

## **“I Lived and Learned”: Violence, Survival and Knowledge in Trans Women’s Lives in Turkey**

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Taşcıoğlu, E.E., 2015. “I Lived and Learned”: Violence, Survival and Knowledge in Trans Women’s Lives in Turkey. *Oñati Socio-legal Series* [online], 5 (6), 1452-1470. Available from: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2700226>



### **Abstract**

This article examines life story narratives of trans women in an effort to understand how violence produces and shapes their lives and subjectivities in Istanbul, Turkey. After delineating the main forms of violence that target them, it looks at the ways through which trans women negotiate, challenge and transform the parameters of their life-worlds through an engagement with their violent experiences. I especially focus on trans women's production of a particular kind of knowledge which enables them to claim an authoritative voice and construct themselves as subjects who have access to the hidden realities of life that are not accessible to others who did not go through these experiences. Next, turning my attention to trans women's creative work on their subjectivities, I show how they actively work to cultivate themselves as ethically good, disobedient and struggling beings, as individuals and as a collective, and how the transmission of this construction forms and transforms their selves and relationships. Underlining the intricate ways in which processes of oppression, exclusion and violence affect and inform gendered lives and strategies of survival, this discussion highlights the interconnections between power, subjectivity and resistance, and the productive tensions inherent to the positions of marginality and the potentialities of survival in dire times and places.

### **Key words**

Narrative; trans Women; violence; survival; Turkey

### **Resumen**

Este artículo analiza relatos de la vida de mujeres transexuales en Estambul, Turquía, en un intento por entender cómo la violencia crea y da forma a sus vidas y

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I would like to thank Angela Melville, Santiago Abel Amietta, David Whyte, Roberta Bosio, Chiara Ragni, and my two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this article. I would also like to express my gratitude to Floretta Boonzaier and David Gadd for including my work in this special issue and to Cristina Ruiz for the assistance in the publication. Finally I thank Renato Treves Programme of University of Milan and Juan Celaya Grant of International Institute for the Sociology of Law for funding the research project from which this article is drawn.

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subjetividades. Después de describir las principales formas de violencia que sufren, se ve de qué forma las mujeres transexuales negocian, se enfrentan y transforman los parámetros de su mundo, a través de una lucha contra sus experiencias violentas. Especialmente se centra en la producción por parte de las mujeres transexuales de determinado conocimiento que les permite sostener una voz autorizada y construirse como sujetos que tienen acceso a realidades escondidas de la vida que no son accesibles a quien no vivió estas experiencias. A continuación, la atención se centra en el trabajo creativo de las mujeres transexuales sobre sus subjetividades, y se muestra cómo trabajan activamente para cultivarse como seres éticamente buenos, desobedientes y luchadores, de forma individual y colectiva, y cómo la transmisión de esta construcción forma y transforma su ego y sus relaciones. Subrayando la forma intrincada en la que los procesos de opresión, exclusión y violencia afectan y conforman la vida desde una perspectiva de género y las estrategias de supervivencia, este debate pone de relieve las interconexiones entre poder, subjetividad y resistencia, y las tensiones productivas inherentes a las posiciones de marginalidad y el potencial de supervivencia en situaciones y lugares terribles.

**Palabras clave**

Relatos; mujeres transexuales; violencia; supervivencia; Turquía

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## 1. Introduction

Sex change operations were legally recognised as early as 1988 in Turkey which allows trans women to have sex reassignment operations and make the necessary changes in their official documents. This recognition on the legal texts, however, does not reflect the real lives of trans women, which are rather shaped by various forms of marginalisation, injury, and even death. A quantitative survey conducted by Lambdaistanbul LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex) Association<sup>1</sup> (2010) laid bare the problems of trans women of Istanbul: Almost eighty-two percent of the research participants stated that they have to do sex work due to discrimination in employment; ninety percent was subjected to physical violence by security forces and seventy-eight percent was sexually assaulted by unknown people.<sup>2</sup> Qualitative research also explicated the multiplicity of exclusionary measures that trans women face (Selek 2006) and shed light on how law is constitutive of the unequal ground on which trans women's lives unfold in Turkey (Taşcioğlu 2011, 2015).

Given the encapsulation of trans women's lives by different forms of violence, the question of how they survive and live through these different modes of marginalisation becomes even more pressing. Elaine Scarry, in her influential book *The Body in Pain* (1985), investigated the relation of pain and consciousness to suggest that pain is the disintegration of consciousness, language, and world. According to Scarry, physical pain brings about an "absolute split between one's sense of one's reality and the reality of other persons" (Scarry 1985, p. 4) and thus is "radically subjective" (Scarry 1985, p. 50) and "unsharable" (Scarry 1985, p. 16). Veena Das, by contrast, challenged the view that pain destroys one's capacity to communicate and offered alternative ways of understanding the experience of violation, trauma and suffering (Das 1995, 1997, 2000, 2007, Das *et al.* 2000). Arguing that pain is rather a social experience and its expression an invitation to share and an appeal for acknowledgement, Das in her various works showed how subjects can incorporate their painful conditions into everyday life experience by turning them into conditions on which to ground their empowerment, resistance and resilience.

A reading of violence, survival and self-making in this vein requires an understanding of power as not only repressing, demobilising or pacifying, but also as a relation of force that permeates life and is productive of new forms of subjects, desires, relations, and discourses (Foucault 1978, 1980). Reformulating Michel Foucault's notion of "subjection", Judith Butler in her *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) explicates how power subordinates and simultaneously produces and gives shape to the very subjects that it subordinates: "Power not only acts on a subject but, in a transitive sense, enacts the subject into being" (Butler 1997, p. 13). The subject that emerges from this account is not fixed nor does it precede power relations, but is produced through them which form the necessary conditions of its possibility and "is the occasion for a further making" (Butler 1997, p. 99). Such an understanding of power and subject formation encourages us to locate agency within this productive relationship, and to conceptualise agency, rather than as external to power and as the relative autonomy of the subject from relations of power, "as a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable" (Mahmood 2005, p. 18).

In light of this reading of violence and self-making and the understanding of power as investing its subjects with new forms agency, this article examines life story narratives of trans women in an effort to understand how violence produces and

<sup>1</sup> Turkish LGBTI rights organisation founded in Istanbul in 1993.

<sup>2</sup> A detailed summary of the survey and data on different forms of violence committed by a variety of institutional and non-institutional actors against trans women is available online at Lambdaistanbul LGBTI Association (2010).

shapes their lives and subjectivities in Istanbul, Turkey.<sup>3</sup> After providing a short account on methodology, the article will set out to delineate the main forms of violence that target trans women since their early childhood into their lives in the urban city of Istanbul, including family disownment, threat, physical coercion and institutional violence. Trans women's narratives suggest that these violations they suffer lead to irrevocable transformations in their sense of self, relationships and world; and yet, posing trans women's lives as totally "passive" or "repressed" would be a miscomprehension. Rather, in the midst of various forms of deprivation, trans women find various ways of survival. The fourth section of the article will thus focus on the ways through which trans women incorporate these various forms of oppression into their lives as individuals and as a collective. In particular, it will examine the formation of selves and expressions of autonomy and agency that trans women formulated in their life story narratives, which are enabled, also in their own views, by their painful experiences even if their lives have been shattered by these very experiences.

## 2. Listening to life stories of trans women

The data for this article derives from my PhD research where I examine life story narratives of trans women in order to understand their relationship with the law and its translation into their citizenship experiences in contemporary urban Turkey (Taşcioğlu 2015). Life story interviews, as a qualitative research method, form significant means into inquiring the 'life worlds' as experienced by social actors and has the potential of revealing how people convey meanings of their experiences and construct their subjectivities at the intersection of the social and the personal (Riessman 1993, Plummer 1995, Franzosi 1998). Although the focus of my research was not explicitly on the topic of violence, in the context of this article, life story narratives proved to be a useful tool in analysing how trans women experience violence, how they revise and reconstruct their identity and social position, and how they establish a meaningful continuity in their lives through a creative engagement with their experiences.

I found research participants through my own networks among trans women which I have been forming since 2006 in LGBTI organisations of Istanbul. When I first reached the likely participants of my research, I explained my project briefly and that I wanted to listen to their life stories. Following Chase's (2003) critique about posing overly abstract sociological questions to research participants, I chose to locate the interviews in participants' actual experiences. Accordingly, the interviews were organised around three stages. First, the research participants narrated their life stories in the way they wanted to with minimum intervention. Then, when I found necessary, I asked them for more elaborate narrations on events already mentioned; and finally raised several themes such as relations with the family, the law, the city, in broad terms if they had not been addressed. In some cases the interviews took more than one session, the longest one more than nine hours, spanning over five meetings. I conducted and transcribed all the interviews by myself and treat these narrations for the purposes of this article as a reservoir which provides a way of understanding how violence is embedded in trans women's lives.

My analysis in this article relies on life story narratives of five trans women, as I name them here: Derya, Cansu, Melisa, Gönül Anne and Handan Anne. Their ages ranged from 27 to 59. Their family backgrounds or educational distinctions did not seem to play a significant role in their lives and all were of lower socioeconomic status and were living under similar conditions. All had once been or were at the

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<sup>3</sup> I deploy the term 'trans' as an umbrella term to refer to people "who have undergone hormone treatment or surgery to reconstruct their bodies, and to those who cross gender in ways which are less permanent" (Hines 2007, para. 1). 'Trans woman' addresses any male to female (MTF) person who has gone or goes through varying degrees of gender transition and is also increasingly being used by trans women to denote their identity in Turkey.

time of the interview employed as sex workers. Cansu, Gönül Anne and Handan Anne had quitted sex work, and Derya and Melisa were actively involved in its different forms. Their sex worker status is not unimportant, as their interactions with various forms of violence that are discussed throughout this article take place in close relation to the interrelatedness of their sex worker status and trans identity.

Trans women live a communal life and have strong ties with each other, as one of my participants referred to as "the biggest yet loneliest family of the world". Thus our interviews were often enriched by anecdotes about the experiences of other trans women whom I did not interview or meet at all. Moreover, as almost all of my interviewees live and/or work with the company of other trans women, the interviews at homes usually took place in their presence even if we were in a more private part of the house, such as the bedroom of the participant. As a result, the interviews were sometimes interrupted by the commentaries or anecdotes of other trans women. This had disadvantages as well as advantages. At times it cut the flow of the narration and introduced new topics. Yet more importantly, these dynamics during the interviews made me more aware of the interrelationship between my participants and other trans women and provided insight to the extent that their experiences were constructed not only as individual stories but also as a communal one.

Another crucial dynamic for the aims of this article was that younger research participants usually directed me to interview some elderly "knowledgeable" trans women to listen to their life stories. Upon interviewing them, I concluded that one of the ways that knowledge is perceived in this context consists mainly of the knowledge and survival skills gained through experience as a trans woman and a narrative competence accompanied by a strong memory to tell about all these lived experiences. This is understandable as making a life as a trans woman in Turkey until late age is difficult which only a few succeed. Moreover, as I will be arguing below, this claim to knowledge forms an important means for trans women to domesticate violence and establish their identity, by creating out of what otherwise would be considered as disruptions a sense of order and continuity. To signify our relationship as well as their status within the community as 'mother's, I add to the pseudonyms of these two elderly trans women the word for mother in Turkish and refer them throughout the article as "Gönül Anne" and "Handan Anne."

### 3. Narratives of violence

#### 3.1. *Violence at home*

In what follows, I provide a brief account of the stories of violence my research participants told me, before I proceed to the analysis of how trans women negotiate, challenge and transform the parameters of their life-worlds through an engagement with these violent experiences. All the life story narratives that I elicited for this study started off with childhood memories. Trans women's early childhood experiences commonly reveal, in their own terms, a sense of "feeling a difference". In the interviews, most gave accounts of how "realising their difference to the other boys" has been a major turning point in terms of their sense of self, and subsequently in their everyday lives and relations to the family. Most narratives of this period consist of detailed descriptions of how since early years of childhood they were inclined to occupy themselves with activities culturally coded as feminine, such as playing with dolls, doing housework or handicraft, and enjoying the company of female friends and relatives. In their accounts, as much as their inclination to female activities, their sustained rejection of masculinity appears to be crucial in the formation of their sense of selves, self-legibility, and expressions of agency.

Childhood for most of my research participants has been marked by coercion and violence when their femininity was constantly repelled by their family, school or community. Derya remembered a blow on the head by the school master, Handan Anne told the story of being ostracized by her school friends and Melisa of her family's corrective measures to make her act as a boy, while Cansu and Gönül Anne recalled their family's increasingly violent approach towards their deeply felt sense of selves and bodies which engulfed the whole of both's childhood narratives. Despite the humiliations, impositions, insulating measures and the atmosphere of insecurity they were forced to endure, trans women emphasised how those were attempts in vain, and put forward the inability of violence to change their way of being as a clear evidence of their quest to live up according to their gender identity against all odds.

Cansu was the only trans women among my research participants who "came out" to some of her family members and probably the one who was subjected by her family to the most extreme levels of violence. She first shared her gender identity with her sister who would tell about this against Cansu's will to their mother to "find a solution". This act of coming out would not result in the understanding and support that Cansu had hoped for. Instead, it marked the beginning of a continuing series of verbal, psychological and increasingly destructive physical violence that targeted her at home to the point that she was forced to take her own life by drinking a bottle of DDT. When she opened her eyes at the hospital where her family had brought her to die, Cansu was threatened not to go back home and in her words, "That was how I got disconnected from home. I got disconnected from home. This is how my childhood passed."

Not every trans woman I interviewed had been put or threatened to death by their families as it was the case for Cansu, but abandonment by or separation from the family came up as common experiences. All trans women I interviewed were abandoned or expelled by, or had forsaken their familial ties in their teenage years, although some re-established contact years later. The tension between family and community expectations on the one hand and their search for spaces to express their gender identity on the other seems to have got resolved only when they left home, their family and towns behind. Handan Anne, the only trans woman who described a happy family life in her childhood years, expressed this double meaning of the separation from the family when she was talking about the sudden death of both of her parents, the misery she went through those times and the changes brought to her life: "But you know finally one doesn't die with the dead. Even if that is your mother, your father, your sister or your child... one doesn't die with the dead. You go on living. And from then onwards... With their death, the gate of freedom was opened for me..."

### *3.2. Violence in the city*

The second period which emerges in the narratives of trans women is their lives in Istanbul away from their families. In these narratives, one can detect two forms of talking about Istanbul. In the first kind of talk, Istanbul is depicted as a place of independence, ability for self-expression and autonomy. Indeed, trans women's efforts to start a new life in Istanbul enabled them to surpass the limits set on them by their earlier networks and provided them with a new means for making sense of themselves and a space to express their gender identity. The two over fifty years old trans women that I interviewed, Gönül Anne and Handan Anne, talked about their arrival to Istanbul as the first time of seeing other trans women, learning about trans identities, and thus becoming legible to themselves. Entering the trans community also brought a strong sense of empowerment for all my research participants and involved tacitly a break with their past and its replacement with a new present: "Finally I was free" was how Gönül Anne felt when she began living among her trans friends.

This emerging sense of belonging to the trans community of the city ran parallel to the second kind of talk about Istanbul. "You have to move compulsorily to big city. And then the most painful, worst times of the life begin actually. You don't realize this at first," Derya said. This talk depicts the city as a place of poverty, violence and suffering. Gönül Anne and Handan Anne narrated their lives as street children until their entry to sex work when they have been raped number of times by police officers or passersby. Others narrated their efforts to find jobs or abuses and discriminations they encountered in workplaces.

Although their reasons to enter sex work are varied, sooner or later after their separation from their families and arrival to Istanbul, trans women I interviewed began working as sex worker. Most emphasized that they did sex work mainly in order to make a living at a basic level and likened sex work to "torture" establishing it as a form of violence. For Gönül Anne, on the other hand, entering sex work was a decision which she took after being harassed by men in other workplaces:

Then I began in Abanoz<sup>4</sup>. I have a circle now. Good. Here I cannot see anything to feel pity for. You are forced to do sex work. Trans women are forced to sex work. No, not like that. As I told before, I wanted to work. But the man finds a way to take advantage of you no matter how good you are. He takes advantage of you. No matter how hard you try to work, they pull you from your feet. So I said. This is more honest. At least, come on! I am in prostitution and I will get money!

Besides their struggles to sustain a living as a sex worker, other forms of violence are abundant in trans women's lives in Istanbul. Displacement and exclusion that they individually and communally have experienced in Istanbul and even out of the city has become a substantial part of their lives. All narrated stories of violence they were subjected to by sex work clients, partners, neighborhood thugs or unknown assailants. Even though a wide array of interactions and negotiations of trans women in the city are produced at the intersection of different kinds of violence, the violence of the legal actors and institutions, primarily of the police, was by far the dominating form of violence that appeared in this part of their narratives, including constant police surveillance, ID checks, fines, house raids, arbitrary arrests, detentions, torture and sexual violence.

Derya's narrative demonstrated the prevalence of the intrusion of legal institutions in trans women's lives as well as its force of violence. Her account on her life in Istanbul was clearly demarcated through time periods each of which she equalized with different forms of violent treatments of the law of street sex worker trans women. She told in detail the heavy tortures and sexual violence she was subjected at police stations in late 1990s: "They wash you with pressurized water, and make you wait until the morning, on a winter day, completely naked, until the morning, in tiny detention rooms, in an awful condition." All this violence, she believed, accumulated into "an enormous burden and pain upon her body" and eventually turned into tuberculosis. Notwithstanding its instantaneous harms, the violence outlasted the actual physical injury and its cumulative force did leave its imprint on her mind, on her body and well-being.

Not only police power, but also the power of the judicial system shapes trans women's marginality to a great extent. All trans women I interviewed had a number of judicial cases throughout their lives in Istanbul, some still pending at the time of our interviews. Most of their appearances at the courthouse were driven by their interactions with the police, and in most of these cases they appeared as defendants based exclusively on police allegations. Derya's account on the changing techniques of the police in the last few years to address trans women sex workers focused on this point:

<sup>4</sup> A street known as the host of the first legal brothels in Istanbul that were opened in 1884 (Wyers 2013).



Before they used to take and release you after ID check. They used to beat you and hit you with baton 2-3 or 5-6 times and release you. Now they take you to trials and they make you crawl from pillar to post. You go to a trial ten times. One single trial! What is the difference? There is no difference. It got even worse. Much worse.

In this context, violence encapsulates the lives of trans women in Istanbul at the intersection of their interactions with a wide range of institutional and non-institutional actors, which has also an effect in producing trans women's subjectivity as a distinctive locus of social marginality. Trans women construct themselves as in a permanent state of injustice and suffering due to their gender identity. Derya's account continued:

Our lives are very difficult. Sustaining livelihood is difficult. The street is difficult. Believe me, everything is very difficult at the moment. I mean not only for me. I talk about me and I think about what I told. If you were in my position... I have many friends who live in very difficult conditions. I mean, always. Transvestites are the ones who suffer the most in this life. I have no doubt about it. We suffer in each and every matter. Is there anything we don't suffer from? We suffer in every matter.

Suffering, as this quote shows, was constructed by trans women not only as individual stories but also as a communal one. In the next section, I touch upon some of the ways through which trans women cope with these difficulties, establish their individual and collective identities, and re-establish a sense of order, control and continuity, and how they do so, based on their difficult conditions and painful experiences.

#### 4. Narratives of survival

The previous section shed light on the persistence of violence and suffering in trans women's lives and life story narratives. What trans women told me about their lives, however, did not only consider violence, exclusion and pain. Their narratives also pointed out to the diverse ways through which they survive and manage to reconstruct the world as meaningful and livable, even if it has been shattered by painful experiences. In this sense, trans women's narratives were not only narratives of violence but also of surviving, of restoring their sense of self and reclaiming their life from violence.

My focus will in this section will be on two of such ways which provided my research participants the conditions of their resistance, resilience and empowerment as they were reflected in their life story narratives: First, I will look to their production of an alternative knowledge through which, I argue, trans women are able to claim an authoritative voice and construct themselves as subjects who have access to the hidden realities of life that are not accessible to others who did not go through these experiences. Next, turning my attention to trans women's creative labour on their subjectivities, I will show how they actively work to cultivate themselves as ethically good, disobedient and struggling human beings and collective, and how the transmission of this construction forms and transforms their selves and relationships.

##### 4.1. *The poisonous knowledge*

In her work on violence and subjectivity, Veena Das (2000) is concerned with the interaction of production of truth, the power of voice and the will to live left in the aftermath of violent events. For her, exposure to violence provides one access to "poisonous knowledge" by throwing into question the assumptions one had made about life and its qualities (Das 2000). Poisonous knowledge does not simply mean speaking about the traumatic events of the past. It refers to a certain kind of truth that is not accessible in ordinary circumstances and one that enables to incorporate traumatic events into everyday life and redeem voice, by rendering these painful experiences meaningful and habitable.

Parallel to the poisonous knowledge Veena Das eloquently describes, most articulate expressions of a point of truth on which to ground a life and an identity in the narratives that I elicited were formulated in relation to trans women's construction of a particular kind of knowledge and of themselves as the carriers of that knowledge. Their narratives suggested that only by undergoing suffering can one seriously comprehend the true knowledge about what life really is and that they are in possession of this knowledge as it has been revealed to them by their experiences. All trans women's narratives conveyed a message that they "did not have all that suffering in vain" in Gönül Anne's terms: "I lived and I learned. I see life from a different perspective now. I understand it. So it was good for me in a way. I understand people very well now."

One common way through which my research participants underlined the importance of their painful experiences in the acquirement of this knowledge was their construction of life as a school. Recounting me their "painful experiences" or "painful days" in their own words, they emphasised strongly that they were not ashamed or afraid to tell their life experiences, as many others would be. Rather, they found these experiences to be the source of the knowledge on which the foundation of their stance on life rests, and a source of empowerment that distinguished their knowledge and identity as genuine over educated and/or conventional wisdom and forms of living. Gönül Anne went on:

Life is a school. Because they taught me these. It was not teachers who taught these. It was those men, this or that. People taught me. One lira for a bagel<sup>5</sup> and you learn it. There is no such issue, such requirement as to go to an academician and take a course. I am a distinguished professor in my own field. Of course. And no professor is able to come and study this school of arts of me. Because there is no such school. You cannot study this school of arts at the life university. No one can. It is very difficult. How well can you act as a prostitute? How well can you act as a trans? You cannot. You can only act superficially. [...] You learn what it means to be fucked by someone only when you are fucked. 'I wrote their lives.' 'I did this. I did that.' Get over with these.

How I was perceived by the research participants shaped our interactions and the presentation of this knowledge and its acquirement by trans women in the narratives. At times – like in the quote above – the knowledge I was assumed to have gained through university education was contrasted to and challenged by the kind of knowledge they gained through their experiences – in the words of Gönül Anne, in the "life university." For them, not education but experience was the route to knowledge. At other moments, as it was usually the case in the interviews with elderly trans women who treated me mostly like a daughter, I was a young woman who was there to listen to their story, to be advised on certain topics and to make use of their story not solely for my research but also for my life trajectory.

Not only in inserting their difference to me, but the differentiations which they made between the older and present versions of themselves tracked the route of acquirement of this knowledge. In the former phases of their lives, they described themselves as ignorant, innocent, and weak, while at the present they considered themselves to be more courageous, mature and wise. Their accounts of earlier years were repeatedly used to testify for the lack of knowledge and ability to act entailed by the absence of painful experiences in the past to draw on. Talking about her first arrest by the police, Melisa said: "I don't know anything. I never lived this. I am 18 years old, an ignorant. Because I do not know of such pain, I am unconscious about it." Later in our interview, she would provide a view on how she believes this growing out of ignorance happens gradually, drawing a parallel with my education trajectory:

<sup>5</sup> This is a reference to an incident when Gönül Anne, as a street kid in her teen years in Istanbul, was approached by a man who offered her money for a bagel and later raped her.

For years I've been running around. Do you know how our circle is? It develops level by level, step by step. [...] For instance you studied; your education went further, you fulfilled higher responsibilities. It works the same way in our circle, my sister. First you have a period of *Kezban*<sup>6</sup>. You are ignorant. It is like you believe in everything, you do this and that.

Besides numerous references to "being ignorant"; "being naïve", "not knowing the evil", "lacking the ability to know whom to trust", and "believing in everyone" were some of the other common expressions trans women used to describe this period of their lives. In telling these experiences, their emphasis was on their survival despite all physical and psychological suffering, and that they learned valuable lessons for their lives by means of these experiences: "Believe me; I regard myself as a person in her 45-50s because of the struggles of life I gave," said Melisa who was 28 years old at the time of our interview. When Gönül Anne was telling about her first arrival to Istanbul and the days she was living on the streets, raped various times by men, she underlined how one leaves this ignorant state of being: "Slowly I began to understand what things are. What words are. What numbers are. What life means. I began to distinguish what is what." Maintaining an image of her earlier self as "an apprentice", she went on explaining how she learned life: "I always say that you learn life as you are being fucked. Whatever you are, you cannot learn life without being fucked. Certainly muck muck<sup>7</sup>."

So far it should be clear how trans women narrated an understanding of life as a school and of themselves as having been able to get to know life better by means of their painful experiences. But what did the life teach them or what did this knowledge consist of? Very much like what James C. Scott (1992) called "hidden transcripts" that articulate inverse, oppositional values to the social order described by "public transcripts", the knowledge my research participants laid claim to was a kind of resistant discourse that offered an oppositional, inverted knowledge into "life's hidden realities", as many stated. These realities were very much related to questions that were raised by trans women's experiences and asked for a re-evaluation of the uniform and immutable conceptions of the life as defined and fixed by the norms of the society. In that sense, their narratives testified for the societal rule's "hypocrisy" and "discrepancies" and were aimed at challenging knowledge about themselves as well as about family, men, law and the state.

This resignification of the social order involved the knowledge on what it means to be trans or sex worker. In their narratives trans women repeatedly rejected conventional wisdom about their identities and laid bare the truth about themselves from their own perspective. Gönül Anne, who grew up amongst beatings of her father and grandfather until she ran away from home, pointed to the meaninglessness of resorting to violence to impose gender roles as follows:

There is no sense in oppressing someone, in beating, to make a boy or a girl out of him by force. People are just lying to themselves. It doesn't happen like that. Samoa Island is so beautiful in the issue of sexual taboos. I mean they should leave everyone in the world to decide on their own behalf. They shouldn't let anyone go out of her own way and cause an accident. Because I liken this to cause an accident and kill people forcefully while they were going only on their own way.

Other trans women also emphasised the irrationality of imposing gender roles upon trans identities, and demanded the acknowledgement of their experiences and of the violations they have suffered. Some explicitly rejected commonplace claims that trans identities "are imports from the West to Turkey" or "increased in number" and constructed their life, knowledge, and testimony as evidences against those claims. Handan Anne, for instance, complained about the "ignorance of people" and put forward her historical knowledge vis-à-vis the official and commonsensical

<sup>6</sup> *Kezban*, a Turkish female name. In slang, it indicates an inexperienced, naïve person.

<sup>7</sup> Typical onomatopoeia for kissing sounds in Turkish.

demarcations of Turkish society and inserted trans identities as a genuine element into the Turkish history and culture:

Actually we exist in the Turkish culture. People don't know their history, their past. For instance transsexuals were very precious during the reign of Murat IV. The ones who did not have transsexual neighbours were not respected. Families used to take their sons to male *hamams*<sup>8</sup>. Men had their first sexual experience with transsexuals. Or there is a folkloric song called Benli. Do you know it? Benli was a famous transsexual of those times. [Tells the story of Benli] Of course the stories that are told are not these. People are ignorant. They do not know about these.

The line trans women drew between themselves as "knowledgeable" and the rest of the society as "ignorant" was not solely about the knowledge of about being a trans or sex worker. Their experiences had led them to question broader taken for granted aspects of life and guarantors of truth, safety and love. For some trans women, such as Gönül Anne, the contradictions between what one is told and what one sees at an early age leads one to challenge religion, its integrity and guidance:

You go to the religious school on the other hand, you read Quran, listen to the orders of Allah but there is nothing in your life that you see in Quran. This is another contradiction. I mean when you look to the Quran, it is very beautiful; but what you see when you look back to your life is something completely different. There are so many contradictions that disbelief begins at that point. Discrimination begins there. There is no relation between what is in Quran and what is happening at your home.

The changing meaning of "home" and the inversion of the knowledge about spaces was another common point in the narratives in this regard. Spaces which commonly would be considered as sites of love, safety and warmth cease to fulfil their promises and turn into grounds where pain and rejection unfold and the self is violated. Home turns into a place where "the otherisation and discrimination begin", and far from offering shelter is experienced as hindrance and confinement. Gönül Anne told:

So I ran away [from home]. Oh, I am free now! I breathe as I run away. As I tell you, when I went out of the house, wandering around on that yard made me happy. As if I am condemned to thousand years, as if I am in a dungeon; I was experiencing the biggest freedom and breathing when I went out. [...] Home is supposed to be one's shelter, where one would live happily. Home is warmth. This is not the case. Outside world gave me happiness. They used to say that outside world is bad but I knew that home was worse than that.

The resignification of home and family as limits upon oneself is coupled with the new meanings given to other places. Streets, forests and even cemeteries become sites which offer freedom, peace, and safety. Handan Anne recounted:

I cannot forget the peace and comfort sleeping in the cemetery gave to me. I never had a sleep like that in my life. The sleep in the cemetery is a beautiful sleep. It is not possible to tell about, it should be lived. [...] Cemetery is the most secure place, did you know? There is no evil in cemetery.

One other frequent target in the narratives of trans women that they claimed "to know their real faces" were socially respectable men. They mostly appeared in the narratives as abusers, rapers, sex work clients or sexual deviants. Gönül Anne, while narrating her days as a street child, said:

I never forget this... Those monsters, all those well-intentioned old men, gentlemen... Whatever their profession was, without any exception, they used to take and abuse us. They used to take us to *hamams*, or to their houses, to nooks... Those men would never be unoccupied. All of these were pious, respectful men. Since then, I am well trained, that is, about mankind.

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<sup>8</sup> Turkish bath.

Anthropologist Helio Silvia considered similar statements of Brazilian travesties as "a kind of guerilla warfare against macho men, married men, family men, 'squares' ('caretoes'), all those who under the cover of good behavior can slip, under protection, into practices that are not compatible with their public images" (Silvia 1993, p. 99 quoted in Kulick 1998, p. 161). During our interviews, trans women shared examples of such guerrilla warfare and pointed to the gap between the real identities and appearances of Turkish men. They mentioned several examples of what they found to be "perverse" sexual requests of their clients and told of their desire to be penetrated by trans sex workers, condensed in their common referral to their penis as "national wealth." Telling about "the double lives of men," Derya said: "People think that we are the deviants but the real deviants are those family men." Melisa added: "Only interest. They are only after their interests, fucking and money." Still, men were not almighty, and their lack of self-control signed them as inferiors. Gönül Anne explained: "Because I got to know so many men in my life... Do you know? Men are actually pitiful. Men are like children. All they care about is, let me talk to you openly, so you learn it, they only care about their bowel and they do not know what to do with that." Later on, while talking about a sex work client man, who despite his "tough" outlook ended up in demanding a masochistic role play, she would warn me against the deceptions and appearances of men as well as of the life in general:

You see, life is always a deception. Colours are very beautiful but don't let yourself be deceived by the colours of mankind. Look to the real colours, to the colours of the nature. Don't let yourself be deceived even by them. Because sometimes they are poisonous. Mankind's colours are deceptive too, they might poison you.

Once "poisoned" by what they later recognised as deceptions of life, trans women's life experiences added to their construction of the true knowledge of law as well. The nature and authority of the law were highly questionable in their narratives. Reflecting on the intrusions of the law into their lives, many directly challenged its promises of delivering equality and justice and framed it as one of the most persistent violators and unwelcome powers in their lives. Handan Anne shared an account of how she was raped and then beaten by a watchman during her first days alone in Istanbul: "He was a man of law, but do you know what? I suffered the biggest malice in their hands." Cansu said: "We are always told to trust the police, the law, aren't we? But let me tell you what I learned by living all these years: They are the last ones that one can trust in."

Others talked openly against official and commonplace claims that torture is an issue of the past in Turkey. Melisa added: "No one should tell that torture is over, it is still going on and we, trans women, are the witnesses." Derya, on the other hand, while she was talking about the legal treatment of trans women by law in the 2000s, also provided a critique against modernist understandings of the law when she presented a firm disbelief in its progressive accounts and consciously worked against public narratives which in particular read the law in a progressive fashion towards civilisation, inclusion and equality: "Then the 2000s... The millennium years that were said to be beautiful years... We never saw a millennium. There is no such thing. There is no difference. It got even worse. Much worse..."

#### *4.2. Reclaiming life and cultivation of the self and community*

In accepting that life is learned through painful experiences and challenging the givens of society based on these experiences, my research participants framed life as a struggle and transmitted an understanding of themselves and their community as constantly struggling. Their narratives underlined the struggle one has to give to survive and keep one's own ground, and the importance of not avoiding but learning to confront taxing entanglements in order to redeem one's life. Gönül Anne stated:

Because this is life. My life. Committing suicide is very easy. I also tried that but... It is very cheap, very cheap. Cheaper than a tinplate. Even tinplate has a meaning. If I am a human, I learned how to struggle with these. [...] This is the fact of life; you have to cope with these things.

In this section I look to trans women's construction of themselves as struggling, good and courageous subjects who, against all odds, pursue to achieve integrity, satisfaction and meaning in their lives and reclaim agency. These attempts were elucidated in their narratives on multiple levels. One concerned their individualised efforts against letting themselves into the hands of violent acts and their shattering effects. Consider again Gönül Anne's account on how she consciously worked on her subjectivity against violence and derived a sense of agency from cultivating positive emotions and practices such as love and self and mutual care in the face of the negativity imprinted on her life:

You grow up in such an environment. I say fortunately I didn't turn into a monster. I mean. I could have grown up into a much different person. I could have grown up into a villain. But it means that I still keep alive that love in me. [...] I always aspired for the nature, for love. I aspired for flowers. I aspired to be good, to be a good human. Amidst all of this ugliness, I aspired for those beautiful things that I could aspire for. Yes, there were times when I felt hatred as well as feelings of revenge. But I suppressed them in time. I learned that revenge wouldn't help and that it is bad and would only lead me towards my own end. Then I learned to love myself. Before everything else, I learned to love myself, to respect myself. I sold my body, worked at night clubs, in circuses; probably I exhausted myself in many different ways. But even in that moment of exhaustion, I learned to love myself. And I aspired to nourish love and respect for others. Not that I didn't have any lacks, I did. I aspired to fill them.

This strong impetus of Gönül Anne for cultivating love and compassion for herself and others underlines a strong sense of agency and resilience, and translates into the power she has upon her sense of self, her feelings and acts despite the physical and psychological suffering she had to endure throughout her life. Other trans women also gave accounts of their love for nature, their efforts to take care of themselves and others, and to be good humans. Although they had little control over what could and did happen to them, they did have some control over themselves and the strength to formulate commitments in their lives according to their own desires.

Another way in which trans women expressed their struggles to survive related to their attempts to insert laughter and joy into the places of violence and suffering in order to domesticate violence that engulf their lives and make it endurable. Gönül Anne eloquently articulated the meaning of *güllüm*, a unique element in Turkey's trans subculture that basically means joking and having fun, for trans women's lives:

As I always say... *Güllüm* is our lives. What we call *güllüm* is something weird. It is like a green oasis in the middle of trans women. In other words, *güllüm* is like a spring in a desert. It is the joy of life. [...] *Güllüm* connects you to life even in your saddest moments. For instance we had a funeral. We cried and then we laughed all together at one instant. You can suffer inside, but you can go out of that suffering for a moment.

As a survival strategy, *güllüm* enables trans women to suspend and transcend unbearable moments, restore oneself and the group mentally and, even if momentarily, provides an important anchor point to establish their agency and a sense of control over the course of their lives. Gönül Anne's elaboration went on demonstrating how *güllüm* also shields them against the intrusion of violence into their lives and helps keep one's self at least partially apart from the harms that it inflicts on the body and the mind: "You are beaten, you are beaten by the police, you are smashed, you are insulted, but when you are by yourself, with your friends,

you destroy all that torture with one *gullüm*, with one joke. And you forget that beating you got. This is how we always survived."

This conception of self that rests on a conscious cultivation equips trans women with a yardstick to morally evaluate others, especially the violent intruders into their lives, and appeal to a sense of righteousness and justice, even if the society, law or the state do not necessarily acknowledge so or dictate otherwise. In this regard, trans women's narratives were full of stories of facing authorities courageously, when they, in the face of a perceived injustice, opted for challenging the opponent openly. Some of these were stories of moments when trans women felt in a desperate situation where they had nothing else to do to save themselves out of that position. Elderly trans women were especially prone to give lengthy accounts of more collective actions of resistance, struggle and disobedience such as riots and hunger strikes. Some of these actions were more aggressive, noisier and violent. Gönül Anne narrated an incident when police detained a big group of trans women in the late 1970s and piled them for several days in a tiny and stuffy detention room at the police station. On the fourth day, the harassment by the police chief sparked a big rebellion:

Seyyal stood up and jumped. Holding the collar of the police chief, she said 'God has given you two eyes, was not enough; he gave you two more eyes of glass. As soon as she shouted 'I fuck your eyes', she took the glasses and punched him in the face. All of us got up. Tülay broke a chair into pieces, I am still in shock, and all of us are doing something. Oh my God! We blew down, knocked over and trampled down all those cases, files, teapots, sinks, everything. We broke everything into pieces. No stone was left on another one. I never forget. One of the girls butted the iron door of the room. I saw 'Onion Head'<sup>9</sup> lying below her. She just had had appendicitis operation; she blew up her suture with her hands. It was total chaos.

This episode was followed by the submission of the police to trans women's demands and they were released from the police station. Just before they went out, the following conversation took place between Gönül Anne and a police officer, which Gönül Anne told proudly about: "Do you know what a police officer said then? 'You would never fall down. You are like a castle. Look, I admire you, this stance of you. No one here can do what you did.' He said exactly this to us."

The same pattern of encounters repeatedly emerged in trans women's narratives: They, individually or collectively, resist an unfair practice, either related to themselves or others, and raise their voice, at times in a violent manner. Then the challenged party is overpowered by trans women because they are unable to deal with their courage and determination. These actions are both pragmatic and symbolic. They are pragmatic in that they are temporary reactions to a sense of injustice and desperation and are aimed at solving problems immediately in the face of the lack of alternatives. They are symbolic in the sense that they create a strong sense of agency and counter-discourses that pose trans women against both the actors of these unjust acts and to the submissive and subservient practices and discourses of others, by stressing how they talk up and resist, if necessary in a violent manner, against the inequalities and injustices that they encounter.

Many experiences of this kind, parallel to experiences of violence, were rendered by trans women meaningful or understood as collective even if they were lived through individually. During the interviews I was also told direct assertions of trans women identity as one that is disobedient and courageous, ready to confront and struggle. "Transsexuals were always free. They never let themselves enslaved by anyone" or "Transsexuals recognise no rule. They only abide by the rule of their minds" were some of the statements trans women invoked in order to underline their common noncompliant, independent and defiant character. Handan Anne stated openly trans women's transparent and brave characteristics, while telling about how they have been historically present in LGBTI organising, many times in leading positions:

<sup>9</sup> Nickname of a trans woman.

Look, I always state this. I always state this reality without any hesitation, without any exaggeration. When there was no Lambda<sup>10</sup>, no Kaos<sup>11</sup>, before there was any LGBT organisation, we transvestites and transsexuals did our activism. As a matter of fact our activism is at the forefront since Ottoman times, since our existence came into being. We didn't escape under umbrellas when it rained on us. Even if it rains, we are here; even if cannonballs are fired, we are here; even if the skies fall down, we are here. We have no hole to escape. Our colour is evident.

Finally, the transmission of this construction of trans identity, especially from elderly trans women to younger generations – a practice that mirrors the life story narratives that I collected – plays a significant role in the formation of trans women's oppositional subjectivities as knowing, ethical, and struggling human beings who share a common identity and living. Trans women create a repertoire of their individual and collective narratives of violence and survival, which establishes a connection between different generations of trans women and in turn provides an important anchor point to develop a sense of belonging. Derya's connection of her own survival struggle to the struggles of earlier generations of trans women was a case in point in this regard:

Our struggle was initiated by those who were exiled, by their riots, by their hunger strikes in the 1980s. You know what? In the first pride we are a handful of people only on İstiklal Street. Last year we were tens of thousands. I cannot tell you how proud I was seeing that crowd. This is thanks to the struggles of our elders. Actually you should go and listen this history from them.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, I examined life story narratives of trans women of Istanbul, Turkey, in order to understand how violence shapes their lives and subjectivities. Following Foucauldian theorisation of subjection (Foucault 1978, 1980) and its further articulations by other scholars (Butler 1993, 1997, Das 1995, 1997, 2000, 2007 Mahmood 2005), I suggested that to understand the conditions of trans women's lives we should look not only to the repressive effects of power, but also to the productive ways in which it endows subjects with new forms agency and transform selves, forms of living and collective biographies. This allows for a reconceptualisation of the notion of 'agency' as nothing outside of or external to power. Rather, as Butler points out, agency can be understood as "a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power" (Butler 1993, p. 15).

Narratives of trans women underlined the role that violence played into the conditions which made disconnection from family obligatory and painful as well as an inviting and liberating prospect. Their escape from violence and oppression and quest for independence took them to Istanbul, where they found themselves in a completely different set of social relations, livelihood and forms of violence. However, we have also seen that the very processes and conditions that subordinate trans women turn into the means through which their very subjectivities are produced and given shape (Foucault 1978, 1980, Butler 1993, 1997, Mahmood 2005). As such, this article documented some of the subjectivities and modes of self-making that emerged from trans women's precarious condition. By generating a poisonous knowledge based on their experiences, I claimed, trans women manage to articulate the disruptions in their lives and reconfigure their very identity. In contrast to views on violence and the subsequent trauma as resisting any effort to give them meaning, this knowledge did not consider one's painful experiences as a traumatic insertion of the past into the present, but rather a new horizon of meaning that is constituted by those experiences. For "there is a kind of knowing that works by suffering", and without this knowledge one cannot understand "the way human life is." (Nussbaum 1986, p. 46 quoted in Das 2007, p. 76).

<sup>10</sup> LambdaIstanbul LGBTI organisation.

<sup>11</sup> KAOS GL, Turkish LGBTI rights organisation founded in Ankara in 1994.



This knowledge that cannot be engaged by the intellect but only through suffering included trans women's convictions about their gender identity and about family, men and the law. As these embody some of the most important forces that target trans women and circumscribe their lives, it is not surprising that the poisonous knowledge trans women produce target them back. In trans women's experiential corpus of knowledge, their non-normative gender identity appears as natural and a genuine part of Turkish culture and the norms that violate this identity are resignified by a radical subversion of the dominant forms of knowledge. Men, that are taken to be the ideal embodiment of the citizen of the state, emerge from their narratives as those who lead double lives and, if anything, it is their moral inferiority what sets them apart. Family and home, in a complete reversion, are reframed as the sites where violence, abandonment and disowning were met for the first time and cease to have the capacity to provide one safety and love. The law is thrown into question, and far from securing rights and wellbeing, becomes one of the main unwelcome powers in one's life.

Foucault defined ethics as a modality of power that "permits individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being" (Foucault 1997, p. 225). This definition resounds with my discussion of the labour trans women exercise on their lives, the capacities of their selves and their sense of being. Trans women conduct and describe themselves as subjects who strive to actively cultivate practices, techniques, and discourses through which they can protect themselves from the harmful effects of the forces intruding their lives, and achieve a particular state of being, happiness, and truth, in other words, an ethical living. A related instance of autonomy that my research participants talked about was the moments when they, individually or collectively, challenged those in positions of authority. These moments varied from individual acts of resilience to communitarian outbreaks. The importance of these acts, I argued, reside in the meanings they signify to their practitioners and in the work they do in constituting its practitioner as much as in their pragmatic ends. By these means, trans women produce and sustain a sense of being alive, of having the control of their lives, and keep alive the sense of a self that is disobedient, rebellious, and defiant. Furthermore, the transmission of this construction and strategies of survival aid to the construction of trans women as a resilient community that has a past, a present, and a future, and that is shaped by their struggles of various kinds against the multiplicity of powers attempting to intervene in their daily lives.

The narrative and the act of telling appeared to be other crucial means in the sustainment of this continuity, control and agency. Narratives of violence which trans women told me contained fear, pain, disappointment, frustration, anger and misery. However, it was also through constructing and communicating narratives that they resisted against multiple erasures, made themselves the subject of their own speech and affirmed their survival over the forces that sought to rob them of agency (Brison 2002). Narration gave trans women the opportunity to talk back to the institutions, actors and norms who violated, exploited and dehumanized them and to establish their own facts from their own perspective. By challenging the conventional wisdom, trans women used narratives as a means to resist social marginalization and exclusion and to redefine their position within the society, and as such, narration enabled them "sustain a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances" (Jackson 2002, p. 15).

Underlining the intricate ways in which processes of oppression, exclusion and violence affect and inform gendered lives and strategies of survival, trans women's stories present us the productive tensions inherent to the positions of marginality and the possibilities and potentialities of ways of survival in dire times and places. In words of Veena Das, this account allows us to see "what it is to pick up the pieces and to live in this very place of devastation" (Das 2007, p. 6) "by embracing

the signs of injury and turning them into ways of becoming subjects" in a shattered environment (Das 2007, p. 215). Gönül Anne said:

You are walking on a road full with broken glasses. You don't have any other way. You have to walk on those broken glasses. You cannot even feel whether your foot bled or fell apart. But you are walking on that road. And even if then, after that road of glasses, you enter a straight, clean one, the wounds on your feet never heal. Still, it is those steps that take you somewhere.

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