

Violence, Forced Displacement and the Transgendered Sex Workers of Istanbul

By Rustem Ertug Altinay

Even though the transgender community in Turkey is fairly large and visible, the literature on the community is rather limited. Most literature about the subject seeks to interpret the experiences of trans people within the framework of psychology or psychiatry, or it focuses on popular culture to understand the power relations in and through which transgender subjectivities are produced. However, the literature on the history of the transgender community and Turkey's transphobic policies is fairly limited. In this article, I seek to focus on a particular period to discuss how different forms of violence targeting the transgender community in Istanbul subjected them to forced displacement in the city.

Contrary to the contemporary homophobic and transphobic discourses (Selek 2007:194), homosexuality and transgenderism were widespread in the Ottoman Empire. While some biologically male trans people worked in the entertainment sector, most others were sex workers of sorts (Bardakci 2005:94). With the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic, the norms about gender and sexuality as well as the forms of popular entertainment changed, and it became increasingly difficult for male-to-female transgender people to find work in any other sector, and sex work gradually became the only alternative. By the 1960s, transgender sex workers started to work in the streets and gained visibility (Cingoz 2007). Working in the streets of central districts, they were easy targets for police. In 1973, the first brothels for transgendered prostitutes were opened in the Beyoglu district of Istanbul. In these brothels, they enjoyed relative security and regular health inspections. In the late-1970s, the government of the "social democrat"

Republican People's Party started a war against these brothels. They provided no alternative employment opportunity and simply tore the brothels down. Therefore, the workers had to move the brothels to less central streets within the same districts (Cingoz 2007).

The transphobic policies intensified with the military coup of 1980, and violence became part of the everyday life of the trans community, particularly among sex workers. Today, due to the stigmatization; the absence of any affirmative action, and despite the demands of trans activists, only a handful of transgendered individuals work in any profession (Ogunc 2007) and, to my knowledge, there is only one person, a medical doctor, employed by the government. Even trans people with a university degree are unable to find employment (Berghan 2007). Moreover, they usually enjoy little family support, and they are vulnerable to family violence in the name of honor. Hence transgendered people have few alternatives besides sex work. However, unregulated sex work in a city where the crime rates are considerably high makes sex workers the target of customer and gang violence.

The violence against the transgender community in Istanbul peaked in 1996, before the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (HABITAT II). The city attempted to look "modern" and "Western" for the conference. Stray dogs and cats were killed, some buildings were painted, and sidewalks were replaced. This was also a great opportunity for the middle-class to reclaim the districts which the trans community shared with other abject groups such as the Roma, illegal international migrants, children living and/or working in the streets, and the Kurds who

had to come to Istanbul as migrant laborers. This period of forced displacement witnessed the collaboration of different groups, exerting various forms of violence.

The Association to Protect and Develop Beyoglu, a civil society organization established by some of the wealthiest Turkish businessmen and important bureaucrats in Istanbul, combined a nostalgia for an imaginary past with the need to “clean and protect Beyoglu” from the “others” (Selek 2007:171). The association enjoyed great support from the media to reproduce these discourses, and to legitimize the forced displacement. In the streets, real estate owners collaborated with ultranationalist gangs to exert physical and verbal violence on trans people. They would stone their homes, break their doors or beat them in the middle of the street. These violent actions were often backed by the police who rarely did anything to protect the victims. On the contrary, police violence became an even more serious problem. The possibility of being taken under custody and tortured even on the way to the market became part of everyday life.

It was at this time Turkish media coined the term “transvestite/transsexual terrorism.” The term referred to disorganized incidents of violence allegedly committed by the trans community (Berghan 2007, 47). In the newspapers, magazines and on television, stories of “transgender terrorism” would stigmatize the trans community and feed the hatred towards them. Although they were victims of violence, they were often reported as being the perpetrators of it. They had nothing to do with the concept of terrorism, and yet they were victimized by the media through the attribution of being terrorists. The acts of violence perpetrated upon the trans community subjected them to a

discursive violence that would legitimize the violent acts of the police and the general public. Moreover, they were not given a voice in the media to defend themselves. Thus, the public image of the trans community as terrorists was established quite firmly. Many of them had to leave the districts where they used to live. Today, these streets are among the most expensive areas of Istanbul. The former inhabitants have found shelter in other spaces of abjection. This analysis shows how different groups employing violence unite to exclude “others” to spaces of abjection. It demonstrates how social “integration” is nothing but a far away dream for some, and social collaboration can be a tool that works against marginalized populations.

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