gender rules which define the parameters of single womanhood. The driving force behind their active resistance is the motivation for a freedom from the sets of codes that fix the boundaries of their subjectivities. We can say that they practice the understanding that the personal, sexual life is actually political which also acted as the fundamental premise of the second wave feminists.

All these examples, among countless others, indicate how these women are taking personal responsibility for their conduct and finding solutions to problems faced. Based on the capital they possess, they shift their strategies as well as negotiate the sphere of “proper sexuality”. They regret the bitter fact that virginity, for most people, is still an indicator of unmarried women's morality. The interviewees challenge any view that measures one's good manners based on her/his sexual conduct. They do not respect

the opinions of anybody, male or female, who value them solely because/of their sexual behavior.

They find circulating news in the media about “women turned out into the streets in the morning of the first night since they couldn't prove their virginity through their bleeding hymens” very annoying. They contend that the discursive language in motion diminishes the effect of sexual violence. In other words, women imply that the constant usage of the concepts such as tradition and honor neutralizes, if not even justifies, the power of sexual and physical violence directed against women.

Throughout her discussion on honor crimes in Turkey, Koğacıoğlu discusses “tradition” as an effect of power relations in the society, and elucidates the ways in which the legal institution, among many others, is being effective in the production of violence against women and how the judicial idiom and practices imply a strong commitment to family honor (2004: 119, 120). Koğacıoğlu, also, analyzes presuppositions regarding the sanctity of familial and societal honor as being deeply embedded in the discursive and practical spheres of institutions as to have become invisible.

(T)he gesture of declaring an arbitrary line between the institution and tradition is common to all institutional discourses; the operations of the institutions are seen to be independent of the mechanisms of tradition and immune to their impact. The institution thus sees itself as outside tradition. In this way, clarity and transparency are on the side of the institution, and murkiness and imprecision are projected onto the tradition part of the binary (2004: 140).

Turkish media, by portraying the crimes or the “nonvirgin-bride scandals” in a particular way, acts as another institutional actor to carry the “tradition effect” forward. Those news, mostly, circulate around the stigmas on the female body while also framing virginity as a categorical measure for the quality of single women upon entering their marriage (Bennett, 2005). Women participants have, at different times, expressed their annoyance at related/similar news in the media. An interviewee, Elif, a 30-year-old computer engineer, put her complaint in the following way: “Actually, the message given is quite simple. They say women ‘stay virgin until your wedding night if you do not want to regret and suffer later’.”

The honor code is a dynamic concept whose attributions are constantly shifting. As it is a negotiable sphere, both men and women struggle to deal with its provisions and requirements through their own strategies. The notion of honor gets ingrained in women's identities, and as the feminist movement in Turkey argues, what we call "honor" restricts and silences women in diverse spheres of social life honor. It reappears at the legal and literary level every single day. Soap operas, jokes, newspaper articles altogether treat the notion of honor in a consistent way to provide "a consistent view of it". Quite ironically, on a more personal level, women do not give up the concept of honor entirely either. Although as "emancipated" women, we say that we do not care about people's imaginations associated with honor, or what people may think about our morality, in fact, we still want to be recognized as chaste women. In our moral code, we are all chaste women with voices of praise.

Similarly, my interviewees have not given up the concept of honor yet. It still acts as an organizing concept in their lives and social relationships. However, they do not take it as a given but reappropriate its connotations. Young single women define honor as uncompromising honesty and trustworthiness, not as a source of distinction based on premarital sexual abstinence. They do not see virginity as a state of holiness, sign of chastity or purity and thus, they do not consider it as an index of honor or any other moral code. While keeping the notion of honor, although with a different message, in process for their identity construction, women come to redefine the ideals of proper womanhood. To put it simply, honor continues to construct female identity. I believe, these practices hold that concern with honor is not specific to the traditional rural community in Turkey but it is an inalienable aspect of the identity development of metropolitan women.

Women deal with the fluid notion of honor through their everyday strategies. Based on its redefinition they re-negotiate its consequential meanings and requirements. What may seem surprising is that despite all the criticism against honor and its performance as an oppressive tool, they do not give it up but continue to formulate a morality over it. Women are playing with the tools of patriarchy; that is, although they negotiate the meanings attached to certain properties of womanhood, they are still using the same terms as honor similarly.

They speculate on “moral sexuality” and honor which still act as primary points of reference in their discourses. Despite the fact that women chastise the imaginary link between “proper femininity” and female virginity, in their narratives they keep the authority of patriarchal mechanisms of monitoring the female body. The footprints of similar scripts seem to influence women's experiences. This also implies that total empowerment of women, regarding virginity loss and premarital sex, is an illusion which also unveils that social agents', women's in this case, dispositions to act and their categories of perception and understanding are not independent from existing social conventions and rules, but they result from their inhabiting the field (Bourdieu, 1977).

Their narratives tell us that although they resist the culturally defined modes of control of female sexuality, they set new limits for proper sexual experience by their discourses. I think that the continuous existence of normative models placed on premarital sexuality gives women's sexuality the status of a regulative property.

4.4 Idealizing/Justifying Sexual Acts: Is Love a Safe Ground for the Loss of Virginity?

The most challenging aspect of women's empowerment for me, as a researcher, was the ‘legitimate’ basis in which premarital sexual experiences have been situated. All of them ‘justify’ their sexual acts through various arguments. Namely, their reflections on their ‘first nights’ never act in isolation to a legitimate ground for getting involved in premarital sexual activity. Love, among many justification tools, is the first and foremost variable which ‘legitimizes’ the loss of virginity. Instead of framing sex as a purely bodily or physiological performative act, they romanticize it by inserting ‘affect’ and emotion into stories of virginity loss. Romanticizing stands as the primary strategy which justifies premarital sex in the eyes of women's perceptions. This rationalization derives from women's need to frame their “first night” narratives with a meaningful beginning and end. Having socialized in a culture which values virginity over many other things, women have hard time in giving up to keep their hymens intact. Even if

they reward or omit it, they look for a fantasy to dignify their virginity loss with a consistent story.

If the initial sex is not to be experienced in a socially approved context as a marriage recognized by everybody, a replacement should enter. This something else, in most of the cases, is the passionate affection and desire felt by lovers for each other. While women imagine their first nights as their most romantic adventure ever, love comes to replace the formal institution of marriage in respect to premarital sex for women to re-idealize this experience.

It was a difficult decision for me, too. You know, we all grew up with all these norms and values which make us think that keeping our virginity for our future husbands would be a best idea. I was under the influence of this idea as well. At first, I didn't want to make it but then I said to myself. "You love this man a lot, right? He loves you too, even more than you love him. So what's the matter?" Now, I don't regret it. After all, our relationship was one of love and romance. (Zeynep, 24).

I have a friend whom I know since I was 16. When I visit her at home and we start chatting about men and relationships her older sister always tells us that to have sex we should first find a man who would love us. She also says that a committed mutual relationship is worth of everything including sex. The idea is quite interesting but it's also right I guess ... (Ayşe, 26).

Women's justifications for having sex imply an implicit ambivalence on the part of women. Concerned about possibilities of being prosecuted for any nonfulfillment of a moral promise they are trying to offer a secure base for their seemingly "unconventional" act. As if their sexual encounters are moral transgressions or social sins, or as if, as a researcher, I might judge them for their sexual life stories, they are seeking to provide a kind of legitimate ground for their sexually activity as young unmarried women. These justifications appear as products of a long process of negotiation, and carry the associations that they may be attacked if they just frame their premarital sexual experience in isolation to some other notions, endorsed by the society, as romantic love, morality, respect, and emotional attachment. Accordingly, their construction of consistent narratives vis-à-vis their virginity loss experience, and struggle for defending their sexual ethics mark these women's ambivalence and confusion.

It was a complicated decision for me too. I remember myself thinking about it during many nights. If I weren't sure that he loved me that much I would never do this. However, it was our first year anniversary. I thought it was the right time, both for me and for our relationship. ... Now I don't regret this decision but maybe I might if I experienced it with a boy I just came across (Melis, 27).

I slept with my boy friend when I was 19, it was my second year in college. I think this is the average age when you feel yourself as a grown up. I believe that those who have such experience at an earlier age regret it later. I mean, when you are too young you can make wrong decisions and maybe regret later because you had slept with a boy who didn't really deserve it (Seda, 26).

In short, virginity loss memoirs are packed up in meaningful stories. An affectionate relationship based on mutual love is the safest ground for sexual involvement with the opposite sex on the part of single young women. The history of the relationship, mutual trust, and age are some other criteria that affect people's attitudes towards premarital sex. In other words, young women continue to value virginity because they predicate premarital sexual activity primarily on love and committed romantic relationships. Women's viewing a committed love relationship as the only appropriate context for premarital sexual intercourse along with their willingness to locate virginity loss in a meaningful and consistent story point refer to a moral economy of virginity. The term 'moral economy' is used in the broader sense of Didier Fassin: "the economy of moral values and norms of a given group in a given moment" (2005: 365).

4.5 Discourses of Moral Justification: Is Virginity in the "Mind" or in the "Conscience"?

When asked about their opinions about the notion as "virginity between the legs", women interviewees have found such an association very humiliating for women. They, instead, affirm that "virginity is not in the hymen, but in the mind" or similarly, they say that a woman's virginity or honor do not derive from her sexual experience or lack

thereof, but they are in her conscience. Although these two recent phrases reproduce the idea that virginity is a part of female identity, I argue instead that they invent new senses of “rational” and “conscientious” morality around female virginity that continue shaping women’s thoughts, behaviors and thus, bodies.

Women who use the first phrase “virginity in the mind” seem to affirm a modern, broad-minded stance vis-à-vis those who associate honor and purity with a woman’s lack of sexual experience. Although this motto seeks to escape women from the “medically measurable signs of sexual modesty”, it establishes a new definition of virginity, and thus again recycles the construction of an ideal womanhood through virginity.

While seemingly condemning traditional controls of sexuality, however, the motto bespeaks a novel form of control. Implying that the spiritual virginity is a state above and beyond natural and anatomical virginity, the statement points to the education of women’s desire in compliance with the dictates of the mind, rather than the impulses of the body (Parla 2001: 83).

This discussion also relates to the idea in Turkey of “modernity dominating people’s minds” in Turkey. The modernising elite have long argued that women themselves could be trusted with guarding their own chastity, and thus being honorable women once they were allowed to educate themselves. “Education would provide them [women] with reason as well as income, and with these qualifications a woman would never have to marry just to be able to survive and *protect her virtue*”¹⁵ (Sirman 1997: 8)

In the early republican era, in Turkey, the notion of honor continued to define gender identity. The social order, based on notions of morality and justice that derived from a combination of Islamic and Turkic ideas of governance, recognized women’s primary virtues as affectionate motherhood and altruistic wifhood (Mardin, 1962; Sirman, 1997). The family, that is the house, in this model, constituted “the node of power and authority that maintained order”¹⁶ (Sirman 1997: 2). The control of women

¹⁵ Emphasis mine.

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion see Duben 1985, Sirman 1990.

by their male kin was justified in the name of protecting not only the modesty of a woman but also the honor of the entire family. The newly formulated slogan ‘virginity in the mind’ focuses on notions as ‘rationality’ and ‘reason,’ and thus locates the conception of virginity into a logical arrangement of items which set up the social order.

Displacing the language of kinship, honor and shame, custom and tradition, and appropriating the language of rationality and education, the phrase “virginity in the mind” suggests that a woman can and should draw the boundaries of her sexual freedom according to the rational choices that will lead to a healthy, stable, national family (Parla 2001: 84).

Most participants framed virginity as a moral issue during the interviews and told me “virginity is in the conscience of a person.” Although this latter phrase carries similarities with the one above in terms of showing how virginity is still an intricate aspect of women’s identity, the expression distinguishes itself from the former in many ways. The phrase, first of all, refers to the notion of morality. The location of virginity into one’s conscience, defined as motivation deriving logically from ethical or moral principles that govern a person’s thoughts and actions, complicates, rather than ease, possible ways by which women might possibly avoid the equation of sexual purity with a woman’s chastity/virginity. This understanding of virginity replaces female virginity and honor in the morality of women, and therefore installs the notion of premarital sex into a person’s moral sense of right and wrong affecting her own behavior. Thus, honor becomes something that women, themselves, generate and protect. The use of the term ‘conscience’ also puts a normative concern by implying that a single woman should conform to her sense of right conduct and not do something immoral if she does not want to have a feeling of shame.

In short, these two recently formulated slogans, utilized by women themselves, about virginity refer to the idea that modesty and virginity, in different disguises, are still intricate aspects of women’s self-definition. They also demonstrate the bitter fact that notions as honor and virginity, once re-produced and re-defined by different parties, spread out and pervade many other spheres. Moreover, this coming together of the rational and ethical/conscientious, along “with the physical and sexual insistence on the male/female divide,” also implies a mode of biopolitics (Miller, 2007).

Based on my own ethnography, I can say that women involve in the moral economy of virginity and premarital sex; that is, they engage in premarital sexual activity by making moral decisions, though much of the time these are made “on automatic” through having ethical dispositions which become part of their habitus¹⁷. Both the newly formulated phrases they use about virginity and their emphasis on a sense of honor, together with their efforts for legitimating their narratives of virginity loss and premarital sexual experience in consistent and meaningful stories embedded by a committed love relationship indicate a moral dimension. These single young women’s sexual behaviors tend to be based on various mixtures of habit and convention, discursive construction, and pursuit of interests and power (Sayer, 2004). Love seems to form the ‘moral heart’ of metropolitan women’s dispositions on premarital sexual intercourse. In that sense, I believe, love is the best tool to make women feel that what they do is right or conducive to well-being both emotionally, conscientiously, and rationally. In sum, based on my own ethnography, while on the one hand women are empowered in terms of their sexual lives, they still seek to render their narratives of virginity loss as well as consequent premarital sexual experiences meaningful through moral rationales.

Taking women’s efforts to justify their premarital sexual activities as well as their negotiation of the meaning(s) of virginity into consideration, the big question arises: what source of alertness or uneasiness creates all this abundance of discourses on virginity and premarital sex that young single professional women have dealt with? More importantly, how do women perceive and describe their state of keeping an eye on their sexual behaviors in a constant manner? Although not explicitly asked by the researcher, this question has been reflected on by the interviewees quite several times. Women mostly described the state of maintaining continuous vigilance over their bodies and thus, sexualities as an omnipresent source of discomfort. Single women, who have active sexual lives currently, claimed that the normative idea of virginity is carved in their bodies and identities that it is nearly impossible for them to let go of it. In a similar

¹⁷ I am aware that despite popularising the concept of habitus, Bourdieu largely ignored its ethical dimension. However, I think this is a useful term to discuss how one’s sexual morality and behavior is implicated in his/her commitments, identities, resources, and ways of life.

pattern one interviewee, Melis, a 27 year old manufacturing engineer, said that concerns on the morality and the socially appropriateness of sex before marriage do not automatically resolve once one decides to lose her virginity or to have sex. Dila, another interviewee and research assistant of age 32, defined this 'never ending' preoccupation with female virginity in the following way. "I don't quite believe that a woman who has been exposed to talks about how much important is to keep one's virginity until marriage for a long time, could get rid of this pain. This is like stomachache, I mean a pain that you don't know the reason, a pain which does not go away with rest or medicine." After Dila's interview that inspired me to reflect on the notion of 'stomachache', I heard three other women using the same word. The term 'stomachache' in Turkish, besides its primary dictionary meaning, is used to refer to issues, or people, that cause annoyance. Similarly, I use it in the title mainly to refer to a phrase commonly used by single professional Turkish women, which depicts virginity as a nuisance and a cause of complaint. Again, I believe, the word 'stomachache' greatly reflects the intense distress caused by the taboo of premarital sex in Turkish women.

4.6 (Dis)Empowering Practices by Women: Virginity as an (En)Gendered Investment

In the middle of the interviews, most participants explicitly referred to a group of women whom, they argue, use the value placed upon virginity, as an accreditable tool for their actual status in the society; that is, they aim to benefit from the connotations attached to premarital sexual abstinence. In other terms, under the name of taking precautions for enhancing their social status, they come to conform to the sets of codes governing female sexuality. Women, who claim to resist the oppressive norm of virginity, that is my interviewees in this case, react to women who, they assert, submit to men and their fantasies. Professional young women I talked to in my study are angry with women who "stay virgins just for not losing her value and not missing the chance of profitable marriage." To use a feminist terminology, they openly criticize women for

submitting to patriarchal imagination and thus reproducing stereotypes and the predominant representations, including ‘the respectable madonna’ versus ‘the rebarbative whore’ dichotomy. The participants hold that such self-control on the part of fellow females proliferates the idea that women who conform to the rules of the patriarchal regime, and even impose them on other women are worthy of the protection from the man's side of the “patriarchal bargain” (Kandiyoti, 1988). To use Kandiyoti's framework and terminology, women who comply with the patriarchal norms are rewarded with “security, stability, and respect” (1987). To use the tools of Bourdieusian analysis, we can argue that those practices related to the guarding, sanctification, or reverence of virginity, that is the hymen, are largely utilitarian and economistic, with actors seeking to maximize various forms of capital to enhance their own positions within structures of inequality and domination (1977).

Different women have changing attitudes towards premarital sex and virginity loss which also make different strategies women are developing vis-à-vis ‘the virginity question’ intelligible. Some of these strategies may be called conventional since they have been practiced since a relatively long time. Turkish women have been exposed to virginity tests and artificial virginity operations to monitor and repair their hymens, respectively. I contend that practices such as hymen repair surgeries, virginity examinations, and anal sex repair (when the woman performs it for the sake of not losing virginity) still reflect gender stereotypes based on patriarchal notions of women's sexual and reproductive roles and functions. They seem to offer short-term solutions to women’s momentous problems. I argue that these strategic practices, settled by women, stand for interventions to their bodily integrity, and thus deny them a satisfying sex life. They alienate women from their own bodies and sexualities, and distort their sense of self. These practices disempower women's sexual self-realization. From a gender perspective, they illustrate how women are fashioning themselves as “angels” to comply and play with male-constructed social norms, and reflect the power of male fantasies to justify unfair social practices. “Women organizing themselves around fantasies of purity and idealization in disempowering ways” also render the oppression women are facing less visible and negotiable. Moreover, all those nontrivial sorts of resistance tell us about forms of power women are caught up in.

Young, single, professional women say that common practices exercised by women as virginity surgeries to ‘fix the hymen’ or engaging in anal sex for the sake of keeping the hymen intact are intentional efforts on the part of women for enhancing her chances of good marriage and upward social mobility. These women continuously assert that “complicit” women use their virginity as a legitimate ‘certificate for their purity,’ and a reliable ‘measure of their morality’ in their own words. To put it otherwise, when asked about whether these practices render women more powerful vis-à-vis men, they strongly contended that these are not signs of defiance against men’s dominance. Since these practices do not target the control and discipline entailed in the notion of virginity in a critical and challenging way, I, as a feminist researcher, do not either consider these ‘survival strategies’ as individual-communal projects against the ongoing vigilance over female virginity. Since these survival mechanisms reflect how women adjust their own bodies to the cultural proscriptions surrounding themselves, in my opinion, they do not stand as active forms of women's empowerment. I hold the view that every such like practice mirrors women’s intentional efforts for ‘chastity.’

Similarly, women in my sample call traditional cultural discourses into question while showing resentment at any attempt to legitimize the ongoing vigilance over female sexuality on the part of women. They explicitly refer to the idea that such practices disembody and disempower them not only in sexual relations but also in all aspects of life.

Hymen repair surgeries are very humiliating for women. How can one woman make this injustice to herself? ... On the other hand, I also feel sad for them. I know, these women, as I have, have all grown up with fear and shame of sex. ... I see this as nothing but a self-torture (Berrak, 31).

Lastly, I would like to note that the interviewees, while refusing any kind of categorization on the axis of “virgin” versus “non-virgin”, themselves make other sorts of classification among different women based on their sexuality/sexual outlook. To put it otherwise, these women in a way carry on intra-women (sexual) violence. Although women avoid making distinctions between virgins and non-virgins in terms of their morality, it does not mean that they get no longer involved in sharp categorizations. Women stigmatize and categorize one another in covert ways, some of which directly target sexual attitudes or dispositions. This internal hierarchy implicitly starts to act as

any other restrictive classification among women themselves. Furthermore, it reflects how women set new boundaries for proper femininity and sexual conduct. Two interviewees' statements, among many others, pattern this finding.

Some women wear mini skirts when they go to Taksim. They change partners every week. We have a neighbor for example; she works at a shopping center in Levent. She always brings men to her apartment. It's not good either (Nermin, 26).

To put it otherwise, what is also found significant in women's own narratives is that although they favored a space of sexual liberation and actualization for women themselves, they implied that single women who changed partners frequently, and seemed always sexually available, should be more selective with their partners, and consider factors as respect, reciprocity, mutual pleasure, tenderness, and love before involving in any sexual encounter. Although they did not say explicitly, they perceived these women, their metropolitan fellows of similar ages, loose and flighty, referring to their (lack of) sense of virtue, self-worth, and self-respect. Women's disapproval of 'very liberal' attitudes towards premarital female sexuality indicates their consent to the 'limitations' of sexual permissiveness. Furthermore, such classifications of femininity, and related sexual comparisons show metropolitan women's tacit judgments about the ways in which female sexuality should be regulated and monitored. These categories also show how metropolitan single, educated women, based on their own definition of proper female sexuality, differentiate themselves both from 'sexually promiscuous women' and 'patriarchal women'.

Similarly, women apply minor practices on a daily basis in terms of strategizing their relationship with their social network. To give examples of such daily habits, young single women do not want their neighbors to see them with different men so often, they try not to bring boyfriends to home. They do not wear clothes that may seem promiscuous. The fear of being marginalized by society as well as the idea that certain cases may make their social lives harder let them take periodic self-defensive measures as exemplified above.

4.7 Summary/Conclusion

This ethnographic study has explored metropolitan women's narratives of virginity loss and premarital sex. The main axis of the research lies in women's relative empowerment vis-à-vis the patriarchal regulation of female sexuality. Women, rather than merely playing the role of silent intermediaries, act as 'transforming' agents in the organization of sexual relations between men and women. Moreover, they actively re-construct their own understanding of proper femininity and re-negotiate sexual activities within the constraining social structures and cultural practices. They think that a positive and enriching female sexuality are serious challenges to dominant masculinities.

The interviewees express their reactions against the constant controlling of their bodies via their own sexual narratives and subjective reflections on virginity. In addition, they show resentment against women in pursuit of status considerations in a culture of virgin-idolization, implying that they neutralize the potential effects of their struggle. However, on the other hand, they make efforts to legitimize their sexual activity through moral and sentimental instruments. They invent a new sense of morality for their premarital sexual activities and use new discourses underlining moral rationales for engaging in premarital sexual activity. However, while attacking the traditional definition of virginity they produce novel forms of "rational" and ethical/conscientious controls on female virginity and sexuality.

Participants' voices highlighted the fact that young unmarried women always strategize on the issue of sexuality. Although women reach a fair consensus on the idea that the ongoing vigilance over virginity together with the high value placed on it simply restrict the female body and regulate women's behavior, for the moment they are not able to present a united front on the issue of active resistance against any related practices through their bodies. While some believe in various new possibilities of empowerment these practices may in fact open up, others seem much more reluctant in actively resisting the pressures of patriarchal societies.

The idea that we cannot talk about a category of “true womanhood” as a fixed female identity is again located in this study (De Beauvoir 1989; Spellman 1988). Rather, the data reinforced earlier findings that class differences are not an additional component to gender yet serve as the founding blocks of womanhood (Bora 2005). To code and analyze the interview data, as well as interpret the dynamics of women's construction of practices and strategies regarding virginity loss and premarital sex, consideration of their class positions, age, marital status, educational background has been of a great importance. Their depiction/characterization with proper femininity and moral sexual conduct/acts carry implications about the ways in which class, education, age intersect with gender to shape attitudes towards female sexuality.

Chapter 5

“IS FEMINISM RADICAL AND/OR MARGINAL?” WOMEN’S AVOIDANCE OF THE ‘FEMINIST’ LABEL

A common attribute of women participants is that they are reluctant to identify themselves as feminists. In interviews with seventeen ‘metropolitan’ women, all the women except two declared that they were not feminists. One woman said, “I would not call myself a feminist, in fact I *like* men.” Another woman added, “I’m not a feminist, I would say. Probably feminists wouldn’t like me, since I want to get married and raise a family with children.”

When asked about their attitudes towards feminism, more than half of the women participants did not want to explicitly define themselves in relation to feminism at all. Suggesting the ambiguity in the term *feminism* and its negative connotations, women gave several reasons for distancing themselves from the identity of ‘feminist.’ A number of interviewees felt that feminism is an ‘aggressive and angry movement.’ Nermin, a 26 year-old research assistant, said that “I, also think that everybody should be treated equally and that women should be *given* their rights and respect. However, feminism goes *too far*. It’s quite separatist.” Another interviewee, Asli, a 31 year old company manager, said that “I’m not quite sure whether I would call myself a feminist. I guess, not. Actually I’ve never been exposed to serious discrimination by men.” Here, feminism is seen as a gendered ideology of anger, and a “place where grievances against discrimination can be voiced, rather than a perspective that sees power inequalities influencing every domain of gender relations” (Aronson 2003: 915, 916). Apart from this, such a statement as “I’ve never been exposed to serious discrimination by men” implies an assertion of not having ever been discriminated on the basis of gender which seems to contradict the women’s former complaints of “being treated unfairly in the society only since they are women.”

Other women participants also distanced themselves from feminism as a result of the term’s stigma, particularly separatism from men. For example, Ayşe, a 26 year old project designer in an international advertisement company, said, “I just want to find a man with whom I’ll be happy. Although I’m not planning to bear four or five children I

still want to raise a family.” Nermin thought that being a feminist meant that she should not marry a man with whom to spend the rest of her life:

I have a neighbor in İzmir, she is a feminist. She says that she will not devote all her life to a man and many children. She says she deserves much more than that. I don't think like her. I think that's not what I want to do. I want to love one man till I die, and have a happy family.

The interviewees' responses, thus, suggest that young women avoid the 'feminist' label because they fear it distances them from men, marriage, and motherhood (Sigel 1996).

This perspective reflects an encounter of metropolitan women with negative perception of feminists as egocentric women against the notion of marriage and family. Similarly, most women resist the 'feminist' label because of negative perceptions of feminists as unattractive, unfeminine women with 'hairy legs.' For instance, although Nil, a 28 year-old interpreter, said, "I just think that everybody is equal," she did not want to identify herself as a feminist: "I still think women should take care of themselves. ... Women are supposed to be delicate and elegant. I don't like women who act like men do." These responses suggest that young women associate feminists with tomboyish women with "hairy legs" and "man haters". In other words, the stereotypes young women attach to the 'feminist' label cause them to reject it.

Another thing many women implied in the interviews is that men around them would think that they hate men, and that they "do not aspire to a future with a man." When asked whether she was a feminist, one interviewee said, "I don't label myself a feminist. Although maybe I would call myself as such, I don't. I don't want to get behind such a *radical image*." The data support earlier findings (Bolotin 1982; Kabasakal, 1998) on young single women's attitudes towards feminism, in the United States, and among women managers in Turkey respectively, that women are unwilling to call themselves as feminists not only because of the connotations they attach to the 'feminist' label themselves but also because they fear that others, especially men, would think of them as "not feminine enough" and "man haters."

Taking women's attitudes towards feminism and the rising women's movement as well as their purported resistance to the ongoing vigilance over virginity and premarital sexuality, largely discussed in earlier sections, into consideration, I argue that women's defiance of the feminist identity and their support for gender equality are powerful

ironies. In the next part of the paper I examine in detail how those ironies come into being, and how they come to influence young unmarried women's lives.

5.1 “Radical” Women’s Narratives on Virginity Loss: Feminism as a “Radical” Ideology

Nineteen percent of the interviewees, that is 15 women, distanced themselves from feminism while only two women told that they might identify themselves as feminists. When all the interviews are taken into account, these two women seem “radical,” in terms of ways/forms of virginity loss, vis-à-vis other women who reject the ‘feminist’ label. One of these two women reported that she had her hymen removed by a doctor in a state hospital in Istanbul. Dila, a 32 year old research assistant, told of her decision ‘to get rid of’ her virginity in the following way:

It was my first year in college, and I really wanted to *get rid of* my virginity. It was a real burden to me. One day I decided to *get rid of* it. However, I told myself that I didn’t need a man for this. ... At that time, the most feminist position for me was to not to be deflowered by a man. ... I always call this performance as a “feminist stance” against the patriarchal order (emphasis added).

Another interviewee who called herself as a feminist was Selda, a 29 year old manager in a tourism corporation. Her story of virginity loss seems to align with Dila’s story. When asked about her first sexual experience, Selda said, “My story (*of first sexual intercourse*) may seem to you a little bit *radical*”. Then, she continued:

I gave my virginity to a man I met in a bar. Actually, before that day, I was always willing to *get rid of* the thing called virginity. It was a problem in my life. And, I didn’t want to sleep with a man who would be proud of the idea that he was the one who took my virginity. I didn’t tell him that I was a virgin. I don’t know if he even realized that. He was too drunk.

By refusing to be men’s virgin brides and denying the romanticization of the ‘first time’ or the re-idealization of virginity, these two women demystify virginity. The fact that

only two women out of seventeen embrace feminism in both name and substance, and that these two women are the radical ones in terms of their attitudes towards, and perceptions of virginity loss and premarital female sexuality is quite significant with regard to women's approaches to feminism in Turkey. The embracement of the 'feminist' label only by women, self-identified as the *outliers* in the society, shows how women themselves eschew feminism in the Turkish context and add to the continued marginalization of feminism as a fringy, borderline ideological movement.

5.2 “Ironies” of Single Womanhood: Feminism as a Potential Resource

Single women's avoidance of the 'feminist' label is quite ironic considering the vulnerability these women feel in their lives. Unmarried women say that they feel themselves vulnerable in their relations with other people, including their own social network. A number of interviewees indicated that unmarried women are subject to constant monitoring of their behaviors in society. They suggest that married people, men and women, have ambivalent, if not contradictory, stances towards single women. The ambiguity about the phenomenon of single womanhood is mostly based on quite conflicting views about the lives of single women. While on the one hand, unmarried women are regarded as 'aberrations,' on the other, they are seen as 'fortunate' not to be burdened with familial responsibilities. In other words, although unmarried women think that they often receive 'implicit allusions to their lack of responsibility' and therefore, perhaps the inability to take on responsibility, on the other hand, they seem to feel that their lives also provoke envy on the part of married women. I believe that ambivalent attitudes towards single womanhood together with stereotypes of single women, as selfish, career-driven women and/or as spinsters put unmarried women in a vulnerable position. This vulnerability derives from the idea that while they are accused of pursuing 'independent lives,' they are also implicitly attacked for not conforming to the roles of wife and mother, and thus, seen as threatening to the social order. Hande, a 29 year old manager in a local company, said: "Since you are not married people think of you as a selfish person. Everybody expects you to be a dedicated mother. If you aren't married or don't have children you are even not invited to certain occasions. It's

so bothersome.” Another interviewee, Güneş, a 31 year old English instructor in a college, complained about the same thing:

Since you are a single woman in her thirties people think you are a selfish career woman who doesn't take the time to have families. They think that as a single woman you don't have any problems, any responsibilities. It isn't fair. I have millions of things to think about. ... From time to time, my (*female*) friends, implicitly, criticize me out nothing. Since just I don't have a husband or a child I'm not a bad person. I don't know but so often, I think that they are also jealous of me.

Single women's experiences and their expression of other people's strong beliefs and deep prejudices about singleness explicitly suggest that unmarried women need to assert that they are enacting a different type of femininity which is different from the 'conventional' form of femininity, that of getting married to a man and subsequently bearing children. I think that these women may benefit from feminism as an empowering resource in their struggle and confrontation with stereotypes of single women. Feminists maintain that women may choose to pursue different lifestyles and not to choose to get married or bear children, and can be happy at the end. Feminism, as an ideology of gender equity, contends that women are not bound to pursue a motherhood role in a heterosexual nuclear family, and thus, provides unmarried women ideological tools to challenge the stereotypes of single womanhood. I argue that women, with the fear of becoming marginalized by a society that values 'altruistic wives and mothers,' and that attaches negative connotations to the feminist label, may use feminism as a resource to reduce their vulnerability in a society which tends to value women only if they conform to the roles of wife and mother, and thus enhance their living conditions.

What I find ironic is that unmarried women simultaneously deny the 'feminist' label while also reacting to discrimination from members of the same and the opposite sex based on their marital status. That is, although single women complain about their marginalization in the society both by men and their female married friends, they do not embrace feminism either in name or in substance. To put it differently, in spite of the fact that unmarried women look for resources to challenge the gripping fears and annoying clichés about single women, they do not welcome feminism, a movement that ostensibly recognizes and fights for women's needs, home. Despite seeking to resist

various informal attacks made on the basis of their femininity and to feel equally entitled to stay single, unmarried women do not endorse the principles of feminist ideology which would provide them resources to help them deal with strong prejudices about single womanhood and to reduce their own vulnerability vis-à-vis gender stereotypes as well as the conventional understanding of ‘proper’ womanhood and femininity. Such an irony, I believe, derives from negative associations attached to feminism, among many other reasons, which rend the positive, empowering beliefs a feminist would embody quite invisible.

5.3 “Are You Always Available to Have Sex?”: Difficulty in Negotiating Body Boundaries

When asked what they think about the feminist movement in Turkey, and the common motto among Turkish feminists, “Our bodies belong to us,” most interviewees said that they do not take these slogans or campaigns seriously since they believe these attempts do not seem to succeed. A woman participant, Nil, said that “I think that feminists act out of anger. While some of their claims are quite true, they mostly go *too far* and fall short of their goals.” Similarly, Melis said:

I know the slogan (*Our bodies belong to us*) you mention, and I understand what they mean by saying it. However, it doesn’t seem to work. ... This slogan, for example, is extremist, and it is quite arrogant. Women have much more serious problems, they are battered, can’t have jobs. Feminists, firstly, should deal with these issues.

However, having said this and taken a position against such feminist conceptualizations and discursive practices, Melis expressed her annoyance at men’s perceptions of young single women who pursue ‘independent’ lives. She said that “Only since I live alone, and have boyfriends, or go out in the night, men think that I am always available for sex.” Then she added, “The fact that I am not a nun doesn’t mean that I’m always ready to go to bed with him (*a man*).”

These complaints on the part of single women are ironic when their views on feminists' struggles with body matters are considered. Nearly half of the women participants implied they are annoyed that men 'push' them for sex. Zeynep, a 24 year old dentist, said, "Since I don't care about virginity, men think that I'm a loose girl. I think they imagine that I have sex every day with a man." At another interview, Berrak, a 31 year old architect, uttered quite similar words.

For men there are two types of women, virgins and others. Once they see that I don't care about virginity, and stuff like that, they start nudging me to go to their places. I mean, my boyfriend, he thinks that since we're in a relationship I should always be ready to have sex. I'm not supposed to sleep with him whenever/everytime he wants.

These statements point to women's difficulty in negotiating their body boundaries. Their annoyance with men's 'rampant' attitudes, and their ambivalence about their partners' persistent sexual demands suggest that women seek to negotiate their sexual boundaries, and tell their partners no when they do not want to have sex. An interviewee, Güneş, expressed her annoyance at "being seen sexually available" all the time, as follows:

Men have this idea in their mind: "Since you don't care about virginity, then let's have sex". It's so stupid. ... There are times that I really don't want to be so intimate with a man. I mean, I don't always feel myself ready for it. It's quite complicated, I cannot tell it.

I argue that the idea that these women refuse to promote feminism is quite ironic as feminism would be an empowering resource for single women who want to negotiate their sexual experiences. Despite being willing to not to have sex on certain occasions and/or to avoid casual sex, young unmarried women find feminist goals quite ambitious and 'pointless.' I think, that women, in fact, implicitly or unwittingly refer to the feminist notion as the need to assert control over their bodies. This also shows the irony that single women keep referring to feminist notions while simultaneously rejecting the label. The reasons for that may be the will to be in rapport with the general assessment about feminism in the society, and/or women's own ambivalences about, or misunderstandings of, the scope of feminist ideology.

I think that women's insistent refusal to identify themselves with feminism, is ironic, if not contradictory, in the sense that it could allow women to frame their own 'situational' abstinence from sex. Feminism may allow young single women, not having strict sexual inhibitions, as virginity or premarital sexual abstinence, to negotiate their body boundaries vis-à-vis men who would equate their sexual attitudes with "constant" sexual availability. It may also act as a secure ground, for single women, to settle their sexual boundaries.

In sum, female participants' responses pointed to a reluctance on their part to call themselves as feminists, and to an avoidance of any possible personal identification with the 'feminist' label. Suggesting the ambiguity in the term *feminism* and its negative connotations, women regarded feminism as a 'radical' movement "in the pursuit of extreme goals" and thus, remained reluctant to embrace feminism in name. However, their annoyance at stereotypes of single womanhood and their subsequent vulnerability in the society, as well as the difficulty in negotiating their body boundaries vis-à-vis men who consider single women, with 'liberal sexual attitudes' as 'always available for sex' show that women's refusal of the feminist ideology is an irony in terms of leaving them disarmed against the clichés of single womanhood. I believe that feminism, in both name and substance, would be a great resource for these young unmarried women who seek to escape vulnerability, and to assert absolute control over their bodies and sexual experiences¹⁸.

¹⁸ For a detailed discussion on "patriarchal bargains" and their implications for women's consciousness and struggles, see Kandiyoti, 1988.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to investigate young single, metropolitan women's understandings of, and attitudes towards premarital sex and female virginity. I have attempted to reflect on women's narratives of virginity loss and premarital sexual experience, mainly in order to analyze the dispositions, and perspectives of well-educated, unmarried professional women that have gained recent visibility as a new sociological class in Turkey in last years. Throughout the paper, I have argued for the complexity of women's activities and discursive practices around volatile and intimate subjects as premarital sex and female virginity. By taking individual narratives as points of departure and reference simultaneously, I seek to examine the intricacy of changing social norms around proper womanhood, honor, virginity, and female sexuality. Furthermore, I have speculated on women's conceptions of single womanhood, feminism, and sexual morality.

This study has only partially explained the relative empowerment of these economically secure women vis-à-vis patriarchal expectations of female modesty and proper femininity. Although the third chapter traces some of the critical strategies that women develop for resisting against the ongoing vigilance over female bodies, it remains limited in terms of answering some related questions as follows. How far do the limits of empowerment strategies of women extend? Can they form the foundation for any significant social transformation? Or are they just illusions on the part of women who act within the borders of social conventions and rules? How can the arguments of empowerment and biopolitics reconcile? These questions and many others, including the sociological dualism as structure versus agency, are outside the scope of this work. I believe, given the complexity of these issues, this study can be a call for greater sensitivity in future research to the possibilities for resistance and empowerment on the part of young single women, and to the diversity of women's experiences of, and discursive practices about notions as sexuality, and gender relations.

Another important finding in this study is the negotiation of premarital sex and virginity loss among young single professional women living in Istanbul. The thesis

manifests women's efforts to legitimize and idealize their sexual acts through diverse discourses of moral justification. Women predicate premarital sexual activity primarily on love and committed romantic relationships. Despite their explicit critiques of the use of female virginity as a gendered investment for chances of good marriage and upward social mobility among some women fellows, metropolitan women themselves do not leave the vigilance over female bodies and/or 'hymens'. They, rather, develop novel forms of control of sexuality that tend to locate virginity in the "mind" or the "conscience" of a woman. I believe this thesis contributes to the existing literature on virginity question in Turkey while it deepens the discussion on women's associations with virginity loss, premarital sex, single womanhood, proper femininity as well as notions of honor and sexual morality. Establishing the extent to which women of this newly emerging sociological group colluded with patriarchal expectations of female sexuality and proper womanhood in Turkish society, or were able to carve out a relatively autonomous social and political project would, however, require further meticulous investigation.

The fourth chapter traces some of the critical annoyances of young unmarried metropolitan women about 'myths about single womanhood', and 'stereotypes of sexually active women.' The author maintains that feminism that is *ironically* challenged, if not 'crucified', by women themselves, would in fact be an empowering resource for women to not only escape prejudices about single womanhood, but more importantly, to negotiate body boundaries, and assert control over their bodies, thus liberating themselves from social criticism.

Last but not least, this study can be thought as an effort to provide a preliminary basis for further research on sexual attitudes and behaviors of young single women in Turkey. I believe, a sustained critical analysis of professional metropolitan women's subjectivity that would draw upon notions of current interest across the social science, such as identity formation, experience, and self-representation, could enhance our understanding of women's sexualities, and manifest the possibilities and limitations of women's agency in relation to highly gendered institutional and non-institutional practices and discourses.

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