

**BARGAINING WITH HETERONORMATIVITY:  
ELABORATIONS OF TRANSSEXUAL EXPERIENCES IN TURKEY**

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. RATIONALE

*“We are in deep sorrow because another transsexual friend of us became the victim of heterosexist system, and was murdered. We are full of rage because we have just arrived here from her funeral. We are frustrated because we don’t know who is next. We are asking: Are the police going to find the criminals? Will judge stop favoring the murderers under the name ‘provocated’ while dealing with hate crimes? We are asking: Who is going to protect our right to life and security? We have knocked your doors, we have raised our voice and we have worn cerements on the street in order to draw your attention. Do you think that we are just acting? How long are you going to keep watching us being hunted one by one? Hitler asked them to wear pink triangles and persecuted them, but he was unable to exterminate them. You, the ones who have been watching the crimes, do you think that you can eradicate us just by killing? So, here we are declaring: We will not change, but you will get used to us. Screw your morals washed with transsexual and homosexual blood”*

The quotation above is taken from the press declaration of Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transsexual and Transvestite (LGBTT) Rights Platform, who organized a protest meeting after the murder of a male-to-female transsexual who was shot in her head with a rifle in Ankara on the 10<sup>th</sup> November 2008<sup>1</sup>. Four months after the incident, I heard about another bitter event, this time in the famous city of Istanbul. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of March 2009, Lambda Istanbul LGBTT Solidarity Association announced that Ebru Soykan, a transsexual activist, was stabbed and killed in her apartment<sup>2</sup>.

After gaining legal status in 1988, Turkey’s transsexual people have become more visible. Especially in the music sector, transsexual stage performers have gained considerable popularity. However, there is limited opportunity for the transsexual community to have

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<sup>1</sup> Complete declaration and photos from the protests can be accessed through the website of Kaos GL, the LGBTT Association which was founded in Ankara, in 1994:  
<http://www.kaosgl.com/node/2151>

<sup>2</sup> News in norwegian: <http://www.gaysir.no/artikkel.cfm?CID=13470>

access to livelihoods except in the entertainment sector which is already difficult to become involved in. In other words, oppression and marginalization of transsexual people in Turkey have been continuing despite the restricted alternatives available for them.

This research is an attempt to draw attention to the experiences of transsexuals in Turkey where the majority plays the three wise monkeys who **hear**, **see** and **say** no evil. In other words, people don't hear about tough experiences of transsexuals. When they witness the abuse of a transsexual, they ignore it and they don't talk about it.

## 1.2. RESEARCH SETTINGS

In 21 May 2008, Human Rights Watch (HRW) published a report called "*We Need a Law for Liberation: Gender, Sexuality, and Human Rights in a Changing Turkey*"<sup>3</sup>. Based on interviews conducted with more than 70 LGBTTT people, the report sheds a light onto the tough experiences of LGBTTT people. Regarding the issue, the report calls authorities to take three urgent actions, saying : Turkey should establish unequivocal constitutional and legislative guarantees of equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people; discrimination in the Turkish military should end; European Union (EU) should make Turkey's record on sexual orientation and gender-identity-based discrimination integral to its review of human rights progress in Turkey (<http://www.hrw.org/en/node/62197/section/3>). According to the recommendations of HRW, there are three arenas to be focused on: The current legislations in Turkey; military institution; current politics and negotiations with EU. Taking a quick look at these three areas would give rough background information about the research settings through which my project has evolved.

First of all, regarding the legislations, it is known that neither transsexuality/transvestism nor homosexuality have ever been criminalized in Turkey. Although the majority of the people in Turkey are known to be Muslim, Turkey is a secular state. Thus, it is not governed by Islamic Laws which generally criminalize sexual dissidents, like the laws in Malaysia, Iran or Saudi Arabia (Partog, 2006). However, due to the lack of direct reference to 'sexual orientation' in the constitution of Turkish Republic, LGBTTT people cannot find any legal basis to raise their voice for equality.

Secondly, adopting a very old and powerful militarist tradition (Selek, 2001, pp.92-93), The Republic of Turkey was established on the strong ideals of military. The military has an important influence on the social life of the country. Thus, the military's approach to gender

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<sup>3</sup> Report can be downloaded from:  
[http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/turkey0508\\_1.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/turkey0508_1.pdf)

diversity is crucial. As I mentioned above, the Turkish state has never criminalized sexual dissidents. Yet, it was the military regime of 1980's that established the stage ban for singers who were performing in a cross-dressing way. That period of oppression lasted approximately three years. Currently, the military's perspective on gender diversity is still discriminatory. For instance, military service is obligatory for every male citizens of Turkey, except homosexuals. By receiving a report from the military doctors documenting that the individual is "unfit due to psycho-sexual problems", a homosexual man is not obliged to serve in the military (Altınay, 2004, p.80). The discourse of military which pathologizes homosexuality effects the attitudes towards LGBTT people (See also Chapter 2 and 8).

Thirdly, it is crucial to take a quick look at the ruling party in the Turkish government to highlight the continuing political debates in Turkey. Currently, the Turkish state is ruled by the Justice and Development Party (JDP) which can be described as "a pragmatic-conservative and Islam sensitive party" (Cizre, 2008, p.1). Since the day JDP came into power, it has been proposing reforms in relation to Turkey's membership to EU (ibid, p.1). When it comes to reforms regarding LGBTT rights in the constitution, it is possible to say that JDP is quite evasive in their policies. At first sight, this might be interpreted as a neutral standing. However, there are examples of discriminatory governance when it comes to the LGBTT associations. For instance, last year Lambda Istanbul LGBTT Association was decided to be shut down by Istanbul city government with the claim that the association is against the public morals<sup>4</sup>. Finally, the supreme court overturned the decision to dissolve Lambda Istanbul, arguing that the association is legal and could keep on functioning. In relation to the closure of Lambda Istanbul LGBTT Association, Turkey received a lot of critiques from international human rights organizations who generally pointed at Turkey's negotiation process for EU membership and reminded the government of the fact that the closing down an LGBTT association would critically affect Turkey's international reputation.

It is possible to say that these three levels of structure mentioned above are influential in the lives of all LGBTT people in contemporary Turkey. However, when it comes to transsexuals and transvestites the conditions seem to be tougher. The chapter in HRW's report, which specifically deals with the conditions of transgender<sup>5</sup> people, is called "*A Social Hell: State Violence, Abuse, and Harassment against Transgender People*". As the title

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<sup>4</sup> Read more about the closure of Lambda Istanbul in english, on :

<http://www.lambdaistanbul.org/php/main.php?menuID=26&altMenuID=47&icerikID=3719>

<sup>5</sup> The report covers the experiences of transsexual, transvestite and transgender people under this topic. Here, 'transgender' is used as an umbrella concept covering all categories. See, the terminology section for more information about the use of these categories in literature and this thesis.

manifests itself, the chapter depicts a very dark picture of the circumstances shaping transgender people's lives.

### **1.3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:**

As I mentioned above, HRW underscores three levels of regulation which are related to the lives of LGBTTT people in Turkey, namely; legislations, state and military. However, is it enough to consider these regulations as the fundamental parameters that shape the experiences of LGBTTT people?

It is possible to amplify the scope of discussion through the lenses of Judith Butler. She argues that a regulation should not be elaborated merely as a juridical form of power, but should be considered as it is related to the norms (2004, p.55). Regulations idealize certain type of actions and behaviours. In other words, certain ways of being are idealized by regulations which produce the "parameters of personhood" (ibid, p.56). Rethinking the operation of legislations, state and military in Turkey through the lenses of Butler unveils the gender norms that are (re)produced by these regulative institutions. In this sense, the exemption of gays from the obligatory military service, the lack of reference to 'sexual orientation' in the constitution of the Turkish state, and government's attitude towards LGBTTT associations can all be taken into account as sources which produce certain norms. These norms either neglect or discriminate the existence of LGBTTT people.

Butler (ibid, p.41) also states that gender is in itself a regulatory norm and it "requires and institutes its own distinctive regulatory and disciplinary regime". Gender simply produces and naturalizes the notions of masculinity and femininity (ibid, p.42). Based on Butler's intriguing argument it is crucial to realize how gender is regulating the social relations and how it serves other regulatory mechanisms. Undoubtedly, this interrelation between gender and regulation affects not only the subjectivity of transsexuals when they are experiencing their gendered selves, but also society's perception of transsexuals.

Assuming that the dominant gender ideologies in Turkey are heteronormative, the major objective of this research is to elaborate the influence of heteronormativity, which is (re)produced by regulatory mechanisms in Turkey, on the lives of transsexual people. More specifically, I would like to answer the following questions:



\*How do the dominant gender ideologies in Turkey shape the growing up experiences of transsexuals?

\* How do transsexuals in Turkey live out their sexual identity within the boundaries of established gender ideologies and regulatory mechanisms set up by state legislation and policies?

\* How do transsexuals deal with medical and legal authorities through their journey of sexual reassignment?

\* To what extent and how are dominant gender ideologies and regulations experienced differently by female-to-male (FTM) and male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals.

\* How does the gendered discourse of military influence the experiences of transsexuals in Turkey?

Since nationalism is a strong ideology in Turkey, I will try to answer some of these questions in relation to the operation of ‘nationalism’ within the regulatory mechanisms mentioned above.

#### **1.4. STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS**

Following this short introduction on the underlying rationale and the objectives of the research, I will proceed with introducing the ‘terminological route’ that will be followed throughout the thesis, before moving to next chapter.

Chapter Two will provide background information about the ‘gender identities and diversity in Turkey’. First, I will draw attention to the modernization process and underline how the ‘modern man’ and the ‘modern woman’ were constructed through this process. Second, I will provide information on the LGBTTT community in general, and transsexuals/transvestites specifically.

Chapter Three is on methodology. This chapter is basically constructed upon the choices that have shaped my research project before, during and after the fieldwork. First, I will portray the study design where a shift of focus of my research will be discussed. Second, I will describe the choices of data collection techniques, reflections on the fieldwork and ethical considerations. Third, there is a section on data analysis. Finally, all the key informants of the research will be introduced briefly at the end of the chapter.

Chapter Four is called ‘Theorizing Transsexual Experiences in Turkey’. Here I will briefly introduce the literature that shaped my theoretical point of view, and introduce the theoretical framework that will be applied in this study.

Chapter Five is the first empirical chapter of the thesis. In this chapter, I will throw light on the ‘growing up’ narratives of transsexuals.

Chapter Six will focus on the process through which the ‘transsexuals’ decide to ‘go public’ with their sexual identity. This chapter will specifically elaborate the informants’ narratives of ‘rupture from home town’ and entering the ‘transsexual/transvestite subculture’.

Chapter Seven will refer to the experiences of transsexuals in relation to the regulations of sex-reassignment surgery in Turkey.

Chapter Eight, will be dealing with the narratives of the informants who are earning their life from sex-work.

Chapter Nine will draw upon the experiences of transsexuals in relation to obligatory military service and the discourse of military institution.

Finally, Chapter 10 will contain my concluding remarks to the thesis.

## **1.5. TERMINOLOGICAL ROUTE**

In her book *Gender Diversity*, Serena Nanda (2000, p.9), describes sex, gender and sexuality as cultural constructs and underlines the necessity to be aware of cultural variations. Nanda’s study presents a comparative analysis of gender variations among different cultures and demonstrates how ‘transvestism’, ‘transsexuality’ and ‘transgenderism’ can be attributed different meanings in different societies. Similarly Dave King (1993 p.6), in his book *The Transvestite and the Transsexual*, underlines the necessity of a constructionist perspective in relation to the studies of gender variations. Different from Nanda, King (1993, p.156) underscores the possible variations within a culture as well, arguing that people can define themselves as transsexuals or transvestites although their self identification can be disputed by medical professionals, or other transsexuals and transvestites.

Due to the nuances regarding the use of the concepts ‘transsexuality’, ‘transvestism’ and ‘transgenderism’, I feel the necessity of elaborating these terms briefly as they are related to my study, and clarify the terminological route that will be used throughout my study.

## **Transvestism:**

Although there existed a variety of diagnostic terms for the act of cross dressing before 1900, such as ‘effemination with fetishism’, ‘contrary sexual feeling’, it was probably Magnus Hirschfeld, the German physician, who used the term ‘transvestism’ for the first time in his book “Die Transvestiten” which was published in 1910 (King, 1993, p.35). In the contemporary discourse ‘transvestism’ generally refers to the “practice of cross-dressing either sporadically or permanently and for different psychological or cultural reasons” (Nanda, 2000, p.108). Undoubtedly, there is not any universal way of cross dressing or one correct definition of similar practices. In her ethnographic study about Najavo people, Carolyn Epple (1998, pp.273-274) discusses many concepts that are also referring to people who cross dress in Native American Culture, such as “alternate gender”, “berdache” and “two spirits”. She argues that although these terms can be seen to cover similar categories of people, they differ politically. For instance, the term berdache, which means “male prostitute” in French, was used by explorers and missionaries to describe the people who were transgressing the so-called natural gender behaviors (ibid, p.280). While berdache was more developed around the sexual practices and produced by the sex/gender binary, alternate gender implies “a gender on its own right” (ibid, pp. 271-272). Serena Nanda (2000, pp.12-13), also mentions that the term berdache is a product of European ethnocentrism which has been rejected lately and argues that there is no consensus about the terms which can replace it. Hence, there is a variety of conceptualizations used to define people who have a desire to wear the clothes of the opposite sex, or act like the opposite sex. In the Turkish historical context, it is possible to come across to several conceptualizations of cross dressing as well. Probably the most famous ones are *Köçeks*, who are male dancers performing in women’s clothes, or *Zennes* who are male actors, performing women’s role on the stage (see also, Selek, 2001, pp.98-106). Transvestism, in Turkey, can be regarded as an inclusive term. It is used to describe both cross dressers and pre-operated transsexuals. In this study, I will regard transvestites as people who simply define themselves as transvestites regardless of their practice of cross dressing. In this sense, none of the respondents of this research project characterized themselves as transvestite.

## **Transsexuality:**

In 1950s, the term ‘transsexual’ emerged to distinguish people who would like to pass permanently to the opposite sex, from people who cross-dress temporarily, i.e. transvestites (King, 1993, p.43). The term was introduced by Harry Benjamin, *German endocrinologist*, who regarded transsexuals as “the most extreme group of transvestites who wish to change their sex” (ibid, p.43). This perspective which sees transsexuality as a continuity of transvestism was later challenged by Robert Stoller who defined a totally distinct transsexual structure from that of transvestite (Millot, 1990, p.49). He argues that a male-to-female transsexual is feminine but not effeminate and wearing women’s clothes does not sexually attract him (ibid, pp.49-50). In contrast to transvestites and homosexuals, he does not feel himself to be a man (ibid, pp.49-50).

Currently, transsexuality is generally defined as the discordance between anatomy and subjectively experienced gender (Nanda, 2000, p.94). Through sex change operation, a transsexual person aims to become a member of the desired sex. Politically, ‘transsexualism’ does not offer a radical challenge to sex/gender binaries and the hierarchical construction of these categories. In her article “‘Either/Or’ and ‘Both’/Neither’: *Discursive Tensions in Transgender Politics*” Katrina Roen contrasts “radical politics of gender transgression and liberal transsexual politics” (2002, p.502). She argues that while transgender people aim to deconstruct categories like ‘man’ and ‘woman’, transsexuals are interested in transition from one sex to another accepting the preexistence of two sexes (ibid, 501-502). A more radical but similar view can be found in the work of Janice Raymond who rejects the view that transsexuals challenge the gender roles simply because they exchange one gender role for another (1994, p.xviii). For her, it is quite impossible to change from one sex to another (especially from male to female) and the sex surgery industry is actually a product of perception of men who have “literally and figuratively, constructed women for centuries, are now ‘perfecting’ the man-made women out of their own flesh” (ibid, pp. xiv-xv). Her argument is based on the vitality of ‘biology that shapes the history’ (ibid, p.xx). For instance, the female ability to menstruate, and get pregnant is crucial for female history and identity (ibid, p.xx). In other words, she emphasizes that a male-to-female transsexual can hardly become a real women because of lacking this female biological history.

Based on the definition that ‘transsexuality is the discordance between anatomy and subjectively experienced gender’, I can tell that all the informants of my research projects are transsexuals. However, it does not mean that they define themselves as transsexuals. For

instance a male-to-female informant prefers to call herself ‘transsexual’ stressing the relevance of her transition history for her self identity, where as another female-to-male informant rather calls himself ‘male’ and ‘man’, rejecting the word ‘transsexual’. Throughout the thesis I will refer to informants as male-to-female transsexual (MTF) or female-to-male transsexual (FTM) and mention their self identification where it is necessary.

### **Transgenderism:**

“When I realized that I was a trans captivated within the binaries of manhood/womanhood, I understood that I was not a male caged into a female body. Then, I deconstruct the ‘imprisoned/captive’ relation between myself and my body<sup>6</sup>”

The quotation above belongs to a FTM activist of Lambda Istanbul, and it sounds like the manifestation of transgenderism which has not been largely vocalized as a concept within the Turkish context. Basically, transpeople (transgenderists) are described as people who do not fit themselves in one of the two genders (Nanda, 2000, p.98). In this sense, ‘transgenderism’ indicates a standing that is against the mainstream dichotomy of sex/gender and it has strong political implications. It is, however, difficult to talk about a consensus regarding the nuances of the ‘transgender’ spectrum. For instance; Vern L. Bullough (2000) defines a relatively wide scope of transgender behavior in his remarkable piece *“Transgenderism and the Concept of Gender”* stating that transgender behavior covers individuals with a variety of sexual preferences , from those who prefer cross-dressing to the ones who follow traditional clothing and points at transsexuals as the most radical group of people. However, as I mentioned in the ‘transsexuality’ section above, transsexuals are generally considered to be politically different from transgender people.

In the case of Turkey, transsexuals, transvestites and transgender people do not form politically separate groups. The majority of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual and transvestite (LGBT) organizations do not pronounce the term ‘transgender’. They do, however, sometimes refer to the fluidity of gender identities and implicitly echo the ideal of ‘transgenderism’.

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<sup>6</sup> From the interview published in Kaos GL magazine, issue: May-June 2007, pp.34-36

## CHAPTER 2

### GENDER IDENTITIES AND DIVERSITY IN TURKEY

It is generally argued that The Republic of Turkey is a hybrid country between the ‘traditional East’ and the ‘modern West’. On the one hand, it has been trying to reach the ‘western’ standards of life in terms of politics and culture since the republic was established in 1923. On the other, it has been regarded as a traditional country similar to its neighbours in the east. When it comes to instances of ‘failure of modernity’, the country is usually depicted as being squeezed between the traditional and the modern. The experiences of LGBTT people are often attempted analyzed in relation to this ‘in between’ situation of the country. Due to the fact that homosexuality and transsexuality have never been criminalized in Turkey, the country is often categorized as a modern nation. However, dramatic instances of violence against sexual dissidents could also be seen as the echo of the traditional values dominating the society.

In her article “The Honor of the State: Virginty Examinations in Turkey” (2001),Ayse Parla elaborates the contemporary virginty tests in Turkey which are either tolerated or condemned<sup>7</sup>. Although there is no direct reference to virginty tests in the Turkish penal code, there were direct references towards the virgin status of women in defining crimes and legal punishment<sup>8</sup> (p.79). Regarding the issue, Parla (p.66-83) points at the state apparatuses which involve in the virginty examinations and she argues that any analysis about virginty tests should go beyond the arguments of “incomplete modernity” and rather examine the regulatory mechanism of the ‘modern’ nation-state which claims sovereignty over the individuals in the

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<sup>7</sup> Her article begins with a reference to an incident which happened in Turkey: The principle of a highschool called the father of a female student and told him that his daughter had been meeting boys and she might have lost her virginty. The principle suggested that the father that he shuld have his daughter examined. Before being examined, the female student fled and was not seen for weeks. They found her dead body later. The father had the virginty exam performed on her daughter’s dead body.

<sup>8</sup> Parla’s article was published in 2001. At that time, all forms of assault aimed at single persons were grouped under the topic ‘Felonies against Individuals’. However, any sexual assault against women were grouped under ‘Felonies against Public Decency and Family Oder’. Regarding the issue, Parla(2001, p. 77) states that “The woman’s body under sexual attack is construed not as a violation of individual rights, but of the family order”. Besides the Penal Code was defining different punishment for sexual assault regarding the status of the ‘victim’: married, woman, girl (kız, literally means girl, but used to refer virgins). For instance, a rapist would receive less punishment if the victim is woman, but not virgin.

In 2005, new amendments were approved in the Penal Code. Now, any sexual assault towards women is taken into consideration under the code ‘Felonies against Individuals’. Futhermore, there is no more differentiation between the ‘virgin’ status of the ‘victim’ in the definition of punishments for sexual assaults.

See the english report “What brings the new Turkish Penal Code for Women”, published by the women’s right organization called ‘Flying Broom’ on :

[http://en.ucansupurge.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=86&Itemid=40](http://en.ucansupurge.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=86&Itemid=40)

name of nation. Parallel to Parla's argument, my intention is to elaborate transsexual experiences in relation to dominant gender ideologies which are partly reinforced by the regulatory mechanism of the Turkish State. In this sense, I intend to provide background information about the 'gender identities' in Turkey, as they are enforced by the disciplinary mechanisms of the state. First, I will focus on the modernization project in Turkey as the process through which 'femininities' and 'masculinities' were (re)defined. Second, I will draw attention to 'gender diversity' in Turkey. This part will highlight the identity formation of LGBTT people in Turkey.

## **2.1. Modernization Project: Redefinition of Gender Identities**

Since the establishment of the Republic in 1923, Turkey have gone through a processes of westernization, secularization and nationalization; i.e., the components of what is often defined as the modernization project ( Saktanber, 2002, p.20). Undoubtedly, the shift from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey was primarily about the structural transformations such as building a nation-state from a multiethnic empire or separation of state affairs from religious rules. However, there were other aspects which were also influenced through out this radical break with the past. One of the major outcomes of modernization process was the change in the "subject constitution of the regime" which meant the introduction of new identities (ibid, p.20). Among many, I will only concentrate on the 'gender identities' that were defined in this process.

### **Modern Turkish Woman:**

Parla (2001, p.70) argues that women are generally considered to be the fundamental basis upon which the notions of modern become constructed. Concerning the Turkish modernization project, this relation between the notions of 'modern' and 'woman' is also apparent. Transition from an empire to a nation-state required the creation of "rational individuals in a national society" which inevitably entailed the participation of women in the modernization process (Saktanber, 2002, p.121). Under the Ottoman Rule, religion was the legitimate source for the regulation of social life (ibid, p.138), and women were dependent on men in every aspects of life. Hence, reforms were needed to free women from the burdens of

tradition and turn them into citizens. The adoption of Swiss Civil Code<sup>9</sup> in 1926 and the introduction of women's suffrage in 1934 can be seen as the major reforms concerning women's citizenship rights. However none of the reforms were intrinsically aiming at deconstructing the traditional gender roles. In the end, none of the reforms regarding the equality between men and women directly concerned the woman's welfare, but were defined as the precondition for Turkey to become 'modern' as a state (Saktanber, 2002, p.123). In her article *Emancipated but unliberated? Reflections on the Turkish Case*" (1987), Deniz Kandiyoti argues that the reforms relating to gender equality of the young Republic were incapable of mobilising women but rather left them as the passive receivers of the reforms. This argument is widely supported by Turkish gender scholars who point at the persistence of traditional norms and values about gender and sexuality. In fact, for many it was the cooperation of new republic with the predominant patriarchal structure that enabled the smooth functioning of the reforms (Saktanber, 2002, p.121). Here, the notion of 'nationalism' plays a balancing role between modern and traditional. While Kemal Ataturk, *the founder of Turkish Republic and the major commander of Independence War*, were proposing reforms concerning women's citizenship identity, he was referring to the heroic role played by women during the war<sup>10</sup> (Parla, 2001, p.71). At this point, the 'patriotic/nationalist' woman emerged as the peculiar hybrid of a traditional and a 'western' woman (ibid, p.75). This image of the nationalist/patriotic woman was not traditional and backward-looking in terms of appearance and she would not stay at home but participate in the public sphere and serve the modernization of the nation. But at the same time she would be careful about her honour and chastity. In other words, the patriotic modern citizen identity limited the experience and the expression of a distinctive female sexuality (ibid, p.73). In her article "*Slave Girls, Temptresses and Comrades: Images of Women in the Turkish Novel*", Deniz Kandiyoti elaborates the images of Islamic, western, and nationalist women as they are depicted in the late Ottoman Empire and the early Turkish Republic novels (1988). Novels from that specific

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<sup>9</sup> Adoption of Swiss Civil Code guaranteed all Turkey's citizens equal right before the law, regardless of their language, religion, race and gender. The most important aspect was the 'secularization' of the legal system. In terms of women's rights, the law guaranteed:

- the equality between men and women within family
- 'official' state marriage as the only 'legal' marriage. (religious marriage is not legally recognized in Turkey)
- Abolishment of polygamy
- equality between men and women regarding the issues of divorce, marriage, inheritance and witnessing in trials.

The civil code was revised and approved in 2001 and came into effect on January 1, 2002. Further information in english is available on:

<http://www.byegm.gov.tr/on-sayfa/new-civil-code.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Women actively participated in the Independence War(1919-1922), like carrying ammunitions and so forth (Parla,2001, pp. 71-72).



time period are generally considered to be important in terms of their contribution to the bargain with the traditional values which are persistent to changes. Focusing on the different portrayal of 'nationalist woman' and the 'western woman' characters, Kandiyoti (ibid, p.161) concludes that nationalist woman characters were depicted as equally modern as the western ones but in a 'genderless' way, while the 'western' counterpart is portrayed as a sexual perverter. Based on her analysis, she argues that the modernization process required a symbolic veiling to repress sexuality while freeing women from the actual veil (ibid, p.161). Hence, modern Turkish woman was expected to be emancipated from the burdens of traditions but should keep in mind her national duty of keeping her honour, something which was only possible by erasing her sexualized 'femininity'. However, "it is probably only the first generation of Kemalist women who were able to fulfil these requirements and attain the ideal of the modern Turkish women" (Parla, 2001, p.76). In the contemporary Turkey, it is difficult to say that the majority of women are entirely free from the traditional constraints and enjoy their participation in the public sphere. According to the statistics, in 2007, labour force participation rate for women was 22.2 percent. Political participation of women is remarkably low as well. Currently, there are only 50 women deputies in the Turkish Parliament which consists of 550 seats<sup>11</sup>. This can be related to the fact that the reforms for the improvement of women's status in Turkey were not easily accessible for the majority of women in the country. Hence, the designation of modern Turkish women (during the modernization process) is not adequate to explain the variety of female identities in Turkey today. For instance Saktanber (2002, p.18) refers to Islamist women as an "unintended consequence of Turkish Modernization". In this context, it is also difficult to find a place for MTF transsexual in relation to the portrayal of modern Turkish women.

### **Modern Turkish Man:**

Besides the female identity, male identity was also affected by the modernization process and the notions of nationality. Regarding the issue, I want to draw attention to the military institution in Turkey, as a major source of 'nationalism' and 'masculinity'. Adopting a very old and powerful militarist tradition (Selek, 2001, pp.92-93), The Republic of Turkey was established on the strong ideals of military. Being one of the taboo issues in the country, there are limited studies on the Turkey's "militarist, masculinist, modernist genealogies"

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<sup>11</sup> Statistics are taken from the report which is published by Turkish Republic Prime Ministry Directorate General on the Status of Women.. It is available in Turkish : <http://www.ksgm.gov.tr/Pdf/turkiyede%20kadinin%20durumu%20SON%2005.05.2009.doc>

(Shafak, 2004, p.27). Lack of documentation about the issue can be regarded as an indicator of the power of the institution over the society. Military service is obligatory for every male citizen since 1927, and it is strictly applied and legally enforced. Anyone who wants to escape from his national duty is punished. Also, anyone who ‘alienates’ the public from military service can also be punished according to the criminal code<sup>12</sup>. In this sense Ayse Gul Altinay’s study “The Myth of Military-Nation: militarism, gender, and education in Turkey” can be regarded as a very brave attempt of deconstructing the institution (2004). She portrays the relation between the military institution as a source of “hegemonic masculinity”, and the male identity in Turkey. What makes her work interesting is her analysis of how men become a ‘real man’ by military service, and how they are socially as well as legally condemned if they do not fulfil their national duty (p. 78 ) Having such a strong influence on the social life, military is also crucial in terms of who is excluded from it. Defining the major traits of being a Turkish male citizen, military creates its own outcast. Referring to Connell’s major work on masculinities, Altinay points at the gay masculinity as a subordinated type of masculinity whose subordination is reinforced by the military (p.80). As I mentioned in Chapter 1, military service is obligatory for every male citizens of Turkey, except homosexuals. By receiving a report from the military doctors documenting that the individual is “unfit due to psycho-sexual problems”, a homosexual man is not obliged to serve in the military (ibid, p.80). Although homosexuality have never been regarded as a crime in Turkey, the discourse which is (re)produced by military is important for shaping the public view. Being explicitly excluded from the ‘national duty’, gay men are hardly accepted as ‘masculine’ enough. Undoubtedly, it is not fair to depict ‘ideal masculinity’ as it is merely produced by military.

Parallel to Deniz Kandiyoti’s former work about the novels of modernization project, Elif Shafak (2004) presents a similar analysis of the novels written by Ottoman male authors in the last phase of the empire. In contrast to Kandiyoti who focus solely on the women, Shafak interprets the male characters in the novels. She argues that male characters who become too ‘westernized’, were depicted as lacking ‘masculinity’ (ibid, p.28). Calling them as the first “Other” of the literature, she underlines how femininity was a devaluing feature for the modern man , just like it was for the modern woman (ibid, p.29)

So far, I have outlined the aspects of the female and male identity whose borders were drawn by the modernization project in relation to the nationalist notions of the country. The way femininities and masculinities were described in relation to Turkish identity is also

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<sup>12</sup> Article 318 of the Turkish Criminal Code provides for imprisonment for up to three years for making up public statements that undermine military service.

crucial in understanding the hatred towards ‘sexual dissidents’ by the nationalist groups of the contemporary Turkey’ which will be discussed in the next section.

## 2.2. Gender Diversity in Turkey

*“...And there is always hegemony. A white, Turkish, Muslim, male hegemony... It entails the (re)production of individuals who will carry its values and norms. If you dare to contravene its boundaries, the hegemony labels you as a ‘threat’. In Ülker Street, there are campaigns launched with Turkish flags, against the shame of glorious Turkish Nation, the transsexuals...Turkish Flag and heterosexism, hand in hand , and totally peaceful.”*

The quotation above belongs to a LGBTT rights activist, as it is quoted in the study of Pinar Selek called *“Masks, Cavaliers, Gacis”<sup>13</sup>, Ülker Street: The place of exclusion of a subculture* (2001). Her study is based on the incidents of violence which took place against the transsexual/transvestite inhabitants of Ülker Street right before the UN Habitat Conference was to be held in Istanbul in 1996. Forced dislocation of transsexual/transvestite individuals were interpreted as a ‘cleansing’ operation by the LGBTT rights organizations and condemned by many international human rights associations<sup>14</sup>. What makes Pinar Selek’s work interesting is how she is shedding light on the relationship between the notions of ‘nationalism’ and the hatred against sexual dissidents. She points at the fact that, when transsexual/transvestite inhabitants were attacked in their homes, their neighbours were hanging Turkish flags on their windows to indicate that they should not be targets (pp.167-169). Furthermore, *“Grandchildren of Mehmed Fatih<sup>15</sup> cannot be fag”<sup>16</sup>* was one of the slogans shouted by a group of young people who were members of the nationalist movement party (ibid, p.169).

Although there is little written about female-to-male transsexuality/transvestism and female homosexuality during the time of the Ottoman Empire, it is known that male homosexuality and male-to-female transsexuality/transvestism were generally tolerated during

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Gaci’ is a gay slang term which refers to old and wise woman.

<sup>14</sup> See the report published by Human Rights Watch on : <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/62197/section/3>

<sup>15</sup> One of the major sultans of Ottoman Empire who conquered Istanbul in 1453, and was named ‘Fatih’, the conqueror, after it.

<sup>16</sup> It is possible to come across with the same slogan in many online forums where people are discussing homosexuality in Turkey.

Ottoman Rule. The most cited examples concerning the sexual dissidents of that time are *köçek*, male dancers in women's clothes, *harem ağası*, castrated guardian of the harem<sup>17</sup>, and *iç oğlanı*, boys who were sexually serving the sultan (Selek, 2001, pp.98-106). In more recent years, Turkish Republic has witnessed the fame of two male-to-female transsexual/transvestite singers in the country. So, neither in the history, nor in the contemporary times, 'sexual dissidents' are forming an unknown group of people. Referring to the time of the Ottoman Empire, Selek argues that everything was accepted because it was taking place in the 'private sphere', far from the public gaze (ibid, pp. 97-98).

In this section, my intention is to throw light on to the process where LGBTTT people have started to demand the public sphere, in other words 'coming out'<sup>18</sup> of their closet. First, I will provide an overview of the historical emergence of LGBTTT movement in Turkey which was particularly initiated by male homosexuals and comprised lesbians, bisexuals and transsexual/transvestites during the later stage of the movement. Second, I will draw attention specifically to the transsexuals/transvestites in Turkey.

### **LGBTTT movement in Turkey: Coming out of the closet**

So far, I have elaborated the impact of the Turkish modernization process on the definition of appropriate female and male identities. Due to the existence of rigid prescriptions for gender and sexual identities, people who were staying outside of these frontiers were naturally in need of gathering together. During 1970s, private gatherings behind the 'closed doors' were finally started to go public by the formation of small male homosexual groups whose objective was to raise consciousness among the gay community<sup>19</sup>. Selek (2001, p.109), argues that those small groups were the natural results of modernization which required sexual dissidents to achieve an identity. I would also want to draw attention to the worldwide momentous events of that decade. Undoubtedly, the voices of the 68 generation were heard in Turkey as well and different groups of people were mobilizing parallel to the world wide identity movements. In terms of the awakening of LGBTTT movement in Turkey in 1970s, I think the Stonewall Revolt of 1969 also played a significant role. The revolt, which is reclaimed as the birth of global LGBTTT movement, was started by

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<sup>17</sup> Quarters for women in a palace.

<sup>18</sup> The term 'coming out' refers to the process when a LGBTTT individual stops hiding her/his sexual identity. 'Coming out to oneself' is generally used for one's own realisation and acceptance of one's own sexual identity.

<sup>19</sup> See *LGBT Rights and Movement in Turkey*, pp: 45-46, available on: [http://news.kaosgl.com/Kaos\\_GL\\_Eng.pdf](http://news.kaosgl.com/Kaos_GL_Eng.pdf)

drag queens, transsexuals, gays and lesbians in a bar called Stonewall Inn in New York City's Greenwich Village in 1969<sup>20</sup> which had been periodically subjected to police violence. Thus, it is crucial to locate the emergence of LGBTTT movement in Turkey in relation to these 'global' mobilizations as well.

The beginning of the 1980s was marked by the impact of the military regime which came into power on September 12, 1980 and stayed in power for almost three years. It is generally known as a period of silencing of the civil society<sup>21</sup>. The strict and oppressive regime of the military affected the sexual dissidents as well. Probably transsexuals and transvestites were the most vulnerable group experiencing forced hair-cuts, physical violence and dislocation from the neighbourhoods (Yıldız, 2006, p.48). In July 1981, "transvestites and the effeminate singers" were banned from the stage and television by the military officers (ibid, p.48).

In contrast to the 1980s, 1990s witnessed a louder re-awakening of LGBTTT people. It was the time when the movement started to institutionalize itself with the establishment of Lambda Istanbul in 1993<sup>22</sup> and the Kaos GL Ankara in 1994<sup>23</sup> which have been the most active and politically vocal LGBTTT organizations in the country. Although these organizations include transsexual and transvestite individual in their agenda, they primarily focus on the rights of gays, lesbians and bisexuals. If we leave the organizational level aside, in their private life transsexuals/transvestites form a separate 'subculture' under the homosexual subculture (Selek, 2001, p.123). In other words, they form the 'Other' of the others. According to Selek (ibid, p.123) the major reason of this separation is the 'sex work' that the majority of the transsexuals/transvestites are performing. Some, like Berghan (2006, p. 58), may also argue that it is their way of constructing their gender identity in a conformist way which distinguishes them from LGB people. Undoubtedly, there are many ways of looking at TT people as a separate political and social group. In order to clarify the specificity of their identity in Turkey, the following section will present some juridical, social and political background information.

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<sup>20</sup> See more about Stonewall revolt with photographs and documents on : <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/eresources/exhibitions/sw25/case1.html>

<sup>21</sup> Around 650,000 people were detained, 230,000 people trialed, 50 executed, and 14,000 stripped of their Turkish citizenship. All political parties, unions and foundations were closed. Read more: <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/10793296.asp>

<sup>22</sup> It is an organization that was formed by a group of gays and lesbians right after İstanbul city government banned the Christopher Street Day Sexual Liberation Activities that were to be celebrated in July 1993. <http://www.lambdaistanbul.org>

<sup>23</sup> Kaos GL was founded in September, 1994. It has been publishing "Kaos GL gay-lesbian cultural magazine" since its foundation. <http://www.kaosgl.org>

## **Transsexuals/Transvestites: ‘Other’ of the Others**

In this section, I will initially summarize the ‘legal’ issues concerning transsexuality in Turkey. Later, I will focus on the social attitude towards the transsexuals/transvestites in Turkey, which will highlight their conditions of living. Finally, I will present transsexual/transvestite associations and their political claims.

### **Legal Issues:**

As I mentioned above, LGBTTT identities have never been criminalized in the history of Turkish Republic. Until the 1980s there was no reference to LGBTTT issues in Turkish Law (Atamer, 2003, p.14).

The first time ‘transsexuality and transvestism’ became the subject of legal and public debates was in 1981 when the military regime put stage ban for male singers who perform in women’s clothes. One of the most notable victims of this period was Bulent Ersoy, famous singer and actor, who was singing in a cross-dressing way. Right after the stage ban, Ersoy went through a sex reassignment operation in London and changed his sex from male to female. Ten days after the surgery, she returned back to Turkey in order to continue her profession as a female singer which would not be in contradiction with the existing law (Ogunc, 2007). However she had fallen into a legal gap because of holding a blue id which is given to male citizens<sup>24</sup>. As a result, Bulent Ersoy started a legal battle which lasted for seven years. Finally in 1988, a new article was added to the civil code; “In cases where there has been a change of sex after birth documented by a report from a committee of medical experts, the necessary amendments are made to the birth certificate”. This amendment is considered as the manifestation of a legal recognition of transsexual community in Turkey (Atamer, 2003, p.14). However, this regulation led to the emergence of new uncertainties due to its lack of emphasis on the preconditions that should apply for a sex-change operation to occur (ibid, p.14). Uncertainties were creating the potential for medical malpractice, unethical medical interventions, and a profit market (Kandiyoti and Robert, 1998, p. 22). In 2002 preconditions were legally set for those who want to have a sex-change operation , according to which the sex-change candidate is supposed to be older than 18 years old, unmarried and unproductive, and a person for whom sex-change operation is a critical must for the mental wellbeing (ibid, p.15). The precondition of ‘being unproductive’ is one of the points that has been criticized a lot for being paradoxical. A transsexual with a proper sex organ and hormonal structure is

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<sup>24</sup> In Turkey, identity cards are designed in different colours for males and females. Pink card is given to the female citizens, while male citizens are given a blue identity card.

totally capable of reproduction (ibid, p.16). Thus, a lot of transsexuals are seeking medical treatment in order to destroy their reproductive capacity before they apply for sex-change surgery. Furthermore, the precondition of “unproductiveness” causes legal dilemma for pre-operated transsexuals who already have a child (ibid, p.16).

### **Social Issues:**

It is crucial to point out that, legal recognition of the new sex after surgery does not automatically bring public recognition. Increasing visibility of transsexuals after the amendments in the law raised questions about the accommodation of this group in a generally conservative society (Kandiyoti, 2002, p.278). In contrast to some famous singers and stage performers, most of the transsexual/transvestite individuals are marginalized. As their sexually identity does not allow them adequate access to jobs, a large number of transsexual/transvestite people are performing sex work. Many argue that violence against this community is mostly a result of the negative attitudes about sex work in general. Regarding the relationship between violence against transsexual/transvestite community and the sex-work they perform, the regulations of brothels are vital. According the existing regulations, sex-work is only permitted for those who are holding a pink identity (Basaran, 2007, p.26). Hence, a male-to-female transsexual who has not changed her identity card in accordance with her current ‘sex’ cannot work in authorized brothels. Similarly, a male transvestite who is cross dressing cannot perform sex work in ‘legal’ terms. As a result of these regulations, many transsexuals and transvestites are obliged to work on the streets under unhygienic and insecure conditions.

### **Political Issues:**

Until very recently, the issues concerning transsexuals and transvestites were covered under the agenda of LGBTTT organizations. However, when it comes to collective action among different groups within LGBTTT community, TT people were generally left aside due to their different social and political concerns. As argued by Buse Kilickaya<sup>25</sup>, earning life from sex-work prevents many TT people to participate directly in the wider LGBTTT movement, since they are working at night and feeling tired during the daytime. In 2006, when the systematic attacks towards transsexual and transvestite community in Ankara

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<sup>25</sup> The former president of Pink Life LGBTTT organization. Information received from her speech at Transforum’ seminar records from the 3.International Meeting Against Homophobia, Ankara, 19.05.2008.

dramatically increased, Pink Life LGBTT organization was established with a primary concern regarding the problems of TT<sup>26</sup>. It is possible to say that ‘obligatory sex-work’ lies at the heart of their organizational concerns, which is described as both the reason for and the consequence of violence their facing:

*“We are trying to construct a life within the triangle of sex work, mafia and violence...There are only a few transsexuals who have managed to live until the age of 40, and there is probably no one retired. We don’t have any expectations from life...”<sup>27</sup>*

The quotation above belongs to the former president of Pink Life LGBTT association which is primarily concerned with the problems of transsexuals and transvestites in Turkey. Such a life circle, as it is expressed above, undoubtedly necessitates a different agenda for political action. In addition to Pink Life which is located in Ankara, there are TT political initiations in Izmir and Istanbul as well. Izmir Transsexual and Transvestite Initiation was established in 2007 right after a transsexual was shot in her shoulder by a police.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.pembehayat.org>

<sup>27</sup> The quotation above is extracted from Buse Kilickaya (former president of Pink Life LGBTT Association)’s speech at the International Meeting Against Homophobia in Ankara, in 2008.

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.kaosglizmir.com/index.php?sayfa=yazi&yazino=48&islem=2>



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction:**

Defining methodology as “a general approach to studying research topics”, Silverman (2001, p.109) underlines that our choices of methods and the ways we use them can be regarded as “research strategies”. In this sense, this chapter will serve as an overall description of the “research strategies” of my project. First, I will elaborate the ‘study design’. As I shifted the focus of the research during the field work, this section will first describe the project that I initially attempted to research. Then, I will explain my experiences in the field which led me to change the focus of the initial project. Second, I will describe the methods of data collections. Third, I will depict the underlying ethical considerations of the research project. Fourth, the methods of data analysis will be discussed. Finally, all the key informants of the research will be introduced briefly.

#### **3.1. Study Design**

##### **Project Proposal**

Being a member of the wider LGBTTT Rights movement in Turkey, I have been experiencing the evolvement of the movement by following the activities and debates which have taken place within the framework of LGBTTT Rights. Having transsexual and transvestite friends, I have especially been concerned about the increasing violence towards transsexual and transvestites in Turkey. As I was studying in Ankara when Pink Life LGBTTT Association was formed in 2006, I had chance to participate in their street demonstrations and attend their press declarations in relation to transphobic instances in Ankara. Since I came to Norway for educational purpose in August 2007, I have been following the updates of Pink Life LGBTTT Association via internet. Based on this background, I decided to write a research project about Pink Life LGBTTT Association in order to explore the dynamics of transsexual/transvestite movement in Turkey. When I was developing the project proposal, Pink Life LGBTTT association was very active with their drama groups, seminars and street protests. I was planning to conduct a ‘social movement research’ by focusing on these activities. The fact that I already knew some members of the association made me feel confident about their cooperation for the project. My initial contact with the association in relation to the project

proposal affirmed my feelings. When I shared the very rough version of the project proposal with two activists via internet in December 2008, I received positive feedbacks. They told me that they were very open to the idea of working together with me. After I designed the project more in details with supervision at the university, I contacted the activists of Pink Life again, informed them of the final version of the project plan and confirmed my field work plans in Ankara for the summer 2008. However, the fieldwork did not proceed in accordance with the plan due to several factors. In the following section, I will elaborate the personal and political challenges I faced during the fieldwork.

### **Reflections on the field:**

Due to bureaucratic procedure in relation to the renewal of my residence permit in Norway, I started the fieldwork in the beginning of July 2008, three weeks later than I had planned. The process in relation to my accommodation developed in a smooth way. I moved into the flat of Eser, who is also one of my informants, and began to live with him and his girlfriend. They gave me a separate bedroom which provided me privacy. However, having no keys to the apartment made me dependent on my hosts because I was setting my agenda according to their plans.

Right after I moved in, the first thing I did was trying to call Pink Life LGBTTT Association to inform them about my arrival. I was also hoping to set the schedule for a visit to their office. However, I did not receive any answer from the association. After waiting a couple of days, I went directly to their office which is located in Kizilay district and found the association 'closed'. I started to get worried because the association had seen to be really active on their website and the email groups. I got in touch with an activist that I knew as a friend, who told me that Pink Life was still functioning. When I asked her about the paradoxical situation that there was no one in the office, she was suddenly so distant and reluctant to talk about it. She was probably trying to save the reputation of the association. I tried to contact other activist friends and received similar reactions. They did not want to talk about why Pink Life LGBTTT Association was not working actively. Realizing that I would not be able to conduct a research about the transsexual and transvestite movement, I decided to change my research focus. When I told about my decision to some activist of Pink Life LGBTTT Association, they gently asked me to draw a 'pink story' about the association and represent them successfully in my thesis. It is undisputable that they have achieved many things in relation to transsexual and transvestite rights in Turkey. However, the association

was simply ‘not working’ when I was in Ankara and I could not find a reason to misrepresent them. It was the first time when my political and personal ideas were in contradiction. This situation reminded me of Patricia Zavella’s work from 1993, called ‘Feminist Insider Dilemmas: Constructing Ethnic Identity with Chicana Informants’. She asserts that insiders are trusted by the informants and they are more likely to be cognizant and able to avoid being deceived by the informants (Zavella, 1993, pp.138-139). Yet, being a member of a subordinated group might bring constraints of feeling a responsibility towards the community studied (ibid, p.139). As a member of the wider LGBTTT movement, I was feeling responsible to promote Pink Life LGBTTT Association’s work and their struggle. However, as a researcher I found it ethically challenging. As a result, I decided to shift my focus from association to individuals. Hence, the research objective became ‘transsexuals’ experiences in Turkey’, regardless of the activism background of my informants.

### **3.2. Methods of Data Collection**

My research project is based on the principles of qualitative research. Denzin and Lincoln (2003, p.5) notes that, “qualitative researchers study the things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them”. In this sense, my attempt was using data collection techniques that will enable me to observe transsexuals’ experiences and capture their perceptions regarding their own experiences. For this purpose, I used qualitative data collection techniques of semi-structured interview and participant observation.

In relation to semi-structured interviews, I conducted ten interviews with five female-to-male transsexuals and five male-to female-transsexuals. I reached them by snowballing technique through the network of LGBTTT people I knew in Ankara. Prior to fieldwork, I prepared an interview guide which had several subsections. Since I shifted my research focus, I changed the ‘thematizing’ (Kvale, 1996, p.88) of some sections for the respondents who are not members of Pink Life LGBTTT Association. For instance, I changed activism ‘theme’ with ‘views on the existing LGBTTT Associations’ and ‘views of the possibilities of organizing transsexuals and transvestites’. The other sections of the interview guide based on biographical questions (in relation to childhood, family, school and work life) were applied to the most of the informants.

In relation to the participant observation, I took part in many parties, and other social events with LGBTTT people. As I mentioned before, being familiar with the environment was

an advantage for me, as I had easy access to those activities. During the course of time, my researcher identity was open to everybody. This situation led some friends whom I knew from before to stay distanced from me. However, I had chance to talk with several people on ‘everyday’ topics which provided me the rich background information about LGBTT subculture. Furthermore, having a transsexual host opened the doors to an underground transsexual and transvestite group. By ‘underground’, I don’t exactly refer to a group of people who are living extremely marginal lives. What I mean is, I had chance to take place in ‘house gatherings’, where transsexuals and transvestites gather separately from gays and lesbians. During these gatherings, I listened to a lot of stories about ‘sex-work’ from different people who are working as sex-workers. Those house gatherings provided me with new insights of transsexual and transvestite community in Ankara. Due to ethical considerations, I will not use any personal information that I received during these house gatherings (although some of the people I talked allowed me to use it).

Finally, I got some audio and written materials from Kaos GL Ankara. They gave me the sound records of ‘Transforum’ which was organized on the last day of the Third International Anti-Homophobia Meeting 12-19 May 2008, the annual meeting of international LGBTT organizations and individuals in Ankara, where the speakers are discussing the transsexuality/transvestism from different angles (organizational basis, individual aspects, surgery .etc). Regarding the record, I got permission from Kaos GL to use the data since the forum was open to public and media as well. In terms of the written materials, The Law and Discrimination Report (2008) which was prepared by the lawyer Oya Aydin, as well as The Lesbian-Bisexual Women’s Report (2007) were obtained. I also received the special editions of Mesele Book Magazine and Amargi Feminist Journal on ‘the closure of Lambda Istanbul LGBT organization’ by the ministry of Istanbul. They are all constructing my secondary sources of data, which are vital for providing me the relevant background information about my project.

### **3.3. Ethical Considerations**

Kvale (1996, p.110) notes that, “Ethical decisions do not belong to a separate stage of interview investigations, but arise throughout the entire research process”. So, ethics do not start and finish with the informants safety and privacy, but includes additional points during the research. Regarding the informants, the ethical codes of ‘informed consent’ and ‘confidentiality’ were strictly applied. The interviews were conducted after a verbal consent.

Being aware of the sensitivity of my research project, I was very careful about not to cause any emotional harm. During the interviews the informants were constantly reminded of their right to withdraw consent to research. When it comes to the issue of privacy, I asked all the informants to find a nickname for themselves for the sake of their anonymity. Although some of them insisted on that I can use their real name, the nicknames will be used throughout thesis. Furthermore, since I used an mp4 player to record the interview accounts, I assured the informants about the confidentiality of these records. The digital interview files and the transcriptions are erased after the analysis of data and they will not be used for any other purposes.

### **3.4. Methods of Data Analysis**

As it is mentioned above, I used a mp4 player to record the interview data. As a starting point of data analysis, I transcribed all the interviews. The language of all the transcriptions are Turkish but I also translated the majority of them into English before I start analyzing them. During the translations I tried to be as careful as possible in order not to lose any meaning due to the language differences.

In relation to the interview analysis, Kvale(1996,pp.192-193) outlines five different procedures: categorization of meaning, condensation of meaning, structuring of meaning through narratives, interpretation of meaning and ad hoc methods for generating meaning (ibid, pp. 192-193). I used two of them for my data analysis. First of all, meaning condensation, which is mostly defined as the attempt to look for meaning units in large interview texts and to describe their main themes (ibid, pp.196), was a useful tool for me. Through the transcriptions, I searched for significant concepts. Commonalities and differences between the salient themes of each interview text provided me the key points to focus on. In addition to meaning condensation, meaning interpretation was another method that I adopted from Kvale. He argues that interpretation entails a particular distance from what is said directly (ibid, p.201). This critical position provided me a certain kind of consciousness about the interpretation of informants' accounts. The interview texts were not analyzed as facts but they were taken into consideration as the individual perceptions and understandings of the informants.

Additionally, I benefited from narrative analysis. Steph Lawler (2002, p. 243) defines narratives as accounts which contain characters and a certain type of action within an overall plot. According to Ricoeur (as cited in Lawler, 2002, p.245) people make an identity which is

connected to the social world through their narrations. During the semi-structural interviews that I conducted, informants told about their experiences through narrations. I tried to trace the role of the actors and their actions in each narrative in order to understand how the personal experiences of the informants' are interpreted by themselves. This method enabled me to capture the interrelation between their subjectivity and the social structure.

### **3.5. Brief Presentation of Key Informants**

Throughout this section, each of the informants will shortly be described. I will basically highlight their family origin, educational background, current work and general facts about their sexual identity. There are two subsections, focusing respectively on the informants who are female-to-male (FTM) and male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals. For the sake of their privacy, informants will be presented by the nicknames they chose for themselves. Regarding the use of subjective personal pronouns, I will use 'she' for MTF transsexuals and 'he' for FTM ones.

#### **Female-to-male Informants:**

**Eser:** He was born in Eskisehir in 1980. He has two older brothers. His mother is a housewife and his father runs a small dress shop. At the age of 15, his parents decided that they could not deal with his 'abnormalities' and sent him to Ankara where his uncle lives. He ran away from his uncle's place after a short time and withdrew from high school. At the age of 22 he went through a breast removal surgery and he is now under the hormone treatment. Currently he is working in a restaurant where they serve home-made food to the factory workers.

**ZenZen:** He was born in 1976 in Tokat. He is the single child of a middle-class family. His mother is a housewife and his father is a civil engineer. In comparison with other informants, he is coming from an open-minded family. However, regarding his sexuality, he confronted many difficulties outside of his family. He was encouraged by his parents to continue his education in another city than Tokat. After being granted admission to the department of Turkish Literature and Culture at the Ankara University, he moved to Ankara at the age of 18. He decided to change his sex from female to male when he was 22. It took three years for the legal process of the sex reassignment surgery to be completed. Finally he changed his sex

from female to male when he was 25. Currently, he is working as an operator in a mobile phone company.

**Tim:** He was born in 1976 in Afyon. He was raised by his single mother after the death of his father when he was 3 years old. He has an older sister but she is not mentioned so much throughout the interviews. His mother who is a maths teacher, have been very supportive although she had gone through a severe ‘denial process’ when she learnt about Tim’s sexual identity. Due to being fed up with the pressures of Afyon during his puberty, he decided to move to Ankara and studied tourism at Hacettepe University. He had his sex-reassignment surgery in Istanbul at the age of 25. Currently he is working as a web-designer.

**Jilet:** He was born in 1982 in Aksaray. He is the youngest of five siblings. His father is a retired civil servant and his mother is working as a domestic worker. Due to financial problems he had to quit school after middle school to help his mother with her job. He pictured his family as being traditional and conservative. Although he did not come out with his sexual identity to his parents, his mother enforced him to attend several sessions with quack doctors and other spiritual healers. He ran away to Ankara at the age of 17. He has worked in several short term jobs. The last time he spoke to his mother was when he was 21 before he went through breast removal surgery. Currently, he is unemployed.

**Yaman:** He was born in 1977 in Zonguldak. He has one younger sister. His father is a soldier and his mother is a housewife. Due to his father’s profession, his childhood was passed travelling between different cities. He was dismissed from high school (in Izmit) due to being involved in a fight when he was 14. He came out to his parents as a transsexual at the age of 20. His mother temporarily moved out to Ankara with Yaman in order to take him to Gülhane Military Medical Academy (GATA), Department of Psychiatry. Yaman and his mother attended to therapy sessions for six months. Psychological support enabled his mother to go through the process much easier. During this process, Yaman decided to settle down in Ankara, whereas his mother went back to Izmit to calm down his father who was very confused. He had breast removal operation when he was 24. Currently, he is working as a hairdresser assistant.

## Male-to-female Informants

**Oya:** She was born in Muğla in 1979. She has an older sister. Her father runs a small market in their neighbourhood and her mother is a housewife. Although Mugla is considered to be a modern city in the western part of the country, she experienced certain pressures regarding her sexual identity. Her father is known as the *bakkal*<sup>29</sup> of the neighbourhood which made her more visible as the son of the *bakkal*. She confronted the pressures of neighbourhood at a very young age and decided to move to Ankara where she already had contacts through her boyfriend. For a short period of time, she tried to earn her life from car-washing and as a domestic worker. Yet she could not stabilize and started to work as a sex-worker in women's clothes at the age of 17. She has been under the hormone treatment since 1999. Currently, she is saving money for her operation and she is planning to quit sex-work after the operation.

**Sevilay:** She was born in Konya in 1975. Her family runs a small restaurant. She described both her mother and father as being religious. She has three siblings but she did not talk so much about them. Because of her sexual identity, she experienced enormous pressure placed on her by her parents and her uncles. She was held captive at home for a long time and was not allowed to go outside. With the help of her older sister she ran away to Ankara when she was 20. She has been under hormone treatment since she was 23. Currently, she is performing sex-work to make a living.

**Burçe:** She was born in 1978 in Eskişehir. She is coming from a high status family. Her father is a neurologist and mother is a lawyer. She was brought up by her aunt who was her nanny at the same time. She came out to her mother as homosexual when she was 19. After therapy sessions and constant pressure placed on her, she decided to move to Ankara to get prepared for the university entrance exam. When her parents learnt that she was under hormone treatment in Ankara, they stopped their financial support. As a result of running out of money, she started to perform sex work. She changed her sex from male to female when she was 22.

**Yıldız:** She was born in 1981, in Kırıkkale. She grew up in Kırıkkale and moved to Ankara for university. She, however, did not register herself at the university. She went through sex

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<sup>29</sup> Small market of the neighbourhoods where only small items are sold, such as daily newspaper and bread.



reassignment surgery in 2007. She is still holding her blue identity card therefore she can't get married to her boyfriend. She is earning her life from sex work.

**Banu:** She was born in 1974, in Afyon. After her parents got divorced, she moved to Istanbul with her mother to live with her grandmother. She decided to move to Ankara when she was 20. She worked as a bartender for a short while. However, she had to quit when she was verbally and physically attacked by some customers. She changed her sex when she was 25. Currently, she is a sex worker. She is planning to quit soon. Her plan is to move back to Istanbul to her mother who accepted her sexual identity recently. She is a volunteer of Pink Life LGBTT association, even though she does not attend their activities regularly.

# CHAPTER 4

## THEORIZING TRANSSEXUAL EXPERIENCES IN TURKEY

### **Introduction:**

Through out the background chapter, I have tried to present an outline of dominant gender identities in Turkey as they have been shaped through out the modernization process. I have also drawn attention to the (re)claiming of gender diversity which has been vocalized by several groups composed of LGBTTT people. Finally, I have introduced transsexuals and transvestites as a separate social and political group from the mainstream LGB community despite their assumed solidarity with the wider community. In this chapter, I will start by outlining the literature dealing with the experiences of transsexuals and transvestites in Turkey. After comparing their different approaches regarding the field, I will introduce a theoretical framework developed from Deniz Kandiyoti's notion of '*Bargaining with Patriarchy*'. I will also examine theories of 'nationalism' with particular attention paid to V. Spike Peterson's work on '*nationalism as heterosexism*'.

### **4.1. Previous Studies on the Experiences of Transsexuals/Transvestites in Turkey:**

Experiences of transsexual and transvestites in Turkey have not achieved a considerable attention among social scientists. But, there are a few exceptions. Mary Robert and Deniz Kandiyoti's introductory essay from 1998 called "*Photo Essay: Transsexuals and the Urban Landscape in Istanbul*" is a pioneer work. One of their major findings is the impact of both local and the global social spaces on the lives of transsexuals (p.20). On the one hand, these people are subjected to the national state apparatuses in terms of legal regulations about changing their sexual identities; on the other, they are part of the global market through overseas sex reassignment surgeries, and job hunting in international night clubs (ibid). Although Robert and Kandiyoti's work is limited to male-to-female transsexuals only and the study seems to focus merely on experiences of transsexuals who are either sex workers or stage performers, it provides a fundamental guideline which outlines contemporary laws regarding sex reassignment procedures. It also gives a brief overview of the most important

political events affecting transsexuals in Turkey<sup>30</sup>. However, none of these events were elaborated in details. Interestingly, this pioneer study has not been cited by any studies written on transsexuals and transvestites in Turkey.

Another study presented by the sociologist Pinar Selek in 2001 is called “*Masks, Cavaliers, Gacis, Ulker Street: The place of exclusion of a subculture*”. As I have mentioned in the background chapter, her work is a deep inquiry into the event that took place in Ulker Street, which was just referred to but not analyzed in the previous work of Kandiyoti and Robert. Selek’s empirical data is based on narratives told by the witnesses of the ‘cleansing operation’ and interviews with heterosexual inhabitants of the same neighborhood. What makes her work interesting is the discussion of nationalist hatred towards sexual dissidents which explicitly surfaced during the events taken place in Ulker Street (p. 167-169). She mentioned how TT people were attacked by people holding Turkish flags and how hatred was vocalized by the nationalist groups. However she did not theorize the relation between nationalism and the negative attitude towards sexual dissidents. Her work is constructed upon the frameworks of social exclusion and subculture.

One year later, Deniz Kandiyoti published a more sophisticated article about certain circumstances that shape the lives of transsexuals in Turkey. Her work “*Pink Card Blues: Trouble and Strife at the Crossroads of Gender*” underlines the interaction between ideologies of gender, state and market in Turkey as they are important parameters in the lives of the transsexuals (2002, p.290). A critical point of her study is the argument about the ‘coercion’ on some transsexuals that leads them to sex change surgery in a society which is profoundly intolerant of gender ambiguity (ibid, p.284).

Finally, there is a recent work called “*Lubunya: Transsexual Identity and Body*” written by Selin Berghan in 2006. Berghan’s research is based on her face-to-face interviews with eight male-to-female and one female-to-male transsexual in Turkey. Her major argument is that transsexuals’ ways of constructing their gender identity is extremely conformist which contributes to the dominance of gender binaries in the society. However, she also underlines the destructive character of male-to-female transsexuals in a system which favors male domination (pp.58-59). For her, transsexuals’ rejection of their male identity while constructing a female one can be seen as an important threat to the patriarchal values (p.59).

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<sup>30</sup> For instance, they mention the military coup which was launched in 1980 in terms of its sanctions towards social deviance, and they point at the cleansing operation of Ülker Street from transsexual and transvestite inhabitants before the UN Habitat Conference was being held in 1996 (p.20).

All of the studies presented above have been playing an important role in making the TT experiences visible in the Turkish academic context. It is possible to say that the perspective that I formed has been influenced by all those studies. For instance, Kandiyoti's study from 2002 inspired me to include the state as a crucial parameter of TT's experiences and helped me to see the importance of social structure as an important unit of analysis. Selek's work stimulated my curiosity about the relevance of 'nationalism' as a crucial notion for discussing transphobia. Finally, Bergan's study motivated me to elaborate the (re)production of dominant gender ideologies through the identity construction of TT individuals.

In this sense my aim is to unite Kandiyoti's emphasis on social structure, with Berghan's emphasis on identity construction in order to highlight the interconnectedness between the TT life experiences and the structural conditions of their lives. What I would like to examine is how these two interact and shape each other. At this point, I would like to integrate the notion of 'nationalism' as an important aspect of the social structure in Turkey which is influential in the definition of appropriate womanhood and manhood. Furthermore, I will expand the TT experiences by covering the analysis of 'growing up' narratives which was missing in Berghan's study on TT identity construction. Her work presents transsexuals as people who 'suddenly' turn into a woman or a man while overlooking the childhood and adolescence confusion of these people. Broadening the scope of analysis through the inclusion of 'growing up' experiences of TT people will provide the necessary lenses to see the operation of norms and beliefs regarding gender issues in the institutions of family, school and other institutions. Such an attempt of including 'growing up' stories is not completely new if we look beyond the borders of Turkey. In her article '*Growing Up Transgender. Stories of an Excluded Population*', Surya Monro(2006), for example, questions the structure that perpetuates the social exclusion of transgender and intersex young people in UK. Throughout her article, she presents some informants' (either transgender or intersex) childhood and adolescence stories, which demonstrate the problems that these young people faced regarding their sexuality (pp.310-313). She argues that one of her objectives is to fill the gap in the literature regarding transsexual and intersex young people because the majority of the studies available are from USA and the considerable amount of literature dealing with transgender young people are existing within the discipline of medicine (p.298) In this sense, I would like to analyze the experiences of transsexuals in Turkey by covering the period that a transsexual realizes he/she belongs to the opposite sex, confronts both societal norms and constructs his/her new transsexual identity in relation to the dominant gender ideologies. In other words,

I would like to intersect not only the past and the presents of a transsexual but also the individual experience with social structures.

For this purpose, I will adopt a theoretical framework that will blend Deniz Kandiyoti's approach of *'Bargaining with Patriarchy'* with the notion of *'heteronormativity'*. So, *'Bargaining with Heteronormativity'* will be the backbone of my theoretical route. I will also benefit from theories of 'nationalism' through the lenses of V.Spike Peterson who 'queers' Nira Yuval-Davis's nationalism framework through her specific focus on *'nationalism as heterosexism'*.

#### **4.2. Bargaining with Heteronormativity:**

As a theoretical point of departure, I decided to benefit from Deniz Kandiyoti's cross cultural comparative study of gender and society from 1988, named "Bargaining with Patriarchy". She describes the bargaining process as "women's strategies to maximize security and optimize life options within the structural and cultural limitations of patriarchy" (p. 274). For example, in classical patriarchy<sup>31</sup> women who live with their husband's family are not only subordinated to their husband but also to their mother in law. Therefore, these women are hoping to bear a son who will increase their ranking within the household (pp. 278-279). Furthermore a son will eventually provide women their own "subservient daughter-in-laws" (p.279). Hence, bearing a male child is the strategy that increases women's options within classical patriarchy. Kandiyoti also underlines the temporality of patriarchal bargains which are open to transformation and renegotiation (p.275). However none of the transformations bring a radical breakdown of the rules of the bargain. Despite the resistance strategies of women that (re)shape the patriarchal bargain, in the end women keep operating according to the dominant gender ideologies (Kandiyoti, 1998, p.136). Through the guidance of Kandiyoti's framework, my objective is to analyze the process through which transsexuals construct their identity in relation to the dominant gender ideologies. In this sense, I switch the term 'patriarchy' with 'heteronormativity' to emphasize the heterosexual character of the 'rules of the bargain'.

As a term, heteronormativity is "based on the assumption of a binary gender concept and a hegemonic heterosexual norm" (Rosenberg, 2006, p.111). As norms are the social rulebooks, normativity can be regarded as the power system that preserves those norms (ibid,

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<sup>31</sup> Kandiyoti (1988, p. 278) states that "classical patriarchy may be found in a geographical area that includes North Africa, the Muslim Middle East (including Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran), and South and East Asia (specifically, India and China).

p.111). In this sense, heteronormativity should be understood in relation to the power system that perpetuates the binary gender concepts and the heterosexual desire.

According to Tiina Rosenberg (2006, p.112), heteronormativity has two guiding principles. First of all, through the categorization of ‘us’ and ‘other’, heteronormativity excludes those who deviate from the norm. This principle can be recognized in the naturalizations of dichotomies favoring one category at the expense of other (ibid, p.112). In order to grasp the hierarchical gendered order between ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ and the ways they are constructed, this principle is crucial. The key point is the fact that ‘one’s own norm is naturalized and unquestioned’ (ibid, p.112). The second principle of heteronormativity is described as the assimilation of the deviant (p.112) According to Iris Marion Young (as cited in Rosenberg, 2006, p.113) the assimilation process is about the participation of the excluded into the dominant culture and their way of asserting themselves according to the predefined rules.

Based on the framework of Kandiyoti and the notion of ‘heteronormativity’, we can use ‘Bargaining with Heteronormativity’ as the necessary lense to elaborate transsexual experiences in Turkey. Here, ‘heteronormativity’ refers to the power structure that influences transsexuals’ gendered subjectivity and their rational choices to increase their life opportunities. In other words, since their childhood transsexuals have been confronted with the principles of heteronormativity within the family, at school, in the neighborhood, and generally in society (I will use ‘structure’ to refer all of these domains). Their gendered subjectivity, the way they perceive the world and themselves in relation to the world, are all affected by this interrelation between heteronormativity and themselves. However, transsexuals’ bargain with heteronormativity is slightly different from women’s patriarchal bargain. While women operate within the constraints of gender ideologies without radically challenging them, transsexuals bargain with heteronormativity may transcend the limitations, and result in the subversion of sex/gender dichotomies and the hierarchies between them.

So far I have introduced ‘Bargaining with heteronormativity’ as the major theoretical route I am going to follow. The way that hegemonic heterosexual norm and gender binaries are being reinforced is also important to explore the experiences of transsexuals in Turkey. In the case of Turkey, I will focus on ‘nationalism’ which is a crucial means of reinforcing gender identities in Turkey (see also background chapter).

### 4.3. Gender and Nationalism:

Since 1990s, grand theories about nationalism have been under attack due to its ignorance of gender as an important unit of analysis (Valenius, 2003, p.34). There are many scholars who have attempted to bring gender back to the theories of nationalism. For instance Anne McClintock (1997, pp.89-90) argues that nationalism is from the very beginning constructed as a gendered discourse and no nation in the world provide women and men same access to the rights and resources within a nation-state. In order to emphasize the hierarchical roles distributed between men and women within nationalist ideals, McClintock quotes from Cynthia Enloe, saying that nationalism “ typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope” in order to emphasize the dominant masculine ideals behind nationalism (p.89). Similarly, in her article “Masculinity and nationalism: gender and sexuality in the making of nations”, Joane Nagel (1998, p.251-252), argues that the nation-state is primarily a masculine institution and cultures of nationalism emphasize masculine cultural themes like honor, patriotism and bravery while women are occupying symbolic roles that reflect the masculinist definition of femininity. In this sense she underscores “patriotic manhood and exalted motherhood” as icons of nationalist ideology (p.242). Carrying the discussions one step further, V.Spike Peterson (1999, p.34) argues that nationalism should not be examined only as gendered but heterosexist.

In order to explore further the relation between gender and nationalism, I want to refer to Nira Yuval-Davis’s work from 1997 called “Gender and Nation”<sup>32</sup>. Her work suggests five intersections between gender and nation: (1) women and the biological reproduction of the nation; (2) cultural reproduction and gender relations; (3) gender relations and citizenship; (4) gendered militaries and gendered wars; (5) gender, nation and the politics of women’s empowerment (pp.22-25). In order to reveal dominant gender identities in Turkey and their connection to the Turkish modernization project (which is generally taken into account as being parallel to Turkish nationalization process), I will use three of the intersections proposed by Yuval-Davis. I will read each of them through the lenses of V.Spike Peterson (1999)’s article “*Sexing Political Identities/Nationalism as Heterosexism*”, who ‘queers’ the work of Yuval-Davis. My objective is to shed a theoretical light on ‘Turkish nationalism’ as a source of ‘heteronormativity’ which is influencing the experiences of transsexuals in Turkey.

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<sup>32</sup> “Gender and Nation” can be regarded as a revised version of her previous book with the co-author F. Anthias from 1989 named “Woman-Nation-State”. The intersections between gender and nation presented in this chapter are originally introduced in this previous work. For further information, see : Ozkirimli, U. (2000), “Theories of Nationalism: A critical introduction”, pp. 204-205

The first intersection to be examined is the relation between women and the biological reproduction of the nation (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p.22). Pointing at the women's reproductive capacity as an issue which is usually taken into account on the basis of 'rights' to have or not to have children, Yuval-Davis emphasizes the way women's reproductive capacity is connected to the national collectivity (ibid, p.22). Reproduction of new generations with pure blood is crucial in nationalist projects where genealogy is vital (ibid, p.22). Regarding the same issue, Peterson (1999, p. 45) argues that the relation between nation and reproduction results in the disciplining of families as being heterosexual and fulfilling their duty of sexual reproduction for the collective interest. She emphasizes how non-reproductive sex emerges as a threat to the national interests (ibid, p.45). When it comes to Turkey's modernization project, the relation between women's reproductive capacity and the nationalism cannot be easily recognized because 'genealogy' is not crucial to be counted as a real Turk. However, women's reproduction is still assigned a very critical role in the name of 'motherhood'. Quoting from Ataturk, who says "*The highest duty of woman is motherhood. If one realizes fully that education of both boys and girls starts in infancy, the importance of motherhood becomes evident*", Ayse Parla (2001, p.74), shows how expectations of mothering and the patriotic citizen identity is blended. It is possible to say that male-to-female transsexuals are not allowed to accomplish their national duty of 'mothering' in Turkey due to the regulations of sex-reassignment surgeries. As I mentioned in the background chapter, one of the preconditions to apply for sex-change operation in Turkey is 'to be unproductive' (Atamer, 2006). Hence, a transsexual is not counted as eligible to raise future generations. Furthermore, it is also possible to interpret the current sex-reassignment regulations in Turkey as a way of 'controlling the unwanted population (see also Peterson, 1999, p.45).

Another intersection which is introduced by Yuval-Davis is between cultural reproduction and gender relations (1997, p.23) She states that "specific codes and regulations are usually developed, defining who/what is a 'proper man' and a 'proper woman', which are central to the identities of collectivity members" (p.67). According to Peterson(1999) reproduction of cultural forms are strongly related to the reproduction of a symbolic order that perpetuate "gendered dichotomies and oppositional gender identities, while exclusively heterosexual family life ensures that heterosexual practice and gendered divisions of labor/power/authority are the only apparent options" (p.47) This perspective is really instrumental to interpret the childhood experiences of transsexual people, since most of them refer to their confusion with the gender dichotomies in their household, and underlines their deviation from the expected gender roles that is introduced to them according to their sex.



Moreover, this approach is crucial to understand how ‘femininities’ and ‘masculinities’ are constructed and what kind of meanings are culturally assigned to them. In the case of the Turkish modernization project, ‘femininity’ is generally considered to be devaluing for both nationalist woman and nationalist man (Shafak, 2004, p.29). An indicator of this are the ways that women are constructed as ‘genderless’ and men are humiliated when they are effeminate. In this sense, transsexuals’ ways of constructing their own femininities and masculinities are directly linked to the (pre)defined codes. Furthermore, the breakdown of the bargain or ‘subversion’ of ‘proper’ maleness and ‘proper’ femaleness are linked to the same codes. If there were no codes, there would be no subversion.

The final point from Yuval-Davis’s framework that I will benefit from is the relation between gender and nation as they are intersected through gendered militaries and gendered wars (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p.24). Due to its strong relevance to my research, I will specifically focus on the ‘gendered militaries’. Military and security institutions have been a historical site of hegemonic masculinity, where masculinity has been normalized and regularized (Kronsell, 2005, p.282). In most countries, military service is available only to male citizens since “their sex has been taken as a given, a ‘natural’ circumstance determining their status as the country’s defenders” (ibid, p.282). The fact that Turkish military is explicitly excluding homosexuals with the premise that they are “unfit due to psycho-sexual problems” can be seen as parallel to the first principle of heteronormativity defined by Tiina Rosenberg, which is about the separation between ‘us’ and ‘other’ in a hierarchical manner. In other words, because military is defining male homosexuality as ‘pathological’, it can be regarded as a source of ‘heteronormative’ ideals. It is also linked to the question of who is eligible to serve the nation. Regarding the transsexual experiences in Turkey, gendered military is also important. For instance, a female-to-male transsexual might not totally feel like a so-called ‘real’ man because he is not allowed to serve his country as all natural-born males are supposed to do.

#### **4.4. Use of Theoretical Framework within the Empirical Chapters:**

During the following empirical chapters, ‘bargaining with heteronormativity’ will be the backbone of the analysis. In Chapter 5, I will discuss ‘growing up’ narratives of the transsexuals and analyze the operation of heteronormativity during their childhood and adolescence periods. Chapter 6, will focus on the narratives about the ‘rupture’ of the transsexuals from their hometown and their entrance to the transsexual/transvestite subculture.

Theoretically, I will discuss these stories in relation to strategies that are developed by informants during their bargaining with heteronormativity. Chapter 7 will elaborate the regulations concerning sex-reassignment surgeries in Turkey and analyze the influence of ‘nationalism’ on the operation of these regulations. Furthermore, informants’ experiences in relation to these regulations will be discussed as a ‘bargaining process with medical and legal authorities’. Chapter 8 will draw attention to the experiences of transsexuals who are earning their life as sex-workers. I will analyze ‘sex-work’ as a strategy that helps transsexuals to survive within the heteronormative social structures. Finally, in Chapter 9 I will discuss the informant’s bargaining process with both the obligatory military service and the nationalist gendered discourse (re)produced by the military institution.

## CHAPTER: 5

# GROWING UP TRANSSEXUAL

### **Introduction:**

Throughout this chapter, I would like to elaborate transsexuals' experiences of growing up as they are narrated by five FTM and four MTF transsexuals<sup>33</sup>. I have divided this chapter into two sections. First, I will depict the 'innocence' period of informants where their childhood narratives will be presented. These narratives will enable me to understand gender binaries as they are initially introduced to the informants by their family and other people around them. Second, I will portray the 'realization' process of the informants through their narratives of how they experienced their altering body and their initial sexual attraction during their adolescence period.

### **5.1. Innocence Period: Elaborating Childhood Narratives of Transsexuals**

This section will draw attention to the childhood narratives of the informants. It is called 'innocence period' because the narratives refer to a time period where the informants were not fully aware of their contradiction with the gender dichotomies. When the informants were narrating their childhood, all of them put emphasis on their own deviation from the gender binaries. While some presented memories of being corrected by their family members, neighbors or teachers who were trying to place them into the appropriate gender roles, others underlined the tolerance they were enjoying.

I would like to start with the narrative of Eser. He described his family as "*a typical Turkish family*", and portrayed his mother as a devoted housewife who loves her children and ready to sacrifice everything for them. His father who runs a textile boutique was described as an aggressive and serious man. Eser added that the silent boss of the household was his mother. Describing his two brothers as adorable, he explained how he had enjoyed being a part of their game until he had found himself crashing to the boundaries of gender binaries:

*"Before elementary school, I was spending all my time as a tail of my brothers. I was following them to everywhere. We were like homeless street children who were outside from morning to night. Playing outside, play fighting, ringing other people's door bells and running away...The childish things you know... There were always some girls playing with*

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<sup>33</sup> One of the 10 contributors of this research did not want to talk about childhood and family issues

*ropes in front of our apartment, but I was never interested in their games. What I was concerned about was my underdeveloped arm muscles, and the number of wounds on my legs. One day, I think I was going to second year of elementary school at that time. My brothers suddenly pushed me away from their game, telling me that I could no more join them. They said "it is so stupid, you are embarrassing us". It is not about the embarrassment issue... I was rejected by my brothers and that hurt me. I ran to my mum crying, and complaining...and she slapped on my face saying 'stop crying. What you expect? You are a girl, be like a girl, one day you will get married and look at your dirty knees. You never think of what other people might be talking behind me and you. Are you proud of being a shame for me?' She said like thousands of things I hardly remember. (showing me the hardly recognizable scars on his arm) All these scars are from those times...(Laughing), don't worry they are not blade scars. I was biting my self instead of cutting. I kept on biting myself because I was so frustrated and I was so angry with myself. I was not feeling wrong, but I knew that something was wrong. Everything started to seem silly and shitty. I was forcing myself to make sense but I failed each time...I was just so angry each time when my brothers came back from a football game with blushed, sweaty and happy face." (Eser, FTM)*

The operation of gender binaries are easy to recognize in Eser's story. The strict opposition of masculine and feminine gender roles is not only explicit in his mother's and brothers' behaviors but also in Eser's own subjectivity. First of all, as he grew older he was expected to fit clearly to his biological sex by performing feminine gender role. Asking him to be neater and cleaner, his mother was trying to encourage Eser to be more 'girly' because one day he is expected to get married. Furthermore, his brothers set clear lines between themselves and their 'female' sibling.

We can also focus on Eser's own subjectivity in relation to his childhood. While emphasizing his difference from other female children, Eser underlined his masculine characteristics as a child. Here, we can recognize the bodily aspects of his narration. He mentioned his interest in his undeveloped arm muscles and his wounds on his legs. Since they are both related to his physical body, it is interesting to see Eser's perception of a masculine body. Furthermore, he also talked about his frustration in relation to his own situation as a child. The fact that he was biting himself can be regarded as a self reaction to his own physical body. Perhaps, he was so confused because he could not fit himself within the gender binaries.

During the later part of our interview however, Eser told that, as a child, he had accidentally witnessed a conversation between his parents, indicating that his father were proud of his 'boyish' behavior in contrast to his mother.

It is possible to recognize a similar experience in the case of Tim who is a FTM transsexual. He lost his father in a car accident when he was three years old. He was raised up by his widow mother to whom he is strongly attached. He told me how he had enjoyed playing with this mother's eyeliner to draw a mustache above his lip, pretending that he was the father of the household. *"It was a joke we used to laugh a lot about... Well, mum did not have a very feminine posture either"*.

Probably, it is possible to come across many females who have tried to draw a fake mustache and never received odd reactions. I chose to include the story not because it is very original but it is a gate for future discussions. In my view, female children are seen to be more tolerated when they transgress gender roles whereas their male counterparts are being corrected more severely. In other words, adoption of masculinity is generally seen to be less threatening than the adoption of femininity.

ZenZen is another FTM informant. He portrayed his family as very open-minded. He said he had been a boy-girl during his childhood and none of his parents had tried to change him. He was expected to wear skirt only during the Ramadan Bayram when he was visiting his grandparents. Otherwise, he was allowed to wear whatever he wanted. His neighbors and teachers did however try to correct him:

*"Neighbors were warning my mother. They told her that I was in a sensitive age period and I should be taught how to walk and talk. Our sport teacher was always criticizing my sport clothes. All the girls were wearing tights, but I was preferring to wearing baggy shorts... Some people in the neighborhood were asking me on purpose 'Are you the son of Mr.X? Oh, I thought he only has a daughter'. You could hear the humiliation in their sounds. I was squeezed between two opposing sides. My parents were hugging me, whereas people outside were pointing at me. I was confused what is real."* (ZenZen, FTM)

ZenZen's narrative is crucial because it presents the contradiction he had experienced during the childhood. On the one hand, he was allowed to step outside of the gender binaries. In this sense, he enjoyed a certain degree of tolerance just like the other FTM informants that I discussed above. Yet, it does not mean that he was totally free from gender norms. For instance, he was expected to wear a skirt on traditional days. Hence, he was actually aware of

the appropriate image of a female child even though his parents did not try to dictate him this image. Regarding the reactions he was receiving from neighbors and teachers, it is possible to say that gender binaries were not easy to avoid for ZenZen. He might not be subjected to these dichotomies regularly, but he was definitely aware of their existence.

So far, I have given examples from the narratives of FTM informants. I pointed at the operation of gender binaries during their childhood periods and discussed how it constrained their lives despite the certain degree of tolerance they enjoyed. I would like to continue by illustrating the childhood experiences of Burce who is a MTF informant. She described her lawyer mother and neurologist father as busy people who did not recognize her “ambiguity” when she was a child. I asked her what she meant by “ambiguity”, she replied:

*“I was a very feminine child. I mean I was really feminine. Ok, I was spending hours playing computer games and so. Maybe it covered my girly sides. I think so. But, I can tell you that I was very emotional, never liked to swear or fight. I was a naïve, conformable, polite boy. It was easy to beat me or hurt me, you know both physically and emotionally. I was feeling upset when other kids were chasing a defenseless cat. They (referring to her parents) never recognized it.” (Burce, MTF)*

Burce was raised by her aunt who was her nanny during her childhood. She described her aunt as a key figure in her life who was trying to teach her to become a “*Heartbreaker Casanova*”. She told that one day she came back from school crying because there were a couple of pupils who were teasing her for a reason she could not remember when I was interviewing her.

*“I told you how sensitive I was. Anybody could make me cry by simply touching me. Poor me...I remember my aunt being a little bit annoyed me crying. I look ugly when I cry, I also sound terrible... So she kneeled down, held me so tight and told “Don’t cry you little man, this is what they want. When I was a child, we were making fun of boys who were crying like you. It makes you look like a gullible chicken. Do you want to look like the lamb of your mother? One day you will be a very attractive man and all the girls will be fighting for you. But stop crying now. No one will be interested in you in this way.”*

It is undisputable that Burce’s aunt was trying to comfort her upset nephew. More importantly, however is the language she used trying to encourage Burce. She sounds like a

fighting couch trying to motivate Burce for the next struggle and asks her to be as tough as possible. In Turkish language, being a lamb of the mother (*anne kuzusu*), is a phrase used for people who are very attached to their mothers. It is also used as a teasing phrase to insult boys who cannot manage to become a man yet. Gullible chicken (*kezban tavuk*) is a phrase that is generally used to describe girls who are very emotional and cries all the time. Burce is thus asked to leave aside characteristics that are generally considered to be 'feminine'. In her narrative, it is also possible to point at the dominant heterosexual discourse which makes Burce's aunt automatically think that her nephew would sexually be attracted to the female sex. Based on this assumption, she tried to encourage Burce by reminding her of the girls who would compete with one another in order to date her. Another vital point to be highlighted in relation to Burce's narrative is the way she employs the gender binaries herself. Just like Eser, who tried to underscore his masculine features as a kid, Burce also stressed how feminine she was. Stressing her sensitivity and politeness, she distinguished herself from other male children.

Oya, who is another MTF informant also talked about her feminine behavior as a child. Her narrative explains how scared she was to be caught acting 'feminine' by her family:

*"Mum is a housewife. Dad runs a small market. Well, he had never had a regular income but thanks God we always had food on our table...Mugla is a modern city, you see on television, all the tourists passing by. My dad is a modern man, I can say. But he is running that small market located in the heart of neighborhood. People know each other...So he never liked me being so girly. When I was a kid, I was sneaking into my sister's closet when mum was outside, and dad was probably at work. I was touching her clothes and so. Call it curiosity or whatever you want. I was never brave enough to try them or to use her perfume, of course. I remember those days dark. Me, being a child and unsure about what I was doing at all."*(Oya, MTF)

It is interesting to see how difficult it might be for a boy to look or even touch the female clothes or female accessories even it is just because of curiosity. Oya's curiosity and her lack of courage to try her sister's perfume must be a remarkable moment of her innocence period. During the interview, she sounded like she was feeling sorry for her own childhood which is surrounded by infinite curiosity and feeling of guilt due to her attraction to that perfume.

To sum up, the narratives of the informants demonstrate that the lines between gender binaries are drawn more concretely for male children than the female ones. Experiences of

FTM informants show that they had more flexibility to cruise into the gender roles of the opposite sex during their childhood. Here, I do not overlook the fact that some FTM informants were also attempted to be fit into the appropriate gender roles. For instance, Eser's mother was presented to be very worried about Eser's gendered future, but his father seemed to be less concerned and was even proud of Eser's masculine behaviors. Similarly, ZenZen narrated the contradictory reactions he was receiving from his parents and the neighbors. I think these contradictory reactions manifest that there were at least a certain degree of freedom FTM informants could enjoy during their childhood. When it comes to the MTF informants, all the narratives are based on the memories of a sharp correction. They are always asked to be as masculine as possible.

## **5.2. Transsexuals' narratives of 'realization' process**

Almost all the informants followed a clear chronological time line when I was interviewing them due to the order of 'themas' in the interview guide. Hence, the childhood narratives were immediately followed by their adolescence stories. They narrated how confused they were about their developing body and their emerging sexual attractions. I decided to analyze those narratives under the heading called 'realization process'. Here, I do not use 'realization' necessarily as 'coming out' to themselves as transsexuals. It is a process where they begin to question their confusion in relation to their standing within the gender binaries. Different from the childhood narratives, the following stories refer to the instances of conscious confrontation triggered by bodily changes and development of sexual desires. First, I will concentrate on the narratives based on the confusion about bodily changes. Second, I will focus on the informants' experiences of sexual attraction.

### **Experiencing the Altering Body:**

My interview guide did not include any direct question referring to the experiences of the changing adolescent body. While MTF informants did not talk a lot about the perception of their physically changing body, almost all the FTM informants mentioned their experiences regarding the issue.

As I already introduced in the previous section, Eser is a FTM informant whose mother was portrayed as being so frustrated by Eser's gender transgression. Regarding his adolescence, Eser narrated:



*“I began the middle school. I had no friends at that time, was pretty lonesome. Puberty and my growing boobs... I was wearing extra large tops to cover them... One day, I found this box laying on my bed. Mum had bought a bra from the bazaar. I opened the box, and hold it...I tried to imagine it on me. I was frustrated but curious at the same time. So, I put it on and stood up in front of the mirror. When I saw my reflection, the cables in my head exploded. I went crazy. Immediately I took it off, threw it away and went for a long walk. When I came back, mum was waiting in the kitchen with the bra box in her hand. She might have taken it back from the garbage bin. She started to hit me with that box crying and swearing. ‘Stupid girl, what do you think you are doing? Don’t you have any respect for your mother? Look at yourself. Are you going to stay in your father’s house forever? Ugly, you should start to behave yourself. Tomorrow morning, I will be giving all your clothes to the son of the janitor...Go take a shower you look like a witch.’” (Eser, FTM)*

An immediate response to this narrative could be that there is nothing special about experiencing frustration over the changing body during that period of age. However, that piece of story carries great insights about gender dichotomies and how they are attempted to be installed in a young person. These dichotomies are crucial to understand the way Eser was experiencing his physical and emotional world. Eser told that he was uncomfortable with the use of bra when he put on it for the first time. This fact might have two dimensions. First of all, we can say that he was confused and frustrated with his developing breast simply because it was a new experience. He did not tell anything to indicate that he was feeling like a boy or man. So, we should not necessarily relate his negative feelings to his transsexuality. However, his feelings might also be the consequences of the gender ideals he was growing within. He was probably aware of the fact that he was expected to use the bra because it was left on his bed. A bra is more than a piece of clothe, it is also a carrier of heavy symbolic meanings. It is possible to read these meanings through the anger of Eser’s mother when she realized that Eser was not interested in wearing a bra. Reminding him that he was not supposed to stay in his father’s house forever, Eser’s mother was emphasizing the marriage. In other words, Eser was told that he was expected to get married and leave the father’s house. In this sense, the bra can be seen as a symbolic step towards the gendered future. Hence, it is possible to say that Eser’s frustration might also be linked to his realization of this gendered future. In other words, he might have begun to understand the conditions that would be constraining his life options.

Tim's story is also based on confusion in relation to his developing body. Similar to Eser, he also talked about his frustration as an adolescent as being linked to the entrance of new accessories in his life:

*“New accessories entered my world like pads, tweezer, wax. I was not using tweezer but you see people using it around you. So you feel like you have to do the same... You cannot stop the biological change. You are bleeding and you have tummyache, and definitely you become uglier. I was shapeless. I understood that I wanted to be a man at that time. I did not like bleeding, it did not fit me... I wanted my breasts to be smaller. I was not content with them, not at all” (Tim, FTM)*

. In Eser's narrative it was his mother who had played the leading role. In the case of Tim, his peers can be regarded influential. It is possible to say that he was comparing himself with the other female children and he felt obliged to remove his body hairs. Different from Eser, and other FTM informants, Tim is the only one who clearly stated that he was feeling like a member of the opposite sex at that time.

Another story which is based on the rage of growing up belongs to Yaman who is another FTM informant. He was dismissed from high school because of a fight he was involved. I asked him the reason of the fight, and he explained his general mood of anger at that time:

*“It feels like the entire world collapsed upon your head .Your parents think that you have mood swings just because you are a teenager. It is more than this. Your body is changing, and you can't stop it. Then the question pops out in your mind: why am I trying to stop it? Do you know how much I've tried to talk to Allah, telling him that I feel so sorry and guilty that the womanly curves do not look good on me...I mean, I had to convert my anger to somewhere in the end. It was the healthy reaction, you know. I've never been a suicidal person because I've never tried to repress my anger. That was good in the end.”*

I did not get to know the reason of the fight that led to his dismissal. What is important about this narrative is that it concurs with others that include instances of an inner mood of anger. One can object to this argument by pointing at the fact that the majority of young people have similar confusions during adolescence. Yet, I would like to underline the specificity of the experiences of transsexuals, especially FTM ones, as a consequence of lack of reference

points that they can guide through out their adolescence. Comparison with other people seems to be a crucial point in the realization process of transsexuals. It is the time when they relate their subjective experiences to the experiences of other people with the attempt of figuring out some commonalities. In this sense, FTM informants seem like lacking reference points in comparison to MTF informants. To clear my point I would like to point at Sevilay's story.

Sevilay was the only MTF informant who talked about her body hairs as the major source of confusion during her high school years. Comparing herself to her peers at school, she said she had not been like an ordinary boy who was proud of his growing chest hairs. She also mentioned that she had not been courageous enough to shave her "disgusting, itchy, hard" hairs because she had never seen a man eager to remove body hairs before except *ibnes*<sup>34</sup>. In the case of Sevilay, she was questioning her reaction to the body hairs in relation to her peers at school. Through her reference to gay and effeminate men, she was trying to make sense of her experiences in relation to people who might have similar problems about body hairs.

Transsexuals' attempts to compare and relate their experiences with other people around them are also obvious in the experiences of their initial same-sex attraction. I will elaborate some narratives in the next section.

### **Initial Same-Sex Attraction**

Some of the informants narrated their confusion with the realization of their same-sex attraction before their transition to the opposite sex. In other words, FTM informants narrated their attraction to female sex, and MTF informants narrated their attraction to male sex during the time they were growing up. However, I should underline that "Transsexuality is not an extreme version of homosexuality as it is often believed to be" (Selek, 2001, 84). So, there are transsexuals who are gays and lesbians, that is, they are attracted to same sex that they have transitioned into. As, I mentioned in the beginning, all the informants of this research defined themselves as heterosexuals with a focus on their current attraction to the opposite sex. This led them to experience same-sex attraction before they came out of the closet as a transsexual. The following examples point at that period of time and illustrate informants' confusion of same-sex attraction:

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<sup>34</sup> *İbne*: in Turkish language, it is a slur term used for gay or effeminate men. The word has been started to be used by many LGBT activists as well as a political positioning against heterosexism.

Coming from a relatively open minded and caring family, ZenZen described his ‘innocence period’ as a comfortable period of time. He was not exposed to strict gender roles introduced by his family. However, the way he realized his emerging same sex attraction was narrated to be a very tough experience:

*“ZenZen: I was too young for that. I was just a girl who looks like a boy. I never said “I must be male”... When I realized my sexual desires towards girls, my world turned upside down. I had no idea how my parents would confront it. I found some sexuality books from dad’s library. You know those consultant books like encyclopaedia. I was trying to find something about my desire. When I read about homosexual women, I was so excited. I had heard of homosexual men from TV, but I had not come across anything about lesbians. So, I was a little bit relaxed of hearing about the existence of lesbians...And it was ok to be a lesbian, I could easily hide it and live by myself. But, I was so scared of disappointing my parents even though I knew they were open-minded, modern people. But this idea of seeing their daughter holding the hand of another girl...I don’t know. Gradually, I began to feel the change inside of me. So irresistible...I was admiring the boys who can flirt with girls. During the course of time, I became so hostile to myself, punching the walls and talking rude around, swearing...I was even swearing to my parents in their face. All those crying crisis, for hours and hours, until I had a horrible headache. Dad told that I was making mum upset and they were worried about me. They suggested providing me a psychological consultant, but I just rejected. They never insisted...One day I was walking back home from somewhere I don’t remember so clear now. I met two boys from high school. They were one year older than me. They attempted to start a fight by pushing me to the corner of the street, saying ‘We can fuck your mother’ and I said ‘Say one more thing about my mother and I will fuck yours until she cries’ I know how bad it sounds now... It just popped out from my mouth. Suddenly, one of them grabbed my vagina over my pants and grinned ‘come and fuck her with that thing, you whore’. Someone was passing by the street and told them to leave me alone. I ran away to home. I was thinking of killing them at that moment. I really wanted to break their hands and twist their heads. I felt like I was going to explode of anger...I was so embarrassed, and had this thing inside of me, you know because I could not punch them on the face. Those animals, I really hope they crashed under a bus...Anyway, I went back home, and punched the little window over my door with anger. It broke down and cut my head. It was bleeding a lot. Mum grabbed me to the hospital. Dad was at work. This beautiful nurse was dressing my wound. She was so nice to me, I mean ..(laughing) She was looking into my eyes and trying to comfort me because I was*

*still so emotional in the hospital and dropping a few tears. The attention of that nurse made my day. Me and mum went back home with that stupid smile on my face, still dreaming of that nurse. You know, I could just injure myself again to be close to her one more time...That night I told my father that I had feelings for girls. He stared at me without talking for a while. We were sitting on my bed. I felt so guilty and said ' No, dad maybe I don't feel in that way...maybe just for nowadays' ... He told me not to tell anything to my mother unless I am sure. I guess he talked to my mum about the issue. She never explicitly said anything. But, I could feel that she became so protective. When I was going out, she was asking me not to stay so late and asking details about the people was going out" (ZenZen, FTM)*

In relation to ZenZen's experience, we can see the constraints of heterosexist gender binaries that shaped both his own subjectivity and other people's reaction to him. Undoubtedly, these two dimensions are interwoven processes. First of all, it seems like growing up with open-minded parents does not free someone from the burdens of gender binaries. Eventually, people hit the limitations of prevailing binaries in relation to their sex and gender. Dominant heterosexist discourse conceals the homosexual desire and turns it into a mystery. The way ZenZen sought through encyclopedias can be seen as a manifestation of an inner requirement to find out other people with similar experiences. In other words, he was looking for a reference point that he could relate his same sex attraction to it. In relation to ZenZen's perception of himself, we should not overlook the fact that he was specifically deprived of information about female homosexuality. He mentioned that he was aware of homosexual men from television, but female homosexuality was a mystery for him when he was growing up. Regarding this issue, Tim, who is another FTM informant, argued that effeminate men are teased a lot in Turkey and this is what makes them more visible compared to girls who don't fit to the stereotypes. He said that, as a child, he was aware of males who want to change their sex to female, but he had never come across the contrary.

Experiencing a state of solitude is either explicitly or implicitly depicted by all the FTM informants of this research. Their narratives generally stressed that they did not know anyone like themselves. However, MTF narratives of growing up do not refer to the same type of loneliness. MTF informants told that they were alone because they did not know whom to hang out with or simply because they did not have many friends. Yet, they told that they were all aware of gay and transsexual people, like the nationally famous singers; Bulent Ersoy and Zeki Muren. On one hand, these circumstances can be regarded as an advantage for MTF transsexuals during their journey of discovering themselves. On the other hand, they can

create some problems by making MTF transsexuals more easily recognizable by people around them. I will present a part of Burçe's narrative to explain the nuance in a more concrete way:

*"I never enjoyed hanging around with my male classmates. They were so rude, Fenerbahçe<sup>35</sup> hooligans. I did the mistake of my life by falling in love with one of them. It was like impossible love, really utopian. First of all, he would have definitely castrated me if he learnt about my feelings. I was really falling down at that time. I could not study, eat and sleep... You know what platonic love might have done to you. I was trying to hate him. I was reminding myself of all horrible characteristics of him. There were a lot of them actually. I told you that I was an emotional kid, and can you imagine me as heartsick? I was crying all the time, playing with my hairs, trying to give them new shape. Again, it was my aunt who recognized the change. She was not my nanny anymore but I was going to her place for lunch sometimes. She had this ability of reading your feelings by looking at your face. That makes her a little bit creepy... One day we were eating and I was not in the mood because that guy had begun dating a girl, a girl with pimples on her face and the ugliest teeth. So, I was having a bad time obviously. My aunt told me "you have something..I know you do. I will figure it out, don't worry . Can you imagine? She was ...a little bit insane, the way she was talking "I don't want you to turn one of the perverted musicians on TV". I played the stupid of course. She said "Look dear, you have a very beautiful face and a good hearth. You are easy to be deceived because you never doubt people. You accept everybody. I know your weird walking friends. You should stop seeing them" I was shocked. I mean, isn't it too bad? She saw this stupid Dj with funny sun glasses who fucks around on TV and thought that I will become exactly a jerk like that. Do they have to present gays so marginally on TV?"(Burce, MTF)*

Burçe's quotation does not say anything about whether it was the first time she experienced same-sex attraction or not. Her account is particularly centered on her suffering as a person who was platonically in love. The way she suppressed her feelings can also be observed in the lives of many heterosexual people. However, we can trace the influence of heteronormativity in her narrative. Even though Burçe did not mention any confusion about her sexual attraction, she was basically troubled due to her aunt. Burçe's behavior and appearance was judged by her aunt through heteronormative lenses. In other words, she probably had a rigid definition of a masculine male in her head and she was comparing Burçe

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<sup>35</sup> One of the three biggest football team in Turkey.

with that ideal description. This is why she called some of Burce's friends "people who walk in a 'weird' way". She also warned her nephew not to become one of the 'perverted' musicians on television. I think, the remarkable point of that piece of story is the language that implicitly reflects homophobia and transphobia. That is, Burce's aunt was implying the threat of gender transgression in a way that avoids the direct use of the words such as 'gay' or 'transsexual'. Negation of these categories in daily language can be regarded as an effort to make gays and transsexuals invisible (see also, Rosenberg, 2006, p.113). In relation to the operation of heteronormativity, we can also analyze Burce's self expression. In contrast to ZenZen (FTM) who said that he experienced a great solitude related to his emerging same sex attraction, Burce did not mention anything about it. She was probably aware of people like her. The only thing she was complaining about was the biased representation of gays on television. However, her own self expression is also biased in relation to heterosexual masculinity. Throughout her narration, she was distinguishing herself from male students, indicating that her male counterparts were rude football fanatics and she could have nothing in common with them. It is interesting to see how she related masculine gender role with negative characteristics. She told that the person with whom she was in love could have castrated her because of her feelings. In this sense, the masculinity that she is distancing herself from, could never endure the idea of being loved by a man. Here, the concept 'castration' is significant due to displaying Burce's approach to masculinity from a different angle. Castration can be regarded as a way of taking away ones 'manhood' and it has powerful bodily implications. Here, Burce's perception of the masculinity would physically punish the same-sex desire (male-to-male) by destroying the function of the testes.

### **5.3. Discussion:**

Based on the nuances of 'growing up' experiences of the informants, we can examine the multiple ways that heteronormativity operates through. First of all, as Rosenberg (2006, p.112) stresses, heteronormativity is based on the naturalization of dichotomies. Thus, in a system which is characterized by the strict opposition of gender roles, transsexuals (including both FTM and MTF ones) confront certain challenges due to their gender transgression. They are introduced to the rigid definition of gender binaries either within their families, in their neighborhood or at school. Hence, it is not possible for them to grow up free from the opposition of masculinity/femininity. In this sense, we can say that they learn the golden rule

of the heteronormative bargain. That is; there are certain rules that regulate gender, and breaching them would be a form of deviance.

However, this golden rule seems to be open to negotiation when it comes to FTM transsexuals's innocence period. Despite their subjective, inner confusions about their gender, most of them talked about a certain degree of freedom they had enjoyed. They were somehow more tolerated when they were adopting masculine gender role as a child. Generally, MTF informants were asked to avoid feminine characteristics which were considered to be problematic. Why does heteronormativity differently operate for MTF and FTM informants? We can explain this situation by the argument that says heteronormativity, as a guiding principle, generally naturalizes dichotomies by favoring one category in relation to the other (ibid, p.112). In this context, it is possible to argue that 'masculinity' is generally favored in relation to femininity. Contradictory experiences of MTF and FTM growing up experiences also evoke the gender ideologies of the Turkish modernization project. Shafak (2004, p.14) points at how femininity was a devaluing trait for both modern man and the modern woman. Although none of the FTM informants mentioned that they had been encouraged to leave their femininity, their lack of femininity was not perceived as a threat either.

Interestingly, FTM informants whose innocence periods were narrated to be relatively easier than the MTF ones had tougher realization processes. Almost all the FTM informants expressed their bodily confusion during their adolescence. Especially, experiencing menstruation and developing breasts were told to be a turning point in their life. When it comes to emergence of their initial same-sex attraction, MTF informants emphasized their deprivation of a reference point that they could relate themselves to. It is known that female homosexuality is not openly vocalized in Turkey although there are contemporary projects developed by LGBTTT organizations that intend to contribute to the visibility of female homosexuality in the country<sup>36</sup>. But why does female homosexuality remain a mystery while male homosexuality is almost known by everybody in Turkey? This can also be explained by the hierarchical order between masculinity and femininity. Since femininity is perceived as a threat for male, effeminate guys, homosexual males and MTF transsexuals are generally condemned due to being perceived as adopting 'femininity'. As Tim (FTM) argues, this situation results in the visibility of male homosexuality. This seems to enable MTF informants

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<sup>36</sup> For example, the photography project "Open Your Face" is developed by Kaos GL and the photographer Nevruz Ebru Aksu. The project exhibits the photos of 12 lesbian women who are loud and proud about their sexual orientation. The photos were first displayed in 2007 at the International Meeting Against Homophobia, Ankara.

For more information, check the website: <http://www.kaosgl.com/node/2387>



during their realization process. In other words, they are aware of other people like themselves. However, this also creates a vulnerable situation for them. It is more difficult for MTF informants to remain in their 'closet' and conceal their sexuality.

## CHAPTER 6

### ‘GOING PUBLIC’ AS TRANSEXUAL

#### **Introduction:**

The previous chapter threw light on the growing up experiences of the informants. Their narratives demonstrated that none of the informants were entirely aware of their ‘transsexuality’ during the ‘innocence’ and ‘realization’ periods. However, they were in a state of confusion in relation to their experienced contradiction with gender binaries. This chapter will focus on the time period when the informants accepted their ‘transsexuality’ and decided to ‘go public’ as a transsexual. Here, ‘going public’ does not mean that all the informants automatically came out of their closet. But, it refers to a process through which they began their attempts to live their life as a member of the opposite sex and sought ways to make it happen.

In this sense, this chapter will concentrate on two ways that the informants initially followed in order to live out their transsexual identity more openly. First, I will present stories about informants’ rupture from their hometown. Second, I will focus on their experiences with the transsexual/transvestite subculture as it was narrated by the informants.

Theoretically, I will elaborate informant’s rupture from their hometown and their entrance to transsexual/transvestite subculture as strategies through which transsexuals tackle the constraints of heteronormativity.

#### **6.1. Rupture from Hometown**

Sociologist Pinar Selek (2001, p.126) argues that almost all the transsexuals and transvestites in Turkey have to leave their families due to their noticeable deviations from the gender norms. She also states that some of the transsexuals she knows are known to be living abroad by their family. “Some cut their long hairs, let their facial hair grow and put on corset to cover their breast once or twice a year to visit their families” (ibid, p.126). It is possible to say that the findings of my research are supporting Selek’s argument. None of the informants that I interviewed are living with their families. All of them left their hometown in their late teens or early twenties due to their sexual identity. The reasons that Ankara was chosen as the final destination are diverse. Generally, Ankara was assumed to be bigger and relatively liberal in contrast to their hometowns. Additionally, some told that they had moved to Ankara

just because they knew some people there. While some informants keep contact with their family, others clearly expressed their reluctance to meet their families again. In this section, I will present some of the narratives that are related to informants' rupture from hometown.

Oya is one of the informants whose experience of same sex relation led to her rupture from her hometown. She narrated her relationship with a sense of longing, explaining how this 'forbidden love' resulted in a chaos.

*“Oya: In the downtown, there was Uncle Suat who was running a button shop. He had a son with whom I was so close. He was four years older than me. He was some sort of my confidante. So attractive he was, and I was burning for him. I did not have to explain him any of my feelings simply because he already knew them. He had feelings for me also. During those dark middle school years, he was standing there and smelling so beautiful. We became a couple...Oh dear, we were so gullible at that time. Everything was so pure for us, no lies and no deceptions. I could talk to him for hours and hours. People around us were probably thinking that we were just buddies (kanka). I cannot describe the thing between me and him. I am grateful to Allah for giving me the opportunity to meet him. I could have killed myself otherwise. I was suicidal. He made life easier for me. He lifted me up in my down periods. I was never someone who was hungry for love. I mean, I knew that I was precious in the family. But, Suat's son was giving me something different, so dense. It is indefinable...Like the song 'my eyes were getting wet due to the intensity of my love'. He was making me real. He was talking to me as if I was his queen. Everything is passing. My glorious Allah only let us keep the memories...Later on, somehow, Uncle Suat heart of us and he attacked my father in front of his market, telling him that I was perverting his son. Dirty slanders...My father came home and he started to beat me and my sister. He was crying at the same time...*

*Deniz: Why did he beat your sister?*

*Oya: He was full of anger. I understand that it was hurting him deep inside. Until that day, he was so gentle to me and my sister. However, he slapped us so hard that day. I am not angry with him. I mean I still love him so much. Somehow, I escaped to Ankara. I also became distant to my sister for a short period of time. I guess, she was busy with healing the wounds of our parents. She also had some difficulties in accepting me. But, now we see each other. Although, she does not approve every step I take, she supports me...I also call mum by phone sometimes. But dad rejects talking to me” (Oya, MTF)*

During the interview, she also added that it was Suat's son who had given her some contacts in Ankara and helped her move. I had many questions in mind to ask Oya about the time period that she decided to leave. But I felt like I should not dig very sensitive memories.

Oya's 'forbidden love' seems to cause troubles not only for herself but also for her parents. Regarding her personal experiences, she was constrained in living her relationship openly. The way she narrated her boyfriend who was treating her like a queen, indicates that this person was a key figure in her life, in relation to her transsexual identity. Far from judgemental eyes, it was probably her boyfriend who helped her forget about all the gendered restrictions and made her feel completely like a woman. She also talked about her inclination to commit suicide at that time, and expressed her appreciation for her boyfriend's love that gave her the power to endure. Hence, it is possible to say that she was personally affected when her relationship was limited. She became deprived of someone who was releasing her life potential. Oya's 'forbidden love' also caused some problems for her parents. Her father's frustration might be the reflection of the social pressure on him. He was known by the neighborhood and Oya's same-sex affair would probably break his pride and destroy his reputation. When Uncle Suat attacked him in front of his shop, Oya's father probably felt humiliated and responsible for Oya's deviation. Taking all these different aspects into consideration, Oya's rupture from her hometown can be linked to her attempt of both increasing her life opportunities as a transsexual and protecting her parents' from further emotional destruction.

Sevilay is another MTF informant. She grew up in the city of Konya, which is generally known to be a conservative place. Different from Oya, Sevilay was severely abused by her family because of her sexual identity.

*"I had never pretended to be someone else. I was a beautiful girl in a male body. I was walking like a girl in Konya, can you believe me. That self-confident I was. Undoubtedly, everything has a price. I have always been rebellious. I was rebellious at that time as well. Dad was trying to recreate my posture. Telling me shit about how I was supposed to walk, and talk. Arms were supposed to be a little bit open while walking. Like those guys acting in Kurtlar Vadisi<sup>37</sup>. How could I, tell me? That was pissing him off, because he was desperately*

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<sup>37</sup> Turkish Soap Opera based on mafia stories.

*afraid of me being gay. To be honest, I was enjoying his anger. I was the frustrated one. I was angrier than him.”(Sevilay, MTF)*

She told that her deviation from gender binaries had returned to her as violence. Beating and home captivity is the two main type of violence she was subjected to. She told that she was locked up in a room for several weeks and kept distant from any type of communication facilities like telephone and television. I still don't know the intensity of the abuse she had experienced. It was easy to observe the rage in her voice and in her sharp mimics. I intended to ask about her mother's role during the period of time, but she interrupted me before I finished my question, saying:

*“She is worse than dad. She never wanted me around, I could feel it. She was treating me as if I was a shit, nothing more important. It is just fine. I am not going to complain here. I don't care about her. Maybe she is desperately struggling with a fatal disease now. It does not matter at all. I don't give a shit about her.”*

She added that she owes her freedom to her sister who helped her to run away from the captivity. When I asked her whether she currently keeps any contacts with her family, she said:

*“I was 20 years old when I came to Ankara. Even if your family is so cruel to you, there are times that you might miss them. So, this one time I was so drunk like a dog. During that time I was using birth control pills...They are told to be helping the boobies (memişler) grow up faster. It destroyed my mental and physical existence. Testosterones were clashing with the pills. It was a nightmare...During that time, I started to drink and dial. I wanted to speak to them (family). I told my mum that I wanted to be a woman. She hung up, and I never talked to her again...”*

For both Sevilay and Oya, their sexual identity seems to form the major factor that led them leave their home town and family behind. Interestingly, both of them tried to get in touch with their family at a certain point in time. I realized that it might be a part of their heteronormative bargain after I talked to a gay activist from Kaos GL Ankara. He said *“Once you are accepted by your family, the world can be heterosexist, violent, totally black. You don't care at all. Why? Because you have your family that you can rely on...”* Similarly, both

Oya and Sevilay might be looking for a trace of support from their family that would help them during their bargain with the heteronormative world. Sevilay mentioned that she was using birth control pills during the time she tried to call her family. Birth control pills are generally known to be the first underground step of hormone treatment due to the wrong belief that it has positive effects for those who want to change their sex to female. In this sense, Sevilay was probably in the beginning of her journey towards changing her sex. Thus, we can read her attempt to call her family as a part of the bargain. She might have wanted to receive their approval in order to be stronger in her future bargaining process with the heteronormative structure of the society.

What is worth discussing in both Oya's and Sevilay's families are, the way their families take a side in the heteronormative bargain as well. None of them narrated that their families had tried to find them in Ankara. In other words, their families did not try to get in touch with them until they themselves made an effort to call them. Families' rejection of their children can be an indicator of the fact that families also involve in a bargain with the heteronormative society. As long as their 'gender deviant' children are far from sight, they do not create a problem for the heterosexual reputation of the family. In other words, families might be trying to give a message to the society that they do not approve of their kid more than society does. Hence they still want to remain members of the heterosexual community. Yet, we should not overlook the fact that there is also a very subjective dimension in the way that families put a distance between themselves and their children. For instance, the fact that Oya's father was crying when he was beating his kids can be the indicator of his personal suffering. Perhaps, he internalized gender binaries so profoundly that he thought they were immutable. Hence, he was totally devastated when his son was breaching them.

Banu is the only informant was brought up in the famous city of Istanbul, by her mother and grandmother. She moved to Ankara when she was 20. I asked her why she decided to leave Istanbul which is known to have a very large transsexual community in Turkey.

*“People know Istanbul very wrongly. Ok, I am not originally from the city but I think I know the city as well as the people who were born here (Istanbulular). I don't believe in those who claim that the city is really modern, very open and it allows you to be whoever you want. Ridiculous... I have heard things that would make you faint right here. Some bastards can fuck my ass in the Beyoglu and when I complain guess what happens? The police would force*

*me to take a shower. Delete the traces. Why? Faggots (ibnes) are not so different from street dogs...I was aware of all the dirtiness around me when I was in Istanbul. But it was not actually the city that I ran away from. I love my mum. She struggled a lot after she divorced my dad. I did not want to be an extra burden to her. She would not be able to handle it at that time. Of course, there is another point. Let's look at everything from my side. How would I breathe if I continued to live with my mother and my grandmother, in the same house, within four walls? I would loose my mind" (Banu, MTF)*

Despite her focus on the potential danger of Istanbul for transsexuals, Banu's rupture from this city is seen to be triggered by anticipations. She was trying to protect both herself and her mother. Although, she did not mention any bitter memories about her mother's reaction to her sexual identity, she sounded quite sure that she would not be able to act so freely near her. Thus, she wanted to move far away so as to 'breathe' as a transsexual. On the other hand, her rupture from Istanbul can be interpreted as an attempt of protecting her mother. Apparently, divorcing was a rough experience for her mother and she was already on the verge of a sense of emotional destruction. Thus, Banu did not want to sadden her more by forcing her to confront with her child's transsexual identity. When I was interviewing Banu, she was making plans to move back to Istanbul to live with her mother who recently approved of her sexual identity. Banu is now 35 years old.

As we remember ZenZen from the previous chapter, he is coming from an exceptional family who was tolerant and supportive to ZenZen's sexual identity. Yet, just like the other informants, he also had to leave Tokat, his hometown, because of challenging the gender binaries. He told that he had received a major encouragement from his parents when he was planning to move to Ankara.

*"ZenZen: Tokat was like hell, seriously, worse than hell. I knew that I was supposed to run away from this horrible city. Admission to a university in Ankara would save me. I began to study so hard, like a vegetable without a life. Dad was helping me with mathematics. He is engineer and so great in teaching. They (referring to both his mother and father) put intense effort during my preparation for the university exams. So, I succeeded in the exam, received an average point that helped me to apply Ankara University. I was admitted to the department Turkish Literature and Culture. Happy end! Interestingly, we had this optimism about Ankara at that time. As if it was the only gate to a bright future.*

*Deniz: Did you find what you expected from Ankara?*

*ZenZen: Here it is bureaucratic, grey and it smells government. Ankara has its own chaotic environment. However, it is crowded and this is good. It gives you space to hide. What can I say, I am still here. You can find the marks of Ankara on me... (He stopped for a while. It seemed like he was lost in some moments) I told you how my mum was paranoid about my security in Tokat. Well, sending your kid to Ankara is not different from throwing him to the big ocean.”(ZenZen, FTM)*

ZenZen’s advantageous position is an exception among the other informants. His parents supported him when he was struggling to leave Tokat. More importantly, they invested in his education which can be regarded as a brilliant way of contribution to ZenZen’s future life. However, at the end of the interview, he sounded a little bit skeptical concerning whether Ankara was the right gate to his liberation or not. I will come back to the rest of his story in the following section.

To sum up, the narratives demonstrated how the lives of the informants were constrained in relation to their sexual identity by their family and/or the place they were living in. Many informants described their rupture from their hometown as an attempt of ‘running away’ or ‘escaping’. This process of moving away from the family and the hometown indicates their strategy through which informants began to search for a new place where they can live their transsexual identity more comfortably. Furthermore, some of the stories showed that rupture from hometown is also linked to the informants’ intention to protect their families from emotional annihilation and social exclusion. Even though the limitations of family and hometown might vary for each person, their bargaining process seems to be developed around the same strategy.

According to Selek (ibid, p.126), it is the rupture from the family that makes the transsexual/transvestite subculture so powerful simply because transsexuals are forced to live close to each other. I will elaborate this subculture as it was narrated by the informants throughout the following section.

## **6.2. Transsexual/Transvestite Subculture**

Subculture is generally defined as a group which differs from the dominant culture in some crucial aspects but still remains a part of it (Dowd and Dowd, 2003, p. 22). LGBTTT people are considered to be a subculture on the basis of their deviation from sex/gender dichotomies (Selek, 2001, pp. 46-47). Although none of the informants of this research used



the word 'subculture' to describe their own social environment, some of them narrated a group of LGBTT people that they gradually became a part of. Selek (ibid, p.123) argues that transsexuals and transvestites in Turkey are forming a separate subculture under the mainstream LGBTT subculture because of performing sex work to earn their life. The informants of my research partly justified this argument. Through their narrations, many expressed a certain commitment to a small group of transsexuals and transvestites, distancing themselves from other gays, lesbians and bisexuals. However, this commitment should not necessarily be reduced to sex work. Selek overlooks the FTM transsexuals who are not working as sex workers. In this chapter I will present some of the narrations regarding transsexual/transvestite subculture by capturing the diverse perspectives of MTF and FTM informants. Theoretically I will discuss informants' position in relation to the development of transsexual/transvestite subculture as a strategy in their heteronormative bargain.

As I have presented in the 'rupture from hometown' section, ZenZen was encouraged to move to Ankara by his parents who put intense effort on his education. He left his hometown right after he was admitted to Ankara University. The following part is taken from the interview when ZenZen was talking about his first years in Ankara.

*"ZenZen: ...Ankara University is a very political school as you know.*

*Deniz: I have heard about some political events taking place there. But, can you explain it more in details for someone who is not familiar with Ankara?*

*ZenZen: Within the body of Ankara University, DTCF<sup>38</sup> is a very lively faculty! There are still several issues going on there...Newspapers don't mention them. ..DTCF is a very closed faculty. Issues are knotted and solved within the faculty. Generally robocops<sup>39</sup> intervene the events. They just beat (coplamak) the left- wing students, and leave. Students are divided into two. There are fascists and leftists...In 1994, the year I started university, Ankara University was politically instable. One day on our way to the faculty, we found ourselves in the middle of a conflict. There were students fighting against each other with sticks and knives. Suddenly the tear gas exploded...It is typical...Policemen are on the side of the right wing. They provoke the conflict just to beat leftist students. During the course of time, I realized that my sexual identity was very political. I was attacked a couple of times because of my open sexual*

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<sup>38</sup> Faculty of language, history and geography

<sup>39</sup> Special unit of the police department who deals with street protests. They are called robocop because of their outfit.

*identity. One day, a guy making wolf<sup>40</sup> sign with his hand spit on my face when he was passing by me. I never shouted my sexual identity loud, but I was not hiding it either... Gradually, I found myself approaching the leftist students. But most of them were homophobic. Homosexuality was a taboo for people who were talking about revolution. How pathetic. Oppression of sexual identity was not an issue worth discussing. There were always other topics... You have to use the words 'proletariat', 'labor class' in your sentences if you want to be heard. What would happen if a labor class boy is kicked out of his house due to his love? No one wanted to talk about it. I attended some meetings of leftists groups for a short while. I felt isolated. And I found anarchism! "If I can't dance, I don't want to be a part of your revolution". I was reading a lot, learning a lot... I met gays and lesbians within the anarchist group in Ankara. The maleness inside of me started to dominate myself. I was not feeling so comfortable with lesbians. You know what, it is like a pissing contests. Who is suffering most? Who is the most marginal one? Lesbians perceive everything within this framework. They live in a pissing contest. I was aware that lesbians were not content when I was close to them. I never enjoyed being with them either. People are gossiping a lot." (ZenZen, FTM)*

ZenZen's experiencing of Ankara brings out the different bargaining processes that he engaged in. First of all, he mentioned the polarized student groups at Ankara University. Because of his sexual identity, he said he had been attacked by a student who was probably as supporter of the Nationalist Movement Party. This event was narrated as the reason for ZenZen to become closer to the leftist students, and part of a strategy that ZenZen developed. Perhaps he wanted to be represented and supported within one of the student groups that would provide him security within the campus. However, he did not find what he was expecting within this group. He clearly expressed his critiques of the heteronormativity within this leftist student group, telling that they overlook LGBTT themes in their politics. As a result, he started to search for new alternatives that would enable him live his sexual identity more openly. Finally, he said he met gays and lesbians in a group of people in an anarchist group of people. Yet, his negative opinions about the environment manifest that he was not totally satisfied within this group of people either.

The following part from the rest of his interview is interesting the way that it illustrates his involvement to the transsexual/transvestite community.

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<sup>40</sup> 'Wolf' is the symbol of Nationalist Movement Party in Turkey.

*“A gay friend of mine introduced me to a transvestite. From her I received a telephone number of a doctor who was dealing with sex-reassignment surgery. It took approximately six months for me to call the doctor. I just wanted to get some information but it was too complicated for me at that time. I was so confused in my head. I began to hang out with transvestites. They were more sincere than other people. They never judged me. I never felt myself as a second-class person when I was with them. During my last year at the university, I moved out from the dormitory and started to live with a transvestite who was a sex worker. It was only one year that we lived together. When I was living with her I rediscovered Ankara. The dirty city and its horny sick men... One day X (his flatmate) came home from work with her face bleeding. It was early in the morning. She was beaten up by some people on her way back home. I threw up when I saw her face. I was supposed to take care of her but she was the one who actually comforted me that morning...”*

ZenZen’s story challenges SeleK’s argument who states that sex-work is the major factor that separates transsexuals/transvestites from the wider LGBTT subculture (ibid, p.123). ZenZen was a university student who was supported by his family. Despite his advantageous position in relation to other transsexuals, he decided to move in with a transvestite who was working as a sex worker. The intersection of these two different lives is interesting. Perhaps, approaching closer to other transsexuals (regardless of their profession) was a strategy that ZenZen developed. He was also confused about sex-reassignment and he probably needed assistance and presence of other people who might share his feelings. The fact that sufficient information regarding sex-reassignment was not easily accessible can also be considered as a factor that brought ZenZen into a group of people who could provide him the essential guidance for his new life.

Similar to ZenZen, Banu also underscored the fact that transsexuals need each other in order to learn the survival tactics for the difficult life conditions they are forced to live within. She sarcastically explained the process that transsexuals drift to the margins of the society.

*“Nobody wants transsexuals to be around. This is a fact. But, there are people like me, right? There are transsexuals everywhere. You may like it or not. Transsexuals are living in this country also. Different from other people, I have to be invisible (laughing). How can I be invisible? Am I a wizard or what? Of course not...But I should find a way to live and be*

*invisible at the same time. This is what people like me do. If you are a transsexual, you should find other transsexuals and learn the ways to survive in this country.” (Banu, MTF)*

Banu’s quotation underlines the general attitude that excludes transsexuals. Putting emphasis on the fact that excluding these people cannot actually eradicate them, Banu described how heteronormativity results in the isolation of transsexuals from the rest of the society. It is indicated that the only option that is left to transsexuals is to build a life that is out of sight. The difficulty of constructing a life in extreme conditions brings transsexuals close to each other because they need to “learn the ways to survive”. Banu’s narration evokes a battle situation where the transsexual alliance should develop a battle plan to fight against the common enemy. Here, the common enemy is the heteronormative system that tries to suppress them.

As a final example, Eser’s story will be presented. I have previously mentioned that his gender transgression frustrated his mother while his father was pretty content with Eser’s adoption of masculine gender role. When he was fifteen, “the secret boss” of the family, namely his mother, decided to send him to Ankara where his uncle was living. She was hoping that a bigger city would make him forget about his gender ambivalence. He said that he felt himself like a street dog when his parents put him on the bus to Ankara. His uncle and aunt were narrated to be friendly people in the beginning. Later, Eser mentioned an incident when he was severely beaten by his uncle and ran away from their apartment. This particular event is crucial for his entrance to transsexual/transvestite community.

*“Eser: My uncle and my aunt were always very nice to me. They did not seem to care about the way I look. But, I was obviously annoying the teacher at school. She complained to my uncle...He beat me like hours. I thought I was going to loose my consciousness. My eyebrow, lips were bleeding. He turned into a monster. I ran away from the apartment, stayed one week with a lesbian. Her parents did not let me stay longer. So this girl found another place for me near a transsexual. She was really a caring woman. I was sleeping in her bed and she was giving me advices about the people I should stay away from...Like pimps, cops, MHP (Nationalist Movements Party) supporters. I don’t think that I can pay for her. May Allah make her way bright.*

*Deniz: How long did you stay with her?*

*Eser: Not so long, I guess. I was more like a nomad. From one transsexual to another transvestite... MTF transsexuals are so ready to care of you. Their life is very different but*

*they know how you feel. When you tell them about a bad experience, they can cry instead of you” (Eser, FTM)*

It is possible to argue that Eser’s special attachment to MTF transsexuals were based on the issues of ‘support’ and ‘guidance’ that he needed. Parallel to narrations of other informants, Eser’s story also highlights that he learnt how to survive through the advices he got from other transsexuals. In relation to these advices, the part about Nationalist Movement Party is interesting. Although the rest of Eser’s interview does not include any political views, it is interesting to see how the ‘NMP’ was perceived as a potential threat among transsexuals.

To sum up, dominant heteronormative structure result in the exclusion and isolation of transsexuals. Many of them lack support and guidance in relation to their sexual identity. In this sense, they seek people with similar experiences who could help them. This situation might be seen as the reason that makes transsexuals to live close to each other. Thus, the formation of the transsexual/transvestite groups can be regarded as a strategy to survive within the boundaries of heteronormativity.

### **6.3. Discussion:**

Throughout this chapter I have presented a wide range of stories that are based on informants’ experiences of ‘going public’. These stories refer to a time period when the informants decided to continue their life as a member of the opposite sex. This very subjective attempt has undoubtedly social consequences. The research material showed that informants were confronted with a number of problems due to their sexual identity. Initially, all the informants realized that their lives were somehow constrained in their hometown either by their family or the other people around. Generally, their sexual identity was attempted suppressed in different ways. While some stressed the physical and emotional violence they had been subjected to, others underscored the anticipated reactions that they would receive in their hometown. Except from Eser, who was sent to Ankara by his parents without his consent, all the informants moved away from their hometown seeking an alternative place where they could construct their transsexual identity in a more open way. In addition to their hopes for a more liberated future, the attempt of protecting the family is another reason that triggered some of the informants’ rupture from their family. In order not cause any (further) emotional destruction for their family, some informants chose to run away before they came out of their closet. Locating all these different type of experiences within the framework of heteronormative bargain, we can say that many transsexuals live far from their family and

hometown as a strategy that enables them to hold on to their transsexual identity. However, rather than liberating them, we may say that the rupture from hometown actually strengthens the core of heteronormative features of the society. By running away from the conditions that label them as deviant, or abnormal, transsexuals perpetuate these labels. In other words, the system that leads to transsexuals' rupture from hometown/family, keeps on limiting their life options. In this sense, Banu is the only informant who managed to break down the rules of the heteronormative bargain at the age of 35. She decided to move back in near to her mother who approved of Banu's transsexual identity. Hence, Banu overcame the gendered restrictions that pushed her away from Istanbul. Of course, it does not refer to a complete subversion of the gender norms. It is, however important at the personal level that she challenged the gender dichotomies in her mother's head.

The stories that are illustrated under the section 'transsexual/transvestite subculture' show the next level of the informants' bargaining process. Once the informants left their hometown, they narrated that they had gradually entered a group of transsexual/transvestite people. It is mentioned by all the informants that they had experienced a special type of solidarity within this transsexual/transvestite community that they could not find elsewhere. Here, it is crucial to extend the scope of Selek's analysis who argues that it is the 'sex-work' that unites many transsexuals (Selek, 2001, p.123). My findings demonstrate that FTM informants who are not performing sex-work also belong to the transsexual/transvestite subculture. Even the most advantageous one, ZenZen whose parents are very supportive, is a member of this subculture. Then, what separates them from other LGB people? The reason for the 'seclusion' can be the special type of assistance that transsexuals need, such as access to hormone treatment and sex-reassignment surgery. It might also be the transsexuals' conformation with the system which excludes them. They eventually want to transit to the opposite sex and live as either a man, or a woman, so they simply reproduce the gender binaries (Roen, 2002, p.505). However, we should not forget the fact that some transsexuals may also be homosexual. For instance, in the autobiographic movie 'She is a boy I knew'(2007) which was directed by Canadian male-to-female transsexual Gwen Haworth, Gwen says that she was actually a lesbian, and after the sex-reassignment she continued to be attracted to her former wife. In the documentary, her friend is explaining the confusion that Gwen created:

*"Many people were surprised by your continued attraction to women. One of the first questions that I was asked by a number of people was "what does that mean? (after the sex-*

*reassignment) She is attracted to guys now?” and I was saying “no, no (laughing) she is a lesbian” and they said ‘what!’<sup>41</sup>*

Hence, the reason that transsexuals/transvestites (regardless of their sexual identity) form a separate subculture under the wider LGB subculture might be the fact that they share a common misery. They have grown up with confusions and contradictions due to their deviation from gender binaries. They were also aware of the social troubles that were waiting for them. However, their inner feeling, that they belong to the opposite sex, is so powerful that they want to go public in spite of all the heterosexist reactions that are waiting for them. Sharing this unique experience might be the core factor that unites transsexuals/transvestites.

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<sup>41</sup> Quotation is taken from the official trailer, which is available on the official website of the documentary: <http://www.artflick.com/trailer.html>

## CHAPTER 7

### **Bargaining with Medical and Legal Authorities about Sex-Reassignment Surgery**

“No one gets sent to a psychiatrist for announcing a plan to cut or grow his or her hair or to go on a diet, unless one is at risk for anorexia (Butler, 2004, p.87)”.

The quotation above is taken from Judith Butler’s remarkable piece from 2004, called “*Undiagnosing Gender*”. Discussing the diagnosis for gender identity disorder, she points at how people lose their autonomy on their own body in relation to any choices about their sex and gender (ibid, p.75). On the issue of sex-reassignment surgeries, she underscores the paradoxes of legal and medical regulations. On the one hand, people who want to change their sex are forced to be medically diagnosed with gender identity disorder, which might result in their stigmatization as being sick and abnormal, but on the other hand, the diagnosis secures legal status for one’s gender and sometimes provide financial support from insurance companies (ibid, pp.75-76).

As I mentioned in the background chapter, changing sex is totally legal in Turkey. However, the candidates should fulfill certain preconditions to go through sex-reassignment surgery. Hence, sex-change operations are not “elective surgeries” (Butler, 2004, p.75), but they entail a legal and medical approval to be performed in Turkey. Yet, there also exists an alternative (underground) market which provides hormone treatment and sex-change surgery without any precondition. This market, undoubtedly, does not provide legal recognition since it does not help people to change their status of sex on their identity card.

Among the informants of this project, two of the FTM transsexuals and three of the MTF transsexuals have gone through this medical and legal procedure and changed their sex. All the other five informants are under hormone treatment. In this chapter, I will present their stories about ‘legal’ sex-reassignment process and the ‘alternative ways’ of doing it. Theoretically, I will consider these stories as the indicators of a bargaining process with medical and legal authorities.



## 7.1. Changing Sex in a Legal Way

This section will throw light on the experiences of the informants' who have changed their sex by following the legal route.

Tim is one of the informants who changed his sex from female to male. He told that he had decided to have a 'similya'<sup>42</sup> in his late teens. However, he had to postpone his decision due to his mother's denial; she did not want Tim to go through sex-reassignment. Right after he convinced his mother, Tim initiated the legal procedure. He was 23 at that time, and waited almost two years for the operation:

*"My psychologist repeated several times that surgery would be a turning point in my life. He told me that I had to be so sure because there would be no turning back. I told him "I am as sure as my name" but he said "I want you to understand that it is a huge step. You will be the man of your house. You know men are the ones who take care of everything. You should be able to take care of your woman in the future. Can you protect her? Can you protect her honor? You should be able to do all these things. You should feel the strength inside of yourself." He asked me to think of my decision profoundly. I told him I was totally sure again...It was not a problematic period. I just completed the bureaucratic steps. Somehow, I knew that I was going to get the approval from the commission, the board who writes the final report for the court... I was actually more worried about the costs of the surgery*

*Deniz: How much did it cost?*

*Tim: About 5.000 Turkish Liras (around 2500 euro)*

*Deniz: How long did it take for you to complete the legal process?*

*Tim: Almost 2 years...But it can take longer for a MTF transsexual.*

*Deniz: Why?*

*Tim: It is the preconditions for sex-change operation... If you want to change from female to male, you agree that they remove your ovaries during the sex-change operation, right? You just have to show that you are already incapable of reproducing. I received a report without completing that precondition actually. Don't ask me because I don't know. The situation is more difficult for MTF ones, they kill the production of sperms during the hormone treatment*

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<sup>42</sup> Similya is used to refer 'penis' in gay slang.

*or with some drugs maybe. So, I waited only 2 years. But a MTF might wait longer to get permission for the surgery.*

*Deniz: They wait longer because killing the reproduction of sperms takes more time?*

*Tim: Not just that, I am not a medical professor...But their therapy sessions might take a longer time. Doctors want to be sure that they don't change sex only for sex-work." (Tim, FTM)*

It is not unique that transsexuals follow a series of procedures on their way to change their sex. However, Tim's experience is vital due to indicating a very contemporary debate in Turkey in relation to sex-change operations. As I mentioned in the background chapter, one of the preconditions for a candidate who wants to change sex is being 'unproductive'. As a result of this precondition, during their bargaining process with authorities who give approval for sex-change operation, transsexuals follow different ways to 'fulfill' this precondition. Additionally, Tim highlights another important issue, by arguing that it takes a longer time for MTF transsexuals to receive approval from the medical committee. In addition to biological reasons, i.e. the time required to deactivate the reproductive capacity, Tim also underlines a social claim. Doctors' assumption that MTF transsexuals will end up as sex-workers also manifests the mainstream perception that "sex-work is not a consequence but the reason of transsexuality" (Berghan, 2006, p.33)

Finally, in relation to Tim's story, the attitude of the doctor should not be overlooked. It seems like he was trying to be sure whether Tim was capable of being a 'proper' male. His description of the masculine gender role evokes the heterosexist mentality of the medical authorities. According to the doctor, a man is supposed to be tough and should be able to protect his woman. His argument manifests how conventional gender norms dominate the medical domain when it comes to sex-reassignment. Tim was evaluated on the basis of his knowledge of the unwritten laws of masculinity. Especially, the way he was reminded of his new responsibilities about protecting his woman, indicates the hierarchy between male and female. It sounds like 'being a man' is a special status in life, and Tim's doctor was trying to be sure whether Tim deserves this status or not.

Yıldız changed her sex from male to female in 2007. She said that it was the most reasonable decision she had taken in her life:

*“It is not only about hormones and cutting off the penis. Look here (pointing her nose), I had surgery of my nose first. It looks prettier now. Plastic surgery is everywhere, right? You can receive botox injection in lips today, right? It depends on your budget. You change your look whenever you want. I like my face, it is really womanly. When I had my nose done, I was already looking womanly before the surgery. I was using herbal mixtures which helped me to sound like a woman. I was so confident that I would get approval soon due to my ‘womanly’ posture. My boyfriend and I visited the psychiatrist together. We had to go there for a couple of months. Then, we waited some more time to get an official report. It took some time, a couple of months again. I was really tired of telling my story to them. But my boyfriend was with me throughout the process. I think the fact that I have partner quickened the process. Finally I got the permission and went through the operation.*

*Deniz: You mentioned that you were telling stories. Can you talk a little bit more about that?*

*Yıldız: I was trying to explain you all the process...the time that I was visiting psychiatrists and so. Doctors will not give you permission if you don't clearly express your suffering. But it is not difficult to convince them. Before you go to a psychiatrist you learn some tips from your friends. Some doctors love classics. So, you put on a tearful face and tell “I can't stop putting make up on my face. I want to throw up when I hold my penis to urinate...(laughing)”. Some doctors also ask “What are you going to do after surgery? You are aware that this surgery might completely change your life...People might not be open to you. There are many others who have become prostitute. What is your plan?”*

*Deniz: What was your story then?*

*Yıldız: Mine was not a story, I told them the truth. I want to settle down with my boyfriend, continue my life as a woman, have a family, and I want to see myself as a woman when I look into the mirror”(Yıldız, MTF)*

There are two points to be emphasized in relation to Yıldız's account. The first one is Yıldız's perception of the gender categories. The second is the operation of the procedures for sex-reassignment surgery.

Pointing at the widespread of plastic surgery, Yıldız implied that removal of the penis and hormone treatments are not very different from having a botox injection. In the end, she argued, they all depend on people's financial situation that determines whether they can

afford the surgery or not. During her explanations, Yıldız used the word ‘womanly’ for a couple of time, saying that she was already looking ‘womanly’ and she had a ‘womanly’ posture. This might be regarded as Yıldız’s perception of what a woman is. For her, it is not only about having a vagina but it is related to some deep characteristics you have. In other words, this womanhood is something so strong that it automatically manifests itself on someone’s appearance. In this sense, all she had to do was using herbal mix to diminish the male tone of her voice and getting ready for the medical evaluation.

Yıldız’s self confidence in relation to her evaluation meeting with the doctors also raises important issues about the operation of the sex-reassignment regulations. She said that that it was possible to get some personal information about certain doctors. On the basis of the information, transsexuals sometimes create a story of their own that will help them to easily receive their sex-reassignment permission from the doctor. Obviously, there actually exist no clear standard according to which transsexuals are evaluated. There is also one point that supports the argument of Tim about the prejudice of the doctors that MTF transsexuals want to become sex workers. Yıldız mentioned that she was asked about her future plans and reminded of other transsexuals who became sex-workers.

Banu is another MTF informant who had her sex changed when she was 25. Complaining about the long procedure she had followed before the surgery, she said:

*“Banu: The legal system in this country is terrible. It functions extremely slowly. I had the money to afford a sex-reassignment operation in Europe. But they don’t allow you to go abroad because their laws are different.*

*Deniz: I actually read that there are people going to UK for the operation. Do you think that they go through the sex-change operation illegally?*

*Banu: (in an angry tone of voice). No, I am not meaning it. I could go to UK as well. But, what would happen when I come back to Turkey? Imagine me standing in the airport showing my passport and id to police? Allah knows what would happen...Who would inform the military service?*

*Deniz: Who?*

*Banu: Not the doctors in UK. But here, if you have a legal permission to go through the surgery, the court will inform the military institution instead of you. But I told you it is so slow. I waited almost 3 years. When I applied to the court for the first time, it took almost 4*

*months for them to send me the medical committee. The psychiatrist were all nuts. They taught that I was raped by my father or abused by my teacher during my childhood.*

*Deniz: Why would they think so?*

*Banu: They are trying to find a reason. This is how it works. It is not a normal thing to change sex, right? You should have a good excuse. I told you that they were all fucked up in their mind. They ask you stupid questions like “Are you planning to have a child in future?” How can I have children? I wish I could but I can’t bear a child like a normal woman... Can I adopt? Of course not.*

*Deniz: What did you answer to them about having children in the future?*

*Banu: I told them “ ...in a couple of centuries, when the system allows people like me to have children, than I will have plenty of them!”(laughing)*

*Deniz: How long did it take for the committee to give you the report?*

*Banu: Long enough to drive me crazy. At the end of the second year maybe longer, they signed my report...Then I waited a long time for my operation. They gave me an appointment for 7 months after I received the legal permission. 7 months! I tell you, there are people who are thinking of killing themselves during this process. Being in between is the worst thing. You want to be operated as soon as possible” (Banu, MTF)*

Banu’s narrative also depicts her bargaining process with the medical and legal authorities. She told that the medical committee was trying to find a ground for her desire to change to the female sex. Doctors’ assumption that Banu might have been raped or abused during her childhood manifests the heteronormative logic of the authorities. It is generally assumed that transiting from one sex (especially from male) to the other one is something that should have a fundamental reason. The hierarchical order between the categories of female and male might stimulate that question in the head of the doctors: “How would someone give up their male identity? There should be something traumatic behind it.” Furthermore, the way Banu was asked about her future plans in relation to having children is interesting. Recalling Peterson’s argument, we can say that the medical and legal authorities are trying to control the “unwanted population” (Peterson, 1999, p.45). In other words, the authorities probably want to secure the gender norms by keeping an eye on the people who want to change their sex. By ensuring that transsexuals will not have any children, authorities try to maintain the gendered order of the society. In the end, it is already difficult for the majority of the population to grasp the idea that one can change their sex. How would they react to a child whose parents are transsexual?

## 7.2. Seeking Alternative Ways

In addition to the legal procedure of changing sex in Turkey, the narratives of some informants demonstrate that there is also an alternative market, which provides an underground way of access to hormone treatment and sex-change operation. In this section, I will draw attention to these narratives:

Eser has not gone through sex-reassignment operation yet. He has been using hormone pills for almost four years and he had his breasts removed two years ago. I would like to share a part of his narrative to illustrate the underground market of sex-change operations and hormone treatment.

*“Eser: (in relation to legal sex-reassignment procedure) Believe me, I even don’t know much about how these things are functioning...It is really difficult to get information about it if you don’t have any contacts...Who are you going to trust? When it comes to the possibilities in Ankara...I really don’t want to misinform you because I am not so sure about the process. I don’t have enough knowledge about hospitals. All I know is that you have to apply to the court to ask for permission to change sex. If they accept your case, then you can have all the treatments...It is really complicated...But there is also an underground version of this. Find the right people and they help you reach your goal. You pay less but you gain some risks in exchange. But, if you really want something, it is always worth taking the risk, right? I wanted it so much, and I got my hormone shots periodically. It has been a while since my last shot because I am broke lately.*

*Deniz: What about your breast removal surgery?*

*Eser: I don’t want to go in details. I don’t want to cause trouble for other FTM transsexuals who want the same operation. I can just repeat myself. If you want something very much, you can always find alternative ways to get it.” (Eser, FTM)*

Eser’s narrative demonstrates the difficulties that transsexuals face in relation to their access to proper information about sex-reassignments. When he defined the legal procedure in Turkey as ‘complicated’, I reminded him of the similar procedures in other countries. He said: *“I am sure people in those countries have alternative ways as well”*. In relation to the

formation of an underground market, one can argue that ‘bargaining procedure’ might be so exhausting financially and mentally that the transsexuals choose to seek alternative ways of transition although it is very risky.

As the final example, Burce’s quotation will be presented. She told that she had gone through sex-reassignment surgery legally when she was 22. Complaining that she had spent almost 4000 Turkish Liras (around 2000 euros), she told that it was actually possible to be operated for half the price at an underground market. She narrated the logic of the market:

*“Let’s be honest. When we check the regulations about sex-change operations, I mean they are nonsense. They are trying to prevent people to change. If you think of the enforcement of stupid preconditions, you will understand that they are not protecting the transsexuals. Right? They don’t provide health services to me after the transition...they are not guaranteeing work for me. When you changed your sex, you are on your own. So, I don’t believe that the laws aim to protect transsexuals. So, why should people experience all those tough conditions to change in a legal way? I am asking to you. Why would people wait all those years and try to convince the psychiatrists about transition? Why they would spend so much time and money? There are other ways of doing it. Like it or not. But, there were always an alternative way. Ok, there are also people who are trying to exploit your situation. But, as long as you know the right people, you can be operated in a cheaper and easier way...I was stupid not to choose that way”*

Burce’s quotation emphasizes that current regulations for ‘sex-reassignment operation’ are not ‘protecting’ the transsexuals but prevent them from their objective instead. Thus, there is an alternative way of ‘changing-sex’ and accessing hormone treatment outside of the limitations of regulations. The existence of an underground market can be regarded as a ‘breakdown’ of the bargaining process. In other words, transsexuals who are fed up with the authorities withdraw from the bargaining process. Instead, they follow a more risky route and eventually achieve their goal of transition to the other sex.

### 7.3. Discussion:

Based on the narratives of the informants, we can conclude that regulations concerning sex-reassignment surgery in Turkey are based on heteronormative logic. Thus, transsexuals engage in a bargaining process when they attempt to medically change their sex.

In relation to the heteronormative character of the regulations, we can say that it reinforces the hierarchical order between the categories male and female (see also, Rosenberg, 2006, p.112). While changing from female to male is not so challenging in terms of legal and medical procedure, changing from male to female is narrated to be difficult. Regarding the issue, I would like to point at the news that was recently published on the website of a highly ranked Turkish newspaper on 13.04.2009<sup>43</sup>. It is about a 33 years old sport teacher, who changed sex from female to male in Turkey. There are two photos assisting the news; one is taken from school displaying the teacher in a male suit talking with the students. The other one is taken from the hospital room, probably after surgery, where the happiness of the teacher is observable from his face. The news portrays a short biography of the teacher, and a detailed description of the surgery with the narrations of the doctors who tell how they managed to construct a penis with a piece of skin they had taken from the arm. Finally, the future plans of the teacher are presented. At the end of the column, the website of the newspaper gives space for the readers' comments. The majority of the comments are very positive. Some of them are wishing the teacher a very happy life after the surgery. Some of them are expressing their pride in relation to the development of Turkish medicine. There is however one last comment from a reader saying: *"How hypocritical you are...If the teacher was a male who was changing his sex to female, would you still be writing that nice comments?"* This news also manifests how transition to male sex is interpreted as something which is not threatening. It can be regarded as the indicator of the dominant gender ideologies in Turkey, which devalues femininity while exalting masculinity (Shafak, 2004, p.29).

Furthermore, in relation to narratives that are presented in this chapter, one can observe the impact of 'nationalist' ideologies behind the way sex-reassignment surgeries are regulated. In relation to the precondition which states that a transsexual candidate should be 'unproductive', we can talk about the relation between gender and the biological reproduction

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<http://www.milliyet.com.tr/Yasam/SonDakika.aspx?aType=SonDakika&ArticleID=1082424&Date=13.04.2009&b=33%20yilin%20ardindan%206%20saatte%20erkek%20oldu&KategoriID=15&ver=99>



of the nation (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p.22). The current laws can be regarded as a guardian of the 'heterosexual reproduction' of the nation. Preventing all the possible ways that a transsexual might have children is an indicator of it. In other words, transsexuals are not perceived to be suited for raising future generations. Furthermore, the attitude of some doctors can also be related to the intersection between "cultural reproduction and the gender relations" (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p.23). There are certain images of a proper 'man' and 'woman' in the mind of the medical authorities, and some of the doctors (as in the case of Tim) want to ensure that the transsexual candidate will reproduce the gender roles that are prevailing in the society and which are crucial for the 'collective identity' (ibid, p.67).

Regarding the heteronormative regulations of 'sex-reassignment surgery' in Turkey, it is possible to say that transsexuals involve in a bargaining process with these regulations. They try to increase their options as much as possible through several ways. Some of them obtain information about how to deal with certain psychiatrists, and tell them the stories they want to hear. They agree to not having children and ensure the authorities that they will establish a proper way of living. However, some transsexuals do not engage in this bargaining process. Instead, they follow an alternative way to change their sex. In other words, they refuse to operate according to the rules of the bargaining process and establish their own rules. This can be regarded as a subversive strategy to deal with the constraints of the medical and legal authorities.

## CHAPTER 8

### SEX-WORK

#### Introduction:

It has been stressed both by Selek (2001) and Berghan (2006) that the overwhelming majority of MTF transsexuals in Turkey are earning their life from sex-work. Although Selek's work does not contain any insights about FTM transsexuals, one of the eleven informants of Berghan is a FTM transsexual. She states that all the informants of her study have performed sex-work except the FTM informant (2001, p.34). Similarly, all the five MTF informants of my project are working as a sex-worker to make a living. None of the FTM informants mentioned that they had to perform sex-work in their life. Two of them who have university degree are holding professional jobs. Additionally, there is an unemployed one, a hair-dresser assistant and one who is working a restaurant which serves home-made food to the factory workers. Although they talked about some difficulties that they had faced at work in relation to their sexual identity, none of the FTM informants considered their transsexuality as the primary reason of their working status. In contrast, all the MTF informants referred to their sexual identity as the leading factor that forces them to sell their body. In this sense, all the MTF informants strictly rejected the mainstream idea in Turkey which states that "sex-work is not a consequence but the reason of transsexuality, that all the transsexuals are people who are searching for an easy way to make money" (ibid, p.33). In this chapter, I will elaborate the experiences of MTF informants who have been working as sex-workers.

I will begin with the story of Oya. As we remember her from the previous chapters, she is a MTF transsexual who had to move from her hometown because of her forbidden love affair with the son of the button seller in her neighbourhood. When her relationship was discovered by the button seller, Oya decided to move to Ankara in order not to cause any extra burden to her father's destroyed reputation. The following interview account is about Oya's experiences during her first years in Ankara:

*"Oya: The day I come to Ankara is a huge step in my life. I met people like me. They found a car-washing job that would help me to save some money. But, I could only work for a couple of weeks. Other workers were teasing me so the boss told me very politely that I should leave... There was not any work available for me. I felt that I was a burden for the people*

*with whom I was staying at that time. I was washing the apartment when there was no one at home. I was trying to contribute. But, after a while I just wanted my freedom. I knew some transsexuals were selling sex. It is not something to be exaggerated. It is not the end of the world. I started to join them on the street. I was dressing in women's clothes, and...kolis<sup>44</sup> started to approach. I started to make money slowly....It was very difficult in the beginning, the adaptation. You grow up hearing a lot of stories about 'whores', when you become one of them I realized that is it not that bad. I was not that comfortable with the car-washing work. People were looking at me as if I was an alien...They were verbally abusing me all the time. When it comes to sex-work, everything is black and white. I am very open. I am not hiding my sexuality. Work is the only place where I don't have to hide myself.*

*Deniz: Do you customers know your sexual identity before they purchase sex?*

*Oya: I haven't gone through the operation yet, but as you see I have boobs...I use hormones. I am the way I am to my customers. They know everything. If you take a man in your bed and then display your similya<sup>45</sup> suddenly, he might kill you...Let's say you want apple. What would happen if the greengrocer gives you pear instead? (Oya, MTF)*

The quotation is taken from my first interview with Oya. I had the chance to conduct a short interview with her again, later. I asked her opinion about Bulent Ersoy, the famous transsexual singer in Turkey, she said:

*"She has a powerful voice. You know I have a beautiful voice as well. But I can never become like her. Why? She struggled a lot in her life but I am exhausted. People like me are exhausted. I don't have strength to raise my arm, how can I fight for better life standard?"*

The process through which Oya drifted towards sex-work indicates her struggle of being autonomous. In addition to her financial independence, she was also fighting for her social independence. In economic terms, she was trying to earn money to make a living. However, the jobs she attempted to get were either not available or they were constructing a threat to her due to her sexual identity. Regarding her social autonomy, she was seeking a way of making money where she was not obliged to conceal her transsexuality. This is probably why she emphasized the fact that sex-work is the only domain where she could be "herself", free from all the masks. Indeed, it is her transsexuality that is being demanded by her own customers. At

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<sup>44</sup> Koli refers to both 'sexual intercourse' and 'customer of a sex-worker' in gay slang.

<sup>45</sup> Similya refers to 'penis' in gay slang

first sight, Oya's arguments on sex-work sounds like she is actually eager to perform sex-work due to all the benefits she receives through her job: her financial and social autonomy. However, a more careful look reveals the fact that she may actually internalized the constraints of her situation. In other words, she does/can not think that an alternative way of life is possible for her. She said that she already knew some transvestites who were selling sex. She might have perceived sex-work as her inevitable way of living because all the transsexuals she knows are either sex workers or famous people like Bulent Ersoy who do not give any hope for her. Saying that she is exhausted to fight for a better life, Oya is positioning herself exactly in the social space that she is assigned by dominant gender ideologies. In other words, she is not trying to challenge system which captures her within the limitations of sex-work as the only way of survival.

In order to broaden the discussion about transsexuals' experiences of sex-work, I want to proceed with a part of the interview that I conducted with Sevilay. When I was interviewing her, it was around 16.30 in the afternoon. Her phone rang during the interview, and it was one of her customers who called her.

*“Deniz: Do they usually call you in the day time?”*

*Sevilay: Rarely...I wish they always called me during the day so that I could be a normal person. I could sit at home at night and watch television.*

*Deniz: So, do you work through appointments?*

*Sevilay: (she laughs very long)....You are such a kezban<sup>46</sup>. I also work on the street but it is not that often. But, it is difficult because of policemen. They are patrolling everywhere, asking money for nothing. Even when you are not working, they can fine you. Everything is nonsense in this country. Am I a criminal? Am I a burglar? You can call me a whore but I have morals.*

*Deniz: Is it because of the policemen that you start working through appointments?*

*Sevilay: I have already been giving appointments. I have regular customers. But sometimes, I also wait on the street. It is risky and...it may create troubles. There is mafia threatening, there are policemen disturbing you...*

*Deniz: Do your customers know your sexual identity? (She had not gone through sex-reassignment surgery at the time of the interview.)*

*Sevilay: Of course they know. I don't hide anything. I serve as their wife if they ask me to, or I can also become their husband when they ask. You understand, right?*

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<sup>46</sup> Kezban means 'freshman' in gayslang

*Deniz: I understand. I have heard the same expression before<sup>47</sup>.*

*Sevilay: It is not my phrase.*

*Deniz: In our previous talk, you said you don't want to have a sex-change operation, can I ... (she interrupts me)*

*Sevilay: I don't think that it is important anymore. I really wanted to go through the operation when I was younger. But ... I mean I accept the fact that I will never be able to have the operation. Unbelievably expensive... So, I think I lost my eagerness. I don't have any power left to struggle.*

*Deniz: I would like to ask more questions about your work. If you feel uncomfortable, you don't have to answer. Is it ok?*

*Sevilay: Ok.*

*Deniz: Have you ever been subjected to violence due to your work?*

*Sevilay: Of course, all the sex-workers have such experiences.*

*Deniz: Do you think that a heterosexual sex worker would be subjected the same amount of violence like a transsexual sex-worker?*

*Sevilay: It is a very strange and difficult job... People treat you as if you were a princess but in a minute they can be psychopath. You can be subjected to beating and.... sometimes customers refuse to pay. It is not easy to ask for your right. I can't go to police. But a heterosexual woman can work in a safer environment... They have much less trouble with police. When you are transsexual, everybody feels like they have right to treat you as if you were a shit. I told you that I have regular customers. It is good for both my health and the customers' health. What would happen if I get sick? I don't have insurance... So, I have to take care of myself... I use condoms and so... It is the only type of job that I can find. I need bread, right? I need to eat like other people. So, I should keep my work. I should secure my self."*

Sevilay's experiences are demonstrating various facets of sex-work in Turkey. First of all, similar to Oya, Sevilay also underlined the fact that her customers know her sexual identity. Thus, her sexual identity becomes one of the reasons that she is specially demanded by the customers. Here, sex-work illuminates the hypocrisy of the dominant gender ideologies. The system which excludes transsexuals during the daytime, call them back at nights (Berghan, 2006, p.41). Concerning the working conditions of transsexual sex-workers, Sevilay's narration illustrates the operation of heteronormativity. Undoubtedly, sex-work is a

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<sup>47</sup> To be both wife and husband means to be both in a passive and active position during the sexual intercourse.

very challenging experience for both heterosexual female sex workers, and transsexuals. However, due to the legislations which state that only those who are holding a pink identity card can work in brothels, transsexuals like Sevilay (who is holding a blue identity) have no option but to work on the streets or work through appointments. Sevilay explained how threatening it could be to work on the streets. She mentioned mafia, problematic customers and even violence that might come from the police. Insecure working conditions of transsexuals seem to be multiplied with the discriminatory attitudes of the police. Sevilay emphasized the fact that she would not go to police in case of an emergency in order not to meet any additional trouble at the police station.

As the final example, Banu's story will be highlighted. In the previous chapters, it is mentioned that Banu is the only informant who grew up in the biggest city of Turkey, but decided to move from Istanbul in order not to live with her mother and grandmother. Regarding sex-work, she is an exceptional case due to the fact that she was about to quit sex-work when I interviewed her. Her plan was to move back to Istanbul because her mother recently accepted Banu's sexual identity.

*“Deniz: How are you going to earn money in Istanbul?”*

*Banu: I know that I won't be selling sex. So, I don't have any working plans in Istanbul...*

*Deniz: Other than sex-work, do you think that you can find some sort of job?*

*Banu: (looking surprised) Other than sex work? I mean, what can I do except sex work?*

*There is enough money on my bank account, and my mum is getting pension...They are more than enough for our living.*

*Deniz: Does your mother know that you have been working as a sex-worker?*

*Banu: We never talk about it...But she should know. She is a clever woman and she is probably aware what transsexuals do. Have you ever seen someone like me working in McDonalds, or in a supermarket? Everybody knows how transsexuals earn money and this is why they think that we don't deserve to live among them. But, what about the customers? They are the brothers and fathers of the people who don't want me to live among them? My customers are the people who wish that I was dead. But I am telling you, you should hear their sex fantasias. People give you money and tell “can you please act like my sister” , “I will be girl, you will be the mother” There are dozens of these. Sick, totally sick men...They have right to live in this country. What about me? I am the one who screw the morals so I don't have right to anything.”*

Banu's narrative indicates the way that transsexuals internalize the rules of the heteronormative bargain. This might be the reason that Banu was really surprised when I asked her if she had an alternative plan for earning money in Istanbul. "What would a MTF transsexual do, except sex-work" can be the general way of thinking among transsexuals because the heteronormative system does not let them think other ways. However, the fact that Banu was planning to move near her mother and quit sex-work can be regarded as the 'break down' of the heteronormative bargain. In other words, she was planning to quit her position in which 'heteronormativity' locates her.

### 8.1. Discussion:

*"People are asking: "Why are you selling your body? At least you can sell bagel (simit), this or that on the street... You can't expect everyone to be as strong as Esmeray"<sup>48</sup>. We knock a lot of doors and ask for job but no one is eager to employ us... Obligatory sex-work has a chain effect in our lives... Being forced to live at night and obliged to sell your own body lead us to use drugs and overuse of alcohol. Many transsexuals/transvestites feel more comfortable when they use drugs due to the sex-work... A sex-worker has to use drugs to do sex-work. This situation increases her tendency to commit crime because she doesn't have any life expectations. We don't believe that sunny days are waiting for us. It affects our relations with our family and friends. My friends invite me to their place at night, but I can't join them because I work at night. In our relations, there is no room for trust. We have been harmed by people whom we have trusted before..."*

The quotation above is extracted from Buse Kilickaya's (former president of Pink Life LGBTT Association) speech at the International Meeting Against Homophobia in Ankara, in 2008. She is responding to the mainstream attitude towards transsexual sex-workers, underscoring the fact that sex-work is the final choice for the majority of transsexuals after they have been denied other means of earning a life. Buse's summary of the circumstances which constrain and shape the lives of transsexual sex-workers are reflected in the narrations of the informants throughout this chapter. There are two important themes to be discussed in relation to transsexuals' standing within the sector of sex-work. The stories of the informants

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<sup>48</sup> Esmeray is a famous MTF transsexual who have been earning her life by selling mussels on the streets. Recently, she is also performing stand-up comedy in several cities.

are primarily important as they highlight the special demand for transsexual sex-workers. They have their own customers who want to be sexually served by a transsexual. Thus, sex-work happens to be a vital social domain where transsexuals are not supposed to hide their sexual identity. However, it is the same sexual identity that results in their exclusion from the other domains of the social world (including working life) and leads them to work as sex-workers. This situation seems to be accepted by some transsexuals, i.e. they do not question the unfairness of the system. They do not try to challenge it. Here, I am not claiming that it is easy to deconstruct all the dominant gender ideologies that pave transsexuals' way to sex-work. However, I am trying to underline how transsexuals are playing the game according to rules. Hence, within the framework of 'Bargaining with Heteronormativity', we can say that transsexuals accept the bargaining offer which assigns them to the role of sex-worker. In this sense, 'sex-work' become a means of survival in the heterosexist system. Here, Banu (MTF) is the only informant who managed to breakdown this fundamental rule of the bargain (on a personal level) by deciding to quit sex-work. Now, she will probably be seeking alternative ways to increase her life options other than sex-work.



## CHAPTER 9

### OBLIGATORY MILITARY SERVICE

#### **Introduction:**

Kronsell (2005, p.281) argues that “institutions largely governed by men have produced and recreated norms and practices associated with masculinity and heterosexuality”, and she emphasizes the military institution as a major actor in defining the hegemonic masculinity. As it is mentioned throughout the background chapter, the Turkish military is a very powerful institution that regulates the social relations in Turkey. Obligatory military service is assigned strong nationalist and masculine values. Any attempt to avoid this nationalist duty is socially and legally condemned. The heterosexist facet of the military institution reveals itself when it comes to the exclusion of homosexuals from the obligatory military service with the homophobic statement that homosexuals are “unfit due to psycho-sexual problems” (Altınay, 2004, p.80).

Among the informants of this research project, there is only one MTF transsexual who served for the military before she changed her sex from male to female. There are, however, other informants who have some experiences in relation to the gendered discourse which is (re)created by the military institution in Turkey. Although these accounts are limited, they provide a very useful lens through which we can see a very different dimension of transsexuals' lives.

Banu is the only informant who served in the military at the age of 18, before her transition to female sex when she was 25. I asked her why she did not get a report to be exempted from the military service:

*“Why should I use my sexual identity as an excuse? I did not want to be a part of their ideology. They want to label homosexuals as someone who should be kept in quarantine. My sexual identity is not epidemic...But if you have asked me why I did not refuse to go to military as a conscientious objector, I would have told you the truth, that I was scared. I was too young for that. Nowadays we read on the papers like...Halil Savda<sup>49</sup>. But it was not that common... I also believe in Allah. I don't want to go through the anal test or let them see*

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<sup>49</sup> A conscientious objector who declared his objection while he was already serving in the military in the city of Tekirdag, Turkey. He was sentenced to 3 months and 15 days of imprisonment on the charge of ‘insistence disobedience’

*photos of me...during. You know what I mean. Why would I do that? My bedroom is my bedroom, and it is my privacy” (Banu, MTF)*

I also asked her whether she confronted any difficulties due to her sexual identity during her military service:

*“I served for military in Trabzon<sup>50</sup>. Our troop was composed of nice folks. Some of them were even nicer...There were cute boys, and I think it was just a little bit difficult for me to hide myself. Because...of course I was looking at some guys accidentally. For example, during the dinner if a cute guy was sitting in front of me, of course I was getting a little nervous. I was trying to not to say something stupid...That’s it, I’m happy that I got my discharge certificate (tezkere). I am the winner here. Banu is 1, Turkish Army is 0” (Banu, MTF)*

Banu’s standing in relation to obligatory military service can be considered as an attempt of breaking down the heteronormative bargain. Instead of playing the game according the rules, she rejected to be labeled as someone who has ‘psycho-sexual problems’. In other words, she did deconstruct the healthy/not healthy approach of military towards homosexuals.

Furthermore, we can even say that she managed to include a ‘woman’ in the military service, since she is a transsexual. Thus, it is possible to see Banu as a ‘winner’ of her heteronormative bargain.

In the following interview extraction, Yıldız (MTF) talks about the process of receiving a medical report to be exempted from obligatory military service:

*“Yıldız: The first time I was called for military, I was staying with my family. It was almost fours years before I went through sex-reassignment surgery. I knew that I could never stand military service. I have respect for the army but ...I have been told a lot of rumours about the military service. They might be right or wrong. But, for my own security, I did not want to go to military service.*

*Deniz: So, you received a report (çürük raporu) to be exempted?*

*Yıldız: No, that would kill my father. I told you I was living with my family. Luckily, I was admitted to Ankara University (she later told that she never registered herself to the school). I went to the military bureau, and postponed the service for two years. Even that was enough to*

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<sup>50</sup> A city which is located in the Black Sea Region of Turkey.

*make my father upset. But, I comforted him telling ‘Give me two years, I will be finished with school, then I will go to military, come back to Kırikkale and introduce you the most beautiful girl on earth as my wife.’ Small lies do not kill anyone.*

*Deniz: What happened in two years? Did you receive another call from military?*

*Yıldız: I was in Ankara at that time. Before they called me, I decided to go there to receive a report. The next part is classic. I was sent for check-up in the health department. They told me to get undressed...asked whether I have problems with my respiratory system. I said ‘no’, the doctor was about to write ‘fit’ on my file...The examination took 10 seconds! I gently said ‘I want consignment to psychiatry, I am gay’. So, they sent me to mental clinic.*

*Deniz: Did you tell them you are transsexual?*

*Yıldız: I told everything to the psychiatrist. I don’t know if he was paying attention what I said... He was watching my photos where I was wearing a woman’s dress. That was it, I got the report and celebrated my freedom with a bottle of Efes<sup>51</sup> that night.*

It is possible to point at two bargaining processes in Yıldız’s narrative. First, she was bargaining with her father in relation to obligatory military service. In order not to cause a trouble with her father, she avoided to get the report showing that she was ‘unfit due to psycho-sexual problems’. In this context, it is possible to observe the importance of military service and the meanings ascribed to it. While negotiating with the military authorities, Yıldız was dealing with the gendered discourse of the military institution. During her medical evaluation process, she was explicitly bargaining with the health department of the military institution. She said that she showed the doctors of her photos in women’s clothes and obviously the doctors were easily convinced about Yıldız’s sexual identity.

Undoubtedly, the discourse of obligatory military service is influential in people’s attitude towards those who does not serve in the military. Burce’s quotation below explains how the discourse of military might be effective in people’s perception of transsexuals:

*“One night I had to take a taxi from ASTİ<sup>52</sup> to Ayrancı<sup>53</sup>. I was trying not to keep eye contact with the driver. Then my telephone rang. I tried to ignore it but after a while I had to answer.*

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<sup>51</sup> Turkish Beer

<sup>52</sup> Ankara Şehirler Arası Terminali (Ankara Central Bus Station)

<sup>53</sup> A district name in Ankara

*Probably it was my tone of voice that awakened the taxi driver. He stopped the car in the middle of the street and asking me to leave. I told him that I had money, and I would pay the cost. He attempted catch me by my shirt to pull me closer to him. I grabbed his arm and pushed him away. He said “Go kill yourself! When you let people fuck your ass, my son is fighting the terrosist in Sirnak<sup>54</sup>, sleeping on the snow. How sad that he has to endanger his life for street dogs like you” Can you believe he just left me in the middle of the street at that night. I had to walk all the way to Ayranci. I did not send his son to Sirnak. Is it fair? Why am I the one to be blamed?”*

Burce’s account illuminates how nationalist ideology and transphobia might be in concord with each other. The taxi driver’s negative attitude towards Burce’s sexual identity was vocalized with a language that reflects the nationalist discourse of the military institution. It does not necessarily mean that the taxi driver’s hatred was constructed by the military institution or the nationalist ideology. However, his transphobia reflects the hierarchical order between those who serve in the military and those who do not. In other words, who is counted as a citizen and who is not? For the taxi driver, Burce has no right to be defended as a citizen because she is a transsexual. Furthermore, the taxi driver even thinks that Burce should better be killed. Undoubtedly, there might be several ways to explain the reason for the taxi driver’s violence to Burce. I just want to point at the relation between militarism and nationalism that is concealed behind the taxi driver’s language of hatred.

In addition to MTF transsexuals, the discourse of military seems to be influential in the lives of FTM transsexuals as well. Jilet is one of them who has a strong attachment to the Turkish Military:

*“Jilet: I used to love watching the soldiers’ parade on every 29<sup>th</sup> October<sup>55</sup>. I was sitting close to the television and dreaming about myself in uniforms and boots. For Ramadan Bayram, my uncle gave my brother a uniform for his size. He even got a green cap. I was so jealous of him. Still, I envy men...I mean the natural born ones (smiling) who go to military service. That is what makes them a real man.*

*Deniz: Have you ever heard of the term ‘conscious objector’?*

*Jilet: I am not sure...I think I know. I read it before but I can’t give you a definition.*

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<sup>54</sup> A city name which locating in the eastern part of Turkey.

<sup>55</sup> Turkish Republic was established on 29th October 1923. So, 29 October is celebrated as the Republic Day.

*Deniz: Gay males are exempted from military service in Turkey. What do you think about it?*

*Jilet: I think it is right. If you are gay, how can you feel comfortable with all the men around you? But, I..If I was a gay male, I think I would hide my gayness and go to military anyhow. It is a duty in the end and there is just one Turkey...You should defend the country as man”*

Jilet's narrative demonstrates the masculine ideal of the military's discourse. He repeats his eagerness to serve in the military by underlying how military service is related to become a 'real man'. Thus, Jilet might be thinking that serving in the military would be a means to justify his maleness. In this sense, one can say that Jilet's bargaining process is related to gender ideologies produced by the military service. Since military service is assigned only to male citizens, defending the nations is perceived as a duty given to only male citizens. Under the influence of this discourse, Jilet would probably feel himself as real as a 'natural-born male', if he could serve the military.

### **Discussion:**

“Military and security institutions have been a historical site of hegemonic masculinity, where masculinity has been normalized and regularized (Kronsell, 2005, p. 282). In this sense, the way Turkish Military Institution (re)produce masculinity is crucial in relation to the experiences of both MTF and FTM transsexuals. It is possible to argue that this institution is a heteronormative one. Rosenberg (2006, p.112) argues that through the categorization of 'us' and 'other', heteronormativity excludes those who deviate from the norm. Hence, military institution separates between 'us', who are capable of accomplishing the 'national duty' and 'others' who are 'not capable of serving to the nation'. This separation is crucial due to reinforcing the 'nationalist' homophobia and transphobia. In this sense, the taxi driver's attitude towards Burce can partly be explained through the gendered discourse that is reproduced by military institution. At least the way he referred to his son in the military while he was arguing with Burce is interesting. More over, taxi driver's sentence “*Go, kill yourself! How sad that he (referring to his son) has to endanger his life for street dogs like you*” can also be analyzed through the notion of 'nationalism'. Kronsell (2005, p. 282) underlines that military service is assigned to only male 'citizens' in most of the countries. Thus, in order to achieve the status of a proper citizen, males are supposed to serve in the military. In this context, for those who do not serve in the military are not regarded as 'citizen'. Maybe this is why the taxi driver mentioned that Burce has no citizenship rights like 'right to life'. Thus, those who are in the military (like his son) should not be responsible for protecting Burce.

Furthermore, based on Jilet's narration, it is possible to observe how the masculine ideal of military is influential on FTM transsexuals. According to Jilet, military service is an important indicator of masculinity and a must to become a 'real man'.

## CHAPTER: 10

### CONCLUSION

The introduction to this thesis begins with a quotation which is taken from the press declaration of LGBTTT Rights Platform about the murder of a transsexual on the 10<sup>th</sup> of November in 2008. The chapter proceeds with the news on another transsexual crime in Istanbul on 10<sup>th</sup> of March 2009. While finalizing the thesis now, I should sadly include two additional instances of transphobic murder. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of March, a transsexual woman was found dead in the city of Bursa<sup>56</sup>. Recently, LGBTTT community of Turkey is again in deep sorrow after Melek, a transsexual activist of Pink Life LGBTTT Association, was brutally killed in Ankara, on the 11<sup>th</sup> April.

As it is mentioned in the previous chapters, this research was stimulated by the dramatic increase of violence targeting the transsexual community in Turkey during the last few years. Underscoring the fact that the majority of people in the country have a tendency to ignore the screams of the transsexuals, the primary objective of this research was defined to draw attention to the experiences of transsexuals.

The accounts of the informants in this research demonstrate that their transsexual identity has led to both personal and social challenges in their lives since their childhood. The intensity of the challenges varies for each informant. However, their origin is same: Heteronormativity. That is “based on the assumption of a binary gender concept and a hegemonic heterosexual norm” (Rosenberg, 2006, p.111). Informants’ narratives illustrate how their lives have been limited by the principles of heteronormativity, and showed their strategies to tackle various constraints. Furthermore, some of their experiences serve as a useful device through which we could trace the influences of the regulatory mechanisms (state, military institution, legislations) as the ‘nationalist’ forces which perpetuate the heterosexist gender binaries in Turkey.

In this chapter, I will summarize the main findings of the separate empirical chapters and draw a broader picture of the interrelation between the transsexuals’ individual experiences and the dominant gender ideologies in Turkey.

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<sup>56</sup> She has had her head cut off.

### **Reiteration of the Main Findings:**

Throughout the thesis, the experiences of transsexuals were elaborated with a focus on the interrelation between the transsexuals' self perception and the society's attitude towards them. 'Heteronormativity' was chosen as a useful terminological device to describe the prevailing gender ideologies in Turkey. It was stated that heterosexist gender binaries are constraining transsexuals' lives both at the institutional level and the individual level.

Institutionally, state, legislations and military were described to be the major regulatory mechanism that perpetuate the dominant gender ideologies and shape the life options of transsexuals in Turkey. It was argued that the legal recognition of transsexuality, that is, their right to have sex-reassignment surgery and their right to change the 'sex' status on their identity card, does not necessarily bring about their liberation in Turkey. In contrast, the gendered discourse which is reinforced by the regulatory mechanisms perpetuates the condemnation of transsexuals in the country.

Concerning the role of the state, there are several points to be illuminated. First of all, the ruling elite resist embracing any policies for the improvement of the lives of sexual dissidents in the country. There is no official vocalization of the marginalization of LGBTTT people. On the contrary, it is possible to say that there is an indirect governmental oppression of the sexual dissidents, such as the attempts of banning the LGBTTT associations. When it comes to the constitutional rights of the LGBTTT people as 'citizens', the state seems to fail in securing some of these rights. Especially the transsexuals of the country seem to be deprived of their right to security. Informants' accounts illustrated the transsexuals' mistrust of the police; indeed, they expressed a salient fear of violence emanating from the police.

The heteronormative character of the contemporary legislations revealed itself throughout the transsexuals' narratives on sex-reassignment surgery and sex-work. Regarding the regulations of sex-reassignment surgery, heterosexist norms can be observed as they are harmonized with the nationalist ideology. The precondition which states that a transsexual candidate is supposed to be 'unproductive' manifests the relation between gender and the biological reproduction of the nation (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p.22). While guarding the heterosexual reproduction of the nation, this precondition also implies that transsexuals are not allowed to bring up the future generations. Concerning the regulations of sex-work, it is vital to underscore the fact that only those who hold a pink identity card are allowed to work in legalized brothels. This precondition indicates the exaltation of sexual intercourse between the opposite sexes as the majority (almost all) the customers of brothels are men. Here, it is also very important to recall the colored identity card regulation in Turkey. Females are



assigned to the pink identity card while males are given the blue identity card. This regulatory condition reinforces transsexuals to complete their transition to the opposite sex both medically and legally. Because “in Turkey, one’s properly documented identity matters a great deal” (Kandiyoti, 2002, p.279), people whose documented identity does not match with their gendered appearance might lead to problems when they are asked to show their identity card. Giving no legalized room for sex and gender ambiguity can also be regarded as the manifestation of dominant heteronormativity in the domain of legislations.

As mentioned in the background chapter, the discourse centered on the military institution is known to be a powerful source of dominant gender ideologies. The fact that gay males are discriminated from the obligatory male service under the labeling of “unfit due to psycho-sexual problems” pave the way for increasing homophobia and transphobia as well. Moreover, since the fulfilment of the obligatory military service is assigned strong nationalist meanings, people who do not accomplish their national duty are subjected to the hatred of extreme nationalists. Hence, the military institution’s gendered discourse constraints the lives of sexual dissidents.

The operation of the regulatory mechanisms of state, legislations and military are interwoven. They operate in harmony while limiting the life options of transsexuals. There is, however, an individual level where the operation of heteronormativity is also salient. The accounts of the informants demonstrated that the pervasive constraints of heteronormativity are internalized by the transsexuals both in their wishes and their behaviour. Hence, the majority of the transsexuals do not develop strategies that would entirely contribute to the “liberation” of their sexual identity but generate short-term solutions to live out their transsexuality.

In order to live their sexual identity more openly, transsexuals rupture from the place they grew up. However, rather than being liberated, they continue to be drifted to the margins of life as they are also excluded from the majority of people in their final destination, i.e. Ankara. They are deprived of any medical or social information that would enable their transition to the opposite sex. As a result of this, transsexuals look for assistance and guidance among other people like themselves. When it comes to the sex-reassignment surgery, some of them manage to breach the heteronormative legislations by getting operated within the underground market. This market, however, guarantees no security of health for the conditions of the operation. In the end, it is triggered by profit markers who are aiming to making money out of the vulnerable situation of the transsexuals. When it comes to the issue of earning a life, MTF transsexuals cooperate with the hypocrisy of the system by responding

the demand of sex-work. Indeed, many of them cannot even think of an alternative work rather than selling sex. FTM transsexuals seem to be relatively more advantaged when it comes to the working life. Indeed, the research findings demonstrated that FTM informants have generally been more tolerated since their childhood. Their adoption of masculine gender roles and their lack of femininities have not been perceived as a major threat by their families or other people around them. FTM informants, however, suffered more than the MTF ones during the realization process of their sexual identity because of the fact that female homosexuality and FTM transsexuality is relatively unknown to the overwhelming majority in Turkey. Condemnation of the adoption of femininity by males results in the visibility (and vulnerability) of male homosexuality and MTF transsexuality. However, masculinity remains to be an exalted characteristic for both males and females. The contradictory experiences of MTF and FTM transsexuals manifest the hierarchical order between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ in Turkey. In other words, masculinity is generally favoured in relation to femininity.

*“There are many ways to kill. You can stick a knife into one’s belly, take away one’s bread, not heal one from a disease, stick one in a bad apartment, work one to death, drive one to commit suicide, send one off to war, etc. Only a few of these things are forbidden in our country (Bertolt Brecht)”<sup>57</sup>.*

On the basis of Brecht’s definition of crime, I am not going to claim that transsexuals are intended to be killed by the regulatory mechanism in Turkey. Yet, as the findings of this research reveals, transsexuals in Turkey are dramatically subjected to discrimination. Since their childhood transsexuals are confronted with biased attitudes in relation to their gender. They are attempted to be corrected by several actors around them. At the time of realizing their sexual identity, transsexuals experience a chaotic period of time due to their deviation from the expected gender norms. As their inner complexity combines with the oppressive reactions of the people around them, transsexuals are drifted to a state of solitude. Some of them even become suicidal. When transsexuals want to change biologically, they face with bureaucratic barriers and inadequate assistance. As a result they might end up with alternative ways of sex-reassignment surgery which can be life threatening. Furthermore, as the majority of transsexuals experience exclusion from the domain of work, they are obliged to earn their lives through risky conditions without being provided any social security. Additionally, they

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<sup>57</sup> Extracted from Karen R. Achberger’s book called “Understanding Ingeborg Bachmann” from 1994, page: 98

become more vulnerable through the transphobic/homophobic discourse which is (re)produced by institutions like military which has a strong influence on the public opinion. Thus, when I read the crime definition of Brecht, I just wondered which ways of killing are forbidden in Turkey.

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