

Gendered Power Relations in the School: Construction of Schoolgirl Femininities in a Turkish High School

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Abstract—In this paper our aim is to explore the construction of schoolgirl femininities, drawing on the results of an ethnographic study conducted in a high school in Ankara, Turkey. In this case study which tries to explore the complexities of gender discourses, we were initially motivated by the questions that have been put forward by critical and feminist literature on education which emphasize the necessarily conflicting and partial nature of both reproduction and resistance and the importance of gendered power relations in the school context. Drawing on this paradigm our research tries to address to a more specific question: how are multiple schoolgirl femininities constructed within the context of gendered school culture, and especially in relation to hegemonic masculinity? Our study reveals that the general framework of multiple femininities is engendered by a tension between two inter-related positions. The first one is different strategies of accommodation and resistance to the gender-related problems of education. The second one is the school experience of girls which is conditioned by their differential position vis-à-vis the masculine resistance culture that is dominant in the school.

Keywords—Femininity, gender relations, masculinity, school, education in Turkey

I. INTRODUCTION

IN this paper our aim is to explore the construction of schoolgirl femininities, drawing on the results of an ethnographic study conducted in a high school in Ankara, Turkey. In this school ethnography which tries to search the complexities of gender discourses, we were initially motivated by the questions that have been put forward by critical and feminist literature on education which emphasize the necessarily conflicting and partial nature of both reproduction and resistance and the importance of gendered power relations in the school context [1]-[2]-[3]-[4]-[5]. Drawing on this paradigm our research tries to address to a more specific question: how are multiple schoolgirl femininities constructed within the context of gendered school culture, and especially in relation to hegemonic masculinity?

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II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

A. Theoretical Framework

Feminist literature on education is a rich collection of different paradigms and varied subjects of study. Yet, it is possible to trace an apparent shift of paradigm from the reproduction approach of 1970's to the post-structuralist aura of our times. Thus, we see that the reproduction approach [6]-[7]-[8] which had focused on the interaction between education and capitalism, class structure, state, and patriarchal gender relations has been mostly replaced by the studies that concern the discursive construction of gendered identities and in the school as a special terrain which has a particular 'gender regime'[9]. This post-structuralist turn in the literature reveals the complex, complicated, and contradictory nature of gendered power relations, hence the conceptual impossibility of a simple reproduction of a unitary system [2]-[3]-[10]-[11]. We generally share the concerns of this approach and conceptualize the school not as a place which reproduce the gendered power relations constituted outside, but as a hegemonic site where gender is reconstructed within the context of a peculiar gender regime. School does not produce and impose unitary, standard female and male identity and/or sex roles within a binary discourse. There are multiple and competing gender identities and gender discourses though this is certainly not an endless game of differences [11]-[12]-[13]-[14]-[15]. Thus, it is important to highlight the contingent limits to discursive formations. Among the multiplicity of gendered subject positions some forms of masculinity appear as hegemonic, while determinate form of femininity is emphasized [9]-[13]. But, as we try to mark in this study, talking of multiple gendered identities and hegemonic masculinity is not satisfactory as long as we don't relate it to the particular gender regime of the school. This relation is of vital importance as we assume that school does not mirror the hegemonic masculinity operating at the level of general society. Gendered nature of school as a cultural institution has varied and complex dimensions [8]. However, from the point of view of this paper which focuses on the construction of schoolgirl femininities, we find it necessary to underline some determinate factors.

Firstly, we should address the problem of gender violence that seems to be the most important constitutive part of the gender regime of school. Different aspects and manifestations

of this problem have been addressed in the rapidly growing literature [16]-[17]-[18]-[19]-[20]-[21]-[22]. Although there is no clarity as to the definition of violence, we see that there has been a general tendency to broaden the definition of the concept. As Osler [21] points out, most serious problems of schoolgirls are directly related with the hidden and 'normalized' culture of aggression. This is the underlying reason behind the academic failure and social and psychological withdrawal of many 'problem' girls as well as those who are not even regarded as 'problem'. Also, gender violence is constructive for the construction of schoolgirl femininities. Our study reveals that the general framework which conditions the construction of multiple femininities is engendered by the presence of a hegemonic masculine culture. All feminine identities are affected differently by the culture of aggression and bullying and the way different girls relate with this culture determines the central elements in their gender discourses. We will also stress that the potency of masculine culture is realized mostly through its effects on the relations between different groups of girl.

Secondly, the fact that the school is the very place where the discursive construction of the tension between femininity and academic success and/or intelligence takes place makes it a special site for the construction of femininities. As it is emphasized by several studies, the main contradiction that schoolgirls is confronted with is the expectation that they should be both 'feminine' and 'successful' at the same time [23]-[24]-[25]. Confronted with this contradictory demand, most schoolgirls resort to the strategy of feminization of academic success, while some marginals go for the post-feminization of success [25]. But as long as being clever and intelligent is seen as a masculine trait, schoolgirls can not escape the destructive effects of this paradoxical expectation [23]-[26].

Thirdly, we should cite another gendered aspect of school which has special importance for the construction of (contradictory) gender subjectivities. The official culture of school pretends to be sex/gender neutral, but is in fact characterized by the omnipresence of gender [17]-[27]. This places schoolgirls in another contradictory position whereby they are expected to be both sexual and non-sexual at the same time. Young women must present a desirable heterosexual femininity or risk marginalization, yet bear responsibility for negative attention afforded to their embodied femininity. As Aapola, Gonick and Harris state "young women must submit to the male gaze and yet exhibit responsibility in avoiding unwanted male attention" [28, p.140]. Thus, school culture reproduces the good girl -bad girl distinction, causing a lot of trouble and discomfort between different groups of girls [29].

Lastly, we think that the question as to the gender regime of school should be considered in direct relation to neo-liberal transformations of our times. This transformation has many effects on the gendered power relations in the school [30]-[31]. For our purpose here one certain effect is of special importance, and that is the fascination with the problem of

'failing boys'. The decisive shift of attention from girls' problems to boys' problems is extensively criticized in the literature. [32]-[33]. Girls are increasingly seen as successful and 'compliant', while boys are seen as the 'problem' in education. As boys' problems (particularly the violence in schools) are gaining a hyper-visibility, the specific gender-related problems of girls are rendered invisible. The most likely result of this new turn is the underestimation of specific mechanisms of withdrawal and manifestations of distress of female students [21]. In this study, we argue that in Turkey, the main impact of neo-liberal transformation on the gendered power relations in schools is realized through the reinforcement of a masculine resistance culture which led to specific problems for girls. We also will try to show that such specific mechanism and manifestations are the constructive part of the schoolgirl femininities.

B. Methodology

Our theoretical position led us methodologically to design a case study according to the maxims of critical ethnography [34]-[35]. Critical ethnography involves keeping alert to structural factors while probing meanings and asks how these meanings relate to wider cultural and ideological forms [34, p.205]. Following the insights of this approach, we tried to explore both the authority structures of a concrete school environment and the competing gender discourses from the students' point of view. Besides the insights of critical ethnography, our feminist standpoint in educational research also enabled us to place the subjectivities in the context of gendered power relations [35]. Consequently, we did five months fieldwork in a public high school in Ankara and conducted 55 in-depth interviews with 40 students (20 girls, 20 boys) and 15 teachers (12 women, 3 men) and all of the administrators (three women). We also carried out participant and non-participant observations in school areas such as the Counseling Service, the Teachers' room, classrooms, the canteen, the school yard, during which we engaged in many non-structured and semi-structured interviews with both students and teachers. Lastly, we did a research on the official documents of the Board of Discipline and the Counseling Service.

The high school at which we conducted our research was selected for several reasons. It is a public school in the center of Ankara, the capital city of Turkey. The school is situated in a neighborhood where all of the major social transformations are densely intermingled, and this peculiarity enabled us to elucidate the multifarious problems related to the changing meaning of education. An old and very restricted area of squatter houses and recently developed middle-class residential areas are mixed in this particular locality. So, the majority of students come from families with low incomes. Yet, this neighborhood is not an example of urban wreck, populated by working class or underclass but a lower-middle class area where even the remaining squatter houses are in a rather proper condition. Therefore we did not observe a dominant 'culture of poverty' there. Neither did we observe the dominance of an Islamic/conservative culture. Regardless of its middle class and 'secular' culture, the neighborhood is still under the impact of

neo-liberal transformations such as unemployment, growing poverty, the growing power of ethnic communities and informal even Mafioso relationships. In the end, trapped in a web of unemployment and poverty, the local youth culture is based on multifarious manifestations of masculine power.

III. MASCULINE RESISTANCE CULTURE

The most general result of our research is that the neo-liberal transformation of Turkey within last twenty years resulted in a structural crisis of education whereby public schools have been reduced to function as a 'correction house' aiming to tame 'unruly' young people. This constitutes the root cause of the acute crisis of authority and the rampant resistance practices in high schools today. As we concluded from the research, this resistance culture is mainly of masculine character. The main reason to the crisis of school authority is that authority is seen by most students as marginalizing, degrading, discriminating, arbitrary, helpless, careless and fearful. At the forefront of the widespread instances of oppositional acts come the behavior that aims to sabotage the classroom order and the resistance practices that try to break the rules regulating time, space and body on the whole school terrain. The critical reactions against the school authority are widely held by all the different groups of students, but in differentiated ways. However, and notwithstanding this 'differentiated' dissatisfaction, we can identify a dominant resistance culture that functions as a powerful counter-authority over the pupils. Our research supports the arguments as to the importance of the adolescent peer group, particularly for the construction of distinctive status hierarchies based on social power or popularity [36]. In our research we also observed the hegemonic power of that masculine resistance culture over the student community as a whole. Thus, the school culture is primarily determined by the extremely intricate dynamics of the conflict between these two 'authorities'. This culture embraces and/or excludes all different groups of students in different ways. Against the teachers' authority, it also functions as a counter-hegemonic force undermining their 'taming/civilizing' mission. Deriving its 'potency' chiefly from the 'neighborhood-based' identities of the majority of students, this culture is based on a vigorous masculine assertion of power. In line with Jackson [37] we can describe this culture as the failing boys' compensatory culture of 'aggressive laddism'. Many students from the lower classes are compelled to strive for 'power' in their own ways in a ruthless world where only the powerful dominates. So, these 'powerless' young people try to acquire 'power' through the only alternative left to them: masculinity which is construed as the ultimate power. Despite the fact that there are many students who are not of the same neighborhood and who try to stay outside of this masculine culture (mostly the girls), this 'culture of masculine power' takes its hegemonic force from its being the only available tool at hand to oppose the 'taming/civilizing' school authority.

IV. CONSTRUCTION OF MULTIPLE FEMINITIES

Gendered power relations are more complicated than any simplistic binary discourse of the girls versus boys suggests [12, p.153]. Thus, in line with many theoretical and empirical studies our study highlights the multiplicity of competing gender discourses that girls draw on [12]-[15]-[24]. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that some of these discourses have more power and potency than others for particular groups of girls and "conformist discourses continue to exert more power than transgressive and transformative ones" [12, p.156]. Our study reveals that the general framework of multiple femininities is engendered by a tension between two inter-related positions. The first one is the educational expectations of girls which significantly differ from that of boys. Education is seen as the most important and effective means for personal empowerment against the possible restrictions that a would-be husband will possibly exert on the woman/female party in the marriage. Unfortunately, the high expectations of girls remain unmet by the gender regime of school and different subject positions emerge from the different accommodation and resistance strategies to the gender-mediated problems. Secondly, the school experience of girls is determined by their differential position vis-à-vis the masculine resistance culture that is dominant in the school. Here we see that the main line dividing the girls among themselves is the one between those who are inside and those who are outside the masculine resistance culture. In the following section, we want to analyze these two positions and the resulting femininities in detail.

A. Strategies of Accommodation and Resistance

For female pupils the meaning of education is strictly related to a strong sense of gender equality. Almost every girl we interviewed perceived education as the only and most important means to empowerment in a patriarchal society. Most of them learned this lesson mainly through positive or negative life stories of women in their family as well as from the admonitions given by them. Such admonitions propose that girls must absolutely have a good education and a profession in order not to depend on a husband in marriage. In short, girls differ from boys in the sense that for the former, education still remains as the principal means of personal empowerment. Compared to boys, girls seem to be more 'hardworking' and 'compliant' if not necessarily the more 'successful' students. But, we must pause at this point in order to look deeply at the concept of 'compliance'. Industrious working, 'compliant' behavior and the resulting 'success' are sought not only because it is seen as an handfold against a would-be husband, but also as means to protect and isolate themselves from the effects of masculine culture in the school. In addition, 'hard-working' is also a practical way to escape from the time-consuming chores at home and thus from a traditional women's role imposed by the family. Thus, the seemingly complaint attitude of girls at school is developed as a strategy against the masculine culture at school and patriarchal roles at wider society.

Unfortunately the seemingly compliant attitude of girls leads to the assumption that girls do not have any problems at all. Therefore, the high educational expectations of girls remain unmet by the gender regime of the school. 'Gender regime' of the school [9] creates many specific gender-mediated problems for girls. Firstly, in contrast to the 'hyper-visibility of boys' and their problems, girls are usually assumed not to have problems [33]-[38]. Teachers are often able to ignore the types of behavior commonly exhibited by girls in difficulty, which may disrupt an individual's learning but are likely to have a lesser impact on class discipline than physical aggression such as withdrawal from participation in class, truancy and self-harm [20, p.574]-[21]. Students who experience problems with the curriculum tend to engage in gender-related behaviors, which make boys particularly vulnerable to disciplinary exclusion and which among girls may lead to self-exclusion. As we will specify in the following sections, self-exclusionary type of behavior also differs according to the different femininities. The girls who are attracted by the masculine culture are confronted with a high risk of disciplinary action, and withdrawal from participation in class, truancy and self-harm is also widespread among them. Those girls who are not involved in this culture mostly experience a high degree of isolation as well as suffer from the lack of teachers' attention, resulting in serious degree of withdrawal from class participation. Another specific problem occurs for the ones who reject the forms of femininity and popularity conferred by the masculine culture and aspires for high academic achievement. Renold explores the status and contradictions of high-achieving girls who are labeled as 'square'. As she notes although it was an acceptable and legitimate feminine subject position, officially regulated and produced by the pedagogic discourses within the school, rejecting popular peer culture and achieving in high academic terms marked these girls as 'different' and often resulted in teasing and exclusion [24].

B. *Girls vis-à-vis The Masculine Culture*

In our research we saw that schoolgirls were being categorized, labeled and stigmatized by the masculine culture. The presence of the masculine culture means different things for different groups of girls and every group develops different strategies of reaction and accommodation. Yet, we also saw that girls' reactions were mostly "contained within and rarely challenge the existing structures and ... girls were trapped in the very contradictions they would transcend" [12, p.164]. The masculine culture and the hegemonic masculinity it promotes create a paradoxical situation to which girls strive to adjust in different and intricate ways. The difficulties resulting from the contradictory construction of female sexuality as both passive and potentially dangerous are thoroughly analyzed in the literature [24]-[28]-[39]-[40]. Thus, it is pointed out that young women must present a desirable heterosexual femininity or risk marginalization, yet bear responsibility for negative attention afforded to their embodied femininity [28]. Drawing on this literature, our research also discloses the delicate ways schoolgirls endeavor to cope with this dilemma.

We see that the dominant masculine culture in the school has an irresistible appeal because it appears as a conducive instrument that might contribute to the emotional and physical interaction between boys and girls. However it also frightens many girls because of its oppressive and harassing character. As Lahelma argues there is a fine line between playing with is just fun and behavior that is experienced as harassing [18]. Hence, romantic involvements and sexuality which are experienced within the parameters of masculine culture involve many serious risks and dangers for girls. That is why most girls we interviewed are too circumspect about sexuality and many have clear cut convictions about the 'legitimate' limits to teenager sex. Against the backdrop of a powerful virginity taboo, the 'legitimate' limits stop at the door of kissing and holding hands. Those girls who dare to transgress the limits confront the risk of being stigmatized as 'whores'.

We can say that most of the girls we interviewed were generally very skeptical and circumspect in their relations with boys. However, there are real differences of attitude between those inside the game and outside the game. For those inside the game, there are dense and intimate relations with the boys, while for the others there is but minimum interaction with boys. This means that the degree and density of fear felt by those outside the masculine culture is much higher. Also we see that there is a serious tension between those inside and those outside of the masculine culture. This tension is mainly played out through sexuality and is directly related with the good girls-bad girls dichotomy [15]-[23]. As Youdell notes constant policing of each other creates a lot of anxiety among girls [15].

We have argued that there are multiplicity of competing gender discourses and varied femininities in the school. In the following sections of the article we want to analyze the resistance and adaptation strategies of different groups of girls and to explore the state of being stuck between educational expectations and masculine school culture. We will mention four different types of feminine subject positions, namely 'tough girls', 'whores', 'teacher's pets' and 'the rest'.

C. *Inside The 'Masculine Culture': 'Tough Girls' and 'Whores'*

a) 'Tough girls'

These are the ones who enjoy the popularity and femininity conferred by the masculine resistance culture. For this reason, they are considered as bad girls or difficult girls. As Robinson says about 'difficult girls', they are generally more assertive, confronting, loud, aggressive and uncontrollable (p.278) [41]. As it is frequently indicated in the literature, girls' assertive or disruptive behavior is seen as anti-feminine and tends to be interpreted more negatively than boys [12]-[29]-[41]. Therefore, they can easily "get caught in this reputation cycle" [41, p.280]. While they are seen as anti-feminine, this reputation also implies many things about their

'precocious' femininity. Walkerdine describes how playful and assertive girls come to be understood as over-mature and too precocious [29]. As she points out, while it is certainly a space in which they can be exploited, it provides a space of power, although one which is subject to discourses of denigration. Similarly Reay, in talking about 'spice girls' asserts that "their espousal of girl power... allowed them to make bids for social power" [12, p.160]. Similarly, we can say that 'tough girls' appear to transgress prevailing gender rules while also active in constructing traditional heterosexuality [12].

The school experience of girls inside the 'masculine culture' is shaped in accordance with the masculine power culture and it derives mainly from the sexual tension between the two sexes. There are intense and intimate relations of friendship and love as well as harassment between those girls and boys. The admission of these girls into the masculine culture is conditioned by their class position as well as their character and looks. The most common trait of the girls we classified as 'tough girls' is being 'jaunty', 'free' in their manners and outfit and highly self-confident

As to the educational expectations of these girls, we can say that lower-middle class girls within this category really want to 'succeed' and to have a profession although they do not consider themselves 'successful' or 'promising'. The school experience of most of them has been very unstable and interrupted for various reasons. Most of them have either been expelled from school before or then returned, repeated the classes or currently under the threat of being expelled. Nevertheless, they feel a strong sense of commitment and affection for the school, because they are among the ones who shape the school culture. As is apparent in expressions such as 'everybody knows us', 'I know everybody here', 'we have a wide circle', they step forward as 'big sisters', in other words as the leaders of girl gangs.

Aysun was a typical example of a tough girl. Here is her account as to her 'transformation'.

"When my father enrolled me to this school, I cried for a week. The people I know who graduated from this school used to tell us about nasty things... about drinking alcohol, smoking, fights etc... I myself had to adjust to this culture though half-heartedly. We did the same things we saw here. We have become like them. But now I love the school".

Then, what is the story of this transformation? How come these girls got involved into the masculine power game so outrightly? The quotation from Aysun clarifies the intricate ways in which girls are compelled to enter into the game. We want to draw attention to the point that in this discourse, 'oppression' mostly signifies the physical/verbal assaults to chastity.

"But I don't like the social surroundings of this school. The people of this neighborhood are very bizarre. They like to oppress people just for fame, they say "I'm here, I'm the father of this school, I command, I repress, etc" ... here, even smoking is seen as an asset, the social environment here is very bad, something like a Mafia, they don't come here to learn, they do everything to make a 'name' here ... when I first arrived in the school, they tried to oppress me as well. They said "you are colt/rookie", I waited patiently for a long time. Then I showed myself too. I said "who do you think you are, you cannot oppress me". And when I resisted in this way, I was stigmatized".

Intense interaction between girls and boys within the masculine power game enables pleasurable relations but it also points to the existence of a serious sexist oppression. Boys' treatment of girls reflects a strong male supremacy that classifies girls as those 'to be loved' and 'those to be abused'. For those 'to be loved' there are strict limits to behavior. Aysun clarifies the limits as:

"We have been dating for nine months. We are kissing, hugging at most. He loves me, so he would not want anything bad to happen to me. He would not do anything bad to me even if he wanted to. I have a family, so he would not defame me".

There is a real dilemma for those girls 'inside' the masculine culture: On the one hand, they are expected to meet the demands of boys for friendship and love on the other hand, they are faced with the risk of being labeled as 'whore' / 'whore' when the vague borders are violated. Thus, the tension stemming from swearing, harassment, gossiping, defamation and labeling concerning the chastity/honour of girls appear to be the main stimulus behind the fights among girls. In the end, girls are driven to protect their 'name' by doing exactly the same things as boys. Their sub-culture is also organized around the same motto: 'You should be powerful in order not to be oppressed'.

b) 'Whores'

It is important to stress that the attribution 'whore' refers to the instant possibility of stigmatization which is valid for every girl inside the power game rather than designate a distinctive category of particular girls. Our observations about this 'category' of girls are in line with Youdell who points to the centrality of virgin/whore dichotomy for the constitution of valorized heterosexual femininities in school cultures [15]. It is not the 'fact' of being or not being a virgin that is crucial. Rather it is the constitutive force of a discourse of virginity and the ways in which the deployment of this constrains the possibilities for intelligible hetero-femininities, that is significant within the students' discursive practices [12, p.262]. Discourses of this feminine morality also entail the

necessity for this (im-) morality to be policed. The fact that female sexuality is pathologized in many ways is frequently indicated in the related literature [15]-[24]-[29]. Female sexuality is often constructed as potentially dangerous and girls as the object of male desire. The dominant gender discourse leads to a damaging culture of verbal harassment among girls and self-exclusion occurs as a result of bullying. The 'whores' are the ones who are most exposed to the damaging effects of the harassment culture.

Being a 'desiring' girl who violates the vague borders of masculine culture suffices to be stigmatized as 'whore'. In every school culture, there are such girls representing this demonic sexuality. We have seen the discursive construction of this demonic sexuality properly in the case of Asya who revealed us her tragic story. It was the family environment with a heavy sexist oppression where Asya faced the stigma of 'whore' for the first time. Among the girls we interviewed, it was only Asya whose family did not support her educational ambitions and tried to convince her to get married instead of going to high school. But Asya wanted to continue her studies and to have a profession to make a living, just because she observed in her close family circle the "*misery of women who get married at an early age and who have problems with their husbands*". Unfortunately, the school experience of Asya ended with a great trauma. When we met her, she was a school failure who had been estranged from school and was on the verge of making up her mind as to whether she would drop the school or not. The quotation below shows the sources of her desperate situation.

"We ran off from school with my friends several times with friends. I used to run off quite often when I'm got bored with classes. I did not want to come to school because I'm not happy here. This year I have many problems with my friends. All of them are boring me. I don't have any good friends. All boys are ill-intentioned in their approach towards me, because my looks are nice. They verbally harass me, hold me, and try to fondle me. For example, I like a boy from my class. When he comes and sits next to me, puts his arm around my shoulders, other boys come and say "it is our turn". He can not do anything to them because they are his close friends. All of them want to abuse me because I don't fool around with them. They easily use that word, "whore", into my face. I cannot make complaints about them to teachers, because it is their usual attitude. I usually don't talk to them. I hate the men in my class. Anyway, I will leave the school next year. It is not because of school but because of my classmates. My mother also wants me to go to a school in my neighborhood so that I will not be able to go to the city center. Sometimes we go to city center with friends, we go to cafes

etc. I go home late at night, so my mother does not like it".

Asya does not only have problem with her classmates. Teachers actively contribute to her stigmatization process as well, making things worse for her.

"The main problem is men, these pervert men. Then come teachers. When I wear a skirt or put on some make up, I dread the teachers. For example, in my first days in school Miss. Ayten used to talk to me very often. I was thinking to leave the school just because of her. Maybe she does the same thing to others, I don't know, but I felt as if she was messing only with me. She used to say "why are you coming to school", "you are not coming to school to learn". She clearly meant that "you are coming here to fool around with boys". She said many hurting words like "I do not want to waste my time with you; I want to spend my time on the good students".

Under such heavy sexist pressure, Asya's perception of man, love, sexuality and virginity begins to get blurred and she turns to an object open to abuse or even to rape because of her 'desires'. On the one hand she does not trust men and says that she "*wants to have a man without feeling any affection or/and love to him and leave him once she conquered him*". On the other hand she seems very submissive towards men when she says that "*what do men exist for? He should be possessive, be the father to our children, so that you will not go astray, he should be a bit macho*".

D. Outside The Masculine Culture: 'Teacher's Pets and 'The Rest'

a) Teacher's pets

There are other girls who stay outside the masculine resistance culture but certainly not immune from its effects. Generally girls in this category are the most better behaved and compliant students in school. They are very respectful of the teacher's authority and never violate school rules. Our research tries to illuminate varied dimensions of this contradictory subject position, some of which have been widely analyzed in the literature. [23]-[24]-[25]-[26]-[33]-[41]. Some writers underline the paradoxes of being 'clever' and 'feminine' at the same time. Although being 'square' was a particularly 'feminine' position to occupy, it also defeminised girls who occupied this position because of their rejection of (active) heterosexual practices and desires, so embedded in the normalization and regulation of 'normal' girls [24, p.580]. Other writers spotlight other kind of problems related with being a 'quasi-teacher' [24]-[33]-[41]. Perceived to be passive and controllable, the 'good girl' image was used by teachers as a standard measurement of good student behavior. Nevertheless, this quasi-teacher subjectivity is not valued properly and become a disadvantage for these girls.

We want to add to the valuable insights of the literature the further complexities the 'idealized' girls are faced with due to the presence of a masculine resistance culture. This is the group of girls who are outside of this masculine resistance culture and 'closer' to the teacher's authority. These are 'successful' girls with a middle class background, with whom the 'unruly' boys experience the most severe sexual tension. For 'unruly' boys, to ignore and harass the so-called 'teacher's pets' also means resisting to the teachers' authority. Thus these girls experience a deep feeling of estrangement from the school culture in general and are supporting more authoritarian practices.

We have seen the most extreme example of a 'teacher's pet' in the case of Cemile. Cemile is one of the most successful and extremely compliant girls in the school and attracts the hostility of many of her classmates. She is also labeled as a militant 'feminist' (in the sense of being a man-hater) by most boys and girls. The long quotation below shows perfectly the intensity of tension Cemile experiences with the masculine culture at school.

"Our class is full of those who failed in the previous years, who are unsuccessful; they discourage the ones who are trying to succeed in classes. I don't like my classmates at all. All the students in the class are against me. ... One of them insulted me, he said things like "animal, idiot". In response, I said "don't address me in this way, you poor soul, that is all, but the class still holds me responsible for everything. They are jealous of my success. If you treat them in a friendly manner, then they will abuse you. So, I don't want their friendship. In our circle, there is no one I can talk to, about the war for example ... the only thing they [the girls in my class] do is crying and lamenting for boys... And the boys regard girls as sex objects. Some girls are pleased with it. It is fortunate that our grandmothers, who carried ammunition to the fronts during the Turkish national war, did not see this situation".

Her scathing criticism is directed against the masculine culture and the image of 'popular' girl. She concluded from what she has observed in her class that girls as well as boys are degenerated. She particularly hates boys. She tries not to establish any kind of relation with them. Against boys who taunt her for being a feminist, she advocates feminism as follows:

"I do not discriminate between boys and girls but I observe many things in my surroundings. When I see those women who are battered by her husbands, I decide not to marry. It is for sure that there are good men, but I don't see them around".

Cemile also directs heavy criticisms at girls and the culture of girls around her. She thinks that *"they come to school for purposes other than education"*, *"they are under the influence of magazine culture radiated by television"*, *"and they develop wrong type of relations with men under the pretext of love"* etc. Against them she constructs herself as a *"Turkish girl following the line of Atatürk the Founder"*.

When we look at from Cemile's point of view, we notice the bullying and harassing character of this culture. But on the other hand, when we look at other students' eyes, we also notice her frightening estrangement and her demeaning attitude towards other pupils. In other words, Cemile seems wild and cruel too. We can conclude that Cemile as the 'ideal student' appears as one of the weirdest figures in school.

b) And 'the rest'

The girls from the poorest strata seem to have the least contact with the masculine culture. The reason why we call them as 'the rest' is that these girls are not cared for by neither other students or by the teachers. They think they are treated as if they don't exist in school. We see that they are made totally 'invisible' by the gender regime of the school. Not confronted with the risk of disciplinary action, these girls are the ones who are most likely to express self-exclusionary types of behavior [21]. We also see that these girls are mostly neglected not only by the school culture, but by the literature as well. As to their femininity, we can say that they do not rise even to the level of 'good girls', although their self-identity is mostly constructed against the 'bad girls'. Educational life of these girls has been very problematic from the very beginning. Their families are and/or cannot be supportive enough for them. Like all other girls we interviewed they also believe in education as the most powerful way to empowerment for women. At the limit case, going to school and getting married are constructed as alternative options in life. The school experience of these girls is shaped both by their resentment against teachers and by their class and gender animosity against the masculine culture. Thus, the girls develop a serious indifference towards the school environment and isolate themselves from other students.

Meral is a typical example of these girls. She comes from a very poor family where the father died at a very early stage of her childhood. She also had to cope with a serious illness from early age on, so her education has been frequently interrupted from the very beginning. Meral's narrations represent the typical themes that are dominant in the gender discourse of these girls. These can be stated as follows: extreme importance placed on education, strong sense of responsibility towards family, fear of authority, demonizing the 'spoiled' students as the main sources of all troubles in school, regarding herself superior over all other students in terms of maturity, strong awareness and acceptance of her own social class position, a perceivable humanitarian concern for existent inequalities in the society. The quotation below shows clearly how these themes are intricately articulated in her discourse.

“Teaching is a sacred profession ... They try to do their best to us teach something. The spoiled students do not appreciate the chance they have been given. Teachers say that “we don’t want anybody to fail” but the students don’t care and in the end they lose... Here, I can not make any friends. The way they think is entirely incompatible with mine. They laugh at things that mean a lot to me. They make fun of many things. For example, they make fun of poor people who line up for cheap bread, sick people, and handicapped children. I too can be regarded as a half-handicapped person. I learnt many things when I was in hospital, I have known the people. So, I see myself as more mature person”.

In these girls’ narration ‘spoiled’ behavior designates those which express self-expression, self-confidence and disobedience to authority. Such attitudes present a threat not only in class terms but also in gender terms. They are afraid of boys not only because they see them as the main bearers of ‘spoiled’ culture but also as a sexual threat. Here are another girl’s words:

“My elder sister says “draw lessons from the films you have seen, you must remember, they (men) can take you somewhere, they can put a sleeping pill in your tea cup, and then they can treat you as they please’, so, I’m afraid of men, I don’t trust them ... They are staring at girls, looking at their bottoms, they are molesting, so I conclude that they can do harm”.

These girls stay away not only from the boys but from the ‘popular’ girls as well. Their identity is constructed against them. In their narration about such girls, gender and class dimensions are intermingled. Here is an exemplary view:

“The so-called popular girls don’t come near us, they are very haughty, they are too selfish, they dress up and put on make-up, they go to the private courses, they are spoilt, frankly speaking, they enjoy to be involved with men”.

Consequently, these girls implement a peculiar kind of isolation strategy against the masculine school culture. We see that their typical reaction towards this culture is one of ‘not getting involved’. They believe that if “*you do not get involved, they would not harm you any way*”. They try to cope with the threatening reality by ignoring it. But in order to avoid being involved, they have to exert a strict control over themselves.

V. CONCLUSION

The most general conclusion of this article is that the multiple femininities of schoolgirls are conditioned by the tension between two interrelated positions. The first one is the educational expectations of girls which significantly differ from that of boys. Education is seen as the most important and effective means for personal empowerment against the possible restrictions that a would-be husband will possibly exert on the woman/female party in the marriage. Unfortunately, the high expectations of girls remain unmet by the gender regime of school, and different subject positions emerge from the different accommodation and resistance strategies to the gender-mediated problems. Secondly, different types of feminine subjectivities are determined by their differential position vis-à-vis the masculine resistance culture that is dominant in the school. However, regardless of one’s position vis-à-vis the hegemonic power game, masculine culture creates a serious tension for every group of girl.

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