

Performance As a Strategy for Women's Liberation: The Practices of the Theatre of  
the Oppressed in Okmeydanı Social Center

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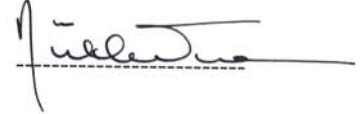
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*Dedicated to my grandmother*

*Fatma Altuğ (1906-2003)*

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## ABSTRACT

### **Performance As a Strategy For Women's Liberation: The Practices of the Theatre of the Oppressed in Okmeydanı Social Center**

by

**Jale Karabekir**

This study aims to analyze the practices of *the theatre of the oppressed* with women in the Okmeydanı Social Center, along with women's narratives on these practices and the social center itself, in terms of women's strategies for liberation within the context of Turkey. The thesis aims to show that the perspective that approaches the issue of women's liberation within the framework of modern education discourses and their practices fail to develop strategies for women in their everyday life. The main argument of this thesis is that *the theatre of the oppressed* provides a space and a tool for women in terms of their emancipation, transformation and helps them to develop strategies for resisting patriarchy.

This thesis discusses the premises of considering *the theatre of the oppressed* and performance as a feminist method for women's liberation, as a means of deciphering the construction of gender identities, gendered organization of everyday life and the patriarchal power relations.

## **KISA ÖZET**

### **Kadınların Özgürleşmesi İçin Bir Strateji Olarak Performans: Okmeydanı**

### **Toplum Merkezi'nde Ezilenlerin Tiyatrosu Pratikleri**

**Jale Karabekir**

Bu çalışma, Okmeydanı Toplum Merkezi'nde kadınlarla yapılan Ezilenlerin Tiyatrosu pratiklerini; kadınların bu pratikler ve toplum merkeziyle ilgili anlatılarını Türkiye bağlamında kadınların özgürleşme stratejileri içinde çözümlemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Tez, kadınların özgürleşmesi meselesini modern eğitim söylemleri çerçevesinde ele alan bakış açısının ve bu bakış açısından yola çıkan pratiklerin kadınların gündelik yaşamlarında stratejiler üretmede yetersiz kaldığını göstermeye çalışmaktadır. Tezin temel iddiası, Ezilenlerin Tiyatrosu'nun kadınların yaşamlarında özgürleştiren, dönüştüren ve ataerkiye karşı direnme stratejileri geliştirmelerini sağlayan bir alan ve bir araç sunduğudur.

Ezilenlerin Tiyatrosu'nun ve performansın kadınların özgürleşmesi bağlamında, toplumsal cinsiyet kimliklerinin kurgulanışlarının, gündelik yaşamın cinsiyetlendirilme süreçlerinin ve ataerki iktidar ilişkilerinin çözümlenmesinde feminist bir yöntem olarak değerlendirilebileceğini tartışmaktadır.

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## INTRODUCTION

The case study on *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops and performances held in Okmeydanı Social Center between the years 2000 and 2002 is the main concern of this thesis. I use the techniques of *the theatre of the oppressed* in the exploration of women's oppression in Okmeydanı. This thesis aims to explore the relationship between feminism and theatre in terms of *the theatre of the oppressed* and feminist practices.

*The theatre of the oppressed* techniques that I used in this research have been developed by Augusto Boal since the 1950s. Recently, it is used all over the world by theatre professionals (individuals and groups) and social workers in various community centers<sup>1</sup>. Being a Brazilian theatre director who focused on and examined oppression throughout society, Boal's goal was to change the dynamics of conventional theatre and to make popular theatre where people could intervene. The roots of *the theatre of the oppressed* were located within the proletarian movement in Brazil, in which Boal tried to use theatre as a consciousness-raising tool<sup>2</sup>. In his theory of *the theatre of the oppressed*, Boal focuses on the transformation of

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<sup>1</sup> The problems and oppressions addressed in this work contain different issues such as AIDS, street kids, prostitutes, violence, youth and so on. The most important institutions that are working on the "Theatre of the Oppressed" are CTO (Centro de Teatro do Oprimido- The Center of the Theatre of the Oppressed) in Rio and Centre du Théâtre de l'Opprimé in Paris. A network, "formaát" of the "Theatre of the Oppressed" practitioners has been forming in Amsterdam in order to exchange experiences and form a forum space among practitioners. See [www.formaat.org](http://www.formaat.org)

<sup>2</sup> After the military and political intervention in Brazil, he was exiled and he had to move to France where he had to invent different types of the "Theatre of the Oppressed" techniques. The main problem that he faced was the conceptualization of "oppression" in Europe that really differs from Brazil. Working with different societies, he developed different types of techniques in terms of different needs of the communities. Basically, these techniques can be categorized into three dimensions: "Newspaper Theatre" and "Legislative Theatre" have political, "Invisible Theatre", "Image Theatre" and "Forum Theatre" have social, and "Rainbow of Desire" and "Cops in the Head" have therapeutic dimensions. "Newspaper Theatre" and "Legislative Theatre" focus on the activation and awareness of the audience in the political problems of the society. "Rainbow of Desire" and "Cops in the Head" are basically based on personal experiences that reveal the unnoticeable self-oppression. "Invisible Theatre", "Image Theatre" and "Forum Theatre" are concerned about the social oppression throughout society and try to find solutions through the intervention of audience.

theatrical means such as the actor, audience, space and theme. His main concern is to change their usual conceptualizations by constructing a bridge between actors and audience. He tries to activate the audience and to transform them into active and creative agents where they could change the script and in general, the world. In this sense, the usual type of interaction between actors and audience could change into a dialogue where the audience makes its own theatre in order to change the society.

These techniques were not designed for exclusively feminist concerns. However as *the theatre of the oppressed* was about oppression and inequality throughout society, some feminists began to use these techniques for feminist aims. *The theatre of the oppressed* offers a new technique/method for feminist activists and social workers, in terms of applying and improving the techniques of *the theatre of the oppressed* in their fields<sup>3</sup>. *The theatre of the oppressed* opens up a theatrical space where women's oppression can be projected and consequently it provides us with a new method for overcoming women's oppression.

In this thesis, I use *the theatre of the oppressed* as a tool and as a method in order to explore women's oppression in the context of Okmeydanı Social Center. The possibility of intervening in the play performed on stage and the interactive feature of *the theatre of the oppressed* that enables the audience to participate in the struggle against oppression provide me with a new approach to the notion of 'resistance' to patriarchy. I facilitated six *forum theatre* workshops and nine forum performances in

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<sup>3</sup> Aside from the systematic oppression of issues like race, class and so on, the "Theatre of the oppressed" techniques have been used in women's issues (i.e. abortion, inequality, sexual abuse, violence and so on.) in Europe since the 1980s and North America in the following years. Not only in relation to those various themes that consist feminist concerns, but also as a theatrical/social technique, as a tool for feminist consciousness-raising and so forth, the "Theatre of the Oppressed" techniques have been used by and in cooperation with feminist pedagogy and activism.

Okmeydanı Social Center. Different forms of women's oppression were presented at the theatrical stage. Both the performers and the audience tried to solve those problems and conflicts by using one of techniques of *the theatre of the oppressed: forum theatre*. My main concern then is the exploration of 'interactivity', 'performing' and 'strategizing' processes in the context of women's oppression within *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops and performances.

In particular, women who had shared these experiences in Okmeydanı Social Center were the actors of this study that aims to show an alternative method for women's emancipation. The *forum theatre* workshops and performances not only try to figure out the oppression of women in Okmeydanı, they also try to form a space for presenting and creating solutions. The formation of such a space provides a set of strategies that could empower women in their struggle against oppression. In this thesis, I will try to explore the relationship between the interactive theatre and women within the context of Okmeydanı Social Center and try to point out the significance of theatre and specifically 'performing' and 'strategizing' process of the empowerment of women. More specifically, my goal is to look at how 'performing' enables women to create strategies by examining and analyzing the process and outcomes of these performances.

Being the first social center of Istanbul, Okmeydanı Social Center was established on the busiest street of Okmeydanı, Darülaceze Street. Social centers in Turkey as state institutions are governed by the General Directory of Social Service (Sosyal Hizmetler ve Çocuk Esirgeme Kurumu - SHÇEK) and according to the social work literature, they aim to facilitate the integration of undeveloped/developing urban

areas or peripheries with higher rates of migration. In the Okmeydanı case, this institution plays a remarkable role for women participants. After its establishment, women in Okmeydanı began to attend the activities that the social center provided according to the different needs and demands of applicants. With the courses and seminars, Okmeydanı Social Center became a space for women where they experienced how they could express themselves, where they participated in various activities and where they met other women. It also represents the dominant discourse on women's emancipation based on formal education. Therefore the Okmeydanı Social Center is not any randomly selected setting to test my arguments about the relationship between feminism and *the theatre of the oppressed*, but a specific context where women's emancipation is constructed through the discourse of 'education for women'.

This thesis consists of five chapters. In the first chapter, I will make a brief review of the discourse of 'education for women' in Turkey. I will try to explain the current relationship between feminism and the state in the context of social centers and try to highlight how women's liberation is seen through the discourse of education. In the second chapter, I aim to examine the close relationship between feminist theories and *the theatre of the oppressed*. Here, my focus will be on the exploration of resistance using Judith Butler's theory of 'performativity' in relation to Augusto Boal's techniques of *the theatre of the oppressed*. This also opens up a methodological discussion that comprises of the relationship between feminist research methods and the techniques of *the theatre of the oppressed*. The third chapter consists of the methodology of this thesis that includes detailed descriptions of how *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops and performances were organized including the

interviewing process. In the fourth chapter, I will give descriptive information about the setting and the context of this research to highlight how the social center is imagined through women's narratives, and in what ways the definitions of the social center and women's imaginations of the social center differentiate. This is important in examining the 'tool' for liberation for women that is created by the collaboration of the state and women's institutions. In the last chapter, I will narrate the performances and the strategies created in Okmeydanı Social Center in relation to how women perceive these in respect to their narratives. I will argue that the performances of *the theatre of the oppressed* make the multi-layered forms in which women encounter oppression in their everyday life visible. It creates a space to name and discuss them. Through its interactive method it transforms women into a community. Last, but not least, *the theatre of the oppressed* as an experience enable women to challenge oppression and imagine and construct new gender identities.



## **CHAPTER I: WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND THE DISCOURSE OF 'EDUCATION FOR WOMEN'**

In this chapter, I will discuss how 'education for women' discourse was articulated within women's movements and how this discourse has changed its structure, targets and strategies over time. I will first discuss the significance of education for the first and the second wave feminisms in the West<sup>4</sup>. Although the formulations of these early perspectives have been challenged by the third world and post-structuralist feminists whom I will barrow from throughout the following chapters, in this chapter I will mainly try to construct the influence of the first and the second wave feminisms in Turkey where education discourse is still dominant.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women in Britain and the United States began to question the gender inequalities embodied in their respective societies primarily through problematizing the concept of 'citizenship'. Ideas developed in the Enlightenment and French Revolution drove women to recognize the existing inequalities between women and men and to challenge the legal structures and regulations that subordinated women by denying their basic rights. Within the first wave feminism women demanded education in the traditionally 'male' occupations, such as medicine, law, theology, since women at that time were still situated in occupations, which reflected their 'natural' capacities as mothers and care givers such as teaching, nursing, work-house visiting and working on school boards (Sanders 2001:24). In relation to education, women not only demanded equal

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<sup>4</sup> Although I know that 'West' is not a homogeneous category, in this thesis I will use it as a term that includes the countries France, America and England where feminism as a political and academic practice has initially emerged.

access but also problematized the methods of education and suggested that education for women should be restructured around the idea of ‘critical thinking’ (Donovan 1992: 69). Education was primarily seen as an instrument of becoming conscious about oppression, rights and equality, and primarily for becoming part of the public sphere. Additionally, this critical thinking also presented an instrument for women’s empowerment, by which they could make themselves independent from ‘men’.

While first wave feminism emphasized equal access to formal education, second wave feminism developed distinctively feminist education methods. One of the most important outcomes of second wave feminism is the concept and the method of ‘consciousness-raising’. Underlying the slogan of ‘the personal is political’, feminists suggested that ‘consciousness-raising’ is “the move to transform what is experienced as personal into analysis in political terms, with the accompanying recognition that ‘the personal is political’, that male power is exercised and reinforced through ‘personal’ institutions such as marriage, child-rearing and sexual practices” (Thornham 2001: 30). Feminist theorists have described consciousness-raising in feminist activism as a way of opening up a new space for women to rediscover themselves as women and thence to theorize that identity and its possible transformation (Thornham 2001: 33).

In sum, feminist demands, critics, protests and actions in the West focused on the ‘education for women’ in different ways. First wave feminism targeted at formal education and ‘critical thinking’ for women, while the second wave feminism discussed education in relation to consciousness-raising. In the context of the women’s movement in Turkey, which was influenced by western feminism,

education for women was also defined through the strategies and discourses of women's empowerment.

### **The Discourse of “Education For Women” in Turkey**

In Turkey women's struggle against oppression can be analyzed in four consecutive periods: Ottoman Women's Movement, Republican Era, feminism of the 1980s and institutionalized feminism after the 1990s. The reason I use these periods is to trace the evolution of 'education for women' discourse over time. The first two periods were influenced by Western feminism and the nationalist discourse in Turkey. The discourses on liberation of women were articulated through equal rights and women's education until the 1980s. Two significant changes took place after the 1980s: first, the idea of 'education' was challenged and replaced by the consciousness-raising method of second wave feminism; secondly, particularly after the 1990s, feminism has been institutionalized to a significant extent, and feminists have become actively involved in the running of both state and non-state women's institutions where the discourse of 'education for women' has been re-iterated.

#### *Ottoman Women's Movement*

The Tanzimat period (1839-1878) represents a significant turning point in the Ottoman modernization process. Large-scale reform projects in the areas of military, bureaucracy, law and education had been launched in that period. Within this context women's education was perceived as vital and necessary for the modernization of the society and the family. This discourse on education was also supported by the 'male' modernist intellectuals of the empire. For instance, Şemsettin Sami in his book,

*Kadınlar* (The Women), emphasized the significance of ‘education for women’. His idea of ‘woman’ derived from her role of ‘mothering’. He believed that women as mothers had to be educated so that they could raise their children -the new generation of the ‘civilization’- and he emphasized women’s education as a way of establishing harmony in marriage (Sami 1996: 27). The discourse on education had concrete results that provided different kinds of educational opportunities for women<sup>5</sup>.

Women themselves perceived education as the primary means for self-empowerment. Inspired by western feminism, they demanded equal access to education, but different from western feminism they regarded education as a means to question certain forms of oppression, specific to Ottoman society. The issues of ‘marriage’, ‘family’ and ‘polygamy’ were intensively discussed within the context of roles and responsibilities associated with sexual division of labor and regulations<sup>6</sup> on ‘women’s rights’ (Tekeli 1998: 340).

In this period, formal education in primary school became widespread for women. But ‘education for women’ did not consist of only formal education; there were other means of ‘educating women’ such as journals, books, courses and conferences (Van Os 2002: 343). For example women’s journals<sup>7</sup> covered a variety of subjects,

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<sup>5</sup> The right of formal education for women was first actualized with the opening of Kız Rüştıyesi in 1862 and Kız sanayi Okulu in 1869. Additionally, women who would become midwives were accepted as listeners to some courses in medicine school and especially Darülmualimat (1870), which aimed to educate teachers for girls’ school, were also established and this opened a space for women participate in the working-life (Çeri 1996: 16). Accordingly, there were two other educational opportunities for girls, one was to take lessons from home tutors (mürebbiye) and the other was to register to the foreigners’ schools. In 1908, women had access to education at the university.

<sup>6</sup> In 1841, the right of formal marriage before ‘kadı’; 1845-1857, the prohibition of slavery and female slavery; 1856 the right of inheritance.

<sup>7</sup> For further information see the monograph of the women’s journal, *Kadınlar Dünyası* (1909-1923) in Serpil Çakır’s book, *Osmanlı Kadın Hareketi*, Metis Yayınları; and for non-muslim women’s journals, as a case, see Melissa Bilal, Lerna Ekmekçioğlu & Belinda Mumcu’s article “Hayganuş Mark’ın (1885-1966) Hayatı, Düşünceleri ve Etkinlikleri: Feminizm: Bir Adalet Feryadı” in *Toplumsal Tarih*, Mart 2001

focusing on domestic tasks, and other gender based roles and responsibilities. They were also considered as being a ‘school’ for women’s modernization, where aside from laying down the outlines of ‘women’s education’ practical ‘knowledge’ about household, cooking and caring was transmitted<sup>8</sup> (Toska 1994: 198-199). Women’s associations also became a space for women’s education. The aim of these associations could have been different from each other but they all emphasized education for women and their participation in social life. Some provided workshops and courses for women in order to promote their skills in occupational training. They organized public meetings and struggled for the right for ‘employment’. The periods of war also required the assistance of medicine, so that the education of midwifery and nursing aid became significant issues in women’s employment opportunities.

Within the Ottoman women’s movement, strategies and struggles against oppression were articulated by the means of journals, associations and participation to social life, in which ‘education for women’ was at the center of demands. Although Ottoman women were influenced by Western<sup>9</sup> feminists’ thoughts and actions on ‘suffragette’, they mostly focused on issues such as polygamy, divorce and exclusion of women from social life, which were considered to be specific to Ottoman society (Tekeli 1989: 35). Those involved in this movement were mostly elite and educated. They tried to establish a political party for women, *Kadınlar Halk Fırkası* (Women People’s Party) (Abadan-Unat 1998: 328) in the early 1920s, which marked an important date in their long lasting struggle in Turkey.

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<sup>8</sup> Representation of ‘education for women’ could also be seen through the girls’ photographs with holding books in their hands that emphasized the privilege of being literate (Toska 1994: 200). This idea could also be supported by the popular play *Vatan Yahut Silistre* by Namık Kemal (1983), in which the main female character Zekiye appears in the first scene with a book in her hands.

<sup>9</sup> Tekeli (1998) stated that the flying action of Belkis Şevket Hanım in 1913 resembled the flying action of Miss Muriel Matters in 1909, for propagating women’s right in voting.

### *The Republican Era*

The establishment of the republic marks another significant turning point in the history of women's movement in Turkey. Thereafter the woman question and the struggle for rights were defined within the Kemalist discourse. Until the 1980s it is hard to talk about an independent women's movement in Turkey. Since, after the establishment of the republic, woman's question was appropriated by dominant official discourses. In the 1920s the authorities of government closed *Kadınlar Halk Fırkası*, which was then turned into *Türk Kadınlar Birliği* (Turkish Women Union-1924), aiming "to promote and improve women in social and intellectual aspects, to have social and political responsibility and consciousness, and to help poor families, women and children" (Kılıç 1998: 348). In 1927, Nezihe Muhittin and her friends were expelled from *Türk Kadınlar Birliği* under the state's pressure when they attempted to ask for the right to 'vote' (Kılıç 1998: 348).

As Nükhet Sirman argues the republican era took over the heritage of the Ottoman Empire in terms of regarding women primarily mothers and wives, but added the role of patriotic citizens to this definition. Accordingly, in the republican era, women's education was also a significant issue. Through women's access to professional occupations, which required 'education', women again became a symbol in the "realization of the national goals of the republic" (Sirman 1989: 10). The associations of professional women were also established during this period<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, associations encouraged by the state mainly consisted of 'educated' and 'elite' women like in the Ottoman period.

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<sup>10</sup> Türk Üniversiteli Kadınlar Derneği (Association of Turkish University Graduate Women-1949), Türk Soroptimistler Derneği (Association of Turkish Soroptimists-1948)

*Türk Kadınlar Birliği* was established again in 1949 in order to strengthen the roles of women as mothers, wives and responsible citizens, as projected by the state. Women's associations, Women's Branches of the CHP (the Republican People's Party) and its auxiliary institution People's Houses (Halkevleri) also participated in the making of the nationalist discourse, where women's rights were celebrated and maintained through a recourse to the emancipatory potential of Kemalism (Tekeli 1989: 35). These associations consisting of the "so called" liberated women, reproduced the 'education for women' discourse by acting on the basis of the assumption that the 'other' women who were 'oppressed' would be liberated through education. Accordingly, these associations organized some courses on 'literacy' and 'handicrafts', as well as providing scholarships for female students (Kılıç 1998: 351).

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the growth of leftist movements in Turkey where oppression was defined exclusively in class terms. Class structure was perceived as the fundamental source of people's oppression, where there was no need to talk about women's oppression as a separate issue. According to this discourse, women would be liberated through the struggle against class inequality. As Tekeli argues, within this period women's oppression and women's movement were not articulated through the questioning of patriarchy, but rather defined in terms of class system (Tekeli 1989: 36). As Sirman stated, "the fight was strictly against class system and any other ideology such as women's rights had to be subordinated to the main goal" (Sirman 1989: 16). Different kinds of women's organizations<sup>11</sup> were established in this period, and they evolved under the hegemony of the leftist movements. For

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<sup>11</sup> *Devrimci Kadınlar Derneği* (Revolutionary Women's Association), *İlerici Kadınlar Derneği* (Progressive Women's Association), *Demokratik Kadınlar Birliği* (Democratic Women's Alliance), *Emekçi Kadınlar Birliği* (Laborer Women's Alliance), *Devrimci Kadınlar Birliği* (Revolutionary Women's Alliance), and *Devrimci Kadın Dernekleri* (Revolutionary Women's Associations).

instance *Devrimci Kadınlar Derneği* aimed at voicing women within this ‘revolutionary struggle’ (Kılıç 1998: 351). *İlerici Kadınlar Derneği*, tried to change and regulate daily lives of women in the sense of solving their problems on particular issues such as water shortage, adequacy of transportation, communication and so on. But in this period, women could not talk about women’s oppression and create strategies against it.

### *Feminist Politics and Women’s Movement in 1980s*

By destroying the leftist movement, the military intervention in 1980 fundamentally changed the political arena of Turkey. In the early 1980s, ‘feminism’ emerged within small groups of women gathering in Istanbul and Ankara. However, this emergence was criticized for being ‘Eylulist<sup>12</sup>’ (Kılıç 1998: 355). According to the new social movements theory, the emergence of ‘feminism’, like other new social movements (such as student, ecological, environmental, anti-nuclear, peace movements) can also be considered as a reaction to the shortcomings and insufficiencies of the old social movements that focused on a singular, core contradiction, such as class (Önder 2003: 38). The insufficiency of a singular category to contain all inequalities led to diversity within the political field. Accordingly in the context of Turkey, one can argue that Kemalism and the leftist movement had prevented the emergence of a feminist movement.

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<sup>12</sup> The military intervention was held on 12th of September. Leftists made a connection between the emergence of feminism and the military intervention, which contained condemnation and critique of the feminist movement. They blamed feminist movement to be the product of the military intervention, which destroyed the democracy and the human rights in Turkey.



I would like to use Gülnur Savran's categorization of the feminist movement in Turkey in three phases; the early 1980s constituting the ideological background, after 1987 active period of campaigns and after 90s institutionalization and project-making feminism periods (Koçali 2002: 74). The articles on the feminist movement in Turkey, all begin by narrating small groups gatherings and consciousness-raising<sup>13</sup>. The first instance of visibility for 'feminist action' was the four-day symposium held in 1982, with the participation of a French feminist, Giselle Halimi where problems of women were discussed and 'the term *feminism* was firstly articulated' (Tekeli 1989:37). The expression of women's oppression was first used in the press with YAZKO, the Cooperative of Writers and Translators that offered feminists to take part (one page) in the existing journal *Somut*. It was a 'space' where women could, in their own words, "talk about ourselves, to talk for ourselves" (Abadan-Unat 1998: 331).

The second phase was described as an active period consisting of campaigns, protests, congresses, organizations, written materials and journals, all of which indicated women's struggle against oppression. For example, in March 1986 feminists headed towards the political arena in order to provide the implementation of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which was already signed by Turkey in 1985 and organized a petition (Sirman 1989: 16). They also organized campaigns against the Penalty Code (about rape and virginity test), especially related to the Article 438 (that was about the reduction in punishment in the crime of rape, if the victim was a prostitute).

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<sup>13</sup> see Tekeli (1989), Sirman (1989), Abadan-Unat (1998), Kılıç (1998), Timisi and Ağduk Gevrek (2002)

Other campaigns were organized against ‘violence against women’: battering women and sexual abuse using the ‘purple pin’ as a symbol.

The protests and actions emphasized and aimed at the visibility of women’s oppression on different levels. For instance, the protest of Mother’s Day in Ankara and the one-day festival in İstanbul were held in solidarity with the campaign against the battering of women and the Temporary Modern Women’s Museum in Kariye, held an exhibition of kitchen utensils and attracted attention to women’s alienation in the domestic sphere. As Sirman states the song ‘Kadınlar Vardır (Women Are Here)’ was another way of ‘showing’ and ‘challenging’ oppression (Sirman: 1989: 18). It became a symbol of feminism in Turkey and since then remained in the memories.

In short, feminists of this period challenged the oppression and subordination of women in the private sphere, creating a political agenda of their own. Nevertheless, the domination of feminist discourses by other political agendas and conflicts in Turkey continued. Towards the end of the 1980s Islamism and a reaction to Islamism by Kemalist women became one of the primary ways in which women’s issues were discussed in public. The emergence and growth of contemporary Islamist movements in Turkey created its own women’s organizations and journals. Women’s struggle against the state under Islamism was articulated around the remarkable issue of the ‘turban’ in the universities and women’s status in the public sphere. Upon the victory of Welfare Party in the municipality elections in Istanbul, women from that party gained visibility. Debates around ‘Shari’a’ and secularism, and women’s status in public occupied the central stage.

Perceiving the rise of Islamist movements as a threat, Kemalist women began to come together in new organizations, such as Association for Supporting Contemporary Life (Çağdaş Yaşamı Destekleme Derneği, 1989 -ÇYDD) (Kılıç 1989: 356). These organizations function through creating schools, fellowships and participating in public events where they protested ‘the rise of Islam’ that they argued contributed to a duality in the public sphere. Once again, just like Kemalism and Socialism before that, secularism prevents the flourishing of an independent women’s movement.

*After the 1990s: Towards an Institutionalized Feminism?*

At the beginning of the 1990s, the topic of women’s oppression started to find space within various social, political, academic and state institutions. The edited book called ‘Feminism in Turkey in the 90s’ (*90’larda Türkiye’de Feminizm*) supports the idea that institutionalized feminism has become a defining aspect of the women’s movement in Turkey after the 1990s. Eight articles out of fifteen contain the narratives of women’s institutions with their histories, experiences or self-evaluations. This is a remarkable point in terms of demonstrating as how these writers imagine feminism in the 1990s, and also how feminism of the 1980s has been developing within the institutionalizing process in the 1990s. I will examine these issues in four parts: Institutionalization of feminism of the 1980s, NGOs and project feminism, networking and the women’s movement, and state institutions.

Within the institutionalization of the feminism of the 1980s, the following three institutions played a major role: Women’s Library (Kadın Eserleri Kütüphanesi-

1990), The Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation (Mor Çatı Kadın Sığınağı Vakfı-1990) and *Pazartesi* journal (Monday, 1995). The case of Women's Library indicates the importance and significance of 'documentation and archiving of women' and aims from a feminist perspective to collect women's documents that reflect their struggle and resistance against oppression, including both past and present documents (Davaz Mardin 2002: 188). The variability of documents such as journals, books, newspapers, articles, dissertations and collections of women's organizations, women artists and visual documents open up a new perspective in constructing the history of women and its connection with the present.

The second institution, The Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation was established in İstanbul and followed by similar institutions<sup>14</sup> in other cities. It conceptualizes and defines its institutionalizing process in terms of "maintaining the struggle against domestic violence" (Işık 2002: 47) and emphasizes the significance of "creating women's institutions" by creating women's information centers and shelters (Işık 2002: 8). These institutions are the representatives of the 'institutionalized feminism' period, which is still in progress, and they show how two specific fields of 'feminist concerns' -'women's documentary' and 'domestic violence'- became institutionalized as an achievement of the 1980s feminism. The last one is the journal *Pazartesi*, which targets women's concerns at the popular level by including news about women or unpublished news by the mainstream press and targets promoting feminism (Koçali 2002: 77).

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<sup>14</sup> Kadın Dayanışma Vakfı (Woman's Solidarity Foundation, Ankara) and Ege Kadın Dayanışma Vakfı (Aegean Woman's Solidarity Foundation, İzmir)

On the other hand, İstanbul University Women's Problems Research and Implementation Institute (*İstanbul Üniversitesi Kadın Sorunları Araştırma ve Uygulama Enstitüsü*, 1991) and Woman Research Association (Kadın Araştırmaları Derneği, 1991), which collaborate, are also defined as the first feminist institutions of the early 1990s. The feminist institutionalization in academia has continued in the following years by the establishments of Middle East Technical University Gender and Women's Studies (1994), Ankara University Women's Studies (1996) and Mersin University Women's Problems Research Center (1997). This feminist intrusion in the academia has increased academic interest on women's issues from interdisciplinary perspectives.

The second set of developments in this period consists of the creation of NGOs and project feminism, which is still in progress today. Although feminism in the 1990s is considered to indicate a progress in the capabilities of women to solve the issues raised in the 1980s through institutions and gender mainstreaming (Timisi & Gevrek 2002: 38), I believe that feminism in the 1990s constitutes professional areas of its own, which is a problem by itself. According to *Uçan Süpürge*'s (Flying Broom) database<sup>15</sup> on women's organizations in Turkey, there are 358 registered organizations<sup>16</sup>, including 220 associations, 30 foundations, 9 cooperatives and 8 companies. However, I will not discuss all of these institutions, their missions, goals and projects. Instead, I will examine some of the women's organizations that proved themselves to be sustainable, which also indicate the main fields of women's oppression in the context of Turkey.

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<sup>15</sup> This database consists of the recent women's organizations until 2004.

<sup>16</sup> <http://supurge.dinasa.com/index.php?sayfa=3>

In the political<sup>17</sup> and legal realms, there are two NGOs that have focused on gender discrimination. Women for Women's Human Rights: New Ways (Kadının İnsan Hakları Yeni Çözümler Vakfı, 1999) was established in 1993 under a different name: Women's Human Rights Action-Research Center (Kadının İnsan Hakları Eylem-Araştırma Merkezi, 1993). It focuses on the legal regulations with regard to women's human rights. This institution aims at promoting "women's human rights and supporting the active and broad participation of women as free individuals and equal citizens in the establishment and maintenance of a democratic and peaceful order at national, regional and international levels<sup>18</sup>". It not only takes part in the formation of legal regulations, but also develops educational projects and programs for women<sup>19</sup>. Another organization, the Association for Supporting Women Candidates (Kadın Adayları Destekleme ve Eğitim Derneği - Ka-Der) was established to provide equality between women and men in the political arena by carrying out women's ideas and voices to the assembly (Bora 2002: 115). Moreover, at the macro level, the vision of Ka-Der is to change the destiny of women and the country simultaneously. Another example is *Uçan Süpürge* (1996), which aims at strengthening solidarity among women through constructing relations between women who are concerned with women's issues and movement, and supporting their empowerment and problem-solving capacities (Kardam & Ecevit 2002: 94). It reflects project feminism best, with several projects on their database on women's organizations in Turkey: the

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<sup>17</sup> In the political realm, some feminists took part in the establishment of a political party, Freedom and Solidarity Party (Özgürlük ve Dayanışma Partisi, 1996), that was a so-called 'umbrella party', claiming to embody different factions of leftist groups, feminists, greens and so on, as a space where they could make politics. However, the popularity of this party faded away soon. Feminists were disappointed in their struggle because of the leftist and patriarchal hegemony within the party, as exemplified by the establishment of Women's Branch, where the division was made as it was used to be, and where women called themselves 'women of ÖDP'. The emergence of Woman's Branches in Kurdish political parties is also significant in the political arena, where they tried to voice themselves and their oppression.

<sup>18</sup> Available at [www.wwhr.org/id\\_789](http://www.wwhr.org/id_789)

<sup>19</sup> For example, Women's Human Rights Education Program (Kadının İnsan Hakları Eğitim Programı) was relatively widespread in the social centers of Turkey.

annual film festival Uçan Süpürge Kadın Filmleri Festivali (Flying Broom Women's Film Festival), the website (Flying Broom), the bulletin Uçan Haber (Flying News), Flying Broom radio programs, television projects, local women reporters, and NGOs meetings.

Women's institutions established after the 1990s focus on a specific issue in relation to women's oppression and try to create strategies against that particular form of oppression. Feminism is articulated within institutional settings thus giving rise to the application of the concept of 'institutionalized feminism'. In the database of Flying Broom, we can easily see that women's institutions are mostly established as NGOs. Unlike the 1980s, these institutions are seen as expressing the variety and expansion of feminist ideology and discourse. The projects held by women's NGOs aim at "development and empowerment of women by increasing alternatives for women and also by promoting their skills in using these alternatives" (Kümbetoğlu 2002: 168), and providing different sources and mechanisms in their struggle against oppression. However, the struggle of maintaining an NGO and focusing on a particular issue obstruct the construction of a relationship between different forms of feminist politics (Kardam & Ecevit 2002: 92). Recently, these institutions have been realizing their goals by proposing projects supported by international funds. The energies of women are accordingly invested in writing proposals, meeting the demands of requirements and sometimes even competing among other NGOs. Most importantly for my purposes, the project feminism focuses on the education of 'disadvantaged' women, in other words, the women's institutions become spaces where projects are held for 'other women'. Women's NGOs and project feminism override their commitment to feminist sisterhood.

The actions, campaigns and networking function through Internet sources (such as websites, databases, electronic groups and web-based journals), which both provide and restrict access to communication about women's issues, news and activities of woman's organizations. There are also different types of electronic groups formed among the members of institutions on a specific issue (Penalty Code, Woman's Congress and so on). These groups act as realms of networking and discussion for women, where they can organize campaigns and even petitions. Internet sources, specifically electronic groups are the main 'meeting place', where they could encounter with each other.

The positive side of these, as I mentioned in the previous paragraph, is that electronic groups also function towards different goals. For example, these virtual spaces are also used in order to meet with other women, and to get organized through electronic groups within 'real' contexts. Unlike institutionalized feminism, women's movement in the 1990s mostly tries to establish network between different regions, various women's groups and organizations. In the late 1990s and the early 2000s, there were some meetings held, for instance in Diyarbakır, Batman and İstanbul in which Kurdish and Turkish women from various regions of Turkey came together. These meetings aimed to highlight women's solidarity against oppression in the sense of sharing experiences such as 'women's suicides' and 'earthquake'. A similar meeting was held in Konya, followed by a Woman's Conference named 'Organizing Our Liberation (Kurtuluşumuzu Örgütleyelim)' in Istanbul. All these are endeavors of network construction and formation of common feminist politics within the women's movement. On the other hand, there are some platforms formed, which target at



meeting with women and women's organizations on specific issues, such as 8<sup>th</sup> of March Platform (8 Mart Kadın Platformu), Istanbul Women's Platform (İstanbul Kadın Platformu), Women's Platform Against War (Savaşa Hayır Kadın Platformu) and 'issue oriented ad hoc committees' actions.

On the other hand, the Internet sources provide the networking only among women who have access to the Internet. This strictly restricts the communication of women and the networking among the women who don't have access to the Internet. Additionally, the relationship between institutionalized feminism and the women's movement are weakened by the professionalism within feminism. These different forms of organizations cannot frequently come together, in terms of forming common feminist politics, because of the variation related to their targets and their organizational structure.

Finally, we have to pay attention to the state's role in women's issues after the 1990s. Turkish State also establishes its institutions, such as the Turkish Republic Prime Ministry General Directory On The Status and The Problems of Women (Başbakanlık Kadının Statüsü ve Sorunları Genel Müdürlüğü –KSSGM, 1990), which focuses on eight issues<sup>20</sup> and runs projects about women at the governmental level. In the context of legal regulations, women and women's institutions tried to transform state policy. For instance, proposals to change of Law on the Protection of the Family (Aileyi Koruma Kanunu), article 159 in the Civil Code that limits women's working status in terms of her husbands' permission, 'virginity test',

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<sup>20</sup> The fields that KSSGM focuses on are women and press, institutional mechanism for the advancement of women, women in power and decision-making, women and economy, violence against women, women and health, education and training of women, and finally the young women's problems in education and in early marriage. Available at <http://www.kssgm.gov.tr/inf.html>

‘adultery’, and the state’s tendency not to recognize ‘domestic violence’. Also shaping its institutions by projects to educate the police, especially on ‘women issues’ in the State Planning Organization (Devlet Planlama Teşkilatı) programs and by establishing new institutions for women (Işık 2002: 62).

The relationship between ‘institutionalized feminism’ and state regulations can be seen as an achievement of the ‘women’s movement’ in the 1990s. Nevertheless, it is important to question state policy on women’s issues. For example, at the micro level, SHÇEK established three different institutions, Woman’s Guesthouses (Kadın Konukevleri<sup>21</sup>), Woman’s Information Centers (Kadın Danışma Merkezi) and Social Centers (Toplum Merkezi). The first two institutions deal with ‘domestic violence’, and prevent the formation of independent women’s institutions. For example by the law of SHÇEK. SHÇEK is charged with the control of Women’s Shelters. This control mechanism demonstrates how the state took over the idea of ‘shelters for women’ from feminism and took it under its sovereignty. However, another important point here has to be emphasized with regard to the establishment of ‘social centers’, I will argue in chapter four, that social centers serve to produce and reproduce the discourse on ‘education for women’. Social centers, as state institutions, encourage local women to participate in the activities they organize as well as providing a vehicle for institutionalized feminism to realize their goals in terms of applying their projects within the center. This cooperation enables the reproduction of ‘education for women’ discourse at the context of the Okmeydanı Social Center.

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<sup>21</sup> Ideologically, the Guesthouses of SHÇEK was not called Shelters as it is in feminist terminology.

Moreover, some women's institutions also develop educational programs for the personnel of SHÇEK in addition to their programs for the participants of social centers. In the context of Turkey, the relationship between 'institutionalized feminism', NGOs and social centers remarkably point at the significant policies that both state and feminism suggest. State has the control over 'institutionalized feminism' via both regulating and opening spaces for the realization of projects and also via manipulating the services provided by women's institutions. Women's institutions are trying to disrupt the policies of the state related to women by applying their projects and programs in these social centers. Hence, *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops held with women in the Okmeydanı Social Center can be seen as a significant case study to examine the relationship between 'institutionalized feminism', NGOs and state policy.

## CHAPTER II: FEMINISM, PERFORMANCE AND THEATRE

“...it can no longer be denied that there is a uniquely female expression...  
 women's social, biological and political experiences are  
 different from those of men;  
 art is born of those experiences  
 and must be faithful to them to be authentic....”  
 Lucy Lippard<sup>22</sup>

This chapter includes a brief description of feminist theatre, the techniques of *the theatre of the oppressed* and its applications with women in different parts of the world. I will try to emphasize the relationship between feminism and theatre by explaining the techniques of *the theatre of the oppressed*. I will use Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which describes both how gender order is maintained and resisted through performance. I would like to read Butler's theory with the practices of *the theatre of the oppressed* in order to show how *the theatre of the oppressed* techniques could be considered as a tool for women's struggle against oppression. Additionally, I will try to explain the relationship between *the theatre of the oppressed* and feminist research methods in order to emphasize the significance of *the theatre of the oppressed* as a feminist method.

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.themagdalenaproject.org/then.html>

According to Butler, gender “is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 1990: 33). Performance is central to the production of gendered bodies and subjects. Subjects are constituted through citing regulatory norms through their performance. These norms are defined within the heterosexual hegemonic matrix. Performance is a two way process. That is, on one hand, citing norms and materializing them in bodies and identities, it reproduces, materializes and naturalizes norms: “a performative is that practice that enacts or produces that which it names” (Butler 1993: 13). On the other hand, performance also refashions bodies according to norms and enables the constitution of intelligible bodies.

Nevertheless, according to Butler, performance can also be resisting: “the paradox of subjectivization is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms” (Butler 1993: 15). Performance can be resisting to the extent that it produces excess, which enables the recognition of performance as performance rather than as natural disposition. With respect to this thought, Luce Irigaray criticizes the Western traditions of philosophy for systematically placing woman in a negative, non-subject, non-speaking position and focuses on the female body, and works on constituting ‘the speaking body’. According to her argument, the concept of mimesis<sup>23</sup> might become a strategy through which replication and repetition are used:

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<sup>23</sup> Mimesis is a Greek word with the meaning: the act of ‘imitation’.

“To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to submit herself – in as much as she is on the side of the ‘perceptible’ of ‘matter’ – to ideas, in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by masculine logic, but so as to make ‘visible’ by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover up of a possible operation of the feminine in language” (Bell 1999:90).

This is a way of strategizing resistance through regulatory norms. Using the body as a tool in mimicry as she suggests, and replicating and repeating the existing structure of female roles, produces excess within the meanings that constitute as well as resist these norms. Butler, on the other hand, believes that there is specific space from which such performances can be produced. According to her, hegemonic norms are only sustained by excluding certain bodies. For example, in the constitution of the heterosexual matrix, it is the lesbian body that is excluded. Both of these strategies of resistance, i.e. the realization of performance as performance, and the production of performances from the space of inhabitable and unnamable bodies is key for situating the resisting potential of *the theatre of the oppressed*. Although *the theatre of the oppressed* is not considered as a form of feminist theatre, its targets and methods can be used for feminist purposes. In the following part, I will try to explain the relationship between feminism and theatre, briefly explain Augusto Boal’s *theatre of the oppressed* techniques, using the examples of *the theatre of the oppressed* with women and show how it operates as a form of resistance within the framework of Butler’s and Irigaray’s theories.

## Feminist Movement and Performance

In the West, the relationship between feminism and theatre emerged within the context of the second wave feminist movement and it dates back to the 1960s. In US the protests of second wave feminism used the symbolic values and performance strategies of the radical guerilla and street theatre (Carlson 1996: 165). These protests and demonstrations targeted to show how women were objectified in dominant social and cultural systems of representation (Aston 1999: 5) and also constituted the roots of feminist theatre as a professional field. It must also be noted that until the 1980s there has been a distinction between feminist critical theory and feminist performance<sup>24</sup>. In the context of the 1970s Women's Liberation Movement, feminist performance was considered to take place outside the academy, on the streets by demonstrations or at the professional level, while feminist critical theory has been evolving inside the academy through and in collaboration with different disciplines, like woman's studies. Feminist practice and academia met by the late 1980s through the "workshops, performances and talks by practitioners" in the academia. Increasingly feminist scholars began to write about and to theorize this work and in turn, some feminist play writers and practitioners became interested in theory (Aston 1999: 4).

Feminist theatre has been relatively widespread in the west, producing different groups and companies. In the late 1960s in UK *The Women's Street Theatre Group* and *Theatre-in-Education* movement had an influence on the public. *The Women's*

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<sup>24</sup> This distinction was articulated by Aston (1999) by phrasing "finding ways of making theatre feminist, or making feminist theatre"..

*Theatre Festival* in 1973 and the establishment of *The Women's Theatre Group* in 1977 followed these actions (Wandor 1986). *The Magdalena Project*<sup>25</sup> (1986) that supports a network of women's theatre all over the world and also publishes the journal *-Open Page-* is still in progress. In academic field there are feminist critical theory and feminist theatre departments, books and articles are published, festivals and networks are organized. In contrast Turkey had to wait until the late 1990s to discuss and produce feminist theatre in academia or on stage<sup>26</sup>.

After the development of feminist performance/theatre in the professional arena, and with the influence of the interaction between practitioners and academicians, feminist theatre and performance emerged as a discipline of its own with its supporting theories and categories. Within the literature, feminist theatre is considered in three different groups with regards to its relation to theoretical frameworks: Liberal (Bourgeois); Radical (Cultural) and Materialist (Socialist) Feminist Theatre<sup>27</sup>. In general, liberal feminist theatre concerns women's parity with men and adheres to 'universal' values (Austin 1998:137). This resembles the discourse of 'first wave feminism' and its demands concentrate on 'equality' between women and men. On the other hand, radical feminist theatre aims to define and support the idea of a 'female culture' that is separate and different from men's dominant culture (Carlson 1996). Radical feminist theatre is influenced by radical feminism, specifically French feminists. Materialist feminist theatre aims to analyze and understand the ways in which power relations based on class interact with power relations based on gender,

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<sup>25</sup> For more information, see Bassnett, S. (1989) and visit the web site [www.magdalenaproject.org](http://www.magdalenaproject.org)

<sup>26</sup> See, Savaşkan Gedik, T. (1998) and also see the web site of *Tiyatro Boyalı Kuş*, which claims its productions to be feminist within the professional field of theatre, [www.tiyatroboyalikus.com](http://www.tiyatroboyalikus.com)

<sup>27</sup> See, Case, S. E. (1988), Aston, E. (1999), Wandor, M. (1986).



both at the individual and the social level. After the 1990s, as a result of postmodernism and deconstruction, a new concept in theatre, performance and performance art has begun to be discussed: that is 'gender in performance'.

Beyond these professional feminist theatre practices, the methods of *the theatre of the oppressed* play an important role in working with women's groups. They enable both the recognition of oppression and the creation of resistance to that oppression simultaneously. In the following section, I will try to give a brief summary of some of *the theatre of the oppressed* techniques: Invisible, Image and Forum Theatre. I will situate *the theatre of the oppressed* in the framework of performance theory.

### **Theatre As a Strategy Against Oppression**

*"If the oppressed himself (and not a surrogate artist) performs an action,  
this action, performed in a theatrical fiction, will allow him to change  
things in his real life." (Boal 1990: 42)*

How can theatre be used as a strategy in the struggle against woman's oppression? Augusto Boal's *theatre of the oppressed* techniques provides us with a means to investigate this question. His techniques basically focus on 'oppression'. *The theatre of the oppressed* aims to highlight the forms of oppressive conflicts within society and bring them into theatrical form where they could be discussed. The interactivity of these techniques emphasizes the importance of interaction between the performer and the spectator. The intervention of spectators creates the possibility of resistance

and the capacity of oppressed groups to solve conflicts within society. Although this research basically consists of the technique of *forum theatre* and partially *image theatre*, I would like to begin with the technique of *invisible theatre* in order to explain the basic tenets of Boal's techniques.

### *Invisible Theatre*

The main goal of *invisible theatre* is to activate people on a specific social/political subject of importance in society. It turns them into actors of a particular subject. In the construction of *invisible theatre* -in Boal's words- "the chosen subject must be an issue of burning importance, something known to be a matter of profound and genuine concern for the future spect-actors" (Boal 1992:6). What *invisible theatre* primarily proposes is to change the space of theatre. In other words, instead of making a forum on the chosen subject in the theatre building (the constructed theatrical space), it aims to put it out on real settings and contexts.

*Invisible theatre* can turn any place into a theatrical space; i.e. subway, café or bus stations. The subject is improvised and rehearsed as if in conventional theatre, but the performers are aware that it will be performed in the flow of daily life and in a real context and setting. The audience, on the other hand, is there by chance. This is the power of *invisible theatre* that transforms theatrical action into reality. As Boal suggest, "it is precisely this invisible quality that will make the spectator act freely and fully, as if he were living a real solution – and after all, it is a real situation!" (Boal 1985:146-7). *Invisible theatre* calls for a detailed preparation, which consists of imagining different variations in which the spectators can react and intervene.

Within its theoretical frame and application, *invisible theatre* proposes theatrical and social transformation. By transforming any space into a performance space, it abolishes the power and magic of the theatrical stage. There is no wall between the performers and the spectators, no line or border. The play is performed in a real context where people are made into spectators and spect-actors. It changes the relationship between the performer and the spectator, in which the play is re-written together:

“In the invisible theatre the theatrical rituals are abolished; only the theatre exists, without its old, worn-out patterns. The theatrical energy is completely liberated, and the impact produced by this free theatre is much more powerful and longer lasting” (Boal 1985:147).

What is produced in the process of *invisible theatre* is the creation of solutions/strategies by real people through the use of theatre. The magical, powerful and unreachable status of the ‘stage’ vanishes; the spect-actor creates his/her own area to perform, to intervene and to change the situation. Additionally by transforming the spectator into a protagonist, he becomes “the protagonist of the reality he sees, because he is unaware of its fictitious origin” (Boal 1992:17). This forms a natural exchange of ideas between performers and spect-actors (also spectators), which cannot be experienced in conventional theatre.

The important issue in *invisible theatre* is the well-prepared strategies against the reactions of spect-actors and the preservation of the idea of ‘invisibility’. I had experienced an *invisible theatre* in March 2003, just before a public speech on *the*

*theatre of the oppressed*. The room was full of theatre professionals and students, and *invisible theatre* started by a group of students declaring that ‘the education of art should not be charged’. Then a burning discussion ended with repressing the students by the authorities of the theatre center after which the students left the room. The organizer of this invisible theatre informed us that the previous action was a practice of *invisible theatre*. After that, the space turned into a ‘fight place’, where the authorities felt uncomfortable to be an actor in this invisible theatre. As a result, the relationship between the authorities and *the theatre of the oppressed* practitioners and students were broken down, because they had not envisioned the possible reactions and they had not constructed the ‘problem’ well enough for that particular setting. This experience illustrates that both the problem and the setting and their interrelations have to be considered very carefully in order to produce new perspectives. We experienced an invisible theatre in a *theatre of the oppressed* speech, but on the other hand, the performers were affected negatively because of their unprepared attempt.

The other technique is *image theatre*, which I used in the forum workshops in Okmeydanı Social Center.

### *Image Theatre*

The technique of *image theatre* is based on the bodily and physical expressions of oppression. The arsenal of *the theatre of the oppressed* -as Boal calls in his book *Games for Actors and Non-actors*- consists of games and exercises, which presents

new approaches to the expression of oppression. *Image theatre* is built on the variations of ‘sculpting’ exercise, which involves bodily and non-verbal expressions.

In *image theatre* the spectator is expected to participate, first by discussing collectively a certain theme of common interest. What she is asked to do is to express herself by using her own body or using the other participants’ bodies in ‘sculpting’ a group of statues in such a way that his/her opinions and feelings become evident. Any kind of speaking is not permitted and the participant becomes like a sculptor, who must determine the position of each body including the mimics as if they are made of clay. This created statue or group of statues is presented to other participants for discussion. These bodily and physical expressions form a space to discuss the oppression that is seen visually. Later, participants are invited to change the original ‘image’ into an ideal one. In the final phase, the transition of the image/s are discussed:

“...how to carry out the change, the transformation, the revolution, or whatever term one wishes to use. Thus, starting with a grouping of “statues” accepted by all as representative of a real situation, each one is asked to propose ways of changing it” (Boal 1985:135).

*Image theatre* offers a non-verbal theatrical space for the spectator: There is no use of language. It is one of the most stimulating forms of *the theatre of the oppressed*, because the opinions/feelings become visible and gain materiality. Additionally, disregarding language provides the group with a means to create a collective image (expression of the oppression in question). *Image theatre* enables different

possibilities in expressing and challenging oppression. It encourages the spectator to participate in action and “analyze the feasibility of change” collectively (Boal 1985:139).

### **Forum Theatre**

“In forum, the audience not only comments on the action, it intervenes directly in the action, taking protagonist’s part and trying to bring the play to a different end; it is no longer a passive receiver, it is gathering of ‘spect-actors’ (active spectators) who bring their own experience and suggestions to the question, ‘What is to be done?’(Jackson 1995)

As a practitioner of *the theatre of the oppressed* and the English translator of Boal’s books, Adrian Jackson suggests that *forum theatre* is based on the participation/intervention of the spectator in the theatrical action and on the process of replacing the oppressed character by improvising variations to cope with the oppression. In the production of *forum theatre*, just like within *image theatre*, the participants decide on a theme/event containing a particular social/political problem or conflict. This story is transformed into a short play, which is improvised, rehearsed and presented as in conventional theatre. But there are fundamental differences between *forum theatre* and conventional theatre. Firstly, although a forum play consists of a fixed script, dialogue and conclusion, it contains dissatisfaction in its finale, which shows the crisis brought by the main conflict. While the play is presented for the second time, the spectator has the chance to intervene in the play, and she is expected “to continue the physical action of the

replaced actor” and “to carry out the same type of work or activities performed by the actor” (Boal 1985:139). Correspondingly, within this interactivity and intervention, the whole play is changed by the acts of spect-actor, through dialogues and actions she creates, and the original performers also have to deal with this new situation and to act instantly in response. The second difference is the ‘directing’ issue, which depends on the preparation of a play, mainly in the rehearsals. In a forum play the director’s -the joker- role continues during the presentation of the play where s/he plays a role in constructing a bridge between the actors and the spectators. The joker is the one who keeps the forum afloat and activates the spectator in the process (Diamond 2000:9). What the joker has to do is, to activate and maintain the theatrical forum/debate, “which constitutes the improvisation of possible solutions, the intervention of members of the audience, the search for alternatives for an oppressive, unjust, intolerable situation” (Boal 1998:9). Then spectators become spect-actors who are voicing and performing their thoughts in theatrical space. Through the transformation of the spectator into a spect-actor, the spectator finds him/herself in a rehearsal that “stimulates the practice of the act in reality” (Boal 1985:141-2). Boal believes in the power of *forum theatre* since:

“Forum theatre is a reflection on reality and a rehearsal for future action.

In the present, we re-live the past to create the future. The spect-actor comes on stage and rehearses what it might be possible to do in real life”

(Boal 1998:9).

As Boal suggests, *forum theatre* offers a discussion and rehearsal space for the spectators in creating strategies against specific oppressive conflicts. Evidently, its

power, goal and function is distinguished from conventional theatre. Beyond the fictitious frame of theatre, *forum theatre* provides an expansion to reality:

“Forum theatre, as well as other forms of people’s theatre, instead of taking something away from the spectator, evoke in him a desire to practice in reality the act he has rehearsed in the theatre. The practice of these theatrical forms creates a sort of uneasy sense of incompleteness that seeks fulfillment through real action. (...) The truth of the matter is that the spectator-actor practices a real act even though he does it in a fictional manner. While he rehearses throwing a bomb on stage, he is concretely rehearsing the way a bomb is thrown; acting out his attempt to organize a strike, he is concretely organizing a strike. Within its fictitious limits, the experience is a concrete one.” (Boal 1985:141-2).

### **Feminist Practices of the Theatre of the Oppressed**

In this part, my aim is to show the significance and the importance of *the theatre of the oppressed* studies in relation to women’s issues. Berenice Fisher (1994) who researched the practice of *the theatre of the oppressed* with women, focuses on what *the theatre of the oppressed* can offer feminists, in other words how *the theatre of the oppressed* -in practice- is and can be applied to feminist pedagogy and to social work for women. In her research, she observed *the theatre of the oppressed* techniques used by French and Dutch feminists. She interviewed them in order to find out the approaches and achievements of *the theatre of the oppressed* in women’s studies. These studies targeted different woman’s groups and particular field of oppression.



Here, I will summarize some of *the theatre of the oppressed* studies done by these feminists.

By the 1980s feminists in France began to use *the theatre of the oppressed* in the context of the family planning movement. Although they had educational programs for women, they also used *forum theatre* techniques, focusing on subjects such as abortion and gynecological care. Two fundamental issues were addressed in these studies: One was the empowering effect of *forum theatre*, which occurred by replacing the oppressed character. Within its context, women participants realized constraints and oppression of their own lives and also began to struggle and fight against a particular form of oppression. Second one was the consciousness-raising dimension of *the theatre of the oppressed*. In this case, French feminists could broaden their work on family planning towards a wider feminist vision and also broaden their target population (Fisher 1994:187).

In the Netherlands, feminists also emphasized the double potential of *the theatre of the oppressed*, in helping activists to transform themselves and reach out to other women. Ans Pelzer, a sociologist, who worked in Amsterdam with a number of illiterate women's groups, battered women and feminist activists, found out that *the theatre of the oppressed* is especially effective with battered women. She thought that the process of transforming their lives into a theatre made women "*very strong*." The audience and the performers went beyond their pain, got stronger and explored different ways of survival. As Pelzer puts it: "If you [the actors] had been through all this and could talk about it and make a play about it, then it must be possible to survive" (Fisher 1994:187). It was important to emphasize the relationship between

play and survival. In her view, *the theatre of the oppressed* provided a space for women where their oppression could be visible and questionable. Within this process, women could encounter the oppression they faced and could collectively seek solutions to their oppression.

In the field of social work for women, *the theatre of the oppressed* was also used in community programs. Martha Jong, a social worker who worked with young women's groups for instance, used this method to question the mythology of the "*prince on a white horse*". She aimed to challenge the oppressive dimensions of this mythology. Within her project, she encouraged the group to form plays about their future lives. The participants intervened in these plays and replaced the oppressed character in order to find out alternative solutions. Jong used this technique to break down oppressive mythologies and discourses on young women.

On the other hand, Marian Kroese, a member of the Amsterdam-based company Schoppenvrouwen, used forum theatre while working with older women who were divorced. They formed plays about widowhood, which focused on the society's perception on widowhood. Within the context of divorce, they could find the chance to discuss marriage, divorce and widowhood, and also bring widow's oppression into the picture. Kroese observes that acting and play-making are liberating processes for women as opposed to the empty "talking, talking, talking" through which social work is usually done (Fisher 1994:188-9).

Feminists used *the theatre of the oppressed* techniques with different groups and on different subjects. The techniques of *image theatre* and *forum theatre* provided a

different method in expressing, examining and challenging women's oppression. For example, *image theatre*, as I mentioned before, offered a new language for expression. Within the context of women's issues, the *image theatre* technique - bodily expression- could reveal forms of oppression that could not be expressed in words. Accordingly, the unspeakable aspects of oppression could be expressed, imaged and questioned. The characteristics of *forum theatre*, on the other hand, provided an opportunity to go beyond the oppression that was addressed. Through interaction and intervention, women could also find a space to discuss, to fight against oppression and to create collective solutions. As Fisher stated, *the theatre of the oppressed* is perceived as a tool for consciousness-raising in feminist work:

“His (Boal) *theatre of the oppressed* techniques promised to broaden the language of consciousness-raising to include non-verbal and not easily verbalized responses to oppression. His focus on acting seemed to bridge the gap between theory and action. His emphasis on working together to find a way to respond to oppression seemed to support cooperation in an educational setting” (Fisher 1994:185).

The issues that can be addressed through the work of *the theatre of the oppressed* in relation to women are various and depend on the social, cultural, political and economic contexts. But as a method, *the theatre of the oppressed* provides a way to work on women's oppression. It makes feminists reach experiences, investigate and create a space for collective solutions. *The theatre of the oppressed* involves reflection, discussion and decision-making through a theatrical perspective.

### **Defining *the Theatre of the Oppressed* As a Feminist Methodology**

In this thesis, I have feminist concerns in studying women's oppression in the context of Okmeydanı. It is a case study investigating women's oppression, through the method of *the theatre of the oppressed* in Okmeydanı Social Center. As feminist case studies illustrate "posing provocative questions" is crucial (Reinharz 1992: 167). In this thesis a number of questions lead to my approach to women's oppression: How can it be possible to struggle against women's oppression? Does 'performing' create strategies in women's struggle? Thus, I place the issue of 'performing' at the center of this research, through which struggle and resistance are achieved. Here, I will try to show the relationship between feminist research methods and *the theatre of the oppressed* and how *the theatre of the oppressed* techniques can be used as a feminist research method.

Feminist research is "a way of being in the world (...) the experience of and acting against perceived oppression" (Kelly, Burton, and Regan 1994:46). Women's oppression is at the core of feminist research that focuses on "creating knowledge about women's experiences", finding the ways through which it is produced and reproduced, and in what ways resisting, challenging and subverting can be developed (Kelly, Burton, and Regan 1994: 33). *The theatre of the oppressed* techniques provides me with an original method in approaching these feminist concerns. The similarities between feminist research methods and *the theatre of the oppressed* can be seen in terms of participant observation, creating change and constituting a collective identity. For example, feminist action research, in general, aims at empowering the oppressed through understanding and changing their oppressive

realities (Reinharz 1992:181). Moreover, the position of the feminist researcher has to be situated in discovering and understanding the particular research object. In this process, feminist researchers are “also responsible for attempting to create a change” (Kelly, Burton, and Regan 1994:28). *The theatre of the oppressed* technique also focuses on empowering the oppressed. It provides a *rehearsal for future action* and correspondingly the role of the feminist researcher and *the theatre of the oppressed* facilitator resemble each other since they both aim at social/individual change. Not only *the theatre of the oppressed*, but also drama is used in some feminist research. For instance, Vivienne Griffiths uses drama in studying adolescence. Her method is to focus on the experiences of girls and to make them improvise their problems (Reinharz 1992:223). But compared to *the theatre of the oppressed*, in drama ‘talking’ rather than ‘performing’ forms the space of discussion.

The interactivity of *the theatre of the oppressed* also enables a specific interaction between the researcher and the ‘researched’. As I was the facilitator of *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops and performances, I also got involved within this research. This enables my/the researcher’s participation in the research as it is defined through the participatory research method as follows: “an approach to producing knowledge through democratic, interactive relationship” (Reinharz 1992:182). Within this definition, the researcher’s aim is defined as empowering the participants (who belong to a particular community), and working with them in resolving the problems that the community identifies. Identically, by creating performances and using interactivity *the theatre of the oppressed* provides a space and a method in resolving and empowering an oppressed community. Particularly, I -as the researcher and the facilitator- and the participants work together to express their common oppression

and to discuss the ways of changing that situation into a condition where empowerment will be possible.

Three core features of participatory research is defined as political action and individual consciousness-raising; sharing in making decisions and acquiring skills, and “the everyday life experience and feelings of the participants” (Reinharz 1992:182). By conducting and participating in feminist research, feminist researchers have no access to the power to change individuals, but “have the power to construct research which involves questioning dominant/oppressive discourses” (Kelly, Burton, and Regan 1994:39). The practice of change is defined as follows:

“[*change*] can occur within the process of ‘doing research’, and need not to be limited to the analysis and writing-up stages. The potential of research to create change can become an aspect of our methodology, which will in turn create more complex understandings of resistance to social/individual change” (Kelly, Burton, and Regan 1994: 40).

The methodology of this research has strong ties with feminist research methods in terms of understanding, conducting, participating and targeting change. The method I use, in finding out women’s oppression, is *the theatre of the oppressed*, in which ‘change’ is set as the target like all other feminist research methods. Accordingly, *the theatre of the oppressed* becomes the methodology as well as the object of this research. On the other hand, the intervention of the spectator enables the disruption of social conflicts. In Boal’s words on overcoming the oppression, the sense of resistance and survival is perceived as:

“The oppressed has to fortify his will. It’s a fighting back. You fight against someone who wants to impose –be it the boss, be it the man, be it the bank. So the will, in the way I use it, is not the will as society directs it, it’s the will to fight back. To defend ourselves against sadism, private or social, we have to fortify our will (...) I never, never propose solutions to problems. I always question people. (...) We make a dialectical debate. I pose questions instead of giving answers” (Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman 1990:72)

Beyond targeting change and identifying women’s oppression, *the theatre of the oppressed* enables the expressing and the performing of oppression in theatrical form. This enables to question that oppressive situation and to create a discussion space, where it can be heard, seen, questioned and discussed, and more importantly it allows intervention. This constitutes the basis and significance of *the theatre of the oppressed* in terms of creating strategies by ‘performing’. Forum theatre contains various moments of dialogue, of exchange, of learning, of teaching and of pleasure for both the performers and the spectators. In a way, theatre becomes a tool in helping to bring about social transformation (Boal 1998:9). Forum theatre offers the chance to use theatre as a tool for strategizing different models against oppression. The play, itself does not fight against oppression, it needs the intervention of the audience who could become activated as characters in a struggle against oppression.

Moreover, the intervention and the interactivity of *the theatre of the oppressed* enable the oppressed community to find a space and a tool in resisting their

oppression. The regulatory norms that constitute women's oppression are disrupted by the 'performing' act of the spect-actor, by the way of resisting and struggling against the oppression shown on the stage. The intervention of the spect-actor through using her own body and performing strategies makes it possible to change the oppressive script on the stage, through which she is constituted performatively.

The interactivity of the event opens up a space for this 'performativity' in a fictive way –that is the theatre-. But besides that, it also provides the audience to perform and to show the ways in which and *by which* they could encounter, struggle and challenge oppression. In this respect, the term 'performing' became significant in disrupting, changing, resisting and re-constructing gender roles, in the way it was shown on the stage. The theatrical form of 'performing' in challenging women's oppression enables us to re-think 'performativity' and also shows the possibility of women's resistance to oppression.

As a conclusion, performativity makes performance -which both constitutes and reveals gender- visible. In addition to that, in the context of *the theatre of the oppressed*, resistance becomes possible through that particular performance addressed on stage. On the one hand, performativity makes visible the constitutiveness of gender and women's oppression by performing that particular oppression on stage. On the other hand, the interactivity and intervention of *the theatre of the oppressed* allows the spect-actor to perform, and through that, makes resistance possible to that particular forms of oppression, gender construction and regulatory norms.



### CHAPTER III: THE PRACTICES OF THE THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED AS A RESEARCH PROJECT

This chapter aims at narrating my story of Okmeydanı Social Center. Within this story, I will describe the processes of the workshops, performances and interviews in detail. As the method of this research, I will try to explain the ways in which *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops and performances were organized and also how these differentiated from the methods of formal education, a dominant activity in the social center where I conducted my research. Here my main focus is to show how *the theatre of the oppressed* formed consciousness-raising among the women in Okmeydanı Social Center. In each play formed within the framework of *the theatre of the oppressed*, we focused on the awareness and the expression of women's oppression in individual level, and then tried to find out the shared oppression among the group. Through *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops and performances held in the context of Okmeydanı, women's oppression became visible and discussable. The interactivity with the audience, which is a part of this technique, enabled us to develop strategies in coping with women's oppression. I was the facilitator of *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops and performances, and the researcher in the process of interviewing. I will first narrate my story, how I got involved in *the theatre of the oppressed*, and then I will describe the workshops and performances, and finally the interviewing process.

My journey in working with women had started in the year 1997, in Gazi neighborhood of Istanbul and then had continued in Okmeydanı Social Center between the years of 1998 and 2002. The main target of these practices was to

express women's oppression and problems through theatre. However, this process was incomplete in the sense of lacking a debate on solutions against oppression. Then I have met Augusto Boal's theatre of the oppressed techniques. I participated in workshops and training sections in Istanbul and Vancouver, and became a 'real' participant that sought for solutions against her own oppression. Indeed, one of the significant issues that I learnt in Vancouver<sup>28</sup> was the changeable structure of 'oppression' depending on context. In the training sessions the participants were mainly from North America and I had a hard time in finding a shared oppression theme with them. This showed me that oppression changed from community to community and *the theatre of the oppressed* has to be considered as an original tool for each community. When I returned home, I decided to experiment the forum theatre workshops with women in Okmeydanı Social Center.

The workshops and performances held in Okmeydanı Social Center took place between September 2000 and June 2002. In this period, I spent two days every week at Okmeydanı Social Center. The forum event's main characteristic, the participation and the intervention also influenced me in the sense of becoming a part of Okmeydanı Social Center. This included taking part in some meetings that aimed to widen the activities, helping to solve certain problems and establishing relationships between feminist associations, groups, individuals and the Center.

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<sup>28</sup> The training sessions were organized by Headlines Theatre, and held by David Diamond. I participated two levels of the training sessions, that each one was one week long.

### ***The theatre of the oppressed Workshops in the Okmeydanı Social Center***

I organized six workshops<sup>29</sup> in Okmeydanı Social Center. Thirty-four women participated in these workshops and twenty-five of them played active role in the performances. The ages of the participants ranged between sixteen and fifty-one, and only thirteen of them were born in Istanbul. Eight of them were graduated from primary school or were barely literate. There were five secondary school, fifteen high school and five university graduates. Twenty-three of the participants were married, eight were single, two were widows and one was divorced. Within *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops and performances, the women's groups showed homogeneity in relation to their class and their living space. This homogeneity facilitated finding common themes for the plays in the workshops as well as in the process of interventions in performances. As Fisher suggests:

*“Boal’s theatre forum works best with a high degree of homogeneity among the people using it. Their shared sense of oppression leads them to identify with and support the person replacing the protagonist”*  
(Fisher 1994:190).

Each workshop lasted eight to twelve weeks depending on the regularity of attendance and on the decision of whether one or two performances would be staged. The forum workshop was announced by posters and also was advised by the

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<sup>29</sup> The time schedule of workshops were: October - November 2000; January -March 2001; April - June 2001; October – November 2001; December 2001- February 2002; March – June 2002.

secretary of Okmeydanı Social Center and by the deputy director, Nejmiye Melemen<sup>30</sup>. Besides these individual supports, Okmeydanı Social Center -as an institution- provided me with a space for workshops and performances. Furthermore, participating in an activity supported by an institution gave confidence to the participants. Despite the fact that I was working in a state institution, I did not have any administrative workload except informing SHÇEK about the forum workshop with a written proposal beforehand.

### *The Setting of the Theatre of the Oppressed Workshop*

The workshop was held in a relatively large room at the first floor, which was quite luminous but too noisy, because it was situated next to the main street. There were very few furniture in the room, but there were portable chairs, some flowerpots and two bookcases so that we could prepare our setting easily. The floor had been covered by carpet, but it did not offer a functional and clean environment for us, so one of the participants of the workshop found a sponsor for covering it with PVC. For the forum workshop, nothing special was needed; the only need was an empty space and some pillows for sitting and lying down.

### *The Process of the Theatre of the Oppressed Workshop*

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<sup>30</sup> Nejmiye Melemen participated my first forum workshop and played a role in the performance. This was a nice starting point since spectators saw the social worker -also the deputy director- of Okmeydanı Social Center on the stage, acting; so the performance event as a whole got a prestige and significance among the participants. On the other hand, Nejmiye Melemen's advices on participation became more effective, realistic and sincere, since she could also declare as "I have participated and acted, too!"

I tried to formulate my own (and also the group's) method and the arsenal of *the theatre of the oppressed* in the context of Okmeydanı Social Center. I tried not to act like an instructor or trainer. They all knew that I had the knowledge of *the theatre of the oppressed*, but they were the ones that played, created and performed. A shared group identity was easily created; we were all trying to work on the oppression of women, whether it was theirs or mine. Within this group, my role during *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops was to facilitate and help them in creating performances that contained shared oppression. During the workshops, we were learning and experiencing all together. Also we all tried to keep in mind *the theatre of the oppressed* workshop rules while working on the issue of oppression<sup>31</sup>.

The workshop consisted of four main sections: the circle, warming up exercises, constructing images and forming forum plays. A workshop day started with a circle where each participant sat. This also formed the site where we discussed our previous work and shared intimate and personal narratives. The circle symbolized the energy of the group and the opening of the workshop where we created our own reality. The second step was the warming up exercises that consisted of various games to prepare us theatrically and to extract ourselves from the distress of daily life. These exercises also aimed at promoting physical, emotional and sensorial awareness of the participants. After each exercise, the group reformed the circle and discussed about what they felt and thought about it. The third step was the construction of the images that was the core of *the theatre of the oppressed*. The

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<sup>31</sup> Do not harm yourself and the others, by both physically and emotionally; do not compel yourself or the others to do the exercises, because the person knows herself better than anyone; you do not have to participate all the exercises, you can step off whenever you want without any explanation; any kind of observer is not permitted, everyone in the room has to participate; there is no right or wrong in this study, we are not exploring the truth; all the works done and the conversations taken place have to be in confidentiality, it is not permitted to talk about them after the session, with anyone; do not intervene any possible emotional crisis of a participant during the workshop and do not help or ask the reason; we are not searching for a concrete, single solution.

images were the improved versions of ‘sculpturing’ exercises that I have mentioned in the second chapter. The construction of images presented the bodily expression of oppression. There were different forms of constructing and combining those images. This enabled the creation of a discussion space on oppression. During the image work the participants used the techniques of ‘sculpturing’ through their own bodies or the others’ in order to express oppression. According to my experiences of image work, the images showed different characteristics within different groups. For example, the images that we created were extensively large ones compared to those created in Vancouver. Large-scale images emphasize the greatness of women’s oppression and the desire of making it as visible as it could be. Another point was that the images always referred to an oppressor who was imagined to be somewhere out of the image space. When compared to the ones in Okmeydanı Social Center, in Vancouver the images were mostly introverted, small-scale and indicated internal conflicts.

Within the fourth step, forum plays were created through the images created in the workshop representing the problematic. The forum play had to end with a crisis of the protagonist where there is “an oppressive, unjust, intolerable situation” (Boal 1998:9). Usually towards the end of the workshop (on the fifth or ninth week), the group would be divided into two sub-groups in order to create two different forum plays. Each play was rehearsed and then each group intervened to the others’ play for rehearsing the possible interventions that could happen in the upcoming performance.

Finally, in each workshop day the circle had to be completed by putting a stone (or any kind of material that had a special significance) at the center. Then a participant who wanted to say ‘something’ took this stone. Holding the stone indicated the right of speech and everyone had to listen without intervening. The stone was passed among the circle and at the end the circle became completed.

This circle had an important significance for the workshop. The perception of the circle was different for each woman. For instance, in each day a different material was put at the center of the circle. Once a woman breathlessly told the story of her stone as follows:

*On Sunday we were on a picnic in the forest. After sometime I began to look for a special stone for myself. I was wondering about, taking, looking at and leaving several stones. My husband got curious about this. I told him “I am looking for ‘my right of speech’!” He did not understand. I yelled at him: “I am looking for “my right of speech””. Then I found this stone, my husband didn’t ask anything then.<sup>32</sup>*

As this example suggested; the circle represented a space for women, where they could speak out<sup>33</sup>. The circle enabled the sharing of deep and intimate conversations and problems. The feelings and ideas found a space for expression. While sitting in the circle, women discussed the workday practices as well as their intimate

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<sup>32</sup> Pazar günü ormana pikniğe gittik. Bir süre sonra kendim için, özel olan bir taş aramaya başladım. Bir sürü taşa bakmaya başladım, evirip çeviriyordum. Kocam merak etmeye başladı. Ona, “söz hakkımı arıyorum” dedim. Bir şey anlamadı tabii. “söz hakkımı arıyorum” diye bağırdım. Sonra bu taşı buldum. Kocam sonra hiç bir şey sormadı.

<sup>33</sup> I will examine ‘the right of speech’ at length in chapter five.

experiences, fears and angers. The experience in the circle also created and proved that the workshop space was a confidential setting.

My gender identity also played a role in creating a friendly and open environment. I tried to be as flexible as possible. I could change my prepared program according to the number of women attended and according to their specific capacities. For example, I soon found out that physical ‘trust games’ and ‘group games’ which acquired physical fitness were not suitable for the women in Okmeydanı. Additionally, I also tried to make them feel free in choosing the subject to be addressed. By leaving the room, I left them alone to discuss a particular topic, to find out the theme for the upcoming play and to make improvisations. I can easily say that the forum play was the product of their own creation and very much expressed their own concerns. My main contribution within this process was to put the story they improvised into a theatrical structure. I helped them examine the characters they created (her/his characteristics, background, ideas and feelings) and bring the conflicts (the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor) into a theatrical format. In other words, I facilitated the process of turning the improvisation into a play.

The workshop was not without difficulties. Firstly, at times certain differences divided us and overcame our similarities like my single status, my relatively young age and my socioeconomic, cultural background. Okmeydanı Social Center, on the other hand, also signified the differences between us. For example, *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops used the space of this institution where various activities took place. Here, there was a clear distinction between the trainers and the participants in



which the hierarchy and the authority was constructed. Within this context, the difference of *the theatre of the oppressed* laid in its democratic space where women's oppression was examined. However, this difference sometimes created contradictions within their perception of authority and hierarchy that the participants were not used to. In addition to this, the diversity of attendance sometimes composed disadvantages in maintaining consistency. Typical reasons why they were not able to come were illness at the household and visits of relatives. Indeed in November 2001, I also had to take a break, because I was infected by the virus chickenpox from the daughter of one of the participants.

### *The Theatre of the Oppressed Performances*

When the forum play was developed, we decided on the props and the costumes that women could provide easily. Every performer was responsible for her materials and participated in the provision of general needs. All steps of preparation necessitated teamwork. For instance, the title of the performance was found collectively through brainstorming and we used the method of negative selection in order to reach a decision. Announcement posters<sup>34</sup> were also created together. Other trainers at the Center also helped in the process of announcement of the workshop and the performances.

The performance space was at the ground floor, which was used as a classroom and contained a number of useful furniture pieces. In every performance the setting was designed together. We arranged the seats and the stage together. We did not use any

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<sup>34</sup> See Appendix

kind of curtain, so that the space between the performers and the spectator became more interactive. We used the entrances that the room provided. The time and the date of the performances were determined considering personal and institutional conditions. The shows took place in a weekday<sup>35</sup> and were mostly scheduled for two o'clock.

There were nine performances<sup>36</sup> presented and each forum play approximately took ten minutes. The whole event lasted for an hour. The performance event was public, but could not be broadcasted. There were some legal and bureaucratic limitations of the Center. Most importantly, since it is a state office, it does not have autonomy. In cases when the Center wants to broadcast something, it needs to apply to the Social Service Department of Istanbul for approval. This means too much paper work and we soon gave up the idea of reaching a wider audience. However, inviting a journalist is possible without informing the Social Service Department which meant that the show could appear in a journal<sup>37</sup>.

Fifty to sixty spectators watched each performance. The spectators included the participants in the Center, their relatives, friends, and neighbors who were invited by the performers<sup>38</sup>. According to my observation, most spectators were living in Okmeydanı or in its vicinity, they were lower or lower-middle class, mostly married and they were not frequenters of theatre. The biggest problem that we encountered

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<sup>35</sup> Okmeydanı Social Center was not open on weekends.

<sup>36</sup> 28.11.2000 "The Sound of Silence (Sessizliğin Sesi)"; 16.03.2001 "No Way Out? (Çıkış Yok Mu?)"; 01.06.2001 "My Husband and My Mother (Eşim ile Annem)" and "Our Traditions (Törelerimiz)"; 01.11.2001 "The Economic Crisis and its Reflections (Kriz ve Yansımaları)"; 06.11.2001 "This Life is Mine! (Bu Hayat Benim!)"; 05.02.2002 "Do We Have Any Chance? (Şansımız Var mı?)"; 20.05.2002 "Materiality in Marriage (Evlilikte Maddiyat)"; 03.06.2002 "Who is Guilty? (Suçlu Kim?)".

<sup>37</sup> In fact, a journalist attended in one of the performances and published an article about it. See Appendix.

<sup>38</sup> See Appendix for the photograph of the audience

was the disorder of the spectators, not produced by their chatting (it was tolerable) but by their children<sup>39</sup>.

Because the forum theatre was interactive and we invited the spectators to intervene the play, the number and the homogeneity of spectators were important. In my experiences of forum theatre, I found out that if the number of spectators was few, the discussion space that was created by the forum play could be easily formed and the spectators felt more comfortable in intervening. The interventions and the desire of intervening could differentiate if there were officials among the spectators. However, officials mostly left the performance area after the first intervention and this changed the atmosphere of the interactivity.

The performance began when we all lined up in the performing space. There became a relatively silent atmosphere, because something was about to happen. My role was to welcome the spectator:

Welcome to our show!<sup>40</sup>

The audience replied by saying: “Welcome” or “Thank you<sup>41</sup>”. This was the beginning of the performance and the beginning of the interactive dialogue that *the theatre of the oppressed* aims to construct. The theatrical wall between the audience and the performers began to disappear through this dialogue. After that, each of us introduced herself. Then I began to explain what would happen next:

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<sup>39</sup> During the performance, the Center provided a room and a caretaker for children, but this also was not successful, because the children could not be kept in the room or their mothers got worried about them.

<sup>40</sup> Oyunumuza hoşgeldiniz

<sup>41</sup> “Hoşbulduk”, “Teşekkürler”

We did a theatre workshop for ... weeks. This play is its result. We will tell you a story, but this is not Ayşe's or Fatma's story. This is our story. In the workshop, we sat around a circle. We put our feelings, thoughts, stories, and experiences together. Then we created a play out of it. This is not a personal story. This is our story.

We are not real actors. Probably we will have many mistakes. From the beginning we are apologizing for that. But please do not forget, we are not the characters that you will see us playing. Nobody acts herself. For example, on the street you meet this performer. If you call her with the character's name, she would not respond. We are not these characters. We are only acting out. But we believe that these characters exist in real life.

First of all, we will show you the play. Then we can talk about it. Here is our play!<sup>42</sup>

The forum play consisted of a particular oppression and indicated the conflicts between the characters, the oppressed and the oppressor. The play ended with a crisis presenting the main conflict. The intervention space was formed through this crisis, better to say, through the dissatisfaction of the final. Of course, seeing a play is

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<sup>42</sup> Biz ... haftalık bir tiyatro atölye çalışması yaptık. Bu oyun onu bir ürünü. Size bir öykü anlatacağız, ama bu ne Ayşe'nin ne de Fatma'nın hikayesi. Bu bizim hikayemiz. Çalışmalarda, bizler birer çember yarattık. Bunun içine duygularımızı, düşüncelerimizi, hikayelerimizi ve deneyimlerimizi koyduk. Ve bunların içinden de bu oyunun yarattık. Bu kişisel bir oyun değil. Bu hepimizin oyunu. Biz gerçek oyuncular değiliz. Bu yüzden bir sürü hata yapabiliriz. Şimdiden bunlar için özür dileriz. Ama lütfen unutmayın! Bizler oynadığımız karakterler de değiliz. Kimse kendini oynamıyor burada. Örneğin sokakta bu arkadaşlardan birini gördünüz. Eğer onu buradaki karakterin adıyla çağırırsanız, size cevap veremez. Çünkü bizler o karakterler değiliz. Bizler yalnızca oynuyoruz. Ama bu karakterlerin gerçek hayatta olduğunu da biliyoruz. İlk önce, size oyunumuzu göstereceğiz. Sonra onun hakkında biraz konuşabiliriz. İşte oyunumuz

something that most of the guests are familiar with, whereas intervening is not a practice they are used to. The play was performed from the beginning to the end. The spectators clapped as usual, and then my job, as a joker began. I appeared at the stage and created a discussion space:

I thank the performers for this performance. What do you think about the play? Did you like it?<sup>43</sup>

The audience replied with murmurs: “Yes!”, “It is nice”; “We like it<sup>44</sup>” and so on. I encouraged them to discuss the play and to react on the particular issue addressed. Then I continued the dialogue with the spectators:

Did you see any problem in this play? What do you think about it? Does it have to be changed or is it OK as it is? Is there anybody in this play that is oppressed or in trouble? Who are they? Who is the oppressor/s then? What do you think? Can we cope with that oppression? How can we cope with that?<sup>45</sup>

The spectators began to talk about the play, the characters, the subject and they reacted to this situation with comments. They were not satisfied about the play and I informed them about the upcoming process:

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<sup>43</sup> Bu gösteri için oyunculara teşekkür ederim. Oyun hakkında ne düşünüyorsunuz? Beğendiniz mi?

<sup>44</sup> “Evet!”, “Güzeldi” “Beğendik”

<sup>45</sup> Bu oyunda herhangi bir sorun gördünüz mü? Ne düşünüyorsunuz? Bu sizce değiştirilebilir mi yoksa öyle kalmalı mı? Bu oyunda baskı altında olan ya da başı deritte olan kimse var mı? Kimler? Kimler baskıyı uyguluyor? Ne düşünüyorsunuz, sizce bununla baş etmek mümkün mü? Sizce nasıl baş ederiz?

OK, then we will show you the play for the second time. The same play.

If you feel or think that there is oppression or there is a character that is oppressed or in trouble, please stop the play. It is very easy, just raise your hand and yell “Stop!”. Can everyone here do that?<sup>46</sup>

The exercise of rising hands and yelling began, it could be shorter or longer, or other kinds of exercises could be added according to the mood of spectators. Then the play began, I was on the stage looking at the spectators. A spectator raised her hand and yelled “Stop!”. The play was stopped. In general, she began to talk about the situation, I insisted her to come up to the stage. For encouraging them, I asked questions about who was in trouble, how the character might be struggling and so on. If she had answers, I invited her to replace the oppressed character, to cope with the oppressor and to make an effort in finding a solution. Mostly she agreed and the new play began with her strategies. I was always near the spect-actor, so was the original performer. This is because, we wanted her to feel confident, and we encouraged her and controlled any kind of unexpected interaction. When with her decision she finished her intervention, everybody applauded and thanked her. I asked her what she had felt and thought during the intervention. And then I turned to other spectators to see if there was anyone else who wanted to intervene at this stage or any other parts of the play. The performance continued like that.

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<sup>46</sup> Tamam şimdi size oyunumuzu ikinci defa sergileyeceğiz. Aynı oyunu. Eğer baskı olduğunu görürseniz ya da düşünürseniz ya da baskı gören ya da başı dertte olan bir karakter görürseniz, lütfen oyunu durdunuz. Çok kolay, elinizi kaldırıp, “Durun!” diye bağırın. Buradaki herkes bunu yapabilir mi?

In general, there were different types and numbers of intervention in each performance. The total number of interventions was thirty-nine<sup>47</sup>. Not all the spectators intervened, but according to my observations and to my friends' (the ones among the spectators), it was obvious that nearly all spectators were talking to each other, criticizing or analyzing the interventions and commenting about all.

The interventions were not only encouraged by me, but also by performers. Whenever I was about to lose my energy in activating, one of the performers tried to activate the spectator by saying: "Isn't there anybody who can find a solution?" "Isn't there anybody who can rescue me?" "Isn't there anybody who can cope with me?"<sup>48</sup> and so on. The forum performance was ended when there was nobody left who wanted to intervene. But once, one of the performers began to speak about her character's problems after we had concluded the event. Everyone, including me, was surprised but we all agreed with her. Then two further interventions took place. This anecdote showed that not only the spectator's, but also the performer's satisfaction about the intervention was important. The performer did not think that the spect-actors did solve the problem shown at stage and she insisted that some new solutions and strategies should be created.

The forum theatre event creates a discussion space for women, in which the mean is 'performing'. I believe that the performers, the spectators and the spect-actors

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<sup>47</sup> Two of the interventions were performed by male spect-actors. Although most of the spectators were female, there were few numbers of male ones and we did not ask them to go out. Mostly they left the space during the performance, but when they wanted to intervene, I did not avoid this in order to experience the opportunity that a male spect-actor replacing a female character fought against a male oppressor who is acted out by a female performer. The second spect-actor did not replace any character, he created a new male character and widened the picture and presented his solution.

<sup>48</sup> "Çözüm bulabilecek kimse yok mu?", "Beni kurtaracak kimse yok mu?", "Benimle baş edecek kimse yok mu?".

enjoyed the experience a lot. This was an unusual experience for everyone in the sense of making oppression visible and of inviting them openly to struggle with it.

Documentation of these performances mostly consisted of video recordings. Some of my friends recorded all performances with an amateur camera. The recording did not make the performers and the spect-actors uncomfortable. I always informed people that the recording could be paused, but it had never happened. In some performances, I intended to take pictures, but the circumstances of space and light did not allow us to take useful ones. Additionally, I took personal notes of the workshops and performances.

### **Searching for Women's Words**

In June 2002, few weeks after I finalized the last forum workshop, Okmeydanı Social Center was closed because of re-construction work. During this time, I decided to make interviews with the participants of the workshop. I wanted to explore the participants' views about the forum event and the Center, and also to know more about them. I knew them through *the theatre of the oppressed* process. But the interviewing was something different; I had the questions and the tape recorder, and this time they were 'expected' to talk rather than to perform theatrically. Beyond all, the interviewing provided me the opportunity to learn how they imagined the social center, what they thought about the work we had done together, in what ways they found it useful and how their lives have changed after their experiences in the social center and the workshop. Besides that, I aimed to acquire information about backgrounds and their daily lives. During the time of the interview, Okmeydanı



Social Center and the workshops were not active. This became an advantage, because they had already reflected on it and could provide me with lengthy answers. I could reach seven participants whom I decided to interview. There were some specific reasons that led me to choose these particular women. For instance, two of them participated in all the workshops and they had active roles in the Center. Another one was working at the Center as a volunteer and she participated in the workshops, approximately for one year. There was another participant who was a university graduate and had a reputation for criticizing the Center. The other three interviewees' connection with the Center was mainly based on the theatre workshop. It is obvious that these seven women do not represent the participants of the workshops and of Okmeydanı Social Center in general. But my real concern was to discover the thoughts of the participants about the workshops. Beyond their participation to the workshops and performances, I also wanted to give voice to them in the evaluation of these processes. All the interviewees willingly accepted my proposal to interview. They all knew that this was part of my research, but they did not understand the content and purpose of this research. For instance once, during the workshop times, one of the participants had asked me what I was gaining (in material terms) out of these workshops and performances. She wondered the grade I got in the school. Certainly, it seemed impossible for me to explain the aims of my thesis.

I chose to make interviews after summer, from November 2002 to February 2003, because during the summer time schools were over, children were at home and women mostly dealt with their children. Additionally, they mostly left Istanbul for visiting their villages.

The interview questions consisted of five topics<sup>49</sup>. The first part consists of some demographic characteristics, such as age, birthplace, educational status and so on. The second part was about their household and family life. In the third part, there were specific questions about the social center. Here, I aimed at learning about how they imagined Okmeydanı Social Center and in what ways they took benefit from it. In the fourth part, questions about the theatre workshop took place. Their feelings and thoughts about the workshop, the performance, the interventions and the act of ‘performing’, and also the possible connections they made between this workshop and the other courses at the Center were asked. Finally, their experiences of oppression in daily life were questioned.

Six interviews took place at the interviewee’s houses, only one occurred at a workplace. The duration of the recorded interviews ranged from one hour to four hours. Before the interviews, I thought that I had the risk of not having them speak in detail, because they would think that I knew them and their stories well. But this did not happen. I always began with the question, “What are you thinking about the theatre workshop?”<sup>50</sup>. Then I let them speak and finally when there was a silence, I raised a further question. The questions that I prepared were not asked in the same order. But I asked the same questions to all.

The interviewing process has differences and similarities with the process of *the theatre of the oppressed*. Although we had worked together for some time, I went to their homes or workplaces with a recorder and asked questions. Although we had

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<sup>49</sup> See appendix

<sup>50</sup> Tiyatro çalışması hakkında ne düşünüyorsun?

worked on women's oppression and had created performances out of them, in the interviewing we began to talk and examine what we performed. This talk was different from the theatre workshops', not only because the workshop was over, Okmeydanı Social Center was closed and we were evaluating the process, but also because we were in real life situation.

When we met for the interview, we always spent at least one hour for chatting; eating something or drinking tea. They treated me as a guest who came to their place. However, in the process of *the theatre of the oppressed*, I was the facilitator of *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops held in Okmeydanı Social Center where they 'attended'; but in this process I entered their every-day world. It was the world where they faced oppression, constraints and controls. For instance, two of the interviews had to be postponed: One of the reasons was a newborn baby needing to be taken care of (suckling, farting, sleeping processes, which do not have any schedule), and the other was the long working hours of the interviewee.

All the interviewees needed to make some arrangements for scheduling the interview, such as putting the baby to sleep before I arrived and finding a relative to look after her children. The children issue usually constituted obstacles for making proper interviews in the sense that they were curious about what was going on. I tried to make an appointment, while the children were at school, but I was not lucky all the time. Once, the interview had to be held on Saturday, while her children and husband were at home. We settled in the kitchen by closing the door. The two kids were trying to interfere. When the interview was completed, I thanked the interviewee for sparing the time for the interview. As a response, she thanked me for

the fact that she could spend some hours for herself. The interview, in her view, symbolized the time for her own.

Here I will give brief information about interviewees:

**Tevfika**<sup>51</sup> is a twenty-nine years old woman who was born in Sivas. She was brought up and had lived with her family in İzmit. She was graduated from primary school and had worked in a dressmaker's shop until she got married at the age of seventeen. After marriage, she moved to Dudullu and five years later to Okmeydanı. She had a ten-year-old daughter and a newborn baby, at the time of the interview. She stays in a rented flat in which they use stove for heating. They have low income with the only employed person at home being her husband who works in a delicatessen in Mecidiyeköy. She participated all *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops<sup>52</sup> at the social center and took roles in six performances. She had been a participant of the social center since 1998. She had attended different courses and activities and she was working as a volunteer at the Center.

**Aysu**, like Tevfika, was a volunteer of the Center and a frequenter of *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops<sup>53</sup>. She was born in Tokat, but she came to Istanbul when she was a little child and has been living in Okmeydanı since then. She was graduated from the girl's vocational school and held different jobs as a babysitter,

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<sup>51</sup> The names are alias.

<sup>52</sup> The characters that Tevfika acted were, in "The Sound of Silence", the little boy; in "Our Traditions" the pregnant woman; in "This Life is Mine!" woman's first friend, in "Do We Have Any Chance?" first man; in "Materiality in Marriage" the matchmaker and in "Who is Guilty?" first woman.

<sup>53</sup> The characters that Aysu acted were the mother in "The Sound of Silence"; the husband in "Our Traditions"; the wife in "The Economic Crisis and its Reflections", 2<sup>nd</sup> man in "Do We Have Any Chance?"; the young girl's mother in "Materiality in Marriage" and 1<sup>st</sup> woman's daughter in "Who is Guilty?".

domestic worker and secretary. She is thirty-nine years old, single mother. She has two children; her son is seventeen and her daughter is thirteen years old. She was divorced about ten years ago. After September 2000, she had mostly participated in the occupational programs. She was constantly looking for a job, because she had a very limited income that was based on her father's retirement payment and her elder brother's material support. She does not receive a maintenance allowance for her child from her ex-husband. Instead she continues to live in his house, which has only two rooms and has inadequate facilities.

**Gizem**, who is thirty-six years old, was also born in Tokat. She came to Okmeydanı, Istanbul in her early twenties in order to earn money for the needs of her family. She worked in a construction company as a cleaning woman. She fell in love with her husband and got married without the approval of their families. She has two daughters, who are ten and six years old. She had quitted working because she was the only one who could take care of her children who had chronic illnesses. She insists on living in Okmeydanı, because of Okmeydanı Social Insurance Institution Hospital (Sosyal Sigortalar Kurumu Hastanesi - SSK) where she has a strong network. She keeps strong bonds with her village, and kinship relations are still primarily significant in her daily life. She spent a lot of time in the Center and worked as a full-time volunteer. She participated in four of *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops<sup>54</sup> and she liked to attend the programs that are about personal development and child education. She is well known for singing folk songs.

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<sup>54</sup> The characters that Gizem acted were wife's mother in "My Husband and My Mother"; women's second friend in "This Life is Mine!"; third man in "Do We Have Any Chance" and first woman's husband in "Who is Guilty?"

**Zühre** has a keen interest in personal development programs, which she participated in the Center. Additionally, she participated in four of *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops<sup>55</sup> at the social center. She is forty-one years old and was born in Erzincan. When she was three years old, her family moved to Çağlayan, Istanbul, and eight years later the family migrated to Germany as workers. She did not have the opportunity to study in Germany, because she had to take care of her juniors. After they started to go to school, she started to work in a factory. In 1983 she fell in love with her cousin and made a decision to move to Istanbul and to marry him. She did not work in Turkey; instead she became a housewife and a mother of two sons at ages eighteen and ten. She owns the flat they live in. She bought it with her savings in Germany.

**Nil** was born in Istanbul and was graduated from high school. She is forty years old and married. She has two daughters whose ages are seventeen and nineteen. They had lived in Feriköy for fifteen years and there she had a very constrained life: One of her daughters has a serious mental and physical disorder requiring intensive care. The other reason for her constraints was subjected to her husband's domination. After her psychological crisis, they moved to Okmeydanı where her mother lived and Okmeydanı Social Center became a socialization space for her. She only participated in gymnastic course and four of *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops<sup>56</sup> at the social center. She did not work, partly because she did not have financial problems.

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<sup>55</sup> The characters that Zühre acted were, in "No Way Out?" the mother; in "My Husband and My Mother" the husband, in "The Economic Crisis and its Reflections" the daughter.

<sup>56</sup> The characters that Nil acted were, the nurse in "Our Traditions"; the woman in "This Life is Mine!"; the young man's mother in "Materiality in Marriage".

**Arsen** is thirty-nine years old, a university graduate. She was born in Adapazarı, but lived in Bilecik and Istanbul during her childhood. She got married when she was twenty-eight. She has two children. Her son is ten years old and her daughter is six years old. She has been working, but she was unemployed in 2001 during the workshops. She was working in a research company at the time of the interview. They have their own flat which is across the Okmeydanı Social Center. She participated in two of the workshops<sup>57</sup>. She was known for her critical approaches to the activities and the Center.

**Ash** is a thirty-one years old woman who was born in Istanbul, but her parents are from Ordu. When she was nineteen years old, she got married to her mother's nephew. She has two daughters, whose ages are eleven and eight. She is living in a 'family' apartment with her mother-in-law and her sister-in-law. She had worked in temporary jobs occasionally, but always seek for full-time employment opportunities. She has a junior high school diploma, and she was still registered to the high school for working adults. Her relation with the Center was not regular and she participated in some of the workshops, but she only took role in one of the performances<sup>58</sup>.

In this chapter, I tried to narrate the process of *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops and performances. *The theatre of the oppressed* enables women to think, discuss and find out solutions against their oppression by the means of theatre. *The theatre of the oppressed* provides them an intervening tool on that particular oppression and creates a collective discussion space for the other participants of

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<sup>57</sup> The character that Arsen acted was the 1<sup>st</sup> woman in "Do We Have Chance?".

<sup>58</sup> The character that Ash acted was the 3<sup>rd</sup> Woman in "Do We Have Any Chance?".

Okmeydanı Social Center. In the following chapters, I will try to analyze the setting -how social center is imagined- and the method of this research, if it enables women to find out possible solutions against oppression.



## CHAPTER IV: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SOCIAL CENTER FOR WOMEN

In this chapter, I aim to describe the setting of this research in relation to the interviews I conducted. I will first explain how the social center is defined in social work literature and how it functions in the everyday life. I will also discuss the characteristics of Okmeydanı as a distinctive locality, which shapes the specific functioning of the center. My analysis will be focusing on how the everyday activities of the center point out to a difference between definitions and practices, and on the other hand on how women themselves imagine the center concentrating on their expectations and experiences. Through women's narratives and the way they imagine the social center, I will try to show the influences of the 'education for women' discourse which is reproduced within Okmeydanı Social Center by the cooperation of social center and women's institutions.

### The Social Center: "A Space for Integration"

Social Centers are governed by SHÇEK<sup>59</sup>. In 1992, the first social center was established in Ankara, Altındağ, which is known as the earliest *gecekondu*<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Historically, the root of SHÇEK is seen within the charity organization "Himaye-i Eftal Cemiyeti (HEC)" that was established in 1917 by civil authorities. The aim of this association was to provide different facilities for children such as improving their health and educational status, reducing oppression of children, opening reformatories, and preventing children from addiction (Available at [online] <http://www.shcek.gov.tr/web/shcek/tarihce/t1.htm>)

After the establishment of the republic, Children's Protection Society (Çocuk Esirgeme Kurumu - ÇEK), which was a branch of HEC, was accepted as 'an association for public benefits' by the government in 1937 and had a position in which they could obtain more flexibility in spreading out the facilities, opportunities and activities both at national and international level. (for further information about ÇEK, see Libal, K. (2000)). After the political change in 1980 and the economic problems of ÇEK, the association was abrogated in 1981 and SHÇEK was established as a state institution and the law of SHÇEK was accepted. Similar to HEC, SHÇEK deals with family, women and children but the concept of social service expands to different issues in society. Recently, SHÇEK has been functioning in the fields of children, women, elderly and disabled people, and establishing centers for teenage prostitutes, orphans and street children, homeless people and preschool children, and also

neighborhood in the capital city. Recently, Istanbul has eight social centers<sup>61</sup>; İzmir and Antalya follow it with five, and Ankara and Batman with four social centers<sup>62</sup>. The numbers of application to the social centers have been increasing through the years: Until 1999 there were only twenty-eight social centers all over the country, and the total number of applicants/participants was 42.500 (Kurtbasan 2001). Recently this number is fifty-nine with approximately 165.000 applicants according to the records of SHÇEK<sup>63</sup>.

The definitions that I will give you below are mostly derived from social work literature<sup>64</sup> in Turkey. I will first begin with the definition of the social center in terms of the bylaw of social centers which was accepted in 2000 eight years after the centers were first established. According to the fourth article of the bylaw, social centers are created "...for individuals, groups, families and society to cope with the problems that originate due to rapid social change, urbanization and migration, and their aim is to make individuals participatory, productive and self-sufficient for him/herself; they function to protect, prevent, to guide and rehabilitate; they cooperate with public institutions and organizations, local administrations,

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woman guesthouses, social centers, day nurseries, rehabilitation centers and rest houses. For more information see, [www.shcek.gov.tr](http://www.shcek.gov.tr)

<sup>60</sup> Gecekondu is used as a term to indicate the informal housing type of migrants in slum areas.

<sup>61</sup> The social centers in Istanbul are Okmeydanı Toplum Merkezi (Okmeydanı-1998), Kocamustafapaşa Toplum Merkezi (Kocamustafapaşa-1998), Mustafa Kemal Mahallesi Toplum Merkezi (Ümraniye-1998), Sultanbeyli Mahallesi 75.Yıl Toplum Merkezi (Sultanbeyli-1999), 75.Yıl Gazi Mahallesi Toplum Merkezi (Gaziosmanpaşa-1999), Yakacık Toplum Merkezi (Yakacık-2000), Bağcılar-Evren Toplum Merkezi (Bağcılar- 2002) and Zeytinburnu Toplum Merkezi (Zeytinburnu-2002) Available [online] at [http://www.shcek.gov.tr/web/shcek/kuruluslar/tablo\\_top\\_merk.htm](http://www.shcek.gov.tr/web/shcek/kuruluslar/tablo_top_merk.htm) [10.12.2003]

<sup>62</sup> There are social centers also in Adana, Adıyaman, Ağrı, Aydın, Bitlis, Çanakkale, Diyarbakır, Düzce, Edirne, Gaziantep, Hakkari, İçel, Kırıkkale, Kocaeli, Manisa, Mardin, Muş, Samsun, Siirt, Şanlıurfa, Van, Yozgat.

<sup>63</sup> Available [online] at [http://www.shcek.gov.tr/web/hizmetler/aile\\_kadin\\_toplum/top\\_merk.htm](http://www.shcek.gov.tr/web/hizmetler/aile_kadin_toplum/top_merk.htm)

<sup>64</sup> Social services in Turkey have a monopolist structure. School of Social Work (Sosyal Hizmetler Yüksekokulu - SHYO), Hacettepe University has been producing the knowledge of social work in the academia, and SHÇEK is seen as its reproduction space, where graduates of SHYO have opportunity to work in, as civil servants, so that the services and works of SHÇEK becomes the stereotypes in Turkey in the context of social work.

universities, non-governmental organizations and volunteers."<sup>65</sup> In accordance with this comprehensive definition, the social centers in Turkey are established in the peripheral neighborhoods of urban areas where rates of in-migration are high and where there are disadvantaged groups who have restricted access to the resources of the city (Kurtbasan 2001:7). In other words, the underdeveloped/developing areas are seen as the target locations of the social centers (Rittersberger & Kalaycıoğlu 2001:42). In general, the literature of social centers focuses on rapid urbanization and its effects on the migrant population. Ayata summarizes the problems of an immigrant family under three headings: Conflicts within the family, new relations with neighbors, co-workers and so on and the relations in the urban area (Ayata 1999: 19). In order to reduce the problems of migrant family members and to help their integration in urban life, the social centers are crucial. It is expected that attending social centers will accelerate their urbanization process (Tomanbay 1991) and ‘prevent’ possible oppression they will face. On the other hand, Tomanbay defines the social center as a place where “people can know each other, improve their neighborhood relationships and where the new immigrants learn about the urban” (Tomanbay 1991: 49). Similarly Ayata agrees that social centers provide connection among the local people and empower the community (Ayata 2001). Therefore, by constructing new relations and network, social centers aim to raise consciousness concerning the problems and the needs of society, so that the local people can cooperate and participate in finding solutions (Karataş 1999). Moreover at the local level, social centers aim to bring people together, and aim to strengthen democracy in the local area through their participatory programs. In addition to the goals of the social centers described above, scholars agree that every social center has to function

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<sup>65</sup> Sosyal Hizmetler ve Çocuk Esirgeme Kurumuna Bağlı Toplum Merkezleri Yönetmeliği, Resmi Gazete, 11 Temmuz 2000, Sayı: 24106, 9

according to the needs and the problematics of its distinctive location (Karataş 1999 and Tomanbay 1991).

Apart from these targets, there are certain requirements in relation to the space of the social center and its activities. The space of the center is defined as consisting of:

“multi-purpose buildings, which consist of health, social service, and advice bureaus; where there are large rooms, equipments and reading rooms in order to provide an opportunity to the local people to rest in their leisure time and to have entertainment according to their own culture” (Tomanbay 1991: 50).

The activities of the social center are also defined as “exhibitions, competitions, public conferences and public education programs, meetings, celebrations, ceremonies, participatory and pedagogical campaigns, artistic and cultural activities, entertainments, tours, performances, sports, environmental activities, discussions on common requirements and problems, programs on different age-groups, studies on the development of women’s statuses, activities on the problem-solving process of family and individuals, counseling, the activities for improving social solidarity and cooperation” (Koçyıldırım 1999a:144-5).

In sum, social centers are defined as spaces of integration for migrants to the city. This space has to embody multi-purpose buildings and conduct various activities in relation to the needs of local people. Nevertheless, the specific practices of the social

center inevitably depend on its context. In this respect, in the next section, I will try to explain the social and the historical context of the Okmeydanı Social Center.

### **Integration Through Education: Okmeydanı Social Center**

Okmeydanı region, where the Okmeydanı Social Center was located, has no definite geographic borders. This region is located at the junction of three district municipalities<sup>66</sup>: Şişli, Kağıthane and Beyoğlu. Its name came from the Ottoman Empire period, where it was used as an archery ground. Moreover, it had a strategic position in the conquest of Istanbul. Under the Empire, building on this site was not allowed except ‘Tekke for Archers (Okçular Tekkesi)’ and three mosques<sup>67</sup>. Additionally, this land also hosted public celebrations and became a place where people could get together during the times of disasters (İşli & İşli 1994). The region consisted of 1.100m<sup>2</sup> plain land, with borders from Haliç and Kasımpaşa to the stream of Piri Paşa and upper part of Hasköy<sup>68</sup>. According to İşli and İşli’s article, construction in the area flourished after the emergence of ‘gecekondu’ in the late 1950s (İşli & İşli 1994: 126). Recently, however, Okmeydanı does not contain well-designed borders as before.

In Turkey the emergence of *gecekondu* neighborhoods was a result of the high rates of migration from the rural areas to the urban ones. The new comers took role in the urbanization and in the industrialization process since “poorly educated, poorly skilled and unorganized” human labor was needed in the cities (Şenyapılı 1998). The

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<sup>66</sup> Okmeydanı consists of the neighborhoods such as Gürsel, Halide Edip Adıvar, Talat Paşa and Halil Rıfat Paşa.

<sup>67</sup> They are Piyale Paşa, Sinan Paşa and III. Mustafa

<sup>68</sup> See Appendix for the maps that show the region geographically

majority of migrant groups<sup>69</sup> first settled in the old neighborhoods of Istanbul (e.g. Zeyrek and Eminönü). Soon afterwards they increasingly settled near the industrial areas on the outskirts of the city such as the regions between Eyüp and Silahtarağa, Eyüp and Yenikapı, Yedikule and Bakırköy. Three *gecekondu* neighborhoods emerged in three regions: Zeytinburnu, Taşlıtarla and Kağıthane<sup>70</sup> where the land belonged to pious foundations and/or where the possession of land was disputable. As Şenyapılı states, these new neighborhoods were made up of widely scattered houses and where inhabitants were extremely poor in the 1950s, but in the 1960s they became formal neighborhoods. Recently, migration is still significant for Istanbul, e.g. the net migration rate of Istanbul increased from 79 ‰ (1975-80) to 99 ‰ (1985-90)<sup>71</sup>, a figure which includes forced migration from the eastern parts of Anatolia. According to the census of 2000, Istanbul has the highest population of Turkey, with a remarkable amount of inhabitants, 10.018.735 (SIS 2003: 110).

In general, the process of migration includes different issues concerning urban areas, such as the migrant's "mode of arrival, occupation of land, construction of housing, search for employment and life style" (Erder 1999). In relation to economics, migrants provided economic benefits for the city supplying cheap and docile workers, e.g. female domestic labor for the households of middle and upper classes. Also the residents of *gecekondu* neighborhoods were seen as a potential store of votes for political parties in Turkey. These *gecekondu* neighborhoods produced informal type of housing that allows migrants to take use of urban land. In cultural terms, the inhabitants of *gecekondu* neighborhoods were forming different types of network that depended on 'place of origin' in order to survive in the urban space

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<sup>69</sup> Şenyapılı mentions about the population of immigrants in 1950s, by estimating the total number of immigrants in Istanbul as 130.000.

<sup>70</sup> Kağıthane district is significant in my case, because Okmeydanı region is a part of that district.

<sup>71</sup> Available at [online] <http://www.ibb.gov.tr/istanbultr/380/38002/2001/demografi/images/t218.pdf>

(Duben 2002; Erder 1996). Formal and informal networking through the coffeehouses and associations based on place of origin became significant to get information about employment facilities and form solidarity and collective action. In recent years, *gecekondu* neighborhoods have gone through important transformations due to changes in the housing sector as well as in patterns of integration. In the following lines, I will describe Okmeydanı region with respect to these changes.

Alan Duben's study of the Çağlayan region<sup>72</sup> in the 1970s can form a basis for understanding the socio-cultural history of the Okmeydanı region. This region was known for its small-scale workshops and two dominant groups, Black Sea and Eastern Anatolian immigrants who were also distinguished in terms of religious affiliation, Sunnis and Alevis. Although Duben (2002) studied 'class' in Çağlayan, he pointed out that kinship and place of origin were crucial in constituting networks and differences amongst these communities. However, recently in Okmeydanı such a striking distinction between Sunnis and Alevis does not seem to exist at the first sight. Nevertheless, distinctions can still be detected in the difference between associations and places of worship they attend.

Although Okmeydanı was initially known as an Alevi residential area, today it consists of various communities, cultures and classes living together. As far as politics is concerned, this region is well known for its political activism in both legal and illegal organizations. Historically, the politics of Okmeydanı is depended on the leftist movement in Turkey and Okmeydanı region is still politically active. The writings on the walls about illegal organizations and political slogans are the

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<sup>72</sup> Çağlayan region is very close to Okmeydanı region and the structure of the population has similarities with Okmeydanı.

indicators of this activity. However, within the heterogeneous structure of Okmeydanı and its rapid integration to the city these are by and large unnoticeable.

The urbanization process of Okmeydanı highlights its heterogeneous structure. The initial *gecekondu* housings turned into apartments built through formal and informal processes. On the other hand, this region hosts various urban facilities<sup>73</sup>. Okmeydanı also plays an important role within the transportation system of Istanbul both in terms of facilities<sup>74</sup> and in terms of road junctions<sup>75</sup>. Additionally, it is significant that the main street, *Darülaceze Caddesi*, constitutes the border between two district municipalities, Şişli and Kağıthane. This street represents the line between the modern area and its ‘other’. For example, on the Şişli side<sup>76</sup> of the street there are more modern, well-kept spaces and housings, whereas on the Kağıthane side there is still *gecekondu* type housing<sup>77</sup>. Recently, Okmeydanı region contains different types of housing, namely *gecekondus*, ‘informal apartment buildings’ and ‘apartments’.

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<sup>73</sup> First of all, Okmeydanı is known with its health services. One of the biggest Social Insurance Institution Hospital (Sosyal Sigortalar Kurumu Hastanesi - SSK) is located at the beginning of Darülaceze Caddesi, which is the main street. This is a health complex with SSK Hospital, Mother and Child Care - Family Planning Center (Ana ve Çocuk Sağlığı - Aile Planlaması Merkezi) and Istanbul Dental Health Care Center (İstanbul Diş Sağlığı Merkezi). Additionally, there are private health services, like Memorial Private Hospital (Özel Memorial Hastanesi), Okmeydanı Private Hospital (Özel Okmeydanı Hastanesi) and many small-scale health clinics. On the other hand, the largest commercial center of Turkey called PERPA also changed the economic structure of Okmeydanı. PERPA consists of different types of stores from selling mechanical spare parts to advertising agents. There are also banks and restaurants that serve to the center and to the inhabitants. Although there are still empty stores in PERPA, it constitutes and puts the economy into action and makes Okmeydanı a part of Istanbul’s economic flow. On the other hand, Okmeydanı has a relatively comprehensive library, Necmiye Hanım Library (Necmiye Hanım Kütüphanesi) and also a sport complex, Cemal Kamacı Sport Complex (Cemal Kamacı Spor Kompleksi).

<sup>74</sup> Okmeydanı plays a great role in Istanbul’s transportation in which many buses and minibuses worked within this route. There is also a main bus station that connects Okmeydanı to Taksim, Eminönü and Yenikapı, which locates in the neighborhood, Halil Rıfat Paşa.

<sup>75</sup> Okmeydanı junction that connects Kasımpaşa to the other highways, the ones leads to both first and second and Eyüp Bridge, has a very logistic significance in the traffic flow of Istanbul. Moreover, Darülaceze Caddesi, which connects Mecidiyeköy to Eyüp, is parallel to the highway between the first Bosphorus Bridge and Eyüp Bridge.

<sup>76</sup> The urban facilities in Okmeydanı that I mentioned above are mostly located on the other side of Darülaceze Caddesi, on the side of municipal of Şişli.

<sup>77</sup> I am referring to Sema Erder’s study on Pendik, where she investigated how urban space shows differences at the same region by E5 highway cut. For more detail, please see Erder, S. (1997).



Land is mostly used for construction; the houses are all adjoining and only narrow streets are left in between.

Considering these features of Okmeydanı region, it is significant to question the reason why the state established a social center in this region. As I mentioned before, the main goal of the social center is to form networks among the new comers and to build up a community in the local area. This goal is contradicted with the migrants' way of establishing network, which is based on place of origin and kinship relations, and which is located within the spaces of coffeehouses and neighborhood associations. From this perspective, the social center can be seen as an effort by the state to monitor the community's network and control new comers' integration to the city<sup>78</sup>. My interviewees stressed that it was only through the social center that they were able to be part of networks. However, I am not sure whether this is a reconstruction of the past in line with the discourses of the social center or an accurate representation of the past. In the following section, I will examine the Okmeydanı Social Center in terms of its functions, its goals, its target population and its relationships to NGOs and women's institutions. I will primarily look at women's narratives in order to understand how they imagine the social center<sup>79</sup>.

In June 1998 Okmeydanı Social Center was established in the building of Okmeydanı Day Nursery<sup>80</sup>, which is located on the busiest street of the Okmeydanı region, *Darülaceze Caddesi*. It functioned here until 2002 July. Then, it was

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<sup>78</sup> In the context Okmeydanı and Okmeydanı Social Center, I do not encounter with such a tension/conflict. But in the regions where the community networks are stronger, the social center as a state institution constitutes a conflict within that region. For example, in Gazi region, the 'place of origin' associations and their woman's branches opposed on cooperating with the social center.

<sup>79</sup> Here, I will not examine how the community networks have been functioning in the Okmeydanı region. Instead I want to examine how a state institution influences women's narratives in the context of women's education.

<sup>80</sup> Okmeydanı Gündüz Bakım Evi

temporarily closed for about one and a half year in order to fortify its structure against the expected earthquake. In the writing process of this thesis, it was opened legally, with insufficient number of personnel. Thus, unfortunately it was not functioning as it was supposed and in April 2004 it was permanently closed without stating any reason.

Although they share the same building, both the Day Nursery and the Social Center have different working areas, administrations and also entrances. Nevertheless, occupying the same building also constitutes a tension between these two institutions in terms of security, space use and facilities. Okmeydanı Social Center occupies a smaller part of the building and has always a shortage of space in this building, and consisting of two main parts that have no internal connection between them. The first floor consists of the administrative offices and an activity room. The other space is at the basement reached by the garden in front of the offices. The basement includes classrooms and workshops.

Besides the conflict based on use of space between the Day Nursery and the Okmeydanı Social Center, Okmeydanı Social Center has other restrictions and conflicts. One of them concerns the issue of autonomy in relation to the state. The position of the director<sup>81</sup> also creates conflicts at the administration level. The relationship between the NGOs and the social center is primarily based on protocols. These could depend on time-scheduled programs or long-standing collaborations.

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<sup>81</sup> Although she works as a director, her position is deputy. This mainly creates difficulties and restrictions within the bureaucracy.

For example, the protocol between ÇYDD<sup>82</sup> and Okmeydanı Social Center forms a further conflict. This protocol concerns supplementary education for children and ÇYDD's organization of 'after school activities (*etüt*)' in various subjects. Within the context of Okmeydanı Social Center, ÇYDD's strategy is to widen the association's membership using the space and facilities of the center. This forms a tension between ÇYDD and Okmeydanı Social Center. For example, participants were confusing this institution by calling it 'ÇYDD' rather than 'Social Center'. There were two signs at the entrance of the center which formed a discussion matter for the director of Okmeydanı Social Center and the authority of ÇYDD. The physical separation of space also gave rise to this tension: The administration of the social center and the programs prepared by the social worker were located on the first floor, while the volunteers, the administrative staff and the study periods of ÇYDD took place at the basement. In sum both physically and contextually the Social Center was divided into two parts.

Although there were limitations to space and to administrative autonomy in the Okmeydanı Social Center, the social workers could nevertheless determine the specific programs offered by the social center. For example, although central authorities insisted on opening sewing courses for women in Okmeydanı Social Center, the social worker blocked this offer citing the limited space of Okmeydanı Social Center as an excuse. Indeed, she does not believe in this course, because she thinks that it is the product of a discourse in which women are expected to work in jobs extending their roles as housewives. This showed the opportunity of exercising agency within the Okmeydanı Social Center in opposition to state control.

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<sup>82</sup> I have already mentioned about the NGO, ÇYDD in the first chapter. The Kemalist ideology of ÇYDD could also be examined within the case of Okmeydanı Social Center. However, all social centers have to make protocol with an NGO and in Okmeydanı Social Center it is made with ÇYDD.

In Okmeydanı Social Center the deputy director also works as a social worker because of the lack of professionals. Besides the social worker, a psychologist, a pedagogue, a secretary and a cleaning assistant made up the personnel of the center. In Okmeydanı Social Center the professionals' first task is to evaluate the applications of the participants in order to guide them to the activities in the Center or in other governmental or non-governmental institutions. The main reasons for coming to the institution the first time are usually 'economic aid', 'domestic violence', 'divorce and law', 'conflicts of marriage' and 'unemployment'. Although the professionals have no authority of official 'referral' (*sevk*), they guide these applicants by using their personal relations with other institutions. In theory, the referral mechanism should provide more access to institutions where applicants could be better served, but in practice this could not be realized without the professionals' immense personal effort.

In Okmeydanı case, the number of participants between 1998 and 2001 was 4075, with 2078 women-participants among them<sup>83</sup>. This could be an indicator of whom social center is addressed mostly. Women participants of Okmeydanı Social Center were migrants who had strong ties to their place of origin, like the Eastern Anatolian Region; Sivas, Erzurum, Erzincan; the Black Sea Region; Kastamonu, Gümüşhane, Samsun, Tokat and the South Eastern Region; Diyarbakır.

The target population of Okmeydanı Social Center contradicted the definitions in the literature of social centers. Nejmiye Melemen, the deputy director, emphasized that

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<sup>83</sup> Melemen, N. (2001). "İstanbul Okmeydanı Toplum Merkezi". Ev Eksenli Çalışan Kadınlar toplantısı konuşması. İstanbul.

the target population of the social center could be defined through the applications that were mostly for ‘economic aid’ and ‘unemployment’. Because the urban poor needed to work and make money, e.g. in informal jobs like cleaning the apartments and houses, washing carpets and so on, they could not become participants in the Okmeydanı Social Center. Although Okmeydanı region consists of lower and lower-middle classes living together and in different housing and living styles, the urban poor could not take advantage from the Okmeydanı Social Center. It is open only on weekdays, during working hours, so working women cannot take part in the Center.

Okmeydanı Social Center had participants from four municipalities; Şişli, Kağıthane, Beyoğlu and also Eyüp. Although the Okmeydanı region is outside the borders of the Municipality of Eyüp, the location of the Okmeydanı Social Center caught the attention of the women who often visited Okmeydanı SSK Hospital that is on the opposite side of the street from the Okmeydanı Social Center. This place has a growing importance with its health facilities as I mentioned before. This centrality enabled the women participants to meet in the Social Center and also to organize their health care needs while participating in the activities.

In practice, the target population of Okmeydanı Social Center contains women who are housewives. According to my observations, there are three categories of women who come: Women who stopped working or took a break from work or women who had never worked. Also women with babies could not have the opportunity to attend the activities, but women with children could take advantage of the ‘care room’ and the after school activities (*etüt*) for children, while they participated in any of the activities in the social center. Sometimes the opposite was the case. They took their

children to one of the courses and then they came across the activities for women and became active participants themselves. In short, social centers serve women and their children, and it seems to be the only place that has facilities which attract both women and their children, since women can have the opportunity to participate in an activity with their children in there. In practice, these women are the ‘real’ target population of the Center.

The relations among the participants do not show any conflict in terms of ‘class’, ‘place of origin’ or ‘religion’. Although the literature on migration suggests that there could be a conflict among Alevis or Sunnis, the only thing I observed was their emphasis on ‘cultural difference’. The social center offers a space for ‘cultural exchange’. Okmeydanı Social Center becomes a place where they can learn about each other’s cultural habits. They prepare traditional meals using local vegetables and they ask each other to bring grape leaf from Tokat, Madımak (a kind of vegetable) from Sivas if they go to or if a relative comes from their villages. Also Okmeydanı Social Center acts as a feminine space where solidarity amongst women is emphasized. Beyond learning about other regions, women find a space to share their problems and to find solutions in collective ways. In sum, cultural difference becomes significant in their desire to learn about the ‘other’ and to exchange knowledge about cultures. However, at times problems also surfaced. For example, mixed marriage between Alevis and Sunnis and some traditions of Alevis are strongly and endlessly discussed and debated. These discussions were not frequent within the social center, especially within the workshops of *the theatre of the oppressed*.

Okmeydanı Social Center has cooperated with governmental/local institutions<sup>84</sup>, and non-governmental groups and associations<sup>85</sup> in the organization of activities. The activities of Okmeydanı Social Center can be categorized in five main groups<sup>86</sup>: ‘Programs/Projects for Women<sup>87</sup>’, ‘Educational Programs<sup>88</sup>’, ‘Occupational Training<sup>89</sup>’, ‘Handicraft Courses’, gymnastic and other recreational activities such as, celebration of special days, organizing picnics and public displays. All these activities aim to promote knowledge of women in various subjects. NGOs and women’s institutions take an important role in the organization of these activities. Woman’s institutions such as KEDEV and KİHEP organize scheduled programs in

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<sup>84</sup> Such as Sosyal Yardımlaşma ve Dayanışma Vakfı (Foundation for Social Aid and Cooperation), kaymakamlıks, muhtarlıks, district municipalities, Primary Health Care Centers (Sağlık Ocakları), Kız Meslek Liseleri (Girl’s Vocational School), Halk Eğitim Merkezleri (People’s Education Centers),

<sup>85</sup> Such as AÇEV (Mother Child Education Foundation -Anne Çocuk Eğitim Vakfı), KİHEP (Women for Women’s Human Rights – New Ways Foundation Kadının İnsan Hakları- Yeni Çözümler Vakfı), KEDEV (Kadın Emeğini Değerlendirme Vakfı – Foundation for the Support of Women’s Work), LIONS, Marmara Grubu (Marmara Group), Türkiye Bahai Topluluğu, ÇEVHEK (Association of Physicians for the Environment - Çevre için Hekimler Derneği), Rotary, AKUT (Search and Rescue Association - Arama Kurtarma Derneği), TEMA (The Turkish Foundation for Combating Soil Erosion, for Reforestation and the Protection of Natural Habitats -Türkiye Erozyonla Mücadele Ağaçlandırma ve Doğal Varlıkları Koruma Vakfı), private hospitals and schools.

<sup>86</sup> The categorizations are mine.

<sup>87</sup> The programs in this group are:

- 1) Women’s Human Rights Education Program (Kadının İnsan Hakları Eğitim Programı) is a seminar type program that aims to create a debate for women to learn about and discuss the fields as law, education, gender, personal development and political action.
- 2) Effective Communication (Etkili İletişim) is a program that aims to improve the women’s expression in learning & listening within their relationships, and also to improve their ability to solve the problems.
- 3) Social Personality’s (Sosyal Yetkin Kişilik) aim is to find out different methods for improving the effectiveness and awareness of women.
- 4) Group studies focuses on finding out the problems of women and deciding on their activities accordingly.
- 5) Theatre of the Oppressed aims to promote women’s personal/collective awareness and to display interactive performances in order to activate the spectator in finding solutions to women’s oppression.
- 6) Seminars are about law, health and financial issues.

<sup>88</sup> Educational programs differ from each other, according to their target populations and aims. There are programs for improving children’s learning capacities that are given directly to the children or to their mothers, such as Early Childhood Education (Erken Çocukluk Eğitimi) and Preschool Education (Okul Öncesi Eğitimi). The courses of first aid and preparation for the earthquake provide necessary information for women in their daily lives. Additionally, there had been a course “Pregnancy Education (Hamile Eğitimi)” for pregnant women. The literacy courses are open to all ages and also a project called “Supporting National Education Project (Ulusal Eğitime Destek Projesi)” that aims to improve the literacy, runs in the social center.

<sup>89</sup> There are four different programs that aim to provide qualified jobs for the participants of Okmeydanı Social Center. These are Neighborhood Mother, Baby-Sitting, Cleaner and Dressmaking trainings.

Okmeydanı Social Center as well as in other social centers. Additionally, the associations of AÇEV and Marmara Group also carry out their programs in the Center. These scheduled programs and projects held by women's institutions shadow the other activities held in Okmeydanı Social Center in the sense of the number and the frequency of participants. Beyond the occasional courses, the regular activities held by these women's institutions constitute significance within the function of the Center<sup>90</sup>. In sum, women's institutions try to realize their projects by using the space and the participants of the Center.

In the context of Okmeydanı Social Center, 'education for women' discourse is an extremely significant issue. Both the activities of women's institutions as well as social work's own activities focus on education. In this respect, social centers as state institutions become spaces of producing and re-producing the 'education for women' discourse where 'knowledge' is transmitted through women's institutions projects and programs and through state's courses. As a result, institutionalized feminism -as I mentioned in chapter one- uses the space of social centers and reproduces the 'education for women' discourse. The difference between the definitions of the goal of the social center in the social work literature and its practice is crystallized within this discourse. In practice, the target population of social center becomes women rather than the 'community' as in the literature. Accordingly, the goal of the social center that is defined through the integration and community-building process of migrants' shifts to the discourse of 'education for women'. In the following part, I will address women's narratives on the Okmeydanı Social Center in order to explain how they imagine the social center, how the 'education for women' discourse

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<sup>90</sup> For example, some women participants of KİHEP and the theatre of the oppressed came together to establish a workshop of paper recycling with the help of independent feminist women. This workshop (Atölye Mor Kağıt – Purple Paper Workshop) is still functioning in the Okmeydanı region.



becomes a significant issue within their narratives on the social center and how the discourse of the social center influences their narratives and imaginations.

### **Women's Words: Okmeydanı Social Center as a Space Between "Home" and "Outside"**

...we got married, his family seemed a little bit village style to me. Their ideas, everything, their talk, I mean... I didn't like it. They insisted that we should live together with them, even though our houses are separate, they said I should go there every morning, and we should go back around 1 o'clock. I did not agree, we quarreled for everything. For 15 years, this child of mine was born sick. 15 years I was shut in the house, my husband's oppressions and everything. I mean I spent 15 years without anybody, like that, no neighbors, no nothing. Just these two kids. Of course I suffered from these as well, when I first moved here, oh I had a shock, a year before moving in here. (gasps) I mean I couldn't talk, I couldn't talk to friends and neighbors here. (...) Was he jealous then, or was it because I was too naïve. As if some harm would come from the outside, either to him or to me. Because, every evening when he came back home he would tell me, Nil, it is horrible outside, you don't know, there are so many sons of something outside. (...) After I got married, I did not go outside for 15 years, at all.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> "...evlendik, onun ailesi bana biraz köylü geldi, fikirleri, her şeyleri, bütün konuşmaları yani.. hoşuma gitmedi. Birlikte oturacağız diye tutturdular, evimiz ayrı olduğu halde, her sabah gidecektim, ben saat 1 de gece gelecektim eve filan. Kabul etmedim, biraz tartışmalar falan oldu. 15 yıl, bu çocuğum hasta doğdu. 15 yıl eve kapandım, kocamın baskıları falan. Yani 15 yıl kimsesiz olarak, bir 15 yıl geçirdim, böyle komşusuz falan da. Sadece bu iki çocukla. Onların yıkımı da oldu tabii ki, ben buraya taşındığım zaman, ha ben çok geçirdim, buraya taşınmadan bir sene önce. (iç

Nil's story is not unique in the context of the Okmeydanı Social Center. What Nil experienced, more or less, represents the experiences of other participants. Within the narratives I collected, life before social center is always referred within the space of 'home', with an emphasis on 'home' as 'something like prison'<sup>92</sup> and on 'housewife' as 'something horrible'<sup>93</sup>. 'Home' indicates being a full time housewife, which embraces different responsibilities, the monotonous and repetitive housework and being "on call" for the husband and children" (Daly 1996:169). The responsibilities of household tasks designate the physical space of 'home' as invisible, unpaid, indoor. These tasks can change from woman to woman, but fundamentally they include looking after children, taking care of the elderly, maintaining the place of origin relations, the relations with friends, neighbors and relatives, and responding to the needs of the household in general. In basic terms, the lifecycle resembles a vicious circle like in Tevfika's narration of her past life:

Before I started coming to the social center, I was at home. I used to do housework; I used to feed my kid. I used to put her to sleep. I used to go to sleep myself too. Then we used to get up, we used to have our tea. Then it was evening, the meal would be ready by then. My spouse would come, we used to have our meal. I mean in the evening you would go to sleep, in the morning you would get up, again and again, all the same...<sup>94</sup>

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çeker) işte hiç konuşamıyordum yani, konu komşuyla burada konuşamıyordum.(...) O zaman kıskanıyor muydu, yoksa ben çok safım diye acaba. Kendisine ya da bana dışarıdan bana bir zarar gelecek diye çünkü bana her akşam eve geldiği zaman Nil dışarıyı bildiğin gibi değil çok kötü, çok bimmence çocuğu var dışarıda diyordu.(...) Evlendikten sonra ben 15 yıl hiç dışarı çıkmadım."

<sup>92</sup> 'hapishane gibi bir şey'

<sup>93</sup> 'korkunç bir şey'

<sup>94</sup> "Toplum merkezine gelmeden önce, evdeydim. Ev işi yapıyordum, çocuğumu doyuruyordum. Onu uykuya yatırıyordum, onla beraber ben de uykuya yatıyordum. Uykudan kalkıyorduk, çayımızı içiyorduk. Akşam oluyordu, yemek hazır oluyordu zaten, eşim geliyordu, yemeğimizi yiyorduk, işte akşam oluyordu, yatıyorsun, sabah oluyor kalkıyorsun, tekrar, aynı..."

This vicious circle includes household responsibilities and the imprisonment of women in the domestic sphere. As Harris states, the socially constructed distinctions between men and women are defined through a separation of the domestic and the public spheres (Harris 1981: 64). Within this perspective, woman is identified with home, man in social life. The domestic sphere becomes “the site where gender subordination is produced and re-acted” (Harris 1981: 50). Then the imprisonment of women in the domestic sphere -in both metaphoric and real sense- shows the production and reproduction of this subordination.

In the case of Okmeydanı, the practices and the space of a housewife are defined not only through the household, but also through its environment:

The children were small back then, just like that I was busy with the kids, neighborhood and stuff. Again my own circle, I am not a person who got out of that anyway. All by myself. Self sufficient.<sup>95</sup>

In this respect, the definitions of ‘home’ and ‘housewife’ show how women are subordinated and oppressed through imprisonment and deprivation. Tevfika mentions the inequality between women and men in terms of gender roles in society:

They are in the house after the primary school. Why? The men are going to work, to look after them, they (*the women*) don’t need to go outside. Money will come; they are only for staying inside the house, cleaning the house, looking after the kids. No, not like that. Those women, who look

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<sup>95</sup> “O zaman daha çocuklar küçüktü işte, yine böyle, çocuklarla uğraşıyordum, komşuluk işte. Gene kendi çevrem, onun dışına çıkmış bir insan değilim zaten. Hep kendi kendime. Kendi yağımızla kavruluyoruz (Zühre)”

after the children, who raise them, who prepare them for the world, have to be conscious. This consciousness does not happen. I don't know if people are frightened, I don't understand, she shouldn't be conscious, she should remain blind, stay at home, don't want anything, don't say a word, settle with little money she finds, don't spend. Men should go out and wander, as he likes, women shouldn't know, learn anything and accept it as it is.<sup>96</sup>

The role of woman as housewife and the space of woman in the home is challenged within these narratives. Accordingly, women's deprivation is identified with their mobility to participate in social life. Another indicator of deprivation is their self-defining in terms of the rural-urban dichotomy. Within these narratives, the participants of social centers are positioned as "rural", "peasant", "poor", "uneducated" and "unprepared". According to their definitions in line with the social work literature of 'who comes to the social center' or 'who needs education', the rural-urban distinction amongst the participants is emphasized. Because Okmeydanı Social Center provides education for women, according to Aslı, the social center becomes the space of raising the consciousness of people in the environment. She defines the target population of the social center rural people, who "are deprived of knowledge". She supports her idea by making a connection with her family story:

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<sup>96</sup> "İlkokuldan sonra evdeler neden? Kocalar çalışacak, zaten onlara bakacak, onların dışarıya gitmeye ihtiyacı yok. Para gelecek, onlar sadece evde oturmak için, ev temizlemek için, çocuk bakmak için. Hayır öyle değil, o çocuğa bakıp, dünyaya yetiştirip hazırlayan o kadınların bilinçli olması gerekiyor. Bu bilinç olmuyor. İnsanlar bilmiyorum korkuyorlar mı nedir anlamıyorum, bilinçlenmesin, kör kalsın, evde otursun, bir şey istemesin, bir şey söylemesin, az bulduğu para ile yetinsin, masraf yapmasın. Erkek istediği gibi dışarıda gezsin, kadın bir şey bilmeyip, öğrenmeyip bunu her şekilde kabullensin."

Even though I was raised in Kağıthane, (...) I was raised in Istanbul, but I mean I am no different than a person who was raised in the village, as for brains, mentality. Because, as I said had I neither had any friends nor my family took me to a different society. (...) In the social center for people's development, especially people from the rural areas, I consider myself as being from the countryside too, with this mentality. When I say the rural section, I think of a society that is a bit deprived of knowledge. For that reason, for the development of this section, in the social center, education programs, seminars, to raise the consciousness of the people (...) Because there is no consciousness in the family, I see the social center as raising the consciousness also of the families, (...) I was raised in Istanbul, but my personality would have been very different if I were to come out as a learned person in Istanbul, if I were given the chance to educate myself or if I were directed, shown. For there was no consciousness in my family to direct me in this way. I believe I would have been different. Not only me, everybody would have been the same way, they would have succeeded. But oppression, oppression, oppression, oppression, depression, stress, psychological anomaly, has caused us to be deprived of everything.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> “Kağıthane’de büyüdüğüm halde (...), İstanbul’da büyüdüm ama yani köyde büyümüş bir insandan hiçbir farkım yoktur beyin olarak, düşünce olarak, çünkü dediğim gibi ne arkadaşım oldu, ne de değişik bir topluma ailem beni götürdü. (...) Toplum merkezinde insanların gelişmesi için özellikle kırsal kesim, ben kendimi de kırsal kesim olarak görüyorum bu düşüncelerle, kırsal kesim derken biraz bilgiden yoksun kalmış topluluk aklıma geliyor, o yüzden bu kesimin gelişmesi için toplum merkezinde eğitim programları, aynı şekilde seminerler, halkın bilinçlenmesi (...) Toplum merkezi işte ailede bilinç olmadığı için, toplum merkezini de aileleri de bir şekilde bilinçlendirmek olduğunu görüyorum, (...) ben istanbulda yetiştim ama istanbulda aslında öğrenmiş çıkmış olsaydım çok farklı bir kişiliğim olurdu, kendimi yetiştirebilme fırsatı verilseydi bana ya da yönlendirilir gösterilir olsaydı, çünkü ailemde fazla bir bilinç yoktu ki beni bu şekilde yönlendirsinsinler, farklı olacağıma inanıyorum. Ben değil, bunu herkes yapardı, başardı. Ama baskı baskı baskı baskı, bunalım, stres, psikoloji bozukluğu, her şeyden yoksun kalmamızı gösterdi işte.”

This narrative of ‘deprivation’ can be encountered in all narratives. For Aslı, the deprivation consists of a lack of knowledge and education, in both formal and informal senses, and also includes the lack of her parents’ education. She also criticizes family structure where females are oppressed and subordinated. Nil, on the other hand, has similar definitions as Aslı, but she puts herself and the ‘others’ in opposite sides. Although she emphasized the dichotomy of rural-urban identities, she declares, “When I went to the social center, I belonged to a group<sup>98</sup>”. However, within this group, she made clear distinctions between herself and the others in terms of reasons for coming and in terms of rural-urban identity:

Now, my situation is different. My situation was not money anyway, women who go there used to come to get a profession, to make money. (...) My problem was psychological anyway. I needed sincerity, psychological support.<sup>99</sup>

...I told about the social center to my family, my friends, some of them wanted to come along. But my friends, my family are a bit more, I don’t know, because they are a bit more elite when compared to those who go there, they didn’t want to come because it is a social center, because it is a place of the poor, more of the rural, marginal, the slum. I mean they didn’t want to come.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Toplum merkezine gittim, bağlı olduğum bir grup oldu.

<sup>99</sup> “Şimdi benim konumum başka. Benim konumum para değildi zaten, oraya gelen kadınlar meslek edinmek için, para kazanmak için geliyorlardı. (...) Benim sorunum psikolojikdi zaten. Samimiyete ihtiyacım vardı, psikolojik desteğe ihtiyacım vardı.”

<sup>100</sup> “Toplum merkezini akrabalarım, arkadaşlarıma anlattım, biz de gelelim diyenler oldu. Fakat benim arkadaşlarım, akrabalarım biraz daha böyle, ne bileyim oraya gelenlerin yanına göre biraz kalburüstü olduğu için, orası bir toplum merkezi, orası bir fakir yeri, veya daha köylü daha kenar, varoş yeri diye pek gelmek yani, istemediler yani, rağbet görmediler”

Within the context of the target population of the social center, rural-urban distinctions become significant issues. The deprivation of women is defined both in terms of education and in terms of participation in social life. That is obvious in the narratives of Aslı and Nil who claim that rural people are uneducated people who are deprived of ‘knowledge’. In order to overcome this deprivation, Okmeydanı Social Center is seen as a space, ‘out of home’, where they can break their vicious circle and where they can have access to ‘knowledge’. Another way to ‘go out of home’ is through working opportunities. For example, Arsen defines this breaking out with reference to one of the performances they had created:

‘Do we have any chance<sup>101</sup>’ was about that. The easiest way out for a woman is to work, I mean the easiest way to go out of home is through work. When you work, you can go out. Other than that, it changes from place to place. In some places the woman can’t get out of home because of the neighborhood restrictions, or the oppression of the social milieu. In some places she cannot go out because she is penniless. And in the luxurious places, they are living in modern prisons. Even if they go out they can only go to certain places, with their own cars, within their own circle. I mean, it is also a form of captivity. ‘Do we have a chance’ was a play about that.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> The name of a performance we did together

<sup>102</sup> “Şansımız var mı da bu vardı. En kolay yırtmak çalışarak oluyor kadın için yani, evden en kolay çıkış yolu, çalışarak. Çalıştığın zaman çıkabiliyorsun. Onun dışında, haa yani yerine göre değişiyor. Kimi yerde semt baskısı, çevre baskısı yüzünden kadın evden çıkamıyor. Kimi yerde parasızlık yüzünden çıkamıyor. Ha çok lüks yerlerde de, modern hapisanelerde yaşıyorlar. Çıksalar da belli yerlere gidebiliyorlar, hani, kendi arabalarıyla, kendi çevreleri. Yani, o da yine bir anlamda tutsaklık. O anlamda bir oyundu şansımız var mı.”

Women imagine the social center as a space ‘out of the home’ where they can literally go out home in the physical sense and also in the sense of participating in social life. ‘Home’ and ‘outside’ reinforce each other in the description of their lives ‘before social center’. The terms like ‘it was a very distressed period<sup>103</sup>’, ‘I was in depression<sup>104</sup>’, and ‘I was trying to find myself an occupation<sup>105</sup>’ are used in describing their reasons for attending the Okmeydanı Social Center.

Okmeydanı Social Center provides a reason for going out of the home and enables a break from the routine practices of domestic life. Okmeydanı Social Center as a physical and social space provides the participants with the opportunity to meet with other women, to share their problems and to attend the activities. The interviewees’ first encounter with the social center occurred through the course of AÇEV, which was broadcast on television and newspapers or recommended by close friends and neighbors. The goal of this course was to educate mothers who cannot afford to send their preschool children to nursery school. As I mentioned before, opportunities offered for children become a starting point for them to enter the social center, where they become active participants soon afterwards. On the other hand, their willingness to attend the courses of AÇEV also indicates how women give importance to their children’s education and how it is constructed as their responsibilities. For instance, Tevfika tells about her experience in this course by distinguishing “outside” and social center as two separate spaces:

(gasps) I started going out, at first I was going out for one day per week, we liked it **outside**. Also, in Sumru Hanım’s class, it was compulsory to

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<sup>103</sup> ‘çok sıkıntılı bir dönemdi’

<sup>104</sup> ‘bunalıma girmiştım’

<sup>105</sup> ‘uğraş bulma çabasındaydım’



visit one another's house. I established friendships during those visits. I got to know people. I learned different places. (...) As I go to their houses, as I search and find places, as I get on the bus, as I come and go, I started to build my confidence. My friendships are still continuing.<sup>106</sup>

The first encounter with the “outside” takes place with their participation in the activities held in Okmeydanı Social Center. In order to explore their constructions of these terms, “out of home” and “outside”, I need to look at their perceptions of how they define and imagine the social center. More importantly, I want to examine how access to knowledge is defined through these constructions of space. For example, Arsen underlines the significance of social center in terms of providing education for women who are not ‘ready’ for the ‘outside’:

I mean, again the American society, it is like the church, I mean like a place of prayer. I think that the social center is a very important place. It should have its door open for everybody. Of course everyone would have suggestions, it would have a certain standard and a milieu (...) it is necessary to bring people to this point too. It is not something that I gained from there; I am a demanding sort of a girl. I am, I mean, it's so different than what I've lived, it's like I came there, to this point as

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<sup>106</sup> “(iç çeker) Dışarıya çıkmaya başladım, önce haftada bir gün çıkıyordum, dışarı hoşumuza gitti. Bir de Sumru hanımın dersinde, birbirlerinin evlerine gezmeler zorunluydu. O gezmeler sırasında arkadaşlar edindim. İnsanları tanıdım değişik yerleri öğrenmeye başladım, (...) Onların evine gittikçe, arayıp buldukça, soruşturdukça otobüslere binip, gide gele kendime güvenim biraz daha geldi. Arkadaşlıklarım hala devam ediyor. ”

already prepared. However, I believe that people who are not ready should be given education to make them get to that point.<sup>107</sup>

The imagination of the space of the social center as a sacred place which people enter without being excluded, a place where they can be educated in order to get ready for the world outside. Okmeydanı Social Center acts as a bridge between ‘unreadiness’ and ‘readiness’. The means of constructing this bridge is seen as ‘education’. The education that took place in the Okmeydanı Social Center shows the feminine way of the learning process that Arsen compares with the ‘military service of men’. This also indicates how education for women is perceived as the state responsibility:

...men do their military service for two years and they learn to live together. Women never have that sort of a chance. The social center is important for women in this respect. Actually, social centers are places where they can learn to live and do something together. As **they** cannot take us and make us do military service for two years, it can be that sort of a thing when you go there for once a week.<sup>108</sup>

So education is seen as a privilege that also indicates the discrimination between women and men. As Tevfika states, women should have the opportunity to get an education, and according to Arsen, social centers are important for societies in which

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<sup>107</sup> “Yani gene Amerikan toplumu, kilise gibi, yani bir ibadet yeri gibi. Bence çok önemli bir yer toplum merkezi. Herkese kapısını açık tutabilmeli. Herkesin önerisi, tabi bir standartı ve çevresi olacak, (...) insanları da bu noktaya getirmek gerekiyor. Benim orada kazandığım bir şey değil bu, ben böyle bir talepkar bir kızım, ben işte yaşadıklarım çok farklı şeyler, hani ben o noktaya oraya hazır geldim. Ama ona hazır olmayan insanları da o noktaya getirecek eğitimleri vermek gerektiğine inanıyorum işte.”

<sup>108</sup> “... erkekler iki yıl askerlik yapıyorlar ve birlikte yaşamayı öğreniyorlar. Kadınların asla böyle bir şansı yok. Toplum merkezi bu anlamda kadın için önemli. Birlikte yaşamayı, birlikte bir şeyler yapabilmeyi öğrenebilecekleri bir mekan toplum merkezleri aslında. Biz alıp iki yıl askerlik yaptıramayacaklarına göre, haftada bir günü oraya gittiğinde o anlamda bir şeyler olabilir.”

women are imprisoned indoors. The education of women becomes important for the development of the country:

It is a lot more important for our society, for the Turkish society (...) I wish it would exist in every neighborhood, I mean the Turkish society's hands are all tied (not free to act). I think the social center unties the (society's) hands (sets them free), especially the woman's. I don't know, it should take care of her child, if needed, she should be able to leave her child there, she should be able to participate in the production process after she got an education and develop herself. Actually, all of these ways pass through the social center. It seems to me that once the woman stands up on her feet, it would be a lot easier for the man to stand up, also for the whole society to stand up. I mean the woman is actually a lot more important, but this, either everybody is aware of that, and they choose to imprison women on purpose, or I don't know.<sup>109</sup>

All the terms that they used within their definitions of social center, "imprisoning", "lack of/deprivation of education", "gender roles" are resolved through a recourse to 'education for women' discourse. Lack of education is said to be the main reason for their oppression. Social center symbolizes a learning space that creates a new discourse, which translates the invisible into the visible, and which translates the unnamed into the named. As Aysu states:

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<sup>109</sup> "bizim toplumumuz için, türk toplumu için çok daha önemli (...) keşke her mahallede olsa, yani türk toplumunun eli kolu bağlı. Elini kolunu çözüyor bence toplum merkezi, özellikle kadının. Ne bileyim, gerekiyorsa çocuğuna bakabilmeli, çocuğunu oraya bırakabilmeli, kendini geliştirip bir eğitim aldıktan sonra üretim sürecine katılabilmeli. Bu yolların hepsi, toplum merkezinden geçiyor aslında. Ha kadın ayağa kalktı mı, erkeğin de ayağa kalkması, toplumun da ayağa kalkması çok daha kolay olur gibi geliyor bana. Yani aslında kadın çok daha önemli ama bunu, ya herkes çok farkında özellikle kadınları hapsetme yolunu tercih ediyorlar ya da, bilmiyorum. (Arsen)"

Because we are not educated, we are unable to solve our problems. I believe it would be a lot easier if we have education, if we get into relationship with different people. Especially the women have to get education. Girls, we as mothers, as never to be oppressed in the future generations (...) That is why, we also bring up our men ourselves. I cannot blame men here, for it is because our women are uneducated, it is us who made our men like that, by telling thinks like: men are good, men are like that, men can do it, women cannot. That is why I tell every women let's not do it anymore. Let's tell those, I mean the ones who know should tell. Let's open them too.<sup>110</sup>

Education becomes the primary issue in overcoming their oppression and the means of their struggle. But as Aysu states the struggle against oppression has to begin with education and continue by awakening 'other' women. The term she uses, "Let's open them up!" shows that she considers the social center as a place for such an awakening. Aysu, on the other hand does not celebrate 'university education, in contrast she emphasizes that education should include investigation and critical thinking:

I mean I am against frivolously obtaining that diploma as you futilely finish the school, without knowing, learning anything, without getting to

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<sup>110</sup> "Eğitim almadığımız için de, sorunlarımızı da çözemiyoruz. Eğitim alsak, değişik insanlarla ilişkilerde bulunsak, çok daha kolay olacağına inanıyorum. Özellikle kadınların okuması gerekiyor. Kız çocuklarının, bizler anneler olarak gelecek nesillerde hiç ezilmeyen olarak, (...) Onun için, erkeklerimizi de kendimiz yetiştiriyoruz. Erkeklerin ben burada suçunu göremiyorum, çünkü kadınlarımız da eğitimsiz olduğu için, erkekler iyidir, erkekler şöyledir işte erkektir yapar kadındır yapamaz, olayıyla erkeklerimizi biz kendimiz bu hale getirdik. Onun için de, bundan sonra yapmayalım diyorum hiçbir kadına. Bunları anlatalım, yani bilenler anlatsın. Açalım onları da."

know life. I mean I don't want to be a university graduate then. I would have education, if I were investigative, well informed in every branch, if I know what is right and what is wrong, if I do it believing in what I can give to people. I mean, in my eyes, this is what education is, education is when you face problems that you believe in, that you do, that you've investigated.<sup>111</sup>

According to these narratives, education for women should be held in the social centers. This education enables women to go out of the home and break the vicious circle of their lives as well as gender identities. The space of this education, on the other hand, becomes a transitory space where women should be prepared for the 'outside'. In sum, the space of the social center indicates the space between 'home' and 'outside'. Tefrika defines this transitory space for women which is exactly between 'home' and 'outside':

...there, they get ready for the outside, for I couldn't experience that at my home, in my family, they did not prepare me for the outside as they raised me. Because they over protected and preserved me, I have fallen too much, however, I grew up like that in there, as I fall and get up. I consider there (*social center*) as my family. They get ready there before going out, there it is a home, that's the way I see it. (...) (*there*) I would want women to work, they do. Women should both actively participate, but at the same time they shouldn't be permanent, it should alternate, as

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<sup>111</sup> "Yani boşu boşuna okulu bitirip de, diplomayı kuru kuruya bir şey bilmeden, öğrenmeden, hayatı tanımadan o diplomaya almaya karşıyım ben. Yani ben üniversite mezunu olmak istemiyorum o zaman. Ben her dalda, araştırmacı, bilgili, neyin doğru neyin yanlış olduğunu bilerek, insanlara ne verebildiğimi inanarak yapıyorsam o zaman eğitim almış olurum. Eğitim benim gözümde bu yani, inandığı, yaptığın, araştırdığın sorunlarla karşılaştığın zaman eğitim."

everybody get raised, how should I put it, as they find the place where they can go out, find a job, work, they should go there, someone else should come instead, she should be raised there, she should develop her self-confidence.<sup>112</sup>

By defining themselves as deprived, women open a space for intervention that must occur through the means of education. Within these narratives, the social center is seen as the space where this deprivation will be overcome through education and participation in social life. Imagining the social center as a space of education and a transitory space between ‘home’ and ‘outside’, they imagine a space between the ‘private’ and the ‘public’ spheres. However, this is a way of constructing an ‘imaginary’ bridge for women, where they can get ready for the ‘public’ sphere by means of education. Then the goal of social centers defined as the integration of migrants through the provision of access to urban facilities and community building processes shift into the ‘education for women’ discourse that is defined through access to skill and ‘knowledge’. In practice, the function of the social center in the context of the Okmeydanı Social Center is situated within the ‘education for women’ discourse as seen through its activities and through women’s narratives.

On the other hand, the women become the subjects of the ‘education for women’ discourse. Pointing at the significance of ‘education’ in their accounts of the social center as a transitory space, women are subject to and are subjected by the ‘education

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<sup>112</sup> “orada dışarıya hazırlanıyorlar, çünkü ben evimde, ailemde bunu yaşayamadım, beni büyütürken dışarıya hazırlamadılar. Çok fazla koruyup sakladıkları için, ben çok düştüm ama orada düşse kalka şekilde büyüdüm. Orası benim ailem gibi görüyorum Dışarıya çıkmadan önce orada hazırlanıyorlar, orası bir yuva, ben öyle gördüm (...) [orada] Kadınlar çalışsın isterdim, çalışıyorlar. Hem kadınlar görev alsınlar, ama sürekli kalıcı olmasınlar, değişsin bu, herkes yetiştikten sonra, kendini, nasıl diyeyim, çıkabileceği, iş bulabileceği, çalışabileceği yeri bulduktan sonra, oraya kaysın, yerine başka biri gelsin, orada yetişsin ya da kendine güveni gelsin.”

for women' discourse. According to Foucault, "It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word subject: Subject to someone else by control and dependence and tied to this own identity by a conscience of self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power, which subjugates and makes subject to" (Foucault 1982: 212). Accordingly, women become the subjects of this discourse within both its practice and its internalization. Social center is imagined as a space -which prepares unready women- provides education to the deprived ones. The participants of the Okmeydanı Social Center become the subject of 'education for women' discourse and they find the opportunity to express new desires through the construction of new narratives. The emergence of these narratives also are made possible within the social center where 'education for women' is seen as the primary tool for the liberation of women. This discourse is produced and re-produced by the cooperation of the state and institutionalized feminism.

## CHAPTER V: ANALYZING THE THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED PERFORMANCES AND STRATEGIES

This chapter consists of an analysis of the performances we created in the Okmeydanı Social Center. In this analysis, I will also be using the interviews I conducted with women. My aim is to show how the issue of ‘performing’ in the context of women’s oppression reveals the performative constitution of gender identity and through this how the hegemonic matrix -as Butler calls it- becomes visible. I also aim to show how performance enables to occupy challenging and resisting subject positions for making matrix visible. I will also examine how ‘education for women’ discourse -which women are subjected to and subjected by- is disrupted by women’s narratives and the practices of *the theatre of the oppressed*.

### ‘Performing’ Women’s Oppression and Strategies

*“Everyone is aware of such banal facts.*

*But the fact that they are banal does not mean they do not exist.*

*What we have to do with banal facts is to discover – or try to discover – which specific and perhaps original problem is connected with them”*

*(Foucault 1982: 210)*

Nine performances and thirty-nine interventions took place in the Okmeydanı Social Center. Since the performances are about themes women frequently encounter in their daily lives, they become interesting only when the spect-actors participate in them. These performances consist of problems within the domestic sphere where women’s oppression result from relations with family members (husband, mother,



mother-in-law, children and relatives) and is created by individuals belonging to women's inner circle (neighbors and friends). The oppressed ones are always women who are unable to find a solution for a particular form of oppression. I will examine the performances in five groups divided according to their contents: Violence, marriage, reproduction, singleness and harassment. Then I will give brief summaries of the strategies created within the process of spect-actor intervention.

## **I. Performing 'Violence'**

Within the feminist approach 'domestic violence' is the means through which the patriarchal ideology within the family is reproduced. Domestic violence is also supported by the state and the legal order (İlkkaracan & Gülçür 1997: 22). As I mentioned in the introduction, the campaigns, actions, legal regulations and centers (advice bureau and shelters) put violence against women into the feminist agenda since 1980s. However the research, conducted by Gözmez and her friends, shows that in 1998 domestic violence is still widespread throughout the country. According to this research 3.6 % of women are frequently subjected to their husbands' violent actions, 6.5 % of them are sometimes subjected, and 12.3 % of women are subjected to their husband's insults (Gözmez a. e. all.1998: 311). Beyond these, domestic violence is seen frequenter according to different researches. For example, according to Purple Roof Foundation's research conducted with 1259 women between the years 1990 and 1996, 88.2 % of women are living in a violent milieu and 68% of women are beaten by their husbands<sup>113</sup>. However, studies on 'domestic violence' emphasize

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<sup>113</sup> Please visit <http://www.amnesty-turkiye.org/sindex.php3?sindex=ozdais0206200403>

legal regulations<sup>114</sup> as the most important strategy against violence. This study rather focuses on the strategies women develop to stop violence in their performances.

*Performance I: "The Sound of Silence"*

28.11.2000, 35 minutes, Domestic Sphere

Theme: Domestic Violence

Characters: Mother, Father, Mother-in-Law, First Son, Second Son, and Daughter

*"This play was about domestic violence in which the victim was the mother. She started the play with a purple eye indicating a past episode of violence by her husband. The main conflict of the play was created by the desire of daughter to go out with her friends. She asked the mother to give permission for her to go out. First oppression appeared from the side of the mother-in-law who tried to listen to what they were talking about and interrupted this conversation. The mother unwillingly opposed the daughter's desire, because she knew that the father would have a negative reaction. The daughter still insisted on going out and wanted her mother to help her in getting permission from the father. When the father came home, the sons ran to the door to welcome him, in such a way that both the mother's and the daughter's welcoming became undistinguished and invisible. This showed the gender discrimination in that family. During the dinner the mother-in-law, who had power over her son and over the whole family, complained about the mother, who could hardly oppose to those complaints. The daughter wanted her mother to talk to her father about her problem. The mother tried to find a peaceful moment to open up the topic. But they encountered a strong rejection from both the father who said "the*

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<sup>114</sup> See for example, İlkkaracan, P. (1997) and Yildirim, A. (1998).

*girls don't go to the cinema" and from the junior brothers who stated that none of their friends' sisters went to the movies. The conflict occurred with the daughter's crying and leaving the room and the anger of the father. He wanted the mother to bring the daughter back. On the other hand, the sons wanted money to buy toys. The father gave the money and this created a further conflict. The mother suggested that this was an indicator of discrimination: The daughter could not go out, but the sons got money whenever they wanted. This comment made the father even angrier, because he did not want anyone to interfere with his decisions, since he was the breadwinner, he had the right to decide on how the money should be spent. The father wanted to silence the woman by beating her. The violent action was not shown on the stage, instead all characters froze at the moment of crisis.*

### *Strategies Against Violence*

In this first performance –also the first experience of forum theatre in the Okmeydanı Social Center, the spectators felt really uncomfortable and upset. They did not like the concept of the play in the sense of holding a 'mirror' them and of making this common event into an issue. There were four interventions done by replacing the characters of the 'mother' (three times) and the 'daughter' (only once). The first intervention was significant since it emphasized 'performance' rather than 'talk'. She walked angrily to her husband, took the ladle and tried to hit the husband. We stopped the intervention and she returned to her seat. We did not make any comments to her intervention, nor did she. However, everyone seemed to have a silent agreement that this was not the solution that we were trying to find. Her intervention was something not nameable, a moment uninhabitable since it defied all

norms of gender and family. This intervention showed me the power of ‘performing’. It was performed out there and everyone got it; words were unnecessary.

The other three inventions were different from the first one<sup>115</sup>. The women spectators all were trying to change the dialogue that the original performance presented. Two of the strategies aimed to form an interaction space within the script by using body language; creating physical contact with the oppressor and providing information about the problem. These strategies showed the passive mode of the character they replaced, but they were both in struggle with the oppressors illustrating forms of everyday resistance and agency. On the other side, the spectator who replaced the daughter demonstrated an active strategy. She eliminated the other oppressors, her brothers and grandmother, and released her mother from the mediating role between the father and her and faced her father alone. This was a strategy that enabled her to focus on the real problem that was the conflict between the father and the daughter. Without paying attention to the other family members, she used face-to-face interaction in order to overcome her oppression.

## **II. Performing ‘Marriage’**

This part consists of four performances that mainly focus on the family in relation to conflicts on/within marriage. The themes of kinship and arranged marriage were the subjects of two different plays and opened up a discussion on women’s right to make decisions for their own marriage. In the context of Turkey, arranged marriages are widespread. According to a research conducted in 1998, 25.1 % of all marriages are

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<sup>115</sup> See Appendix for the photograph of one of the interventions.

kinship marriages. This percentage shows a slight increase over time: 1883 (20.9%), 1988 (21.1%) and 1993 (23 %) (Hancıoğlu, Tunçbilek & Onan 2001: 3). Women in Okmeydanı considered the arranged marriages as oppression, since women did not have a say in the selection of a spouse and had to be subjected to their family's decisions. The other plays were about marriage where the authority of the husbands was posed as problems. In sum, the plays that will be under examination below, reflects the struggle of women in decision-making process and also their subordinate position in the marriage.

*Performance II: "No Way Out?"*

16.03.2001, 42 minutes, Domestic Sphere

Theme: Consanguineal Marriage

Characters: Mother, Father, Daughter

*"The play was about consanguinal marriage which was arranged among relatives. The father told his wife about the decision they made with his brother: A marriage between his daughter and his nephew. The mother opposed this idea by telling that they were cousins and that they grew up together. But for the father, this marriage was decided and there was no reason to oppose his elder brother. The father wanted her to inform the daughter about this decision. Like her mother, the daughter was also shocked and showed great resistance. She insisted on not getting married, for the reason that they were very close relatives. She wanted to make her own decisions in situations where her whole life would be affected. The daughter went to her room, called her boyfriend and hardly told him this terrible situation in tears. She told him*

*that if they forced her into this marriage, she would commit suicide. On the other side, the father got angry when he heard about her refusal, became aggressive and wanted to meet her face to face. Although the daughter tried to explain her opinions about this marriage, the father was not willing to listen. The crisis of the play appeared with her refusal and informing them about her boy friend. The play ended with the father's attempt to hit her."*

### *Strategies Against Consanguineal Marriage*

There were three interventions and two kinds of strategies were proposed during the interventions: One was to form solidarity among the family members against this traditional form of marriage. The oppressed ones decided to unite and to fight against the oppression together. For example, the daughter decided to talk to her cousin about this marriage and she thought that if they talked and acted against their fathers' decision, they would achieve in convincing them. The other strategy was to use the means of communication. Here, the spect-actor (daughter) tried to convince her father by saying that she wanted to work and earn her own money. She said that in the future when he retired, she would be looking after them. She wanted him to let her free in making her own decisions. She concluded her intervention by telling that she did not want to make him unhappy.

### *Performance III: "Materiality in Marriage"*

20.05.2002, 59 minutes, Domestic Sphere

Theme: Arranged Marriage

Characters: Young Girl, Her Mother, Neighbor, Young Man, His Mother, His Father

*“The matchmaker tried to arrange a marriage between a young man, whose father was rich, and a young girl who was living with her mother. She talked about this marriage with both her mother and his parents. His parents were willing to meet the girl and asked the matchmaker to arrange such a meeting. On the other side, the mother of the girl became very happy, because this meant a wealthy life for her daughter. But the girl hesitated about this marriage, because her wish was to continue her education. Nevertheless, her mother forced her to see him. The man, his mother and the matchmaker came to meet the girl. The man and the girl went into another room where they could talk alone. In this conversation it was clear that the man didn’t want her to continue her studies or to work; and she disliked his personality and thoughts. In the living room the mother tried to arrange a marriage contract, including a car and a flat. After the visitors left, the girl told her mother about her impressions and finally her decision about not marrying. But the mother was determined to marry her. The man and his parents and the matchmaker came for the engagement ceremony. The girl was very unwilling, but all of a sudden she found the ring on her finger.”*

#### *Strategies Against Arranged Marriage*

There were six interventions (five spect-actor replaced the girl, and a male spect-actor created a new character as her boy friend). The spect-actors playing ‘the girl’ tried to convince the oppressors by expressing their ideas and feelings about this marriage and their future plans. One spect-actor tried to convince the mother, another one tried to convince the matchmaker. However, they could not succeed in changing

their ideas about this marriage, because both the mother and the matchmaker considered the wealth of the young man rather than her reasons. Two of the spect-actors intervened in the scene where the girl and the man were talking. Their strategy was to explain their reasons for the unwillingness in getting married. These were her desires to go to the university and to work in the public sphere, which the man did not accept. The last spect-actor had tried another strategy that was speaking to the man's parents. These strategies occurred through courageous interactions with the mother, the matchmaker, the young man and his parents. In several cases, the conversation between the girl and the man was ended or was about to be ended by deciding not to marry.

*Performance IV: "My Husband and My Mother"*

01.06.2001, 47 minutes, Domestic Sphere

Theme: Nuclear Family

Characters: Wife, Husband, Wife's Mother

*"This play was about the conflict between a husband and a mother-in-law. The problem was that he did not want to live with her in the same house, although he knew that she did not have any other place to go. He asked his wife to talk to her mother about this issue, because he wanted to live alone with his wife. As the doorbell rang, the neighbor appeared on the stage. The husband complained about this situation to the neighbor who listened to him in a positive mood. When the wife came into the room, the husband left them alone and the neighbor changed her mood. This time, the wife told her about the problem she faced, from her point of view. She said that she really got sick of his reactions against her mother. Again the*



*neighbor reacted positively and she agreed with the wife's complaints. At this moment the wife's mother approached. She wondered about what made her daughter unhappy. When the wife went to the kitchen, the mother asked the neighbor if she knew anything about this. While the neighbor was about to tell her the 'truth', the wife entered the room and they started a conversation about daily life. After a while the neighbor decided to leave and the mother wanted her daughter to tell the 'real' problem. Although the wife tried to put an end to this conversation, the husband rushed in by asking if she had talked to her mother."*

#### *Strategies Against Familial Norms:*

Three spect-actors replaced the characters: One for the wife, one for the neighbor and one for the mother of the wife. This performance indicated more 'modern' strategies. The spect-actors all tried to change the power struggle by threatening the husband with divorce. They tried to communicate and to understand the reason why he did not want his mother-in-law, but they could not succeed. The legal solution, that was divorce, became the only strategy that they could use in this performance. On the other hand, the spect-actor who replaced the mother-in-law left their home to stay in a rest house.

The 'modern' solutions that include "having access to institutions" do not exactly solve the problem addressed. Access to legal rights (right of divorce) as well as access to institutions (rest house) is put as strategies to overcome women's oppression. The solution was to remove the conflicting parties out of the conflict (through divorce or rest house) rather than to work through the oppression.

*Performance V: “The Economic Crisis and its Reflections”*

01.11.2001, 43 minutes, Domestic Sphere

Theme: Economic Crisis

Characters: Wife, Husband, Daughter, Landlord

*“This play was about the effects of the economic crisis (2001) in the family. The husband came home from work and sat on his couch to watch TV, which was temporarily out of order. He got angrier when the wife wanted money to buy ingredients to cook a meal. He was not willing to give her money saying that he was not hungry at all. On the other side, the daughter had some problems at school and wanted help from her mother. The doorbell rang, the landlord appeared asking for the rent. The husband’s anger grew bigger and he refused to pay. There began a big quarrel, which the wife could not succeed to end. The wife and the daughter needed money for survival, and the husband couldn’t do anything. The wife was in a big struggle and was paralyzed. Her last action was to shout, shout and shout.”*

*Strategies Against Poverty*

Three spect-actors replaced the character, ‘wife’<sup>116</sup>. None of their attempts could be seen as realistic strategies and solutions. They acted out too positively, mostly tried to act and react in a calm way. The only strategy that the spect-actors created was their attempt to engage in a conversation with the husband. They all tried to stop the

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<sup>116</sup> See Appendix for the photograph of one of the interventions.

oppression by their calm attitudes and action towards the husband. For example, one spect-actor asked him to go out if he wanted to watch the football match. She also said that she could also join him and they could visit a friend. Another spect-actor decided to borrow money from a friend or a relative. But these strategies did not help in coping with the problem in real terms, since the problem was caused by 'economics' as much as gender power and it was not possible to address the economic issue within the scope of the play.

### **III. Performing 'Reproduction'**

These plays that concern the issue of reproduction questioned the patriarchal system by problematizing the desire to have a male offspring. Husbands and mother in laws believe that the male offspring shows the continuity of the lineage. In classical patriarchy gender inequality is reproduced in the extended household where the senior male has the authority over the other members, including younger men. The girls are married at an early age, and they live in their husband's extended households. There they are subjected to the authority of the head of the household and also the authority of senior women such as the mother-in-law (Kandiyoti 1988: 278). Kandiyoti's definition of 'bargaining with patriarchy' shows the women's strategies for empowerment in the context of classical patriarchy. The sons provide security in the old age and their wives provide the labor power for older women in their wives. As Marcia C. Inhorn, who studies patriarchy and infertility in Egypt, states "patriarchal bargaining occurs when women adopt interpersonal strategies that maximize their security, often through the manipulation of the affections of sons and husbands" (Inhorn 1996: 6). The reproduction of patriarchy hence, is also enabled by

the control and investment of older women. In short “patriarchal bargaining indicates the existence of rules and scripts regulating gender relations” (Inhorn 1996: 6) and “women’s strategies and coping mechanisms” (Kandiyoti 1988: 285). These plays can be seen as a challenge to ‘bargaining with patriarchy’ and focuses on the relationship between younger women and older women.

*Performance VI: “Our Traditions”*

01.06.2001, 17 minutes, Domestic Sphere

Theme: Male Offspring

Characters: Wife, Husband, Husband’s Mother, Daughter and Nurse

*“This short play took place in a family in which there was a conflict about ‘male offspring’. The woman, who already had two daughters, was pregnant. The mother-in-law wanted and insisted on having a grandson. She was also secretly looking for a new wife for her son. The husband shared his mother’s opinion. In the end, the woman was brought to the hospital to deliver her baby. The crisis happened when they learnt that the newborn baby was again a girl.”*

*Strategies Against Gender Discrimination*

There was only one intervention in this performance<sup>117</sup>. The spect-actor replaced the wife and tried to cope with her mother-in-law. She tried to convince her that the patriarchal system and the traditional discourse have been changing. Her strategy

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<sup>117</sup> See Appendix for the photograph of the intervention.

was to give examples about the significance of having a daughter who is also a human being. But she could not succeed in convincing the mother-in-law.

*Performance VII: "Who is Guilty?"*

03.06.2002, 61 minutes, Domestic Sphere

Theme: Infertility and Childbirth

Characters: First Woman, First Woman's Husband, First Woman's Daughter,

Mother-in law, Second Woman, Second Woman's Mother, Neighbor

*"The play began with the action of the girl-child who wanted money to buy a new ball. The mother was not willing to give her money, but the mother-in-law gave it. During the argument between the woman and the mother-in-law, the husband came home and interfered the discussion and shared the same opinion with his wife. They did not want the child to be spoiled. Touching his wife's stomach, he said that he wanted to feel how his son was. She said that she was not certain if the baby was a boy or not. The mother-in-law also wanted a grandson.*

*On the other side, the other daughter-in-law was talking with her neighbor about her infertility problem. She was very unhappy about this, because the diagnosis stated that there was nothing wrong with her. Her mother, who wanted a grandchild came in and wanted her to divorce and to marry a 'healthy' man. But the woman did not want to have a divorce. The mother-in-law complained about the daughter-in-law saying that she was gossiping about her son as 'heirless'. Both crisis occurred by the*

*intervention of the mother-in-law which threatened both the first and the second woman.”*

#### *Strategies Against Reproduction Discourses*

Three of the spect-actors replaced the first woman and one replaced the second woman. The strategies that they created mostly utilized ‘modern’ means. It was declared that the determination of sex was not in woman’s control. They gave information about the ‘x, y’ chromosomes. But more significantly, they reminded that they were also women and this was not a bad thing. The scientific knowledge became the core of this strategy. As far as the second woman is concerned, the spect-actor tried to find solutions like adopting a child. But the mother-in-law blamed the woman for infertility and declared that it was her fault. Both the first and second woman decided to take the mother-in-law to a doctor who could convince her. Here the strategy was recourse to the guidance of the experts and to convince the mother-in-law to stop their complaints.

#### **IV. Performing ‘Singleness’**

The concept of ‘singleness’ was performed in the context of widowhood and single households. The main issue in this play was the social control mechanism employed towards a widow by her mother and the neighbors. The character created in this play was a workingwoman whose income could be considered to be high. The conflict occurred by her living together with a man without a marriage contract.

*Performance VIII: "This Life is Mine!"*

06.11.2001, 58 minutes, Domestic Sphere

Theme: Widowhood and Gossip

Characters: Woman, Woman's First Friend, Woman's Second Friend, Woman's

Third Friend, Neighbor, Woman's Mother

*"This play was about a widow woman whose relationship with her boy friend was broken up. She was very sad and her friends came to comfort her. Meanwhile a neighbor was secretly watching her. This neighbor called the woman's mother and informed her about this separation. She said that this boy friend also took her car and her jewelry and that everyone in the neighborhood was talking and gossiping about her. She told the mother that since she was a friend of the mother she could help her in this matter. The mother was desperate and began to cry, and decided to talk to her daughter. The mother's reaction was to criticize her for having a relationship with someone although she was a widow. But from the woman's perspective this was her life and she could live the way she wanted. A few minutes later the neighbor dropped in. She also began to criticize her because of her illegitimate relationship. She insisted that because they were not married, the man could cheat on her and leave her. At the end the mother insisted that she had to live with her and forced her to move to her house."*

*Strategies Against Gossip*

There were four interventions. Three of four spect-actors replaced the ‘widow’ and one replaced the ‘widow’s mother’. In this performance the main strategy of the spect-actor was to try to convince others that a woman could have her own life. The script consisted of three ‘single’ women: widow, her mother and her neighbor. The spect-actors focused on this status and tried to transform the discourses surrounding singleness into a discourse on the right to live alone. One spect-actor confronted the neighbor. She declared that she had her own life and she was the only person who would decide on her life. She eliminated the oppression that neighbor created by asking to talk to her mother alone. In this conversation she stated that they both had to live their own lives as they wanted, not as other people imposed. One of the spect-actor focused on the neighbor and tried to find solutions on the neighbor’s problem of loneliness. She advised her to engage in an activity; perhaps in the social center in Okmeydanı.

## **V. Performing ‘Harassment’**

This play is the only one that has taken place in the workplace setting. It deals with the issue of ‘harassment’ that occurs towards women who work outside of their homes. This play can be seen as an attempt to show the construction of the working space as a masculine space.

*Performance IX: “Do we have any chance?”*

05.02.2002, 58 minutes, Workplace

Theme: Gender Discrimination in the Public Sphere



Characters: First Woman, Second Woman, Third Woman, First Man, Second Man,  
Third Man

*“This was a play about three women who wanted to run a small restaurant in an industrial area. The play began with the action of the first woman who asked help from their male neighbors to carry a table. After this help, the two men phoned the third man asking him to bring flowers and chocolate for these women. They were very glad to have women neighbors at the workplace. They thought that this was an opportunity to ask them for dinner. The third man was sent to the restaurant with these gifts. Second woman welcomed him and got surprised when she saw the flowers thinking that the opening of the restaurant would be on the next day. Then they all understood what the flower meant and refused it. But he insisted on giving the flower. At the end they unwillingly took it. While they were concerned if this would happen again or not, if this flower was a genuine gift or not, the third man appeared again with the chocolate. The women realized that those gifts were indicators of harassment. In the chocolate box they saw a piece of paper: an invitation note for dinner. They got angry and the other two men came in to ask what the problem was. The three men were inviting them to go out. Since this was a male-dominated area, they had to get along well with them in order to keep their business. The women were paralyzed.”*

*Strategies Against Harassment*

There had been six interventions in which ‘the first woman’ was replaced four times and ‘the second woman’ two times. They tried to cope with the situation in different ways, but they could not succeed in changing the situation. They eliminated the initial encounter, but they could not avoid the subsequent oppression. There were three main strategies that the spect-actors created. One was changing the relations with these men. For example, one spect-actor changed the initial scene and asked help from the other women for carrying the table. The second strategy was the belief in the solidarity among women. Two of the spect-actors stated that women could do everything by themselves without the help of men. Additionally, one of the spect-actors tried to threaten these men in terms of informing their wives about what they were doing. The last strategy was the access to legal rights and to the institutions. One of the spect-actors wanted to call the police, and another one said that she would sue them. Yet the men declared that in the legal institutions the personnel were also men who would take their side. In short there were different strategies shown on stage, but they could not find a solution to end the harassment.

The strategies that women in Okmeydanı created could be categorized in three main groups. In the first group, women try to cope with the oppression by recourse to official institutions and legal rights. The strategies of ‘going to the court or to the police’, voicing the right of divorce and consulting to the experts all show the different ways in which modern institutions are used to cope. Communication was another strategy. The interaction/communication between the oppressor and the oppressed are changed within the interventions in two ways: One is the effort of the spect-actor to change the monolithic structure of oppression and to transform the monologue into a dialogue where she can also be heard. The other one is to eliminate

other oppressors in order to confront the main conflict/oppressor to stop the oppression. Beyond these two fundamental strategies, the last one is the struggle of spect-actors declaring to achieve solidarity among women in order to gain power.

Almost none of the interventions were able to effectively solve the crisis of the play. Nevertheless, I contend that the importance of these plays is not their power to solve gender oppression on the stage and become ‘an example’ for real life. Rather, their influence can be detected in the analysis of women’s narratives about *the theatre of the oppressed*. I will discuss this influence by showing that *the theatre of the oppressed* creates a collective space for women to name oppression, by constituting a community, and by enabling them to challenge gender norms and imagine different ways of being a woman.

### **“We performed realities”<sup>118</sup>: Women’s Words on the Theatre of the Oppressed**

This part comprises the analysis of the interviews within the context of *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops and performances. In chapter four, I examined women’s words on the Okmeydanı Social Center and explained their imagination of the social center as a bridge between ‘home’ and ‘outside’. I also argued that the social center is defined as a transitory space where education is seen to be the most important means for ‘self-development’. Here, I will try to examine how they imagine and identify *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops and performances in comparison with the educational programs.

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<sup>118</sup> gerçekleri oynadık biz

*“Our Common Theme is Independence and Freedom of Women”: Deciding on the Theme of a Play*

Although educational programs are based on the exploration of particular topics and subjects and depend on finding out examples *from* life, in the performances of *the theatre of the oppressed* life itself becomes the fundamental and primary source. That is life in its all richness, embodying all forms of oppression including economic, social and familial, simultaneously is displayed in a dramatic form. Accordingly, problems and strategies in real life situations become visible through performance. Rather than translating life into the terms and concepts discussed in the class; first, life is discussed, put in a dramatic form, and strategies learned in the center as well as those learned ‘before’ are used in solving problems.

As I mentioned when explaining the process of *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops in chapter three, the participants are free in deciding on the theme that will indicate their shared oppression. Within the workshops, we work on oppression through exercises, games and more importantly ‘images’. In the process of deciding on the theme of a performance, I encourage them to think about their oppression through an image or couple of images or a voice. Then they begin to discuss a chosen subject and propose topics concerning or inspiring them in terms of their oppression:

We used to make images. Before constructing the play, everybody tells what he or she thinks, after that we discuss a bit until we decide whose is going to be (*picked*), then we come to an agreement.<sup>119</sup> (Tevfika)

Our inner voices, everybody would make a noise. With the connotations of that noise, that cry, there came out ‘Do we have any chance?’<sup>120</sup> (Arsen)

Both of these quotations suggest that in *the theatre of the oppressed*, the aim is to give a material, discursive and dramatic form to something that is banal, not talked about, yet oppressive to woman. It is significant to explore how women are related to the proposed subjects and why these subjects are significant for them. Within the narratives, they all declare various reasons for various performances. But significantly, all these reasons are related with their own life and reality. For example, Zühre tells that the play, “The Economic Crisis and its Reflections” was her proposal and she was inspired by her sister’s life. On the other hand, Aslı makes a statement on the reason why they choose the theme of the performance, “Do We Have Any Chance?”:

I think that we chose that sort of a play because our common theme is independence and freedom of women in general.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>119</sup> imaj yapıyorduk. Oyun kurmadan önce, herkes düşündüğünü anlatıyor, anlattıktan sonra kiminki olacağına karar verene kadar biraz tartışıyoruz, sonra orta bir yol bulunuyor. (Tevfika)

<sup>120</sup> İç seslerimiz herkes bir ses çıkarıyordu. O sestten, o çığılıktan çağrışım yaparak, o şansımız var mı çıktı.(Arsen)

<sup>121</sup> Ortak konumuz zaten kadınların genelinde bağımsızlık, özgürlük olduğu için galiba böyle bir oyunu tercih ettik diye düşünüyorum.

They all emphasize that these performances are derived from their own lives; either from their own individual experiences or from the experiences of the community. In the interviews they all state that the themes of the plays are real events. For example, Aysu states that by the performances they created, they aim to put women's oppression into the agenda and to find solutions collectively. Referring to the first performance, "No Way Out?" Aysu states that:

We talked like that among the group, we said where shall we do it, what can we do. (...) Because, in our agenda -I regret to say- but there are those women who are beaten, always. And we decided to bring this subject back to the agenda since people are not still aware of it and they do not change. As within the discrimination of women and men, both the women getting beaten, and girls being oppressed at home, the superiority of men. However we came to realize at the end of the play that everything is not like that anymore. Women have opened their eyes, even if not completely, they are in much better condition when compared to their past situation.<sup>122</sup>

The relationship between daily life and performances enables women's oppression to be visible and debatable. The stories and characters derived from everyday life also help women to act out easily:

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<sup>122</sup> Grup olarak öyle konuştuk nerden yapalım dedik, ne yapabiliriz dedik. (...) Çünkü gündemimizde hep böyle dayak yiyen kadınlar ne yazık ki çok üzümlere söylüyorum ama var. Ve biz bunları tekrardan bir gündeme getirelim, insanlar bu konularda hala aynıyorlar kı, değişiyorlar mı diye böyle bir konuda karar verdik. Kız erkek ayrımcılığında hem kadının dayak yemesi, hem kıza evde baskı, erkeğin daha üstün oluşu. Ama gördük ki oyunun sonunda her şey böyle değilmiş artık. Kadınlar uyanmış, yani çok fazla uyanmasa da, eski durumuna göre çok çok daha iyiler.

...we made up those ourselves anyway, from the things that we see and live, we put in ourselves (...) I, myself, now, I've acted in three (of the plays) one, a nurse, another in "This Life is Mine", oh, and in another one I played the role of a man, father. Those were the things I have lived, for instance, while I was playing the nurse there, sometime ago I had attended a first aid class, so I know it a bit from there, also, we (with her daughter) had stayed in two or three hospitals... I had some knowledge from there. 'This Life is Mine' was something that some friend of mine has gone through. I have played an oppressed woman, I myself was more or less like that, anyway. (...) That was something very close to me.<sup>123</sup>

(Nil)

The realness of subjects affects the persuasiveness of the performances and makes the interventions more possible and realistic. It also helps to activate the spectator, since they see their experiences on stage. Two of the performances were on the issue of reproduction, specifically the desire to have a male offspring. The problematization of this desire as well as their narratives show that this subject is derived from their own lives:

There are so many people around us who say that they shouldn't have a girl, who say that you should definitely give birth to a boy. We did a play like that. A groom who doesn't want his mother in law in the house, who says that your mother shall not stay here, a discrimination between the

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<sup>123</sup> (...) zaten bunları biz kendimiz yaşadığımız gördüğümüz şeyleri uydurduk, kendimizden bir şeyler kattık da çıkardık ortaya (...) Benim şimdi orada, üç tane oynadım, bir hemşire, bir bu hayat benim, bir de ha bir erkek baba rolünde oynadım. Bunlar benim yaşadığım şeylerdi mesela, ben orada hemşire rolünü oynarken benim birazcık ilkyardım kursuna gitmişliğim vardı, oradan biraz biliyorum, biraz bununla iki üç, üç kadar hastanede yattık, oradan biraz bir bilgim vardı. (...) O bu hayat benim de benim bir yakınımın başından geçen şeylerdi. Zaten ezilen bir kadını oynamıştım, kendim de az çok öyleydim. (...) Bu benim çok yakınımın şeydi. (Nil)

boy and the girl in the house, the boy is always superior, girl comes in the second place, the girl doesn't go out. The woman who gets beaten in her house, even though she serves that much, a husband who doesn't work, who drinks, a husband who doesn't bring money to his house. These were the realities of our lives and we acted them.<sup>124</sup> (Aysu)

Yes, these were the problems within my life, in fact, a play that a friend of mine did in the theatre never goes out of my mind, I had lived it myself too. (...) the nurse brings out the baby and shows it to the father, the father says let me tip you, just when he gives her the money the nurse says "you have a daughter" the father puts back the wallet in his pocket and he is very disappointed for having a girl and he doesn't even feel like tipping. This is an insult on girls since they were babies, and I have seen it like that: when I was pregnant to my second daughter, anyway... after my labor my mother-in-law has done it to me, she did it via her present, she made it felt and she also put it into words. She brings a quarter-gold coin to my sister-in-law for she had a son as her fifth child (...) and she gives me one million liras saying 'well you had a daughter, so what shall we do?'. 'Here', she says, you also have a boy and we shall give you a quarter too. I felt very sad and I cried a lot, and I said 'will I have a boy

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<sup>124</sup> Çevremizde çok insanlar var, kız çocuğu olmasın diyen, illa erkek çocuk doğuracaksın diyen. Bir öyle oyun oynamıştık. Kaynanasını istemeyen damat, annen burada kalmayacak diyen, evde kız çocuğu ile erkek çocuğu arasında ayırım, erkek çocuk her zaman üstündür, kız çocuk ikinci planda kalır, kız çocuk dışarı çıkmaz. Evinde dayak yiyen kadın, o kadar hizmet ettiği halde, çalışmayan içki içen koca, evine para vermeyen koca. Bunlar bizim hayatımızın bir gerçekleriydi ve bunları biz oynadık. (Aysu)



only to make you give me a quarter?’ I mean she was treating me so badly for I have had a girl<sup>125</sup>. (Aslı)

My spouse’s mother, I mean my mother-in-law still wants a boy, that came to my mind. (...) her sending me wheat come to my mind. I mean from there the wheat will come; I would swallow it like a pill. Actually (they say) wheat is the sign of a girl, lentil (...) how it means that it will be a boy, and how she sends it, (...) how she goes there and how she promises a sacrificial and she sends it, her role in me wanting a boy, it reminded me of these. But I was aware that there are people who go through the other (*stuff*), I mean we performed those kinds of realities.<sup>126</sup> (Gizem)

My mother-in-law’s used to do that, if there was a boy, she was counted for a child, you know. They used to tell my spouse: “Do it, and you will have a son, you shall have a son” always like that. I had a miscarriage; I was again involved with the theatre then. At the moment of that miscarriage, when my sister-in-law’s found out, you know that this one

<sup>125</sup> “Evet hayatımdaki sorunlardı hatta bir arkadaşımın tiyatrodaki oynadığı oyun hiç aklımdan çıkmaz onu ben de kendim yaşadım şahsen. (...) hemşire getiriyor bebeği babaya gösteriyor, işte bahşiş falan vereyim diyor bebeğin babası, tam parayı verirken, hemşire kızınız oldu derken, adam tekrar cüzdanı gerisin geriye sokuyor cebine ve diyor kız olduğu için üzülüyor bahşiş verme gereği bile duymuyor. Ha bebeklikten beri kızlara yapılan bir hakaret bu, bunu da ben şöyle gördüm, ben ikinci kızıma hamileyken, neyse doğumumdan sonra kaynanam yaptı bunu bana, hediyesinde yaptı ve bunu belli etti bana bir de dile getirdi. (...) Eltime, beşincisi oğlan olduğu için ona çeyrek hediye götürüyor (...) bana da kızın oldu kızın ne yapalım diye 1 milyon hediye veriyor. İşte diyor sen de yap da bir oğlan diyor sana da bir çeyrek takalım. Çok üzülmüştüm çok ağlamıştım ve demiştim ki ben şey sen çeyrek takacaksın diye bir oğlan mı yapıcım, yani beni o kadar kötü görüyordu kız çocuk yaptığım için. (Aslı)”

<sup>126</sup> ...eşimin annesi yani kaynanam erkek çocuk hala istiyor, o aklıma geldi (...) bana buğday göndermesi aklıma geldi. Yani oradan bir buğday gelecek hap gibi yutacam aslında buğday kız işaretlemiş, mercimek(...) erkek çocuk olacağı anlamına gelip onu göndermesi, (...) oraya gidip onu niyet diyip kurban adayarak onu göndermesi o erkek çocuğu istememdeki, rolü onu hatırlattı bana, ama diğerlerinde yaşayan insanların olduğunu biliyordum yani böyle gerçekleri oynadık biz. (Gizem)

is a girl, (*they said*) it was definitely a boy, the boy is gone, that sort of stuff. (...) Now I had a son, nobody called from my spouse's family for example. There's a piece of me like that in every play.<sup>127</sup> (Tevfika)

Although theatre, in general terms, point to the fictiveness of the event shown on stage, *the theatre of the oppressed* performances enable to present real forms of women's oppression within the fictiveness of theatre. For example, Gizem believes that the plots and the themes of the performances are not fictive; they are the realities that are happening elsewhere in the world:

We used to perform the reality, the reality that is being lived. Because in our plays, there were things that I saw, also things that I heard, I mean, we didn't play anything pretended there, because these were things that are lived, maybe in the East, in Istanbul, or in Tokat, I mean, but these were definitely the things we heard of, things we lived. I haven't lived them, but you have, I mean we performed the things that we've been through.<sup>128</sup>

"Living" -as I will explain- is the key term that gives meaning to *the theatre of the oppressed*.

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<sup>127</sup> ...Benim kayınvalidemler yapardı, erkek çocuk varsa evlattan sayılıyordu hani. Eşime hep derlerdi yapın oğlunuz olur, oğlunuz olsun, hep böyle. Ben bir düşük yaptım, tiyatrodada vardım o zaman yine. O düşükte hatta görümcemler öğrendiğinde, o kız ya, bu oğlandı kesin, oğlan düştü bimmence, bir sürü şeyler. (...) Şu anda oğlum oldu eşimin tarafından kimse arayıp sormadı mesela. Her oyunda böyle benden bir parça bir şeyler var (Tevfika)

<sup>128</sup> gerçek hayatı oynuyorduk biz, gerçek yaşanan, çünkü oynadığımız oyunlarda gördüklerimiz de var, duyduklarım da vardı yani, biz orada yapmacık hiçbir şey oynamadık, çünkü yaşanan şeylerdi, bu doğuda olabilir, İstanbul'da olabilir, Tokat'ta olabilir yani, ama bunlar mutlaka duyduğumuz yaşadığımız şeylerdi. Ben yaşamadım ama sen yaşadın bunu, yaşadığımız şeyleri oynadık yani.

*“Living Through”: Deconstructing the Everyday Life Through Performance*

It is important to investigate women’s narratives to see how the ‘education for women’ discourse is opened up for criticism. Although in chapter four, women articulate the importance and the significance of education in defining the social center’s mission, they begin to criticize the educational programs when they compare them with *the theatre of the oppressed* practices. The interviewees all declare that on the contrary to the dominant idea, they do not like to attend handicraft courses, which are boring and requiring great patience. Another reason for the dislike is the individuality that these courses force upon them. Although they assert the advantages of the formal trainings they receive in KİHEP and AÇEV, they emphasize that they are mostly ‘school type (*okul tarzı*)’ studies. Arsen thinks that many participants find these courses boring “maybe that’s why people are avoiding them<sup>129</sup>”. Nevertheless, there are functional similarities between *the theatre of the oppressed* and the practices that concern personal development. They both focus on the development of “awareness”, “expression”, “empathy” and “observation”. For instance, the “sharing hours” of AÇEV, the communication courses and *the theatre of the oppressed* all create a discussion space for women where they can talk and can be listened. The other seminars such as effective communication and social personality also resemble the aims of *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops, but in structure they are too theoretical. Arsen defines them as follows:

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<sup>129</sup> o yüzden insanlar belki çok kaçıyordu

It seems to me as if the writing just stays there. It seems too hard, too technical to take the writing from there and put it into your mind and think it thoroughly, to put it into life. I am still reading, but I am not as hopeful as I was about it in the past. The interactive theatre has thought me that there would be better things and solutions via living and doing (it).<sup>130</sup>

“Living through” and “experiencing” are the terms that they use when they are defining *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops. Beyond the development of individuality, *the theatre of the oppressed* provides them a collective space. They become a group, like a theatre ensemble that creates its own plays. They discover different ways of talking and sharing within the other courses, but most importantly they find the opportunity to practice what they gained in ‘real life’ situations:

There are so many things in theatre, I mean, the mother child education should be of secondary importance, even third, education comes along not with reading, it comes along with living with people.<sup>131</sup>

### *Recognizing Oppression Through Shared Experience*

Besides the fact that *the theatre of the oppressed* is seen by women to be closer to ‘real life’, it is also a means through which women are reconstituted as a community and through which women learn to create and occupy new subject position. *The theatre of the oppressed* enables women’s oppression to become debatable. The main

<sup>130</sup> Yazı orada duruyor gibi geliyor. Yani onu, yazıyı oradan alıp kafana sokup, süzüp, hayata dökmek çok zor, çok teknik geliyor. Okuyorum yine, ama eskisi kadar umudu ondan beklemiyorum. Yaşayarak ve yaparak daha güzel şeyler ve çözümler olacağını öğretti bana interaktif tiyatro.

<sup>131</sup> Tiyatro da çok iş var, yani anne çocuk eğitimi ikinci planda dursun, hatta üçüncü planda dursun, eğitim yine okumakla değil, insanlarla yaşamakla çıkıyor meydana.

difference between conventional theatre and *the theatre of the oppressed* is the concept of 'interactivity'. Within *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops, women collectively decide on a topic that will dramatize the shared oppression and perform it to the audience. Through the interactivity, collectivity is also created among the audience. In other words, the process of *the theatre of the oppressed* reconstitutes women as a collectivity both at the stage of preparation and performance. For example, Arsen defines her experience of conventional theatre in the past through the following words:

I mean, the stage would be like, with the text in your hand, like the preparation of a play where you study it from the text and you act it. (...) Later on, after the university, they said that there is a group like that in Fikirtepe. One time, I went there. (...) But here, it changed all my things about the theatre, my ideas. (...) It changed, because it was interactive. I mean it was a theatre where the audience participated.<sup>132</sup>

Through the participation of the audience, a collective space to discuss their oppression is created. Instead of presenting a script to the audience or memorizing a written script, *the theatre of the oppressed* points at the collective work in the creation and re-creation process of forum plays. As Arsen states:

I hate being dependent on something. You are independent, and because we were prepared beforehand, also because we know each other, even

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<sup>132</sup> Yani işte sahne, sahnede tekst elinde, tekstten çalışıp oynadığın bir oyun hazırlığı gibi olacaktı. (...) Sonra üniversiteden sonra, fikirtepede böyle bir grup var dediler. Bir kere de oraya gittim. (...) Ama burası tiyatroyla ilgili şeylerimi tamamen değiştirdi, fikirlerimi. (...) İnteraktif olması nedeniyle değiştirdi. Yani, seyircinin katıldığı bir tiyatroydu.

though you pull it (*the performance*) to a different direction, in some way we could be in harmony together, for we shared so many things.<sup>133</sup>

*The theatre of the oppressed* is differentiated from conventional theatre by interactivity. The spectator's intervention creates a powerful situation in the struggle against oppression. As Tefrika states:

If we were to perform just like that and go, people wouldn't be impressed as such. For after the play, they congratulate, I don't know, they criticize, they say: what is it that you do. People participate.<sup>134</sup>

What you have to say is pre-determined, it is limited. But theirs are not, they can say whatever they want, the participants.<sup>135</sup>

Similar to the experience of creating plays, responding to these strategies are important experiences both for the performers and the spectators. The aim of this interactivity is to open a space for this community in finding solutions to the common/shared experiences of oppression. This is a dual experience and a conscious-raising method for both sides. In the interventions the performers change their own scripts according to the strategies of the spect-actors. This enables the change in the initial oppression that is shown on stage. The spect-actor not only struggles with the initial oppression, but also with the ones that are created through the interaction of the performer and the spect-actor. This shows how the spect-actor

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<sup>133</sup> ...bir şeylere bağlı olmaktan nefret ederim ben. Bağımsızsın ve önceden hazırlandığımız için, birbirimizi de tanıdığımız için hani farklı bir yöne de çeksen, bir şekilde uyum sağlayabiliyorduk birlikte, pek çok şeyi paylaşmaktan dolayı.

<sup>134</sup> Biz boş boş oynayıp çıksaydık, bu kadar insanlar etkilenmezdi. Çünkü oyundan sonra işte tebrik edenler oluyor, ne bileyim eleştirenler oluyor, ne biçim şeyler yaptın diyenler oluyor. İnsanlar katılıyor.

<sup>135</sup> Senin söylemen gereken belli, sınırlı. Ama onlarınki değil, onlar istediklerini söyleyebilir, katılımcılar

faces with the patriarchal relations within this interaction. In sum, this method operates for the benefits of the community in which all the people in that space become actors.<sup>136</sup> Tevfika illustrates this in practice:

It seems easier to find solution by saying it from the place that they sit in, and when it comes to the point of getting up and practicing it, they understand that it is not so, they think more, it is easy to speak from there, come and do it then. Then they see that they're wrong. We also say, well if it's that easy, why don't you do it? (...) When they participate, it seems to them as if it's easy from the place that they sit, when they get up there. They see that it's not the case, when they come up.<sup>137</sup>

Through the interventions, performing area becomes a rehearsal space for the community in which they can fight against the possible oppressions of their lives. Not only the performers and the spect-actors, but also the spectators who examine this struggle, move into a different kind of experience. Both the performing and examining area turn into a collective space:

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<sup>136</sup> The method that is based on displaying and then discussing is also not functional as this method. See Hauden, L. (1997). In the thesis of Hauden, she used "Theatre of the Oppressed" technique in order to evaluate the transformation of conflict amongst the workers of a photocopy firm. But she changes the structure in the sense of discussing about the play that is performed.

<sup>137</sup> Oturdıkları yerden söyleyerek çözüm bulmaları kolaymış gibi geliyor, e kalkıp uygulamaya gelince öyle olmadığını anlıyorlar, biraz daha kafa yoruyorlar, oturduğu yerden konuşmak kolay, gel bakalım yap. O o zaman işte, şişiyorlar. Biz de diyoruz, ha kolaydı hadi yapsana.(...) Katılınca, onlara oturduğu yerden kolaymış gibi geliyor, oraya kalkınca. Çıkınca öyle olmadığını görüyorlar.

Yes, people used to think very different. I mean, this is how I think but this is the only way I know. To speak to someone else and another way out, other things.<sup>138</sup>

As Gizem says, the performance on stage reveals the oppression, it also encourages and activates the spectator to perform against the oppression/oppressor. Aysu explains her experience and benefit out of *the theatre of the oppressed* as follows:

I saw that there is no single solution. I mean how can we solve. How is the best way, how can it be realized in you life. Different comments came from different people. You tried to find the best among these choices, yourself, for perhaps you did not have your creative power, you did not have an idea about the solution. You stand on that one single point and you can't solve it. You became happy when such solutions came from other people. (...) Actually, they are problems that can be solved. I mean (*those*) that have to be solved here and can be solved also in reality... but one has to have self-confidence and belief. I mean to do that in real life.<sup>139</sup>

By experiencing and performing different solutions, strategies and approaches, the probability of choices and alternative methods can emerge. In this space, we are

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<sup>138</sup> Evet insanlar ne kadar farklı düşünüyorlardı. Yani ben böyle düşünüyorum ama bu yol tek bildiğim. Başka birisiyle konuşup başka çözüm yolu, başka şeyler.

<sup>139</sup> Çözümün bir tane olmadığını gördüm. Yani nasıl çözebiliriz. En iyisi nasıl olur, hayatında nasıl gerçekleştirebilir. Değişik insanlardan değişik yorumlar geldi. En güzeli, en doğrusu neyse onu bulmaya çalıştım sende o seçimlerin arasında, çünkü belki kendinin yaratıcı gücü yoktu, düşüncen yoktu çözüm üzerine. Bir tek noktada kalmışsın, çözemiyorsun. Diğer insanlardan böyle çözümler de geldiği zamanda mutlu oldun. (...)Aslında gerçekten çözülebilecek sorunlar. Yani burada çözümlenmesi gereken ve de gerçekten çözülebilecek ama insanı kendine inancı ve güveni olmak zorunda. Yani gerçek hayatta bunu yapabilmesi için.



looking for the plurality, not an absolute solution. This performing area creates a space where women can search for strategies against oppression. At the first sight the regulatory norms and constituted gender are made visible by displaying the performance, and then by the intervention of the spect-actor, they are disrupted and resisted in the way of searching the possible ways and strategies. However, this happens within a collective space where everything is created through collectivity and shared experience. The spect-actor presents her own solution to the community, the performer responds to her strategy, it can be successful or not.

There isn't a single solution when you display a problem. You see that there isn't a single way out. (...) Everyone used to find the realistic solution from their point of view. (...) (*they*) used to produce a solution according to their reality. I mean, the reality and the standard and the life of the bearer of that solution was accordingly, the solution from within had to be like that. In that sense it provided me with a lot of flexibility. (...) well, I knew it, I have read about them, but I have experienced them while I was doing the interactive theatre, better said, they became strengthened in me, they came on one another and they became stronger.(Arsen)<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Tek bir çözüm yok, bir sorunu sergilediğinde. Tek bir çözüm olmadığını görüyorsun, yani. (...) Herkes kendi açısından gerçekçi çözümü buluyordu, (...) kendi gerçeğine göre bir çözüm üretiyordu. Hani o çözümü üretenin gerçeği ve standardı ve yaşamı oydu, onun içindeki çözümü de kendince öyle olmalıydı. Bu anlamda bana bu çok esneklik kazandırdı. (...)ha ben bunu biliyordum, okumuştum bunları ama interaktif tiyatro yaparken bunları yaşadım, daha doğrusu pekişti bunlar bende, örtüştü ve sağlamlaştı.

On the other hand although I have limitations in evaluating the spectators/spect-actors opinions about *the theatre of the oppressed* performances, Tevfika and Gizem tell about the effect of performances on their friends who has intervened:

She said she got very excited, my neighbor who came lately (she said) it was very different. She came here, she tells it to every neighbor: I went there and I even performed. She goes for the first time. She didn't know at all, just as much as I've told. I come and go but where? Only as much as I've told... She got very excited (she said) she tells the play feverishly: They did this, they mentioned that problem, I got up, you try to find a solution. (Other) neighbors want to come in too. All right girl, let's go this day. They told me: even if the child is born next year, you go, we take care of the kid.<sup>141</sup> (Tevfika)

She got up for the participation, she said she loved it very much, she said I would (love to) come and play too, but, she said, I don't have time, my child is working, my daughter is working, I am rushing my work, and stuff, she even loved our plays, you do very good plays, she said, she said that the people's trouble, women's ideas are being revealed.<sup>142</sup> (Gizem)

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<sup>141</sup> Heyecanlandığını söylemişti en son gelen komşum, çok farklıymış. Burada geldi anlatıyor tüm komşulara, ay gittim oraya oyun bile oynadım. İlk defa gidiyor, hiç bilmiyordu oraya, hep benim anlattığım kadarıydı. Ben gidip geliyorum ama nereye gidip geliyorum. Anlattığım kadarıyla... Çok heyecanlanmış, hararetili hararetili nasıl anlatıyor oyunu. İşte şunu oynadılar, şu sorunu işlediler, ben çıktım, çözüm yolu bulmaya çalışıyorsun. Komşular da gelmek istiyorlar. Tamam kız, şu gün biz de gidelim. Bana şey dediler, seneye çocuk doğsa bile, gidersen biz çocuğa bakarız sen git.

<sup>142</sup> o katılıma girmişti, gayet dedi çok sevdim dedi keşke dedi bende gelsem oynasam ama dedi, vaktim yok çocuğum okuyor kızım çalışıyor, işimi yetiştiriyorum falan dedi, hatta oyunlarımızı sevmişti, çok güzel oyunlar sergiliyorsunuz dedi, halk derdini, kadınların düşüncelerini ortaya çıkartıldığını söyledi

### *Challenging Gender Norms*

As I mentioned in chapter three, the right of speech is also a part of this collectivity and shared experience. Women's right of speech is repressed by the patriarchal system. The gender roles are also strictly constructed and the woman is described through modesty. Nil articulates this modesty as being 'a proper lady (hanım)' and tells how this modesty relates with the right of speech referring to her childhood:

Don't smile, don't show your teeth (...) by saying repeatedly, I got married like that, without being able to speak. (...) I even went to the schools, the high schools, but always in alert (...) be a lady, don't say your opinion at one place, don't talk too much, you are small, you are a young girl and stuff, we got married like that.<sup>143</sup>

In the narratives, women declare that they are also oppressed by discourses regulating the right to speech. The social center becomes a space where they can speak and where they are listened. Not only the theatre of the oppressed but also other programs focus on this issue. But participating in the theatre of the oppressed workshops, women began to learn how they could improve their expression and interaction. Nil gives an example of learning new ways of expression, new gender performances and how the theatre of the oppressed workshops changed her mood. She became a more cheerful and talkative person. She can talk with neighbors and gets along well with her daughters.

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<sup>143</sup> gülme, dişlerini gösterme (...) diye diye, konuşamaz bir halde evlendim böyle yani.(...) Hatta okullara liselere falan gittim ama hep böyle temkinli (...) hanım ol, fikrini söyleme bir yerde, fazla konuşma, sen küçüksün, sen genç bir kızsın falan filan öyle evlendik.

Besides gaining the right of speech, she declares that the existence of those spaces also provide those speeches to be heard and listened:

It would come out that we were taken as human being, we were precious enough to be listened to. We would speak, if nothing we would say our opinion.<sup>144</sup> (Nil)

There was also something in there, both in Nejmiye hanım and in the theatre. You have the right of speak. They have to listen to you, because these are rules, or everybody would go (murmur) so it's like that with us. Here, among my friends, there isn't such a thing. You know, I always say I remain silent<sup>145</sup>. (Zühre)

After I got started, I realized that my voice could come out. Because, normally, you know that there are those people who speak softly in the group meetings. I was always that hoarse one. From those whose voices are not heard. (...) I started talking too much (...) with theatre exercises that we do in the theatre exercises, my awareness has increased.<sup>146</sup> (Tevfika)

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<sup>144</sup> Bir insan yerine konduğumuz, bizim dinlenecek kadar değerli olduğumuz çıkıyordu ortaya. Konuşuyorduk, hiç değilse fikrimizi söylüyorduk.

<sup>145</sup> Bir de şey vardı orada, Nejmiye Hanım'da da öyle tiyatrodaki da öyle. Konuşma hakkına sahipsin. Seni dinlemek zorundalar, kurallar olduğu için yoksa herkes (*bırbırbır*) bizde öyledir ya. Burada arkadaşlık çevremde yok öyle bir şey. Ben susarım diyorum ya hep.

<sup>146</sup> Başladıktan sonra sesimin de çıkabildiğini fark ettim ben. Çünkü normalde hep grup toplantılarında, çalışmalarda kısık sesle konuşanlar vardır ya. Ben hep o kısık. Sesi duyulmayanlardan. (...) çok konuşur oldum ben (...) bu tiyatro çalışmalarında yaptığımız egzersizlerde farkındalığım daha çok arttı.

Besides having such a space and the right of speech, the exercises and games of the theatre of the oppressed also provide the opportunity to express themselves. Similar to Nil, Tevfika thinks that women are obstructed in the act of speaking and expressing their own feelings and ideas that cause difficulties in communicating with people, especially with men. Tevkifa adds that women are under the control of men within the family and they are obliged to stay at home. But recently, she defines her attitudes as follows:

I paid attention to the eyes, eyes tell so much. Before the theatre exercises, I couldn't have looked into people's eyes. I couldn't have talked or listened to while looking into people's eyes, while looking at their faces, especially with men. After the exercises, I realized that I cannot speak without looking into the eyes, I should look into the eyes, I should look into (*his/her*) eyes while listening.<sup>147</sup>

Even when I catch the muhtar (*elected head of the district*) if I have a complaint about the neighborhood, I tell him immediately. Beforehand, Tevfika would find the muhtar and talked to him! It was impossible. I couldn't have found that strength, that courage within myself. It is again thanks to the theatre. For I haven't gotten the strength, the confidence. I acted out in the theatre.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Gözlere ben dikkat ettim de, gözler çok şey anlatıyor. İnsanların gözlerinin içine ben bakamıyordum, tiyatro çalışmasından önce. Hiç gözlerinin içine bakıp, insanların yüzüne bakıp konuşup ya da dinleyemiyordum, özellikle de erkeklerin. Sonra çalışmalardan sonra fark ettim ki, ben gözlere bakmadan konuşamıyorum, gözüne bakıcam, gözüne bakıp dinleyeceğim.

<sup>148</sup> Muhtarımızı bile yakalasam mahalleden bir şikayetim varsa, hemen iletirim. Önceden Tevfika olacak da, muhtarı bulacak da konuşacak! İmkan veremezdim buna. O gücü, cesareti ben kendimde bulamıyordum. Bu yine tiyatrodan olmuştur. Çünkü cesaretim, güvenim yoktu. Tiyatroda ben oynadım.

In sum, *the theatre of the oppressed* provides a space where they have the right of speech by the help of the exercises:

I have actually read about these, I knew, but via interactive theatre I realized them in my life. It gave me the chance to practice them. It made certain things applicable within my life; it made them something else than just theory<sup>149</sup>. (Arsen)

What Arsen emphasizes is the practicability of what they gained from *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops and performances. Accordingly, the attempt of Gizem who tries to use the ‘circle’ in her family life shows best this practicability in everyday life:

What are we complaining about, what do we want from each other, or what decisions are to be made in this house (...) we sit down, one at a time, without interrupting each other, everybody their demands, who has trouble with who (...) we play with stone just like in the theatre (...) we always do it like this, every Thursday.<sup>150</sup>

Like the right of speech, in many senses “Theatre of the Oppressed” affects the participants’ lives. The right of speech enable them to constitute a group of their own, to build a community against women’s oppression and to empower their

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<sup>149</sup> Bunları hakikaten okumuştum biliyordum ama interaktif tiyatroyla hayatımın içine daha çok soktum. Uygulama şansı verdi bana. Teori olmaktan çıkarttı hayatımda bazı şeyleri, uygulanabilir yaptı.

<sup>150</sup> nelerden şikayetçiyiz, birbirimizden ne isteklerimiz var, ya da bu evde ne karar verilecek. (...) oturuyoruz, bir bir sözümüzü kesmeden herkes kendi isteklerini kim kimden aciz yani ne gibi şikayetleri var (...) taşla oynuyoruz aynı tiyatrodaki gibi (...) her zaman böyle oturup yapıyoruz her Perşembe günü

struggle and resistance. The practicability of *the theatre of the oppressed* in everyday life enables to carry the practices from the space of *the theatre of the oppressed* to the space of everyday life. Like the right of speech, another impact of *the theatre of the oppressed* on their daily lives is the change in their worldview that enables them to look at the world in a different way. How can theatre create this change? *The theatre of the oppressed* workshops and performances introduce different perspectives and methods in exploring oppression. By creating performances, displaying them publicly and searching solutions collectively, the participants and the spectator can find ways for struggling against oppression. The possibilities and varieties of the intervention constitute different points of views, which come to being by ‘performing’:

For one thing, it provides me looking from a wider perspective. As I say, everybody has his/her own reality. Everybody looks from his/her perspective. That is why nothing is too limited I mean nothing is actually like you perceive it.<sup>151</sup> (Arsen)

My view, it is different how I look at everything! Even how I open the window there and look at the street is different. I started studying people. The environment. I cannot remain insensitive when something happens. Whatever it may be.<sup>152</sup> (Tevfika)

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<sup>151</sup> Çok daha geniş açıdan bakmamı sağlıyor bir kere. Diyorum ya, herkesin gerçeği farklı. Herkes kendi bakış açısından bakıyor. Onun için yani, hiçbir şey çok sınırlı değil, yani hiçbir şey aslında senin algıladığın gibi de değil.

<sup>152</sup> Bakışlarım, her şeye bakışım farklı! Şuradan camı açıp, yola bakışım bile farklı. İnsanları inceler oldum. Çevreyi. Bir şey olduğunda duyarsız kalmıyorum. Ne olursa.

By challenging oppression and facing different solutions, *the theatre of the oppressed* opens a way in which they can evaluate their former conceptions. The interventions and the exercises of ‘replacing the oppressed’ cause women to gain a kind of ‘empathy’. Through this empathy, the regulatory norms are questioned and the dichotomy of the oppressed and oppressor makes the oppression visible and opens it up for intervention and discussion. As Tevfika states:

...you know, we would do that thing in the theatre lessons; we would put ourselves into the shoes of the oppressed: the oppressor and the oppressed (...) this exercise has thought me to put one’s self into the others’ shoes. If it were in the past, when somebody did something, I could’ve taken it as something against me. But now I can think like, now she is doing this or is saying that, but under what circumstances and in which reality is she saying that.<sup>153</sup>

This replacing, intervening, creating strategies and challenging oppression is defined through empathy. The creation of collectivity and shared experience through *the theatre of the oppressed* workshops and performances enable the change on women’s attitudes and ideas. Specifically the emergence of new forms of thinking creates solidarity among women against the patriarchal system:

A specific example: I started getting people, especially I started getting women. I realized that. Now with my communication with women, I

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<sup>153</sup> tiyatro derslerinde hani şey yapıyorduk; ezilen insanın yerine koyuyorduk kendimizi: ezen ve ezilen(...) başkalarının yerine koyabilmeyi bana çok öğretti bu çalışma. Eskiden olsa, biri bir şey yaptı mı, kendime yönelik alabilirdim ama şimdi şeyi düşünebiliyorum, ya bu bunu yapıyor, bunu söylüyor ama hangi şartlar içinde ve hangi gerçeklik içinde bunları söylüyor.



used to get angry (...) I told you about my landlady for instance, then I thought, it's because her husband was asking her, by thinking what kind of a situation she is in. (...) By putting myself into her shoes, I started to think she's right. In the social life, I am not offended by anything anymore. I am aware that I can handle the problems by talking. I mean, when something happens I don't withdraw myself, I don't shut myself in some place, I don't become pessimistic and become mad at the world. (...) but then I realized that I am a feminist. (...) Actually, I realized that I am always against the oppression of women. I am for the friendship and support among women. (...) I try to support women, wherever I can.<sup>154</sup>

(Tevfika)

Talking about the transformation in their expressions and giving “voice” to women point to the importance of performance in creating new gender identities. The experience in *the theatre of the oppressed* enables them to challenge and change the norms that regulate gender in everyday life.

### *Proposing Topics for Upcoming Workshops*

Some of the interviewees propose some significant themes for future plays. These proposals show that they consider the theatre of the oppressed as an important tool in their struggle against oppression. For example, Aysu suggests that the right of

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<sup>154</sup> Somut bir örnek; insanları artık anlamaya mı başladım; özellikle de ben artık kadınları daha çok anlamaya başladım. Bunu fark ettim. Artık kadınlarla iletişimde, ben önceden kıızıyordum (...) Sana ev sahibimi anlattım mesela, sonra düşündüm, onun kocası ona hesap sorduğu için, onun nasıl bir ortamda olduğunu düşünerek (...) Kendimi yerine koyarak, kadına hak vermeye başladım. Sosyal yaşantıda artık ben hayata ve hiç bir şeye küsmüyorum. Sorunları konuşarak halledebileceğimi farkındayım. Yani bir şey olduğu zaman içime kapanıp kendimi bir yere hapsedip, karamsar olup, dünyaya küsmüyorum.(...) ama sonra fark ettim ki ben feministim.(...) esasında fark ettim ki, ben hep kadınların ezilmemesi tarafındayım. Kadın kadına dost olması, destek olması tarafındayım. (...) Kadınlara destek olmaya çalışıyorum bulduğum yerde.

abortion has to be mentioned for women who do not want to have another child. Additionally, she brings forth the importance of formal education for girls. Arsen wants to participate in a workshop with a mixed group, and she proposes the subjects that concern the relations within the family, relationship with the husband and the sexuality. Aslı proposes to make a play of a powerful woman and finally Gizem proposes a play concerning sexual equality and the decision of making love. She also wants to make a play about a woman's daily life and make her husband watch that play. Aysu says that she would like to perform plays that contain political messages.

In this chapter I tried to give examples of the theatre of the oppressed performances and strategies created in the context of the Okmeydanı Social Center. This is an experiment of the theatre of the oppressed in Turkey that aims to search the possibility for forming a resistance space in the struggle against women's oppression. All women emphasize the significance of the theatre of the oppressed in expressing, challenging and resisting the patriarchal system. The emphasis is on interactivity, performing and "realness" of the theatre of the oppressed when compared to educational programs.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis claims that *the theatre of the oppressed* can act as a tool for women's empowerment, in resisting the regulatory norms, patriarchy, and for strategy creation against women's oppression. Within the thesis, *the theatre of the oppressed* stands out not only as a tool of resistance, but also the method of investigation about women's oppression and emancipation.

An overview of the recent practices of feminist studies in Turkey shows that education is widely perceived as *the* liberatory tool for women. The discourse of 'education for women' has appeared within the feminist movement in Turkey in various forms. However, education discourse was mainly appropriated by the Kemalist ideology as a tool for women's liberation. In the thesis, I have tried to show that the social center becomes a site of reproduction for the 'education for women' discourse through the projects and programs of both the state and institutionalized feminism. Within this discourse, women participants of Okmeydanı Social Center become the subjects of these projects and programs. As I have shown in the third chapter, the space and practices of the education discourse has a high influence on women's narratives about the social center. Looking from this point of view, practices of *the theatre of the oppressed* in Okmeydanı Social Center becomes significant in problematizing the social center as a site of reproduction.

In addition to that, practices of *the theatre of the oppressed* also work to challenge the 'education for women' discourse by reversing its method. Education discourse defines the problem in more abstract terms and treats particular life experiences as

case studies or samples of the main issue. As opposed to that, *the theatre of the oppressed* focuses on women's experience as the main point of analysis and works through the problematization of everyday life and forms of oppression. In doing that, it proposes an alternative method of consciousness rising via performative strategies developed in and through experience.

The interactive quality of *the theatre of the oppressed*, and intervention as a strategizing process not only functions to express and reveal women's oppression, but it also enables the disruption of regulatory norms and performatively constituted gender identities via the creation of strategies against women's oppression. As Butler suggests, regulatory norms and gender constructions are maintained through their everyday performances and bodily materialization. In that sense, practices of *the theatre of the oppressed*, putting stress on performance and experience, help to reveal women's oppression and render the constitution of gender visible and debatable. Although performance appears in terms of fiction within the practices of *the theatre of the oppressed*, this fictiveness actually opens up a space for the women to discuss their oppression in relation to that particular performance. The bodily expression, simultaneously, enables women to disrupt the hegemonic matrix, and creates a possibility of resistance via 'performing' within the particular techniques of *the theatre of the oppressed*.

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