Fast Fashion in the Peripheries of the City: Displaced Women's Labor in Istanbul's Garment Industry

By

Şeyma Yetkin

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Supervisor: Prem Kumar Rajaram

Second reader: Dorit Geva

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Abstract

This thesis sheds light on the precarious lives of female garment workers in a suburb in Istanbul (Kanarya) inhabited by local Kurdish migrants and Syrian Kurdish refugees. By conducting an ethnographic fieldwork in the neighborhood, I situate a gender-focused analysis within the intertwined dynamics of migration and capitalism. The spatial analysis of Kanarya (as a source of cheap and disposable labor for fast fashion supply chains) indicates how the politics of othering mediates neoliberal restructuring of the urban space. In the 1990s, when informal garment workshops were established by Kurdish families in the neighborhood, women participated in the labor force as an exception for the survival of the family. While the perception of exception remains, Kurdish women have filled the workshops since then, together with Syrian women who have arrived in recent years. In this study, I analyze the social space of the workshops embedded in male-dominant relations and investigate the macro and micro dynamics that led to and maintain the feminization of the garment work in Kanarya and therefore *super-exploitation* of women labor.

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Introduction

> "We came to Istanbul in the 1990s from the east. What is the most unqualified job? Textile. You could immediately start from scratch in textile, so we did. For years we worked day and night, we learned how to use all the sewing machines. Then we thought why don't we start our own workshop? That time in Kanarya, all Kurdish families started to do their own business this way. They've already guaranteed 10 workers from the family. It was very easy to set up a workshop. Some could hold down the job, some could not." Hamdiye

Kanarya is one of the peripheral neighborhoods in Istanbul populated mostly by Kurds who moved to the metropolis in the 1990s when the Turkish state initiated military evacuations and intensified armed conflict in Kurdish villages. With the help of their relatives or someone from their hometown, displaced families (mainly from Mardin and Bitlis) settled in Kanarya and soon established small-scale garment workshops to earn a living. For this, household members would move to the workshops, including children over 8. Only the mother or grandmother would remain at home, cooking for the rest. This was how most of the Kurdish migrants initially made a place in the metropolis while becoming a source of disposable labor occupying the underbelly of the global fast fashion industry. Since 2011, Kanarya has also been one of the major settlements for Syrian refugees in Istanbul, especially for Syrian Kurds from Qamislo, Kobane, and Afrin. They were able to participate directly in the labor force, primarily in the workshops owned by previously settled Kurdish migrants, as most of the garment workshops are informally established. The participation of Syrians has added another layer to the social dynamics of the neighborhood within which asymmetrical power relations are mobilized in the fight for bread.

These small-scale (mostly between 5-30 workers)[1] family-owned garment workshops are established in the cellars and basements of local buildings. Without signboards on the walls

[1] There are few bigger workshops with up to 100 workers in the neighborhood but most of the workshops stay under 50 workers – after 50, workshops become subject to the supervision from the state

saying “Urgent! Overlock/Singer workers wanted” or loud arabesque music coming from the basements, they would be almost invisible in the neighborhood. Women from local Kurdish and Syrian families are sweating in these workshops or doing piece-work from their homes. The piles of clothes are all around in the neighborhood. While I was at the to the homes of my informants, it was commonplace that 100 pieces of H&M t-shirts would be in the kitchen to be handled by the mother, with another 200 pieces in the living room processed during the interview. Seeing these women who rarely go to the even the center of the city they live in and constantly circulating clothes labeled with some European brands was what induced me to write this thesis. I try to understand the so called “global village” of our times within which borders disappear for the capital while as a necessary result of this, entrenched and proliferated for some people in various ways. (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013)

Within the scope of this research, I focus on Kurdish and Syrian female workers and aim to analyze the macro and micro dynamics that produce women’s precarious lives in this suburb. What are the broader dynamics of migration and capitalism and how do these two intertwine? (Rajaram 2018) What are the common grounds Syrian and Kurdish people share; how do they align “between inclusion and exclusion” in Turkey? (Mezzadra and Neilson 2012) How do we understand complicated networking relations among the urban poor in Istanbul? How does the logic of “supply chaincapitalism” (Tsing 2009) mobilize the internal hierarchies within the neighborhood? Considering strong patriarchal family structures of two communities and male-dominant social relations in the neighborhood, how can we make sense of women’s participation in the labor force? (Ong 1987; Mies 1986; Fernandez-Kelly 1983)

In order to address these questions, I conducted 2.5 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the neighborhood. My aim was to gather information about the place, the social and economic relations, and the capitalist structure in the garment workshops. In fact, I have been familiar with the neighborhood since I moved to Istanbul in 2007 through my extended relatives living

there. I visited them several times, on Sundays as this is the only non-working day for most of the people in the neighborhood, however I did not have much chance to spend time there outside of these short visits until conducting a fieldwork, which is why my cousin told me "at least we could finally hang out thanks to this *thingy*! (refers to my research)" Together, we attended weddings or tea parties organized by women in their houses that allowed me to have casual talks with them and thus arrange interviews.

Apart from these 'unstructured' talks, I did semi-structured interviews (15) with both local Kurdish and Syrian women held in Kurdish and Turkish languages. My semi-structured interviews mostly took place in the houses or in the clothing shops of my female cousins. With those who were no longer working or laboring from their home, arranging the interviews was relatively convenient. On the other hand, with the women who were laboring in the workshops 6 days of the week from 7 am to 7 pm, I only had a chance to conduct interviews on Sundays in-between household chores. Among the extended family members, it was difficult to arrange one-to-one interviews. Also, I got refusals from some of Syrian women and had to convince the others about the "safety" of my work until they agreed do an interview with me. For some, the feeling of insecurity was immanent in every sphere of life.

During my fieldwork, I was able to enter many workshops with the help of my female and male cousins. Otherwise, this would be hardly possible for me as an outsider due to the suspicions the workshop owners around external contact with their informal business. At the beginning they approached me cautiously until my cousins and I assured them that it will bring no harm for them. I talked with the bosses and conducted semi-structured interviews with some of them to understand the nature of the boss-worker relationship better and to collect information about the supply chains. To that end, I also spoke to the local mediators –called as *fasoncu*- who brings orders from the main subcontractor firms to the workshops. Lastly, I had

an interview with the founder of Clean Clothes Campaign[2] in Turkey who was also previously a denim sandblasting laborer.

Overall, this thesis is an endeavor to make sense of the scenes I have observed and the stories I listened throughout my fieldwork. In order to achieve this, I consider my ethnographic data within the larger dynamics of capitalism throughout this study in order to understand the macro and micro dynamics at work in the field, which in turn, I believe, helps us also to understand these dynamics better. A study of this scope naturally must recognize its own limitations and the need for additional study. Further work such as conducting a "multi-sided ethnography" supported with a survey research could shed additional light on the interconnectedness of these macro and micro dynamics.

In the following chapter, I start with giving a background to my reader and analyzing the common grounds shared by two communities. First, the spatial analysis of the neighborhood aims to demonstrate how politics of othering reflects itself in the particular conditions of Istanbul and mediates neoliberal restructuring of the urban space. The analysis will emphasize the *strategies* of political and social exclusion countered by the place-making *tactics* of the marginalized communities and how these two constitute the particular formation of the urban setting and spatial divisions in the metropolis. Throughout this work, I use 'Kurds and Syrians' by intention, even though my Syrian informants in Kanarya are also ethnically Kurdish. This distinction is central to my analysis, as the othering of internally displaced Kurds has operated through the producion of Kurdish-ness, while Syrians, regardless of their ethnicity (Arabs/Kurds), are marginalized because of their Syrian-ness/refugee-ness. Maintaining these categories in my descriptions will allow for an analytical treatment of their social purpose as categories.

[2] https://cleanclothes.org/about/who-we-are

Chapter I

1. Those who do not belong

Both local Kurdish migrants and Syrian refugees arrived in Istanbul as displaced communities, marginalized through various discourses in different times. They are, hence, asymmetrically situated among those 'who do not belong' to the city and to the nation. In Turkish legal terms, local Kurds have citizenship status while Syrians are not even recognized as refugees; yet in the daily life of Kanarya, legal divisions are quite fluid among those who spend at least 12 hours together on the workshop floor. In this sense, I consider Kanarya to be a neighborhood where state-making practices of "differential inclusion" (2012) are spatialized. Mezzadra and Nielson's notion of differential inclusion refers to the blurred boundaries between inclusion and exclusion within the nation states. Their topological approach to the borders and Badiou's famous "there is an excess of inclusion over belonging" (Badiou cited in Mezzadra and Neilson 2012:62) contain two implications. They suggest that first, borders should not be perceived as walls to be passed geographically; borders are instead social institutions that can selectively proliferate in various ways within the territories of the nation-state, keeping some in limbo. Second, citizenship is not a legal status shared equally by everyone who holds that status and having legal rights does not automatically bring access to those rights.

In Turkey, Kurds and Syrians are (differently) situated within the excess Badiou formulates. The othering of Kurdish identity throughout the political history of the republic put Kurds at the bottom of society with regards to citizenship. While it is beyond the limits of this study to elaborate on the changing state discourses over the so-called 'Kurdish issue' in Turkey, it is important to note that "Kurds" have hardly been portrayed as proper citizens in the nation-state discourse. According to Mesut Yeğen (2009), the policies of citizenship have changed

throughout the republic from seeing Kurds as "prospective Turks" (nonrecognition + assimilation) to "pseudo-citizens" (recognition + discrimination). In the meantime, Kurdish cities located in the southeast of the country have mostly been governed under martial laws and state of emergency (Gambetti and Jongerden 2015: 3), especially when the conflict between PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party) and Turkish Armed Forces intensify.

In the 1990s, the spatial effect of state-making discourses manifested in the western cities when over 3 million Kurds were displaced either through military evacuations of their villages or for various social, political, economic reasons stemming from the ongoing war in the Kurdish region. Since this internal migration, Istanbul has had the largest Kurdish population in the world. With two-thirds of the population characterized as the urban working class, they largely resided in the peripheral zones of the city. Deterritorialized and empty-handed, most of them had to start from scratch, as did the family of Hamdiye (quoted above) living in Kanarya.

Prem Kumar Rajaram (2018) explains capitalist value regimes as "value systems that mediate capitalist modes of production."(628) My analysis draws on his arguments: "capitalism is not, of course, a simple mode of economic exchange: its relations of exchange are mediated by social values and hierarchies, leading to the marginalization of some as 'surplus' populations who have difficulty valorizing their labor."(ibid) The social values attached to Kurdish migrants in Istanbul rendered their subjectivities ignorant and threatening in the city; they were stigmatized with the pejorative labels or associated with terrorism. First, due to the social labels attached to their bodies, they could hardly transform their body power into valuable labor, that is, their labor is cheapened. At this point, the mere economic logic of the capital, in fact, would make use of the cheapened labor, yet, the extraction of cheap labor rather made possible through the spatial division. Most of the Kurds who are deprived of economic and cultural capital to invest in, could hardly find a place with their cheapened labor in the city center, because, as

Gambetti and Jongerden (2015:12-13) argue, their inferiority was not drawn as "rural, disadvantaged other" who might be included through time. They were instead "culturally inferior other" or "threatening other" who are recognized to be kept out from the western urban space as it was enough to talk in Kurdish to create a tension in the public sphere. All these dynamics ultimately put the pressure on Kurdish migrants. Thus, they chose rather moving to the peripheries of Istanbul to make a place.

In his article, Cenk Saracoglu (2009) argues how anti-Kurdish sentiment in western cities does not derive only from the ideology imposed by the state. He says 'what it meant to be Kurdish' is also constructed within the everyday life encounters in the urban spaces and developed through these superficial interactions. In the 1990s, what Ghassan Hage (2016) discusses as the discourse of the 'siege' was voiced by the 'decent urbanites' in Istanbul as 'Kurdish invasion'. (Bora, cited in Saracoglu 2009: 641) Nowadays, this discourse continues to operate in a similar but more intensified way for Syrians as the sentiment of being surrounded by 'backward people' arises again, this time, in reference to refugees.

2. Syrians in Istanbul: Cheap labor redefined

Since 2011 more than 3.6 million Syrian people have been registered in Turkey according to the latest report of Turkish Immigration Authority (GOC). Together with an estimated two more million unregistered ones, Syrians are seen as an "anomaly in the life of an otherwise whole, stable sedentary society." (Malkki 1995:508) The very identity of Syrian refugees has been fetishized and stigmatized producing the view of a "homogenous population" that needs to be kept distinct from the rest of society. (ibid) The portrayal of Syrians throughout the country is either criminalized or victimized (mostly from a gendered perspective, i.e. male refugees are criminalized while women are victimized) on the streets, on the traditional and social media and in political speeches.

Turkish state's open-door policy toward Syrians seems 'generous'. Current AKP government's political discourses favor refugees on the surface, as the leader Erdogan is performing a 'savior role' for the 'Muslim world'. (Memisoglu and Ilgit 2017:327) However, from being guest to temporarily protected subjects, ambiguity in Syrians' legal status is still ongoing and producing 'hyper-precarious' lives. (Lewis et al. 2014) Until 2016, there was no regulation regarding Syrians' right to work. In January 2016, a regulation for temporarily protected subjects has been issued. However, this legal adjustment did not change much the conditions for them due to the unrealistic requirements and cumbersome process of application. Their deprivation of legal rights together with the stigmatized image of Syrian-ness hierarchized them further below in the 'capitalist value regimes'. They become those who have no other choice than to accept the given wage. In this way, the meaning of cheap labor which mediates the social relations of production has been redefined and transferred to a large extent from Kurdish migrants to Syrian refugees.

It has been assumed that spatial division is an automatic result of political and social exclusion. I argue this approach fails to see place-making tactics of the marginalized communities in the urban space. Drawing from extensive ethnographic work in a peripheral neighborhood in Istanbul, Isik and Pinarcioglu (2001) state that having a divided zone enables subaltern communities to create coping mechanisms in the city, especially for those who do not have previous experiences of urban life. In my case, both internal migrants and refugees moved to Kanarya since they have relatives or people from their town to build a support mechanism when they enter capitalist production sites in the urban setting. [3] They are subjects insisting on their fight with the help of kinship networks and earning their bread through their participation in the informal economy in these slums. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize that moving to

[3] For Kurds, there are political motivations as well

these ‘anti-cities’ has been an “autonomous”[4] decision both for Kurdish migrants and Syrian refugees which demonstrates how strategies of socio-political exclusion and place-making tactics of subaltern intertwine and reproduce spatial divisions in the metropolis.

3. *New* Global Order and Neoliberal Turkey

For David Harvey (2006), neoliberalism was a “creative destruction”: it was a political project of the hegemonic ruling class to counter political and economic threats occurring towards the end of the 1960s and intensifying in the 1970s. New political economic arrangements have proven themselves successful in the 1990s and became hegemonic through the Washington Consensus and the establishment of the World Trade Organization. (Ibid p.32)

Turkey, within its particular dynamics, has been integrated into the global neoliberalism in the 1980s. There was a need to restructure the import-substitution-based economy as the country was going through a growing balance-of-payments deficits and a severe economic crisis at the end of the 1970s. (Isik and Pinarcioglu 2001:65)[5] In 1980, the country experienced the most brutal and devastating coup d’état of its political history. Senses (2012) argues that the external support received from the Internation Monetary Fund (IMF) during that time was highly effective on restructuring the direction of the country toward the global neoliberalism. He says:

> “While the IMF was dominant in the design of the short term stabilization aspects of the program, the World Bank played a much more crucial role in the medium and long-term transformation of the economy through its structural adjustment policies, involving the cancellation of industrial projects, the liberalization of foreign trade and of the domestic financial sector, and the subsequent extensive privatization of state-owned economic enterprises. Turkey was one of the first testing grounds for the joint World Bank-IMF approach which later came to be known as the Washington Consensus.” (Ibid:13)

[4] See also “Autonomy of Migration” approach
[5] Translation is mine

On the other hand, the legacies of the 1982 constitution brought by the military regime and violent suppression of the left-wing political activities have largely eliminated the obstacles for a smooth operation of neoliberal policies. (Bugra and Savaskan 2014:40) The country's organized labor movement has been restrained by closing DISK (Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey) and imprisoning its leaders (1); introducing a new labor union legislation to limit the power of the labor unions (2); and enabling expanded subcontracting practices through legal changes. (3) (Ibid:50).[6] The other destructive effect of deregulations was a tremendous de-peasantization which has led people to move to the urban centers. Bugra and Savaskan state that between 1980 and 2012, the share of agriculture in total employment declined from 50.6% to 24.6% due to the elimination of the most agricultural subsidies and barriers against agricultural imports while the manufacturing sector grew, constituting more than 90 percent of exports. (Ibid: 50)

"Disinvestment by states in urban economies" (Caglar and Schiller 2009) together with the growing social and political barriers for the laborers were cornerstones of neoliberal policies, which invited foreign capital to invest in the country. As Eder and Oz states, "trade liberalization started in the 1980s and rather premature financial liberalization in 1990s" (Eder and Oz 2010:89) enabled foreign capital to easily enter into the Turkish market. For the fast fashion industry, the geographical expansion of capitalist activity to Turkey was a spatial fix (Harvey) to relieve two main desires of the capital: short and flexible production cycles for quick response to the demands of the consumers (1); cheap and disposable labor for hyper profit. (2) According to the data provided by United Nations Comtrade, in 2006, Turkey was

[6] Bugra and Savaskan indicate that "Despite the important decline in the share of agriculture in total employment, informal employment remained over 40 percent in the 2000s."

the world's third largest net exporter of textiles following China and Italy and the third net exporter of clothing following China and Bangladesh. (Tokatli et al. 2010: 1203) [7]

> "Turkey's proximity to Europe makes the country more important than China and Bangladesh for the fast fashion industry. When they give us an order we are able to produce and deliver it in 15 days while it takes 3 months for China." Abdülhalim (founder of Clean Clothes Campaign Turkey, previously a denim sandblasting laborer)

The fast fashion trend in the apparel industry has emerged with the aim of 'bringing fashion from the catwalk to the streets'; its target customers are the middle, lower-middle class fashionistas who wish to have the luxury of wearing cheaper alternatives of catwalk pieces. As my informant Abdülhalim states, this new business model requires short production cycles in small batches with a greater variety to induce the consumers to buy more and respond to their demands accordingly. As it can be observed in any Zara or H&M store, fashion collections are not limited to the autumn/winter or spring/summer seasons anymore; shop windows are changing in less than a month with the new collections. According to data provided by *The Economist*, in 2017, Zara supplied more than 20 new collections and H&M managed up to 16.[8] This was made possible through the *flexible* subcontractors.

[7] According to Clean Clothes Campaign the slogan "Cheaper than China" was deployed in south-east of the country.

[8] https://www.economist.com/business/2017/04/08/looking-good-can-be-extremely-bad-for-the-planet

Fig.1: A workshop in Kanarya producing for fast fashion brands including Zara

Chapter II

In the previous section, I explained the fatal alliance of the state and capital. This made the fast fashion supply chains to enter Kanarya for outsourcing. In the following chapter, I analyze the social and economic relations of the neighborhood within which internal hierarchies exist on multiple bases. This analysis will emphasize the way marginalized communities respond to the constant pressures produced in the urban setting. The focal point of the analysis will be on how the struggle for reterritorialization in the city engenders a dynamic social mechanism that mobilizes asymmetrical power relations within the community to cope with the precarity. Second, centered around the informal garment industry, the social formation of Kanarya and its multilayered analysis will try to demonstrate how capitalist rationale has been grounded in peculiar ways in each empirical context and what it might say about capitalism. First, I write about the initial phase, that is, the establishment of the garment workshops in the neighborhood and the proliferation of sub-contracting entrepreneurship practices among local Kurdish migrants in 1990s.

1. Sub-contracting entrepreneurship among local Kurdish families in 1990s

In his book States and Strangers, Nevzat Soguk (1999:5) invites us into the richer world of migrants to see, in addition to their vulnerability and deprivation, their power and resourcefulness for remaking their lives in unfamiliar places. Following this approach, I regard informal sub-contracting practices of local Kurdish migrants as a resourceful response to the neglect of the state. While there is an absence of the vertical regulatory hand of the state on individuals in the informal industry, Kurdish migrants in Kanarya, horizontally formed their own social mechanism to be able to engage with the market as a community. This social mechanism is based on asymmetrical power relations among the members and operates through the interwoven practices of solidarity, dependency, reciprocity as well as competition and

exploitation. This argument is drawn from my ethnographic work and will be concretized throughout the chapter by illustrative examples from the field. [9] [10]

Kinship-based networking constitutes the kernel of the social mechanism as all my informants – both from local Kurds and refugees – stated they came to Kanarya thanks to the previously settled relatives in the neighborhood. Later, networking expands through the practices of reciprocal solidarity that can be characterized by "today is your turn, tomorrow is mine" mentality. This mindset appears in the various details of everyday life, e.g., when they attend a wedding or share the orders with another garment workshop. Since this neighborhood is the place for those who are consigned to oblivion, there is a high level of dependency among the individuals, which is quite decisive in its ability to shape the social and economic relations in the neighborhood. Therefore, enlarging the existing familial network is crucial to distribute this dependency and, hence, to increase the resilience in the fight for bread.

Inasmuch as coping tactics are household-based, the core analytical unit of the social organization in Kanarya is family. If A does a favor to B, this favor, in fact, is perceived as from A's family to B's. This is because the "we-group" (Elwert 1997) identities are formed through the extended family web in the neighborhood to compete in the market and is also a key to understand the organization of labor in the garment workshops. Belonging to a 'we-group', individuals' acts and choices become bounded within paternalistically determined tactics of the family. Women's participation in the textile labor in their early ages has been the principal familial tactic initiated in the times of crisis, both for Kurdish IDPs and latecomer Syrian Kurdish refugees. Since migrant families are large enough and, in many cases,, they live with the extended members, women's participation in remunerated labor became easier, i.e.,

[9] During my fieldwork and while making this argument, I benefited from the extensive study of Isik and Pinarcioglu (2001) covering substantial insights about the strategies of urban poor living in the slums of Istanbul.
[10] See also Gulay Kilicaslan's (2016) findings in her article "*Forced Migration, citizenship, and space: the case of Syrian Kurdish refugees in Istanbul"* on the interactions between Kurdish IDPs and Syrian Kurdish refugees within which social dynamics based on solidarity networks and economic exploitation emerge.

except for one woman staying at home to cook for the rest, other female members could join the outside occupations.

In the narratives of local Kurds, the first few years after the arrival are spent by learning the job and how to conduct in the market via laboring in the workshops preferably owned by the relatives or acquaintances. As most of them were previously peasant farmers, entering into wage labor started under compulsion when they arrived in the city with an empty-hand. Through time, these families tried to turn the compulsion into an opportunity by collecting the wages of the family members year by year to establish their own garment workshop. The aim was to make some *more* money for possible upward mobility; after all, "it was very easy" to open an (unregistered) garment workshop as my informant Hamdiye stated. It was enough to have 100,000 Turkish lira[11] to start the business: "Two overlock machines, a covering stitch and a Singer in a 9-10 square meter room,[12]" she was saying. "This was how we started".

> "We rented a place, bought the machines; my mum was bringing food and water to the workshop. Then we told our friends, relatives or people we knew in the firms to receive some orders. We had an acquaintance who was a buttonhole maker; he brought the first order for us from the firm he was working for. Then one of our fellow countrymen Alaaddin *abi*[13] found some other boutique firms; we worked hard for them, too. When my brother came from the military service we had worked for two more years like that. Then he wanted to expand the business; he hired some workers from the neighborhood." Hamdiye

Through transferring the whole household members to the basements, family-owned workshops came to be installed in the neighborhood. While the gendered division of labor scattered homes, it was re-constituted in the workshops. The labor segments which require mobility and profit calculation have always been reserved for men. For instance, in Nursel's family, even though elder sisters knew the job better, a much younger brother became the boss.

[11] Equals to 16-17 thousand US Dollar.
[12] A sewing machine is called by its brand – *Singer*.
[13] *Abi* means elder brother in Turkish.

Thus, the competition is generated between male workshop owners since those who could supply the cheapest labor for the firms were receiving the orders.

Initially, what made the establishment of the family-owned sweatshops possible was the peculiar articulation of non-capitalist logic of laboring with the capitalist mode of production. The rural logic of seeing children as an economic value to their parents and sending them to the farms for food supply transformed as sending them to the workshops in the new urban setting, yet the crucial difference is the workshops produce surplus value which is absorbed partly by the father or a respected male member in the family but mainly by the top of the supply chain. On the other side, what tied family members to labor in the family-owned workshops stemmed from knowing oneself *only* as a part of a 'we-group' within which self exists for the 'we' so much so that it can get wasted for this sake. Children, especially girls, leave the school in their early ages sacrificing the other possible ways of living by entering into the sweatshops since this is perceived as the only way for contributing to the familial upward mobility. As it has been stated by Isik and Pınarcioglu (2001:35), buying a house in the neighborhood is perceived as the first step for social climbing among the low-income families living in the slums of Istanbul and this argument is valid for Kanarya inhabitants too, as many of them mentioned their housing credit debts.

> "I was 10 years old. You know there was a lot of violence going on in Sırnak in the 1990s. My family sent me to Istanbul to stay with my auntie in Kanarya. I started to work in the garment workshops. Nobody told me to go to school at that time. I did not know. If I had gone I would have been be very successful. You know, I am very good at math. My auntie says my family entrusted her to protect me, so she could not send me to school. Anyway, I didn't know but she collected the money I earned for a year, to rent a flat to bring my family to Istanbul. So they came, too. We worked all together for 2-3 years before we bought a house. It has been 18 years that I am working to pay the credit debts" Seda

By working day and night, small-scale family workshops later started to get larger, enabling them to hire external workers. Subcontracting-entrepreneurship proliferated when people see that the "bosses are earning more" which eventually increased the competition between those

entrepreneurs, who need to produce more and more surplus value to stay in the game. This is how capitalist relations of production came to be installed *from below* in this space. What connects this picture with the understanding of capitalism *from above* comes to light in the way hegemonic value regimes were internalized by subalterns. "Capitalist value regimes" rendering them as worthless are internalized by those at the margins in a way their bodies and selves become worthless also in their own eyes so that it can be used until it gets wasted, especially if there is a possibility for upward mobility. A specific way of *knowing oneself ties subjectivities to labor* (Rajaram 2018:634) and through time this *tie* gets stronger as the bodies and the minds of the people are spent by toiling in the sweatshops so much so that any other capacity to do something else is almost lost. That is how I make sense of my informants' questions: "But why do you research us?" Many of them told me their lives in Kanarya are not worth researching because the only thing they can do is go to the workshops and come back home.

Internalization of worthlessness (of their body and selves) by the laborers came out in various ways during the fieldwork. For example, I was told many times that even though some workshop owners offer social insurance to some of their workers, workers prefer not to have the insurance but to have its monthly payment in their pocket, which apparently makes them feel safer. This plays into the hands of bosses as well since they become exempt from the legal responsibilities like paying taxes; hence staying informal seems like a win-win solution for both sides. However, informality also paves the way for highly precarious work conditions causing several occupational accidents or illnesses. In the narratives of laborers, the way they frame the problem has implications related to knowing oneself: "I was weak I was fainting all the time". I have heard similar statements in which the problems are attributed to oneself instead of the causing conditions. By saying this, I do not draw laborers as unconscious of the heavy workload they are toiling in. For sure they are. What I try to point out here is since laboring in the garment workshops is perceived as almost the only option to value their labor especially for women, the

work conditions are pretty naturalized. Thus, the worth given to her body and self within these work conditions is internalized by her to a large extent. For example, Seda, who is having allergic asthma from the dust of the clothes in the workplace was telling me what a good person her boss was that he did not dismiss her from the employment even though she was being hospitalized time to time. "I was a skilled laborer. I was a safe pair of hands for him," she said while being grateful that, in return, he could bear with her illnesses, so she didn't move anywhere else for 18 years. This is only one instance from my case that demonstrates how disvaluing systems of power obscure the exploitation of the body power through producing selves within the systems, thus maintains unevenness.

2. Boss or worker: Workshop owners in the supply chain capitalism

In her article *Supply Chains and Human Condition,* Anna Tsing (2009) theorizes supply chains "as a model for understanding both the continent-crossing scale and the constitutive diversity of contemporary global capitalism." (148) She argues that gender, ethnicity, national/citizenship status and other forms of diversity should not be approached as add-on elements to the class formation; rather these differences are structurally at the core of the global capitalism for the mobilization of labor in the supply chains. Tsing accurately demonstrates how unequal power structures produced by various grounds like patriarchy, war, colonialism, racism are privileged by the top-of-the chain firms for *super-exploitation* which she defines as "the use of so-called noneconomic factors to determine the rate of exploitation". (158) In her understanding, "the conflation of super-exploitation with self-exploitation" that is inherent in the sub-contracting practices constitutes the engine of the contemporary form of supply chain capitalism.

Tsing's arguments about how supply chain capitalism functions incisively correspond to my case. First, the proliferation of sub-contracting practices in Kanarya is very much related to the "hype and sense of possibility that supply chains offer to the current generation of

entrepreneurs." (149) Especially in the 1990s, the excitement toward outsourcing that was at the highest speed among Kanarya's traders resulted in mushrooming garment workshops in the neighborhood. While trade liberalization was already achieved, the establishment of the Customs Union with Europe in 1995 induced European brands for a growing outsourcing from Turkey.[14] Second, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and informal shuttle traders from post-Soviet countries have increased the volume of trade, thus creating transnational trade circuits in Istanbul on the informal bases. (Eder and Oz 2010) In their study Eder and Oz analyze Laleli district which is the most vibrant transnational circuit where 'Turkey's famous entrepreneurial spirit' is realized. Goods entered Laleli by the small-scale producers in the slums of Istanbul were carried in suitcases by Poles, Czechs, Hungarians or other Soviet traders shuttling back and forth between their countries and Laleli district. Kanarya is among the neighborhoods where garment producers work time to time for Laleli as well although they call it 'domestic market'.

This 'hype of possibility' and abundance of trading networks together with the withdrawal of the state in the 1990s created an elbow room for the entrepreneurs in the informal garment industry; hence those who had even a small capital like Kanarya inhabitants tried to catch the *chance* in a rush. Thus, the share of the textile and garment industry grew by 20.5 percent in the Turkish economy becoming the largest exportation segment among the other manufacturing sectors in Turkey. All the people, both workshop owners and laborers I talked to, were nostalgic about these hey-days of the textile as in the current situation everyone only tries to save the day in the neighborhood. One of my young male cousins and my gatekeeper to access the workshop owners, was trying to make ways through me after he learned I am coming from Hungary. He was asking if I knew someone from there to directly contact without

[14] Exports in the textile and apparel industry increased from US$ 777 million in 1980 to US$ 9.9 billion in 1999. Source: https://cleanclothes.org/livingwage/europe/country-profiles/turkey

mediators to trade the export surplus he buys from the main subcontractor firms: "I have Zara, Levi's… all the clothes I have of high quality you know. Consider this."

The excitement arising from being self-employed by establishing a garment workshop brought along "self-exploitation" of the sub-contractor combined with the exploitation of the weaker members in the community by him. That is why operating a traditional understanding of the boss-worker relationship will not bring an accurate understanding of the labor organization in the workshops. Supply chains obscure exploitation or at least the main perpetrator of it by fragmenting the surplus value. While each accomplice is absorbing some of the profit, the ultimate goal of the chain is to transfer the lion-share to the top. This is why the arrangements related to the profitability are controlled throughout the chain, while those related to the laboring are not. In order to disavow from the responsibility of the laborers, the formal agreements between the firms and the contractors are formulated in a way that the contractor does not stand as an employee of the manufacturer but as an independent enterprise. In this way, if there is a violation of ethical standards of the firms, these independent sub-contractors become scapegoats to put the burden on.

> "In the contract, they try to save themselves. They say what they want, like the percentage of deductions in the case of damage. Then they ask you to change your machines every two years. They tell me you will change this machine every two years but at the same time, you will produce this t-shirt for chicken feed. How can I do that? Is that a contract? If we are making a contract, if you are my employer you should also pay me when you don't send me the orders. What kind of a contract, what kind of an employer is this?" Bayram (owner and worker in a buttonhole making workshop with three Syrian refugees)

The workshop owners I talked to in Kanarya were doing sub-contracting on a small-scale basis. Hence, they do not have direct relations with the brands. The contract my informant was talking about in the quote above is the one he made with the primary subcontractors that are called "firms" in the neighborhood. The brands only sign the contract with the Tier-1 sub-contractors.

> "Some Tier-1 factories do only cutting but most of them have their own sewing sections as well. In fact, there are also some factories that are nothing more than a

> building. They are there only for the show. But generally, when these main sub-contractors have an order, they produce, let's say, 30-40 percent of it in their building. For the rest, they find some workshops to complete the order. And most of the time they show as if they produced all of it. This is how it works." A.

The mediators between the *firms* (Tier-1 sub-contractors) and the garment producers in the neighborhood are called as *'fasoncu'*. Each Tier-1 factory has its own *fasoncu* who is responsible to find outsourcers when it is needed and to watch the overall process from sewing until packaging in the neighborhood. Therefore, having a connection with these mediators is one of the most significant networking for the workshop owners.

There are also many small workshops in the neighborhood depending on the orders from the fellow workshop owners without any written agreement. Where the formally visible supply chain ends, its 'capillary extensions' continues on the informal and disorganized ground. The logic of outsourcing endures on the very small-scale in Kanarya while structured hierarchies become less visible in the business; mutualism, and reciprocity prevails among multiple scattered actors within which exploitation is embedded. For instance, if a workshop owner cannot finish the order on time, he would distribute some part of it to other workshops with fewer piece rates. While this could be perceived as help or a solidarity act with a workshop owner who is new in the business or who has limited alternatives to find customers, the order-bringing part at the same time reaps profit over the smaller fishes in the market by sharing the order with them. Again, a win-win solution appears within which exploitation arises, this time among workshop owners.

Other than time-bound pressuring on the workshops, super division of garment work is another significant ground catalyzing dependency in the social and economic relations. While there are some big workshops in which most of the segments of the work – from sewing to controlling — are all together in the same place, usually garment segments are divided. For example, there are sweatshops which only do "cleaning" in which the task of the laborers is merely to remove the sewing threads from the clothes. Since "cleaning" segment only requires

handwork, women may take the orders from their homes. There are "ironing-packaging" workshops in which young men do ironing since it requires bodily strength while women do packaging by standing all day. If there is a need to accessorize the cloth, women supply this labor usually from their homes. Thus, until it has been packaged and sent to the customer, apparel fabrics circulate around the neighborhood from one workshop to another, to different houses.

3. Negotiations in the workshop

Giant manufacturers' position in the supply chain are nicely put in words by Robert J.S.Ross (2004) in his book *Slaves to Fashion*: "they are the price makers, not the price takers." (p.129) The big players prepare the table so as the small ones compete with each other in order to serve. Therefore, the main perpetrators of the precarious labor conditions are those who are on the top-of-the chain, those who take the lion's share of the surplus value produced in these sweatshops. However, this does not erase the contribution of the others who become a pair of tongs for this exploitation.

The fact that workshop owners are situated in the supply chains increases their dependency on the workers compared to other *independent* entrepreneurs. In some cases, workshop owners in Kanarya are more dependent on the workers than vice versa. Because this mutual dependency is known, workers, in fact, do have a space to negotiate. In response to this, workshop owners use those who are socially less able to negotiate over the wage in the neighborhood, in order to meet the demands of the retail chain and to maintain their profits over it.

> "If a man has 500 Turkish lira to receive, he comes to me on the weekend and says 'put some more'. But girls are not like that. They take the same money as boys, but they do not bring conflict into the workshop. They don't ask for more. They come and work and they content themselves with the money you gave them. They are silent, that is why bosses prefer them." (A workshop owner in the neighborhood)

For years sweatshops were filled by domestic Kurdish women. After 2011, the arrival of Syrian refugees has brought a fresh blood needed by bosses. Hence refugees have quickly participated in the labor force together with local Kurdish women. In the following section, I will write about the ways in which labors of domestic Kurdish women and Syrian refugees are trivialized to analyze the micro-power structures within which surplus value is extracted. This analysis will help to understand the workshop as a social space where the laborers enter with the locally defined values attached to them and the fact that this lays at the core of the organization of labor. However, I argue, the value regimes in the micro-relations of this slum are comparatively more liquid, that is to say, the values attached to some in the community to extract the cheapest labor are not always stable and can be redefined through time if resistance takes place. Therefore, those who are the most vulnerable in the labor market do have a space to improve their negotiation power within the social dynamics of the neighborhood where the high level of dependency prevails.

4. Feminization of garment work

Supply chains capitalism operates by organizing the *differences* both on the macro and micro scales. In her article "The gendered workplaces of women garment workers in Istanbul" Basak Can (2017) analyzes the ways in which women's difference is translated into trivialized labor in the garment workshops in a neighborhood having similar sociology with Kanarya. She elucidates the sexualization of women body and deployment of kinship vocabulary in the workshops and how these two together render women's labor less valuable.

Transferring the family members to the workshops designated social relations of production penetrated by hierarchical male-dominated family structure. Hence externally-hired workers, too, join the workplace within the same structure and become subjected to the gendered organization of the family/workshop.

> "The familial networks within which young women garment workers are embedded not only influence the way they enter or drop out of paid work and make decisions over their life trajectories but also inform the way management develops strategies for efficient production. The use of kinship vocabulary and avoidance of impersonal work relationships are indispensable for a flexible workforce to sustain profitability in the export-oriented garment industry." (ibid:49)

Deployment of kinship idioms is very common in the social and economic relations of Turkey as it appears on the streets as well as in the corporate companies. In the neighborhoods leaning on the informal sector where the relations are coordinated mostly by word of mouth, usage of these idioms[15] matters: it provides trust and safety for the members, enhances the mechanism of reciprocal solidarity and satisfies socio-emotional needs especially among migrant communities. On the other hand, the male-dominated structure of kinship web and its discourses in the workplace smooth the ways for *super-exploitation* of women labor. Familial idioms and their implications help for disciplining women body and regulation of her labor. For example, as it is pointed out also by Can in her article, laborers call the workshop owners *abi*, meaning elder brother in Turkish. This language automatically brings cultural expectations from these roles to mediate the boss-worker relationship.

Basak Can gives examples from her fieldwork demonstrating how cultural expectations like faithfulness and loyalty assigned to a sister in the family are appealed by the bosses to keep women laborers under control. In my fieldwork, Seda's case was very illuminating to explain how this negotiation takes place. Seda has been working with the same boss for 18 years; that is why she was the only one who had social insurance in the workshop. She stayed loyal to him because she thinks he allows her to go hospital time to time and he knows how skilled she is despite her illnesses. Suddenly, the boss closed the workshop; Seda was left alone with the huge credit debts of her family. When she asked for indemnity from the boss, he wanted her not to

[15] *Abi, abla, bacı, dayı, yeğen* are among those idioms commonly used in the social spaces and respectively means elder brother, elder sister, sister, uncle, nephew

ask this money so he can find a job for her in the pharmacy. To translate the case into the conceptual terms, he offers his protection by performing the role of an elder brother in return for the proper performing of sisterhood associated with the silence and faithfulness. This is how bosses try to take advantage of disguising the boss-worker relationship by calling gendered familial roles not to let the female laborer claim her rights.

In the narratives of women, the way they talk about their relationship with the bosses most of the time were very much personalized. That is, the rules and regulations in the workplace can differ according to the person and to the aggregate social capital belonging to her, including her family ties, her being known as dexterous or loyal in the workplace, etc. For example, Ayten was telling me "normally it's banned to talk during the work, but I talk. He knows me, he knows how much I work for him and how I take care of his job, so he doesn't say anything when I talk." Yet, in fact, bringing impersonal, familial terms in the workshop serves for the workshop owners to keep the rights and duties nebulous, open-ended and arbitrary. (ibid) Women are mostly subjected to these amorphous laboring in the workshops which trivialize their labor power and make their effort invisible. Muzeyyen, a married woman who started to go to workshops due to huge credit debts brought about by an irresponsible husband, narrates her illustrative experiences with the boss:

> "I did not trust everybody but this workshop owner was our acquaintance. My brother knew him. I entered the workshop as a controller. I was checking if the sewing is done properly if there is any broken part, etc. After 2-3 days the boss called me. He said things are not going well and asked me to cook for the workers instead of controlling. I said I know how to cook but it is different to cook for 3 than for 30. He slurred over and said, 'you can you can'. Anyways, first, he directed me to the kitchen. Then he started to send me here and there in the workshop for checking, accessorizing, washing the dishes. Not even once did I say 'why do you do this?' Other workers were making fun of me. I didn't care. I was earning my bread. Anyways, in the end, you know what he said to me? He said 'Look, I didn't see your labor, but I am giving this money only for your personality, I liked your personality.' What does personality mean for God's sake? He is the one directing me here and there all the time and saying he is only giving my wage for my personality not for my labor, huh?!

Open-ended duties arising from the impersonal, familial ambiance of the workplace disvalue women's laboring just in the same way it happens in the households. Muzeyyen's labor is made invisible by burdening her with the multi-tasking of occupations that are seen as frivolous and which are associated with her gender, age, and marital status. In this way, her labor is rendered as not worthy to be remunerated by the workshop owner, as it can be clearly drawn from the quote above.

As a second layer of derogating women laboring is the sexualized representations of female garment workers. The ways women try to dissociate themselves from this portrayal are discussed by Can in her article and came out abundantly during my fieldwork as well. (ibid) For instance, Muzeyyen was constantly telling me how she was annoyed by the way male co-workers are looking at her *differently*. She was saying, "It is not good for a married woman to be in these workshops, it's full of dirty tricks". During the interview, she kept explaining how she has to work for her children and that otherwise, she wouldn't even enter through the door. Most women I talked to were trying to justify the reasons they do garment work. When I asked about their relations with the male co-workers, foremen or the owner, first reactions were generally defensive like "I go to my work and I directly come back home. I don't engage too much with the people in the workshop" In this way, they were trying to distance themselves from the established sexual image of female garment worker and the myths circulating in the neighborhood about immoral conducts going on in the basements.

> "You know what? It's not right for a woman to work in textile. All of them become prostitutes. I don't know how it happens but it happens. In each workshop, you can find 3-4 of them. *Fasoncu* (the mediator/distributor) enters the workshop, gives his number to the girls…like that." Bayram, workshop owner

Anonymous 'immoral' stories like the one Bayram told me, circulate in the neighborhood and are also one of the reasons for women to go workshops owned by relatives or acquaintances near their homes, which eventually made them more depended on and enmeshed in the familial

networks. The biological or 'fictive' familial ties and lack of impersonality, however, does not make rules and regulations less strict in the workplace. In all the workshops I have entered, signboards were on the wall: "First comes the quality, our target is zero error" or " It is banned to talk during the work". When I attended a tea party organized by women in their house, Hamdiye, whose family previously owned a workshop, was telling how the workers abuse the familial environment of the workshop and well-intentioned attitudes of the boss so that the he has to bring firm restrictions to manage:

> "You know, our people are very hard-working, but they abuse the goodness of the boss. It happened to us. In the beginning, Faruk (her brother) was allowing them to pray. But they would enter into the praying room and stay there half an hour, texting to their lovers and so on …Then, he established the rule for praying too, after that everybody was supposed to be done with praying in 5 or 10 minutes." Hamdiye

I have been told by both local and Syrian women that their husbands or fathers do not work in the garment workshops due to these despotic regulations where another man would have control over them. "My father cannot stand to receive directions from the boss, he would feel degraded under someone else's command" was saying Nursel. Another informant, Ayten, came to Kanarya to make money for her parents with the other sisters and young brothers by working in her uncle's shop so that the uncle would send their wage directly to her father. However, she said: "My uncle was unfair to *us*. He was not sending my wage to my father. He would buy laptops, phones for himself or spend the money with the girls but he wouldn't send money to my father. That's why I left his workshop." In the words of Ayten let me distill how women labor is regulated in each step by gendered discourses and ultimately entrapped in intersectional systems of capitalism and patriarchy. The implications in her story are the following: Ayten works in the workshops since she can bear to be commanded, to work under a man who gives orders, while this would tarnish father's manhood. Her younger brothers go to the garment workshops, too, yet their being command-able is related to their age while for Ayten and the other sisters, it is associated with the gender and cultural codes attached to it.

Further, Ayten and her sisters previously were sent to her uncle's workshop to stay under the control of the familial, paternalistic protection and gaze. However, being a laborer for the uncle made her labor less recognized and less visible in the capitalist production site as if the workshop was an extension to the home such that her remuneration could be appropriated by the uncle. Ayten does complain about the violation of her remuneration right, yet she perceives her engagement in the remunerated labor as a matter of necessity for the familial survival. This is why when her uncle did not pay her wage, it was construed by her as an injustice to her family and not to herself as she constantly uses *us* instead of *me.*

Women's incorporation into wage labor starts as an exception in the times of familial economic crisis, yet neither the crisis nor the perceived '*state of exception*' pass. Even though many women in the neighborhood became the sole breadwinners for their family in practice, their work is not recognized as such. In fact, it would be unrealistic to expect the recognition of women as legitimate breadwinners from Kurdish families who arrived in Istanbul with strong patriarchal codes in their family structure within which women were not allowed to work or to be much visible in the public space. During my interview with Hamdiye, she was explaining how her elder sister Gulistan was going to the workshops secretly at the beginning. "Because for my father, *normally*, if he takes daughters' money that money would be *haram* (ill-gotten)." It would tarnish his *honor* to accept the money earned by the daughters for the household subsistence. "Yet, there was no other option" she said. Her mother convinced him to let her work by saying "at least let Gulistan collect her wage for the wedding chest, for her pocket money." In this way, Gulistan started to work in the garment shops for her assumed pocket money. Later on, with the other two women in the house, they have become the only family members working and bringing home the bread for a long period of time. Over the course of more than 20 years, while women laboring has been *unwillingly* accepted and allowed, the perception of women wage in the Kurdish families has been maintained as a *temporary*

contribution to the household income and mostly appropriated by the fathers, husbands or elder brothers in various ways.

The perception of women remuneration as supplemental or as temporary help to the legitimate income-earners in the family devalues women labor further, thus cultivating their *disposability* in the capitalist relations of production. Women's disposability stemming from family roles makes them more attractive for the workshop owners since it perfectly matches with the demands of the global garment industry and its ascendant fast fashion business model. In this regard, Maria Patricia Fernandez-Kelly (1983) argues in her book *For We Are Sold, I and My People* support my observations in the field. She says "It has been assumed that the main reason why large numbers of women were employed in early industries was due to the fact that these originally were extensions of "traditional" female occupations such as spinning and weaving. However, this is not a self-evident proposition." (ibid: 81) In Kanarya, too, women are filling the sweatshops not because garment work is coded as *a women's job* which requires feminine dexterity or special talent. While this discourse might have an effect on the organization of labor, it does not constitute the principal discursive dimension of women laboring. Garment labor is not associated with women because it requires a special feminine skill. Instead, women are associated with it because it is seen as an occupation that 'everybody can do' or 'requires no qualification' especially in the current situation of the industry that mostly stands on day labor. For instance, it was possible for me to just enter into the labor force for a day as an *ortaci* (the laborer who goes between the other laborers) without any prior knowledge or to work on cleaning/packaging sections. There are segments that require skills to undertake like working on the machines, yet usually, everyone starts with the most unqualified segments so that later they might improve themselves by learning how to use machines in order to pass those sections rendered more prestigious and bring better wages.

Fernandez-Kelly substantiates her argument on women laboring in the garment industry by saying if the main reason to hire women were their special skills, then how would that explain the employment of the children in the same sector? (81) In my fieldwork, too, the proposed reasoning does not provide an explanatory ground, for instance, for the employment of young Syrian men. Before going to the field, I was imagining the workshops to be filled by women to a large extent. However, I have observed that in the last years, not only did Syrian women become incorporated in the labor force, but so did some young Syrian men. Although these young men are not preferred as much as women by the workshop owners, when there is a scarcity of labor in the neighborhood (if there are no women to hire at the moment), "subordinate masculinities" (Connell cited in Schippers 2007:87) embodied by young Syrian men appear as an option to maintain gendered hierarchies constructed in the workshops. While the "feminine other" is in a 'complementary hierarchical relationship' with the embodied masculinity of the boss, subordinate masculinities as "inferior other" still helps to maintain the hierarchy. (ibid)

Therefore, feminization of the garment labor refers to what Schippers calls hegemonic femininity [16] that "consists of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and subordination of women". (Schippers 2007:94). These traits embodied by the women laborers complement the hegemonic masculinity practices of the boss: "the qualities defined as manly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical relationship to femininity and that by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and subordination of women." (ibid) Traits that are seen as womanly, like attentiveness, silence, and responsibility smooth the ways for the boss to extract the cheapest labor and

[16] I refer to the *locally defined* hegemonic masculinities and femininities, which means specific traits attributed to the femininity and masculinity in this place that maintains the gender hegemony of men over women.

disempower them to negotiate over the wage. The fact that husbands/fathers try to find some other ways to make money or simply do not work and send their wives/daughters to the workshops demonstrates how gender difference is mobilized to employ despotic regulations in the workshop. That is, hierarchical boss-worker relationship is entrenched with the hierarchical masculine-feminine relations for *super-exploitation.*

Chapter III

1. Saving the day

"Our business came to an end Seyma, go research another thing" said a workshop owner. The 'hype of possibility' and the hope for an upward mobility that induced the proliferation of sub-contracting practices in the 1990s was not prevalent anymore when I was doing my fieldwork. Workshop owners were complaining: "In the 1990s things were okay. We were making good money but now we only try to save the day." In fact, this is not only limited to Kanarya neighborhood. Isik and Pinarcioglu (2008) write about how the dynamics of urban poverty is changing in Istanbul throughout the years. In their early work (2001) the authors brought a concept called "poverty-in-turns" that was highly explanatory for the strategies of the urban poor seeking socio-economic climbing in the decades following the neoliberal deregulations in 1980s.

> "The concept of poverty-in-turn connotes peculiar survival strategies of the urban poor in Turkey especially since the 1980s when the country burst into a market-based economy in which thriving informal activities found a strong place. The concept, a la Sen (1992,1999), builds itself on the capabilities of the urban poor, especially on their active strategies vis-à-vis the formal market economy that has hardly given them a safe haven. In this sense, it covers what may be referred to as informal capability, capability earned not through formal processes of education but as the assets accrued by virtue of being part of a network of traditional relations. On account of these informal capabilities, as the concept stresses, the agents of networks may be able to create wealth and help operate an internal mechanism through which the obtained wealth may trickle down from top to bottom." (Isik and Pinarcioglu 2008:1354-1355)

Through the notion of poverty-in-turns Isik and Pinarcioglu provided an understanding of urban poverty within the particular dynamics of Turkey that is 'radically different' than the poverty problem in West European or Latin American countries. They argued within the mechanisms of poverty-in-turn that the urban poor were "help-less but not hopeless"; the inducement for socio-economic climbing was still existing. However, they say, in Turkey too, the mechanisms

of poverty-in-turn is slow by slow turning into a "chronic poverty" of some groups within which urban poor became "not only helpless but also hopeless." (ibid:1367) In this regard, In Kanarya, while the networking relations and informal economy still allow them to preserve the existing situation (also arrival of Syrian after 2011 helped for that) informal capabilities and hopes for an upward mobility are shrinking. The loss of hope, fear, and tiredness came out abundantly during my fieldwork; in fact, I had difficulty to convince people to talk, to tell their stories. For more than 20-30 years of sweating in the workshops, not spending the earned money except for the basic necessities to save for a better future – this never-ending struggle – was exhaustive and soul-sapping.

Many workshops had to close the doors because the profit share of the workshop owners diminished day by day and ultimately resulted in bankruptcy. The pressures of the supply chains have increased over them in many ways. One of the complaints was about the piece rates as stated by a workshop owner: "For this t-shirt they have paid me with the same piece-rate for 10 years. Now, if you go to the shop can you buy this t-shirt with the same money?" On the other hand, the orders received from the firms became more and more irregular and required even shorter production cycles. Previously, work disruptions were not that common so that the bosses could hire laborers for a month. Nowadays, rapid and frequent disruptions to the work make life harder for both sides. For instance, the batches of clothes would arrive to be delivered in a week, forcing the laborers to stay for long shifts in that week, yet the following week laborers would stay at home if the boss cannot manage to find an order. For these reasons, organization of labor in the workshops now mostly stands on the week-based and day-based oral agreements. As the labor conditions are increasingly getting worse, local Kurds, after years of spending their body in the basements, try to *escape* from the garment work, if they can. One of my informant Yasemin, who started to do piece work from home after she got married and gave birth to two children, was saying:

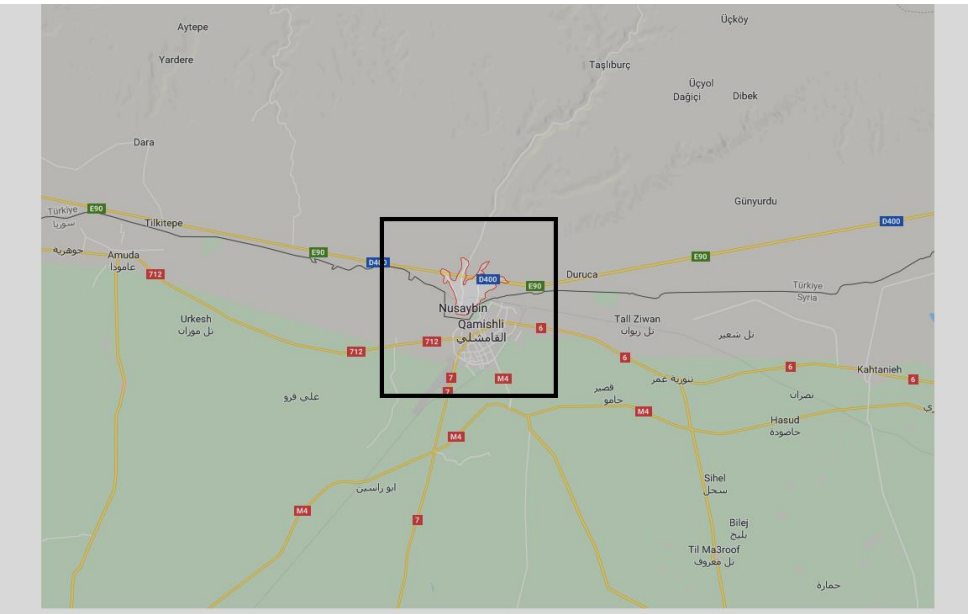
> "You know working in the shops has a 'lifetime'. Your body cannot take it anymore after years. You become older and you cannot maintain your previous performance, but the boss does not understand this. They want you to finish the numbers in any way, at the end of the day. On the other hand, the money they give does not save you. It is not enough. I am working in this sector for years. Once I wanted from my boss to raise my wage. He said no. I said if you say no then I am not going to work here, I left."

Later, she added, "our people (locals) are showing reluctance these days because of the conditions, they say this and that, but Syrians accept everything". In fact, as Yasemin tells, the arrival of Syrians since 2011 brought a *new blood* for the garment work in the neighborhood as most of Syrian women quickly participated in the work force. Being a textile worker was something "better than nothing" for them as it also helped them to *survive*: "Yes here there is no life. We go to work. We come back home. That's all, but at least we don't have to beg for help from anyone. It is good for us."

2. Interactions: Syrian families in the neighborhood

"Today if Syrians leave the country textile industry would collapse" (a workshop owner)

Since the feminization of the garment work was established in the neighborhood through various discourses, when Syrian families arrived in Kanarya, most of the Syrian women participated in the labor force following similar paths with Kurdish women. However, for Syrian women it was not only the gender difference used to devalue their labor in the social space of the workshop. Another line of *difference* has been drawn and mobilized within the relations of production which ultimately impair their negotiation power once more over their Syrian-ness. In this way workshop owners could source the hyper-cheap-and-disposable labor needed for them to maintain the profit share as it was largely shrunken under the growing pressures of supply chains. At this point, it is significant to analyze how, and through which discourses the line of *difference* drawn between domestic Kurds and Syrian Kurds as the nature of the relationship between the two communities has particular dynamics due to the shared ethnicity, language, culture, in addition to overlapping experiences of migration.



In the map above two towns are situated across the border between Turkey and Syria: Nusaybin in Turkey and Qamislo in Syria. In Kanarya, there are many people from Nusaybin and it was easy for me to access them since I and my gatekeepers were from this town too. I could also easily communicate with those from Qamislo as they have the same dialect of Kurdish with the other side of the border. However, as Balibar argues the "hypothetical and fictive nature" of the borders "does not make them any less real". (Balibar cited Mezzadra and Neilson 2013:4) Production of the nation-states through the fictive borders have real effects on the subjectivities. One of these effects called as the "identification effect" by Trouillot, (2001:126) within which subjectivities recognize themselves through the collective lines drawn by the nation states. During the interviews, I could see that, for both communities, the way they perceive themselves and the other community is still under the effect of the territorially constructed, 'imagined' nation-states as I will show in the following section. Considering this effect still exists even

among the most marginalized communities in both nation states – the Kurds – suggests the extent of the state effect on the interpellation of the subjects.[17]

3. Saving each other?

For sure, Kanarya is a much 'safer haven' for Syrian Kurds, firstly because they could communicate with the residents, which was important especially when they first arrived. When I asked questions related to their perception of the neighborhood, they were mostly thankful that they could rent a house, make some money, and meet at least the basic needs in Kanarya. Some of them did not see any other part of the city while some others mentioned they felt uncomfortable when they visited the center: "but here I feel comfortable. I get used to life here". In this regard, throughout my fieldwork, I could see that Kanarya has become a 'meaningful place' for Syrian Kurds too. A place in the sense that Escobar refers to as the: "experience of a particular location with some measure of grounded-ness (however, unstable), sense of boundaries (however, permeable), and connection to everyday life…" (Escobar 2001:140)

Most of the Syrians I talked to stated they are generally contended with the local Kurds in the neighborhood. They mentioned the solidarity acts -when they first arrived- from the neighbors that can be characterized as "vernacular humanitarianisms". [18] Vernacular humanitarianisms refer to "local, grassroots forms of helping others" (ibid) and appear in this neighborhood between the two communities in the form of sharing domestic utensils, household furniture, and sometimes the house itself. The motivations for these solidarity acts can derive from the various reasons. In her article *"Forced migration, citizenship, and space: the case of Syrian Kurdish refugees in Istanbul"* Kilicaslan (2016) writes about the 'political' motivations where local Kurds helped Syrian Kurds through referring to the common

[17] Although the 'identification effect' mentioned above was curbed throughout the years of historical othering, several assimilationist policies of the state helped to maintain this effect on Kurdish population to some extent.
[18] http://allegralaboratory.net/vernacular-humanitarianisms/

experience of displacement and shared identities. In some other cases help is organized through Islamic references, yet, at the end of the day, vernacular humanitarianisms draw a "largely compassionate, chaotic, and confusing" picture.

The discourse of help brings an expectation from the refugees to show "passivity, victimhood, and helplessness." (Nyers 2006) For instance, the most common discourses/complaints circulating in the neighborhood are like "Syrians love luxury." "They go to the seacoast every weekend for picnics. They make *kebab* all the time" "Syrian women are always fancy and wear make-up." "They live better than us". In fact, among many stories, one was very interesting: my local Kurdish informant was telling me, with a super surprised tone, how her fellow female Syrian worker has 4-5 types of chewing gum in her drawer, while she was trying to explain that Syrian women like *luxury.* The discourses over Syrians do not refer to the 'backwardness' or 'inferiority' as it happens in the urban center. However, several other discourses still function over Syrians 'homogenizing' them under these labels. Sirin, a married Syrian woman doing piecework from home, was saying "When one of us does something bad, they say *Syrians* are bad". In another time, when I was sitting with local Kurdish women, there was also Nesrin from Afrin, Syria. She said: "All my neighbors love me, they say you are not like Syrians. I don't know what this means but they say like that."

However, neither locals nor Syrians mentioned experiences that imply a serious tension between the two communities. In fact, there is an increasing animosity towards Syrians in Turkey, especially among lower classes since they accuse refugees of job stealing or for an increase in rents.[19] For instance, the research conducted by Erdogan and Semerci demonstrates that 71.4% of people agree to the statement "Syrians are taking jobs away from people in Turkey" [20] This perception is not common in Kanarya. For workshop owners they were

[19] http://www.arabnews.com/node/1265901/middle-east
[20] https://goc.bilgi.edu.tr/media/uploads/2018/03/12/turkish-perceptions-of-syrian-refugees-20180312.pdf

rendered as a 'blessing'; several times I have been told that Syrians saved their business. "Nobody accuses Syrians of job-losses, people already don't want to work in the garment workshops" said a local laborer and added "everybody is just fighting for her/his bread."

That's true, yet the ground for the fight has never been equal. As I explained in the previous chapter, asymmetrical power relations are inherent in the social space of the workshops and Syrians are situated at the bottom. When I visited the neighborhood two years ago, I asked my cousin if Syrians are receiving less wages than the locals. She said "Syrians receive less wages, but you know they work less, they are not as hard-working as our people". The myths constructed for Syrians are diversified in Kanarya, yet most of them are used to devalue their labor in the workshops, to silence them in a case of conflict. Most of my informants had experiences of unpaid laboring especially when they first arrived, when they were the most vulnerable. One of them Nur, she was my only informant who mentioned a dream for the future – to be a doctor. "Although I know it is impossible", she added. She was also my only Syrian informant who felt overtly discriminated against in the neighborhood and in the country because of her Syrian-ness:

> "From Qamislo we passed to Nusaybin. 3 months we stayed there; no food, no water, no home. Then my brother in-law found a flat for us in Kanarya and we came here. I was 10 years old. After 5 months of working, we understood we are human; there was food, a home to stay. From 7 am to 7 pm, sometimes until 10 or 12 pm we were working. There were times they didn't give our money and we couldn't say anything that time. Why? Because we are Syrians…. From the age of 10 until now, I am only going to work and coming back home, nothing else. I do the same things for 12 hours a day. When I come back home, I don't understand anything either. I live with my family, but I don't know anything about their lives. We cannot talk. I didn't understand anything from this life, I don't know what to say"

Nur was always putting "because we are Syrians" in between her sentences. Nine months she worked, the boss postponed the wages every time to the other months and said he would pay the wages altogether so it would be good for them too, to have it all at once. In the end, he didn't pay. "Why? Because we are Syrians". But "then we learned" said Nur, now "we know

how to respond, we can raise our voice too, so they cannot do this anymore". Until they could learn *how to respond* as Nur says, their vulnerability was used by their bosses. Nevertheless, through enlarging the social networks and seeking the ways to become less vulnerable, they are increasing their negotiation power in the workshops. This could be tracked by their narrations as all my informants mentioned previous injustices, yet when I asked about the current situation, they were mostly *okay* with it.

Abdu, from Kobane, 19 years old, who feels like home in Kanarya and likes to live there, told me he was not paid by his former boss although several times he went to ask for it. "But Mehmet *abe* (the current boss) is like my friend. I love him a lot, he is just, gives what you deserve." This young Syrian guy working as a day-laborer in a very small-scale workshop, says "It is better for me, I take my money just in the end of the day; when you work for a month you cannot know if they are going to give you your money or not." While he was my only male Syrian informant that I had an in-depth interview with, all the other Syrian women I talked to also stated they *prefer* day-laboring. In the highly insecure economic environment of the workshops, they want to have their remuneration straight away since otherwise there would be the risk to waste the whole month. For example, Evin, from Amuda, who looks after her family with her sister, told me that once her boss didn't give her the wage because he didn't like her handiwork. This kind of complaints were common among Syrians, that the bosses are not being fair by saying "you are not skillful" or "your hands are slow". "Whenever there is a defect on the clothes, I am the first one to blame" Nesrin said. Thus, after all suchlike experiences, they became reluctant to accept month-based agreements, and ask for day or week wage which makes them less dependent on the boss and, hence, less vulnerable before him. Therefore, initially demanded by the workshop owners, day wage eventually is used by the Syrian laborers to counter the pressures operated by the bosses; in the end "if it doesn't suit her book, she can leave on the same day". Yet then of course these people have to live from day to day as my

informant Zozan was saying: “I cannot plan next week, I can see today or furthest this week, but I don’t know about the next week”.

4. What makes it *different*: Changing dynamics of patriarchy in the city

Both Syrian Kurdish and local Kurdish communities have strong patriarchy in their family structure in which women are not supposed to participate in outside occupations and be much visible in the public spaces. For those who went through the migration experience and re-settled in Kanarya, these structures are both reproduced and transformed through the participation of women into remunerated labor. However, the fact that women started to appear in the garment workshops does not mean they become automatically less exposed to patriarchal domination and exploitation. Maria Mies (1986:37) uses the concept of *capitalist-patriarchy* “to denote the system which maintains women’s exploitation and oppression”. She uses the term patriarchy not only with its literal meaning of ‘rule of fathers’ but as a broader concept to emphasize the systemic character of the suppressive as well as exploitative relations women are enmeshed in. She emphasizes the “interconnectedness of the two systems” within which “patriarchy constitutes the mostly invisible underground of the visible capitalist system” (ibid) That means, women in Kanarya are not dealing with the patriarchy at home and capitalism in the workshop separately; they are entrapped within the capitalist patriarchy in every sphere of their lives.

I would like to concretize how patriarchy constitutes the ground for capitalism through my ethnographic fieldwork. For instance, reproduction and household care are assigned to the women and seen as part of their nature in the patriarchal structure of Kurdish families. This renders women more disposable because it was perceived that young women work until they get married. While in large Kurdish families the mother used to take care of the housework, after marriage young women are –*normally*- supposed to leave the workshop and turn back to reproductive laboring. This happens if the husband earns enough. That was also one of the reasons of the labor scarcity in the workshops when Syrian women arrived. That is, some of the

second-generation local migrant women who got married, especially those who gave birth, stopped going to the workshops – either because the husband did not allow it, or they couldn't manage to work while taking care of the domestic chores and the children. Some of them continued to the workshops, while others worked from home. Yasemin was among them:

> I worked for long years. Then I got married, I left my work. I worked for 2 months when I was pregnant, I couldn't continue more. When my daughter became 2-3 years old, I had to start again because that time we bought a house. (she means they took a housing loan). In the meantime, I worked 6 more years. Then I got pregnant with my son, so I left the work again. These days I am going for day-laboring sometimes. But I am too tired! There is the baby, housework, and my daughter goes to school. I am worn out! I like the big workshops better, they run a tight discipline, but they give you social insurance, whatever you deserve. Here there are small ones, they seem flexible, but they only try to find ways to use you. What can I do? I am still going there sometimes. They are close to my home. As a married woman I cannot go to these big factories. I have this baby with me.

Nesrin is also a married woman with a son, from Afrin, Syria. Her husband is idling. "He is very irresponsible" she says. As in the local women's stories, her husband, too, does not want to work in the workshops to abstain from a masculinity conflict with the boss: "The only place to work here is the garment workshops but he doesn't like to receive orders. He wants to start his own business". In the end, Nesrin has to bring the bread to the home. Yet, she is also the one who takes care of the son, bringing him to school, on top of shouldering all the housework. That is why, she prefers to work in the *flexible* workshops that allow her to work on an hour-basis or on a piece-basis. After bringing the son to the school, she works in the workshop, earn the wage, and at the end of the day give it to the husband. Nur, another Syrian unmarried girl mentioned above, who gives her wage directly to the father, told me it is better for her to work on a daily-wage, because sometimes she needs to help her mum for the housework. In fact, household chores and care work are very much naturalized by women as their own responsibility. I did not hear any complaint about that. Instead, the motivation for work derives from the *care:* "I work for my children, for my family" while on the other hand husbands draw an opposite picture: "irresponsible and careless."

Commonalities between women's stories vis-à-vis their families are abundant. In all the stories I listened to, women's wages are mostly incorporated by men: either by the father, husband or brother. If so, what makes women's participation in the remunerated labor different in terms of exploitation in this case? Perhaps the answer is it makes the exploitation more visible for women. The exploitation of the women's reproductive labor was not perceived as such because women themselves mostly see the domestic work as part of them or inherent in their women-ness. However, since that is not the case for the garment work, when their wages are incorporated by the men, the exploitation of their labor becomes more visible in their eyes too. It does not happen immediately of course; "consciousness" increases through time and they start to use some tactics to have more autonomy/share on their earnings. For instance, Seda, whose story is told above, was trying to get her indemnity from the boss after the workshop was suddenly closed. I was following her case too, and in the end, she told me she got the indemnity but asked me to keep it secret. Otherwise, her brothers would incorporate the money for their debts, but she was tired of doing this for 18 years and wanted to keep the indemnity payment for herself. Also, Hamdiye opened a tailor shop and Gulistan opened a clothing shop. Hence they have more autonomy over their earnings compared to the workshop where the brother was their boss.

Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) conceptualizes women's tactics and acts of resistance 'to maximize the life options' within the limits of the patriarchal structures as "bargaining with patriarchy." In this sense, as above examples also demonstrate, women in Kanarya, among all the pressures in between the household and the workshop, keep bargaining with the 'capitalist patriarchy' to have better 'life options' in their own perception. Naze, a woman whose wedding I attended was saying: "When I got married, I was bored at home. I was under the pressures of my parents-in-law. They didn't let me go outside. I told my husband I want to continue working. First, he said no, but I insisted a bit and said let me work so we can buy a house. He accepted.

Of course, he would accept, money is sweet, huh?" In that wedding, in a similar vein, Fatma, was saying "either at home or in the workshop I work anyways, at least in the workshop I make money." Even though this money is mostly being appropriated by the male members in various ways, what I observed was that to make money or being able to make money, has slowly but ultimately increased women's negotiation power within the families in Kanarya.

Conclusion

This paper is an endeavor to shed light on women's unseen laboring and an attempt to breakdown multilayered exploitative relations that they are enmeshed in. For this, I thought through my ethnographic data while attempting to avoid erasing the complexities and at the same time to arriving at a better understanding of them. In order to analyze the coping mechanisms of the migrant families within which women are participated into the labor force, first I examined the larger dynamics that produce precarity, because, as Fernandez-Kelly suggests, "when observations about the family strategies and broad political, economic and ideological forces are combined, the participation of women in the labor force acquires its full meaning." (Fernandez-Kelly 1983:12)

That is why, to unveil each layer of the exploitation, I started by providing an analysis of the place and the common social, political, and economic grounds shared by its residents. This analysis also aimed to give a background to the reader and elucidate the specific context of the research site. Within the specific context of Istanbul, I approached to the communities settled in Kanarya as those who are aligned at the bottom of "capitalist value regimes." (Rajaram 2018)

First, I began with the early comer Kurdish migrants who established informal garment workshops in the neighborhood and started to do subcontracting for fast fashion industry in the 1990s. The *paradoxical* connection between the most advanced form of capitalism and "traditional" forms of kinship-networking point to the articulation of the capitalist relations with the local structures of inequality. (Ong 1987) In Kanarya, while kinship-based networking was a form of resource (solidarity, mutual support) to establish the garment workshops, it was in the meantime an adjuvant to the *super-exploitation* (Tsing 2009) of women.

Drawing on my ethnographic work, I analyzed the relations of production in the workshops within which a high level of dependency prevails between the boss and the worker. That is why I maintained that the traditional understanding of the boss and worker cannot bring an understanding to analyze the capitalist structure of the workshops. Instead I build my analysis through Tsing's understanding of "supply chains capitalism" in which "the conflation of super-exploitation with the self-exploitation" are inherent in the sub-contracting practices. By analyzing the position of the workshop owners within the supply chains, I pointed out the prevalence of the mutual dependency between the boss and the worker. This was a key point to understand why and through which discourses the garment work is feminized in this neighborhood. I demonstrated several discourses that I distilled from the fieldwork and examined how these discourses trivialized women labor, rendered them disposable, and thus impaired their negotiation power vis-à-vis the male bosses.

Then I analyzed how the labor of Syrian women is once again devalued through their Syrian-ness which ultimately impaired their negotiation power in the social space of the workshop. Overall, I examined the workshops as a social space where the laborers enter with the locally defined values attached to them and the fact that these values lie at the core of the organization of labor. However, I also maintained that the "value regimes" (Rajaram 2018) in the micro-relations of this slum are comparatively more liquid. That is to say, the values attached to some in the community to extract the cheapest labor are not always stable and can be redefined through time if resistance takes place.

Lastly, I pointed out how women have not become less exposed to the patriarchy in the urban setting, yet they have utilized its changing dynamics and, therefore, increased their "bargaining power" over time vis-à-vis the family. (Kandiyoti 1988) By saying this, I do not imply a "cost-benefit evaluation" for women's participation in garment work. Each woman has a different story, and is paid different prices to survive (with their families) while re-making

their lives. My aim was to draw an analysis on the commonalities among all these varying experiences that I investigated through the fieldwork. I believe a multi-sited ethnography supported with a survey research could make these commonalities and the dynamics that produce women's super-exploitation more visible.

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