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## Narrating Women's Experiences of Gendered Violence: An Introduction

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- 1 In this introduction to the special issue, we will take on the use and meaning of *narrating experience* in feminist politics, through its relation to media. Narration of experience is indeed a common thread that binds different fields/actors together long since feminism became one of the major lines of political thinking: By making women's experiences visible, feminists intervened in the inequalities that women faced in their everyday lives and initiated a long series of legal and political reforms that aim for women's rights. In this process, at the centre of which we can find the struggle against gendered violence, the visibility of women's experiences was made possible first through narration of these experiences in closed groups. These experiences were then brought to public attention through the use of media. Lately, social media has become the arena for sharing and narrating women's experiences – this time reaching an even broader audience.
- 2 This issue covers empirical examples of research on gender in Turkey that deals with narration of experience in different spaces and in relation to different kinds of media. The introduction focuses on how narration of experiences of gendered violence in conventional and social media in Turkey has been used to make a change: to formulate feminist politics, to influence public opinion and to put pressure on policy-makers. We can also call this a kind of feminist storytelling. Here we intend to provide readers with a framework to trace marks of different (although interconnected) ways of narrating women's violent experiences in the media, with the aim of reflecting on the context for the papers included in this special issue.

## Narrating Women's Experiences of Gendered Violence

- 3 Experience has been a counter hegemonic concept developed within feminist theory to demonstrate how women have been disregarded, or rather interpreted as “different from the norm”, in mainstream history and politics. In her pioneering essay, “The

Evidence of Experience”, Joan Scott emphasizes that bringing in the notion of experience to the analysis has challenged mainstream history writing. Scott does not deny the fact that it created “an enlargement of the picture”; but so long as we continue to take for granted the identities of those who are construed as different, she argues, we would end up “locat[ing] resistance outside its discursive construction and reify agency as an inherent attribute of individuals, thus decontextualizing it” (Scott 1991: 777). Therefore, according to Scott, making visible the experiences of those who belong to a certain identity is not enough, but also requires that the construction of identities is historicized. Indeed, this latter point has provided guidance for most of the recent feminist scholarship.

- 4 However, even though experience has been used widely as a term and women's experiences have been a core element in feminist research, the term itself has usually been taken for granted. The notion of experience is far from self-evident and has been handled differently throughout the decades of feminist politics (Mulinari; Sandell 1999). Here, rather than going into a lengthy discussion of what constitutes a proper definition of experience, we propose that when it comes to gendered violence, what feminist politics makes possible is the *narration* of experience; thus a focus on the *act* of narrating is more suitable for understanding the change brought about by feminism.
- 5 Following on from this, we argue that in feminist politics and research on gendered violence, it is possible to identify three broad kinds of narration of women's experiences, or of feminist storytelling, taking place in different arenas and playing important roles in different time periods. Whereas the first period (from the 1970s to the early 1980s) marks the beginning of the narration of experience as a political tool, the second and third periods (roughly from the mid-1980s to the present day) render narration of experience as a primary way of making visible the experiences of gendered violence in the media and hence making it effective in creating public attention. However, describing these periods as different should not be understood as a demarcation. Instead, they are both interconnected and sometimes simultaneous.

## Narratives Told in Closed Spaces - Transformed into Feminist Politics

- 6 The *first kind* of feminist storytelling is autobiographical narratives about experiences of violence and other forms of oppression told by women in closed feminist spaces. Since the initial feminist consciousness-raising groups of the late 1960s and 1970s, which were designed to provide women with the necessary tools to deal with inequalities that they encountered because of their gender, narrating experience has always been at the core of the feminist movements. In MacKinnon's words, the method of consciousness-raising was “the collective critical reconstitution of women's social experience, as women live through it” (MacKinnon 1991: 83). Among other things, through the consciousness-raising method, a plurality of issues were defined, “the most salient of which being abortion and sexual violence” (Ergas 2002: 543).
- 7 Hence, the narrating of experience in consciousness-raising groups was particularly important in the struggle against gendered violence, with the emphasis on the necessity to “believe in women's stories” (in Turkish: *kadının beyanı esastır*). In a time when men's violence against women was considered a private matter of no, or very

little, concern for society, the call to listen to and believe in women's stories about violence was key for feminist politics. In Turkey as well, the feminist struggle against gendered violence started out in consciousness raising groups at the beginning of the 1980s (Sirman 1989); and the movement has played a key role in the handling of the problem throughout the following decades.

- 8 The storytelling of this first kind took, and still takes, place in closed spaces, and their "closedness" becomes a prerequisite for women to put their violent experiences into words and dare to tell their story to others. Apart from consciousness-raising groups, shelters are the most obvious examples of such spaces, created with the aim of providing a physically safe space where women can escape violence, and a psychologically/emotionally safe space where women dare to tell others about their violent experiences. Ideally, in this space, women can trust their stories to be listened to and believed in, and anonymity and a non-requirement to report are core values and practices. Shelters run by feminists in Turkey, such as the case of the Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation, tend to stick more to these ideals; whereas public women's shelters in Turkey may at times lean more on a philanthropic/hierarchical perspective. Following on from this, we may also question to what extent narrating experience may serve the goal of empowerment in these latter institutions (Ekal 2015, Ekal 2019).
- 9 In any case, women's stories about violence, told in these closed spaces, are then transformed by the shelter movement and other parts of the women's movement, and occur for example in the media, with the aim to influence public opinion and put pressure on policy-makers. But they do not become public in the form of personal stories. Instead the stories build the knowledge base and legitimacy of the shelter movement. The stories, complemented and deepened by feminist research, are transformed into a "general"/generalised story built on an analysis about women's everyday lives linking gender, power and violence.

## Women's Violent Experiences as Media Stories

- 10 The *second kind* of feminist storytelling does not necessarily take this detour via closed feminist spaces. Here, personal stories about women's violent experiences are told publicly, in the media, without being transformed into a generalised story.
- 11 This kind of storytelling might be initiated by feminists, as a conscious strategy for making politics against violence, influencing public opinion and putting pressure on policymakers. In this strategy, mainstream media is identified as a crucial arena for public awareness, and feminists are actively using this arena to push the agenda forward. In Turkey, the feminist engagement with the media has a long history, with the movement's publications reaching as far back as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the fledging attention to women's rights in Ottoman women's/charity organisations. These publications were (re)discovered with the rise of the modern women's movement in the late 1980s. The movement itself was extensively involved in its own publishing activities (Sirman 1989, Tekeli 1995) and was empowered by seeing that their "grandmothers" were also struggling for their rights. Since the mid-2000s, feminists have also engaged in actions directed towards the mainstream media, identified media as a platform for feminist activism, and worked to change media from the inside, in addition to creating alternative media (Belge 2008, Alankuş 2007, Ekal; Eldén 2014).

- 12 In mobilizing against men's violence against women, the feminist movement in Turkey and elsewhere have since built engagement around, and been directly involved in, individual cases. That is, in this process, feminists have not only focused on their own experiences of gendered violence, but were able to get in touch with survivors and encourage them to break the silence. With the general awareness about gendered violence, individual women from all backgrounds have become more open about their own experiences and started to talk about them. Survivors' stories about personal experiences of sexual abuse that occurred in the media, vis-à-vis "third-page news" that objectify women and their experiences of violence, has been crucial in putting the issue on the agenda and changing public opinion.
- 13 Public storytelling was also vital for women to make sense of their own experiences and dare to talk (Kitzinger 2004, Mellberg 2002), even though it may also function as a "double-edged sword" (Kitzinger 2004: 46f). That is, it is far from self-evident that women's stories are treated with respect by the media, instead they were often portrayed in a sensationalist manner (Ibid.). Hence, mainstream media also tell their own stories about women's experiences of violence. In other words, we do not only see feminists pushing for the media to give attention to (general or personal) stories about women's experiences of violence, but we also see media defining and creating their own stories, based on their own analysis (Kitzinger 2004). In this process, apart from the sensationalist treatment of women's experiences in the media, we also observe reporters and columnists alike who are very well aware of the harm that may be caused by such treatment and use a rights-based perspective while reporting about gendered violence (Eldén; Ekal 2015, Ekal; Eldén 2014).
- 14 Our research on gendered violence in the Turkish media 2010-2013, shows that some of the personal stories about women's experiences of violence told in the media, particularly stories of fatal violence, *femicides*, have become what we call *emblematic cases* (Eldén; Ekal 2015). This means that they are media stories that have been given a meaning that reaches beyond the individual story, are connected to other stories and that have been important for the public understanding of a phenomena, for example femicides (murders of women) (Ibid, inspired by Kitzinger 2004, Bennet; Lawrence 1995). During the period of our research we saw a strategic feminist engagement in campaigning against murders of women (*Kadın Cinayetlerine Karşı İsyandayız*) leading to the mainstream media picking up the language of the campaign when publishing news about murders of women, and in news about new femicide cases beginning to talk about "yet another murder of a woman" (*bir kadın cinayeti daha*) and linking new cases to previous, emblematic murders of women (Eldén; Ekal 2015:134). A link was created between individual cases, recognising that they had something in common: women are murdered by men because they are women. This led to an unequivocal change in both the presence and understanding of violence against women, and particularly murders of women – femicides in the mainstream media in Turkey (Eldén; Ekal 2014 and 2015)
- 15 In the first kind of feminist storytelling described above, the stories of women's experiences of violence are not directly displayed in the media. Instead the stories are transformed through a feminist analysis into feminist politics, displayed in the media and in other public arenas in a generalised form as women's experiences. The woman and her personal story are protected from media and other forms of public exposure, for safety reasons to protect the individual, as well as for political reasons: the personal story is relevant only if it is generalised. In the second kind of feminist storytelling on

the other hand, the distance between the personal story and the media/public exposure is not there anymore; the personal story is directly exposed. Or perhaps more accurate: the personal story as it is *interpreted by the media* is directly exposed.

## Autobiographical Stories Crossing Media Borders

- 16 Finally, in the *third kind* of feminist storytelling, stories about experiences of violence are told in public, but outside the mainstream/published media. Instead, this time they occur in *social media*, taking the form of autobiographical narratives told by the survivors themselves (be they celebrities or not, that is women from all backgrounds) through hashtags such as the worldwide #metoo, or in Turkey #sendeanlat (#youtellustoo).
- 17 During the autumn of 2017, the #metoo movement spread from celebrities in the US to involve women at all levels of society in many countries all over the world. The “me too” concept was initiated more than ten years earlier by the African American activist Tarana Burke, to make visible and to fight sexual harassment and violence against women. The way in which the 2017 hashtag/campaign was received in different publics, however, depended on many different factors, including the strength of feminist politics in these countries, the general legal framework, as well as previous twitter campaigns on similar cases.
- 18 These hashtags were not only present in social media, but they also became a concern in the mainstream media - they crossed that “border”. Lena Karlsson criticizes current scholarship for heralding social media “as offering a platform for marginal voices that otherwise would not find a media outlet” and she says that the strength of the #metoo, as well as other previous hashtags/campaigns, depended on ample mainstream media attention (Karlsson, 2019). In Turkey, as Pınar Tremblay argues, #metoo was “stillborn”: It was not as widespread and did not receive as much attention in mainstream media as in many other countries (Tremblay 2017). While women did narrate their experiences of violence (mostly their experiences of intimate partner violence, and not of sexual violence as in the original campaign) and advised other women not to stay quiet, to join feminist organizations and set an example that humiliation should be brought to the perpetrators, perpetrators were not named (ibid.).
- 19 Hence, building on our previous research showing the importance of emblematic cases through which violence against women were given a “face”, when looking at the #metoo in Turkey, we could see that this dimension was highly limited, with only a few cases from the TV-series sector. In comparison, another campaign called #sendeanlat (youtellustoo) that was held in Turkey a couple of years earlier, was more widespread than #metoo. It is possible to identify multiple reasons for this: at that time, the hashtag was connected to an emblematic case, the murder of Özgecan Aslan in 2015, building on feminist campaigns about murders of women, and in this sense it was able to make the media attention that started a few years earlier continue. Thus, the very power of the social media campaigns seems to depend on whether they are able to cross media borders. And as in our previous research, we argue that this power indeed comes from feminist movement interventions.
- 20 This third kind of feminist storytelling borrows aspects of the other two, but also adds new dimensions. As for the second kind, these stories were told on a media arena with

the (direct or indirect) aim of reaching out and influencing public opinion. But unlike the second kind, and like the first kind, it is women's own storytelling that is the focus in the third kind, and as in the first kind the focus is on the demand to "believe in women's stories" about violence, and again aiming at revealing what has been hidden. However, unlike the closed spaces in the first kind of feminist storytelling, the personal stories were not generalized or interpreted before reaching the public. Instead they were directly exposed in public – and then transformed into feminist politics.

## Narrating Women's Experiences of Gendered Violence in Turkey

- 21 This issue came about as a result of a workshop entitled "Gender, Violence and Power in Contemporary Turkish Media", that the editors organized at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul on October 26, 2018. In line with these three types of narrating experience to understand the relationship of feminists to media, one common thread in the workshop was the change emanated by the feminist movement on the ways in which news about violence was covered in the mainstream and social media. Our contribution (a short version of which is presented in the introduction to this special issue) and Sevda Numanbayraktaroğlu's contribution represent this thread.
- 22 Sevda Numanbayraktaroğlu, in the article "Agency and the Passive Voice: Gender Ideology and the Press Coverage of Sexual Violence in Turkey", analyses the reporting of sexual violence cases over a period of 20 years (between 1997-2017) in a daily newspaper called *Hürriyet* in Turkey. First, Numanbayraktaroğlu discovers a steady increase in the number of news articles about sexual violence and interprets this as a sign of the dispersal of the stigma around rape. However, as the author also focuses on the use of the active and passive voice in news reporting, another daunting result comes up: "in more than one third of their use of the verb *tecavüz* (rape) and one fourth of their depictions of survivors' and rapists' actions, reporters (consciously or non-consciously) downgraded the agency of the rapists for the rape, assigned responsibility to the survivors for it, and influenced their readers' conceptions of survivors' responsibility for rape and the harm that was done to them" (Numanbayraktaroğlu, <https://journals.openedition.org/ejts/6359> paragraph no. 93).
- 23 A second thread in the workshop concerned the use of the concept of fantasy while dealing with women's desires to fit into normativity, a common pattern that could be observed in popular television shows and in social media. Even though it was initially developed in psychoanalytical approaches, fantasy as a concept, as is explained in Belgin Tekçe's article in this issue, "Fantasy and Propriety in Familial Lives", can also be used to "make visible' desire for normality, as the motivational force for healing reaches and disruption in the propriety of lives, and thus for re-instituting virtuous selves" (Tekçe, <https://journals.openedition.org/ejts/6226> paragraph no. 3). Tekçe investigates the notion of fantasy through a study of life story narratives in the context of Turkey. With a focus on understanding women's strategies to deal with their experiences that fall outside the norm, Tekçe examines two different cases where women feel that they did not have the chance to follow the usual order of things in the course of raising their first born child, and decide to have a second one to make sure that this time they live through this period properly (*usulüne göre*) (Tekçe, *ibid.*). After

discussing these stories, told in the closed spaces of homes, Tekçe also hints at the role of media and fiction in making publicly circulated fantasies our own.

- 24 The third article of the issue, “Mediated Fantasies of the Family on Turkish Television” by Nükhet Sirman, focuses on the narratives of televised fictional series and daytime reality shows aired on television to understand why “notions about the family are not just ideological, but are lodged deep within the subject and therefore difficult to get rid of” (Sirman, <https://journals.openedition.org/ejts/6329> paragraph no. 3). Here, Sirman argues, the concept of fantasy, rather than that of ideology or discourse, is more explicatory: “The latter two rely too much on cognition, and therefore fall short of accounting for the force with which a subject is attached to desire” (Sirman, *ibid.*). Sirman also offers us an analysis of gendered violence as described through narratives of marriage and the family, arguing that looking at gendered violence requires the recognition of fantasmatic desire characterizing notions of family.
- 25 The last article, “Fantasy and Judgement: Brides’ Intimate Talk on Facebook” by Feyza Aknerdem, delves into the question of the desire for normativity through intimate talk of women on a Facebook group (“Brides’ Home and Trousseau”). Social media enables the formation of, what Aknerdem calls, an “intimate public” for women that let them discuss their desires for a good relationship or a fantasy scenario regarding their weddings or other special occasions. An unexpected aspect of this closed Facebook group is that it also becomes a setting for women to discuss/narrate their experiences of violence and seek advice. However, at the same time, this enables others to watch, participate and judge this fantasy; in the intimate public “fantasies proliferate through judgments, and judgments spring from fantasies” (Aknerdem, <https://journals.openedition.org/ejts/6262> paragraph no. 38).
- 26 As a last word, we can say that feminists have always identified media as a key arena for the visibility of women’s experiences and the struggle against gendered violence. As discussed by feminist scholars, media offers both the ground for the circulation of unequal gender norms and the possibility for change. What both threads of our workshop – and now this special issue – demonstrate is that unequal norms and changes towards equality co-exist and that even though feminist movements in Turkey have been able to make intimate partner violence more visible in the media and more possible to talk about, there is still a long way to go for other forms of violence, including sexual violence, to achieve the same visibility.

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