

A Brief Evaluation of the Notion of Honor and the Issue of Honor Crime

Organizational Dimensions and Women's Activism

The Case of Turkey

"The state and politicians continue to be the guardians of the virtue of women in Turkish society" stated a Turkish state official.

In contemporary Turkey as well as in the Middle East, the issue of honor crime is much discussed among the representatives of the government, non-governmental institutions and women's organizations. Briefly, within the media and government discourses, honor killing is commonly considered as the murder of a woman by one of her male family members in the name of 'protecting the honor of the family'. Rather than just focusing on the loss of virginity as the main reason of honor killing, I generally want to shed light on how of the notion of honor and issue of honor crime has to be evaluated in relation to the multiplicity of actors who take place in the cases of "honor" crimes—such as the family members, the relatives, the residents of neighborhood, government officials, parliamentarians, the judges, the lawyers, doctors and so on—and to the multiplicity of the discourses which are produced and reproduced through the media, the state and non-governmental institutions. This article reflects my long term study on honor killing, in which I examined a collage of official discourses about women, family and honor crime by referring to the parliamentary records, and the changes in the Civil and Penal Codes.

In order to understand the scope of the legal changes, I conducted in-dept interviews with lawyers who were actively involved into the process of legal changes made in 2005, which become useful to illustrate how multiple actors play different roles at distinctive levels through the production of discourses on honor killing. In the first part of the article, I will reconsider the construction and reconstruction of honor at national and governmental levels. And in the following section, I will explain the organizational dimensions of the honor crime by paying attention to the local/international activism of women.

The Articulation and Rearticulation of the Notion of Honor in Turkey:

Elvin Hatch categorizes the theories of social honor into two forms: "materialistic approaches" and "non-materialistic approaches" (343:345). Whereas materialistic approaches evaluate the social honor as a material symbol of status, depending on the place of an individual in terms of the distribution of wealth, money or property (material assets), the non-materialistic ones appear to claim that social honor cannot be defined through the material assets, but through social prestige and status which cannot easily be translated into the materialistic terms. Herein, I intend to focus on non-materialistic aspects of honor and I approach the notion of honor as something, going beyond the borders of the conjugal space and beyond individual manifestations. In this respect, I will analyze how the notion of honor is used as a 'strategy' by the state to govern and to control the behaviors and sexuality of women and it is striking to point out how the operation of honor is enforcing the conditions of honor killings.

While searching for the reasons behind the honor killings, there is a common tendency to see 'the loss of virginity' as the main cause of the honor crime. Nebahat Akkoc argues that the issue of honor crime cannot be reduced only to the loss of virginity, for what is striking that the cases of honor crime are related with whole set of attitudes of a woman (125-127). In this sense, the control of the attitudes and of the bodies of women both in the 'public/private' realms is the main reason behind the honor crimes, which cannot be considered as independent of the patriarchal system(s). Honor crime should be evaluated as a specific form of sexual violence which brings many discourses with it. Although in the 'West' there is a tendency to see honor crime just as a form of violence related with 'cultural patterns', it is actually a specific form of sexual violence operating through codes of honor that is legitimized through tools of patriarchal mechanisms directly targeting women's bodies.

Yet, the important point for the cases of honor killing is the idea of 'the protection of family honor' functioning along with the protection of 'honor of the society' and although these two forms of honor seem as different sites, they are so intertwined within multiple codes of honor. So what is common about sexual violence is the possession of men over women's bodies, however the specificity of honor killing comes not from the cultural features, but it comes from the possession and control of men over women's bodies operating on the basis of the codes of honor not only through husband, father, or brother, but also through the society in general. 'Stain on family honor/women's honor' is turned into 'stain on honor of society' with 'stain on honor of nation'.

From a historical point of view, nationalist/modernist discourses were quite important in term of grasping the atmosphere of the more recent debates about the honor crime. In the 1900s, modernist and nationalist discourses of the Turkish nation state presented women ambiguous roles in terms of their sexuality, which oscillated between being 'honorable' and 'dishonorable'. So as to exemplify the nation state discourses, it is really crucial to accentuate the role of law and state reforms about women and family. The 'new' Civil Code in 1926 compromised of many conflicting, paradoxical reforms and articles in itself in terms of gender equality and inequality both in 'private/public' domains. The enactment of Turkish Civil Code in 1926 played an important part in the construction of this so-called equality between men and women, which was based on the 'denial of female sexuality'—valid only in the public sphere; however, in the private domain, legal equality was much more difficult to trace.

According to Ursula Vogel, there was nothing new about the Code Civil; but what is new is that marriage emerged as the only domain where these *gendered feudal type of relations* between men and women are codified (29-44). Husband within the conjugal domain became the representative of the state and the policeman of the family. The 1926 Civil Code gave these men the right to get married combining it with the right to be the head of the family. In a way, family is presented as the essence of the nation in the nationalist discourses and honor was an important discourse with regard to defense of the family and nation. Honor cannot be considered in individualistic terms, but it is a rather relational conception: one's honor is defined in reference to others and most of the time in reference to family and nation. What is important is honor of the family and honor of the nation rather than the individuality of honor.

Honor operates like an invisible cover over the bodies of women and which fixes, controls and disciplines each and every activity of women and men in different ways; in this regard, honor functions like a code for both men and women in the society through the governmental and nation state discourses which enable the production and reproduction of honor; it is like a code, in the sense that it is not questioned, it is taken for granted and it goes without saying. Different codes of honor—honor of women, honor of family, honor of nation and society—cannot be evaluated independently of gender

implications; they are central to social meanings of gender in terms of constituting not only what it means to be a woman but also what it means to be a man.

Michel Foucault's framework is very illuminating in terms of understanding how the disciplinary mechanisms function differently over the bodies of men and women. While these disciplinary mechanisms operate over the women's bodies, the construction of feminine body differentiates from the construction of masculine body. In the case of the production of femininity, patriarchal forces function by means of the disciplinary practices to oppress women (McLaren 97). "Foucault's conception of power as not simply juridical and prohibitive, but also as productive and as exercised on bodies through social norms can account for the ways that oppression can construct identities" (McLaren 97). One of the most important ways of the operation of power over bodies is through the social norms such as honor.

Nation state *per se* creates "docile bodies" and produces certain mechanisms, controlling the sexuality of women on the basis of the discourses of 'being a honorable woman' in which the aim is to control the sexuality of women by only attributing to their 'reproductive functions' for the continuation of the society, revolving around the idea of creating obedient citizens for the nation (See Michel Foucault). Deniz Kandiyoti calls this process of control as the "corporate control" over female bodies (325). This is called "corporate control", since this control not only comes from the state, not only comes from the society in general, but also comes from the parents and relatives. In this context, honor functions as a patriarchal control/power mechanism which regulates all kinds of relations between men and women.

In Turkey, honor crime can be seen as the most extreme effect of power over the women's bodies. The corporate control over the female sexuality displays itself within the honor crimes through the government discourses about the honor crime and family relations, because the cases of honor crime show how multiple actors can play different roles in the murder of a woman in the name of 'protecting the honor of the family'. With respect to recent discussions on honor killing, it is possible to argue that the modernity is not a finite process; it is a process happening at any moment, then the so-called break up between modernity and tradition—by repeating and reproducing itself in line with the modernist paradigm—reflects itself in distinct and contingent discourses about honor killing in the contemporary era.

Honor killing is a specific form of crime against women which is directly targeting the body of women and right of livelihood of them. By reflecting on the citations that I gave at the top, I mainly tried to unmask the gender aspects of what we call 'honor' and examine the significance of the fact that honor is closely associated with women and their sexuality and their relation to their body. Different forms of so-called 'dishonorable conduct', based mainly on multiple norms on how a woman's body and sexuality should be controlled; all of them serve to the rejection and restriction of women's visibility (the woman's body) in the 'public sphere'. Honor cannot be considered as only located within the body of women; honor is targeting both the bodies of men and women and it regulates the relations between them and honor constructs different forms of hierarchical relations between men and women, so the notion of honor operates over two sides: over the body of woman who is considered as 'dishonorable' side and over the body of man 'honorable' side. Honor killings should be evaluated and accepted as 'the one of the most brutal forms of violence' against women—enabled through the patriarchal relations—which transgresses the sexual and bodily rights of women.

The law *per se* is one of the important mechanisms in which both regulation and discipline works together. Especially starting with 1926, as a result of the codification of marriage under the new Civil

Code, family was constructed as a 'modern' institution where men, as the representative of the state in private space, were given the right to have direct control over the reproduction and women. By accentuating the historical construction of honor, from the time of the establishment of the nation state till now, family has been imagined as a universal and instinctual unit; but in fact, family has been constructed and maintained as a tool of power relations to manage populations through the codes of honor.

Organizational Dimensions of the Phenomenon of Honor Killing:

In this section, I will present a brief analysis of the issue of honor crime with respect to the organizational actors and the activism of women both at local/global levels. Honor crime is discussed and problematized not only by the governmental actors, but also by the non-governmental organizations. All these actors at local and global axes produce different discourses on honor crime, leading to the emergence of "an area of struggle", which appears to be a site of conflicts, negotiations and contestations (See Dicle Kogacioglu 2007).

In the cases of honor crime, from a Foucauldian perspective, the actions of professionals enable the functioning of *governmentality* by engendering specific forms of knowledge on the issue of honor killing and creating a specific arena of discussion in which honor crime turns out to be a "space of struggle", and here the conception of *governmentality* functions as a disciplinary power mechanism that is used to create subjects of governance which signifies the governance and control of the women's sexuality at institutional and daily levels (See Michel Foucault). I posit that 'technologies of self' and 'governance of self' are realized through internalization and normalization of governmental tactics and the notion of honor becomes part of internalization and normalization processes through which women are 'policed' by other selves. The notion of 'honor' turns into a 'governmental tactic' to govern individuals and to create specific sites of bodies where all behaviors and attitudes of men and women are regulated and conducted.

Honor crime as one of the most brutal forms of violence opens up a space where the tension between modernity/tradition, secularism and religion and local/global is unravelled. Through the activism, honor crime also constructs a terrain upon which the violence against women is condemned and 'patriarchal' rhetoric of the state is deconstructed. The conception of "patriarchy" can be delineated as a limited abstraction in terms of depicting women only as 'silent victims', giving no space for 'agency or resistance' of women. However, it is possible to overcome these limitations by way of focusing on relational aspects of patriarchal regimes together with thinking negotiations, everyday practices and empowerment strategies of women within the regimes of control and surveillance. The term "patriarchal bargaining", developed by Deniz Kandiyoti, is important to grasp how women are not that passive and silent as depicted within the state discourses and how women can develop different strategies through their everyday practices to deal with and to bargain with patriarchal regimes, which can also be articulated as part of "empowerment" strategies (274-290).

The conception of "the patriarchal bargains" is not only important for understanding women's everyday strategies, but also significant in order to grasp the relationship between non-governmental and governmental actors. Thus, both in everyday relations of individuals and in the relationship between the state and women, these negotiations and struggles bring forth a domain of struggle where women can resist by 'transgressing the boundaries of patriarchal forces'. "This process of negotiation transcends the boundaries of the household and produces often contradictory ideas regarding what it means to be a man or a man" (Sirman 201). The notion of honor regulates the relations between men and women

and among men and only among women not only in the private sphere but also in the public domain through bringing “the patriarchal bargains” into the social space. In this sense, honor crime as a space of struggle witnesses a real bargaining power of women where especially the women’s organizations make important and strong claims to the governments while enforcing the state to make some changes in the law to prevent the sexual violence.

In Turkey, the years beginning with 1980s witnessed the flourishing of various actors in the ‘public sphere’; women’s organizations began to be set up by departing from the slogan of “personal is political” and they started to arrange sessions of discussion to solve the problematic of women’s empowerment strategies/women’s rights. One of the most important women’s organizations is Purple Roof Women’s Shelter which was founded in 1990. The activities of Purple Roof are really important in terms of dealing with the issue of domestic violence. Purple Roof, together with other organizations, made many activities to take the attention of the government to take some actions, to fight the crimes of honor and to prepare the conditions for making considerable changes in the law concerning honor killing, and generally domestic violence.

In order to perceive the scope of legal changes, I conducted an interview with a woman activist working in the Purple Roof who states, “First of all, we should question the honor itself, if we cannot question it, and the changes in the law do not make any difference.” This entails that *honor* determines one’s position within a social space in relation to other people in which honor operates through the complex set of ‘internalized rules and regulations’. In this regard, honor arrives to be as a common sensical part of our lives in which nobody attempts to question and to oppose it.

In 2004, a tragic event of honor killing happened in Istanbul; in this case, Guldunya Toren was killed by her brothers, Irfan and Ferit Toren, with the reason of “cleansing” their family honor (Ceylan 2007). 22-years-old Guldunya was first raped by her cousin, and as a result she got pregnant. Subsequently, she was forced to marry with him by her family; yet she refused, since he was already married. So as to get rid of her family’s pressure, she decided to run away from her brothers. When they first attempted to kill her, she was staying in the house of her uncle; fortunately she survived from their first attack. However, while she was receiving treatment in the hospital, unfortunately her brothers found her again and this time they killed her.

The life narratives behind the honor killings can be very complex, so it is really difficult to reduce one honor crime to one specific reason. The roles played by the government officials, the lawyers and the judges in terms of the legislation and by the doctors are really important. The lawyers of the accused brothers—Ferit and Irfan— claim,

According to the Turkish ‘laws’, the honor is a scared thing and honor is something that needs to be protected. However when you consider the notion of honor for women, in Turkey sexuality is not something free from restraint; it can even be considered as a reason for divorce. It is not true to say that I can live my sexuality however I want. It both concerns the family and society all together (“Tore Cinayetinde Akil Almaz Savunma” *Evrensel*).

As for the major dynamic of the codes of honor, it is vested in person, family, tribe, community, society, state and so on. The notion of honor is produced and reproduced by different actors in different settings and it circulates from one space to another by changing its meanings. Therefore, I propose that it is necessary to look at how various foci talk about honor and honor crime, being indicative of their actions. The murder of Guldunya can be considered as a turning point with reference to the beginning of

the campaigns against honor killing in Turkey and the world. The feminist activist lawyers set up an a platform called Women's Platform of Turkish Penal Code so as to involve into the process of the enactment of the new Penal Code. In 2008, I conducted in-dept interviews with these lawyers to give meaning to the changes in the Penal Code concerning the phenomenon of honor killing. According to the old Penal Code, killing a woman in the name of protecting 'the honor of the family' was considered a reason of extenuation, because this extenuation (reduced sentence) is given to murderers under the article of "Unjust Provocation" in which the "improper" behaviors of women can be a reason of unjust provocation. But what is evaluated as an unjust and improper action is still open to question and to the interpretations of the judges. For Sirman, "law sees the woman who is suspected of bringing dishonor to her family as having provoked her murderers unjustly" (41).

One of these activist lawyers, Esra, who works as a volunteer in the Purple Roof, utters, "Even after the change in the Penal code, the judges are still applying the article of "Unjust Provocation in the cases of honor killing, and they lead to the sentence reductions." According to the research conducted by the Women's Rights Centre in Diyarbakır Institution of Court, for the last five years, 46 cases of honor killings out of 59 are evaluated under the article of "Unjust Provocation". Therefore, this new Penal Law still continues to pave the way for the legitimization of these kinds of crimes. As Sirman expresses, "the legal institution recognizes the key role played by kinship and the family in the political order and organizes the clauses of the Civil and Penal Codes so as to protect the social and familial order rather than the rights of the individual"(51). The Civil and Penal Codes are interacting and talking with each other in terms of making a strong emphasis on 'inferior positionality of women' in the 'familial sphere/public domain'.

Another problem about law is that after the changes in the scope of the old Penal Code, the issue of honor crime was put under the category of "crimes of traditions". During our interview, Esra explained me about the underlying the distinction between the crimes of honor and crimes of tradition. She states that each crime of tradition can be considered as a crime of honor, but the honor killings are more comprehensive compared to the crimes of tradition. On the contrary to the view of Esra, from my vantage point, this is a useless effort to make a distinction between crimes of tradition and crimes of honor, in the sense that what make women exposed to the violence is the result of patriarchal relations, the institutionalization and mediation of hegemonic patriarchal discourses though law, making honor crime a problematic question. In the official discourses, honor crimes are primarily represented as part of traditional patterns (*tore*).The crimes of tradition is defined in the dictionary as, "In some regions, the killing of someone, usually a young girl or woman, by member of her family in accordance with a verdict reached by the *family council*, due to the girl or woman's failure to obey the dictates of *tradition*." (KA-MER Report)

In fact, discussion on honor crime turns into a discussion on 'tradition' rather than on women's rights in the society. In the new Penal Code, by transforming the crimes of honor into the crimes of tradition (*tore*), the gender implications of honor crime have been taken out of picture and then "what was at stake was not women, but tradition" (Mani 153). Even though there are different discourses on honor crime circulating in the society, there is a common and hegemonic/patriarchal discourse created through the mediation of these discourses, via the governmental apparatuses and technologies.

The murder of Guldunya can be evaluated as a turning point also because of another reason, since Guldunya Toren was killed in Istanbul, not in a rural part of Turkey; that is to say, the murder of Guldunya has easily drawn attention from local women's organizations, and international associations such as Amnesty International and the United Nations. Local women's organizations mounted

campaigns for Guldunya and the murder of Guldunya lays the ground for starting a 'resistance movement' in which the voice of women, coming from different ethnic, class and religious backgrounds, began to be heard. Amnesty International started a campaign, entitled "Call to Guldunya" which conveyed honor killing to the global terrain. It can be evaluated as a genuine struggle movement, because although women's bodies are always resisting and challenging the existing power relations, the body of Guldunya became a site for a 'collective struggle' to organize a movement against violence.

The European Union thus takes part in enforcing the Turkish government to assume responsibility against the sexual violence. Even in the movement of the women's organizations, as Esra states, "The women's organizations began to take support from the EU, so this brings vivacity to the activities of these organizations." The works of the local women activists is really important in terms of leading the changes in the Penal and Civil Code to prevent the discrimination against women. As Habibe K. - who is a lawyer actively took place in the movement of the platform of Turkish Penal Code- demonstrates, "Although we could not manage to be successful in reaching to all of our demands, the changes that are made by the contemporary Turkish government were done because of the pressure of women's organizations." As Yakın Erturk implies, "International women's networks can be instrumental in supporting local women's initiatives to resist violence and demand justice..." (174). Hence, the interactions and negotiations between the local and global associations are significant to combat the phenomenon of honor killing, to help individual women and to initiate a peaceful dialogue between women and their families in the cases of domestic and sexual violence.

Not only non-governmental organizations, but also the supra-national organizations at the global level function through governmentality. In this context, it is important to draw attention to the multiplicities and differences. In the terminology of Partha Chatterjee, what these various groups of people construct is the "politics of difference", this is the politics of difference in which governmentality functions and people make some claims from the government (See Partha Chatterjee). All different actors such as women, lawyers, international and trans-national organizations constitutes a space for politics of difference wherein it becomes possible to make different claims from the government, and then hegemonic patriarchal rhetoric of the state begins to be dissolved into the voices of women.

As a conclusion, the activism of women about the phenomenon of honor killing displays to what extent women's activism comes to be successful. Keeping the obstacles that these women face with, in my mind, rather than focusing on the particularity of honor killing, it is important to pay attention to the universality of violence. In different cases of honor crime and embodiments of the notion of honor, what is at stake that various meanings are attributed to the notion of honor, and in order to solve the issue of honor crime, it is necessary to clarify the multiple codes of honor operating in the society, while generating the dynamics behind the honor crime. So throughout this article, I showed how honor as a discourse interplays on different levels and interconnects patriarchal discourses on family and nation. However, it is the time for the activists to raise their voices, to speak unspeakable atrocities, to combat honor killing and also to question notion of honor. In the process of *politicisation* and *governmentalization* of honor crime and the appearance of honor killing as a "space of struggle", honor still continues to function as a normalizing tool over women's bodies (See Dicle Kogacioglu). While the state does not still deal with the issue of honor crime as a specific form of violence against women, the problematization of honor crime *per se* reveals the double-play of the patriarchal norms over the body of women: honor of the man and honor of the nation!

Appendix

Questions:

1. Can you explain the changes in the execution of the cases of honor crime that you encounter after 2005?
2. Can you compare the process beginning after 2005 with the process of old Penal Code?
3. What do you think if there is a reduction in the cases of honor crimes after 2005 and what are effects of the changes in the law? What is the role of state in these crimes?
4. Have you ever involved into a specific organization dealing with honor crime?

Interviews

I reached my interviewees through Vildan Yirmibesoglu who is a lawyer actively interested in the issue of honor crime and she also wrote a book about honor crime (See Vildan Yirmibesoglu). Although she was not in Turkey, via e-mail, she gave me some contacts numbers of lawyers who worked in the Women's Platform of Turkish Penal Code before 2005.

1. Esra H.: She is working as a volunteer lawyer in the Purple Roof Women's Shelter. We conducted an interview on 8 April, 2008 in Istanbul. I found her directly going to the shelter, because I knew that this organization took action during the changes in the Penal Code.
2. Ulfet K.: She is working in the Purple Roof Women's Shelter as a volunteer. I met her when I went to the shelter and I interviewed with her on 4th of April .
3. Canan A.: I contacted her through another activist lawyer. We met her on 17th of April, 2008. Canan A. is working voluntarily in the Purple Roof as a lawyer and she had an important role in the Women's Movement emerging after the 1980s.
4. Habibe K.: I conducted an interview with her on 18th of April, 2008. She was also one of very important lawyers who worked in the Women's Platform of Turkish Penal Code.
5. Ayten A.: We met on 21th of April, 2008 in her office in Istanbul.

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