

“I miss my village!”: Forced Kurdish migrants in İstanbul and their representation in associations

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Metropolises in Turkey like İstanbul, Ankara, and İzmir along with the cities in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia received a significant number of internally displaced Kurds¹ (hereinafter referred to as Kurdish IDPs) in the late 1980s to the 1990s. One of the impacts of this displacement in the urban areas has been the alteration in the ways in which some hometown associations functioned, and the formation of some new Kurdish associations. Changes in the nature of migration from voluntary to forced migration have largely contributed to the way some hometown associations began to restructure their agendas and their depiction of the needs of their members, in addition to the extension of their service areas to reach out to these forced migrants. However, as argued below, the way many hometown associations dealt with the problems of the Kurdish IDPs and their identity issues were limited and non-political as compared to the newly formed Kurdish associations of the 1990s, which extended their service functions to include the expression of the needs and identities specific to the “Kurdish group,” and in the case of Kurdish women’s associations to “Kurdish women.”

This article has three objectives. The first is to determine how forced migration to big cities has contributed to the problems encountered by migrant Kurdish women in their daily lives in İstanbul both as *women* and as *Kurds*. Following this will be an examination of the manner in which forced migration has affected the way old hometown associations from the Kurdish-populated areas and the newly formed Kurdish associations²

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1 This study uses internal displacement and forced migration interchangeably.

2 This study only covers hometown associations, Kurdish foundations, and some institutions, which

represent and express migrant Kurdish women's problems and identities at the local level and deal with the "Kurdish problem" at the national level.³ Finally, this paper will discuss how the arrival of the Kurdish IDPs to İstanbul has affected those female Kurdish members of these associations, who were born in İstanbul or who have been in the city much longer than the forced migrants.

In the following sections, I will first present the historical background of the Kurdish migration to İstanbul, with a specific emphasis on how the forced migration of the 1990s is different from the previous voluntary migration waves. Then, I will analyze the specific problems of the migrant Kurdish women confront in their daily lives in İstanbul followed by a discussion of how forced migration has reinforced Kurdish consciousness both among the migrant and early-settled Kurdish women in the city. This will be followed by a section which deals with the socio-economic and political consequences of forced migration as they affect first the functioning of the hometown associations, then the formation of Kurdish associations. In the conclusion, I will reflect on the future research agenda on the issue.

function like associations in practice but have the legal status of "private company" to escape police surveillance. It does not deal with informal gatherings, which have not been institutionally formalized (e.g., "Saturday Mothers"). In the period after the fieldwork, some other associations were founded (e.g., Amargi). Neither of these is covered in this work. For the purpose of clarity, I will call the hometown associations from the Kurdish populated regions as hometown and newly founded Kurdish foundations and some institutions mentioned above as Kurdish associations hereinafter.

- 3 To study the above-mentioned questions, I held in-depth interviews, employed questionnaires, and analyzed the publications of associations, newspapers and journals. The number of associations whose members and leaders I interviewed is as follows: 27 hometown associations, 7 Kurdish associations, and 2 human rights associations. Out of these 7 Kurdish associations, 3 identify themselves as preserving and furthering Kurdish art and culture, 2 as representing Kurdish women and their problems, 1 as dealing with the problems that emerged after forced migration, and 1 as providing legal and psychological support for the forced migrants. Only 2 have "Kurdish" in their names; yet 2 have a reference to acclaimed Kurdish symbolic places and 1 has a Kurdish name. The focus of this study is Kurdish women although I also utilized information I gathered from interviews with the male members of the sample associations. I had a total of 68 interviews with the leaders, and old and new members of several associations as well as non-members (as a control group). This sample consists of 17 females and 51 males. The number of male association members and leaders is higher because most of the leaders of hometown associations are male. Among the female interviewees, there are those who experienced the forced migration as well as those who were born in İstanbul; there are association members, leaders and non-members. Following are the age distribution for these 17 women: 6 are between 20-29 ages; 8 are 30-39; 3 are 40-49. Out of the 17, 10 are forced Kurdish migrants, 6 are daughters of migrant families of the voluntary migration and only one was born in İstanbul. Among the forced migrants, 9 have arrived to İstanbul before forced migration started. 4 were Alevi and 13 were Sunni. Although 14 have identified either Zaza or Kirmanci as their mother language, only in 5 cases were the interviews conducted in Kurdish with the help of an interpreter.

Historical background of Kurdish migration to İstanbul:

Since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Turkey experienced two major waves of internal migration from the rural areas to urban centers, each with different characteristics. The first wave of migration from the late 1940s to the early 1980s was the result of the mechanization of agriculture and integration of markets, which eliminated small-scale subsistence-oriented farming and left no incentive for surplus human power to stay in the rural areas.⁴ Millions of peasants moved to urban centers initially as seasonal workers,⁵ and later established themselves as permanent residents.⁶ As a result, the urban population, which was only 24.9 percent of the total population in 1950,⁷ jumped to 59.01 in 1990.⁸

The second major wave of internal migration, which started in the second half of the 1980s and escalated in the early 1990s, was forced migration from Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia. Since 1984, many people have had to leave the region, but forced migration escalated further after 1993, when village evacuations were intensified. Three factors led to forced migration: the evacuation of villages by the military, allowed by the 1987 emergency rule;⁹ the pressure of the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan - Kurdistan Workers' Party*) on villagers who do not support the PKK to leave their villages; and insecurity resulting from being caught between the armed insurgents and Turkish security forces.¹⁰ Many Kurds

4 Bahattin Akşit, "İçgöçlerin Nesnel ve Öznal Toplumsal Tarihi Üzerine Gözlemler: Köy Tarafından Bir Bakış," in *Türkiye'de İçgöç* (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yayınları, 1998), Kemal H. Karpat, *The Gecekondu: Rural Migration and Urbanization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

5 Although this was the predominant reason for most of the migrants, there were also other factors such as educational and political reasons. Especially during the late 1970s into the early 1980s, some members of the illegal leftist groupings moved to the big cities because of increasing state control in their regions.

6 Total rural to urban migration between 1950 and 1985 is over seven million, Akşit, "İçgöçlerin Nesnel ve Öznal Toplumsal Tarihi Üzerine."

7 Karpat, *The Gecekondu*.

8 Erhard Franz, *Population Policy in Turkey: Family Planning and Migration between 1960 and 1992* (Hamburg: Deutsches Orient-Institut, 1994). Between 1923 and 1950, there was also immigration from Greece, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Romania. Total immigration from the Balkans during this period was 850,000. Immigration from these countries continued until 1960, after which it slowed down. The last immigration wave occurred in 1989, when more than 300,000 Turks came from Bulgaria, nearly half of whom returned later, İlhan Tekeli, "Involuntary Displacement and the Problem of Resettlement in Turkey from the Ottoman Empire to the Present," in *Population Displacement and Resettlement: Development and Conflict in the Middle East*, ed. Seteney Shami (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1994).

9 In 1987, the prime minister Turgut Özal, established a system of emergency rule (OHAL) with a government-nominated regional governor for most of the southeast. It aimed to control the region with strict state measures. The system was also supported by the 'village guard' system of thousands of civilian, pro-government Kurds to supplement the state's control in the region, Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds and the Future of Turkey* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 61.

10 Kemal Kirişçi, "Turkey, Regional Profile Europe," in *Internally Displaced People: A Global Survey*, ed. Janie Hampton (London: Earthscan Publications, 1998), 198.

left their villages and moved to the nearest urban centers or urban centers in the Western Anatolia. A significant proportion of the population has moved from the region in the last fifteen years,¹¹ mostly to the periphery of nearby cities, as well as to shantytowns surrounding İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir, and Adana. According to the report prepared by a committee of the Turkish Grand National Assembly, in six Eastern and Southeastern Anatolian cities which were under the State of Emergency legislation (Diyarbakır, Hakkari, Siirt, Şırnak, Tunceli and Van) and five nearby cities (Batman, Bingöl, Bitlis, Mardin, Muş) 820 villages and 2,345 hamlets were evacuated, and 378,335 people were forced to migrate.¹² However, many human rights organizations estimate the number of forced migrants to be around 2-4 million.¹³

Kurdish women's experiences in İstanbul

This last migration wave had many different consequences as compared to the earlier rural-to-urban migration. In contrast to the largely economic migration of the 1950s-1970s, this latter wave contains elements related to the larger issue of the "Kurdish Question" in Turkey. The traumas related to having experienced a "forced" move as well as the difficulties encountered in the city due to their ethnic identity put Kurdish IDPs into a different category than the former migrants.

The migrants of the old wave to İstanbul maintained their social ties by visiting their place of origin, and receiving support from their families and

11 Southeastern Anatolia is characterized as a traditional agricultural region. Beginning in the late 1960s, the region started to lose its population towards big metropolises as a result of increasing dominance of market mechanisms in the region. The rate of out-migration increased especially after the 1980s due to the conflict between the Kurdish insurgents and the Turkish military. However, the latest developments to boost economic growth through a series of irrigation and development project such as the GAP (Southeastern Anatolia Project) helped to attract in-migration towards the region's urban centers, and the population growth in the urban centers of the region began to increase again, Bahattin Akşit et al., "Population Movements in Southeastern Anatolia: Some Findings of an Empirical Research in 1993," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no. 14 (1996), 54. Thus, the region lost its rural population to the big cities in Western Anatolia as a result of the conflict between the Kurdish insurgents and the Turkish military at the one hand, while administrative-urban centers of the region attracted people on the other hand, increasing the urban population of the region.

12 "Doğu ve Güneydoğu Anadolu'da Boşaltılan Yerleşim Birimleri Nedeniyle Göç Eden Yurttaşlarımızın Sorunlarının Araştırılarak Alınması Gereken Tedbirlerin Tespit Edilmesi Amacıyla Kurulan Meclis Araştırması Komisyonu Raporu," (Ankara: T.B.M.M., 1997).

13 See the 1995 edition of Human Rights Watch Report at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/WR95/HELSINKI-16.htm>, where the NGO estimates the number of displaced around 2 million people. According to Göç-Der (Immigrants' Association for Social Cooperation and Culture), 3438 rural settlements have been evacuated and 4-4.5 million Kurdish people have been resettled, Göç-Der, *Göç Edenlerin Sosyo-Ekonomik, Sosyo-Kültürel Durumları, Göçün Ortaya Çıkardığı Sorunlar, Askeri Çatışma ve Gerginlik Politikası Sonucu Yaşam Alanlarını Terk Eden Göç Mağdurlarının Geri Dönüş Eğilimi Araştırması* (İstanbul: 2001), 12.

acquaintances in their home villages/towns. The literature on the issue suggests that in case of forced migration, most or all material and social ties at the place of origin typically are severed, and forced migrants are left with little or no personal connections with their place of origin.¹⁴ However, if the forced migrants choose cities in which they had relatives who established a livelihood, the process of adaptation to the city becomes easier and faster.

Most of the Kurdish migrants who came to İstanbul in the 1990s because of deteriorating security conditions and pressures from the village guards in their region have indicated that they had to sell their houses and lands in order to come to the city, and most mentioned that they did not know what happened to their belongings.¹⁵ On average, the forced migrants of the 1990s in İstanbul have worse living conditions than the voluntary migrants of the early period, primarily because the former had to leave the region together with their families and without any support from those who remained behind.¹⁶ Also, the migrants who came to İstanbul in the 1990s faced circumstances that were substantially different from those the earlier migrants encountered.

First of all, the relatively high employment opportunities and social mobility for migrants in the 1960s and 1970s began to shrink in the late 1980s as the unemployment rate began to increase and income gap widened.¹⁷ Most of the migrants who came to İstanbul between 1985 and 1990 and in the post-1990 period had a disadvantage in the job market mainly because of low levels of education, which created inequality between the locals and the migrants.¹⁸ Boratav argues that the majority of those who are unemployed in İstanbul are the ones who migrated to the city in the last decade.¹⁹

Secondly, beginning in the late 1980s, anti-Kurdish sentiments in big cities created inter-ethnic tensions.²⁰ The migratory wave of 1990s

14 Janie Hampton, ed., *Internally Displaced People: A Global Survey* (London: Earthscan Publications Ltd., 1998).

15 Human Rights Association, *İstanbul'a Sığınan Kürtlerin Yaşam Koşulları Üzerine* (İstanbul: Kurdish Commission of the İstanbul Human Rights Association, 1998), Human Rights Association, *Yaşadıkları Topraklardan Metropollere (İstanbul-Mersin-Bursa) Göç Eden Kürt Ailelere Yönelik Araştırma* (İstanbul: İstanbul Human Rights Association, 1995).

16 Sema Erder, "Köysüz 'Köylü' Göçü," *Cörüş*, no. 34 (1998).

17 Ayşe Ayata, "The Emergence of Identity Politics in Turkey," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no. 17 (1997), Michael Danielson and Ruşen Keleş, *The Politics of Rapid Urbanization: The Government and Growth in Modern Turkey* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984).

18 Ferhunde Özbay, "Migration and Intra-Provincial Movements in İstanbul between 1985-1990," *Boğaziçi Journal* 11, no. 1-2 (1997): 122.

19 Korkut Boratav, *İstanbul ve Anadolu'dan Sınıf Profilleri* (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1995), 56.

20 Ayata, "The Emergence of Identity Politics in Turkey.," Şengün Kılıç, *Biz ve Onlar: Türkiye'de Etnik Ayrımcılık* (İstanbul: Metis, 1991).

resulted in an increase in the proportion of İstanbul's Kurdish population. Although we do not have a definitive figure on the number of Kurds in İstanbul it is argued that they account for one-third of approximately twelve million inhabitants of the city.²¹ The increasingly tense political environment due to the ongoing conflict in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia as well as its relatively minor reflection in the Western cities turned Turkish-Kurdish relations in some neighborhoods in İstanbul sour. Most of the Kurdish migrants interviewed for this study indicated that one of the most common problems they had to face was the refusal of some of the Turkish landlords to rent apartments to them because of their Kurdish identity. Some of the interviewees also reported that when they had problems with their Turkish neighbors over any issue, their neighbors used the word "Kurd" as a pejorative label.

The two other significant problems forced Kurdish migrants encountered in İstanbul are voting restrictions and the difficulty of the families in registering children for school.²² In Turkey, in order to vote, a person has to be registered in his/her city of permanent residence. Also, to enroll a child in school, one needs proof of residence. Because these migrants can neither return to their insecure homes to get these legal documents nor transfer their documents without personally applying to the administrative offices in their city of permanent residence, some of them have not been able to exercise these rights.

The examples above point out that Kurdish migrants in İstanbul have faced problems not only because of the overall economic depression the country has been going through, but also because of their Kurdish identities. In fact, this experience, which has its roots in the 1990s, continues today. Many journalistic reports point out that old urbanites still consider Kurdish ghetto (*varoş*) dwellers as potential criminals and expose them to racist, discriminatory practices.²³

Besides encountering problems due to their Kurdish identity, many migrant Kurdish women have had extra difficulties in their new environments because of their gender. In several studies on many Middle Eastern countries, the *city* has, until recently, typically been described as a place where women have been exposed to male dominance, subordinate position in the family, and segregation in social life.²⁴ Recent studies however point to the diverse opportunities cities offer to the new

21 Kirişçi, "Turkey."

22 Sema Erder, *Kentsel Gerilim* (Ankara: Urmag, 1997), 153.

23 Okan Konuralp, "Batının Kürt Gettolari," *Tempo*, 4-10 May 2005.

24 Among many, see, for example, Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1992).

inhabitants in their family environments as well as in their economic, political and social inclusion in the city.²⁵ Although it is hard to come up with generalizations about the effect of the city on the lives of women, urban studies in general agree on one thing: that “(t)he city as a site of everyday practice provides valuable insights into the linkages of macro-processes with the texture and fabric of human experience.”²⁶ Using Low’s approach, I want to explore two aspects of İstanbul: as a new environment to which the migrant Kurdish women must adapt, along with the new types of problems they encounter; and as a space where the migrant Kurdish women encounter not only the old Kurdish İstanbulites but also others (Turks and the Roma, being the most frequent encounters among others). The literature on migration suggests that women’s experiences and problems related to migration are different than those of men.²⁷ These differences arise from women’s different socio-economic roles in rural areas, which change once they move to cities,²⁸ as well from their different socialization patterns both in the place of origin and of destination. Research in Turkey also shows that the experiences of migrant women in cities differ not only from those of men, but also vary among different strata of women migrants.²⁹

In terms of settlement, displaced Kurds were forced to choose rather different patterns from those who moved to İstanbul previously. Whereas the early comers were settled in almost all parts of İstanbul, most Kurds who came to İstanbul in the 1990s settled down on the outskirts of İstanbul, mainly because either the rents in these locations were cheaper or they could get away with informally built dwellings. Neighborhoods such as Ümraniye, Bağcılar and Sultanbeyli on the Asian side, and Büyükçekmece, Küçükçekmece, Silivri, Sarıyer, Esenler, Esenyurt, Gaziosmanpaşa, Avcılar and some parts of Taksim (Tarlabaşı) on the European side were suddenly populated with these newcomers.

Forced migrants’ settlement has numerous consequences in migrant Kurdish women’s daily life. A recent study has shown that most of the

25 Tahire Erman, “The Impact of Migration on Turkish Rural Women: Four Emergent Patterns,” *Gender and Society*, no. 12 (1998), Tahire Erman, “The Meaning of City Living for Rural Migrant Women and Their Role in Migration: The Case of Turkey,” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, no. 20 (1997).

26 Setha M. Low, “The Anthropology of Cities: Imagining and Theorizing the City,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, no. 25 (1996): 384.

27 Floya Anthias, “Metaphors of Home: Gendering New Migrations to Southern Europe,” in *Gender and Migration in Southern Europe: Women on the Move*, ed. Floya Anthias and Gabriella Lazaridis (New York: Berg, 2000), Silvia Chant, ed., *Gender and Migration in Developing Countries* (London: Belhaven Press, 1992), James T. Fawcett, Siew-Ean Khoo, and Peter C. Smith, *Women in the Cities of Asia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984).

28 Fawcett, Khoo, and Smith, *Women in the Cities of Asia*.

29 Erman, “The Impact of Migration on Turkish Rural Women.”, Erman, “The Meaning of City Living.”

Kurds in İstanbul chose this city as their destination because of their relatives who established themselves as residents there, and a vast majority found jobs and housing through these networks.³⁰ Being in touch with relatives on the one hand eased the traumas of settling down in an “alien” environment, but on the other hand isolated especially the older migrant Kurdish women from the rest of the urbanites. It is interesting to note that the Kurdish children of the families who settled down in Tarlabası, a neighborhood which has been known as a place dominated by the Roma, who themselves have also been excluded from the mainstream Turkish society, experienced social isolation even from the Roma families. Similar to this experience elsewhere in İstanbul, Erder’s 1997 study found out that Kurds in Pendik, a neighborhood on the far Asian side of İstanbul, experienced problems both in terms of establishing a ‘livable’ life and good relationships with their neighbors. Erder’s interviews with 32 Kurdish families that had experienced forced migration to İstanbul showed that Kurdish women and children were unable to shop in local grocery shops due to linguistic barriers; their non-Kurdish neighbors were unwilling to pay neighborly visits to them; the children of these non-Kurdish families refused to play with the children of the Kurdish families calling them “gypsies,” and that the Kurdish men had trouble finding permanent jobs and had to settle for the seasonal jobs in the construction sector.³¹

The findings of this study point towards a contrast between the two sexes in terms of educational level, and the ability of speaking Turkish. Most of the women who left their homeland and came to İstanbul cannot speak Turkish. While almost all Kurdish men completed their primary educations, or at least attended primary school for a couple of years, the literacy rate among the Kurdish women who came to İstanbul in the 1990s is very low. Moreover, Kurdish men were forced to learn Turkish in order to deal with the state authorities, and/or during their military service. They have to work and enter into contact with other people in their daily lives, both of which require not only speaking Turkish but also in some cases a good with “accent.”³² Compared to the high literacy level among Kurdish

30 Akşit et al., “Population Movements in Southeastern Anatolia.”, Human Rights Association, *Yaşadıkları Topraklardan Metropollere*.

31 Erder, *Kentsel Gerilim*, 70.

32 Having a good accent in this context refers to speaking Turkish with an “urban” İstanbulite accent, especially without an Eastern pronunciation. Particularly in the urban centers in Turkey, speaking with a “good Turkish accent” in the public spheres has always been not only a good asset, but also been at the center of Turkish nationalism. Even though other accents such as those of the north – the Black Sea Region - have also been out of the “expected” and in some cases the subject of jokes, they were rather more “accepted.” Eastern accents, on the other hand, were distinguished as signs of backwardness, something related to how “Easternness” was perceived from the 1950s onwards

men in Southeastern Turkey, nearly half the women are illiterate.³³ Not only did migrant Kurdish women who were unable to speak Turkish have problems finding jobs and socializing with non-Kurds in the city, but, in some cases, they also met a hostile environment. Most of the families who left their native regions during the 1990s were forced to live in the same quarters in İstanbul in order to decrease the traumas related to this problem of relative isolation. Many migrant Kurdish women were also compelled to live in a neighborhood where their relatives or acquaintances resided so that they would ease the longing for their home villages.

Moving to a big city also changed the role of the women in the household. Lale Yalçın-Heckmann found that in Hakkari, a city in the Southeast Anatolia, the chores of Kurdish women consisted of raising children, taking care of the livestock and home, working in the land during the harvest, and preparing harvested grain (in agricultural production) and dairy products such as butter, cheese and yogurt (in pastoral economy) for household usage and market.³⁴ The results of this study suggest that these chores are more or less typical to many Kurdish women in villages. However, their new environment in the city, which most of the time took the form of small city apartments with a very crowded living area, limited the functions of these women. As a result, especially the role of the older migrant women in the household shrank.³⁵ This result, in fact, contradicts earlier research on migrant women in Ankara. Erman ascertained that “the fact that they [what she calls the most submissive migrant women] are free from the burden of rural tasks and enjoy leisure makes them quite happy with their urban lives.”³⁶ She argues that this is augmented by the fact that

in Turkey. During the times when the clashes between the PKK and the military forces intensified, some walls in big cities were covered with the posters of Turkish ultranationalists, calling Turkish citizens to speak Turkish: “Citizens, Speak Turkish!”

33 “Turkish Women Who See Death as a Way Out,” *New York Times*, November 3, 2000. According to the 2000 census results, the percentage of illiterate women in the cities of Southeastern Anatolia ranges between 25 percent (Gaziantep) to 55 percent (Şırnak) (Results of the 2000 Census, data gathered from State Institute of Statistics, May 18, 2005). According to Hacettepe University’s results of the 2003 demographic study, the biggest gender difference in education is in eastern Turkey, with 85 percent of the men having some sort of education in contrast to only 61 percent of the women (See Türkiye Nüfus ve Sağlık Araştırması TNSA-2003 available at <http://www.hips.hacettepe.edu.tr/tnsa2003/data/turkce/bolum2.pdf>).

34 Yalçın-Heckmann argues that although these jobs are carried out throughout a village woman’s adulthood, their frequency and intensity could change, and could be hierarchically arranged according to prestige, Lale Yalçın-Heckmann, “Gender Roles and Female Strategies among the Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Kurdish Tribes of Turkey,” in *Women in Modern Turkish Society*, ed. Şirin Tekeli (New Jersey: Zed Books, 1995), 222-23.

35 This same argument can also be found in some Kurdish women journals. For example, see *Jujin 1*, no. 2 (1997): 41, *Roza 3*, no. 14 (1998): 14-17.

36 Erman, “The Impact of Migration on Turkish Rural Women,” 154.

these women live in squatter neighborhoods, where they can socialize with their female neighbors and get their support. The results of the present study show that if the migrant settles down in a neighborhood where she has nobody to talk to, or where her children face labeling and experience hard times finding peers to play with, the new environment becomes unbearable.

One Kurdish woman in her late 40s, who did not speak Turkish, described her migration story to me with the help her two daughters and an interpreter. She had been in İstanbul for only two years at the time of the interview, but this was enough for her to miss her village, where she felt that she had more freedom:

Back in my village, I had more freedom. When men worked I used to take care of the animals and children. Here, I only have to stay at home. When I was in my village, and I needed something, I could go outside and buy it. Here, I do not even have the chance to sit outside in the garden. There, I used to share a lot of things with people. Here, I sit at home with my hands tied up” (a migrant woman in İstanbul, interview, February 5th, 2000).

Almost all the Kurdish female interviewees talked about how hard their lives in İstanbul were due to the fact that they missed their land and the physical environment in their villages, whereas few of the male interviewees mentioned this. This attachment to the place of origin which is embodied in their ways of life, their daily practices and the roles that originate from these practices is one of the reasons preventing women from adapting to their new lives in the city.

The sudden and forced migration to İstanbul also brought extra burdens in the new lives of many migrant Kurdish women. Linguistic barriers and illiteracy, combined with general unemployment problem in İstanbul added most migrant Kurdish women into the category of the “urban poor.” Urban poverty in particular forced many younger migrant Kurdish women to search for jobs in the city. Interviews for this study revealed that many Kurdish women in İstanbul chose not to serve as house cleaners because they found these kinds of jobs degrading. Since language acted as a barrier in finding jobs in İstanbul, in many migrant Kurdish families young sons or daughters found jobs to provide money for the family. Many young migrant Kurdish women provided cheap labor, mostly for the textile industry, whereas older migrant women served in the mechanical sectors through their work at home or provided their labor in hand-made labor-intensive commodities. These tasks were formerly undertaken by the immigrants

from the Balkans, especially by the Bulgarians, but with higher wages. These underpaid jobs also do not provide social security. Whereas for some older migrant Kurdish women, life in İstanbul meant just sitting at home, for a few, it also brought a limited job opportunity in areas where labor could be delivered at home. For example, women from Mardin, a city in Southeast Anatolia, found themselves preparing stuffed sea shells, a type of food sold by street vendors and something most of its female producers have never even tasted. This alienation both from the tasks they undertook and the urban public spheres not only led to many psychological problems but even to suicides in extreme cases.³⁷ The same trend can be seen in the big cities of the Southeast Anatolia, where many migrant Kurdish women had problems in adapting to the city life.³⁸

We should underscore however, the fact that migrant Kurdish women do not make up a homogenous category. These problems mentioned above mostly refer to the older migrant women who were socially excluded due to linguistic problems and who were economically marginalized. The severity of these problems, particularly the depression due to social exclusion, is arguably lessened among the younger migrant Kurdish women who appeared in the public sphere by providing cheap labor, serving in associations, or in rare cases, had the chance of going to school. Yet again, this should not mean that younger migrants are excluded from discriminatory practices. Both the present study and Secor's demonstrate that in some cases, younger women get exposed to exclusionary practices in their workplaces, neighborhoods and schools.³⁹ One of the younger migrant Kurdish women, who was working as a teacher in a high school in İstanbul at the time of the interview narrated her story of how she felt excluded and labeled as a 'criminal' at her school just because she was Kurdish:

One day, the principal found that the Turkish flag had been taken down. He immediately came to me and asked whether I was the one who had done it. At that moment, you feel the pain, the pain of being different (İstanbul, interview, March 5th, 2000).

This is not to say that all Kurdish women found themselves in the same social entrapment. Similar to Erman's 1997 and 1998 studies, I argue that the nature of social inclusion/exclusion, gender identity and employment

37 See various issues of *Roza* and *Jujin*. For example, *Jujin* 1, no: 2 (1997): 41, *Roza* 2, no: 8 (1997): 20, *Roza* 2, no: 9 (1997): 24-25, *Roza* 3, no: 14 (1998): 14-17.

38 Müjgan Halis, *Batman'da Kadınlar Ölüyor* (İstanbul: Metis, 2001).

39 Anna Secor, "There is an İstanbul that Belongs to Me: Citizenship, Space, and Identity in the City," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 94, no. 2 (2004).

patterns in the city vary depending on age, level of education and confessional differences (Alevi⁴⁰ versus Sunni identity). In fact, although not discussed in detail here, it seems like these last two factors are highly correlated. In the lack of a comprehensive study on the issue, we can suggest that this correlation might stem from the fact that Alevi families are more willing to let and even encourage their daughters to get an education, the end result of which shows itself as more opportunities for employment in this context.

Forced migration and a new life in the city: Revival of Kurdish consciousness?

Patterns of social inclusion/exclusion and the daily encounters described above have also been closely related to the formation of ethnic consciousness among the Kurdish migrants in İstanbul. I do not, however, suggest that such consciousness suddenly emerged as a result of an increasing sense of discrimination in the city, but, rather, that the past feelings of relative deprivation and suppression came to the surface, and were reinforced by the poor living standards in the new environment. As Erder suggests,⁴¹ ethnicity can be the extension of historically determined past relations or can be constructed by contemporary group interactions, and ethnicity formation is a very complex process shaped by interethnic communication and its institutional arrangement. The belief among Kurds that all the things they have lived through in the past decades⁴² happened to them and to “their people” just because they were Kurds strengthened their national sentiments. This is not to argue that Kurdish migrants were devoid of ethnic consciousness in their villages or that it revitalized once in the city. Rather, the claim is that one should look at this as a process, which has a beginning in the place of origin and continues in the place of destination. In many cases, what we rather see are ethnically conscious Kurdish migrants whose “nationalistic” sentiments increase as result of what they have experienced in their home places and in the cities they have migrated to.

40 Alevism is a heterodox sect in Islam. There are significant differences in the beliefs and worshipping practiced by Sunnis and Alevi in Turkey, which created a long-lasting animosity between the two. Alevi Kurds are large in numbers especially in Bingöl, Tunceli, Erzincan, Sivas, Yozgat, Elazığ, Malatya, Kahramanmaraş, Kayseri and Çorum. It is estimated that around 70 percent of the Kurds in Turkey are Sunni, and the remaining 30 percent consists of Alevi and Yezidi, Peter Alford Andrews, *Türkiye’de Etnik Gruplar* (İstanbul: Ant Yayınları, 1992), 161.

41 Erder, *Kentsel Gerilim*.

42 Although not commonly, I came across migrants who compared their displacement stories with those of their ancestors (especially of those who experienced the Dersim rebellion of 1937), and drew similarities of Kurdish displacement experiences in the history of the Turkish republic.

Identity-formation is a *relational process*.⁴³ First, it is a process because it continues to shift as the individual gets exposed to new environments or new realities. Second, it is relational to place, history or memory attached to place. Third, it is constructed *vis-à-vis* the “other.” Keeping this in mind, we can argue that displacement reshapes identities. Therefore, one needs to examine how the new environment enforces/destroys ethnic identities.

Interviews with the internally displaced Kurds for this study reveal that many Kurds who came to İstanbul as a result of forced migration were aware of their ethnic identities prior to migrating to İstanbul. However, in the new context, they perceived themselves relatively worse-off (emotionally and materially) than they were at their place of origin before 1987 when the state of emergency was declared. This sense of deprivation, disempowerment, and material loss, in many cases, *reinforced* their ethnic consciousness since many believed that it was solely because of their ethnic backgrounds that they had to live through such traumas. As a result, many found refuge and safety nets in their ethnic communities and identities.

This reinforced ethnic consciousness can also be found in the way that they reconstruct their identities in relation to place. For many, home represents a place where they could feed themselves, feel that they were part of a community, and even enjoy being alive. Consequently, İstanbul is the place of exile within national boundaries. The story narrated by a Kurdish migrant illustrates how Kurds feel in İstanbul:

We had our house, our animals there. Everything was very nice before these events started. I would like to go back home. Who does not want to go back to where they used to live? I am constantly sick ever since I came to the city. I miss my village and want to return. I want to smell its air, taste its water. It was nice, but in the absence of the pressure. We want the removal of state pressure (interview, İstanbul, February 2000)

Here, the interviewee is referring to the period from 1987 onwards where the strict state control was imposed in the region through establishment of the emergency rule, pressures by the village guards to evacuate their houses intensified, and other human rights abuses took place. This sense of belonging to the past and uneasiness with the present time and place constantly reinforce Kurdish identity among the migrants. And it is this

43 Among many who argued this see Paul R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (New Bury: Sage Publications, 1991), Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding*. Princeton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), Crawford Young, “The Temple of Ethnicity,” *World Politics* 35, no. 4 (1983).

attachment to community or ethnic group which brings about the necessity of keeping their culture and tradition alive. In fact, the traumas they lived through and discrimination they experienced in the city constantly add to this longing and feeling of alienation. Other studies ascertain this finding. In Secor's study, one focus group participant, who came from Tunceli region in 1993, considered İstanbul as a foreign place (*gurbet*) in which she felt herself as a 'foreigner.'⁴⁴

It is also interesting to note how the narratives of history and place are important in migrant women's identity construction. Within this context, the use of the word "region" and "home" among the displaced is noteworthy. For many migrants of the pre-1990s the meaning of 'home' was consistent with the official definition. That is to say, when they referred to place of origin or home, they meant a village, town, or a city consistent with the official administrative units. However, for many displaced Kurds, home or region in the 1990s refer to an *imagined political entity*, that is, an 'independent Kurdistan.' In my conversations with the forced migrants, I quite often heard them referring to their homes as belonging to a different geographical political entity; a place that has distinct cultural and political characters, sometimes pronounced as "Kurdistan." Region in this sense becomes an "arena of struggle, site of symbolic contestation and theaters of history."⁴⁵ This change in the definition of region/home is a subversion; a bottom-up response to a top-down definition of region. This *resistance identity*,⁴⁶ generated by historical meanings, memory, and experience (within this context of migration), may sometimes be supported by associations discussed below.

However, although for many, the new environments enforced their already-existing Kurdish identity, for some, especially those who chose İstanbul to escape from a highly polarized and conflict-ridden places, new environments meant new realities. Their new concerns were to feed their children, to find a job, and be able to send their children to school. For them, economic realities far surpassed their cultural needs. Thus, in some cases, we see a complete self-induced isolation of these families from their old social lives and extended families in order not to be associated with any political activity that the police might find suspicious.

44 Secor, "There is an İstanbul that Belongs to Me," 356.

45 Yvonne Muthien and Meshack Khosa, "Constructing a Regional Political Identity in South Africa," *Social Identities* 4, no. 3 (1998): 469.

46 Castells defines resistance identity as "generated by those actors that are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society." See, Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 8.

The role of informal networks and hometown associations

Literature on rural-to-urban migration and adaptation to the city contains an abundant number of citations to the role of informal networks and associations to ease the process of adaptation to urban life.⁴⁷ In this section I want to examine the role of the hometown associations in a context where ethnicity and gender constitute the cornerstones of being “underrepresented” in the city and when the issues relevant to these identities are at stake.

Hometown associations⁴⁸ are formed by migrants in cities as a result of structural (economic and political) conditions.⁴⁹ Many hometown associations were formed in İstanbul, especially after the first migration wave during the 1950s-1970s to help migrants deal with the new conditions as well as to reproduce the ‘traditional’ values in the new urban setting.⁵⁰ The main task of these associations was to alleviate the feeling of longing for their home villages/cities by re-generating some aspects of their lives back home such as their traditional folk dances and cuisine as well as creating a sense of solidarity in the city (i.e., lending money to each other when in need, helping each other to find jobs.). These associations were founded on the spirit of *hemşehrilik*,⁵¹ denoting solidarity based on shared geographical origins. Besides facilitating urban adaptation, and reproducing ‘traditional’ life in the new environment, these associations played a key role in the development of their region through providing services and infrastructure as well as trying to improve the regional social and cultural life.

In the 1990s some of the hometown associations began to change their scopes as the number of Kurds in İstanbul and their problems changed as a

47 Among many, see for example, for general discussions and other case study examples Guilain Denoeux, *Urban Unrest in the Middle East: A Comparative Study of Informal Networks in Egypt, Iran, and Lebanon* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, “The Migrant Village Association in Latin America,” *Latin American Research Review*, no. 21 (1986), Saskia Sassen-Koob, “Formal and Informal Associations: Dominicans and Colombians in New York,” *International Migration Review* 13, no. 2 (1979), Diane Singerman, *Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics, and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), and as references for the role of informal networks in Turkey, see Sema Erder, *İstanbul’la Bir Kent Kondu: Ümraniye* (İstanbul: İletişim, 1996), Ayşe Güneş-Ayata, “Kentsel Türkiye’de Toplumsal Cinsiyet ve Etnik Kimlik: Alevi ve Soydaşları Örneği,” in *Cumhuriyet, Demokrasi ve Kimlik*, ed. Nuri Bilgin (İstanbul: Bağlam, 1997), Karpát, *The Gecekondu*, Peter Suzuki, “Peasants without Plows: Some Anatolians in İstanbul,” *Rural Sociology* 31, no. 4 (1966).

48 Hometown associations are also referred to as regional and village associations in the literature.

49 Hirabayashi, “The Migrant Village Association in Latin America.”

50 Karpát, *The Gecekondu*, Suzuki, “Peasants without Plows.”

51 The meaning of *hemşehrilik* differs according to circumstances. Literally, it refers to the link between people originating “from the same city.” However, it may also mean people “from the same village,” “from the same town,,” or even “from the same region.” Thus, two people from the same city might consider themselves as *hemşehri* in a neighborhood dominated by people from other cities. Again, two people from the same region are *hemşehris* in a different region.

result of the forced migration from the region. Some of these associations began to highlight their ethnic origins parallel to the increasing problems Kurds have faced both at the local and national levels, especially after the forced migration. Thus, these associations, on the one hand, started to strengthen the solidarity among the migrants and help to keep cultural norms alive, and, on the other hand, in the 1990s they served to solve the socio-economic and political problems of their members in İstanbul. Some hometown associations from Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia began to mobilize their members to take a stance on such issues like forced migration from their home villages in particular, and democratic rights in general.

The voluntary migration of the pre-1980s produced hometown associations whose constituents were from the upper middle class, who were concerned with mobilizing people in the name of regional development, while at the same time using these channels for the social and political mobility without presenting themselves as representative of the rights of a specific group. Because these associations adopted a clientelistic, integrationist approach, they did not mobilize many people politically, and their scope of activity was limited with kinship solidarity activities (such as helping the development of their region, etc.) or clientelistic mobilization (e.g., trying to gain the votes of the fellow *hemşehri* during local elections). Moreover, the migrants who came to cities in the earlier period used their informal networks in order to ease the difficulties of the transition period rather than resorting to these associations.⁵²

Hirabayashi argues that sometimes, migrant associations facilitate “the pursuit of economic interests and the political interests and goals of their members in the city. These functions appear to be especially heightened in national settings in which social perceptions of race or ethnicity play a role in blocking access to, or to fair distribution of, key resources like jobs, housing, and education.”⁵³ As argued above, Kurds’ forced migration to İstanbul resulted in a blocked access to many social and economic opportunities in the city primarily due to their Kurdish identity and suffering caused by forced migration. The resulting sense of inequality and discrimination further led to politicization of some hometown associations along ethnic lines. Ayata argues, “the 1990s in Turkey have been years during which identity politics became a means of expressing protest against both increasing inequalities and social, political and cultural

52 Karpat, *The Gecekondu*.

53 Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, *Cultural Capital: Mountain Zapotec Migrant Associations in Mexico City* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993), 17.

domination.”⁵⁴ However, what makes the associations referred to in this study significant is not only the rise of identity politics in Turkey generally, but increasing importance of “Kurdish Question” and specifically the consequences of forced migration.

The forced migration of the 1990s changed the socioeconomic and political profile of the Kurdish migrants in the cities. Accordingly, the profile of those who were represented or helped by these associations changed over time. Many hometown associations began to help these migrants especially in terms of providing clothing and food. In some cases, they also used their informal networks to locate new jobs for their members. Although, some hometown associations only fulfilled their traditional roles without representing the rights of an ethnic group per se, many hometown associations came to terms with their ethnic origins as a result of the mass Kurdish migration to İstanbul. Many of these associations started to hold some of their cultural activities both in Kurdish and in Turkish.

In this study, we can track down two effects of the forced migration in the expression of Kurdish identity: those that affected the forced migrants and those that affected the early-settled migrants or İstanbul-born Kurdish women who now serve as members in the Kurdish associations. In the latter category, meeting forced migrants in the city acted as a catalyst, moving these women move from assimilation stage to the assertion of their Kurdish identity. Ayata argues that increasing interaction in big cities produced an awareness of ethnic differences, leading to a sense of “them” and “us.” This differentiation has led many Kurds to perceive themselves as a collective with some developing a minority consciousness. “Through minority consciousness, they develop[ed] networks that can be devoted to the expression of political power and new demands in resource allocation. Through this process they [began] to define their group *vis-à-vis* others.”⁵⁵ Although many hometown associations surpassed the two levels in Drury’s definition of ethnic mobilization through developing ethnic consciousness, and deploying cultural criteria to emphasize their differences,⁵⁶ not very many hometown associations took political action about the issues that concerned them.

54 Ayata, “The Emergence of Identity Politics in Turkey,” 60.

55 Ibid.: 62-63.

56 Beatrice Drury argues that ethnic groups can mobilize as a “response to a set of events or situations which are perceived by the group to be of special significance to its concerns and indeed to its very existence” Beatrice Drury, “Ethnic Mobilisation: Some Theoretical Considerations,” in *Ethnic Mobilisation in a Multi-Cultural Europe*, ed. John Rex and Beatrice Drury (Aldershot: Avebury, 1994), 15. Here, ethnic mobilization is defined as a process that involves four stages: developing group consciousness; employing cultural criteria to sharpen group differences; organizing resources in order to take action; and lastly, taking action -usually political action - to defend group rights.

Even though most of the forced migrants proved either unable or reluctant to become members of hometown associations, the new problems that they brought up were now to a certain extent part and parcel of these associations. Especially between 1993-1994, when forced evacuations increased dramatically, some of the hometown associations tried to publicize the issue through public gatherings, petitioning, and lobbying. In 1996, several hometown associations established a platform to promote democratic rights and freedoms.⁵⁷ This platform was formed by the hometown associations of the Kurdish and Alevi-populated regions. Hence, one can argue that regional identity, upon which these associations were formed, was now coupled with “Kurdishness,”⁵⁸ however it may be described. More importantly, this rapprochement between the early-settled Kurds and the newcomers paved the way for the early-settled and the new generation of Kurds in İstanbul to recognize their “Kurdishness.”

A 24 year old Alevi- Kurdish woman, who was working in a Kurdish women’s association for seven years, argued that she recognized her “Kurdishness” through the contact she had with Kurdish migrant students who came to her school in the 1990s. She explained this process as:

The self-recognition of my Kurdish identity goes back to the 1990s, not so far away. It happened during my high school years. There were people at school, who had come as a result of forced migration. I saw their families, their lives. I was born and raised in İstanbul. My Turkish is good, and my appearance is typical, so that I can adapt to the city. Thus, I did not have many physical constraints in that sense. But I saw those people, who had a different language. Their Turkish was not good. I saw them being ridiculed. I witnessed how hard their lives were. This helped me recognize my ethnic identity (a member of Kurdish women’s association, interview, İstanbul March 2000).

Another woman, aged 36, who came to İstanbul in the late 1980s, stated that she worked to establish an association to help Kurdish migrants in the early 1990s. When I interviewed her, she was an active member and one of

57 *Dersim: Tunceli Kültür ve Dayanışma Derneği Yayın Organı* 2, no. 3 (1996).

58 My objective in this paper is neither to define Kurdish identity nor to express how the Kurdish members of these associations perceive it. At this point, suffice to argue that even though there are dialectical, religious, and social differences among the Kurds, the Kurdish members of all associations had one definition in mind: a Kurd is the one, who feels like a Kurd. The 1990s also had this effect of leaving aside factors such as Alevi-Sunni animosity and linguistic divisions, which prevented the Kurdish mobilization.

the administrators for three years of an association that helped migrants. Her interest in working for a migrant association started in the mid-1990s when she realized that İstanbul was receiving a great number of displaced Kurds:

There was a mass migration in 1993-1994. Most of these people came to my neighborhood. When I saw a migrant family, I used to go and visit them. I asked about their well-being. I had neighbors who were willing to donate food and clothes to these people. I started acting like a mediator between them before our association was founded (a member of Kurdish woman association, interview, İstanbul March 2000).

Even though forced migration to İstanbul changed the quantity and the quality of the hometown associations, how these associations viewed the role of women in society did not change much. Hometown associations are dominated by men, and they replicate the traditional roles assigned for men and women in urban settings. This traditional view prevents men and women working or socializing in the same place. Even though some of the Kurdish men, who came as a result of the forced migration, began socializing in some of these hometown associations, Kurdish women were kept in homes. Thus, while some hometown associations tried to attract Kurdish women to their activities, they did not generally show the same willingness to include them in their governing bodies, making these attempts insincere in practice.

In most cases, women constituted about 10 percent of hometown association membership. Women's participation sometimes reached around 25 percent in the hometown associations of Alevi-populated regions. This is not surprising because there are significant differences between how Sunni Kurds and Alevi Kurds perceive the role of women in society. Alevi Kurdish women, unlike many Sunni Kurdish women, are not forced to veil, and they can socialize and work with men. Also, in Alevi society, as mentioned above, younger women have greater access for schooling than in Sunni society,⁵⁹ the end result of which is higher literacy and education level in the former. Thus, Alevi Kurdish women can adapt to city life more easily than Sunni Kurdish women. Previous studies also indicate that Alevi Kurdish migrant women adjust to urban life easier, are more eager to work and have higher status in the family.⁶⁰

Before the 1990s, in the associations from the regions where the majority of the population is Alevi Kurds, Alevi identity and leftist

59 Mehmet Bayrak, *Alevilik ve Kürtler* (İstanbul: Özge, 1997), 56.

60 Erman, "The Impact of Migration on Turkish Rural Women.", Erman, "The Meaning of City Living."

ideologies were much more prevalent than Kurdish identity. The 24-year-old Alevi Kurdish woman describes this dilemma as such:

[When I was in primary school] my school teacher asked me where I was from. I said ‘Erzincan.’ He asked ‘Are you Kurdish?’. I answered ‘No, I am an Alevi.’ Actually, I knew what Kurds were, but at that time, for me being an Alevi was important because that was what I mostly heard about at home. In fact this is my religious identity, not my ethnic identity (a member of Kurdish woman association, interview, İstanbul March 2000).

The domination of Alevi identity over Kurdish identity began to change especially in the 1990s, forced migration being one of the most important factors of this change.⁶¹ However, we have to note that this change is mainly found among the “mobilized” Alevi Kurds, not necessarily including all members of this category. In fact, many argued that most Alevi-Kurdish migrants who came to İstanbul have been assimilated into the mainstream Turkish society either in their place of origin or in the city. Thus, the increased sense of “Kurdishness” among the Alevi-Kurds most frequently ensued from politicization along other lines, i.e., class and sectarian affiliation.

The role of new associations: An alternative mobilization of Kurdish women?

Many Kurdish women’s newspapers, which came to life beginning in the late 1980s, point out the fact that although forced migration exposed many Kurdish migrant women to discrimination, poverty, social exclusion and various psychological problems attached to these social issues, their experiences in the metropolises of Turkey led to one “positive” consequence: the politicization of the Kurdish women, who have come to İstanbul in the earlier wave or were born there.⁶² What they mean by politicization is mobilization along ethnic identity and the expression of their grievances of forced migration, the “backwardness” of their region and the suppression of their cultural rights. This politicization was usually carried out under the leadership of pro-Kurdish political parties and platforms established by several hometown associations as well as the newly formed Kurdish associations.

61 For further discussion, see A. Betül Çelik, “Alevi, Kurds, Hemsehris: Resurgence of Alevi Kurdish Identity in the 1990s,” in *The Alevi Enigma*, ed. Joost Jongerden and Paul J. White (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

62 See various issues of *Roza* and *Jujin*, especially *Roza* 1, no. 2 (1996).

Compared to hometown associations, the most significant qualitative difference in these Kurdish associations in terms of the participation of women is the men to women ratio: in most cases it reaches one to one. Whereas hometown associations are dominated and led by men without exception, some of these newly formed Kurdish associations are led by women. In the latter, the likelihood of meeting a Kurd who came to İstanbul as a result of forced migration is higher than it is in hometown associations. One of the reasons for this is that almost all of these Kurdish associations had implicit ties with one of the two pro-Kurdish parties: DBP (Democracy and Peace Party)⁶³ or HADEP (People's Democracy Party)⁶⁴; and, in the case of human rights associations, with either the leftist or Islamist parties. Although the 1980 Constitution bans any organic link between associations and political parties, many members of the newly formed Kurdish associations were also members of DBP or HADEP. Often, the administrators of the Kurdish associations also served in the sub-committees in either of the parties. In this context, it is very probable that these people reflect the perspectives of their parties to the policies and perceptions of their institutions. Most of the members of these Kurdish associations were supportive of one of the pro-Kurdish parties. That is to say, the forced migrants of the 1990s are more aware of their Kurdishness, and are more supportive of the pro-Kurdish parties than the migrants of the earlier wave. As a result, they perceive newly formed Kurdish associations as being more receptive to their needs and more representative of their political orientations. In fact, most forced migrants consider HADEP and associations that are close to this party as the only institutions that could truly represent them.

Even though the forced migration of Kurds to İstanbul has changed the nature and functioning of the hometown associations in terms of how they perceive the “Kurdish Question” and how they represent their members, with few exceptions they are still traditional in the sense that they maintain patriarchal values (i.e., segregation of the sexes and keeping women at home). Thus, on average, the importance of gender-related issues and the role of women have not increased in home-town associations, although ethnicity-related issues gained significance. On the other hand, almost all

63 In 2002 DBP dissolved and joined the newly founded Hak ve Özgürlükler Partisi (Right and Freedoms Party).

64 Both parties were closed by the Constitutional Court. DBP's closure dates back to the end of 2000 whereas HADEP was closed in March 2003. HADEP's closure is the fourth in line. After HEP (Halkın Emek Partisi/People's Labor Party), DEP (Demokrasi Partisi/Democracy Party) and ÖZDEP (Özgürlük ve Demokrasi Partisi/Freedom and Democracy Party) were founded and dissolved. However, the fifth party by the same members was founded right away: DEHAP (Demokratik Halk Partisi/Democratic People's Party).

the women working in the Kurdish associations believe that the 1990s was a turning point in terms of the mobilization of Kurds in İstanbul, and consider forced migration as one of the factors that played an important role in this change. They also attach a great value to their associations in terms of making them recognize their gender identity along with their ethnic identity. In Kurdish associations, where both ethnicity and gender related issues have more significance as compared to the home-town associations where gender-related issues are undermined, it seems like it is easier to find more Kurdish women members.

A 26-year-old Kurdish woman, a daughter of a migrant family of the earlier wave, who actively took part in the activities of a Kurdish association, which included shooting a documentary on the forced migration of the 1990s, describes recognizing her Kurdish origins and her gender identity as a simultaneous process:

Women, when they become political [and start working in these institutions], recognize their womanhood. Thus, this politicization is not just along ethnic lines. One way or another, there is something in that which reminds you of your gender (a member of Kurdish woman association, interview, İstanbul March 2000).

What that “something” is hard to explain for them. This may be rooted in the confrontation since the late 1980s between the state on the one hand, and the left and the Islamists on the other.⁶⁵ Most of the women in the newly founded institutions label their political ideologies as “leftist/socialist.” Since the mid-1980s, women in the leftist factions have been forming feminist circles under the aegis of their organizations, which is significant when compared to the non-existence of the women’s question on the agenda of the Turkish Left before 1980.⁶⁶ A similar process took place in most of the countries in the Middle East, where “the left-wing women’s groups tied to political parties tend to be more feminist in orientation. (...) Earlier, women’s organizations tied to left-wing political parties tended to subsume ‘the woman question’ to larger political and party objectives.”⁶⁷ From the late 1980s through the early

65 İlhan Tekeli, “Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’ndan Günümüze Nüfusun Zorunlu Yer Değiştirmesi,” *Toplum ve Bilim*, no. 50 (1990).

66 Fatmagül Bertay, “Has Anything Changed in the Outlook of the Turkish Left on Women?” in *Women in Modern Turkish Society*, ed. Şirin Tekeli (New Jersey: Zed Books, 1995), 251-54.

67 Valentine M. Moghadam, “Women’s NGOs in the Middle East and North Africa: Constraints, Opportunities, and Priorities,” in *Organizing Women: Formal and Informal Women’s Groups in the Middle East*, ed. Dawn Chatty and Annika Rabo (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 39.

1990s, the early-settled migrant Kurdish women in İstanbul not only realized their Kurdishness, but also their gender identities through Kurdish associations. “I also work for the DBP. But I express myself much better here [in this Kurdish women institution]” says the 24-year old Alevi Kurdish woman:

I would like to work along both lines [ethnic and gender]. For me, my ethnic identity is much more important but I have other problems, too. I am young. I have problems because of this. I have problems related to my womanhood. I want to work on these, but the priority is on my ethnic identity. This is a *Kurdish women’s association*. (a member of Kurdish women’s association, interview, İstanbul March 2000).

Secor claims that becoming political is a “moment infused with the contradictions, tensions, and ongoing negotiations over Turkish citizenship and Kurdish identity that have historically given shape to Turkey’s political arena.” She suggests that “the spatial and temporal boundaries produced through relations of gender and class are clearly important to women’s everyday experiences in the city,” but that these differences are not be reducible to class.⁶⁸ That is why many Kurdish women organizations originally stemmed mainly from Turkish leftist organizations in earlier decades, but later followed a different path as representing *women* and *Kurdish* identity. This representation of Kurdishness, however, diverges from other Kurdish associations’ approach as well. The recognition of Kurdish identity (or becoming ‘political’ in this context) does not automatically or swiftly bring about feminist sentiments; but helps begin a questioning of existing social structures. Some members of Kurdish women’s associations reported to me that they are against the patriarchal values of the Kurdish culture, an issue that many other Kurdish associations do not deal with.

In the 1990s, when we decided to organize a Kurdish women’s movement [which would become institutionalized later on], we decided that it should be independent from any political affiliation. However, there were some who claimed that we should have solidarity with men as well. That is where we started to move on a different path (a member of Kurdish women’s association, interview, İstanbul March 2000).

68 Secor, “There is an İstanbul that Belongs to Me,” 355.

Activities that differentiate Kurdish women's associations from both other Kurdish associations and hometown associations are that they are trying to get migrant Kurdish women out of their houses and educate them about gender rights in their daily lives. At the same time, they are trying to mobilize migrant Kurdish women in the urban poor category by making them join the activities and marches on the 8th of March Women's Day, which they call Women's Labor Day.

Another reason given by most of the migrant Kurdish women to explain why they choose these associations over the hometown associations is the capacity of these institutions to reproduce the physical environment and culture that they miss through cultural activities⁶⁹ they undertake in Kurdish. They also find their associations politically active in pressuring the government to relocate people back to their villages. Hometown associations are perceived as "nostalgic," and as places where patriarchy and patrilinearity are exercised. Both lack of political activism and unwillingness to encourage - or even in some cases a conscious effort to suppress - women's participation make hometown associations less attractive for many Kurdish women. Many report that it is the cultural activities, such as theatrical performances, choral societies, and shooting documentaries which make them become members of these associations. Especially forced Kurdish migrant women, who do not want their children forget their mother tongue, bring their children to these activities, and through this, they join the public space.

Conclusion

Similar to many studies on forced migration to urban places, this study demonstrates that migrant Kurdish women's experiences in İstanbul after their forced migration to the city led to several problems, among which we can list social exclusion, poverty and social isolation. Migrant Kurdish women's gender identity in public spheres in İstanbul has largely been underrepresented, language serving as the biggest barrier in their social integration. On the other hand, some younger Kurdish women "joined" the urban economy through their labor in the informal economy and low-paid in-house jobs. The 'rediscovery' of gender identity among the early-settled or İstanbul-born Kurdish women in İstanbul was an end result of increasing contact between the early-settled Kurds and the Kurdish newcomers. This rediscovery of gender identity in most cases went in hand

69 The cultural activities undertaken by these institutions include performing plays in Kurdish, showing documentaries and movies about Kurdish culture and forced migration, organizing panels and talks on human rights and forced migration, staging folk dances, inviting Kurdish singers for public audience, documenting Kurdish literature and history, etc.

with Kurdish ethnic consciousness in the newly established Kurdish associations and the transformed Kurdish hometown associations.

Although forced migration helped many hometown associations to recognize their Kurdish origins, and began emphasizing their “Kurdishness,” the representation of Kurdish women in many of these associations did not improve. Many Kurdish women, especially those who came to İstanbul in the 1990s, consequently, found more representation in the newly founded associations, which tried to publicize the issues raised by forced migration, as well as other issues like human rights, the “Kurdish problem,” as well as the problems of Kurdish women. One of the reasons why both ethnicity and gender have been better represented in these latter categories is that many traditional practices exercised by most of the hometown associations, such as sex segregation and not allowing women in public places, have been outdated by the newer associations.

This study was an analysis of the post-1990 experiences covering the period of 1993 to 2000. Much has begun to change especially in late 1999 with the capture of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK. The biggest consequence of this event was subsiding of the forced migration to cities, which is now replaced by migration to cities in search of employment. The capture of Öcalan and improvements in the exercise of Kurdish cultural rights in the public sphere as an outcome of Turkey’s efforts to become a European Union member also affected the mobilization and politicization of Kurds. There is a pressing need to study several new problems faced by Kurdish urban poor (e.g., increasing use of drugs, resort to prostitution and illegal activities as an outcome of poverty) as well as representation issues in the 2000’s İstanbul.

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