

## Chapter 10

# *'No Job for a Grown Man': Transformations in Labour and Masculinity among Kurdish Migrants in London*

Sarah J. Keeler

### Introduction

The interstices of gender and migration are now being more thoroughly mined for analyses which can shed light on the reformation of identities and inequalities in the twenty-first century global economy (Piper 2007; Tastsoglou and Dobrowolsky 2006; Willis and Yeoh 2000). However, such work tends to equate gender with female migration, often obscuring the presence of men. As both Joanna Herbert and Ali Ahmad argue in this volume, the cultural and economic (re)construction of masculinities, as migrants and refugees become enmeshed within new localities and transnational systems, remains neglected: part of a wider neglect of masculinity as a domain of analysis within social science (Gutman 1997). Transnational migration has generally created conditions in which identities — those of gender, ethnicity, class, nation, religion — are destabilised, rendering locatedness problematic (Appadurai 1996; Hall 1996). In what follows, I outline the complexity of such interstices using a case study to highlight the changing ways in which certain identity markers (those of gender) are foregrounded as a kind of response to the simultaneous invisibility of others (those of ethnicity and 'nation').

The case study looks at Kurdish migrants from Turkey, many of whom arrived in London as refugees in the early 1990s, during the height of conflict between members of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Turkish state. It focuses on self-perceptions of masculinity and their relation to labour trends which research participants have seen as diminishing their ethnic identity as they experience a process of being subsumed into the local 'Turkish speaking' economy and into productive roles traditionally attributed to women — namely those of sewing and food preparation. The research is based on my more than three years of close contacts with Kurdish diasporans in London and elsewhere. This chapter also draws on interviews with six men, varying in age from 27 to 46, about their experiences and ideas of migration, gender, identity, labour and the challenges they face as Kurdish men engaged with these issues, on informal group discussions with people in the community, and on participant observation which took place during and since the

time of my fieldwork in 2004-2005. I draw on the experience of my PhD research into transformations in identity discourse within the Kurdish diaspora, much of which centred upon narratives that situate differences of gender, political ideology, age, and social class as constitutive elements in the shaping of 'authentic' Kurdishness. Because this particular Kurdish population is not yet well-established relative to other UK immigrant populations, and remains largely invisible in terms of the ethnic monitoring and overall demographic delineations prevalent in contemporary Britain (Griffiths 2002), it represents a particularly pertinent example of how such complex realities play out, drawing on both transnational and local realities.

A conversation I had near the outset of my PhD fieldwork was the initial impetus for this piece. I was speaking with Hasan,<sup>1</sup> a 39 year old community worker who has lived in London for the last seventeen years, and has thus witnessed the many transitions which have taken place in identity formations — ethnic, gendered, political, social — at the community level within this relatively 'new' Kurdish migrant population in London. Seeking to understand the relationship between the growing commodification of 'ethnic' identity in the global cityscape of London, the development and uses of ethnic nationalist discourses transnationally, and their implications for the placement of Kurdish migrants within local political economy, I wanted to know about labour practices. Hasan told me:

The important thing is, most men, when they came from Kurdistan — at first they came alone, as young single men, like me ... even if they went back and married or brought family later — most of the men took jobs in clothing factories or restaurants. We were cooking, sewing ... There were a lot owned by Turks when I arrived. See that hotel there, across the street? It used to be a small factory where we sewed, it's where I had my first job. We had to take the jobs that were here because we couldn't speak the language well enough ... although people didn't like working for Turks. But more importantly, we took jobs, like sewing and cooking that men didn't do, that — in Kurdistan, this is done by women. So it was a big challenge to being a man. The men who came and did those jobs felt threatened, it even caused embarrassment at first. We had to change the way we think about being a man, you know? (Hasan).

For a society in which the traditional relationships between specific gender and productive domains are fairly clearly delimited, this was significant. I was struck by the multiple challenges to the integrity of Kurdish masculinity that were embedded within Hasan's description of Kurdish men's experience of job-seeking in their newly adopted country, and by the parallel drawn between material, social and symbolic forms of productivity — of 'male/female', Kurdish identity, the nation. I wanted to further explore how normative assumptions of gender within Kurdish society in Turkey were challenged by migratory experience, and what sorts of responses this generated in the local London discourses of 'Kurdish community' in exile. The interstices of ethnicity, gender, and politics as identity markers, and the relative social positioning enabled or conscribed by these in the context of a local 'ethnic' political economy dominated by Turkish entrepreneurs are thus the underlying themes of this chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of participants.

Here I seek to recentre the construction of masculinity within these themes, which is not only an assumed but unknown quantity within Kurdish society as far as social science research goes, but which remains generally under-attended in prevailing Gender Studies — a field of enquiry in which 'gender' often continues to be synonymous with 'women'.<sup>2</sup> In addressing this theme within my own data and in studies of gender generally, and following from Hasan's observation that to 'change the way we think about being a man' involves a process of negotiation, we need to direct enquiry towards understanding the construction of both masculinities and femininities in relation to one another, and the 'different ways that masculinities are performed or enacted in specific settings' (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994, 38). From the point of view of the current volume, one of the fundamental shifts in setting which influences such performances is that of migration and the transformations in gender relations within this context. Therefore, although my discussion deals specifically with men's place within migration, it considers changing masculinity as shaped alongside changing (and re-embedded) ideas about femininity. That such labour roles were viewed by many as damaging social standing, and that engaging in female pursuits such as sewing added insult to injury, is implied by a comment from Anwar who told me:

You should have seen the scandal when family at home found out my cousin was working in a factory, making women's clothing. Everyone thought we came to Europe for a better life, and Faoud had told them that he owned a shop. Wallahe, it caused so much gossip and he was really embarrassed, [laughs] all that time he had been sewing women's knickers. It was so terrible. people thought it brought a lot of shame to our family (Anwar).

### London's Kurdish Community — Ethnic Unity and Internal Diversity

Kurdish populations in London are, like all diaspora groups, marked by a significant internal diversity (Werbner 2004) in religion, social class, language, region of origin, migratory experience and other factors. My reference to 'Kurdish diaspora' is based predominantly on self-ascription by interviewees, and includes those from all these diverse backgrounds and the four states which encompass Kurdistan (Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria), but within this chapter I am dealing specifically with groups from Turkey.<sup>3</sup> The north-east London borough of Hackney is home to a sizable Kurdish population originating mainly from rural, largely underdeveloped and conflict ridden south-eastern regions of the country. The enforced cultural and linguistic assimilation of Kurds by the Turkish state, and the concentration of both Turks and Kurds in the borough have created a particular complex of economic relations. Today

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<sup>2</sup> Ironically, this view, though often taken up by feminist scholars and those with a more explicit focus on women's studies, serves to perpetuate an epistemological system in which men and masculinity are 'unmarked categories' (Mooers 2003), the norm against which we measure 'pathologies' including that of women and femininity.

<sup>3</sup> My use of terms such as 'Kurdish community' or 'Kurdish diaspora' are made with a full awareness of their potential to reify what are inherently fluid social categories, and thus gloss over the above differences as well as age and gender.

the Kurdish population in Hackney, where the traditional 'female' labour activities concerned are concentrated, is estimated to be approximately 10,000 (Hackney Council 1999a). Kurdish migrants began to arrive in Hackney from Turkey in large numbers during the early to mid 1990s, when tensions between the ethnically based PKK and the nationalist/Kemalist Turkish military led to armed conflict, and an eventual large scale refugee crisis. The fighting between PKK guerrillas and the Turkish army violently cleared thousands of villages in the south-east Kurdish region. The subsequent forced migration of many thousands of Kurds from these agricultural regions (Griffiths 2002) resulted in large numbers of semi-skilled refugee populations arriving in London with limited opportunities for insertion into the mainstream economic infrastructure. Many had previously been engaged in work as farm labourers (Hackney Council 1999b), and few had received opportunities for higher education, either because of their socioeconomic status, or because the conflict in the region disrupted the possibility for people to engage in such pursuits.

However London has long been home to other Kurdish minorities, many of whom arrived from Iraq and Iran in earlier decades, starting as early as the 1960s (Griffiths 2002). Unlike fellow-Kurds from Turkey, these individuals have often tended to be more urbanised, middle class and thus more highly educated. Their socioeconomic backgrounds and migratory experiences have generally enabled them to settle in more affluent neighbourhoods of west London, including Hammersmith, Fulham and Ealing where many became business owners and others entered professions. While many Kurds cite diasporic displacement as facilitating a wider consciousness about the depth and diversity of Kurdish culture and experience throughout the homeland (cf. Alinia 2004), this has not necessarily mitigated against the inevitable tensions of social class and political ideology which arise in such a complex diasporic landscape. Elsewhere in this volume, Herbert highlights the ways in which categorizations centring on ethnicity can overwrite tensions and divergences of class and migratory experience/aspirations (cf. Gardner 1995).

One of the key tropes within these contestations over defining an essential nature of Kurdish identity and experience has pivoted on the ascription of gender roles and behaviours. Kurds from middle-class backgrounds have been more active in defining bourgeois masculinities in which the emancipation of women is an aim if not always a reality of community life in the UK. Others from rural backgrounds have at times tended to maintain a system in which 'the family-as-microcosm of culture' (Appadurai 1996, 45) ensures a focus on fixed gender roles for both men and women. This seemingly dichotomised situation is complicated by the local mobilisation of nationalist discourses, specifically that of the PKK, whose ideological underpinnings advocate an egalitarian gender system based on Marxist-feminist theories. Thus the relationship between local economic realities and transnational political processes can make for exceedingly fluid and often contentious constructions of identity, gendered and otherwise. It is precisely this complexity, and its attendant uncertainties, that facilitate the imposition of fixed readings of masculine identity vis a vis feminine ideals of 'traditional' Kurdish culture, seen as under threat both from the conditions of conflict in the homeland of Kurdistan and from the uncertainties of belonging in a post-modern global city like London. That the men with whom I spoke are ambivalent even at an individual level with respect to their desires to maintain fixed

gender roles on the one hand, while also wishing to embrace the changes wrought by migratory processes, is evident in their narratives.

Following from Allen, I observe that 'questions of sameness/difference and 'we/they' quickly evaporate in the face of personal, particular histories' (1994, 97); both the questions of difference and the particular histories are shaped partly by contingent questions of gender. Despite the particularities borne of the internal diversity of supposedly coherent ethnic or cultural 'groups' like the Kurds however, attempts to gloss this over with essentialist readings persist. The amorphous conditions within transnational migration, for example, can lead to reactive constructions of a monolithic identity in the face of situations which actively serve to destabilise absolutes (Hall 1996). Very often these essentialist constructions are propounded by social and political actors with a vested and privileged interest in maintaining the status quo; those political and economic elites, men, the state (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994). Thus, although the emergence of diaspora has generated substantial debates and internal conflicts over what constitutes 'Kurdishness' for this globally dispersed population, its flip side can be seen in attempts to stabilise a uniform 'Kurdish identity', which works largely for the claims of (Kurdish) nationalist interests (Keeler 2007). A key practice within this process involves the creation of essential Kurdish masculine and feminine ideals, and indeed we can observe here as in other cases the ways in which '(masculinised) power is consistently associated with those who have control over resources and who have an interest in naturalising and perpetuating that control' (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994, 21). I will return to the ways in which tangible representations of these gendered ideals play out in the local political economy of London's Kurdish diaspora, and how notions of 'masculine' and 'feminine' become complementary dimensions of an 'essential national character'. For example 35 year old Anwar, a restaurant manager who arrived in London at the age of 23 and is single, described his ideal partner as follows:

To me, I would like a nice Kurdish girl. She should be educated, but ... sweet, I like a girl who is sweet and soft — a little bit happy to please the man, to make me feel like the man and I'm special. I would love to meet such a girl who could support me. And of course she would need to speak Kurdish. Some girls in Europe do not you know, but it is important, for me, if you want to have children (Anwar).

Anwar's narrative characterises an ideal of Kurdish femininity which, although challenged within increasingly competing discourses, remains pervasive as a way of representing the nation and as an aspiration for men like Anwar. Nationalist, ethnic and gendered ideals intersect in the course of contestations over power and identity, and within such ideologies women, whether in social or biological reproductive capacities, are often positioned as the sacrosanct embodiment of the nation, while men are cast as her protectors (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Allen 1994; Yuval-Davis 1997). Conditions of migration and diaspora may in fact serve to legitimise such representations as the heightened importance of identity, which stems from this dislocation from homeland, and symbolic forms of identity maintenance which underlie it, places an onus on migrants to uphold and protect a 'pure' notion of ethnicity, identity, and nation in gendered terms (Ignacio 2005). A material example

of this can be observed in the prevalence of Kurdish women in traditional national dress within the popular iconography of Kurdish diasporic spaces in London, gracing everything from the paintings which adorn the walls of Kurdish community organisations, to the decorative rugs found in many Kurdish homes (also see Herbert, this volume).

Kurdish refugees from Turkey, unlike Sunni Kurds originating from Iran and Iraq, are predominantly adherents of Alevism (followers of Ali), and there is little consensus as to whether this group constitutes a Muslim sect in either beliefs or practices. Alevis, although sometimes seen as a sect of Shi'a Islam, also incorporate pre-Islamic dimensions into their religion, and engage in social behaviours and forms of worship that differ significantly from orthodox Sunni Islam which is present in religious communities in Turkey (Shankland 1993). Several of these, including joint worship between men and women — in a *cemevi* (or 'meeting house') rather than a mosque — and lack of prescription on the wearing of the headscarf or *hijab* for women, have important implications for gender relations. For these and other (often politically motivated) reasons, Alevis have often been vilified by the Turkish state as well as by Turkish Sunni populations in migrant receiving countries where large numbers of Alevi Kurds also reside (Mandel 1995). As such, Kurdish migrants and refugees in London are rarely more than culturally conscribed Muslims. Indeed their relations with other Muslim populations in the migratory context are occasionally fraught with tension and conflict, like their interactions with ethnic Turks in Hackney.

However, from an external viewpoint, especially given their placement within the sort of immigrant 'Little Istanbul' atmosphere of east London — filled with shops, cafes, and community services where Turkish is often an unofficial *lingua franca* — Kurds are viewed generically as 'Middle Easterners' and as Muslims. Here I want to provide a sense of the many layers and interstices which both inform and restrict the processes of identification for Kurds in London. Gender, religion, geography, ethnicity and class distinctions traverse, overlap, and contradict one another. Despite their relative attitudes of gender equality vis a vis some more orthodox Muslim populations, Kurdish society in the particular region of origin is still very often patriarchal in character (Mojab 2002), and marked by clear 'male/female' divisions of labour. This is clearly indicated by Hasan's remarks, which opened the discussion, while another interviewee told me

Sure, it was a big comedown when you leave home and — we thought we would be improving — then to end up sewing women's clothes or making bread all day [laughs]. These are the mum's jobs! (Hasan).

The reconfiguration of this gendered labour, and the subordination of particular ethnicised masculinities to dominant forms of masculine power (eg. Kurdish versus Turkish) draw on and interact with processes of gender construction located in regional, global and local political economies. In a social system in which inequalities are predicated largely on (internally and externally) constructed identity markers, and when those inequalities are tied up with latent or real conflicts, it is no great step to suggest that 'women are used in defining boundaries, and asserting the dominance

of some men over other men through the protection of 'their' women' (Allen 1994, 98). In this context, women's bodies become the sites over which national, ethnic, religious and other struggles are literally and symbolically waged (Yuval-Davis 1997), but those who remind us of this gendered element in nationalist thinking tend to overlook their impact on men; they also experience culturally coercive imperatives to serve as the 'protectors' of this national/feminine ideal. In terms of everyday social interactions and activities, this includes the display of 'appropriate' characteristics and behaviours of 'our' masculine ideal. Murat, one of the first to arrive with the earliest of the refugee movements in 1993 and now a community leader, believes that:

Unfortunately, the culture that we come from, well there is a lot of inequality ... women are second-class citizens, for sure. This is accepted. But we know we need to change this and actually Kurds are doing a lot, they are the first to speak out against such things, like honour killing for example. Compared to other groups like Arabs in Iraq or others, the Kurds are the most critical (Murat).

Murat's statement indicates the ambivalence and competing loyalties for a multiply subordinated group — recognising the systematic domination of women within his cultural background, he is then quick to distance Kurdish cultural norms from those of contiguous cultural groups; implicit within this is an identification with liberal western ideals of human rights.<sup>4</sup>

### **Men's Labour, 'Women's Work' and Employment in Britain**

East London has long been a point of settlement for labourers from diverse migrant backgrounds who quickly became embedded in the dense local manufacturing economy (Eade 2000; Ahmad, this volume). At the height of the Kurdish refugee influx in the early 1990s, Hackney was still home to a thriving economy of small industrial production, specifically in the textile industries. This relied on the substantial numbers of annual migrant arrivals who, for reasons of economic opportunity, social networks and language and infrastructural resources, chose the borough of Hackney as their home. Such populations have long formed an exploitable labour pool for the industrial economy in the area, only recently replaced by a service-based economy. The borough was also notable at the time for its considerable population of Turkish nationals, who, in the early 1980s, followed the settlement by Turkish Cypriots in the east London borough during the 1950s and 1960s. A typical chain migration pattern had by then been established, and local economic, social and cultural infrastructures had begun to develop accordingly. In this respect at least it is unsurprising that Kurdish migrants from Turkey, many of whom had a better grasp of Turkish than of their native Kurdish as a result of the assimilationist policies of the Turkish

<sup>4</sup> These debates have become increasingly salient in recent months in Britain in the wake of several high profile cases of 'honour killings' (McViegh 2007) which have prompted Kurdish community leaders and women's right groups to call for reflection and action on the position of women and patriarchal power in Kurdish society.

state, also chose to locate in the area. Here, they could access legal, health, housing and educational services in a familiar language, and shop and socialise as well. However, in so doing, they had to further deny or suppress a distinct and hard fought ethnocultural identity which had been, through its often virulent repression by the Turkish military, a major impetus for their initial flight from the Kurdish homelands. As Hasan explains, many Kurds from Turkey carried a 'self esteem problem', both conscious of the deterministic demands of the market in the UK and also harbouring internalised and unresolved notions about cultural inequality in their homeland.

They hid who they were because maybe they were ashamed or — they were — afraid for example they couldn't survive, wouldn't find a job. You needed to speak Turkish and anyway if you went to school in Turkey you were brainwashed (Hasan).

However, just as the refugees were arriving in growing numbers and in need of work, the domestic manufacturing sector began to dry up and increasingly move towards offshore manufacture. The available work, as interviewees have pointed out, was generally in small textile factories, and increasingly towards the late 1990s, in cafes and kebab shops at the heart of the 'Turkish speaking community' in Hackney and throughout the east end. In such establishments, employees were subject to long hours, poor job security, often systemic denigration, and were left with virtually no chance to develop further skills or opportunities. Forty-one-year-old Karzan who arrived as a single asylum seeker in 1995 describes the labour conditions at the time both in terms of the physical demands and of the diminished social and political positioning of Kurds in this context:

We worked in the — well yes, they were like a sweatshop. People couldn't speak a word of English, some had never been outside their villages. But you could get work in the factories because you spoke Turkish and so did the owners. It was not good work though, they made us work long hours and usually people didn't know their rights so they were sometimes paid illegally. And if you had political views [PKK support] ... well, you couldn't have political views! Later some people took jobs in cafes and kebab shops, when the factories started to leave. But for a man to be doing this ... it's not productive. What can it contribute to society? (Karzan).

Thus, unskilled and vulnerable to the changing contours of the British asylum system, such Kurdish arrivals in Hackney experienced multiple disadvantages; subject not only to a hegemonic political economy of white domination, but also to Turkish entrepreneurial elites who were happy to exploit their vulnerable social positioning. Many Kurds I spoke with saw Turks as demonstrating a greater racist bent than white Europeans. Kurdish migrants were daily confronted with the hegemonic conditions of their own oppression by the Turkish state, through its reproduction in social interactions with Turkish migrants in the UK. Further, the elision, through local procedures of categorisation, of distinct and in some respects mutually antagonistic ethnic identities — those of ethnic Turks and Kurds — into a single 'Turkish Speaking Community' (Ahmet 2005) was often seen to reproduce their subordination within the nationalist categorisations of who is and is not 'of the nation' in Turkey itself. As Karzan explained, local policies continue to assume



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Turks and Kurds are culturally synonymous, as they 'do not understand the idea of a Kurd'. Thus the 'racialised capitalism' described by Ahmad (this volume) is dislodged from a simple black/white dichotomy, instead taking as its reference point the complexity of ethnic relations in the homeland. Displaced by the salience of antagonisms between Turks and Kurds in the local context, the dynamic of white oppression of ethnic minorities seems for the men I encountered to have been recast in gendered terms.

Nonetheless, this 'Turkish speaking' urban milieu also afforded opportunities for earning a livelihood in a context which was otherwise economically challenging for the arriving Kurdish refugees, many of whom came from semi-skilled village backgrounds. Often the earliest migrants found work (frequently illegal, and thus subject to considerable exploitation) in the small factories manufacturing garments and textiles for British retailers. By the time of the main refugee influx of Kurds in the 1990s, the Turkish population in Hackney were sufficiently established to be in positions of ownership and supervision within these industrial ventures. Despite the hegemonic system which this engendered with respect to culturally contiguous but often mutually antagonistic groups, it also brought about an informal process of integration and social change, as Kurds from small villages were exposed to the multiethnic city through the microcosmic spaces of their workplaces. Employed by Turks, they also came into contact with Vietnamese, Bangladeshi, Caribbean and other co-workers, and began to develop a greater sense of diversity and tolerance. This also meant, in practical terms, that English was the only shared language by which the various employees could communicate. For example, when Murat arrived, he worked in a textile factory run by Turks. He explained to me how interactions between various ethnic groups working alongside one another created both bridges and barriers, and helped in creating the 'ethnic' economy and multicultural environment of Hackney as we know it today:

You see, when we first came ... I didn't speak English and even though I didn't want to be working again (for Turks), having them tell me what to do, degrade my identity ... I could get no job someplace else. So it was bad in one way because it means you can't establish yourself. I was — you're speaking Turkish all the time! But then, also we learned things from each other, there were many other people — Chinese, Vietnamese, and Bangladeshi people working in the factory. Can you imagine, if you come from a village in Kurdistan ... I had never seen a black person before. So we had to all learn English then so we could speak to each other. And at lunch times ... you learned about others' cultures, other kinds of food and things ... so in this way we learned — we came to know multiculturalism (Murat).

Murat's experience speaks to the positive potential within destabilising processes wrought by transnational movement of people, ideas and goods. Although feeling exploited by Turkish factory owners who in Kurds' own essentialist discourses had played a part as coercive (and often demonised) oppressors, Kurdish labourers came to rethink their identities, in some ways replacing Kurdish ethnicity with a shared notion of an urban underclass of minority labourers. Murat's narrative suggests that this experience allowed for a partial liberation, and made possible identification with an 'other'. However, this partial identification with 'otherness', and the divesting

of essentialist ethnic ideologies which it implied, did not carry over into gender in the same way. On the contrary, the challenges to masculinity, unlike those to ethnicity, did not bring about an identification with feminine otherness, but instead a reassertion of differential gender markers, and a distinction made between 'good Kurdish women' and amoral European women. The identification of employers as antagonists in the repressive homeland conversely may have led to an increased sense of identification with the host society and with other minorities, as Murat's comments demonstrate. Thus if the daily engagement with wage labour in a largely hostile host society reproduces hierarchies and inequalities entrenched in that global system (Mandel 1995; Sassen 1996), the reference points extend far beyond an obvious first/third world, black/white conception of things. Indeed, Kurdish men tend to narrate their experiences of discrimination in the UK in terms not of racism but of language, as their comments testify.

### **Ethnicity and Gender in the Symbolic Economy**

The decline of manufacturing industry and the rise of a service-based economy has involved a transformation in the placement and significance of migrant labour within the global city (Sassen 1999). The aestheticisation of identity (be it ethnic, gendered or otherwise), and the place of the body — now product as much as producer — within that, has become commodified as a package-able (Zukin 1995) source of 'authenticity for sale'. When people come to dine in a Turkish or Kurdish restaurant, they do so not only to sample the lovingly reproduced traditional fare, but also to view and experience the process by which it is created and the atmospheric features which lend it cultural 'weight'. The cultural, social and economic encounters which take place in these spaces can serve as highly condensed moments of identification of or with particular 'others'. As demonstrated by Kurdish men's narratives of labour and migration in the multicultural context of the global city, these processes of encounter, identification, and 'othering' can be emancipatory or humiliating in equal measure (Lees 2004). The demeaning aspects of their experience are simultaneously expressed in ethnic and gendered terms; through their insertion into the local ethnic economy of Turkish speakers, the men experience an erasure of their Kurdish identity which recalls their disempowerment in the homeland. Further, the 'domestic' types of labour in which they engage destabilizes their relationship to notions of acceptable Kurdish masculinity. Ahmad (this volume) looks at the conceptual renegotiations which take place as the demands for patriarchal control among Pakistani men are confounded by the blurring of private and public spheres. For Kurdish men in Hackney this loss of control, though not expressed in terms of patriarchal power, may be experienced through being cast in female productive roles, or sometimes more directly, through harassing behaviour from white female customers which the men interpret as being inappropriately sexual.

Even for those Kurdish migrants who come to the UK with some skills and experience, there are challenges in acquiring livelihoods in London's economic infrastructure, due to a variety of factors including language barriers and what many feel to be the persistence of structurally embedded discriminatory practices. For

example, 46-year-old Mustafa, who has been in London since 1999, trained as a teacher in Turkey. However, since he lacks language skills and his qualifications are not recognised in the UK, he now works in a café in east London. He told me of his experiences of job-seeking:

I wanted to find work [in education] but it is difficult. If I spoke the language better it would be easier, but when you are trying to find work ... I had to earn a living, it's not so easy to learn the language, there is no time, there is stress. I tried for two years to find a job with some teaching ... but no one could help and finally I had to take this job. I don't like what I'm doing, sometimes I feel ashamed ... but what could I do? I had to feed my family. Now I won't improve [English language]. There is no time, and the work — I am working twelve, sometimes fourteen hours ... (Mustafa).

Although Mustafa thinks his employers are essentially fair and honest ('not like some bosses I heard of') sometimes, working late nights in the café, he describes being subject to uncomfortable situations and even racist abuse. Many men who work nights in kebab shops and cafes indicated that they find the work especially degrading because, as their establishments keep late hours when few other businesses are open, their workplaces are sites for illicit, potentially unsafe, and sometimes violent behaviour from customers leaving clubs and bars late at night under the influence of alcohol and drugs. It is evident from several of the men's narratives that they may at times feel that this exposure compromises their capacity for a 'correct' lifestyle that maintains their integrity as Kurds and as men.

Twenty-seven-year-old Ali, who came to the UK when he was only twelve in 1992, has grown up in London and worked in a kebab shop (often alongside his father) nearly all of that time. Speaking about the kinds of indirect sexual harassment he has experienced when serving customers, he said:

In the past I saw ... sometimes girls or women would come in — you know, if they had too much to drink or if they came from the club. They want to have a laugh or show off to their friends ... they would be very rude, very sexual remarks sometimes ... wearing very little clothes or acting in an inappropriate way — and also aggressive, being very suggestible! I think they thought "he doesn't understand what we're saying, we can say what we want" ... You know, like thinking we're just Muslims or some stupid Turks and trying to take the piss, to embarrass me. But actually it was embarrassing, I usually didn't know what to do so I just did pretend not to understand ... (Ali).

Ali's narrative indicates how, when his normative ideas about 'appropriate' female behaviour are confronted with new possibilities, he reasserts ethnic and gender stereotypes: those of wanton western women versus disciplined Kurdish men vulnerable to feminine 'corruption'. It also indicates how sexist and racist attitudes in the dominant culture make the multiple intersections of gender, ethnicity and class far from straightforward systems of dominance/oppression. Such complex realities call for an 'attempt to describe and analyse divisions of labour not as formal and static ideal types but in their actually occurring and contradictory cultural and historical manifestations' (Gutman 1997, 391).

In these social interactions 'there is a multiplicity of identities being formed and reproduced in these decentred spaces of the economy' (Sassen 1996, 184),

and ethnicity and gender are continuously shifted, fore-grounded or subordinated relative to one another in a given context. Ali also indicated that for him, many Kurds actively participate in this system of marginalisation of 'decentred' productive spaces, further devaluing them; he spoke of his belief that Kurdish society in London is 'closed' and 'outdated', and that an emphasis on earning a living at the expense of self-improvement has prevented him and many peers from gaining educational qualifications which might lift them from these degraded and marginalised social positions.

If I had gone to school more and spent time studying, instead of having to work with my father in the shop, I could have a proper job now, instead of stuck in this kitchen, waiting on people. This is no job for a grown man. I'd still like to go to university one day (Ali).

The productive roles that Kurds play in this context are given no place in the hegemonic gendered and ethnicised narratives of white British, Turkish or Kurdish society. Being valued by neither the British political economic mainstream nor the Turkish or Kurdish views of 'traditional' masculinity, Kurds are potentially subject to racist and sexist pejoratives and to the very real risks associated with work in late night establishments (Parker 1994). Like many migrant labourers who work on the margins, invisible within dominant economic, social and political narratives, these men experience feelings of exclusion and oppression in which they must 'regularly cross a perilous divide separating two different worlds', and where 'the characteristic economic relations between 'First' and 'Third' worlds are linguistically, socially, and culturally reproduced' (Mandel 1996, 151). The multiple experiences of devaluation and the impenetrability of spheres of privilege and disempowerment are vividly illustrated in Anwar's remark

I have to tell people I am a Turk if I want to get a job, because still they or the Persians or Arabs control things ... we just serve the kebabs. And also, British people, they don't know the difference. They come in and they just want a taste of Ali Baba, right? (Anwar).

The implied messages in these narratives about the hazards associated with work in the catering industry also serve to reveal the complex relations between local conditions of economic exploitation and more diffuse yet no less powerful Orientalist inscriptions of cultural otherness which facilitate these local inequalities. Research has shown how the commodification of 'ethnic' cuisine and the 'cultural-experience-for-sale' that comes alongside this can threaten the sense of cultural integrity many minority employees struggle to maintain in the context of cultural dislocations (Harbottle 2000). The subtle play of sexual politics and vestiges of colonial domination tied up in such seemingly innocuous relations as those between staff and customers in Asian take-away restaurants in Britain, as described by Parker (1994), further sheds light on Kurdish men's narratives, and the embarrassment they feel at the hands of female customers and in the eyes of their communities and society at large. Karwan too described situations in which he was

... shocked by girls and the way they behave in public ... everything sex. I wanted to tell them "aren't you ashamed?" but in the end I just smile, I don't want to lose my job

and they are not worth it. My daughters would not behave like this. I am not like some Kurdish men, looking for some quick fun on the side of [in addition to] my wife. We get this reputation, but then some of the [British] women — also they want to take advantage of this (Karwan).

He also expressed feelings of being 'ashamed for myself and for them'.

What Parker (1994) refers to as 'encounters across the counter' in catering work interrogate men's notions of gendered divisions of labour in potentially productive ways, but also reinforce culturally conscribed ideas about gender, particularly the acceptability of normative female behaviours in British or Kurdish society. When viewed through the prism of gender, the 'perilous divide' (Mandel 1996) between spaces of minority labour and exploitive European domination encompass transnational realities including these popular culture tropes, and all the 'loops that tie together fantasies about the Other, the conveniences and seductions of travel, the economics of global trade, and the brutal mobility fantasies that dominate gender politics' (Appadurai 1996, 39; cf. Bowman 1996) globally. As refugees with few practical resources allowing them to manoeuvre through exploitive systems in the UK, Kurdish men in this employment sector face a 'situation where impotence [is] structured into the social situation by political and economic forces' (Bowman 1996, 93), and which they often feel powerless to change if they want to maintain their tenuous place in London's global market and local ethnic economies.

Men who engage in such livelihoods are not only vulnerable to sometimes racist abuse from aggressive or drunken late night customers from the dominant white population in London (cf. Parker 1994), but also to a sense of being subordinated to racist/nationalist Turkish discourses recalling traumatic experiences in the homeland, which may involve a painful denial of their ethnicity. Kurds too, especially those from urban or middle-class backgrounds, also often view such labour as embodying all that is 'backward' and best left behind in their culture and its relative positioning within London's multicultural spaces (cf. Caglar 1998). Such ideas are embedded within the discourses of perceived differences of religion, class and gender within Kurdish migrant populations in London. For example, when opportunities arise for contact between the various 'sub-groups', and when discussions about the nature of Kurdish identity, social progress and the like arises (which is almost inevitably the case in such diasporic spaces), a frequently dismissive insult of others' opinions runs along the lines of 'go work in a kebab shop' or 'he should be selling doner someplace'. This equates such work with low educational levels and with the more traditional insults levelled at men who engage in 'women's work' (Morvaridi 1993). It also suggests the complexity of class differences and the significance of gender within this, as debates centring around women's rights set 'progressive' educated Kurds against 'peasants' from uneducated backgrounds. Nonetheless, while middle-class Kurds vocalise their belief in gender emancipation, such insults suggest the degraded spaces of 'female' productivity in their own estimations as well.

Thus, the types of physical labour, the geography, and the social relations which characterise this form of livelihood for Kurdish men regularly put them in situations where they feel ethnically, sexually and socially degraded. While dominant white British society valorises the labour activities of white, middle-class men at the expense

of invisible, minority-dominated service industries within the capitalist economy (Sassen 1999), the 'ethnic economy' to which they are relegated further compromises the capacity for Kurdish men to express their sense of ethnic identity in the face of a continued perception of Turkish domination and cleavages within Kurdish diasporic space. In such cases, where 'understanding a situation and devising strategies of empowerment within it is often not a sufficient defence against the overwhelming powers of hostile states and exploitive international economies' (Bowman 1996), the men I interviewed tended to displace any sense of disempowered masculinity onto efforts to reassert notions of what constitutes 'good' or 'shameful' female behaviour, and cast this in primarily ethnic terms.

### **Conclusions — Gender, Ethnicity and Mobility**

The role of Kurdish men from refugee backgrounds in local economies of difference has placed them at a tricky crossroads, tending to challenge ethnic essentialism but to reinforce gender essentialism. Their encounters with various cultural others in the urban milieu has been complicated by Kurdish political interests in local and transnational 'community' discourses (Keeler 2007). Within their nationalist discourses, the female remains an important marker of pure and recovered ethnic identity, upon whose bodies and images national identity is inscribed. This has the two-fold effect of making men both more empowered as brokers of political and discursive control, and conversely, as everyday social actors, less so by virtue of their invisibility within discursive structures. In seeking to remain loyal to what they see as a devalued ethnocultural identity, and to reclaim their collective if not individual ethnic integrity, Kurdish men frequently seem to fall back on archetypal notions of essential female characteristics in their narratives. This is evident in the ways they describe their encounters with non-Kurdish women in public spaces, as well as the ways in which they more broadly define their labour experiences (often vis à vis these western women), as 'embarrassing' or shameful' by virtue of their 'female' connotations. As Kurdish culture becomes more institutionalised in the migratory context of London, it resists invisibilisation and repression within state systems in the UK, and within a hegemonic 'Turkish' discourse which elides difference within a monolithic framework of Turkish nationalism. However, this process is paradoxical in its potential for liberation or continued oppression, for it also serves to reaffirm potentially coercive forms of identity discourse in gendered terms. Thus the notion of Kurdish femininity as rooted in and protected by 'tradition' has gained momentum in some quarters, which in many respects runs counter to the transformative notions of Kurdish masculinity hinted at by my interviewees.

Kurdish refugees face considerable challenges as they struggle to reclaim aspects of their culture which they see as having been degraded by British and Turkish hegemonies, and confront those aspects of their culture which they see as obsolete, all the while balancing loyalty to notions of ethnic 'purity', national struggle, fixed notions of gender, and integration into new homelands. Appadurai observes that

... deterritorialized communities and displaced populations, however much they may enjoy the fruits of new kinds of earning and new dispositions of capital and technology.

have to play out the desires and fantasies of these new ethnoscapas, while striving to reproduce the family-as-microcosm of culture (1996, 45).

To a certain extent, these ethnoscapas and the economic systems of which they are a part incorporate the sublimated sexual politics of the dominant western gaze in the context of commodified identities, alongside the characterisation of western and Kurdish women. Elsewhere the racialized nature of this political economy has revealed how white women and minority men, comparatively disadvantaged by virtue of their respective forms of otherness, are pitted against one another in a battle of 'have-nots' (hooks 1995). The tensions between accepting — even embracing — the implications of a post-modernity which both dissipates gender differences, and commodifies an essentialist version of ethnicity, and maintaining cultural integrity in the face of this are daily realities for Kurdish men whose participation in society serves to interrogate their notions of gender and labour. In the context of migration (often forced and traumatic as with the case of many Kurds arriving from Turkey), the characterisation of certain labour functions as 'women's work' — while also largely influenced by normative gender roles in Kurdistan — is a means for disenfranchised Kurdish men with limited opportunities in London's complex political economic landscape, to react to their exclusion and objectification.

For their part, the men I interviewed remain ambivalent about their newly acquired roles in British society. Although women emerge in these discursive spaces only rarely, and then in dichotomised terms as corrupt western aggressors or as idealised bearers of Kurdish identity (with little account of the dynamic realities that exist in the margins of such oppositional discourses), several of the men I interviewed pointed out the unforeseen advantages and new forms of social capital that emerged in these spaces of critical encounter in a global city. Hasan and Murat for example both discussed the transformations which resulted from their labour experiences, affecting both their thinking about being men and being Kurdish in positive terms. Ali, despite what he sees as negative aspects of his social positioning within Kurdish and wider society in London, aspires to a greater sense of achievement and integration. This suggests that although men in a wider context continue to be perpetrators and beneficiaries of women's subordination (see Ahmad, this volume), and despite their relative disempowerment vis à vis the dominant culture, the intersection of ethnicity, class and gender within the complexity of the global city can also serve to productively interrogate men's complicity in such systems.

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