FORCED DISPLACEMENT AND CHANGING SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF MIGRANT WOMEN IN THE URBAN KURDISH COMMUNITIES OF ISTANBUL

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Abstract

In this paper I explain the changes in migrant Kurdish women's socio-economic status who were forcibly displaced from their hometowns as a result of the conflict between PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and TAF (Turkish Armed Forces) in the 1990's. As part of my ongoing research, so far I have gone through a select bibliography and conducted field research which includes in-depth interviews with internally displaced Kurdish women residing in three neighborhoods of Istanbul. This paper reveals what it means for Kurdish women to withdraw from production, which they used to participate actively in the rural areas prior to internal displacement. Most of the interviewees are housewives who are neither formally nor informally integrated into the

economic life. Despite their withdrawal from production in the rural setting, enhancement of social capital through their membership in the People's Democratic Party (HDP) enables Kurdish women's access to assets and networks in the city that are vital to the maintenance of household livelihood. This paper shows that internal displacement has been instrumental in creating opportunities for Kurdish migrant women to transform their social capital through political activism in the city and to realize their capabilities as manifested in the field of livelihood.

1. Introduction

This paper explains the changes in internally displaced Kurdish women's socio-economic status who were forcibly displaced from their hometowns as a result of the conflict between PKK ((Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan - Kurdistan Workers' Party) and TAF (Turkish Armed Forces) in the 1990's in Turkey.

This conflict was an end product of Turkish state's denial of the existence of the Kurdish people and its avoidance of the ethnic aspect of the Kurdish question ever since its establishment in 1923 (Yeğen, 1999). The modernization project which was initiated by Mustafa Kemal – the founder of the Turkish Republic – resulted in the creation of regional disparities and of the Kurdish elite which has developed ethnic awareness (Yavuz, 2001). The fall of the Ottoman Empire and the foundation of the Turkish Republic on the basis of the nation-state model has shifted the emphasis from religion to ethnicity as the source of identification. This in turn resulted in the rise of politicized ethicity among the Kurds. Following Hakan Yavuz's work about the Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, guerilla warfare led by PKK between 1983 and 1998 against the Turkish state constitutes the fourth stage within the framework of the evolution of Kurdish nationalism (Yavuz, 2001). 1987 marked the year when emergency rule was instituted by Turgut Özal who was the prime minister back then (Çelik, 2005). Emergency rule which lasted for 20 years prevailed over eight Kurdish populated provinces of the eastern and the south-eastern Anatolia and included three more provinces in 1990 (Yavuz, 2001).

According to GÖÇ-DER report 2008, between 1989 and 1999, 3438 rural settlements from this region had been evacuated as a result of the on-going conflict (Barut, 2008). This in turn resulted in the forced displacement of 4 to 4.5 Kurdish citizens from the eastern and the southeastern parts of Turkey and their withdrawal from production. In its report published in 2006, Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies states that women constitute 40% of the internally displaced population who has been forced to leave their places of origin due to security reasons (Tgyona, 2006).

The aim of this paper is to question the changes in the socio-economic status of internally displaced Kurdish women with a reference to their increased gender awareness through political mobilization. It focuses on how Kurdish migrant women enhance their social capital in the urban setting through their membership in the People's Democratic Party (HDP) which is a pro-Kurdish political party established in 2013. My argument revolves around how enhancement of social capital enables Kurdish women's access to assets and networks that are vital to the maintenance of household livelihood, though they are neither formally nor informally integrated into economic life in the city. The term 'livelihood' will be the focal point of my analysis.

The concept of 'sustainable livelihood' provided by Chambers and Conway in IDS Discussion Paper 296 and Pierre Bourdieu's definition of 'social capital' will form the basis of this paper's theoretical argument. Despite the conflict has caused physical and emotional damages on the Kurdish community, subsequent migration was instrumental in creating opportunities for Kurdish women to increase awareness of their gender identity through socialization in party activities in the urban setting and to realize their capabilities as manifested in the field of livelihood. This theoretical framework and chosen concepts will guide me in evaluating and supporting the findings of my fieldwork conducted in three districts of Istanbul which are Bağcılar, Ataşehir and Başakşehir.

Qualitative research methods are used in this study in order to gather information about the experiences of internally displaced Kurdish women. As part of my ongoing research, so far I have conducted in-depth interviews with sixteen migrant Kurdish women coming from different cities of the eastern Turkey and relied on narratives about their pre-displacement and post-displacement experiences in order to obtain information. I asked open-ended questions throughout the interviews and let the interviewees dominate the flow of conversation. The

rationale behind using such a technique was to create a cordial relation between the respondent and myself as a researcher. This cordiality would make them feel comfortable as they share their experiences of forced displacement. For ethical reasons and trust building, identities of the interviewees are not compromised and they are identified through an anonymous interviewer ID.

2. Theoretıcal Framework

Robert Chambers and Gordon R. Conway draws upon the definition of 'sustainable livelihood' provided in the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 and suggested a revised conceptualization

The authors state that capabilities, assets and activities without which one can not make a living are all integral parts of a livelihood (Chambers & Conway, 1991). They argue that sustainability of a livelihood comes from its ability to withstand shocks and strains, to develop capability and enrich assets and to create fertile ground for the upcoming generation to maintain their lives. Following the authors' suggestion, the household is the major entity that is analyzed in my study through a gender lens. As Chambers and Conway claim, there are four constitutive elements of a livelihood at the household level. The first element is people which can be translated as an emphasis on agency. This is basically the ability of people to withstand shocks and crisis situations and to explore the available opportunities to make a living. From this perspective, individuals are depicted as active agents who can change their life trajectories. However, this does not mean that there are no external factors affecting human lives, which goes beyond their will. The conflict between PKK and Turkish Armed Forces in the1990's in Turkey was such an external factor which left no choice for the Kurds of the Eastern and the Southeastern Anatolia, but to evacuate their hometowns to survive. Despite all those hardships Kurdish migrant women have gone through, they have managed to find ways to recover from shocks through socialization in the party activities and utilization of formed networks to maintain household livelihood.

Second element is the activities done by people. Third one is assets. In line with Swift's classification, Chambers and Conway divide assets into tangible and intangible ones (Chambers & Conway, 1991). Different from Swift, the authors add four sub-categories under the main headings of intangible and tangible assets. Whereas stores and resources are categorized as tangible assets, claims and access are classified as intangible. Estate, water, tree and livestock

can be counted as tangible resources which would help us understand how Kurdish women maintained their livelihood in the rural setting. On the other hand, the authors define 'claims' – a sub-category of intangible assets – as demands made on social circles, state and non-state institutions for receiving in-kind and material support and gaining access to resources and information (Chambers & Conway, 1991). At this point, the concept of 'social capital' as defined by Pierre Bourdieu enters into the picture.

Bourdieu defines social capital as the totality of authentic or potential resources which ensue from being member of a community and which provides long-lasting relationships (Bourdieu, 1986). These relationships are marked by the characteristic that involved parties recognize each-other and enjoy the returns from social capital possessed by the community. Group solidarity is the pre-condition of profits derived by the members which in turn reinforces solidarity. Bourdieu states that relationship formation is not a static but a dynamic process. He goes on to argue that a tremendous effort is made to institute and re-produce long-lasting relationships which is facilitated by the exchanges between the group members (Bourdieu, 1986). With regard to the issue of convertibility, Bourdieu claims that social capital can be converted into economic capital under specific conditions (Bourdieu, 1986). He goes on to argue that goods and services may be instantly accesible through economic capital. However, he claims, this may not be the case for other services and goods that can be attained only through the possession of social capital, but which would be in use independently of time (Bourdieu, 1986). Moving from this definition, my analysis draws upon the argument that Kurdish women have brought their social capital in Istanbul along with its continuities and ruptures when they were forced to leave their hometowns in the 1990s.

3. Instıtutıonalızed Socıal Capıtal: The Case of Kurdısh Mıgrant Women ın Istanbul

In my analysis, I adopt a historic approach to analyze continuities and changes between rural and urban lives of migrant Kurdish women with reference to Bourdieu's concept of social capital. One should keep in mind that times spent in the rural setting in the pre-displacement period are not a-historic. Before Kurdish women's rural to urban migration in the 1990's, they had 'traditional' social support mechanisms, exclusive assets and resources and social networks which

helped them to earn their livelihoods [4, p. 220].

During my fieldwork, almost all sixteen interviewees stated that agriculture and livestock were the sources of livelihood in the rural area. Only two families among the interviewees did not settle in villages and did not do agriculture to make their living. Both women and men participated in the production process as unpaid family workers and they were not covered by any social security institution. According to the data gathered from Turkish Statistical Institute, the ratio of women as unpaid family workers was much more higher compared to that of men between the years 1988 & 1999 all across Turkey as can be seen in "Figure 1". Kurdish women's narratives of rural life confirms this high ratio of female participation in agricultural activity in the eastern and southeastern parts of Turkey. Following Chambers and Conway's classification of assets as tangible and intangible, agricultural land can be categorized as a tangible resource that Kurdish women had access to in their rural settlement.

One common point that interviewees stressed is that money was not the medium of exchange in the rural area. Instead, some mentioned that villagers were exchanging outputs they produced on their lands. One of the interviewees stated that surplus products were given to the ones in need. Agricultural products were not exchanged or sold. This brings us to the concept of 'gratitude' which is defined by Bourdieu as " *recognition of non-specific indebtedness*" that is felt by each group member towards the other (Tgyona, 2006). According to Bourdieu, social exchanges between group members become markers of mutual acknowledgement which in turn reinforces group solidarity. Over time, group members start to feel social obligations towards each other. From this process of social exchanges arises the feeling of 'gratitude' which result in the fulfillment of obligations without expecting something in return. This is exactly how the Kurdish people felt towards each other in their rural settlements where they have shared the same social space, spoke the same language and worked on the same land for years. This feeling of gratitude as defined by Bourdieu is manifested in Kurdish women's narratives which pointed to the supply of agricultural goods to needy community members. In this sense, this '*mutual and non-specific indebtedness'* which has grown out of exchanges between members of Kurdish community was one of the most vital support mechanisms that helped the Kurdish women to maintain their livelihood in the urban setting.

Kurdish women's access to tangible and intangible assets was much more easier in the

rural area in comparison with the urban setting. Kurdish women idealized rural life which, in their opinion, is marked by abundance, tranquility, 'freedom', solidarity and intimate social relations. However, in terms of social relations between men and women, their idealized freedom does not imply that they were free in the literal sense. Eleven out of sixteen Kurdish women that I interviewed stated directly or indirectly that they lived in a male dominated community. It follows from Kurdish women's narratives that relations between men and women are organized in line with hierarchical family structure. Kurdish women's narratives reveals that Kurdish women are discriminated against both spatially and on the basis of age. Let's suppose that the oldest male member of the household is only 9 years old and the oldest female member is 70 years old. The age variable does not make a difference in such a hierarchically organized male-dominated community. The 9 year old boy wear the pants in the family. Age matters when the same sexes organize their relations with each-other, but it has no relevance when it comes to managing the relations between different sexes. With regard to the issue of spatial discrimination of Kurdish women, another interviewee – Berfin – stated that female and male members of the household did not share the same room when dining. Another Kurdish women – Dilan – told that women did not talk to their father-in-law due to their cultural code.

Narratives of these Kurdish women clearly tell us that it was men who determined the boundaries of women's mobility. Kurdish women told that they were not allowed to get out of the village on their own. Kurdish women were socially and spatially discriminated, yet they narrated the encounter with the Kurdish female fighters as a transformative experience. This encounter led them to re-think their status in their community and in some sense created gender-awareness among them. The nature of this encounter is best described by Rojda's statements. She defined her encounter as a liberating experience. She said that she started to question the hierarchical family structure. She said she felt empowered as a woman when she saw female guerillas fighting for their freedom and Kurdish identity. This can be viewed as a starting point where Kurdish women began to question their gender identity, their capabilities and organizational abilities. A sense of belonging based on birthplace, ethnicity and memory has been the ground on which group solidarity was built in the rural setting. The emergence of guerilla warfare and visibility of female Kurdish fighters in the 1990's in spaces which is not familiar to women has created an awareness among them that solidarity can be built upon gender

identity.

The seeds of gender awareness were planted in the rural area, yet this was not translated into an immediate visibility of women with all their assets and values. The channel through which Kurdish women's struggle against oppressive Turkish state and patriarchy has been expressed is their identification with and socialization through the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in the post-displacement period in Istanbul. This process of socialization has increased their already existing gender awareness which led to the transformation of social capital which they brought with themselves to the urban space. This transformation which is a function of institutional visibility through party membership manifested itself in Kurdish women's struggles against the state and male domination which is fought in the battlefield of livelihood.

Helen Young and Karen Jacobsen did fieldwork in the Darfur region of Sudan to understand how migrants – who were subject to conflict-induced displacement – undergo a process of livelihood adaptation in the urban setting (Young & Jacobsen, 2013). In their work, they state that 'urban migration' is a coping strategy of migrants who flee from conlict situations (Young & Jacobsen, 2013). Chambers and Conway also defines 'movement' as a strategy to withstand shocks (Chambers & Conway, 1991).

Chambers and Conway also mentioned 'depletion' as another stragegy to recover from shocks and strains. It basically implies immigrant's consumption of the assets they possess. If we apply this coping strategy to the Kurdish case, we would see that after deciding to migrate, Kurdish families
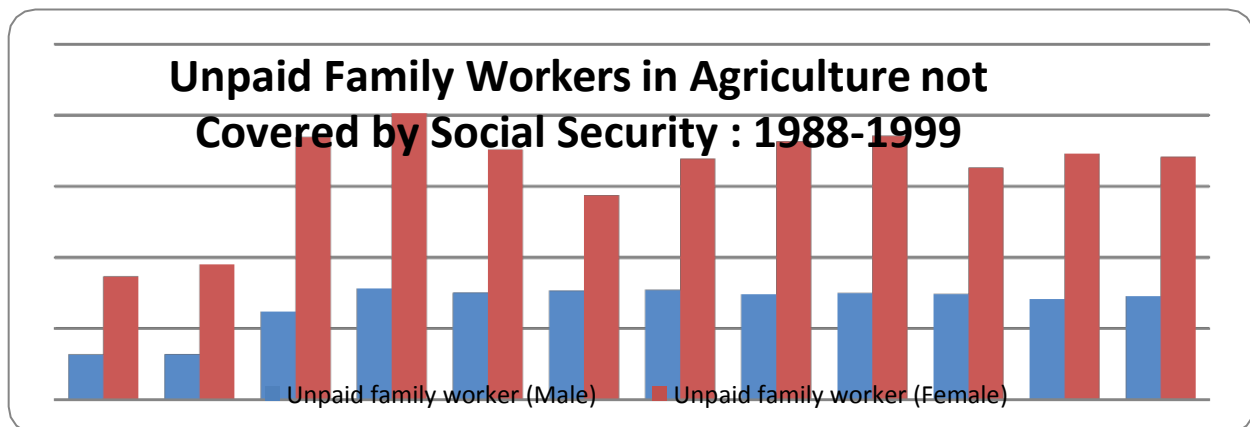
Figure 1: *Unpaid Family Workers in Agriculture not Covered by Social Security (1988-1999)*
Source: TURKSTAT, the Results of Household Labor Force Survey

sold their livestock at very cheap prices if not burnt down by the armed forces of the Turkish state. The rationale behind it was to make some money in order to meet the travel expenses and to maintain their livelihood in the transition period. Chambers and Conway also categorize 'claims' as another strategy that help people to recover from crisis situations with the least damage [5]. In the case of forced displacement of the Kurds, Kurdish migrant women made claims on the Turkish state and applied for social assistance to maintain the household livelihood. Kurdish women applied to municipalities at the district and provincial level in their new urban settlements to receive in-kind or material aid. In most cases, their applications have been rejected on the grounds that they were politically affiliated with the Kurdish movement. One of my interviewees – Berivan –told that she applied to Bağcılar municipality for social assistance. She mentioned that the Turkish state did not provide her with assistance due to the fact that her daughter's name was the name of a female guerilla martyr. She thinks she was discriminated on the basis of her ethnicity. Even though Kurdish women did not have feelings of trust towards the state authorities, they applied for social assistance to make sure that their family could move on.

As a result of the conflict in the 1990s, many households lost their access to tangible assets such as land and livestock. In his study on displaced persons in Mindanao, Philippines, Rufa Cagoco-Guiam states that denial to forcibly displaced persons of their access to land is a major source of deprivation (Cagoco-Guiam, 2013). The denial of access to land was instrumental in constraining Kurdish women's mobility. The feeling of captivity has revealed itself in the narratives of Kurdish women that I intervieweed. Rona said that she felt trapped in a prison in Istanbul. She added that she was freer in the village when they worked on their farm surrounded by mountains. It made her feel bad to withdraw from production. Out of 16 Kurdish women who were forced to migrate, fourteen Kurdish women are currently housewives who used to actively participate in agricultural production in their rural settlements. One of them is a university student and the other one works in a bakery in her neighborhood. Ten out of 16 Kurdish women receive social security benefits through their husbands or fathers or children. Five of them is not registered to any social security institution.

Only Berfin does not receive dependent benefits because she works in a job covered by social security.

This finding gives us clues about the workings of Turkish social security system which is

based on premium payments (Candaş.). As Buğra and Keyder argues, Turkish social security system takes family as the core unit; associates provision of 'health and pension benefits' with formal employment and adopts a gender-blind approach (Buğra & Keyder, 2006). The system categorizes women either as dependents or totally excludes them from social security arrangements (Keig, 2008). Housewives and unpaid family workers are included in this categorization. Women are not considered individual agents within the social security system. Instead, social security system classifies them as 'wives', 'daughters' and 'mothers'. In cases where these women are related to someone who is covered by social security, they receive dependent benefits through the male members of the household. In other cases they are completely excluded from social security arrangements (Keig, 2008). Adoption of a gender-blind approach prevents women to be on equal grounds with men as citizens. This is exactly the case with the internally displaced Kurdish women. There is no channel for women to individualize through citizenship. Thus Kurdish women rely on HDP to realize themselves which opens a space for them to liberate from male domination and state oppression.

One of the interviewees – Roza – told that male domination is not experienced heavily lately and that party membership prevents men from exerting pressure on women. In Dilan's case, male violence has continued after she migrated to Istanbul. She was beaten by her husband to death, but she did not tell the doctors or the police not to make a bad reputation about her husband who she described as a respected man in the eyes of party members. In the city, she showed signs of empowerment. She realized that she is not obliged to undergo her husband's treatment and that she could break this vicious chain and stand on her own feet. She told her husband to leave the house and he did. She also tried to overcome the hierachical organization of daily life by sexes. She told her father-in-law that communication between sexes is something that should not be considered abnormal. Dilan started talking to her her father-in-law in the urban setting which she says is not considered proper in the village due to their cultural code. The backing of People's Democratic Party has been instrumental for Dilan to earn self-esteem.

Rona – anohter interviewee – settled all affairs on her own since her husband was either in jail or had an occupational accident. She has been integrated into the informal service sector so as to look after her children in the absence of her husband. Her husband's imprisonment and his occupational accident led her to take over the burden of earning a livelihood alongside household

chores and child rearing. She wiped the stairs of apartments, worked as day-laborer and sold handcrafts. She said she got reaction from her social milieu just because she worked. However she says that she was able to overcome hardships thanks to the party. Throughout her narration, Rona stated, **"If you are vulnerable as a woman, they can do anything they want. If a woman trusts herself, she can overcome any obstacles."**

People's Democratic Party clearly has become the source of her self-esteem and support she needed in her hard times. Life conditions compelled her to become a part of the informal labor-force as an uninsured worker. As a lonely women, she only had herself and the Kurdish political party to rely on. In time, she realized that she was capable to do anything she desired and to break male domination. She said that it was not considered proper for a woman to work. However, she broke the chain and no matter what they said, she accepted it normal for a woman to work and leave domestic sphere.

Another Kurdish migrant women who has increased her gender conciousness is Sosin. Sosin states that she has developed an awareness about women and their history. This awareness has positively transformed her relations with her husband who has become gender concious throughout the course of his activism in the party. Her political activism helped her develop gender conciousness which in turn further politicized her gender identification. In the past, her ethnic identity outweighed her gender identity, but now she says it is just the opposite.

4. Conclusions

The conflict between PKK and the Turkish Armed Forces deprived Kurdish women and men of their livelihood assets. During the conflict in the 1990s, about 3,000 villages were burnt down by the armed forces in order to destroy the popular support base of PKK [Yörük, 2012]. In their narratives, Kurdish women told that the armed forces not only burned down their houses, farm land and pastures but also their livestock. This clearly indicates that the Turkish state initiated a deliberate policy to destroy the livelihood assets of the Kurdish people which are vital to their survival. The destruction of assets would eventually leave them with no choice but to migrate. Rural to urban migration altered the ways for the Kurdish women to make a living. They suddenly found themselves in an insecure environment where they do not have knowledge of the local language and encounter acts of humiliation and discrimination from members of the

cost community. Out of helplessness and destitute, they even applied for social assistance provided by the Turkish state which they mistrust. In such an atmosphere, they turned their faces to the People's Democratic Party as their 'delegative institution' which is representative of the Kurdish community (Tgyona, 2006). In that sense, I would say that solidarity among members of the Kurdish community has been re-instituted through party membership in the urban setting. At the beginning, ethnicity may be the sole motivation of Kurdish women's to become party members and to participate in party activities. However, in time, Kurdish women have increased their gender-awareness through socialization in party activities and party buildings. Kurdish migrant women socialize in party buildings which serve as a social space for solidarity. They organize condolence ceremonies for Kurdish guerillas who were martyrised in a conflict situation. They share their pain. In those party buildings which are solely used by women, they sometimes organize tea parties. In this way they create a social space for themselves where they can share their problems and experiences in daily life, and discuss political issues on the agenda. This information flow raise their gender awareness and empower them both socially and politically.

As mentioned before, encounter with guerilla women constituted a turning point which led Kurdish women to question their status in the society and their social relations with men. Some interviewees said that they felt more comfortable and secure in the village during the presence of female guerilla fighters. They started to take different and more confident positions in their relations with men. Despite their positioning, their valuable labor and key role in the maintenance of livelihood has been rendered invisible both by the Turkish state and men. Migration to urban space led to the transformation of social capital possessed by Kurdish migrant women. Their previously unrecognized presence and power has gained institutional visibility through their party membership. This process of institutionalization facilitated their access to resources and assets available and revealed their key role in sustaining household livelihood.

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