

Promoting Sexual Rights Through Human Rights Education: Experiences at Grassroots in Turkey

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1 Introduction

Throughout the world, sexual rights remain one of the most contested domains of women's human rights. Issues around sexuality are those that first come under attack, be it on international platforms such as the United Nations, or in national contexts. Conservative political forces are striving to maintain and reinforce control over women's sexuality with ever increasing resolve. Control of women's sexuality is the root cause of many women's human rights violations, such as 'honour' crimes, early and forced marriages and female genital mutilation (FGM), and these violations are legitimised by conservative forces through the imposition of patriarchal social constructs and the misuse of religion and traditions.

Taboos around sexuality, reinforced by the rise of conservative political forces, continue to generate and maintain oppressive constructs and misconceptions about women's sexuality. This not only prevents many women from having an affirmative approach to sexuality and the opportunity to enjoy positive sexual experiences, but also infringes on fundamental rights and freedoms such as health, education and mobility, hindering equal participation in social, economic and political spheres. Yet at the same time, determined efforts by activists to promote sexual rights as human rights worldwide are spreading and gaining strength, countering global conservative politics and challenging taboos around sexuality. Women at international and national levels, as well as at the grassroots level, are vigorously struggling to realise their sexual and reproductive rights, becoming more vocal and advocating on numerous platforms. This article draws on experiences from Turkey, a context in which struggles for sexual rights contend with patriarchal norms and conservatism about women's sexuality. It draws on

the experience of the Turkish women's rights organisation, Women for Women's Human Rights (UWHR) – New Ways,¹ and explores how taking an affirmative approach to sexuality can open up space for women to claim their sexual rights.

2 The struggle for sexual rights in Turkey

The situation in the Turkish context is parallel to the global context, where sexuality – in particular women's sexuality – remains a taboo in many instances and increased activism for and awareness of sexual rights meets the attack of conservative political forces. The constructs around women's sexuality are an intricate web of genderised notions, patriarchal constructs and customary practices, which leave little or no room for the expression of sexuality. The lack of information on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and comprehensive rights-based sexuality education, the strong codes of conduct for women's sexual behaviour taboos around women's sexuality (especially premarital and extramarital sexuality), constructs such as the women's duty to preserve virginity until marriage and the honour/shame dichotomy, which governs women's sexuality, still dominate women's lives (Ilkcaracan and UWHR 1998). Oppression from society and the family forestalls women from asserting bodily autonomy and realising sexual and reproductive rights as human rights.

Discriminatory customary practices and patriarchal social constructs, which impose the notion that sexuality is a taboo, or at the very least a very private matter which cannot be discussed, talked about or advocated for, continue to legitimise human rights violations in the domain of sexuality (Ilkcaracan and Seral 2000). They also shore up a discriminatory approach to women's sexuality and social norms and

practices which deny women bodily and sexual autonomy. Even though Turkey has achieved major gains towards gender equality through recent legal reforms, including the penal code and civil code, and is signatory to numerous international documents (including the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development Platform of Action) without any reservations, in everyday life women continue to face discrimination and violence in the domain of SRHR. Human rights violations such as marital rape, early and forced marriages, honour crimes and virginity testing are still legitimised through patriarchal social constructs. It is only recently that, through extensive and persistent advocacy efforts of the women's movement in Turkey, such human rights violations have become more publicised and discourses claiming these are 'realities of Turkish society', 'business of the family', and 'honour of men' have begun to be questioned and contested.

Women's groups' advocacy has led to major achievements for women in the domain of SRHR through the recent penal code reform in 2004. The Campaign for the Reform of the Penal Code from a Gender Perspective (2002–4), initiated and coordinated by WWHR – New Ways, resulted in over 30 amendments that constitute a major step towards the protection of sexual and bodily rights of women and girls in Turkey. As a result of the campaign, legislative measures have been taken on 'sensitive' issues, including the criminalisation of marital rape and the removal of the provision granting sentence reductions for honour killing perpetrators. What is also very significant is that the entire discourse of the penal code has been transformed, recognising women's ownership of their bodies, abolishing the notion that women's bodies and sexuality belong to the family and society, and discarding constructs such as 'honour', 'shame', 'morality' and 'virginity' as terms of reference for sexual offences.

Even though the above-mentioned positive developments reflect the advancement of sexual rights in legislation, the resistance we faced during the campaign from government officials, parliamentarians, as well as attacks from conservative religious media that 'promiscuous women were trying to destroy the moral fabric of Turkish society' are indicative of the fact that women's sexuality is still a taboo, a patriarchal and discriminatory approach aiming to control and oppress women's sexuality persists. Therefore, it is difficult to argue

that the improvements in legislation directly translate into women's lives and transform attitudes and negative connotation about women's sexuality.

3 Taking an affirmative approach to sexuality

There is an obvious need for addressing issues of sexuality and promoting sexual rights so that women can claim autonomy and take an affirmative approach to sexuality. Transformative awareness-raising so women can first change their own perceptions and challenge the patriarchal constructs around sexuality is essential to empower women to make free and informed choices and realise their sexual rights. Field research conducted by WWHR – New Ways in different regions of Turkey between 1994–7 revealed that women were not aware of their rights as foreseen in national legislation and international documents and lacked the necessary skills to realise their rights, including SRHR (Ilkkaracan and WWHR 1998). For example, field research conducted in Eastern and Southeastern Turkey in 1996–7 revealed that 51 per cent of the women had been married against their will, despite the fact that Turkish Civil Law foresees mutual consent as a prerequisite for marriage. Some 67 per cent of the women believed that if they committed adultery they would be killed by their husband and/or family and 52 per cent had been subject to marital rape (Ilkkaracan and WWHR 1998).

It is in this context and for these reasons that WWHR – New Ways have made sexuality one of its priority areas, both in advocacy efforts and grassroots human rights training. WWHR developed a comprehensive, holistic human rights training for women in 1995. The overarching objective of the Human Rights Education Program for Women (HREP) is to enable women to exercise their rights both in the private and public spheres, overcome violations and individually and collectively mobilise for social change (Ilkkaracan and Seral 2000; Ilkkaracan *et al.* 1998). Currently the most widespread and comprehensive non-formal human rights education programme in Turkey, HREP is being implemented in collaboration with the General Directorate of Social Services by social workers trained by WWHR. Over a decade, the programme has reached 36 provinces in all regions of the country and over 4,500 women have participated in the programme to date (Kardam 2003). HREP is a 16-week long holistic programme with a participatory approach, conducted in closed groups. Covering all aspects of women's human rights, ranging from civil

and constitutional rights to economic rights and violence against women, to women's political participation, women's organising to sexual and reproductive rights, as well as modules on gender-sensitive parenting and communication skills, the programme strives to equip women with the necessary knowledge and skills towards the realisation of their rights.

4 Sharing experiences, challenging taboos

Sexuality and sexual rights are an integral component of the programme, with two modules devoted entirely to sexuality and sexual rights, and one module on reproductive rights. The modules on sexuality in the HREP are designed to deconstruct the misconceptions around sexuality, challenge the above-mentioned taboos and empower women to take control over their sexuality, thereby enabling women to have bodily and sexual autonomy. They are also designed to help gain awareness of the fact that the control of women's sexuality is a patriarchal control mechanism enforced by society and family, infringing upon women's human rights. It should be noted that, in most instances, women in HREP groups not only lack accurate information on sexuality, but have also themselves internalised the taboos and misconceptions. Furthermore, brought up with the notion that sexuality is a 'private' matter and that it is 'dirty' – especially for women to talk about – initial resistance to the subject is common. The testimonies of HREP participants are very revealing as they depict different ways in which women's sexuality is denied and laden with patriarchal constructs:

When I was eight years old, I was curious about the sexual organ of our neighbour's son and wanted to see what it looked like. When my family found out about this, they confined me to a dark room. After three days of confinement, I was taken to a doctor for a virginity test, and taken out of school. I still suffer from this experience. I have difficulty in having sex with my husband. I feel pangs of anxiety and shame.

Unfortunately, in our country, one of the tools most frequently used to repress our sexuality is honour. Honour is deemed to be contained in a woman's body. Her honour belongs to the men, in fact it belongs to the whole society. This is a great injustice committed against women's bodies and sexuality. When you interpret honour this way,

many girls cannot get an education, cannot marry the man of their choice or cannot go out to work.

We don't know our body, our sexuality. I didn't know either. Even when we were small, they always made us wear long underwear. Under dresses, we wore pajama trousers. 'Be careful when you sit down', 'when you work, don't bend and stick your bottom out', 'don't turn your behind to men, walk backwards' ... This is what we are taught as children. How can we overcome this?

Women are not supposed to be forward and to express some of their feelings openly. Even when I'm having intercourse with my husband, I wonder if he's going to take it wrongly and think I'm too keen. My husband worked abroad. When he came back, I couldn't express my desire openly, so that he wouldn't think I had such desire while he was away. I couldn't share my own personal feelings, thoughts with my husband.

Tackling sexuality and sexual rights in a closed group, within a human rights framework and rights-based approach gains crucial importance, considering women's own perceptions and experiences. Therefore HREP serves as a great tool and opportunity for women to discuss freely their experiences and feelings, and share within a safe space the violations and discrimination they face. The role of the trainer not as a teacher, but rather as a group facilitator is very significant in this case, as she has to facilitate a safe environment free from prejudice and reaffirm the feeling of group solidarity for participants. As in other modules of the programme, trainers are especially encouraged to share their own experiences, and contribute to the discussion primarily as a woman. In most instances, this serves to ease tensions and create a feeling of trust and support.

Addressing sexuality within a human rights framework in the scope of HREP is a strategic choice. As the control of women's sexuality is one of the major mechanisms of controlling and suppressing women, and lies at the root of many women's human rights violations, it is essential to draw the links between oppression of sexuality and human rights violations such as honour crimes, forced and early marriages, sexual violence including marital rape, etc. Using a human rights discourse and a rights-based approach for this analysis highlights the

fact that sexuality is much more than a private, personal issue and is very much shaped by the political, social and cultural context. As participants are able to trace interconnections between the violations and discrimination they face, the rights-based approach leads to empowerment, with the foundation of bodily integrity and sexual autonomy; sexuality, sexual and reproductive rights become a human rights issue, within the understanding of the indivisibility of human rights.

5 Questioning control over women's bodies

Questions of sexuality begin to be raised early on in the group, in the modules covering women's human rights and constitutional and civil rights. In particular, when we speak of questions of marriage and divorce, gender-based discrimination and women's human rights violations, the conversation inevitably turns to the construct of honour, the limitations on women's mobility and early and forced marriages. Even though at this stage participants do not directly draw the links between sexuality and honour, through the sharing of experiences, the control of women's bodies and sexuality is often implicated as a primary reason for the limitations of one's right to choose. Following these, sexual violence is directly addressed in the violence against women and strategies against violence modules, as one of the types of violence women are subject to.

This allows for sexual violence to be directly defined as a form of violence, and participants can together first identify types of sexual violence, and then devise strategies to overcome and/or prevent sexual violence. In these workshops, sexual violence in the family and marital rape particularly, are contentious issues which need to be tackled. Drawing on from international documents, as well as national legislation, and the human rights and gender equality framework presented in the first modules, the group facilitator encourages women to challenge the taboo of marital rape and redefine it as a violation, rather than a customary accepted practice. Through linking the local with the national and global context, namely that women throughout the world face such violations and struggle collectively to overcome them, a sense of awareness and solidarity develops, which is later reflected in sexuality modules. These modules also help participants to realise how sexual violence or domestic violence are not merely personal and private matters, but rather stem from the systematic patriarchal sociopolitical system of

gender inequality and discrimination, and thus enable them to question the underlying political, social and cultural contexts.

6 Exploring sexuality

Sexuality and sexual rights are strategically discussed completely separately from sexual violence, in two modules deliberately conducted towards the end of the 16-week programme. The women and sexuality modules begin by participants sharing experiences of how their sexuality is controlled or ignored. These discussions include questions of not only how men and family control women's sexuality, but also how sexuality is controlled by public institutions, workplaces, schools, the state and society. The trainer also shares her own experience with the group to reaffirm solidarity and enable trust. This is followed by an informational session on female sexual organs and their functions. This seemingly technical section is very beneficial to demystify sexuality and introduce the right to pleasure. The session is supplemented with an illustrated booklet entitled *We Have Sexuality!* by UJWHR – New Ways, which provides in-depth accessible information on sexual organs, women's sexuality, sexual rights and the right to pleasure. Women often also use these booklets as a tool for expressing themselves and sharing their feelings with their spouses. One of the strategies participants employ is to leave the booklet lying around the house so that the husband can see, and many women report that it serves as a facilitator to allow them to talk about sexuality.

The feeling of solidarity and comfort which develops over time, provides a safe and comfortable space to talk about sexuality, which for most participants remains a private and, in most cases, a taboo issue. Furthermore, as participants develop an holistic perspective of human rights during the first weeks of the training, it becomes possible to integrate sexuality within that perspective. Addressing sexuality separately from both violence and reproductive health and rights points of view serves two purposes: it ascertains an affirmative and empowering approach towards sexuality and provides space to disassociate sexuality from coercion and oppression and deconstructs the notion that women's sexuality is constructed around and limited to reproduction. Within the established framework of human rights, it is also ascertained that sexuality is not just a private, but also a public political issue through the discussions in modules of violence, civil rights, economic rights,

etc. Thus, the necessity of realising sexual rights is not only essential, but also natural and justified with the holistic approach of HREP.

The second module entails a free association exercise on phrases associated with male and female sexuality. This is an integral step in deconstructing the misconceived notions around female sexuality, which associate it with concepts of 'duty', 'motherhood', 'virginity' and 'being oppressed' and also challenge the notions around male sexuality. The understanding that women and men are different, yet equal, emerges from this exercise, mostly through women's personal experiences. For example, while discussing the notion that men have more sexual desire than women, or it has to be men who initiate sexual contact, participants often give examples from their own lives on how these are actually only misconceptions, imposed by society. These discussions lead to the exploration of sexual rights, including the right to know one's body, the right to orgasm, the right to seek sexual experience independent of marital status, and also the right not to experience sexuality.

Following the modules of women and sexuality, the workshop on reproductive health and rights naturally assumes a rights-based approach and is structured around a woman's right to freely make decisions around her reproductive rights. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) sections on reproductive health and rights are extensively used in this module, as well as discussions on reproductive health policies and how they may lead to women's human rights violations and discrimination. Birth control methods are discussed extensively from a gender perspective, including side-effects and the right of women to choose whichever method suits them best. Pure medical and/or family planning oriented approaches are also challenged in the module. As the session follows the sexuality workshops, reproductive health and rights are also discussed in the framework of women's sexuality and human rights, as only one aspect of women's sexual life. The patriarchal notion that women's sexuality is limited to reproduction is naturally debunked.

7 Realising sexual rights

UUWHR's work on sexuality has helped to create spaces for women to speak the unspeakable, to share things that would otherwise be silenced, and to

know themselves and each other in new ways. These kinds of processes are a vital complement to policy advocacy, grounding the rights and entitlements that are claimed at the national level in the realities of women's lived experiences, and enabling women to realise their rights. The sexuality modules transform participants' approach to sexuality, enabling them to identify constraints and take an affirmative stand and to devise strategies to realise their sexual rights. The fact that these modules are not conducted on their own, but are rather tackled within the framework of HREP, which equips women with an awareness of human rights and legal literacy, is central to overcoming taboos around sexuality and introducing a rights-based perspective. Thus, despite the national and global contexts where sexuality remains an ever contested domain, and sexual rights are always those first under attack, women at the grassroots level in Turkey strive to break taboos and realise their sexual rights. The transformation and awareness that has come about, as well as women's determination, are best reflected in their own words:

Until I participated in this training, I didn't know that girls or women can feel sexual pleasure.

Now I say, when women don't want to they can say no. You want it, I don't and right now I'm not available. Men have to respect that. When it is forced, it is like rape. There is such a thing as marital rape. Women should know that they have the right to go to court. Even if he's her husband, she has the right not to make love. They have to know it.

I think women should first discover their bodies and ask what the woman wants. Not what the man wants. Sexuality is something created by nature, it can't exist without the woman. Life starts with her. When I took part in the meetings, I said this education should be given before marriage. In the same way that they give religious lessons, they should give premarital education. A woman should know how she can please her husband, how he can please her, how they can teach their children.

People should know themselves, they have personal rights. I have the right to make love. I have the right to experience pleasure. I want to use these rights, but as women we were repressed. From now on I will speak about pleasure.

Notes

- 1 WWHR – New Ways is an independent women’s NGO founded in 1993, based in Istanbul, Turkey. WWHR’s primary areas of work include advocacy and lobbying to promote human rights on the

national, regional and international levels; human rights education; and the publication and dissemination of a wide array of awareness-raising and resource materials. See www.wwhr.org for more information.

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