

Shifting Subjectivities, Cultivating Safe Spaces: Mothers' Perspectives on Virginity in Contemporary Turkey

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Abstract

Following Ozyegin's (2015) work on Turkish youth and virginity, this study considers Turkish mothers' negotiations of the Turkish discourse of virginity. We define the discourse of virginity in Turkey as the historical, cultural, political, and religious ideologies surrounding women's chastity, which sustains asymmetrical gender relations. Via interviews in 2016, we aimed to understand how seven members of one urban social circle interpret the role of virginity in their lives and the lives of their adult children. The participant mothers, aged 47-59, were all heterosexual college-educated Muslim women with white-collar careers. Participant mothers discussed virginity from what we interpret as three "tactical subjectivities" (Sandoval, 1991, 2000): *modern women* who believe in women's rights, *modern mothers* who respect their children's choices regarding premarital sex, and *caring mothers* who worry about social ostracism from such choices in a society that demands chastity for unmarried women. Tactically shifting among these three subjectivities, participant mothers talked about communicating survival strategies to their children while cultivating safe spaces that empower them to subvert what participant mothers view as repressive aspects of the Turkish discourse of virginity. We frame our analysis with third space feminism understood as subtle practices of resistance emerging from interstitial social locations, such as the participant mothers managing modern secular lives in a religiously conservative society.

Keywords

Virginity, Turkey, third space feminism, mothers, tactical subjectivity

Introduction

In a 2014 speech, the Deputy Prime Minister of Turkey, Bülent Arınç, said: “Where are our girls, who slightly blush, lower their heads and turn their eyes away when we look at their face, becoming the symbol of chastity?” (Dearden, 2014).

The discourse of virginity circumscribes the lives of women in Turkey. Ozyegin (2015, p. 48) writes of the “significance of virginity as a charged site of control over women’s sexuality” in Turkey. She observes that “the multilayered societal transformations of the recent two decades” is “marked by the emergence of public discursivity” on the topic of “women’s sexuality and virginity” (p. 48). We define the discourse of virginity in Turkey as the historical, cultural, political, and religious ideologies surrounding women’s chastity, which sustains asymmetrical gender relations.

But virginity is not solely about the presence or absence of a hymen. Chastity is woven throughout broader aspects of the culture, such as modernity, marriage, and respectability. There are only two respectable social positions for women in Turkish culture: virgin and married. Neither allows women sexual agency. *Namus* in Turkish culture ties patriarchal family honor to the ability to secure women in the family from sexual violation and thereby protect paternity. Thus, suppressing women’s sexuality becomes part of Turkish idealizations of gender for both women and men. The discourse of virginity in Turkey is often in the news, movies, political speeches, legislation, and everyday conversations. Virginity is the assumed norm for unmarried women in hetero-patriarchal Turkish society, and

unmarried women who are not virgins are regarded as immoral, unclean, and undesirable. Tying respect for unmarried women to their virginity reinforces a sexual double standard (Essizoğlu *et al.*, 2011; Kandiyoti, 1987, 1988). For women, even the perception of sexual promiscuity can produce life-altering social repercussions. To protect respectability, then, women “choose” to restrain their sexuality and safeguard their virginity (Alemdaroğlu, 2015; Ergun, 2007; Müftüler-Baç, 1999). One could argue that women in Turkey are legally free and capable of making decisions about their sexual lives. However, Turkey’s rising religious neoconservatism has emboldened authoritarianism “geared towards ensuring pervasive control of women’s bodies and sexualities” (Cindoglu & Unal, 2017, p. 39).

Ozyegin (2009) argues, “Despite the unquestionable significance virginity holds for the control and regulation of women’s sexuality in Turkey, the meanings girls and women attribute to virginity remains an understudied topic” (pp. 106-107). She has shown that contemporary attitudes towards virginity among Turkish youth, known as “young circles,” skirt strict definitions of virginity based on chastity by using inventive practices and rationales. Our work here adds the perspectives of one group of mothers to this literature. We asked a group of 47- to 59-year-old heterosexual, college-educated, secular Muslim Turkish mothers with white-collar careers to share their thoughts on virginity.

Below, we situate these economically comfortable and educationally privileged participant mothers’ discussions within the modern Turkish political history of women’s rights as well as contemporary sociopolitical factors implicated in the Turkish discourse

of virginity. Then we introduce Sandoval's (1991, 2000) tactical subjectivities by way of third space feminisms (Bañuelos, 2006; English, 2005; Khan, 1998; Pérez, 1999; Shah & Golombisky, 2017; Villenas, 2006; Zubair & Zubair, 2017). Tactical subjectivity describes women strategically changing allegiances to achieve ends in social contexts where they do not have political means. Pérez (1999) calls such practices third space feminism where agency is enacted by subordinated or silenced voices from interstitial locations. Both tactical subjectivity and third space feminism illuminate our analysis of the participant mothers, self-defined as modern secular women, who, despite their privileges, occupy an increasingly tenuous position in contemporary Turkey's conservatism. When speaking about virginity in Turkey, participant mothers tactically shifted among three subjectivities, which we have labeled *modern women*, *modern mothers*, and *caring mothers*. Participants' descriptions of their mothering philosophies in conjunction with the Turkish phenomenon of virginal facades—women pretending to be virgins—characterize a politics of virginity moving away from a social imperative toward covert practices of choice.

Women's Rights in Turkey's Geopolitical Milieu

Women in Turkey live amid apparent contradictions: traditional culture, driven by patriarchal interpretations of Islam that prescribe women's chastity and obedience, and European culture, promoting Western ideas about women's

individual autonomy and equality. As a secular republic with a century of evolving women's rights, Turkey is unique among Muslim countries in the Middle East. Yet the new millennium has witnessed a political climate seeking to roll back Turkish women's rights. Contemporary Turkish women abide with these and other seeming tensions. Lived experience, however, is always more complicated than such facile binaries.

Within this milieu, the discourse of virginity in Turkey can be understood in terms of a "politics of the intimate," regulating women's sexuality and reproduction within Turkey's heteropatriarchal goals of family, religion, and state (Acar & Altunok, 2013). In "modern Turkey," "intimate citizenship" or "reproductive citizenship" draws our attention to the ways that struggles to control women's sexuality and reproduction remain "emblematic of social engineering projects," including iterations of Turkish nationalism and women's movements (Unal & Cindoglu, 2013, p. 21).

This process was already under way in the late 19th century at the end of the Ottoman Empire as discourses of science, medicine, technology, and industry were increasingly brought to bear on regulating women's reproductive health—not to modernize Turkey but to steel traditional Islamic morality against the dangers of encroaching European modernity (Demirci & Somel, 2008; Unal & Cindoglu, 2013). Thus, "Puritanism attached to female sexuality lies at the heart of modernization discourse in Turkey," argue Unal and Cindoglu (2013, p. 23). The political ambivalence resulting from using logics of democracy to reinforce conservative Turkish values continues to this day. For

example, in the contemporary period, reversing Turkey's constitutional headscarf ban in 2013 was framed by government officials as a democratic reform recognizing the rights of women wearing headscarves to participate in public institutions and government, an argument that functioned politically to divide rather than unite religious and secular Turkish women (Cindoglu & Unal, 2017; Ozkaleli, 2018).

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1923, republican dispensations toward women's equality did not substantially change the nationalism that urged women to enact their citizenship by rearing Turkish citizens. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's Republic of Turkey embraced modernization practiced as Westernization. In this environment, women became the fertile ground upon which to grow a modern secular state. Republican women were encouraged to enter public political and professional life via formal education, which was promoted as key to women's equality as Turkish citizens.

There were inconsistencies that belied women's emancipation under the new Kemalist republic, however. Women's entrance into public life depended on chastity for unmarried women; for married women, the tradeoff meant sexual modesty, prioritizing motherhood, and fulfilling their obligations to the family and its private household (Arat, 1994; Gole, 1996; Kandiyoti, 1987, 1988; Tekeli, 1995; Unal & Cindoglu, 2013). Kemalist women were to be "virtuous, asexual, [and] nationalistic mothers" (Ozyegin, 2009, p. 106). Additionally, the women envisioned for and who benefitted from Kemalist reforms came from economically and educationally privileged backgrounds clustered in urban areas, which excluded poor women and women from rural areas (Arat, 2000; Jelen,

2011). In the Kemalist social contract, women's rights serve the republic by producing the literal body politic of a modern secular nation (Arat, 1994; Müftüler-Baç, 1999). Nevertheless, Kemalism remains synonymous with a modernized secular Turkey.

Intimate citizenship for Turkish women, then, has not changed substantially in nearly 100 years, despite some adjustments in the interim. International discourses of global overpopulation and family planning coincided with Turkish law legalizing contraceptives, as well as limited access to abortion. However, these rights codified into law are not necessarily available to Turkish women in practice (Acar & Altunok, 2013; Onar & Müftüler-Baç, 2011; Sümer & Eslen-Ziya, 2017; Unal & Cindoglu, 2013). Nor do such formal rights depend on promoting women's choice, autonomy, or bodily integrity. Rather, even Turkish politicians and lawmakers tend to frame support for legal abortion in terms of reproductive citizenship, such as medical public health, civic public safety, and national workforce economics (Unal & Cindoglu, 2013).

During the first decade of the new millennium, Turkey's now stalled European Union (EU) accession project prompted gender equity constitutional, civil, and criminal legislative reforms (Müftüler-Baç, 2012). Some of these changes addressed sexual violence and domestic abuse, among other related issues, such as polygamy and honor killings, all formerly "taboo" topics for Kemalist feminists (Sümer & Eslen-Ziya, 2017). Penal code references to "morality, chastity, honor or virginity were removed" (Acar & Altunok, 2013, p. 19). These legal changes in the name of Turkey's EU project were praised for replacing "the

notion of protection of public morality with protection of the individual, and his/her sexual and bodily integrity” (Acar & Altunok, 2013, p. 19).

Paradoxically, this legal progress occurred under the socially conservative, Islam-informed, and anti-feminist Justice and Development Party (JDP, a.k.a. AKP, based on the Turkish-language acronym). The JDP/AKP became Turkey’s ruling party in 2002. The failed EU application is owing in part to the JDP/AKP’s support of regressive gender ideologies and its regime’s increasing suppression of political opposition. The JDP/AKP’s success has been supported by a conservative Islamic constituency, although the JDP/AKP is not formally linked to Islam. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s consolidation of power has included constitutional changes to Turkey’s checks and balances among the branches of government, as well as quelling dissent and free speech, Turkey’s independent press, and academic freedoms for Turkish state universities, especially since the failed military coup in July 2016.

Cindoglu and Unal (2017, p. 41) argue that over the past decade “the discursive regulation of women’s bodies and sexualities” has functioned to rally conservative political power in Turkey. Erdoğan’s pro-natal regime combines conservative religious rhetoric with concerns about Turkey’s low birth rate. Erdoğan is on the record for public statements claiming women and men by nature are not equal (Agence France-Presse, 2014), patriotic women should bear at least three children (Cetingulec, 2015), working women who do not bear children are only half persons (Bruton, 2016), contraception is treasonous (Yeginsu, 2014), cesareans should be illegal (Ahmadi, 2012), and abortions are equivalent to mass

murder (Arsu, 2012). Erdoğan has said that in hindsight Turkey should have re-criminalized adultery and extra-marital sex in 2004, regardless of the EU application (Smith, 2018).

The Turkish Discourse of Virginity

Against this backdrop, women in Turkey navigate the discourse of virginity, regulated by religion, family honor, and women’s social respectability achieved through marriage. “In Turkey, woman’s chastity remains the most important control mechanism over female freedom,” wrote Müftüler-Baç (1999, pp. 308-309). Alemdaroğlu (2015, p. 57) writes of the “norm of chastity and its close link with the honor of the family.” Kavas and Gündüz-Hoşgör (2013, p. 59) note that across Turkish socio-economic classes, “*namus* (honor),” referring to the “chastity or sexual purity” of women remains relevant to both the status of women and mothering practices in Turkish family life.

The key to understanding virginity in Turkey is understanding that respectable women cannot be sexual outside of heterosexual marital reproduction. Ozyegin (2009, 2015) describes a continuum of virginities in contemporary Turkey. Traditionally, a virgin is a *keiz*, a “girl,” understood as desexualized, unmarried, hymen intact. “Technical virgins” are unmarried women who engage in intimate sexual relations but not intercourse. “Virginal facades” refer to unmarried women who engage in sexual relations but lie about it. Among these, unmarried women might consider themselves to be “moral virgins” rather than physical virgins because their sexual activity occurs in committed heterosexual relationships.

Virginity is mostly assumed to be moot for out lesbians who then are pathologized, regardless of where they actually fall on the continuum, unless they are deploying heterosexual facades, in which case freedom of movement will be constrained by the social rules dictated by the heteronormative discourse of virginity.

In Islam, premarital sex is forbidden for both genders; however, women bear the burden more than men. In predominantly Muslim Turkey, women live under pressure to protect their virginity and even prove it through virginity examinations, although forced virginity examinations became illegal in 1999 (Ayotte, 2000; Ergun, 2007; Parla, 2001; Sakalli-Ugurlu & Glick, 2003). Women learn to restrain and hide their sexuality (Gelbal, Duyan, & Ozturk, 2008; Sakalli-Ugurlu & Glick, 2003). Turkish women who engage in premarital sex face dire ramifications, such as alienation, exclusion, and victimization not just by society, but also by the family (Bekker *et al.*, 1996; Ergun, 2007). Families who know that their daughters are virgins support their children emotionally, but emotional support from the family can decrease when a daughter is known to have engaged in premarital sex (Yalcin, Aricioglu, & Malkoc, 2012).

Forbidding premarital sex as shameful is related to the importance of marriage in Turkish society. In Turkey, marriage is the means by which women gain social and legal status and respectability (Ergun, 2007). A woman's virginity is a prerequisite for attracting the best husband, thus securing the best possible marriage (Millar, 2008). As such a valuable resource, virginity is guarded by families, thus by daughters, even if their only access is via a facade.

While marriage is a woman's means of gaining social respect, the family enforces family honor and defines the ways women can bring shame to the family, including premarital and extramarital sex. Women's bodies are preserved, monitored, and asexualized for the honor of the family (Cindoglu, 1997; Gelbal, Duyan, & Ozturk, 2008). Damaging family honor can seriously threaten women, such as alienation from the family, loss of self-esteem, suicide, domestic violence, and murder (Ergun, 2007; Sakalli-Ugurlu & Glick, 2003). Given such pressure and danger, women comply with traditional norms to avoid risking their lives by shaming their families. This pressure in part explains Turkey's high rates of vaginismus, a sexual disorder resulting from psychological pressure to preserve one's virginity (Tugrul & Kabakci, 1997; Yasan & Akdeniz, 2009).

However, some argue that young women's perspectives on virginity are changing (Ellialti, 2008; Ozyegin, 2009, 2015; Yalcin, Aricioglu, & Malkoc, 2012). Although Turkish society still subscribes to conservative notions regarding the preeminence of the family, young women in Turkey increasingly adopt more Western lifestyles, particularly among affluent educated urban families (Yalcin, Aricioglu, & Malkoc, 2012). Agreeing with Bayat's (2010) thesis on *How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Alemdaroğlu (2015) documents young Turkish women successfully bending the rules of Turkish feminine respectability to achieve individual aims, albeit enacted differently across socioeconomic status. How Turkish women embody and resist Turkish respectability politics differs by class, achieved by but also determining level of education, access to financial resources,

community standards and levels of surveillance, and family political affiliations, etc. (Alemdaroğlu, 2015; Beşpınar 2010; Kavas & Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2013; Müftüler-Baç, 1999; Ozyegin, 2009, 2015).

Despite class and other differences, Turkish women do question oppressive norms and traditions, including religious, state, and family control of women's sexual agency and experience (Ellialti, 2008). One result is "virginal facades," women pretending to be virgins to maintain their respectability. Artificial virginity, including reconstructive surgery, is a way Turkish women choose to hide premarital sexual encounters and prevent alienation (Bekker *et al.*, 1996; Cindoglu, 1997; Ellialti, 2008; Ozyegin, 2009, 2015; Sakalli-Ugurlu & Glick, 2003). Ozyegin (2009, 2015) documents educated young women in Turkish society who believe it acceptable to engage in intimate sexual practices outside of marriage if they do so in a loving long-term relationship or with some kind of an emotional investment in the relationship. In the present study, the participant mothers echoed this sentiment. Despite changing sexual attitudes among the young women in Ozyegin's work and among the mothers of adult women in the present study, preconditions to premarital sex in Turkey persist as a woman's sexuality remains tied to having a monogamous relationship as a prelude to marriage.

Third Space Feminism and Tactical Subjectivities

Turkey and women in Turkey abide along axes transversing Europe and the Middle East, tradition and modernity, *namus* and individualism, the Muslim faith and secular women's movements, and *kiz*

and virginal facades. These apparent contradictions led us to read the Turkish participant mothers' social location through "third space feminism" (Bañuelos, 2006; Khan, 1998; Licona, 2005; Pérez, 1999; Shah & Golombisky, 2017; Villenas, 2006; Zubair & Zubair, 2017). Third space feminism provides "a mechanism for pulling into relief lived human-scale interstitial realities" (Golombisky, 2015, p. 406). Third space feminism then led us to understand the participant mothers' mobile ideas about virginity in terms of Sandoval's (1991, 2000) tactical subjectivities. Sandoval's (1991, 2000) "differential consciousness" famously described "tactical subjectivities" among U.S. women of color shifting their alliances across treacherous circumstances to achieve situational political ends. Pérez (1999, p. xvi) writes: "Sandoval theorizes that differential consciousness allows for mobility of identities between and among varying power bases... I argue that the differential mode of consciousness to which Sandoval refers is precisely third space feminist practice." Third space feminism is mostly attributed to post-colonial Chicana feminists (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012; Bañuelos, 2006; Pérez, 1999; Sandoval, 1991, 2000; Villenas, 2006). However, Muslim women's lives also have been interpreted in terms of navigating third spaces (Khan, 1998; Shah & Golombisky, 2017, Zubair & Zubair, 2017).

Anzaldúa's (1987/2012) "borderlands" refers the interstitial contexts and practices of daily existence where marginalized women might still oppose and rebel against dominant discourses of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality, and thus surreptitiously exert a measure of

independent will even as they are socially invisible, subordinate, or untouchable. Similarly, Pérez (1999) defines third spaces as obscured social locations hidden in between typical socially constructed binaries such as private–public where women quietly rebel and over time sabotage the dominant order. Pérez writes that “women as agents have always constructed their own spaces interstitially, within nationalisms, nationalisms that often miss women’s subtle interventions”; such interventions she describes as “third space feminism-in-nationalism” (p. 33). Golombisky (2015, p. 407) writes, “Third space agency communicates by way of mischievous, disobedient practices that resist, disrupt, and displace authority, history, and canon (Bañuelos, 2006; Bhabha 1990; Khan, 1998; Licona, 2005; Pérez, 1999; Villenas, 2006).” In the present case, the open-minded parenting described by the nonetheless economically secure participant mothers was employed cautiously. However, we argue, this open-mindedness does more than enable social change in the next generation; such parenting also represents social change. Mothers communicating their resistant and even subversive beliefs in relationship with their children becomes an intergenerational third space feminist pedagogy empowering their children to enact those beliefs (Villenas, 2006).

English (2005, p. 87) writes that the “third-space practitioner strategizes and shifts to meet the needs of the situation.” Sandoval’s (1991, 2000) description of tactical subjectivity helps us to interpret the participant mothers’ sometimes inconsistent ideas about virginity as pragmatic instead of unreliable. Sandoval (1991, 2000) defines differential consciousness as adaptive affiliation

deployed by U.S. women of color, marginalized by not only society but also women’s movement and Black Nationalism. Tactical subjectivity is a mode of strategically making political coalitions in order to endure in unfriendly circumstances and advance agendas. Differential consciousness and tactical subjectivity, according to Sandoval, are flexible strategies for being nimble enough to change gears across changing sociopolitical landscapes. Tactical subjectivity enacted from third spaces helps explain the ways the Turkish participant mothers negotiated their ideas about women’s equality, talked about supporting and guiding their children’s independent choices regarding premarital sex, and said they work to protect their daughters from emotional pain and social ostracism.

Participant Mothers

In July 2016, days before the attempted military coup, the first author interviewed each of seven cisgendered heterosexual Turkish secular Muslim participant mothers, ages 47-59, regarding their perceptions of the Turkish discourse of virginity. The project was IRB-approved in Turkey and the U.S. The interactive conversations were conducted in Turkish in Turkey. Members of the same social circle, the participant mothers were married, widowed, or divorced. Six of the seven participant mothers had at least one daughter. All the participants’ children are heterosexual. The participant mothers are all identified by pseudonyms:

- Berrin, 51, a retired journalist with a teenage daughter in private school
- Elif, 55, a retired banker with two adult daughters, one in graduate school

abroad and the other practicing medicine

- Pervin, 59, a retired English teacher with one daughter in graduate school abroad
- Damla, 50, an English language professor with a daughter in college
- Ceyda, 52, a public-school mathematics teacher with a daughter in medical school
- Melis, 47, high-school mathematics teacher, with a daughter and a son, both in college
- Ipek, 54, a school teacher with an adult son

Recruited as a homogenous snowball sample from the same social circle, the participant mothers shared educational, professional, and economic privilege, despite their subordinate age and gender status. Throughout the interviews, the participant mothers talked about virginity in connection with modernity in Turkey. All the participant mothers self-identified as “modern” women who subscribe to secular Kemalism, particularly on women’s issues; they all voiced concern about the increasing conservatism dominating politics and social life in Turkey. Additionally, as educators, five participant mothers offered first-person observations regarding Turkish “young circles” and youth culture. After several iterations of analysis, three themes emerged: Turkey as a country in flux, participant mothers’ hedging their positions on virginity, and wider social change regarding attitudes toward and enactments of virginity in Turkey.

Modern Women, Modern Mothers, and Caring Mothers

Threaded through our interpretation of third space feminism (Pérez, 1999), the participant mothers’ shifting positions on virginity can be understood as “tactical subjectivities” (Sandoval, 1991, 2000), which, in turn, might participate in creating the social change the participant mothers said they are witnessing. These Turkish mothers negotiated the discourse of virginity in Turkey from three different but always exclusively heterosexual subjectivities: *modern women* in the Kemalist tradition of Turkish gender equality, urbane “Western” *modern mothers* who support sexual agency for their children, and secular Muslim *caring mothers* who worry about the social consequences of their children’s premarital sex in an increasingly conservative and religious political climate. In doing so, the participant mothers portrayed the complicated structure of Turkish society when it comes to the discourse of virginity, if only in heteronormative terms. Although the participant Turkish mothers spoke from privileged economic and cisgendered heterosexual social positions and although their experiences of oppressions are different from the women Sandoval (1991, 2000) describes, the participant mothers’ interview transcripts demonstrate them describing strategies of persistence and resistance for themselves and on behalf of their children within the complex, multilayered Turkish sociopolitical system.

Modern Women

Participant mothers identified modernity in relation to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's historical efforts to modernize and Westernize Turkey and prioritize secularism. When they spoke as *modern women*, participant mothers talked about losing virginity as both a physiological state and a social taboo tied to morality and marriage. Participant mothers as *modern women* described virginity as an outdated and oppressive discourse in contemporary Turkish society. In *modern women* mode, their discussions of virginity favored women's agency and freedom to choose in matters of sexual conduct, including premarital sex and cohabitation.

Participants as *modern women* emphasized the importance of gender equality when talking about virginity. They recognized a gender double standard when it comes to virginity. They argued that although men, too, begin their sexual lives as virgins, the Turkish discourse of virginity continues to derive almost exclusively from the status of the hymen, which is oppressive for women. For example, Damla, the 50-year-old teacher with an adult daughter, began her discussion of the Turkish understanding of virginity with a nearly clinical heteronormative description of the hymen:

When I think of virginity, the first thing that comes to my mind is the hymen. Losing virginity means that penetration occurred and the hymen stretched open. It means a girl had sex. When a hymen is stretched open, it means there was a relationship, a sexual relationship with a male.

Damla, however, continued by raising questions about men's virginity:

Of course, the same applies for males too, I mean, they lose their virginity, too. If a male is a virgin, we can say that he has never had sex before.

Berrin, the 51-year-old retired journalist with a teenage daughter, also emphasized the importance of gender parity in her discussion of virginity:

If people manage to see women and men as equals, it will be easier to get rid of the idea of virginity. I mean we talk about a woman's virginity, but if we see them as equals then we need to talk about a man's virginity, too.

Speaking as *modern women*, participant mothers also disagreed with the prerequisite of marriage in a woman's sexual life. They said that marriage should not be the ultimate goal for women and that women should be free to have premarital sexual experiences if they choose. Melis, the 47-year-old teacher with a daughter and a son, talked about her experience of being a virgin when she married her husband. She said she did not have premarital sex because social norms expected her to remain chaste until she married. She said this way of thinking is damaging because women are left sexually inexperienced, which risks couples being sexually incompatible: "But this was very wrong in so many ways. A woman should get to know different men before getting married." From a *modern woman's* perspective, sex should not be tied to marriage, according to Melis.

When talking about marriage, participant mothers, including Melis, emphasized the importance of "getting to know" partners prior to marriage. In these

responses, “getting to know” was a discrete way to refer to sexual relations. Ceyda, the 52-year-old teacher with an adult daughter, said that couples should be able to live together before getting married and society should accept it. She said that marriage should not be the condition for having sex: “I didn’t have sex before getting married. I thought it wouldn’t be acceptable. Before marriage it is important that partners make sure they know each other. This is a great way to prevent marital problems.”

The way participant mothers talked about sex as a part of “getting to know” a partner shows how they employ a modern perspective to challenge marriage as a precondition for sexual intimacy or losing one’s virginity, and they even embrace the far more radical idea of a respectable woman having sexual appetites, regardless of marital status. Although participant mothers began their discussions of virginity from their personal experiences and their opinions as *modern women* who believe in gender equality, they switched to a mother’s perspective when talking about their children’s virginity. This tactical shift in subjectivity was not about enforcing a generational double standard even as they rejected gender double standards. Rather, this shift from championing gender equality to advising caution in flouting social mores reflected parental concerns for the wellbeing of their children.

Modern Mothers and Caring Mothers

Modern mother mode refers to participant mothers’ acknowledging their children’s agency and distancing themselves from their children’s sexual choices. On the other hand, *caring mother*

mode encapsulates participant mothers’ emphasis on responsibility and “making good decisions,” as well as the importance of privacy and safety in the society—all demonstrating the participant mothers’ anxiety regarding their children’s decisions. Participant mothers switched back and forth between *modern mother* mode and *caring mother* mode in conversations about their children.

As *modern mothers*, participant mothers talked about providing their children with the support systems they need to thrive in Turkey, where familial support is crucial for women to avoid alienation, exclusion, and victimization (Yalcin, Aricioglu, & Malkoc, 2012). In the present case, this was especially so when daughters lost their virginity out of wedlock. Participant mothers’ *modern* approach to supporting their children’s choices is necessary to the survival of their children in a society with conservative views regarding sexual practices. All the participant mothers said that they respected their children’s ideas about virginity and their children’s choices.

Although participant mothers deployed a *modern mothering* approach to virginity, as *caring mothers* they proposed certain conditions for sexual freedom. Such conditions were framed not as ways to limit adult children’s freedom, particularly in the case of daughters, but instead to protect them from marginalization in Turkish society. All participant mothers mentioned teaching their children to make healthy, well-informed, and careful decisions.

For example, Elif, the 55-year-old retired banker with two daughters, noted that even though she respects her daughters’ choices, it would be better for them to remain virgins until they get married. As a *modern mother*, she said, “They

can make their own decisions as adults.” But as a *caring mother*, she said: “But I would want them to be traditional. There should be [gender] equality... But if you are living in Turkey, there is no other choice. Women need to protect their virginity in order not to lose their respected status.”

Similarly, Pervin, the 59-year-old retired teacher with an adult daughter, emphasized the importance of her daughter being in a satisfying relationship with someone who respects her daughter’s choices: “I want her to make her decisions carefully. I know it’s her life. But I don’t want her to be sad later. She should be with someone who is right for her, who won’t make her upset or regret her decisions.”

Ceyda emphasized the importance of emotional involvement and respect in her daughter’s relationships. “It’s up to her,” said Ceyda, in *modern mother* mode. But Ceyda continued in *caring mother* mode: “I just want her to live her life without burning herself out. Because when you look at Turkish men, it is very hard to find someone who respects you. I don’t want her to be emotionally hurt.”

In all the interviews, participant mothers communicated their belief in the importance of respect, safety, care, and happiness in relationships, which is why they tell their daughters to “make good decisions.” During the interviews, “making good decisions” was a euphemism for being in a committed relationship before losing one’s virginity out of wedlock. “Making a good decision” reflects a respectful and caring relationship guaranteed by emotional attachment, as opposed to a casual sexual encounter. Participant mothers said when they talk with their children, they emphasize the importance of being in a committed

relationship as a condition of premarital sex to avoid the impression of promiscuity.

Participant mothers became *modern women* when talking about their personal politics on the topic of virginity, *modern mothers* when initially speaking about how they perceived their children’s independence and agency in choosing when to lose their virginity, and *caring mothers* when worrying about their children’s social acceptance and happiness in a relationship. Through shifting among these subjectivities, the participant mothers seemed to cobble together safe supportive familial relations so their children can make sense of virginity and resist the dominant ideology around it.

Changing the Discourse of Virginity

Claiming they are witnessing progressive social change regarding Turkish sexual practices, participant mothers talked about their perceptions that Turkish youth are increasingly engaging in premarital sexual experimentation. Participant mothers also discussed the existence of virginal facades. Through choosing to lose their virginity and lying about it, Turkish women as virginal facades challenge the normative understanding of virginity and the Turkish patriarchal expectation that women remain sexually chaste until the moment when heterosexual marriage is consummated.

Bhabha (1990) and Pérez (1999) draw attention to how social change emerging out of third spaces—interstitial, between, or invisible social locations or positions—can manifest subtly because such spaces are assumed to be powerless, irrelevant, or nonexistent. Although social

conservatism currently dominates Turkish politics, the participant mothers said they have seen progressive change regarding how virginity is perceived, talked about, practiced, and embodied. All the participant mothers said losing virginity outside of marriage remains a Turkish social taboo that limits women's sexuality. However, participant mothers also said that some women simply lie about their virginity to be respected in the society and that young people do not think virginity plays an important role in their happiness. Consequently, according to the participant mothers, attitudes toward virginity are slowly changing in some social circles, even though this change is not obvious or openly acknowledged in the society. This cautious optimism must be tempered with a reminder that most of the participant mothers have or had careers as teachers in Western Turkish cities, giving them first-hand yet limited experience observing social transformation among urban Turkish "young circles."

Some participant mothers cited the existence of virginal facades as evidence of contemporary change in the Turkish discourse of virginity. Although virginal facades do not openly contest an asymmetrically gendered sexual contract in Turkey, by losing their virginity before marriage and lying about it, virginal facades do subvert the contract and enact social change. Another interpretation, however, might argue that women do not "choose" to pretend to be virgins in order to be subversive; women are forced to pretend given the high probability of harsh social penalties for openly defying social expectations. Moreover, the existence of virginal facades, as well as the rise of hymen reconstructive surgery in Turkey, not only proves that virginity remains important in

Turkish society, but also perpetuates the repressive discourse of virginity in Turkey. But the participant mothers did cast virginal facades as agents of change. Ozyegin (2009, 2015) also argued that the young virginal facades in her study reflect a changing society among college-educated women in Turkey, which she attributes in part to their education.

In the present study, participant mothers identified morality and respectability as the reasons why Turkish women employ "virginal facades." Participant mothers disagreed with conventional wisdom that Turkish women only gain respect by being either married or a virgin. One of the teacher participants, Melis argued that women lie about virginity because losing virginity is socially unacceptable:

They say virginity is morally right, but actually it's not what they think. Not many people are virgins. In Turkey, people have two masks. People don't show who they really are or say what they actually think. They choose to pretend like they are virgins.

Elif, the retired banker, shared this view. She said that "virginal facades are necessary and not rare." Elif articulated the pressure that respectability exerts on Turkish women. She argued that Turkish women, in the name of respectability, have no choice but either to sacrifice their sexual freedom or to lie about their virginity. She said: "Being a virgin also provides respectability for a woman. Women choose to be dishonest to be freer and more comfortable in the society."

As a successful pretense to complying with social norms, virginal facades can be understood as "doubling" from within third spaces (Pérez, 1999). Acts of doubling "seem to mimic the social

order's rules while changing them" (Shah & Golombisky, 2017, p. 17); "those without social status or power perform social change right under the noses of the dominant, privileged, and/or oppressive groups in power" (pp. 5-6). Even though unmarried non-virgins do not openly admit they have broken a taboo, they indeed got away with it. Getting away with it repeatedly over time eventually effects change (Bhabha, 1990; Pérez, 1999).

Participant mothers also emphasized how young people, or "young circles" in the literal translation from Turkish, increasingly do not give credence to virginity. This argument by the participant mothers serves as another indicator of social change already occurring in Western urban Turkish society. A 55-year-old high school English teacher with an adult son, Ipek said: "I look around, and I see that virginity is not important anymore. Teenagers can think more critically and reject oppressive limitations."

Participant mothers said that Turkish youth do not consider virginity important to their happiness. Participant mothers shared their belief that young people resist the discourse of virginity through sexual experimentation and by losing their virginity at an earlier age and before marriage. However, the "young circles" and Turkish youth that the participant mothers refer to likely share the same urban social status as the participant mothers who speak from privileged educational, professional, and economic positionalities. The participant mothers' generalizations about contemporary Turkish youth, then, likely come from and are limited to the participant mothers observing their own children's "young circles" as well as, in the case of the five participant teachers, students in their

schools. Compared to young people living in more conservative rural and especially Eastern regions of Turkey, the more European and cosmopolitan Turkish youth might not feel the same extended family and community pressures in their lives and so enjoy more freedom. In the opinions of the participant mothers, however, in their *modern women* mode, virginity is not valued among urban "young circles" and young people are subverting the discourse of virginity in Turkish society by viewing it as irrelevant to their lives. We argue this change the participant mothers observe is made possible by people such as the participant mothers, who resist the discourse of virginity and respect their children's agency.

Conclusion

When talking about virginity in Turkey, the participant mothers spoke from three subjectivities, which we have described in terms of Sandoval's (1991, 2000) shifting tactical subjectivities. Participant mothers as *modern women* argued for gender equality in human sexuality. But, as *modern mothers*, they also emphasized their preference for committed long-term relationships as a condition for their children's premarital sex. Positioned between resisting compulsory virginity and protecting their children, participants in *caring mother* mode hedged their bets by urging caution with regard to practicing sexual freedom. While shifting among these subjectivities, the participant mothers also described Turkish "young circles" who do not revere virginity as in the past. Although these "young circles" referred to economically comfortable urban youth in Western(ized) Turkey, the participant

mothers' observations still reflect some measure of social change in Turkey. We argue that by respecting their heterosexual children's sexual agency, participant mothers, also heterosexual, offer a safe space where their children can choose to challenge the Turkish discourse of virginity. Thus, by encouraging and enabling their children to break from strict social mores on premarital sexuality, the participant mothers are participating in the social change they say they are witnessing.

Interpreted through Pérez's (1999) third space feminism, the participant mothers can be understood as deploying resistant tactics that discreetly subvert Turkey's "politics of the intimate" (Acar & Altunok, 2013) that oppresses women by defining them in terms of "reproductive citizenship" (Unal & Cindoglu, 2013). If the discourse of virginity in Turkey represents an either/or binary—virginal/pure or non-virgin/sullied—then participant mothers reveal different attitudes about virginity that, like virginal facades, need not be either repressive or promiscuous. Berrin, the retired journalist with a teenage daughter, exemplified these shifting tactical subjectivities. Like the other participant mothers, Berrin described navigating contradictory social locations as a well-educated secular Muslim career woman who said she wants the best for her child living in a conservative national political climate. As a *modern woman*, Berrin argued that women "should be free to have sex" before marriage, and in the *modern mother* mode, she said that she wants her daughter to "have choices" about premarital sex. But, in the *caring mother* mode, Berrin hoped her daughter tempers her choices by "making good decisions" to avoid being ostracized by good society.

By bringing the participant mothers' perspectives on virginity into the literature on Turkish "intimate citizenship" (Unal & Cindoglu, 2013), the present work also brings together wider public negotiations of virginity, which situate it as women's most valuable trait, and Turkish women's personal perceptions of virginity, which propose a more liberated understanding of women's sexuality. But we recognize the limitations of documenting one privileged social circle. We also recognize that the presumption of heterosexuality was central to participant mothers' views. Their definitions of virginity focused on vaginal penetration during sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. Mirroring the heterosexism of the Turkish discourse of virginity, the participant mothers' heteronormative understanding of virginity does not account for other sexualities, sexual practices outside of heterosexual intercourse, definitions of virginity not tied to the hymen or gender, or even unanticipated but common ways to rupture the hymen outside of sexual activity. More important, the Turkish discourse of virginity reflects an oppressively heteronormative worldview that is as homophobic as it is sexist. Accordingly, the progressive change in the matter of Turkish sexual citizenship reported by the participant mothers does not extend to individuals who are not heterosexual or cisgender.

Beşpınar (2010) documented shifting employment tactics and strategies differing by class among Turkish women as "clandestine acts used to gain maneuverability" (p. 529). Beşpınar, however, argued that such "'tactics' emerging from limited possibilities...are far from creating new gender-egalitarian rules or empowering women collectively" (pp.

530-531). Ours and hers are different studies, but we take Beşpınar's point seriously, that working around the system does not substantially inconvenience the system and even can be interpreted to validate it. Ozyegin (2009, p. 120) says much the same thing, that transgressing social boundaries by deploying virginal facades "ultimately reinforces the valuation of virginity." Furthermore, we note, individual women coming up with individual solutions does lay responsibility for change on disempowered individuals and minimizes the possibility of organized political and social action that enlists women to work together to intervene across their differences of race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, generation, education, class, marital status, etc., which is Sandoval's (1991, 2000) point. However, we plead a more optimistic view of "clandestine acts used to gain maneuverability": Women who serve their own purposes by appearing to follow the rules as they get around such rules *are* enacting change. This is Pérez's (1999, p. 33) "doubling," a "performative act" of "subtle interventions." She writes, "Where women are conceptualized as merely a backdrop to men's social and political activities, they are in fact intervening interstitially" (p. 7).

One also might argue that positive change depends on many individuals' acts of resistance, such as the participant mothers who support sexual freedom for their children, particularly their daughters. We suggest that the participant mothers are describing strategic familial pedagogies. Villenas (2006, p. 157) writes, "So look closely because somewhere in the dark shadows of a women's *sufrimientos* [suffering] we might find, as Collins (1999) emphasizes, a mother's immense capacity

to dream and prepare us for lives she could not imagine." (p. 157). Following Collins and Villenas, we see the pedagogical parenting practices of the participant mothers as forms of resistance that supplant the dominant discourse of virginity. Although not enough on their own to transform oppressive gender and sexual norms, the persistence of people such as the participant mothers can become anchoring points from which to organize social change and create a more liberating discourse about sexuality in Turkey. In this sense, then, the participant mothers might be imagined as building bridges out of third space shadows into a quiet transformation.■

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