

## Perceptions and Mentality Structures

# “Home Sweet Home”: Women and Men in the Democratization Process



**TESEV**

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### Summary

This study aims to map the relations between democratization and mind-sets, and focuses on gender as a powerful tool. The immediate answer to the gendered mind-sets in Turkey, would be that the norms and schemes that refer to gender relations are conservative and anti-democratic until they are shifted and even shattered by men and women in their daily life activities. Yet, this study shows that such an assumption is highly limited if not problematic: In order for the daily life experience to present an elbow room to exercise personal empowerment strategies, a capacity of subjectivity is necessary, and it has been observed that this capacity is fundamentally damaged for most people we have interviewed.

The capacity for subjectivity is damaged in different ways, among which declared and physical violence is the most widespread. It is especially observed in narratives of domestic violence towards women; yet, men have also narrated acts of violence committed towards them during their childhood and adolescent years. It must be noted that these two types of physical violence are presented in categorically different ways: It is easier for women to talk about these experiences in a personal level while men tend to present them as abstract and general situations. As a result, violence experienced in schools and the military, rationalized as rites of passage, is easier for them to talk about while domestic violence is not.

The capacity for subjectivity is also severely damaged by obstruction and social pressure, that stem from family life and cause men and women to live under a suffocating feeling of control even until their thirties. Men seem to experience this type of control only before they become “grown-ups,” but women are not considered grown-ups until the end of their lives. It is reflected both in the limitation of outside activities, the control of the female body and arranged marriage. Perhaps the most severe type of control is the second, especially in the form of virginity tests. A milder representation of bodily control is expressed in the limitation of clothing possibilities, such as the double sided problem of control that women experience over religious covering: It is forbidden on the public level and indirectly forced on the private level –family, neighbors, relatives. While most interviewees object to the state limitations on covering, they tend to affirm the importance of chaste dressing. As a direct result of these mind-sets that have adapted to severe bodily control mechanisms, chastity is presented as a taboo in most interviews. Sexual experiences are synonymous with ignorance, embarrassment, fear and insecurity both for women and men. When sexuality and marriage are discussed together, instead of personal satisfaction and feeling content, communication breakdown and disillusion are expressed. In other words, the damage in subjective capacities is represented as disempowerment, unhappiness and loneliness.

The damage in the capacity for subjectivity influences the ways men and women perceive the world as well as their societies. They tend to view the world as a dangerous place where they can not be influential actors. The discriminative clichés reflect these worries. Homophobia is first on the line, but the perception of difference in terms of feelings of hatred and fear is very common. Sex differences are formed in the private sphere and result in reactions towards the possibility that these differences might fade. The codes of difference are formed in relation to parenthood roles and the codes relating to womanhood and manhood. Alternatively, gender equality in the public sphere –and not yet the private- has also become a part of these codes. Only adult women in their middle ages and up constitute a relation between gender equality in these two spheres and argue that equality on the public level can only be obtained by means of equality on the private level.

The damage in the capacity for subjectivity result in alienation from schemes of meaning that people move within, in their daily lives. Religiosity, conservatism or modernist world views do not function on an integral level, but they are seriously “personalized.” This process pertains to isolation, disempowerment and an increase in fear rather than individuality. Thus, we have defined this process as deterritorialization (or, “yersizyurtsuzlaşma” in Turkish) as practical and mental planes of belonging have disappeared, and close relations are dispersed in alienation from schemes of meaning. The process of deterritorialization can evolve towards democratization and liberation but from the point of view of gender, disempowerment overruns the possibility of liberation.

Nevertheless, Muslim and Kurdish identities, do serve as empowerment tools for people even though they do not see themselves as political subjects by providing new frames of meaning as moving grounds rather than roles to play. From the point of view of women, for whom the damage in the capacity for subjectivity is persistent, waged work is the area of liberation. The power of earning their own wages that they control, as well as political and civil societal activities stand out in women’s narratives as their means for liberation. Yet there are limitations on these means such as the chastity taboo, or that, ideally “uneducated” and “unqualified” women are only allowed to wage-work in times of economic difficulties. Thus the possibility of empowerment by public activities is not equally possible for all women, but it depends on the formation of new frames of meaning that include liberation side by side with empowerment.